

# DEFENDERS

VOLUME 1

## M2K Special Edition Cyberback

Collecting Defenders #1-13 by Will Short and Russ Anderson



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*Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...*

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## Issue #1

# "GATHERING OF SHADOWS" Part I

by Will Short

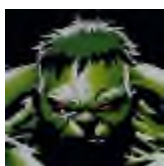
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Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk

The night has crept over New York City, covering the skyline like a dark, cold afghan, and blanketing the buildings with a richly thick nothingness. Shades of black, grey, and blue are the only visible along the streets, and the few that are walking these streets are those who only do so in the twilight hours. Most others are in their deepest hours of sleep, or at very least, soon to wake up for their early jobs in the heart of the city, arriving when the day's first light begins to dissolve the solid darkness into liquid sunlight.

Stephen Strange is of the creed who usually try to get their sleep at night. He goes to bed at a decent hour, most of the time, and wakes soon after the sun has risen in the morning. This night is such a night, a normal night when he sleeps soundly in his comfortable bed. The room he sleeps in is very dimly lit by a single candle on the opposite end from him, providing enough illumination for the varied magical artifacts spread throughout the shelves and drawers.

None of this is out of the ordinary for the room of Earth's Sorcerer Supreme. A man of his position must keep such artifacts around, if not just as various souveneirs from his many adventures over the years, then as part of a mystical arsenal to keep at his disposal, just in case. There is no one besides Stephen in the room to see the items by a mixture of the candle's flame and the starlight. But things can quickly change, especially in the Sanctum Sanctorium of Doctor Strange.....

The small amount of the light in the room is enhanced by an eerie, unnatural light, forming only a few short feet away from Stephen's bed. He does not wake from is heavy slumber as the light forms.

"Stephen.....Stephen....." a wailing, male voice calls to the keeper of

the house. The sorcerer still lays, dead to the world and his surroundings, undisturbed.

Once again, the voice calls, full of pain and suffering.  
"Stephen.....please, Stephen..."

His head against the fluffy pillow, Stephen's eyes slowly open slightly, and fall again. His eyelids flutter open and close a few times, until he finally realizes what he hears. The magician sits up in bed, stiffly and suddenly, his bare chest showing and his lower body covered by the detailed, purple sheets and blanket.

"Who is it?" he says with some concern, but less surprise than you would expect. "Who's there?"

The stray light catches the corner of Stephen's eye, and he turns to see the apparition hanging suspended in the air near him.

Light emanating in all directions from it, the vision is a puddle of silver hue, shining with a metallic luster and containing two completely white eyes, devoid of pupils, and a single lipless mouth, still uttering the mystic's name as though it were being tortured...

"Stephen.....please....." The indifferent and almost droning voice is familiar to the man it calls for.

Stephen gets up from the bed slowly and cautiously, and walks closer to the moaning mist of a vision. He feels a strange kinship with the strange creation before him. Making a possible realization, Stephen says in almost a whisper under his shortening breath.....

"...Norrrin? Surfer...is that you?"

Doctor Strange receives no answer from this ghastly thing he sees, wondering whether or not it truly is his former teammate and long-time friend, the Silver Surfer. He receives only a response in the same manner as before.

".....Stephen.....please, help...help....."

Before Stephen Strange can ask anymore questions of the mysterious formation in his sleeping quarters, the apparition disappears slowly, even more gently and secretly than before, simply whisking itself away like a collection of gray sand grains blowing and swirling in the end until they finally collapse on themselves and disappear.

The door to the dark room opens just as the image reaches the end of its disappearance, and Stephen's old friend and servant Wong enters quickly, holding a candle of his own and wearing his green sleeping robe.

"Master Stephen, is something amiss? I thought I heard you speaking, and I thought maybe you were having disturbing dreams again....." the Asian servant says with a deep concern.

Stephen turns to his faithful servant and looks very serious.

"No, Wong.....not dreams." the mystical mastermind says calmly.

"Then, what...?" Wong asks.

"I think one of my old friends is in trouble, Wong." Stephen explains shortly. "And he is a friend who should not be ignored in a time of need."

The doctor walks over to a chair, taking his usual loosely fitting mystic's suit, also donning his partners, powerful artifacts, and boosters of ability, the Eye of Agamotto and the Cloak of Levitation. Wong is confused as to why his master is dressing so late at night, but he allows Stephen to explain on his own.

"Go ahead and put some tea on the stove, if you would, Wong."

"Certainly...are we expecting company, Master Stephen?"

As Stephen Strange walks out the door of his bedroom and into the darkened hallway, he answers.

"Let's hope so."

---

The dawn's faint light struggles to shine through the many elaborate windows of Doctor Strange's large dwelling, and the early morning's calm stillness is interrupted only by the firm speaking of the King of Atlantis.

"How long can the world's strongest mortal take to bound such a short distance?" Namor complains, sitting cross-legged in one of Doctor Strange's chairs at the small dinner table. Wong offers Namor a cup of piping hot tea, and the Sub-Mariner accepts the cup

cordially.

"Thank you, Wong." he says, breathing in the tea's herbal scent and steam, and taking a long, full sip of the refreshing beverage.

"Certainly, Master Namor. Is there anything else you need?.....A towel, perhaps?" Wong asks, pointing out the King's shortcoming but doing so with his everlasting politeness.

Namor wonders for a moment, and then looks down at his body, still dripping water onto the chair and floor. Embarrassed, he grimaces and answers the servant.

"Why...yes, please, Wong. I apologize...I'm a bit tired, and I came as quickly as I could, so....." Namor says humbly, for once.

Wong laughs understandingly. "Hahaha...oh, Master Namor. There is no need for apologies...I will be back with a towel in a moment."

"Thank you very much."

Stephen enters the room and bids welcome to his fellow hero.

"Namor...I'm relieved that you were able to come here so quickly."

Namor turns to his host. "Greetings, Stephen! It has been too long since I have seen you, friend.....I take it this early morning invitation was not for the worst of reasons....."

Stephen pours himself a cup of tea and stands against a wooden cupboard, sighing and taking a sip. "I'm afraid it is."

Namor frowns some, and becomes more curious. "I feared as much...what is the disturbance, Doctor?" he asks.

"We will wait for the Hulk to arrive before I explain.....I assume he's not here yet?"

The avenging son of Atlantis frowns again, more this time, and answers Stephen.

"No, he is not, and I can't say I'm very much surprised. He has always been more of an individual than a good team member...and we both know he has his mixed history....."

"You haven't had such a clean record yourself, Subby. And besides, some of us like to try and sleep in between one hard day's work and

another." the sarcastic and booming voice of Bruce Banner, the incredible Hulk, bounces around the room, causing both Namor and Doctor Strange to notice his entrance.

"Hulk...welcome." Stephen greets him, and the green behemoth lumbers over to the tea, taking a tiny cup in his powerful hand and sips at it.

"Hey, Doc." the Hulk says, and stares at the King of Atlantis smugly. "Nice hair, buddy. What'd you do, swim here?" he teases Namor, who still drips salt water in the sorcerer's kitchen.

"I merely came here as soon as possible, Hulk, which you could at least attempt to do..."

It is obvious to Stephen that the two will take the bickering as far as possible if he does not intervene, so he speaks.

"Hulk...Namor.....please. I've called you both here for an important reason."

The other two apologize simply with the looks on their faces, and listen intently to their friend and host.

Stephen begins his explanation. "Last night, I was woken from my sleep by a startling vision.....a shining silver puddle in the air, with a face within the puddle, calling my name and asking me to help. What startled me the most about this vision is that the voice and face.....well, they seemed to belong to the Silver Surfer."

Doctor Strange notices a change in the posture and expression of both of his guests as he tells of what he told. He stops speaking, and the Hulk speaks, sounding a little frightened.

"Hey, uh...Doc? That's really weird...because I had the same vision just the other day, too....."

"I, too, saw the Silver Surfer's face in a small puddle of silver recently. I just dismissed it as a strange dream or hallucination, though." Namor admits, and Doctor Strange continues.

"Then I am even more glad that I called both of you here, this morning." the magician says, sounding relieved and scared at the same time. "I managed to examine the energy source behind the vision I saw, and I found it to be very familiar...but I couldn't put my finger on it, and I still can't."

"Could it be the Surfer's own energy?" the Hulk inquires, but Stephen shakes his head.

"No...I know Norin's Power Cosmic energies well. This was from another that I recognize, but can't name."

"We can only assume that the Silver Surfer is in some type of peril then." Namor adds.

"That's correct. Before Namor arrived, I attempted to search for the same energy source, and the only location with any trace of the same energy is.....well, Zenn-La." the doctor explains.

"...that is...?" the emerald giant asks, taking another sip of tea and finishing off his small cup.

"This is, Hulk, the Silver Surfer's home planet." Stephen answers bluntly, and Namor sets down his cup quickly.

"Do you think the Surfer could have some type of trouble that he can't handle himself on his home planet?" the Sub-Mariner says with worry.

"I do. And if it's something that he can't handle himself...it has to be something pretty big." Stephen agrees.

"But are we really going to go all the way across the galaxy for something we don't really know for sure.....?" the Hulk asks skeptically, crossing his huge arms across his chest.

"I think it is our duty as founding Defenders to help a former member and old friend, if he is in need." Stephen states nobly.

"I agree." Namor announces. "The Surfer is a powerful and valuable ally."

Namor stands as he says this, his muscular frame glistening with wetness, as if he were defying some great foe.

"So...I guess this is sort of like a reunion or something?" The Hulk leans onto the counter and holds his monstrous arms up while wondering.

"I suppose so...we are the original Defenders. I can't think of any others more fit to take part in this." Stephen sounds proud and almost excited about the decision, despite the current situation for



which they have been brought together.

"It has been a very long time....." Namor tells them.

"Don't worry, gills...if you're rusty, I'll save your salty green trunks..." the Hulk begins to tease again, and as they begin to bicker once more, Stephen holds his head and says to himself quietly, "...I guess this is why these two are on teams for so little....."

Wong walks in again, holding two towels and looking surprised at the sight of the Hulk. He is even more surprised when Namor "playfully" pushes the Hulk, whose massive body knocks over the tray of tea cups. A few of the mugs shatter as they fall to the floor, and the two men stop when they hear this, along with Wong's voice.

"Master Namor...Master Hulk.....please!" the servant pleads with the guests as they move out of his way as he investigates the damage.

"Sorry, Wong...I guess we got a little carried away there." the Hulk sounds sincerely sorry, and he is.

"I apologize too, Wong." Namor says, and Wong turns his upset cringe to a warm smile.

"No real damage is done, my friends. Please just try to be more careful when you are in the kitchen, though....." Wong says. "Oh yes...I have your towel, Master Namor." he holds out the fairly nice beach towel to the Sea King, but Namor refuses it politely, shaking his head and holding back his hands.

"I appreciate it, Wong, but we must be going." the Submariner says.

"Oh? So you all are going, Master Stephen?"

"Yes, Wong.....we're going to be gone for a little while on urgent business. I assume everything will be fine here, like usual?" Stephen says with assurance.

"Of course, Master Stephen. Do be careful though..." the Asian man advises.

"Don't worry, Wong...I take my work a lot more seriously than wing-feet here." the Hulk jokes, but Namor ignores it this time.

"By the way," he continues, "Just how do you plan on getting us to Zenlava, Doc?"

"Zenn-La, Hulk.....You seem to forget that I am the Supreme Sorcerer of Earth, my friend. It should be very simple for me to transport us safely to the Silver Surfer's home planet."

"Then let us move quickly...Norin Radd's safety may be in danger!" Namor urges, and the others agree.

As the three men, apparently the Defenders once again, disappear in a flash of red light, Wong uses the left-over towels to wipe up the spilled tea and to pick up the shards of the mug, doing so quickly and with precision. Wong takes pride in his work, as his family members have before him, and he has no quarrels with the work.

After he is done cleaning, Wong searches the house for more to do, but happily finds that there is really nothing that he has to do. With time to relax, the servant runs a warm, steaming bath to ease his busy body. As the warm water vapor fills the room and fogs up the mirror, Wong removes his robe and steps slowly into the tub, allowing the water to seep into his skin's pores and relaxing with his thoughts solely on the feelings he receives. His head against the warmed porcelain, his eyes closed, Wong almost fails to hear the loud crash from the other end of the house.....but luckily, his sharp ears catch the noise, and he jumps out of the bathtub quickly, tying his robe and running out of the bathroom to follow the noise.

The crash came from Stephen's Sanctum Sanctorium.....that much, Wong knows. As he hurries to the room, he flings the door open and finds the shining, limp body of the Silver Surfer on the floor in a pile of debris and broken glass, the morning light shining in strongly through the destroyed main window. His trademark silver board lay near him, inseparable from its rider.

"Oh my...!" Wong exclaims, rushing over to the body of the alien on the floor. Wong holds the Surfer's head, trying to find some sign of life, and the former herald's eyes open slightly. He speaks painfully.

"Stephen.....where is...Stephen.....?" he asks, straining.

"The Doctor just left, Master Norrin, along with Namor and the Hulk.....what has happened? Are you injured?" Wong worries hurriedly over the fallen cosmic rider, but the Silver Surfer does not answer as another voice threatens from above.

"He will soon be more than injured!" the strange, inhuman voice yells boldly from above. Wong and the Surfer look up through the

window-turned-skylight, and through the hole and the baptism of forced sunlight, they can make out an orange, muscular form, with a winged helmet and a hammer in hand.....

"Who.....?" Wong wonders aloud, and the Silver Surfer murmurs.

".....Beta...Ray.....Bill..."

The strangely clothed creature from above laughs and descends upon the two inside.

---

"Um.....is that it?" The Hulk's voice can be heard in the vacuum of space only because of Doctor Strange's various spells, supporting the trio of Defenders as they lay their eyes on the startling sight in the midst of space.

Where the planet of Zenn-La once existed, now only a great number of small asteroids and other varied pieces of debris are seen, floating randomly and aimlessly in the nonexistent gravity of deep space. Stephen is horrified and confused, and does not speak yet.

"Huh, Doc? That's supposed to be a planet?" the Hulk asks again, and Namor holds his finger to his lips, shushing the green goliath.

"Shhh.....something's wrong. Leave him be....." Namor tells the Hulk, and they both go along with it.

Stephen stares from inside the Bands of Cytorrak, still able to easily stare at the outside space easily through the crimson field. He looks through the countless rocks and metals, the possessions and fragments of buildings, and God knows what else.....and in the distance, within the former volume of the planet Zenn-La, Stephen can barely make out a single figure, floating suspended among the apparent destruction with its arms crossed.

Separating from the other two, Doctor Strange floats, protected, towards the figure, still unable to make out who or what it is. He cannot hear Namor and the Hulk discussing behind him, but he assumes they would be. Still approaching the mysterious figure, still Stephen's vision does not improve. But, surprisingly, he hears a voice speak to him, as though it were coming from within his ears, or even his head.....

He cocks his head, and listens to the phantom voice.

"You'll not find your friend here, Stephen.....only your end."

The Hulk and Namor can only watch from a distance as a figure appears as if from nowhere and attacks Doctor Strange in the middle of blank, endless space.

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***NEXT ISSUE: More Defenders join the fray, as New York's heroes band together to battle a common threat...a former hero. Who is the strange man in space? What happened to Zenn-La? These questions and more answered in Defenders #2.***

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #2

# "GATHERING OF SHADOWS" Part II

by Will Short

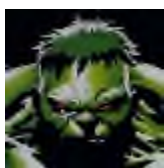
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Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Silver Surfer

In Patsy Walker's small New York apartment, the television roars loudly and shines brightly. She watches intently, dressed in a soft red robe that hides her thin nude form beneath, and drops her can of soda on the floor.

"Oh my.....!" She exclaims, and stops herself quickly so she can hear the story behind the disturbing scene on the television. She sees the images of Beta Ray Bill battling, and badly beating, the Silver Surfer all around New York. She has never seen the powerful rider of the space-ways so easily beaten into submission, *and* the fact that it is being so easily done by a former ally.....

Patsy's breathing becomes heavier, and she can feel the adrenaline rush through her. From worry for her friend and excitement for her chance.

This is her chance to bring the Hellcat back into the land of the living.

Patsy leaves the television on as she rushes to her closet and pulls out a large plastic container from the bottom, ripping off the top in a rush like a young child at Christmas. On her knees in the closet, she takes out and holds up her pride and joy -- her second identity ... maybe even her real identity ... the yellow and blue costume of Hellcat.

She strips herself of the comfortable robe and throws it on the ground, quickly holding out the bottom of her yellow body suit for her leg to step into. It has been a little while since she has put this on, and she is not as fast as she used to be ... but her sense of urgency and fulfillment renews and enhances her speed. Patsy puts

on the yellow top, the blue boots and gloves, ties the blue sash, and for the final touch, pulls her cowl over her head, leaving her luscious flame red hair visible.

The transformation complete, Patsy hurriedly runs to lock her front door to ensure no unwanted visitors in her absence. As she heads for the window, the screen of the television once again catches her eye. She sees three figures, now, and new one added to the battle. At first, Patsy is not sure, but she soon recognizes the man.....

---

The Black Knight is very angry and very confused.

Moments ago, according to his biological clock, Dane Whitman was not Dane Whitman, nor was he the Black Knight ..... he was Daine of Whitemaine, a skillful squire in ancient England, under the rule of King Arthur. As he was training in swordplay with his master and distant relative Sir Percy of Scandia.

And all of a sudden, he had appeared in what he recognized as New York. He quickly saw a fellow hero, the Silver Surfer, being savagely attacked and bested by an inhuman looking creature wielding a hammer. A creature he soon recognized as the usually noble Beta Ray Bill. The Black Knight does not question the situation ... a friend is in trouble, and that is all that truly matters.

"Bill!" he exclaims, leaping mightily from his standing position and landing on the severely strong alien. Whitman quickly attempts to bring him down with blows forceful enough to injure a normal man ... but Beta Ray Bill is neither normal nor a man.

The light orange horse-faced warrior throws Dane off of his back with ease, grunting like a rabid animal while doing so. The Black Knight's body, out of control, lands on top of the Silver Surfer. "Surfer ... Surfer, art thou well?" He asks his friend, and the Surfer hardly has the strength to answer him.

"I ... I am not, Black Knight. Beta Ray ... Bill has never been this powerful ..... before."  
Climbing off of the Silver Surfer and helping him up, the Black Knight inquires to the situation.

"Too powerful for even thou, Surfer?"

"Yes, ... somehow he even rivals the Power Cosmic." Shaking

himself to full focus, the Surfer realizes the threat beside them, "Quickly, Black Knight ... we must regroup!" He says, picking up the Knight and flying up and away quickly.

"We flee, Surfer? I thought thou more noble," The Black Knight says disappointedly, and the Silver Surfer looks at Dane, noticing his changed dialect.

"Black Knight ... what has happened to you? You speak and keep yourself differently," the Surfer points out, referring to Dane's full beard.

"What dost thou, mean, Surfer?"

"...Nothing. How did you get here, by the way? You seemed to appear very suddenly."

"I know not, friend, but 'twas a lucky thing I did. It was not moments ago that I was in old England herself...."

"That is very strange, but I fear that must wait," The Surfer says, looking down with the Black Knight and seeing the otherworldly friend of Thor charging at them once again with a revived vigor.

---

Kinship.

It is said sometimes that twin siblings have been known to feel when the other is near, to know when the other is in trouble. Some have even gone so far to say that the two may know what the other is thinking, or what the other is doing, or even deeper.

Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie of Asgard, can feel the presence of another Asgardian native somewhere near. She knows not whether it is a being, an object, or something else ... but she does know that it is of Asgard, her beloved home.

She must find it. She has to ... for her own sake.

---

If you were part of one group, one ethnic division, one reputation, one company all your life, and one day you were suddenly not part of it anymore -- You weren't welcome at all -- If that was all you really knew well in your life, what would you do?

If you knew, you could possibly help Luke Cage.

The muscular black man walks down the street, his powerful hands shoved deep into his pockets. His thick neck angled his head down at the sidewalk. He looks like a shamed man ... and in truth, he is. To himself, at least.

The Avengers don't want him. The Fantastic Four is four again, and has been for a while. Even Heroes For Hire, his first home and his old fallback, is through with him. He hasn't been able to contact Iron Fist ... God only knows what he has been up to. Luke simply can't find a place for himself ... solo work has never been his forte. He works best with a group, a team ... some sort of organization.

But not that's all he is: a singular man blocked from all he used to know. Cage ... Power Man ... Luke Cage. Whatever you call him, he no longer has the self-confidence for solo work.

He finds it hopeless.

Nearby, Luke Cage hears screams, and instinctively he runs swiftly in the direction of the sound.

---

The crowd surrounding the momentous battle is itself continually getting larger with each passing moment. It is made up of various onlookers, pedestrians, authorities whose purpose is really more to protect the citizens, postponed motorists, and then there is Regina Garney.

Or rather, it is Regina McBride-Garney, or even Regina McBride. That is still debatable, and really depends on the situation. In this one, it is unimportant. Walking by with her young son Mark on the way back from the grocery store, the crowd has blocked her way for the past quarter of an hour. Frankly, she is not happy at all.

"Come on, people!" She says to them angrily as she attempts to make room for herself and her son.

A police officer nearby, with little else to do, reaches out and stops her, "C'mon, ma'am, please don't get rowdy. This is hard enough as it is."

"What is? What's this all about, anyway?" Regina asks, sounding



annoyed and uncaring.

"What's it about? Just look up there, lady!" The officer says as he points to the sky.

Regina turns, still holding her son's hand, and sees the massive battle taking place at various sites on the street.

"Mommy?" Mark asks innocently, and then points at the fight. Even though he has been living in New York all seven years of his life, he is still not very familiar with the site of super-beings.

"Those are just ... people in tights, fighting a monster. Okay sweetie? Now come on, we need to get home."

She takes his hand and gives a little jerk, not at all angrily but just to tell the child that it is time to go. He obeys, but before she can reach her apartment complex, another officer stops her.

"Where do you think you're going, miss?" He says, sounding only slightly polite. And forcibly at that.

"I'm going home ... there's no 'think' about it," Regina says in a frustrated tone, and continues to try to return home.

"You live in these apartments, ma'am?" He asks, stopping her again.

"Yes, These apartments. Right here. Within ten seconds walking distance. Now, will you please let my son and I go home?"

"To there?" The officer asks loudly, and laughs. "Haha ... lady, that place isn't anywhere near safe until this battle's over!"

Regina shuffles the grocery bag in her arm and adjusts her grip on Mark's hand. This does not make her happy at all. "You're telling me that I have to wait for this large-scale bar fight to be over before I can even go home?"

The officer is not amused, but he isn't really paying attention that well, either,

"Basically, ma'am."

Frustrated, she sticks the police officer with the grocery bag, and kneels down for a second.

"Hey...!" He begins to complain, but she cuts him off, speaking to

Mark.

"Mark, honey? Can you stay with this nice policeman for a minute? He's not a stranger ... he's your friend, and mommy's got some business she needs to take care of."

"Okay, Mommy," He agrees right away, and stands closely to the young officer, who watches as the mother walks off.

"Ma'am? Hey, lady! Where do you think you're going? You're gonna get yourself ki--"

He does not finish as Regina begins to grow in size gradually, until finally she is as tall as one of the small office buildings nearby. He watches still as she enters the battle.

"What in the Hell?" The officer wonders, and Mark just looks on like nothing is out of the ordinary.

---

The crimson Bands of Cytorrak wrapped around them as a protective force, Namor and the Hulk struggling to force their shield to move with them. It is no use. The magic is too strong, even for the both of them.

"Dammit!" The Hulk grunts, his raging emerald muscles testing their strength against that of Doctor Strange's skill in weaving mysticism. He finds it to no avail. Namor has stopped trying, and halts the Hulk as he watches their friend being attacked by the mysterious man.

"Hulk ... stop for a moment, and watch the stranger. He battles the Doctor with a mystic art paralleling Stephen's ... possibly even better!"

"Man ... we gotta help the Doc."

"Indeed, and quickly."

"But I can't do a damn thing with this shield around us!" The Hulk complains, and kicks at it with his huge booted foot. There is no response.

"I feel so helpless ... not as helpless as Stephen's looking out there, though," He continues, sounding more worried now as he watches Doctor Strange battle with much effort, but to little avail.

"Who are you?" The Doctor asks through gritted teeth as the mystery man creates a small but powerful dragon of pure energy and sends it against him.

The man only laughs, watching Stephen struggle to find an effective spell against the creation, and after a moment he creates a small vortex to suck up the monster.

"Haha! Stephen, were you not taught better than that? That is a basic spell! And you are the Sorcerer Supreme! You must do better than that ... else I should strip you of your title." The man taunts Stephen, and the Doctor becomes more angry and flies quickly towards the cruel man, mystical energy coming off of him like steam in the emptiness of space.

He stops suddenly, flying back as though reeling from hitting a wall. He then floats in space, looking limp and injured. The bands around Namor and the Hulk gradually begin to fade.

"Uh oh. Hey Subby, take a look!"

As Stephen Strange drifts nearer to being unconscious, the Hulk draws in a mighty breath. He fills his giant lungs to their fullest point before the shield around him and his fellow Defender finally breaks. Namor is not prepared, and as the Hulk leaps free from his former barrier, the Atlantan king is left without oxygen. He took a breath too late, and there was nothing to take in.

"All right, son, let's see how those tricks do against this old slugger!" the Hulk says, quickly thrusting his huge body towards the man. He laughs again.

"You consider yourself old? And I ... I am 'son'? Hahaha! You have no idea how backward you are, mortal ... but it is no matter. My business is with this so-called 'magician' ... you and the Atlantan may leave!"

With those words, the man holds out his hand, and a blinding light strikes across what seems like all of space. With that, Namor and the Hulk are sent back from their original place.

---

"Yes ... yes! Bring more!" Beta Ray Bill cries insanely as the heroes pile on him time and time again. Each time he bursts forth as if

stronger than before, "You will all die, like the Surfer ... bring more to me!"

"This is most unlike your usually noble ways, Bill!" Valkyrie claims after retreating from a powerful but fruitless assault on the alien wielder of the Uru mallet --- A gift from Odin himself!

"Isn't it, though? I love battle, woman ... and this certainly is a battle!"

The Silver Surfer has suffered the most. He is nearly exhausted and sitting on the side of the battle, firing stray bolts of energy when possible. They do little to affect the alien.

"Can we not do more, friend Surfer?" The Black Knight asks, the efforts with his sword spirited but nearly useless against the powerful Beta Ray Bill.

"It would seem not, Knight."

"Damned to Hades...!"

"Come on, ya ugly sack'a crap ... give!" Luke Cage cries in battle. He attempts to wrestle with Bill, but his great strength is still no match for the Thor-level might of the alien. Luke is thrown to the side like a doll, but manages to knock some rubble onto his opponent, burying Bill and landing safely. Hellcat approaches him, worried for his safety.

"Oh my! Luke! Power Man, are you all right?" She asks sweetly, helping him up. He allows her to for a moment, but shakes her hand off almost angrily as he finally stands.

"I'm ... I'm fine. He just caught me off guard, that's all."

Hellcat can hear the embarrassment in his voice, "Don't worry, Luke ... none of us have been able to get anything on Bill yet. He seems like he's been powered up a few times over!"

"It can't be hopeless though," Luke adds in, "there has to be something we can do."

"Maybe I can be of some help," A large, loud voice says. Luke and Hellcat turn around to see a towering woman in normal street clothes loom over them.

"Who ... who are you?" Hellcat yells to the giantess.

"Listen, does it matter? Do you want my help or not?" She answers, rushing.

"Oh ... well yes, of course! I don't know what for though....."

The Black Knight manages to get the assembled heroes together, and he makes a suggestion.

"By Excalibur, I believe I have the answer, mine friends!" He says happily after some thinking.

"Well then, what is it?" Hellcat says.

"The mallet that yon creature carries ... 'tis like that of Thor, correct?"

Valkyrie handles that question quickly, "Yes. The hammer 'twas given to him by Odin himself."

"Then perhaps separating Beta Ray Bill from his hammer will diminish his power."

"Sounds good," Luke says, "but first we have to get someone to hold him while we take it from him."

"I will hold him, but I will need help," The Silver Surfer states.

"Norrin, will you be all right? Your strength, after all," Hellcat worries about her friend. Nothing uncommon.

"My strength is fine, Patsy. As I said, though, I will need help."

"I can help ya' out, if it will do any good," Power Man says. The Surfer simply nods.

"I can help hold the guy too," Regina adds.

"Who is this giantess...?" The Black Knight begins to ask.

"Just call me Gina."

"Is she just a spectator?" The Surfer asks skeptically, but the Valkyrie steps in.

"I know not who the sister is, but one of her size and strength will undoubtedly help our quest."

"Fair enough then, Gina. You will aid in holding Beta Ray Bill, while I take the mallet from..."

The Black Knight stops speaking suddenly, and the others still listen intently.

"Dane? What's the matter?" Hellcat asks, and before he can answer, he is gone. No flash. Nothing. He is just gone.

"What the Hell was that?" Power Man asks.

"The Knight said he came here from England's past randomly earlier," the Surfer responds, "It is no matter for the moment, mine friends. The alien rises again, and we must act!"

As the raging Beta Ray Bill gets up, the Surfer along with Power Man and Regina all rush to the site. They quickly grab his powerful arms and hold them in place, barely able to contain his power and energy.

"Unhand me! You will all surely die for this! By my hammer Storm Breaker, I will kill you all!" He yells in a maniacal discharge of anger.

Brunnhilde approaches him from the front, before he can break free. She stands bravely with her hands on her skinny, feminine hips -- sword at her side. "And I claim, by my sword Dragonfang, that you will do no more evil this day!"

And with that, she grabs the hammer from the alien's strong hand and forces it from him.

Beta Ray Bill stops struggling, and the others let him go. A strike of lightning can be seen in the clear sky, and before the others can speak to him ... Beta Ray Bill is transformed into his normal alien form.

"What ... what has happened? Is this ... Earth?" He asks, confused.

"Yes, Bill. You're with friends, but there's been some problems." Hellcat begins to explain, but she is interrupted by Valkyrie's voice.

"And indeed, friend, there will be more ... so states Brunnhilde,

wielder of both Dragonfang and Storm Breaker ... and the harbinger of death for you all!"

Confusion runs rampant, and Beta Ray Bill just sits and stares. He does not understand ... but he soon will.

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***NEXT ISSUE: More about the mysterious man, the fate of Namor and the Hulk, and Valkyrie's new state of mind. Plus, what happened to the Black Knight? Come back in a month for Defenders #3.***

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #3

# "GATHERING OF SHADOWS" Part III

by Will Short

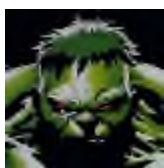
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Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Hellcat



Valkyrie

Namor, the Submariner and King of Atlantis, has kissed many attractive women in his life.

His deceased wife Dorma ... his former consort Merrana ... even Mr. Fantastic's wife, the beautiful and famous Invisible Woman, Susan Richards. Many women, heroines and citizens alike, consider Namor to be an attractive man himself. In fact, the Atlantan King could probably have his choice of female companions ... maybe even certain male companions.

But were Namor given the choice, he would most likely have given the monstrous Hulk as one of his last choices. Nevertheless, as the Submariner comes to his senses, two feelings are most prominent in his mind: the strange but somewhat familiar sensation of zero gravity, and the uncomfortable and disturbing feeling of two large, dry lips pressed to his.

Opening his eyes, Namor only sees a mass of green, and he immediately begins to struggle. "Mmmmmffff...!" he tries to yell, but the vibrations of his vocal cords only find themselves muffled as they travel into the hot, damp mouth of the incredible Hulk. With all of his effort, Namor pushes the green man-monster off of him until the Hulk pulls back.

Through widely opened eyes, the Submariner inspects his surroundings and finds nothing. Nothing meaning empty space ... barren, black abyss inhabited only by distant suns, stars, and planets. He panics, and exhales deeply. As he tries to speak, he finds a burning in his lungs not often felt by the Lord of the Atlantic Ocean, the feeling of suffocation.





**Silver Surfer**

"Woah ... woah there, Subby! Don't pass out on me again," the Hulk says, and before Namor drifts back to whence he came, puts his lips to Namor again and empties his mighty lungs into the Atlantan's body. The Submariner struggles only a little, but as he is brought quickly back from the brink of unconsciousness, he stops. As soon as the Hulk as sure his friend is once again awake, he pulls back, waiting for the imminent outburst from Namor.

"Imperious Rex, Hulk! What do you think you're doing?!" Namor exclaims.

"It's called CPR, and it just saved your life."

"How? It was uncalled for!"

"Hey, listen. If you had a little stronger lungs, it wouldn't be a problem. We're lucky that we're both dense enough to survive this vacuum as it is."

"My lungs are perfectly healthy, for my race, Hulk." Namor says, and he finds his supply of oxygen once again running low.

"Hu....kkkKKK...KGGHHH...!" he begins to suffocate again, and the Hulk quickly inhales and then exhales into Namor's mouth.

The king looks uncomfortable in the Hulk's arms, trying to avoid heavy breathing to prolong another touch of the lips between himself and the Hulk.

"Let me fly on my own. I'm no helpless woman," Namor says, and the Hulk complies.

"Suit yourself. I was just trying to help." He is released from the green behemoth's grip. The momentum from their mysterious attacker's blast\* continues to send them peeling through space, and Namor allows his own ankle wings to control his speed.

(\*In last issue. -Will)

There is an uncomfortable silence between the two Defenders, and after a moment of discomfort from short gasps, Namor is able to speak. "Was it really necessary?"

"Sub ... Namor, unless you want to die out here in the middle of nowhere, it has to happen."

The Submariner frowns and the Hulk looks back from his forward position, noticing.

"Believe me, I didn't enjoy it anymore than you did. Now let's try to keep the chatter to a minimum ... I only have so much oxygen in these beauties of lungs for the both of us."

So the two continue to fly, without controlled direction, through space. After some time, Namor feels the now normal urgency for air, and he flies faster to meet the Hulk and point at his face, begging for air.

The Hulk does his duty quickly, ending it as quickly as possible. "What are we to do now?" Namor asks as he flies parallel to his emerald savior.

"Well," the Hulk thinks for a bit, his uncluttered mind searching for an answer. Namor does not give him enough time to come up with a decision, and speaks again.

"I'm worried for Stephen. The man attacked brutally."

"Yeah ... yeah, I know," The Hulk says, distracted as he racks his brain for ideas. At this time he notices a nagging in the furthest reaches of his thoughts ... almost a calling, like a beacon. He holds his head, shaking it slightly, his eyes closed with the strain of finding the feeling's pleas -- and then he turns his head to Namor.

"What is it?" Namor asks, wondering the state of his partner.

"I ... I've got this feeling. I've had this kind before."

"What do you mean?"

The Hulk thinks again, quicker this time, "I think I know which direction to go ... but we have to do it fast, because I don't have a whole lotta air left."

"Fair enough, but how? We've been on this same path for a while now..."

"It looks like you've got decent control over your movement with those wings of yours," the Hulk says, pointing in the direction of the Submariner's feet. "You can probably change our direction."

"I will try ... but they aren't wings." Namor says, readying himself for the change in trajectory.  
Hulk does not quite understand, "Huh?"

As Namor flies above his friend and grabs onto the monster's large back as well as possible, he says into his green ears, "I don't have wings ... they are fins. Now tell me which direction to turn to."

And the Hulk does not say anything, simply pointing in what he feels is the right direction. Namor lets his fins go to work, slowly but surely forcing the King and mighty green mortal into a new and hopefully helpful path.

---

"Brunnhilde? What's wrong?" Hellcat says, not fully aware of her situation. She has just seen Beta Ray Bill stripped of his Uru mallet by Valkyrie. The plan had worked, the alien hero lost his abilities and having changed back to his "normal" form. Normal for *his* race, at least. But something is amiss. The Valkyrie turned after retrieving the hammer, and immediately threatened her allies.

"Wrong? Nothing is wrong that I can think of, Hellcat," The blonde Asgardian beauty says as she approaches the feline redhead.

"Uh ... Valkyrie...?" The Valkyrie raises her new toy, the hammer Storm Breaker, looming over Hellcat's skinny frame and threatening to end her newly renewed career.

As the mallet begins to come down, Patsy feels frozen. She is afraid -- she knows she must move as quickly as possible, or else it will all stop, suddenly and horribly. It seems easy enough to jump in any direction out of harm's way ... but for some reason, she just can't.

"Hellcat!" Luke Cage's voice yells in fear for Patsy's life, and she feels the Power Man's own lightning fast reflexes at work as he uses his muscular body to push her out of the way; throwing himself at her entirely in an attempt to save her.

They land in a pile of sweaty, shaking flesh and clothing, and he pulls her up with him. "Jesus ... what was that? You almost get yourself killed, girl!" he exclaims while she stands.

"I ... I don't know, Luke. It just seemed to slow down there for a minute. Thanks for the save, though."

"Least I can do. But forget about it for now, because it looks like our buddy just turned into the next problem," Luke says -- referring to Valkyrie's change in sides.

Luke and Patsy look over to see the battle continuing without them. Valkyrie's abilities have apparently also been enhanced, and she battles their new friend called Regina, who seemed to come from almost nowhere but with welcome growth abilities. Not to mention the cosmic veteran Silver Surfer. Even with two such powerful beings, both fighting full force against a single opponent, the Valkyrie's newfound strength holds it's own.

Patsy notices another figure running through the battle and towards herself and Luke Cage, and quickly sees that it is Beta Ray Bill. He speaks first when he reaches them.

"You are. ... Hellcat?" he asks, recognizing her as one of Earth's many heroes.

"Yes, Bill. You are Beta Ray Bill, right?"

"I am ... but I do not know how I came to be here on Earth, or how my hammer Storm Breaker was taken from me!"

Luke explains, "Beta Ray, we all came here when we heard you kickin' the crap outta the Silver Surfer, there."

Bill looks over and recognizes his friend, the Surfer. "Norrin? I was attacking Norrin? But why...? I do not even remember doing that."

"Your guess is as good as ours, but apparently the grudge has been passed on to Brunnhilde. It happened when she took the hammer from you."

Beta Ray Bill only ponders the situation for a moment before coming to his conclusion, "Yes! That must be it ... the hammer, it is causing it's wielder to attack the others." The alien says.

"Even if that's right," Luke asks, "how does that help us out?"

"You will see, soon enough. If the hammer is separated from me for more than sixty seconds..."

There is a flash of light similar to before, and Valkyrie's new hammer is no longer that at all -- but a plain, wooden staff of little to no use for battle. This makes no difference, though, as the Asgardian

woman halts her quarrel with the Surfer and the woman Regina.

"..it changes back to it's other form, a staff," Bill finished.

Hurrying towards their friend, Hellcat and Luke discover that she has dropped the staff and backed away from it, as Regina and the Surfer follow in suit. "Valkyrie, what happened?" Hellcat asks as she hugs her close friend, both former Defenders.

"I know not, Patsy," she answers lightly, holding her head, "No sooner had I taken the mallet from Beta Ray Bill that I lost all recollection and control."

Hellcat and the others explain what she had done while under the influence of the hammer.

"Gods! I apologize for doing such things ... I had no idea!" Brunnhilde says, and the others easily forgive her as all of them gathered around.

"So is this over? Can the battle stop now?" Regina asks the others, still in a hurry.

"Not by a long shot ... how come the hammer stopped working once it became a staff...?" Luke wonders, and Beta Ray Bill tries to answer.

"Whatever force is within my hammer took control of it while it it's mystically enhanced form ... so it's possible that the power it took from Storm Breaker was diminished when it changed back to a staff."

"What do we do now, then?" asks Hellcat.

"I do not know ... when I scan the staff, I find only a small presence, one that is familiar ... but it is very faint, and I cannot identify it." The Surfer informs the others.

"I cannot be without my hammer forever," Beta Ray Bill hints. They all know that they must find something to do with the staff laying before them, but none of them are sure what.

"Perhaps Stephen Strange could investigate the item?" Brunnhilde suggests, but the Silver Surfer shakes his bald, shining head.

"I first came to Doctor Strange when Beta Ray Bill and I landed on

Earth\*...he is not even on the planet."

(\*In Defenders #1 -Will)

"Where? Stephen usually travels in astral form," Hellcat asks, and a booming voice from an unseen speaker answers her.

"The Doc's off on big business, Pats ... and he's in big trouble."

Many of them recognize the voice, and they turn and see the Hulk and the Submariner standing nearby.

"Hulk! Namor!" Patsy cries, and is the first to meet them. "What's going on? Do you know about this?"

"Know about what?" Namor asks, and sees the massive crowd, the fair amount of destruction, and the large collected group of familiar faces. Most of all, he sees the Silver Surfer.

Walking past Hellcat, Namor goes to the Surfer and speaks to him, relieved but confused.

"Norin! You are on Earth?"

"Yes ... there is a long story behind it, but I am here." The Surfer admits.

"But ... you appeared to the Hulk and I. Stephen, too ... you were calling for help?"

The Surfer's metallic brow becomes as wrinkled as his shell-like skin does, "I do not know what you are talking about. I sent no distress call."

"Then ... you do not know about Zenn-La?"

"What of my home planet? What do you mean?"

The Hulk and Hellcat join the rest of the group, and the Hulk catches up on the conversation.

"Aw man, Subby .. I dunno if we should break this to the poor guy," the Hulk argues passively.

"Break what to me? What do you mean?" The Silver Surfer is losing his composure, becoming more and more flustered.

Namor makes the decision for himself. He knows what it is like to lose a home ... to want revenge ... to have your basis of life abused and destroyed.

"Norin," he says, beginning lightly, "Zenn-La has been destroyed."

---

In the crowd surrounding the calmed battle scene, Mark Garney is impressed and a little confused.

His mother left him with the police officer to join the battle, but he had strayed away from the easily distracted young man. He knows his mother is special ... he is reminded of that every time she wakes up, every time she changes from one kind to another. He is used to it, because he deals with it every day.

But he is not used to seeing his mother join in the battle. She usually is merely annoyed with the actions of superhuman battles when they are presented ... he cannot help but wonder why she did it.

His young mind cannot wonder as deeply as yours or mine, but there are many possible reasons. Annoyance? Jealousy? Need for action, or for change? Did she just want to get home?

Perhaps Regina does not even know, herself. It was impulsive, her joining the battle, but she has done it. Even as she stands here listening to the heroes' banter on unknown subjects, she divides her thoughts between her choice of action and her son; still in the crowd.

She looks for him, and once spotting him, waves with her gigantic hand. Mark smiles warmly.

---

The pain and chaos is beyond unnerving or disturbing ... it is close to insanity, but even further. Stripped, beaten, invaded, submitted --- all these things and more Doctor Strange feels in the middle of the field of debris that used to be the planet Zenn-La.

He does not even know what the mysterious man is doing to him any longer. He cannot see the actions, or his surroundings, or even his attacker. The swirl of sound and fury is all Stephen knows. It is a new experience.

And even in the midst of the astounding amount of input and absorption, giving and taking, destruction and creation going on between the two men in space ... Stephen Strange manages to make out a single phrase from his attacker.

"An irony, Strange ... I am your better, both as your teacher and your replacement!"

Among all other things, Stephen feels cold.

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***NEXT ISSUE: Stephen's fate is revealed, as is the mystery of the force within Storm Breaker. A battle of epic proportions and a two classic, bittersweet reunions. All mysteries are solved, and all loose ends are tied up in the specially-sized Defenders #4.***



Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #4

# "GATHERING OF SHADOWS" Part IV

by *Will Short*

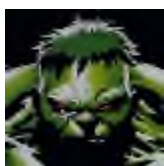
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**Doctor Strange**



**Namor**



**Hulk**



**Hellcat**



**Valkyrie**

"What.....?" Norin Radd...Silver Surfer, Cosmic Rider of the spaceways, contorts his metallic face in confusion and delayed shock, which is impending. The galactic hero is very loving of his home planet, and for its protection he has done many things, including becoming the powerful being his is today. And today, he has learned something so horrible...so surprising...even he must hear the news twice to truly take in its intent.

"Surfer, I am sorry...your home planet is gone." Namor, the Submariner, also frowns as he delivers this heartbreak wrapped in a message.

Tremors begin at the very bottom of the Silver Surfer's being, both physically and emotionally, making their way up his entire body until they reach the nucleus of his person, the head, the mind...the mouth. Concern turns to anger as the Surfer forces his rage into his arms and pushes Namor down to the ground and stands over him menacingly, pointing at the Son of Atlantis.

"You lie, Namor! My beloved planet still exists...I was there only a few days ago. This is not true!" The Surfer reaches to Namor and holds him down with his superior strength as his fellow hero struggles beneath.

"Unhand me, Norin! I'm telling you the truth...why would I do any different?"

He would not, because Prince Namor is an honorable man. This, the Surfer knows, and he looks away from his friend as he lets him back up. Namor rises, ready for more violence from his overreacting ally, but Norin remains silent, apparently staring at nothing.



**Silver Surfer**

Hellcat approaches the Surfer and places her small, feminine hand on his shoulder, speaking softly like a loving mother would to her fretting child.

"Norin, please, let it out...it's okay." But the Silver Surfer does not acknowledge Patsy's attempt at helping him in the only way she knows possible. He is far too taken by his own thoughts...his own memories.....

Under his breath, his usually commanding voice loses its strength and nearly whispers without hope, "Zenn-La ... Shalla-Ball ... everyone...."

The Hulk, too, steps forward, and says in the most encouraging way he knows, "It's the truth, Surfer...I saw it too. I dunno why or how, but it was all rocks and debris when we got there\*..." But Bruce Banner stops when he realizes that his words fall on deaf ears.

(Back in Defenders #1. -Will)

Looking to the sun's light, which is gradually faltering as the hours of the afternoon slowly slip away, Norin Radd feels a complete and utter numbness about him, one he has rarely felt before.

Were the Silver Surfer able to cry, to shed a tear for his fallen home, he certainly would, for the planet of Zenn-La has often been the most important thing in his life. But as to Galactus's design, the Surfer has neither the ability nor the need for bodily functions. Those strings tying him to humanity were destroyed long ago. And now the final, thickest rope of a string holding the man once called Norin Radd to his former life has been broken, shattered into all he can think of as a field of jagged rocks and debris, surrounded by the loneliness of space.

The Silver Surfer is silent and unchanged in appearance, and the others can only imagine what happens in the mind of their space-faring friend.

The Hulk is the first to speak, albeit, with a hush and directly to Valkyrie

"Brunnhilde...what's the deal with this big group? Looks like something big has been going on..."

"Aye, Hulk, a great battle has taken place...though I must admit, a portion of it has been erased from my mind, as some force seemed to

control me for a short spell." She answers, and Patsy overhears them, taking it upon herself to inform them.

"She was taken over by something when she took Beta Ray Bill's hammer from him, and the same thing seemed to be controlling Bill when he followed the Surfer here. The force seems to be evil, since whoever has held the hammer has attacked us..."

"Sounds bad...but still, why all the people?" the Hulk asks, confused.

"I, mineself, felt the presence of Beta Ray Bill's Asgardian mallet, and followed it to the battle already taking place." Valkyrie explains.

"What about these others?" Hulk asks, looking over the expanse of mainly familiar faces. Luke Cage, or Power Man. Hellcat .. Valkyrie .. Silver Surfer...someone who looks like Beta Ray Bill, not without the costume...and then that huge woman.....

"Who's the giant over here?" he asks his female friends as he points to the towering woman among the other heroes.

"Actually, that's something I've been meaning to ask her myself..." Patsy says, confusing the Hulk, and she walks over to their newfound comrade and yells to her.

"Hey! Um...Gina! Yeah that's it..." she remembers the woman's name. "Can you come down here for a sec?"

The woman takes notice and kneels down to hear the small costumed Hellcat speak. Patsy shakes her head, "Haha...not exactly what I had in mind. Can you maybe shrink down...like, to normal size?"

"Oh, I guess." She replies almost annoyed, and concentrates only for a moment before shrinking her body down to its usual size.

This is the first time Hellcat, or any of them, have gotten a good look at their mysterious helper Regina. Her hair is cut right at her shoulders, brown and thick, and curving like her body. She appears to be an older woman, but still in her physical prime, and very attractive with her bright green eyes, voluptuous body, and strong but womanly features. The only thing strange about her, besides the fact that she joined the battle randomly\*, is that she did so in completely average street clothes.

(\*Along with the others, Regina Garney joined in the battle with

Beta Ray Bill in Defenders #2. -Will)

Patsy offers her hand, and Regina shakes it loosely. "I go by Hellcat...glad to have you help us out, but I'm sure all of us are wondering...who are you?" The other woman answers.

"I don't have a special name or anything...this isn't usually my type of thing. My name is Regina McB.....er, I mean Garney. Regina Garney." Patsy does not notice the stumble in her phrasing.

"Glad to meet you, Regina." Regina does not echo Hellcat's friendly tone, or even respond.

"Thou claim to not be a hero, yet so freely you joined our battle...why so?" Valkyrie asks, joining the conversation, and Regina sighs.

"To tell you the truth, I was just trying to hurry things up so me and my son could get home." She says, and the Hulk's eyes bulge some as he exclaims aloud.

"You what?"

"Listen, I've had a long day, and Mark and I were coming home from the grocery store when you super heroes' important battle got in the way like usual. I didn't really care, but we couldn't get back to the apartment until this little squabble was done. So I figured I'd help out...and now it seems like everything is done with, so if I can just get back....."

Patsy interrupts her. "Actually, we have a few problems to deal with still, and I'm sure your growth powers could come in handy..."

It then becomes Regina's turn to interrupt. "I don't have growth powers...or at least, this is the first time I've had them, so far."

"What do you mean?" Patsy asks, but Namor cuts into their discussion.

"The explanation does not really matter, but the answer to the question: will you help us? There are still two problems left to deal with...Beta Ray Bill's hammer, and Doctor Strange's attack in space."

The Hulk has wandered during Namor's sentence, and speaks loudly to the others while looking around at the ground. "Where is the

thing, anyway?"

"What 'thing'?" Namor asks.

"You know, Beta Ray Bill's hammer...I don't see it."

Beta Ray Bill walks over and helps Hulk find the frail wooden staff, which the Hulk picks up. "In this form, the presence isn't nearly as strong, but as a staff, I still cannot use its power!" the alien claims, and Hulk looks at it closely.

"This is your hammer? I can't really see anything good about it...doesn't even seem sturdy."

As he says this, the green behemoth strikes the staff on the ground thrice to test its mettle, and as he does so Beta Ray Bill yells, "Hulk, no! The staff..."

But he is too late as another flash of lightning and the sound of thunder are made, and the staff in the Hulk's strong hand changes once again from plain wood to the mystical metal uru, to Storm Breaker, the hammer of Beta Ray Bill.

The Hulk, who rarely yells for any reason besides aggression or anger, nearly screams in agony.

"rrrrrrRRRRRAGGGGH!" The giant creature thrashes about, still holding onto the hammer and drawing the attention of all those nearby.

"Sweet Christmas...everyone get outta the way!" Luke Cage yells, and everyone does so, with or without his encouragement.

Those who took cover wait for some sort of sign to prepare for a fight, one that would be basically hopeless against the world's mightiest mortal possessed. But in their respective positions and places, they hear nothing after the Hulk's scream, and feel no more crashes or rumblings.

Raising her head to see what has happened, Valkyrie frowns and speaks, "What be this? I neither see nor hear anything of danger."

Power Man gets up to force Valkyrie back down into a crouch, but Brunnhilde easily keeps the mortal man from keeping her down.

"For soothe, Power Man...do not attempt to hide me! I need no

protection like some sort of pathetic child. And alas, there is nothing to have protection from."

"Huh?" Patsy grunts, and lifts her head up to inspect the scene, and finds the Hulk, as she had expected. But what surprises her is that the emerald goliath is not raging for destruction, or attacking much of anything for that matter.

"Stupid freakin' hammer...."

Not much of anything besides the hammer itself, at least. He throws it down on the ground and dents the road with their combined power. Beta Ray Bill flinches, and speaks.

"My friend, please...Storm Breaker is not a toy to be thrown about!" the alien says, but Hulk does not answer as Hellcat speaks.

"Hulk? Is that you?" Patsy asks him, as the others join her in revealing their bodies once again.

"Of course it's me...no thanks to this damn mallet though." He says, pointing at said weapon and looking back over at his friends.

"What's the deal then? The thing didn't take you over...?" Luke asks, confused like the others, and walks over to the Hulk and the hammer on the ground to figure it out.

"It's not like it didn't try...I felt something trying to control me, but I forced it out. I was too strong for it."

Valkyrie wonders. "Thou was able to shake that which I was completely taken by?"

"Well, I am the Earth's strongest man."

She frowns. "Dost thou hint at something by 'man'?"

"Huh? What're you talkin' about, 'Hilde'?"

"Listen, it doesn't matter," Patsy begins, "What does matter, however, is that we've got someone who can touch the hammer without being taken over."

"Ya know Patsy, there's something else about that thing..." the Hulk says to her with some sort of discomfort, and Hellcat can hear it.

"What is it, Hulk?"

"The presence that tried to take me over.....it seemed really familiar, like one I've felt before....."

"Do you know who it is? What it is?" she pleads.

"I'm...really not sure." He does not want to say anything too early, but he has a feeling...

"Think, Hulk. You must know, and so must we." Namor eggs him on, and finally Bruce gives.

"Well, I'm not quite sure...but I meant, I've felt it before...when I used to be around Daimon." He struggles to say this.

"What?" Patsy is the first to wonder.

"Daimon Hellstrom...Hellstrom. Your Daimon, Patsy. I didn't want to say anything yet but I think that's who it is."

A tingling feeling rushes through Patsy Walker's body and she is reminded of someone who she thought was gone forever...her ex-husband, and former fellow Defender, Daimon Hellstrom. She lets her mind wander to the thoughts of him as Hellstrom, the Son of Satan, and the last time she saw him...

Namor interrupts this reminiscence, "Hellstrom is involved?" he asks, and Hulk nods his head slightly.

"I'm pretty sure...I have a knack for feeling that type of thing."

Regina, feeling out of place but still shamefully intrigued by their discussion, speaks out. "Seems like everyone in the super hero in the business knows each other..."

"I guess...but it's hard to put it like that." Hulk says to her.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't always define people as heroes or criminals...some people do stuff different. Some of them are bad at times and then good at times, but it's hard to even say what they do is, for good or whatever." Patsy answers for the Hulk, and Regina nods her head, not completely understanding but finding the urge to want to learn more about what they speak of.

"Enough talk," Namor says, and calls the group together. "We must devise a plan to save Stephen, and after that we can have him exorcise the hammer of whatever force controls it."

"Good deal, but how do we do that?" Hulk asks. "None of us but Surfer here can really do much space traveling, and if the guy took out the Doc, then I dunno how Norin would do against him..."

After a long spell of self-induced silence, the Silver Surfer speaks up. "I will fight more valiantly than ever before for Zenn-La's vengeance." He says boldly and plainly, and almost as if to defend his honor.

"I know you will, buddy, but like I said, I dunno what you'd be dealing with," Hulk explains, "The guy easily took Doc Strange, and to tell you the truth, we don't really know what he's done to him since..."

The Hulk's sentence is abruptly ended when there is a short flicker of light, and another more ominous voice speaks.

"I believe you will find out what the good Doctor has gone through to be quite impairing..."

The large gathering of heroes turn to find Stephen Strange's body, floating unconscious in the air, and stripped of his trademark artifacts...the Cloak of Levitation and the Eye of Agamotto. They find that the man floating erect beside him now wields these two things, a young and strong bald man wearing a flowing brown robe underneath the mystic red cape, power seeming to flow freely about his form.

"...though not quite as permanent as what we have in store for you." The man finishes, and smirks horribly. The others react instinctively.

"Stephen...!" Patsy exclaims, and both the Hulk and Namor take their battle stances below their foe.

"This is the guy who attacked the Doc over by Zenn-La...who are you?" the bulging Hulk asks angrily, pointing his strong finger at the man above.

"I'm sure if Stephen were awake, he could answer you. But alas, he is not..." the man answers, once again avoiding an answer.

Regina immediately grows to her enhanced size and strength, and



approaches the mysterious man in the air to strike a giant's blow to him.

The blow is forced back on herself, as Regina hand comes back and strikes herself in the face roughly, causing her to fall down from the power of the blow. Patsy runs to her side, passing by while she approaches their common foe.

"Gina, please be careful...when you're dealing with this type of mystic, you can't just rush him! You have to use your mind and skills..." she says, and Luke Cage agrees negatively.

"That's right, and usually you can leave that sorta thing to the Doc up there...but he's out for now, so who knows what we're gonna do."

"You and the others will do nothing, Luke Cage, as I gathered you all here for a reason. " The man above them announces, and they decide to listen. "For many years I have been gone from this plane of existence, dead to this world and alone in the Astral Realm, as I watched a lesser sorcerer grow happy and gain recognition as a hero, while I wasted eternity as a ghost of a man."

Namor intrudes on him. "A lesser sorcerer? The Doctor is the Sorcerer Supreme...there are few, if any, better than him!"

"Silence." The man responds calmly, and holds out his hand, pointing a long nail at Namor and causing him to grab his chest in pain and fall to the ground, grunting as he does so.

"Woah, watch out there, Subby," Hulk says and catches his partner.

"Now, as I was saying...I could not stand to simply allow this magician to enjoy the fruits of magic after what I had done for him. So throughout my time away, I gathered and absorbed any and all energies in the Astral Realm that I could, until finally I was able to create a new, powerful body for myself in the physical world, and I set out to take what is rightfully mine, and to destroy that which this 'Doctor Strange' has made for himself."

He pauses for a moment, and stares into the faces of those below him. "This is not an attack...this is an execution. Have you not noticed that most of you have all at one time or another been called Defenders?" They look around and notice, with the exception of Regina, that they all have been Defenders at one time or another. "The Defenders have always been the children of Stephen, his pride and joy. If he is without his tools, his title, or his precious creation,

then how can he live?"

"So you're just going to kill us all? What about the Surfer, and the Hulk? They're not that easy to get rid of..." Patsy says, trying to intimidate him.

"It is a mere feat for me to kill this man-monster...and as for the former herald, I've already made sure that, even if he were to survive, his life would not be worth living..."

"What do you mean?" Norin says, as his name is mentioned once again and suspecting the foulest of play.

"I believe you know, Surfer...your precious home is no longer in space, or not as a whole, at least."

The Surfer's rage floods him once again. "You? You destroyed Zenn-La?" he says angrily, zooming close to the man on his fabled board and giving him a look to chill most others.

"It was all a part of the plan, boy...Zenn-La, giving the three original Defenders the same vision of your distress call, providing Beta Ray Bill's hammer with a vengeful spirit, making sure that all of you were gathered here today.....none of you, with the exception of this towering woman, are a victim of circumstance."

The Surfer flies in closer and fires strong cosmic energies from his eyes and hands at the man, but he does so in vain. The powerful man simply absorbs the incoming energies as if they were nothing, and Norin realizes that his foe is more powerful than he imagined.

"All of those people...what did they do to you? What have I done to you to deserve such a thing?" the Surfer cries.

"You are a part of this mock sorcerer's organization, and have been involved in bringing joy to the man's life. That is enough." He answers coldly.

"You still haven't told us who you are." Namor says with some pain, still reeling from his previous assault.

"I?" the man asks, smiling slightly as he says so. "I.....I am Stephen Strange's teacher in the mystic arts, I am sorry to say. I am the one called the Ancient One."

The others below remain silent still.

"Well? What have you to say, before you die?" the Ancient One says.

"Um..." the Hulk speaks first, "I don't think any of us really know who you are, buddy."

"What?" the villain's face looks similar to his former frail body's in his scowl, and nearly yells, "You do not know who I am? The Ancient One, former Sorcerer Supreme?"

The others are silent again for a moment, and before the Ancient One can say something else, they finally answer.

"Well...not really." Patsy answers.

"Hmph.....well, fair enough, children. You may not know my greatness, but I am sure that you are quite well acquainted with the being within Beta Ray Bill's hammer, the Storm Breaker."

And before anyone can inquire as to who exactly is in the mallet in question, the Ancient One holds out his hand, in the direction of Storm Breaker, and the hammer begins to float in the air just as Stephen Strange's body does. The weapon slowly glides over to the Ancient One, animated by the touch of magic's unseen fingers. The gathered heroes merely look on as this occurs, and finally Storm Breaker reaches the Ancient One and holds its place seamlessly in midair.

"You may now reveal yourself, Daimon. I am sure you need no introduction."

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### **Elsewhere...**

Where there once was an empty alleyway, there is now an inhabited one. The thick form of a sword-wielding character is shrouded with the overbearing buildings around him when he drops as if from nowhere onto the welcoming ground.

"This...this is New York, once more, not England," says the man in a rather archaic fashion. The not-so-distant sound of quaking and loud voices pricks his ear before he may even fully realize his placement.

Thus he runs off towards the direction of the sounds, his cape

flowing behind him as the breeze blows through it, leaving the alleyway once again lonely.

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There is a shaking within the floating hammer. From its very core comes a rumbling accompanied by a swelling high-pitched scream almost like a violently strong whistle, and within a few short seconds buildings nearby lay in jagged ruins, sidewalks are cracked beyond repair, and the shards of glass from shattered windows sprinkle around the onlookers below as a shower of beautiful, menacing crystals. The sound created is deafening, and Regina turns to the crowd and her home.

"My apartment!" she exclaims with worry, distracted from what occurs in front of her. Regina turns back when the strong, ominous voice takes her ear.

"Your...apartment? It is nothing."

"And who the Hell are...y.....oh..." Regina retorts angrily, stopping herself when she sees the man, or creature, or whatever it is in front of her. The others look on at him too, with astonishment. And Hellcat feels sick to her stomach.

The lightly red-haired being stands tall and noble with an air of heat and madness radiating about him. For some reason, he smiles, revealing a fanged set of teeth.

"Who the Hell, indeed. I am the Son of Satan, little woman, and the Ancient One has released me from my place of imprisonment upon this Earth, and upon you and your friends first."

A wide-eyed Hellcat stands among the others before the man, or half-man, that she once called friend, lover, teammate...husband. Among the mix of emotions she feels is a suddenly conjured memory of the feelings she once had for him in a time that seems quite far away from this moment, all found in the burning eyes of the fiery devil-spawn. Daimon Hellstrom, Son of Satan, Hellstrom...all these and more are the names for this being, and Patsy Walker is frozen beneath his presence.

"I figured it was you, Daimon...You left us a loooong time ago, pal," Hulk states, standing still but ready below the three aloft figures, "And it doesn't look like anyone's too happy that you're back."

"Yet he is returned, mortal, and he is under my power to end you

all." The Ancient One claims proudly.

"He is the Son of Lucifer, Ancient One!" Valkyrie adds, herself, "He is under no one's hold but his own!"

"Hold your tongue, Asgardian. You obviously do not realize the power of one who was once mentor to your sorcerer supreme. Daimon was captured under my power before I even left the Astral Plane, and once free, I placed him within Beta Ray Bill's hammer. Possessions are rather common to his blood..."

Still almost frozen in time, Patsy continues looking at her former husband in awe and says to him, very quietly, "Daimon? Is it...true?"

"I'm not one to often speak of truths, woman!" His harsh words are a spear through Patsy's sometimes still girlish heart, and in the pain she feels she fails to notice Daimon's own awkwardness at her question. He raises his cuffed fist, a trident in the other, and flames find form at his fingertips, after which quickly spreading to the seven men and women. They are engulfed with the Hellfire, not burned but lifted in a state of motionless above the tattered streets.

"This is my freedom from the word 'Defenders' ... this is my freedom from all manhood and Earthly ties. This is your END, all of you, and the beginning of a new age for both Hell and Earth." The Devil-Son's tone is as stifling as the field of flame around his victims. "I will be a prisoner or Defender no longer..."

"And for which you will no longer stand, demon!" Ebony black metal shines in the high afternoon sun and the connecting line of Hellfire from Daimon to the Defenders is split. As the seven fall to the ground, each finds a surprising and hopeful sight, the glistening armor and cursed Ebony Blade each making the Black Knight. Hellstrom quickly casts his arm in the direction of the Knight, and he falls from the invisible force of the infernal blow. But he jumps to his feet again with no hesitation, this time blocking another attack from the Hell Prince with his dark sword's blade.

"...Dane?" asks the Hulk.

"Thank God...he's back!\*" Hellcat exclaims while she rises with the others.

(\*Dane Whitman, the Black Knight, appeared out of nowhere in Defenders #2 only to disappear soon thereafter. -Will)

"You try my patience, knight! What power will you have against the might of the Adversary's very blood?" Hellstrom asks intimidatingly, floating closer to the vigilantly standing Black Knight. "And what of the endless mystics of the Ancient One, Doctor Strange's teacher and better? What will you and your sword and your friends have against that?" Daimon's face is directly in front of the Knight's, so close that Dane can smell his sour breath and feel his acidic spittle splattering on his helmeted face.

"I have only my skills and my sword, Spawn of Satan, as ever," Dane states, raising the sword with his gloved hand, "But that sword is the Ebony Blade, which may carve even the most mystic of things! Have at you!" With these words he spins his arm and hurls the Ebony Blade, missing his apparent target...but embedding itself centered in the chest of the Ancient One himself, who struggles almost helplessly in the air.

Daimon spins to see the ancient wizard, his youth quickly fading in front of his eyes, and with it his power.

"Argggghhh! The Ebony Blade...should have been destroyed long ago, for the sake of all...magic!" the Ancient One says while he tries in vain to pull its piercing black steel from his sternum. An orange-gloved hand finds his while he fumbles with the weapon...

"That's...enough." Those below and the Ancient One himself exhale at the words of the conscious Doctor Strange. He now holds the Ebony Blade, which has on it the black blood of the Ancient One, and thrusts it deeper into his former teacher.

"Ach!" the magician sputters.

"I followed you once, and respected you...you taught me about my vanity and pride. You changed me. And now you have changed," Stephen tells him quietly, floating in front of him with the sword in his hands, "You've gone mad in the Astral Plane, Ancient One, and your pride and jealousy have gotten you this far, and no farther. You've brought yourself a second death." Coursing through the Doctor's experienced hands, through the sword and into the body of the Ancient One, are energies beyond rational explanation that slowly deteriorate the mad mentor's state even further, until his bones are visible and his skin turns to feeble dust, blowing away to reveal not a skeleton but a translucent twin to the Ancient One's destroyed body.

"Return to the Astral Plane," Stephen says to the disembodied spirit,

"go there and think about this. You'll be there for a long, long time." Like fog on a rapidly heating window the projection fades, and soon all eyes have returned to Daimon, who rises high above all the others on a pillar of Hell's flame.

"The Ancient One's will was not completely my own, but he made a point I cannot deny! I'm no longer bound to you or humanity, Defenders, and this will not be the end." The pillar crumbles into scattered flames that melt the concrete itself and open a gaping, burning hole in the ground that opens to the nether regions of existence itself. He slowly descends into the orifice, like his fallen father did long ago, and yells maniacally.

"In Hell, it will NEVER end." And then he is gone, and so are his flames and all other traces of his being there, besides the giant, smoldering injury to the New York Street.

As if they were all told to do so, each of the eight assorted people gather around to look through the smoke of the hole into its endless depths. Three women and five men stare into the freshest mark of Hell on our plane, some tired, some heartbroken, some triumphant. Eight faces present themselves to the darkness...and find a temporary ending to their dilemma.

Amidst it all, over the buzzing of the crowd rear to her and the others, Regina finally asks something sheepishly.

".....What's a 'Defender'?"

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### **A Very Private Corner of Hell...**

He meant what he said, didn't he?

He really does want to rule both Hell and Earth, and finally, Heaven. He really does want to destroy everything down to the final thought of the Defenders. He really does want to finally exercise his full rights as the Son of Satan himself?

Maybe.

But he also misses the companionship of his friends and the lower rodents called "humans." He misses the thrill of adventure and battle for what should be Good. Most of all, he misses the touch and voice of a recently remembered embracing, red-haired goddess whom he

cannot shake the thought of...

Daimon Hellstrom, the Son of Satan, meant what he said, didn't he?

No...he didn't. But he is the Prince of Lies, and it is his place to do something like that. He broods on his twisted throne, three-prong fork in hand...and he waits.

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***NEXT ISSUE: The three original Defenders hold a meeting, people come and go, while a twisted sideshow carny haunts the countryside of Colorado and Hellcat is given an offer that is hard to refuse...all this and possibly more in DEFENDERS #5.***

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Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #5

### "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR" Prologue: Flame Surrounding the Storm

by Will Short

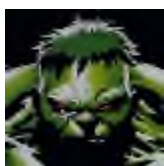
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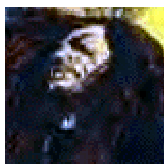
Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Hellstorm



Hellcat

*Recently in "Defenders":* The force within Beta Ray Bill's hammer was revealed to be none other than former Defender and Son of Satan Daimon Hellstrom. The foe who battered Doctor Strange at the former site of Zenn-La, Strange's former mystical mentor the Ancient One, had paired with Hellstrom to destroy the Defenders entirely from jealousy and madness, but the Black Knight's sudden reappearance and Ebony Blade destroyed the Ancient One and sent Daimon fleeing back to Hell, leaving ten assorted heroes exhausted and confused on the streets of New York...

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#### *Interlude* (Little Rock, Colorado)

The bitterly freezing breezes blow softly through the tall trees that dot the side of the street, chilling even the cold white snow that has collected on the wise plants. The nipping air easily finds its way through the jackets of the three young boys, all brothers, who run along this street, overjoyed with the first considerably snow of the year and the beginning of the long weekend they have planned ahead.

They are running, and even they do not know where or exactly why. They are too happy, though, entranced in the mood that the weather brings them to give it even so much as another thought.

"Free from it all!" declares the youngest as he runs ahead of the others, his turquoise jacket accentuating his youth as he jumps into the air and twists with his arms raised to the sky. "Seven inches of snow, no school, and the holiday break coming up in just a few



**Valkyrie**



**Silver Surfer**

weeks...this is great!"

"We only get this for four days, Adam," says the young man whose age lies between the two others', and who runs considerably slower than the others. His voice is slightly monotone. "Then we go back to school and the living Hell begins again..."

"John, just shut up," the oldest finally orders while he keeps up with Adam. "Four days is enough time to get plenty done, so just keep it to yourself if you're gonna mope, okay? Me and Adam don't have to take you along, you know...you're old enough for mom to let you go on your own."

"Yeah," Adam echoes, "Me and Pete don't have to take you along, if you're gonna be all sad." He points to John and with innocent concern he adds, "You shouldn't say the 'H'-word, either...not unless it's for church."

"Why the Hell not?" John asks quite blatantly, and smiles slightly for the first time at his younger brother's reaction.

"John! Pete, make him stop..."

"Just leave it alone. It's not that bad a word, and he's just going to keep on about it anyway, so both of you just keep quiet and don't bug each other." He takes a rejuvenating breath from his sprinting and then comments more quietly. "I swear, you two have most amazing ability to spoil a perfectly good.....

".....Weekend." He finishes his sentence as they come to a shrouded brick wall and halt at the sight of it. Without realizing it, they have entered an alley none of them remember seeing before in their close community. The realization brings a quick chill to their already frozen bones.

"Now look what you guys did," the elder brother says, ready to turn around and restart their aimless running. "You were arguing so much you made us lose our way..."

Pete thinks for a moment while the others wait in silence, and he scratches his brown hair in deep thought.

"Actually...I don't even remember where we were going."

Uncomfortably, the youngest brother agrees. "Me too. Was it the library?" And John rolls his eyes, scoffing.

"The library...I'm glad *I'm* not in second grade anymore."

Before Adam can even begin to retort, Pete holds up his hands to halt them.

"Everyone just shut up for a minute..." His breathing has become deeper and less fulfilling.

"Listen, I don't care where we were going, but there's nothing to do here, and...let's just go, alright? We can argue about where we're going later," he finally manages to spout, sounding less confident than before.

"Yeah...okay." Adam, for the moment, has nothing more to say, and the third of them concurs.

"Let's get outta here. I don't like this place..." Adam turns to begin leaving, and as the others follow, they find the same thing he has found:

The end of the alley, or an end of the alley, in place of where they had entered it.

In unison they all look back to the other end of the alley and find the same scene as before, shadows and all, and from the darkness a figure seems to manifest itself from the very fabric of the absence of light, making the brothers jump.

"You don't like this place, little boy?" the figure asks, remaining in the hiding confines of the darkness. "And I thought *every* little boy liked the circus..."

"Circus...?" Adam asks under his breath. Pete steps forward, albeit timidly, and tries his best to sound confident.

"W-Who are you? And what happened to the alley...?"

Pete leaves it at that and the figure steps out of the darkness, revealing himself. His long, frizzy black hair lays past his shoulders, clad in leather and black silk. The top hat atop his head blends into the place of his origin, and below it is his deathly pale face, the only coloration of which being the black circles painted around the man's piercing eyes. He is skinny, and not particularly tall nor all that short.

"Oh, this isn't an alley anymore..." he says in his raspy voice and

drawing nearer to the family, "This is the front entrance to the circus."

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean..." John says, then passively turns away from Pete's quick glare.

"What circus? There's a circus in town?" Adam asks gleefully, mirroring the mysterious man's advances.

"Of course there is...this circus is always in town, no matter where you are. Do you want to see it?" the stranger asks.

"Stay back, Adam...you never answered me. Who *are* you?" Pete asks as Adam ignores his suggestion, inching closer to the man and the dark wall, which looks to be more a black door than a wall now.

"My name's Alice." he finally tells them.

"Alice? That's a stupid name for a guy...sounds kinda gay..." John comments, and Alice looks on to Adam walking the other way.

"Maybe I think 'John' is a stupid name."

"How did you...?" John asks, but Pete directs his attention to their brother as he reaches out to the liquid wall of shadows that has formed out of the brick.

"Adam, no...!"

And then he is gone completely, leaving the two brothers with their strange captor, who looks them over as if asking a question.

"Well?" he adds to the look.

"Fine. Let's go, John..." Pete says, grabbing his reluctant brother's arm and dragging him into the swirling abyss. As they enter, Alice follows, and suddenly the alley is normal again, lit by the dim winter sun and made of bricks once more. The first thing they see on the other side of whatever they passed through is a sign.

"Welcome to Wonderland."

***End Interlude***

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*New York, New York...*

"This is...stupid. Stupid and crazy..." Regina Garney says apprehensively while Doctor Stephen Strange, the Hulk, and Hellcat all crowd around her.

"The Defenders obviously need to be together again," Patsy Walker, the Hellcat, tells her, "And you need to be a part of it."

"You don't even *know* me!" the mother exclaims, "I'm no hero...I hate super-heroes, you can ask anyone."

"It's your own choice whether or not to put your abilities to good use," Doctor Strange's wise voice speaks. "Unluckily I wasn't...around...to see what you did, but some of the others have told me that you joined the fight by yourself, and your powers are something to speak of as well."

"Listen..." Regina begins, and slowly begins recapping what has happened over the past day. "I just wanted to help get this over with so me and my kid could get home...I didn't mean to get involved in it this long, and when that...man, or whatever he was, destroyed my home it probably destroyed just about everything we own.\*" She makes a sour frown and passively folds her arms. "That's why I've never done anything with my powers before...I just knew that something horrible would happen just like it does with all you super-types...and now me and Mark have nothing, and what's been accomplished?" Her voice subsides slightly near the end of her sentence, and she looks down to the ground.

(\* Regina joined the fray in Defenders #2, while the Ancient One destroyed her apartment in Defenders #4. -Will)

"I don't think you understand the ramifications of what happened just now," says Doctor Strange, "But nonetheless, any number of people were saved today. You were a part of that, Regina..."

Before he can take his sentence any further, the air is interrupted with the shrill call of a young boy sprinting their way on the cracked pavement, his eyes spread wide as his bright eyes.

"Mommy! You and the tights-men saved the day!" he cries joyfully, jumping into his mother's loving embrace.

"Something like that..." Regina replies almost indifferently, holding her child tightly to her body. Mark pulls away to look her in the

eyes.

"What're we gonna do about our house, mommy? The bad man blowed it up." Regina's eyes droop even more sorrowfully as she strokes back a stray lock of his unkempt blonde hair. "I...I don't know, honey. We'll think of something..."

A hand finds Regina's thin shoulder, and she looks over it to see attached to the hand the caped form of Doctor Strange, who smiles warmly at her and her child. "I have a place," he says almost jokingly at the reference, "It's rather large...the both of you are welcome to stay there as long as you like."

"We could always use another powerhouse on the team," the Hulk adds playfully, "None of these others have even put up a good fight against me."

"That's not my power..." Regina answers, standing with Mark's hand in hers, "And I'm still not joining a silly super-team. This has taught me that nothing good can come from it." Passing her first comment away, Stephen reiterates.

"I wish you could reconsider," says Doctor Strange as he smiles again, "But the offer remains whether you join us or not...my sanctorum is open to you and Mark."

The sorrow seems to lift from Regina's face slightly and she almost manages a smile with Mark's warm little hand in hers.

"That's...really nice of you to offer, but we couldn't impose..."

"There would be no imposition at all. As I said, it is a rather large place with enough room for many guests...and I have a feeling I'll be having a great deal of those visiting, anyway." He motions to the loosely assembled plethora of godlike men and women gathered in the surrounding area.

"Speaking of which, Stephen," says Patsy, who has turned to said group of assorted figures, "What exactly is the status of the Defenders? I mean, we never really were the most organized of groups, and there are a lot of people here..."

"I've already begun thinking of this, Patsy," Stephen claims easily. "I believe some discussion is in order. If we can all return to my sanctorum, we may be able to make some headway while Regina and Mark decide whether they wish to stay with me or not..."

"I will not be returning with you, Stephen." So proclaims the metal-tinged voice of Norin Radd, the Silver Surfer, who overheard the wizard and approached him with his gleaming board and the alien Beta Ray Bill, his mallet Storm Breaker returned to him, in tow.

"Norin...I..." Strange begins to say, and is interrupted yet again as the Surfer raises his hand.

"No...please spare me your words for the moment. I do not wish to sound rude, Stephen, but I am in no mood for discussion. I have many things to sort out at the moment...one being that I cannot stop thinking about my home and its people\*. I have reason to believe there may be some survivors, and even a small chance is enough for me to scour the stars searching them out." He pauses for a short instant. "I cannot always be here dealing with Earth, Doctor, and I hope you have realized that." To this, Stephen nods somberly, and the silver-plated rider speaks again. "Beta Ray Bill has offered his aid in my search...I feel it is my rightful place to do so. I hope you and the others may understand this," he says, searching for acceptance in the eyes of his longtime comrade.

(\* The Surfer's home planet of Zenn-La was destroyed by the Ancient One immediately before Defenders #1. -Will)

"Of course, Norin," Doctor Strange says to him. "We will miss you...but I understand your need, and I'm sure the others will too."

"I'm gonna miss you, Surfer," Hulk reveals, offering a mighty green hand to the shining former herald, who takes it in an almost equal grip. "The old team won't be the same without you." Climbing onto his board while Beta Ray Bill swings his mystical hammer to prepare for flight, the Silver Surfer looks down on his friends with a melancholy, barren eye. "And I will miss you...perhaps I will return to the Defenders someday, but even I am not certain of it. Farewell..." With that, he and the Norse-endowed alien fly swiftly into the sky and ultimately out of the orbit of our planet, leaving eight varied figures watching intently from the battle-razed site.

"He's not very...'balanced', I guess, right now, is he, Stephen...?" Hellcat asks quietly, still looking to the place where she last glimpsed the Surfer.

"He never really has been, has he?" is his reply, said without malice. "Bill may be able to anchor him some, but that's all I can hope, besides that the Surfer never finds the Ancient One, for my teacher's own sake." His own tired eyes return their stare to Regina and her

son beside him, and he speaks to her invitingly.

"So? Will you at least visit my home and consider a stay while the others and I talk for a bit?" His mustache curls slightly above his smile which offers friendship as well as shelter, and Regina looks down to her son.

"Mark, do you want to take a trip to the magic man's house?" she asks him, and he grips her hand tightly as he answers with a resounding, "Yeah!"

"Then take hands, all of you," he says loudly to the group, "We will retire to my quarters to rest...and for some of us, to talk." As they gather, Brunnhilde the Valkyrie smiles a true warrior's smile at Regina, and says to her, "I verily hope that thou may take to our numbers...I would be proud to battle alongside the likes of such a valiant warrior, and one so strong, as well."

"...Thanks....." Regina says apprehensively, "But like I said...that's not really my power...or at least not always."

"I do not follow," the Valkyrie says, but Regina only shakes her auburn head.

"Don't worry about it for now." And the warrior goddess does not.

So, under the mage and sometimes leader's suggestion, Hellcat takes his hand and so does Mark, already clinging to his mother. The Hulk joins, as do Valkyrie, Luke Cage, and Namor, who all at once disperse their respective images into the air and take to a magical flight of particles that many have never experienced and never will have the chance to, beginning a journey to a place that many have never visited and most likely never will have the chance to. They are the select that may do so...though some are more appreciative of the feeling than others.

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### ***Second Interlude*** (Hell's Kitchen, New York)

He is an angelic guardian wrapped in the guise of a devil. He is fearless and without inhibition. Nothing may stand in the way of his protection for the dark city corner he has named his lair.

He is Daredevil, the man without fear, and his right foot just broke a



man's jaw.

"I told you...how many times? Three? More?" the Daredevil asks without a smile, though his words hint at sarcasm. He lands, again ready to strike with his billyclub clenched tightly in his red-gloved hand. Behind him stands, rather staggers, a man known to most of Hell's Kitchen as Slick Rick Arknoff, grasping his shattered mouth under calloused hands.

"Nah...naw, Dehdvil...ah jus cum to see ma kid..." says Slick Rick, straining under the pain and unable to form his words. As he lies though a mouth quickly filling with blood, Daredevil relaxes his stance and walks over to him slowly, looking on him with pity.

"Rick, I told you to stay out of the Kitchen...it was a part of the deal. You gave me your promise." He puts his strong hand on Rick's back as he bends over to vomit a colorful, pungent mixture of alcohol, blood, teeth and stomach acid. "Then you not only try to sneak in under my nose, but you run from me *and* pull a gun on me. I didn't want to make it worse, Rick, but I can't keep having this happen. I can't have you dealing in my town...and I *hate* guns."

Once his stripped stomach is done emptying itself, Rick slowly raises his torso and looks past Daredevil's crimson, chiseled face to the evening sky, already losing the day's light. High atop the roof where the red man chased him, and knocked his gun loose before he could even fire it, and broke his jawbone, Slick Rick frowns crookedly.

"Ah...ah just wannad ta see...ma kid....." he echoes from before.

"You can't see Travis or your wife for another three months...you know that. If you'd just wait, we wouldn't have to keep extending it." He sniffs the air and holds out a hand palm up. "And stop lying to me. Hand it over, Rick."

After a moment's hesitation, Rick sighs and reaches into his brown coat's inner pocket and retrieves from it a small plastic bag filled with shining white powder, then waits again before slowly placing the bag in Daredevil's open palm with a trembling hand. Daredevil shakes his head and walks to the edge of the roof to pour the sugar-like crystals out. As they are caught and blown away by the wind, Rick flops to the edge and falls to his knees, moaning like a wounded animal.

"The stuff is no good for you, Rick. You're lucky this is all I'm

doing...they would tear you up in the courtroom if I turned that stuff in, and you'd probably never see your family or even the light of day again."

"Ahhh.....ah no...ah needit."

"What you need is rehabilitation and some time in a jail cell to think." Turning from Rick, Daredevil paces in that direction, continuing and sighing. "My fault, really...but Dina begged and begged me, and then Travis...well, you've got a great kid and wife, Rick, and I can understand why you'd want to see them, but this isn't going to be the way to get there. I guess I just hoped that someone could change but..." Suddenly, he stops, and perks his keenly acute ears to the slowly frosting air.

There is still a heartbeat...it's increasing, pounding like it will burst from his chest, and seeming to get further and further away.

"Rick...?" he asks again, and turns. Daredevil's radar senses no figure at the edge of the roof.

He runs to the side, and sends his radar out again...only in time to hear the splintering of bones, so much that they turn to dust and make a very unique smell like friction and death. Daredevil hears the liquidation of Rick's internal organs and muscles...he tastes the blood particles that have hitched a ride on the wind's back. "Rick..." he says a final time, whispering the man's name as he kneels on the edge of the twelve-story New York building, where Slick Rick Arknoff was last seen living.

After moments of thoughts drenched in pity and guilt, possibly a little relief that comes with the guilt, Daredevil jumps down from the building in a graceful flip, landing on the darkening street where few walk. He ignores the puddle that used to be a body on the ground nearby, and while some many think he is lucky that he cannot see it, they have never experienced a completely dismembered body through superhuman senses.

Nearby, he slowly makes his way to a pay phone, and dials three numbers without urgency. Less than three rings later, an attentive voice is heard on the other end of the line.

"NYC 911 Emergency, this is Jeff."

"Hello....." Daredevil says as his free hand finds its way to message

his temple, "I'd...like to report a suicide."

Minutes and too many words later, the Daredevil is on his way home under the guidance of his swinging club. As he takes the short journey, his mind is ravaged with thoughts of what may have been had he treated simply one past situation differently, even in the smallest way, to make a difference. The thought, though hindering, does not carry with him long, as he has trained himself to somehow accept what has happened almost no matter what it is. His apartment is within sight now, and he anticipates the rest, even if constantly interrupted, he may find there. Of course, tomorrow he knows he will have to tell Dina and Travis.....

The window cracks open and he crawls inside slyly like a thin spider. The one he has chosen this time leads to the kitchen, with its tiled floors and not-so-stainless counters. Feet on the ground, Daredevil begins to peel his second skin from his face as he walks into the next room, his dark living room.

Before he may sit on his couch, Daredevil jumps at the phantom voice behind him.

"Well...you certainly took a while getting home, didn't you?" it says, causing Daredevil to flip and return his mask to face the source of the voice. It is strange...he heard no heartbeat, no breathing or movement, and still hears none of these things, only the stranger's voice.

"Come now, Matthew, there's no reason to put that on. We're all friend here, after all." From the other side of the room Daredevil senses a thin, medium-sized male, though the state of the man...or whatever it may be...is in debate, without any audible or otherwise signs of being there besides the protector's acute radar and hearing.

"Alright. You know who I am, you got into my apartment without me knowing, and you've somehow managed to cloak all ways I could possibly identify you. You have five seconds to tell me who you are, what you want, and how you got in here....." He speaks confidently, only to hide the strange nervousness he has suddenly found.

"I won't be needing that much time to show you, Matthew."

"Don't call me that. And show me what? Obviously you know my condition, if you know who I am....." But the solid cold slowly creeping around Daredevil's limbs is more imagery than he could

ask for. He struggles, though in vain, and the stranger steps closer to grab one of the Daredevil's engulfed arms as the dark crawls up him like chilling vines.

"It's time we showed you a little scare, don't you say?" Muffled groans are all that escape the Daredevil's mouth, and the pale man with raven black hair smiles. "I knew you'd say that."

As the two are absorbed in the shadowstuff, Daredevil feels himself being almost pulled through some sort of opening in existence. The feeling is not unlike pulling a wet rag through a hole that is too small for it...though the red-suited vigilante is more than a rag, and the hole he is being pulled through is more than ordinary. With that in mind, a rag would put up no purposeful resistance to its pulling. Daredevil, however, has no intent of letting that happen.

His mind clouds with the inky substance that has engulfed his body, but the force that attempts to wrench him elsewhere finds another acting against it, something based internally of its target...

"Get..."

Something burning red with violation and contempt...

"...Out..."

The willpower of a strong man...the iron will of Matt Murdock, the Daredevil.

"...Of my *HEAD!*"

He somehow finds the strength to lift his limbs and grab at his temples, writhing in the agony of the battle taking place within his mind. His refusal to give in is the only true weapon he has, and in the end, it makes him the victor...though not before the darkness finds a hidden corner of his collective thoughts long left dusty and untouched.

More suddenly than they appeared, the thin man and his darkness is gone, and Daredevil is alone in his living room, eyes dilated while trembling, kneeling...recounting countless nightmares that may or may not have ever existed before this night. In theory, Daredevil has nothing to worry about...he is the man without fear, after all.

But along with Daredevil there is Matt Murdock...only a man, a blind lawyer, and every man has his own fears, inside and out, to

face.

### ***End Interlude***

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#### ***The Innermost Depths of Doctor Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum...***

"All I know is I'm not going to have a damn UN sanction or reserve members of anything, if I'm going to be a part of this. That's not what we're about..." These are the words of the incredible Hulk, sitting cross-legged with a dwarfed cup of steaming coffee hanging from a single green digit.

"I agree, and I think that's precisely it: we're not about anything in particular except for...well, 'defending'." Doctor Strange concurs. "The Defenders have never been a celebrity-filled, public country club, nor a secret society like all the Xs.....we've been.....a rotating family, to put it one way. We have what we need and who we need when we need it."

Namor sits forward in his own chair at the triangular table, placing his hands open on its unknown wood. "This is true, my friends, that can also be said that that is one of our faults. How many times have the three original Defenders returned from distractions to find new faces we have never seen before with our name?"

"That's really of no concern," Strange tells the Atlantean prince, "Because in each case the new members have been very capable allies and most ended up being valuable, good friends. It doesn't matter to me whether they have our blessings or not...we are not the only people who have proved ourselves Defenders."

"As much as some of us might want to think that..." the Hulk adds quietly, looking away from his friends.

"I am not suggesting that we keep others from joining...in fact, I believe it would be good for the team to have such an experienced warrior as Warbird in our midst..."

"Stop thinking with your..." Hulk interrupts, but is overpowered in speech by Namor.

"I was not *finished!* I am not suggesting we admit no new additions...I *am* saying that to be successful we must have some sort of order, some sort of leadership and guidance!" says Namor,

banging a now closed fist on the three-pointed furniture, luckily for itself being sturdy enough to withstand his relatively weak blow.

"I kinda miss the days when we would just get together when something really needed to happen..." The Hulk says this passively, and Stephen immediately follows it.

"We won't be a tightly held group, Hulk, but we must have some sort of allies waiting on call..." Stephen tells him as Namor stands angrily.

"Why have allies on call? Why not just have a melodramatic herald off in space that may or may not come to aid us, or a woman who has had more lives and identities than the devil himself?" The sarcasm in his words is uncommon for the prince, but it reaches the other two, especially Stephen for some reason, quite clearly.

"See here, Namor..." the magician begins and stands, while Hulk stays at the table, his monstrous head supported in both his hands as he stares at the table.

"Maybe we should've had the others in on this one..."

---

### *Elsewhere in the Sanctorum...*

"So...explain this to me again?" Luke Cage says this to Regina Garney across the kitchen of Doctor Strange, as the servant Wong sets a steaming cup of coffee before her on the table.

"Thank you very much," she says to her newly acquainted servant, who merely nods and exits the room in response. Turning back to her captivated audience, the likes of Luke Cage, the Valkyrie, and the Black Knight, Regina takes a sip of the offering and explains her situation once again.

"I have, really, any and every power you could imagine...every time I go to sleep, I wake up with a new power that replaces the last one."

"How couldst one come upon such a wily and powerful situation?" Asks Brunnhilde, her sword never far from her feminine yet deadly hand.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," Regina answers. "It's been like this for a few years. Just wait and see when I go to bed next...it's been awhile

since I rested."

"And you have no idea how such a thing could be bestowed on you?" the Black Knight inquires, echoing the Valkyrie's own, and Regina shakes her head. "Then perhaps Stephen can help you with that as well...he is rather schooled in the mysterious."

"We'll see. I guess it depends on whether Mark and I stay with him or not..."

Muffled through the thick walls of the room, a high-pitched cry of juvenile astonishment enters the kitchen. "And it sounds like if he has his way, Mark and I will at least be having a long discussion about it..."

---

### *Still Elsewhere in the Sanctorum...*

"Look at *that* one!" Mark Garney's short finger is pointed at the Orb of Agamoto, the centerpiece to Doctor Strange's collection of the arcane. As he runs quickly to it, Hellcat attempts to hold him back to no avail.

"Hold on there, Mark," she says light-heartedly, "We should probably just look and not touch..."

The sphere, resting upon an elaborate podium all its own, reflects the young boy's grinning image while he looks into it. He looks back at Patsy as she walks to catch up with him, still smiling. "Is it a crystal ball?"

Patsy cannot help but mirror that same boyish grimace. "Something like that. The magician, the man whose house this is...this is the most important object in his collection. He looks at it to see other places, even other times if he wants..."

"Really?" he says with wide eyes, then looks back at the ancient glass ball.

"Of course! He's a wizard, remember?"

"Do..." Mark stumbles on his words in excitement, "Do ya think *we* could look at stuff in it?"

"We won't know until we take a look, now will we? Go ahead...let's

see if we can make this thing do what it was made for..."

To Patsy, her words are only pampering, though to Mark they are a promise of things he has only read about. Both stare into the Orb of Agamoto, only one expecting to see anything besides their reflection in the glass. But they gasp in unison, Mark in joy and Patsy in surprise, as crimson clouds begin to form within the mystical item, and within them, images.

"Look!" Mark exclaims, pointing at the swirling now occurring in the Orb. Patsy already is...and she feels her heart skip a beat as she does.

In the mass within Stephen Strange's tool, she sees a face...a handsome man's face, whose burning eyes and regal nose she knows all too well. Behind his image are endless flames mixed into the clouded mist.

"...Daimon.....?"

---

### ***Back in the Kitchen...***

"Agggghhhhhh....!" This time, Mark's scream pierces the wall, and all within the kitchen rise in response, cocking their heads in the direction of the noise.

"Mark?" his mother asks weakly, then with more concern. "Mark!" The four sprint to the neighboring room of Strange's artifacts, opening its large hinged door to reveal a heavily decorated room and, to their initial relief Mark. Only Mark, and he is crying.

"Mark honey...baby what is it?" Regina asks, hugging her son to her as tightly as comfort will allow.

"Where's Patsy?" Luke Cage asks aloud, and Regina looks her son in the eye as she holds him away.

"Mark? Where did the cat-lady go?"

Sniveling and rubbing his eyes, Mark Garney takes his time to answer, but finally does with frightening truth.

"The fiery man in the crystal ball...he took her!"



---

*At the Founding Defenders' Meeting Place...*

"Did you hear that? That scream?" the Hulk interrupts his friends' bickering and stands at attention. The two look back to him with contempt, more so in Namor.

"What are you talking about? I heard nothing..." the Atlantean Prince claims, to which Doctor Strange concurs through a swift nod.

"Probably because you two were too busy fighting to hear it...it sounded like Regina's kid, from downstairs."

"You must be mistaken, Hulk..." the Sub-Mariner tells him, but even as he does that the Hulk moved his large form surprisingly fast to the door and into the hall.

He bounds down the corridor quickly, despite the absence of any other screams, and the emerald man-monster finally makes his way to what he thinks is the door to the staircase. A turned knob and a creaking door later, he is not so sure.

The door slams shut behind him, and the Hulk sees not a staircase but a room he has never seen in Stephen's gargantuan manor before.

"Huh?" he half grunts, and takes heavy steps deeper into the new location. It only takes seconds for him to notice the creeping feeling quickly climbing up his thick leg...but those few seconds are too long. Within the minute, he is overtaken by a horrible solid form of nothingness, and while succumbing to its grip on him, struggling as he may, he hears the fading laughter of an ominous, raspy voice...

The thin man in the top hat steps into sight for an instant, still chuckling to himself slightly as he speaks.

"Heh...'Hulk smash', indeed."

---

*Final Interlude*

She hopes to God, to someone, that this isn't where she thinks it is...but she knows that it is.

The scent of brimstone causes her nose to curl, and the searing flames make her perspire on the endless ground of hot coals she has found footing upon. Below there are more flames, even more intense, and in them she can barely make out the contorted bodies of people and other creatures she doesn't want to think of. The stairs form one by one in front of her from the red-hot coals. She knows she has no choice.

Seemingly endless, the stairs only take a few long minutes to scale to the highest, floating chunk of rock, her apparent goal. Her heart races, and she almost tires by the time she finally gets there. Then it nearly stops again.

"Greetings, Patsy." His voice...it's something that has haunted her dreams for years. On his throne made of bones and coals, rotting flesh and bat wings, entrails and feces, a three-pronged infernal trident in hand, he beckons to her. He is Daimon Hellstrom, the Son of Satan...and he is smiling at Patsy Walker, once his Hellcat.

"What...do you want, Daimon?" She struggles to find a brave tone, and fails. "Do you want to kill me and the others? Or just take revenge on me..."

The look of hurt in his eyes is at least partially sincere. "Why no, Patsy...I do not want to kill you, or hurt you. That is quite far from what I wish to do..."

He stands suddenly, and Patsy backs away slightly. His arms stretch out, seeming to engulf all of Hell around them, and he proclaims in a proud voice, "I want you, Patsy, and..."

"I want to offer you my kingdom."

*End Interlude*

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**Next Issue:** Daredevil seeks the aid of the Defenders, the Hulk undergoes a surprising change, and the Defenders become involved in something more than any of them realize. Plus, Patsy must make the hardest decision of her life, and the return of four familiar faces...all this and more in ***DEFENDERS #6!***

Send comments to "Defending Lines" at [WeekapaugB@aol.com](mailto:WeekapaugB@aol.com).

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...



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## Issue #6

### "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR" Chapter One: Matters Of Their Own

by Will Short

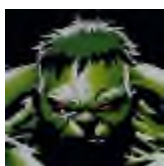
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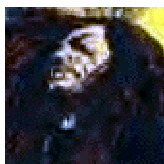
Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Hellstorm



Hellcat

*Recently in "Defenders":* The enigmatic entity calling himself "Alice" attempted to engulf the vigilante known as Daredevil, an experience that the protector just narrowly escaped. Meanwhile, at Doctor Strange's sanctum sanctorum, the three core Defenders discussed the state of the team as the others joined Regina Garney and her young son, Mark. During this, Hellcat was forced into Hell, where she found her former husband Daimon Hellstrom, the Son of Satan, who offered her all of Hell to join him. The same force that attacked Daredevil overpowered and captured the Hulk at Strange's sanctorum, where the guardian of Hell's Kitchen was last seen headed...

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#### Wonderland - *Hulk*

It feels like nothing. Nothing at all. And the void is gradually replaced by...

"...Ughh...Wha--?" The Hulk lifts his head with neck muscles capable of moving mountains. His eyes take a short moment to adjust, and they find a plain room with wooden, windowless walls, all covered with varied papers, themselves covered with numbers and letters scrawled onto them without care.

The Hulk's gargantuan form is the centerpiece of the stagnant room, sitting in a chair far too weak for his girth that somehow still supports him. He sniffs the stiff, scentless air, then surveys his surroundings. Silence nearly consumes the sound of him standing.



**Black Knight**



**Valkyrie**

He takes lumbering steps around the room, observing the sloppily written notes plastering the almost hidden walls. At first they seem unidentifiable, but as he continues, the Hulk's empty feeling is filled with knowledge of the familiar.

"...'e=mc2'?" Whispers the Hulk to himself, reading on. "Time by Mass equals Velocity...Four times three equals twelve." Taking it in all at once, his breathing increases. "Energy cannot be destroyed."

"All equations...*Facts!* What the Hell is this place?" He says loudly to the room. And then, near his chair where he didn't notice it before, he sees another set of numbers written. He approaches slowly, breathing harder and perspiring. Standing over the number, he allows the stillness to eat away at his hardened shell.

$1 + 1 = 1$

"Equals *one?*" And suddenly, Bruce Banner, the Hulk, finds his entire monstrous body flowing with an enraged vitality, his heart racing and his mighty chest heaving. A primordial growl swells up within him, and with its eruption, he brings his powerful fists together and brings them crashing down on the equation and beneath it, the wooden floor.

"*One???*"

The hole is made. Splintered remains of the ground spin down, down further, through a black night and finally spreading their dusty dominion over a decaying face below. Next it is another, and next to that one, a rotten hand, possibly that of a child. The Hulk looks through his hole and is instantly sobered by the sight. He can only squat there, staring down, in utter silence, as the new clammy breeze blows up into his face, bringing with it the first scent...Death. Putrid, rotting death.

After some startled thought, the Hulk lowers himself from the newly-made floor window and drops down into a sea of corpses. The stench is almost unbearable, and the feel of their desentigrating flesh and bone beneath his heavy steps unsettles him as he begins to walk through the hills. Looking back for a brief spell, he sees no room from which he dropped....Only a pitch black sky, and against it, broken, crumbling buildings and their ruins. Eyes hollow of soul seem to stare on while he walks by, like they were judging him...Or perhaps warning him to go no further.

***crunch crunch CRUNCH***

"Ah--Jesus..." With each step, bones crack and give with his weight. He hesitates, considering an alternative, and in seeing none keeps on.

It seems like hours that he walks among the dead. The entire time, he feels his heartbeat increasing, his limbs shaking with adrenaline...If only the silence would go away. If only if would leave him alone. *Something* must be here, *someone* among this death that seems to be creeping up his spine...

And then...

"...Hello...? Is... *\*koff\** Is anyone there? I can't...S-see..."

There is something.

"...Betty...?"

---

### ***Outside Doctor Strange's Sanctorum:***

*I haven't woken up with many hang-overs in my life.*

*Through law school, I kept busy enough -- Ignored enough parties, really, and kept my head in the books -- That I never really got to experience the whole frat thing.*

*And considering things that have happened before, and the things I see, I could've easily become a drinking man. But I didn't. For the sake of Hell's Kitchen -- For my own sake -- I've managed to stay sober mostly. Mostly.*

A blot of red stands out against the pavement in front of Stephen Strange's estate.

*But once, and this isn't the only time I've been drunk...But once, a long time before Karen passed, we had a fight. It was a pretty bad one, over something stupid I'm sure I helped to provoke. So she left for the night, and there I was, angry and alone, and I was so mad I was afraid I'd take it out on the street...Usually that's good. I was mad enough to worry about it though -- I'm not Castle.*

*So I broke out with the old bottles of wine I saved, since it was the only thing I really had, and had my first bender within the confines of my own apartment, drinking until I...Well, I don't know what I*

*ended up doing. I woke up in the morning, and it was like I was in a horrible dank hole, with my senses all scrambled...*

The blot of red, resembling a man, crawls along the cold concrete with exhausting, relentless effort.

*Waking up that morning, it was like I had to crawl out of that hole, weak and confused...Hung over. I'd never felt so bad before, like a waste. My head was swimming.*

His toned muscles lift a crimson arm, quivering from concentration.

*This is a thousand -- No, a million times worse. I was just sort of shakey at first, but after that battle with the Rhino\* things have just gone hill. All my strength...*

**(\*See Amazing Spider-Man #13 - Will)**

At the door, he attempts to knock.

*All...my...*

His head falls, as does his fist with a quiet knock on the bottom of the door, spent. It is silent outside, silent and still, until the doorknob turns and the door opens, allowing Daredevil's limp head and arm to fall into the doorway at the feet of a surprised oriental, baldy man.

He drops his cup of tea with a crash.

"Oh my..." Wong says, staring at the hero's unconscious form.  
"Oh...My."

---

***Inside:***

"Patsy!" Luke Cage cries, bursting into his host's room of trophies and tools, with Valkyrie, Black Knight, and Regina Garney close behind. "Patsy...?"

Each displays their worry through their expression, Regina's the most intense as she runs past the others towards the frail, shivering form under the shadow of the Orb of Agamotto. She ignores the others, and the scream of her vanished friend, to tend to the young boy -- Her son.

"Mark...Mark, honey, are you okay?" She asks intently, crouching beside him. He cradles his knees to himself like a shield from some invisible horror, burying his face in it without answering. Gina holds his arm, squeezing it slightly. "Mark! Please, God..."

Surveying the room, Brunnhilde the Valkyrie stands diligently with a scowl. "She hast...Dissappeared..."

The Black Knight sniffs the air. "Doth anyone else...Smell brimstone?"

"The kid was in here -- Mark musta' saw *somethin'*. Gina, is he--?"

Luke halts himself. Regina still struggles for her child to respond, but his whimpers and shaking do not stop. His soft, slightly puffy cheeks are stained, with remnants of the salty tears still there. His mother shows her own beginning to form, trying to lift his bowed head to no avail. "...Damn," Says Cage. "I say get the others, 'cause we've got a problem."

"I'm afraid we may have others, as well," Says a familiar voice from the door, and the others find Wong standing there, in his arms a lifeless red form...

"Whu---Whut the Hell is *Daredevil* doin' here? What happened to him?" With those words, Mark hugs himself tighter, rocking and crying.

"...Mmmmmuuuuuhhhh...N...Natas...Caasi...D-D-Devil! Devil!" He screams, with Regina holding him, sobbing as well.

"Jesus, do something, will you? You're all heroes, and something--"

"An ally has just vanished without trace, sister," The Valkyrie says, "And something...Strange, is afoot. And -- And...Od's blood, what is that awful odor?"

"Brimstone," The Black Knight tells them. "I already noticed its presence. Tell me, what carries such a smell?"

"...Daimon." Valkyrie's word resounds, causing Mark's fit to pitch more so. "Good Luke--" The Knight says, "Please, fetch Stephen and the others upstairs. Certainly they can be of aid. Wong, set the man down and see to his health. Brunnhilde...I believe Regina is in need of help as well...?" He trails off, nodding at the mother and child.

"Aye, Knight...Though 'tis not for the sake of thy order." She almost sounds bitter, not noticing as Luke leaves through the door, but looking up when she hears a weak voice.

".....w...w-Where...Am I...At the sanctum...?" Asks Daredevil, his eyes fluttering open to consciousness. Wong quickly sets him down

on the ground.

"Please, rest...You came here searching for the Doctor, correct?"

The Devil offers a meek nod. "Wait, then, while Master Cage goes for him..."

Daredevil reaches up desperately, grabbing Wong and cringing.

"No! I saw...In the darkness, I saw him devoured..." Wong shakes his head.

"Jesus...Christ, what's happening around here? Tell me what happened, Mark...Baby, please..." Regina breaks down in her catatonic son's thin shoulder.

"Just wait," Wong says sympathetically.

"The Doctor and the others will be here shortly..."

---

### ***Interlude - The Throne of Hell:***

She stands in the burning realm, that of the bodiless men, in all its morbid wonder. Yet she can only stare through wide eyes at the devilishly handsome man of flame-colored features, his eyes and hair like untamed candlelight. Once Patsy Walker, sometimes Hellcat, had loved this man --- When he *was* a man, she did. He caused her pain, he cost her years of her life to mental illness, and he...

He had been the death of her. Something that was later rectified\*, no thanks to him. Now, less a man than a dark demi-god, he sits before her in his twisted throne of evils, wanting her love once more...And offering his infernal kingdom in return.

### ***(\*In the now-in-our-continuity Avengers Annual 2000 - Will)***

Daimon Hellstrom, or what was once called that, grips his trident until his reddened knuckles turn pale. "All of it can be yours -- Yours and mine to rule. Together."

"Daimon, I...I don't understand. You attacked us...Tried to kill the Defenders, for God's sake! And your...*'Father'*...He..."

The demonic Hellstrom chops his hand through the air. "My father is detained at the moment, beloved...He has left his kingdom for an earthly endeavour that leaves Hell mine for the offering."

"When he gets back, though, what will happen? And what about the *other* ones...His 'brothers', or whatever it is? This isn't some house you can use for a *party* when *daddy's* away. This is ---



It's *Hell* we're talking about here! I can't--"

"Patsy..." Daimon says more softly, the fire within burning less intensely. He rises from the horrid chair and steps her way slowly. "Patsy. I *assure* you, it is all planned out carefully...All is taken care of, *being* taken care of...That is not for you to worry about." He draws nearer, taking her gloved hands in his. She turns to the side to avoid his hypnotic eyes. "Hell *is* and will*remain* to be mine. It can be yours with me."

"Daimon...Please, it's too much, I don't--"

He pulls her closer. His clawed fingers grab her face with more than a little force, something she subconsciously ignores, peering into his soul. "Haven't you felt it, Patsy? Since we saw each other when we fought -- We even felt each other there. You can't deny that. It is *love*, Patsy, *undying* love. You must accept. It is the only way..."

And like a tree falling gradually with time, they ease into a passionate kiss with heat equal to the place surrounding it. They back away reluctantly with time, looking at each other intently. Patsy's look wanes.

"So? You accept?" The devilson asks with something like meticulous hope in his eyes. Patsy inhales, barely letting the air escape when she speaks.

"Can...Can I think about it?"

The caring drains from his eyes to be filled with fanned fire again.

"Fine," He says, abandoning their caress and taking his seat once more, pouty like a child. "Think about it."

"Daimon, I just--"

"Go. *Think*." He points to her, and in a flash of hellfire she is no longer there, with no evidence to prove she ever had been. The brimstone scent already prominent near the throne peaks.

So the Son of Satan slumps in his place of power, his chin resting on a single, mischievous finger. Soon a tiny, rodent-like demon of faded yellow spikes and fur crawls from behind the throne to his master's shoulder. His scratchy voice tickles Daimon's ear.

"Isss the lady joining ussss, my lord?"

"Me. Not 'us'. It is no business of a lowly demon like you, anyhow. I hear each of your little whispers down there --- You would do well not to spread rumors concerning the ruler of Hell."

"M-My sssire, I--"

"And have them bring me Asmodeus."

"Already, lord?"

"Yes," Daimon says without movement or smile. "I suddenly crave to hear the screams of agony."

### *End Interlude*

---

#### *Doctor Strange's Sanctum - Downstairs:*

Steam flows from the Orb of Agamotto. Its strange odor turns to a more familiar one as the others notice it, taking form in the room like it was alive. Shaping, solidifying, it...

A shapely figure in yellow and blue. Hellcat. "...Daimon...?" She recognizes her surroundings quickly, and they recognize her.

"Patsy! You hath returned...Are you hurt?" Valkyrie says close to her.

"I'm...Fine."

"What happened?" Gina asks by the artifact, no longer spewing steam. "What the Hell *happened*? Where did you *go*?" Looking her way, Patsy sees Mark's huddled body.

"What *happened* to Mark? He looks so pale..."

"This, we ask of *thou*, Patsy," The Black Knight says. "Since thy disappearance, the boy has been as *this*, either deathly still or pitching at the word..." He lowers his voice to almost a whisper.

"**Devil.**"

Suddenly uncomfortable, Patsy stares at the child. "I...I don't know what happened, really. We were just looking in the orb and we saw something in there -- What, I don't know -- And...And then I was somewhere else."

"But *where*, Patsy? And by whose power?" The Knight asks.

"I'm...Not sure..."

"God damn it, you *have* to remember *something*!" Gina suddenly bursts out, standing up and tears streaming down her contorted face.

"Mark is almost catatonic and speaking in God knows*what* because of something that happened in here, with *you* --- Maybe even something *you* did to him!"

"Thou speakest lies, Regina," Valkyrie says, almost shielding Patsy.

"She is a good woman, as I believe thou to be, and she would *never* endanger an innocent tot!"

"She doth seem to remember so *little* though..." The Knight says

offhand, and the Valkyrie turns to him with a blazing look.

"Dost thou care to doubt her as well, Knight? I thought thou a warrior true, but Odin help me, I shan't have *anyone* accuse her in such a way."

"I accused no one! Thou twisted it in thy ill mind to think so."

"I shalt *show* thou an ill-minded Valkyrie's fury by my blade Dragonfang--"

"**Stop** this. *All* of you." A suddenly firm voice halts them all. They turn to see Daredevil sitting up under his own power with a disgusted expression to match his tone. "What kind of team is this, the X-Men? Come *on*...It's a disgrace, all of you 'heroes' together and hardly even able to keep it that way." He says, standing carefully.

"Master Daredevil--"

"MmmmmmmaaaaGGGHHH!" Mark resumes his fit, with Regina taking his side to calm him.

-- Er, sir, you should--"

"No, Wong, this is *important*. More than the last time I came to see you and Stephen\*," He says. "If you can all just stop *fighting* for a minute, I can tell you about something that might *help* with all this madness."

(\**During Kevin Smith's classic run on Daredevil - Will*)

Finally, the tension subsides. Slightly. "So, tell us, stranger," Says the Black Knight.

Daredevil continues. "I was attacked in my own home by something, maybe someone, who knows who I really am. Sometimes that hasn't been so hard to find out, but the way he spoke, and the powers he used...Well, they were more than a street-type in red tights can really handle. I just barely escaped, and by the time I got here to talk to Stephen, I was drained.

"Whatever it -- He...I don't know -- Was, it's name was Alice, and it was *dark*. Something I thought the Doctor would be good with...Where *is* he?"

"He is upstairs with the others," Wong explains, "Discussing things with Prince Namor and Master Hulk. Master Luke went to fetch him...But...He should be back by now..."

"I shalt find them, if I must," Valkyrie says, exiting quickly without hearing Daredevil's pleas.

"Wait a *minute* --- Don't you see...?" It's too late. She has gone.

Daredevil's face turns whiter. "Oh, God...Not already..." He says, looking out the open door.

"What's the problem, Da -- I mean -- What's the problem?" Hellcat asks, flustered. Daredevil turns back around, appearing to look at her with blind eyes.

"We keep together, we keep safe. We leave *right* away, get into a public place..."

"And I hope you've got some friends to call, because now it's just the six of us."

Unseen by the adults of the room, hidden by his knees, Mark stops shivering temporarily...And he smiles.

---

### **Wonderland - Doctor Strange**

The buzz of iridescent light. The cold, hard feeling of a chair. The fake wood of the desk under his arms, and the papers covering it...

He's been here before, long ago.

"What..." Doctor Stephen Strange asks, rubbing and shaking his head, slumped in a chair and dressed in a white labcoat. His eyes can barely stay open, he's so exhausted. Sight comes with short time, and he observes the plain office, decorated with diplomas and certificates.

"What am I...Doing in my old office?" He wonders aloud, finally noticing his clothing and grabbing at it. "I--" He stops. A gradual smile crosses his face. "My old *office*..." He lets the phrase linger.

Looking around his desk, he sees a phone, and presses a red button on it. Soon, a buzzing voice answers through the speaker. "Yes, Doctor Strange?" Stephen's smile brightens.

"Ahm...Yes, Derra, I was just wondering...If I was needed. I think I dozed off..."

"Actually, Doctor, a number of patients need your expertise."

"I'll be right out, then," He says with a joy he lost decades ago.

Rising from the chair he strolls out the door labeled "Dr. Stephen Strange, MD." and into a tiled room, centered by a young secretary.

"Ah, Derra," He says, stretching. "Who needs my help today?" She turns to face him in her chair, looking attractive but slightly...Off.

"Well, Doctor Strange, there's --- Oh my," She says, staring at him.  
"What? What is it?" Strange asks, laughing, looking at his chest.  
"Did I spill my coffee again...?"  
"No," She answers plainly. "It's...Your arms, doctor."  
He pauses. "What *about* my arms, Derra?"

She leans forward, squinting a little. "Well...They look broken, Doctor."  
Looking to the limbs at his sides, he finally sees their mangled shape. The swells of pain cause him to cringe, but the anguish brings his groaning.  
"Unghh..." Allowing his tightly shut eyes temporary vision, he looks to his secretary for some sort of help only to find her continual staring. "W-*What...Is* it?" She pauses before answering.

"Your arms -- They seem to have fallen off."

And Doctor Stephen Strange, MD, suddenly notices the lightness of his torso...And the pools of blood forming on the white floor...

"I'm afraid we're going to have to admit you."

---

### ***Doctor Strange's Sanctum - Upstairs:***

His breathing is heavy, having run up and down stairs for the past ten minutes. Luke Cage's strong body can handle the exercise --- But the hallways seem without end.

"Doc?" He yells, slowing a bit and looking on either side of him. He could *swear* he's been down this hall at least twice already.  
"Hulk? *Anyone?*" His concentration shifts from the hall to his shouting. An unwise thing, when running in the house of the strange.

Pressing on, faster, Luke feels a coldness invade the humidity around him. Before he can truly acknowledge the change...

"...aaaaAAAAAGHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Luke Cage is falling into the infinite darkness with nothing to catch him. He looks up at what looks to be where he fell from, and for a moment he thinks he sees a long, pale face staring down at him.

But it's gone. There's nothing but black.

And back above, a cackle subsides. "I am denied '*Sweet Christmas*'? A shame."

The hall is empty once more.

---

### **Wonderland - Hulk**

The jade monster goes through the bodies quickly, as though they were nothing. He has forgotten where he is, the corpses he is standing on and rummaging through...All because of her voice.

"It's so dark...Please help, if there's *anyone* alive out there...!"

With silent power the Hulk digs deeper, until finally dim light strikes the pale, bruised face of the one single thing that once was constant in Bruce Banner's tumultuous life.

"...Oh my God, is that...Is someone there?"

"Betty...It's me."

"Wh...Who?" She asks weakly, half-buried in the hill of the dead, looking beaten and broken of spirit. "I...Don't think I can see anymore..."

"*Me!*" He cries, "Me, Bruce!"

She stumbles on her words. "B-B-But that's not...True...That's not possible!" Betty Banner almost seems to sink down further into the macabre depths. Bruce reaches underneath to find her hand.

"Betty, I swear, it's *me!* I'm here, now...Whatever happened, I'm here now."

Suddenly, her body begins thrashing violently, desperately. A look of sheer terror has come over her face, which is already assaulted by a flood of tears. "What is it honey? *Please*...I don't know what's happening..."

"M-my...J-Just make it *quick*...Please, Bruce, because you loved me when you were a man...I'm begging, end it *now!*"

"Betty, *what the Hell* are you *talking* about?" He asks forcefully, shaking her. Steadying herself slightly, but not completely, she directs her face to his.

"You know what it is Bruce...God, you *have* to know, to remember...

"You did it, Bruce. You killed them...You lost control, and you...You killed them *all*. And now, it's just me left. So please...Let me die."

Hulk's emerald eyes look up from Betty's deteriorating body and mind. A pain is in his gut, looking to the cloudy, looming sky, which he watches for a long, long time as the rain begins to fall with the first clap of mighty thunder. He can feel her pass along slowly below him. He closes his eyes a tightly as he can.

In doing so, he fails to notice the one thing left untouched by whatever brutal rampage came through this place: A simple wooden sign nailed to a post, black letters sloppily painted on it.

**-WELCOME to WONDERLAND -  
Pop. - 1**

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***Next Issue:*** "Inside A Shattered Mirror" continues with Alice's Wonderland being entered purposefully, more being caught in his web, even stranger events in Hell under the new rule of Hellstorm, and a gathering of Defenders new and old in **DEFENDERS #7!**

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### **DEFENDING LINES**

***Send letters or comments to [WeekapaugB@aol.com](mailto:WeekapaugB@aol.com)***

*"Dear "Defending Lines" Guy,*

*I've been keeping up with the Defenders, but it wasn't until I read issue #5 that I was repared to send you a letter. I've really been enjoying the current direction the book is going. The Defenders have always been a great concept because of the varying personalities and powerhouses that make up the team. Your use of the founding members, especially Namor, Hulk, and Doctor Strange keeps me coming back whenever a new issue comes out. The new additions and familiar faces are great too, however, I'd like to be the first one to cast his vote in favor of Beta Ray Bill returning and joining the ranks. I've always enjoyed this character and haven't eally ever seen a book that gave real depth to his character. I think he's got a lot of potential and the Defenders could really use him. His appearance was one of the reasons I kept coming back to the book. Other than*

*that, I couldn't be happier with this book, I'm intrigued by the "Wonderland" plot and also the mysterious force that nabbed the Hulk. The situation rising between Hellcat and Daimon Hellstrom has the makings of a great struggle for Patsy as well (another character I've always liked). Keep up the great work and I promise not to send any more horribly written letters. Until Namor changes his catch phrase to "Go Yankees", make mine M2K!!!*

*Mike "Webs" Exner III"*

Thanks much for my first "real" letter, Mike. I'm glad you enjoy the classic members, and I hope you like the additions I have planned. As for Beta Ray Bill...Well, he and a certain chrome-covered hero may be playing a part in a big, epic, upcoming plot...But then again, in "Defenders", what *isn't* an epic plot? I think this issue gave you some more of Patsy and Daimon...But that's not the last we'll see of them interacting, I assure you. I'll keep writing, Mike, if you agree to too!

Mike writes "Amazing Spider-Man" here at M2K, and so far has been one of the most prolific and enthusiastic writers we've had (plus one of the best guys to handle Spidey in fanfiction). Go check him out...It's the least you can do.

***-Will Short March 21, 2001***



Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...



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## Issue #7

# "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR"

## Chapter Two: Night Calls

by Will Short

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Doctor Strange



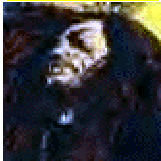
Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk



Hellstorm

**Recently in "DEFENDERS":** Doctor Strange. Hulk. Namor...One by one, the Defenders disappear, most of them removed by the force called Alice to live out their personal tortures. Hellcat has just returned from Hell after receiving a proposition from Hellstorm. While the Black Knight, Hellcat, Daredevil, Wong, and Regina Garney watched her son Mark break down into hysterics at the mention of "devil", they failed to realize that not *all* those missing were taken by the same power...

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This story takes place before [Iron Man #10](#) and [Avengers #8-10](#))

---

**New York City. Knob Hill Apartments.**

**BBBBRRRRRING!**

.....

**BBBBRRRRRING!**

*Phone's ringing.*

**BBBBRRRRRING!**

*...Tired.*



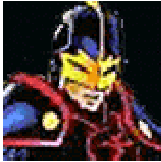
Hellcat

**BBBBRRRRING!**

...Phone's ringing.....

**BBBBRRRRRING! BBBBRRRRRING! BBBBRRRRRING!**

.....



Black Knight

**BBBBRRRRRING!**

"Damn *phone*..." He fumbles carelessly with it from the bed. On his pillow, he murmurs into the receiver. "Hello?" An attractive female voice answers him.



Valkyrie

"...Hello? Is, uh...I'm looking for Mister Richmond. Um, Kyle Richmond?"

"Speaking."

"Kyle? Is that really you?"

"Well -- Don't *tell* anyone, but Kyle's actually been cloned...A few times, really. Each of us is a different part of his personality. Known which one I am?"

"Oh my G-- Kyle, that's not funny! I don't have time to joke right now!"

"It's 'his *sarcastic* side'. Just like that movie--"



Iceman

"**Kyle!** For God's sake, shut up and *listen!* This is *Patsy*."

"...I've known a few Patsies."

"Then this is '*Patsy*' Patsy."

"....."

"Kyle, this is Hellcat."

"...Patsy? I'd heard rumors, but...Man, you never know--"

"I'm not the first to do it\*."

"True. How'd *you* come ba--"



Hawkeye

**(\*Nighthawk found his way back into the land of the living from a coma in Marvel's NIGHTHAWK mini-series. -Will)**



Man-Thing

"Kyle...We don't have time for this! It's a long story, but I'm *back*, the *Defenders* too."

"...I barely recognized your voice, it's been so *long*..."

"Just -- Look, *please*, we're in *big* trouble we don't understand and there's only a few left. We need your help, Kyle...Nighthawk's. Any we can *get*. This thing, this '*Alice*' -- It's already taken Stephen and the Hulk, probably more."

Kyle Richmond lies sprawled in his bed, and as he realizes that the

sun has set, the moon's light hits his face. A low grunt is made, one of resistance. Beads of sweat dot his forehead.

"....."

"Kyle?"

"....."

"Kyle? Oh God, are you *there*? Kyle tell me you're--"

"Yes! I'm *here*, damn it. I'm just....."

"Alright. Alright. Okay...I'll do it. I don't know what 'it' is, but I'll do it. But listen, I'm not exactly the, uh...*Same* Nighthawk I used to--"

"Kyle, we'll take you as you *come*. Can you can talk to anyone else?"

"Like who?"

"I tried calling Isaac but no one picked up..."

"Is-- Christians? Gargoyle?"

"Yes! Can you--?"

"Patsy, I haven't talked to Isaac in...I don't *know* how long. But I haven't even heard of him since...You know, the stuff. On the moon\*. Really I haven't been much in the publ--"

**(\*Referring to Marvel's final DEFENDERS arc, culminating in #152. -Will)**

"It's fine, Kyle...Forget I mentioned it. Just get here fast, *please*."

"At Doc's place, right?"

"Actually, no...Um...Come to the phone booth at One Hundred Eleventh and Main Street."

"...Patsy, what the Hell are you doing there? What's--"

"It's a long story. I'm here with Wong and the other ones left, and we'll keep trying for others...111th and Main...Thanks so much, Kyle. \*click\*"

The noise jolts his ear. He lies there, the silent phone still by his ear, staring up at the dark ceiling. For the moment, it is only a black plane. But lying there, inhaling and exhaling, gritting his teeth, a transformation begins to take place.

"Ghh...Ah-ahck.....GAAHH--"

His body squirms on top of the sheets, the sound of splitting flesh resounding. Still again, he sees the ceiling as a landscape of piercing light and crowded, seething creatures that look on him with fear.

He's achey from lack of sleep. He's tried, but for a time he's not sure of, he hasn't been able to rest -- The night brings form to his inner

darkness along with visions...Visions of times past.

As he rises, Kyle exhales into the stale air in his cubic apartment. The room is illuminated by a horrible, constant light that only he notices. In a particularly bright area, to him, surrounded by otherwise invisible scaled rodents, lays a pile of wrinkled blue and yellow material.

Their whimpers are pitiful as they scurry away from the mound and the approaching figure of Kyle Richmond as its shape alters. His shock white pupils glow gently against red irises. Hoarse, raspy words escape his dark lips.

"I guess it's started, then....."

Kyle holds the costume up to the inverse light, where others would see only the black. He sees what he should.

A hawk, in the dark of night.

*RRRRRIP*

---

### **Interlude. Elsewhere.**

She had only just left the room. Their voices were still lingering behind her when she felt something dragging at her being. She had expected a void.

This is what she found.

"Od's *beard*..." Whispers Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie, looking out over a jagged cliff at the broad plane of gray, dusty hues. great river nearby runs black, like nothingness, and her shining blue eyes follow its trail to a form she knows all too familiar, and the tired souls at its base.

"I've not heard mine name uttered as such in some time. However, when the ship Naglfar ceases its construction, 'tis understandable." The sudden, phantom voice, whose tone is unmistakable to the Valkyrie, causes her to jump. Even as she turns, she can feel the pulsing presence behind her.

A single commanding eye greet her. "Lord Odin!" She exclaims,

then quickly kneels before the king amongst gods. He places an ancient hand on her shoulder, her motion to rise. "Mine lord, why art thou here? Is this not...?"

"There is no doubt that it is indeed Hel, riding daughter."

"...But the dead," She says worriedly, turning again to the ghastly bodies, standing still as death below, to cast her warring arm at them. "Their toenails no longer build the barge of Ragnarok, and they but stand there. 'Tis as though they are without meaning, Odin!"

"And why *should* they have any meaning, Brunnhildde, in the absence of their grim mistress?"

Valkyrie feels Odin come closer, the power burning off of him and warming her from the still coldness around her. "Sire...Thou couldst not mean...." Looking at their lifeless bodies, a collection of husks, she stops herself. She can feel the lack in the underworld, and the All-Father speaks ever true.

"I saved thee from a certain dark fate, just now," Odin says, a comforting murmur as thick as the trunk of Yggdrasil in her ear. "The pale creature would have taken thee, had I no use for thee here. But thou were plucked by mine hand so that thou may see this." "Then thou knowest?" She asks in a hopeful way. "My allies, the Defenders, and this being called 'Alice'..." "Thou needn't worry. 'Tis a base force, one of the simplest, oldest little things upon Midgard. Yon fellow warriors already are gaterhing against it.

"I have no worries for them, though, my Valkyrie. I would not have had worries for thou, either, if indeed the vile thing of fear had been successful in taking thou. Thy defending heroes are of strong mettle..."Tis a *coming* danger that I hath brought though here to notice."

Goosebumps crawl up and down her thick skin. "My lord, I..." "Shhhh...Thou need not but listen, child, that you may begin to understand what is transpiring at this very moment. The land of Hel and its peoples sits motionless, its ruler Hela vanished from her horrid throne. She eats not from her dish Hunger, nor strikes with her knife Famine.

"Think, o' Valkyrie...Wonder. Could such a force truly dissappear for no reason at all, no trace left in its stead? If Hela merely left temporarily, would her peasants stay slack-jawed and taskless as such they are? There is war on the horizon, its outcome unforeseen

even to *this* old god. 'Tis the oldest battle. I know thou will be strong enough when it calls. But thou must *prepare*."

"My king, can thou not *aid* me...?"

"It is not my place to do so, beautiful one.

"Think on these things, mine child of Valhalla. When thou leavest, simply follow the light from outside. Thou shalt do as thou must.....And through Thought and Reason, I shalt ever be watching."

And as Brunnhilde listens to Odin's words echo and fade, she feels that wonderful presence she's long missed ebb until finally, it is no longer there, leaving her alone with an army of common, lost souls.

The Valkyrie takes a final look at their hollow faces, each seeming to meld together with the next, as though they are all one melancholy field of ash.

Chilled a final time, she turns to the white light behind and follows it.

---

## **New York City. 111th and Main Street.**

"Lookit, willya? Freakin' heroes usin' th' payphone..."

"...He saved me once, ya know..."

"Listen, Natasha, it *attacked me*. At my own *apartment* -- I *panicked*. I...What? Well I'm *sorry* I had you safety in mind. I *thought* I was doing you a fa...No. No, look --"

".....*Thought she was dead*--"

"--*Didn't you see that TV special? She got better*....."

"*They always do*..."

"I'm calling you *now* because you're the only other capable person I would involve in this. Sure, take it as a compliment if you want...Take it however you *want*, I'm still asking you.....

".....**Ha!** *Pretty damn pathetic, on the street like that...Figured they'd have the respect to keep it away from the common man*....."

"...*Guy in red's pretty hot, if you ask me...Dardevil*....."

"What the Hell was *what?* Oh, that's just the kid... You know, the *kid*. Oh. Yeah. Okay -- Look, I can't explain it all now, just get to -- Well, I'm relieved to know SHIELD's tracers still work. Right.

'Bye.'

Daredevil hangs up the phone in a nearly silent click that is a bomb dropping in his ears, drowning out the passing, swelling mass of chatter around him. It still doesn't drown out Mark's shrill wailing. Or his mother's increasing heartbeat.

"What did you just say?" Regina asks firmly to the teenage girl. She and her friend look at each other, then at her again, nodding in the scarlet-clad hero's direction.

"Daredevil. He's hot. Not sure why he's--" Mark's blaring sobs increase again, bringing an annoyed look from the girl. "What's wrong with *him*?" Gina's own face becomes darker.

"Gina--" Hellcat begins and tries to keep her back. The mother passes her child to Wong, who holds him with a natural comfort. "What's *wrong* with him.....Everytime you say that word, he gets worse. Don't *say* that word."

"Regina..." Says the Black Knight, but even *his* will is overpowered by that of a desperate mother.

"Daredevil?" The other teenager snickers. "What, is he your boyfriend, or--"

And they all feel it, especially Daredevil, the air around them suddenly humid, almost seering. The vigilante can't see her, but he knows that something is happening as her heart pumps boiling lifeblood at a dangerous pace. The two girls have the priviledge of watching paralyzed as Gina's face fades to a depthless black, her eyes and hair pure flame.

Hellcat watches as well. The fire is strangely familiar to her.

"Gina...?"

The young womens' trembling faces come alight in the transfromed mother's illumination. "Dont *say*.....That *word*." Her breath is dotted with embers.

"Gina, *please*," Daredevil exclaims, injecting himself between her and the cowering girls. "Just *calm down* -- They don't know. Back off, okay?" He says strongly, and gradually, her flame dies down, but only after another look from her glowing eyes.

"...Patsy, what *was* that?" Daredevil asks.

"I slept," Gina answers for her, taking Mark back from Wong and soothing him.

"Toldja he's hot...Just like a real hero!" Comments one of the girls as

they quickly make their exit. In their leaving, Daredevil finds himself aware of a familiar heartbeat, an alluring scent of distinct foreign perfume above that he didn't notice before.

"Seems that I have some competition, red." The voice is like a meticulous and alluring whisper in its raspiness. Stripped from the shadows comes the lithe form in black leather, highlighted by pale skin and lustrous red hair.

Her grace is like nature, seeming to almost float through the air, and once landed, her beauty is just as obvious. "You're lucky I showed up. It looks like you're hardly able to keep your own *group* together..."

"They're not '*my group*.' No offense to anyone, but we're not much of a collection as is. That's why we're making calls."

"Who else, then...?" The Widow asks.

"...Uh, well...*Me*..." Says another phantom voice. Hellcat has already begun to smile before the others acknowledge him.

"Nighthawk!" He hovers in the air, his body barely visible in the dark, arms folded unconfidently. "Well don't just *wait* up there, Kyle..." She says, motioning, "Come down here and--"

She stops. He has already come forward, and as the streetlights cast away his facade, a sullen figure is revealed. It *is* Kyle Richmond, but with two spanning bat-like wings keeping him aloft, he is immediately something new to them.

His skin on the whole looks unnaturally dark, and in a deep crimson from his abdomen to his bare chest is the emblem of his namesake -- Apparently a part of his skin. His eyes are colored similarly, and his hair is unkempt. His fingers taper to sharp claw-points, his only clothing the black leggings.

"That...*Doesn't* look like the same Nighthawk I met a little while back\*," Daredevil says in concern and suspicion.

The Black Knight draws his sword. "'Tis a *demon*...!" He cries, but Patsy holds him back.

"Dane, no! Just... *Wait*..."

"Like I told her--" Kyle says. "I'm *not* the same Nighthawk. Not....." He sees the expressions on Patsy and Wong's faces. He hears the lightened sobbing of the child. Kyle can't help but lower himself to feet above the ground.

**(\*The two met soon after Nighthawk awoke in Marvel's NIGHTHAWK mini-series, only to have Nighthawk kill**



*him and bring him back. - Will)*

"You know about my eyes, DD...How Mephisto tricked me into taking them from him. It looks like the change -- It's kept *spreading* since then. Now I turn into...*This* every night."

"Master Kyle..." Wong begins at the man he's long gone without seeing.

"...We had no idea, Kyle. Are you--" Hellcat asks.

"I feel alright, really. Just sort of -- Different." Kyle's canines flare when he answers.

"This is the best you could do? An under-confident were-demon?" Whispers the Black Widow to Daredevil, scoffing.

"This one isn't *'mine'*...Hellcat called him and the others. *I'm* the one who called my ex-girlfriend into it."

She shoots him a questioning look. "Ex-girlfriend?"

"Whatever. Save it for later."

"Listen Wong, Patsy...*Everyone*--" Nightwing continues over their whispering, "I haven't really gotten used to it myself, and it's not something I -- We need to get into right now. I'm *here* to help, and that should be enough." Kyle looks around in curiosity. "...Is this everyone?"

The answer comes with the powerful gusts of wind coming from above. It sounds like a great engine, a sound familiar to more than a few of them, and a sight known to the world at large.

"Don't *tell* me..." Natasha begins, her hair in a tussle.

The underbelly of the descending Avengers Quinjet opens, and revealed are two faces: the opaque face of the Iceman, and a smug smirk below a mask.

"Picked up Frosty here on the way over--" Hawkeye calls out, letting down a rope-ladder. "Ya want in or what?"

Despite the Widow's next look to Daredevil, each approaches the ladder and climbs, one by one, until they are all within the curving vessel. "Thanks so much, Clint," She says, hugging him around the neck, "And you too, Bobby."

"Don't worry about it, pretty lady," The archer answers, "The A-Team's had a little time to relax these days -- And none a' that for me!"

"Once a Defender, always a Defender," Bobby adds.

"I'm glad you feel that way. Now, *this*," Patsy says, "Is everyone."  
"I should *hope so*," Black Widow says, folding her thin arms.  
"Natasha..." Is all Hawkeye says to her, the red-haired woman responding in kind.  
"Clint."

Daredevil's keen ears have perked though, and he turns his head about. "No -- No, this *isn't* everyone. I only hear eight heartbeats, and there were....." He plucks sounds from the air. "Black Knight and Wong...They're both gone. Right out from *under us*."

"I get the feeling that Dane might not've gone the same way everyone else did\* -- But Wong...God, it's happening without us even knowing it now, isn't it?" Hellcat allows her worry to overbear any guilt she might have underneath.

"Which means that we should probably get going quickly on whatever this is -- And by the way, what exactly *is* that?" Nighthawk asks in his unfamiliar voice. Iceman eyes him, and walks to see his face.

"...Kyle, is that you in there? Kyle Richmond?"

"Don't ask. I don't know what to answer with anymore."

Bobby grimaces with an icy mouth. "Man -- You lose touch for a while and *WHAM*....."

**(\*The Black Knight has been shifting between ancient England and modern times since DEFENDERS #2. -Will)**

"Me and...*DD* can explain on the way there," Hellcat says, taking a seat as the deathly quiet Mark and Gina have done.

"I'm sure *Dee-Dee* has plenty of things to explain..." Black Widow states, sitting next to the red-clad man. Hawkeye has already ventured to the cockpit of the Quinjet, strapped in and readied it.

"Well, since I sorta borrowed this *without* telling any of the other Avengers, maybe you should tell me where it is we're going?"

"To visit an old acquaintance -- I think almost all of us've met him at one time or another. He's probably lonely out there..."

"We're going to Citrusville, Florida."

---

## **Wonderland. Namor.**

He's drowning. But he doesn't know it.

First came what felt like an absence of existence. And slowly, ever

slowly, he could sense rising, a forced feeling, hindered by a weight urging him to sink back down into oblivion.

The invisible force still pulls at his body. Muscles, tendon, and senew wage their battle on the hideous gravity, fueled by his anxiety from experiencing something he hasn't before. His lungs are burning, so he must breathe.

And as he does, it fills him from inside, and he jerks and spasms uncontrollably. His sight shifts to a focus so complete that he can see for miles, perhaps eternally more. It is water, there, opaque and perfect green-blue, falling to shadowy depths as it goes down.

He's choking on the salty water, bitter in his mouth. His eyes closed tightly, he finds himself feeling heavier, and the control his mind has over the body diminishes. The abyss is winning again. He can feel his weakening body sinking down...

Down...

Down...

It would be so easy to give into the relaxing wave of warmth seeping from the back of his head. But the realization comes, and springs him to attention. He struggles again, his throat and head, his *lungs*, aflame. His sight becomes starry and reddened as he lets out a mighty yawp that must carry forever through the endless waves.

But he fails. It enters him again, as big and cumbersome as ever, and he's sinking again. He struggles once more. He fails. Again, and again. He knows what is true, and he's only beginning to grasp it.

He's drowning. Namor, the Prince of Atlantis, Avenging Son -- The *Sub-Mariner* -- Is drowning. And with every breath in what was his native land, he drifts closer to the inky chasm, down...

Down...

.....Down.

Unwilling to yield. Unable to die.

---

**Florida. Outside Cirtusville.**

There is a lone creature, just on the fringes of what we know --  
Where the strangest things are, hiding behind veils drawn by  
normality. They're always there...They always has been. The Florida  
swamplands, just on the edge of civilization, is its mask.

Under a layer of fur-like weeds and flora its eyes are but two  
miniscule embers in the shadows and muck. They observe...The  
sources of approaching voices.

Observe...*Feel.*

*Feel their apprehension. Their worry. Their guilt and indecision-  
and-confusion-and-badpleasuredarkness and --*

*Their fear.....It burns. All but one.*

*Peer around the tree trunk. Quiet -- Watch.*

Observe.

"...So if this 'Alice' guy -- *Thing's* coming out of the shadows to nab  
people, what're we doing in mucksville here?" Iceman looks around,  
observing the dark, bubbling pseudo-land.

"Apparently it doesn't matter *where* we go, now," Daredevil says  
cautiously. "None of us are safe."

"Still, I'll ask again: Why here?"

"Alice.....Is taking his victims somewhere, obviously. I could sense  
it when he -- *Touched* me. I think what Hellcat has in mind is--"

"Shhh," Patsy holds a slim finger to her mouth. "Look." Quietly,  
they peer out into the thick of the wood and there they see the faint  
light of protection. A crimson light.

The darkened trees birth a slothing, gaunt form of green and brown,  
with a pair of ruby eyes above its trunk. It trudges through the mud  
and weeds, a higher form of their own, and stops a while in front of  
the eight.

For moments, they all simply stand there. Then, a child's voice is  
heard.

"Mommy?" Mark asks weakly, and Gina looks down at him in  
shock. The others look as well.

"...Y-Yes sweetheart?" She answers. "Are you...Alright?"

"I wanna use swamp-man's swamp, too."

"What...What do you *mean*, 'use his swamp'?" Mark doesn't answer,

simply turning his head to look at the Guardian of the Nexus. And when its eyes meet the child's, they flare slightly. The creature begins to move its cumbersome arms, albeit quite slowly, conjuring an apprehension in its swamp.

Nighthawk wrinkles his nose in looking at Mark and his mother -- For in the darkness, he sees not only them, but the parasitic demonkind latched unseen onto their bodies. He shakes his head, and tries to ignore them.

"What's that thing *doing*?" Gina asks desperately, hugging Mark tight. "What *is* it?"

"*This* -- Is the Man-Thing. And I think what it's doing..." Hellcat watches on while the air itself begins discoloring and swirling about.

"Aw, Jeez..." Hawkeye places his hand on an arrow.

"It's sending us to help." All but the Garneys feel the pull of the Man-Thing's rift. As they find themselves sucked in by it, Hellcat calls out to the mother and son.

"Get back in the Quinjet and be CAREFULLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL...."

Reality seems to ripple. Within a few brief seconds, her defenders are gone, and Gina Garney looks down at her son, dozing on her shoulder despite what's just occurred.

"They're just...*Leaving* us here? Alone...?" Gina asks herself, and stops, realizing she and Mark aren't the only ones left.

The swamp creature looks her direction, and it appears that it's stare is more for Mark than her. She cradles him closer, feeling the heat seeming to flow off of the monster, and quickly takes a few steps back before half-running to the cold jet. From its window, she sees the creature meld back into the undefined acres of swamp.

On his mother's shoulder, Mark's half-lidded eyes watch the Man-Thing disappear...And they, too, burn.

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## **Elsewhere.**

Matt Murdock, known as Daredevil, is a blind man. Some know this, and some don't.

He's rarely had the opportunity to know true blindness, though, as

his other senses increased enough to create a faux sense of vision and perception known to no other.

Now, he honestly knows complete, utter darkness -- As do they all.

"Natasha?" He cries out, unable to feel, unable to form objects with radar. "*Anyone?* Where did--?"

He soon hears them each calling out similar pleas.

"Where *is* everyone? I can't..." Hellcat hesitates. "I can't see....."

Suddenly, she feels two strong hands grip her shoulders with sharp fingers. Looking up, she finds the familiar yet changed face of Nighthawk, holding her aloft with his leathery wings. In the dark, she can just barely make out his features. He looks back at her.

"I can," He says. "And there's nothing there."

---

### **Interlude. Hell.**

The pacing has gone on for some time now. His thick, leathery boots made of an angel's sacred hide echo against the makeshift platform of flaming rock entwined with serpents and things that have no names, or none that should be spoken aloud.

He is Daimon Hellstrom, if you ask certain ones. To others, he is the Son of Satan, or Hellstorm, the Prince of Lies. Simply Master to many. Heir to the dark realm of tortured souls. And for some time now, he's entertained the notion of reaching out and grabbing his inheritance early.

Yet with so much power within him, merely in his titles, he continues to march feverishly before a congregation, all commanding eyes and untamed crimson hair that seems to begin and end with his face.

His audience is a mixed one, saying the least. One section, on the outer edge of their gathering, keeps quiet conversation.

"...All over a female? A *human* female?" A miniature creature, with scarlet membrane wings and blood, mucus, and sperm from its knife-toothed mouth, which almost forms a smile.

"How...Delicious."

It speaks to the balding, scarred head, with fingers as roots and tender, empty eyesockets, sitting aloofly beside it. "Delicious? Hell, it's a bad deal all around, kid."

"What do you mean, 'bad'? If Lord Daimon becomes the *true* lord--"  
"Then we're all in for some big changes. Women do that to people."

Offended, the creature looks away. "I *hardly* see how females have a single *thing* to do with it. I say it is *his* fault for letting himself fall so madly in love with a...*Creature* like that! The red-haired one, who dresses in strange garb, yes?"

"Yeah. And I wouldn't say much of that where *he* can hear."

"Oh...Oh. Yes. Of course." The winged demon continues. "It is still strange, when he could have the grotesque bordellos of all the underworld."

"What the Hell would *you* know, anyway," The head scoffs, looking on at their current master. "You're just a Goddam succubus..."

While the demonfolk perch themselves to squawk and murmur, the rest of the Morning Son's onlookers sit deathly still, watching in a nervous silence.

After a spell, their host stops in the middle of his jagged court, looking over his captive audience, each with a name so entrenched in legend that they've lost meaning. Mephisto. Thog. Satannish. Eblis. Hela. Baphomet. Pluto. To him, they are all simply a different view of one very important subject.

"You."

With a dirty, long nail, he points into their numbers at the flaming body sometimes called Satannish. His scream is blood-curdling, even here, and he writhes in agony as his form is compressed more and more, drawn along an invisible line to Daimon's finger, and is finally gone completely.

Those watching on would gasp, but they know better. And on his stage of rock and pain, Daimon Hellstrom, the Prince of Lies, conjures a seat for himself. He takes it, looking all the more vital and maliciously content with his blazing trident.

He inhales, ready to speak, and watches the others hold back cringes.

"That will be all, for today. I'm afraid I've still need for guests at the

wedding."

The Prince of Lies smiles, and waits contently.

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**-To Be Concluded In DEFENDERS #8-**

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**DEFENDING LINES**

*Send letters or comments to [WeekapaugB@aol.com](mailto:WeekapaugB@aol.com)*

**From Russ Anderson, on the M2K message board.**

*"Defenders #6*

*By Will Short*

*After reading Defenders #5, I decided that that was the best issue thus far of Will's run--there was a lot more focus, a greater sense of foreboding, no plot devices manufactured solely to bring the team together. Now, after reading Defenders #6, I must amend and say this is the best issue of Will's Defenders run thus far. Those of you who have read Will's work on MVI know that he leans toward the Vertigo-esque, and there's quite a bit of that influence in the last two issues of this series, but Will has tempered the sometimes-pretentious verbosity of his early work, and the result is that his amazing ideas show through better. The sequence with the Hulk was chilling--moreso than that with Doc Strange, even--and Alice's remark as he disposed of Luke Cage was as humorous as it was scary. There's a real feeling of danger as the remaining Defenders are picked off one by one. Will does some great work on Avengers, but IMO this is the team book he excels at, the one he seems to be most comfortable with. I'm really looking forward to finding out where this story is going and what the hell Alice is up to. Oh... and Will, don't think you fooled anybody with that "redrum" trick... I saw whose name Mark Garney was muttering, and I look forward to that long-standing Defender's return to the title. :-)"*

**I've consciously been trying to tone down the extra words in team books recently, seeing as there are so many characters (especially here at DEFENDERS). I agree that it's made it easier to write, and I hope to read as well. Glad you were chilled by the Hulk's sequence -- I was trying to throw in some not-so-subtle symbolism -- And the ominous feeling was intentional, so I'm rather happy you picked up on it. Oh, and about what Mark said: "You'll have to wait" and "Shhhhhh....." Thanks a lot Russ.**



**From Mike Exner, on the M2K message board again.**

*"Defenders #6 was the best issue of Defenders put out so far here at M2K. Alice is a fantastic "villain" and I can't wait to see what his motivations are for capturing the people he has so far. Dr. Strange and Hulk both go through sheer torture in this issue and it's great stuff. The thought of all the bodies Hulk was treading on being all the victims of his many rampages was priceless. Not only were the "Wonderland" scenes good, but the interplay between the other members of the cast were good as well. Wong was used nicely, Daredevil was transitioned into the book smoothly (even a reference to my using him in ASM #13), and the bickering, the wonderful wonderful bickering between the members of the team. Dane is known as a hothead so I'm not to sure I like his medieval/leadership/peacemaker thing going on but I'll deal with it. It was almost funny noticing how Daredevil reacted to the Defenders' fighting, almost a "what's wrong with you people?" attitude. My final kudos deals with the little boy. Why the hell was Mark smiling? Does Alice use children in some ungodly way as his power? Frightening thought. Now, my only complaint at all for this issue would be that Namor wasn't in it at all. I'm sure Will's gonna take care of it in #7, but honestly, I don't want to wait that long. Fantastic issue Will. And the guy who wrote you a letter is a genius. Make mine M2K.*

*Mike III"*

**All that you need to know about Alice will be revealed next issue -- And perhaps a little after that, as well. I really had fun writing the horrific scenes for Hulk and Stephen. Dane has obviously been going through some different changes recently, so I don't think he's exactly sure how to act right now. Daredevil's pretty level-headed, I think, and if *you* saw a bunch of heroes arguing with each other like that, wouldn't *you* react somewhere close to that? I hope you enjoyed seeing Namor, even if for just a bit, this issue, and you can expect him more later. As for Mark...Again, you'll have to wait and see. Thanks for consistantly reading and writing, Mike! You and Russ are both great authors and fans.**

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #8

### "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR" Chapter Three: When You Gaze Into The Abyss

by Will Short

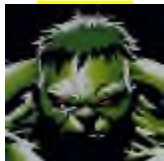
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Doctor Strange



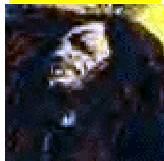
Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk



Hellstorm

***Recently in "DEFENDERS":*** Nighthawk, a demon nightly, and others join a new group of Defenders to save those in Alice's power. Valkyrie is brought to a Hell without rule, where Odin warns her of coming conflict. In Hell, Daimon Hellstrom gathers a captive audience of high entities. And now the heroes have been sent to Alice's Wonderland by the Man-Thing, leaving Regina and Mark Garney in the Nexus with its keeper.....

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This story takes place before [Iron Man #10](#) and [Avengers #8-10](#))

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### **Citrusville, Florida. The Nexus of All Realities.**

For an hour -- Maybe less, but it seemed like longer -- Regina Garney had sat perspiring and nauseous in the seat of a stuffy Avengers Quinjet. She would have never thought herself to be in one, certainly not here.

The weight on her lap was her son Mark, tiny and frail as he napped. His sleep had been motionless, and his mother had checked more than once as he breathed so lightly.

At the same time, in that past subjective hour, Regina had found herself actively watching the vessel's darkness, waiting for any signs



Hellcat



Black Knight



Valkyrie



Iceman



Hawkeye



Man-Thing

of movement.

The taker was there somewhere, she believed. He would not have her son, she had silently vowed to him.

More had captured Regina's view in that time. Through the thick window, outside the metal hide of the ship, stood the keeper of this place -- The shambling creation of plant and the macabre she heard called the Man-Thing.

He'd simply stood there since they went away -- Regina's own defenders, who left her and Mark with this silent, unmoving totem of the swamp. Its bloody, melancholy eyes penetrated the Quinjet's thick exterior, even when she looked away.

It chilled her as much as the thought of the shadows stealing her child.

That was all that mattered to her.

The moon's paleness was hidden by a canopy of muck and trees, and the darkness pervaded the Garneys' sanctuary. A drowsy humidity didn't drift through it but simply laid there, like her son, still and stifling.

Her seat had grown comfortable. She hadn't seen anything yet, after all -- And if something happened, that creature was there. Thoughts were injected into Regina's mind, and even if she subconsciously fought them, her eyelids grew heavier, and heavier...

Finally, an unnaturally dense slumber fell over her, and all was still for a time.

Regina's sleep was so heavy that she didn't feel the fidgeting upon her lap, or the weight that left it. She didn't hear the opening and closing of a mechanical door that, by all means, shouldn't have worked.

She couldn't see, out her shielding window, the small figure standing innocently before the swamp-keeper, or the quick flare that rushed through its unblinking eyes.

She didn't hear the voice of a young boy in the blanketing bayou silence.....

"Can you take me to the fireworld, please?" He asked.

Gently, the Man-Thing responded by extending its trunkish arm, hair-like moss hanging off its sides. Its wooden fingernails touched the boy's own outstretched hand.

At once the Man-Thing felt a burning at its hand and recoiled as quick as possible.

It eyed this boy with a look of pain, who asked staring back, "Please?"

The Man-Thing pondered, in its own way. Then it turned its wide back on the frail boy and gestured with its hands in the air. From the almost nervous gestures came a rift, from it emanating a unique heat all its own.

Mark came to the creature's side, looked at the rift, and then up at the keeper, smiling. "Thanks, Teddy."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Mark stepped towards the infernal rip and looked back. "Sorry I scared you." He passed through it. Reality healed itself as his body disappeared from the Nexus with a weak sucking noise.

The swamp lay silent again afterwards.

And this thing of a man shifted back to its former enrootment, staring ever vigilantly at the slumbering chrome vessel that had intruded on its swamp.

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## **Wonderland.**

It began with darkness. And they supposed that it would end that way, too.

For the man named Matt Murdock, called Daredevil, it was always black. He could feel the void around them though he couldn't see it. Even his sonar found only the bodies of his equally flustered friends.

"So...Uh.....Whatta we do now?" Hawkeye looked around from his own invisible platform. He saw all the others standing as well, scattered about on separate levels.

"It's not like the Man-Thing would take us to the wrong place,"

Hellcat said, and added, "...Would he?"

"We didn't really *tell* him where to send us. Maybe he didn't even *know* where -- Or *how*."

Black Widow's words spread out and seeped into nothing. She, like the others, became distracted by a nagging feeling -- That they had somehow made a mistake.

"Well, he's like -- *The Man-Thing*, right? Burns the fearful, feels your pain?" Iceman let his thoughts trail him along, and the Widow commented.

"Empathy doesn't tell where we need to go."

"I *know* that -- But he's... *Whatever* he is, so I think he'd do it right."

"He wouldn't be the first one screwing up..."

"Tasha, can you back off? Just a little bit?" Daredevil finally asked.

"It's really not helping."

"Maybe you need a break from weird crap like the rest--" Hawkeye was shortly interrupted.

"Oh, what would *you* know about what a woman needs?" Natasha bursted. She tried to get away from both men but was frustrated to find something unseen hindering her.

"...Was she like this with you?" Hawkeye said quietly to the horned vigilante.

"Barely ever. Something's just bothering her.....I think I know what."

"That's probably 'something' *you* should handle then, leader-man."

"I'm -- *Not* the leader. This isn't anything *close* to a team."

Close by, infernal eyes strained to make out something in their native element. They still found nothing -- And Kyle Richmond almost preferred it that way.

"Kyle?" Asked Hellcat, looking Nighthawk's direction. His fleshy wingspan blocked part of his face. She frowned. "...Kyle -- Do you see anything yet?"

He didn't answer.

"Kyle, come on..."

"No," He stated.

"No what...?"

"No *nothing*. I don't see anything."

"Oh....."

Patsy waited, then turned back to see the others actively looking their own ways. Her frown deepened, and Hellcat felt cold. Lonely.

Not a word was uttered as they thought on other things, pertaining to their own and this pit that they found themselves in. When Patsy looked at Daredevil, his horns -- The thought of his *name* -- Made her remember what togetherness felt like.

Something she missed terribly.

***"Predictable."***

"...Uh?" Hellcat grunted. She cocked her head up.

"Did.....Did anyone else hear that?" Asked Daredevil. No one noticed Iceman's body glisten in otherwise pitch dark when he spoke.

"*What's* predictable?"

***"You,"*** It said. ***"All of you."***

There was no question that they all heard it. And Nighthawk wasn't concerned so much with that. "Patsy...?" He asked. Everyone looked his way, and their eyes nearly hurt from the sudden contrast.

It began as an long oval of white, joined by another, larger than anyone present. The pair moved upwards, followed by an outline filled with paleness. The twin ovals twitched, and wrinkles appeared within them.

".....I see something."

The eyes opened. The face was painfully apparent. And massive lips painted black spoke between a smirk. ***"And that's what makes you all such amusing prey. However, the hunt is over."***

***"You're in Wonderland. Now the fun begins."***

Natasha, wide-eyed and mouth gaping, noted softly to herself.

"...I wish I was an optimist....."

## Elsewhen.

Have you ever had one of those dreams? Everyone has.

You know you're dreaming. You wake up, and whatever miracles or horrors hiding there seem to be gone. Then another one pops up -- Reality is invaded. You rouse again, knowing for *sure* that you're among the waking.

You aren't. And soon you can't trust yourself to know the difference between what is dream and what is reality.

Dane Whitman knew this dream. He found himself, time and again, walking across the continent of time. From a modern day New York City to where he kneeled groggily, accented voices approaching.

"Who...Who's there?" He asked through his haze. He couldn't stand, his armor an unliftable weight in his weakness. Sight was returning, slowly. The surroundings they would find was a familiar shock.

"Sir Dane?"

".....I..." He struggled even to breathe.

"Sir Dane, thou art *unwell*. I am afraid Merlin's traveling is *less* than...*Impeccable*."

"Who *is*, mine lord, aside from thyself?" Asked a much older voice with underlying snyderiness.

"Where...What's happening? The Quinjet-- The *others*..." Dane rambled as he felt strong hands on his shoulders.

He was outside. His senses were quickly returning, only adding to his confusion. The hearty laughter almost eased him.

"Ha! I can *assure* though I know *not* what thou speakest of." As Dane was helped to stand, the bright, bearded face came into view. "I have no doubt that there is little *time* for explanations...Nor thy rehabilitation, truly."

It was early morning, Dane could tell. The moon was beginning to set. He saw great stone walls and a clear, starry sky.

"...Okay. Who *are* you? *Both* of you."

"Why, Sir Dane -- Surely thou *jest*," Said the younger bearded man, with thick brown hair and a crown on his head. The other was much

older with wrinkled skin and thin, white hair in excess.  
"Sire, the spell could have disoriented him..."

"Even *so*, a knight would *always* know the face of his king --  
*Certainly* of Arthur *Pendragon*."

Dane looked back and forth between the two men.

"Pendra..." He began and stopped. The laughter welled up from inside him. "Hahaha! Man -- Okay, okay, I've got it. King Arthur, Merlin...All a *dream*."

The two men looked at each other from the corners of their eyes as Dane studied the expansive courtyard they stood in. When he looked back up, Dane noticed.

"...What? What is it?" They only stared at him. Quietly he said, "Dreams don't give each other *looks* like that behind your back."

They all knew how true this was.

---

## Wonderland.

Bobby Drake hated hearing people scream; someone suffering that much. It made him feel guilty, to hear that and not be able to help. He knew it wasn't his fault, told himself so, but since Patsy began screaming, he had felt worse.

And it just kept getting *hotter* in there.

"...**EEEEEEIIII!** Ei! Ah.....A-hugh.....P-pl -- Please....." Hellcat came down from another scream and began weeping again. She was dangling upside down, a puppet in Alice's white hand. His eyes were so close to her, peering into her every inch of being, that she could feel it.

"*Stop*, dammit!" Nighthawk pounded with rage at the wall around him. He dug his dirtied claws in and scratched down its side. The sound was inaudible him -- But Daredevil clutched his ears in pain, almost falling to his knees.

"***Don't be absurd***," Said Alice, on the verge of giggling.

"Nnnnnnn...Ni-- Kyle, *please*....." The screeching continued.



"Nightha -- *Whoever* you are, you're *hurting* him!" Black Widow almost pounded on her own entrapment but stopped herself. "What d'you *mean*...'Whoever you are'.....?"

Kyle halted and looked over. Daredevil was slowly rising again, with the Widow watching carefully. He noticed that Hawkeye was still looking straight ahead.

"...A-heh.....Ha. Heh. Hahaha....HaHA! HahahaHAhaHaHA! **TEE HEE! Haha...**"

When he looked again, Kyle saw a wide, crooked grin on Patsy Walker's sweating, tear-stained face. The uncontrollable laughter didn't seem her own.

In fact, her smile reminded them all of something.

And then, with a gesture, Hellcat was tossed into the abyss. She fell freely until she just hung there, suspended from nothing. Still grinning, still snickering under her breath, still crying. She had gone mad, for the second time in her life, and they all had witnessed it unable to act.

"*Jesus!*" Bobby watched her, watched Alice keep smiling, and naturally changed into the Iceman. He felt warmer. "Don't you have anything *better* to do, than to *screw* with people like this?*Good* people?" Alice was looking directly at, or into, him.

**"No. Of course not. What else could I do?"**

"How about just *leave* us the Hell *alone*? That ever cross your mind?" Hawkeye said. He wished to God for just one fault in his prison, for one shot.

**"That I could never do, I'm afraid."**

"*Why?*" Iceman asked in his discomfort. Alice was still staring at him. "It's like anyone who thinks they're gonna do it different than all the *other* bad guys in the universe -- They make it their *life* to be hard on everyone *else*. I don't *get* it."

**"Why?** Alice asked. Suddenly his giant face was closest to Bobby, who could swear it felt like he was sweating. **"Because your fear, your pain -- You, the 'heroes', with your pride and everything you represent -- Is all that will satisfy me. It's sweet like nectar and**

*bitter like dung. The fear of the mighty, not the average.*

*"Now tell me, Bobby, my dear, dear boy -- And this has been a popular one, recently," Alice continued immediately. "Tell me, do you you enjoy circuses?"*

Bobby's icy brow furrowed. "Not unless they're British and flying." The heat was intensifying and he couldn't tell where it was coming from -- Everywhere at once or nowhere at all.

*"Honestly...You don't enjoy the exotic food, and the animals? All the smells? So many wonderful people there to see the sights?"*

"I..." Bobby felt dizzy, too.

*"And they watch the freak shows under the afternoon sun. Families and circus-folk, pointing and laughing and whispering in the dry heat of summer in some Southern country town."*

The words were omnipresent and they painted a picture around Bobby. Not Bobby -- The Iceman.

*"You're sure you wouldn't enjoy that?"*

\* \* \* \* \*

The Iceman stood there in the light of the afternoon sun, praying for more humidity in the air. He could feel his skin -- No, more than that, his *body* melting into thick slush. It was getting harder just to raise his arms, or his head. He had *told* Old Chuck that the freak show should be inside.

As his own person came down in drops before his eyes, he looked around. First, in a murky view, he saw the mass of onlookers. Their bodies were all one in his sight. He heard their harsh, one-sided babble.

He looked over at the sign nearby and read it silently to himself. "THE ICEMAN - A MUTANT FREAK TOO COOL TO BELIEVE!" it called him. Then something as mushy as his body hit the Iceman in the head.

Red dripped down into his eyes. It wasn't blood, he knew. It was a tomato, and there were more -- And worse -- where it came from. Someone yelled something in a Southern drawl, an the Iceman

wished he would waste away on the hot ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in the dark, where it was much colder, Bobby's body was limp and melting. Nearby, Hellcat amused and horrified herself, spasming. Her eyes were wide and dialated, drool dripping off her lips into nothing. She was still cackling and sobbing, weakly.

Daredevil sensed it all, quiet among the others. For once, he was glad he didn't see it. Alice passed over him and to the leather-clad body of Black Widow. She backed away slightly, defiant with an underlying nervousness, and felt him examine her head to toe.

"Don't -- Don't *look* at me like that!" She said, both sure and unsure of herself.

***"Why, m'dear? You're OH so beautiful..."***

"I...But I'm--"

***"You DO agree, don't you?"*** And Natasha had to hold herself as she slid her back down the slick invisible wall. It felt like cold glass.

***"Just because you've been with so many men, nothing lasting? Sometimes men you didn't even know the NAME of, or that repulsed you, for the sake of information?"***All at once the many faces of men she has known, well or barely at all, horned or plated or unfamiliar looking at her, cringing, and turning away.

She wasn't as beautiful as they believed, at first. Not inside. "Unclean" they mouthed. Natasha believed this and shivered, wanted to close her eyes and cry. But she she had none. She was faceless. She was no one. Just a body.

Daredevil heard her every whimper. He expected to taste the distant salt of her tears, but didn't.

All of his muscles tensed. He wanted to act -- Ached to. But Hawkeye covered the job for him, yelling angrily from his place. "I'm not scared of you. I'm *not!* You don't have *anything* on me, pal. You're just make up and *talk...*"

***"Of course it's not me you fear, Clint. I'm not myself -- I'm not anyone at all. I'm just a mask to be worn, to see the sigts and do my work. And at the same time, I'm the pretender -- Everyone is***

*my own puppet, my own set of eyes to look through."*

Hawkeye saw Alice's face disappear and knew well where it was when it spoke again. He didn't even want to turn around, though he wouldn't admit it.

*"Anything to get what I need, Clint. I've been at this a while -- Believe me, this little visual facade I put on hasn't scared people in a while. I wouldn't expect YOU to be afraid of me. You're a bit more complicated than that.*

*"You're a brave man, Clint. Strong of body and will. An Avenger. You're even helping out these Defenders, or whatever they are. Good for you -- Always willing to help the LITTLE guys. Of course. But I'm wondering...Do YOU remember another little guy?*

*"A frail young orphan who wasn't even accepted well among the OTHER outcasts? You might like him, though I have to warn you, he DID end up as a criminal for a while, later on. Hasn't always played well with others, I'm afraid -- Although he's shaped up a bit. It's too bad about his late WIFE...Just like his mother.....*

*"Who was looking after THAT little guy, Hawkeye? Who's to say that he even really grew up? That he didn't just put on a big boy's longjohns to hide from the cruel world?"*

No one was to say anything at all, at the moment. Alice grinned, and Nighthawk was the only other one to actually look at Clint in the dark. His costume was half-empty and wrinkled. The mask still had a face beneath, but it was round and small, too small. His quiver had fallen to the ground, and little grubby hands tried vainly to grip his bow.

Matt Murdock heard a faster heartbeat for a smaller body, interrupted by the faintly familiar voice of a child.

"Guys...?" Clint said in a voice high with youth. "Help me."

Things were silent again for a while. A strangely comfortable silence, the type that comes when one either has no idea what happens next or exactly what is to come. Nighthawk felt the stare on him, and saw it from a far. But Alice kept his distance.

"What? Go on -- *Do* it," Kyle almost growled through sharp canines. "I know you're going to, so just -- Just do it and be done."  
*"Do what?"*

"Scare me, dammit! What -- Whatever you did to Patsy, and to everyone else. We know it's coming, so just...*Do it.*"

Alice's lips were so big that Nighthawk could see each wrinkle in the ethereal skin of his face as he smiled. It looked like black features on pure white to him.

***"Kyle, Kyle -- You're so wonderfully frightened of yourself that I don't think I'd have anything to add to the job. Now go be a dove and brood for a moment."***

Kyle did as he was told, alone and quietly.

Alice's face faded into darkness, not that Daredevil could really see or sense it correctly. He could just barely tell when a figure formed and stepped in beside him. He no longer felt constricted, half-squatting for comfort there.

**"You don't have to stay here, you know,"** Alice said. His voice sounded much more conceivable now. Daredevil didn't look up.

"So the nickname really means something?"

**"Yes. Without fear -- In other words, useless to me."**

"You won't even try?"

**"I already did, remember? Your apartment? I didn't like it, and neither did you. I can send you *back* if you like. I'm basically done here and there's nothing for you."**

Daredevil was quiet. "...No. I think I'll stay." Alice's already accented eyes got large and stared intensely at the red man.

**"And *why* would you want to do *that*? You seemed like maybe the sentimental type..."**

"Actually, I'll level with you -- I've been sitting here for a while trying to figure out what scares *you*."

**"Ha!"** Alice laughed pompously way. **"Me? *Frightened*?"**

"Yeah," Daredevil said, standing up very gradually. "And I think I have it now."

Alice unconsciously backed off slightly. **"I can leave whenever I like,"** He said. **"This is *my* place..."**

"No, Alice. You can't. I *know* what you're scared of. You're scared of what you can't control, what you can't manipulate. Your heart -- Whatever works as that inside whatever you *are* -- Is beating like jungle drums. You're sweating something *foul*. Something like fear."

The Devil took a step closer, Alice another back.

"You're afraid of *me*, Alice. So this is *my* court now." Again, there was another step, and Alice opened his mouth to say something worthless. It was interrupted by Daredevil's gloved fist.

Alice fell back on his hands and rear and looked up at Daredevil this time. "You're powerless. You're nothing anymore if I don't want you to be -- And I don't."

**"Please -- It's only my *function*. I -- I need it to *live*!"**

"You're not alive -- Maybe something about what you can *become*, but what's inside isn't."

A crimson boot kicked matching blood from Alice's mouth. It fell into the black and puddled like there was ground. Alice whimpered like an infant, but even Daredevil's heart felt no sympathy.

"Now that we have things figured out, I want you to do two things for me. First, I want you to return everyone and everything you took -- Superhero, normal, whatever, *whoever* -- To normal. Bring the Defenders here with me, and send everyone else back home."

"**I...**" Alice began, and seeing Daredevil's straight look, stopped. He stood very painfully, looked around, and blinked.

"Well?" Daredevil asked after a time.

**"Just a moment..."**

---

## **Luke Cage.**

"C'mon -- Let's string 'im up and get it over with!" The man's voice was rough like a coal. Another, obviously younger though he could barely be seen under his white sheets, stood on a stool and tied rope to a thick tree branch, testing it. It had to support weight indefinitely.

After he had decided it did, he gave the signal, and the struggling man was brought up by the other white-covered people. They were all males, and even though he was stronger than each, their sheer number over-powered him.

"Damn boy's a *fighter*..." One of them said, giving him a sharp hit in the side. He was carried to the stool and noose, where he was dropped on the ground and kept still under the others' tough boots. It was hot out. He sweated.

The first hurried them again. "Hey! *Hey!* Let's get this *done*, okay?"  
"Bout to be done *and* done," said another.

The body was stood on the stool, beaten into stillness, and the noose was fitted around his thick neck. He looked down at them, saw the hatred in their eyes, and knew his reflected it.

"On mah *count*, fellas," Was called out. Someone was standing beside him but he couldn't turn his head. "One...*Two*.....***Three!***"

Foot kicked wood and the stool fell. The constriction on his neck began right away and didn't let up, only increased with each passing second. It was already getting hard to hear, to focus, but he knew they were laughing, cheering.

Looking out into their hateful eyes again, he stopped trying to fight the loss of breath. What was it, through the holes cut into their sheet-masks? The eyes, so dark, and the skin...So black.

Luke Cage gasped as well he could. He struggled, grapping the rope slowly killing him. Again his heart skipped, and this time he wasn't sure if he wanted it to begin again. He stared at his own hand, saw its skin in the moonlight.

Pale, pale skin in the night. They left soon after that, and the dizzying end was nearing. Luke thought he was hallucinating or finally passing when it all started fading away. But he could breathe again, and the it felt like the rope wasn't even there...

The Klan members wouldn't find their victim the next morning, hanging and lifeless, but from their word it would still be the small town's joy to think so.

---

## **Wonderland.**

"**There,**" Alice said, gesturing behind Daredevil, who already knew they had appeared. Nine very unhappy and tired people, including Doctor Strange, Hulk, Luke Cage, and Namor -- All recently appeared.

"So you *didn't* take the Knight..." Daredevil said offhand. He couldn't help but listen in on their confused conversation as he turned back to Alice.

"Okay. Now the second part."

**"Please, don't..."**

"Shut up. Shut. Up." Daredevil was almost shaking. "I'm being *more* than fair here, *more* than can be said for you and those poor people back there.

"Now, you're going to take us *all* safely back to the swamp in Florida, and at the same time you're going to *leave* this body you've taken and *never, ever* come near any of us. *Again*. Do you *understand*?"

**"Yes...Yes."** Alice recoiled and looked down at his fancy shoes. **"I'll do it. I don't have any choice."**

Doctor Strange's body levitated over from behind, Daredevil not turning to greet him. "Daredevil...? I'm assuming you're with Patsy and the *others*..." He partly trailed off when he saw the timid look of Alice.

"Yeah...Yeah, I am."

"...Devil, what's going on here? Is--?"

"It's over. It's all over now. I'm just arranging for us to go *home*."

"I can easily provide everyone--"

"I know you can. But he *owes* us. Just...Please go tell everyone that everything's okay and that they're going home."

Stephen hesitated, nodded, and flew away again. Alice stared at Daredevil curiously. **"...Why?"**

"Because I don't know *how* to *destroy* you, and as much as we *all* hate you -- I don't really *want* to. I'm sure you play some sort of role that I don't understand, so it's not my place to judge that. This is all I can do is free whoever's life you've ruined and try to salvage ours."

**"So I'll be--?"**

"Don't remind me. *Yes*, you'll be free. But, God help me, if you even look at me, or Natasha, or *any* of us again, I'm going to find out and I'm going to come here and then I won't make any promises.

Okay?"

**".....Okay. I get it."**

"Good. Ready to say goodbye?"

**"Yes."**

"Then let's go. And no tricks...Or I'm coming back."

---

**Citrusville, Florida. The Nexus of All Realities.**



In the earliest morning light, Nighthawk's membrane wings retracted painfully. His skin returned to its normal hue, and his face lost its demonic features. Kyle Richmond was himself again. Few had time to say anything.

"Bastard!" Luke Cage kicked a pale body hard enough to cave in a tree trunk. There was a thin red mark across his neck. The Hulk and Namor both grabbed his arms to hold him. "Stupid, stupid, *stupid* sonofa mutha--"

"Jesus, Luke, it's not even *him*, buddy," Hulk said to deaf ears.

"Gonna *learn* what that's like..."

"...Cannot believe *I* am holding him back..." Namor mumbled.

Doctor Strange walked over to the body. It was more than familiar -- It was their tormentor's body, or rather the husk he left behind, who was just now waking. Stephen helped him up, but couldn't help noticing just how much we looked the same, simply without the make up. He kept the same attire as Alice and looked rather dazed.

"...God," He croaked hoarsely, and then looked around to see those looking on. He shook his head. "Where and what?" Is all he asked.

"A Florida swamp just outside of Citrusville," Said Strange, "And as to the 'what' -- You were a victim of something as old as time, that used you as its medium."

"You *knew* about that thing?" Iceman asked in shock, before remembering who he asked. Stephen nodded.

"I've encountered it briefly before."

"And you didn't *destroy* it then, Doc?" Hawkeye asked.

"No. It exists for a reason just like you."

"What the *Hell* could it be around for but to torture good people?"

"It needs us as much as we need it, to show us our fears and to define our strengths in turn."

"...Gotcha..."

"I'm sure this is all very confusing, mister...?" Hellcat asked.

"Furnier. Damon Furnier. And you'd be surprised what I've seen on the job..."

"We know what that's like. Anyway, we'd be *glad* to take you somewhere if you--"

"You know, I really appreciate it," He said, already stepping away and eyeing them all. "And *please* don't take this the wrong way, but -- Uh...I think I'd rather handle it myself."

"You're *sure*?" He looked them all over again and nodded.

"Yeah -- Yeah. I, uh -- I know some people in Citrusville. I'll be fine." He left sight quickly. Luke had stopped fighting a while back, and when they let go of him, he kicked a rock into oblivion, cursing over and over.

"Luke. *Luke, c'mon!*" Hulk put a hand on his shoulder. "It's over, man. Just like a bad dream. We *all* had it."

"You didn't have *mine*."

"And *you* didn't have *mine*."

"...I don't care! The suckah's gone. I -- Listen, man...Guys, I didn't get *into* this for *this*. I didn't want this crazy nightmare. I just wanted t'help."

"You *did*," Patsy assured him, but he shook his head and distanced himself from them.

"...Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. I'm not gonna be around to do either anymore. I'm gone."

"Cage, that is no way--" Namor began. Luke turned sharply.

"You got somethin' to *say*, fish king?"

"*No*, guys," Hulk kept them far apart. "Not *now*."

"...Y'know, *screw* it. It's not worth anything anyway. I'm gone."

Luke kept walking away while Patsy called out hopefully.

"Can't we at least give you a ride?" He paused, just for a second, and then was lost in the depths of the swamp.

There was quiet again, until a door opened and slammed shut. "Oh my God -- Ohmygod!" It was Gina, running desperately out into the muck and falling before them all.

"What's *wrong*, Gina?" The Black Widow left Daredevil's side and helped the woman up. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked extremely tired. "You don't look--"

"My *baby*," She cried in Natasha's arms. "M-Mark! They took my *baby!*" The Widow looked at Daredevil more than the others.

"Anyone...?"

"We'll find him," Stephen assured. "I can promise it. I believe some *answers* are in order, though -- You would agree, Kyle?" Kyle Richmond nodded.

"Yeah. It's good to see everyone though." He liked the day.

"Hey, guys?" Iceman spoke up. "Val, Black Knight, Patsy, Mark -- We just got out of Wonderland and brought everyone back, but they're still missing."

"It's not Alice," Daredevil said. "I know it's -- Wait a minute. Patsy?"

"Huh?"

"You said *Patsy's* gone, but she's...She was just here."

Red, reflecting eyes watched a firey rift close in the air from the thick of the swamp.

---

## Elsewhen.

"I fear we are *much* more than dreams, Sir Dane," King Arthur told his knight, looking grim. "Merlin, you *really* must work on thy *weaving*..."

"Magic is an art, Arthur. And art is untamable. Still, this sets things back a bit..."

"What are you two going *on* about?" Dane asked, slightly annoyed.

Merlin seemed to loom over him. "I have had *visions*, blackest knight. They have plagued me night *in* and *out* for some time. This is why we conjured you here before -- Something you *obviously* don't remember."

"Visions of someone centuries after your time?"

"You are misinformed, knight. This era will end, but I will not join it. All of time is mine to see, when needed. And such a talent is why you were brought here in the first place."

"So you *know* that *Guineviere* will bunk with--"

"Merlin *knows*, as have *I*, since he initiated my lordship," Arthur quickly said. "It is not something I'm fond of *discussing*. 'Tis the destiny of Camelot, and it must come to pass."

"We speak, however," The wizard said, "Of something that *can* be averted...With the correct care."

"I have seen a group of heroic *vagabonds* from your time, many *strangers* to each other, led by a man closer to my legacy than one would realize. They are *saviors*, though -- *Defenders*. And I have seen them battle the *Pit* itself, on the side of seraphim."

"*Seraphim*," Dane half-asked. Merlin closed his eyes and sighed. "...*Angels*. High *angels*. These defending knights and agents of Heaven are fighting a *losing* battle."

"I revealed these visions to Arthur. And, the good Christian that

he *is*...He decided we must help."

Athur nodded. "And I could think of none finer than bearer of the Ebony Blade, the descendant of the first Black Knight himself."

"Okay, here's the *problem*," Dane told them. "The Ebony Blade -- It isn't *mine* anymore. Its curse has been passed onto the *Bloodwraith* now..."

"Such events happen far in times *hence*," Merlin revealed, then pointed to Dane's waist. "Unsheathe your sword."

Dane reached to grasp the cold handle in doubt. As he pulled it out, he recognized its weight immediately, and felt an uneasy rush. It was then, as he held the sword upright, that the sun's first rays were cast out.

The weapon was revealed. Its dark metal was like a shard of night in the newborn dusk, unaffected by lamination. It was the Ebony Blade, and Dane found himself speechless.

"*This* is the Ebony Blade of old," Merlin answered the unasked question. "And *it* will be your salvation once more. Yours, and the whole world's."

"What..." Dane was stupified. "What do we *do* with it?"

"You will know when it is right. For now, we wait," Merlin revealed. "Morning has come, and the magicks that brought you here work best in the flow of night. You will be sent to the right time tomorrow."

"Until then, you will resume thy guest room at the castle Camelot," Said Arthur.

They motioned for Dane to follow them. He sheated the Ebony Blade, and in his thoughts, didn't hear anything they said.

He lagged behind for a moment and pinched himself. He couldn't decide if the pain was welcome or a bad omen.

---

## **DEFENDERS #9**

### **An Epilogue. A Prologue. The Time Between Times.**

**"Inside A Shattered Mirror" is over. "The Black Veil" is on the bleak horizon. All over the world, even beyond,**

tension builds.

**Who will defend the weak from the mighty when it  
breaks?**

---

## **DEFENDING LINES**

*Send comments and thoughts to [Defending Lines](#)*

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

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## Issue #9

### "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR"

Epilogue

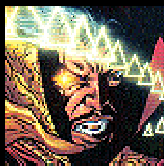
### "THE BLACK VEIL"

Prologue

## Shadows Taller Than Souls

by [Will Short](#)

---

The word "DEFENDERS" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are set against a background of bright orange and yellow flames that appear to be radiating from behind the text.

Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk

---

### RECENTLY IN "DEFENDERS"

The being Alice is defeated, freeing all from his power. Luke Cage leaves. Mark Garney, Valkyrie, and Hellcat are all missing. There are happenings in Hell. And the Black Knight is in the past, staying at castle Camelot, waiting for a certain battle, a war in the present, that he must take part in...

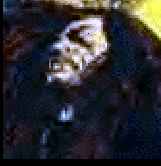
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### Rome.

Kurt Darkholme listened to his footsteps echo off the stone in the hall. Not long ago, just over a week, he'd heard a similar sound as he carried his few bags alone to his new room.

Another week before that, he'd recieved a letter at his New Jersey church. It seemed that the Vatican -- The *Vatican*, he still repeated -- Wanted him. And for some reason beyond him, Kurt wanted very much to be there.

He wasn't sure if it was the spiritual call, or that the letter hinted at



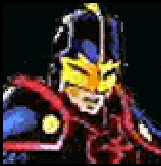
Hellstorm



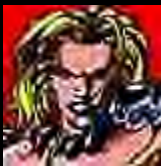
Devil-Slayer



Hellcat



Black Knight



Valkyrie



Nightcrawler

the notion that his position would be more "active" than others. Maybe he just wanted a change.

It wasn't that hard leaving Jersey. Quick goodbyes to the few people he'd honestly touched, half a flight and a teleport later, and he had come to Rome. Of the Roman Empire, of the Vatican...Of clear nights.

He shut his door and locked it from habit. It was a plain room: a bed, a Bible, and a window, essentially. The bed looked inviting; the day had been long, Kurt praying and eating alone, trying to fall into a schedule and follow it. He hoped -- And he *knew*, by God's great will -- That they would accept him eventually. Now, he was simply ready to pray and to sleep.

The stars shone brightly outside, he knew, for reasons probably explained in detail in a textbook. But there was one, as he looked out his window each night since coming, shining even stronger than all the others. And each time Kurt saw it, despite the day before, he would know that it was for the better.

When Kurt looked out the window that night, he frowned. He leaned out the window, his own dazzling yellow eyes twinkling in the dark. The star was gone. Not *truly* gone, he knew. But it felt that way. Something was wrong, and Kurt felt uneasy as he removed his clothes, his tail discarding them, and knelt at his bedside.

Nightcrawler prayed. He felt, more than usual, that it was needed. His sleep was restless and full of nonsensical dreams.

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### **Greenwich Village.**

"Okay," Said the Hulk. His voice was gruff and stale bouncing off the old walls of Doctor Strange's sanctum. "All I want to know is -- What the Hell is going on, who's responsible, and where said party *is*."

"Bruce, c'mon man," Said Nighthawk, who was much more Kyle Richmond at the moment. It was morning, and he had left his name with the dark. "We've all had *more* that a bad *day*, but even Hawkeye and Iceman could get home on their own without complaining. If you keep cool--"

"Keep cool? I'm the Hulk. This *is* cool. For a guy who saw his wife

dead..." His emerald eyes looked to the ground. "This is *cucumber*. Doc, explain where the smashing should commence."

All seeing eyes were on Doctor Strange. He looked tired, as they all did, and uncomfortable even in his own home. Puffy eyes surveyed the muggy room.

The Hulk, that large, green, good-to-have-in-a-fight friend he'd known for so long. He seemed to look away from everyone, his rage truly without direction for once. Kyle, surprisingly, looked bright. His mask was off to show his again human face, one Stephen was quite glad to see. He thought that perhaps his hair had gotten a bit longer, but otherwise Kyle was the same, and that was some comfort.

Daredevil and the Black Widow stood close and yet far apart. There was something wrong enough between them for Stephen to notice and not enough to worry about. Not when there was so much else...

And then there was Namor. Consistant, proud. The Sub-Mariner. He stood firmly with his arms crossed, looking much more vigilant and alive than any of them.

"I'm afraid, everyone..." Stephen said, sighed, and massages his temple. "I'm afraid I don't *have* the answers."

Hulk looked up, slowly at first, then all at once. "Excuse me...?"

"Bruce, don't..." Kyle said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"*Listen* -- I'm not going to *lose* it, okay? I'm just trying to figure out why we *left* the one place we should have been to figure *out* a few things -- Man-Thing's *swamp* -- And why the Doc is holding *out* on us here!"

He pointed a bulky finger at the Doctor, having edged closer to him. Daredevil stood somewhere between them defiantly by now. "I don't like that heartbeat," He said to the Hulk.

"I don't like that we've got *three friends* and a *kid* still missing."

"Could you hold it *down*?" The Widow said hushedly. "Gina's trying to sleep."

"...I'm not holding out." Stephen barely said.

"What?" Asked Kyle, the others sharing the attention.

"I'm *not* 'holding *out*' on anyone. There's nothing for me to hold back. I *don't* have the answers, and we're going to be hard pressed to *find* them -- With this Alice business, I... We have no



idea *what* has taken *who* and *where*."

The room was silent for a second, and he continued more fervently. "I....I'm not being *selfish*, but I am *tired* and *discouraged*. I could *barely* call this last mishap a victory and I'm sure it's taken its toll on *all* of us."

"...What're you *saying*, Doc?" Kyle asked. Stephen shook his head slowly, looking at no one.

"I suppose..." He drew a heavy breath. "I suppose I'm saying -- That I can't *handle* this right now. I'm not sure if even all of us together can. I..."

"I'm sorry."

And then it seemed none could speak. The air weighed them down, a pressure like the bottom of the ocean itself. They all looked down, or away, anywhere else...Except for one used to such pressure.

"...I am *disgusted*." The Atlantean prince didn't hold the words back, and no one tried to do it for him.

"A child and *three* of our friends -- Two of them *women* -- Are gone by some unknown force," Said Namor powerfully, "Almost *assuredly* something *evil*, with *this* group." He took little time between words.

"And yet we are *here* -- Simply *talking* about what could or should be done, or avoiding it all *together*!" He eyed Stephen briefly.

"Hey, man," Hulk sounded defensive, "I'm more than *talk* here."

"No. *You* are no more than *vengeful*. I haven't seen you so quick to anger since your *earliest* days."

"Well...Well what d'you *expect*, dammit?" The Hulk had stepped closer, and Namor was a distinct case where his own size didn't look diminished. "We've just gone through *Hell*--"

"Yes, we *all* did. Each one of us had a personal Hell thrust on us. But that does *not* mean we lose our *heads* -- Or deny its happening altogether." And then Namor was still and quiet again, looking more like a warrior than royalty to them.

He shifted about, looked up, and slowly began to rise into the air. Namor kept a very solemn face as he spoke. "I cannot stand to be here right now -- I am sorry."

"What -- Where are you going?" Kyle asked, just before the Sub-

Mariner reached the skylight and opened it.  
"I, for one, am going to *do* something. *Anything*."

When it seemed like he should leave, he hovered there, looking questioningly at Doctor Strange, who once again had his head in his hands. "...I expected the most from *you*, Stephen."

The skylight shut and the room became darker again.

Kyle turned to them all. "...Well, he's right. I mean -- It's *Namor*, but he's *right*." The Hulk had turned to a wall and looked like he might punch it, but the blow never came. Kyle continued. "Look, we've got the strongest man alive, the sorcerer supreme, the King of Atlantis -- Whenever he gets *back* -- A former Avenger and...And *Daredevil*. We can *handle* this."

"So I'm sticking around?" Daredevil asked.

"What? Oh," Kyle said. "I guess -- I guess that's up to *you* more than us. I just figured after what just happened--"

"Look -- I just happened to stumble into all this. And, no offense, but now that that's taken care of.....Actually, I don't know what I can do for you. I protect the street and that's about *it*..."

"I'm staying." The Black Widow had taken a chair not so far from Stephen, and even he looked up.

"Thank you, Widow," Kyle said, flashing a quick, relieved smile. Daredevil lightly asked, "Natasha?"

"What? I'm not going to *abandon* this. It's not like I have other pressing *matters* or anything -- I'm a free agent now. So I'm going to stay, and I'm going to help. He might be old-*fashioned*, but Namor has the right idea." She crossed her arms against the tight leather of her chest and leaned back, looking directly at Daredevil. He could feel her eyes on him.

"So at least we've got *her*..." Kyle noted, when Daredevil spoke suddenly.

"...I'll stay."

"*Really?* Oh, man -- Okay. Alright. *Great*." And while Kyle went on, Daredevil continued to feel Natasha's eyes directly on him.

"So?" He said. "Where do we start? We don't have any...Well, *clues*."

Kyle suddenly had a glint in his otherwise dark eyes. It wasn't a good thing. "...Maybe we do."

"What d'you mean?" Hulk asked, crossing his arms. "Maybe you

should start from the *beginning* -- Like why you were a...A *whatever* you were last night." Kyle sighed, then nodded.

"Alright. From the beginning..."

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### **Mescalero Apache Reservation. Ruidoso, New Mexico.**

There is a legend that the Elders do not believe. It is not their tale to tell. This is the Legend of the White Apache, a young legend that only the younger Mescaleros will tell around the fire, or for some, in the electric light of their homes.

"The White Man had not intruded on the reservation for many settings of the sun, and the land seemed as free of his taint as it would be. It was their land once again. The Mescaleros of New Mexico were not happy, but they were not greedy. They were satisfied, and they danced in thankful prayer to the gods for it.

When the winter came, there was no snow on the plains, but the cold was not kind to crops. Those who lived the White ways retreated to their metal and glass teepees. For the others, the few young tribesmen who still lived the ways of their ancestors, food was scarce, and each freezing night was a battle. True Apaches welcomed such challenge.

In the middle of the winter, when the wind gods were most playful and the days were shorter than the nights, a White man entered the reservation. He carried nothing but the cape on his back, and spoke quietly. Though his skin was as white as the desert flowers, he went to the true Apaches and asked, in their own tongue, that they allow him to stay. And even in the winter, when there were no crops, and even though he had nothing to offer, they allowed the White man to join them.

He lived their lives with them and practiced the ways of the Apaches' ancestors. He ate their food and danced to their gods when the weather allowed. He lived like a true Apache, yet he was not one. He was White.

When the final nights of that winter came, the land was angry and tired. The true Apaches's food was nearly gone, and their teepees would not last another sunrise. Word spread that the reason for the winter's length and anger was the presence of the Adversary, whose

evil required the blood of a warrior to go on and end the season.

Even as true Apaches, none would face the Adversary. All the warriors were old and tired, and the young tribesmen were virgins to battle. They feared the Eternal Winter in the Adversary's wake. Then the White man left his teepee without a word and walked into the desert, the home of the Adversary, in the cold of night.

The whole tribe, even the new Apaches, watched from afar as the White man approached the Adversary's lair. When it appeared, it was first an old Cherokee, and grew into a great, horrible thing. The tribesmen were prepared for death, but the White man stood bravely it its face.

He reached into his cape, the color of sand, and pulled from it a long spear. They battled, the White man and the Adversary, neither gaining a better hand. Each weapon the White man pulled from his cape broke in battle, and each of the Adversary's blows struck nothing.

When all of his weapons were gone, the White man wrestled his Adversary, and despite his size he held his own with the demon. They wrestled as they fought : As equals. When the moon was at its highest the White man turned, still wrestling, to the tribesmen in the distance. He thanked them, silently, for his time on their peaceful land.

Then, like he handled his weapons, the White man picked up the Adversary and threw him into the cape. The White man followed inside, leaving only the cape, which swallowed itself, leaving nothing. The tribesmen slept soundly that night.

The next morning on the land was warm. Crops were sprouting, and there was peace. And new and true Apaches alike danced to the gods to thank them for sending the only White Apache warrior to protect them.

Some believed he was dead. Some believed he had last his battle.

And others believed that the White Apache, who fought the Adversary as an equal, would battle his enemy for all time, until finally, when all the lands of the world were dead and tired, he would win. He would return."

An orange ball of cloth had appeared in the desert outside Ruidiso early that morning. Within the hour, it unfolded and suspended

itself, and from inside came a man in tribal cloth. A white man.

He looked very tired. But he smiled as he began walking, stiffly, towards the nearest town. He remembered his name. He knew it was time. He would return to them and defend all land.

Eric Simon Payne. Devil-Slayer.

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### **Greenwich Village.**

He would save them. With others, alone...It didn't matter to Namor. He knew that, if it were Susan, or "son" Maaken missing during these times he'd want someone out there looking for them, if the kind himself wasn't already doing so.

The only problem was that he didn't know where to star. There Namor flew, high above New York, without any true direction. A fire burned in him, one he had no outlet for. He looked to the sky, even higher and filled with clouds above him, looking for some sort of inspiration. That's when he saw it.

Among the clouds, a speck. Just that. Namor wouldn't have kept watching it if it didn't begin to grow. He squinted into morning sun.

"...Val?"

The speck grew more and more as it descended, and by the time it was within range of the city, two bodies had materialized. Namor instantly recognized the torn cloth on one of them, more shapely. "Brunnhilde!" He cried out, flying down after them. Something on top was hiding her face, with a putrid color and texture that Namor almost recognized.

There was no sound from either dropping figure until they hit the pavement of Greenwich Village, sending cracks from the street well past the sidewalk. The sound of impact was deafening.

When he first arrived at the scene, he could hear the sound of great lungs, heaving deeply. Namor landed gracefully and stepped, the only figure on the street as others fled, towards the orange, leathery thing huddled over the Valkyrie's body. "Away from her," The king exclaimed. "You would fight a *woman*. What of a *king*...?"

Namor stopped short and stood very still. ".....Isaac? Is that you?"

The gargoyle turned its head, eyes dark crimson like unholy blood. It was -- And it wasn't.

"**You remember me, Namor?**" Said Gargoyle in a voice like gravel. His whole body turned, and Namor realized truly how monstrous he was, both in size and detail. He'd always been ugly, Namor knew, but never so massive, and never as simply demonic as this. "**She did, too. See where it got her?**"

Namor chose his words carefully, taking minute steps with much time between. "You...Are not yourself, Isaac."

"**No. For the first time, I *am* myself. Now, I know you two always had a thing for each other, but she's *mine*.**"

"What? What do you..." His sight wandered back to the limp form of the Valkyrie, bruised and battered behind Isaac. Her clothes were in tatters, torn in all the wrong places for a lady. Then he noticed the dried blood on the inside of her thighs, and felt his hands making tight fists. "You...*You*....."

A fanged grin appeared on the Gargoyle's face. "**Me.**"

Isaac knew what was coming, and continued to smile. All at once, Namor exploded into rage, rushing the Gargoyle with an almost bestial growl. The body he hit was like a wall, which normally he could knock down, but this time only managed to annoy.

"**I'm not anyone's *push-over*,**" Said Isaac as he swatted Namor to the ground like an insect. "**I'm a *god* now. Soon your god.**" Namor grunted with both hits, but he was up and active again swiftly, lifting Gargoyle into the air with more force than he thought he'd need. Through clenched teeth, he shouted.

"--Imperius -- *\*ngghh\* Rex!*" But Namor ignored the unexpected weight and let loose a barrage of punches, holding Isaac as well he could with the other hand. Each blow was felt, both by the giver and receiver, but in one well-placed retaliation from a clawed hand, Namor let the winged creature go and plummeted halfway to the ground before catching himself.

"I -- I don't *care* if you *were* a friend, or what's happened *since*! You strike a Defender, and you strike us *all!*"

The Gargoyle was already swooping down on Namor, raking his chest coldly. "**We were *never* friends.**" Namor felt the blood running down his own face and torso only for a second before Isaac struck him again, and again, with fists that felt heavier with each. "**You don't *mind* fighting me. It doesn't *pain* you.**" The words ached of bitterness. "**And it doesn't *pain me* either. I didn't *like* being the tragedy, the *joke*. I hate you, Namor. You're a handsome, vain, selfish man. I hate you.**" He pulled Namor's bruised face so close to

his own that the king could smell the brimstone on his breath. "I hated you *all*."

Namor knew this was true when he heard it. The truth was in his voice, in his eyes, and in the way he threw Namor back to the ground, where the street was quickly becoming unstable. He scarcely had the energy left to look up from the yielding asphalt. When he did, he briefly looked at Valkyrie, dead to the world. She looked so much more helpless like that.

"When I'm *king*, you're all going to suffer." Isaac landed on Namor's back, his girth nearly snapping it. "*Forever*." The Gargoyle probably went on, Namor assumed, though he could barely hear over the sound of his own face slamming into the concrete over and over savagely. He felt consciousness almost slipping away...Dissolving into nothing.....

But beautiful Brunnhilde was still there. And she needed help. They all did.

So he went. Mustered the final ember of his inner-fire, flew from under the Gargoyle, up and behind him, struck with all his remaining might into the winged back with total abandon, bellowed in pain and effort. "*Ahck--!*" The body fell, and Namor didn't care when and if it rose again. He went to Brunnhilde and took her in his tired arms and was off into the sky as Isaac rose his head. Namor had rarely flown faster.

The Gargoyle would've given chase once he stood. However, he heard something like a voice but more, and stood very still listening to what it would have said, something about not needing to follow, they've learned half the lesson, go to the Pit, the boy is already here. Isaac reluctantly nodded, and whatever communicated with him stopped.

As he readied his wings, Isaac looked around at the pink, fleshy faces of the bystanders, staring in awe. His eyes flared and his voice box rumbled.

"*Grrrrr...*"

The looks on their faces were enough for him as he jumped and descended, claws-first, into the earth below, no passage left behind.

## Elsewhen.

Morning in the English countryside was different than elsewhere, even more so in a bed stuffed with real feathers, in a real castle, with a very real black sword an arm's length away.

Dane Whitman laid in the bed. He wished he could sleep -- He knew he would need it soon -- But he couldn't. That night, when the time was right, Merlin had said, they would return Dane to his home time a final time, wielding this Ebony Blade of the past.

With the blessing of King Arthur himself, he would fight the dark with dark. The said there would be a feast later, to see him off. Knowing this, the Black Knight finally drifted to sleep within the walls of Camelot.

He had a day to wait.

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## Greenwich Village.

"...It wasn't an angel that gave me these eyes -- That was a trick. It was *Mephisto*. He made me kill -- *murder* Daredevil here with them. I saw evil before it occurred, and I'd seen myself killing him.

"So we went to Hell, to save DD *and* my soul. In the end, everything worked out, pretty much...Except I still had these *eyes*. I could still see things before they happened. And I could see all the -- All the *things* on people. The demons, the monsters. *Everywhere*. That, plus my apparent *death*, made it hard to keep my business. I mean, how am I supposed to be in a room full of businessmen with eyes that see *all* the Devil's work? It was driving me *crazy*. The *nights* got bad, too.

"It was small at first. A little voice change, or some extra hair. Claws for nails. Fangs. Then...I -- I cried myself to sleep the first night I grew wings. It's so painful, each time.....

"So I just stayed home," Kyle continued, the others all sitting and listening intently. "I didn't really know what was going on or why -- Yeah, I know it has something to do with these *eyes*, but I can't *fix* it. And I couldn't really control myself at night..."

"You should have looked me up, talked to me about it," Daredevil



said. "I don't know how I would've helped, but we *did* go through an ordeal together there."

"I didn't want to leave the apartment at all. That's where I've been: At home. Hiding from demons. And having dreams."

"What *dreams*?" Hulk asked less than forcibly. Kyle sighed.

"...They're like the *visions* I get, with these eyes. Things happen but they're all put together like cutscenes. It's chaotic. But I've seen -- I saw Patsy, and all of us. I saw Daimon. I saw Mephisto, and - and and bunch of other guys. And we're in New York, and there's fire, and there are these things with six *wings* and....."

Kyle stopped suddenly and looked past his captive audience. Silently, he stood up. The others all turned to see what he saw. Namor landed as lightly as he could through the same skylight he'd left through, very solemn. He carried the body of the Valkyrie with him.

"My God..." Kyle uttered. As Namor fell to his knees he continued holding her, and the Hulk jumped forward to help put her down. "What *happened*, Subby?" He asked the emerald giant, moving Brunnhilde to a couch like a doll. Namor remained on his knees, and the Black Widow stood over him.

"Looks like he got the same as she did," She said. Namor finally spoke.

"No. She recieved...Much worse."

Hulk gripped the couch harshly. "Who *was* it? Who the *Hell* was it?" Namor remained silent, and the quiet was filled with a faint female voice.

"...Isaac....."

"Val? You're awake...Thank *God*..." Kyle kneeled at her level to look her in the eyes.

"I-Is...That you, Kyle? Hast thou returned...To us?"

"For now Val, yes. And I want to help. Who *did* this to you?"

"...Isaac."

"Waitaminute," Hulk grunted. "*Gargoyle* Isaac?"

"Yes. He is no longer *our* Isaac," Namor continued. He stood weakly on Natasha's shoulder.

"Isaac...?" Kyle drew a blank. "B-But -- I mean, he wouldn't do something like *this*..."

".....'Twas an animal. A -- A *monster*. But 'twas Isaac..." Brunnhilde admitted. "I was summoned by Odin...To see that Hel has no mistress..."

"What--?" Daredevil looked up quickly, only to have Doctor Strange slowly respond.

"The Asgardian Hel. With one 'L'."

"Oh."

Valkyrie continued. "Upon returning home, on the bridge Bifrost...He appeared from nothing and attacked with power I've yet seen...No reason or rhyme..."

"I saw them plummet into the city just now," Namor added, finally sitting. "I fought Isaac, and as you can see -- He has changed, both in strength and allegiance. He said he hates me -- Hates us *all*, and that we will all suffer. He truly was uncontrollable. He even...He--" "...He took my maidenhead," Said Brunnhilde. A quiet invaded the room as Kyle covered he bloody lower body with a blanket. Black Widow's eyes were wide in disbelief.

"*What?*" She asked. Daredevil leaned over with his hand in front of his mouth.

"He took her virgi--"

"I *know*. I -- Know."

None of them could find a comfortable way to be there. Sitting, standing, laying, it was all a horrid feeling no matter what. And Stephen was just waiting for it to happen.

"So?" Namor looked the way of the Doctor with those commanding eyes of his. "You see your friends *hurt* when you've done nothing. You see the situation *worsen*. Will you still standy by?"

There was no answer. Stephen looked to the floor, so Namor stood rigidly, supporting himself on the table. He loomed over Namor like a shadow, covering him entirely. "You, a *doctor*? A healer? You can't *stand* this anymore than I can, Stephen. I'm looking at you and I can *see* it. You are not weak like this. Stephen Strange overcame a handicap to became a hero. Doctor Strange has braved treats against Eternity itself. He would not allow a joke like *Alice* to stop him from helping his *friends*."

The king stared at his friend. Stephen didn't return it -- He still stared at the floor. Namor winced, then turned from him in spite.

"...Obviously, you are not Stephen Strange."

Doctor Strange didn't need to watch any of them. "...No." He rose from the chair just as Namor looked behind. "I *am* Doctor Stephen Strange. And I will *not* allow this. *We* won't allow this. We have someplace to begin now...So let's begin."

A hint of a smile almost curled around Namor's thin, regal lips. Just as the triumphant words left the Doctor's mouth, the king's face was

bathed in a quick golden and red light, as were they all. No sound, no smell, just the light.

Behind the light, a young, female voice spoke. "Hi..." It was like magic.

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## Rome.

Kurt Wagner woke to a feverish knocking on his door. He slumped out of bed but found his usual agility by the time he reached the door. As he opened it, Kurt realized he had no idea what time it was. It was still dark.

A pale, thin face greeted him behind the doorway. A young man, probably in his thirties and dressed in the same garments as Kurt, looked up and down. Kurt was used to such stares.

"Can I help you?" He asked with honest politeness.

"I-I-I -- Yeah. You're -- You--"

"I won't bite, I swear," Said Kurt, and smiled, though the guest looked only more fearful at the sight of the sharpened teeth. "I'm Kurt Wagner, if that *is* who you're looking for."

"Yeah -- Yes." He produced a letter in an unsealed envelope very quickly, which Kurt took.

"And what would this be, brother?"

"They said there's been -- Uh, stuff in New York."

"Stuff?" Asked Kurt, opening the letter but not really reading it yet.

"*You* know." The messenger looked around, and gradually seemed much younger to Kurt. "The kind of *stuff* that *you're* supposed to deal with."

"Ah." Kurt scanned the letter. "...'Demon Siting in Greenwich Village'...?"

"Listen, that's all I know. I just carry the stuff. I've gotta go..."

"Oh, of course. Thank you for the--"

"Uh, yeah -- Whatever..."

The messenger quickly exited into the shadows of the hall, and Kurt shut his door. He looked outside, then back at the letter, then at the red and black heap of clothing in the corner of the room.

Kurt smiled. "...Demons in *Greenwich*..." His room was empty before dawn.

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## Hell.

There are so many stones in Hell, as many as are tortured souls there, that no worldly thing could count them. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that none of the Burning Lands' inhabitants failed to notice the tiny body of Mark Garney peaking out from a burning hot rock. He didn't notice the heat, just looked down at the hottest flames and rivers of blood and excrement below.

"Hello, little brother," Said the voice behind Mark. Despite its roughness and appearance from nowhere, Mark ignored it, continuing to look over the edge into the chasm. The Gargoyle sauntered to his side and looked also. "Enjoying the show?" Mark didn't answer. They both watched.

It looked like miles below and was probably more, if there were any measure of distance there. An infernal stage, its centerpiece the handsome, red-haired Daimon Hellstorm, sitting on his hideous throne. The Gargoyle eyed him most narrowly. Before the stage, sitting deathly still and silent, was a congregation of so many faces that Isaac could scarcely recognize some of them. But he knew why they were there, and he knew the essence of each one.

"They're all just shades of father," Said the Gargoyle, bitterly. Each was a lord of lordess of an underworld all their own. "If it wasn't Daimon doing it, I'd applaud this."

The captive audience had shrunk in size since they first gathered, and still they sat quiet, still, just as their host did onstage before them. There was a muffled voice from nearby, off the stage. When she appeared, Daimon stood to face her.

"Patsy, beloved," He said to the red-haired woman, walking unsurely across the stage in her feline costume. She eyed the crowd cautiously as the Son of Satan took her hand and kissed it.

"Welcome. Welcome home." Patsy's eyes followed his as he raised his head again.

"Daimon, I--"

"Don't speak," He said, placing his long, sharp finger in front of her lips. When he gestured behind him, another grotesque throne joined his own. "You've had your time to think, Patsy. Look here -- I offer you a throne next to mine. And see here," He said, pointing out into the crowd, "They are gathered for *you*. For *us*. They are our *fodder*."

And without a flinch, his pointing nail extended further and further towards the bald head of the sitting god Pluto. It pierced his forehead's flesh easily and went deep into his eternal skull. Blackest blood dripped from the wound, and slowly, Pluto's head shrunk to the size of a charm, his body fading away.

Daimon recalled his bloody nail, the head in tow, and he plucked and ate it. "There power is ours, Patsy," He said. She could smell the death on his breath. It would have disgusted her...*It should* have. "All you have to do is give me your hand in marriage."

From the blackness at the back of the stage, there was a rustling, and slowly out of it came a shape just as black. Its hair was like a garden of spikes as it walked towards the red-haired couple, carrying something in its sharpened fingers. Without turning to the creature, Daimon reached behind and took the item from its palm. "Thank you, Blackheart," he said.

"Of course, brother."

"Blackheart will be my best man, you know," Daimon said, staring at Patsy and intoxicating himself in doing so. "He smithed this ring in the fires of Hell itself." He gradually made it to one knee, still looking in her eyes, and pulled her hand to him. The ring was made of a metal so dark that Patsy feared the reflection it would show her. She could feel its coldness at the tip of her finger.

"Well, beloved? Will you marry me?" The tension spread throughout all of Hell. Patsy closed her eyes.

".....Yes." And the ring slipped onto her finger.

Daimon rose, holding her hand. He kissed Patsy on her lips, allowing her to taste what she smelled earlier. It tasted good. "Then take your throne, my future queen, and wait. We will have *afine* wedding, with this crowd as the guests -- The wedding gifts, as well. And then the reception -- *Oh, the reception...*"

They walked to their thrones and sat, overlooking their kingdom. "You will be so proud of your husband, Patsy," Said the lord of Hell to his fiancée. "We are going to succeed where my father failed so long ago."

"**You think she's pretty?**" Asked the Gargoyle. Mark nodded faintly. "**We always fall for the red-headed ones...**" His heavy hand took Mark by the shoulder and began to lead him into the outer darkness. "**But that will be his downfall, not ours, little brother. Now**

come. We have other places we need to be before the wedding.

"Our father says the pieces are all in place," Said the Gargoyle as he and Mark melted into the darkness.

"Now he will play his game."

### TO BE CONTINUED

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## IN OUR DEFENSE...

Letters, thoughts, and reviews can be sent to "IN OUR DEFENSE..." at [WeckapaugB@aol.com](mailto:WeckapaugB@aol.com)

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Nightcrawler was last seen in Marvel 2000's [DEADPOOL #12](#), in which he was a minister at a New Jersey church. His recruitment to the Vatican occurred between that story and this one.
- Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie, disappeared in M2K's [DEFENDERS #6](#), having been summoned to an empty Hel by Odin.
- The Black Knight, Dane Whitman, has been shifting between Arthurian England and the present off and on since M2K's [DEFENDERS #2](#). As of [last issue](#), he was again in the past.
- Patsy Walker vanished from the Man-Thing's swamp at the end of [last issue](#) in her guise of Hellcat. Mark Garney, son to Gina Garney, also took a portal from the Nexus of Realities to elsewhere with the help of the Man-Thing in the same issue.
- All the Defenders experienced their own personal tortures at the hands of the being called Alice, besides Daredevil, who defeated the entity himself. This took place in "INSIDE A SHATTERED MIRROR", running through M2K's [DEFENDERS #5-8](#).
- Namor's "son" Maaken is really an egg whose hatchling modeled its own structure after the first creature it came in contact with -- The Sub-Mariner himself -- In M2K's [IRON MAN Annual 2000](#), the conclusion to the "SEA MONSTERS" story arc.
- The events Kyle Richmond described took place in Marvel's NIGHTHAWK mini-series, by Jim Kreuger and Richard Case.

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## SHORT LIVED PRODUCTIONS

Will Short - 3:04 PM - October 16, 2001

Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder:

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## DEFENDERS #10

# DEFENDERS

### "THE BLACK VEIL"

#### Episode 1

by [Russ Anderson](#) and [Will Short](#)

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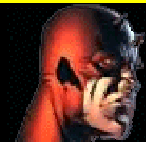
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Doctor Strange



Namor, the Sub-Mariner



Daredevil



Hulk



Black Widow



Nighthawk  
**HELL:**

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### RECENTLY IN "DEFENDERS"

The being Alice is defeated, freeing all from his power. Luke Cage leaves. Mark Garney, Valkyrie, and Hellcat are all missing.

There are happenings in Hell. And the Black Knight is in the past, staying at castle Camelot, waiting for a certain battle, a war in the present, that he must take part in...

---

Eric Simon Payne stepped over a fungus-covered tree root and paused to look around. The swamp encompassed him, buried him in its green and brown folds, its smells and textures hinting of constant death and rebirth.

When all was said and done, he definitely preferred the desolate, dry beauty of America's Southwest to the wet decay of her Everglades. Still, this was a place of power, a place where demons and angels sometimes walked. He had been a Devil-Slayer long enough to be able to recognize such things.

An insect that hadn't originated on this planet chirruped nearby, and Eric knew he was close to where he had to be. The Nexus was near.

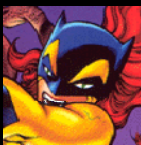
A massive shape shuffled out from under a nearby tree -- a shape Eric had mistaken on first sight for a mass of undergrowth. He saw his mistake now as the thing's great red eyes appeared and



**Hellstorm**  
**ELSEWHERE:**



**Devil-Slayer**



**Hellcat**



**Black Knight**



**Valkyrie**

looked on him impassively.

It was huge, whatever it was. Eight feet of wet, green swamp, standing upright. It was slouched, and its face consisted solely of the red orbs and a strange trunk-like proboscis that hung most of the way down its frame. Eric reached behind him, into the orange folds of the cape draped over his shoulders. The creature didn't look like it wanted to attack, but it would be best to be pre-

He paused, looking into the thing's eyes. It looked back without reaction.

Eric straightened, letting his hand fall back down to his side. Then he gave the muck monster a little bow. "My apologies. I didn't realize at first, but... you're just who I'm looking for."

Unsurprisingly, the Man-Thing remained silent.

So Eric had a seat on the driest tree root he could find. And he waited.

---

The blinding light died off. Her blonde hair curled under her thin face, lit with a thin nose and thin lips. The whole of her body was lithe and petite under a familiar black and yellow spandex.

"Hi," she said again, unsure of the place or the people. She had heard of Doctor Strange's sanctorum before, seen it from the outside even. But inside it was dark, dark even for night, and the people (if they could be called that) gathered there were the same: gaunt, and quiet. They stared back at her blankly. Daredevil smelled magic.

She continued, stepping forward. "My name...I've been called Magik, but my name is Illyana Rasputin. I'm sorry if I'm intruding, but--"

"But you are anyway," said the green one, the Hulk. His body rippled when he spoke. "Doc, can't you put a magic *fence* around this place or something? Keep these people from barging in all the time?"

"If he did, it wouldn't keep me out," Illyana said. Very few people were capable of ignoring the man-giant, but she did,



walking past him and his snide tone - as well as the Valkyrie, bruised and laid out on the couch, and everyone else staring at her - to Doctor Strange. "Sir, Limbo...*Belasco's* Limbo. I'm more than familiar with it, and--"

"Excuse me." Strange didn't bother to use his polite voice. "I'm sorry...Magik?"

"Illyana."

He nodded. "Of course. Illyana -- This is *not* the best of times. And as I'm sure your business is important..." He looked around the room, making a gesture with his eyes. Illyana followed them and saw what she had already seen: the gloom. The injury. *These* were heroes? She couldn't tell just by looking at them. "Well, as you can see, this is *hardly* the best time. If you could come back another time..."

He was the Sorcerer Supreme. He was supposed to understand. "But..."

"You heard him, child," Namor barked from behind the couch. "We don't have the time. And this is far from your own business."

"Hey, come on," Black Widow said. She strolled over to Illyana, who had made two very tight, tiny fists. "We don't have to take it out on *her* alright?" Natasha faced her. "Look Illyana, we'd help you in any other situation, but this is a bad time. A *really* bad time. Maybe you could go to...Oh, I don't know. Who's another mystic? Dr. Druid? No, no, he's dead..."

Illyana made a face that was meant more for Namor and the Doctor. "*Belasco is gone.*" Natasha stopped talking just from the face that Stephen made. In fact the whole room stood still because of it, besides Illyana. "*That* is what I've been trying to *tell* you."

"Who's Belasco?" said Daredevil, having heard Doctor Strange's heart rate kick up.

"...The ruler of Limbo. One of the Limbos, at least," he said. Already he was stepping further away from everyone as invisible forces swept around him. "You are sure then, Illyana?"

*This* was more like it. "Limbo was my home once. I'm sure."

Strange nodded as a third eye slowly formed on his forehead, shut tightly.

"Valkyrie encountered a Hel without a Hela..." Stephen pondered. "And we've dealt with both Daimon Hellstrom and Gargoyle recently."

"I... think see a pattern," Kyle Richmond said. "Hell. God, can't *any* of us escape that place?" Stephen closed his two usual eyes tightly as his third opened up.

"Give me a moment. I'll see if there is anything..." The Eye of Agamotto pierced the walls of the sanctum, pushed past the barriers of the mundane world and searched for the fiery depths. Stephen could feel the heat, and he could see the fire blinding the Eye. Hellfire had never been so bright before. He pushed deeper and found it much more difficult than it should have been. "...There..."

Something impenetrable. Thick, dark... powerful. It came from a source within the inner circles of Hell. Stephen pushed the Eye to go deeper. It tried, and it failed. For an extended second the flames touched the Eye, and so they touched Stephen. He cried out at the burning pain and at the same time felt more behind it. A gathering of power, so black, so evil...

Stephen couldn't control the scream because it wasn't his own. "...Aghhhhhh!"

The Eye returned its gaze inward. It shut quickly and retreated to the pendant around Stephen's neck. When he opened his own eyes again, he was shaking. "Doctor?" Daredevil approached him cautiously. Whatever vital signs he was giving off weren't right at all. "Stephen, are you okay? What is it?" He helped Strange to a chair, where the mage sat, looking very pale.

"No, I... I'll be fine, thank you," he said, then looked up at Illyana. "I found Belasco."

Illyana leaned in closer. "You did? So he's in Hell?" Stephen wiped his perspiring forehead and nodded weakly.

"Yes. He's in Hell. As is Isaac," he announced to the room. "And Daimon. I felt Patsy there too. And..." Everyone but the Valkyrie was crowded near Stephen. He surveyed them with bloodshot

eyes.

"And I can't begin to *imagine* who else. But they are keeping me out."

*Him*, Illyana realized. *The supreme sorcerer.*

---

Hell.

If you had asked Mark Garney what the word meant to him a month ago, he would have told you it was the fiery place where bad people go when they die. A place that hurts you over and over again for all eternity. But in his heart of hearts, he would have equated that damnation only with the worst things in his life up to that point -- Saturday morning cartoons preempted for boring news reports, really cool toys without batteries to make them go, imprisonment in a second grade classroom when all he really wanted was to be outside, brussel sprouts. Things like that.

Now he was getting the real deal, the full effect of Hell in 3D and surround sound, vibrant colors that all seemed to end in a red tinge, roiling up against shadows blacker than any night Mark had ever been lost in. The ever-present sound of untold millions screaming, creating a barely-audible hum in the dry, hot rock of this land. No plant-life to be seen. Hell was dry rock, raging inferno, and blackened sky... and that was pretty much it. Nothing else could long endure here. Particularly the still-living.

His feet dragging, Mark tripped and fell, going facedown on the rock. He heard his guide pause, turn and, with a grunt of displeasure, return to his side.

"Come brother," the Gargoyle said, prodding Mark gently with one claw. "The father will not be happy with us if we tarry."

Mark looked up at the monstrous, orange-skinned demon that had once been a god-fearing man named Isaac Christians.

"Thirsty," he croaked. "I'm thirsty..."

The Gargoyle leapt from foot-to-foot, looking -- Mark thought dimly -- like he had to pee. Had he not been so thirsty and so tired, Mark might have laughed at the idea.

"You will slake your thirst on the blood of thousands, brother.

You will never go thirsty or hungry again, for the untold billions you will sup from. But you *must* get up. The father is near."

Mark nodded, as if this all made perfect sense to him. And it did, in a way... tho if you'd asked him to explain it he couldn't have. Putting his hands beneath him, he tried to push himself up... but his limbs quaked and failed, dropping him back onto the rock.

"You have the strength, brother, but you must reach deep," the Gargoyle prompted, his prancing growing more and more urgent by the moment.

"Can't..." Mark moaned. "Too tired... hungry... just wanna sleep..."

"You must!"

"Tired..."

"GET UP, YOU LAZY LITTLE TOAD!" Gargoyle roared, slamming his hands down on either side of the boy, hard enough to make Mark flop on the barren stone. The thing that had once been Isaac Christians straightened, eyes going wide in guilt and fear. He looked all around and then, satisfied that his loss of control hadn't been witnessed, he leaned over the boy again.

"Forgive me, brother... I don't know what came over me."

Mark looked back at him. He wasn't at all afraid of this man/demon, no matter how horrible his form was. If anything, Mark pitied him, and was just a little bit disgusted by him.

"Come. I will help you to stand, but you must continue the journey on your own."

"Okay," Mark replied quietly. He took the Gargoyle's claw and let the demon help him to his feet. He thought maybe he could go on after all. Isaac's weakness seemed to have invigorated him somehow.

Together, the boy and the demon/man started walking again, blissfully unaware that another set of eyes had seen their exchange. Swathed in the shadows that had borne him, the owner of those eyes moved to follow.

She had been mad before. Utterly, stark-raving mad. It wasn't all that long ago, and she had been forced to revisit that dark patch of her past just hours before.

So why wasn't she mad here? *Here*, of all places. The queen throne of Hell itself, overlooking a captive audience of all the death lords, all the high demons and devil wannabes in existence - The ones that hadn't been killed and absorbed yet by her king. Patsy Walker was forced to endure their belittling stares, to look into their soulless eyes. Why wasn't Patsy cracking?

She knew why: *This* was "normal" for her. To Hellcat, member of the Defenders, a literal gang of introverts and iffy archetypes. To Patsy Hellstrom, wife of the Devil's son himself... soon for the second time. Hell was growing to be a place of not quite comfort, but far from the horrible feeling she used to get visiting the infernal.

Patsy *was* mad, she decided. And that's the only reason this place wasn't driving her crazy. It would be home soon, thanks to the handsome, shock-haired devilspawn who shared the throne beside her - The one made of excrement and the stained stones of execution. His throne was empty, the king elsewhere. And she missed him.

---

"My lord..."

"Brother, Blackheart. We are practically family, and you are to be my best man," Daimon told the jagged, black demon. "No formalities." He had called Daimon over for a private audience and seemed, for once, antsy.

Blackheart blinked, nodded. "Brother, then. I've looked over your wedding guests...The ones from your *father's* side of the family."

"Our current audience."

"Yes."

Daimon looked out into bodies (he didn't care about the faces), holding his trident steadily. "What of them? They sit in fear."

They have no choice."

"Of course, Daimon, but..." Blackheart made sure they were alone before speaking. "Brother, I've accounted for all except for my father. *Mephisto*." Daimon looked back at him. His mouth hung open looking for words, at first, but it faded into confidence. "He was supposed to be here, Daimon..."

"Mephisto. Such a *petty* demon." The future king began taking steps back to his throne. "No worries, brother. Your father poses no threat to *me*. And when the time comes, the wedding... Then, I assure you..." Daimon took his throne. "We will *both* show him how small he truly is."

He looked to his queen, still and beautiful like a statue. "Comfortable, my pet?" Patsy slowly turned to him and smiled uncontrollably.

"Oh yes, dear. Very comfortable. Just thinking, that's all..."

---

"How is she doing?" Daredevil asked, leaning over the back of the couch.

"I don't know the woman that well, but I would guess she's been better," the Widow sighed. Beneath her, Valkyrie lay immobile across the cushions, flittering in and out of consciousness, her golden tresses pasted to her forehead by sweat.

"Besides, you should be able to see more than I can. What do you think?"

Daredevil was silent for a moment. "Her heartbeat's strong... though a little more rapid than it should be. Her breathing's not as shallow as it was when she got here -- that's good." He paused and pulled one of his scarlet gloves off, touching the bare fingers to Brunnhilde's naked forearm. "Surface blood vessels are starting to expand again. I'd estimate body temperature at about 94 degrees. All in all," he said, pulling the glove back on, "I'd say she's coming out of it."

"Showoff," the Widow muttered. But she smiled when she said it -- Daredevil could hear it in her voice -- and it made him feel a little better. Whatever she was angry with him about, he could

still make her smile if he tried hard enough.

On the other side of the room, the Hulk was pacing angrily.

"So what now, Steve?" he demanded. "Gargoyle's in Hell, her boss is in Hell--"

"Belasco," Illyana said. "His name's Belasco."

"Are you still here?" the Hulk demanded. Then, as if she hadn't spoken, "But you can't get us there. So what now?" Great tracts of muscle flexed and moved across the Hulk's back and shoulders. Across the room, Wong winced. The Hulk needed to vent, but there was little the man-monster could do that wouldn't result in damage to the master's home. Even slapping his fist into his palm would likely blow out all the windows in the room.

"There may be more at stake here than just the fates of Isaac and Belasco, Bruce," Doctor Strange replied. "The power it would take to seal off Hell from the Earth dimension... it beggars the imagination..."

"We'll deal with it, just like we always deal with it. But right now, at just this moment, that," he jabbed a green finger across the room at the prone form of Valkyrie, "needs to be our primary concern. I've fought beside Val a lot, but I've never seen anybody tear her up that bad before."

"Nor have I," Namor said beside him.

"Me neither," Nighthawk agreed.

"And it was a friend that did it to her!"

Strange shot them all a look of irritation. "I'm well aware of what happened to Brunnhilde, gentlemen, and I'm doing all I can. Perhaps the Orb of Agamotto could pierce the barrier. That would at least give us a look at what we're dealing with..."

Nighthawk stole a look at Regina Garney, who was seated on the edge of an ottoman, her hands pressed together in front of her face as she watched the superheroes decide how best to go about finding her son. It was obviously taking a great deal of effort for her to remain still, and Kyle Richmond admired her strength. He wanted to help her because it was the right thing to do, but part

of him also wanted to live up to her trust.

And yet, he had been to Hell recently, hadn't he? He didn't even like to think about what had happened to him there... tho he wasn't very likely to forget, given his penchant for transforming into a bat-winged demon every nightfall since his return.

Still, there was Regina... being strong and silent because she knew it was the course most likely to return her son to her quickly. Could Kyle show any less strength than her?

"What of our young friend?" Namor asked, nodding at Illyana. "She seems to possess some ability to traverse dimensions. Can she attempt a crossing?"

"Excuse me!" Illyana growled. "I'm standing right here, your kingliness. You could ask me directly, you know."

One of Namor's eyebrows jagged upward. "Very well. Are you able to attempt a journey to Hell, little one?"

Illyana's eyes fell. "Well... no. Earth and Limbo are the only places I can teleport to..."

The Hulk threw his hands in the air, making Wong wince again. "Oh for--"

"What about the Man-Thing?"

The Hulk froze, as did everyone else in the room. One by one, they all turned toward the person who had spoken, the person who still sat calmly on the ottoman. Regina Garney let her hands fall from her face and folded them in her lap.

"I've been thinking... that maybe he had something to do with Mark's disappearance in the first place. He was lurking around the Quinjet while the rest of you were in Wonderland. And you said he's in charge of some sort of dimensional nexus, right?"

"Not some sort of. *The Nexus*," Strange replied softly. "But yes, Regina, you are correct."

"Well, maybe I'm oversimplifying... but it seems to me that if the traffic control guy can't get us where we're going, nobody can."

"It may not be that simple," Namor said. "The Man-Thing has



ever been a quandary, nearly impossible to communicate with..."

"But she's right," Strange chimed in. "Absolutely right. Damn it all, I should have suspected the Man-Thing as soon as I learned Mark had vanished. If nothing else, he is certainly our best chance for piercing the barrier that's been erected around Hell."

"Then what are we waiting for?" the Hulk demanded. "Magic us there, Steve. If Manny gives us any crap, I'll kick the chlorophyll out of him."

"I want to go too," Illyana said from the Hulk's elbow. The green goliath glared at her. "If Belasco's involved, it's my fight as much as it is any of yours."

"That's arguable," the Hulk replied. "Besides, haven't you been listening? This is hell, little girl. No place for a young lady."

Illyana scowled. "I've been at this almost as long as the rest of you, Dr. Banner. As for Hell... I've been there... I was even dead for awhile..."

The Hulk laughed at that. "Take a look around the room, girlie. If you haven't been dead, you're in the minority. Wong, you've been dead, right?"

"Yes, Dr. Banner."

"How 'bout you, Namor?"

Namor rolled his eyes and looked away. "We are wasting valuable time..."

"Trust me, he has. You, Nighthawk?"

"Twice."

"Steve?"

Illyana waved her hand and a glimmering stepping disk came into view. "Look, let's just go, okay? I can get us to the Everglades, and I can be of use wherever we end up too. This is the Defenders, right? I thought you just let people walk in off the street and join."

"You heard wrong, little girl."

"Your help would of course be welcome, Illyana Rasputin," Strange finally cut in, stepping forward and laying a hand on Illyana's shoulder. "And your mutant ability to teleport will allow me to save my own energies. Thank you."

The Hulk glowered at them both, but fell silent.

"I'm going too," Regina announced, standing up. "If that monster had anything to do with taking my boy away, I want to be there when we find out."

"Gina, I don't think that's such a--"

Regina swiped a hand thru the air, cutting off Nighthawk's protests and the ones she could see forming on Dr. Strange's lips. "Let's just skip the part where you guys try to convince me it'll be too dangerous, okay? I'm not crazy about using them, but I do have metahuman powers. I'm far from helpless. And this is my son we're talking about here..."

"I'm staying," the Black Widow announced from her position in front of the couch.

The Hulk chuckled at that. "Getting too hot for you, Widow?"

"Not at all," she replied icily. "I'd prefer to stay with Valkyrie, see that someone's here to offer some emotional support when she wakes up. No offense, Wong."

"None taken, miss."

"I'll stay too then," Daredevil announced. The Hulk made a dismissive noise.

"I... don't think that's a good idea," the Widow insisted. "I think you need to go, Daredevil."

He blinked, cocked his head in her direction. "Why?"

"If it wasn't for you, we'd all still be stuck in Wonderland. You might be a lot more use than you think. Besides, you've been to Hell, even fought Mephisto. You might be able to offer some insight."

Daredevil frowned at his former lover, listened to the steadiness of her heartbeat. Whatever her motivations, she wasn't being deceitful... she really did think it would be for the best if he tag along. That didn't make him feel any better about her basically telling him to go away, but at least she wasn't trying to hide those sentiments.

"Okay," he sighed, straightening from where he'd been leaning on the back of the couch. "Not sure what I can handle that the sorcerer supreme or the Hulk can't, but if you guys want me, I'll come."

"We can of course use all help that is willingly given, Daredevil," Strange replied. "Now, if we are all of one mind... Ilyana?"

The Defenders gathered around the Russian girl. Another glowing stepping disk materialized beneath them, and in the next moment they were gone.

---

It had been some time since Dane Whitman, the Black Knight, had attended an Arthurian feast in ancient Camelot. Generally preceding the onset of a dangerous campaign, he remembered them as raucous affairs, the Knights of the Round Table hammered to a man (except for Galahad, of course -- noble, teetotal, saintly, utterly boring Galahad). Sometimes massive acts of violence would be acted out between drunken knights on the very table they all ate from. On other occasions, serving wenches would be had by the dozens on the same table.

On this night, Dane suspected there would be a little bit of both types of revelry. This feast was slightly different for the Black Knight, however, as the celebration was in his honor. He was the one who would be embarking on a dangerous crusade on the morrow. He was the one who would raise his sword against the forces of evil.

His sword...

He raised the Ebony Blade from where it lay on the stone floor at his feet. Ponderously, he drew the black sword from its sheath and looked upon it.

The Blade had a blood curse on it, one that had haunted his

bloodline for centuries. Anyone who wielded the Blade and drew blood with it, would be driven to draw blood again and again, in a futile attempt to slake the sword's undying thirst.

He thought he had escaped the curse at last when the Ebony Blade was claimed by the Bloodwraith. The Bloodwraith had promptly brought the curse on his own head, and even tho Dane had always felt terribly about that, there was still a part of him that was very thankful that it hadn't been him.

But then Merlin had stolen him back in time from his native 21st Century, had bequeathed upon him this earlier version of the Ebony Blade, from Merlin's own time.

And this morning, Merlin had informed him that, in order to save heaven and earth, not to mention the Nine Rings themselves, he would have to kill a man with it.

The festivities continued, but Dane Whitman remained a pensive calm at the center of that storm.

---

Eric looked up as he felt it: An arrival. Sitting in this swamp, the Nexus, he felt slightly more attuned to that sort of thing. He looked up to the red, tear-shaped eyes of the root-creature. "That should be them, I suppose," Eric said, and knowing there would be no answer, followed the voices that were fading into earshot.

"...really wouldn't mind coming here so often if it wasn't for the *smell*." He didn't recognize that one. Eric followed further.

"I don't smell anything." Kyle, he assumed. The rumors were true, apparently: He *had* returned. He sounded almost the same as the last time they met. Further.

"Well we wouldn't have to make the place our damn *vacation spot* if Cyndi Lauper here could 'port somewhere besides some place we've never heard of." It sounded like...No. It couldn't be. That cynical tone was too much for *him*. "As it is, we might as well set up a freakin' *hotel* here."

Another voice. Young, female. Eric didn't recognize it, but felt like he'd follow it anywhere. "Hey, I got us here, didn't I?"

"Please, both of you," And *that* one was unmistakable,

confident like a surgeon's hands. "This is neither the *time* nor the--"

Stephen and the others walked into a clearing -- as far as that goes in the swamp -- and stopped cold. He saw someone in the distance, thought it couldn't be. But it was. "...By Hoggoth -- Eric?"

The Devil-Slayer stepped forward. "Yes. It's me." They kept towards him, some familiar, some not. But he felt it from them, they way they spoke to each other and they way they walked - Never too close together: This was still the Defenders.

"Eric, man!" Kyle said. Why wasn't he in costume...? It didn't matter.

"The Devil-Slayer has been long missed, Eric," Namor said with a quick, strong squeeze of his shoulder. "But why here? And why now?"

"Because that is how it has to be," Eric said. Calmly and without a word, he led them back through the brush again to where he had sat before. There they found another smaller clearing, and at its center, the Man-Thing.

"Then... You know?" Stephen asked.

"I've known since yesterday. When my battle with the Adversary, meant to last forever, was cut short by his disappearance, I knew. When I arrived back on Earth, I knew. There is a rumbling in the Gray Lands below," And he pointed down as he walked to the side of the Man-Thing. "Where the dead go. This is my true calling as the Devil-Slayer. So here I am."

"Then this thing?" The blonde girl, Illyana as Eric would learn, asked. "It... will take us there?" Eric shook his head, already reaching for the pouch at his side.

"No. At least, not as you are now. I don't doubt that you've already looked into Hell, Doctor?" Stephen remembered and shivered at the thought, but managed a nod. "Then you know there is something there."

"I don't know what," Stephen admitted. "It's like... *afield*. Something distorting the usual entrypoints to Hell. It was... very

painful. Even I couldn't withstand it."

"And none of us could, or will," Eric said as he fished something out of his pouch, "without this." He held out a gloved hand, little brown, organic beads in his palm. A wrinkle went through Daredevil's nose.

"That's not..." He tensed. "No. *No* way. Do you know what that will do to m--" *Secret identity, Matt*, He remembered. "To us?"

Devil-Slayer scowled. Of course he did. "It will separate your mind and spirit from the shell of your body. It will make you... *malleable* enough to pass through the distortion around Hell unharmed."

"But..." He was grasping for words. There were morals, and there was *reason*. The others remained quiet. "Doctor Strange -- Stephen, tell him this isn't necessary. We have two sorcerers and the *Man-Thing*..." Strange said nothing, just stroked his beard. "*Oh my God!* That's *peyote*. You're actually *considering* this?"

"Only... only if it is absolutely *necessary*." Stephen aimed this at Eric.

"My time with America's natives has taught me much. This is the only way to arrive in Hell safely."

"Then..." Stephen sighed. "It is the only way." They didn't all agree. Illyana had seen Forge on this before... it had scared her. But when Stephen spoke, it was often the decision of the others, too.

"Don't worry, man," Kyle assured Daredevil as the buttons were passed out. "I took some of this stuff in college... it's kind of cool, actually. I mean, in a better situation..." Daredevil didn't respond.

"I guess you have to try everything once..." The Hulk said as Eric came to him. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Hulk." The rest of the buttons went back into his pouch. "You won't be able to join us."

"And why the Hell not?"

"Why not...? Look at you. I wouldn't have enough for you even

if I didn't have to supply everyone else." Hulk breathed very loudly through his nose.

"Listen, Payne! I didn't come along just to get pushed to the side, and--"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Said Illyana. With her free hand she conjured a glowing disk near the Hulk while he was giving Eric the evil eye. "Just go back to Doctor Strange's and wait!"

"...I never liked you, Eric," Hulk said as he slipped a bulky leg into the disk. Eric looked him over.

"You're much different from the last time we met, Hulk," he said as the disk swallowed the Hulk's body. "And still very much the same." And then they were sitting, in the swamp, buttons in hand. Eric joined them, sitting Indian-style by the Man-Thing.

"I'm ready when you are," he said. Stephen looked around to see them all doing the same. They ended up looking to him. Of *course*. Of *course* he would have to go first.

"...For our friends," He said finally, and in a rush, popped the buttons into his mouth. They tasted dry and bitter, but he managed, and swallowed the handful with a gulp. It was their turn. One by one, they did the same, reluctantly. Daredevil went last.

"So... what now?" he asked anxiously.

"Now," Eric said, relaxing, "we wait."

---

A flash of light, a descending disk of white, and the Incredible Hulk was standing on Bleeker Street outside of Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum.

"Kid couldn't be bothered to drop me off inside?" the Hulk grumbled. "This what I get for giving her a hard time over the being-dead thing? See if I don't twist her into a Britney-pretzel next time I see her..."

He got some strange looks as he approached the front door -- it was night, but the streets were never empty in Greenwich, and the sight of the Incredible Hulk just appearing and knocking on

somebody's front door would raise even the most jaded New Yorker's eyebrows.

He ascended the stoop and raised a finger to tap gently on the door... then paused. Squeezing his eyes shut, he shook his head, as if to clear it. "Shut up, Betty," he growled. "Just shut up."

Then he knocked. A moment later, the door opened, and a surprised Wong allowed him back into the house.

As the door shut behind him, a pair of white, pupil-less eyes watched from the shadows across the street. Kurt Wagner had been investigating a supposed demonic sighting in Greenwich for most of the evening. All he'd gathered in the hours he'd been searching was that there had indeed been some sort of metahuman battle between the Sub-Mariner and an orange demon that then disappeared into the street. The accounts were jumbled, and Kurt was sure he could find out more if he could question the populace without fear of them tying him to a stake and burning him alive. Still, he'd decided not to use an image inducer anymore... he was now an empowered representative of the holy mother church, and he would not hide his true appearance any longer.

None of this was on his mind as he watched the Hulk disappear into the Greenwich house tho. What was on his mind was the fact that he'd walked down Bleeker Street three times tonight, and hadn't noticed that house until a 9-foot green giant walked up to it.

But now that he did see it, he knew it for what it was. The home of Dr. Strange. Kurt wasn't sure what business the Hulk had with Strange, but if anyone could give him answers about what had happened here yesterday, it had to be the Sorcerer Supreme.

Of course, the Vatican probably wouldn't be happy to learn that he was consorting with magicians, but he supposed he could just leave that part out of his report.

Looking both ways, Nightcrawler crossed Bleeker Street and approached the front door of the Sanctum.

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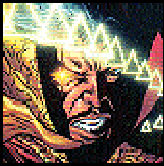
Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

# DEFENDERS

## Issue #10

### "THE BLACK VEIL" Episode Two

by [Will Short](#) and [Russ Anderson](#)



Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk



Magik

### RECENTLY IN "DEFENDERS"

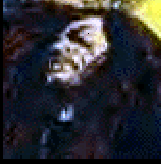
Patsy Walker and Daimon Hellstrom's wedding draws ever nearer. The Defenders are rejoined by Magik, with whom they travel to the Nexus of All Realities. There they meet with the Devil-Slayer, and, with the help of the Man-Thing and Devil-Slayer's peyote, plan to break the barrier keeping them out of Hell...

The late morning sun tasted like a summer lemon: bittersweet and tangy enough to make his saliva glands shoot. It sounded like a geyser in his own mouth. Nearly drowned under the geyser's roar were a million tiny voices that uttered barely understandable words. But their intent was obvious.

They were all sinners, and they wanted him to save them.

"But I'm -- I'm a *devil*," he said, and the voices sobbed in response. They felt like rough, grainy salt, rubbing his skin and entering the little wounds they festered. The devil made a whimper and smelled his own desperation. It was lightly toasted bread with a thin layer of mold -- or moss. He wasn't sure.

The cries swelled again. Not from his mouth, but from everywhere. The devil swung his head from side to side and found that he was standing. He blinked, more times than he intended to, and the action



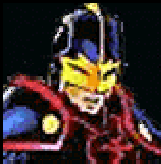
**Hellstorm**



**Devil-Slayer**



**Hellcat**



**Black Knight**



**Valkyrie**



**Nightcrawler**

ended up like a broken record. There were no words to describe it. Matt Murdock had lived in a world of complete darkness since an act of bravery took his sight at the age of thirteen. The handicap became a drive: He became the Daredevil.

But he could see again. And he wished he couldn't.

He felt so minute in the city of dead, gray spires that surrounded him. Each was so tall that they disappeared into the starless night sky before ending. Gray, starless -- All things he hadn't even considered in years. The city went on forever, a flat, sandy wasteland with phallic constructs jutting out, barely any space between. If one fell, the others would follow, and the thought only added to Daredevil's building paranoia.

The people, too many to count, latched to the sides of the ominous towers for dear life and called down to him as before. Their voices compounded into one all-encompassing, undecipherable chant. Its intent was still as clear:

"Save us. Save us."

His gloved hands were trembling, sweat trickling in tiny rivers under his red costume. His mouth was so dry that he thought it might crack. It was painful to speak.

"I can't save all of you!" he cried. As he heard his own voice, the words floated out of his mouth one letter at a time and jumbled themselves to spell ace afloat sun ivy lo. His breathing became shallow as the billion billions called out to him in agony, begging for their freedom.

"How?"

They needed him to escape their sin.

"How can I save any of you," the devil said, on his knees, pulling back his second skin to reveal Matt Murdock's tear-stained face, "when I'm a sinner too?"

Matt heard them crying with him. There was a slight trembling in the sand below him that grew and grew -- And he closed his blood-shot eyes and wished for the darkness again as something burst forth from the sand.

"When should it start working?"

That was all Kyle Richmond wanted to know. Ten minutes ago he and six others had swallowed peyote buttons. He had watched their eyes all glaze over, their worlds falling over them. Illyana, the blonde girl that had tagged along, was smiling ear to ear, humming a Russian folksong as she swayed side to side in rhythm.

"It didn't take this long when I did it before," Kyle said to Eric Simon Payne. They had been friends, long ago. Both were so different now that it seemed like that was the only constant thing.

"Oh?" The Devil-Slayer opened his eyes. He sat Indian-style at the side of the towering Man-Thing, both very still. "You should be feeling the effects now."

"Well, I'm *not*. I'm not seeing *anything*..." Kyle thought for a second. "Are you, yet?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. I'm watching three beasts -- a boar, an eagle, and a fish -- council each other behind you. But I know how to *channel* the freedom the peyote gives my soul."

"...You've done it a lot before." Kyle looked around cautiously. "I just did it once -- in college. Sort of an experimental thing."

He watched as Namor reached out in front of him and grabbed something that wasn't there.

"Stop fighting me," the king said. "You must come back. I am the *king* and I say you *must* come back!" After a second of frustration he leapt forward and tumbled with himself on the wet grass. The action lasted a half-minute and then, taken with something else, Namor sat silently with his legs out.

"But I don't feel like that now," said Kyle, turning back to Eric. "That *feeling* -- that something's there, or that you're being watched. I forget what it was like, but I'm not feeling it."

Eric's face began to melt as he spoke. "Life experience can change the effects." A slew of vermin crawled up his back and began slurping desperately at the liquid.

"I guess," Kyle said, petting the one-footed golem that had hopped over beside him. "I just hope I get into Hell without frying my brain,

y'know?" He laughed through his nose. "Haha! Listen to me -- I hope I get into Hell alright."

Eric simply nodded and closed his eyes again. The time was approaching. And Stephen could feel it as well.

The doctor remained silent the whole time. He heard Daredevil's muted sobs and hushed whimpers, the only movement about him in his shifting facial expressions. He heard Regina Garney's deep breaths that sounded like they went all the way down to her soul. He wondered what she saw -- what they all saw. No. More importantly, he wondered what *he* would see, or feel.

And he realized he felt more relaxed than he ever had in his entire life. The hint of a smile curled one side of his lips.

"The time has come," the Devil-Slayer said, more to the Man-Thing. He stood slowly. "Now we go to Hell."

A massive trunk of an arm was raised, hair-like vegetation hanging off of it, and the Man-Thing froze again. There was a statuesque beauty in it. From that came a hot feeling over the seven.

The heat they felt became a yellow grid. All of the squares were monotonous and black. Circles, triangles, all shapes except squares, flew into the spaces. Nothing fit. But enough of them together broke the grid.

Further. All seven saw at once with a single pair of eyes.

A comet made of burning silver fell from the sky and splattered ginger ice cream and coral all over them. Illyana giggled, and Namor tried to eat the coral.

Further.

Piles of purple rattles became toy knives, which became rocks. Gore-encrusted spears. Three bloody nails. A hall of torches, paved with human flesh. They walked down the corridor. It was Stephen who unlatched the door and opened it. A blistering hot wind blew on them. Nighthawk screamed as leathery wings ripped out of his back in the realm of eternal night.

They had arrived. The Man-Thing was alone again in its swamp.

---

"Back already, master Hulk? What happened to the others?"

Glowering, the Incredible Hulk pushed through the doorway and into the foyer of Dr. Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum. He towered over the bald, utterly inscrutable Asian man who had allowed him entrance, but said Asian man did not flinch or cower. He simply pushed the door closed and folded his arms in his oversized sleeves, awaiting a response.

The Hulk's eyes narrowed, and for just a moment he seriously considered backhanding the puny man. How dare this weakling not quake in fear? He was the Incredible Hulk for Christ's sake. He was the mightiest mortal on this planet, and he would damn well be shown the respect that entailed, even if he had to smash every--

The man known in more formal circles as Dr. Robert Bruce Banner shook his head suddenly in a vain attempt to clear it. God... what was he thinking? This was Wong, for crying out loud. Manservant to Dr. Strange. Helpful, good-hearted, completely inoffensive Wong. And he was contemplating slapping the little guy through a wall? What the hell was wrong with him?

"We met up with Devil-Slayer in the swamp," was the Hulk's tacit explanation. "Right now, your boss and the others are getting hopped up on the local flora, and then they're gonna head into Hell."

Wong blinked. "Beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," Banner replied, and then he spun on his bare heels and moved through the doorway into the great room. He kept his head down and walked quickly, making a heroic effort to keep a lid on the aimless rage growing in him. Fortunately for Wong, the manservant didn't choose to pursue the matter. Even had he been insensitive to the Hulk's hair-trigger anger, he was distracted at just that moment by another knock at the door. He answered it.

Standing on the stoop outside was a blue-skinned, pointy-eared demon in a black trench coat. Beneath the open front of the trench coat was a black suit topped by the white hyphen of a priest's collar.

"Good evening," the demon said, smiling to reveal sharp teeth. "I was wondering if I might have a word with Dr. Strange."

"The master is not available right now," Wong replied. "Perhaps you might come back later? He would be happy to honor an

appointment..."

The demon didn't answer right away, just gave Wong an appraising glance. "You're not frightened by my appearance?"

Wong almost laughed. "I've seen worse."

The demon did laugh then, and Wong understood immediately that there was no harm in this man -- for man was what he was, not demon.

"Well, perhaps I might talk to the Hulk then," Nightcrawler suggested. "I really need to speak to someone who was in the area this morning. I've been sent from the Vatican to look into a possible... well, encroachment on this plane by the forces of Hell..."

"Ah yes, the matter of master Isaac. Come in, come in."

Wong let him in, took his coat, and led him into the great room. At his entrance, the room's three occupants turned and regarded him.

First there was the Hulk of course, a threat implicit in his stance and in the generally unhappy expression he wore. He stood near the window, an island unto himself. On the couch near the center of the room, two beautiful women sat, one a redhead, one a blonde. Nightcrawler immediately recognized the redhead. The blonde was unknown to him, but she stared at him over a cup of tea with eyes he could simultaneously fall in love with and run screaming from. She was wearing an armored outfit somehow reminiscent of the garb of the Avenger Thor.

"You already know the Hulk," Wong said by way of introduction. "These ladies are the Black Widow and Brunnhilde the Valkyrie, respectively. Defenders, this man is a representative of the Catholic church--"

"I'm not buying any Watchtowers," the Hulk growled.

"--and he would like to speak to you about Master Isaac."

Brunnhilde's eyes flashed at the name, and she set her cup down with hands that trembled. The Black Widow put an arm around the woman's shoulders, then looked toward Kurt.

"Nightcrawler, right? Of the X-Men?"

"Yes. But I left the X-Men some time ago. I'm now a representative of the Church." Kurt's eyes flicked toward the Hulk. "The Catholic church. Not the Jehovah's Witness."

The Widow snorted. The Hulk frowned and turned toward the window. Brunnhilde folded her hands.

"What is it that you wish to know, holy man?"

Kurt's eyes widened for the briefest of moments. He hurriedly regained his composure, but he saw that Brunnhilde had noted the change of expression. In his investigations before coming here tonight, one of the witnesses had described a beautiful blonde woman that had appeared to be the object of the brawl between the Sub-Mariner and the orange demon. This witness, who had seemed more than a little distracted by the fact he was talking to a mutant, had added that the woman had looked pretty badly hurt -- assaulted, maybe.

Kurt had talked to three people, and only the one had thought to mention the blonde, so he'd discounted it. Now though...

But Brunnhilde's eyes asked for no pity. They were hard as steel, and silently demanded an answer to her question.

"Only what happened. And whether my superiors are right in suspecting the monster sighted here was truly a demon."

"Wong, would you mind brewing us some tea?" the Widow suggested. "Nightcrawler, why don't you sit down? It's a long story..."

---

"So this is Hell," Illyana Rasputin mused, looking up into the burning firmament. Then, with a disappointed sigh, "I've seen worse..."

Devil-Slayer was crouching down in the red and black dirt, sifting his fingers through it. Now he frowned up at the beautiful young woman at his side. "Don't fool yourself, girl. This is the very threshold of the underworld. We haven't seen one tenth of one percent of the horrors this place has to offer yet."

Illyana looked surprised at Devil-Slayer's bitter tone, but Namor-- who knew a little about deep, almost genetic, anger--understood

completely. Eric Simon Payne was exactly what his name stated: a slayer of devils. For him, coming to this place was like an Inquisitor going down among the heretics. Heretics who drank blood and burned inverted crosses.

The Sub-Mariner looked around. Unending rock met his gaze, glowing a dull red from the endless flames licking out of the sky and the horizon. The only colors here were black and blood-scarlet. He wondered with an uncharacteristic twinge of worry how long he would last in this blasted land before dehydration laid him low.

At least the madness brought on by Eric's narcotics had seemed to burn itself out in their crossing. Namor had a dim, disquieting memory of eating coral from the sky...

"Guys... I don't think Daredevil's doing too well..."

Namor and the others turned. Nearby, the woman Regina Garney knelt next to the red-suited Man Without Fear. Daredevil was convulsing, thin lines of snot and drool tracing lines through the dirt crusted on one cheek. Dr. Strange moved forward and knelt down to examine him.

"Who's doing this to him?" Regina demanded.

"No one, I suspect." Strange had cast a quick spell over the hero's body, and was startled at how difficult the simple incantation was. For the moment he kept this disquieting tidbit to himself. "There's no magic involved here. I believe he's still experiencing the effects of the peyote."

"He looked like he was tripping pretty hard back in the swamp," Kyle growled. He hadn't intended it as a growl, but the leathery bat wings sprouting from his back weren't the only change this place had wrought upon him. "But why is it still affecting him and not the rest of us?"

"I... don't know, but perhaps--"

"To arms!" Devil-Slayer cried suddenly, leaping to his feet and slipping one hand behind his back and into his cloak. When the hand reappeared, it was brandishing a one-handed axe, its handle wrapped in leather. It looked like the Hollywood tradition of a tomahawk, but like all the weapons Eric drew from his cloak, it was far more than that.



"Eric?"

"To arms now! We are under attack!" At Devil-Slayer's feet, where he'd been stirring the dirt with his fingers a moment ago, the black soil seemed to be separating from the red, and rising up on a pillar of its own mass. In moments, the pillar was eight feet high, and then it began to take a definite shape. The bottom half split down the middle into two legs, massive arms sprouted from new shoulders, and an assortment of tendrils reminiscent of dreadlocks sprouted from the crown of a black, featureless head. Featureless, that was, until two crimson eyes flared to life in it.

Blackheart, the son of Mephisto, had come to welcome the Defenders into Hell.

A feral cry on his lips, Devil-Slayer charged... only to be batted aside by one of those massive arms. As Eric was still flying through the air, Blackheart gestured with the other arm, and the very earth beneath Strange, Daredevil, Regina Garney, and Nighthawk erupted. Regina screamed, and the four of them were hurled across the rocky earth.

"Demon!" Blackheart turned toward the voice, and Namor's fist punched all the way through his black skull and out the other side. Before the King of Atlantis could wrench free, the black soil that currently made up Blackheart's form tightened and hardened around the arm. And then hellfire leapt from the demon's face, and Namor the first began to scream as his skin cooked.

Illyana raised her soulsword, not sure if it would be any use against this thing, but positive she couldn't just stand by and watch the Sub-Mariner get broiled alive. "Go for his head," she heard from behind her, and looked over her shoulder to see Nighthawk roaring past her, his wings beating the air. "I'll distract him." He looked wobbly, as if he'd been badly hurt by Blackheart's opening attack, but he dove into battle anyway, slashing ineffectually at the demon with his talons.

Illyana tightened her grip on her sword and leapt into the fray.

---

Nearby, Stephen Strange and Regina Garney lay prostrate across the unforgiving dirt of Hell. Slowly, the world began to swim back into focus for Earth's sorcerer supreme, and he lifted his head weakly. The rest of the Defenders--those still standing anyway--were

engaging Blackheart.

Stephen tried to clear his head, but there was a buzzing near the back of his skull that made it hard to concentrate. He was concussed, he was sure of it. And if what he had begun to suspect about his abilities was true--if the barrier around Hell had blocked him off from the power of his mystical benefactors--then they were all in some very serious trouble here.

He began to get to his feet anyway, an attempt at a spell on his lips, when something the size of a football hit him hard in the chest. He fell to the ground again, this time on his back.

"Zorcerer, Zorcerer, not zo zupreme. In more trub-bul dan even 'e could dream."

Sitting on Steven's chest was a small, blood-red demon. It was the size of an infant, but more than half of that size was taken up by its head. Its huge eyes were coal-black, and though no lips surrounded the jagged fangs in its mouth, it still seemed to smile at him. Wings made of bone and burlap sprouted from its back.

Stephen's lips skinned back from his teeth in disgust. A blood cherub... and where there was one of them--

Before he could complete the thought, a dozen more of the cherubim descended on him from nowhere. He got his hands up above the torrent of leathery red flesh, and gestured in an attempt to invoke the Fiery Bonds of Balthak. For a moment, the Bonds appeared, encircling the writhing body of cherubim and the sorcerer they encompassed in bands of mystical plasma. But then they sputtered and vanished altogether, and Stephen Strange's cry of panic was cut off just as abruptly.

"Gadder dem," one of the blood cherubim--the one who'd first landed on Strange's chest--commanded. He glanced around, saw three of the Earth dwellers engaging Blackheart, and the Defender known as Devil-Slayer lying insensate nearby. The cherub pointed at Eric. "'im doo."

In moments, the demons had vanished again, this time with Dr. Strange, Regina Garney, and Devil-Slayer in tow.

---

Namor had already fallen mercifully unconscious by the time

Nighthawk dove toward his tormentor, black talons outstretched and fangs bared. Kyle slashed at the demon's hide, but the injuries sealed themselves as quickly as they were created. Blackheart turned toward his opponent, Namor still hanging limply from his face, and a gout of flame erupted from beneath Nighthawk. The Defender swerved in his ascent, but it wasn't quite enough. Hellfire engulfed him and he tumbled to the ground, his flesh burning.

Magik, meanwhile, had used the time Kyle had bought her well. Blackheart had completely dismissed her as a threat, turning away to focus on the more aggressive Nighthawk. Magik got in close, and remembering what Kyle had told her about where to strike, drove her soulsword into the back of Blackheart's head, above Namor's trapped arm.

Illyana Rasputin's soulsword will, depending on its wielder's intent, cause little or no physical damage, targeting instead the victim's soul. On the Earth plane or in Limbo this attack can be devastating. In Hell, where the souls of the tormented give shape to the land itself, it is absolutely cataclysmic.

Blackheart roared--the first noise he'd made since appearing to them--and both Magik and Namor were hurled from the demon in the resultant outburst of power. Magik lost her grip on her soulsword, leaving it buried deep in Blackheart's skull, and had only half a second to worry about this before her spinning body struck an outcropping of rock and lay still.

Blackheart had fallen to one knee and now, with ebon power still radiating from him, shakily drew the sword out of his head. He considered the blade for a moment, then put his hand to the wound it had inflicted. It had not healed as the injuries inflicted by Nighthawk had. Blackheart looked to his opponents.

Nighthawk, Magik, and Namor were all either unconscious or too dazed to resist him further. But the other half of the Defenders, including the sorcerer... were nowhere to be seen.

The burning coals that served as Blackheart's eyes in this form narrowed. His attack hadn't been powerful enough to vaporize the fleshbags, he was sure of it. Ever since he and Daimon had hatched their scheme to seize control of Hell, Blackheart had endured a disquieting sense that they were being conspired against. After all, considering the very important faces missing from Daimon's hell-lord menagerie, it was perfectly conceivable.

And now, here was further proof. Someone had spirited the rest of his victims away, for what purpose he knew not. And Blackheart was at least as unhappy about this as Daimon Hellstrom would be.

Tendrils of black earth and rock sprouted around Nighthawk, Magik, and Namor, clutching the trio of Defenders close and then pulling them below the surface. Blackheart tarried for a moment longer, still clutching Illyana Rasputin's soulsword in one hand, then he flowed back into the soil of Hell and was gone.

---

Nearby, hidden behind a blasted, blackened stand of cobalt, Daredevil continued to fight the drug rampaging through his body and his brain, forgotten by all but the lithe, sinister shape whose shadow now fell over him. "Well," the shape breathed, "isn't this an interesting development..."

---

"...and Isaac -- *Gargoyle*. He was--"

"A friend. A friend most dear..."

"And then--"

"He vanished. I and the others lost contact with him for years. The last I saw him, he was a sweet, dignified man... trapped in the body of the monster, but a man no less. But then... his power. 'Twas tenfold more than ever before. He ambushed me, *me*, on the bridge Bifrost as I fled to Midgard. And then... the things he did..."

Brunnhilde strained to go further. She looked down at her body -- a body no longer clean, thanks to *him*. Thanks to Isaac. There was phantom pain in her bowels. A gentle hand touched her taut back, that of the Black Widow, and it told her that she needn't go any further.

"I apologize. I don't mean to pry with these *questions*, but..." Nightcrawler said from his seat, a crouching position in the center of the wall. "Well, you realize that this is all very... *very* complicated." Wong took the empty cup dangling from one of his six fingers, to which Kurt nodded graciously. He returned to the Black Widow, who sat next to Brunnhilde on the couch opposite him.

"Yes, well," the Widow admitted, "that's very... *impressive*,

considering your affiliations."

Kurt's eyes lit. "I'm sorry?" He watched Natasha, whom he'd only known from the loosest meetings but always saw as confident, struggle uncomfortably for an explanation.

"Come on," she said. "You know..." With two black-leather fingers she made either an X or a cross. Kurt exhaled.

"Ah. This is the truth... I can't deny that. But *still*," he insisted, "even considering that -- Defenders in *Hell*. Friends becoming enemies. Limbo -- empty. People showing up out of no..." The Widow gave him a look and he exhaled again. "...where. Okay. Your point is taken."

"Such is the life of a Defender," Valkyrie said. She was halfway through downing her third cup of tea, upon Natasha's insistence, and looked into the center of its swirling. "No matter what paths we take, each seems to lead to the realm of the damned."

Something like a huff sounded in the background, near the window where the Hulk stood rigid. His expression was statuesque, a permanent squint looking out into afternoon Greenwich.

"There is no need for *hopelessness*," said Wong, who had hovered about the entire time. He was as much a part of the conversation as he was part of the room itself, poking out only when necessary. "Master Stephen and the others are more than capable."

"Which is why we stayed here," Natasha said as she nodded. "Or partly why *I* did." Not wanting the quiet to creep in -- as quiet in this room of Doctor Strange's sanctum so far had never brought good -- she asked of Wong, "Do you think, if it's not too much trouble, that you could bring us some more tea?"

His slightly wrinkled smile was otherwise flawless. "Of course, Miss Natasha. No trouble at all." Wong spun, tray of cups in hand, and immediately found the pain of a swinging door in his arm. The dishes crashed down to the thick carpet, where Wong instinctively looked first. Coming up, his eyes caught two well-crafted boots, connecting to chainmail, passing a sheathed sword and broad chest finally to a familiar face, half-hidden by navy-colored metal.

The helmet was removed as Wong and the others shared a collective gasp. "Dane," Natasha said, "you... you're--"

"I'm back," the Black Knight said. "And I'm here to help. Things are happening -- big things." He surveyed the room and naturally focused on the patch of shadows on the wall. "Wait, is that... what is it, *Nightcrawler*?"

"He is a guest," Wong said, cleaning up the mess of shattered porcelain. "Much has happened in your absence."

"More than you know," the Knight said. "But I know the gist of what's happening *here*."

"You... no longer speak a fancied tongue," Brunnhilde said behind the thin wall of her tea's steam. Dane stared through it, into her large blue eyes.

"No. I was *confused* then, when I did." Dane traced the hilt of his blade carefully. There was a spark that was always there, in the unshaven face of the Black Knight. But here it was more intense and, unlike the last time he had been there, with direction. "I've been ping-ponged from here to the past more times than I care for, all leading up to this." A beat, and his eyes darted. "They've left already, *haven't* they?"

"If you mean the master and his companions," Wong nodded, "then yes."

Dane hurried to put his helmet back on. "Then we're following."

"Wait, wait..." the Widow said, coming over from the couch. "Okay. First, I told them I was staying here with Val, and she's in no shape to go anywhere. *Anywhere*. And second--"

"Please." Brunnhilde had stood as well, and though it didn't look like the most natural thing in the world, she was feeling more vital by the moment. "Please," she said again, "do not speak for me, Natasha. Your nobility rivals that of my own sisters, and this I appreciate... but I am nothing if not a warrior, and more importantly, my own. It has done my heart no good to lie like a bed stricken hag. My fellow warriors -- my *friends* are lost in a land where none are welcome, defending Midgard and much, much more, the Allfather has assured me. My position *demandsthat* I join them... and my soul asks me the same, at disadvantage or otherwise."

Natasha continued looking at Brunnhilde after she had her say. Words failed her. Not so for Nightcrawler, though, as his voice

emerged from the shadows.

"I believe you had a second point?" he asked, smiling lightly with two protruding incisors. Natasha sighed, looked at Dane, handsome as ever in his battle gear, and sighed again.

"Yes. There's no point now. I've made my decision too. Fine -- we're going to Hell. I don't know *how*, but we're going to help. I guess...that's what Defenders *do*."

"As I said," the Knight stated, "we're following."

"You are not."

The source of the voice (which was really more like a great, warming vibration through each of their bodies) was from above -- through the arcanelly-marked window and up into the air, where something shone brighter than the sun itself. In fact, they first thought it was simply *fire*. But it was much more than that.

Wong again dropped the mess he was cleaning. "Oh my..."

Hovering a good seven feet above where they stood, it... *he* floated, aloft on a pair of wings whose feathers danced with pure white flame. Another pair covered his eyes, just below the fair blonde curls of his untamed hair. His skin was pale, and there was a faintly luminescent quality about his wiry build. Yet another pair of wings hid his abdominal area, for he was quite nude, make no mistake about it -- the sort of thing only angels can get away with.

All the heroes, save for the Hulk, looked up and had to stare for a time. The sky, and the world, seemed so mundane and lifeless behind him. Brunnhilde, highest of the Valkyrie, came from a place some called the *Golden* Realm. She had seen treasures and beings beyond imagination. She had even been in the presence of Thor, Prince of Asgard and the Nine Realms' greatest champion. But this - *this* was the most awe-inspiring and beautiful sight she had ever seen in her immortal lifetime.

"God, Wong... you and Stephen running a *commune* here?" Natasha said from the corner of her ruby lips. The Asian man shook his head very slightly, very carefully. "Well, it sure *seems* that way. And I can't *believe* you missed that punchline opportunity, Hulk." She let her gaze wander over to the monstrous figure by the window. "Hulk?"

He turned around, absent of any urgency, and looked plainly at the angel above the sanctorum... though not before thoroughly trouncing Natasha with a single emerald glare.

"Who *are* you?" Dane called up, shielding his eyes as the others had to. "... *What* are you?"

"I?" asked the angel. "I am a seraph of Heaven's first circle. His will is my message. My name is Gabriel."

"*Gabriel?*" Dane blurted out. "... as in... as in 'in the *Bible*' Gabriel?"

Nightcrawler more than muttered, still staring. "He interpreted the prophet's vision of the ram and the he-goat, explained the seventy weeks of years. He... he announced the birth of *John the Baptist*..."

"The same. And now I descend once more, combining forces mortal and divine to stop the madness of the Pit."

"Then we're going *up* -- *instead* of down," Dane said.

"There is no direction humanly imaginable for the fraction of Heaven you are about to visit, little knight." A benevolent light began to fill the room.

"*Wait*," Natasha held up her hands. "I don't remember agreeing to any--"

"It is not your choice, woman," said Gabriel, his body becoming more and more part of the glow. "*Your* fate has been decided by a higher power."

The light swallowed them, then fizzled out of the room. Wong emerged, eyes wide to watch it dissipate. After some thought, he decided it was a good idea to have a cup of tea himself. He had heard it soothed worries.

---

Eric Simon Payne. He is called the Devil-Slayer. Why, one might ask? And the answer would be that, due to a number of circumstances beyond Eric's control, it has come to be his main point in life to slay devils or demons, what have you. Cherubim, in this case, who had transported he, Doctor Strange, and Regina Garney to the sand-blasted wasteland on the outskirts of Hell, which



made New Mexico's deserts seem fertile in comparison.

The cherubim had maintained a constant squeaking and giggling between each other, speaking barely audible words if they were words at all. Their tones were snide, though, and the voices unmistakably demonic: of the devil.

So one could understand why it took a crippling headache, a perpetual red sandstorm, and bonds of hellfire to hold back Eric's rage. He waited with the other two, too taken by their injuries to do more than listen to the murmurs of the hellborne and wait.

There. A looming orange figure appeared in the crimson maelstrom, followed by a smaller shape that trudged along beside. They seemed to cover miles in one second or perhaps the three humans and their captors were meeting them halfway. In any case, the two shades on the horizon took form quickly. Regina bit her lip, furrowing her brow so hard that it felt like the blood vessels in her forehead would all break at once.

He was such a wonderful sight. She hadn't gone a day without seeing him since he was born... up until all this business. And yet, as he came into view, Regina Garney felt a rush, millions of tiny pinholes that could've been made by the swirling sand or not. It was discomfort, no, she knew it wasn't just that. It was pain.

"Mark..." she said through dry lips. The boy smiled in a way she'd never known, walked a way he never had before, at the side of the scaly demon. At once, both groups stopped in the middle of the landscape.

"Hello, mother," Mark said. "And hello, brothers."

The cherubim grumbled a general response and smiled their bloody grins. A hot tear slipped down Regina's cheek. "Mark, what's *wrong*?" She shook uncontrollably. "You... you're..."

"I'm me, mom. It took a while for Isaac to explain what that is to me, but we've been walking for a long time and, well... I'm going to finally be what I was born to be." Regina was slapped by a cherub before she could blubber any longer. She stood, bound, bruised, and beginning to believe that she was seeing her son for the last time.

"**And here we are,**" Mark's companion said, running his eyes over the pink flesh before him. "**A family reunion, and yet more.**" He wandered over to Devil-Slayer, Mark at his heels, and looked into

him no more than an inch from his face. Hot, musky demon-breath entered Eric's nostrils.

"Eric. The *Devil-Slayer*. Even *you've* shown up today. How special. I thought you'd have been lost in the folds of history by now."

Eric almost growled, "Like how your dignity and passion have been swallowed by that swollen form you wear?"

Isaac *did* growl. "*I will show you passion,*" he said, grabbing Eric by the neck and lifting him. The claws pierced his outermost flesh and threatened to go deeper. "*Passion from years of blind pity and manipulation by the weak things. Passion*"

"Come now, Isaac," the voice said, cool and everywhere at once. "We spoke of your temper." Eric felt the ground hit him hard, and he fell to his knees without balance. Stephen's interests laid elsewhere.

"You," the mage said. "*I know* that voice." Images sprang to Doctor Strange's mind, of Hell itself bursting in the middle of Greenwich Village, of Defenders separated and battling the forces of the damned. History wasn't repeating... but it was echoing.

"Of course you do. Every human knows this voice, it lives inside of you. Each of you pathetic, sinning, insignificant little Adams and Eves, stealing, screwing, and killing in your wonderful Eden. When you do these things and ask yourself 'Is it right?', it's my voice that you hear tell you:

'No. So just do it.'

Stephen, Eric, and the demons all knew the voice, the face and the name that went with it. But the rusted gears of Regina's mind took their time, until she finally realized that, yes, she too recognized the voice. She had heard it woo her, speak in quieter, more intimate tones. Regina had heard it in the middle of the night, in her dreams, breathing deeply onto the back of her neck as it raped her and called her whore-mother. And it was unmistakable that this voice speaking was the same one that groaned heartily as he spilt his burning seed in her womb almost four years ago...

Mark Garney would be celebrating his fourth birthday in three weeks. Regina closed her eyes and felt the pain grow and grow. "You... you..."

"Me," he said contently. "I'm glad you'll be here to see this what

you've made possible." And simultaneously Isaac and Mark stood together, legs shoulder width apart. They held hands, the orange scales almost crushing the boy's tiny fingers. The air felt so dense that it was choking.

Stephen felt it happening more than any of them, but they all felt something. The sands increased, almost blinding, tiny debris assailing all senses. Through it all, the two figures clutching one another's hands again grew vague, and even more so as the storm intensified. The trio of Defenders thought they might be seeing things. But that wasn't a good assumption in this place.

Through the sandstorm, it appeared that where Mark Garney and Isaac had stood was a single, bulky figure. Above it all, over the sound and fury that was almost too much to bear, and the wailing scream of a mother's breaking heart, only the voice was dominant:

"My son finally has a worthy brother... and Hell, a new prince."

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**To Be Continued...**

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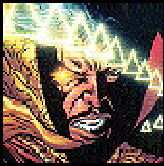
Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder...

# DEFENDERS

## Issue #12

### "THE BLACK VEIL" Episode Three

by [Will Short](#) and [Russ Anderson](#)



Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk



Magik

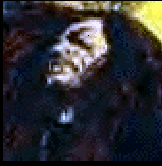
### RECENTLY IN "DEFENDERS"

Patsy Walker and Daimon Hellstrom's wedding draws ever nearer. The Defenders are rejoined by Magik, with whom they travel to the Nexus of All Realities. There they meet with the Devil-Slayer, and, with the help of the Man-Thing and Devil-Slayer's peyote, plan to break the barrier keeping them out of Hell...

Long before he'd been caught in the explosion of fire and radiation that unleashed his monstrous id upon a defenseless world, Dr. Robert Bruce Banner had decided that there was no God. No Heaven. No Eternity into which his dead soul could hope to someday wander. In his more optimistic moments, he hoped the universe was governed by karma, and justice meted out through reincarnation. In that case, at least, he could look forward to something better in the next life. Lord knew he'd suffered enough during this one for the next twenty lifetimes.

But Heaven? No, ridiculous. Even after all the fantastic things he'd seen, he still couldn't bring himself to believe in that.

Which is why he wasn't quite as dumbfounded as the rest of the Defenders when a naked, winged man claiming to be an archangel converted them to angel song and transmitted them along an invisible ray of celestial light to what he said was the first circle of



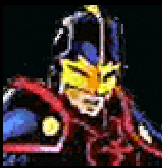
**Hellstorm**



**Devil-Slayer**



**Hellcat**



**Black Knight**



**Valkyrie**



**Nightcrawler**

Heaven.

---

Kurt Wagner, Catholic priest and former X-Man, stood in the warm glow of light emanating from the Archangel Gabriel and steeled himself against the tears that wanted to spill over his cheeks. Every man and woman in his calling dreamed of this, of standing in the presence of the recognizably and unequivocally divine. Despite the natural cynicism brought on by years of battling demigods and self-proclaimed messiahs, Kurt knew, to the depths of his soul, that the winged man standing before him on this white plain, lifting a flaming sword above his head, was the real thing.

Gabriel let out a cry of simultaneous rage and beauty, an ululating symphony of holy power that echoed over the plain. And it occurred to Kurt that Heaven, for all its representation in Earthly mediums as a place of light and vision, was neither of these things. True it was bright, and the visual beauty here, even in this level white field, was almost painful in its purity. But Heaven, to be well and truly understood, needed to be heard. The sound of the angel's voice, the constant background hum of holy power running through this place like blood.

Heaven is sound. This is what Kurt Wagner was thinking as the distant shushing of thousands of flapping wings sounded over the plain.

---

Dane Whitman fell to one knee as the sound of the wings' approach grew and grew. He was standing on the lowest edge of Heaven, the circle closest to Earth and farthest from God, and still he was humbled by everything here. He felt unworthy to touch the soil of this place, and for a moment the mission given to him by Merlin and Arthur crumbled away, shattered by his own humility.

And then the Ebony Blade began to sing in the scabbard at his side, adding its darker, *basso profundo* note to the general chorus. And Dane remembered who he was and why he was needed here. He gripped the hilt of the Blade and waited with his fellow Defenders.

---

Natasha Romanov was not a superhero. She was an espionage agent. Sure, as the Black Widow she'd fought beside, and even led, the

Avengers, and she'd been with the Defenders for a while now too, but in all that time she had never--never--felt so out of her depth as she did at that moment.

There were men--angry, flying men with flaming swords--sweeping across this plain toward them on feathered wings. She had grown up in Communist Russia, and so she had never been a believer in the Christian or the Jesuit God. But whatever these beings were, they radiated a presence and a power that were greater even than Thor's. She readied the widow's bite bracelets on her wrists. Whatever was going on here, Matt--Daredevil--was surely in danger, and she'd been the one to send him into it. She would have to be ready to act.

---

Brunnhilde stood at the side of the archangel, watching him call his brethren home, and wondered if this was what mortals felt like when her sisters in the Valkyrior rode in after a battle to claim their souls. She, who was rarely impressed by warrior's might, was, in this instance, awed. There were thousands of the winged men. All coming here.

"You are ready, sister?"

Brunnhilde looked around at the archangel who had brought them here. Gabriel. His presence was...intoxicating. She'd never felt so drawn to another being before, both physically and spiritually...and never had she felt so unworthy to stand in another's presence. Her humility had nothing to do with the angel's perfection, and everything to do with her lack of same. She could still feel, if she allowed herself to, her violent rape at the orange-clawed hands of a man she had once called friend. Could hear Isaac mocking, spitting on her even as he took her maidenhead.

She was impure. So how could she hope to stand with a being that remained so perfect? And yet, he had called her 'sister'...

In a rush of bludgeoned air, the seraphim arrived, dropping to the white soil of Heaven's first circle with a thunder that was oddly comforting. There were thousands of them, an endless field of feathers and perfectly sculpted bodies.

"Yes, I am ready," she said finally, gripping Dragonfang's hilt. "Let us away."

Gabriel began to sing again. And this time he was joined by his

brothers, their voices rising up, up, up until it seemed the firmament itself must crack. And, amazingly, that's just what it did.

The white sky cracked down the middle at the onslaught of the gathered seraphic voices. The Black Veil was torn asunder, and the road into Hell thrown wide. The Defenders and the seraphim plunged through it.

---

The barren dirt of Hell pulled together in a clump, piling over seven feet high. Legs, torso, arms - the head solidifying last.

“My brother,” said Blackheart, once his body was fully formed. The crimson-brown soil behind him coughed up three bodies, dirt caching each. Dark tendrils presented Magik, Nighthawk, and the Sub-Mariner. The latter was unconscious, burned, and limp as a ragdoll.

Illyana sputtered, close to vomiting. “Blagh! *Blagh!* Good *God* - that was *disgusting*.” She shut her mouth quickly, realizing what she said and where she was, unable to rub the muck from her eyes. She saw a staircase of jagged rocks form for Blackheart as he approached what looked like a twisted altar on a stage. Facing the stage, standing at ground level, were hundreds of people - rather *beings*, she realized - divided into two groups by a long carpet leading to the stage.

Blackheart looked in that direction, over the faces. Not faces - names. Synonyms for the word evil. The time drew nearer.

“My brother,” Daimon echoed. He rose from his throne, leaving the side of his wife-to-be, and met Blackheart close to the edge of the makeshift stage. “I see that guests are already arriving.”

“Indeed.”

The prince flicked his ruby-colored eyes up, studying something on Blackheart's face. “Arriving and going about business as usual,” he said. Daimon could see straight through the hole in Blackheart's head, past the obsidian gore that filled it. Blood like oil still dabbed the outside of the wound. Son of Mephisto or otherwise, Blackheart is rarely injured in battle.

“Indeed.”

“He attacked us,” Magik said. “So I attacked him.”

“*Hush*, girl,” Blackheart hissed, spinning to face her. Ilyana remained straight-faced. “Naughty little *wench*. You see where it got you, now, don’t you? Yes. And those tentacles are good for more than *holding*, you-“

“Blackheart.” Daimon’s voice was nothing more than before, yet Blackheart gave the prince his undivided attention. “Not here. Not in front of my bride,” he gestured back to the red-haired beauty. “Not on our wedding day.”

“Wedding day?” Nighthawk had stopped struggling. There was enough to wrestle with as it was. His back still ached where his leathery wings had broken free of the skin. He looked to his side at Namor, king of all Atlantis, twitching randomly, skin bubbling in places, falling in and out of consciousness. Hell was not a place for the Sub-Mariner.

And further away, beyond the two brothers, alone on the double throne: Nighthawk’s friend, Patsy Walker. Hellcat. He could see, with his devil-eyes, the taint that hung about her like a stench. She smiled distantly. “Wedding day...”

Blackheart hung his less-than-whole head.

“Not yet, at least,” Daimon added. He then noticed the shining thing in Blackheart’s hands. It was a sword of ethereal metal, its sheen so pure compared to the flames of Hell that his eyes almost hurt. “Questioning your own power, Blackheart?”

“Ah. The *girl* used this,” Blackheart admitted, holding the blade out horizontally. “It came from the air itself. She *hurt* me with it, Daimon. She hurt me. I have made new bodies and the wound stays.”

The sword felt light in Daimon’s hands. It was beautiful. He ran one long-nailed finger along the blade’s edge and withdrew quickly. Reddest blood dripped from the tiny cut in Daimon’s finger. He sucked it clean and smiled with lips that looked painted.

“What do you call this, young lady?” he asked.

Ilyana stared back at the prince like no peasant should look at royalty. A moment later, she was gasping and kicking at the tendrils



encircling her as it threatened to thin her lithe hips even further.

“Answer him,” Blackheart commanded.

Magik held out until she nearly blacked out, then choked, “Soul...sword...”

Daimon made a fanged smirk. “Soulsword.” He studied it again. “Haha! *Soulsword*. What do *you* know about *souls*, little girl?” She didn’t answer. “Aside from the name, this is a fine blade.” He looked at Blackheart. “And a fine wedding gift.”

The word made its way through Nighthawk’s labyrinth mind to the man buried inside, where it reverberated: *wedding*.

Blackheart nodded. “Of course, brother. It is yours.”

“Daimon.”

The brothers looked up. “Kyle Richmond. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Not long enough since I’ve seen you or this place,” Nighthawk said calmly, his voice gravelly, as a demon’s should be. “You’re *sick*...”

“Oh!” Daimon half-barked, and the sound snapped out from the stage to Nighthawk, making every single imprisoned hell-lord twitch in fear at its passing. “Oh, *I’m* sick. I’ve heard of your problem, Kyle. And I used to suffer the same confusion you do. I thought I could be one of them, too.”

“One of-?”

“Them! Normal. Human. *Mortal*. You saw me struggle to be one. And look at me now! I’m not trying to serve in Heaven. I’m reigning in Hell. I’ve accepted what I am. I suggest trying the same.”

The man-demons shared an intense stare.

“You gave up is what you did,” Nighthawk, or Kyle, finally said, quite clearly. “And now you’re having to force a girl to *marry* you.”

“Patsy loves me, Kyle,” Daimon said. “She is my queen, as she has always been. She was the whole reason I put on the façade - walked among you. It didn’t work. So now she’s changed *forme*. Hell is

ours-”

“You’re the *son* of Satan,” Illyana interjected. “That makes you prince, not lord.”

Daimon eyed her briefly, annoyed. “You’re *blind*, aren’t you? Look around you, little sorceress. *Look* at our audience.” She did and remained quiet. “They’re temporary guests.

“Did you know that with every belief, a counter-belief is created? For all the good thoughts, generous gods and angels created from man’s need for worship, an evil counterpart is born. And with each of those births, a portion of the true Hell’s power is diminished.

“Mephisto. Thog. Even Belasco - existence is getting crowded. No, it’s *been* that way for some time. And I’m the only one that will actually *fix*

The soulsword glowed brighter in Daimon’s hands. He held it away from his body.

“Belasco?” Illyana asked.

“His Limbo is ripped from the shadow that the true Hell casts. His being is a *parody* of the idea of the Devil.”

“Then why isn’t *the Devil*—“

“My father is a failure,” Daimon said, biting out the words. “He failed in the Great Rebellion. Over and over, he loses. So I dethroned him. And where he failed - where he made mistakes - I will succeed.”

Up went the sword, just like Daimon’s voice.

“First, we wed. And then I *feast*. The pretenders will die, each of their little Limbos and Hells dying with them. And all that stolen power will return to *me*. Won’t that be nice? To not have to worry about Pluto and Hela and Satannish and all the others? Instead you’ll just have *me*.”

Nighthawk stared up at the sword, blinding his dark eyes.

“Then comes Heaven - *and*...whatever falls between. *You’ve* fallen between me and power, Kyle,” Daimon turned to Nighthawk now. “Your little bit of Mephisto is still rightfully mine. I can take it

back.”

Again, the soulsword flashed. Namor groaned at Nighthawk’s side, convulsing. Light shone on his burns as a horrible shredding, ripping of membrane sounded. Nighthawk didn’t make a sound - just writhed as Daimon severed his right wing in one swift cut.

“P-Patsy! Augh...” White hot pain, sweat in his eyes. He doubled over in his restraints. “*God*, heeaaaaghhh!”

“We’ll see if you maybe would rather *stay* a demon...” Daimon said. Ilyana watched but remained still, helpless, as her sword flashed once more, and that awful *tearing* sound came again. Then came the sickening *thud* as the second wing fell to the ground. The screaming stopped. Daimon dug his nails into Nighthawk’s chin, forcing him too look up.

“Sorry,” he said, like some careless boy. “I just needed to get it out. Issues with Dad, you know. Consider it your wedding present to me.” Daimon wiped the blood, dark enough to be brown, off the soulsword on Nighthawk’s ripped costume, then alighted on the stage.

He began making his way back toward the thrones, which seemed to drift together more with each step he took. He spoke without looking back, eyes fixed on one thing alone.

“Brother,” he said, and Blackheart’s head came up. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m *tired* of waiting. I’m ready to get on with it. Now. Aren’t *you*, dear?”

Patsy Walker looked up, like she’d been awakened from a light nap. A pleasant smile slid across her face.

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

The king-in-waiting turned to his brother, the soulsword gleaming in one hand, holding his bride’s in the other tightly enough for it to hurt. She was numb head to toe.

“You heard your sister-in-law. Call the demons, the punished. Call them *all*. We begin within the hour.”

"Matt. Wake up, darling."

Matt Murdock came back to his senses with a start. A hand was on his cheek, and it felt--and smelled--familiar. He knew every contour on that hand, the tiny scar on one finger where its owner had sliced it on a broken glass when she was nine. The scent of fresh soap that always hung about her palms and wrists, like she could never quite believe that she'd scrubbed them clean.

"Karen?"

"Oh Matt, what are you doing here?" the love of his life said as he sat up and turned his face toward her. "You couldn't have been sent here. Not you, never you."

Matt shook his head, trying to gain his bearings. Wherever they were, it was cold. Very cold. He was lying in a drift of snow. How had he got here? And how could Karen be here? She was...

And then he remembered. The peyote button, the violence it had wrought upon his enhanced senses, and then Devil-Slayer leading the Defenders into Hell. He remembered nothing once they'd stepped through the blasted doorway, except...it had been hot. Appallingly hot.

And now here he was lying in a snowdrift, talking to his dead girlfriend.

"You're a delusion," he said, holding his aching head.

"No, Matt. No, I'm not." She touched his face again, and damnit, she felt *real*. Not like a drug-induced hallucination, but like a real, breathing person. "I wish I was, but..." She looked away, Matt could hear her heart speed up in anticipation of her confession, "Think of the things I did during my life, Matt. Prostitute, betrayer. Would you expect me to go to the other place?"

"You died for me."

"I guess that didn't balance the scales. God, Matt...it's so good to see you, but not this way."

Matt touched her hand, felt the familiar, light fuzz of hair across the back of it. So convincing.

"We're in Hell," he said.

"We're in Hell," she confirmed.

"I can't accept that you're here." He stood up and turned away, his radar sense echoing back an endless, powdery plain of snow. "The last thing I remember is heat."

"Things change quickly here. It goes from hot to cold in the blink of an eye. Nothing is constant." A beat of silence, and then her voice again, deeper, throatier. "Especially not you."

Matt Murdock's radar sense sketched out the change in 'Karen's' shape behind him. He couldn't make out the fine details, but he sensed the head elongating, the mouth hinging open, impossibly long against her breasts, the prehensile tongue wagging out toward the back of his neck.

In one fluid movement, and without turning toward the creature, he slipped his billy club free of the holster on his hip and jammed it into the doppelganger's jaws. The demon that had assumed Karen's shape emitted an "urk!" and fell backward, struggling with the object pinioning its mouth open.

"Matthew, Matthew," a new voice chided. "So unnecessarily rough with the rabble."

Daredevil let his radar sense glide over the new arrival. Whatever the thing's shape was, it was uncertain enough to confound most of his senses. Most, but not all. He knew that voice.

"Hello Mephisto," he said. "That was a dirty trick."

"What? The succubus?" The demon-lord was squatting atop a stand of snow-covered rock, and Daredevil sensed him extend his arm toward the choking demon. "I had nothing to do with that. Your own inner turmoil drew it here...though I admit to standing idly by to see how it fared against you."

"What are you doing here?"

"This is my home, trespasser," Mephisto said lightly, and suddenly he was gone from the rock and standing beside him. Daredevil threw out a fist, but now the demon was standing on the other side.

"Aren't you going to ask me where the rest of your Defenders are?"

"Actually, I'd hoped to beat it out of you, but that doesn't seem likely, does it?" Putting his back to Mephisto, he walked back to the succubus, placed a foot on its chest, and yanked his billy club roughly out of its mouth. The creature howled, and started to get to its feet, murder in its eyes as Daredevil turned away.

"No more games, Mephisto. Where are my friends?"

The succubus leaped at him, its jaws swinging wide again...but vanished in a puff of brimstone not a foot from Daredevil's back.

"Bothersome pestilence," Mephisto opined, clapping his hands together. He turned to Daredevil. "Very well then, Matthew. Come along."

There was an impact against his chest, and the snowscape seemed to blur away around him. When the sensation stopped, he was standing on a rocky crag, the familiar heat and smell pounding his enhanced senses.

"Where are we?"

"Look down," Mephisto said at his elbow. "Or 'ping' down in your case. Tell me if you see anybody you recognize."

Daredevil crouched, one hand on the edge of the rock, and focused his attention into the pit that opened up in front of him. It took him a moment to filter through the voices and smells, but once he knew who to listen to, he figured out what was going on quickly.

"Hellstrom is killing and absorbing the power of all those demons." He looked around at Mephisto. "I suppose you're in league with him."

Mephisto's eyes twitched in amusement. "What makes you think that?"

"You're not down there, bound with the others, are you?"

"If I was in league with him, you would be the one bound beside your comrades, not I. But no...Hellstrom's schemes came to fruition only recently, while my attentions were diverted...elsewhere.\* Otherwise, I'd have stopped him long before he got this far. You've probably noted that my despised son has

thrown in with the rogue, however."

(\* Check out current issues of Wolverine to see what Mephisto has been up to -- Russ and Will)

Daredevil noted the familiar shape of Blackheart at Hellstrom's side. Unmoved, he turned his radar sense to the heady task of picking the Defenders out of the mass of bodies below. He found them, heard the barely-conscious groans of Nighthawk and smelled the boiling flesh of Namor. He puzzled over the contented sighs Hellcat was making from what looked an awful lot like a throne. But...

"Where are the others?" he demanded. "Strange, Devil-Slayer, and Regina. I don't sense any of them."

"Ah...that. Now that is another matter altogether. It seems I'm not the only one Hellstrom 'missed', and that other has captured your remaining allies."

Daredevil's eyes narrowed--a habit left over from the days he'd actually been able to stare people down. "What's your game, Mephisto? Why are you giving me all this information? And why aren't you doing anything about Hellstrom?"

"Who said I wasn't doing anything about Hellstrom?" Mephisto wheedled. "As for the information I'm handing you... It amuses me to see you dance. Now." He stepped aside and swept an arm to his right, in the opposite direction of the rocky cliff they'd just peeked over. "Strange and the others are that way. Choose who you're going to rescue first, little Devil."

---

It had been a most *wonderful* ceremony; a gaunt soul had played perfect tri-tones on an organ of bones as the audience waited in hushed anticipation. Most weren't sure whether they wanted it to go faster or slower; either way, the end was imminent.

Daimon walked down the aisle with a succubus at his arm, who left him with a lingering touch as he approached the stage. There was a podium of black shells and hardened insect armor, and behind it, Blackheart - presiding and best man.

The music grew louder, a swirling cacophony that encompassed all else, as *she* made her way between the two groups of Hell-lords. The horde of neverborne grasped at rocky steeps and hovered on batty

wings as the pale shades of dead men watched indifferently with their milky gazes. All that could be seen was her dress; darkest satin that covered her almost completely. It made her fair skin seem snow white where it showed--around her neck and, to a lesser degree, her face behind the black veil. Cherubim hopped around carrying the dress's slack in her wake.

It was one slow stride after another. Her glazed blue eyes stared straight ahead at one goal: her devilishly handsome love. They would be married today. Again.

The couple came to stand before Blackheart as he read from the New Book of the Law, which Daimon had put the finishing touches on earlier that day. It was a story about facades, evil fathers, and the beautiful fire burning within all things that *must* be freed.

Then he read them their vows in his inhuman, gravelly voice. Blackheart made them promise that they would rule together - over fire, earth, and cloud; that their love would survive battle, war, and death, as they would suffer none of the latter.

"I do," Daimon said as he faced his bride. Blackheart read Patsy's vows, which she repeated obediently like a child. They had almost reached the end, Daimon realized. He had done it. The feasting would soon begin. Blackheart finished. It was up to Patsy. She held a moment of silence, grasped in her hand giddily, unknowingly a torture to the captive audience. It was to be the last moment before her life *truly* began...*again*.

A breath raised in her throat. "I-"

Her next word was drowned out, if it was even spoken. The sound was so loud; it shook deeper than the body, a sustained note vibrating all the land. Some of the demons were grabbing their ears, howling, hoping to overpower it. But whatever drove the note was a far higher power than these lowly demons.

The red sky split open like a cracked skull. The entire wedding was frozen, and for a second, nothing happened. Then he came plummeting through, falling with his sword pointed straight down until it drove with all his weight into the torso of a serpent demon. There was a beat of stunned silence, and then the Black Knight pulled the Ebony Blade free, and stood confidently on the quivering body.



Above, the rift opened further, and all of Heaven spilled forth.

Gabriel led his brothers in on flaming wings, carrying maces, swords, and shields, swooping like raptors on the damned. Behind, dark in comparison, were the Hulk, Nightcrawler, Black Widow, and the Valkyrie, practically falling out as the Knight had.

Daimon had long since turned from the altar. He looked out past the audience and saw his kingdom assailed. He smiled.

“So the reception begins early,” he said and looked at Patsy. “Don’t worry, love,” he lifted her black veil, “we aren’t done yet.” He placed a goodbye kiss on her rosy lips and leapt off the stage with soulsword in hand.

Blackheart had already broken up into the ground around the stage; Patsy could feel him moving away below her feet. She cast her eyes out to the fields.

Angelic strength swung flaming blades through leathery bellies as Hell’s claws tore into the luminescent skin of the seraphim. Bodies and feathers already littered the barren crags.

“For Heaven!” Gabriel cried, raising his flaming blade and taking three demons with it. Valkyrie wasn’t far behind, and she ran in with her own sword ready.

“Yes,” she said, swinging violently, then more quietly, “for honor.”

Nightcrawler watched them both between bamfs and well-placed punches. His three-fingered hand *itched* for a sword, but he made do. For once, it was a commodity to look as he did. Hell’s army was not smart - most ignored what looked like one of their own.

---

The Hulk fought without a word. Two pointy-eared heads were crunched in one massive hand, while the other crushed the very ground of Hell and fell Daimon’s soldiers.

“Ragh-!” he grunted at the pain in his leg. He looked and saw a lone head, freshly separated from body, gnawing vigilantly at his Achilles’ tendon. With a guttural cry, the Hulk stamped the head into a stain and continued lashing out without care.

A black pillar rose out of the cracked ground and began to take

shape. The Hulk turned his attention to it, but no matter how hard he hit it, it continued to take form until it was a pillar no more. Blackheart caught the Hulk's fists and leaned in eye-to-eye with the man-monster.

"Sad creature," he said, trying to crush the green hands. "Your leash is almost chewed through, isn't it?"

He was surprised to feel one of the massive fists pull free and plow clear through his chest. The Hulk made an unintelligible noise and Blackheart smiled as his chest reformed around the arm inside him.

---

Like a duet, the Black Knight and Widow took turns laying into the surrounding hordes, striking at once when necessary. They were literally back-to-back, resting their legs, feeling the other's body heat.

"Where's - hh," Natasha said, kicking hard at the wall of red flesh that rushed what they saw as two simple meatbags. "Where's Stephen?"

They circled in unison - four legs, one warrior - and Dane was bathed in boiling netherblood.

"Don't know," he breathed. "I see Namor and someone else over there. No doctor."

Rotating again, the Widow struggled to see over the heads of the army. "It's Nighthawk and Illyana--"

"Watch out." The Ebony Blade sliced past her face and slashed off a thorny brown hand grasping for her hair. She nodded in thanks.

"I think you're going to have to free them. Looks like - like--" she ducked a claw and put her fingers right where they would knock a human out. It was painful enough for the seven-armed thing, which whimpered and pulled back.

"I'm not leaving you alone."

"Oh, don't even *start*," Natasha said, elbowing him. "Go."

The Black Knight hesitated, then broke free of their gestalt and began to hack his way to the three captives. When he looked back,

he could see nothing but the unholy army around Natasha. They were falling. He turned around and ran into something solid.

“Well.”

*Somebody* solid. Daimon pointed the tip of his wedding gift - Illyana's soulsword - at Dane's chest. “Care to duel?” he asked. Dane eyed his goal. “I'll trade you - a good fight for *them*.”

Without another word, Dane raised his weapon. And just as the two swordsmen took their stances, the ground quaked. No, no quake. It was a rhythm, pounding over and over. And it was growing like a strengthening heart beat. Steady. Drudging.

War drums sounded from somewhere behind Dane. They marched to a beat of six. It was *another* army, led by an orange demon and...and...

Daimon looked up, almost costing himself his head as Dane, unfazed, drove forward with the Ebony Blade. He blocked, but couldn't tear his eyes away from the direction of the drums. Another army. And at it's head...

“Father...?”

Hell quaked.

---

Oh.

His radar could have been weirding out on him. *Could* have been. But he had a feeling it wasn't. Daredevil had reached as far up the side of the structure as his radar sense would allow, trying to gain some sense of how tall it was. He was getting nothing but solid wall and open sky, and he had the unsettling feeling that this wall had no upper edge. It just went on and on, up and up forever.

It should have gone without saying, but he was really starting to hate this place.

“A waste of your time, as I told you.” Mephisto stood a distance behind him. “No use trying to measure things here. This is *Hell*. We have a scale all our own.”

Apparently so. Not only could Daredevil not figure out the height of

the fortress; he could just faintly hear the heartbeats inside, the most important one being the slow but familiar *lub-dub* of Stephen Strange. If anyone was necessary in situations like this - well, it was him.

Daredevil's own heart had settled somewhat since he'd had to duck out of sight of an army earlier as it had departed through the fortress' gates. There were so many, he'd barely been able to get an idea of any of them. They had stunk badly, though, and the two leading the pack smelled familiar. Almost like...Mark?

They had marched in sixes and took their time doing it. Steady, proud, confident. And large, as well. They came out of the fortress and left it empty save three souls: Dr. Strange, the Devil-Slayer, and Gina Garney.

"Mm," Matt murmured, feeling the entrance. Of course there wasn't a way in. When would it be that easy? Certainly not since he joined up with the Defenders. And *certainly* not since he'd come to Hell.

"It would appear you made the lesser choice, Matthew," said Mephisto, closer now. "Friends locked away here while others are fighting the forces of Hell itself. And you're helpless, a blind street-fighter among the damned. Simply delicious." Closer again. "Tell me - for my own amusement, of course - what *do* you plan to do, Matthew?"

This wasn't like fighting drug-dealers, or gang members, or even the Kingpin. Those things Matt Murdock was used to; they involved earthly evils he was, in retrospect and in comparison, beginning to cherish. He missed the mean streets of Hell's Kitchen.

Hell's Kitchen. The courtroom. Matt of all people knew that, sometimes, you have to play the devils' games to make sure you came out on top.

Why did this have to be any different? It wasn't about Matt or Natasha or any of the Defenders anymore. He'd just been almost run over by the army of Satan himself. What they needed was the supreme sorcerer; he was the last hope.

And *Matt* was *his* last hope.

Daredevil turned around. Mephisto loomed over him, waiting patiently.

“Well?” the demon asked. Matt put on his court voice.

“I’ve done some thinking.”

“Yes?”

“Basically, this looks like a losing situation. I’m helpless right here, and I’m close to it out there, too. I figure - what have I got to lose? I’m already in Hell.” He swallowed. It burned slightly. Mephisto was listening.

“So listen. As long as I’ve dealt with you, you’ve had only one goal - souls. You want them. And you know who’s got one?” Matt could almost hear the devil salivating. “Yes. Me. You’ve been after mine for a while. The way I see it, if I do nothing, we’re *all* going to suffer. So I’m going to make you a deal:

“My soul for my friends in this fortress here. Free them; don’t mess with them once they get out, and get them to where they can help against Daimon. Do that and you can have what you want of mine.”

Everything stood still. Mephisto wetted his lips before speaking.

“You...are making *me* an offer? You.”

“Me,” Matt nodded.

Mephisto would have turned redder if he could have. It was a frustrating situation; he had been hiding so well thus far, biding his time until Daimon made the inevitable mistake that would put him, Mephisto, back on top. If he did this, he risked exposing himself. Certainly it wouldn’t go unnoticed.

But this was *Daredevil*. Only the Surfer had a soul like that.

“And what makes you so sure,” Mephisto asked snidely, still playing his cards close, “that I can even *open* the fortress of the Fallen One himself? *Hmmm?*”

Matt took a step back. “Well hey - I guess you’re probably right. I guess a *parody* of the original couldn’t do much against the real thing.”

Playing the devil’s game. Mephisto smiled a wide snaky grin and wrung his hands. He knew the fortress was nothing. He had decided.

“Yes,” he hissed, then chuckled slightly. “You know this ‘parody’ better than most. You know what I am capable of.”

“And I know what you want.”

“The trade of *any* successful devil.” One more bit of consideration was needed; but only that. “Fair enough, Matthew. Your soul for your friends within Lucifer’s fortress.”

They shook hands in a grip that felt like a battle. Mephisto was moving towards the castle, speaking over his shoulder to a slightly numb Daredevil.

“And believe me, *partner* - you will keep your word as I keep mine.”

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**Concluded in DEFENDERS #13**

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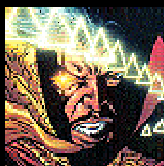
Gathered to battle the strange and mystical evils of the multiverse.....Doctor Strange...Namor, the Submariner...the Incredible Hulk.....They and a constantly changing group of others fight valiantly to keep the universe safe from pain and disorder..

# DEFENDERS

## Issue #13

### "THE BLACK VEIL" Finale

by [Will Short](#) and [Russ Anderson](#)



Doctor Strange



Namor



Hulk



Nighthawk



Magik

“Away!”

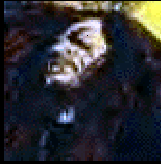
Demons clawing at her back, Brunnhilde the Valkyrie worked sword-and-fist towards the craggy stage where the closest mortal friend she’d ever had sat. Forget the fact that two infernal armies, one led by Daimon Hellstrom and one by his father Lucifer, were locked in all-out war. Forget that the Defenders, like vultures among eagles, were caught in the middle fighting alongside the seraphim of Heaven. Forget even, for a moment, the violation she had suffered at the hands of a former friend but a day (she assumed; time churned by slowly in Hell) ago.

Patsy Walker, Hellcat, was her friend. Practically her sister. If it were up to Brunnhilde, the flame-haired woman would fly on winged steeds as one of the Valkyrie. Her heart, her soul – as a mortal, was that strong. So Brunnhilde believed.

“Hellcat,” breathed the Valkyrie, leaping and landing next to her friend. “Patsy! We have no time to waste. The Defenders hath arrived. Thou art saved.”

Patsy, still dressed in the black satin gown she’d almost been married in before the rude intrusion of war, sat in her twisted throne and didn’t so much as look up.

“Patsy?” Brunnhilde took a step closer, placing a strong hand on the bride’s thin, pale arm. Patsy wrenched it away immediately.



**Hellstorm**



**Devil-Slayer**



**Hellcat**



**Black Knight**



**Valkyrie**



**Nightcrawler**

“Don’t touch me!” she cried, a disgusted scowl on her painted face. “Go away.”

A scaly, brownish creature was crawling up Brunnhilde’s back. One stab over her shoulder with Dragonfang and, demonblood on the stage’s rocky floor, the annoyance was ended.

“Thou art affected,” said the Valkyrie firmly. “Daimon controls thy—“

“No! No. I’m in control. I’m already saved,” Patsy said. Long legs crossed, she went back to watching the war. “My prince – my husband’s out there fighting for me right now. When he’s done, we’ll live happily ever after. Together. King and queen.”

“Patsy, this is not thy way. We must take leave!”

“Oh, yes!” Patsy bobbed her head playfully. “To go home with the soulless magician, and the himbo king, and the monster! To go back to that creepy house where all the wrong things echo and we hide in the shadows until something comes and gets us, and then we have to fight again. Instead of being queen of my own kingdom. Instead of finally living an easy life. “You got out of it, Brunnhilde, but when we fought that thing Alice, he brought back the madness. My madness. And maybe there’s still a little with me know, and maybe that’s good. Because I know what I want.”

Patsy nodded towards the black blood squirts and swords clanging in the wasteland below.

“You go back to your monsters,” she said. “I hear you’re practically one of them, after what you let Isaac do to you.” The Valkyrie gripped her sword’s hilt so tight that she almost broke skin. The rage, the guilt, was contained. In the process, eight years of friendship were torn aside. Patsy tapped her sharpened nails on the armrest. “I’ve got my own.”

---

Matt Murdock prided himself on his ability to get around. He understood this feeling to be common to most blind people--the stubborn refusal to believe that you need someone else's help to navigate through the world of the sighted--but in his case, a case that included four dramatically enhanced senses and one extrasensory radar, that pride took on a whole other meaning. Nobody could navigate a maze of tenement rooftops like him.



Nobody could track a single smarmy stool pigeon through Josie's Bar while surrounded by two dozen of the pigeon's angry drinking buddies as easily as he.

But after five minutes in Satan's fortress of blasted scarlet rock, he was about as lost as he ever had been, his only beacon the shimmering heated shape of Mephisto striding ahead of him. He was entrusting the devil to lead him to his friends. If he'd ever done anything stupider, it wasn't coming to mind.

"I hope," Mephisto growled, "that you are not counting on the Supreme Sorcerer to free you from our bargain once I've released him."

Daredevil didn't reply. He had to admit, the thought had occurred to him...

"I think you will find that Strange's power is much diminished beneath this Black Veil Hellstrom has cast over my kingdom. Else he would have broken free on his own by now. Your soul belongs to me, Murdock. Once this final detail is seen to."

Matt nodded once, sharply. If Strange and the others *weren't* freed, there was a very real chance that Daimon Hellstrom's hold on Hell would become so firmly cemented that he'd move on to the Earth Dimension. What was one soul compared to that, no matter how attached to it Matt might be?

Mephisto held up a hand, calling a halt. "We near the center of the stronghold."

Several steps ahead of the demon lord, the tunnel widened, and became a giant cavern. Inside that cavern, a tremendous wind pounded the rock with swirling mountains of red sand. Daredevil should have heard the cacophony long before they reached it, but he was finding that nothing here obeyed his accustomed rules of reality.

Mephisto put a hand to the tunnel wall and, for a moment, he neither moved nor spoke. Then, straightening, he said, "I see."

He snapped his fingers, and the roaring of the blood-red sandstorm was overlapped by the wail of a human being in torment.

"What are you--?"

"Silence!"

Daredevil might have pressed the issue, but he was interrupted by a body exploding from the wall of swirling sand. Before it had struck the rock floor and skidded to a halt, Matt had identified it by its heartbeat, scent, and shape as Regina Garney, mother to Mark Garney, the little boy they had come here to save. She had been the one screaming.

"What are you doing?" Daredevil whipped his club at the demon and dropped to his knees at Regina's side. "She's only flesh and blood, Mephisto! Be gentle!"

The club passed right through the demon and rebounded off two walls before returning to Daredevil's hand. Mephisto didn't even look at it.

"I had to pull her out of a containment circle and across several miles quickly enough that she wouldn't be torn to shreds by this bone sand, Murdock. If you wanted gentle, you should have made your bargain with the Care Bears."

Regina was just barely conscious. It was remarkable that she was even breathing. "What about the others?"

"I'm working on it, you annoying pestilence."

Two new screams joined the roar of the sand, and a moment later, the swirling wall spit Doctor Strange and Devil-Slayer onto the tunnel floor. These two didn't seem as damaged as Regina had been, but their clothing was in tatters, their flesh bleeding freely. Doctor Strange was the first to regain his wits.

"Daredevil. What--?"

Before the question could be voiced, a new sound was laid over the sand-roar. Not an improbably amplified scream this time, but rather the cry of a wild animal. A very *angry* wild animal. Strange's head whipped around at the sound.

"Oh no."

The sand stopped. All of it, frozen in mid-air like a high-speed photograph of blood red snow, and the noise of it could no longer dull that scream coming from somewhere in its depths.

At Daredevil's feet, Regina muttered her son's name. "Mark..."

The wall of hanging sand ripped open, and a dark orange behemoth strode through the gap like Moses through the Red Sea. Leathern wings unfurled from the creature's hunched back, and the smell of brimstone and sulfur coming off of it was almost too much for Daredevil's already overloaded senses to bear.

"Those are our father's toys, demon," the Gargoyle growled.

"Demon?" Mephisto demanded. "I am much more than that, you ignorant maggot! Or didn't your father tell you?"

"Our father told us only that your continued existence is due solely to the fact that you have ever amused him, pathetic one."

The Gargoyle was dangerously close now. Daredevil knew well what this creature had done to Valkyrie, and he knew he should be rushing his friends to safety, but... he was getting a strange radar reading off the demon, as if one form was laid over another. One was the orange monster that was visible to everyone else, and the other was that of a small boy. A very familiar small boy...

"Maarrkkkk..." Regina Garney's half-conscious voice was a plaintive moan now.

"Fool of a fool!" Mephisto roared, striding into the parted sandstorm. "Hardly born, and already you mock your betters!" Something like a crimson bolt of electricity with the inner texture of bloody ground meat exploded from Mephisto's hand. The bolt took the Gargoyle dead on.

He laughed in reply.

An orange bolt flashed from one of the Gargoyle's claws, washing over Mephisto and into the tunnel passage. Daredevil threw himself down over Regina as Doctor Strange erected a shield. Even through it, the power behind the beam skated across Matt's senses like electricity and fire and tingling frostbite all in one.

"Stephen..." Devil-Slayer said. "We can't stay here."

"I know. My powers may be limited, but I can at least take us to the others. Prepare yourselves."

Still maintaining the shield, Stephen Strange crossed his wrists

above his head, muttered an incantation, and teleported the Defenders away in a flash of green and white light, leaving Mephisto and Gargoyle to settle the dispute on their own.

---

The Ebony Blade rang against the Soulsword, and the Black Knight threw his weight against his opponent.

"Almost had me there, Whitman," Daimon grinned, his oversized canines gleaming as he allowed the Knight to push him back. "That *must* be frustrating. I was distracted by the arrival of my father's army. You could have ended all of this with one stroke of your sword, but alas!"

Dane didn't say anything. Instead, he angled himself out of the path of the Soulsword and dropped his Ebony Blade, severing the lock they'd created. He tried to bring the Blade up at a shallow angle, to rip the Helllord open from waist to opposite shoulder, but Daimon was already dancing backward, out of his reach. A slash opened across Hellstrom's bare torso, but it was hardly the killing stroke the Black Knight had intended.

"That *hurt!*" Daimon roared, and waved a hand. The soil at Dane's feet exploded in flame. His armor's joints began to fuse immediately, his flesh cooked beneath the metal. Dane threw an arm over his face and dove forward, somersaulting across open ground and coming up to one knee just in time to block as Daimon swung for his neck.

"I have more important things to worry about than you, meat!"

"Then go deal with them, Hellstrom," the Black Knight grunted, fighting against his opponent's superior strength and the nearly welded joints of his battle armor. "We'll see how far you get before I take your head."

---

The Hulk roared and plunged his left fist into the earthy black morass of Blackheart's body. As had happened with the right fist, this one also became stuck in the demon's torso. His opponent didn't exactly have a face--more like two red embers burning in vaguely eye-like locations in his head--but Bruce Banner was sure the creature was smiling anyway.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you the legend of the tarbaby, monster?" Blackheart asked. "Or is your intellect so far gone that even these common sense lessons are lost to you?"

Nearby, Nightcrawler cartwheeled over the heads of two horned demons and cannonballed into a third. "Doctor Banner!" he cried. "Do you require assistance?"

The Hulk grinned. "Tell you what, elf. The Incredible Hulk ain't gonna need no priest's help until he's dead. And maybe not even then."

Flexing his massive shoulders, applying the leverage he'd created when he trapped his second hand, the Hulk ripped both arms outward, tearing Blackheart completely in half and scattering pieces of him across the battlefield. The demon's upper and lower halves toppled to the ground, and the Hulk proceeded to stamp them flat, saving the part with those expressionless red eyes for last.

"Brainless beast," Blackheart's head growled as the Hulk pounded his chest into black gravel. "Later for you."

And then, before the Hulk's foot could descend on the head, it vanished, melting into the ground like ice into a pool of warm water. He was gone.

"Aw no," the Hulk said. He wheeled around, absently shoving aside a knot of charging demons, and scanned the battlefield with his narrowed emerald eyes. "You don't get off that easy, freakshow..."

---

A wall of obsidian earth exploded upward behind the Black Knight and collapsed over him, engulfing his head and yanking him backward from his deadlock with Hellstrom.

Straightening, Hellstrom laughed. "Very good, brother. Good show."

The wall of earth had shaped itself into Blackheart's eight-foot tall form. The Black Knight's head was engulfed in the demon's fist, dangling him several feet above the ground. The Ebony Blade flashed out in an arc, but Blackheart's body just reformed over the

gashes it created.

"I will see to this flesh, Daimon," Blackheart said. "You must engage your father and protect your bride."

Daimon saluted him with the sword. "I'll be back, brother. This shouldn't take long." He turned and began slicing his way through the demonic and heavenly forces, toward his father. Toward Satan.

---

Somehow, the Black Widow had managed to get herself completely cut off from the others, surrounded on all sides by leathery red flesh and gleaming black claws. Despite her years as an Avenger and her more recent time as a Defender, she simply wasn't wired to think in terms of having a team to back her up. Too many years as a lone espionage agent. So now she was paying for it, nowhere near either her fellow Defenders or the small army of angels that had accompanied them down into this place.

Her Widow's Bite had managed to hold many of them off, and as for the ones it hadn't, well-placed hand and foot strikes had taken care of them. But now the charge was getting low on her bracelets, and swinging her legs and arms was beginning to feel like swinging fully-loaded barbells. She wasn't an archangel, nor was she a gamma-irradiated behemoth or even an acrobatic mutant. Sooner or later, they were going to tear her down.

But, damn them, she was going to make them bleed for it.

This was what she was thinking, blasting a demon directly in his wide-open jaws, when a nearby flash of bright white light turned her vision into a useless blank slate. She stumbled back, blinking furiously, and felt a leather-skinned mass hit her in the abdomen, throwing her to the ground and landing on top of her. The impact brought her vision back online, just in time to see the demon she'd just blasted throwing its hideous mouth wide.

"I'm going to eat that pretty face right off your head!" The demon roared, its maw still smoking from the blast.

"Some of us like her face right where it is," a familiar voice said, and the blunt end of a red billy club slammed into the side of the creature's face, spraying its teeth out the opposite side of its mouth. The club rebounded away, and was replaced with a red

boot, smashing the demon off of her.

"Matthew?"

"Didn't expect to see you here, Tasha," Daredevil grinned, offering her his hand. Behind him, the Devil-Slayer and Doctor Strange were driving the wall of demons back while Regina Garney lay curled in a fetal position at their feet.

"Matthew!" She sprang to her feet and threw her arms around him.

"Whoa, easy on the secret identity there, babushka," Daredevil laughed, clutching her to him. "I'm happy to see you too. But how did you guys get here?"

"The angels." She gestured at the winged men with their flaming swords, engaging the demons in bloody battle all over the field. "But I'll explain all that later. Right now, we have to help Dane get to Daimon Hellstrom--"

"Dane?"

"The Black Knight." The Widow tightened her bracelets, and gave Matt the most honest smile she'd given anyone in a long time. "What do you say, cowboy? Daredevil and the Black Widow, together again, one more time?"

"That's right babe," he agreed, not allowing his own smile to falter until Natasha had turned away. "One more time."

Together, they leapt into the fray.

---

Blackheart was watching the armored fleshbag squirm in his grip, idly wondering whether to just let him suffocate or perhaps pop his head off his shoulders instead, when he heard and felt the approach of a large herd of stampeding cattle.

Or, as he found out moments later, the approach of one very angry Incredible Hulk.

The Hulk's fist met the side of Blackheart's head, completely annihilating it in a spray of burning coals and gravel. The demon stumbled, head reforming the instant the Hulk pulled his fist back, and turned his burning gaze on the man-monster. He was about to

say something clever and threatening, but then the Hulk's massive, square jaws closed on his outstretched arm, severing the hand holding the Knight.

Dane Whitman dropped to the ground, Blackheart's hand falling apart around his face and finally--*finally*--allowing him to breathe the fetid air of Hell again. He spent exactly two seconds filling his lungs, and then started tearing at the fused, useless armor around his chest and torso. It was more hindrance than help now. He cast his helmet aside too, leaving him bare from the waist up.

He stood, scanned the battlefield, and spotted Daimon Hellstrom, wading through the demonic ranks toward Satan himself.

"Thank you, Doctor Banner!" he cried, and began moving as quickly as he could toward the Son of Satan.

"Whatever," the Hulk replied. He chewed up the mass of sulfurous earth he'd bitten off of Blackheart, and spit it back at the creature's expressionless face. Then the two monsters lunged at each other.

---

"Ah, Borniel. How are you, old friend?"

Satan seized the flaming sword of a passing archangel and pulled it and its bearer out of the sky. The angel hit the ground hard, tried to get back to his feet, and was driven down again when Satan's foot landed on his spine. The lord of Hell's hands closed around the angel's feathered wings and, with a grisly ripping-crunching sound, tore them free of his back.

"You should have come with me, Borniel," Satan said, tossing the wings absently into the swarming armies that surrounded them. "I know you were tempted to. And maybe you wouldn't have come to this end if you had."

"You... can... never win... Morningstar..."

"Says the third-string archangel bleeding to death all over the soil of Hell. I don't think your opinion matters that much to me at this point, Borniel."

The sound behind him was no more than a whisper, barely audible over the sounds of war, but Satan heard it, and spun, meeting Daimon Hellstrom's thrust with the flaming blade he'd just taken



from the archangel.

Satan smiled. "Let's ask my son what he thinks."

"Your time is done, father! You are nothing to me. I have defeated you before, and I will do so again!"

"You have caused me setbacks, Daimon, for which I am immensely proud of you. But you lack the proper respect, and for that, I regret I shall have to--"

Whatever Satan regretted, no one ever found out, for at that moment the archangel Borniel leapt onto his back, throwing his well-muscled arm over the demon lord's eyes.

"I *defy* you, Morningstar!" the angel bellowed as Satan staggered backward. "I *defy* you!"

"And so do I," Daimon Hellstrom smiled. He lifted the Soulsword and, with a roar of triumph, split both Satan and the archangel Borniel in twain.

---

Illyana Rasputin pulled with all her considerable strength at the chains pinning her to the ground. On her right, Namor the Sub-Mariner was still and quiet, maybe dead after being exposed to the dehydrating heat of Hell for so long. To her left, Nighthawk groaned in half-conscious agony as the gaping holes in his back from which his demon wings used to spring bled freely.

And all around them, a battle that they had absolutely nothing to do with threatened to spill over them at any moment, killing all three while they lay there, chained and helpless.

So intent was she on breaking free, that Illyana didn't feel the rush of cool, fresh air against her cheek. She heard the angel-song though--the low, musical, almost molecular hum of Heaven given form and purpose.

The most beautiful man she'd ever seen landed on the ground in front of her, utterly naked and glorious, with white feathered wings springing from his back. Without a word, he raised his flaming sword and brought it down hard at her.

Her bonds fell away with a heavy *clank*, the sword splitting the

hell-wrought iron links like so many dry twigs. Illyana blinked, let the chains wrapped around her fall away, and rubbed at her wrists.

"Thank you," she said uncertainly. "My friends... they're hurt..."

"That they are," the archangel replied, turning his pupil-less white eyes on Namor. "But they are no longer your concern, Darkchylde. You must go now, and reclaim your birthright."

"My bir--?"

Of course. The Soulsword. Symbol of her power and the pain she had endured to earn it. Hellstrom had taken it away from her, but the sword was literally a piece of her soul. She knew where it was, even across the pandemonium of this battlefield, as surely as she knew the location of her right hand.

Without another word, she summoned a stepping disk and teleported away.

---

Satan fell, and his army began to crumble around him.

Daimon Hellstrom looked on this, pleased at the sight of his own forces tearing the other demons to bits as they scattered in disorganized panic. It wouldn't take long to rout them, and considering Satan had also been working against the archangels all this time, there should be few enough of them left at the end that they could be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

This was the greatest moment of Daimon Hellstrom's life, and he spread his arms, feeling the heat of hell on his bare chest, reveling in it. The only thing that would make this more perfect, in fact, was if his bride was at his side. He looked around, back toward their hellish thrones.

Patsy was seated, shaking her head calmly as Brunnhilde the Valkyrie gesticulated wildly over her. Behind Brunnhilde, an archangel Daimon recognized as the lead troublemaker himself, Gabriel, alighted on the stage. As Daimon watched in horror, Gabriel leaned over and seized Patsy roughly by the arm.

"No!" Daimon began moving toward them, cutting down enemy and ally alike--anyone foolish enough to keep him from his bride. Gabriel and Brunnhilde had just earned themselves a special place

on the new Lord of Hell's priority list. He would visit agonies on the both of them that would make the tortures of Saint Florian look like an erotic massage in comparison. He would--

Something punched him in the chest, stopping him in his tracks. He looked down.

Three feet of ebony steel was jutting out of his bare sternum, a black ichor that might have been blood in the days when he was at least partly human pouring out of the wound and onto the ground, where it disappeared instantly into the ever-thirsty soil. Daimon looked at it with a strange, detached curiosity, even going so far as to finger the end of the blade. A line of black spit fell from his lips and slid across the sword before joining the rest on the ground.

"Whitman," he said. His voice was weak and good-humored, almost amused.

"Goodbye, Hellstrom," the Black Knight said from behind him. And then he twisted the Blade.

Daimon Hellstrom screamed as all his hellborne might, all the energies he'd absorbed from the various Death Gods, exploded out through the hole in his chest in a miles-high geyser of black, foaming power. The column roared into the ebony sky, higher than the naked eye could see, and when it seemed it could go no farther, it sledgehammered into some unseen barrier that encapsulated all the land.

And cracked it.

Great jagged rends of white and blue spider-webbed across the firmament, spreading to every corner of Hell within the span of a heartbeat. For a moment, everyone on the battlefield paused to look up.

In the next, the sky exploded. And the Black Veil finally fell away.

---

Ilyana was in transport via her stepping disk for only an instant, but when she popped out the other side, everything had changed.

What looked like great chunks of the sky were raining all around, giant slabs of black, shot through with red and edged with white,

crushing dozens of combatants with every impact. Ilyana took this in, and then spotted Daimon Hellstrom nearby, appropriately skewered. Just like a pig.

The Soulsword was lying at his feet, dropped and forgotten. Ilyana snatched it up and, without another word, teleported away.

---

They began to drop, from the opaque waves of the River Styx, through the City of Dis's gates topped with the heads of the heretical and traitorous (all of which stopped their moaning for once to watch the spectacle), over the overgrown Wood of Suicides and right up to the very Throne of Hell itself – the demons, under both Hellstrom and Satan, fell as though struck by a sudden, horrible illness whose symptoms are to bray, jerk horn to claw, and cease. Shards of the Black Veil showered down on their bodies as the power of all the hate, lust, gluttony, violence the Son of Satan had ingested went back into the musty humidity of the air and became mixed with it. If it was possible, Hell was only getting hotter.

Nightcrawler watched the falling warriors, still fighting the weakening survivors, and wondered if demons in Hell could actually die. It was the sort of thought that tip-toed across Kurt's mind as he lay halfway between sleep and waking during late hours in his humble Vatican room. On some level, perhaps many levels, he was happier to be here now than there. One army was fading quickly, at least. And there were people like the Devil-Slayer who, though badly cut, as if he'd been subjected to some banned medieval torture device, was making sure that *no* infernal creature remained standing.

"The armies – I believe they're falling!" Nightcrawler called out to the Slayer. The latter held a mace in one hand, a shield in the other, and brought both down on a straggler.

"Looks like all Hell's falling apart," said the Devil-Slayer.

Kurt appeared at his side, *bamf*, in a brimstone-hinted burst of crimson. "Have we won?"

"Really, I can't tell what's happening. All I know is that some are still standing." The Slayer continued to hack away, and Kurt got the feeling that he was barely being noticed.

“Then we continue to fight,” Nightcrawler concluded. “I have faith. And if not, we go out doing right. If I’m meant to die, I hope it is with a sword in my hand.”

Swinging the mace with one hand, the Slayer reached deep into his cape and, without a word, tossed a curved, circular-cuffed blade Kurt’s way. Nightcrawler laughed.

“Finally! All this swordplay and I was feeling left out.”

Back to the battle, the comfortable weight in his hand, Kurt Wagner noticed the emptying field, the ferocity that was leaving even the best hellions. That and the sheer power loose in the air, very much a part of it. Something had happened, a shift that he could breathe in, and all Kurt wanted to do was laugh and swashbuckle away.

---

No one noticed the lithe female figure popping in and out across the cooling field of war. With all that was happening, the focus was you and your own, even for Illyana. Cold nibbles were darting up and down her left arm up to her shoulder and out to the tip of her shimmering Soulsword. Magik, Darkchylde – she took long, confident strides until she stood under a monstrous shadow, fully eclipsed save for the glint of her spreading armor.

“—cook your flesh and crush your bones,” Blackheart rasped in the Hulk’s face, the two eight-foot bodies clashing hand-gripping-hand. His breath was full of sulfur and bile, but the voice suddenly shifted higher and higher. “And then, Bruce,” said the voice of Betty Banner, “I can play with your soul here for all eternity.”

“Keepin talkin’,” the Hulk grunted. “Keep talkin’! ‘Cuz the madder I get – the madder I get, the stronger...”

He stopped as Blackheart’s vague face went to a blank expression. Something silvery jutted out just underneath his chin and made two quick swipes to each side and his head, a jack-o-lantern of embers and earth, fell off his disintegrating body and rolled to the toe of a metal boot.

“No,” said the Hulk, shrugging his shoulders rhythmically and flaring his nostrils. “No you just didn’t. He was *mine*. He was—“

“He was mine,” said the Darkchylde. She plucked Blackheart’s

head and held it close to her whitened eyes. Top to bottom, she was dressed in armor made of no metal the doctor in Hulk could recognize. “He was ugly to me before.”

“Yeah, and he’s gonna be *real* ugly when he comes back for his head. I oughta let him take a few chunks outta you before I kick his—“

Under her jagged helmet, she shot him the disgusted look of one whose very character has been questioned. “This is the *Soulsword*. Blackheart won’t be reforming. Even if he could, he doesn’t have much of a reason now.” Her tone and voice didn’t match the teenage girl they came from. “His brother is dead – I pulled this sword out of him myself.” There were hints of oily blood and soil still on the blade. Darkchylde didn’t care to clean it, but she dropped Blackheart’s head and kicked it away.

“So we’re done?” He’d lost the chance to give a good beating, but maybe the Hulk could finally leave this place – these people – and get the hell back to the life of a gamma-irradiated monster.

She shook her head and waved the Soulsword to include all directions. “The fighting’s stopped. I—“

“Fine.” The monster stepped up to her, his presence making her body doll-like in stature, then lumbered past, cracking his knuckles in a sound like rivets shot into steel. “Headbusting’s done for the day then. *Thanks*, princess.”

He walked onto the battlefield, crunching gasping creatures beneath his steps like so much gravel. The Darkchylde’s armor was quickly becoming but a hint of a memory of a glimmer as she watched him. Light swallowed Illyana. The wandering dust trail she left obscured whoever retrieved Blackheart’s face and ate it whole with a hoarse, satisfying sigh.

---

“Did you feel that? Of course you didn’t.”

Mephisto wasn’t used to being on the receiving end when it came to chatter. A devil can sweet-talk. With a lash of the tongue a good devil can make paradise seem like not nearly enough. Of the many prides, the countless powers, a devil like Mephisto holds the spoken word as priceless. Now all the abilities and tricks he had

were next to nothing and for once the high demon had little to say.

His wiry arms waved, weaving what forces they could. Columns of jagged stone rose from the soil with his gesture, went until neither he nor his enemy could see the top. The columns then crumbled, kicking up so much debris that for a moment the mass of leathery muscle they fell upon might well have been gone. But Mephisto could tell before things settled that it was pointless.

Dressed in a fresh layer of soil and dirt, the Gargoyle stood his ground.

“It’s over, Mephisto,” he said. A few steps towards Mephisto and the devil found himself taking almost as many back. “Hellstrom is dead. Blackheart is dead. That’s what we felt.” Then the Gargoyle slapped him. Like some insolent child or inane housewife, or perhaps more like a wildcat would provoke its prey, this young creature slapped Mephisto; over and over, light enough to mostly annoy, just hard enough to hurt. “Now we’re whole. The child and the gargoyle are one and all the power that comes with being the infernal child is ours. Prince of Hell! Haha!”

Another slap.

“You’re an ugly, confused amalgam of a helpless little boy and a lonely old man in an oversized package,” said Mephisto. He caught one flailing claw and tried to sink his own nails into the thick orange hide. “Lucifer is even more of a fool for...for...”

When he found that his clutching was of no use, the inability to speak returned to Mephisto. He glanced up into the hungry, almost lustful eyes of the Gargoyle. They didn’t match. One was stark yellow with flecks of oak and darkness, its pupil vertical; the other was circular with an iris like an undisturbed pool of water. They flinched, and Mephisto suddenly understood what the mortal victim of an animal attack must feel like. The Gargoyle struck, over and over again, and Mephisto’s pink flesh opened in a cluttered mess of teeth-marks and gashes. The creature was taking fast and thin breaths, grunting and growling the language of murderous abandon. Claws went deeper than flesh and bone, each tooth in a snap was felt individually. Mephisto could feel it all inside of him and knew his strength was flowing out more freely than his blood. These were injuries as only the son of a devil could inflict – physical, territorial, spiritual.

His form was coming apart at the seams. All Mephisto could

muster by the end was a whimper – a helpless little cry from the demon that fancied himself a devil as his presence was torn limb by limb, then into shreds, then to just another stain on his assailant's body. A flash of power erupted from the Gargoyle's body, and with a wail of exile, even the stain was gone. The Gargoyle blinked his mismatched eyes, licked his lips, and reveled in the aftertaste of a fresh kill.

“Say what you will. The fact of the matter remains that Blackheart is still dead and we're still here. Like father like son.”

---

Daredevil's scream punched a hole through the Black Widow's post-battle afterglow. She whirled, saw the man clawing at his face as a red-white foam exploded from his mouth, saw him topple over onto his back in a cloud of fine black dust.

"Matthew!" she cried, not caring about his secret identity anymore, not caring about anything but helping him. Dear God, he'd been fine just a moment earlier, silent as always in the wake of a battle sorely won. And now... now...

He was still clawing at his face, even though Natasha got the impression he wasn't exactly conscious anymore. She grabbed his hands, tried to restrain him, but he was far too strong in his panic. He was screaming someone's name.

"Mmmmaaaggggiiiee!!!!"

"Help me!" Natasha screamed. "Somebody help me!"

A pair of two-toed feet landed in the dust at Daredevil's other side, a curved pirate's sword falling to the ground alongside them. And then Nightcrawler was there, kneeling next to the man and helping the Widow fight his clawing hands.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know! He just--"

Matt's head lunged forward suddenly, and fired a glob of spit at Nightcrawler's face. The mutant flinched back, but didn't let go of the man's hands.

"He is *mine*, Wagner! Mine! Just as you will be, you disgusting,



pretentious, freak! Like a swine in a tuxedo, that's what you look like in that priest's collar! Who do you think you are?"

The voice wasn't Daredevil's at all, though it was inarguably coming from his mouth. He dropped his head back to the ground, and arched his back until he was bent almost double, feet scrabbling for purchase in the dirt. Again, he called out that name.

*"Mmmmaaagggiiieeee!!!"*

*"Mein Gott,"* Nightcrawler breathed, looking across at the Widow. "I think--I think he's being possessed."

---

Even with his face in the dirt and the scent of his own blood thick in the heavy air, Kyle Richmond could smell the vaguely unpleasant odor of overcooked fish coming off of the unconscious, dehydrated form of Namor, the mighty Sub-Mariner. Kyle's hands were free--though he couldn't remember who had cut the chains--and now his claws curled into the dirt, finding purchase and slowly dragging his uncooperative body toward his teammate. He had no idea what he might do when he reached the Sub-Mariner's side. Maybe nothing. Maybe he just didn't want to die alone.

He'd only crossed half the distance--part of him aware that the fighting around him had mostly stopped--when he felt the strong hands on his back, covering the stumps of his severed wings.

"Your time is not now, Kyle Richmond," the archangel said in a voice so resonant it would have shamed Isaac Hayes. "And, unlike your friend, your dual nature allows me some power in your recovery."

And then Nighthawk felt agony and ecstasy fill him all at once, etching outward from the wing stumps and throughout his body through the tangle-tree pathways of his vascular system, carried in his blood, feeding his flesh until the injuries and pains had been cauterized into warm scars of experience.

The pain drove him into unconsciousness long before his healer's work was done.

---

"Trying to possess him?" the Widow demanded. "A demonic possession? Like in *The Exorcist*?"

"Not exactly. Contrary to popular belief, a demon actually has to be invited in. It can't just go around taking over little girls and masked men at its whim. But, whatever happened here, for some reason the possessing entity is not strong enough to fully take control. Not without wearing Daredevil down first anyway."

"Well... you're a priest! Exorcise him!"

"*Fraulein*, I have been a priest for a very short time now. I've *never* performed an exorcism. I doubt I could even remember the proper prayers."

Natasha's eyes narrowed to slits and went cold as ice. "Try, damn you," she hissed. "Or go get Doctor Strange. Don't just sit there on your furry ass and tell me how hopeless it is!"

Nightcrawler flinched at the ferocity of her words. Then, quickly, he nodded. "Very well. Restrain him as best you can. I will need my hands for this."

---

Dane Whitman strode across the battlefield, stepping carefully over the bodies of the dead, wondering what would become of them, who would bury them. The Ebony Blade hung at his side.

He also wondered if the Defenders would hate him for what he'd had to do today.

"Dane."

He turned, and watched as Doctor Strange, restored to full power with the fall of the Black Veil, dropped to the ground beside him.

"Stephen. It's good to see you."

"And you," Strange replied, but he was looking at Dane quizzically, as if searching for some evidence to put the lie to what he was seeing. Finally, he just came out with it. "You stabbed Daimon--" *Oboy*. "Look, Steve, I had to--"

"Why didn't the Blade's curse affect you?"

Dane blinked. Then, he almost laughed. He'd nearly forgotten about the blasted curse...

"The curse on the Blade says that I must draw blood to activate it. According to Merlin, with all the power Daimon had incorporated, he didn't even really *have* blood anymore, only Hellpower flowing in his veins. To tell you the truth, I wasn't absolutely sure Merlin wasn't just shucking and jiving me until--"

*"Murderer!"*

A screeching, red-haired shrew in what looked like a flowing black wedding gown fell on the Black Knight seemingly from nowhere, hands and fingernails curled into well-honed claws. A look of such utter hatred marred her features that Doctor Strange didn't immediately recognize her. When he did, her transformation nearly broke his heart.

It was Patsy Walker.

Without missing a beat, the Knight stooped, dropped one shoulder, and used Patsy's momentum to flip her away from him. She somersaulted, the dress curling around her like spraying oil, and landed on her feet. Wheeling around, she made to begin the attack anew.

A mammoth green hand closed around her waist, lifting her off the ground and holding her there while she hissed and spat and struggled against it.

"That's enough, Patsy," the Hulk said from behind her, sounding uncharacteristically subdued.

"He killed my husband! He killed him!"

"Look again," Doctor Strange said, gesturing across the field, toward where Daimon had fallen.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with flowing red hair was rising to his feet. At first, Patsy didn't recognize him. Something was missing from his bearing, some indefinable sign of regality, and the large black pentagram that had formerly glowed darkly against his torso was gone, replaced with a jagged pink scar.

Patsy deflated, her face falling and tears welling up in her green eyes. Tremblingly, she said her husband's name.

"Release her, Bruce, if you please."

The Hulk set Patsy down without argument. As soon as she was free, she stumbled forward, fell to one knee, then got up and staggered across the field toward her husband.

The Black Knight was looking at Strange, confused. "I don't understand. Is this some kind of illusion? Isn't that even more cruel than..."

Strange shook his head. "No, no illusion, old friend. I sensed it as soon as you struck Daimon down. You truly did not draw his blood, did not kill him. It protected you from the blood curse, but also spared Daimon his life."

"Then this isn't--"

"It is over. Daimon may live, but he has been reduced to a state that, for him, resembles death. His link to his father's power has been broken. Now and forevermore, he is the worst thing he could possibly imagine: a mortal." Strange watched as Patsy reached her husband's side, watched as they flung their arms around each other, sinking to their knees together among the muck and blood.

"For the moment, at least, that is punishment enough for the both of them."

---

*"I exorcise you, o impious Satan!"*

Seconds earlier, Kurt Wagner had spit into his own hand, over and over again, until his mouth was as barren as the ground they knelt on and his voice a dry rasp. And then he did something with that handful of saliva the Black Widow never would have believed.

He blessed it.

There was no water in this place, as Namor would have attested if Namor were conscious to do so. But in order to perform the exorcism rite as Kurt had learned it, the victim had to be exposed to holy water. Under the circumstances, this was as close as

Daredevil was getting.

*"In vain do you boast of this deed! I command you to restore it as proof before the whole world that, when God receives a sinner, you have no longer any rule over his soul!"*

Natasha was practically sitting on Matt's chest now, while Nightcrawler held the holy sputum to the man's forehead. Matt was hissing and growling and struggling beneath them.

*"Return therefore this deed whereby this creature of God foolishly bound himself to your service; return it, I say, in His name by whom you are overcome!"*

*"MMMMMAAAAGGGIIIEEEEE!!!!!"*

"He's fighting it!" Natasha cried, managing a grin as she fought to keep Matt pinned down.

*"When your power has come to nothing, presume not longer to retain this useless document!"*

Daredevil jerked, snapping with his teeth at the three-fingered hand on his forehead, but Nightcrawler grabbed him by the jaw with his opposite hand and forced him to be still.

*"By penitence already has this creature of God restored himself to his true Lord--"*

Daredevil's thrashings were becoming less pronounced. The Widow was actually having some success in holding him down now.

*"--spurning your yoke--"*

"mother," Matt Murdock groaned.

*"--trusting in the Divine mercy for defense against your assaults!"*

Daredevil was still. Over him, Nightcrawler and the Black Widow gasped for breath, sharing an uncertain look between them.

"Did it work?"

"I--I think so." Nightcrawler removed his hand from Daredevil's

forehead. His palm-print was burned across the mask.

"I take it he's Catholic."

Natasha laughed, despite herself. "Oh, very much so. Wouldn't it have worked on an atheist?" Then, sobering, she added, "What do you think got hold of him like that?"

"I have no idea," Nightcrawler replied, turning his gaze out over the battlefield. "But whatever it was, and wherever it is now, I'd be willing to wager it's very, very upset."

---

In a dark, unknowable place, where nightmares and forgotten devils go to die, the loose collection of dark magic and evolutionary fear that had once been called Mephisto watched as Matt Murdock was wrested from his grip, his soul returned to its vessel. Leaving Mephisto alone here, alone in the dark.

He wanted to cry out his fury, but he had no voice. He wanted to clench his fists and stamp his feet, but he had neither.

None of it mattered, though. He would heal. With the fears and petty hatreds of man as his food, he would return in no time at all. And eventually, sometime down the road--perhaps not until the day Daredevil died but probably long before then--he and Matt Murdock would meet again.

And on that day, he would learn the price of reneging on a deal with the devil.

---

No one noticed her wake up and stumble off in the middle of all the bravado, breakthroughs, and angles giving stern goodbyes. The heroes were too busy acting like it was a victory. Well, it wasn't – not to Regina Garney. She'd followed them to Hell to find her son. Now he was lost to her. Only her need for revenge approached being great enough to fill the hole her son's absence left.

"I knew it," she said, her face a contortion of barely-contained rage. "I knew you couldn't really be gone. I *knew* it." Her fists balled and she suddenly towered stories above the naked thing she'd found laying quietly on a boulder. Eyes and hair literally

ablaze, she grit her teeth and bathed her finding in angry firelight.

He sat up and shook his head, running his hand through his long, curly blonde hair. He looked like he'd woken from a short, unsatisfying nap, leaving him weak and groggy. That appeared more important to him than the fire-giantess before him. "Woman, I am not who you think."

She lifted him from the rock like a doll and squeezed tight. "Don't try to lie to me! After all this time, don't play even one more game with me. You raped me! You raped my life! You're the devil and you gave me a son and ripped him away."

The naked little man didn't squirm. It didn't hurt. His membrane-lined wings popped out between her fingers and he just watched her, listening.

"Every night...every night after you did it I'd dream *horrible* things. And when I did, I'd wake up like *this*. Did you give me this power to punish you? Because that's all I have left, dammit," she squeezed harder, "that's all!"

"Mother."

She knew the voice and didn't want to turn to see – but she had to. Flapping his wings at Regina's shoulder was a little orange-and-purple gnat, something that used to be her son, used to be a man, and now was a twisted little monster.

"Mark..." she breathed, totally forgetting the tiny weight in her fist.

The Gargoyle spoke loud and formally. "Unhand him. We'll only ask you once."

"Dammit, I'm your mother, Mark!" The tears had been so many, so hard, that Regina found she was fresh out of them. Besides, this was barely her son anymore – now it was just a reminder of the past years of hell. Her trip to this place had started earlier than anyone else's.

"Don't make us hurt you, mother. Believe us, we can."

What was the point? Regina saw none. She placed the naked man back onto his rock and, unconsciously, her stature returned to

normal. The flames all but flickered out. “Who are you?”

“I am Lucifer.”

“You said you didn’t rape me...”

Lucifer regained his footing and held himself like only true royalty can hold, naked and beautiful like a dimmed sunset. “Not as you imagine it. I was only a third of your trouble, if that much.”

One figure appeared in the near distance, then another, both treading over the overgrown garden of rocks and spent soldiers. Their eyes never met. Both were winged.

“Father...?”

“Yes,” all three answered – the fallen angel Regina had held, the red-haired man with horns and sharp, dark features, and the black demon whose face was unbearable to look at for more than a few seconds at a time.

Someone said, behind Regina, “You were dead.” Over her shoulder were the Defenders – battered, grim, and exhausted – with both a glossed-over Hellstrom and Patsy in tow. It was the Black Knight who spoke. His sword was drawn. “I saw it.”

The man who resembled an older portrait of Daimon smiled crookedly. “Your eyes aren’t the only thing you can’t trust in Hell. The Soulsword,” he motioned to Illyana, who had shed her armor but still held the blade, “merely cleaved us.” “A delectable treat it made of Mephisto’s son.” The demon whose face was currently a bull’s licked a soil smudge from its cold lips. “Because of it we are now three. Devil—“

“—Satan—“ spoke the red-haired one.

“—and Lucifer.” The nude prince spoke it like a chore. He held his knees atop a higher rock now. He had no discernable genitalia.

“But – but what happened? All the beings Daimon brought here...?” Nightcrawler’s theological curiosity was piqued, helping to carry Daredevil’s dead weight along with the Black Widow.

“What does it matter?” Lucifer looked away, letting Satan take over.



“I’m sure some of them got away, reformed. Hela, Belasco – they’re sly, but they’re nothing. Let them go. The rest are divided among us.”

The demon added, “Sweet power. Sweeeeet power.”

“I suggest you leave,” said Lucifer. “Before we change our mind.”

Stephen Strange stepped forward. His inner leader was free to speak with the Black Veil gone. “Change your mind about *what?*” He held the Devil-Slayer from stepping forward without looking.

“Letting you go,” Satan told him matter-of-factly. “It’s a one time offer.”

The demon rubbed its crotch with a sharp hoof, nearly drawing blood. “One time offer. I want to suck on your soul and call you brother. Be my valentine.”

“Father...?” The situation had brought the Gargoyle to silence before but this...*this* was an outrage. “You promised! My revenge, you promised it! We have the Sorcerer Supreme, the Prince of Atlantis...so many souls!”

“Oh, quiet,” said Lucifer.

Satan had already begun drawing a door in the air with his hooked little fingernail. “Really. You’re beginning to sound like another son I used to have.”

The Gargoyle grimaced. His father could be cruel. Regina gazed upon him silently with a hint of distant pity and loss. This was the life he’d earned: prince to a triumvirate in the realm of the damned for all time. Patsy looked at Daimon and found nothing in his eyes but a wish to leave. She shared her husband’s sentiments.

“I like souls,” the demon smiled. The Hulk felt bile in his throat at the sight and almost used both Namor and Nighthawk’s unconscious bodies to beat it even further away.

“You’re letting us go?” the Black Widow asked. “Just like that?”

The three devils looked upon them from varying heights of stone.

“Please, just go. We have a Hell to run.”

“Go home and lick your wounds. You don’t pose any threat to us now or ever. And next time you won’t get off so easy – *if* you’re foolish enough to return. But I suppose our destinies intertwine.”

“Let’s intertwine. I just can’t get you out of my mind. Play with me.”

A door large enough for one at a time was etched in Hell. Stephen cast a wary look upon it as the amulet on his chest opened to an eye.

“Is it safe?” asked the Devil-Slayer.

“Yes,” was the doctor’s diagnosis. “As safe as it was coming here.”

Doctor Strange was the first to use the door, which for him opened directly to his sanctuary. Daredevil and the Black Widow walked into Matt Murdock’s New York brownstone. Nightcrawler immediately went to the bed in his crisp Vatican quarters and prayed. Regina Garney stepped out in front of the crumbled heap that was once the house she and her son played, learned, and lived in. She wept. Some followed each other; some went places where they knew they’d be completely alone. Whoever left last shut and locked the door behind them.

It wasn’t much of victory, but they’d have to take it.

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## AFTERWARD

Yeah, an afterward. Four thousand word fanfiction issues have author’s notes or letters sections. Eight thousand, nine hundred and fifty-eight word chunks of narrative get an afterward. Man, that’s almost a seventh of an average-length novel! But if you’ve followed DEFENDERS this far you’re used to the wordage – and hopefully you can put up with a little bit more.

Russ thought it’d be a good idea to give a little background on my goals for ‘The Black Veil’, so how bout some’a that, huh?

The Defenders, especially under the pen of J. M. Demattis in the early 1980’s, have always had a certain link to Hell. It started with Daimon Hellstrom (Hellstorm, Son of Satan) and carried on to his father, as well as any number of Marvel analogues of the devil – Mephisto, Asmodeus, Satannish, Thog, and more. All have

appeared as lords of some sort of underworld or something close to the archetypal Prince of Lies and for a long time there was little continuity between them. Marvel's Hell was pretty darn complicated. With this arc, I wanted to simplify it. My solution was to slim down the number of devils walking around (yes, you can wave a permanent goodbye to Thog and the others killed by Daimon) to three – a being closer to the beautiful Morningstar with his eyes still watching the heaven he fell from (Lucifer), a devious, more traditional but still modern Satan, and the demonic soul-eating embodiment of unbridled sin, the Devil. With Blackheart dead and Daimon stripped of his title, the Gargoyle fits the role of the infernal son...

Whew. Yeah, so I wanted to make Hell a little simpler, a little more clear-cut. That's my solution. Or I should say, our solution. To go back further...

I started this series out three summers ago. If you want to go read the four issues, do so for comedy's sake, or at least to see (hopefully) how far we've come since. I think things improved with each issue after #4 and those steps turned into leaps once Russ Anderson came on as the man who sculpts my chunky ideas into fine shapes and has written the better parts of the past four issues both in quantity and quality. We may have taken a while to get things out, but Russ was always patient, always professional, and always on top of things. Most of all, he made me strive to do my best with every scene of his I received.

Russ is a modest guy, as most of the good ones are, and he's probably been thinking, or even saying aloud, "Will, stop. Stop stop stop. Wrap it up." Take a bow before I end it, Russ. We've garnered two Editor's Choices together and left our mark. I can't thank you enough for 'helping me out with the series' (as he so put it when he offered it to me a year and handful of months ago).

DEFENDERS was my first series for Marvel 2000, amassing a whopping (ha!) thirteen issues in about two and a half years. There are parts I'm immensely proud of and others I cringe at. Over all, I'm proud. Those thirteen issues can serve as a record of my growth as a writer and, being one of my few truly complete runs, is close to my heart.

Thank you, all who've written us with words encouraging and critical. Thanks especially to those of you who've stuck around all the way to the very, very end. I can only hope that one of you who truly has enjoyed the series thus far might pick it up. If not,

someday, if and when Russ isn't doing a million things at once (and doing them well...and on time), if and when I can keep a schedule, there's one more story we wanted to tell. It begins in Egypt with a floating jewel...

But that's an *if* and a *when*. As it is, I'm happy with what we've got.

**Will Short**

(wondering if he should write an afterward for the afterward...)

5:14 PM / February 27, 2003

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