

# DEFENDERS

Volume 2

#1 – 12

Written by Josh Reynolds



Howard the Duck



Aquarian



The Star of Capistan



Dr. Strange

This is Howard. He is a duck.

"Ahem."

Sorry. THE duck.

"Damn straight."

Howard has been tasked with defending the soft, luscious, tasty-

"You finished?"

Sorry, sorry. Howard is tasked with defending the underbelly of reality from the low-blows directed at it by myriad strange and frankly ludicrous threats. Also, lemurs.

"Lemurs?"

Lemurs. Can't trust them. Sticky little fingers. Like carnies.

"Carnies."

Carnies. Horrible people. Bad teeth.

"Should I-"

No. No. I'm fine.

"You sure?"

Quite.

"THEN GET ON WITH IT!"

Fine! No need to shout. Frazzin-razzamatassduck.

"What was that?"

Nothing. Howard is a mall-cop-

"No, I'm not-"

Can I finish? Can I finish please? Thank you. Howard is a mall-cop in the mall of Everything. He checks your bags at the door and follows you through Macy's. Even though you haven't stolen anything in months and it's just because you're of a certain heritage and frankly I'm offended by the implication that-

“Wrap it up.”

My mother is a Seminole, you know. I’m used to the white man’s racism.

“Nobody car-Seminole?”

Seminole-quartz. Rare gem.

“Hunh.”

‘S why I didn’t get good grades in mineral-school. Racism.

“I’m a duck, how do you think I feel?”

Feathery?

“Speciest.”

Damn straight.

Vol. 2, #1

February 2008

Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"JABBERWOCKY..."

Written by Josh Reynolds

Surrounded by the red glow, the mighty Defenders sank through the eternal chaos of non-linear time. Reality fluctuated sideways in a constant stream of unintelligible cosmic chatter, the ocean-thoughts of vast, universal entities-

“I hate narrators. Especially when they’re cursed rocks.” Howard muttered, clutching the crimson glow of the Star of Capistan to his chest. The gem seemed to growl. The young man standing beside him looked down in confusion, brown doe-eyes wide and innocent.

“What?”

“Nothing, kid.” Howard shook himself and looked up at the messiah known as Aquarian. “We’re back. Home sweet home.”

The red glow faded and the familiar wrong-joisted walls and puce carpeting of the Crooked House was revealed. Howard tossed the Star from one hand to the other and listened to it giggle in his head.

“Bev! We’re back!” he shouted.

“Did you get the milk?”

“No!”

“Did you kill Dracula?”

“No!”

“So basically, you did nothing from the shopping list.”

“Yes!” Howard said.

“Bad day?” Beverly Switzer, henna-haired, Jewish, and single (but on the market, LOVEline connection # 459) swept out of the kitchen, ducking under the off-angle door frame. She smiled and the Star grew warm in Howard’s hand. He looked down at it and grunted disgustedly.

“You could say that, yeah.” Howard allowed Beverly to hoist him up and peck him on the beak. “How was your day?”

“Finally figured out was making that noise in the garbage disposal.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Apparently, we don’t actually have a garbage disposal.”

“Do I wanna know?”

“Probably not. But for future reference, his name is Zuul. Hi, Wundarr.” Bev said, smiling at Aquarian.

“Great.” Howard looked up at Aquarian. The long-haired youth was staring at Bev like a pole-axed ox as usual. “Kid?”

“...”

“Kid!”

“Yes, Howard?”

“Don’t you need to meditate or something?”

"I-yes. Yes." Aquarian said. He swept past them, heading for his room. Bev watched him go, smiling, finger tapping against her lips.

"Heavenly butt."

"Bev-"

"What? I'm just looking."

"Yeah. Heard from the Doc?"

"Not a whimper."

"Figures." Howard shook his head and threw himself into a ratty looking recliner that occupied one end of the living room. He leaned back, webbed feet up, eyes closed. "What are we doing here, Bev?"

"Didn't the narrator-"

"I meant in the existential sense."

"Ah." Bev shook her head and sat on the arm of the recliner. "Free room and board."

"Least he could do."

"No. The least he could have done was to leave us homeless."

"Good point." Howard thumped the arm-rest with a fist. "The kid did good. But we wouldn't have been able to handle things if the Avengers hadn't been there-"

Oh I don't know about that, Howard. I'm sure you would have managed.

Howard and Bev looked up as the shimmering astral form of Doctor Stephen Strange coalesced somewhere in the vicinity of the ceiling.

"Doc." Howard said, his tone guarded.

Howard. How is Wundarr?

"Oh fine, fine. Just another one of us orphans."

I am working on that Howard. Rest assured. Both your world and Aquarian's-

"Are dust on the wind. Fleeting grains of the sands of time." Howard leaned forward, beak snapping angrily. "But you don't plan on admitting it until you don't need us anymore, right?"

Howard...while I am no stranger to a caustic attitude, it really never solves anything. If a ghost could look affronted, Strange did. Ask Namor. Ask any of my previous Defenders-

"Can't though, can we? Because we're here. Wherever here is...cosmic waiting room." Howard gestured at the house around him.

You can leave anytime, Howard. You have the means. The Star of Capistan-

"Might eat my soul every time I use it!"

Is that not worth the price of a meal at Sizzler?

"Ooh, Sizzler!" Bev clapped her hands. "Ducky, we should-"

"No!" Howard snapped, eyes never leaving Strange.

Howard, you are the perfect bearer for that ungodly stone. You have an innate affinity for magic, as I've said, but not nearly enough to get into trouble. And the strength of your will rivals that of the greatest psyches Earth has ever produced. Strange said, arms crossed, staring down at the fuming Duck. Mine among them.

Bev mouthed 'conceited' at Howard, hand raised to hide her mouth. Howard grunted. Strange's eyebrow went up as if the other one was weighted down with granite.

I saw that, Ms. Switzer.

"Avaunt foul shade!"

"Bev-" Howard closed his eyes and rubbed his head. "Look. I'm sorry, Doc. But the dynamic duo-"

"Trio." Bev said.

"Trio-" Howard corrected.

Quartet.

"Nobody asked you!" He shook the Star of Capistan quite rudely and looked up at Strange. "We need help."

Howard- Strange sighed. No.

"I should have brought Shatter-jerk home." Howard muttered. "You still haven't told me why!" he continued, shooting a glare at Strange.

Because...I'm not in charge, Howard. Strange said, smiling slightly. Well, I say smiling but it was more of a sneer. Well, I say sneer but-

Quiet. Strange said.

Douchebag says what?

What?

Ha!

“Ignore him.” Howard shook the gem idly. “Anyway, you mean I could've-”

Perhaps we should discuss this later, Howard. My mystic senses-

Douchebag senses.

Silence! Strange said. My senses reveal an aberration in the skein of reality, a disruption of the Seen by the Unseen, a-

“Problem?” Howard supplied.

Yes. Quite. In England. It looks like a job for the Defenders!

“But since they're not here, we'll handle it, right?” Howard groaned as he flipped himself out of his recliner. “We only just got back!”

I notice that I can still sense Dracula's presence-

“Going, going.” Howard stumped down the hall towards Aquarian's sanctum. “Kid! It's boogie-oogie time!”

In his room, Aquarian floated, cross-legged, a foot above his floor. Meditating.

Right. Cobblers, that is.

“Must you?” Aquarian said, a sigh escaping at the end. “I'm concentrating on something.”

Red-haired something, right? Perky ti-

“For a stone, you are quite irritating.”

For a messiah you have strong pecs.

“What?”

I thought we were sharing non-sequiters.

Howard thumped on the door. “Kid!”

“Coming Howard.” Aquarian unfolded with inhuman grace and passed through the molecules of the door as if it were the merest mist. Cool, hunh?

“Quiet.” Howard shook the stone in both hands. “And stop narrating!”

Somebody has to! Otherwise no one will know what’s going on! Especially you chumps...

“Chumps?”

How about twits?

“Aaargh!”

Howard had a fiery tem-

“StopitstopitstopIT!” Howard hurled the stone, bouncing it off of the wall.

Ow.

England swings like a pendulum doooo...

“What was that?” the man dressed as a mouse spun around, pistol wobbling in shaky fingers.

“What was what?” the man dressed as a haberdasher who might possibly, on the face of it, be mad, said nervously.

“I thought I heard something?”

“Something whiffling perhaps? Or-dare I even dream-burbling?” the woman dressed as either a rabbit, white or a Playboy bunny, English, clapped her hands and squealed in glee, nearly bursting out of her waistcoat. She hopped forward on one tiny foot, hands tight under her chin, ears bobbing in time to whatever internal scattershot rhythm moved her lithe form. Before her, the original copy of Lewis Carroll’s poem, Jabberwocky, rotated slowly beneath laser sensors, motion sensors, and weight sensors.

“Oh frabjous day! Finally, after years. Well, I say years but it’s more like weeks. Well, I say weeks but it’s more like days. Well, really, just today. But it has, I trust, been ever-so long a day.” the White Rabbit sang, gloved fingers wriggling over the rotating papers.

And somewhere else, somewhere dark and bright, something in a waistcoat set out through a dark, tulgey wood. It burbled. It whiffled.



It even chuffed.

To be continued...

Next Issue: What has the White Rabbit done? Oh noes! Her pert bosom shall be devoured most surely by-by-well, see for yourself in ‘...WILD AND WONKY’ in thirty days!

Oh yeah. Howard will be in it too. If you like that kind of thing.

I was born among the suppurating wounds of reality newly formed. My form was hammered into solidity by the thundering hooves of the stars themselves and I-

"Are a rock." Howard the duck, late of Cleveland, early of the mystic oasis known as the Crooked House, squawked beneath his breath, his grammar as terrible as his fashion sense. In his palm, the crimson gem known to the educated as the Star of Capistan, a gem of untold mystic-

"Like I said. A rock."

A magic rock.

"Still a rock."

Fine. Be that way. Where were we going again? Sarajevo?

"London. Or Aquarian does his little null-field trick again," Howard said, eyeing the gem fowly. 'Fowly', get it? Because he's a water-fowl-

"Who is it talking to?" Aquarian said. Howard looked up at the spandex-clad messiah and shrugged.

"Who knows? Who cares? Answer: Not me."

"Howard-" Aquarian began, then hesitated.

"Yeah, kid?"

"How long will Miss Switzer be staying with us?" Aquarian said in a slow voice. Howard looked up at him. He didn't speak for a moment, then,

"Long as she wants I guess."

"I hope she chooses to stay. For awhile, I mean," Aquarian continued. "It would be nice..."

"Yeah. Wouldn't it..." Howard said, not really listening. Instead, he watched reality float by the crimson tinted bubble they stood in, faintly glowing globules of time and space crawling across the surface and wobbling away. He examined his reflection in the stone's shiny surface, the face of a middle-aged duck, trapped in a world he never made. His feathers had gone from yellow to white in places. His clothes were frayed and cheap. Only his stogies were expensive-

"Stop narrating." Howard said.

Vol. 2, #2  
March 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"...WILD AND WONKY"

Written by Josh Reynolds

Magic is a funny thing. It exists in the oddest places, congealing and expanding through the hidden warren of tunnels and strata that burrow through the skin of reality. It's a cancer, really, when you come right down to it. Benign mostly. Sometimes though, sometimes it ain't.

This was one of those times. Hoo-boy was it one of those times.

The Jabberwock was a nightmare in a plaid waistcoat with burning eyes and great, grasping claws and it wuffled and burbled as it came galumphing through the halls. A tail like a bound bunch of steel wires snapped and popped, cutting paint from the walls and sending oxygen molecules running.

It was a nonsense beast, a Questing thing, made up of rhyme and chaos and the random, unfocused magic that coats certain ancient texts like the saliva of a particularly friendly dog. It had existed in its tulgey wood, a shadow on the mind, until the proper condiments of madness had been spread upon the reality closest to its gate.

The White Rabbit was its mustard sauce.

She reflected on this while she ran, her disjointed mind bouncing merrily down the bunny -trail of a back-lit ego that knew no literary foil. White-gloved hands slid across a glass display case as her lithe form vaulted over a collected folio of Ezra Pound's greatest anti-Semitic rants, provided by the Jewish Gentleman's Society of Stevenage.

She landed lightly, high-heels clacking on the floor. Behind her, the Jabberwock, wild and wonky, burbled and smashed Ezra Pound aside as if it were no more than words. A claw, wet with the blood of the unfortunate Dormouse and Extremely-Dead-If-Not-Mad Hatter, tore through the floor, tossing tiles willy-nilly.

"Eep! Eepeepeepeep!" The White Rabbit squeaked as she hopped aside and began to run again, bobtail shivering. "Oh fie, oh fee, whate'er shall become of meEep!" A tail barbed like a fishhook darted over her head and came down in front of her, sending her flying. She hit the ground hard and rolled, dust covering her. Her eyes narrowed as sanity, what there was of it, gathered together its tattered dignity and reasserted itself.

"You're just lucky I left my vorpal sword at home, sirrah!"

The Jabberwock chuffed, lamp-like eyes swiveling and glaring about. It flexed its talons and flapped bat-like wings. It smelt something...

The White Rabbit heaved herself up and brushed dust off of her blue suit-coat, glaring back at the creature she had summoned. Intentionally, of course. Accident was happenstance for proles.

Granted the creature was harder to control than her source had promised. Impossible, in fact. Maybe it had something do with the fact the disc bearing Lewis Carroll's features was not a chip from his headstone, but in fact, upon further and strenuous examination, plastic. She frowned and tossed the disc away. Glass shattered and she blanched.

"Whoops."

The Jabberwock swung its head back towards her, frog mouth sighing in anticipation. It stepped towards her.

"Now, now, now, let us not be hasty, sir. Let us not be rude. Was it not this winsome hand which freed thee? Was it not this face which was your first sight upon existence?" The White Rabbit said, holding her hands out. "Fie, sir! Fie! This is unseemly-"

A red glow flared to life suddenly, brilliantly, drowning out the rest of her words in a crash of reality. The White Rabbit gaped. The Jabberwock grimbled. Howard glared up at the beast, a wreath of smoke crowning his head.

"Great."

Elsewhere.

There was a pond. And in that pond was a frog. And that frog had once been a man, though this was ages ago and he only dimly recalled it. Instead, he contented himself with froggish activities such as extreme sitting, lily-pad edition, and fly-eating.

In truth, he was big for a frog. And growing bigger, though in incremental stages. An inch here, an ounce there. A slow, methodical process of re-evolution.

The man with the strawberry-colored eyes watched from his seat on a park bench near the pond. The man was everywhere and nowhere, a spec of frozen time that refused to move on.

Doctor Stephen Strange watched the man for a time and then, sighing, sat beside him on the bench.

"This is foolish."

"Only in context," the man with the strawberry-colored eyes replied. "Moment to moment, my actions make perfect sense. For instance, the killing of that frog will result in my death. Or my victory."

“You have no idea which it is though, do you?” Strange asked, genuinely curious.

“No...omniscience is not with me at the moment.”

“But?”

“But what?” The man looked at Strange, smiling benignly. Strange frowned.

“But you are going to do it regardless.”

“Of course not. What kind of man do you take me for?”

“I don’t know, honestly,” Strange said, leaning forward, chin resting on his hands. “I do know that you have been manipulating certain...minor events on this plane of reality for a while now.”

“Minor events?”

“Forgive me-”

“No. You’re right. Little things. That’s all I can see,” the man said. “I’m a positive bear for small things. It’s part of the prophecy, you see.”

“What prophecy?” Strange raised an eyebrow.

“Why...the one I made.” The man with the strawberry eyes smiled, ruby teeth flashing.

Swinging London.

“You sir, are a duck,” the White Rabbit said, nose twitching. Howard looked her up and down.

“And you, madam, are a trollop.”

Ooh! Zing!

“Shaddup.” Howard shook the Star idly and looked around. He looked the Jabberwock up and down. “Well, at least it ain’t vampires.”

The Jabberwock hissed and lunged. Howard snapped his fingers. Aquarian swept a hand up and summoned a null-field into being, shielding them, the White Rabbit included, from the blow.

“Kid...cut its head off,” Howard said, pointing at the beast. Aquarian blinked.

“Howard, I-”

“C’mon, kid. I wanna go home. I wanna see Bev. I wanna eat a TV dinner and watch crappy public access programming like a good American,” Howard said. Aquarian shook his head.

“I can’t. This being is alive, not like the vampires. I can’t simply kill it-”

“What?”

“I can’t!”

“Great. Perfect.”

“Besides which, only a blade vorpal and true can slay the Jabberwock,” the White Rabbit said, hands behind her back, looking up into the rage-contorted features of the beast she had summoned. “That’s why I summoned it, after all.”

“And you were going to do what with it exactly?” Howard said. The White Rabbit blinked.

"I don't believe I considered that. As such. Therein."

"You didn't-"

"It's a Jabberwock! Who doesn't want a Jabberwock?" The White Rabbit looked panicky. Howard bit his cigar in half.

"Stop saying Jabberwock!"

Jabberwock! Jabberwock! Jabberwock!

"I. Said. Stop. NARRATING!" Howard squawked. He hurled the Star of Capistan with all of his might. The stone sheared through Aquarian's null-field as if it weren't there and flew straight down the gullet of the snarling Jabberwock. The creature stumbled back, clawing at its serpentine neck, eyes bulging comically.

The trio looked at one another. Aquarian opened his mouth. Closed it. Howard covered his face with his hands, sighing. The White Rabbit watched the demon-entity stumble backwards, forwards, and side to side as it tried to extricate the mystic stone from its throat.

And then, with a strangled whimper, it died. As did the twelve exhibits beneath its flailing form, which included Hemingway-scribbled bar napkins and a volleyball signed by Helen Keller.

“A prophecy,” Strange said flatly. The strawberry eyed man shrugged and smiled sadly. In the pond, the frog croaked happily.

“I have my moments.”

“A prophecy.”

“What can I say?”

“This is idiocy,” Strange said, shaking his head. “The stone-”

“Is the heart of things, yes,” the strawberry-eyed man said. He smiled at Strange’s glare. “No pun intended.”

“I doubt that.”

“We used to be such friends-”

“You possessed me!” Strange shouted, eyes narrowed. The man shook his head.

“The stone possessed you, not me. But that’s why I want it back. To keep the world safe-”

“To reiterate-I doubt that,” Strange said, settling back, calm again. “What’s the prophecy?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s already begun.” The man spread his hands and smiled sadly. “You know better than most that once these kind of things have begun, they can’t be stopped.”

“I-” Strange rubbed his face and looked at the frog. “Such a small thing. They all are. Even the youth-”

“Ah. The boy. Yes.”

Strange turned. “He’s the one, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Howard will not give him the stone,” Strange said. “That’s why I put it into his care.”

“Ah yes. The duck.” The strawberry-eyed man blinked. “The duck. The rabbit. The frog. The cow. And what was it...ah, yes, the-”

“This won’t happen. I won’t let it,” Strange said, rising to his feet. His fingers curled into crooked shapes. The strawberry-eyed man didn’t look at him. He looked at the frog.

“Such small things,” he said. Strange lowered his hands.

“The small things are often the greatest,” Strange said. The two-men watched the frog for another hour. Then, going in separate directions, they left the park.

On his lily-pad, the frog snapped a fly out of the air. Only it wasn’t a fly.

It was a sparrow.

And the frog wasn't a frog. Not really. Not anymore.

The White Rabbit watched the volleyball roll past and turned to the others. "Well, that was a lark, wot?"

"How did the stone pop your shield, kid?" Howard said, ignoring her and looking at Aquarian. Aquarian shook his head.

"I-I don't know. Nothing has ever-"

The Jabberwock sat up, suddenly, red light streaming from its open mouth, its eyes, its bat-like nostrils. Aquarian reacted instinctively, his null-field spearing out, flattening, slicing through the serpentine neck easily. He stared at his hands, appalled.

The creature's body fell backwards, but the Jabberwock's head remained floating, dripping red light and black blood. Howard looked up.

"Cut that out."

Can I keep it? Please?

"No." Howard held out a hand and the Star of Capistan dropped glumly into it, exiting the stump of the Jabberwock's head with a plop! The discarded head fell and Howard gingerly wiped the stone clean with the edge of Aquarian's sleeve. The youth grimaced.

"Great job, kid. Wish you'd done that in the first place."

"Howard, I-"

"Fie, my foemen-foeduck-whatever, do we engage in pithy debate or sweaty fisticuffs?" the White Rabbit said, putting up her tiny fists. Howard stared at her with a gimlet eye.

"What?"

"Do we fight, sir?"

"Why would I want to fight you?"

"Because-because-I am a villainess! An arch-villainess!" the White Rabbit protested. Howard shrugged.

"Lady, I only handle the mystic crap. You're just a broad in tights."

"But-but-but-"



“Howard. Sirens,” Aquarian said. “We must go.”

“Yeah.” Howard held up the Star of Capistan. “Home again, home again, jiggety-jig.”

The red glow surrounded Howard and Aquarian and before the astonished eyes of the White Rabbit they began to fade. She could hear the sound of sirens now and a thrill of panic filled her.

“No! Wait! I’m-” she began, leaping towards them. Ruby light flashed. The world twisted. Then, heat. Intense heat. And finally, a blessed coolness.

The White Rabbit sat up out of the pond, spitting water from her mouth. Howard lay across her lap, blinking in shock. “What-”

“So,” something grumbled. A shadow fell across woman and duck. They looked up. And up. Into the bloated, amphibious, evil features of the creature looming over them. “So!”

“Oh, crap,” Howard said.

“Yes! Yes, ‘crap’ indeed, duck! For I have returned! Let the world tremble at the tread of...GARKO, THE MAN-FROG!”

To be continued...

Next Issue: Man. I got no idea what’s going on here. Just go with it. There’ll be some stuff about Bev next time. And the Crooked House. Also, lots of frogs. LOTS. Be here in thirty for ‘A REIGN OF TOADS...’

"Let the world tremble at the tread of...GARKO, THE MAN-FROG!"

Yeah. That's a good spot to pick back up.

Howard the Duck, canard extraordinaire, stared up into the slavering, fang-filled maw of the titanic frog-thing looming over he and the buxom, powder-puff sporting criminal-queen known as the White Rabbit.

"What kind of frog has fangs?" Howard said, rising to his webbed feet and brushing water from his sports-coat.

"Garko has fangs, duck! The better to chew you with!" Garko bellowed, reaching long fingers towards the foul-mouthed fowl. Howard leapt back, fists raised.

"Come on then!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen, cease!" the White Rabbit crowed, standing up in the thigh-deep waters of the pond. She held her hands up, and her bedraggled ears dangled on either side of her head.

"Who-" Garko began, rising up over the criminatrix. She glared up at him, eyes narrowed.

"I, sirrah, am the most franjabulous White Rabbit, Empress of the Underworld and Queen of Crime! And I demand that you state your purpose in this unseemly, unprovoked-"

"Unprovoked? UNPROVOKED?" Garko fairly shrieked. He brought warty fists down into the pond, throwing up a mini-tsunami that washed woman and duck up onto the shore, scattering pigeons in their hundreds. Garko pointed a talon at Howard.

"HE TURNED ME INTO A FROG!"

"You're already a frog!" Howard snapped. Garko blinked.

"A smaller frog then!"

"Yeah? But you're back, so obviously it wasn't permanent!"

"Permanent? I'll give you permanent!" Garko licked his lips-wait, do frogs have lips? Maw, then-licked his maw and gave a tremendous croak. As the echo faded, it was answered by a chorus of smaller croaks. In seconds, a veritable deluge of frogs were popping out of the grass, the mud and the pond, bulbous eyes alight with uncommon ferocity. Garko laughed and hopped up and down, scattering water and frogs.

"Kill them, my lovelies! Kill them for your king! Kill them for GARKO!"

Vol. 2, #3  
May 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

## "A REIGN OF TOADS"

Written by Josh Reynolds

“Where are we?” Aquarian whispered to himself as he floated in abstract space. It was a white void rent through with startling wounds of suppurating color that flashed and mewled distressingly. Immense bramble-like growths of alien coral curled out of nowhere and grew back in on itself like floating free-form sculpture.

Oh, and we’re a ‘we’, now?

“I never denied your sentience,” Aquarian said quietly as he drifted towards the gleaming, crimson light of the Star of Capistan, the greatest eldritch artifact the world has ever-

“Be silent.” Aquarian gestured, and a null-field snagged the stone and drew it towards him, though he did not touch it. “What happened?”

...

“Stone...”

Let me just say, it wasn’t my fault. It was hers.

“That strange woman who-”

Interrupted a delicate procedure? Yes. Her. Aquarian scratched his head with simian-

“Stop narrating, please.”

Please? Howard never says-

“Howard is full of anger. I am not.”

So wrath’s not your sin, hunh? What about lu-

“Quiet. Please,” Aquarian said, his voice soft, but his eyes hard. “Where are we?”

You’re asking me? I’m just a rock. But if I had to hazard a guess, given the terrain, I’d say we’re somewhere south and an hour to the left of the Dark Dimension.

"And Howard?"

Heh.

Aquarian frowned. "What do you know?"

Not a thing. Oh, and by the by...duck.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" Aquarian didn't even flinch as something smashed into his null-field and rebounded. He turned, his eyes widening slightly as the gray tide of Mindless Ones bounded towards him through the aether.

"Oh my," he said, floating backwards as the blocky, featureless shapes crashed into him, knocking him head over heels, despite his field. "What are they?"

See above.

"Stop narrating and tell me! Are they alive?"

Close enough but not quite. They don't feel pain, if that's what you're asking...

"It wasn't," Aquarian said, gesturing sharply. His field expanded, shoving the Mindless Ones back. The creatures pushed against his field ceaselessly, hammering away with their massive fists or blasting strange energies from their single cyclopean eye slit.

"No pain?"

No pain. No brain, no pain, no gain. That was a short haiku.

"No, no it wasn't." Aquarian stood, hands outstretched, fingers curled. A Mindless One separated into seven parts, sliced into bloodless chunks by Aquarian's null-field. Another was scooped up and hurled away like a baseball. But still, they came on, crashing into his field, pressing against it, somehow, amazingly, inexorably, pushing him backwards.

"Their strength-"

Mindless, yes. I believe I mentioned that. I can get us out of here you know...all you have to do is pick me up.

"No." Aquarian shook his head.

Then I guess we get to test the limits of that fancy field of yours, hunh?

The Crooked House.

Beverly Switzer watched infinity coruscate, wondering how it got so old, so fast. She blew a strand of hair out of her face and closed the door. Nothing for it, she was bored. Bored, bored, bored.

I've always found the gentle rhythms of infinity to be soothing, myself.

"Doc?" Bev turned, eyebrow arching. The astral image of Doctor Strange hovered in the center of the room, hand clasped behind his back. He smiled politely.

Miss Switzer. I just stopped by to check-

"Thoughtful as always, Doc. Tell me something, when do I get to go home?"

Howard could return you to Earth anytime, Miss Switzer-

"Well that's a fib." Bev ran her fingers through her hair and grinned. "Try again."

Hardly a fib...I gave Howard the Star to facilitate transportation between this safe-house and-

"Yeah, about that...we got rats. Or demons. Or demon rats. I whacked something with a broom anyway..." Bev said, gesturing idly. "Plus, hey, cursed gemstone is not my ideal way to fly. Not Howard's either." She peered up at Strange. "Me and Ducky figure it's a test, right?"

I am not in the habit of testing people randomly, Miss Switzer. Strange's mouth quirked in something that could have been a smile. Bev clapped her hands.

"Key word is 'random', Monty."

I don't get the reference.

"Neither do I," Bev said, shrugging. "I'm tuned in to frequencies I didn't even know existed before I got here. Think I'm a latent psychic?"

Most humans are. Strange waved his hand. Why do you think it's a test?

"Same old be-bop, Doc...life's a test and then you graduate, right?" Bev flopped down into Howard's recliner and sighed. "Ducky did some research on the Star and found out-"

That it had possessed me.

Bev looked up at Strange and her smile slid away like water. "Yeah. That it possesses anyone who uses it. Except him...so far," she said softly. "Since we're cynical around here, we're just wondering when and why, in that order."

Miss Switzer, I- Strange fell silent, his eyes melancholy. Then, Never and because Howard is the only one who can. Howard does not come from this reality and thus has a certain amount of

immunity to the Star's influence. In his hands it goes from a malevolent weapon to a relatively benign tool...but-

“But?”

“But Howard doesn't have possession of it at the moment.”

Bev and Strange turned as the door to the Crooked House closed softly. The man with the strawberry-colored eyes smiled his strawberry smile at Bev and clasped his hands beneath his chin. “But you didn't know that, did you Stephen?”

“Who are you, Red?” Bev stayed seated, her left hand, the one not visible from the door, drifted down towards the pistol holstered under the recliner.

“I'm the Strawberry Man. Pip-pip!” He gestured and faint tendrils of crimson energy uncoiled from his fingers and seized Beverly by her arms, legs and throat. “And you're my cherry in the pie, Beverly Switzer!”

No! Strange said, magic crackling around his weaving fingers as he swooped between them. Begone! I have no wish to confront you-

“Nor I you, brother-father-blood, but these things must be done and done oh-so swiftly!” The Strawberry Man thrust his free hand towards Strange, releasing a burst of crimson light that shattered Strange's astral form like glass. “So there...”

Elsewhere, Stephen Strange's eyes shot open and he gasped, sucking air into his lungs. Running his hands through his hair, he stood on shaky legs. Wong stood nearby, ready to steady him if he required aid.

“Master?”

“It's started, Wong.” Strange summoned his crimson cloak with a crook of his finger. “I've tried to stave it off, but I should have known better. Now I have no choice...the Defenders must be destroyed!”

<

Cleveland. A park. And a pond.

“Fie, I say fie! Away from me you cretinous amphibians!” the White Rabbit yelped, lashing out with a stiletto heel to impale a frog that was trying to gum her ankles. “I have no part in this! Cease your attempts at mastication!”

“She's right. I have no idea who she is, Garko!” Howard squawked as he avoided a hurtling bullfrog. “Hell, I barely know who you are!”

“Garko, Garko, GARKO! I am Garko the Man-Frog! King of all amphibians! You may have stopped me before-” the giant frog-man roared.

“You didn’t put up much of a fight.” Howard said, kicking another frog away. His mind was whirling, confused. Aquarian was missing. So was the Star. And apparently Garko was back. Bad to worse. His life was par for course.

“DIE DUCK!” Garko lunged out of the pond in one great hop, clawing for Howard.

“No.” Howard ducked under the sweeping talons and rammed his head into Garko’s gut, sending him sprawling back into the water. The Man-Frog backhanded him and sent him flying away.

Howard hit the ground and bounced up, slamming against the side of a car that had pulled up. The duck shook his head and looked up at a pair of legs. Close by, sirens howled.

“You!” a voice said.

“Tompkins?” Howard said, shaking his head. “Is that you?”

“Howard?” A strong hand hauled Howard to his feet. The police officer was a tall man, with sandy, thinning hair and the beginning of a belly. He was dressed in civilian clothes and clutched a Glock in one hand. “Jesus, I haven’t seen you in years. Since that thing...with the cow...” Tompkins trailed off.

“It was a vampire.”

“Yeah...”

“It was!”

“Should’ve figured you’d be here, though, considering your history-” Tompkins waved several uniformed men forward. “Cordon off the park until the Green-Meanies get here!”

“Tompkins, I ain’t got time to chat, there’s a-”

“Giant frog running rampant over the park? Yeah, we got the call.” Tompkins checked his weapon and waved a hand at the police officers running to and fro around them. “And we’ve already alerted the Vault. Hopefully they’ll send their animal-control boys out here-”

“Better hope they get here soon Tompkins...look!” Howard pointed as a tide of toads hopped forward, murder in every croak!

To be continued...

Next Issue: Garko and his army of amphibians take Cleveland! The White Rabbit shows off her vocabulary! Howard and Tompkins, together again for the last time? Beverly vs. the Strawberry

Man! Aquarian vs. the Mindless Ones! And Doctor Strange vs....the Turnip? Be here in thirty for  
'...MAKES A HORRIBLE MESS'!



Doctor Stephen Strange hovered over the city of Cleveland, his crimson Cloak of Levitation snapping around his slim form like the pinions of some great hawk. One hand was extended away from his body, a soft glow surrounding the spread fingers. He spoke, without speaking, his mind reaching out across the vast distances. Searching for something in particular.

A mind. Or the ghost of a mind. An echo of a fading thought, its final screams imprinted upon the city's aether like a thumbprint in clay.

An enemy of everything that was human. Dead and gone and rightly so. And now he was going to bring it back. Strange swallowed thickly, a flash of pain dancing across the upper reaches of his conscious mind, the lingering after-effects of his encounter with the Strawberry Man.

There were many types of evil in the cosmos. Strange knew this, because he had faced most of them. Foul evils, large evils, infernal, alien, and other. And then there was the evil of the Strawberry Man, which was just a small evil, the equivalent of a cosmic pick-pocket. The world would continue much as it always had, should the creature be victorious. But it would be just a little bit worse than it was now, and it would grow even more so as the years progressed. A spiritual cancer that grew and grew as it devoured its host slowly. No one would notice, their eyes elsewhere. And once inside, once past the threshold, it would be impossible to excise.

Thus, preventative surgery was called for. No matter how much it might sicken him. No matter how many new nightmares he would gain in the doing of this thing.

To save reality, the Defenders must die.

Do you hear me, Phelch of the Turnipae? Strange whispered into the void.

I hear, a rasping voice echoed weakly in Strange's head. After so many years, I hear...again.

I can give you life, as well. A body, Strange thought, frowning in disgust, both at the mind he was touching, and his own actions. If you agree to my terms...

Yes! Anything! Name your price! Anything to be free again, to roam the meat-world, my mighty vegetable brain free to-

Silence beast! Strange thundered. Simply listen...

Vol. 2, #4  
July 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"...MAKES A HORRIBLE MESS! "

Written by Josh Reynolds

Cleveland. A public park. Frogs everywhere.

I mean, everywhere. Frogs here, frogs there, frogs in your underwear.

“Tompkins! I need a gun!” Howard squawked as he punched a lunging frog out of the air. The big detective looked down at the duck and grimaced. He had aged since Howard had last seen him. Badly. Overweight, running out of hair and wearing a tie that looked like Salvador Dali had thrown up on it, he was the picture of the seedy detective from every noir film, ever. A low rent Columbo or Dennis Franz with a makeover.

Still, he had his standards. Lines he wouldn't cross.

“No!” he said, forcefully.

“Tompkins-”

“No! Hell no! No guns, no knives, not even a spitball! Get out of here before I run you in!” Tompkins gestured towards the hastily set-up police barricade. “You and your playboy bunny.”

“Playboy bunny? I, sirrah, am-” the White Rabbit began, finger in the air, chest inflated in indignation.

“Nobody cares,” Howard snapped, fists clenched. “I-”

“DUUUUUCK! FACE ME, DUCK!” a croaking voice bellowed. Howard whirled as Garko bounded towards them, scattering hapless police officers like tadpoles, his crimson eyes bright with a berserk fury. “FACE GARKO!”

“Crap,” Howard said, diving under Garko's looping arms. “Crap, crap, crap.”

“The duck is the merest of feathered poultry-oons,” the White Rabbit said, laughing. She spun on one heel and drove her other tiny foot into Garko's belly, driving the air from his lungs. “Why not face a true opponent, my fine amphibious friend?”

“Who-” Garko wheezed, clutching at his stomach. The White Rabbit huffed in annoyance.

“Fiddle-dee-DEE, my good Sir Toad-”

“Frog-”

“Whatever,” the White Rabbit crouched into a fighting stance learned from intensive hours in front of the television, her fists raised. “I have told you my name, surely you must know my face, have you not heard of Her Royal Majesty, Queen of Crime Itself and Duchess of Murder?”

“I’ve been a frog! Forgive me for not checking the tabloids, you inauspicious hussy!” Garko protested, rising ponderously to his feet. “And in any event, my quarrel is not with you-”

“Then perchance an alliance?” the White Rabbit grinned wickedly and danced in an excited circle. “For that most unseemly foul has ruined my own plots and plans and deeds most dastardly!”

Garko blinked. “What?”

“A team-up, sirrah! In the Mighty Marvel Manner!”

“What?”

“An concurrence of pathways, a melding of digressions, a-” the White Rabbit said, spinning her arms in circles. Garko swatted her to the ground and held her in place with a mighty paw.

“I understand the concept, witch. I merely have trouble understanding what you think you could possibly offer me when society itself has rejected me and been, in its turn, rejected by me...”

“You know, Garko, guys like you really annoy me on a deep and personal level.”

Garko whirled, his jaw smacking right into Howard’s fist and staggered back, pawing at his face. Howard bounced towards him, readying another blow.

“You got a grudge against society so you turn yourself into a giant frog, or pick up a gun or build a damn tank and go careening into other people’s lives like a wrecking ball and for what?”

“VENGEANCE!”

“Nah, that don’t wash,” Howard said, popping a feathered fist into Garko’s throat. The frog gagged. “See, ‘vengeance’ implies you’re going after somebody who done you wrong, but you, Garko, and guys like you? You go after everybody and anybody. That’s the definition of a bully, and me, I hate bullies!”

“You-” Garko made a feeble lunge. Howard dodged and kicked him in the knee. Garko fell to the ground and snarled. Then, abruptly, screamed as several dozen tasers buzzed at once and he was lit up like a Christmas tree in Santa’s sweatshop. With a sizzling groan he collapsed onto his face and lay still.

“Told you we had it handled, duck,” Tompkins said, gesturing with his taser.

“Careful with that thing, Tompkins,” Howard said. Tompkins shook his head.

“Don’t worry, duck. Much as I’d like to kentucky-fry you, frogs-legs are the only things on the menu today.” Tompkins gestured. “Oh, and her. According to the background check, she’s wanted in six states and four countries-”

“I was framed!” the White Rabbit shrieked, getting to her feet. “It was the frog!”

“I need her, Tompkins.” Howard stepped between the gathering crowd of cops and the White Rabbit. “Somehow, she’s why I wound up in Cleveland instead of-”

“You know what duck? I can’t really bring myself to care about whatever weird shit you’re involved in. You’re nothing but trouble and if you want to press me, I’ll run you in...just like last time!” Tompkins shouted, pointing. “Now step aside!”

“Nope.” Howard grabbed the White Rabbit by the wrist and began to run. “Nice to see you again, Tompkins, have fun!”

Are we having fun yet? Because I know I am.

Aquarian gritted his pearly teeth and reinforced his null-field as the endless blows of the-

“I can’t concentrate with you blathering!” the man-god hissed. But I don’t blather. Stones can’t, you see, and I am most definitely a stone-

“Stop it!” Aquarian said, a trifle desperately. The Mindless Ones continued to smash at his shield. A steadily increasing pressure. He had never felt anything like it in his short life. They did not stop or falter.

He would have to try something different. Something desperate-

“I am not desperate. Merely shocked,” Aquarian said. “Get out of my head, stone.”

But it’s so cozy in here. Besides which, might I mention, all you have to do is pick me up and we could be out of here, dude. I’m hanging on by my thumbs here, man. Just give me something, anything, a baby opening, and I’ll whisk us away-

“I think not. I simply need some breathing room,” Aquarian said. “I believe I have come up with an adequate solution.”

He raised his hands, fingers curled. His null-field began to contract in on itself, drawing closer to him and extending down into the alien rock beneath his feet. He had never tried the trick before, but there was a first time for everything. His field contracted to within an inch of his skin and had sunk down several feet when he abruptly caused the portion beneath the ground to flare like a flower tasting rain.

The ground shuddered as the null-field caused it to crack and buckle. The alien asteroid he was standing on began to rip itself apart at the seams. The Mindless Ones stumbled and fell as the ground gave way beneath them and then, abruptly it was gone and Aquarian floated in space, held aloft by his null-field.

“See? A simple solution,” he said.

“Indeed. One wonders why you didn’t think of it sooner,” a voice purred. Aquarian turned, but not quickly enough as a crimson light smashed into him, sending him hurtling towards the shimmering plains far below!

His null-field protected him from the worst of the blow and the ensuing landing, but even so he had certainly felt it. Aquarian staggered to his feet, looking up in wonder. When had it last been that he’d felt a blow? Years?

A shape made of soot and fire and draped in ragged purple walked down from the sky, step by step, eyes blazing. Aquarian felt his stomach clench as he felt a surge of fear at the sight of his attacker. Doctor Strange had mentioned him several times.

“I wondered what had stirred up the Mindless Ones,” the Dread Dormammu said. “I am less than impressed.”

See? See? I told him he’d need my help!

The Crooked House, leaning between the butterfly seconds.

“Ahhhh,” the Strawberry Man said, licking his ruby lips with a purple tongue. “Can you taste that? It tastes like destiny.”

“Movie buff, hunh?” Beverly Switzer said, trying to hide her trembling. He had released her from the spell he had used to bind her moments ago. The Strawberry Man looked at her, as if seeing her for the first time.

“Not at all, maybe so,” he said in his soft, lilting voice. “Sorry, I’m elsewhere at the moment. Doing exciting things.”

“Must be fascinating,” Bev said.

“Not really, no. More tedious than anything.” The Strawberry Man was thin, with a potbelly and red all over. Hair, lips, teeth, nails all of it shades of strawberry red. He was dressed in a suit and tie, with ruby rings on his fingers and a ruby tie pin in his tie. “It’s a pleasure to meet you by the by the by.”

“Thank you?”

“Welcome, I’m sure. I apologize for my entrance, but I detest ghosts,” he said.

“That was my doctor.”

“Your doctor is a ghost?”

“Ghost with the most, coast to coast,” Bev said sidling away from the Strawberry Man. He smelled like ripe fruit, sweet and slightly sickening. She had to get to the recliner and Howard’s gun. “Why’d you chase him off? Planning to do horrible things to me?”

“Perish the little children, ginger-nut. I need you singing sweetly and shaking that thang,” the Strawberry Man said. “Plans can’t span without you, baby-baby. You hear me?”

“Like a record on a player, man,” Bev said, sitting down in the recliner carefully. Carefully now. “Who are you again?”

“We covered that already, try and keep up. If you can’t keep up, read the previous issue,” the Strawberry Man said. He stopped and stared into space for a moment. Bev took the opportunity to reach under the recliner and grope for Howard’s pistol. It was a special pistol, one he’d scavenged from somewhere unpleasant. Sometimes, at night, it breathed.

Bev’s skin crawled as she curled her fingers around the grip. Then she was swinging it up, barrel aimed at the Strawberry Man’s face.

“Where’d you get that, kit-kat?” he said brightly.

Bev pulled the trigger.

We’re back in Cleveland. Try and keep up. Have a nosh, enjoy yourself. Because Howard certainly isn’t.

“Tompkins! You can’t do this!” Howard squawked, rattling the bars on his cell. “At least put me in solitary! Waaugh!”

“Oh, do be quiet duck.” The White Rabbit paced the length of the holding cell, hands behind her back, ears drooping. “I must cogitate a method of egress from this foul institution!”

“You know, I’m only in here because of you!” Howard whirled, pointing. “If we wind up in the Vault-”

“I look forward to devouring you in the exercise yard, duck,” Garko shouted from the next cell. The giant frog squatted in the middle of the cell, head cocked. “Or sooner...”

“Ribbit, ribbit swamp-lips!”

“I’ll swallow you, feathers and all!”

“Gentlemen, please! We must pool our resources or be forever locked in chains of iron!” the White Rabbit said, raising her hands. “We must align ourselves...”

“Oh no, I’m already on a team and one is more than enough. I-” Howard stopped. “Does anyone smell that?”

“Smell what?” the White Rabbit sniffed the air.

“It smells like-”

“Blood! Blood for the One!” the vampire snarled, cutting a slice through a police officer’s body armor and sending the man spinning away over desks and chairs. A dozen other undead monsters followed suit, attacking policemen with feral fury.

They had attacked at nightfall. Thirteen unholy warriors, sent by the disciples of Dracula Himself, newly risen, to free a fourteenth by the command of Dracula. For such was the desire of him who ruled the undead, that all his servants answer his call to war.

Even...the oddest among them.

The leader of the creatures, Ovid by name, slapped aside another cop and stalked down the hall, through the bullpen and towards the evidence room. He could hear her calling to him, whispering for help.

“Be calm, mistress, the children of Varnae come to free you from whatever hellish torment these blood-bags have-”

BOOM.

BOOM.

Ovid spun as the shotgun belched and tore twin holes in his chest. Tompkins glared at him.

“I swear to God-”

“Please don’t,” Ovid snarled, lunging, slapping the weapon out of Tompkins’ hand and shoving him backwards into the wall, talons pressed against his throat. “Where is she?”

“Who? The Rabbit?”

“No. Her. The servant of my God.” Ovid’s claws cut thin furrows in Tompkins’ flesh. “Where is the one you have kept pinned between life and death all of these years?”

“You don’t mean-” Tompkins went pale. “No! God, no!”

“Ah...I can read your surface thoughts, mortal. She is there,” Ovid said, turning his red eyes fixing on the evidence room door. “You are of no more use, then.” With a casual swipe, the vampire tore Tompkins’ throat out in a welter of blood. Tompkins slid down the wall, gurgling, clutching at himself, dying. Ovid turned away contemptuously and yanked open the evidence room door, pulling it off its hinges.

His eyes immediately found the wooden box wedged between shelves at the back of the room and he hissed in anticipation, claws flexing. There. There!

With a single smooth movement he tore the box top off and stared down at the form within. It was...larger than he had expected. More...he blinked. Shrugged. One did not argue with the edicts of Dracula. One merely followed them.

With a grunt, he pulled the stake loose from its place and an undead heart, long dormant, began to beat again...

To be continued...

Next Issue: All hell breaks loose, literally! Featuring the return of a villain nobody asked for! The Defenders (kinda) versus the legions of Dracula (again)! Aquarian, alone in the Dark Dimension (but not quite), except for a certain mineralogical individual! Be here in thirty for 'THE FUTURE SUCKS...'



Cleveland.

The stake slid free of the withered muscle and with a slimy sputter, it began to pulse. Thump. Thump.

For forever, there had been the darkness. Blessed, barn-tight darkness. And now, the harsh slaughter-light pulled her back, back to a world she had never made. Never asked to be a part of.

She rose from her box, from the soft caress of the hay, bones crawling with new muscle, new hide, her eyes shining with hate. Hate for all that lived and especially that which did not.

Ovid, vampire-myrmidon of the King of the Undead, Magister of the Varnaic Canticle, stared, crimson eyes wide as he took in the thing he had been sent to free. He stepped back, jaw sagging. "You're a-"

"MOO," the Hellcow said. A chill hoof lashed out and Ovid flew backwards, pale flesh marked with the imprint. Ovid hit the wall and a set of evidence shelving collapsed atop him. He clawed free. The cow in the black cloak stalked forward on dull hooves, fangs bared. It hissed. Ovid raised his bloody hands in supplication.

"Milady, please! I meant no-"

"MOOO!"

Horns flashed in the light of the guttering ceiling bulb. Ovid screamed as he was lifted, forced back, impaled. He grasped the horn, claws scrabbling. This was impossible! It couldn't be happening! Why was this-

He hit the wall and his black heart exploded, shredded by the horn and the impact of the charge. The dark flower of vampire-kind was hurled aside, crumbling to dust, as the Hellcow thundered from the narrow confines of the evidence room, searching for her enemy. The Caped Man. He was here. She could smell his stink. Cape flowing, she became a sour-milk scented mist and spread, searching, searching.

She would find him. Destroy him. Destroy all he held dear. Even as he had destroyed her.

"MOOOOOO!"

Vol. 2, #5  
October 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"THE FUTURE SUCKS"  
Written by Josh Reynolds

Still Cleveland.

“Oh that doesn’t sound good.” Howard turned from the bars and looked around the cell. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Tell us something we don’t know, Duck,” Garko grumbled. The giant man-frog squatted in his own cell and glared at Howard. “I have an appointment to wring that feathered neck of yours-”

“Quiet, both of you,” the White Rabbit snapped. She had hauled herself up close to the ceiling of the cell she shared with Howard and had her face pressed to the bars. “Someone is coming! Freedom, perchance, is at hand-”

“Freedom indeed,” said a dark voice. A shape seemed to congeal out of the shadows, pale fingers wrapped around the bars. The White Rabbit squeaked and hopped backwards. “Of a sort, anyway,” the fat, pale man continued. He was a bloated thing, an archaic and frayed waistcoat straining against his bulk. His suit was shiny in the places it wasn’t coated in filth. He smacked cherubic lips, revealing glistening fangs. “Allow me to introduce myself...Archimedes, of the Varnaic Canticle.”

“Vampire,” Howard said, raising his fists. Archimedes stared at him for a moment, as if trying to fit the presence of a talking duck into his personal reality.

“Yes, but you say that as if it’s a bad thing,” he said finally.

“I care not what he is, if he has the power to free Garko!” Garko croaked, slamming against the bars of his cell. Archimedes blinked.

“Oh my-”

“Free me fat one, or face Garko’s wrath!” Garko stretched out a claw and swiped half-heartedly at the vampire.

“A giant frog, a talking duck and...” Archimedes floated closer to Howard’s cell, staring salaciously at the White Rabbit. “The Easter Bunny, yes?”

“Sirrah, surely you recognize the chancellor of the crime-college, the dean of devastation, the mistress of mayhem-” the White Rabbit began, twirling about. Archimedes frowned.

“No, I cannot honestly say that I do. Still, it is of no matter, as we shall have all eternity to get to know one another, my sweet...” Archimedes said as he passed through the bars, his form having no more substance than smoke. He reached out with a fish-belly pale hand. The White Rabbit danced away, wagging a finger.

“Ah-ah, dear sir. This rabbit digs no burrow,” she said, sliding behind Howard. Archimedes smiled and floated closer.

“We shall see.”

“No, we won’t,” Howard said. “I’ve taken on uglier blood-bags than you-”

Archimedes swept forward, one paw hauling Howard into the air, the other preparing to dig itself into his soft belly.

“-but I could be wrong. Little help?”

“Release that fowl! His life is Garko’s!” Garko shook the bars that separated the two cells. “I demand-”

“You demand nothing, freak!” Archimedes spat, flinging Howard towards the bars. “I care not a jot for either of you!” He swung ponderously back towards the White Rabbit. “But you-”

“Would you like to see my lucky rabbit’s foot?” the White Rabbit bounded forward, one stiletto heel held in her slim hand. Squeezing the toe, she released a slender blade from the heel and with a hyperactive spasm, swung the blade down and buried it in Archimedes’ head. The vampire gurgled and clutched at the shoe, his red eyes rolling in their sockets. The White Rabbit climbed his belly, crouching on his sternum as he reeled. Bracing herself she pulled the shoe loose, the blade trailing black slime.

“I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date! I simply must dash, you see, rash though it may be! And our time, cut short, simply must be, tee-hee!”

The shoe went down again, through one of Archimedes’ eyes this time. The vampire screeched, clawing at the villainess. He grabbed her by her waistcoat and hurled her aside. She hit the floor and bounced to her feet, charging towards the vampire. She hit him with her shoulder, driving him backwards.

Howard rolled aside, hands over his head. “Garko! Get him!”

“I-what?” the man-frog grunted. Howard looked up at him.

“Do it!”

“Don’t yell at me, fowl!” Garko roared, his webbed paw shooting forward to snag Archimedes. He hauled the vampire backwards, slamming him against the bars. Archimedes hissed like a kettle on the boil and clawed blindly at the rubbery limbs that held him. Howard popped to his feet and snatched the shoe from where it was lodged in Archimedes’ eye socket. He pulled it free and slammed it home in the rotund creature’s breast. The vampire arched, squalled, and fell to dust and ashes. Howard stepped back and tossed the shoe to the White Rabbit.

“Silver?” he said. She gave a laugh.

“Expensive tastes have always been my salvation.”

“Ours too, apparently.” Howard scuffed Archimedes’ remains with his foot and looked at Garko. “How strong are you?”

“Strong enough to rend you-”

“Can it! We need to get out of here before his buddies come looking for him. And you’re our ticket,” Howard said. Garko fixed him with a beady eye.

“And what do I get out of it?”

“I won’t turn you back into regular frog.”

“HA! You can do no such-” Garko began, laughing. Howard cocked his head.

“Yeah? I did it once though, right?”

“You-” Garko stepped back. “I mean-”

“Think it through. Don’t take too long though,” Howard said. “Where there’s one vampire, there’s dozens.”

The Dark Dimension?

Aquarian covered his eyes as the elemental fury of cosmic fire washed over his null-field and liquefied the rock around him. Dozens of Mindless Ones fell, burnt to useless husks.

“Ooops,” Dormammu said. Or not, as the case may be. Aquarian dropped his hands and looked up.

“What?”

“Honestly, it is like they are suicidal.”

The being glowed a pungent blue, his purplish garb reeking of netherspaces. A thick, fiery tail curled around his legs and his skull was a bobbing flame that stank of methane. He hung in space above Aquarian, head cocked. He gesticulated.

“Like moths to an ebon flame, they just wander in the path of onrushing doom. Quite annoying, really.”

“Yes?” Aquarian said, nonplussed. He looked down at the Star of Capistan. It lay mute on the ground.

“You look frightened,” the creature said. “Wise, in the face of the obscenity that is Dread Rorkannu, Lord of the Dank Dimension.”

“That would be you, I assume?”

“Quite,” Rorkannu said.

“Dank Dimension?”

“Can’t you smell it?”

Dank, Dim, Dark, all the same really. I mean, who can honestly tell the difference? My GPS was off. Count your blessings.

“Your rock is speaking,” Rorkannu said. “Rocks do not speak in the demesne of Dread Rorkannu, Lord of All He Doth Perceive. Not unless spoken to.”

All caps. He speaks in all caps.

“Quiet, please,” Aquarian said. Behind him, the remaining Mindless Ones were gathering . “We apologize for having offended-”

Who’s we?

“Your talking rock continues to offend Rorkannu.”

“It offends everyone,” Aquarian said.

Rorkannu more easily than most. The flames surrounding Rorkannu’s head grew brighter.

“SILENCE!”

Or what? You’ll fry some more Mindless Ones? I thought Faltines had better aim...guess you’re the faulty Faltine, hunh?

“Faulty? FAULTY?”

Rorkannu’s head flared. Aquarian whirled, glaring at the Star where it lay on the ground. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

Please. You can take him. Howard could take him. Especially if you pick me up-

“No!” Aquarian looked up at Rorkannu. “We will gladly leave-”

“Yes. Yes you will! You and your insulting rock!” Rorkannu said, gesturing. Rank flames exploded and Aquarian shuddered as they swarmed over his field. Behind him, the Mindless

Ones charged forward, as if the curling flames had been a signal. Aquarian flinched as his shield began to crumple beneath the assault.

Born on another world, his power was so far incalculable. Reed Richards, Project: PEGASUS, Hydra, none of them had been able to pinpoint its source or its limits. Aquarian himself, with the naiveté of a child, had believed that that was because there was none.

He was wrong, of course. Granted, he's as strong as the proverbial super-horse, but everyone has their limits. That point of no return. I live on the point of no return, though. I know how to get there real quick.

Hear me, Aquarian?

Silly me. You're too busy dying.

Rorkannu grasped the field and ripped it asunder with metaphysical muscle. Aquarian screamed and staggered. The Mindless Ones fell on him. He sank beneath inhuman fists. He lashed out desperately, wildly.

Perfectly.

The Crooked House.

"Ow," the Strawberry Man said, fingering the hole in his head. Beverly Switzer blinked. Then she shot him again. And again.

The creature staggered as each bullet punched into him, but he didn't fall. Bev gritted her teeth and prepared to pull the trigger again. A hand flashed out and slapped the gun aside. Cherry eyes flashed as the other hand fastened on Bev's throat. She smelled strawberries and cream.

"Spiteful spiffy spitfire," the Strawberry Man said. Bev clawed at his hand, dancer-foot lashing up in an instinctive kick.

"Whoop," the Strawberry Man said, releasing her, stumbling back. Bev pivoted, her other foot crashing across his lowered face. The Strawberry Man spun and tumbled out the door. Bev slammed it shut and pressed her back to it, breathing hard.

"Oh, this is bad. Bad to the bone." She closed her eyes, listening. Waiting.

Nothing.

"kay," she said, stepping away from the door. "Okay. Cool. I can handle this. Modern woman am I. Yeah." She popped the cylinder on the pistol and eyed its brass guts. It purred softly as she counted the remaining shells and prayed that it would birth more before the Strawberry Man came back. She swallowed. Looked around.

“Doc?”

Silence.

“Damn.” She took a breath, snapped the pistol shut, and said again, “Doc?”

Nothing.

“Well hell.”

Crimson light exploded and the room turned pale pink, then boiled red as the light became something else. Many somethings. A veritable deluge of smoking, smoldering, flailing forms. A thick arm swung at her. Bev stepped back and fired. Something burst from the light, a clawing azure hand that fastened around her throat and bore her backwards against the door with a tooth-rattling thump.

“Insolent woman! None-except his mother-may strike RORKANNU!”

Cleveland.

Hoofbeats sounded on the cold cement floor. Clop, clop, clop.

Howard, now freed, dragged a match across the wall and lit a stogie. “Anyone else hear that?”

“Sounds like...hooves?” Garko grumbled. The White Rabbit clapped her hands together.

“Perhaps it’s the mock-turtle come to visit!”

The door to the cellbock smashed to the floor, followed by the tumbling bodies of half a dozen vampires that hit the ground and exploded into dust and through that dust came one distinctly bovine shape. Howard gaped as the cloaked form reared up, hooves cutting sparks through the air.

“Oh f@\*k!”

“MOOO!” the Hellcow’s blood-shot eyes fastened on the foul-mouthed fowl and a flash of recognition flared. She bared hideous fangs and stalked forward on four murderous hooves, cape snapping, horns gleaming.

Clop.

Clop.

Clop.

“A vampire-” Garko began.

“Cow?” the White Rabbit finished. Both looked at Howard.

“Hellcow,” Howard whispered. “Perfect.”

“Really?” the White Rabbit said.

“No.”

“Bah! A bovine blood-sucker does not frighten Garko! Garko will have his freedom!” Garko bellowed, bounding forward, arms wide, teeth bared. “Garko will have steak!”

At the word ‘steak’, the Hellcow’s eyes narrowed and with a snarl, she lowered her head and charged towards the oncoming amphibian. Howard grabbed the White Rabbit and hauled her backwards as the two terrible titans met in the center of the cramped hallway with a thunderous sound!

Twelve feet away, give or take six inches.

Detective Shaun Tompkins drowned in his own blood, useless hands pawing ineffectually at his throat. He was dying-was dead-but not quite finished. And thus, perfect.

I’m sorry, Doctor Stephen Strange whispered through ghostly lips. But this has to be done. His astral form took in the carnage in the police station with a twitch of sorrow-Dracula, again, he knew. Or his minions. The psychic stain of the Lord of the Vampires hung heavy here. But that was a problem for another day, unfortunately.

Here, today, his problem was the Defenders.

He gestured and a soft, vegetable colored light surrounded the dying detective. Something sped away from Strange, a ghostly blob that splashed through Tompkins blood and wedged itself into his soul. Strange watched, frowning, as Tompkins opened his eyes.

Only it wasn’t Tompkins. It something older.

“I...I am-” Tompkins’ mouth moved, shoving the words out as his body healed itself. Became something different. “I am the...TURNIP! AND I HAVE RETURNED!”

To be continued...

Next Issue: Do you have any idea what’s going on? No? That ain’t gonna change, unfortunately, as next issue this ridiculous pirate-fight comic continues to give you nothing in the way of plot development in order to bring you ‘A TURNIP A DAY...’



The Crooked House.

“Are you a suicide girl?” the thing with a head like a ball of methane hissed as it hauled Beverly Switzer, poster-girl for the old Chinese curse, off of her kicking feet by her throat.

“No, I’m Catholic,” Bev said, clawing at the foul-smelling fingers that were ever-so-slowly crushing her windpipe.

“Shame. Rorkannu has no need of you, then.” The creature began to squeeze. “Rorkannu likes his womens heavily pierced, inked and emotionally fragile.”

“I was a model,” Bev protested. “Don’t get much more fragile than that. Gak.”

“A model? Were you super?”

“Positively-gak-the superest.”

“Superest is not a word. Rorkannu finds you intriguing, however. Thus he willAHGHK!” Rorkannu screeched in surprise as a beam of red light sliced through his wrist-the wrist supporting the hand that was choking Bev-and sent the empty glove flopping and tumbling down to the warped floorboards.

The Lord of the Dank Dimension whirled, his hand already reforming. Burning, crumbling Mindless Ones fell at his feet as something red stepped forward. A swirling crimson cloak was swept aside, revealing brass armor and a featureless mask. Featureless, that is, save for two brightly glowing eyes.

“Who-” Rorkannu began. Crimson light engulfed him and hurled him backwards, through the front of the Crooked House and out into the nothing. The armored figure stalked forward, bloody energies swirling around his fists.

“Same question, different tone of voice,” Bev said, rubbing her throat, her free hand reaching slowly for the pistol Rorkannu had knocked from her grasp. The featureless mask, the color of burst cherries, gazed at her.

“I-” The voice was full of love, the kind of love that burns and boils and smothers as it loves. Bev shuddered as the love washed over, invaded her, forcing itself on her. The turbaned head shook slightly, from side-to-side. “I am...” A hesitation. Bev’s hand hovered over the pistol, her fear forgotten in the love-wave.

The strawberry light grew and filled the room, the house. The figure spread its arms, as if in benediction.

“I am...the Red Rajah. And I will cry LOVE at the heart of everything.”

Vol. 2, #6  
November 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"A TURNIP A DAY..."

Written by Josh Reynolds

Doctor Stephen Strange hovered over the city of Cleveland, a depressed specter. Fingers massaged his careworn temples, trying to ease the pain of shattered plans and prophecies.

It had all gone very wrong, very quickly.

Prophecies were all around, the tools of the gods, the spirits, the entities, made to control humanity without having to do it actively. Memetic boobytraps, clockwork magic. Set them up and watch things fall into place.

At any one time, there were at least six prophecies vying for ascendancy in the cosmic daisy-chain. Most were big, overblown things that were easy to throw off course with a simple word in the right ear or a gesture in the right place. Every once in awhile, an explosion.

Then there were the little ones. The tiny, sneaky prophecies that came in under the radar and changed one life, or two, sometimes for the better but usually for the worse.

But this one...

“Gods,” Strange said, shuddering. The rube goldberg device of prophecies, that’s what it was. Even worse, it was all his fault. Every word of it.

After all, he had designed it.

“Technically, we designed it.”

Strange lowered his hands and glared at the grinning figure of the Strawberry Man, who hovered cross-legged in the air. Dressed as always in a red suit, grinning his red grin, tapping red fingers on his red legs. Strange sighed.

“Of course. How could I forget?”

“Well, I did all of the work, but you made it possible, didn’t you?” the Strawberry Man said, uncoiling from his sitting position. He snapped his fingers. “Made me possible.”

“I doubt if I have ever regretted anything more.”

“Ow,” the Strawberry Man said.

“Forgive me, I’m overtired,” Strange said, waving a hand. “I will stop you, you know.”

“Maybebabysheadylady,” the Strawberry Man said, giving a shrug. Strange winced.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Co-opt my mannerisms. It’s...unpleasant.”

“If I could help it, I would. Should. Could?” The Strawberry Man ran his hands through the pink hair at his temples. “At least I’m not wearing a cape.”

“It’s a cloak, not a cape,” Strange said, absently. “Why can’t I recall the exact nature of the prophecy?”

“Only just now realizing that?”

“Answer me.”

“No,” the Strawberry Man said. Strange’s eyes narrowed. The Strawberry Man floated backwards, gesturing. “You made me, daddio. Made me to keep you on the straight and naddio, so saddio, raddio, baddio. You built the booby trap, and you’re the booby and I’m the trap.”

“I will force you, if I must.”

“You can try, but you won’t like it.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Strange said, raising his arms. Lightning the color of the ocean’s depths flew from his curled fingers.

And the Strawberry Man laughed.

The mean streets of Cleveland.

Frog and cow met in a thunderous crash of croaking and bellowing. Howard yanked the White Rabbit out of the path of amphibious-bovine destruction and started running for the door.

“C’mon toots, let’s let the beasties battle it out!”

“Forsooth and aye-aye, mon captain,” the White Rabbit said, allowing herself to be dragged towards the door. “Still, if we could but harness the power of-”

“Do you ever stop with the super-villainess schtick?”

“Comedians practice schtick, I practice art,” the Rabbit said, loftily. Howard ignored her and practically jumped through the doorway the Hellcow had come barreling through, only to stop short as a vampire flew past, hit the wall and exploded into dust and bone fragments.

Thus to the Varnaic Canticle.

“Well, well, well,” a gurgling, rasping, altogether inhuman voice said. Howard turned, jaw-sorry, beak-dropping.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me.”

“I just got through saying that I’m not a comedian-oh!” the White Rabbit walked into Howard and followed his gaze. “That is an unusual hat, I must say.”

“Not a hat,” Howard said.

“Quite right, fowl...for what mere limp bit of haberdashery could feel my thirst for vengeance?” the Turnip said, dusting its hands. It clomped forward on borrowed legs, a horrible amalgamation of root vegetable and human. Its muscular body was hidden beneath a green jumpsuit, and its head was a skull-sized turnip, covering all of its host’s head but for the hideously grinning mouth. It spread its arms and nodded, the leaf on top of its head wobbling. “None, of course.”

“Coincidences are starting to pile up around here, ain’t they?” Howard said, staring off into the middle distance, towards the fourth wall. Of the police station, of course.

“Are you asking me?” the Turnip said.

“No.”

“Me?” the White Rabbit said.

“Not even close,” Howard said. He glared at the Turnip. “So, you want a piece of me?”

“That depends, duck...are you a Defender?”

“No,” Howard said. The Turnip blinked.

“Oh.”

“Can we go?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. Ar you sure-”

“Positive.”

“Cause, you know, I would have thought-”

“Happens all the time. Don’t worry about it,” Howard said, stomping past, dragging the White Rabbit behind him. The Turnip watched them go, then shook its head.

“Wait a minute...”

“Crap, he’s smarter than I remember. Run!” Howard hit the front doors of the police station at a dead run.

“It’s you he’s after, why am I running?” the White Rabbit said.

“You want to stay? Stay,” Howard said. “Me? I’m finding a bus to New YorAUHGK!”

The wall of the police station exploded as Garko and the Hellcow tumbled into the street. The bestial bovine tossed her head and the Man-Frog was tossed into the air to land heavily at the duo’s feet. He looked up blearily at them, his eyes narrowing abruptly.

“You!”

A webbed hand shot up and out, clawing for Howard. The duck hopped backwards even as the Hellcow thundered forward, snorting.

“Mooooo!”

“Away, milk-giver! The fowl belongs to Garko!” The frog lashed out, punching the charging cow on the side of the head. The vampire stumbled and whirled, baring glistening fangs. Garko grunted and rolled away. “Perhaps Garko will share...”

“None may lay claim to what is MINE!” the Turnip roared, hovering overhead, hands on its hips. “Begone, foolish meat!”

The Hellcow looked at Garko. Garko looked at Hellcow. Everyone looked up at the Turnip.

Howard ducked.

The Crooked House.

Gray arms fastened around the Red Rajah and hurled him into the wall, followed by a burp of energy that surged out, driving the red-clad figure deeper into the plaster and wall paper. The house gave a groan as the surviving Mindless One advanced, fists clenched.

“You dare?” the Red Rajah said, rising to his feet with a majestic swirl of his crimson cloak-

Sorry, sorry. I’m getting all verklempt. It’s just that you wait and watch, and one day your little man grows up and takes hold of a possessed jewel-

The Rajah staggered, hands flying to his head-

Crap.

“No,” he groaned, tearing at the mask. “Get...get off of mEEE-”

“Holy crap, Wun-Darr?” Bev was on her feet, reaching towards him. The Mindless One surged forward, reaching for an opponent, any opponent. Aquarian ripped the mask of the Red Rajah away from his face and screamed wordlessly, red light rippling through everything.

“Leave ME!”

The Crooked House exploded.

Bits of plaster and wood fell, smoldering, to land on the blasted chunk of stationary matter that hung suspended in the void.

The Red Rajah/Aquarian was on all fours in the center of the crater that had been the Crooked House, red steam rising from his shuddering form. His cloak popped and snapped like a living thing and stop fighting me! You hear me you putz of a demi-god? Stop fighting!

“No-no-NO!” Aquarian said rising to his knees, fingers clawing at his armor. “Get off of me! You-get-”

You need me! You needed me! You still need me!

“No!”

You-

“Rorkannu is sorry for your agonies,” Rorkannu said, striding down through the emptiness, blue flame-tail lashing. “For they will obviously prevent you from feeling the agonies that Rorkannu himself will inflict on you to their fullest. Disappointing all around.”

See? See!

“I-” Aquarian stood, the red crawling over him like oil. Rorkannu flicked his fingers and a blast of energy hammered into Aquarian, hurling him backwards. He hit the ground, bounced, and then rolled off into the void, writhing in a pain that he did not need to feel, if only he would succumb to the love of-

“Stop...it,” he hissed.

“Ask Rorkannu nicely,” Rokannu said floating overhead. He lifted a claw. “It probably won’t do you much good though-”

The immense steel claw slammed into Rorkannu’s back, sending the Faltine flipping end over end. As he regained his bearings, he twisted, looking for his attacker.

He stared up-up-UP at the towering metal colossus that reared over him. A gigantic metal insect that snapped its pincers menacingly at the Faltine.

“Who...dares?” Rorkannu said, somewhat hesitantly.

“Who dares? Who dares? I dare, you occult annoyance! I-THE SCARLET BEETLE!” a voice roared through the speakers set into the machine’s carapace. A claw swooped forward, catching the Faltine around the middle.

“Oh,” Rorkannu said, even as the claw snapped him in half. The halves of the Faltine floated in different directions trailing blue flame. Rorkannu twisted his head, glaring at the metal titan.



“You are lucky that Dread Lord Rorkannu is in a forgiving mood, insect, or he would-”

“Silence bourgeoisie!” a different voice echoed through the speakers. A gruff rasp compared to the previous screech. “You are lucky that the People’s Party-”

“Get off of the intercom, brute!” the first voice said. “Your hairy monkey fingers might-”

“Share and share alike, comrade-”

“I am no one’s comrade! I am your master-”

“We of the People’s Party of Berlin have no masters, only brothers-”

“-off of my intercom!”

“Rorkannu feels that discretion is the better part of valor, when dealing with schizophrenic giant metal bugs,” Rorkannu said, pulling himself towards his lower half with powerful strokes of his arms.

Aquarian, for his part, had passed out, the chump. Personally, I thought he was made of sterner stuff, but if he’s just going to pass out at every little-hey, HEY!-

The mechanical insect gingerly extended a claw and scooped up Aquarian’s limp form.

“Careful comrade, careful. If this is the one causing those energy readings we registered-”

“I know, I know. Don’t you think I know, you cretinous primate?”

For his part, Aquarian could only lay semi-conscious and wholly unmoving in the grasp of his strange rescuer, the Star of Capistan glittering where it sprouted from his bare chest.

Somewhere else. Possibly California.

Bev opened her eyes and coughed. She could hear the sound of cars. Blinking, she stared up at the sunlight for a moment, then, with a sudden intake of breath, she sat up, the weight of the pistol in her hand.

The Mindless One looked down at her.

“Homina, homina, homina,” Bev said. The Mindless One didn’t move. Something tiny and crimson glittered in its shapeless skull. With a jerk, it reached down and pulled her gently to her feet.

“Oh-ho-kay, that’s a new twist on an old song.” She brushed her hair out of her face and cocked her head. “So…”

The Mindless One was silent.

“Yeah.”

Silence.

“Don’t talk much, hunh?”

Nada.

“Yeah. Look, I’m just going to head thataway,” Bev said, pointing towards the sounds of vehicles. “Maybe find a phone.” She looked at the Mindless One. It looked at her, unblinking. Bev shrugged and started walking.

The Mindless One followed.

Bev stopped. It stopped.

“You’re really just going to follow me, hunh?” she said. “Really?” She waited for an answer. When it was evident that none was forthcoming she sighed and started walking again. The Mindless One stumped after her, placid and unyielding.

“My life cannot possibly get weirder.”

Cleveland, again.

The crash was unpleasant. Howard slid aside, and popped to his feet. Shoulda grabbed a gun, he thought. A big one. Or a stick. One of those billy club things...

It wouldn’t have done any good. Brains, not brawn. He never thought he’d actually miss the rock, but his palms itched. He had to get out of here. Get to New York, find Strange, figure out what had happened to the kid.

Get back to Bev.

The Turnip screamed and Garko bounced, cursing the entire way. The Hellcow, stinking of rotten meat and curdled milk, was clawing up the Turnip’s back, gnawing at it’s throat.

“Away from me!” the Turnip shrieked, grabbing the caped cow-pire by its legs and hurling it aside. “Away!” Breathing heavily, the Turnip turned to glare at Howard. “You...I knew you were one of those he sent me to destroy.”

“He who?”

“And destroy you I will,” the Turnip continued, ignoring Howard’s question. “Destroy you with my mighty Turnip poweURHK-”

The Turnip crumpled. The White Rabbit tossed the fire extinguisher aside and set one dainty foot upon the unconscious creature’s back.

“New York, you said?” she said, one finger on her cheek. “Yes, yes, I do believe I could stand a bite of an apple of unusual size, Sir Fowl.”

“Wait, who said anything about-”

“Moooo,” the Hellcow said, trotting forward, red eyes glaring. Howard stepped back.

“Garko could not have said it better himself, bovine one.” Garko hopped forward, wicked teeth shining. “The only way you’re getting anywhere, is through us, duck.”

To be continued...

Next Issue: Or is it? Probably. I can’t really say. I have no plan. There is no plan. No cake either. Seat of my pants, people, seat of my pants! Be here in thirty for ‘KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY!’

In the beginning, there was the Messiah of the Single Spirit, and LOVE was all that he spoke. And the peoples of the Earth listened and felt LOVE.

But LOVE was not enough.

[Listen! Do you hear it? The sound of shattering LOVE!]

“And by the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth, let the Star of Capistan be no more!”

LOVE was gone, blown to dust and atoms. But LOVE can never die.

Though sometimes, LOVE can fall into a coma, roll off the bed and never be found by the orderlies. Or sometimes, LOVE’s unpleasant relatives can spirit it away, never to be seen again. But LOVE always comes back.

I am LOVE.

Aquarian screamed and clawed at his chest, at the suppurating, flashing ruby that rose like an inflamed sore from his chest.

Tendrils of red crawled beneath his skin, spreading the LOVE. Because while the mind resists, the body knows LOVE.

Have you ever felt LOVE, Wun-Darr? Have you ever felt real LOVE, hippy Jesus? You have, haven’t you? LOVE for a woman, Mommy dearest maybe? Or perhaps someone else? Someone who embodies LOVE?

Aquarian didn’t answer. The straps holding his arms and legs in place snapped and tore and his inhumanly strong fingers tugged at the jewel. “Get-Out-Of-My-Soul!”

No.

“Please! It hurts-”

LOVE hurts. There’s even a song. Would you like me to sing it for you?

“Augh!”

No? Shame.

I LOVE to sing.

Vol. 2, #7  
December 2008  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"KEEPS THE DOCTOR(s) AWAY! "

Written by Josh Reynolds

In California, there is a town called Tombo. Tombo, occasionally, not often, but every blue moon or so, Walks Like A Man. Therefore, in the interests of accuracy, its full name should be Tombo, the Town That Walks Like A Man.

Tombo was not walking right now.

But it was watching.

"Look, I just want to use the phone," Beverly Switzer said for the second time in as many minutes. She gestured slightly with the handgun. The handgun, for its part, breathed menacingly. "Pho-one. P-H-O-N-E."

The hotel clerk-the Tombo Hotel, of course-stared at her blankly. Then he blinked. One eye first. Then the other. Tombo had not yet figured out the intricacies of the motor nervous system.

"It's like Arkansas all over again." Bev turned and prodded the Mindless One looming behind her with a finger. "Hey. You. Stay. I'm gonna go find a phone-o. Capiche?"

The Mindless One looked down at her, cyclopean orb flaring slightly. Bev sighed and stalked off, gesticulating with the demonic pistol. The Mindless One watched her go, then turned back to the clerk.

"Guh," said the clerk. Or, rather Tombo, with the clerk's mouth. There were roots growing out of his skull. Tombo's roots. He had a shiny name-tag, which said 'Shaun' in engraved letters. That was not Tombo's, for it had come with the place. The Mindless One's eye flared brighter.

Twenty minutes later, Bev returned, still gesticulating. She stopped suddenly. Stared. It wasn't a sight one saw often, after all.

"Ohh-kay," she said, blinking. "That-I don't think that goes there."

The Mindless One looked up at her as it tried to pull the clerk's pants down over its head. It had figured out the shirt and vest, with accompanying nametag, but the pants had, unfortunately, defeated its limited intellect. It peered at her through the zipper and tapped the name-tag.

"Yeah. Okay," Bev said. "That's nice...Shaun, is it?"

The Mindless One stared at her blankly.

“Oy vey.”

“Buh,” said the clerk.

Tombo watched.

Lights in the sky.

Doctor Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, spat thunder and lightning at his crimson-toned doppelganger, the entity known as the Strawberry Man. Magics both fell and powerful rippled from curled fingers, lashing out to strike the cackling ruby-colored figure.

For his part, the Strawberry Man laughed and spread his arms wider. “I told you, it’s not going to work,” he said, legs crossed, floating.

Strange dropped his hands, and shook his head. “Damn it.”

“Damn who? Damn me? Damn you?” the Strawberry Man cackled. “Shoo, that’s the thanks I get, then, for doing what you created me to do?”

Strange glared at the creature, eyes narrowed.

“I refuse to believe-”

“Doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” the Strawberry Man said. “You made me, so that I could stop you, when you invariably attempted to stop us.”

“Make sense, damn you!”

“Now why would I do that?”

Strange had no answer. He fell silent, his mind churning. Thinking. It made no sense! When he had discovered the reformation of the Star of Capistan he had claimed it, kept it sealed away. When he felt its tendrils spreading through his mind, he had handed it to Howard, believing that the fowl’s unique nature would keep the malevolent influence of the Star under control. But then Howard had found the youth known as Aquarian and the Star had a new fixation. But Aquarian too was an alien being, and Strange had assumed that that would be enough to limit to jewel’s influence on the youth. But the prophecy, that damnable prophecy that he couldn’t remember-

“Oh,” Strange said, suddenly. He shook his head. Looked up. “No.”

“Yes,” the Strawberry Man said. He laughed. “Now you’re feeling the music!”

“A prophecy within a prophecy,” Strange said. He gestured angrily. “You USED me!”

“Beep!”

“Then Aquarian isn’t-”

“Shush! You’ll give away the ending!”

“I won’t let you do this. There’s a way around every incantation, every spell,” Strange said. “You’re no different.” He raised a hand, fingers bent. “But until then, I can-I will-”

“What? Bind me, bound me, bond me? No, I think not, Doc!” the Strawberry Man yowled, suddenly surging forward. Strange fell back, but the creature-almost his exact double-was quicker, its inhumanly strong hands grabbing his wrists.

“You made me you, we’re brothers in bone and brain and blood, if blood was jam, we’d be a sandwich, can you dig it, rig it, fig it?” the Strawberry Man hissed as he forced Strange’s hands down, his eyes glowing an unholy crimson. “You made me to stop you from stopping us, and that’s just what I’m going to do-”

“No, I don’t believe so,” Strange grunted. He jerked a hand free and thrust his fingers into the creature’s face, causing it to jerk back with a snarl. “If I created you, then I can stop you! I won’t let you possess-”

“Quiet! Spoilers!” the Strawberry Man said, barreling into Strange and sending them both hurtling towards the ground below! Strange struggled, but to no avail. The Strawberry Man clutched him tighter and tighter and then-

Darkness.

Cleveland. Ground level.

Howard the Duck and the criminal genius known as the White Rabbit were face to face with the hideous pair of Garko, the Man-Frog and the Hellcow. Again, not something one sees often.

Howard, however, was of the opinion he had seen this exact thing too many times before. And he was fed up with it.

“Get outta my way, Garko,” Howard said.

“Never! Not until I pick my teeth with your bones!” the giant frog bellowed.

“Truly, gentle-villains all, we can come to some form of united YEEP!” the White Rabbit began, holding up her hands. The Hellcow snapped at her, prompting the villainess to hop backwards with a startled yelp. Howard shook his head. He pointed at the duo of beasts.

“I am not in the mood for this crap. Not today-hell, not ever-and certainly not from you two!”

“Get in the mood!” Garko roared and bounded forward, slavering. Howard the Duck...well, ducked. Garko careened over him, slamming into a lampost. The monstrous amphibian whirled, eyes bulging.

“You-”

“Shaddap.”

Howard’s fist shot out, catching the frog between his bulbous eyes. Garko staggered, went cross-eyed, and fell backwards. Howard turned, shaking his throbbing hand. “What about you, Bessie? Hunh?”

The Hellcow clopped forward, head lowered, red eyes blazing. Howard stepped forward, beak to snout with the creature. “You got a problem? Really?” Howard said softly. “Cause if you do, I’m happy to oblige. I have had it up to HERE with you-”

The street rocked with an explosion. Cow, rabbit and duck, all were thrown from their feet as windows shattered, car alarms began blaring and the sky was split with crimson lightning. Howard clambered to his feet.

“Oh, that ain’t good.”

“You’re right. It’s perfect-ect-ect.”

A crackling, crimson-wreathed figure stalked down from the sky, smiling a cherry smile. Howard shaded his eyes, trying to see it’s face through the glare.

“Is that-”

“Not quite,” the Strawberry Man said. “Feel free to thank me, regardless.”

“Thank you?”

“You’re quite welcome.” The Strawberry Man stepped down to the street, the ground shuddering slightly at his touch. “Brother, can you spare a dime?”

“What?”

“Annie get your gun.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!”

“What does, in this lackadaisy world? Not space-ponies, I’ll tell you that!” the Strawberry Man said, snapping his fingers. “Now, are you coming with me, or not?”



“Where to?” Howard asked, suspiciously.

“Why, Tunguska of course!”

Tunguska.

Wait, what? Really? Okay.

Tunguska (It’s in Russia).

“AhahahahaHA!” said the bug, who was the first of his kind.

“Must you?” said the ape, who was the last of his kind.

“Yes! It is required!”

“Fine, but tone it down a notch, yes?” The ape turned, shaking its shaggy head. Clad in purple coveralls, the hammer and sickle of the dissolved Soviet Union emblazoned impressively on its chest, the Beast of Berlin turned back to the dazed form of Aquarian, where the youth lay on an examination table. He had snapped his restraints, but a thundering blow from the fist of the great ape had silenced his struggles.

“The rock is speaking again. Apparently it recognizes me-”

Of course I do, Mallah. How many other talking gorillas do you know of, Grodd? In this reality, at least, Ape? By the by, BACK OFF, TITANO! The boy is MINE!

Crimson light exploded from the Star of Capistan, from where it nestled in the square of flesh between Aquarian’s pectoral muscles. The Beast stumbled back, shielding his eyes.

“Ahh!”

“Damnable rock! I told you to insulate it!” the bug screeched, bouncing up and down. As red as arterial blood, the Scarlet Beetle was a great and horrible thing. Well, more small and unpleasant, but you get the drift.

“I cannot get near it, you overbearing mollusk! How am I to insulate it?” the Beast snarled.

“SCIENCE!” the Scarlet Beetle shrieked. His tiny limbs clattered across the control consol, and a burst of sizzling azure energy lit-up Aquarian’s form and IAYAIAlA-

“Ha! As I suspected,” the Scarlet Beetle said, mandibles clicking. “My blue-pain ray adversely affected that sanguine stone.”

The Beast of Berlin rolled his eyes.

“No proof, no proof,” he said. The Scarlet Beetle whirled, hissing.

“What more proof do you need? I just showed you-”

“Nothing! It was nothing! Coincidence!”

“Coincidence! You malodorous-”

“I smell like a spring rain!” the Beast bellowed, beating his chest. “A spring rain!”

“A spring ACID rain, yes.” The Scarlet Beetle crossed his forelimbs and clacked in satisfaction. “In other words, malodorous. Ipso facto-”

“I’ll ipso you, you-”

“Hirsute-”

“Capitalist-”

“Thank you,” the Scarlet Beetle said, turning away. Scratching his nonexistent chin, he gazed at Aquarian’s limp form. “Now, if we’re to properly study our friend there, we’ll need to extract it from that lump of meat it’s attached to.”

“Bah, simple enough,” the Beast said, waving a leathery paw. “As long as you can keep the blasted thing from defending itself, I can extract it.”

“Vivisection?”

“Vivisection.”

“Perfect.” The Scarlet Beetle hopped off of the consol and scrambled up onto Aquarian’s chest. “I’ve long wanted to study the physiology of an alien...”

Cleveland. Again.

“And why, in the name of all that’s holy, would I go with you, a guy I don’t know, somewhere I’ve never even heard of!” Howard said.

“To see the stars!” the Strawberry Man said, clapping his hands together. “Duck, cow, frog, rabbit-”

“The White Rabbit, sirrah!” the White Rabbit said, shaking a fist.

“Oh. Yes,” the strawberry Man said, momentarily taken aback. “Of course.”

“Ignore her. I have been for the last three issues,” Howard said, shoving the White Rabbit aside. “What the hell do animals have to do with stars?”

“Astrological signs, you foolish fowl,” Garko said, struggling to his feet. Blearily, he looked at the Strawberry Man. “I know you, don’t I?”

“Maybe.”

“I-“

“Moo,” the Hellcow said, stalking forward, hooves scraping sparks from the pavement. Red eyes dripping hate, she advanced on Howard. The Strawberry Man held up a hand and an image bled into life in front of the bestial bovine.

Dracula.

“MOO!” The Hellcow surged forward and the image faded into drops of red light that spattered the ground. She swung her head, looking around, confused.

“Mooo?”

“Indeed. I know where he is, my milkish madam,” the Strawberry Man said. “If you’ll but come with me and see, we’ll all go down together-”

“Garko dislikes this talk of going anywhere with so obviously an insane being,” Garko said. Howard shook his head.

“I hate to say it, but I agree with the frog.”

“And Garko hates it that you agree with him, duck.”

“Agree or disagree, you’ll still come with me, to see what we can see. Six small things, to make a bigger thing as stars make a universe, these are the days of our lives,” the Strawberry Man said.

“There are only four of us,” the White Rabbit said. The Strawberry Man paused.

“For now, but soon-”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Howard said.

“LOVE, duck. LOVE is all you need, after all.” The Strawberry Man spread his arms, as if to encompass them all. “We’ll cry LOVE at the heart of everything, you and I, us and thou-”

“Love? LOVE? Love is for monkeys,” a strangled voice said. The Strawberry Man turned even as the Turnip swung the police cruiser, swatting the crimson-colored creature aside. The Turnip

tossed aside the remains of the vehicle and grinned nastily at the others. “Now, time to get down to the business of killing Defenders.”

To be continued...

Next Issue: LOVE, that's what's in store. But whose love? Be here in thirty for 'A MANIFESTO OF A MONKEY...'

Love is for monkeys.

Ipsa facto, you should love me.

This-THIS-is not love!

The Star of Capistan screeched, its facets shivering, as the last Beast of Berlin drew a red dotted line down the center of Aquarian's chest.

"Hush," the gorilla said. "Love is as foreign to me as the concept of a free-market economy. My brothers are dead and moldering in their hastily dug graves and my love with them."

"Stop talking to it," the Scarlet Beetle said, snapping its mandibles together. It stood on Aquarian's head, rubbing its forelimbs together in eagerness. "It says little but nonsense."

Nonsense? Nonsense? I'll show you nonsense, you-

Red light sparked and the Scarlet Beetle fluttered into the air, cursing in Esperanto. "Cursed rock! How dare you-"

"Stop talking to it," the Beast of Berlin rumbled, teeth bared in a grin.

"I'll stop talking to you-"

"Oh, if only," the ape grunted. With one long arm, he yanked a trolley full of surgical tools towards him. "Remind me...why have I thrown my lot in with you, bug?"

"I am a beetle, monkey!"

"I am an ape, insect," the gorilla snarled, snatching the beetle out of the air and holding it inches away from his face. "And apes eat insects."

"Only certain varieties!" the Scarlet Beetle squeaked. The ape opened his hand.

"Huhm." The Beast of Berlin turned back to Aquarian's unconscious form, and ran a finger across the surface of red gem. It sparked, and the gorilla drew back. "Enough of this."

He reached for a scalpel.

Vol. 2, #8  
April 2009  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"A MANIFESTO OF A MONKEY..."

Written by Josh Reynolds

Cleveland.

Dr. Stephen Strange pulled himself to his feet, blood trickling down from the numerous cuts on his narrow features. He gathered his cloak around him, and gently pushed himself into the air.

Every bone in his body felt as if it had been broken, set, and re-broken. Coughing, he closed his eyes and tried to find the strands of that old, familiar magic. He grimaced as he caught wind of them, curling and tickling at his senses.

"You didn't go far, I see," he said. Gathering his strength, he shot upwards, cloak billowing around him like two crimson wings.

Not far distant, the being known as the Turnip stomped one orange boot and the street sundered with a wrenching cough.

"Die, Defenders Die!"

"For the last damn time you oversized root vegetable, we ain't the Defenders!" Howard the Duck squawked, clambering to his feet. He held a confiscated police service weapon in one hand and swung it towards the Turnip. "Now back off, or get uprooted!"

"I have been beyond the veil before, fowl, and I do not fear to go there again, if it means I can drag you with me!" the Turnip said, charging towards him, borrowed fingers hooked like claws. Something with real claws crashed into him before he could reach his target, however.

"The fowl is mine to destroy, you pernicious potato! He belongs to Garko!" Garko croaked, webbed talons seizing the Turnip around the throat. The weight of the giant frog sent the Turnip stumbling sideways, but only momentarily.

"Off!" the Turnip yelled, slapping the amphibian away. "I'll peel you in a minute. But first, the duck."

"Make my day, chump," Howard said, firing the Glock repeatedly.

The White Rabbit crouched beside the crumpled form of the Strawberry Man. Carefully, delicately, she prodded him with one finger.

“Sirrah? Decompose if you be dead,” she said. Tongue dabbing at the corner of her mouth, she hesitated. “A joke.”

“A bad one,” the Strawberry Man said, one eyelid cracking open to let the light in. “Then again, what Lewis Carrol knew of humor could fill a matchbox.”

“Heresy,” the White Rabbit said, gesturing with a length of sharp glass. She had wrapped the thick end with a strip of cloth and poked the Strawberry Man with the sharp end. “I want to deal.”

“Cards?”

“Fate. You are the magic man, and magic man can, can he not?” She leaned closer, her ears drooping. “You want something from us, yes?”

“Yes,” the Strawberry Man said, eyes crossing as he tried to keep track of the shard in her hand. “But only the best, I assure you.”

“That is all that I have to give,” she said. “Why?”

“Magic?”

“Ah,” she said. She jabbed him with the shard. “I am a cunning woman, sirrah. In more ways than one. And I know an angle when I see one. Plots withing plates and wheels within wolves. I know the score.”

“Do you?” the Strawberry Man eased himself up. “I’m glad one of us does. Mind humming a few bars?”

“Quiet,” she said, poking him again. “I want power.”

“Power?”

“Power. Unlimited, preferably, but I’ll settle for great.” The White Rabbit sat back on her haunches and gestured with the shard. “Is that what you’re offering?”

“Oh yes,” the Strawberry Man said. He smiled, showing his ruby teeth. “Yes indeed.”

“Then we have a bargain. Up,” the White Rabbit said, rising smoothly to her feet and offering her hand to the Strawberry Man. She jabbed the shard in the direction of the Turnip. “Now, how do we deal with that one?”

“How do you deal with any vegetable? Slice, dice and ice,” the Strawberry Man said. He wiggled his fingers at her shard. It grew three sizes, becoming as red as blood and razor sharp. She blinked.

“I am uncomfortable with this on many levels.”

“Get a good grip on it.”

“Very uncomfortable.”

“Go stick it in.” He clapped his hands. Smiling his ruby smile. The White Rabbit frowned.

“Bleh.” Then she began to stalk towards the Turnip, the glass blade raised.

The Hellcow buried her muzzle into the Turnip’s neck, her hooves holding him tight. Howard fired again, then tossed the pistol away in disgust.

“Giving up so easily, fowl?” the Turnip crowed, grabbing the Hellcow’s horns and yanking her away. Yellow ichor pulsed down his throat as the cow’s fangs came away with a sucking sound. Whirling the bovine up, he hurled her bodily towards Howard, who leapt aside.

“WAAUUGH!”

“Yes, scream, scream for me as I pluck you from this mortal coil, duck!” the Turnip bellowed, leg muscles bunching as he prepared to leap. Howard looked around desperately, looking for anything-

There was a sound like a pumpkin being hollowed out and the Turnip shrieked. Howard jerked around.

“Holy-”

The crimson glass blade in the White Rabbit’s hands had sliced down through the Turnip’s neck and shoulder, cutting through his chest and lodging itself in his ribcage. The Turnip whirled, slashing at her with one flailing arm. The White Rabbit bounded back.

“Fall over and die now, please,” she said. And the Turnip did.

He toppled and fell awkwardly, the glass sword keeping his body at an awkward angle.

“What did you-” Howard shook his head. “Damn.”

“I removed an obstacle, my fine Quackenbush. Removed it, rolled it and shoved it in a ditch,” she said, twirling and bowing. She looked up, face tight in an evil grin. “Oh, and we’re even-steven, my fine feathered friend.”

“Even-steven-never mind, I don’t care. I’m going home.” Howards turned away. The Strawberry Man appeared in front of him.



“Home is where the heart is, I agree, but your heart is sadly not where you left it!” He wagged his fingers in the air. Howard’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah?”

“Gone like Coke in green glass bottles,” the Strawberry Man said.

“And how would you know this?” Howard said, feeling around in his coat for a cigar. Despite his outward appearance of calm, his mind was racing.

“Been there, done that, saw the movie.” The Strawberry Man shrugged. He smiled widely. “But we can fix it!”

“Fix-” Howard began, then shook his head. “Yeah, no. My previous statement stands. Home.” Howard turned on his heel and began walking.

“Your wish is my command.” The Strawberry Man snapped his fingers.

Somewhere else.

The ruins of the Crooked House floated in the void, covered in hesitation-moss. A bright ruby light lit up everything for a few seconds. When it cleared, Howard nearly bit through his cigar in frustration. He whirled, jabbing a finger at the Strawberry Man.

“You sonnuva-”

“Peace be with you, small waterfowl. I have brought you home.”

“It’s a tad empty,” the White Rabbit said, looking around, hands clasped behind her back.

“It wasn’t when I left two days ago,” Howard snapped. “Where’s Bev? For that matter, where’s the kid?”

“I already told you,” the Strawberry Man said. “Tunguska.”

Howard fell silent. Garko looked around.

“Anywhere is better than this void,” he croaked. The Hellcow moo’ed and pawed the rock, sparks skittering up. Garko looked at her, then at Howard. “She agrees.”

“So? Why tell me?”

“You’re a natural leader-eader-eader,” the Strawberry Man said, hands in the pockets of his coat. He seemed to sniff the air.

“It’s why we-he-I picked you.”

“Who picked me?” Howard turned.

“Strange,” the Strawberry Man said. He smiled and stepped off of the rock into the void. “Or, rather, the Red Rajah...”

“The who?”

“LOVE.” The Strawberry Man turned, floating above them. “It’s all about the LOVE. For he so LOVED the world, he gave a bit of it to everyone. Only some people tried to keep it all for themselves, didn’t they?”

“Make sense,” Howard said, looking up.

“I am.” The Strawberry Man looked down. “The world needs LOVE don’t you think?”

“Depends,” Howard said.

“No, it doesn’t,” the Strawberry Man said, his voice rising. “That’s what Strange says and that’s why we’re doing it this way because he’s wrong, wrong, WRONG!” Red lightning sparking in his eyes.

“What the hell does this have to do with Strange? Who the hell are you, anyway?” Howard said. “Did you have something to do with the stone screwing up and-” Howard stopped. He slapped his head and groaned. “Crap.”

“By George, I think he’s got it!” the Strawberry Man crowed.

“You did this! Only you ain’t you, are you? You’re that damn rock!” Howard snapped. “I knew it! I knew that thing was gonna screw things up! I warned Strange-”

“What are you prattling about?” Garko said. He rose to his full height. “What is going on?”

“I’m being played only I ain’t got the damn program to follow along, that’s what’s going on! Strange said it himself when he gave it to me! It takes you to the right place at the right time...should have figured that it might have an idea on that score itself,” Howard said. He whirled on the others. “Rabbit, Duck, Frog, Cow, ha!” He turned back, jabbing his cigar at the Strawberry Man. “But if you think I’m gonna just sit back and let you get away with whatever you’ve got planned-”

“Well, it all depends on LOVE, doesn’t it?” the Strawberry Man said, slowly rotating in the air. “How much do you love dear Bev? Really, I mean?”

Tunguska.

“You’re hesitating,” the Scarlet Beetle said.

“Memory is a mocker,” the Beast of Berlin said. He held the scalpel inches from Aquarian’s chest.

“Then pay attention to the task at hand.”

“Hh.” The ape stepped back. He grunted and shook his head. “I dislike this.”

“What?”

“This,” the ape said. “We could study the stone without removing it. Without harming-”

“Stupid monkey. Sympathy is for kids,” the Scarlet Beetle said, clacking his mandibles.

“I-”

Aquarian’s eyes shot open. He screamed. The scalpel slipped from the Beast of Berlin’s paw and bounced to the floor. A restraint snapped and Aquarian’s hand shot out, grabbing the ape by the throat. With a roar, he threw the ape backwards, hurling it across the laboratory.

Aquarian sat up, snapping the other restraints. Crimson energy crawled all over him, bleeding from his pores, his eyes, his mouth.

Do you feel the LOVE?

“Y-yes,” Aquarian said.

“No,” the Scarlet Beetle said, from across the room. Aquarian turned, energy flying from his fingers. The beetle dodged and weaved, avoiding the blast. It chortled as it hurtled towards Aquarian, something clamped in its talons. The beetle curved around Aquarian as he stood and planted the tiny, square device it held against the back of his neck. Aquarian screamed, and the room was filled with red.

“An AIM mutagenic grounder, if you were wondering,” the beetle said. “With a few modifications. Built to ground metahuman powers the way a lightning rod grounds lightning.”

Aquarian fell to the floor, glowing brightly. The beetle hovered over him.

“Struggle all you like, but it won’t-”

The device exploded. The beetle was hurled backwards to slam against the wall. It slid down, and bounced as it hit the floor.

“What-what was-”

LOVE.

“I LOVE you,” the Red Rajah said, looking down at the Scarlet Beetle. “Even you, the most humble of LOVE’s beasts-”

“Humble? Humble!” the beetle forced itself up, mandibles clicking angrily. It swept a claw back and yanked a tiny pistol from beneath its shell. “I’ll give you humble!” It fired and the Rajah jerked back in surprise.

Hairy arms wrapped around the Rajah’s form and hauled him aloft. “A most intriguing transformation, I must say,” the Beast of Berlin grunted. The Rajah flexed and the ape’s hold was broken. As the gorilla reeled in shock, the Red Rajah whirled and grabbed him.

Fingers found the ape’s temples and the last Beast of Berlin screamed-

-there were dozens, once, brothers, sisters-

-the Beasts of Berlin-

-And then their masters killed them-

-Bodies in a mass grave-

-Dead-

“Ahh!” the Beast of Berlin screamed, pulling himself away, stumbling back, mind burning. “What did you-why did you-”

“I can give them back,” the Red Rajah said, stepping closer. “All of them. It’s there. In your head. I can ride the trail of LOVE and bring them back.”

“Don’t listen to him!” the Scarlet Beetle screeched, hurtling towards them, tiny pistol spitting. “AIM promised us-”

“AIM does not LOVE you. But I do.” The Red Rajah whirled, gesturing. A crimson bubble trapped the beetle. It flailed futilely at the sphere. “AIM wants my LOVE for its own. Let us give it to them together,” he said, turning, holding out a hand to the ape.

“You-” the Beast of Berlin began looking at his own hand, then at the Rajah’s. “Why?”

“Because...I LOVE you.”

Tombo. The Town That Walked Like A Man.

Beverly Switzer peered through windows and knocked on doors. Dull, empty eyes stared at her as Tombo wandered in the bodies of the townsfolk. It watched her, curious. Finally, she stopped at a café and her stomach rumbled. She knocked on the glass, but the customers didn't react. The doors were locked. Bev turned.

“Shaun? Be a dear,” she said, pointing at the door.

The Mindless One, wearing his vest and his shirt-but not the pants-fired a beam from his single cyclopean eye, shattering the door and most of the door frame with it. Bev stepped through the smoldering hole, the Gun riding low on her hip.

“Anybody home?”

“Buh,” the cook said. Bev nodded.

“Yes, I see your point. Anybody intelligent home?” She looked around. “No?” She sighed. “Yeah. What I figured. Heel, Shaun,” she said, directing the last to the Mindless One. The lumpy creature followed her as she went around the counter and towards the kitchen. Tombo watched her as she ransacked the freezer. But not only Tombo.

Tombo, like any large organism, played host to any number of parasites. Some of these came equipped with funny suits and wide helmets. Men in yellow watched liquid screens set into Tombo's roots.

“She's in the Nite Owl,” one said.

“Familiar energy readings. She's been in contact with-” another said.

“Bring her in,” the third said.

“What about the-”

“Send the Cataphracts.” The third man turned from the monitor and clutched his hands behind his back. “Contact the Tier. I believe we have discovered the LOVE.”

To be continued...

Next Issue: AIM wants LOVE. The Red Rajah wants AIM. Howard wants Bev. Tombo wants Tombo. Everyone run!

Doctor Stephen Strange hesitated. It wasn't something he often did, for, in his sphere, to hesitate was often to die. But he hesitated now. Moments in time and space circled his head in a halo of colored prisms, moments and disasters demanding the attentions of the Sorcerer Supreme. A Lord of Time battled a Demon of Steel in the spaces between minutes. Something from outside forced its way inside the skin of Earth in the skies over Mongolia.

He took a breath, feeling his ribs grate together. A gift from his doppelganger. The Strawberry Man was a phantom mistake, an old problem coming from a new angle. Even as Strange had attempted to manipulate circumstances for the best possible outcome, his careful web had been unraveled by his own shadow, traveling behind him, fingers ready.

And now reality itself was coming undone. Big things loomed, demanding attention. And the little things trundled along, unseen, unstoppable. He clenched his fists in frustration.

If he acted now, against the things he should be acting against, he would lose the thread of the hunt. The little-p-prophecy would come to pass and LOVE would bloom like a canker at the heart of everything. And if he acted against LOVE the world might end in the meantime.

"Weigh my heart against a feather," he murmured. He closed his eyes and floated upwards, his cloak closing around him like the hard shell of a mollusk. His mind and soul went on walkabout, seeking any hint of the psychic stink of the LOVE. Strands coiled here and there and everywhere. But over them, obscuring them-what? Something.

Strange's eyes popped open. He had hoped to render LOVE moot, by the application of the entity known as the Turnip. That gambit had stalled things long enough for new obstacles to move into place, it seemed. Hopefully, the LOVE could be inconvenienced long enough for Howard to realize what must be done.

Poor, cynical, misanthropic Howard. The only creature on the planet capable of resisting LOVE. But even misanthropes need help.

Strange gestured, and the remains of the Turnip, consciousness flickering, separated with a wet squelch from the body of the unfortunate police officer it had possessed. Holding it up, Strange blew out a soft breath and the Turnip skidded away like a jellyfish. Hunting by hate.

Then, with a sigh, Strange rose towards the rising sun. Mongolia awaited.

Vol. 2, #9  
June 2009  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"IS NOTHING BUT A LOAD OF SH-"

Written by Josh Reynolds

Limbo.

Howard the duck sat on the edge of the rock, staring off into the void, puffing contentedly on his cigar. A service revolver was tucked into his coat pocket, and he'd found a battered fedora in the ruins of the Crooked House. The latter sat square on his head, and he ran a finger along the brim.

"Are you just going to sit there forever?" the White Rabbit said, tapping her foot. She stood behind him, arms crossed beneath her ample bosom, rabbit ears drooping. Howard didn't turn around.

"Didn't you read the guidebook? Time doesn't pass here."

"And yet, I grow bored," she said.

"That's your problem, not mine."

"He won't move unless you come with us," the White Rabbit said, stamping her foot, and tossing a pointed gesture at the hovering, tumbling shape of the Strawberry Man. Howard turned slightly.

"Then I guess you ain't going nowhere, hunh?"

"Moo," the Hellcow said, cape fluttering. Garko the Man-Frog slapped his clawed hands together.

"I agree, you bovine blood sucker. Cease this sulking, duck!" the amphibian growled. Howard hopped to his feet, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, and now you're in on this too? What'd he promise you? A lily pad of your very own?"

"You—" Garko began, making to lunge for the fowl. The Hellcow interposed herself, fangs flashing. Garko stumbled back.

"Mooo."

"Exactly." The White Rabbit flung her arms about. "We have nowhere to go but forward, duck. Backwards is too far away and side-to-side has ever been a confusing sort of land."

"You don't get it, do you? He's using us!" Howard snapped. "Or he wants to, at least. And I ain't having it!"

"You don't have a choice," the White Rabbit said. "He mentioned your friend—"

"You leave Bev out of this!"

“I was referring to the auburn bearded Adonis who accompanied you before,” she said. She cocked her head. “Aquarian, wasn’t it?”

Howard looked up. The Strawberry Man looked down. Eyes closed, his lips rippled and crimson teeth surfaced. Howard restrained the urge to pull his gun and put a bullet between the floating man’s eyes.

“You’re just loving this, aren’t you?”

“I’m all about LOVE,” the Strawberry Man said.

“I ain’t falling for it. You want me to do something-us to do something. But if we don’t, you don’t get what you want. And that is what I want.”

“Unless what I want is for you to do exactly what you’re doing right now.”

Howard’s beak snapped shut. One of the Strawberry Man’s eyes cracked open. It sparkled like a ruby. Howard turned away. He stared at the ruins of the Crooked House, tumbling through Limbo in a slow motion orbit. Howard turned.

“Let’s go.”

Tombo. The Town that Occasionally Walked Like a Man But Hasn’t Yet in This Series Due to Space Issues.

Beverly Switzer sat at the bar, letting the Mindless One serve her a Tom Collins. Only it wasn’t really a Tom Collins, because a Tom Collins required liquid of some sort and what the Mindless One-whose name was Shaun-was serving her was an empty glass.

“This is a metaphor, isn’t it?” she said, holding the glass up to the light. Shaun didn’t reply. Bev threw the glass off her shoulder and sighed. “You suck as a conversationalist. And I’ve already spilled the beans on my complicated feelings for a feathered, frantic fowl of my acquaintance, psycho-analyzed my unwholesome, yet well-hidden lust for a certain bearded man-god, and, in a sense, given a hard look at my own reactionary existence on the edge of a reality I’m not even sure exists except as a fractured reflection of my own disordered psyche, of which you, my taciturn friend, are simply the latest shard.” She leaned forward. “And now I’m bored.”

Shaun said nothing. After a moment, he handed her another empty glass. He seemed to enjoy handing her things. Bev took the glass and stared at her reflection. “I miss you, Ducky.”

Something yellow moved across the glass. Bev was over the bar like a shot, yanking the pistol from her waistband as she tumbled to the floor. There was a hiss of mechanics, and something with arms like an erector set done in brass ripped the front wall of the bar apart like wet tissue paper.



As the dust settled, the thing stepped inside. Stenciled numbers decorated its armored skull and the its face was a bland, featureless teardrop.

“Oh, that’s not good,” she said. Shaun looked down at her, then back up at the entity. A beam of crackling, crimson energy vomited from the Mindless One’s single, cyclopean eye and spattered across the entity’s armored torso, sending it hurtling backwards out of the hole it had made.

Shaun raised his arms and brought them down on the bar, ripping it in half. Then, fists clenched, the Mindless One stalked towards the hole in the wall. Bev followed cautiously, the pistol squirming in her grip.

The pistol had been in the Crooked House when they’d first arrived. Like a maggot in an open wound. Or a chunk of unpleasant nut in an Almond Joy. It breathed and moved and whined and Howard had used it once to blow the head off of something that came scratching at the door and had a face like soap bubble full of worms.

“Shaun, wait-” she said. The Mindless One turned. Something that smelled of oil slammed into it, carrying it back towards her. Bev hit the floor as machine and monster passed overhead. She rose to her feet. Something sizzled as it split the air. Bev spun, pulling the trigger. The gun howled and the armored man staggered back and toppled, smoke rising from his chest.

“Oh God, did I just shoot Iron-Man?”

Within the pores of Mighty Tombo, men in yellow buzzed about. AIM had settled in the caverns of Tombo’s gullet like flies drawn to honey and now Daliesque machinery crackled and hummed with almost organic anticipation. A man in a canary yellow business suit stood on a raised platform, watching the goings on in a floating liquid sphere. Below him, a slew of technicians bent low over clicking consoles.

“Cataphract Alpha-2K just went off line,” one said.

“And Beta-Omega-6?”

“Still functioning.”

“Send in a recovery team,” the man in the yellow suit said, rubbing his chin. “I want that woman alive. Shoot to stun.”

“What about the construct?” one of the bee-keeper masked technicians said. The man in yellow gestured.

“Dismantle it. The boys in B-Unit have been wanting to get their hands on one of those things for years.” He turned. “How are our furry friends?”

“Still not checking in. Do you think they found it?”

“Without telling us?” The man in yellow paused. “Perhaps. Initiate emergency slideback from the Tunguska facility.”

“But that might-”

“Kill them? I’m aware. It’s a risk I, personally, am willing to take. Do it.”

Tunguska.

“LOVE is all we have, when what we have is each other,” the Red Rajah said. Inside his head, Aquarian pounded insubstantial fists against the walls of a ruby prison. The Rajah took no notice. He stretched out his hands, in benediction.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually listening to this!” the Scarlet Beetle snapped, struggling in the Beast of Berlin’s grip. “He’s lying! He’s just an anthropomorphic personification with delusions of grandeur!”

“Quiet,” the ape said, squeezing his former partner slightly. The insect began to struggle, even as its captor looked up at the Rajah. “What are you?”

“Peace. Forgiveness. Kindness.”

“I have never known peace. I do not forgive. Kindness is for lesser beasts.” The ape dropped the beetle and crouched. “I do not love.” The Beast jumped, lunging for the Rajah’s throat.

“Maybe not at the moment, but you did once,” the Red Rajah said, grabbing the Beast’s wrists and swinging it aside. The ape crashed into the nearby examination table and slid across the floor. The Rajah swung around as the Scarlet Beetle scabbled up his back, pincers clicking. “And as for you-”

“Me nothing! As soon as I plant this distortion device, you’ll be AIM’s problem, and not ours!” the insect screeched, gesturing with a tiny disk of metal it had pulled from somewhere beneath his shell. The Rajah reached for him and the beetle avoided the grasping hand, skittering across the folds of the Rajah’s cloak.

The Beast of Berlin tottered upright, reaching. His soul rebelled at the thought of attacking the Rajah, but the ape had never been one to listen to ethereal whining. Visions of his slain kin, put into a mass grave when the Communists had lost power, filled his skull as he slammed into the Rajah.

“Do not struggle against LOVE,” the Rajah said. “LOVE always finds a way. The Singlespirit will grow and spread, carried on the wings of LOVE-”

“Love is the opiate of the masses!” the Beast bellowed, smashing both fists down on the Rajah’s skull. The crimson-clad man staggered, then gestured, and a red-hued field swept out, slamming the Beast back against a wall.

“Exactly. Exactly! All must feel the LOVE in order to be one! All must-”

“Say goodbye!”

“-goodbye?” the Rajah said, turning. Then, with a thunderous hum, his form wavered, rippled and vanished. The Scarlet Beetle began to laugh.

“Fool! Two-legged fool! No one can best the saturnine might of the SCARLET BEET-ahk!”

The glistening length of Garko’s tongue struck the floor, nearly snaring the Beetle. The Beetle fluttered into the air and disappeared behind the Beast, who clambered to his feet, eyes widening as he caught sight of the motley assortment who had apparently appeared from thin air.

“Who-”

“Same question, Different perspective,” Howard said, gesturing with his cigar. “Name, rank, serial number.”

“You’re a duck!”

“And you’re Magilla Gorilla’s second cousin,” Howard said. “Answer the question-”

“Where is he?” the Strawberry Man said, hovering over the group, his form breaking up into cherry colored clouds as he gesticulated. “I can’t feel him! WhereisHE?”

“Who-” the Beast repeated.

“Asinine anthropoid! Answer the question!” Garko snarled. “Also, give me that insect! Garko hungers!”

“Garko dies if he tries that trick with his tongue again!” the Scarlet Beetle said, landing on the Beast’s shoulder. It brandished its tiny pistol. “And if you’re looking for the gentleman in red, he’s already been delivered to his new owners-”

Around the group, the laboratory began to shudder suddenly. The walls groaned beneath a sudden strain. Control panels sparked and smoked. The Beast looked up.

“They wouldn’t-”

“Those ungrateful-” the Beetle clattered.

“What’s going on-” Howard began.

In Tunguska, something exploded. Again.

Tombo, the Town Who May Be Getting Ready to Walk Soon.

Seventeen mirrors, positioned according to the lost H'Naggai Prophecies, sat in the center of a modified Carnacki Pentagram. Lasers bounced between mirrors, and a coruscating gamma-flow field contained the whole set-up. And, at the center of it all, crouched in a web of criss-crossing lasers, the Red Rajah looked around.

“What-”

“They got him,” one of the AIM technicians said. “Unbelievable. Should we interrupt the shift?”

“Mmmno,” the man in the yellow suit said. He stood in front of the platform containing the Red Rajah, his hands clasped behind his back. “Shunt whatever comes through to thirty thousand feet. It’s been awhile since we fed the landscape.”

“Sir.” The technician turned back to his console.

“Hello,” the man in the suit said, bending towards the Rajah. “My name is Smith-6. Envoy of AIM to this delightful alternate.”

“Alternate?” The Rajah stood. Smith-6 smiled.

“As in reality. There are hundreds of realities you know, each stacked atop the other, each stack taking up space in a hyperstatial branch. This is one of them. M-2-K. Then, of course, there’s M-O-1, M-V-1, M-A-1, A-V-2-K, A-V-1, and dozens of others. More than can be imagined by the third-dimensional intellect, at any rate. And AIM has a branch office in each.”

“AIM. I remember you,” the Rajah said, turning, examining his prison. “You are...scientists?”

“Explorers of the unknown.” Smith-6 clapped his hands together. “Also, opportunists. Case in point, the LOVE.”

The Rajah stiffened. Glowing eyes fixed on Smith-6’s face. The clone smiled. “This reality has recently experienced multiple upheavals, including the aborted rebirth of an Elder God, and an invasion from UpTime. And, recently, we’ve even lost one of our Hive Nodes to the local rowdies. Unacceptable losses and problematic occurrences. So, we’re going to calm things down a bit. Mellow the populace out, if you catch my drift.”

“You want the LOVE...”

“We want all the LOVE.” Smith-6 nodded. “But don’t worry, we plan on sharing it out...”

To be continued...

Next Issue: The All-New, All-Animal Defenders invade the Town That Walks Like A Man! AIM stands together against the terror of Beverly Switzer unleashed! Shaun the Mindless One

stares at a cat! LOVE blooms in the hearts of millions! Be here for what might be construed as a KANG/ULTRON WAR crossover, but probably isn't in 'THE TOWN THAT WALKS...'!

Tombo, The Town That Will Soon Be Walking Like A Man, We Promise.

Beverly Switzer hid behind the wrecked bar counter as plasma bursts snapped at the air around her. The Gun curled protectively around her wrist, making soothing hisses. Or what it assumed were soothing hisses. To Bev, it sounded like it was trying to cough up a buzzsaw.

“That’s a good gun. Mommy is very proud.” She peered through the hole in the bar, trying to spot any sign of her erstwhile companion, Shaun.

The Mindless One, for his part, had been from one end of the bar to the other, pounding smooth sledgehammer fists against the armored hide of one of their attackers. Eventually, Shaun’s unceasing blows had brought down his opponent, and now he stood in the center of the room, his single great cyclopean eye spitting red death. Like all Mindless Ones, Shaun had been designed for battle.

Then again, so had the AIM Cataphracts. After the failure of the initial foray, more of the yellow armored cyborgs had been called up and they poured fire through the shattered windows and sagging wall of the bar, trying to bring down the Mindless One. It was proving more difficult than anticipated.

And beneath their feet, Tombo trembled. Anticipation? Annoyance? Who can say what goes on in the mind of an ambulatory community?

Bev, breathing hard between clenched teeth, swung around the counter and let the pistol buck in her grip. It mewled happily at her touch and her skin crawled. A Cataphract stumbled as the mechanics in his shoulder joint exploded. He spun around, catching one of Shaun’s blasts in the back. An orbiting camera-eye captured the image and sent it down, into the guts of Tombo.

“Ouch,” a man in a yellow business suit said, watching the playback of the image. He looked down at one of the bee-keeper technicians. “This is not going well.”

“We underestimated the endurance of the entity-”

“It’s got a LOVEjones,” one of the other bee-keepers said. He tapped the instrument panel before him. “That thing is fairly glowing strawberry.”

“Well, that explains that.” The business suit looked at the second bee-keeper. “Love Jones?”

“I have Netflix.”

“Ah.” The business suit rubbed his chin, musing on the nature of LOVE. A confusing business all around really. He was glad that they had left that bit out of his mix, all in all.

Vol. 2, #10  
October 2009  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"THE TOWN THAT WALKS-"

Written by Josh Reynolds

The AIM facility, a loose collection of bubble pods, appeared in the air over Tombo, carried in a cool blast of Tunguska air. Inside, a bevy of anthropomorphized animals, a woman in white and one shrieking spell-ghost felt gravity catch them.

Howard the Duck cursed as he felt the building begin to tumble. He grabbed twin handfuls of the Beast of Berlin's fur and said, "What the hell is going on?"

"Emergency shunt," the ape snarled, swimming through the air towards a control panel. "We're being pink-slipped!"

"Fired? Inconceivable!" the Scarlet Beetle squawked.

"I do not think that word means what you think it means, to quote Mandy Patinkin," the White Rabbit said. She looked at the Strawberry Man. "Do something!"

"I-I-I-I-" the Strawberry Man said, hovering helplessly. His insane energy was gone, as if it had never been. He was thinner somehow, stretched at the molecules, and dancing on the edge on nonexistence. This was not part of the prophecy. Not the way things should go.

"Figures. Disc always skips right at the good part," Howard said. He looked back at the Beast. "How do we get out of this?"

"I'm thinking. We should have already exploded-"

"Imploded!" the Scarlet Beetle said.

"Does it matter right now?" Howard said.

"Depends on whether you care how your remains are strewn across the known universe," the Beast said. "Regardless, something has gone wrong."

"Which means?"

"We won't die swiftly, in a flash of light, but instead will plummet to the earth, trapped screaming inside a ball of steel where, upon impact, we will be reduced to nigh-formless jelly."

"Right." Howard closed his eyes for a second, then opened them. "Who can fly?"

“Moo.” The Hellcow flapped its hooves.

“Really? Cape’s not just for show then?”

“Moo!”

“Fine. Do the flappity-flap thing and grab the bunny,” Howard said, shoving the White Rabbit towards the Hellcow. He looked at the Beast and the Beetle. “Two out of the way. Can we open this tin can up?”

“Of course! But why?” the Beetle said, arms crossed. “How do you hope to escape?”

“This is a secret base isn’t it? Don’t you have jetpacks or something in here?” Howard flapped his arms and spun in a circle. “Rocket sleds? Escape pods?”

“I-” the Beetle began. He looked at the Beast. “Do we?”

“Yes, but-”

“Great! Let’s the rest of us get to them!”

“One question,” the Beast said. Howard gave him a gimlet eye.

“What?”

“Can you pilot Mandroid armor?”

Tombo stirred. The ground shook.

Bev stepped out from around the bar, gun held by her side. Shaun dropped the unconscious Cataphract he’d been pummeling and stepped to her side. Outside, more Cataphracts awaited. Mandroids, as well. And MODOCs-Mobile Organisms Designed Only for Combat-aplenty. All to apprehend one Jewish American Princess, one Hell-forged handgun, and one Mindless mockery of manhood.

Bev whistled.

“Surrender. Please,” the lead Mandroid said.

“I just wanted to call a cab,” Bev said. “And not get shot at. Is that so wrong?”

“Ms. Switzer, if you’ll come with us, this whole thing can be explained. Just put down the-ah-gun? Is that a gun?-and come with us-”



Shaun's eye flared. The Mandroid stepped back, raising his energy gauntlet. "Call it off, Ms. Switzer."

"Sorry champ, he's a rebel without a cause," she said, tapping her hip with the gun. "And I recognize you guys from the television news. All that yellow armor and the cyborgs and such. You guys are Hydra, right?"

"AIM, actually," a Cataphract said.

"There's a difference?"

"Seriously?" The Cataphract looked at the Mandroid, then back at Bev. "Really. Seriously?"

"What? Did I hit a nerve?"

"Do we look like Nazis?"

"AIM are Nazis?"

"Hydra are Nazis!" the Cataphract said, his energy sword sizzling as he stabbed at the air. "We're AIM!"

"Communists?"

"Scientists!" the Cataphract said.

"I'm Jewish, actually," another Cataphract said.

"But you blew up that bar," Bev said. The Cataphract nodded.

"With science!"

"As opposed to Hydra, who blow things up with the power of National Socialism?" Bev said, fingers to her lips.

"Yes! No," the Cataphract slumped. "Wait. Gary?" He looked at the Mandroid.

"I'm Sandra, Tom," the Mandroid said.

"I'm not Tom. I'm Carl." The Cataphract sounded insulted.

"Why do you sound insulted?" another Cataphract, presumably Tom, said. "Would it be so bad, being me?"

"You have a gun for a face!"

“I still have feelings!”

“Damn it Carl,” Sandra the wo-Mandroid said. “Stop picking on Tom!”

“Gary-”

“Sandra, damn it!”

“Sorry, you all look alike!”

“What, you think all Asians look alike-”

“I’m black,” another Mandroid said.

“Stay out of this Gary! This is between me and Carl!” Sandra said.

“It’s the armor! You all look like eggs with legs!” Carl said, looking around desperately.

“I can’t help my bodyshape!” a third Mandroid yelled.

“Phyllis, I didn’t mean-I was just saying-”

“Misogynist!” Sandra said.

“Oh just shut up-” Carl looked around. “Crap. Where’d they go?”

As one, the group turned. Shaun was running slowly past them, Bev carried over one flat shoulder. She waved. Tom, the Cataphract with a gun for a face, waved back. Carl hit him.

“Would somebody please go after them?”

The dark, thumping heart of Tombo.

“We have really got to organize a corporate retreat,” the business suit, known to his associates as Smith-6, said. “I mean honestly. That’s-”

“Normal workplace tension. Nothing to worry about,” a technician said. “Buncha crybabies.”

“Tom?”

“Yeah. It’s not like he was great looking before, right? Think he’d be happy.”

“Still. Gun-face.”

“Plasma arc, actually.”

“What’s it do?”

“Shoots plasma. In an arc.”

“So...a gun then.” Smith-6 loosened his tie. “This is why I’m glad I’m a clone.” He ran his hands through his hair and spun on one heel. Behind him seventeen mirrors, positioned according to the lost H’Naggai Prophecies, sat in the center of a modified Carnacki Pentagram. Lasers bounced between mirrors, and a coruscating gamma-flow field contained the whole set-up. And, at the center of it all, crouched in a web of criss-crossing lasers, the Red Rajah.

“How are you feeling?” Smith-6 said.

“Release me! The LOVE craves freedom!”

“Momentarily, minutely,” Smith-6 said. “When we say, how we say. Is that so wrong?”

“You cannot control LOVE!”

“We’re AIM. We develop intelligent suns before breakfast and convince them to commit suicide by lunch. There’s very little we can’t do, my friend.” Smith-6 fiddled with his tie and frowned. “See, this is how it’s going to go. We’re going to capture your friend-Ms. Switzer, I mean-and then we’re going to threaten her with involuntary bodily modification if you don’t do what we want. Crude, but I’m betting there’s enough alien loose in that magic ghost brain of yours to ride to cooperation station, am I right?”

“Release me and feel my LOVE,” the Rajah said, pressing against the mystic barrier which held him.

“If only my lawyer were here,” Smith-6 said. “If that’s not grounds for a sexual harrasment suit right there, I-” He stopped, then turned to the technician. “Did that science facility ever land?”

“What science facility?”

“I never thought I’d die this way,” Garko the Man-Frog said, watching as Howard aimed the Gauss rifle he’d found among the tumbling debris. The weapon was the size of a canoe paddle and as wide as the fowl that held it. It could cut through titanium like butter and made adamantium molecules dance nervously. Trust AIM to leave it laying around where anyone could get to it. “I figured something with a highway and a truck. Maybe a particularly persistent French chef-”

“You’re awfully maudlin for a nigh-indestructible amphibian,” Howard said, trying to aim while spinning in the air. “Help me aim this.”

“Why?”

“We need to get out of here before this thing hits the ground, so I’m making a door,” Howard said. “How the hell do you fire this thing?”

“Push the red button!” the Scarlet Beetle said, swimming towards them. “It’s always the red button!”

“This is a bad idea,” the Beast of Berlin said from within a suit of Mandroid armor that had seen better days. “This model hasn’t seen an engineer’s touch in decades. I’m not even sure the thrusters work!”

“Good time to find out then,” Howard said. He looked at the Hellcow. “You know what to do?”

“Moo.”

“You better.”

“Such concern,” the White Rabbit said. “One would almost think you’ve grown attached to me, Ducky-”

“Don’t call me that!” Howard snapped. “You don’t get to call me that.” He spun, glaring at the Strawberry Man, who was floating nearby, eyes unfocused, mouth hanging open. He looked empty and almost nonexistent. “Somebody grab that.”

Garko obligingly wrapped his long arms around the homonoculous. Froggy lips wrinkled away from froggy teeth. “He feels like a wet trashbag. What has happened to him?”

“He’s a magic spell,” Howard said. “Only someone cut off the magic and now the spell is fading.” He looked around. “We ready?”

“Moo!”

“Boom-shaka-lacka,” Howard said, pulling the trigger.

The wall exploded and the sky reached in and pulled the guts out of the tumbling facility, taking every living thing inside with it.

“Whoa!” the technician said.

“What? What?” Smith-6 said, leaning over the man’s work station.

“Massive energy surge above us!”

“The Tunguska facility?” Smith-6 said. The technician shook his head.

“Maybe, but it should have imploded, not-Geez!”

“What now?”

“It’s heading right for us!” The technician slapped a button on his console. Alarms began to blare. “Citizens of Tombo! Brace for impact!”

“Citizens-there’s just us here!” Smith-6 looked around, as the other technicians gripped the edges of their workstations with their best Star Trek poses. “What are you doing? We’ve got enough shielding to hold off the Celestials!”

“We live here, we’re citizens,” the technician said. “This is home and no one is going to take it away!”

“You’re from a cloning facility in Burbank!”

“Impact in T-minus 6 seconds-”

“Craaaaap!” Smith-6 was flustered. He looked around desperately, then grabbed the technician and closed his eyes. He wondered if any of the other Smiths had to deal with days like this.

A chuckle caused his eyes to pop open. He turned. The Red Rajah floated in his prison, seated on the air in an upside down lotus position.

“You find this funny?”

“Don’t you?”

“Is that a town down there?” the White Rabbit said, hanging from the talons of a bovine bat.

“Mooeep,” the Hellcow said.

“Delightful! Let us land, my fine blood-sucking bovine bernadeth, and see what there is to see!” The White Rabbit clapped her hands gleefully.

“Meeoop!”

“What? What is-” The White Rabbit twisted in the bat-cow’s talons. The sun was rising over the distant mountains. “Oh. Oh my.” The Hellcow spun, wings whipping around as the first of the solar rays clawed at her supernatural flesh and dove towards the town below.

For their part, the rest of the group clung to the Mandroid being piloted by the Beast. Howard, crouching on the armored suit’s shoulders. The Beetle, clinging to Howard’s shoulders. And Garko, holding on to a tangle of wires that extended from the decommissioned suit’s internal workings.

“We need to get out from under the wreckage!” Howard said, shouting into the open helmet. The Beast snarled wordlessly and fumbled with the controls. Howard looked up, eyes widening

slightly as he took in the rate that the remains of the facility were plummeting towards them. He shook the helmet. “Serpentine, Sheldon! Serpentine!”

“It’s hard enough to drive this thing without you shaking my telemetry all over the place!” the Beast snarled. “Backseat driver!”

“Communist!”

“And proud of it!” the Beast roared. He yanked on a control stick and the armor did an abrupt barrel roll, swinging sideways, avoiding a chunk of debris. The Hellcow flapped past, circling the armor, the White Rabbit clinging to the creature’s talons for dear life.

“Look out! Look out!” she shrieked as the bat-cow flapped past the others frantically. Howard looked up again, knowing he was going to regret it.

“Oh son of a-”

The facility groaned as it cut through the air, hurtling towards the town below. The Town, for its part, wondered about the keening whistle of the facility’s passage, and cracked open one massive eye.

Tombo blinked and the Tunguska facility hit it dead in the eye, exploding into burning pinwheels that scattered for miles.

Tombo raised a hand made of North Street and rubbed its face. As awakenings went, it was a rude one. And Tombo was not a morning person.

Tombo sat up and roared.

...

See? Just like we promised.

TO BE CONTINUED...

NEXT ISSUE: Tombo Prowls! The Red Rajah busts loose! The Defenders reunited for the first time, for the last time! AIM cuts its losses! Prepare for the coming of the Auditor! Battle for the City that Walks as a Man! Be here in thirty for '-FALLS LIKE A KING!'

Tombo, the Town That Walked Like A Man, awoke from its dreamless slumber and began to clamber upright. A mouth made of brick, pipe and parking meters opened in a roar like a cement mixer falling off a cliff.

It pawed at the burning remnants of the AIM facility that had crashed into its eye and bellowed again, shocking the pigeons nesting in its head into flight. Fingers made of dead-end roads scraped, dislodging metal and plastic.

Vision restored, Tombo took a thunderous, faltering step. Then, another. And another. Trees bent and burst under the weight of the ambulatory town as it made its way forward.

There was somewhere Tombo had to be. Somewhere it had forgotten to go. But now it remembered. Tombo walked.

In the midst of the debris just below Tombo's eye, Howard the Duck clung from a jutting support beam, staring down at the ground far below his kicking flippers. "Crap," he said. He looked up.

"Duck," Garko said, looking down. The man-frog crouched above him, eyes glowing evilly, fangs bared in a grin. "It looks as if you could use a hand."

"And you could use a breath mint," Howard said, pulling himself up onto the beam. "Where are the others?"

"Dead, possibly." Garko shrugged, sending a shower of broken metal and glass sliding down towards Howard. "But I live. And you live. At least for now. So perhaps we should finish our business, hmmm?"

"Really? You still on that?" Howard rose to his feet, balancing precariously. He pointed at Garko. "Now? While we're riding the eyeball of a giant man made of buildings. Now is the time you pick."

"Good time as any, fowl," Garko said, tensing to spring.

"No. No it ain't. It is, in fact, the worst F@\*\$\*ING TIME YOU COULD PICK!" Howard said, shaking his fists. Garko hesitated. Howard sprang from his perch and grabbed on to a nearby window sill. He jerked the window open and slid inside. After a moment, he stuck his head back out. "Are you coming?"

"I-"

"Fine. Have fun getting down." Howard made to close the window.

"Wait!" Garko scrambled towards him. "I'm coming, you detestable duck."

“Good. Glad to hear it. Let’s find the others.”

Vol. 2, #11  
January 2010

Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"-FALLS LIKE A KING!"

Written by Josh Reynolds

The White Rabbit awoke and looked up into the slavering maw of bovine oblivion. “You are drooling, madam,” she said. The Hellcow, perched on her haunches, looked slightly sheepish.

“Moo.”

“Why thank you. I have, in fact, always believe that my neck was my best feature,” the White Rabbit said, tossing her hair and crawling to her feet. “I can’t see the sun. Where are we?”

“Moo.”

“Really? It got up? Just like that?”

“Moo.” The Hellcow shrugged, her hooves clicking together. Her crimson eyes glowed eerily as she looked around.

“Fascinating.” The White Rabbit scratched her head, then, frowning, straightened her ears. “Where are the others?”

“Here,” came the simian grunt. The Beast of Berlin thrust aside a chunk of debris and shook himself. He extended his hand and opened his palm. “And here.”

The Scarlet Beetle unrolled from within the ape’s palm. “We survived. No thanks to your piloting skills you hairy bungler!”

“I can still squash you,” the Beast rumbled, making to close his fingers. The Beetle squawked and hopped onto a jutting shard of metal. The ape looked at the others. “Where are the duck and the frog?”

“Right here,” Howard said, clambering through the wreckage, followed by Garko. “Where’s the magic-man?”



“If you are referring to me-e-e, then I-I-I am right here-ear,” the Strawberry Man said. He seemed to bleed into visibility, flickering like falling rain. Ruby teeth glinted between pink lips. “Momentary mechanical difficulties, nothing more.”

“Yeah.” Howard looked at the Beast of Berlin. “Your bosses-AIM-they’re here?”

“Somewhere, yes,” the ape said, dubiously. “But with-”

“I can find them,” the Scarlet Beetle said. “The question is, why should I, hmmm?”

The Strawberry Man was suddenly there, beside the beetle, his fingers closing around its tiny form. “Because it is Necessary.” He looked at the others. His face no longer resembled Stephen Strange’s, or, indeed, any face at all. It was just eyes and a grinning mouth. The spell was breaking down.

“Oh yeah? And why is that?” Howard said. He pointed at the sentient spell. “Why is any of this necessary?”

“LOVE is close, and when everyone is feeling LOVEly and groovy, everything will be better,” the Strawberry Man said. “You’ll see!” He looked down at the beetle in his hand. “Fly, little friend, lead us to LOVE and understanding!”

“Report! Damn it, report!” Smith-6, project leader and clone, barked at the bee-keeper drones clad in canary.

“Tombo is active!” one said, climbing back up towards his consol. The whole control room had seemingly flipped on its side, and sparks and debris shuffled down as the reverberations of Tombo’s distant steps shook everything.

“I can see that, thank you, where is he going, please?” Smith-6 said.

“Umm-ah-”

“Where is that, exactly?”

“If he stays on course, at this speed, we’ll be arriving at Monster Isle in exactly four hours,” the drone said. Smith-6 slapped his head.

“Damn it!”

An alarm began to blare, and the man in the yellow business suit spun, his horrified gaze finding the electric pentacle where the Red Rajah squatted, cross-legged. The Rajah leaned forward, and Smith-6 turned back to the drones. “The wards, somebody check the wards!”

“Wards are holding, but we’re getting geo-synch slippage!” a drone yelled.

“English, please!”

“The farther we go from where the wards were originally set up, the weaker they get. We were using a ley-line interface and if Tombo leaves its radius...” the drone trailed off. Smith-6 frowned.

“What happens?”

“LOVE actually,” the Red Rajah said. “I told you, little clone. You cannot hold back the Age of LOVE.”

“What’s the status on our people in the field? Anyone manage to scrape up Switzer before Tombo got up?” Smith-6 said, ignoring the Rajah.

“I don’t-” a drone began. “Wait! Wait, I’ve got a signal!”

“Is it one of ours?”

“Looks like a Mandroid recall signal.” The drone turned. “Should I signal for a bodyslide?”

“At this point, I’m for grasping at whatever shred of hope exists-yes, please,” Smith-6 said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “They better have her.”

They did. Sort of.

The Mandroid arm clanked down onto the teleportation platform, wrapped around the unconscious, bloody form of Beverly Switzer, actress, and wielder of the Six-Shot Satanic Sidewinder Salvo Stuttgart, also known as the Snuffling Gun. A gun that perked up as it realized where it was, and lifted itself, and Switzer’s arm.

It hissed, rattling its cylinders.

“Oh hell,” Smith-6 said. The gun replied with a snarl and the slug bounced back and forth, criss-crossing the control room like a drunken hornet before finally plunging into a control consol, which exploded in a shower of sparks.

The wards surrounding the Red Rajah began to sputter and fade.

“Oh hell,” Smith-6 said again.

Shaun the Mindless One awoke as the darkness turned crimson. His single great cyclopean eye blinked, then focused, first on the power cables and bent water pipes holding him trapped, then on the small, single file line of beings traveling below, winding their way along what had been the town’s sewer system and now was Tombo’s small intestine.

The Scarlet Beetle flitted through the tunnels, followed closely by the others. The Strawberry Man came last, hovering several inches off the ground. Howard and the White Rabbit led the way. Howard was hunched over, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Oh cheer up,” the White Rabbit said. “We’re going forward. Forward is better than backwards any day of the week, isn’t it?”

“Depends on what’s ahead of us,” Howard said.

Shaun’s eye flared, and the debris restraining him turned to slag. He fell, crashing down in front of the group. “Holy-” Howard scrambled backwards as Shaun rose to his feet.

“What is it?” Garko snarled. He shoved past Howard and the White Rabbit and bounded towards the Mindless One. Shaun didn’t move as the frog crashed into him and bounced backwards.

“The last piece of our puzzle,” the Strawberry Man said, floating forwards. “Now let’s all come together. We have the duck, the rabbit, the frog, the cow, the bug, the ape and the vessel, all together again, for the first time, the last time.” He clapped ethereal hands together, smiling widely. “LOVE is in the air!”

Shaun peered up at the Strawberry Man, then turned and began to plod away. The Strawberry Man blinked, then whirled. “Follow him!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep your shirt on,” Howard said. He looked back at the others. “Okay. Here’s the deal. I’m going to get my friends back. And my rock. That’s it. No prophecy fulfilling. No freeing a rampaging demi-god. None of that.”

“And?” the Beast of Berlin said.

Howard pulled his confiscated pistol out of his coat and thumbed back the hammer with an audible ‘click’. “And, if any of you get any ideas in that regard, I’ll shoot you in the head.”

“Eep,” the White Rabbit said.

“Damn right eep.” Howard turned, glaring up at the Strawberry Man. “After you, Jeeves.”

“You can’t deny the LOVE, Howard,” the Strawberry Man said, frowning.

“I can deny anything, red. I’m a professional,” Howard said, stalking past the floating figure.

It was all making sense now, of course. It always did in the fifth hour. That was what Strange said, that was the way it worked with magic. Prophecies only made sense in hindsight, and this one was more confusing than normal because it was random. The only reason he was here was because the curse-the spell-whatever it was, had been convinced that he would be the perfect tool in getting it where it needed to go to do what it needed to do.

Whatever that was.

The others were here for the same reason. Necessary because there needed to be components for the spell to work, but chosen for their-what? Randomness, probably. Gullibility, in some cases. None of which explained why he was going along with it. He knew what was at stake. And the kid-even Bev-were nothing when you put them up against the fate of things. Strange would have let them die or whatever.

Howard frowned. Then, he didn't really care about the world, did he? No. All he really cared about was his friends. He didn't have many, after all. Everyone else could go hang.

"Ms. Switzer. Please wake up. Your gun is growing agitated," Smith-6 said. Bev groaned and stirred, rubbing her head. She felt like a herd of Jewish grandmothers were doing a two-step on her cerebral cortex, and not in a good way.

"Ow," she said.

"Yes. The gun?"

Bev looked at the man in the yellow business suit, then down at the gun in her hand. The gun clicked. She climbed to her feet. "Where am I?" she said.

"The heart of the matter," Smith-6 said. He looked around the ruined control room and snapped his fingers. Two drones stepped forward, hefting plasma rifles. "Drop that...pistol, Ms. Switzer, please, thank you."

Bev sighed and dropped the pistol to the platform. "Ya got me, Sheriff. I surrender."

"My name is Smith. Smith-6, to be exact." He looked at her. "I am not a sheriff."

"It was a joke."

"Oh. Ha," Smith-6 gestured for her to step forwards. "I do wish to apologize for this. But, well, we're out of time and luck, so desperate measures are called for." He had a bulky looking pistol and he aimed at her. "Please come here."

"I got a choice?"

"Not even remotely."

Smith-6 took hold of her arm and yanked around so that she was facing the dais. He pressed the pistol's barrel to her head. "Now. You just settle down."

"I'm settled," Bev said.

“Not you. Him,” Smith-6 said. The Red Rajah had uncoiled and was standing, his palms pressed flat against the fading mystical barriers. “Settle down, or she dies.”

“Why should he care?”

“Beverly,” the Rajah said, his featureless ruby mask dissolving, revealing the pale features of Aquarian. Bev gasped. The Rajah reached out a hand, his fingers puncturing the wards like thin ice. A cracking sound filled the air. The room shuddered, and equipment sparked.

“Oh,” Bev said, softly. “Oh, Wundar. What have you done?”

“Given in to the LOVE.” The Rajah stepped back, his mask reappearing. “Let her go.”

“No. No, I think not. Calm down, and we might let her live-”

“Bev!”

Smith-6, still holding Bev, whirled around. The hatch to the control room had fallen open during Tombo’s rise. Howard stood in the entry way, pistol aimed at Smith-6. “Let her go!”

“Damn it! Drop the gun!” Smith-6 said, trying to shrink himself behind Bev. The AIM drones stepped up, hefting their weapons. “Drop it now!”

“Sir, should we-” one of the drones said.

“No! Not yet. Not unless we have to.” Smith-6 brandished his weapon. “Drop it duck! No one has to get hurt.”

“Pain is LOVE,” the Red Rajah said, striking the wards with a fist. More sparks jumped. Smith-6 whirled back around.

“I thought I told you to settle down!”

“The LOVE wants to be free,” the Strawberry Man said, sliding past Howard and lunging for Smith-6. The Accountant of AIM spun, firing instinctively. The Strawberry Man exploded into crimson blobs of ectoplasm. The blobs hit the floor and went liquid, slithering towards the dais. The others crowded into the room.

“Everyone is here. LOVE is in the air,” the Red Rajah said, stepping back. The wards crackled and began to dim. Tombo’s heavy footfalls changed timbre. One of the AIM drones looked at the screens hanging all over the room.

“We’re in the Pacific! Tombo is heading home!”

“No!” Smith-6 stepped back as the Red Rajah stepped off the dais. “The wards-”

“Free LOVE,” the Red Rajah said, stretching out a hand.

“Nothing’s free, kid. I thought I taught you that,” Howard said, firing his pistol. The Red Rajah staggered and turned.

“Howard-”

“What are you doing?” the White Rabbit said, snatching for the gun. “We’re here to help him, not-”

“Help him do what? Turn reality into a giant-sized love-in?” Howard shoved her out of the way. “Nuts to that, sister!” Garko took a swipe at him, and he scrambled away.

“Protestations aside, fowl, we made a deal, and the Rajah will honor or Garko will squash him as easily as he does YOU!” the frog said, bounding forward. Howard streaked between the two AIM drones, who, in panic, fired at Garko. The frog bellowed as he was struck. He reeled back.

The Hellcow shoved forward, slamming into one of the drones, her fangs nipping at his wide helmet. The Beast of Berlin loped towards Smith-6, murder in his eyes, but the Scarlet Beetle beat him there. “You tried to kill us!” the Beetle shrieked. “For that I’m going to personally-”

Shaun’s beam scattered them all an instant later. He stomped through the crowd of dazed and limp forms, reaching for Bev and Smith-6. Howard, having avoided the blast, bounced forward, catching Smith-6 in the back of the legs. He fell with a yelp. Shaun grabbed Bev. The Red Rajah grabbed Shaun.

“Release her. She belongs to me,” the Rajah said. The Mindless One backhanded the Rajah, knocking him aside. Howard scooped up the Snuffling Gun, which clicked in greeting as he rolled across the floor and took aim at the Mindless One.

“Hey Ducky, how about a helping hand,” Bev said as Shaun picked her up.

“Gimme a minute, Bev,” Howard said.

Something beeped. Everyone stopped. Smith-6 got to his feet, his face mournful. “Damn it. We’re out of time.” His body began to shake. “This operation is officially scraAAPPAUCK-” Smith-6’s form blurred and seemed to spread like a stain. His suit ripped and fell away as his form bulked out.

The White Rabbit grabbed one of the drones and shook him. “What’s going on?”

“He’s been replaced! The project has been scrapped! We’re all dead!” the drone said, grabbing at her wrists. “All of us!”

The Scarlet Beetle and the Beast of Berlin shared a look. “The Auditor,” they both said, at the same time.

“LOVE-” the Red Rajah said, rising to his feet. A yellow fist sent him crashing back to the ground. The fist was attached to a massively muscled humanoid with the face of a born accountant and the build of the Hulk.

“-Is not in the budget,” the Auditor said, cracking its knuckles. “Operations are suspended indefinitely. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

Electricity rolled off the Auditor, striking out at all angles. Far above and out and around, Tombo, waist deep in the Pacific Ocean, suddenly staggered. Lightning crawled up the creature’s spine and sparked in its brain. Tombo clutched its skull.

And then, Tombo screamed.

TO BE CONTINUED...

NEXT ISSUE: This is it! The final issue! Will Tombo make it home? Will the Red Rajah find LOVE with Beverly Switzer? Will the Auditor-uhm-audit something? Yes to all of those, but not in the way you think, or maybe exactly in the way you think, depending on how you think!

Once, there was LOVE. Then, it was blasted, burned and blazed away. Scoured from the surface by the flames of Faltine, leaving only wreckage in its wake. Ash shadows that drifted across a broken plain.

Those who had known LOVE now knew only the ache of not-love. Mindless, soulless, they crashed against existence, hungry for they knew not what.

Until now.

It had been an accident of cosmic humbuggery. Vast forces nudging small dominos in a game that would only mean something in a hundred years or a thousand. The little ripples that made up entropy. A lone Mindless One, left by a careless Faltine at the sight of a battle with the wielder of the Star of Capistan. A battle which had pushed said wielder just enough, to allow LOVE in.

Pieces on a game board, moving, moving.

Shaun the Mindless One howled in his head as he glared at the LOVE made flesh. Everything that had once been his-and by extension, his race's-within easy reach. The missing piece of a cosmic puzzle. Flickers of red lightning, invisible to every eye but Shaun's, struck his sloped skull, firing dormant wounds into painful life.

End game.

Shaun looked at Beverly Switzer, in his arms, then at the Red Rajah, on the ground at his feet. And then, finally, at the yellow-skinned Auditor of AIM. Shaun's eyes flashed and a beam of crackling energy lashed out, striking the muscle-bound Auditor and staggering it.

The Auditor shook away the smoke of the blast and grimaced. "I understand how you feel, sir, but causing a scene is never the answer."

Shaun slung Bev aside and charged. Auditor and Mindless One crashed together in a flurry of blows.

Tombo, the Town That Was Walking Home, staggered again, clutching itself. It screamed again, sounding like a million voices, yelling through a million bullhorns, and began to sink to its knees in the Pacific Ocean.

Vol. 2, #12  
February 2010  
Marvel 2000 Proudly presents...

"IT ALL MAKES SENSE IF YOU START AT THE BEGINNING"

Written by Josh Reynolds



Howard the Duck watched the fight, and shook his head. He stuffed the Snuffling Gun into his coat pocket and went to help Bev. “What the hell is going on?” she said.

“Same as ever, kiddo,” Howard said. “Lots of crazy, not a lot of comprehension.”

“Oh good. For a moment, I thought we’d lost the plot.”

“Plot is the last refuge of the terminally creative,” the White Rabbit said, crouching nearby. “All in all, I wish I’d stayed with the Jabberwock.” She hefted a discarded particle rifle.

“And I wish I’d left you there,” Howard said. “What are you doing with that?”

“Going to join the rumpus, of course,” she said, giggling. “Calloo, callay, it’s going to be a wonderful dayEEK!” She squealed as she was hoisted into the air by Garko, who glared first at her, then at Howard.

“What is going on, duck?” Garko snarled.

“Why ask me?”

“Moo,” the Hellcow said.

“What she said,” Garko added. Howard looked at them both and shook his head.

“Fine. Magic is going on. I tried to tell you idiots, but you didn’t listen. We’re the moving parts in a magical mechanism. We’ve done our job, and now it’s time to go.”

“Go where, exactly?” the Beast of Berlin said. He was crouched in front of a nearby computer screen, his fingers flickering over the keyboard. “We’re in the middle of the ocean!”

“Monster Island,” the Scarlet Beetle said, zipping through the group. “This town is a biological anomaly, and it’s following an ancient instinct. All the big ones have it. Groot. Goom. Gorgilla. Eventually, they all go home.”

“And it’s taking us with it. Wonderful,” Garko said. He looked at Howard. “So what do we do?”

“Again, why ask me?” Howard said, looking thoughtfully at the fight between the Auditor and the Mindless One. He looked at the Beast. “What the hell is that thing?”

“His name is Shaun,” Bev said.

“The other thing!”

“The Auditor. It’s a pre-programmed assault mode, built in to every AIM supervisor-drone. Based on gamma mutation principles,” the Beast said. He grunted. “Never seen one in action before.”

“If we leave, we don’t have to see it now!” the Scarlet Beetle said. “Those things can level cities, if they’ve got the proper authorization!”

“Does this one?” Howard said.

“Maybe,” the Beetle said. “Who knows? Smith-6 wasn’t very high up in the food chain, but-”

The Mindless One tumbled past, scattering the group. The Auditor stalked towards them. “Cost-cutting principles remain the same at every level of the enterprise. Downsizing will help stabilize our bottom line during these troubled times.”

“He means us,” the Beast of Berlin said, helpfully.

“I got that, thank you,” Howard said. “No need to have security see us out, we can find the door.”

The Auditor lunged, one big canary fist crunching through the floor. Howard jumped aside, reaching for the gun in his coat. Garko bellowed and bounced onto the Auditor, but was swatted aside.

“We will need to work together to beat it,” the Beast snarled. Howard laughed.

“Of course we will,” he said, taking aim with the Snuffling Gun. “Because that’s how this goes. It just keeps throwing threats at us, until we get to the end.”

“End of what?” Bev said.

“LOVE,” the Red Rajah said, pulling himself to his feet, his crimson cloak flaring around him. “And the end is only the beginning.”

“Annoying cryptic subtext-check,” Bev said, looking for cover. The Red Rajah made a grab for her, but a blast from the rifle in the White Rabbit’s hands sent him sprawling.

“Grabby, groping gods get gadzooked,” she said, stepping back to stand beside Bev. “I’m Alice. Didn’t I see you in Bandersnatch Blues?”

“You saw that?” Bev said, hefting a chair. “Did you think the monologue was too much?”

“Not enough, really.”

“What does that thing do?” Howard said, grabbing the Scarlet Beetle.

“It’s got reactive synergy, based on Adaptoid technology,” the insect said, struggling to free itself. “It assesses a situation, then makes the necessary-ah-adjustments!” Howard turned.

“Great. Okay, here’s what I want you to do-”

“Moo,” the Hellcow said, barreling into the Auditor from behind, as the Beast of Berlin wrapped hairy arms around its thick neck. The Auditor grabbed a handful of the ape’s cover-alls and yanked it forward, slamming it into the Hellcow. Both fell in a tangle. The Auditor turned.

The Scarlet Beetle thrummed past it, catching its attention, pulling it around. Howard shot it. The Snuffling Gun yowled. The Auditor staggered, looking down at the orange serum leaking from the wound.

“Unexpected expenses,” it said, frowning.

“Risks of the market,” Howard said, skipping backwards as the Auditor stepped towards him. He glanced over his shoulder, trying to determine where the Rajah was. “Here’s another one.” As the Auditor sprang at him, Howard rolled out of the way. The Auditor slammed into the Red Rajah and both of them went careening through the wall.

“Weren’t you coming here to save him?” the White Rabbit said.

“I am,” Howard said. “Trust me.”

Tombo was on all fours now, shaking its head. Everyone inside the AIM base was thrown sideways as the Town roared out in pain. “Crap,” Howard said. “We need to get out of here!” Water flooded into the room, lapping at ankles and knees.

The Red Rajah held onto the edges of the hole he’d blown in Tombo’s belly, bracing himself against the Auditor’s blows. He’d erected a null-field moments before the creature had connected, but he could still feel the vibrations of each blow.

The Auditor had nothing in it of LOVE, no emotional web to pluck, no mind to beguile. It was nothing. Strong nothing.

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.

Inside the Rajah’s chest, the Star of Capistan cringed as another blow shook it in its red nest of crystalline tendrils. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. Aquarian was the Key. The host that would enable it to spread LOVE.

Why aren’t you tougher?

“What?” the Red Rajah said.

You heard me! You’re a super-baby! Alien Jesus with hippie hair! Why aren’t you able to fight rent-a-Hulk here?

“I-stop it! I need to concentrate!” the Red Rajah said. He strengthened his shield. “He-it-doesn’t have a mind or a soul! I can’t make him LOVE if he doesn’t even understand the concept!”

Strange would have beat it by now. It’s just a robot!

“Shut up. I am the Red Rajah! The Red Rajah!”

The blows came more rapidly. The Red Rajah glanced over his shoulder, at the waves lapping at Tombo below. Even with the null-field in place, he was being shoved backwards-

The Auditor’s hand passed through the field as it weren’t even there. Steely fingers fastened around the Rajah’s throat, cutting off his air. “Energy field analyzed. Compensating.” The Auditor yanked him forward. The Red Rajah struggled, sending slivers of crimson null energy into the Auditor’s form, trying to rip it apart.

Great. Perfect. Wonderful. Now we’re being strangled. Not LOVing this. No sir.

“I-ahck-I am forced to agree,” the Red Rajah said.

Oh good. Then you won’t mind when I do...THIS.

“What?” the Red Rajah looked down at his chest. The Star of Capistan pushed through his chest, rising from his robes. The Auditor focused on it, then, predictably, grabbed it, fingers digging into the Red Rajah’s chest.

Aquarian screamed as the red seeped away from him, draining and coiling around the Auditor. The Auditor dropped Aquarian and staggered, shaking its arm as if to dislodge the gem that had bonded itself to its palm.

Mmm. Organic, but mindless. Convenient.

“Alert! Hostile takeover! Alert the shareholders! Alert the shahaWWK!”

Do shut up. You were never more than a two-bit background character, and frankly, we’re all sick of you. You too.

The Auditor, body rippling with changes, kicked Aquarian’s limp form, rolling him towards the hole in Tombo’s belly.

You were a horrible host. Weak. Argumentative. If I’d wanted argumentative, I’d have stayed with-

“Me.”

“Howard,” the Auditor turned, cloak whirling around it. Only it wasn’t the Auditor. Not anymore. The Red Rajah flexed his hands. “Come to beg forgiveness?”

“Nope.” Howard was sitting on a jutting stump of machinery, hands behind his head, legs crossed. “Wondered if that would work.”

“Your idea, then?” The Red Rajah laughed. “Figures.”

“Kinda like old times, ain’t it. Just me and you and the kid.” Howard gestured at Aquarian. The Rajah looked down, and sniffed.

“I had high hopes for him.”

“Yeah. I know.” Howard tapped his forehead. “Why do you think Strange picked him?”

“Because I told him to, of course. Quietly. Subtly,” the Red Rajah said. “Where are the others, Howard?”

“Gone. Escape pod. While you were busy, we found one, and I shoved all the non-essential personnel into it. Bev. The frog. All of ‘em.”

“How...anti-climactic.”

“What I do best,” Howard spread his hands. “What? You thought we were going to have a big fight?”

“I’d hoped,” the Red Rajah said, crossing his arms. “I’ve been waiting to experience true physicality for ages-”

“Body-stealing not good enough?”

“Now that you mention it, no.”

“Strange knew you were in his head, you know,” Howard said, pulling a scrap of cigar from his coat and sticking it into his beak. He held up a finger and a flicker of flame sprouted from the tip. The Red Rajah blinked.

“You can’t do that.”

“Of course I can. Strange has been teaching me magic.” Howard shook his finger out and puffed on his cigar. “In between post-hypnotic trances.”

“What?”

“Strange has been Sorcerer Supreme for how long now? You don’t think he can’t tell when there’s a niggling crimson worm of intelligent spell burrowed into his subconscious,” Howard

said. He shook his finger. “That’d be stupid. He knew. And he countered it. You made a copy of him to craft that cockamamie prophecy in the first place-”

“Cockamamie? I’m quite proud of that, actually,” the Red Rajah protested.

“You would be. And Strange made a copy of your copy, and gave it to me in order to keep me updated on you,” Howard said, pointing.

“Wait. What? I would have known-” the Red Rajah began, shaking his head.

“You’re a rock. I’m surprised you came up with a plan in the first place.” Howard tapped ash on the surface beside him. “Good plan, though. Very open. Lots of confusion. Lots of coincidences. Nothing really to do but dig in and ride it out.”

“Which you did admirably. And now, with my new body, my vessel, I can finally do what I was created to do.” The Red Rajah spread his arms. “And I have you to thank.”

“Yep. You do. Of course, you’ve got the wrong vessel, but hey, no plan is perfect.”

“Wrong vessel? Organic. Mindless. Soulless. This thing was built for me.” The Red Rajah laughed. “And now, I think, I’ll fill you with more LOVE than your feathery little form can take.”

“Before you start spreading fluids, maybe you ought to take a look at this,” Howard said, holding up a jury-rigged looking device. It was blocky and trailing tubes and wires. “AIM never builds anything without a shut-off switch. One twitch, and I shut down that thing’s central cortex and trap you in a hunk of dead meat.”

“You-” The Red Rajah paused, head cocked. “Crap.”

“Yeah. Like I said, no fight.” Howard chuckled. “You put this whole deal together, but we gave it a few tweaks. Prophecies are awful specific, especially the little ones. You set it up so the right body would come to you, but instead of jumping into it, you took a rental.”

The Red Rajah was silent. Then, “I suppose that one is on the escape pod as well?”

Howard tapped his beak. The Red Rajah sighed. “And we both know my LOVEjones isn’t going to work on you. So, really, my only option at this point is to strangle you with my own two hands!” A fat spark of energy leapt from his palm, knocking the device from Howard’s hand. Howard ducked as the Red Rajah lunged for him.

“Kid! Now!”

A beam of pure null-energy punched through the Red Rajah’s chest, carrying the Star of Capistan with it. The Auditor crashed to the ground, off line. Aquarian, his palm pressed to the bloody hole in his chest, had risen to his knees. As he slumped, Howard caught him.

Crap! Crap! CrapcrapcrapCRAP! You're dead, duck! When I find a host-

The Star rolled across the floor and bounced off the foot of Shaun, who looked down at it. Howard wrapped his coat around Aquarian's mid-section. "There we go." He looked at Shaun. "Pick it up, big guy."

Wait, what? You're seriously going to let me-

"Quiet, you. Pick it up."

"Howard," Aquarian began. Howard put a hand on his shoulder.

"Easy kid. I know what I'm doing."

Shaun stooped and picked up the Star. It flashed with eagerness.

Perfect. The Chosen Vessel. The perfect host from which to spread the LOVE. You're done, duck. The prophecy is fulfilled!

"Yeah. About that," Howard said. Shaun shoved the Star into his eye socket. The Mindless One twitched and its gray skin became a deep crimson. It raised its arms.

I-I can't-what is this? What did you do? I can't-

"Doc figured it out after your last run-in," Howard said, crouching slightly. "He back-tracked your history, hunting your trail back through time and space. He figured out where you came from. Why you spout that crap about love." Howard crooked his fingers. "You're a like a tranquilizer. Created to control one of the most violent species in existence. And when someone decided that they wanted that species for a biological weapon, they chucked you into our dimension."

The Mindless One hunched, clutching at its head. Its skin rippled like glass under sunlight. Howard pressed on, relentless.

"You're mystic toxic waste. Excess matter. And Doc allowed you to set this gig up so that we could get you into a position to go home. Residual memories made you choose a Mindless One for a host. Because, hey, 'mindless' right?" Howard gestured. "Only they ain't. They're a hive mind. Vicious, psychopathic, and dumb as a million bricks, but a hive mind. And you're a part of it."

No. No!

The Mindless One staggered upright, groping blindly. Howard gestured again, sharply. Light emanated from his hands.

"Yes. Time to go home, pal. It was fun, but play-time is over. Go spread the good word among your own people," Howard said, sweeping his arms aside. He spat a string of garbled syllables





That's it. I'm done. Weird wasn't it? I started this series as an experiment, just to see how many strange Gerber characters I could re-introduce to M2K continuity in something approaching a cohesive (HA!) story. Consider it a gift. Garko. Hellcow. Aquarian. Plus a few others. What happens next? How will Howard and co. escape Monster Island? There they are, just waiting for someone else to pick them up and run with them and tell those stories.

Someone like you.

Go ahead...I dare you.

- Josh Reynolds