



# M2K Special Edition Cyberback

Collecting Fantastic Four #1-16 (Volume 2) by Alan Strauss



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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#1 (Volume 2)**

## **"WEIRD SCIENCE"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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The Fantasticar swooped down from the New York skyline, leveling off before a massive glass and steel spire.

The new Baxter Building was coming along nicely. Although still covered in trestlework and exposed girders, the construction phase was mostly finished, leaving only a giant steel number four to be hoisted into place by cranes.

Susan Richards reflected how pristine and peaceful it looked. A stark contrast from the chaotic scene on the streets below.

Her reverie was broken as an arc of flame shot out from around the southern edge of the building, causing the whole structure to glow. Her teammate, and brother, the Human Torch hovered into view.

"No go, Reed," he said. "The hangar door's stuck pretty good. I don't think it can be budged from outside. If you want though, I can always cut us a hole."

Her husband shook his head. As he did, Susan couldn't help but notice the dark circles under eyes. Had he gotten any sleep this last week?

"Best not, Johnny. We'll just have to go in through the front door."

"Ya sure, Stretch? That mob don't look too friendly."

"I'm sure. As long as everyone stays calm and keeps their head, we'll be fine."

The Thing nodded, operating the controls to reduce power to the lifts. Outside, Johnny gave them a thumbs-up and preceded the car down towards the crowded streets. Already the mob was reacting and Susan could see them yelling and pointing fingers their way. She closed her eyes and mentally crossed her fingers.

The last thing they needed was another incident.

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They landed on the sidewalk outside the building, still a good twenty feet from the doorway. Already the Fantastical was being pelted with stones and rotten fruit, while the more daring among the crowd slapped at the windows with their signs.

The one in front of Susan read: "Reed Richards - Baby Killer!" followed by another that depicted the Thing drawn like Frankenstein's creature with the slogan: "No More Frank-Science!"

After that, Sue stopped reading them.

"Ben, we're on crowd control. Remember, we don't want to hurt them."

"Awww, not even a little?"

"Save the levity until we're inside. Johnny, I want you to clear us a path when I give the signal."

"Gotcha," her brother replied over the comm-line.

"And what about me?" Sue asked.

"As soon as we're clear of the car, put a field around it. No telling what this crowd might do if we leave it out here unprotected. After that, take us inside."

She nodded and Reed touched the controls. The bubble hatch of the car slid back, exposing them to the shouts and curses of the angry mob. Immediately, a hail of objects came sailing at their heads only to burn up in mid-flight as Johnny incinerated them.

The team leapt into action, their movements as smooth as well-oiled machinery. Reed stretched out from the co-pilot's chair, his arms molding themselves into massive scoops as he pushed back the crowd. The Thing used his huge bulk to do likewise.

Now it was Susan's turn. Crawling out from the cockpit, she walked out onto the back of the Fantastical and concentrated. A thin, invisible force-field enveloped the vehicle from back to front, creating just the slightest tremor as it formed beneath her boots.

While she was doing this, one of the protesters separated himself from the crowd. He crawled up onto the Fantastical's wing and made a b-line for her. Susan saw him coming--could have handled him easily--but the Thing moved first.

Snatching the man up by the collar of his coat with one of his huge mitts, he snarled, "Going somewhere pally?" With a grunt, he tossed him gently into the crowd. Even at that, the man bowled five others over as he landed.

"Thanks, Ben."

"Definitely my pleasure, Suzie."

Seeing his wife was finished, Reed nodded to Johnny and her brother dove at the crowd, causing the protesters to scatter away from the door. As an added touch, he burned several of their signs into ash.

After that, their work was mostly finished. Susan formed an invisible tunnel through the corridor Johnny created, and then extended it around the ship. The mob was left to rage outside, unable to harass them further.

The whole operation took less than five minutes.

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"This is just plain ridiculous," the Thing complained as they marched through the lobby.

"Is it?"

"What, you're not actually taking them clowns outside seriously are you Reed? It's just a buncha media hoopla. You know how people are..."

"And how's that?"

"Oh, they love ya when you're pulling their butts from the fire. But just as soon as their hind quarters quit burning, they ain't got no more use for you. S'human nature, I guess."

Johnny rolled his eyes. For his part, Reed forced a smile, but made no comment as they passed through the security check.

The new Baxter Building was built so that anyone entering the main building via the lobby had to pass through a small security hallway, no bigger than an average waiting room. In a matter of seconds the visitor would be barraged by hundreds of sensors and run through the computer's vast databanks, which would then decide which--if any--of the building's rooms and facilities would be open to them. It was built this way so that the team's friends would be able access their archives and equipment, even if they were away on mission.

The whole process was so unobtrusive that Susan barely noticed it and they soon passed into the greeting room. It was still fairly shabby looking, with boxes stacked in towers and furniture covered in plastic wrap. Sue hadn't had a chance to arrange things since their return from Pittsburgh.\* While they could have easily afforded to hire an interior decorator and pro movers, she preferred to deal with things hands-on.

\* (Site of their previous HQ - Alan)

After all, the Baxter Building may have been residence to the world's greatest superhero team, but it was still a home. Her home, and she wanted it to feel that way.

"Ben, take Johnny, and see about opening the hangar manually."

Ben nodded and the two disappeared down one of the halls.

"Mom, Dad!"

Franklin peeked his head in from the living room. He was dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and--she saw to her disapproval--dirty gym socks. His hair gave the impression it may have been combed once, but certainly not within the last month.

"You guys are on the TV."

"No doubt, son," Reed replied, brushing past him towards the lab-wing, "but I don't have time to chat now. I need to remote-pilot the Fantastacar indoors."

Sue could hear the annoyance in her husband's voice and noted the surprise on Franklin's face. She quickly moved to cover for Reed, asking politely: "What are they saying, honey?"

Franklin shrugged and she followed him into the living room area. It too was still in disarray, although someone had taken time to clear off the couch and setup the TV and game systems. On the big screen, a news program was playing.

The onscreen text read: Live! Terror at the Baxter Building! Shaky footage of Ben tossing her would-be attacker away from the Fantastacar along with Johnny blitzing the crowd was being played in a loop. A breathless reporter kept babbling something about the Fantastic Four's violent overreaction to peaceful protesters.

Sue closed her eyes and sighed. Wonderful. More problems. It figured.

"They were playing Dad's interview all day too. The talk guys kept saying how *fatigued* he looked, whatever that means."

She thought about Reed, and the deep lines etched in his face as he'd rushed off to the labs. Fatigued.

That much, at least, was true.

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"...according to the DEA, it's now being used to smuggle drugs into this country, practically undetected. There's literally no means for law enforcement to combat it."

The TV screen was split three-ways, allowing news host Jackson Orizio to share a troubled expression with the audience. "Were you aware of that, Dr. Richards?"

The man in the first square shook his head. The info-blurb below him read: *Dr. Reed Richards, meta-science expert and Fantastic Four founder*, identifying him for the viewers at home.

"No, I was not," he replied. "I'm not even certain that information's entirely accurate..."

"But you did invent the technology in question?"

"Yes, but it's application was altogether different. It's main use was in studying the Micro-World..."

"The Micro-World?" Orizo repeated with amusement. "Which is?"

"Possibly one of the great discoveries of the last century. I don't know if we have time to go into specifics but--"

"Well, wait a minute here, just, excuse me," interrupted the man from the third and final square, a young professional with steel rimmed glasses and a crisp Caesar cut. The peevish expression he'd held during Richards' replies had turned to one of genuine annoyance. "I'm sorry, but may I speak?"

Orizio nodded. "Go ahead, Mr. Strawslinger."

"What we're hearing is exactly what I'm talking about. Reed Richards does not live in the real world. People like him do not live in the real world. The rest of us, however, do, and we have to try to live normal lives in the same community he unleashes his weird science on. This is precisely the point I'm trying to make."

Richards shifted awkwardly in his seat. "May I respond to that?"

"Just one moment," the host replied, glancing down at the notes he held. "Because I think this touches on the issue in question. According to Mr. Strawslinger's book, for example, a study by UNICEF found that in a recent flare-up between India and Pakistan over seventy percent of the weapons used contained technology that can be traced back to parts patented by you Dr. Richards."

The screen changed to stock footage of an anonymous man in a headscarf handling a futuristic rifle.

"Apparently one of these weapons is so powerful it can destroy an Abrams tank, one of the U.S. military's top performance vehicles. Is that right?"

Strawslinger nodded. "That's exactly right, Jackson."

"Now when you hear these sorts of things, Dr. Richards, what do you think?"

Richards shifted again, clearing his throat. "I don't know. I mean, I believe my work's being taken out of context here. I don't invent or sell weaponry."

"But your technology," the host pressed, "has been used to augment existing weaponry, far beyond the extent of conventional science. And now that weaponry is being used by some of the world's very worst, even superhuman, threats. Am I fair in saying that much?"

"Perhaps, it's possible, I haven't studied the relevant data. Either way a scientist can't be held responsible for every single use his technology is put to."

At this, Strawslinger threw up his hands in a display in of exasperation. "And here go. Nobody's ever responsible. They make these dangerous toys--and Dr. Richards isn't the only one, just the most conspicuous--and walk away blame free, while the rest of us have to deal with the expensive and often deadly consequences."

Orizio shook his head at the camera, looking both deeply puzzled and disturbed. "A troubling reality to be sure."

"Wait," Richards cut in, "wait, may I respond to what he just said?"

As if in reply the screen condensed back into a single square, both Richards and Strawslinger disappearing from sight.

"I'm sorry gentlemen," Orizio said, "that's all the time we have at the moment. Of course, we'll be happy to have both of you back on later in the week. The book is Webster Straw slinger's *Unnatural Acts: The Case Against Meta-Science* and the film, of course, currently the third grossing in the nation. Interesting, interesting stuff."

An image of a attractive, sleepy eyed woman appeared in the corner of the screen. It was framed by jagged red text that read: *Grisly Murder Mystery Continues?*

"Later this hour a look at the death of famous starlet Virginia Pokes and a startling revelation about her newborn son that may surprise everyone."

Jackson Orizio smiled broadly and adjusted his notes.

"Up next on the Hype!"

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Three hours later, Sue switched off the telephone with a sigh. It seemed like every reporter they'd ever met had called the building at least twice. Then she'd brushed off with little remorse. The rest were friends and family though, and that required more tact.

Jennifer alone had kept her on the line for over twenty minutes, insisting that if they needed legal advice to call her. Even Steve Rogers phoned, from Paris of all places, sounding genuinely concerned. He remained one of the politest men Sue had ever met.

It was good to hear from them all, although it was a shame the situation had to be what it was to get them to call. That was the way things were in this life though.

Placing the phone back in its cradle, Sue left the living room and headed towards the lab-wing. She hadn't heard from Reed since they'd brought the Fantastical inside. Now it was late and Johnny and Ben had already gone home; Ben said the hangar problem had something to do with the new hydraulics, and he'd fix it tomorrow.

Sue found her husband in his Tinker Room, or at least that's what she called it. It was filled with all the little inventions and gizmos he played with when there wasn't something bigger on the line. Basically just a study packed with cluttered work benches and bookshelves.

In other words, an absolute, terrible mess. But still very Reed, she felt, and so she liked it all the same.

He was sitting in his chair, watching the television when she walked in. Sue recognized the program on sight.



"Reed, you shouldn't watch that. You're just tormenting yourself."

"I know. How stupid of me though," he mused, "I should have been more prepared when I went on that show. Had my facts all ready."

"You did fine. It was an ambush. Like Ben was saying, it was a slow news month so they picked you for a pariah. It will blow over."

He smiled half-heartedly and clicked it off. "No doubt."

Sue walked up behind him, placing her hands on his shoulders. They felt tense.

"Oh," he said with sudden enthusiasm, "Guess what I found?" He pushed some papers aside and stretched his arm around to present her with a tiny wooden object. It took her a moment to realize what it was--his favorite pipe.

She wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. I thought you threw that stinky thing out."

"Apparently not. I haven't smoked in how long now? Yet there it was in one of the moving boxes. Amazing really."

It was, she supposed, given the clutter of his labs and the number of headquarters they'd gone through in the last few years. Just about anything she'd had from her old pre-Fantastic Four days had been reduced to rubble or scrap years ago.

"You're not thinking of taking it up again? Your doctor would have an aneurism."

"No, no," he replied with amusement, tossing it back into the paper shuffle. "Of course not. It got me thinking is all. At one point, I was actually planning to modify it, make it so that it would turn the smoke into something beneficial. I never figured out what though. An asthma inhaler maybe."

She raised an eyebrow. "You wanted to make it so asthmatics could smoke pipes?"

"I wanted to make it so I could smoke a pipe!"

They both smiled, and for a moment the mood felt a little lighter. It didn't take long for Reed to grow gloomy again though.

"Funny, I didn't even consider it at the time, but such a project would have cost millions. All that money to create a silly pipe no one could afford anyhow. "

"You're not blaming yourself are you?"

Reed shrugged. "I don't know. Not really. There's some truth to what they're saying though, isn't there? A lot of my inventions haven't done very many people much good. At least not the right kinds of people."

Sue released his shoulders and placed her hands on her hips. She let a little anger seep into her voice.

"That's absurd and you know it."

"Yes," he laughed., "I suppose it does come off rather self-pitying. Still, did I mention the Palo Alto Research Center called this morning?"

"Oh?"

"They said they thought they'd take a rain check on my speaking engagement there. Nothing personal, of course, just didn't want the bad press. That makes the tenth cancellation since Tuesday."

"I'm sorry. But it's their loss, right?"

"Right..."

Sue frowned, annoyed by his hang-dog tone. It wasn't like him and she was growing tired of it.

"Look, if you want criticism Reed--real criticism--then here's some: For one, I don't like how curt you were with Franklin earlier. You shouldn't brush him off like that. And secondly you shouldn't mope around here like you have been either. It worries him. It worries me."

"I wasn't aware I was moping," he said, sounding genuinely surprise. "Or that I was being curt. Maybe it's the medication."

"So you're still taking it then?" Reed had been on Clopidogrel and similar drugs ever since his stroke.\* She was always worried he'd stop without telling her.

\* (Reed suffered a massive stroke while battling Dr. Doom in M2K Fantastic Four #44 - Alan)

"Of course. What's an old man without his pills?"

"You're not an old man, Reed."

"I know," he said with a weary grin. "Only kidding."

Not old, she thought, just tired and a little heartsick. This was hardly the homecoming they'd hope for when they came back New York City, hardly the way to follow up on his recovery.

"Yoshi\* said she's making Kakuni with Yakitori and cabbage tonight."

\* (The team's live-in nanny. Intro'd in M2K Fantastic Four #45 - Alan)

"Sounds delicious in the way only something unpronounceable can."

Sue laughed. "She's a very good cook actually."

"I never said she wasn't! I'm just a terrible linguist."

She opened her mouth to say more but the high pitched warble of an alarm cut her off. A red light began to flash on a wall consol to their left.

"Hum," Reed said, his chair swiveling as his neck stretched across the room for a better look. "Odd."

"More bad news?"

"I'm not certain," he said, punching in a command to link up with the main computer and scan the readouts. "But it appears one of my probes in the Negative Zone has picked up something. A faint radio signal from the Uncharted Area."

"That doesn't sound like cause for alarm."

"That depends. The signal is repeating Morse code, dear."

She raised an eyebrow.

"SOS."

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Meanwhile, a dimension away, the first Earthling to ever set foot on Planet 32-I of the Uncharted Area worked furiously at the controls of her improvised radio telescope.

It was a long shot, she knew, for in a moment They would realize what was happening. Again she scanned the horizon for any sign of approaching searchlights. All remained dark.

She had no way of knowing if her efforts would pay off, no way of knowing if she was even aiming at the correct coordinates. The odds of her signal actually being detected by the Fantastic Four's probe were probably less than .01%.

Nevertheless, those were the best odds she was going to get.

SOS, she repeated, transmitting the bursts of code into space, SOS.

As she sent the very last message, the ground suddenly jumped from the boom of propulsion jets. Turning towards the horizon, she saw searchlights flickering into life all around the clearing, highlighting its jagged landscape in an eerie glow. Already the stench of ozone burned his nostrils.

They had arrived.

And the killing would soon follow.

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***Next: Into the Negative Zone!***

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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#2 (Volume 2)**

## **"MYSTERIOUS PLANET"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**What Came Before:** On the heels of the Fantastic Four's NYC homecoming, Reed Richards finds himself under scrutiny for the effect his technology has had on society. Harried by protesters, media criticism, and his own health, the world's greatest scientist is now faced with yet another dilemma--a mysterious SOS signal from the Uncharted Area of the Negative Zone!

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The Nega-Rover floated quietly through the void of space. Outside the stars seemed to move by at glacial pace, having a drowsy effect on the ship's four passengers.

Only one aboard remained aware at all times of the reality. Propelled by a massive anti-matter engine of his own invention, the Nega-Rover was in fact racing through the darkness at a speed close to light.

This did not alarm the man, for it was hardly the first such trip. Reed Richards had been to the Negative Zone more times than he could count. It never ceased to be dangerous, but then most of his adventures were.

In the seat beside him, Ben Grimm occupied himself with the ship's controls, keeping a keen eye on every gauge and readout. He'd been a great pilot in his youth; still was, in fact, although his rocky body and three-fingered hands prevented him from using most conventional aircraft. Reed had to specially modify all of the Fantastic Four's vehicles to accommodate him.

Reed still felt guilty for Ben's deformity. He always would and that, he felt, was proper. Of course, it was just one among many such blames that fell squarely on his shoulders. A bad way to think of things, he realized, but there it was.

In the backseat sat his other teammates, among them his wife, Susan Storm. She smiled faintly as he caught her eye, before returning to the magazine she was reading. Her brother Johnny had stretched out next to her, his eyes closed as he rocked to the tune of whatever song was playing in his I-pod.

In other words, they all looked comfortable. Just another day's adventure. Why did he feel so out of sorts then? Somehow listless and jittery at the same time. Uncomfortable.

Reed glanced at his reflection in the silvery metal of the ship's bulk head. His face looked worn, haggard, like it had after the stroke.\* Maybe he should have kept up with the medicine the doctors prescribed.

\* (M2K Fantastic Four #44)

I don't feel sick though, he reflected. That wasn't it. Just distracted after that damnable interview and the nonsense outside the Baxter Building.\* What really worried him was much simpler.

\* (Last issue)

They were headed into a sector of the Zone he was unfamiliar with, towards a mysterious planet, the source of an unlikely radio signal picked up by his probes. SOS it had read. Yet none of the various creatures in this dimension used Earth languages, let alone something as obscure as Morse code.

The likelihood that this was a trap was extremely high. If so, their lives would all be in danger, in a land very far from home. Once again the dice would be rolled, with the fate of his friends and family in the balance.

There was no choice in the matter though. If there was any chance the call for help was genuine, they had to respond.

That was what the Fantastic Four did.

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"Aw, man, c'mon," Johnny moaned as the team gazed out the window. "Why do we get all the ugly planets?"

As the Nega-Rover broke the upper atmosphere of 32-I, the planet's surface came into view. Ugly, Reed had to admit, was a pretty good description. Long stretches of craggy, barren rock, most of it charred and blackened as though a great fire had swept over it. The few trees and bushes in sight were little more than scrubs and dead branches.

"I'm signing up with Doc Strange next time. He gets all the cool sets. I mean this place looks like Ben's face."

"And howsa about we check if the air's breathable by throwin' you out the airlock, smart ass?"

"Save the fighting until we land boys," Sue told them, folding up her magazine and slipping it under the seat. "Punchlines are a lot funnier when you're not being scrapped out of burning wreckage."

"Fah," Ben replied with a scowl, "like there's any chance of that Suzie. You're flying with the pros here."

True to his word, the ship touched ground with only the slightest bounce as the rockets shut down. A mist of fine red dust rose into the air in a thick cloud, obscuring their vision from the windows.

"First readout's positive gang. A surprisingly high concentration of oxygen in the atmosphere. Nor am I picking up anything toxic," Reed said, already working the ship's array of scanners. "It should be safe to breath without a mask."

"Sounds good, boss." Johnny had unbuckled his harness and was already on his way out of the cockpit. "First one spots a Dairy Queen, it's on me."

"Actually, it might be better to wait until I finished my readings. There's no point in wandering around if we've set down in the wrong spot. What we're looking for may be on the other side of the planet for all we know."

"Ah, let the kid stretch his limbs Reed. I'll keep an eye on him," Ben said, working the kinks out of his own bulky limbs as he followed Johnny towards the rear of the ship. "Or throw him down the nearest crater I find. Whichever strikes my fancy."

Reed looked towards Susan and she shrugged. They'd both had the experience of leading the Fantastic Four in the past and one thing you learned early on was *lead* could be a relative term with Johnny and Ben.

He turned back to the consol screen. "Still no sign of any radio signals, although this is approximately where they were transmitted. How are we looking on life readings? Anything out there?"

"The scan's not complete but my intuition says yes."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," Sue answered, pointing towards the windows, "take a look for yourself, dear."

The dust, he discovered, had started to clear and the bleak terrain became visible again. The first shapes he spotted were Johnny and Ben, standing just a few feet in front of the nose cone. Then other shapes came into view, humanoid figures--dozens of them--arranged in a semi-circular pattern around the Nega-Rover.

They appeared to be armed.

"Ah," Reed said. "I see."

---

By the time Reed and Sue disembarked, the figures had drawn closer, keeping low to the ground as they studied the team. They had human proportions and features, differing only by their large yellow eyes and the tufts of silky fur that grew from their forearms. Their skin was a reddish bronze, mostly exposed save for a few scraps of loose cloth around their waists.

They had a primitive look, Reed decided, but that didn't mean they were harmless. Most were carrying long metal javelins held at the ready, and he had no doubt they could do the average human body fatal damage if thrown by an expert.

"You know," Johnny was saying, "I almost feel sorry for these guys. On Earth, they'd know better but these poor scrubs don't even realize who the Fantastic Four are."

Ben cracked his knuckles. "Guess they're about to learn the hard way, kid."

"Easy, gentlemen, we're not here for a fight. Sue, maybe you should put a shield around us before any of our friends here decide to try out those spe-

Before he could finish, a new figure broke from the ring and strode in their direction. A long green cloak whipped around its shoulders as a twinkle of light reflected off the silver casing of its right arm.

Johnny reacted first, a burst of flame instantly engulfing his body as his powers switched on. Several of the natives leapt backwards at the sight and a few tossed their javelins, bouncing them harmlessly off Ben's skin.

"You," Reed said.

"Yes, old friend, me," a familiar voice replied. Reaching up the figure removed the hood from its face.

She smiled.

---

"...this is Ben and Johnny, and of course my wife, Susan. Allow me to introduce Professor Andrea Wells of Empire State University."

"How do you do?" she said politely. "I'm glad to see that your team received my radio signal."

"You two know each other, I take it?"

Andrea smiled, an action that encompassed her whole face. She was an attractive woman, perhaps ten years Reed's senior but easily passing for younger. She had dark caramel-toned skin with curly auburn hair, pulled back into a practical pony tail. The patched remains of a white flight suit hugged her toned body while the frayed green canvas from a pop tent provided the cloak.

"Yes," Wells answered, "Reed and I met back in college, during the Subspace & Time Anomaly Con, if I recall. Quite an occasion that."

"Hum," he answered with a thoughtful smile. "I'm not certain Doc Matthias would have agreed with you."

"If he did, it would have been a first, hmm?"

The two shared a laugh, drawing mostly blank expressions from the rest of the team. They had never heard of a Prof. Wells and, given the visual, it seemed a strange omission even for Reed.

"So we came here to rescue Reed's old flame?" Johnny joked, before smirking at Reed.

"Nice, by the way. I had no idea you were getting that kind of action at those nerd cons of yours."

"It wasn't that way at all. Andrea was several semesters ahead of me when I arrived and the top of her class. I respected her work tremendously."

"Don't let him fool you," she said, smiling slyly as she squeezed Reed's forearm. "He always had a bit of crush on me I think."

Sue pasted on a fake smile. "Really? How funny."

"Of course. But I never had time to reciprocate. How I was to know then that he'd go on to be *the* Mr. Fantastic?"

"Believe me, no one was more surprised than myself," Reed said, ignoring the teasing as he glanced down at her left arm. It appeared to be built out of polished steel. "And how did *this* happen? I don't remember it the last time we met."

"A nasty little mix of rotten luck and damned stupidity. Remember the Maklov Time Sphere experiment the Albino Twins use to always talk about? Well, one of the crazy bastards finally convinced me to give it a try. Should have known better," she said, shaking her head ruefully, "lucky to lose just the arm."

"Ah. I always did say their methods rather dangerous." Reed recalled Andrea had always been interested in the riskiest experiments though, even back in their college days. It didn't surprise him to hear that one of them had finally left its mark on her. "Still, it looks like good work."

"The best." She raised her hand, flexing the surprisingly nimble metal fingers. "My ex worked development at Stark Labs. He was a real prick about it, but it got done all the same."

"You could have contacted me, you know. Our labs are always open to friends."

She smiled. "That's sweet. Believe me I considered it too, but hated to bother you. You're usually so busy saving the world and all. I wouldn't have done so now but it seemed like the only option."

"Only option for what?"

"Getting off this rock, of course," she clarified. "Which reminds me..."

As the five Earthlings became reacquainted, the natives had grown increasingly agitated. Their eyes kept straining towards the horizon, as though expecting something terrible to appear there any minute.



"...we'd best clear out of here. They're bound to show up soon. We don't want to get caught out in the open."

"Caught by who?"

"I'll explain as we go," Andrea replied, pulling the hood of her cloak back in place. "Can you hide your ship?"

Reed touched a button on his belt and the Nega-Rover immediately faded from view. For added precaution Sue stretched one of her densest fields around its hull. Between the two, an army would have been needed to find and break into it.

"Impressive..."

"The camo works on the same principle as my wife's powers. She can--"

"Of course. I know. The Invisible Woman, yes? I still read the papers." Andrea spared a cool glance back at Susan, who returned her look with equal coldness. It did not appear to be love at first sight.

"Shall we go then?"

Andrea made a circular motion with her right hand and the natives seemed to take this as a signal to filter out of the clearing. The team quickly followed in their wake.

"So are there more hot chicks in meta-science or is this a fluke? 'Cause I'm starting to think I majored in the wrong subject at Metro..."

"And that one?" Andrea asked Reed, indicating Johnny. "He's the one that explodes, right?"

"Only in our dreams lady," Thing mused. "Only in our dreams..."

---

As they traveled up the jagged bluffs of 32-I, barely keeping pace with their nimble guides, Andrea explained the rest of her story. It was pretty much as Reed guessed. She had, some time back, been part of a research project recording wave patterns within the Negative Zone's Distortion Field.

It was hoped a reason could be discovered for the abnormal energy emissions Reed had once recorded there. A whole range of half-baked studies had been humored by the team, everything from proving superstring theory to using the Zone as means for a commercial teleportation service on Earth.

Unfortunately, the funding fell through and the project went belly-up. Nonetheless, Andrea had gotten the bug and she continued to explore the Zone on her own time. The last few months she'd spent mapping the so-called Uncharted Area when disaster struck. Her ship--designed on a similar pattern as Reed's old Explorer model--crash landed on Planet 32-I, damaging most of its equipment.

Through the entire story, Reed marveled mostly at how full of energy Andrea was after all this time. While she might have technically been older than him, she didn't show her years at all. He, on the other hand, seemed to feel the weight of every last one of these days.

"At first," she explained, continuing her narrative, "I made the best of it, especially when I ran into our friends here. They seemed peaceful enough, if a tad primitive. I figured my work among them would be purely anthropological, at least until evidence of a more advanced civilization began to surface."

"Really?" Reed said, his voice betraying his skepticism. They'd seen little on this planet so far to suggest that its advancement went much past the flint and fire stage.

"Indeed. A possible Type II."

"That seems unlikely. Such a society would never let their planet fall into such a state. They'd have the technology to create a virtual Utopia."

"Yes," Andrea noted grimly, "it would seem that way. Unless someone made that choice for them."

The party they'd been following had drawn to a sudden stop and the team paused as well. They now stood in the midst of a wide valley peppered with imposing mesas. There was no sign of life beyond the blowing sands and sharp rocks.

Extending her mechanical arm, Andrea pointed towards a distant canyon. "There. Look."

Reed widened his hand, using it to shield his eyes as he squinted through the dust. A single red sun supplied just enough light to lend the landscape a dusky hue. Finally, his vision focused enough to see what Andrea was indicating. Cut into the sloping rock, barely noticeable to the naked eye, were the imprints of stone buildings.

This, he realized, was where the tribe lived, in a series of caverns carved into the sheer rock. Similar to the cave palaces of the Anasazi in the American Southwest.

As Reed studied the city, he spied another group of natives approaching from the canyon area.

"Someone's coming."

Andrea climbed onto a nearby rock for height and nodded as she recognized their banners. "It looks to be the Queen's entourage. She's come to greet you personally. I'm afraid I made some fairly big boasts about you gentlemen."

"Oh, man," Johnny said, taking a look for himself, "some kind of alien, Amazonian Queen? You just know she's going to be smoking hot too." Ben shot him a wry look and he scowled back at him. "What? You know that's how these things work."

Andrea slid back down from his perch and joined Reed. "We should move forward to meet them."

"Anything we need to know beforehand?"

"Just--"

Suddenly an earth-shaking boom sounded from the sky above them. The whole landscape seemed to tremble and a look of wild-eyed terror overtook the natives. Dozens of searchlights sliced through the clouds in saber-like beams.

"I'm guessing that ain't the rest of the welcomin' committee..."

"No," Andrea replied, the harsh winds tearing savagely at her cloak. "It certainly isn't."

As the first large craft came into view, a swarm of smaller shapes broke free, filling the air with a paralyzing hum. As one flew closer, Reed identified it as a small personal hover-craft, similar to the Avengers' sky-cycles. The thing at the controls, however, was like nothing human. It stood over eight feet tall with four long chitinous arms and a head like a black widow spider.

And its weapons, Reed reflected, looked a lot more dangerous than javelins.

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**Next Issue:** *The Fantastic Four vs. the Ghosts Gods of 32-I!*

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### **Fantastic Forum**

Author's Note:

At this point, some of you may be wondering what exactly is going on. Fantastic Four Volume 2 isn't shaping up to look a whole lot like Fantastic Four Volume 1. What happened to Pittsburgh, Club 4, and Lyja?

Allow me to explain.

There are two reasons for this gap. The first was my own reluctance to write another author's stories. The previous run in Fantastic Four ended in several cliff-hangers. As eager as I was to sign up for the title, I didn't feel that I could do them justice. My own material gives me enough trouble; I didn't want to do anyone a disservice by writing a shoddy conclusion.

The second reason is that someone else had already signed up to finish Volume 1. This situation sounded ideal to me. After taking a look at that writer's notes, I proceeded to do up a proposal set to follow his story. Sadly, that story never got written. As a result my proposal took for granted several events that never happened--such as the team returning to NYC.

Which is all starting to sound like a big mess. Luckily, there's a silver lining.

A third writer, Stephen Crosby, has stepped in to finish up Volume 1 after all. Not only does his issue complete the previous writer's run but it ties in nicely to Volume 2 as well. Amazingly, despite the restrictions, he also managed to write a fun little story that stands on its own merits.

So I urge anyone reading this to go check out Crosby's Volume I finale and let him know what you think.

- *Alan Strauss*

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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#3 (Volume 2)**

# **"THE GHOST GODS OF 32-I"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**What Came Before: Answering a distress call from the Uncharted Area of the Negative Zone, Reed discovers a marooned colleague living among the planet's primitive tribes. Their happy reunion, however, is cut short when the team is caught in the crosshairs of an attacking army...**

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The field of Meta-Science has many luminaries. For example: Doctors Reed Richards, Henry Pym, and Bruce Banner. Names every bit as household as the president or last season's American Idol winner.

It also has other, lesser stars, who for whatever reason never quite make the papers. One of these was Professor Andrea Wells, a theoretical physicist and occasional adventurer known only among her closest peers.

Over a long--if decidedly checkered--career she had made several significant discoveries in the fields of space/time anomalies, advanced AI, and parallel dimensions. Her findings were well respected in academic circles even if publishers remained hard to find. Part of the reason for this was her taste for the oddball jobs, the dangerous assignments that led to places few others dared to venture.

Given that, it was not entirely surprising that Andrea should find herself marooned on an alien planet as an attacking army descended on her head.

That didn't mean she had to like it.

"C'mon," Andrea yelled, hurrying back towards her friends. "We have to find cover! We can't be caught out in the open."

Overhead the engines of the attackers' hover-crafts filled the sky with an ear-piercing hum. They swarmed in black masses around a single base ship, a cocoon shaped craft the size of an Earthen battle cruiser. It cast a dark shadow over the valley, broken only by the searing pinpoints of its searchlights.

"Quit staring, damn it!" Andrea insisted, unable to keep the anxiety from her voice. Unlike them, she has seen what these things were capable of doing. "We have to move!"

Despite her insistence, Andrea's friends seemed unwilling to budge. There was a very good reason for this too. They were the Fantastic Four, Earth's greatest superheroes, and facing down alien armies was just one of the many hazards of the job.

"Are you coming?"

"Nah," said the Thing casually, rolling his shoulders like a ball player called to bat. "Don't think so."

Andrea froze in her tracks, looking from the Thing to his other four teammates. Reed and Sue continued to watch the circling ships with mounting curiosity, while Johnny levitated a few feet off the ground, a halo of white hot flame surrounding his arms. The natives they'd been traveling with had already dropped their weapons and fled in a panic.

"Been waiting to pulverize something all week. This looks like too good an opportunity to pass up."

"Big guy's talking sense," Johnny replied with a smirk. "What do you say Reed? We cut loose?"

As the aliens drew nearer, a shower of lasers rained down into the valley, kicking up dust wherever they struck. Reed Richards stepped back as one landed just inches from his boot, nearly singing the tip. Glancing from the scorch mark back into the sky, he nodded once.

"Pulverize it is."

---

As usual, Johnny was the first to spring into action. Covered head to toe in flame, he shot into air like a missile, aiming for the nearest alien in reach. It was an ugly looking thing, he thought, tall and bipedal, with the spindly black arms and hairy head of a spider.

Ugly, however, didn't necessarily mean fireproof.

As Johnny closed in, he sent a fireball blazing towards the hovercraft that held it up, a small one-man ship similar in the design to the Avengers' Sky-Cycle but bristling with weaponry. Johnny's aim was dead on as always but before his bolt could reach its target, the ship had already exploded into powder, sending its occupant spiraling through the air.

Johnny glanced back towards the ground to spy Ben balancing a pair of car-sized boulders in his giant mitts. Even as he watched, his teammate picked another target, threw, and knocked a second ship to pieces.

"Okay," he called out with a grin, "you think that's impressive, gravel face? Watch."

Extending his hands, he loosed a gout of flame into the nearest enemy squadron, consuming their ships in a cloud of fire. Dozens of the creatures went diving into the open sky rather than risk burning up in the wreckage.

As if in response, another boulder whizzed past Johnny's ear, followed by an explosion.

The contest was on.

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While their teammates thinned the field, Reed and Sue were on the move. Gliding across the valley on one of the Invisible Woman's domed platforms, they sped towards the natives' home, a crude city carved into the wall of a distant canyon.

It wasn't the safety of the city's caverns they were after though, but the Queen's entourage. In a gesture of royal good will--apparently brought on by Andrea's boasting--the tribe's Queen had marched out to meet the Fantastic Four as they approached her city. So it was that when the alien creatures attacked, the Queen's party had been stuck out in the open, too far from their city walls to get back in time. Reed knew that the natives, armed with little more than spears, would prove easy prey for their attackers.

Meaning it now became a race to see who got there first.

As they soared across the sand and rock, a hail of laser fire pinged off Sue's force dome, requiring every inch of her concentration to keep it solid. Reed just did his best to stay still and let her do her work.

"What are those things, Andrea?"

The professor, who had tagged along with them, could only shrug. "No idea, but the natives are terrified of them. They've attacked at least three times since I showed up, always with terrible results for the tribe."

Reed frowned. "Why? I don't see what threat these simple people could offer a race with this sort of tech."

"A good question, but I can't answer it. There doesn't seem to be a reason. They simply attack, destroy whatever they can, and then disappear, only to return weeks later for more of the same. They never take anything or anyone with them."

"Strange."

Wells nodded. "Apparently they've been at it for years though, maybe even centuries. From what I can tell they go back as far as the natives' history. In fact, most of their religious ceremonies have to do with placating them. They call them the Ghost Gods."

A dozen of the hovercraft screamed overhead, raking the dome with bright flame. Sue's two passengers ducked reflexively but she held her ground, somehow even managing to pick up speed. Yet it still seemed as though miles separated them from the Queen, and the aliens were already picking at their stray edges.

"There has to be a reason, Andrea. Who goes to the effort of sustaining such an army just for sport?"

"No clue. If there is a reason," she offered, "then I can't surmise it and neither have the tribal leaders. All they know is that they live in constant fear of these attacks."

Reed shook his head, his expression both troubled and oddly vibrant. For the moment all worry over the last few days--the media criticism, the canceled engagements\*--was gone from his mind. Instead it had focused laser-like on this new information. Because however this battle turned out, he knew there was a question here that needed answered.

\* (See Fantastic Four v2 #1)

And answering questions was what he did best.

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One more down, Johnny told himself as he weaved around his latest victim, puncturing its engines with a tongue of flame. The wounded hover-craft spun away from him, trailing a plume of black smoke as it plummeted to the ground. Somewhere along the way its occupant leapt free before it shattered on the rocks.

A helluva fall, the Human Torch reflected, but a few broken legs and collar bones would serve them right. It was a lot less final than what they were offering him.

By this time, most of the hover squads had been cleared out of the sky. Below him, Ben could be seen swatting aside a few final attackers, using one of their own crumpled ships as a bat. The rest were gathering around a group of natives to the south. Reed and Sue seemed to be en-route, but they could always use a little help, Johnny figured. Blowing things up was sort of his specialty.

Nodding to himself, he was about to set course when the air suddenly lit up. Lasers, dozens of them, coming right for him. He went into evasive maneuvers, corkscrewing into a dive and then out again. As fast as he was, he couldn't dodge them all. A stray shot one clipped his arm and a painful jolt shot up his back.

"Sonuva," he cried between gritted teeth, struggling to get a bead on his attackers as he spun around. There was no sign of any more hovercraft in the area though, which left only one source. Their base ship.

As if to acknowledge his hunch, its heavy gun batteries swung on him again and fired off a second barrage. This time he was ready, rising above the blasts before they could reach him.

"Alright," he said, eying the vast battleship and the row of cannons that sprouted from its gunports. "Fine. You want to play too huh?"

A cloud of flame rippled over his body and Johnny smiled grimly.

"Then lets see what you got...."

---



As Reed and Sue came within view of the Queen's entourage, they became witness to the terrible carnage. Before their eyes, the natives were being cut down in swathes. With eerie precision, the hovercraft simply formed into groups of ten--like bowling pins--and swept the crowd, leaving rows of bodies in their wake.

Reed was ready with orders but Sue knew what was needed before he got them out. As their dome skidded to a stop on the rough ground, she immediately dropped their force field and began erecting a new one--a wide flat barrier big enough to shield all forty or more survivors. Already, rows of laser shots began to bounce off its surface.

Meanwhile, Reed and Andrea moved quickly. Rounding up the wounded and frightened, they did their best to corral them into a smaller area, allowing Sue to cover the group more easily. Fast as they were though, they could not rescue everyone.

Two, four, five, ten more were cut down as they fought to contain things.

At last, they managed to move into a group dense enough for Sue to drop a dome around them. Despite the fact their shots were having no effect, the Ghost Gods continued to fire, mindlessly hammering her field with barrage after barrage. Sweat began to bead across her forehead.

"Can you hold it?" Reed asked. If the shield fell, he knew, they'd be mowed down almost instantly. Neither Johnny or Ben were anywhere close enough to aid them.

"I can," she replied with gritted teeth, "in fact..."

Sue closed her eyes, her face contorting with strain as she manipulated her field further. Slowly little knots began to bead on the field's surface before bursting outwards in a shower of tiny, invisible pellets. They struck with the force of buckshot, peppering the aliens and their crafts.

A number of the ships caught fire or went smashing to the ground. A few toppled into Sue's shield, staggering her reserves as she fought to keep it in place. Others were tossed from their seats with broken arms and legs.

She repeated her attack twice, dwindling their numbers each time, but the effort took its toll. With the third barrage, she staggered, falling to one knee as Reed rushed to catch her. The shield began to flicker unsteadily.

"Can't...much...longer..."

"Just a bit more," he said, casting his eyes around the terrified crowd for any sign of the weapons. There was nothing more dangerous than the tribe's flimsy javelins. How many of the enemy, he wondered, could he take out before they were overcome? No more than four or five, he suspected, and then...?

"They've stopped shooting."

Reed looked up to see Andrea standing at his side. She seemed surprisingly jubilant.

"I think they're retreating."

And so they were. The remaining raiders had turned away from the entourage and were rising back into the sky. They appeared to be hightailing it towards their ship, which is when Reed first noticed there was something wrong with it.

The base ship's searchlights had stopped shining and it lurched dangerously to one side. Thick clouds of dark smoke gathered over it.

"My God," Andrea said. "It's on fire."

Even as they watched, bright flames crawled across its frame, sweeping over the bow. It listed further and began a slow plummet towards one of the distant mesas. Oblivious to the mounting danger, the hover-riders continued to sail towards it and, as a terrible thunder tore through the valley, they disappeared into a halo of flame.

Reed covered his eyes from the flash. Even at this distance, he could feel the hot wind of the explosion. When he looked again the ship had broken in two, its burning wreckage spilling out onto the other side of the mesa.

"Johnny..."

Reed glanced back to Sue and found her staring at the same awesome sight. It took a moment for him to realize what she meant. Then it hit him--had Johnny...?

He fumbled with the comm-link on his belt. "Johnny! This is Reed! Are you okay?"

Only static. He flipped the frequency to Ben.

"Ben, are you alright? Do you see Johnny?"

"I've fine Stretch, but the kid ain't anywhere around here." The voice was quiet for a moment and then it came back, hoarse with alarm. "What? You're not thinking...?"

"I don't know," Reed said, "I can't raise him--"

Suddenly he looked up and saw something streaking towards them like missile. "Sue! Your shield!" He knew, however, it was already too late.

Luckily it didn't matter.

"Whew!" Johnny called as he pulled up just shy of singing their hair. "Did you see that? Am I awesome or what? I mean, you guys did okay but damn, I took out the whole freaking ship!"

Reed and Sue both sighed as one, before exchanging relieved smiles.

---

"First thing's first," Reed said, as Johnny touched down next to them and flamed off. "We'll need to gather up any of the creatures who survived that explosion. Hopefully we can get some answers out of them."

"No such luck, Stretch." Ben appeared at the edge of the crowd, a handful of charred rags in his huge hands. "Ain't nothing left."

"There must have been some survivors..."

"No," Andrea informed him, "I'm afraid there won't be. The Ghost Gods' dead and injured have a very short, well, shelf life you could say." She pointed a steel finger towards the spot where Sue's bullets had forced a squad of hover-riders down. Although the ships themselves were in tact, there was nothing left of their owners save burnt rags and acrid smoke.

Reed frowned, his brow knit in confusion as he examined their remains. There was little of any worth there. Even the ships, though still whole, no longer worked. They had fried their own circuitry from inside.

The Ghost Gods had come and gone, leaving nothing but empty husks and smashed machinery.

"More mysteries."

"Um, Reed, I don't want to interrupt but, ah..."

Reed turned to see a party of natives approaching them. They looked physically identical to the others, bronze skinned humanoids with large yellow eyes, but it was clear these were ones of rank. They wore heavy bracelets and anklets of carved bone and carried long poles with banners made from dyed reptile skin. The other natives gave them a respectful berth.

"Andrea?"

"The Queen," his friend explained, and even as she spoke her honor guard parted. A regal figure appeared from the center of the entourage. She was a tall, graceful woman, her dark hair pinned at the base of her long neck with a jade-like broach. No bone trinkets decorated her body but instead an intricate pattern of delicate tattoos that ran from her slim shoulders all the way to the tops of her feet.

She walked boldly up to Reed, stopping a mere arms length away to stare directly into his eyes. He was uncertain what to do but, as it happened, nothing was required.

Without sacrificing grace or poise, the Queen dropped solemnly to her knees and touched the tip of her forehead to the ground before his boots. The tribe, moving almost as one, rushed to follow her example.

"What's going on?" Reed asked nervously.

"Nothing to be alarmed about. I'm afraid your bit of heroics has had a rather profound on our friends though."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," Andrea clarified, "they think you're their new gods."

---

Several hours later, things had begun to sort themselves out. Rather than go through the trouble of explaining the frankly unexplainable, the team allowed the tribe to fete them as triumphant gods, sharing their meager drink and food with them. For their part, Reed, Sue, and Johnny abstained, unwilling to eat alien cuisine without the benefit of chemical analysis. Luckily, Ben ate enough to cover for all of them.

"Heck," he said, "given what I been through, if I ain't dead yet then I don't reckon any grub's gonna to claim the prize."

It seemed like a logical enough argument, given the circumstances.

The feast was followed with rituals of song and dance, but Reed and Sue stayed no longer than was necessary to be polite. Johnny and Ben were having fun enough for the both of them at any rate. Instead, they had allowed Andrea to lead them into the canyons' deep caverns, where she claimed to have something important to share with them.

"What, exactly, are we going to see Andrea?"

"As I told you before, there's evidence on this planet of a once greater civilization, one of incredible technological prowess, and I don't mean the Ghost Gods. You did not seem to believe me at the time."\*

\* (Last issue - AI)

"I wouldn't go that far," Reed said, "although I'll admit it seems unlikely."

"Perhaps, but I know my business. At some point in time, this planet was home to a civilization of remarkable advancement. Easily surpassing our own."

They were traveling through a dark stretch of canyon, feeling their way along the rocky walls as Andrea led. Their only light was supplied by a pair of small flashlights they'd grabbed from the Nega-Rover earlier.

"If that's true," Sue said, "what happened to them?"

"If my theory's correct, you've already seen what's happened."

"You mean...?" She motioned her head back towards where they'd come from.

"Precisely. I believe those tribes are all that remains of an advanced race. How they reached their current status is a mystery."

"The Ghost Gods?" Reed suggested.

"A possible theory, one I have certainly humored, for lack of a better one."

Up ahead a light had appeared in the tunnel. Switching off their own, they followed its glow until they came to an opening in the cavern, this one several miles from the spot they entered, on the other side of the canyon.

As they stepped outside into open air, Reed could not stifle a gasp.

Rising from the scabble rock of 32-I a giant, luminous city filled his frame of vision. It was a thing of beauty. Paved streets and elevated walkways wound their way through a series of crumpled citadels and glowing spires, like some futuristic vision from *Arabian Nights*. Everything had an abandoned, long-decayed look, but that did not hide the majesty of the architecture.

"My God."

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"It's incredible," Reed said, buoyant with curiosity as they waded into the ruins. Andrea was more than accurate in her assessments. Everywhere there were signs of incredible technological acuity.

"These pads, Andrea, do you think?"

"Teleportation conduits? Indeed I do."

Trading a quick grin with his colleague, Reed returned to his investigations, scrambling through rubble and layers of dust to examine the street lamps. Somehow they were still glowing as bright as day after centuries of disuse. "And power? What did they use for power?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Andrea said, a hint of amusement in her voice at witnessing Reed's child-like excitement. Sue was smiling as well--it was the liveliest she'd seen him in months.

"There's something that looks like a possible fusion reactor a mile to the west, though I couldn't make heads or tails of it."

"I'll have to see it," Reed said, "I'll have to see all of it. Do you realize what can be done here? There's enough left standing to rebuild. Sure there's damage but the infrastructure for water, sewage, power systems, they're all still in place. With a little work..."

"Possibly," Andrea mused, "although the tribes haven't shown much interest. They seem to think the place is cursed. Trespassing brings on attacks by the Ghost Gods, you see. Of course, now that they're gone..."

Reed merely nodded, continuing to move from structure to structure, his intensity almost unnerving as he analyzed every nut and bolt. Despite his attention to detail, he was moving at such rapidity that it took Sue some effort to catch up to him.

"Slow down buster, it's not going anywhere."

"First," he said, without so much as glancing back at her, "we'll need to locate their water source. I'm guessing there's a reservoir of groundwater beneath the city, but they may have also built some sort of hydrogen generators. Then--"

"Reed," she said, "stop it already!"

He paused, turning to face her with a look of surprise. "What?"

"All this stuff you're talking about. Re-building this and that, who's going to do it?"

"What do you mean?" he said, clearly confused. "We are."

"Reed, the work you're talking about, it would take months, maybe years. We can't stay here that long. Even if time does progress differently in the Negative Zone, that's too large a commitment."

He shook his head. "I'm not following you...."

"We have a home, Reed. A family, friends, our own world that needs us. We can't stay here. We accomplished what we came for. We've found the source of the distress signal and we even chased off these Ghost Gods creeps in the bargain. But we're done now."

"No. No, I don't think so. We can't just leave a discovery like this."

"And what do you suggest?" She asked, puzzled by his stubbornness. "That we move here? What about Earth? What about your children? Don't you want to see your son and daughter?"

He laughed. "Of course, I do. And I will when we're finished here. They're not going anywhere."

Sue frowned. She had had enough; it was time to put her foot down. "We're not staying Reed and I'm not arguing. We're going home. Johnny and Ben will back me up on that."

At last, she saw something come over his face. He paused, tapping his index finger against his temple thoughtfully, as though considering what she'd said. "Perhaps," he decided, "you're right."

Sue nodded, relieved at his more rational tone.

"You and the others don't need to stay here. I should be able to handle what's required on my own."

Her mouth dropped open. "You can't be serious..."

Reed took her by the shoulders, his voice almost pleading. "Can't you see, Sue, that this is what I need? My work is valuable here. There's so much good I can do for those people, good they'll appreciate. I can give them back what they lost. I have to do this."

As his words sunk in, Sue realized for the first time just how changed he looked from the last few weeks. The run-down, world-weary man who'd been struggling under the weight of public criticism at home had disappeared. In his place, was the young, enthusiastic Reed of old, the man who could barely wait to get into the lab each morning. To do what he did best.

It was refreshing in a way, although there was a hint of a new intensity, a near fanaticism almost, that frightened her. Perhaps, she thought, he did need this. A time away from Earth, a chance to heal, both in mind and body. A chance to excel again.

Was it fair to say no to that?

"When would you return?"

"Just as soon as my work was finished. We could rig one of my Negative Zone probes so that I can keep in contact with you. Time passes quickly here. It may not take longer than a week or two at home, and in that time so much could be accomplished..."

"I don't know, Reed," she said, fighting aside her own doubts, "if you honestly think this is what's best...."

"I do."

And so it went. The rest of the team was as shocked as Sue by the announcement but they offered only token arguments. After all, if his wife was agreed to such an arrangement, then what grounds did they have to protest it?

As a vanquishing god, the natives were more than happy to accept Reed's continued presence and, no doubt, that happiness would only increase in the months to come as he restored the city's wonders to them. Oddly enough, Andrea agreed to stay along as well, curious to see the fruits of the rebuilding effort. Which meant their whole rescue operation had amounted to not much of a rescue at all.

Leaving one of the Nega-Pods from the Nega-Rover's storage hold, Susan said her final goodbyes, wishing Reed luck and success. As their ship pulled away from the planet's surface though, she could not quite shrug off the feeling that this marked something significant.

What was bothering her, she couldn't put words to. It had nothing to do with the pushy Andrea. Sue trusted her husband entirely, and furthermore she knew he could handle himself here alone. Any trouble that cropped up, he'd be more than capable of dealing with it.

Nevertheless, the premonition remained. Sue had a sense of terrible foreboding. As though a deadly enemy lay just outside her vision, waiting only for the right moment to strike.

Would she be ready when it finally did?

**Next Issue:** *We take a break from the mysteries of 32-I for an All Star Marvel Team-Up as the Thing and Franklin Richards face the terror of...the Junior Inventors of America?*

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## Fantastic Forum

Author's Note: Apparently I jumped the gun last issue about Stephen Crosby's Fantastic Four Vol. 1 finale. It's now available to read [here](#) and I strongly urge FF fans to check it out.

Originally I was going to post an e-mail that I received from previous FF scribe Jason Bruss. With typical shortsightedness though, I somehow deleted it from my mail box. So to make a poor summary of it his message essentially said some nice things about my first couple issues.

This was appreciated. It's difficult to follow someone else's work and you worry that maybe you've made a mess of things. That may very well be the case, but he was nice enough not to say so. So I thank him. Even if I did accidentally delete his mail.

- Alan Strauss

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## MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

### Fantastic Four

### #4 (Volume 2)

### "BOY GENIUS"

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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Every year on a Sunday, running from eleven o'clock to five o'clock in the afternoon, is a wonderful little event practically no one knows about. That's because practically no one is invited. Very few meet the qualifications.

Those who do merit an invite, however, invariably show up. It's something of an honor and, besides, their parents usually make them. Whether they enjoy the experience or not is mostly a matter of personality and preparedness.

Franklin Richards, for example, was one of the gloomier ones.

"Ah, kid," his Uncle Ben was telling him, "what's with the mopes? You're not nervous are you?"

"No," he said, "not really..."

Ben nodded sympathetically. He was a funny looking sort of man and had been drawing stares from all over the convention hall since they'd entered. This did not bother Franklin. Ever since he'd known his uncle, Ben had been a eight foot giant carved out of orange rocks. That's the way he was *supposed* to look. Besides that, an equal number of stares were reserved for Franklin himself, and he didn't look funny at all.

"You know your pop would have took ya if he could?"

"Yeah."

"Sure ya know," Ben said. "He just got stuck saving the world again. But he'd be here with you if there was any way possible."

Franklin nodded. He knew. Right now, his dad was busy helping people in the Negative Zone while his mom was someplace the team considered even more frightening--the TV talk show circuit, recording interviews about *Unnatural Acts* \*, the book that was making such a big stink about dad's inventions.

\* (See M2K Fantastic Four v2 #1)

Not that Franklin had read it or anything. He didn't really like to read much, especially since the only thing around the house were science manuals and newspapers.

"I know, Uncle Ben."

"And don't you listen to what them yahoos on TV are sayin'," Ben added, his wide mouth folding downwards in a grimace. (He had a face that reminded Franklin a bit of Ernie on Sesame Street.) "Your pop's a real hero. Finest man I ever met."

"I know, Uncle Ben."

"Course ya do. In fact, you're gonna grow up to be just like 'im way I figure it. In fact, I'd be willin' to bet your little whatever-it-is here is gonna blow the judges' socks off." Ben smiled and jerked a thumb towards the gizmo on the table beside them. It looked something a toaster with fly swatters connected to the top. "You know where you're gonna put the trophy?"

"Not really..."

Ben laughed, a booming sound that drew more than a few alarmed looks.

"Ah, well, you'll figure it out when you get home." His uncle then made a show of looking up at the ceiling lights and scowling. "Whew, these lights in here are killin' me. Need something to drink, how about you?"

Franklin doubted he could drink anything but he nodded anyways. That's because he knew his uncle wasn't really hot or thirsty either. Ben Grimm, the Thing, could walk through molten lava without breaking a sweat if he wanted.

"Alright, champ. I'll be right back. Don't go winnin' the contest 'for I return ya hear?"

"I won't."

And, if nothing else, Franklin was pretty sure that much was true.

---

As Ben worked his way through the crowd, Franklin gazed around the rest of the hall. It was filled with young people of various ages, the oldest in their early teens, the rest much younger. He supposed there were probably all sorts of brackets for different age groups to compete in. Not that he much cared.

Still, the thought made him glance down at the pamphlet folded in his palm. An older lady in a maroon cardigan had passed it to him when he arrived at the hall. Besides parents and guardians, the convention workers and judges were the only adults in the building.

Sighing inwardly, Franklin opened the pamphlet and looked at the cover. A picture of a grinning sub-atomic molecule winked back at him. Under it a banner read: *Junior Inventors of America Convention - '07. Inside were all sorts of pictures of past winners and their grinning parents.*

*The Junior Inventors of America Convention is the most prestigious gathering of young geniuses in the United States. Begun in 1964 as a small private get-together of scientific enthusiasts, it has since evolved into a bi-annual tradition, highlighting the wonderment of scientific progress and invention that invigorates today's youth.*

Franklin rolled his eyes before scanning the rest of the text. Eventually he skipped to the end which read: *Following the invention presentation, every Convention ends with the award ceremony, where one promising youth is presenting the Junior Inventor of America Cup, an achievement of great magnitude. Past champions include such luminaries as Boethius Cragmire, inventor of the artificial appendix, Doris Weatherby, head of product design at Stark Industries, and no less a personage then the son of Fantastic Four founders' Reed and Susan Richards:*

**Franklin.**

At the sight of his own name, he bit his lower lip and folded the pamphlet back into a square. This he thrust deep into the pocket of his black sports coat. He suddenly looked gloomier than ever.

"Hello," said a voice that wasn't Ben's.

Franklin glanced up warily, dreading it was someone with questions. A colleague of his father or an eager judge, itching to see what the famous Richards' boy had brought this year.

Instead it was a girl--a short, skinny, not particularly imposing girl, with thick black-rimmed glasses. She was, Franklin guessed, about a year or two younger than himself.

"Um," he said. "Hello?"

"You're not sick or anything are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh," she said, blushing as though she'd made some gaff, "I'm not saying you are. I just wondered is all. You look kind of sweaty, I mean."

Franklin realized that she was right. He was sweating, particularly his hands, which he quickly wiped along the sides of his pant legs. "These lights," he said, rather dumbly, "are hot I guess..."

"Uh huh."

She smiled slightly and then turned to focus on whatever she was doing here. Apparently arranging some sort of cards in front of the invention on the table next to his, the one that looked a bit like a see-through house vacuum full of anti-freeze. She was putting, he thought, a tremendous amount of effort into their placement.

"Um," he said, after a moment, "is that your invention?"

She nodded.

"What does it do?"

She shrugged, rather shyly he thought. Her eyes remained locked on the cards, getting their arrangement just so. Franklin scooched up to the edge of his chair, craning his neck as he tried to get a peek at them.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he said. "Nothing."

The girl looked over at him, a thin brow rising over the rims of her glasses. "You're trying to look at my cards, aren't you?"

Now it was his turn to blush as though caught doing something criminal. "Maybe."

"How dare you!"

Franklin sat back in his chair, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't--"

But then the girl was giggling. "I'm just kidding. They're for the judges, stupid. My parents said I should label everything."

"Oh." He smiled when she smiled. "Okay."

The girl walked up closer to him and, in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little bit..."

"Me too!" She got quiet for a moment and then continued rapidly, "I've got a real good reason though. I betcha you don't."

"I do." He really did.

"What is it?"

"I'd rather not say."

"If you tell me yours, I'll tell you mine."

Franklin thought about it. For some reason, he did want to tell. Had wanted to, in fact, since before they left today. He couldn't, however, tell Ben. There was no way he'd have understood.

"You go first."

The girl stepped back, crossing her arms over her thin chest. She, like most of the kids in the hall, was dressed formally for the occasion. White blouse with navy blue tie and a pleated skirt that came to just past her knees.

Scrunching her nose, she studied him very closely, as though evaluating his character all in one go.

"Well, okay," she said, "but you can't tell anyone else."

He nodded solemnly. "I promise."

"My invention," she whispered, cupping her hand over her mouth and moving in closer, "doesn't work."

Franklin eyes grew wide and he smiled a little. "At all?"

"Well, no," she clarified, "It does a little bit. But not correctly. It's really horrible. I'm so scared the judges will notice. Right in front of everyone. God, would that be embarrassing!"

"Why don't you just not present it, then?"

"Because," she said, "my parents would totally kill me."

In a lot of situations other kids might have looked at her strangely. This was not one of those situations though and Franklin was not one of those kids. He understood exactly what she meant.

"Okay. Now what's yours?"

"I was just joking," he lied. "I don't have one."

The girl kicked him hard in the shin. He barely smothered a yelp.

"You better tell me!"

"Okay!" He smiled despite the pain in his leg. "Geeze. But it's really a lot worse than yours."

"I seriously doubt it."

Franklin took a deep breath and, inwardly, winced. It came out in a single breath. "I didn't really make my invention. My dad did."

There was a moment of awkward silence and then:

"That's totally against the rules!"

"I know!" Franklin said, before adjusting his volume back to a whisper. "I know. I mean I was supposed to help and everything. I was there when he did it." He pointed towards one of the fly-swatter-things. "I screwed that in place."

"You're a cheater!" She looked mad. Whether she was pretending or for real, Franklin didn't know. Maybe a little of both.

"Hey, I don't even want to be here!"

He thought she was going to kick him in the shin again. Instead, she sighed.

"Yeah, me neither. I hate the Junior Inventors Convention."

Franklin looked around the hall for the first time in the last few minutes. Uncle Ben was standing by the vending machines, his back turned towards him as he signed auto-graphs for the younger kids. On the other side of the room, one of the parents was propping open the halls' double doors to let some cool air inside.

"I've got another secret," he said.

"And what's that?"

"I hate it even more then you do."

The girl smiled and nodded, causing a few stray strands of her dark hair to fall in front of her eyes. She swiped them aside and tucked them behind her ears. "So what do you think we should do?"

Franklin glanced from the invention tables, to his Uncle Ben, then back to the open doors. He struggled with the thought for another second or two, before turning back to the girl.

They both grinned.

---

Outside the convention hall, it was a beautiful day. The sun was out in full and a slight breeze tugged at their neckties as they cut across the alleyway, careful to avoid the eyes of any curious parent who might usher them back inside. Eventually they wound up about a block away, on a crowded New York street corner.

"My name is Eva, by the way. Do you have any idea where we are?" the girl asked, looking a bit nervous. Clearly she was unused to the bustle of the big city.

"Sure, I think so. My Uncle Johnny takes me to a little pizza parlor up the road sometimes."

She nodded. Her hair, shoulder length and dark with red highlights, blew crazily in the wind.

"You wanna go there?"

She nodded again and they started up the sidewalk in what he hoped was the right direction. They didn't get far though before a sudden cacophony of blaring horns and angry shouts drew their attention elsewhere. There was a traffic jam, they discovered, on the next block over and the cause of it was standing in the middle of the intersection.

"Wow," Eva said, "what is that thing?"

Franklin didn't know but he had an idea. He'd seen similar sights in his young life--a perk of being an unofficial Fantastic Four member--but usually done up much better. Of course, the likes of Reed Richards and Victor Von Doom were hard to compete with when it came to building things.

It was a fine robot monster otherwise.

Standing about as tall and wide as a diesel truck, it was built along the designs of a king gorilla. Big frame, small head, huge shovel-like arms. Two tall chimney stacks jutted from its back, belching exhaust smoke into the air as the machine clunked and clattered. The face was mostly made of one glowing red stoplight eye and a row of jagged teeth that Franklin thought looked a little overdone.

It was hard to get them right though, Franklin knew. Sometimes even the best planned robot just came out looking silly. Either way, it was probably dangerous.

"Who's that next to it?"

A boy about his own age was standing beside the hulking robot, his head coming up to just a little past its waist. He was ignoring the drivers' curses and working intently at a remote in his hand.

Franklin shrugged. No one he knew.

"Let's go find out then."

Franklin looked doubtful but followed along with Eva. When they came into speaking range, she called out: "Hey! What are you doing?"

The boy looked up. While he was about Franklin's age, that was as far as the similarities went. Where Franklin was thin and tow-haired, this kid was tubby and dark, his hair done in a shaggy bowl cut. He had narrow-eyes, a small chin and forehead, all coupled with a vaguely suspicious look. A fairly unpleasant face when taken altogether.

"None of your business."

"Are you heading to the convention?"

It was a pretty good guess on Eva's part given the giant robot. Maybe that was his invention entry Franklin thought, although he didn't see how it would fit through the doorway.

"Yes," he sneered, "how clever of you to notice."

"You don't have to be nasty," Franklin said. "She was just asking."

"And I was just answering her dumb question. If you think that's nasty though, then you'd better clear off before things get really ugly."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," the boy said, working at the controls again, "that when I'm through there won't be a convention left to talk about." He seemed to expect some reaction from that but neither Franklin or Eva looked particularly alarmed.

"You're going to attack the Junior Inventors' Convention?" Franklin asked, turning towards the robot. "With that?"

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason..."

"Is there a point though," Eva asked. "For destroying it, I mean?"

"A point? A *point*?" the boy demanded, straightening his back and puffing out his chest in what was probably meant to be an imposing stance. Unfortunately, his face shot red--almost instantly like a Christmas bulb--and his eyes grew even squintier. It sort of ruined the effect. "Only that they've insulted me for the last time! Five years running they have failed to award me the Inventor's Cup for my work. How they have slighted my genius! Now they will learn the price for their lack of vision!"

"Oh," Franklin said. "Okay." The whole speech sounded kind of prepared to him.

"Hey kid! What the blazes do you think you're doing?"

All three kids--not certain which of them was being yelled at--turned to face the new voice. It belonged to a gray-haired traffic cop in a white shirt and black slacks, who was huffing his way up the sidewalk towards them.

"You got to get that blasted thing out of there, you're blocking up traffic! Where are your parents anyhow?"

The boy touched a button on his remote and the robot shifted its bulk to face the officer. The cop froze in his tracks. Another button was pushed and the stoplight eye blinked bright red. A traffic pole a foot away from the man turned orange, spouted flame, and slugged to the ground in a melted puddle.

For an old man, Franklin reflected as the traffic cop turned and ran, he sure had a lot of speed in his legs.

"Well, okay," offered Eva. "Good luck with your revenge, I guess."

"Wait a minute!"

Franklin and Eva stopped as the chubby kid clomped over to them. He was dressed in a black tuxedo with tails and a purple sash, an outfit which only served to emphasize his ungainly build.

"I," he said triumphantly, "know who you are."



"Who? Me?"

"Yes," he said, scowling, "you're Franklin Richards."

A look of surprise came over Eva's face and she turned her head to stare at him as well. As she matched mental pictures to actuality, her eyes only grew wider. "You're *the* Franklin Richards? Oh my God, why didn't you say something?"

Franklin sighed. "I guess it never got brought up."

"Oh my God," she repeated, now to herself. "I can't believe I kicked the real Franklin Richards."

"Well, you *are* Franklin Richards and I demand to know what you're doing out here and not inside the hall!" The kid crossed his arms and gave him a vicious look.

For his part, Franklin was at loss for anything to say. The whole situation was starting to seem very silly to him. Perhaps he should have just stayed inside, after all, and took his humiliation face-to-face.

"He's out here because he didn't want to present his thing."

"And why not? He's the great Franklin Richards isn't he? The boy who won the last three years running. The one who stole my rightful trophy!"

Franklin honestly couldn't remember seeing the kid previously, but then he never paid attention to the other contestants anyhow. He usually fell asleep during their presentations.

"He didn't want to present 'cause his dad made his invention for him."

A look of wild rage came over the kid's chubby face. Somehow his cheeks got even redder as he sputtered: "What? That's cheating!"

"I guess so."

"You guess so? Are you kidding me? I've been losing all these years and you've been cheating?"

"Not on purpose," Franklin said. "My dad's just really intense about it. Honestly I think the competition's stupid anyhow."

The kid fixed him with a glower of pure hate. He looked like he might try to strangle him at any moment, or at least command his robot to do it. Instead, he narrowed his eyes, glanced at Eva and then back to Franklin.

"I'm going to tell the committee."

Franklin shrugged. "Go ahead. I don't care."

"They'll throw you out," he said with relish. "It will be really embarrassing I bet."

"I won't even be there. Maybe you didn't notice but we were walking away from the hall, not towards it."

The kid frowned. "So where are you two going then?"

"A pizza place up the road," he said. "We'll probably stay there until the convention's over."

"Really?" Suspicious now.

"Yeah."

"Well," he said, the rage slowly giving way to a hesitant awkwardness. "Do you think, maybe, I could come with then?"

Franklin and Eva exchanged glances. She threw her hands up as though to say '*up to you*'. With a faint smile, Franklin nodded his assent. "Sure. But you have to leave that thing here."

The kid quickly slipped the remote into his back pocket and together the three headed up the street. The passengers in the stranded cars, still recalling the melted street lamp, watched them leave in respectful silence.

"What's your name anyways?"

"Nightshade."

"But what's your first name?"

"Hubert..."

Somehow they both managed not to laugh.

"Tell the truth, are you really Franklin Richards?" Eva asked as they finally disappeared around a corner. "Really?"

Meanwhile the robot, still belching exhaust, occupied itself tying car bumpers into pretzels.

---

Back at the conventional hall, there was an uproar. As Franklin's name was called for presentation, no one stood up. Initially there was shock, then concern as they checked the hallways and restrooms, and finally resentment. This, many felt, was just like a Richards.

"Just because his father is a member of the Fantastic Four," one of the judges sniffed, "does not mean he's eligible for special treatment." There was murmured agreement.

"Ah, keep your shirts on will ya? He'll be back any second."

Luckily, before he ran out, Franklin had left a note on the table next to his invention. It promised he would be back shortly and included the special squiggle the family used to

indicate he was not in danger. (As a child Franklin had been prone to frequent kidnappings). Otherwise Ben would have been more beside himself than he already was.

"Mr. Thing, we-"

"Ben Grimm."

"Mr. Ben Grimm then," the judge corrected dryly. "We can not hold up the entire competition just to wait for one wayward child. If there's no one here to present his invention, he will have to be disqualified. The rules clearly state-"

"Ah, stuff yer rules," Ben growled. "I'll present the damn thing."

Another murmur went through the crowd and the judges eyed him with disapproval. It was not unheard of for a contestants' parents or guardian to present their invention but it was highly irregular.

"Very well..."

"Alright then." He walked over to the table, grabbed the toaster-like gizmo, and thrust it at them. "Here."

The lead judge wrinkled his nose. "Here, what?"

"Here. Judge it."

"You have to explain what it does first, Mr. Grimm."

Ben looked down at the shiny box in his hand. As was usual when it came to such things, he hadn't the foggiest idea what was what. Still, be damned if he was going to tell them that. Setting the gadget back down on the table, he looked out at the crowd and cleared his throat.

"Okay then. This is, ah... Well, let me just..."

Reaching out with his giant stone hand, he touched a wrist-thick finger to one of the swatter protrusions. It snapped off. "Er," he groaned as a gasp went through the crowd. "S'nothing! It's supposed to do that. Now shaddup."

He touched another antenna; this one snapped off as well. Little wisps of smoke began to rise from under the machine. Someone in the audience stifled a giggle.

"Sonuva, just wait a second..."

More breaking, more laughter. Ben's hands continued to fight with him and the crowd seemed to enjoy the spectacle.

It didn't take long before his temper reached boiling.

On the way back from the pizza parlor, Eva grew worried. "Our parents are really going to be upset."

For the first time that afternoon, Franklin considered what may have happened in their absence. Probably not much. If they were not there to present, the judges would just have to go on to someone else, right? It didn't seem like that big a deal.

Plus his parents weren't there anyhow. While his dad may have burst a gasket, Uncle Ben never got angry with him. He mostly saved that for guys like Dr. Doom or Uncle Johnny.

"It'll be fine. They probably didn't even notice we were gone."

Hubert made a face. "You should have let me destroy the convention in the first place. Then there wouldn't be any problem."

"Yeah. Maybe next year."

Still Eva couldn't ease her mind and they hurried the rest of the way there. They got back just in time to see the Thing being escorted from the hall. It took about every grown-up in attendance as well as pair of police officers to see him out.

"Lousy freakin' convention anyhow! Ought to bring the whole place down, it'd serve ya right!"

He kept ranting on like this while some of the parents egged him on with insults of their own. The police officers were surprisingly respectful though. The Thing's reputation for bending cruiser cars in two or leaving them stuck in trees was legendary.

"Hey, Uncle Ben," Franklin said quietly as he approached. "Did I miss anything?"

Upon sight of him, the Thing's anger dissolved at once. Suddenly, he looked rather abashed. "Ah, geeze, kid, where were you?"

"We just went out for a walk. I left a note..."

"Yeah, I got it. The egghead committee here wouldn't believe me though." The big man sighed. "Sorry, Frank, but it looks like I kind of ruined your whole event."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

Ben smiled, figuring the kid was just being nice. Most of the other adults had begun to wander back inside, grumbling about the Richards family's outrageous behavior. There was a very good chance they wouldn't be seeing an invite next year.

As for the police, they had already made it halfway across the parking lot, arguing over whether they should leave a ticket on the Fantasticar or not. They sure as heck weren't going to hand it to Ben.

"Who're your friends here?"

"This is Hubert Nightshade." The chubby boy frowned on general principle. "And this is Eva...."

Franklin looked at her, realizing he hadn't got her last name.

"Eva Nyugen."

"Yeah, that so?" With an embarrassed frown, Ben reached out with his big hand and deposited a crumpled ball of brass in hers. "Then I think this may be yours."

"What is it?"

"It used to be a trophy."

Her mouth dropped open. "You mean I won?"

"Kind of," he said. "I think yours was sort of the only one left when I got done..."

"Oh my God!" Eva shouted, jubilant anyways. She grabbed the crumpled ball and made for the entranceway. "I've got to go tell my parents!" Within a matter of seconds, she had disappeared back into the hall and the doors slammed shut behind her.

Franklin had not even had a chance to tell her goodbye.

---

Hubert made his exit soon after that--he had a robot to check up on after all--and the two decided to call the convention a day. Piling into the Fantastical, Ben fired up the jets and soon they were airborne.

As they glided over the New York rooftops, Franklin sat back in his seat and thought. He felt strangely melancholy. It was not because of the convention. Winning, losing, or being thrown out meant nothing to him. Instead, he thought of the two other kids he'd met today and the brief moment of fun they'd had.

It seemed as though he rarely got to meet anyone his own age. With his parents' constant adventuring, he rarely had time to attend a normal school and most of his education was done at home. That left just his parents' friends and most of them were superheroes as well. They seldom brought family when they visited.

Franklin sighed. Anyhow, the day was over now. It had been an interesting experience at least.

"Hey, pal," Ben said, glancing at him in the rearview mirror. "I really am sorry back there."

"It's alright, Uncle Ben. It doesn't matter."

Franklin smiled sadly at him and took a moment to struggle out of his restrictive coat and tie. He tossed the jacket on the seat beside him and, when he did, a small square of paper fell out. It was the Convention pamphlet.

He picked it up and opened it. The grinning molecule winked at him again. Under it was the same banner, of course, but below that was a scribble of text he hadn't noticed before. It read, in pink ink: *Call me - Eva* followed by a phone number.

"I got an idea, Frank. Howsa bout we stop for pizza on the way home?"

Franklin grinned and slipped the little square of paper back in his pocket.

"I don't know, Uncle Ben. I think I'd rather have ice cream."

"Oh ho," his uncle said, grinning back at him. "A man after my own heart, I see!"

And so the Fantasticar dipped down from the sky, returning its contented passengers back to the lively streets below.

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**Next Issue:** *A distress call from Atlantis sets the Fantastic Four on a mission to rescue Namor, only to discover the real enemy may be--the Prince himself?!*

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## Fantastic Forum

For those wondering why Franklin may seem a little older in this story, that's because he was advanced to his early teens in the final issue of Jason Bruss's run. That issue has since been removed from the site to make way for Steve Crosby's excellent finale. When I wrote this story, however, it was still posted and, I assumed, established continuity.

Enjoying the final product too much to simply scrap it, I have since removed any mention of Franklin's specific age from the story. He is obviously a bit older than his last in-continuity birthday though, which took place way back in Fantastic Four Volume I #10 (he was six). And I think that's alright. There have been a lot of issues of Fantastic Four released at this site since then--with a number of significant events and revelations along the way--and the cast gaining a few years doesn't seem that outrageous to me.

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#5 (Volume 2)**

# **"THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

---

Yoshimi Yokota--Yoshi to her friends--was no stranger to odd situations. She had, in her short career as a live-in nanny, been through a lot. For example, the year she spent working for the Narobian ambassador and her eleven identical children. A nerve racking experience to put it mildly.

Nevertheless, the Fantastic Four were rapidly winning the prize. Take, for example, today when, walking into the dining room, Yoshi found the table and chairs mysteriously floating in the air.

Peeking out into the hallway, she discovered more of the same. Loveseats, ottomans, coffee tables, and so forth wafting hither and thither. Even as she watched, a wicker footstool shoved its way rudely past her, without so much as a pardon me.

"Hey!" she complained, but it didn't pay her much mind. The stool continued on its way until disappearing into one of the Baxter's Buildings' half-dozen guestrooms. She decided to follow.

Within, Yoshi discovered even more gravity-free furnishings, including the guest bed, which bobbed along on the ceiling like a chunk of driftwood at sea. In the center of the chaos, stood her employer, Mrs. Susan Storm-Richards, the Invisible Woman. She was humming happily.

"Good afternoon, Yoshi." She gestured with her hand and one of the floating paintings carefully hung itself on a nail. "Just doing a little rearrangement."

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Richards," Yoshi said with just a hint of relief. At least, she told herself, the furniture wasn't haunted. Around here even that small a comfort was good news.

"Susan, please. Or Sue."

"Alright," she said, not for the first time. No matter how her employer insisted, Yoshi found it very hard to call the world famous Susan Richards anything other than missus. Ambassadors and celebrities were one thing, but the Invisible Woman? A whole other league.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Well," Susan said, "actually, you c--"

A crash from the opposite room interrupted her employer mid-sentence. It had not, Yoshi thought, sounded promising. The expression on Susan's face seemed in agreement.

"I guess we better go find out what that was, hmmm?"

Yoshi nodded and, with furniture still levitating eerily through the room, the two of them walked one door down to the living room. Inside Ben and Johnny--the teammates and seemingly permanent houseguests of the Richards--were standing in front of the couch, gazing down at the remains of a broken lamp.

Upon sight of Susan, Ben pointed a thick stone finger at Johnny. "He did it."

"Yeah. Right. Cause I'm the big clumsy ape with the ten ton body."

Ben took a playful swipe at him and Johnny neatly side-stepped it. "Slow," he chided with a lop-sided grin, "so slow."

"Okay, you two," Susan said, hands on her hips. "Enough horse-playing. I've hardly had the chance to unpack and already you're destroying my house?" She didn't, Yoshi thought, really sound that angry though.

"I can pick it up."

"Thank you, dear," she said, "but I think the boys can clean up their own messes."

"Hear that? Boss says to clean up yer mess, brat."

Johnny rolled his eyes and, grabbing one of the magazines off the coffee table, scooped up some of the lamp's clay shards. "Which reminds me," he said, "why does Sue always get to be in charge when Reed's gone? I've been on the team just as long as she has."

He looked towards his sister, as though expecting an answer, but she never had the chance to reply. The familiar warble of the main computer's warning alarm had suddenly come over the intercom.

*Emergency message for the Fantastic Four. Emergency message for the Fantastic Four.*

Susan was already out the door as Johnny walked over to Yoshi, handing her the rolled up magazine and lampshade with a playful wink. He then followed his teammates into the hall.

"You the team leader," Ben was chuckling as they left. "Haw, that's rich."

---

Four hours later, the Fantasti-sub was gliding towards the domed city of Atlantis. As always the team was struck by the strange, otherworldly beauty of the sea kingdom.



Within the transparent shield that surrounded Atlantis like an up-turned punch bowl, hundreds of beautiful coral spires competed with blue marble ionic columns and Parthenon-style architecture for the eyes' attention. Amidst this archaic scene swam a parade of domesticated sea animals--messenger dolphins with the colorful trappings of the Atlantean guilds, giant riding sea-horses and porpoises, and whales carrying vast loads like pack mules.

It was an amazing sight even for the Fantastic Four, no strangers to other worlds, galaxies, and dimensions. Nevertheless, Johnny looked disappointed.

"So what's the emergency? Looks like business as usual at Sea World."

Sue shrugged. "The details in the message were fairly scant. All it said is that the royal palace was under siege and the Atlanteans were requesting our help."

"Funny how old turnip head always needs our help," Ben grunted, "but we never see hide or hair of him when our bacon's in the fryer."

"We don't know if Namor's the one who called us."

"Ah, c'mon sis," Johnny said. "People don't sneeze in Atlantis without a royal pardon first." Sue could see they were itching to argue so she simply smiled and let it pass. It was funny to her how little things changed. Although Namor and the Atlanteans had been their allies for years now, Ben and Johnny--even Reed--had never entirely forgiven them for the old days. They still seemed to think that any moment the tables might turn again.

Maybe that was reasonable, she thought, given their history. For her part, Sue had never hated Namor and doubted she ever could. He did what he thought was best for Atlantis, even if it didn't always earn him the surface world's acclaim.

As the mini-sub drew closer to the city, a brace of shark-riders rode out to greet them and their headlights glinted off the Atlanteans' green and silver armor. With a motion from the leader, they were guided towards an open docking tube made specifically for surface dwellers. These were the only spots in Atlantis, outside the palace, that weren't filled with sea water and enough pressure to crush the average human body.

They waited until the seal was established and the oxygen levels stabilized, before popping the hatch and entering the tube. It was made of a fibrous, plastic-like structure that proved surprisingly sturdy under their feet. It led them to a small ante-chamber decorated with a simple stone bench and a brace of flags hanging over the doorway.

The flags, Sue noted, looked different than the royal purple ones she was used to. The woman waiting to greet them, however, was as stunning ever.

"So what's up, Nita?" asked Johnny. "Another sea monkey infestation or something like that?"

Namorita smiled and bowed slightly to her friends in the Atlantean fashion. Unlike her cousin Namor, she had the blue skin and dark hair of an Atlantean woman.

"It is good to see all of you. I'm glad you were able to respond so quickly."

Sue smiled and exchanged a friendly hug with her friend. "There's always time for those we care about. I must admit though, we are surprised to see you here. I'd heard you were working with Force Works now."

"That much is true. When my people asked my aid though, I was honor-bound to respond."

Sue nodded. The Atlanteans put great stock in personal responsibility and honor, which made it all the more odd they would approach outsiders for help.

"I notice your husband is absent. I hope he is doing well?"

"He's fine, thank you. Unfortunately, other duties have called him away from Earth\* right now or he'd be here with us."

\* (M2K Fantastic Four v2 #2-3 - AI)

"I'm sorry to hear that," Namorita responded with a frown. "I fear we could have used his expertise."

"Ah, don't ya worry cutie, we can get along without Stretch. Just point us towards whatever giant octopus or evil starfish is botherin' ya and we'll take of it."

"I'm afraid it's not so simple as that, Mr. Grimm. As I mentioned in my message, the palace is indeed under siege, but not by our enemies."

Johnny smirked and made a face, like she'd just said something crazy. "Then who? Jehovah's Witnesses?"

"Our own people. They have surrounded the palace and my cousin, Prince Namor, has barricaded himself inside."

Sue frowned and crossed her arms. It was her turn to look confused. "I don't understand. The Atlanteans worship Namor. Why would they do this?"

"You have been away for some time, Susan. The Atlantean people are changing in many ways, positive ones on the whole I believe. A reform movement has recently come into vogue and one of their main goals has been to establish a Democratic Republic like the surface dwellers dote on."

"And in order to create a democracy," Sue mused, "they have to be rid of the monarchy?"

"Exactly. The movement, however, has been largely peaceful. Its leaders told my cousin he could keep his title once the elections were held, but the majority of state decisions would be made by the new representative council." Namorita sighed, casting her eyes sadly towards the floor. "But you know stubborn he can be. Rather than give in, he's locked himself inside the palace and now protesters are surrounding the gates. There's been no violence yet but..."

Sue nodded. As in all such things, bloodshed was only a matter of time unless the tension was diffused. Unfortunately, the particulars made that even trickier than it seemed. Namor was noble, heroic, kind-hearted and many other fine qualities, but he was also the most

pig-headed man Sue had ever met. Once backed into such a corner, there was no chance he was going to stand down on his own.

"We'll do what we can, Nita. Will he be willing to talk to us?"

"No one has been granted entry for the last week," she said, "but I have a feeling he may make an exception for you and your friends, Susan."

She smiled grimly.

"Then take us to the palace."

---

Sue Richards had never been a history buff but she understood the principle of a moat. During the feudal period of Europe, princes and lords surrounded their castles with deep trenches and lakes in order to make it more difficult for invading armies to overrun the walls. The idea was the same here.

Except, in Atlantis, trenches and water meant nothing to an attacker. Instead, the Atlanteans had built a series of airtight bubbles around the royal palace. If an invading army attempted to storm it, they had to pass through these areas, which could be drained of water in a matter of seconds by massive underground pumps. Since Atlanteans could only breath underwater, these air bubbles could be deadly to attacking troops.

Naturally, these defenses could be circumvented by a determined enemy. All defenses can. In the case of the Fantastic Four, that was unnecessary. Being surface dwellers, they were able to pass through them in relative comfort.

"In my book," Ben was saying as they strode across a pink coral bridge, "it's about time. Where's finhead get off prancing around like he's little lord Fauntleroy? 'Bout time the Atlanteans wised up."

"He's been good leader."

"Yeah, well, Mussolini made the trains run on time, right? Doesn't make it right."

Sue rolled her eyes. If there ever was less apt comparison between two men, she could hardly think of it.

"Ole rockhead's got a point. Slapping around tyrants is sort of under our job description, right? Doom, Annihilus, Mole Geek, you know the type."

"You mean like Black Panther and Blackbolt? That sort?"

"Ah," Ben grunted dismissively, taking his usual tack when the argument outpaced him. "Them guys is different. You're just making excuses."

As the trio passed through a final archway--its columns carved in a flattering replica of the prince himself--they could spy the ramparts of the palace. As soon as the guards spotted them from the wall, there was a flurry of action as loyalists manned the battle stations.

Nevertheless, when they reached the entrance, the massive doors swung open and the drawbridge lowered. A group of twenty Atlantean soldiers came out to meet them, their heads covered in the bulky gear they needed to breath out-of-water.

The lead soldier bowed coldly and motioned them inside. Susan returned his gesture while her teammates sized him up impatiently.

"Just let me do the talking, alright guys?"

"Sure, Suzie, sure" Ben said, flexing his fingers as they entered the palace. "You do the talkin', I'll do the clobberin'..."

*Just pray, she told herself, it doesn't come to that...*

---

They were met in the antechamber by a stooped old man in thick burgundy robes. He introduced himself as the court seneschal and he had come to meet them personally on behalf of Prince Namor. Despite the courtly greeting though, Susan could feel the coldness of their reception. Their armed escort remained within sight, ready it seemed to leap forward and cut them down at the slightest infraction.

"Welcome surface dwellers..."

Susan bowed respectfully to the old man and he nodded his head perfunctorily. His eyes, rheumy and tucked within heavy folds, peered out at her with obvious distaste.

"I'm afraid you've come at inopportune time. The Prince is unable to entertain guests."

"Well, we ain't here to entertain, pally."

A sharp look from Sue silenced her teammates. "Please," she said, "we desire an audience with Namor."

He looked them over head and toe, offering the faintest hint of a smirk. "I do not see the need."

"You don't see the need?" Susan repeated, aghast. "There's a war threatening! Namor is the only one who can prevent it."

The old man's face kept its bemused expression as he fixed her with his haughty gaze. "Predictably, you misunderstand the situation, outsiders. It is entirely out of the Prince's hands. His people are in rebellion. It is they who must either heel or be crushed by his might. If, perhaps, you wish to convince them of the futility of their actions, then be about it. Our Lord promises to be merciful to those who surrender now."

"This is insane! Please," she pleaded, "won't Namor listen to reason? Does he really desire bloodshed?"

He sniffed. "He desires only what is his. No king of Atlantis has ever abdicated the throne willingly. He does not plan to be the first to so disgrace it."

Sue noted the glimmer in the Atlantean's eye as he spoke and realized what he was driving at. Namor could not simply step aside. No matter what they said or threatened, that was not a possibility. It would leave an unbearable mark of shame on his name and family.

The first king of Atlantis to relinquish his power without so much as drawing a sword. For Namor, it was unthinkable. But was war the only other solution?

Such stupid, thick-headed arrogance, she thought to herself, but the blood would be no less terrible because of it.

"If we could find a way to resolve this conflict peaceably," she asked, "would the Prince hear it?"

The seneschal regarded her with shrewd eyes. His wizened face, honed by years of political dealings, betrayed not a single thought. He merely nodded and said, "Our lord is very open-minded of course. I'm sure he shall give any words of yours appropriate consideration. But do not expect the impossible."

Sue bowed respectfully. "May my friends and I have time and place to discuss this issue in private?"

"Yes, we shall grant this favor."

Lazily, he raised a crooked finger and a retainer appeared from the adjoining room.

"Escort them to the banquet hall and give them full benefit of our Lord's hospitality. They are to have absolute privacy and anything else they desire." He looked down at Susan. "You have two hours."

"And then?"

"And then," he said, "my man will escort you to the gates."

---

"Oh, brother," Ben said, sniffing at one of the golden wine chalices on the table before crumbling it into a ball. "*Grant us this favor?* I'll grant him a favor alright--knuckle sandwiches, all ya eat."

"Tried 'em," Johnny said with smirk. "Too much ham, not enough zip."

Ben shot his teammate a glare before whirling on Sue. "Suzie, look, I know ya used to have a thing for this guy, but this is nuts. Clown's off his rocker. We need to take him down for

somebody gets hurt here. You heard the way that guy was talkin'. They're practically itchin' for a war!

Sue shook her head. "Then we heard two different things. Why do you think Namor sent him to meet us? He knows we're here to help prevent this war but if we approach him in the wrong way, it will only escalate things. Namor doesn't want this conflict but he can't stand down. His pride won't let him."

"Don't sound like what I heard, lady. You sure don't just *want* that to be true?"

"He's our friend. It's not by accident we're standing here. He could have thrown us out just as easily as not. He wants us to find a solution." Sue dropped into one of the hall's chairs, squeezing her eyes as she massaged her temples. "If only..."

*If only, what?* she asked herself. Sue knew the other half though. *If only Reed was here.* She could see the same unspoken question on her teammates' faces. Reed would have known what to do; Reed would have seen the solution to this problem by now.

Reed would have acted like what he was: the team's true leader.

Sue winced at her own thoughts. Was that really true? She had stepped into the role of leadership before and had success. But those instances, she knew, were mostly combat situations. Ben or Johnny probably could have done just as good a job. By now, they all knew their way around a battlefield.

But when it came to a spot like this--where hundreds, maybe thousands, of lives hung on her making the right decision--was she fit to fill his role? A nagging suspicion told her she wasn't.

Before the team had even come into existence, Reed had planned for its possibility.\* From the beginning, he knew what needed to be done and had never hesitated. Sue, on the other hand, never even dreamed of taking on such a role. Her powers had come as a great shock, and not exactly a welcome one.

\* (Revealed way, way back in Fantastic Four vs. X-Men - AI)

When Sue was a girl--and really she was still just a girl when the accident occurred--she had never wanted to be a hero or to live a life of action. Her desires had been simple. At most she daydreamed of being an actress, but even that wasn't serious. Really she had wanted to marry a good man, have children, live a normal life.

Was that bad? Was that something to be ashamed of? Sue didn't think so but nevertheless it suggested she was far from a first choice as a superhero team leader. Those first few years after the team came together, she barely even participated in their battles and victories. While the others trained and trained, eager for the next fight, she found herself dreading it.

Why do we have to always fight it out? Why, she had asked herself, couldn't they work things out more peacefully, make the enemy come to their side? Absolute foolishness in hindsight, right? As though Doom could have been talked out of his mad schemes.

She sighed. Maybe that was it. She lacked that killer instinct, the confidence of a born warrior. Maybe-

Suddenly, Susan sat up and ran back through her previous thoughts. A smile crept over her face.

"Whatcha got, Suzie?" Ben asked. "Clobberin' time?"

"No," she told him, "not yet, not ever if I can help it. Let's get back to the throne room."

Ben and Johnny exchanged glances as their leader headed purposefully back towards the way they entered.

"Well," Johnny said with a grin, "you heard the boss, right?"

"Yeah, yeah..."

---

Prince Namor, the monarch of Atlantis and hero of legend, sat upon the throne of Atlantis with a crown of laurels on his head. He was garbed in a white silk toga, the scepter of royal power lying casually in his lap as he surveyed his uninvited guests from his chair of gold and pearl.

His face was cruel with royal disdain.

"Know now surface dwellers, I grant this audience only out of past respect. You have no business in Atlantis on the eve of war."

Unfazed by this churlish greeting, Sue strode boldly up to the throne. The guards placed their hands on the hilts of their swords but a single frown from their ruler backed them down.

"We come as friends, Namor."

"Then I hope we shall not part as enemies."

"As do I..."

At this Sue stepped forward, climbing the three or four steps that separated her from the Prince. When she reached the last one, she dropped down to one knee and bowed her head respectfully. A look of shock came over her teammates' faces.

"No way," Ben growled. "I'm gonna knock th-"

"Shhh," Johnny said, placing a restraining on his friend's shoulder. "Sue knows what she's doing..."

Even Namor looked stunned. "Please, Susan," he said with alarm, "this is not necessary between us!"

"I must kneel, good Prince, because I have come to ask your royal highness a favor."

Suddenly his eyes narrowed and a bit of the coldness seeped back in. "What favor would that be? Be warned that I cannot abandon the fight, even for you."

"I would not request it. Instead I ask a favor for myself."

"Which is?"

"Did you not notice, wise prince, that one of our number is absent today?"

"Of course," he said. "The talented if fool-headed Reed Richards, your husband."

"Then you must realize the position we are in."

A look of confusion came over the Prince's face. "I'm not sure I understand..."

"Without Reed Richards we are placed in a dangerous situation. It is his leadership and wisdom we rely on. In his absence, we are greatly weakened and, I fear, in a perfect position for our enemies to take advantage. That is why I must ask you this favor."

"This favor?"

"Your strength, your prowess, your knowledge of tactics and years of leadership experience. You are the only man fit to stand in his place. We beg you--I beg you--to please come and aid us in this time of need."

Ben looked like he was choking on something foul but Johnny clapped a hand over his mouth before he could shout anything stupid.

"Please," she said, "as friends, as allies, can you ignore our plea?"

For a moment the Prince stood still as stone and a great silence fell over the hall. His eyes, hard and dark, remained focused on the human woman at his feet. There was an anger there, outrage even, and it was mirrored in the faces of many in the hall.

Susan knew she had placed him in an awkward position. To deny her request would be to dishonor himself through disloyalty to his friends and allies. Yet to answer it meant leaving Atlantis, ceding the fight before it even began. She could only hope her earlier judgment on his true feelings had been correct--that he would avoid bloodshed if given the opportunity.

At last Namor stood. The hard lines of his face softened as he took Susan's hand. When he spoke, he spoke directly to her, but his voice filled the entire hall.

"Your words were heartfelt, my dear friend. I cannot help but to be struck by them. When you arrived, I had thought you'd come to dissuade me from the inevitable. Now I see you were brought to Atlantis by your own circumstance. Do you realize what you ask of me though?"



"I do," she said, "but there was no other of equal prowess we could approach. Our debt to you and your people will be great."

"So it shall. But then the Prince of Atlantis is always generous to those in need. It is his character to repay past friendship with gratitude and love, even at personal hardship." Here the Prince paused and turned his eye on the others in the hall. "If only the same could be said for the Atlantean people."

There were suppressed murmurs across the throne room. The Prince's retainers realized at last what they were witnessing. The crisis was passing without a single drop of blood spilled.

"Sire, you cannot--"

Namor held up a hand, silencing the dissenter with but a gesture. "As for my people," he declared to those still standing, "inform them that their glorious Prince leaves now to fulfill his duty and honor his line, even while his ingrate subjects dishonor his name and shame their once proud heritage. Know I shall return no more until the wrong done me has been righted."

As he finished his speech, which undoubtedly would be reported word-for-word throughout Atlantis, he removed his crown and placed it calmly alongside his scepter on the vacant throne. He then lifted Sue gently back to her feet. Only the faintest smile passed between them.

"I am an Atlantean no longer!"

A shockwave passed over the assembled soldiers and royal advisors but none spoke aloud as the four figures walked proudly from the throne room--three humans and the former Prince of Atlantis.

The Fantastic Four.

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**Next Issue:** *The story returns to the Negative Zone as Reed Richards uncovers the truth behind Planet 32-I. A truth that may prove too much for him to bear...*

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## Fantastic Forum

Author's Note: Namorita appears courtesy of Daniel Ingram, who writes her regular appearances over in Force Works.

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#6 (Volume 2)**

## **"BEHIND THE CURTAIN"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**What Came Before:** *While responding to a distress signal from the Negative Zone, Reed Richards discovered the ruins of a futuristic city on an uncharted planet. He now works to rebuild it, hoping to both uncover the reasons for its decline and to regain his own flagging faith in technology...*

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Laughter was not a common sound among the tribesmen of Planet 32-I. Their lives were too short, too hard, to allow for it. Each day was a struggle for water, food, and survival on a harsh and dangerous world.

They made allowances, however, for the two strangers that now entered camp. After all, being gods, their ways were not always clear. Besides, some argued, why should they not laugh and be merry? They had defeated the demons that plagued the tribe and brought many miracles to the valley, giving them fresh water and a powerful magic that they called "electricity."

Laughter seemed only natural for such carefree gods. Indeed, more than a few of the tribesmen shared private smiles of their own to see them coming.

"It's only a matter of time, Andrea," Reed was saying as he swung his knapsack down next to the equipment shed. "The layout isn't even that complex. Once I figure out how the storage component works..."

The second figure, a slim woman whose curly brown hair had been tied back with a red kerchief, laughed. "Tell me, don't you ever get tired?"

"When there's so much work to do? So much to still accomplish?" He shook his head. "We rest enough when we're dead."

They had been here for over a month now and already the changes were incredible. The ruined city their camp sat outside of had begun to hum with life again. The generators had been repaired, much of the water system restored, and even a few of the magnetic rail cars

were up and running again. It was an impressive amount of progress, especially for two people with only an untrained labor force for help.

The city was not the only thing that had changed. Reed, himself, looked different. Gone were the dark circles from under his eyes and the slump in his shoulders. He looked refreshed and alive, as though twenty years had fallen away.

For Andrea it reminded her of the young freshman she'd met in college, the eager student who wanted to learn everything from the first moment he stepped on campus. And had then proceeded to do so.

"Feeling literary are we?"

"Hm?"

"I will have an eternity to rest. Sergovia I believe." She smiled. "Or his obituary. I forget."

Reed smiled back but probably hadn't heard her. He was already spreading their maps and blueprints out on the stone bench in front of them. Hunching down, he began to study his latest obsession -- the city's old defense network.

"It still doesn't make sense to me how such an advanced civilization could fail," he said.

"The weapons of these Ghost God terrors\* were toys compared to what I'm seeing here. At their height, the people who lived in this city should been able to tackle them with ease."

(See Fantastic Four v2 #3 for Reed's first encounter - AI)

"It's certainly a mystery," Andrea said before ducking into one the tents. Returning with two cups, she poured a draught of dark liquid into each. She handed a glass to Reed.

"What's this?"

"Bourbon," she said with a wink. "From my own dwindling stores. I never go dimension hopping without it."

"Hum." Reed took a small sip and nodded. It was good. "What's the occasion?"

"You're the occasion. I'm celebrating the world's greatest scientist doing what he does best. It's a joy to finally see it up close."

He laughed. "Thank you, but really, it's not all that. Ask my family, I drive them half nuts most of the time."

"That's them," she said softly, reaching out to top off his glass. As she did so her other hand grasped his, as though steadying the cup, and lingered there. "This is me."

Reed smiled before noting the serious look in her eyes. He had never been much of a romantic but even he recognized what they were saying.

"Andrea," he replied, pulling away, "I'm flattered but I can't. I have a wife."

"Who's light years away and wouldn't have to know. I'm not asking for anything."

"I know," he said, "but I still can't. I took a vow."

Andrea raised an eyebrow, as though suspecting he may be joking. When she saw that he was genuine a grin took its place. "And so honest and true on top of it all! Tell me, does it ever hurt? To be so perfect? To be Mr. Fantastic?"

"I'm not perfect. I just do what I think is right, as best I can, like everyone else."

"Ooo, maybe there is a flaw. False modesty," she joked, "is quite unbecoming..."

Reed didn't know what to say to that and luckily he didn't have to think on it long. A commotion arose in the camp as a runner came panting into view. The camp workers gathered around him as he sprinted towards the strangers' tents.

"*Sehod* Richards," he gasped, using the honorary title the tribe had given Reed. Andrea said it meant something like 'Wise Conqueror'. It was a bit embarrassing in his opinion. "A scout has returned from a great distance away bearing terrible news."

"Tell us, please," Andrea said.

Reed had yet to learn more than the rudiments of the language. He simply hadn't had the time. It was as much as he could handle just to make out what was being said.

"He says he has found the Ghost Gods' home. The place where they come into the world."

"Where?"

A fearful look came over the man's face and he lowered his voice, as if fearing the very words he used would bring doom down on their heads. "A great silver lake where the demons come from the earth itself. He has seen it with his own eyes."

Reed and Andrea exchanged glances.

"Can this man show us where the lake is?"

"No, *Sehod*, no! He is scared out of his wits. He is no condition to return to such an awful place."

Reed grabbed a pencil and a loose sheet of paper from the table. He turned towards Andrea with a determined expression.

"Tell him that the scout will have to draw us a map then."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"It's more than wise," he said with a tight smile, "it's about damn time. This little mystery has gone on long enough for my tastes."

She nodded, uncertain how prudent such a plan was but accepting that Reed knew his business. The leader of the Fantastic Four had faced enough danger in his life to know to do deal with it.

"We're going to meet the Ghost Gods face to face."

---

Much later, the two scientists stood atop a tall mesa, gazing over the charred landscape.

They'd circled the area over a half-dozen times and there was still no sign of any lake. Already the sun was dipping low in the sky and, once it set, what little light they had would disappear. Taking out his binoculars, Reed again scanned the horizon.

"Perhaps," Andrea suggested, "we misread the map?"

That would have been easy enough to do. The best the scout had been able to give them was a rough approximation of landmarks and distance. To Reed, very little of it meant anything at all and Andrea was in an only slightly better position.

The scout's trip, part of a food scavenging expedition, had taken him several weeks. With the use of the two-man Nega-Pod the Fantastic Four had left them, they were able to make much better time. If they'd read the signs right, Reed believed they were now in the right area.

The problem was they weren't entirely sure what they were looking for.

"I haven't seen any large bodies of water since I arrived here, let alone a lake."

"We may be looking for something much smaller in reality," she suggested. "Perhaps a pond or crater with some moisture collection."

Reed nodded, refocusing the binoculars. As he placed his eyes back against the sockets, a bright sliver of light made him wince. Thinking it was glare from the lenses, he swiped his thumb over them and tried again. The light was still there.

"Here! Look. " He passed the field glasses to Andrea.

"What is it?"

"I'm not certain. It looks like a reflection. Off something metal maybe. Perhaps that's why we missed it before, the sun was in the wrong position to catch it."

She nodded.

"Do you think it may be our friend's silver lake?"

Reed stood up, tucking the binoculars away before climbing into the cockpit. He offered his hand to Andrea to help her back inside.

"Only one way to find out."

---

They located the source of the sheen on a small hillock, surrounded by thick granite rocks. At a height, Reed was unable to recognize what it was but as the Nega-Pod gradually descended, he began to put it together.

"It looks a bit like a door," Andrea ventured.

"Yes, large too. An underground hangar perhaps. Judging by the rust, I'd guess it's been here for quite some time."

Reed activated the landing gear and felt the bounce of the shocks as they touched down. Stretching his arm around the seats and into the hold's lockers, he pulled out two pulse rifles. He handed one to Andrea.

"Just in case."

She nodded and they both leapt to the ground below.

The dust from their landing hung thick in the air as they approached the door. It was as wide across as a tanker truck and nearly as tall. Here and there spots of gray metal caught the light, but most of it was caked with heavy rust.

"Doesn't look much like a silver lake, does it?"

"Hardly," Reed said, wishing he'd brought along more equipment from camp. A sample might have allowed him to calculate the age of the metal. Scanning for radiation or other toxic emissions would have been a wise precaution as well, but it was bit too late to worry about that now.

"I don't see how we're going to get inside," Andrea said, "unless there's another entrance. There's no way we're forcing that."

He nodded. All of the heavy cutting equipment was also back at camp for use in the rebuilding effort. Nothing on the Nega-Pod was powerful enough to even dent this, not that he would have risked it. There was no telling what lay behind those doors.

"Perhaps, we sh--"

A loud clanking interrupted Reed. The doors shuddered, sending flakes of rust into the air, and then a bone numbing screech rent their ears.

"I can't see!" Andrea shouted, fighting to be heard over the clatter. A fissure had formed in the rusted metal and a blinding silver light seeped out.

Reed was in a similar dilemma, dots jumping before his eyes as he struggled to refocus them. He was just making out three lumpy figures haloed in light when the shooting started. The first blast passed inches from his left ear and he dove to the ground.

A second arc of light shot towards Andrea and she squatted down, firing back. One of the blurry figures was flung to the floor as the others turned her way. A third barrage lanced out at her and she spun to her left, crumpling to the ground.

Reed reacted quickly.

His body stretching outwards like taffy, he was on the figures before they could re-sight their guns. As he closed in, Reed noted they were the same sort of creatures the team had fought weeks ago -- four armed, spider-headed monsters with beaded green eyes.\*

(M2K Fantastic Four v2 #3 - AI)

Swinging his rifle like a bat, Reed struck the first creature in the head. Both it and the weapon shattered in a spray of sparks. The second one brandished its rifle but Reed moved faster, wrapping his malleable arm around the gun and jerking it free. His other hand, expanded to the size of a wind sail, then swooped in and slapped the creature across the hangar. Crashing into one of the light panels that ringed the walls, it slumped to the ground in a shower of glass.

That was merely two. During the last conflict there had been dozens of attackers and, as Reed stared into the tunnel, he expected to see more racing their way. There was nothing there however, just a long span of corridor.

Reed turned back to the enemy at his feet. Where its head had been smashed, a mess of circuitry and fiber optics poured out onto the floor. Robots. The Ghost Gods were machines. He watched as their bodies slowly dissolved into acrid smoke--the result of some fail-safe mechanism--leaving only the usual foul-smelling rags behind.

The land grew quiet again. He realized Andrea had not gotten back up.

---

"Are you alright?"

Reed finished dressing Andrea's wound with the First Aid Kit from the Nega-Pod. She had been struck in the left thigh, a painful injury but not a fatal one.

"If you mean will I live, I think so."

"I mean are you well enough to be left on your own."

Andrea raised an eyebrow. "You're not suggesting you're heading back in there?"

"I am. I have to find out what's behind all of this."

Recognizing the determined look in his eyes, she simply nodded and took the remaining rifle as he offered it.

"If you see anything at all," he said, "fire a warning shot from the Nega-pod and get out of here. This ship should easily outrace anything of theirs."

She was already sitting in the cockpit of the Pod and, even with her wounded leg, it would be no trouble for her to operate the controls. They both knew this, but she still hesitated.

"And leave you here? With those things?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "Besides, if something happens in there, you can't save me. It's better you inform the tribe--give them a chance to find cover--and send word to my teammates."

No point arguing, Andrea realized, as she sank back in the chair. He had already decided. "Okay, Reed. Just be careful, alright?"

"I will."

She watched as he turned to go, moving cautiously over the rocks and into the hangar. As he disappeared up the silvery tunnel, the door made another terrible screech and slowly eased shut.

An odd premonition struck her as the last of the hangar's lights blinked out. Her fear, she found, wasn't that Reed would fail but rather that he might succeed. Whatever the secret of 32-I was, Andrea had a growing suspicion that its discovery would not be a happy one.

The worst part was there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

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As the hangar doors clanged shut, the lights flickered out, reducing Reed to just the handheld flashlight from his belt. Clicking it on, he proceeded up the tunnel.

The darkness didn't matter much as there was little to see. Occasionally, he passed a few hover-cycles like they had seen before. None of them seemed to have been moved or operated in years, and they were layered in dust. The place smelled heavily of mildew and decay.

After about a mile, the tunnel branched off into several smaller hallways. Reed followed one that led to an expansive high-roofed factory cluttered with machinery. Like everything else, the machines looked antiquated, as though they'd been sitting untouched for decades, maybe longer. Throughout room, he found bins filled with arms, legs, heads, and other body synthetic parts, apparently used in construction of the Ghost Gods.

At the back of the factory, he discovered rows of completed robots hanging on racks. As his flashlight passed over their green eyes, they seemed to glow, but nothing stirred. They simply dangled before him like marionettes.

This technology, Reed realized, was very similar to what he'd been working with in the ruined city. None of it was as advanced, but it was adequate to its crude purposes. He had a feeling that whatever had built the one, had also built the other.

Exiting the factory, Reed entered another hall and was surprised to detect a bluish glow at the end of this one. He continued cautiously, expecting to trigger an alarm at any moment. No locks, shields or guards moved to block his passage though.



He entered the room with no difficulty. It was a large circular dome into which seven other hallways connected, like the spokes of a wheel. Reed guessed it was the center of the complex and what he saw there startled him.

Thousands, maybe millions, of video screens lined the walls. Each one displayed a different part of 32-I, every canyon, mesa, and blasted valley. As Reed moved among their blinking images, he discovered an entire section of feeds linking to the tribe's home city. Their every movement was being studied.

Finally he stopped as he came across a row of screens that showed the ruined city. He recognized the tilted spires and crumpling walls, as well as the various additions and rebuilding efforts that had been completed since his arrival. Viewed through the screens, his work took on the eerie feel of a child's erector set, as though it was little more than building blocks slapped together.

Suddenly the images on the screens disappeared. They were replaced by a flat blue screen with a simple row of text. Written thousands upon thousands of times in every direction he looked.

From somewhere above him a voice repeated the words.

It said: ***Hello, Reed Richards. Welcome home.***

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**Next Issue:** *Namor visits the Big Apple. Times Square! Rockefeller Center! And...the Skrulls?!?*

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## Fantastic Forum

Author note: **What the hell?**

That's an understandable response. If not to the end of this issue, then certainly to the five month gap since my last release. Excuses? Just the usual -- real life and a nasty case of writer's block. This issue in particular was a beast to write and edit. Originally almost twice as long as what you just read here, number six was meant to be far more revelatory. Unfortunately, it just wasn't working the way it was written.

The silver lining is that things are now back on track (cross fingers, bite tongue) and you can expect to see more of the Negative Zone than originally planned, not just 32-I. Which should be fun. Also up ahead: more Namor, more Franklin & friends, and the reintroduction of the Frightful Four (last seen skulking through the pages of M2K's FF way back in issues #25-26 of Volume I).

So thanks for reading, and an even bigger thanks to the editors (new and old) for their patience. - Al

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#7 (Volume 2)**

**"A PRINCE AMONG MEN"**

***Written by Alan Strauss***

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*Ten Secrets to Celebrity Chic!*

*Virginia Pokes Mystery to be Made into Film!?!*

*Unnatural Acts: What You Don't Know HAS Hurt You!*

*How to Lose Weight in Just Fifty Seconds A Day!*

Namor, former Prince of Atlantis, gazed over the newsstands' magazines with growing annoyance. Their headlines made no sense to him. The pictures were only worse. Who were these people, he wondered, and why did they think the promise of discovering the "Sexist Man in America" should interest him? Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese poetry would have been easier to decipher.

Meanwhile, all around Namor, bustled the great city of New York. Cars whipped past, horns honked, and a colorful variety of surface dwellers trudged along on their day's errands. He watched them go with complete detachment, much like they might view similar scenes on a movie screen. None of it seemed quite real to him.

And, yet, following his self-exile from Atlantis\*, this was now supposed to be his new home. The very thought brought a scowl to his face.

\* (Fantastic Four v2 #5 - AI)

This chaotic, messy tableaux might have been many things, but home was not one of them. Not for an Atlantean and certainly not for a Prince.

He glanced back down at the racks and a newspaper headline caught his eye. It read Atlantis in bold text across the fold. Picking the paper up, he flipped it open and saw the rest of the title.

Atlantis: Lost City Finds Democracy

Namor wrinkled his nose. Typical. The article practically gushed with praise as it described his ouster and his traitorous subjects' efforts to form a Republic like their own. A few lines of it was enough and he crumpled the paper into his fist. "Democracy," he mumbled, "what foolishness..."

"Hey, buddy, you buyin' that?"

Namor looked up to see the newsvendor staring daggers at him. He was a large man, pot bellied, with a baseball cap on his melon-like head. One of the loud, sloppy cretins the surface dwellers seemed to have in such abundance.

"Do not," Namor warned, "raise your voice to me."

"Then don't wrinkle my papers, asshole!"

In Atlantis such impertinence would have earned the fool a broken nose at least. Unfortunately, Namor was here on the good graces of the Fantastic Four. One of their members, Susan Richards, had recently extricated him from a difficult situation, and honor said he owed her a debt. He would not offend their hospitality by breaking their laws.

Swallowing his anger, Namor reached into his coat and tossed the vendor a few quarters. The paper he deposited in a nearby waste bin.

"Oh! There you are," called a cheery voice from behind him. "I thought I'd lost you."

Namor turned to find a young Asian woman smiling up at him. Her name was Yoshi. She was the Richards' live-in nanny. In other words, a paid servant, although one they treated like part of the family. An odd custom he'd seen more than once among the surface dwellers.

"I found the store stuffy," he explained. "I decided to wait outside."

Yoshi nodded and handed him a bag full of produce. "Could you take that please?"

He complied, but made a point to frown while doing so.

"By the way, Namor, I really appreciate you coming along like this. I know it was silly to ask but you didn't seem to be busy and sometimes I get frightened going out alone. I mean the Fantastic Four have so many enemies, you never know right?" Yoshi sighed, juggling the other two bags as she spoke, "And then there's all this terrible stuff about Mr. Richards. The last time I tried to do a little shopping, the reporters practically mobbed me."\*

\* (Reed Richards has become the target of a media frenzy as of Fantastic Four v2 #1 - AI)

"You need not fear on that account," he assured her. "As long as you're in my presence, they should know better than to approach."

This much was true. Even among the touchy meta-human set, the former Prince had a particularly poor reputation for his treatment of the press. It was very hard to pursue lawsuits for smashed equipment when your target lived at the bottom of the ocean, after all.

"Well, thank you Namor, it means a lot."

He nodded faintly. She was not unlikable for a surface dweller, but the idea that he was serving as a bodyguard for the Richards' nanny kept cropping up in his mind. It was not a pleasant thought.

"Now," she said with a smile, tugging at his coat sleeve. "If we can just find a cab..."

---

One of the odd yellow carriages infesting this city had pulled up to the curb. They were called taxi cabs and Namor likened them a bit to the hired coaches certain merchant families used in Atlantis. Nobles, naturally, kept their own.

The idea of paying to be chauffeured offended Namor but there wasn't much choice in the matter. Yoshi had been dead set against taking the Fantasticar, wishing to keep a low profile. And she wasn't about to let him fly her back to the Baxter Building with a load of groceries in her arms.

Sighing inwardly, he steeled himself to approach the vehicle. While he dawdled, a man in a business suit pushed in front of him and hopped in the cab's backseat. As the door slammed shut, the driver began to pull away.

A flash of anger came over Namor.

"Outrageous!" he growled. "Does he think I'll let such a slight stand? I-

"Forget about it," Yoshi said, grabbing his shirt cuff again and yanking him towards another cab. "You snooze, you lose."

While Namor tried to puzzle out the meaning of that phrase, she quickly piled their bags inside and climbed in. The cabbie gave him a funny look as he stood on the curb.

"C'mon, c'mon, if you're coming!"

Yoshi nodded encouragement and he finally sat down in the seat. The car, he thought, had a vaguely unpleasant smell, like surface dweller sweat and stale cologne.

"Where to?"

"42nd and Madison," Yoshi answered.

Namor kept his eyes away from the windows as they sped off. The sight of other cars tearing by at such unnatural speeds made him uneasy. It was very different than Atlantis, where a vehicle was not bound so much by gravity. On the surface, if something came hurtling towards you, you could not simply swim over it. You hit it straight on.

The cabbie noticed him staring at the dashboard and must have assumed he was looking at him.

"So what's with the pointy ears, Dr. Spock? Some sort of Lord of the Rings Convention?"

Namor did not care for the cabbie's fresh tone or the overly familiar grin on his face. The man looked as though he hadn't shaved in a week and his clothes were disheveled. An intolerable lack of decorum from a public servant.

"Watch your tongue," he told him.

The man frowned, glancing back over his shoulder. "What'd you say to me?"

Yoshi tugged at Namor's arm, shaking her head, but he ignored her. He'd about had his fill of surface dweller arrogance for one day. "I said hold your tongue."

"Hold my tongue, huh?" He grinned, looking almost as if he suspected he was being put on. "You rather walk?"

"Do you have any idea who you're talking to?"

"No," he chuckled. "Who?"

"I am Prince..."

Namor paused, the slip hitting him with surprising force. He was Prince of who exactly? Not the Atlanteans, not anymore. The title had ceased to exist. So who was he then? Neither Atlantean nor surface dweller, there seemed to be no ready answer.

The cabbie shook his head as his strange patron went silent. "You're Prince, huh? Well, ya look different from the last time I saw you."

"Your manners, mortal, leave much to be d-"

There was a terrible squeal as the cab jerked to a stop. Namor was flung forward in his seat, spilling Yoshi's groceries all over the floor. He took a moment to make certain she was alright before whirling back to the driver.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

The cabbie paid him no mind. He had already worked his body halfway out the driver-side window and was staring over the tops of the cars in front of him. Traffic had come to a complete standstill.

"Jesus Christ," he said, "would you look at that!"

Namor leaned forward, trying to get a better look as Yoshi gathered her items off the seat. There was alarm in the man's voice.

"Skrulls!"

Namor was out of the cab and in the sky within a moment. As he soared above the jammed highway--tossing aside the bulky coat that constrained him--the source of the commotion came into view. A small ship, about the size of a tugboat, had landed in the middle of the busy intersection. The figures milling around it did indeed look like Skrulls.

Although Namor had had only minimal contact with the aliens himself, he knew the Skrulls were frequent opponents of the Fantastic Four. Years ago they had mounted an attack on the surface world and the fledgling team had prevented their invasion. Ever since then the aliens had maintained a grudge against the Four.

Meaning their visit here today was unlikely to be friendly.

And yet, as Namor closed in, he wondered if this was his business. He had no personal grudge against the Skrull race and the surface dwellers were not his wards to protect. It had not been so many years ago he had mounted his own military campaigns against them. The mutual distrust remained to this day. Why should he risk his neck for this rude, unappreciative rabble?

Still, there was his debt to the Four. It was the whole reason he was in this vile city.

Susan Richards had come to Atlantis to plead his protection in her husband's absence. Admittedly it had been part of a ploy to help him to avoid a war among his people. That didn't mean what she said was false though. The Fantastic Four did have many enemies, among which the Skrulls ranked as one of the most powerful. With their numbers depleted, the team would be at a clear disadvantage in a fight.

Besides, whether the proceedings had been farce or not, Namor had given his word to defend them in their time of need. For him, that was reason enough to continue.

If the Skrulls had thought to catch their opponents unready, they were about to receive a rude shock.

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As Namor swooped down towards the sleek red craft, he counted at least ten Skrulls on the street below. They were all armed but did not seem to be using their weapons yet. Of course, most of the surface dwellers had already fled the area, evacuating their cars. Even the handful of police officers on the scene were keeping their distance. The former Prince felt a certain satisfaction at their relieved expressions when he came into view.

They may not have liked him, but they were more than happy to accept his help. Typical of their kind.

Namor slowed his flight and gently floated down to the street in front of the ship. As soon as his feet touched the pavement, several of the Skrulls swiveled their rifles in his direction. Their weapon technology was deadly, he knew, light years in advance of anything Earth had created. One of their guns probably could have taken out the whole block if given the chance.

Such toys, however, made little impression on the former Prince. Turning towards the nearest Skrull, he studied it with haughty disdain. It had olive green skin and pointy bat

ears, with a knotty chin that reminded Namor of the outer shell of an oyster. A metallic purple armor covered its body.

"Where is your leader, dog?"

It made to draw the pistol from its hip holster but a slim hand restrained it. A second Skrull had stepped up to the alien's side. This one was female and looked nearly identical to the rest, except for her tapered build and long, white hair. Judging by her confident pose, Namor guessed she was the ship's captain.

"Do not waste time with this one," she told her man, taking in the Atlantean with an eye every bit as disdainful as his own. "He is not worth the effort."

"You may find otherwise."

She merely smirked at his bluster. "I doubt it Earthling. Since you are here though, you may make yourself useful and go fetch the ones called the Fantastic Four. That is who we seek."

So they were here looking for Susan and her friends just as he'd suspected.

"What business do you have with them?"

The captain smiled archly and turned aside, dismissing him with a gesture. "Just be about your task, interloper, and bring them here. The sooner we are done with the Fantastic Four, the sooner we can leave this backwater planet."

Namor could have easily complied with the aliens' demands, summoning the team through the comm-link on his belt. But he saw no reason for it. Things would go faster without them. He doubted the likes of these would take much effort.

"Nay, I think not. You'll deal with me curs and find it more than enough."

The Skrull soldier went for his gun again but another hand stopped him. This time it belonged to Namor. His fist connected with a satisfying crunch, knocking the creature off its feet.

The others opened fire.

---

The Skrulls' lasers converged on a single spot. Unfortunately, their target was no longer there. Namor was airborne again.

The Atlantean weaved gracefully through the sky as the aliens tried to pinpoint him. Their stray shots struck empty cars and the sides of buildings, dissolving metal and brick alike. They never came close to Namor though. He was simply too fast.

As the former Prince dodged another barrage, he touched down on the sidewalk. Grasping a heavy metal mailbox with one hand, he yanked it from the cement as easily as a gardener

pulls a dead weed. This he tossed at a pair wide-eyed Skrulls, flattening them against the hull of their ship.

Already, he noted with pleasure, their ranks were breaking. They began to panic. Most turned and fled back towards their ship while the rest fired more and more erratically. Grabbing a street sign from the road, he used it to swat aside a few of these remainders.

At the sight of their comrades being bashed through the air, the remaining Skrulls lost heart. Namor smiled. If these, he reflected, were the worst that Fantastic Four had to face then he envied them. Such a paltry force wouldn't have withstood a second on an Atlantean battlefield.

It was with these thoughts of victory still in mind, that Namor realized he was no longer standing. He was airborne again, but not of his accord. Before he could take control, he landed on the roof of a car, its windows exploding in a spray of glass. A cloud of asphalt and rubble rained down on him.

For a moment, he was too stunned to react. The dust was thick in his nose and mouth. He coughed, spitting out a clod of brown gunk.

The spot where Namor had stood a moment before was little more than a crater. He'd been thrown to the other side of the street by the blast. Pulling at the rubble that still pinned his legs, he scanned the area for the cause. It didn't take him long to discover it.

The barrel of the Skrull starship's cannon was aimed directly at him. He was a sitting target.

Namor stopped moving. He couldn't outmaneuver it, not in the awkward position he was in. Suddenly, he realized how fool-hardly his bravado had been. The Skrulls weren't clearing the streets to escape him. They were getting out of range of their own weapons.

"Done are we?"

Namor glanced to his left. The Skrull Captain stood a safe distance away, holding her pistol at a rakish angle.

"Do not feel badly," she told him. "For an Earthling to die by a Skrull's hand is no shame. In fact, it is a rare honor."

They had him dead to rights. Perhaps their weapons wouldn't kill him; his body's tenacity was something his enemies had learned many times over, to their great regret. There was no doubting, however, that he wouldn't walk away from such an attack whole.

"Ready to die?"

Namor looked at the woman, his dark eyes betraying no fear. A smile bent his lips. "Yes," he said. "But I don't think it shall be today."

She smirked and pulled the trigger.



Everything seemed to happen at once.

The Skrull's weapon fired, its bright red beam heading directly for Namor. It never struck home. As the shot came within a foot of the Atlantean, it was deflected harmlessly into the air. Even as this was happening the ship's cannon turned a bright orange and began to droop, the metal turned to slag. At the same time, a shape struck the pavement in front of Namor hard enough to send cracks fissuring up the street.

"Well," it said. "See ya gone and made some new friends, huh, fish lips?"

Now the Fantastigar appeared above them, winking into existence as the Invisible Woman dropped her cloaking shield. Johnny finished welding shut the cannon's nozzle before flying over to join the team.

"Things were well in hand," Namor said stiffly as he tossed aside the rest of the rubble. "You needn't have interfered."

"And let 'em blast ya into powder?" The Thing grinned. "Have to admit, don't sound half bad..."

Susan descended from the Fantastigar, an invisible disc placing her gently on the ground. With a quick gesture, she then used her powers to restrain the ship's captain, encircling her in invisible bands. The Skrull fixed her with a vicious glare.

"This is quite the reception, Earthlings. I had heard better of you."

"Then you should have known not to attack our city," said Johnny. "Don't you Sci-Fi Channel rejects ever learn?"

"We didn't attack anything," she answered with a hiss. "Your friend attacked us!"

The team turned to Namor. The question in their eyes did not sit well with him.

"They claimed they were here for you," he said coolly. "I merely acted in your defense."

The Skrull struggled at her bonds but Susan held her in place. "Lying fool," she shouted at the Atlantean. "We said no such thing! I told you we sought the Fantastic Four. You only needed to call them here as we asked and this would have been avoided. We were sent here to deliver a message, not to attack them!"

Susan frowned, her expression still skeptical. The Skrull did not sound as if she was lying but they had been tricked in the past. "Then why didn't you come to us directly? You had to know landing in the street like this was bound to cause trouble."

"It was our intention to arrive at your base but we were given the wrong coordinates. We set down in some place called Pitt's Burg but there was no Fantastic Four. The mere mention of your name was enough to set the populace at arms. Finally, we were told to search here." She glanced from Susan to Namor and then back again. "It has been a most frustrating experience."

"Well, what's the message lady? Skrulls offerin' discounts on Q-tips?"

The captain straightened a bit, trying to regain her dignity despite the restraints. "We are retainers from the Ky-la clan. We were asked to inform you that scion Lyja has survived transit to her homeworld and remains under the care of our physicians.\* It was with great reluctance the family contacted you but they wished to express thanks that you returned their blood alive."

\* (Check out M2K Fantastic Four v1 2007 Annual for 'how' and 'why' - AI)

"Aw, Jeebus..."

"Now," the captain said with a sneer, "will you let me and my men go, or must we suffer still further humiliation for our services?"

Susan exchanged a look with Namor but she saw nothing there but surprise to match her own. There was little reason to doubt the Skrull's story.

With reluctance she removed the bands.

---

A short time later, the Skrull starcraft rose from the highway and streaked off into the sky. Its exit proved far quieter than its arrival. The damage left in its wake, however, was impressive. Wrecked cars, effaced buildings, and a crater the size of a small Buick. News film crews were already on scene, capturing the image of the Fantastic Four standing amidst the destruction.

More fuel to the fire, Susan thought. The press would have a field day. Considering what had happened in Pittsburgh with the Vioxx\*, they'd be lucky if the mayor wasn't calling for their ejection by tomorrow morning.

\* (That'd be the 2007 Annual again. Seriously, you probably ought to read it. - AI)

Nothing, it seemed, was going their way.

"Wow, just wow. Real great job jerk off," Johnny said as the Skrulls faded from view. "Awesome teamwork. Maybe next time you can burn down the Avengers' mansion in our name."

"Watch your tongue."

"Seems to me," Ben replied, "it's your tongue what needs watching pal."

Sue could feel the tension in the air. Her teammates had never fully trusted Namor and this was the last thing she needed. Johnny, in particular, looked ready for a fight. Lyja, after all, had once been his lover.

Luckily Namor kept a stoic calm in face of their insults. An unlikely show of restraint, Sue thought. One that suggested just how embarrassed he was by this debacle.

"Everyone, please calm down, it was a mistake..."

"Sure was," Ben growled, "'cept the mistake was when we took this bozo home. He don't belong with the Fantastic Four, Suzie."

"Do not forget you asked me here," Namor stated, fixing them all with a fierce glare. "Not the other way around."

"Sue asked you buddy, not me," Johnny corrected. "We should have let you to rot in Atlantis. We've already got enough garbage in this city."

"Enough!"

With a growl, Namor turned on his heel and leapt back into the sky. Sue's protests quickly receded as he rose out of earshot.

A disaster. He had done his best to help his friends and the result was this--chaos, destruction, maybe worse. He should have expected no less.

What did he know of these people? Of their ways? What place had he, a man who had led armies and ruled over three fifths of the globe, with a team of surface dweller celebrities like the Fantastic Four?

They were right. He did not belong here.

But if not here, then where?

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**Next Issue:** *Whither Namor? Whither Reed? None of your business is where! I mean, whither. Anyways, please join me next time for a brief two issue interlude featuring the not-so-triumphant return of the World's Most Commercialist superhero team!*

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## Fantastic Forum

Hey, look, an actual letter! A Vol. 2 first! Let me wipe off the year's worth of dust and get down to finally answering it...

*Hey just wanted to drop you a line about your latest issue of Fantastic Four.*

*This is one of the first issues on them in fan fic which has really caught the essence of those first hundred issues the sheer awe of the job they do. The things that they see.*

*Reed was great throughout this issue with all his goings ons on the N-Zone planet and I for one am looking forward to the N-space journey.*

*The thing however I'm most looking forward too when it happens is for all of the F4 to be united and launch into action as one showing why they are the first family of marvel.*

*Anthony Crute*

Thanks, Anthony. Trying to capture the feeling of the Lee/Kirby years in prose has been tough, but I hope on occasion I've hit the right notes. I do love those early issues.

Number six was a bit difficult for me, so I'm glad it wasn't a total bust. Reed's been an enjoyable character to write (that '50s science-hero type is fun to play around with, even if I'm sort of putting him through the ringer right now) so I'm hoping his adventures in the larger Negative Zone will prove fun.

As for the FF reuniting...well, that'll have to wait. Hopefully, the eventual payoff will be worth it. Thanks for writing!

Oh, and for those who might have missed it, be sure to check out <a href="http://m2k.omegacen.com/marvfanfare/MF59.html">Marvel Fanfare #59</a> for a cameo by Susan Storm. (It seems like I'm always pointing readers towards Steve Crosby's stories in these blurbs....and you should all be thankful, because there's a lot of worse places I could be directing you). Plus it features the criminally underappreciated Hellcat. How can you go wrong?

And, finally, a sincere apology to everyone who reads and writes at M2K for the ridiculous wait between issues in this series. I suck. But, as ever, I do hope to improve. So thanks to everyone for their patience and understanding.

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#8 (Volume 2)**

# **"THE DYING OF THE LIGHT"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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Andrea Wells awoke in a nervous sweat.

It was the dead of night and outside her tent a frightful din could be heard. Howls, she thought, like a dying animal. Mournful lows, human almost in their agony -- but that was mere fancy on her part. The howling, she knew, was only the wind. Another dust storm was whipping its way across the flat, torrid landscape of 32-I, the same as last night and the night before that.

She closed her eyes and prepared to drift back into fitful sleep, when another sound reached her ears. A hollow clanging, one almost smothered up in those fierce winds. This was a man made noise if there ever was one. No mistaking that. It was coming from somewhere out in the storm, somewhere in the dead city their encampment abutted.

Several minutes passed before Andrea managed to find her boots and goggles in the dark, then pull up the hood of her tattered green cloak and fasten it tight about her throat. She exited the tent with a heavy fluorescent lantern swinging in one hand and her laser rifle in the other, serving as a makeshift crutch. Her left leg was still weak from the injury she'd taken over a week ago.\*

\* (Andrea was shot back in M2K Fantastic Four v2 #6 - AI)

No more than three feet was visible through the red dust at any given time as she trailed the feeble light of her lantern, keeping to the newly constructed path that led into the city. It was one literally beaten into the dirt by the feet of the tribesmen Reed and herself had drafted in their reconstruction efforts. In a very short time, they had done a great deal to return the abandoned city to working order. One day, very likely soon, this path would become a road she thought, lit by street lamps and traveled by caravans or even automobiles of some design. Why not?

The revival of this old science, once the cobwebs were peeled back, would move swiftly she was certain. However it had been stolen in the past, the light of progress would now return to this world. That would be her legacy here. And Reed's too of course. More his than hers, if she was to be honest.

Except he was missing now. For over a week. He had gone into the base of the Ghost Gods, the strange mechanical creatures that menaced the people of this world, and he had

not returned. This was Reed Richards though. Mr. Fantastic. She was worried but she had not given into anything like despair.

It took longer to reach the city at night than it would have in the daytime. Andrea had to move slowly, carefully judging each step and double-checking her direction. It was easy to get lost in the dust storms and the tribe told many tales of wanderers who braved the winds, never to return.

Thankfully the storm grew less fierce as she entered the city proper, although she felt no less uneasy there. The same shapes that gave the city its dream-like appearance in the bright sun -- its high silvery domes, sweeping arches, and elevated magnetic railways -- took on aspects of horror in the dark. Long, impenetrable shadows spread out before her and, under the dim moonlight, the rails looked like so many coiled snakes.

Andrea shivered and continued to track the sound to its source. It grew louder as she went, eventually leading her to a building they had taken to thinking of as the central power station for the city. Much of their work had been focused here, attempting to restore the generators and repair what remained of the city grid. They had enjoyed a great deal of progress and were confident of restoring full power any day now.

This is where the sound was coming from. And this is where she found him. Andrea no longer needed her lantern here, as the interior lights had all been turned on, bathing the plant in a piercing blue neon glow. For a moment she felt blinded. Not by the lights but by what she was seeing beneath them. She couldn't make sense of it. There were parts of machinery scattered everywhere on the floor. Machinery that, she swore, had only recently been repaired by her own hands, now smashed and disassembled beyond hope of scavenging again.

It took a moment before she realized how that could be. He was destroying it. All of it. He was dismantling their work piece by piece.

She finally found him in one of the control rooms, the wires having been torn from the mainframe, diodes smashed and circuit boards crushed savagely under heel. He was so hard at work he didn't note her arrival, or perhaps didn't care.

"Reed?" she whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. "What...what are you doing?"

He didn't flinch at her touch but he froze. When he turned to face her, she reflexively stepped back. His face was haggard and gaunt, a scruffy line of stubble covering his chin. It was his eyes that frightened her most though. Bloodshot, red-rimmed, full of exhaustion and despair.

"Leave." She shook her head and Reed repeated that one word, firmly, before returning to his destructive work. All further effort to get his attention failed. It was as if she was no longer there as far as he was concerned.

The dismantling went on for hours and there was no end in sight when she finally crept away. The storm had stopped but a fine red dust still clung to everything. The sun's first rays were already peeking over the horizon.

Andrea returned to her tent, puzzled, upset, and most of all frightened.

Frightened by that awful haunted look in her old friend's eyes.

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"...and then I left."

"But what happened to Reed?"

"I'm so sorry, Susan, but I don't know."

Three weeks had passed since that night if Andrea's timeline could be believed. Susan had no reason to doubt her yet still found doubt her first instinct. She knew very little of this woman, after all, and it was her distress signal that had called them to the Negative Zone so many months ago. Now she'd returned with wild stories about her husband gone half-mad. Stories that didn't sound like the Reed she knew at all.

Her husband didn't destroy. He simply didn't. It was antithesis to the man she loved. She'd quicker believe her brother kept a notebook full of poetry under his bed. Which is to say she struggled to believe it at all.

Why would Wells lie though? Everything had seemed well in hand when the team had departed 32-I. She'd disliked the thought of splitting up at the time but Reed had been insistent. They were needed back on Earth and he was needed there. Simple enough. Unspoken was also the fact it provided him a chance to get away from the intense criticism he'd been suffering of late, ever since the publication of *Unnatural Acts*.<sup>\*</sup> He could do what he loved in peace while the worst of the media blitz blew over.

\* (A critical exposé on the unforeseen applications of meta-science in the MU, first appearing back in M2K Fantastic Four v2 #1 - AI)

If Wells was telling the truth, could someone else be involved, Susan asked herself. Had one of their enemies set a trap? Gotten Reed alone and then sprung it while his family was literally a world away? His behavior as Andrea described it could easily fit the MO of the Puppet Master or the Hate-Monger. There were plenty of other maniacs who called the Negative Zone home too, and many had grudges against her husband.

So a trap was very possible, she knew. Anything was really. Membership in the Fantastic Four had taught her that years ago.

Equally possible is that it wasn't as simple as a villain this time. That worried her most of all.

"I couldn't stay, Susan, I just couldn't. Reed was already gone by the next morning and the tribe had disappeared as well. I tried to find them, I did, but with my injury..."

Andrea paused to sip unsteadily from a mug of warm tea, her eyes focused downwards to avoid meeting Susan's own. This woman was a scientist not an adventurer, she had to remind herself. While she couldn't quite bring herself to tell Andrea that leaving her husband behind was okay, she could at least try to understand.

"Without them I had no source for food or water. I tried searching but when my supplies ran low, what else could I do? Maybe I should have left even sooner, contacted you right way. I didn't know the proper move."

"And you have no idea what happened to Reed beforehand? No idea what brought this on?"

"Only that he disappeared into that bunker for several days without contact. Whatever he found inside must have made him regret everything we'd done and..."

"And?"

"And possibly more, Susan. I'd never seen him like that. Not while we were students together at least. I don't know what it all meant. Only nothing good."

---

Funny. It was funny, he thought. Life. The twists and turns it took, how you never really knew where you might end up. Just when you thought you had things figured out -- if you managed to even reach that point -- something new would come along to change it all on you.

At least that's what Griffen Gogol was thinking as he slipped his flashlight into his belt before starting the evening shift. He was not, by nature, given over to philosophical musings. It's just that there was something about security guard work that seemed to encourage introspection in him.

Probably the routine and isolation, he figured. A Rousseau or Nietzsche could have constructed and laid waste to entire worldviews within the empty hours he passed in an average week. Griffen had no such ambitions. He did, however, enjoy chasing the occasional idle thought.

Like this one now. About life's funny twists and turns. The funny part being that with all the strange twists his own had taken he'd somehow ended up here. A paunchy middle-aged security guard who put in an eight hour workday and then went home to a tiny apartment and two demanding toy terriers. And he wasn't unhappy. In fact, Griffen rather liked the arrangement. It was far better than anything he'd ever done up until now, including working as a plumber or even briefly wearing a cape.

Griffen was in the midst of such deep thoughts when he rounded a corner of the warehouse and found himself facing his second worst fear. An actual intruder. In theory always a possibility, but it wasn't really supposed to ever happen. He wasn't quite sure if he should take this one seriously though. After all, the man was sporting a top hat, black bolo tie, white gloves, and the sort of pointy waxed mustache made famous by Snidely Whiplash.

"Hey, ah, you're not supposed to be in here...?" For some reason, Griffen phrased this as a question.

The dapper figure, tall and angular in his absurd dress clothes, bowed and displayed both of his hands palms up. They were empty. He then removed the top hat from his head and spun it around, exposing the inside to Griffen. Also empty.

"Um, sir, did you hear me...?"



The man smiled slyly and plunged his hand down into it. His arm sunk almost up to the elbow, which seemed improbably far to Griffen given the hat's dimensions. When he pulled it back out, he was holding a fluffy white bunny rabbit by the ears.

"Say, that's pretty neat. But, seriously, this is breaking and entering, you can't just waltz in here and..."

The man held the rabbit out to Griffen.

"No, no, I can't take that! It's cute and all but..."

The rabbit's eyes, so small and shiny, latched onto his own. Red, he thought with a sudden start. They were very, very red, and they flickered. In fact, the longer Griffen stared into them, the more he became certain that there was something inside of them. Flames. There were tiny flames dancing within the heart of its eyes and they began to grow in intensity until he realized he smelled something burning. They licked out him with a crackle of heat and he did what came natural.

He screamed.

The man in black watched calmly as Griffen fled in terror, a fluffy bundle of white fur bounding after him, wisps of smoke trailing in its wake. He bowed theatrically to the now empty hallway and carefully placed his hat back on his head. Picking up a large bundle in a burlap sack at his feet, he then strolled towards the warehouse's exit.

An exit marked with an enormous '4' and the unheeded warning: 'Property of the Fantastic Four. No trespassing allowed.'

---

Susan sat in the living room of the Baxter Building long after Andrea left, thinking. A whole range of thoughts crossed through her mind, some connected, some seemingly random. Mostly about Reed, of course, about herself, but also about mundane things like what her children would want for dinner tonight. The practical could never be completely dismissed from her concerns. She was a mother as well as a hero. She prioritized the former over the latter most of the time. When she could.

That troubling duality was among her thoughts, in fact. How tiresome this life could get. Always worrying about her family, never able to relax, or focus on just the one thing. Someone was always missing or in peril or in crisis. How could someone live like that? How had *she* lived like that? Or had she really?

Sometimes it felt like things were just one loose thread away from unraveling. The right pull at the right time, be it from Doom or even something as trivial as a muckraking book, and it would all come apart at the seams.

It wasn't until she heard Namor gently clearing his throat behind her that Susan realized she wasn't alone.

"God, you scared me. How long have you been standing there?"

"I don't know. Before that other woman left. I heard what she told you."

"You should have said something Namor. Do you know I've been trying to contact you ever since you ran off?"\* She sighed. "I really don't need additional stress right now."

\* (last issue - AI)

"I do understand, Susan. I required time to think, as you did just now."

Think about what, she wanted to demand, but her upbringing held those words back. That would be insensitive. Namor was going through trauma of his own, having recently left his home in Atlantis, perhaps for good. He was no longer a king there and part of his identity had been stripped from him.

Nor was Namor fitting in well here. He never had. A small part of her felt for him, when she allowed herself that luxury.

"And what did you decide?"

"I hadn't decided anything until a few moments ago. In fact I'd returned here even more confused than before. I thought I might travel the globe but I have done that before and it did not interest me then. Now I know what my purpose is here. First, however, I need to hear what you've decided."

"I think that's obvious. I have to gather the team and go find Reed."

"But the Negative Zone is a very large place, Susan. There's no telling how long it may take."

"I don't have any other option."

He sat down on the cushion beside her and took her hand in his own. She allowed this but with a wariness in her eyes. Namor had long ago accepted that she'd married another man, but never with the best of grace. *No* was a very hard word for the prince of over two thirds the globe to understand.

Former prince, she reminded herself.

"Let *me* go. Let me find your husband and bring him back to you, Susan."

She wasn't sure how to respond. This offer wasn't what she expected. "That's...kind, Namor. It is. I can't though. We're his family."

"Yes, exactly. A family. A family with responsibilities at home. I've lived here long enough to see that. Your children need you. Your world needs you."

Responsibilities. He was right there. Even now Ben and Johnny were out assisting in clearing away the collateral damage from the Avengers recent battle with Kang's armada in New York City. There were always things like that calling for their attention. Early reports had even placed Dr. Hank Pym among the casualties.\* The Fantastic Four were certainly needed here now, but when weren't they?

\* (Both results of the Kang/Ultron War. See related mini-series on this site. - Backlogged AI)

Reed was needed too. By the hero community, by his fellow scientists, and by her and their children most of all.

"Finding Reed may take a very long time, Susan. For me that matters not. Time no longer has any immediacy for Namor. There is no where I need to be. No one misses my presence."

"That's an exaggeration..."

"Is it?" Namor smiled faintly, something he rarely did. "I know I must appear foolish at times to surface dwellers. My ways abnormally brusque. I am not ignorant nor self-deluding however. I will be as much a burden to you as an aid if I stay. In this quest, however, I can serve a purpose."

"I... I don't know Namor. It's not a question of your sincerity or ability. I don't doubt either one. I'm just not sure I can stand to sit here, not knowing..."

"Perhaps it's not entirely your decision to make? You have responsibilities, much I once did in Atlantis. And responsibilities are demanding things that do not allow people to meet them only at their convenience. The world cannot be long without a Fantastic Four, whereas the world now finds even one Namor superfluous. It is clear who can be spared and thus who should go."

She opened her mouth to protest again and his hand squeezed hers, gently but firmly.

"Let me do this Susan. Let me help you as you helped me. I will not fail."

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Two hundred miles from the North Pole, deep within the Arctic Circle, a peculiar man sat on a melting iceberg. He was small and green with a head like an oblong football and a body so gangly and thin it might have been constructed from pipe cleaners. He sat reclining in a plastic foldout chair, dressed only in a pair of Bermuda shorts, reading a glossy tabloid magazine. The wind chill was just slightly below thirty degrees Celsius.

Nearby, unobserved, a polar bear squatted in the snow, studying him curiously, as a cat might eye an open can of tuna.

Oblivious, the man licked his finger -- the moisture began to freeze almost instantly -- and carefully turned the page. His brow was knit in concentration. He'd come out here today to work on his tan, naturally, and so had not expected to be confronted with Important News. The 'i' and the 'n' were, in fact, capitalized in his mind.

An article, the one directly below a scintillating foray in deceased starlet Virginia Pokes's varied love life, had captured his full attention. It was titled: 'Where's Reed Richards?' and then, as if uncertain anyone could be presumed to care, followed up with the subtitle: 'World's Most Fantastic Couple on the Rocks.'

The man sat up. The polar bear inched closer.

Even more terrible words followed. Reed Richards had been absent from Earth for several months now. His female partner, Susan Storm Richards, has been seen in the company of Namor during that time. According to the paper, Reed and Susan were married, a bizarre Earth custom of bonding so fascinating that the man had once even tried it out himself.

The article, however, seemed convinced their marriage was now doomed. Speculations were rampant. Accusations cruel. Fantasies frankly suggestive. Clearly someone had to do something. Someone like --

The polar bear sprung forward at that very instant, clamping powerful jaws around the man's scrawny throat. It was a killing blow deadly enough to down a three hundred pound seal instantly. As soon as tooth touched flesh, however, a jolt of electricity shot through the creature's massive body, leaving it stunned but otherwise unharmed. Impossibly, its would-be victim had evolved into a thing of pure energy.

He was still sitting in his sun chair though and finished his thought undisturbed.

Someone like the Impossible Man!

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**NEXT ISSUE:** *With Reed still missing and the rest of the Fantastic Four preoccupied, it's left to Franklin and friends to investigate a robbery at the FF's warehouse. The problem? The thief appears to be a dead man.*

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### **FANTASTIC FORUM**

This was a short one but ungodly difficult to actually write for some reason.

Observant readers or those blessed with elephantine memories, might recall my Next blurb in FF #7 hinting at an interlude involving the New Fantastic Four. That didn't happen, as I decided to buckle down and finish this one first. Those issues may still appear in the future as time permits, possibly next year.

As for '09, I'm hoping for at least one more release and possibly a Christmas Special I've had percolating for awhile now. Crossed fingers.

As always any and all feedback's greatly appreciated.

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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#9 (Volume 2)**

**"UNINVITED GUESTS"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**Previously: With the Fantastic Four away, it's fallen to Franklin Richards and his young friends to investigate a robbery at the team's warehouse. All clues point towards an old foe, Miracle Man, save for one problem: he's dead. Actually, make that two problems, as panic suddenly floods the city's streets...**

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"I don't get it. I mean, what are they running from?"

A good question. The smoke is what had initially caught Frankin's attention. Spying it through the warehouse's office window, he had rushed outside to investigate the source. Or, more accurately, his friends Eva and Hubert had rushed and he had reluctantly followed them. He'd already known that something bad was apt to be behind it. That's the way things worked in his family. He was used to it.

More than that, he was kind of tired of it.

Eva and Hubert, on the other hand, were ecstatic. He suspected that they'd already convinced themselves that they were now on a genuine Fantastic Four-style adventure. A dream come true for them, although he couldn't quite see why.

"I don't know, but they look frightened."

And it wasn't any fire scaring them. The smoke they'd seen from the window was the result of a few tipped over trash bins whose contents had caught light. Presumably by accident, like the multiple fender benders that had halted traffic up and down the street. Several cars had already been abandoned, their occupants fleeing up the sidewalk on foot, in states varying between their own bewilderment to outright terror.

"Maybe we should ask someone," Eva decided, snatching at the cuff of one of the frantic passerbys. "Excuse me, sir, but what's going on?"

"Going on? You ask me what's going on? Are you nuts?" The man jerked his sleeve out of the girl's hands, his eyes glazed and wild. "Alligators, kid! Giant man-eating alligators! Can't you see them crawling up out the manholes?"

Unfortunately, despite a fervent desire on at least two of their parts, they could see no such thing. No giant alligators, man-eating or otherwise, were visible anywhere on the street. Only mobs of confused people tripping over one another in their flight. Franklin was surprised that no one had been hurt yet, but if things kept on this way that was bound to change very soon.

"And why do they keep ducking into random cars?" Hubert asked.

Franklin had noticed this as well. As the people ran, several would check the doors of the abandoned cars and, if they found them unlocked, would pause to lean inside. They appeared to be turning on the radios, which made even less sense. Especially since the radios, as they grew near enough to hear one, seemed to be playing nothing but static.

"I don't know, guys. This is weird. Maybe we should go back to the warehouse before things get too dangerous."

"Um, Franklin," Eva replied, pointing back the way they came. "I think it might already be too late for that..."

Of course, even without looking, Franklin already knew what was waiting back there for them.

Something bad.

As usual.

---

"I think it's gaining on us! Keep running, keep running!"

They kept running, weaving between stationary cars and around small knots of frightened people cluttering the sidewalks. They'd already gone two blocks and were rapidly growing tired, particularly Hubert who now lagged behind, puffing like a bellows. Although their current pursuer had started out as just a small dot on the horizon, it seemed to be gaining rapidly, both in proximity and size.

What they didn't know, and didn't have time to discuss and so find out, is that there was no consensus among the three as to what exactly was chasing them.

Franklin was certain it was some kind of giant robot, a combination of the old Elektro diagrams he had seen in his father's lab and the stories Mr. Stark used to scare him with when younger about something called Ultimo. Whatever it was, it was large, made of glistening steel, had huge hinged jaws, and eyes that seemed to stream a dark purplish energy.

Eva, on the other hand, would have staked her life that it was an enormous ape chasing them. One that looked a whole lot like the monster in that movie her father had shown her last week, King Kong, dubious anatomy and all.

And, lastly, Hubert knew he was being pursued by an enormous fifty foot woman in a black lace brassiere, a woman with alarming similarities to his mother.

"This is absurd," Eva complained, between breaths. "Giant monsters are, like, physically impossible!"

"Huh?" It seemed a strange time for a science lesson, all considered.

"The bone structure of your average mammal, including human beings, could not support a blown up version of the same. The legs would snap like twigs, for one."

"So what are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say is --" At that moment, a spray of glass erupted through the air as a giant robot/monkey/stiletto heeled foot flattered a Volkswagon a few feet behind them. "EEK!"

"In that case," Hubert said, stumbling to catch up as the other two paused for breath, "I completely agree, well put."

They'd all realized that running headlong up the street wasn't going to serve as a longterm strategy. For every ten steps they made, the thing behind them also made ten, covering several times the distance. So Franklin made a command decision. He grabbed Eva's wrist and went barreling into a nearby alleyway. It would be too narrow for their giant pursuer to follow, he figured.

Unfortunately, there was a slight miscalculation in his plan. A mere fifteen feet into the alleyway, a tall slatboard fence had been erected, one that was too smooth for them to scale. By the time they realized this, the giant robot/ape/Oedipus Complex had already caught up with them, blocking their exit.

"I think that was probably a bad idea," Franklin noted, sheepishly.

"HERBIE! Wake up!" The knapsack on Eva's back jerked left, then right, then left again, until the Velcro seal came undone. A small silver globe with a bright blue glass eye floated up into the air.

"HERBIE activated. Please -- bztt -- input command."

"Use your death ray! On that...that thing! Hurry!"

Hubert, his face as round and red as a tomato now, still managed a smile. "And you said adding a death ray was stupid..."

"Scanning for target. Error, no target found! Input new command."

By this time, the monster had finished studying the alley, which was in fact too narrow for it to enter. It had devised a simple solution to this problem. Placing one hand on each of the opposing buildings, it positioned itself so as to squish them with its enormous heel, like bugs caught in a crevice.

Meanwhile, HERBIE continued to be fussy. "Error, no target found! Input new c-"

"Oh, just shoot straight ahead, why don't you? Shoot! Shoot!"

A panel opened in the bottom of the globe and a small appendage shaped like a dental drill emerged. A spiral of greenish plasma erupted from the tip, passing harmlessly through the monster's kneecap and continuing across the street, where it bored a neat hole through a department store's display window. The fashionably attired mannequins inside melted like wax.

"So...it's, what, intangible too?"

The robot fired again, this time higher, its beam passing through the monster's neck before disappearing into the sky. (It would miss the wing of a Detroit-bound passenger jet by mere inches.)

"It's not real." Hubert decided with a scowl. "It's some kind of...hologram...or..."

"Illusion!" Eva corrected. "An hypnotically-induced illusion, I bet. As in Miracle Man. This must be why he stole whatever he stole. To terrorize the city."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Actually that didn't make any sense at all, really, but similar things happened all the time.

"And as the only people who know about the robbery, that means we're going to have to be the ones to stop him!"

"Um, I guess," Franklin said, none too sure that line of logic was sound, "but we don't even know where he is."

Eva grinned and removed the knapsack from her back, fishing something out of the bottom of it. It was a small handheld device that resembled a GPS unit. A flashing red dot lit up the middle of the display screen. "Actually, I think we might. I found this in the office at the warehouse. I figured your dad would probably place trackers on any confiscated super villain equipment, just in case of a situation like this one."

It did sound like something his dad would do. Unfortunately.

"Oh. Great. So....where's it indicating?"

---

It was, fortunately for them, indicating a location not too far away. Just another three blocks, provided they cut through a few alleyways, to the WJKY radio station. The latter



discovery helped them put two and two together, namely the people flipping on car radios and their own sudden hallucinations. Apparently, Miracle Man was broadcasting his hypnotic signal via radio waves, causing anyone who heard them to see frightening visions.

So as the three progressed they did their best to avoid any stationary cars, even stuffing torn bits of clothing into their ears as a precaution. This made conversation rather difficult.

"We're going to need a plan when we get there," Hubert noted. "We need to figure out who's team leader first."

"What?"

"Team leader! We need a team leader!"

"Why do we have to have a leader?" Eva asked.

Huber snorted. "What a total girl question."

"Huh? A grilled what?"

"A total girl question! That's a total girl question! It's obvious why we need a leader!"

"Why?"

"Because!"

"Because why?"

"Conversation's over! Franklin's the leader. No further discussion! Besides...we're here."

The radio station and the street outside it were both eerily calm. Somewhere in the distance they could hear emergency sirens wailing. Things were no doubt getting worse, and they still had no idea why this was happening and only a slightly better notion of who was responsible. Behind those doors, anything could be waiting for them.

Hubert and Eva removed the stuffing from their ears and looked to Franklin. "What's the plan?"

Of course, he hadn't the foggiest. This was something his father excelled at, not him, and yet somehow here he was, playing the same role. It seemed depressingly unavoidable.

"Um, we just go by ear, I guess? Well...maybe not by ear, but...you know. Just so long as we remember that it's all done by hypnosis and can't really hurt us, we should be fine, right?"

---

Fifteen minutes later, Franklin was fairly certain they were all going to die.

He had already lost sight of Eva and Hubert, which should have been physically impossible in a studio this size. The room's dimensions, however, were shifting at random. At times

he'd find himself moving through a series of narrow, winding hallways, or suddenly standing in the middle of an impossibly cavernous room, its walls stretching to the very limits of his vision. One moment he might be floating in mid-air, the next falling down a kaleidoscoping shoot into the blackest of bottomless pits.

That was of course all in his head. The result of hypnotically-induced illusions playing mind games with him. But realizing this did not make the illusions seem any less real or disorienting to Franklin. His last glimpse of his friends had told him they were fairing no better, Eva under the impression she was being eaten alive by feral aardvarks and Hubert certain he was drowning in a vat of rancid chocolate mousse.

Only HERBIE remained unaffected. But, without anyone to give him orders, he now floated motionless in the center of the room.

Think, Franklin told himself. There's got to be a way to overcome this, to break this spell we're under. After all, even when alive, Miracle Man was hardly considered an A-lister. He was, frankly, kind of a dork. There must be something...

The room shifted again, twirling like a gigantic cyclotron and turning Franklin's stomach into taffy. He closed his eyes and was surprised to find the sickness quickly dissipating. But, then, of course it would, he told himself. He was not actually spinning. There were no centrifugal forces involved. The hypnosis might be muddling his thoughts but not his actual body.

So he kept his eyes closed and tried instead to focus on sound. Slowly he began to isolate the people around him. He could hear Eva, almost at his shoulder, making small whimpering noises as she struggled with whatever illusions were attacking her now. And those heavy gasps from a few feet away were probably Hubert's.

Next he made out a third person, one breathing rapidly as though his or her adrenaline was pumping, and he took a tentative step in that direction, then another. As he did new sounds assailed him, as if correcting for his change in strategy. He heard the voice of his father clearly.

"Franklin? Franklin, for Pete's sake, can't you concentrate? This is simple rudimentary physics, you should already be familiar. Sometimes I don't think you listen to a word I --"

It faded into another voice, one he recognized as belonging to his parents' good friend, Dr. Strange.

"...have a placed mental block on your powers. It's to everyone's benefit for now young man. Of course it's not a permanent solution, and you could still...."

"...disappoint me," his father sighed. "Is it too much to expect at least a little of myself in you? Some flicker of curiosity? When I was your age, I'd already built my first superconductor out of household items from the family junk drawer. Sometimes I wonder if you're really..."

"...not too dangerous to be allowed to run free," Dr. Strange continued. "With Franklin's powers, there's really no telling what he might do one day, even by accident! He's a danger to everyone, he's..."

Between these increasingly shrill voices, Franklin could just distinguish the breathing, now so close he could almost feel it on his face. Gripping the broken flashlight he'd borrowed from Mr. Gogol\* in one sweaty hand, Franklin swung it with an angry howl. It hit something solid.

(See last issue. Yes, every detail I write has a purpose! (Except when it doesn't). - AI)

Something solid that yelped.

He opened his eyes, just in time to see the last wisps of a giant distorted Mr. Fantastic fade from sight. On the floor in front of him Miracle Man was sitting on his behind, his top hat askew. He looked more surprised than injured and slowly his form began to evaporate, like mist in a sudden wind.

In his place was left a young girl roughly Franklin's own age.

And she did not look pleased.

---

"You broke it!"

The girl stopped scowling at Franklin just long enough to gather the pieces of a small box-shaped gizmo up off the floor.

"Broke what?"

"What do you think, genius?"

She was a small reed-thin girl, scrawny almost, with curly hair, caramel-toned skin and a pert nose. Her eyes, narrowed and teary now, were normally quite large and almond-shaped. Franklin felt strangely guilty as she glared at him, although he was still fairly certain she was the bad guy here, not him.

"Hey, you're a girl."

She rolled her eyes. "Gee, you think?"

"No, I just mean...what happened to Miracle Man?"

She sighed and stood up, still fiddling with the box, slowly putting the pieces back in order. "I know who you are, of course. You're Franklin Richards, aren't you? I've seen your picture in the paper before. I suppose that means we're, like, destined to be archenemies."

"It does?"

"Probably. Miracle Man was my father, you see."

"Oh." Franklin paused, unsure what to make of that revelation. "So he put you up to this then? Is he around here somewhere...?"

"Yes. And no. He's still dead as far as I'm aware. I never actually met him."

"So how could he..."

"A videotaped recording," she explained. "He left me a bunch of taped recordings. My mother didn't want me listening to them but I snuck them on my own. This whole thing was all his plan. I just sort of followed the steps he laid out."

"Including breaking into my family's warehouse?"

"Yes." She grinned suddenly. "That part was actually kind of fun!"

"But how did you..."

"Hypnotize people? Mostly this box my dad made, which you better not have wrecked. All I do is switch between the different settings. It's pretty cool and super easy."

"Is that what's been hypnotizing everyone around town?"

She explained that, no, that was done through a separate recording currently being transmitted over the studio's radio relay. That's what she'd retrieved from the warehouse, actually. She was rather happy to hear that it was working too, since it was difficult to tell from up here.

"You realize it's causing a lot of trouble though, right?"

"Well, duh. I mean, I think that was pretty much my father's plan! You know, revenge and stuff, for not appreciating his genius, etcetera, etcetera."

"Right, yeah. Of course." This was, in fact, a very common source of motivation among career super villains. They were all chronic attention hogs. "But people are going to get hurt if it keeps up. Someone could even die, if they haven't already..."

She stopped to consider, as though this was the first the thought had crossed her mind, and bit her lower lip. "Oh. Well... I guess I could probably shut it off now. I suppose it's made enough of an impression. As long as Miracle Man gets the credit for everything."

"Oh, I'll be sure to tell the authorities who was responsible alright..."

Now the girl, perhaps noting the disapproval in his tone, sighed. "You know, it's not easy having a famous father like mine. It's a lot to live up to. I guess you probably know something about having a famous dad though..."

Franklin did and for some reason that softened him towards her, despite the fact she was obviously nuts and had put them through a great deal of trouble. "Yeah, well, anyways, you said you could turn it off?"

He followed along behind her as she stopped the recording and then handed the tape over to him. She wouldn't be needing it any more, she explained. There wasn't really any purpose to performing the same act of villainy twice. In her father's instructional tapes, he

had explained many times over the importance of keeping an act fresh if you wanted to maintain your audience.

"Wait. You're not, um, going to keep doing these things are you?"

She smiled and shrugged but any reply she may have planned beyond that was drowned out by a long groan from under the console. The radio program's host was currently crawling his way back out into the open. He looked a bit worse for wear but otherwise okay. Seeing him reminded Franklin of his own friends and he went to check on their condition. Eva was sitting cross legged on the floor, rubbing her head, while Hubert lay prone on his back, his right hand shielding his eyes. It had been a long day for both.

"Because, I mean, I think that would be a bad idea. I can understand you feeling pressured to follow in your father's footsteps, believe me, but he was, no offense, kind of a dangerous lunatic and..."

"Um, Franklin?"

"...well, have you considered therapy? They'll probably make it a mandatory part of your rehabilitation anyways when we turn you in and..."

"Um, Franklin?"

"What?"

"Who are you talking to?" Eva asked.

"To...you know, I forgot to ask your name? Since you already know mine, I..."

Franklin turned around and found himself gazing across a now empty studio. The little curly haired girl was gone, along with any sign of her hypno-box. Obviously it wasn't quite as broken as she'd claimed or else she was amazingly quick on her feet. Either way, it appeared that he'd let her get away.

"Oh, jeez."

"I take it Miracle Man is gone?"

"Girl, and, yeah, it looks that way. I think I may kind of suck at adventuring."

Eva smiled. "You'll get better! Anyways, we still stopped the bad guy, and it was fun, wasn't it?"

Somewhere behind them Hubert groaned. That seemed like answer enough, for now.

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**NEXT ISSUE:** *It's back to the Negative Zone as Namor searches for the missing Mr. Fantastic. But does Earth's greatest scientist even want to be found?*

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## **FANTASTIC FORUM**

And so concludes a bit of silliness that I hope readers didn't find too off-putting. This will be the last we see of Franklin, Eva, Hubert, and HERBIE (August, what, 6? 7? I don't know...) for the time being, as we instead zero in on this run's final two storyarchs.

What's in store? More Negative Zone, more Impossible Man, a return of the Frightful Four, and maybe even some answers to a few lingering questions, who knows? Either way, I hope you'll stick around to find out.

- Alan Strauss

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#10 (Volume 2)**

## **"HYPNO-THERAPY!"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**Previously: With the Fantastic Four away, it's fallen to Franklin Richards and his young friends to investigate a robbery at the team's warehouse. All clues point towards an old foe, Miracle Man, save for one problem: he's dead. Actually, make that two problems, as panic suddenly floods the city's streets...**

---

"I don't get it. I mean, what are they running from?"

A good question. The smoke is what had initially caught Frankin's attention. Spying it through the warehouse's office window, he had rushed outside to investigate the source. Or, more accurately, his friends Eva and Hubert had rushed and he had reluctantly followed them. He'd already known that something bad was apt to be behind it. That's the way things worked in his family. He was used to it.

More than that, he was kind of tired of it.

Eva and Hubert, on the other hand, were ecstatic. He suspected that they'd already convinced themselves that they were now on a genuine Fantastic Four-style adventure. A dream come true for them, although he couldn't quite see why.

"I don't know, but they look frightened."

And it wasn't any fire scaring them. The smoke they'd seen from the window was the result of a few tipped over trash bins whose contents had caught light. Presumably by accident, like the multiple fender benders that had halted traffic up and down the street. Several cars had already been abandoned, their occupants fleeing up the sidewalk on foot, in states varying between their own bewilderment to outright terror.

"Maybe we should ask someone," Eva decided, snatching at the cuff of one of the frantic passerbys. "Excuse me, sir, but what's going on?"

"Going on? You ask me what's going on? Are you nuts?" The man jerked his sleeve out of the girl's hands, his eyes glazed and wild. "Alligators, kid! Giant man-eating alligators! Can't you see them crawling up out the manholes?"

Unfortunately, despite a fervent desire on at least two of their parts, they could see no such thing. No giant alligators, man-eating or otherwise, were visible anywhere on the street. Only mobs of confused people tripping over one another in their flight. Franklin was surprised that no one had been hurt yet, but if things kept on this way that was bound to change very soon.

"And why do they keep ducking into random cars?" Hubert asked.

Franklin had noticed this as well. As the people ran, several would check the doors of the abandoned cars and, if they found them unlocked, would pause to lean inside. They appeared to be turning on the radios, which made even less sense. Especially since the radios, as they grew near enough to hear one, seemed to be playing nothing but static.

"I don't know, guys. This is weird. Maybe we should go back to the warehouse before things get too dangerous."

"Um, Franklin," Eva replied, pointing back the way they came. "I think it might already be too late for that..."

Of course, even without looking, Franklin already knew what was waiting back there for them.

Something bad.

As usual.

---

"I think it's gaining on us! Keep running, keep running!"

They kept running, weaving between stationary cars and around small knots of frightened people cluttering the sidewalks. They'd already gone two blocks and were rapidly growing tired, particularly Hubert who now lagged behind, puffing like a bellows. Although their current pursuer had started out as just a small dot on the horizon, it seemed to be gaining rapidly, both in proximity and size.

What they didn't know, and didn't have time to discuss and so find out, is that there was no consensus among the three as to what exactly was chasing them.

Franklin was certain it was some kind of giant robot, a combination of the old Elektro diagrams he had seen in his father's lab and the stories Mr. Stark used to scare him with when younger about something called Ultimo. Whatever it was, it was large, made of glistening steel, had huge hinged jaws, and eyes that seemed to stream a dark purplish energy.



Eva, on the other hand, would have staked her life that it was an enormous ape chasing them. One that looked a whole lot like the monster in that movie her father had shown her last week, King Kong, dubious anatomy and all.

And, lastly, Hubert knew he was being pursued by an enormous fifty foot woman in a black lace brassiere, a woman with alarming similarities to his mother.

"This is absurd," Eva complained, between breaths. "Giant monsters are, like, physically impossible!"

"Huh?" It seemed a strange time for a science lesson, all considered.

"The bone structure of your average mammal, including human beings, could not support a blown up version of the same. The legs would snap like twigs, for one."

"So what are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say is --" At that moment, a spray of glass erupted through the air as a giant robot/monkey/stiletto heeled foot flattered a Volkswagon a few feet behind them. "EEK!"

"In that case," Hubert said, stumbling to catch up as the other two paused for breath, "I completely agree, well put."

They'd all realized that running headlong up the street wasn't going to serve as a longterm strategy. For every ten steps they made, the thing behind them also made ten, covering several times the distance. So Franklin made a command decision. He grabbed Eva's wrist and went barreling into a nearby alleyway. It would be too narrow for their giant pursuer to follow, he figured.

Unfortunately, there was a slight miscalculation in his plan. A mere fifteen feet into the alleyway, a tall slatboard fence had been erected, one that was too smooth for them to scale. By the time they realized this, the giant robot/ape/Oedipus Complex had already caught up with them, blocking their exit.

"I think that was probably a bad idea," Franklin noted, sheepishly.

"HERBIE! Wake up!" The knapsack on Eva's back jerked left, then right, then left again, until the Velcro seal came undone. A small silver globe with a bright blue glass eye floated up into the air.

"HERBIE activated. Please -- bztt -- input command."

"Use your death ray! On that...that thing! Hurry!"

Hubert, his face as round and red as a tomato now, still managed a smile. "And you said adding a death ray was stupid..."

"Scanning for target. Error, no target found! Input new command."

By this time, the monster had finished studying the alley, which was in fact too narrow for it to enter. It had devised a simple solution to this problem. Placing one hand on each of the opposing buildings, it positioned itself so as to squish them with its enormous heel, like bugs caught in a crevice.

Meanwhile, HERBIE continued to be fussy. "Error, no target found! Input new c-"

"Oh, just shoot straight ahead, why don't you? Shoot! Shoot!"

A panel opened in the bottom of the globe and a small appendage shaped like a dental drill emerged. A spiral of greenish plasma erupted from the tip, passing harmlessly through the monster's kneecap and continuing across the street, where it bored a neat hole through a department store's display window. The fashionably attired mannequins inside melted like wax.

"So...it's, what, intangible too?"

The robot fired again, this time higher, its beam passing through the monster's neck before disappearing into the sky. (It would miss the wing of a Detroit-bound passenger jet by mere inches.)

"It's not real." Hubert decided with a scowl. "It's some kind of...hologram...or..."

"Illusion!" Eva corrected. "An hypnotically-induced illusion, I bet. As in Miracle Man. This must be why he stole whatever he stole. To terrorize the city."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Actually that didn't make any sense at all, really, but similar things happened all the time.

"And as the only people who know about the robbery, that means we're going to have to be the ones to stop him!"

"Um, I guess," Franklin said, none too sure that line of logic was sound, "but we don't even know where he is."

Eva grinned and removed the knapsack from her back, fishing something out of the bottom of it. It was a small handheld device that resembled a GPS unit. A flashing red dot lit up the middle of the display screen. "Actually, I think we might. I found this in the office at the warehouse. I figured your dad would probably place trackers on any confiscated super villain equipment, just in case of a situation like this one."

It did sound like something his dad would do. Unfortunately.

"Oh. Great. So....where's it indicating?"

---

It was, fortunately for them, indicating a location not too far away. Just another three blocks, provided they cut through a few alleyways, to the WJKY radio station. The latter

discovery helped them put two and two together, namely the people flipping on car radios and their own sudden hallucinations. Apparently, Miracle Man was broadcasting his hypnotic signal via radio waves, causing anyone who heard them to see frightening visions.

So as the three progressed they did their best to avoid any stationary cars, even stuffing torn bits of clothing into their ears as a precaution. This made conversation rather difficult.

"We're going to need a plan when we get there," Hubert noted. "We need to figure out who's team leader first."

"What?"

"Team leader! We need a team leader!"

"Why do we have to have a leader?" Eva asked.

Huber snorted. "What a total girl question."

"Huh? A grilled what?"

"A total girl question! That's a total girl question! It's obvious why we need a leader!"

"Why?"

"Because!"

"Because why?"

"Conversation's over! Franklin's the leader. No further discussion! Besides...we're here."

The radio station and the street outside it were both eerily calm. Somewhere in the distance they could hear emergency sirens wailing. Things were no doubt getting worse, and they still had no idea why this was happening and only a slightly better notion of who was responsible. Behind those doors, anything could be waiting for them.

Hubert and Eva removed the stuffing from their ears and looked to Franklin. "What's the plan?"

Of course, he hadn't the foggiest. This was something his father excelled at, not him, and yet somehow here he was, playing the same role. It seemed depressingly unavoidable.

"Um, we just go by ear, I guess? Well...maybe not by ear, but...you know. Just so long as we remember that it's all done by hypnosis and can't really hurt us, we should be fine, right?"

---

Fifteen minutes later, Franklin was fairly certain they were all going to die.

He had already lost sight of Eva and Hubert, which should have been physically impossible in a studio this size. The room's dimensions, however, were shifting at random. At times

he'd find himself moving through a series of narrow, winding hallways, or suddenly standing in the middle of an impossibly cavernous room, its walls stretching to the very limits of his vision. One moment he might be floating in mid-air, the next falling down a kaleidoscoping shoot into the blackest of bottomless pits.

That was of course all in his head. The result of hypnotically-induced illusions playing mind games with him. But realizing this did not make the illusions seem any less real or disorienting to Franklin. His last glimpse of his friends had told him they were fairing no better, Eva under the impression she was being eaten alive by feral aardvarks and Hubert certain he was drowning in a vat of rancid chocolate mousse.

Only HERBIE remained unaffected. But, without anyone to give him orders, he now floated motionless in the center of the room.

Think, Franklin told himself. There's got to be a way to overcome this, to break this spell we're under. After all, even when alive, Miracle Man was hardly considered an A-lister. He was, frankly, kind of a dork. There must be something...

The room shifted again, twirling like a gigantic cyclotron and turning Franklin's stomach into taffy. He closed his eyes and was surprised to find the sickness quickly dissipating. But, then, of course it would, he told himself. He was not actually spinning. There were no centrifugal forces involved. The hypnosis might be muddling his thoughts but not his actual body.

So he kept his eyes closed and tried instead to focus on sound. Slowly he began to isolate the people around him. He could hear Eva, almost at his shoulder, making small whimpering noises as she struggled with whatever illusions were attacking her now. And those heavy gasps from a few feet away were probably Hubert's.

Next he made out a third person, one breathing rapidly as though his or her adrenaline was pumping, and he took a tentative step in that direction, then another. As he did new sounds assailed him, as if correcting for his change in strategy. He heard the voice of his father clearly.

"Franklin? Franklin, for Pete's sake, can't you concentrate? This is simple rudimentary physics, you should already be familiar. Sometimes I don't think you listen to a word I --"

It faded into another voice, one he recognized as belonging to his parents' good friend, Dr. Strange.

"...have a placed mental block on your powers. It's to everyone's benefit for now young man. Of course it's not a permanent solution, and you could still...."

"...disappoint me," his father sighed. "Is it too much to expect at least a little of myself in you? Some flicker of curiosity? When I was your age, I'd already built my first superconductor out of household items from the family junk drawer. Sometimes I wonder if you're really..."

"...not too dangerous to be allowed to run free," Dr. Strange continued. "With Franklin's powers, there's really no telling what he might do one day, even by accident! He's a danger to everyone, he's..."

Between these increasingly shrill voices, Franklin could just distinguish the breathing, now so close he could almost feel it on his face. Gripping the broken flashlight he'd borrowed from Mr. Gogol\* in one sweaty hand, Franklin swung it with an angry howl. It hit something solid.

(See last issue. Yes, every detail I write has a purpose! (Except when it doesn't). - AI)

Something solid that yelped.

He opened his eyes, just in time to see the last wisps of a giant distorted Mr. Fantastic fade from sight. On the floor in front of him Miracle Man was sitting on his behind, his top hat askew. He looked more surprised than injured and slowly his form began to evaporate, like mist in a sudden wind.

In his place was left a young girl roughly Franklin's own age.

And she did not look pleased.

---

"You broke it!"

The girl stopped scowling at Franklin just long enough to gather the pieces of a small box-shaped gizmo up off the floor.

"Broke what?"

"What do you think, genius?"

She was a small reed-thin girl, scrawny almost, with curly hair, caramel-toned skin and a pert nose. Her eyes, narrowed and teary now, were normally quite large and almond-shaped. Franklin felt strangely guilty as she glared at him, although he was still fairly certain she was the bad guy here, not him.

"Hey, you're a girl."

She rolled her eyes. "Gee, you think?"

"No, I just mean...what happened to Miracle Man?"

She sighed and stood up, still fiddling with the box, slowly putting the pieces back in order. "I know who you are, of course. You're Franklin Richards, aren't you? I've seen your picture in the paper before. I suppose that means we're, like, destined to be archenemies."

"It does?"

"Probably. Miracle Man was my father, you see."

"Oh." Franklin paused, unsure what to make of that revelation. "So he put you up to this then? Is he around here somewhere...?"

"Yes. And no. He's still dead as far as I'm aware. I never actually met him."

"So how could he..."

"A videotaped recording," she explained. "He left me a bunch of taped recordings. My mother didn't want me listening to them but I snuck them on my own. This whole thing was all his plan. I just sort of followed the steps he laid out."

"Including breaking into my family's warehouse?"

"Yes." She grinned suddenly. "That part was actually kind of fun!"

"But how did you..."

"Hypnotize people? Mostly this box my dad made, which you better not have wrecked. All I do is switch between the different settings. It's pretty cool and super easy."

"Is that what's been hypnotizing everyone around town?"

She explained that, no, that was done through a separate recording currently being transmitted over the studio's radio relay. That's what she'd retrieved from the warehouse, actually. She was rather happy to hear that it was working too, since it was difficult to tell from up here.

"You realize it's causing a lot of trouble though, right?"

"Well, duh. I mean, I think that was pretty much my father's plan! You know, revenge and stuff, for not appreciating his genius, etcetera, etcetera."

"Right, yeah. Of course." This was, in fact, a very common source of motivation among career super villains. They were all chronic attention hogs. "But people are going to get hurt if it keeps up. Someone could even die, if they haven't already..."

She stopped to consider, as though this was the first the thought had crossed her mind, and bit her lower lip. "Oh. Well... I guess I could probably shut it off now. I suppose it's made enough of an impression. As long as Miracle Man gets the credit for everything."

"Oh, I'll be sure to tell the authorities who was responsible alright..."

Now the girl, perhaps noting the disapproval in his tone, sighed. "You know, it's not easy having a famous father like mine. It's a lot to live up to. I guess you probably know something about having a famous dad though..."

Franklin did and for some reason that softened him towards her, despite the fact she was obviously nuts and had put them through a great deal of trouble. "Yeah, well, anyways, you said you could turn it off?"

He followed along behind her as she stopped the recording and then handed the tape over to him. She wouldn't be needing it any more, she explained. There wasn't really any purpose to performing the same act of villainy twice. In her father's instructional tapes, he

had explained many times over the importance of keeping an act fresh if you wanted to maintain your audience.

"Wait. You're not, um, going to keep doing these things are you?"

She smiled and shrugged but any reply she may have planned beyond that was drowned out by a long groan from under the console. The radio program's host was currently crawling his way back out into the open. He looked a bit worse for wear but otherwise okay. Seeing him reminded Franklin of his own friends and he went to check on their condition. Eva was sitting cross legged on the floor, rubbing her head, while Hubert lay prone on his back, his right hand shielding his eyes. It had been a long day for both.

"Because, I mean, I think that would be a bad idea. I can understand you feeling pressured to follow in your father's footsteps, believe me, but he was, no offense, kind of a dangerous lunatic and..."

"Um, Franklin?"

"...well, have you considered therapy? They'll probably make it a mandatory part of your rehabilitation anyways when we turn you in and..."

"Um, Franklin?"

"What?"

"Who are you talking to?" Eva asked.

"To...you know, I forgot to ask your name? Since you already know mine, I..."

Franklin turned around and found himself gazing across a now empty studio. The little curly haired girl was gone, along with any sign of her hypno-box. Obviously it wasn't quite as broken as she'd claimed or else she was amazingly quick on her feet. Either way, it appeared that he'd let her get away.

"Oh, jeez."

"I take it Miracle Man is gone?"

"Girl, and, yeah, it looks that way. I think I may kind of suck at adventuring."

Eva smiled. "You'll get better! Anyways, we still stopped the bad guy, and it was fun, wasn't it?"

Somewhere behind them Hubert groaned. That seemed like answer enough, for now.

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**NEXT ISSUE:** *It's back to the Negative Zone as Namor searches for the missing Mr. Fantastic. But does Earth's greatest scientist even want to be found?*

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## **FANTASTIC FORUM**

And so concludes a bit of silliness that I hope readers didn't find too off-putting. This will be the last we see of Franklin, Eva, Hubert, and HERBIE (August, what, 6? 7? I don't know...) for the time being, as we instead zero in on this run's final two storyarchs.

What's in store? More Negative Zone, more Impossible Man, a return of the Frightful Four, and maybe even some answers to a few lingering questions, who knows? Either way, I hope you'll stick around to find out.

- Alan Strauss



**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#11 (Volume 2)**

**"BRAVE NEW WORLD"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**PREVIOUSLY:** After responding to a distress signal from a former colleague marooned in the Negative Zone, Reed Richards chose to stay behind and investigate the mysterious ruins of a planet known only as 32-I. Now he too has gone missing under strange circumstances, leading an old ally, and sometimes rival, on a quest to find him...

---

Try to picture the universe.

It looks a little like this: a rapidly expanding soap bubble.

Now try to picture the cosmos, containing an infinite number of universes, all loosely connected, a web of membranes, perhaps best visualized by dumping a bottle of bubble bath in an enormous washtub. Some of these membranes expand, some contract, and some share uneasy borders.

That was the relationship between the universe of mankind and the so-called Negative Zone. Two bordering universes that could, theoretically, never mingle, as one was composed of matter and the other antimatter. Both would annihilate each other should they ever merge. Their two soap bubbles would pop, simply put, leaving no residue behind.

Yet, through a scientific miracle called the Distortion Area, small bits of matter occasionally crossed from one universe to the other. Somehow positive charges were changed into negative ones and vice versa without altering the atoms themselves. This should have been impossible but for one caveat, the statement that made the word 'impossible' itself antithetical to science.

Which is: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

And some magical thing or things at sometime in history had wanted the universe of mankind to mingle with its neighbor, the Negative Zone. Thus it was.

What one might see upon entering the Zone wasn't so different from any other carbon-plentiful universe. Although significantly smaller than man's universe, that still meant billions of solar systems containing trillions of planets. One of those planets was a tiny little rock once labeled 32-I in the exploratory journals of one Dr. Reed Richards, an earthman who claimed to have discovered the Zone, as if discovering something that had always been was even possible.

From there one could travel a relatively trivial seventeen-hundred light years and reach another planet as yet unnamed by man. Of course it had been named in the astronomical journals of many Negative Zone civilizations, among them: Talon 6, Yazzratklatz-ktz, Ybirk, 000000010, and the Big Red Eye.

The Big Red Eye was an arid rock, largely barren, with little in the way of valuable ores. Upon it two vast armies were currently waging the latest in a near infinite number of battles. Their forces had gathered in a deep valley, like an enormous bowl, their legions teaming at its edges and sometimes spilling over. They fought, and fought, and fought. The dead on both sides

were now stacked in layers, neither army pausing long enough to count their casualties, let alone move them.

At a distance they took on the appearance of waves repeatedly clashing, receding at times to leave behind their lost like ghastly tide pools, before surging forward to clash once again. And almost all of this grim fighting was fought claw-to-claw, tooth to tooth, not with advanced weapons but with bone and sinew.

Yet for all that not one person cared. Not one soul heralded their passing. Every valiant, heroic death -- and there were doubtless many -- bore no more significance than dust in the wind. Unrecorded, uncelebrated and unobserved.

Save for one.

---

And he was a stranger.

He squatted atop the ledge of one of the enormous mesas that surrounded the valley. He had been watching the fight through his binoculars, focusing in at random, sometimes so close he could see the individual faces of the warriors. He could admire their bravery even if this battle meant nothing to him. He didn't even know who was fighting whom or why.

Because he truly was a stranger. Not just to the planet but to the Zone itself. He had come here searching for a man. Not a friend, exactly, not even a man who could be said to like him much, or vice versa. He was here because he had made a promise to a woman he had once loved and who had never loved him.

He had come alone to this strange universe, without friend or ally, a fact which may have alarmed others but not him. He'd spent most of his life alone. Even on his home planet, Earth, he stood apart. It was a world controlled by humans, homo sapiens, and yet he wasn't one. He was ruler of the undersea kingdom of Atlantis until very recently, but never really a true Atlantean either. Not completely. He was also a mutant, so called homo superior, but he had never mingled with others of his kind or cared for their causes.

He was singular. He was unique. He was Namor. The Sub-Mariner.

And he was more than a little lost.

He had passed through the Distortion Area in one of Reed Richards's Nega-Rovers, a slimmed down version of the rocket ship that had once propelled the Fantastic Four into Earth's outer atmosphere. Since the Negative Zone had no vacuums and even its space had an oxygen rich atmosphere, the Rover was built simply for speed. It was little more than a jump drive and a cockpit. It had enabled Namor to travel great distances in a very short time.

Knowing where to travel, however, was the real trick. He had been given the coordinates to 32-I, the planet where Richards, the man he was searching for, had last been seen. He was already gone when Namor arrived though. He had found the bunker Richards disappeared into and discovered nothing inside but dismantled machinery and smashed computers.\* Richards had simply disappeared, yet not entirely without a trace.

(See Fantastic Four #6, Vol. 2 - AI)

A small yet distinct radiation trail had been left by Richards' own ship. The Nega-Rover's sensors were able to detect it, just barely, although at times he had nearly lost all trace. Namor had, in fact, been following its winding path for over three months now. His food was nearly exhausted and he had been sidetracked more than once, fending off multiple attacks by Zone pirates and very nearly being forced to wed the daughter of a race of cosmic squids.

Now he was genuinely off course though and the last of his water reserves spent. This barren planet with its strange clashing armies had been the last to give up even a hint of Richards's radiation trail. It had faded before he'd even landed and now Namor was beginning to realize that perhaps he had bitten off more than he could chew. How could he really hope to find a man who likely didn't wish to be found when he had a whole universe to hide in?

Not that Namor would ever admit such a thing. He had given his word and that was enough.\* Giving up was never an option, even should it mean dying in this strange place.

\* (See Fantastic Four #8, vol. 2 - AI)

Of course, he reflected, placing his binoculars back into their pouch and scratching his scraggly growth of beard, there really was no rush for him to prove that. If he didn't discover some water soon, however, that was becoming a very real risk. As it was, his strength was already severely reduced, a curious effect of being half-merman.

"Well, we're not going to find any here," he told himself, standing up slowly, and knowing in that very same instance he was no longer alone. Something was skittering up the side of the cliff below him. Several somethings in fact. He considered taking to the air -- his mutant ability was a pair of somewhat silly looking but terribly handy ankle wings that gave him flight -- but realized it wouldn't do him much good to abandon the Nega-Rover. Without it he'd be stuck here. And since here had no water, he'd be

guaranteed a slow, certain death. So, instead, Namor crossed his arm and waited for them to arrive.

He didn't wait long.

There were sixteen of them altogether, long chitinous creatures with six legs, segmented bodies, and two purple orbs set above powerful pinchers. All were identical save for one, smaller and brown instead of green, with a noticeably larger head. It was this one who spoke at him in a series of clacks and hisses. The others pointed tubes in his direction which were very probably some sort of weapons.

Namor frowned. Insects. They looked like giant insects. As was true of most surface creatures, he found earth insects repulsive. He fumbled with the button on Richards's Universal Translator and was surprised to hear it decode the creature's words so quickly. They were even fairly easy for him to understand.

It was saying: "Surrender or die."

---

Elsewhere, incalculable light years away in an altogether different universe, the exact same thing was being said by a small human in a purple bullet-shaped helmet. The targets of his wrath, however, looked somewhat less than intimidated.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be that way. This really isn't personal, you know, Mr. Wizard."

"Do not call me Mr. Wizard, traitorous fool!"

"Traitorous? Now, I think that's a little strong, I really do..."

Bentley Wittman, the Wingless Wizard, extended his hand, palm open, at the twelve men seated across the table from him. A greenish glow spiraled up his purple armor -- this purely for affect -- as its embedded anti-gravity discs flickered to life, producing enough G-force to smash its targets into a red goo. And...

Nothing happened.

One of the men finally cleared his throat. "Yeah, ah, we forgot to mention, but we've had the whole HQ done up with Graviton Shields as of last month. It's actually kind of amazing how cheap advanced technology has gotten during this whole recession thing..."

Grinding his teeth, The Wizard switched the settings on his armor and tried again. And again. An awkward silence descended as the men now exchanged embarrassed glances. It was hard to see their old boss in such a sweat, especially since he's just gotten out of prison and all.\* But, well...

(See M2K's The Vault for his prior residency - AI)

"Business is business, Mr. Wizard. And we got to talking while you was in stir and we think maybe we should go our separate ways, you know? It's just there's no money in what you got us doing..."

"No money?"

"Yeah. These flashy robberies and then going after the Fantastic Four all the time. Especially that last one. I mean, Billy here still has his jaw wired up from when the Thing belted him last year."

Billy nodded emphatically, looking as if he had cotton balls stuffed in his cheeks.

"...and, well, we've all got families to think of now too. Well, except Tony, but his mom has been sick lately..."

"The doctors think it's cancer," Tony said, producing sympathetic noises from the other men. Only the Wizard scowled.

"...so we've decided we need to focus on safer schemes in the future. You know, insurance fraud, blackmail, kidnapping. The classics, Mr. Wizard. We're tired of big league superheroes. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I will kill you all."

"Aw, hey now, that's just plain rude," the men complained, "and here we even put together a sort of severance package for you..."

They placed a white envelope on the table, one filled with loose cash, while the Wizard continued to jab fruitlessly at the controls of his suit.



"To which legion are you assigned?"

"You already asked me this. I've told you before that I'm not part of your ridiculous army."

"Then you are one of Blastaar's conscripts. Enemy combatants are subject to execution or enslavement."

Namor did his best to keep his anger in check, never one of his strong suites. He was still suffering from the aftereffects of their fight, the multiple cuts and bruises, the sprained ribs. He had managed to take out three of his attackers before the rest had literally swarmed him. If he been at full strength it may have gone differently but as it was he was probably lucky to be alive.

He was currently in an interrogation room being grilled by the brown insect creature whose squad had captured him. They had been stuck in the same cycle of questions for the last hour. It assumed he had escaped from the ongoing battle in the valley, and was a deserter from one side or the other. It seemed uninterested in his own explanations.

"Curse you, no! I'm not a soldier or a conscript of anyone!"

"Who do you serve?"

"No one! I serve myself."

The feelers atop his interrogator's head twitched slightly, the closest it ever came to showing emotion.

"Illogical."

Actually it didn't say 'illogical', not according to Namor's translator. It seemed incapable of such qualifiers. Nothing was described as good or bad, true or untrue, but merely done or not done. It's vocabulary was incredibly limited although Namor had already come to the conclusion it was the most intelligent of the group. The others, the larger ones, the soldiers, were incapable of any sort of speech at all.

"All must serve one side or the other."

"And no one ever deviates from that?"

It seemed to think the question absurd on its face. "There are Insectivorids and non-Insectivorids. Insectivorids are done. All others are not done. Blastaar is not done. Blastaar will be destroyed. You are one of Blastaar's conscripts."

"No, damn you, I'm not! I came here looking for someone, that's all. Didn't you see my ship?"

"Your ship was dismantled. Its parts will be used to aid the war effort. This is done. You are one of Blastaar's conscripts."

Namor sighed. "Apparently whether I agree or not..."

"Enemy combatants are subject to execution or enslavement. Will you remain loyal to Blastaar?"

"No more so than usual."

"This answer is not done. Will you remain loyal to Blastaar?"

Namor frowned. "No."

"Then you will be sent to Work Planet 13. There you will serve the Insectivorids until death. Lord Annihilus's will be done."

---

Namor was sedated for the trip and when he next awoke he found himself on a cot inside a narrow one-room structure very like the Quonset Huts he recalled from the Great War. Something luminous and blue hovered in front of him. After a moment he realized it belonged to a face, or something akin to one at least.

"Good, you're awake! I was worried you were going to sleep through the day. Our shift has almost started."

He sat up slowly, his body still aching from its recent wounds, although the bruises had mostly healed and the cuts scabbed over during transit. He was handed something in a plastic bowl and he drank from it reflexively. It wasn't water but a viscous tart mixture that left his tongue numb. It did, however, quench his thirst for the time being.

"Where am I?"

"Planet 13 of course! I would have expected them to have told you that much at least. My name is Thello, if you care. I'm sort of the unofficial elder in this particular work detail. Not that that means anyone ever listens to what I say, naturally."

Now that his head was clearing, Namor could take in his host for the first time. He was not human, although that hardly surprised him, and only vaguely humanoid. Thello walked on four pod-like legs with an equal number of three-fingered arms jutting from his flat circumference. A sparkling crystalline shell covered most of his body, allowing one to see hints of his internal organs when the light hit him just right. To Namor, he looked something like an unusual crustacean, a sort of deformed crab with segmented blue eyes on pinkish stalks. He could see no hint of a mouth and he realized he had been hearing him telepathically. Whether that was owing to Thello's physiology or his own limited ability to communicate mentally with aquatic lifeforms was difficult to say.

"Up, up, up," Thello said jovially, grabbing him by the shoulder with surprising strength. "If you're late, they dock your rations and it holds everyone else up besides."

Namor let himself be guided out of the doors where the cold of this new planet struck him like a bucket of ice. If he wasn't awake before, he certainly was now. Everything around him blurred into a sort of utilitarian gray. The dirt under his feet, the sky overhead with its tiny blue sun, and the hundred or so cylindrical huts lined up one after the other, each identical to the one he'd just left save for holographic placards displaying their individual numbers in a dozen different languages.

Across from them sat a single enormous city-sized building, the factory. Also gray, but taller, with billows of dark smoke escaping from its hundreds of smoke stacks. Somewhere in the far distance he could see something like a giant black pitchfork jutting up, but before he could truly study it, they were already inside.

The goosebumps on his flesh immediately gave way to a heavy sweat. Within the factory, giant furnaces belched heat while huge vats filled molds on a series of assembly lines that stretched as far as his eye could see. Hundreds of workers from hundreds of races filled their place on the lines. Thello guided him towards a magnetic rail car that would carry them the three or four miles needed to reach their own detail.

"So all these people are slaves of the Insectivorids?"

"Oh, yes! Their worlds have all been conquered, of course, like mine and obviously yours too." Clearly, Thello did not know Namor's story, which was just as well for now, he decided. "They have us all working together at this munitions factory. You know those little tubes of theirs? Plasma weapons, made to fit their mandibles. I'm sure you've seen them."

"Yes," Namor answered, recalling a few of their beams arching past him during his battle. They hadn't seemed too accurate with them, although perhaps they hadn't really wanted to kill him. "So they have their slaves sitting on a stockpile of weapons?"

"Yes, and I know what you're thinking. It wouldn't work. We may create the weapons here but the ammunition charges are created elsewhere. They're all useless as they are now. Only the Insectivorids are armed."

Thello told him all this in the same cheery voice that he'd been using since Namor awoke. "You don't sound as though you mind..."

"I don't, really. Everyone thinks about rebellion when they first get here but they realize eventually it's pointless. Besides, most of us have no where to go even if we did overthrow them. We are all the last surviving members of our races."

"What happened to the rest?"

"Dead, I'm afraid. The Insectivorids only keep a small section of the population alive as workers when they conquer a planet and put the rest to death as superfluous to their needs. Our planets are mostly homes to similar factories now or their hatcheries."

"Monstrous," Namor said. "Don't you at least wish revenge?"

The crab creature made a motion similar to a shrug. "Maybe once, long ago, I thought that way but I've come to realize it's merely the natural order. They've proved their superiority as a species. This is how things go."

"You just accept that?"

"Better that than to fight the inevitable. Besides, they are not truly malicious, in fact they lack the capability for such emotions. There is no word for torture or punishment in the Insectivorid language and there is something very much like equality within each class, even for the slave class like us. This is more than I can say for life under Blastaar, who ruled my planet before they came."

"I should find it intolerable to be ruled in such a manner by these inhuman creatures. I cannot believe all think as you do."

Thello conceded that not all did but most who felt differently did not survive long. That made the Insectivorids sound excessively brutal, yet that was not how he viewed things. They were merely efficient and, all in all, he said, they were not treated so badly. They were fed, clothed if necessary, given shelter and medical care, even allowed vacations and holidays once the Insectivorids were made to understand what such things were.

"As long as one fulfills one's assigned role, one is treated justly."

"And if you don't?"

"Then you are executed without ceremony. This is true even among the Insectivorids themselves though. They are all hatched according to class...soldiers, instructors, organizers, mechanics, breeders, and so forth. Even Lord Annihilus serves a singular function as their martial leader."

"To what end?"

"The same end as any living things, I suppose. To reproduce and expand onto infinity. They won't stop until they have conquered and colonized the entire universe."

The time for talk was now over for they were holding up the line. Thello found some overalls, gloves, and a face shield that fit Namor's relatively common bipedal body type and showed him what they did. They were fitting rivets into enormous sheets of metal, just one part in a long assembly process. It was manual work that could have been done just as easily by robots but the Insectivorids did not have time to build fully automated world factories like the ones that supplied Blastaar's armies. They moved too

quickly, swarming from planet to planet, and there was always an abundance of captives to man them instead.

"These pieces we're working on, what are they for? They seem too large to be handheld weapons."

"Yes, noticed that did you? I honestly can't say. The factory has been undergoing some changes of late and several of the lines, including our own, have been converted. It's believed there's some sort of special project in development."

"Special project?"

"A super weapon, rumor has it. Annihilus has been losing ground in his ongoing war against Blastaar ever since he lost the Cosmic Rod.\* Perhaps the Insectivorids believe this will sway the odds back in their favor."

\* (A result of the M2K/JLU crossover. See related mini for details. - AI)

"I see."

"Of course it's not their own creation. The Insectivorids are notorious thieves, they have virtually no creativity but are incredibly adept at adapting and reproducing the work of others."

"So who's behind this new project then?"



"A stranger. No one is certain where he's from but he's kept in special quarters with his own armed guard. In fact, I believe that's him right there..."

Namor glanced over his goggles as a group of brown Insectivorids crossed the catwalk above them. A slim figure in a dark blue jumpsuit and lab coat stood in the midst of them, glancing from each station to the clipboard he was holding, as though judging all according to some prearranged diagram. With a start Namor realized he recognized his face. He had found the man he was looking for at long last; he had found Reed Richards.

And he appeared to be working for Annihilus.

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**Next Issue:** Assault on Planet 13!

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## **Fantastic Forum**

"...advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" is one of Arthur C. Clarke's Three Laws of Science.

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#12 (Volume 2)**

**"ASSAULT ON PLANET 13"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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**PREVIOUSLY:** After months in the Negative Zone, Namor has at last located the missing Reed Richards. Unfortunately both have been made prisoners of the voracious Insectivorids, forced to serve them and their relentless war machine upon threat of death. For at least one of them, however, forced may be the wrong word entirely...

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A loose circle had coalesced at the center of the camp. It was formed from hundreds of bodies, men, women, and others less easy to classify, culled from a collection of races and physiognomies as varied as the stars themselves. All were dressed in some form of the same bland overalls, the working uniform for the slaves of Planet 13, as gray and dusty as the world itself.

Two stood in the middle of this circle. The first was a hulking creature covered head to toe in thick bristling black fur like quills with a single murky green eye in the middle of its forehead. It clenched and unclenched its huge three fingered hands, each as large as a butchered calf, with obvious impatience.

The other, in contrast, displayed little but a meditative calm, stretching his legs and arms in slow preparation. Despite his confident bearing, however, the mood of the circle was apprehensive. Nervous eyes darted from heavy brows while others smirked with bloodthirsty anticipation. All recognized the obvious. It could be seen by any sentient with visual receptors, which was most in attendance. The human was half his opponent's size and far larger opponents had been broken by Juro's fists in the past.

Yet still the man exuded calm. He was slender even by humanoid standards but toned with an aquiline face and ears that pointed at the tips. His dark hair hung at shoulder length, a full beard lending maturity to his lean features. Everything about him seemed trim and angular and controlled. Even the prisoner overalls hung differently from his body than the others, with an authority incongruous to his position.

*"You can still call this off, Namor..."*

The ghost of a smile passed over his lips. "I have never avoided a fight in my life, Thello. I shall not change my ways now, I suspect."

It was more than pride motivating him though. He had been trapped three months now on the Insectivorids' work planet. In that time he had gone from lowly prisoner to a man of prominence, someone the other prisoners looked up to for advice and leadership. It was only natural then that he should come in conflict with Juro, the plant foreman, who ruled over the other slaves as the camp's de facto leader. Hailing from a planet with a higher gravity, he possessed a strength that instilled fear and deference into the others.

Namor did not fear him though. Namor feared no one, especially not some oversized brute like Juro. Once he'd made that clear, conflict became inevitable. Only one of them could lead. Namor intended it to be himself, for he had plans, plans that did not include spending the remainder of his life here.

Juro slapped his palms against the thickness of his thighs and strode to the center of the circle. He announced something in a chortling voice that brought laughter from some corners.

*"I believe he just, um, questioned the social class of your mother and tendered speculation as to the inadequate size of your reproductive organs."*

"You don't need to translate."

*"Oh, it's no problem," answered Thello, his voice echoing cheerily in Namor's mind, "it's the least I can do as a telepath, really! I fear he is growing impatience though. Are you sure you won't call off this madness? No one will think the less of you."*

Namor glanced at the circle of faces surrounding him then upwards where the world's tiny blue sun hung weakly in the gray filament like a dimming light bulb. Nearby, just behind the slave huts and the electrified fence that held them, loomed the enormous factory where they all toiled day in and out, its featureless bulk stretching wherever the eye seemed to roam.

And finally the thing itself, further out still, the large black pinnacle that twisted menacingly into the sky, still unnamed. The mysterious project their work was now centered on.

"I would think the less of me, Thello. That is all that matters." Namor now turned to face Juro, his chin tilted high in arrogance as he too walked to the circle's center. "Let us begin, creature, before your stench alone finishes the j-"

At what moment Namor actually went airborne he was unaware. One instant he was speaking and the very next thing he felt was his face skidding across the ground in a cloud of dust. His ears rang while blood and grit pooled on his tongue. Something had hit him so hard and fast that he literally had not seen it coming. Another like that and he'd be unlikely to ever see anything again.

Perhaps, Namor reflected as Juro lumbered in his direction with a satisfied grin, this wasn't such a great idea, after all.

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A feint. A dodge. A glancing blow all but unnoticed by his opponent.

Namor realized that brute force wasn't working. This was not a first for the former prince, exactly, but neither was it a common occurrence. On his own planet and in his native element, his strength was often so overwhelming as to render most battles mere formality. As a result, he rarely hesitated to engage an opponent fists first, a fact that earned him a reputation of being rash, bullheaded, and incapable of strategic thought.

Nothing could be less true. One did not rule over the oceans of Earth -- a planet that was little but ocean, a fact the surface dwellers seemed content to ignore -- without a capacity for tactical planning. Namor was merely pragmatic. If muscle could win the day, then why waste time complicating matters?

But it wasn't going to be enough to defeat Juro, not in these conditions, where water was scarce and his strength at a minimum. So Namor adapted.

His opponent had him outmatched in terms of raw power and possessed a quick right that he couldn't risk letting connect again. Juro wasn't invincible though. He had weaknesses too. The short stocky legs that strained under his top heavy bulk, rendering him slow and lumbering; a single eye that gave him poor depth perception and a lack of peripheral vision.

Namor took note of these things as quickly as a trained tracker might note a footprint left in the soft mud. And so it went -- feint, dodge, weave, a flurry of quick circling footwork, that left his opponent increasingly tired and lightheaded.

Juro was too arrogant to realize what was happening. The glancing blows that Namor landed were of so little consequence that he felt certain the fight was all but over. One proper punch and the thing would be finished. It wasn't until some twenty minutes later, stumbling at the end of an overextended punch, that he found himself on his hands and knees. When he looked up again he saw Namor, fists clenched together in a tight ball and delivering a blow that started from his ankles and flowed up through the toned muscles of his back, connecting with Juro's chin in a sharp crack.

The circle was silent with awe as the foreman hit the ground in a cloud of gray dust. The silence wasn't broken again until the crackle of a plasma bolt rent the air.

The slaves broke in confusion as a squad of brown Insectivorids scuttled into their ranks, neuronc whips hanging from leather belts strapped across their thorax. Their officer studied Namor and Juro with typical inscrutability.

"This behavior is not productive! You will cease loitering immediately and report for work detail!"

Obediently, the slaves began to file away. Namor, however, kept his ground, offering the dazed Juro a hand up as he recovered. The foreman glared balefully at him for a moment then nodded his gruff respect, before joining the ranks of the other slaves.

The Insectivorid officer stepped in front of Namor as he moved to follow.

"Not you. You will come with us."

"A disciplinary action?" He shrugged his indifference. "Very well. I care not."

The insect cocked its head, feelers twitching, a sign either of amusement or confusion, he was never certain. "You are wanted for an audience. We are to present you to the creator one."

"The creator?" Namor asked. This particular title was new to him.

"All must serve the will of Annihilus" was what he received in way of a reply. A typical Insectivorid response and one that left little room for argument as his escort quickly surrounded him.

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They marched him through the front doors, past belching furnaces and rows of bent workers in overalls and protective face shields, ascending to the vast metal catwalk that hung suspended fifty feet above the factory floor. From there they trekked deeper into the structure until finally reaching the central column that served as the operational hub. Like the Insectivorid barracks that oversaw the slave camp their factory office had the crude rough look of mud pillars, although the material itself was far stronger. Thello claimed they built these things by patiently shaping the saliva they could regurgitate at will. To Namor it looked like nothing so much as a glorified wasps nest.

His escort prodded him into the one of the darkened holes and they descended several feet into solid blackness, guiding him along several

branches in the tunnel. Eventually they came into a wide open room and the sudden glow of light within made Namor shield his eyes. When he opened them again he found himself in a surprisingly human habitat. Chairs, tables, a cot, and something very like a computer monitor. Behind and above it and pretty much everywhere else he looked the walls had been smoothed and covered in detailed schemas, blueprints, and equations.

Namor was only mildly surprised to find a familiar face behind the desk, chin balanced between thumb and forefinger, the picture of all-encompassing thought.

"Reed Richards."

The man in question glanced up sharply. "Ah. You're here then..."

"I'd wondered if you were aware of my presence on this planet."

"I've known ever since you arrived, actually." Reed indicated one of the chairs, simple things of metal and soft plastic, likely constructed by the man himself. "Please take a seat. I'd offer you something to eat or drink but I'm afraid my fare is no different or more plentiful than what you're already receiving. The Insectivorids don't believe in any kind of special treatment."

"How very...egalitarian of them," the former prince sneered.

"Yes, quite...very much so, in fact ..."



Namor allowed himself to relax just enough to be seated but no more. Something in Reed's demeanor was off-key to him. They were not the type of men to warmly embrace each other even in the best of times, but there was now an awkward coolness that had not been there before, at least not in many years. It was not just the uncharacteristic shabbiness of Reed's appearance, but something in the eyes, something wild and new that struck Namor immediately.

"If you've known about me since I arrived, I'm surprised it took so long to arrange a meeting. I saw you only once, briefly, but never again, or I should have made the approach myself. They seem to keep you well cloistered." He paused. "You must have guessed I came to the Zone looking for you?"

"I'd surmised as much, yes." A frown, as though reevaluating something painful. "Sue must have had a hand in that."

"Naturally. The whereabouts of Reed Richards are hardly a concern of mine in the normal sphere of things. That said, you were a difficult man to find. If not for these creatures..."

Namor made a motion with his hand to indicate the Insectivorid guards but they had by now already departed, exiting as quietly as they'd entered. There was never an excess movement or noise where they were concerned. Like machines, he felt, only somehow less personal.

"Yes," Reed replied. "I ran afoul of Annihilus's men. Carelessness on my part, no doubt."

"So you are their slave as well. That would explain your close captivity. They must have recognized your aptitude with machines and put you to work as well."

"Yes...but...well, no. There's a small, perhaps significant, difference..."

"The private quarters, you mean?"

"The fact I volunteered my services."

The former ruler of Atlantis was not a man known for temperate responses and the one he gave now was surely heard even by the slaves working the lines outside. "Volunteered? Is this a jest, Richards!? Even I know of Annihilus's relentless thirst for conquest. Surely, you would not..."

Reed smiled, a sad and somehow resigned gesture, as he sat back in his chair.

"Not normally, but my perspective on things has changed of late. In all truth being found by the Insectivorids was something of a godsend for me...."



*One Month Ago...*

From somewhere above me a voice spoke.

It said: *Hello, Reed Richards. Welcome home.*

By now you probably know how I came to that moment. Sue would have told you about my work on 32-I.\* Possibly even Andrea. I assume she left for Earth after I scrapped everything. We'd spent months rebuilding those old ruins to their former glory. Trying to make things run again. If I'd known then...

\* (See Fantastic Four v2 #1-6 - AI)

But of course I couldn't. It was a mystery how such an advanced civilization had toppled and its people retuned to savagery. We blamed the so-called Ghost Gods and their murderous raids. Even then, I should have recognized something was wrong. How could a single army lay an entire planet to ruin, a planet with such a high level of technological development?

If I'd been at my sharpest, I surely would have seen the signs. But I wanted it to be what I saw in front of me. The media frenzy at home, the sudden spotlight on my work, the insinuations that I'd caused as much harm as good. Here was a chance to prove otherwise. To lift a people out of fear and tyranny, to right a wrong.

Hubris, I suppose. I've never been especially literary, and psychology as a discipline has always bored me. So maybe it's just best to say I did what I always do.

I fixed things.

It was going well too, when Andrea and I received news that the Ghost Gods headquarters had been discovered. Our team had dealt with them handily before and I felt confident I could put the rest of them out of commission by

myself. No need to call Ben and the others back. It turned out I was right, but not in the way I expected.

It wasn't a military camp or a headquarters. It was a laboratory. A factory. The Ghost Gods weren't gods, they weren't invaders, they were mass produced robots. And the thing that greeted me? That was their architect. The Omnivac. A world machine. Something I should have guessed.

Any society as advanced as the one on 32-I would inevitably dispense with the inefficient waste of a bureaucracy. Intelligent life, with its capacity for error and procrastination, would best be organized not by each other but by machines. A super computer that could keep track of and analyze information far more precisely than even hundreds of dedicated scholars.

Everything from weather prediction to population control to cultural trends would be handled through Omnivac's administration. As long as its data was sufficiently up-to-date, meaning as long as it remained aware of everything happening on its world, it would be the best possible guardian of its people's fate. No more tyranny, no more injustice, no more inequality, no more want, no more unnecessary pain due to mistakes and flaws. No more surprises.

When it welcomed me that was not because it knew me personally. It knew my name because it had been monitoring me since my arrival, gathering data on this new factor in its otherwise meticulously controlled environment. Doing as it had been programmed, in other words. It greeted me as friend because in me it recognized familiar traits, traits that had been shared by its original creators.

It thought I was its new caretaker.

"How long," I asked, "has it been since the last one?"

"Calculating...one moment please. It has been four thousand seven hundred fifty years, eight hours, and three minutes. Welcome."

That's when I made Omnivac explain its purpose, although by then I basically knew. What I really wanted to know is how had it had gone so wrong. This blasted planet. These ruined cities. These miserable primitive people. And these robot tormenters... why? What had failed?

But it did not understand. Nothing had gone wrong. It's primary function had been to make its creator's race content, to arrange an environment best suited to its needs. And so it had. It began by stripping away the centuries of advanced technology they had built up to make their lives comfortable and easy. In a mechanized society that no longer required organic labor or thought, they had fallen into depression, ennui, and chemical dependency. Life had become superfluous to them at all levels.

But in the tribes, fighting day to day for survival in a hostile world? Every life was suddenly precious again. That alone was not enough though. If it was to stay that way, something was necessary to cull the herd, something to keep them from fighting and killing one another, and the inevitable technological advances that would ensue as a result. And so the Ghost Gods were created. An impersonal implacable enemy to focus their hatred and aggression on.

It's solution to the miseries of a modern technological society was to destroy it. It had succeeded in its programming. It had made its world into the one best suited to the instinctual needs and desires of life.

It had created a living hell.

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"Naturally, I destroyed the machine, then and there. An overreaction on my part, I suppose. It was only doing what it had been created to do, after all. Not so different from the rest of us, if you think about it."

Namor now sat with arms crossed as Richards finished his tale, his bearing as rigid as the expression on his face. He did not like this sort of talk, even if he understood it better than he might have normally. The situation in Atlantis had been equally shocking for him. He had never thought the Atlantians would depose him in such manner, not in a coup or a violent takeover, but peaceably, as though he had become superfluous to them. Antiquated. His whole reason for living -- to protect and serve and guide his people -- an embarrassment.

He considered sharing this with Richards but then thought better of it. He did not believe in pouring out one's troubles to others and was surprised Richards was so eager to do so. It betrayed a weakness in Namor's estimate. Further sign of inward sickness.

"Very dispiriting, I'm sure, but that does not explain why you are here now, helping these creatures."

"Doesn't it?" Reed clasped his hands together and scowled. "I honestly thought it did. I'd been confronted with the very thing I'd been trying to avoid. Facing the responsibility of my work. The inherent destructiveness and nihilism hidden at the heart of progress, how it's always the militaries of the world that benefit most from new technology and the inner need for domination that drives it, how in the end so little of it makes us happy. I was still puzzling through this dilemma when the Insectivorids came across me."

"And you volunteered your services to them? Because, what, you were confused? Depressed? This makes no sense to me Richards."

He shook his head. "I volunteered when I learned of their situation. An ongoing war in which Annihilus is slowly losing to Blastaar's technologically superior forces. Two species driven by their natural impulses. On one side the primitive need to grow and breed and reproduce endlessly. On the other, the desire to conquer and control all within sight. Naturally the side with the greater creativity was winning. I decided I could help even the score and end, or at least stalemate, their conflict for the time being."

"And so provide the rest of this universe some relief. I see but I do not agree with it. To help Annihilus by providing him with a new weapon will surely have deeper repercussions."

"The weapon will only work once and will take an entire planet to utilize. This planet in fact. It's a design I've modified from Galactus's old technology."

"The Planet Eater? You're going to destroy this world?"

"Convert it to energy, yes, and in such way that the intense gravitational force of the reaction will birth a black hole. The plan is to detonate it when Blastaar's armada arrives, something that is likely to occur within the next month if scout reports are accurate."

Namor nodded slowly. He was familiar with large scale warfare in a way few modern earthlings were but still this didn't feel right to him. "But won't that kill millions? Isn't that against your principals? And the prisoners on this planet, what of them, Richards?"

"Collateral damage, I'm afraid. Believe me, it took some convincing to sway the Insectivorids to my way of thinking. Not because of the loss of life, of course; they have a very practical view of death, seeing life not in terms of individuals but the propagation of their race. No their doubts had more to do with my former run-ins with Annihilus. When they realized the weapon I was proposing was an actual possibility, however, they slowly came around."

Namor's fists clenched at the cold lack of emotion in his voice. "Surely you jest. The Reed Richards I know..."

"The Reed Richards you *knew* was a fantasist. I am a realist. This is what I do. This is my work. This is my contribution."

"I will not allow it!"

Namor was ready to lunge across the table, prepared to throttle some sense into his former ally if necessary, when several strong pincers latched onto his arms and cut into his flesh. The Insectivorid guards had returned, as silently as they exited, and were now holding him firmly in place. One glance at Richards informed him that it was he who had summoned them.

"I expected you might feel that way and in all truth I didn't bring you here to confer with you. I know you well enough to guess you're planning something with the other workers. You're a natural leader and I was probably remiss to let you run free this long. I can't have any interruptions. Everything is on a precise time table. Of course if I have your solemn word not to interfere..."

"Never," spat Namor.



A smile seemed to cross Reed's tired face. "I didn't think so. Meaning you'll need to be placed in solitary confinement. When a transport ship becomes available, I will see if I can have you safely removed. There's no reason for you to get caught up in this."

"Do me no favors, Richards. I would rather d-"

The former prince continued to threaten and curse Reed's name as the guards dragged him from the room. Long before his voice had faded into the depths of the hive, Richards was again hunched over his desk, already lost deep within his work.

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Seconds minutes days weeks. Time soon blurred into non-existence in the stultifying darkness of Namor's cell. There was no source of light, except for the slot where the bowls of mush they called his meals were pushed through, although that alone was not enough to break him. To one who traverses the depths of Earth's oceans, light is hardly a necessity. Nor was the lack of sound particularly maddening.

It was the absence of movement that tormented Namor most. The cell was so cramped he could barely stand upright and when stretched on the floor he could touch all four walls at once. And nothing moved around him. The air was warm and stale and there was nothing of life anywhere. It was so unlike the world of his home that a point soon came when he would have been glad to feel even the skitter of an insect across his flesh or hear the scuttling of a rat's claws.

But such things did not exist on this barren planet.

By the time they came for him again he was weak beyond measure and nearly delirious. They dragged him along the tunnels and up into a light so bright that his eyes throbbed with pain.

"Where," he rasped, "are you taking me?"

The one with the coloring of an officer answered him. They didn't need to answer a prisoner of course but the Insectivorids were literal beings. They enjoyed making statements of fact and laying out their objectives. It helped to cement events as done in their minds, the only pleasure known in their regimented existence.

"We have been ordered by the creator one to escort you to an evacuation ship."

"...Richards..."

"We have also been ordered to ignore all orders from the creator one that do not pertain to warfare and weaponry. You are excess organic material and using an evacuation ship to transport you anywhere would be a waste of valuable assets. You are instead to be disposed of promptly."

They had brought Namor to a deep pit a short distance outside the camp and now dropped him unceremoniously on the dirt before it. Rifle in hand, feelers twitching rapidly, the officer then gave his men the signal. "Annihilus's will be done."

Bright light cut the air all around him although Namor's cloudy thoughts struggled to make sense of them. The shots should be coming towards him, not passing over him, and yet that's what was happening. He was not the

only one puzzled as the Insectivorid guards were quickly cut to pieces by the oncoming blasts.

It was only when Namor heard Thello's voice in his head that he understood.

*"So you are alive! We had thought for certain they'd killed you. Imagine our surprise when we saw them dragging you across the field!"*

Namor felt a heavy hand on his arm as he was crudely jerked to his feet. The bloated face of Juro glowered down at him, a welding iron held ready in his hand. Namor tried to jerk away before realizing that this was in fact one of his rescuers. Other workers in their gray togs, holding various weapons of their own, were gathered behind Juror.

"Wha- What happened?"

*"We don't rightly understand it ourselves," Thello explained. "The guards have simply vanished. The outposts are all abandoned and the gates left unmanned. It is as if they are evacuating. Ships have been coming and going all week long. Some of us have gotten rather...well, feisty in their absence...although I scarcely understand why..."*

This was enough to bring some life back to the Atlantian at last. Namor pulled himself up with effort and glanced wildly around him. Seeing Thello's spongy blue form floating nearby, he grabbed his nearest tentacle and shook him roughly. "The project! Is it finished?"

*"What project? What are you --"*

Finally Namor spotted it in on the horizon, the enormous black pinnacle that rose just outside the factory. It was now joined by several others, mirror duplicates, one for each direction of the compass. A thick haze seemed to coalesce around their fork-like prongs.

"The weapon! It's finished isn't it? That's why they're evacuating. It's being activated! Blastaar's ships must be arriving soon. The Insectivorids are going to destroy this planet and everything on it, including us, if we don't stop it!"

Realization spread slowly among the other slaves as Thello explained the situation as rapidly as he could. Howls of anger, misery, and disbelief rose up in reply.

*"How long do we have?"*

Even as Thello poised this question, lights began to flash along the lengths of the obelisks, and the sky above them turned dark. Countless specks had suddenly filled the heavens above. Ships, they realized, thousands of them. Dreadnaughts and star cruisers, some as large as continents, had now gathered above Planet 13. Blastaar's war armada had arrived.

The weapon had already been activated.

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**NEXT ISSUE:** What happens when the world's most dangerous technology falls into the wrong hands? That's a question the Wizard and the new Frightful Four would very much like to answer!

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#13 (Volume 2)**

## **"REVERSE GRAVITY"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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Previously: With the unwitting help of Impossible Man, the Wizard and his new Frightful Four have defeated half of the Fantastic Four and taken over the Baxter Building, placing the world in direct danger from its vast technological arsenal. Meanwhile, Reed Richards remains in the Negative Zone where he appears to be aiding Annihilus's insatiable armies in their war with Blastaar's legions; appearances however can oft be deceiving...

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"There is a single light of science and to brighten it anywhere is to brighten it everywhere." - Isaac Asimov

My name is Reed Richards. Some have labeled me Mr. Fantastic. I've never encouraged that. Most of the time it feels like a misnomer. Once in a great awhile I almost think I live up to it. I don't think I would consider today one of those days.

"Richards! What have you done?!"

The voice of Namor boomed across the empty factory as I slowly descended the catwalk. Behind him stood a veritable army and each member of it more unique than the last. All were prisoners of the Insectivorids, sole survivors of their races, now freed, their enslavers having fled the planet only moments ago. I could not help but think what a suitable leader my old friend looked while standing at their head. He did not seem nearly as pleased to see me.

Rough hands seized the front of my shabby lab coat and shook me until my teeth rattled. "Is it too late to stop it? How could you Richards?! Answer

me!" Namor appeared ready to strike me. It would not have been the first time. Ours was a difficult history, but not one I held against him.

"Please, Namor," I said as calmly as I could. "Before you act too harshly, follow me back outside, if you would."

*Careful*, one of the other prisoners cautioned, his voice broadcasting itself through our thoughts, some kind of telepath apparently, *they may have left guards to watch him. It could be an ambush.*

"They did leave guards actually. You can find them upstairs in the control room, unconscious and securely bound. They shouldn't be too much trouble." Now my interrogators were confused. Perhaps I was being cruel by stringing things out. "Please come with me outside..."

Reluctantly they obeyed, following me around the quieted assembly lines and through the massive front doors into the yard beyond. A startled tremor swept through their ranks as they stood in the cold air and stared upwards. A shimmering green mist now illuminated the sky like the Northern lights of our world only here stretching across the entire heavens, without visible end.

"What manner of weapon is this, Richards?" demanded Namor.

"It's not a weapon. I'm sorry I had to trick you my friend. It was absolutely necessary in order to deceive our hosts. They had to believe I was the man I appeared. Broken, half-mad, and more than willing to help them win their war at any costs. If they ever once suspected otherwise, they never would have allowed me to work." I smiled wearily. "It was also sadly necessary for me to see to it that you didn't interfere. I hope your imprisonment wasn't too harrowing?"

"Then you mean this is not -- "

"A weapon based on Galactus's planetary energy condensers? No, although the technology is partially borrowed from his old designs. It's a planetary shield, fueled by the planet's own magnetic fields, infinitely rechargeable and nearly impenetrable from outside forces."

The tension seemed to slowly drain from Namor's face as he digested what I told him. As he realized the threat was truly past.

"So you...?"

"So I did."

Next came the long and tedious part. The explanations. Of how I'd run across the warring fleets of Annihilus and Blastaar while traveling Zone in the wake of my disappointments on 32-I. How I'd ended up captured and realized that this planet was directly in the line of advance for Blastaar's fleet. I knew then that the Insectivorids would rather destroy this camp and all of its occupants than ever let it fall to their enemy. The impersonal way they thought made that almost inevitable. It also would have made inevitable the deaths of everyone here.

Upon that realization I'd scrapped all plans for escape and turned my mind instead to developing a means that might save them. It had worked, but was hardly a perfect solution. They'd be safe as long as they maintained the shield, but they were essentially trapped on this planet, surrounded by hostile armies. Despite how barren it looked, there was plentiful water frozen underground and they would be able to survive, although it would not be an easy life.

Truly, I was not certain how much of a favor I'd really done them, yet it was the best I could manage. They did not seem anything but thankful. In fact they were full of ideas as to what to do next.

"...with ample materials on this planet and the still functional factory, we should be able to build whatever we need, including workable ships."

They were soon debating the practicality of blockade runners and the feasibility of setting-up trade with other non-aligned planets or on the black market. There was even talk of trying to unite the other free planets, to form a coalition against Blastaar and Annihilus in order to fight back. Namor was especially fond of the last. Always one to take the aggressive approach.

*Are you planning to stay?* asked the telepath, a thoughtful being that I might have loved to study in other circumstances. *Your help would be invaluable to us.*

"I'm sorry, but...I can't. I've spent too long here already. You can always contact us if you need our help of course. Namor will know how. As for me, I've managed to smuggle aside the parts for a new Nega-Rover during my long imprisonment, and if you'd just be willing to assist me..."

The construction would take a few weeks time to complete and by then it would be ready to launch. It was time. I felt tired and was sick of the Zone and its problems.

I was ready to go home.

---

Namor did not join me on the journey back. He told me that he planned to stay awhile longer yet and see the newly freed prisoners better established in their liberty. I sensed a serenity about him. I think he was almost happy to be in charge of this little army of refugees, surrounded by implacable enemies, with only his strength to guide them. Something must have happened back on Earth but I didn't ask for details. He'd told me he'd return there soon enough.

I clasped his hand and said my farewells. I wished him well and meant it.

Retracing my way through the Zone was difficult even though I'd fortunately managed to save my original navigation journals. It was a fascinating universe, full of wondrous sights, but one that nagged at the edges of your mind. I'd heard the rumors swapped among others who had visited these worlds that the Zone had a way of warping one's best intentions and bringing despair and madness to those who did not belong there. Such would be hard to justify on any scientific grounds but then it's bizarre cosmology matches little I know of normal physics.

Many times I've wondered if it really exists at all. If it is not more a state of mind than a physical reality. It's a topic I've discussed with Dr. Strange many times, although he is naturally less bothered by the implications than myself. Metaphysics are his comfort zone, you might say.

Whatever the case, I could not think myself out of it, I still had to use physical means to escape back to my own world. That meant accessing the gate, the machine I had built decades ago to traverse the Distortion Area that existed between the anti-matter universe and our own. I'd hid it on a small barren asteroid to dissuade the curious from finding it. Checking its systems brought forth a curious discovery.

One of the nodes was down. Not just any one either but the one located inside the Baxter Building. The gate had gone offline. Very strange for they did not as a rule malfunction.

Fortunately, I've learned long ago to plan ahead in all things. I have roughly half-a-dozen portals on the network located in various safe locations in cases of emergency. I decided to make use of the one I kept at our Pittsburgh offices.\* Carefully programming the coordinates, I ignored the growing stiffness in my chest and arm. I'd been feeling a lot of that old pain lately



but there weren't doctors I could address about it out here. It was best to keep my mind focused and expect trouble.

(The Fantastic Four was briefly based in Pittsburg. See M2K Fantastic Four v1- A1)

Always expect trouble.

The gate whirled into life and I stepped through the middle of its swirling center. A strange and indescribable sensation washed over me as reality literally bent to accommodate my mass. It was over in a moment and I stepped out the other side, into the warm stuffy air of my Pittsburg storage unit, back on Earth at last.

"It certainly took you long enough."

---

People might not believe this but I've always had good luck with women. I know it doesn't fit the stereotype of the socially awkward nerd but then I've never been that person. I've always tried to present myself to others with sincerity and confidence, to augment my intellectual pursuits with an equal number of athletic and social ones, to be the best person I can possibly be. That always seemed to me the goal of a well-led life. When did mediocrity become acceptable?

When it did become okay to stop caring about things?

Yet even though I've held my own among members of the opposite sex, I've only ever loved one woman. She was beautiful although that alone was not what had seized my heart. It was her vivaciousness, her love for life, her warmth, her caring, her easy charm, her humor, her resilience, and especially her quick and ever-open mind.

Susan made me better in every way. And when you find a person who does that, you never let them go, not unless you're a fool.

"So did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, offering me a steadying hand as I readjusted from the transit. Changing matter states is always unsettling.

"Not really," I replied. What I'd discovered was merely something I already knew. That whenever you run from a thing, it's always waiting for you at your next destination. Everyone has to face reality and accept that the

consequences of our actions are not always simple or desired. But they remain ours to own whether we wish to or not. "Still, I suppose I did some good. Helped some people. I tried to anyways."

"That's all any of us can do, Reed. Try. And you try harder than most..."

There she was being gentle with me. Most women, quite rightly, would have been angry to have their husband disappear for as long as I'd been away, whatever their reason or excuse for it. Instead she was trying to be strong for me. That was my Susan. Always supporting the rest of us through our none too infrequent issues. The backbone that seldom got the credit it deserved.

She couldn't completely hide the tension on her face though and I realized how strange it was that she should be here of all places. What was she doing away from New York? And why had that gate been down?

"Now you tell me, what's happened?"

"It's the Wizard again. It's our home he's broken into this time." She related the news with a clipped and brittle anger. No matter who you are, no matter your lifestyle, having your family home invaded was a special kind of intrusion. "I was away at a press conference and didn't know what was going on until it had already happened. Fortunately, Yoshi was out shopping with Franklin and Victoria at the time. They're safely hidden with their Aunt Jenny right now. Ben and Johnny however..."

"I see. No word." I frowned. "Strange they weren't able to handle them. Wittman's never been too much trouble before."

The Wizard was another eccentric grandstander. Our adventures seemed to attract them. For the most a pitiable man and not exactly Victor when it came to scheming. He was dangerous all the same though.

"I thought that too but..." Sue then explained to me that our bothersome old friend from Popponia had been with them, at least according to the press footage. That was even more strange. "I can't imagine he intends us harm, he never has before..."

"No, me neither, although things do change suddenly, don't they? Whatever's happening we're going to have find out the hard way it seems."

I felt my wife's grip tighten on my arm. The concern had returned to her face. "You look exhausted, Reed. Maybe we should get some help this time. The Avengers are away, I've checked, but there are still the reserves..."

"And put them in danger?" I shook my head firmly. "By now Wittman will have begun sorting through my inventions and he knows what he's looking at for the most part. I can't risk exposing others to them. They're my responsibility."

Not exactly the right words to ease Sue's mind, I realized, and even I could hear the ragged edge to my voice. So I added, more gently, "Besides...I'm probably the only who can get in if he's gotten the security systems back on line. We both know I've made them to withstand an army. I had to with my family living there."

That was a point Sue couldn't argue so she didn't press it further. I also knew better than to suggest she stay behind. Truthfully, there's no one I would rather have at my side.

"Let's go clean house."

---

From the outside it didn't appear to be much different than when I'd left it. A little indistinct and bluish in hue but that was the optical effect caused by the plasma force fields. Below us crowds of reporters and the idle curious had gathered to watch. That too was much the same as before although at least they weren't holding signs.\* We ignored their pointing and exclamations as we floated overhead in one of my spare hover cars.

(As in Fantastic Four v2 #1 - AI)

"Needless to say the Wizard has the security up and running again. I think I can override the more dangerous ones from here," I said, working through my remote terminal, "but he's recalibrated several of the simpler systems and changed the codes around. I'm not going to be able to simply shut it all down."

"Meaning?"

I looked over at my wife. The wind had formed a nimbus of blond hair around her head and, combined with the determined thrust of her chin, she had never looked more beautiful to me.

"Meaning we're going to have to risk it. Between your force shields and my knowledge of the layout I believe we can still get inside safely. We're going to use the emergency escape tube on the roof. I left it off of the blueprint schematics that Wittman's surely downloaded by now. That may buy us some time."

She nodded. "How much?"

"I'd say we have roughly two minutes after I disconnect the alarms before they notice and react."

"And that's assuming they're not watching us from the windows right now?"

I smiled. "Yes, that's assuming that."

"On your word then, professor."

We were perfect symmetry in motion. In the split second that it took for me to shut down the force field and reactivate it, Susan had us through the hatch and safely inside. The sonic scramblers began to assault us immediately but I had already shrunk my eardrums to a shape incapable of detecting their sound waves while my wife has formed an invisible sound proof barrier around her own head. We outmaneuvered the rest of the security in the same quick manner. My knowledge combined with her multi-faceted powers -- no mere automated system could ever hope to stop us.

It was still tiring however. We were both panting by the time we actually set foot inside. An intensive full body work out in less than a minute flat and we still had our actual intruders to deal with. I was already having trouble catching my breath and I knew the stitch in my side was more than simply a stitch. It was radiating pain up my entire left side.

"Reed, are you okay? We can still call for back-up."

"No. We finish this just like planned. Fast and efficient. You find Salamandra and Dragonman. They'll be upstairs, probably plotting their escape from the rooftop. I know where Wittman will be..."

"What about Imp?"

"I don't know. Hopefully we can reason with him if it comes to that."

Susan caught my eye and stared back at me with intense meaning. "Okay. But you be careful Reed."

I pushed back my personal pain until I could at last manage a smile. "You can depend on me, Sue."

---

Working my way downstairs I began to discover the extent of the damage. Holes smashed through walls, fractured glass, scorch marks everywhere. Somehow a large section of the second floor had collapsed into the first, and starting on the entry level a crater the size of a large refrigerator dropped straight down through the lower levels, as if someone had released a bomb from inside the building. Both the result of Wizard's gravity-altering handiwork, I suspected.

All considered it could be worse. Our home was still standing. It could be repaired again. I followed the hole downwards, stretching my body cautiously along its length, until finally I reached the labs and testing facilities. I could already hear the crackle and hum of heavy machinery running nearby. The lighting had been turned off on this level but my way was soon being lit by bright flashes of blue and yellow energy. I discovered their source exactly where I'd expected to end up -- the weapons and design department of my facility.

"Ah! Mr. *Fantastic* himself. I was wondering when you'd finally arrive. I bet your wife is somewhere above us, am I right? My little friend would be so happy to know his plan actually worked. Alas, he's no longer here and I'm afraid I'm going to have to deny him his happily ever after..."

Bentley Wittman stood amidst the ruins of my workshop. Dozens of experimental weapons of various sizes and shapes had been piled around him. Each had been made with a specific purpose in mind, a possible contingency to be met with, and in a world where alien invasions, trans-dimensional attacks, 'supernatural' threats, sentient viruses, and your standard eighty-foot tall giant monsters were a daily reality, that encompassed a great deal indeed.

"This has been a truly fascinating last few hours for me, Richards. I think I'm forced to concede, as much as it hurts my pride, that you might actually be equal to my own brilliance. I mean, some of these inventions..." He

waved a wand-like instrument at me, twirling fanciful designs in the air with it. I recognized it immediately as my Mach 2 Chronal Disrupter, semi-affectionately nicknamed the Time Bomb, a last ditch weapon to be used only in the case of a severe time-space disruption. It had the potential to destroy not objects or people but actual years. Literally wipe away entire moments in the time stream through the creation of reverse singularities. "Truly impressive. And so nice of you to leave the instructions in the computers where I could get them!"

"Put it down Bentley," I said wearily. "It's not a toy."

*"Put it down, Bentley?"* the Wizard repeated. His mocking good humor instantly mutated into something vicious. "I don't think you understand, Richards. This is the end. I have every conceivable weapon science's greatest mind could build right here at my disposal and I know how they operate. You can't defeat me. Nobody can now. Like many other Frankensteins past you are about to be slain by your own monster."

I shook my head. "We don't need to do this, Bentley. What's the point? If you want to tell the world you beat me, fine, you beat me. I won't refute it. But these things are very dangerous and -- "

"Enough! Such pathetic wheedling sickens me." The Wizard smiled. "Now, please...*try* to die with a little dignity."

He raised his hand and fired a cloud of ink-like substance at me. I reflexively stretched my body out of the way without thinking, seeing the cloud disperse behind me from the corner of my vision. Instantly my elasticity began to disappear and my body grew rigid. I knew the weapon. A handheld nano-machine device, designed specifically to locate the source of a metahuman's powers and temporarily counter them.

My body drooped to the floor as another beam weapon came barreling at me. This one I couldn't dodge and it hit me square in the chest, knocking me backwards into a metal work bench and sending a spray of tools hurling through the room. I felt no physical pain at first. Things simply began to drift apart. Not simply in terms of my vision, but literally. My solid form had begun to dissipate.

The effects of a Molecular Destabilizer, of course. It was devised from the same science that I'd used to harness the unstable molecules that now made up ninety percent of the world's superhuman wardrobe. Except in this weapon it had been altered to cause material structures to break down into their component molecules.

I could hear the Wizard laughing now and it sounded far off, even though he was standing directly above me. The air was filled with the stench of burning electrons. It was a strain for me to speak.

"Susan...Franklin...Ben...Jonathan...Victoria..."

"Yes, yes, how very sweet. And in honor of your achievement in making me the forthcoming ruler of this planet, I promise that the deaths of the rest of your execrable family will be quick and relatively painless." Bentley smirked, adjusting the settings on the gun he was holding. "Now, goodbye. For once, the better man won."

He pulled the trigger. Then pulled it again. Nothing. By his third attempt I was standing upright again.

"Bently... You didn't think I would install any kind of failsafe in all of these weapons? A phrase, a code, a *thought*, that would render them useless? The 'instructions' you downloaded from the mainframe? Didn't you find the encryption on it rather easy to break? Don't you suppose there's a reason for that? That maybe I preferred you to find that relatively harmless information so that you'd stop digging for the rest." I smiled coldly through the agony that still tore at my body. "Don't you realize that anything you can think of on even your best day, I've already imagined a hundred ways to counter?"

The Wizard jerked the trigger again and then tossed the weapon aside with a growl. "You think you're smarter than me! You think you're better!"

"I've always been smarter. We both know that."

He howled in unthinking rage and unleashed a gravitational spike onto the level below us, causing the floor to bow outwards and then collapse. I fell ten feet to the hard ground below, barely able to break my fall in time by softening my body just before it struck. Bentley saved himself with his anti-grav discs. He still had his own creations to rely on, after all. He was still formidable.

"You haven't won Richards. When you're dead, I'll have all the time in the world to figure a way around your little tricks!"

Bently now used his fields to propel the debris from the collapsed floor at me. I dodged most of what he threw but several heavy scraps managed to

strike me painful blows as they hurled past. Closing the distance, I stretched my arms around him, compressing them tightly, rendering his power less easily applied by turning us into a single unit. Anything he aimed at me, would strike him just as surely.

Cursing in anger, the Wizard shot upwards, carrying both of us towards the upper levels, first using the hole he'd made earlier and then actually propelling us through floor after floor. Bruised and battered, I still managed to keep my hold. Bentley's armor was in tatters by the time we approached the upper floors, his helmet burst, and one of his gauntlets torn from his arm.

"It's over," I told him, gasping for breath. "Stop before you kill yourself!"

"I don't care if I kill myself! I won't lose to you again!"

At which point he brought the building down on our heads. Using the last of his gravity-controlling powers, Bentley caused the upper floors to collapse inwards. There was no where for me to leap or scramble to escape what was coming. The mass struck us at once and buried us deep beneath its load.

Sometime passed before I woke again.

My body was still buried under the rubble, but I could see something. A small weak ray of light had managed to get through. My first thought was that I could escape by stretching my body free of the crushing weight but when I attempted to move a pain coursed through my arm and chest with such intensity that I could barely keep from screaming. I decided to remain where I was for now.

Susan would come looking for me soon, after all. She'd have dealt with others handily enough and had likely even located Ben and Johnny by now. She was strong, stronger than she's ever even allowed herself to realize. She would come.

Meanwhile I stared at that single light until at last I recognized it for what it was -- the sun. Bentley had literally brought the roof down on top of us. I was now looking at the sky above. It was bright and clean and beautiful. A new day.

I closed my eyes and smiled.



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## Epilogue

Two hundred light years out from the Saffron Nebula a graveyard had formed. Its freshly erected tombstones were made up of the still smoldering debris of the Insectivorid's First Galactic Fleet. Many of the bodies that would eventually rest here for all eternity here had yet to succumb to death. They floated amongst the wreckage in their final pangs of agony. In negative space it was in fact possible to hear them scream, only no one was listening.

Least of all the entity that now sat perched in the central hub of the fleet's one remaining ship. This was the Insectivorid's flagship and it had been preserved only by virtue of the cloaking technology that kept it hidden from all detection. It was the only ship in the once great armada capable of such a feat for the means to recreate it had long since died out with the fragile brilliant race that created it. They had proven uncooperative to the Insectivorids and had thus been removed as excess organic material.

Such was the will of Annihilus.

And that will was seldom denied. At least that had once been true. It seemed less certain now as Lord Annihilus sat gazing at readouts of the battle's results. Over twenty thousand Insectivorid ships had been destroyed along with their crews. All were replaceable and their lord felt no, was in fact incapable of feeling any, regret or sadness over their loss.

What bothered him was the numbers, the cold and undeniable facts. Blastaar's projected losses were but a fraction of his own. The Insectivorids had lost yet again. And this battle was but the latest in a long series of such defeats. Such news puzzled him. He actually felt anger, the only emotion outside of the numb satisfaction of an objective completed, that he was truly capable of recognizing anymore.

If things continued along this line then the Insectivorid empire was doomed. That finality was only a matter of time. As warlord it was his duty to prevent that, to see his people multiply and fill all corners of habitable space, but he could not see how to succeed. He yearned to feel the flesh of his opponent yielding to his iron grasp, to hear the agonizing death rattle of his enemy, yet this was denied to him.

The will of Annihilus was thwarted.

The doors to his chambers opened soundlessly as two officers, their brown segmented bodies emitting a dull sheen under the blue lights, approached his control chair with a ritual show of deference. At last they finished with a crisp salute and announced the reason for their interruption. They had a prisoner to present to him.

Fresh confusion and anger immediately consumed Annihilus's thoughts. This was unusual behavior -- prisoners were not to be presented to him in person -- and all things unusual were aberrant to his thinking. "If deemed useful it is to be sent to the nearest work detail, if superfluous, it is to be destroyed. These are my directives for all prisoners."

The first officer bowed his head low. "I cannot do that, my lord."

This was too much. To defy a direct order from the Lord Annihilus was a crime of the highest order. "You have disobeyed my will. You are flawed. You will destroy yourself immediately to keep your defective materials from infecting the entire hive!"

It saluted at once then turned about face, marching back up the corridor, and towards the nearest incinerator room in order to comply with its new orders. Only once the door had slid shut behind him did Annihilus's composure begin to return. He addressed the next officer, repeating his directives from before, assuming the problem resolved.

This officer also bowed his head. "I cannot do that, my lord."

Could this be? Had an entire brood become corrupted? Perhaps that explained their recent failures. A purge would be necessary to correct it. Before making such a drastic decision though, he needed more information, as much as it irritated him to allow such an affront to go without instant punishment.

"Explain yourself."

"We cannot destroy this one, my lord. Our weapons have no effect. It is unlike anything we have encountered before. We seek your counsel."

At which point a small creature stepped out from behind the shadow of the ant-like Insectivore. It was long and gangly of build with a bright green pallor to its skin. "Hello," it chirped, extending its hand outwards. "This sure is an interesting universe you've got here! My friends call me Impossible Man, by the way."

Lord Annihilus stared on in mute wonder as it beamed up at him.

"Anything I can do to help?"

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Next: ???

### **Fantastic Forum**

And that's a wrap folks. For me anyways. It was a long time in coming but has at last arrived despite several uncomfortable bumps, stall-outs, and detours along the way. Is it the story I hoped it would be? Not entirely but I don't think the final product is too shabby on the whole. There are sections that may feel a little rushed, particularly these last few issues, but there are others parts I'm genuinely proud to have written.

So what's next? Well, that's entirely up to the next writer, whoever he or she may be, including what exactly was meant by my second to last scene up there. My original proposal involved Reed dying a heroic death (playing off the heart condition the previous writer gave him) followed by another lengthy twelve issue run dealing with the aftermath and the creation of a new Fantastic Four. Reed has always been such a charmingly old fashioned character to me -- the square-jawed science hero with his pipe and *deux ex machina* inventions -- that I figured removing him from the equation in what I hoped was a dignified manner might allow for a different take on the book and the family dynamic that drives it. But that's neither here nor there.

Because, needless to say, in the long interim stretching from the optimistic days of my freshly written proposal and my final limp over the finish line, things naturally changed, and I now think it's best to leave such a momentous decision to the next writer (not to mention the editors!). In fact, that's pretty much true for everything in this run of mine. Treat it all however you want. Expand it, retcon it, or just ignore it altogether. While there are some elements I genuinely hope stick around -- the older Franklin, Jason Bruss's peculiarly endearing nanny Yoshi, a Namor who isn't eternally stuck in the ever boring role of Atlantis's king -- I surely won't begrudge whatever direction you choose. Do what you need to write the stories you want.

All I hope is that you have at least half as much fun doing it as I did these last few years. Oh, and I'd also like to insert a final thanks to the editors for their assistance and patience as well as all the previous writers whose take

on these characters had such an impact on mine. Thanks for the opportunity and I hope everyone who stuck with it enjoyed the ride.

-Alan Strauss

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#14 (Volume 2)**

**"A SINGLE LIGHT"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

---

The man looked like a shaved gorilla.

He was tall, stooped, with wide shoulders and splayed feet. Even his face was abnormally broad, with nostrils large enough to fit a smaller man's knuckle. Yet despite this thuggish appearance, he was easily the best dressed figure in the room in his crisp pinstripe suit and fedora.

"So tell me why exactly it is ya called us here," he demanded, lowering himself onto a bulky steel chair. "And it had better be good."

His name was Joe Fix-it and *here* was the conference room of the Baxter Building, home to the Fantastic Four. It was air conditioned and well-furnished, with a panoramic view of the New York skyline along its eastern wall. Still Joe found it hard not to squirm. There was just something about the place that made him uncomfortable, something...hokey, for lack of a better word. Whether it was the potted ferns next to the screen marked "Battle Monitor" or the fact that the faces of the owners had been stamped onto the wide oak table, he couldn't say.

Probably the faces though, he thought, glancing down at the one in front him. The cartoonish visage of the Thing grinned back up at him. How could anyone put up with that?

"Of course it's a good reason," said the one who'd called them here. He was hanging upside down from the ceiling in in s clingy suit of red and blue spandex. Somehow this image failed to inspire confidence in Joe. "I felt it was time for a reunion. You know, to touch base."

"Touch base," Joe repeated drably.

"Exactly! We are the official reserve for the Fantastic Four, after all. It's important that we stay in contact, I think."

"I really hope," he said with a scowl, "you're kidding. At the very least, the world had better be on the verge of ending..."

"Technically...not yet. But it could happen any day now. That's why I wanted to make sure everyone was accounted for and in tip-top condition."

Spider-Man delivered that speech as though expecting a hearty nod of agreement. If so, he was sorely disappointed.

"Now how about you Ghostie?" he continued, undeterred, rotating on his webline so that he could face the third guest. Garbed in riding leathers and chains, he looked a bit like something off an old *Guns N' Roses* album cover. "You doing okay? We worry. Your head's on fire..."

The Ghost Rider merely crossed his arms and stared straight ahead. Never a great one for conversation.

"Do you have any idea how rare it is for me to get control of this body?" Joe indicated the torso in question -- his own -- with a growl. "And you're wasting my time like this?"

"Oh, boo hoo," Spider-Man said, "Ghostie here has the same problem and I never hear him complaining."

"I thirst for Vengeance," the spirit intoned.

"See?"

Joe continued to scowl. If he was closer he may have taken a swing at the wallcrawler.

"Now, onto the first order of business. You would not believe how hard it was for me to get a hold of you guys. Sheesh, I mean, couldn't ya at least leave your digits with the Avengers or somebody?"

Nobody said anything. Somehow Spider-Man took this as encouragement.

"Well, anyways, no more worries." He dropped down on the tabletop with surprising lightness, failing to so much as rattle the fruit bowl. "Problem solved."

Joe looked down as Spider-Man sent something skidding across the table to stop in front of him. It was a small brass circle the size of a belt buckle. The words *New FF* were inscribed on it in silver trim.

"That's right -- official communicators!"

"Jesus. You don't actually expect me to wear this?"

"Sure," Spider-Man replied, tilting his head. "If you don't like pins, I have Velcro."

While they spoke Ghost Rider brought his communicator up to the hollow sockets of his eyes for closer inspection. It burst into flame.

"I just hope ya didn't make these yourself," Joe said, refusing to even touch the metal discs, "'cause that might be the most pathetic thing I'd ever heard..."

Spider-Man seemed at a momentary loss for words before scooping up the extras and dropping them into a pocket of his suit. "Um, no...of course not. Like I have that much free time? Please..." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Which reminds me -- where is Wolverine anyhow?"

Joe had been wondering that himself. It didn't seem like much of a New Fantastic Four reunion without the runt here, even if it did improve the smell of the joint. "Got me, pal."

Spider-Man sighed.

"Why does he always have to be late?"



Meanwhile in another wing of the Fantastic Four's sprawling headquarters, a fourth man stalked the hallways. An air of danger -- or at least something sour smelling -- hung about him as he stumbled from room to room, grumbling curses.

Physically, he was a less than imposing sight. Short, hairy, dressed in a sweat stained wife beater and jeans, the most notable thing about him was his hairdo. It flared out from each side in wings, both coming to points at the back of his head. No one was quite sure who styled it like that but it appeared to be a professional cut.

The state of mind of that barber can only be guessed at. In the case of Logan, however, his state of mind was fairly obvious. He was staggering drunk.

When Logan got up this morning, he hadn't started out with that intention. It was just the sort of thing that happened when you drank half your weight in alcohol. Almost like a freak accident, he figured, no one's fault really.

Luckily, Logan was no stranger to such accidents and knew how to handle himself. Which is why he was now prowling the halls of the Baxter Building, hunting for the inevitable beer fridge. The kitchen had already proven beerless but that was no big surprise. The Richards had kids after all.

That did not, however, mean the place was dry. Jolly Ben Grimm, he knew, must have consumed a crate or two a week. It was just a matter of finding it. The meeting could wait until then. A man in his line didn't get as far as he had without knowing how to sort priorities.

Confident in his logic, Logan rounded a corner and felt something hard and metallic bounce off his chest. He staggered back, finding himself face-to-face with a floating sphere roughly the size of a beach ball. It was covered in silver chrome, with spindly metal arms jutting from its side and a soft blue light glowing from a glass eye in its center.

"Good afternoon, sir!" it offered in a cheery voice. "This is the lab storage wing. May I help you?"

Logan growled reflexively.

"I'm sorry, your response did not register properly, sir. Would you please repeat yourself?"

"Move," he said, swiping it aside with his arm. The robot bounced off a wall, rolled across the floor, and came to stop at the foot of a drinking fountain. Logan grunted and walked on.

A moment later HERBIE was hovering quizzically at his side again. "If you tell me what you're looking for, sir, perhaps I may assist you."

"Beer."

"Beer?"

"Beer."

HERBIE seemed puzzled by this unusual request, his arms twitching nervously in the air. "Did you check the kitchen?"

"Do I look stupid?" Logan snarled.

Wisely, the robot chose not to answer that.

"Hey. What's in here?" He'd come to a stop before a heavy door with a window of reinforced glass placed at eye level. Logan had to stand on his tiptoes to peer inside. His eyes quickly latched onto a large white freezer standing in the room's corner. "Bingo."

"Sir? Sir! I must insist that you refrain from entering that r--"

"Shaddup," Logan said, casually slicing the robot in two, before doing the same to the door lock.

Inside, he discovered a laboratory storeroom filled with boxes of strange equipment, most unidentifiable to his eye, although a few pieces reminded him of enormous microscopes. A number of glass cases had been arranged along the walls, housing what appeared to be miniaturized models of futuristic cars and toy spaceships. Some were so tiny he could barely see them, even standing just a few inches from the glass. On a table near the center of the room, he found a row of empty beakers. They had a peculiar, but not unpleasant, odor as he passed them under his nose.

Finally, he came to the fridge. It opened with a hiss, a cool blast of air striking his face. Row upon row of tantalizing bottles waited patiently within, each filled with a familiar-looking amber liquid. Logan smiled as he picked

one up. A coat of frost on the bottle's surface made it slick though, and it slipped through his clumsy fingers.

The glass shattered as it struck the floor, splashing the bottle's contents across Logan's shins.

At which point, the room began to change...

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Another ten minutes had passed in the meeting room. Spider-Man had finally run out of words to babble while Ghost Rider sat like a statue, arms still folded, head threatening to set off the smoke detectors any second. Joe Fix-it contented himself with checking and re-checking his wristwatch. Just five minutes more, he decided, and he was calling it a day.

Suddenly Spider-Man dropped down from his webline, landing squarely in the center of the table. He was not so gentle this time. The force of the impact nearly dumped Joe's cup of coffee into his lap.

"Heads up everyone! My spider sense is tingling!"

"It is huh?" Joe said with a smirk. "I think I passed a bathroom on my way in if that's what you're getting at..."

"No, that is *not* what I w-"

The shriek of an alarm interrupted them.

“Hey, hear that? See! See! It doesn’t lie. Never doubt the spider sense!”

Joe frowned, praying the alarm would stop just as suddenly as it started, but no such luck. Perfect. Just what he needed. This is what he got for agreeing to meet-up with these clowns though. They were always trouble. Drew disaster like flies to stink.

They followed the shrieking alarm out of the room and through a series of hallways, eventually finding themselves gathered outside a storage room in one of the Baxter Building’s many lab wings. The remains of a robot, bearing familiar claw marks, sparked nearby and the room’s door was screeching fitfully as it attempted to seal itself. Someone had punctured its control panel.

A bright yellow warning light flashed from within.

Stepping cautiously over the threshold, they discovered the source of the confusion standing in front of an open refrigerator. Their fourth teammate. Logan was cursing a blue streak as he slowly, but undeniably, shrank down to the floor and then disappeared from sight.

“Huh,” Joe noted dryly. “Well, how about that? Shall we call it a day then?”

Spider-Man held up a hand. “Actually, we should probably investigate...”

“I don’t really see why.”

"Call it a bad habit..."

Joe grumbled under his breath as the webhead led them over to the open fridge. Where their teammate had been standing moments ago was a puddle of amber liquid and shards of broken glass. He reached down to pick up the broken half of a bottle.

"Um, maybe not a great idea there, Joe...I mean, we should probably wait until, ah..."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to investigate so bad, right? Well, I'm investigatin', so shut it."

Pulling the kerchief from his breast pocket, Joe used it to wipe clean the label. It read: 'Twenty-Four Hour Reduction Formula', the words written in the kind of happy balloon-letter font usually reserved for children's birthday invites. A second line added the warning: 'Apply with Caution!'

"Hmph," Joe noted, rubbing his thumb over the letters. "Guess the shrimp shrunk. I..." He heard a sharp intake of breath, and glanced up at Spider-Man. Up. *He* -- the Hulk -- had just glanced *up* at someone.

"Oh, *goddamn it...*"

---

He was the first one to wake up because he was *a/ways* the first one to wake up. That was one of the many benefits of a vigorous healing factor. Another was how fast one could go from stinking drunk to relatively sober. By now, the only lingering effect Logan's bender came in the form of a very mild headache. Not even a proper hangover really.

Of course, there were other aftereffects worth considering.

For example: the enormous glass dome Logan now found himself inside, its ceilings lined with blinding white neon lights. A large plaque standing nearby read: 'Welcome to Sub-Atomica.' Below it was a city map, its roads laid out like the spokes of a wagon wheel, and next to that a height chart. An arrow pointing to just a few feet above Logan's head informed him: 'You must be no taller than à to exit the Micro-Tron.'

So that was kinda curious, he reflected.

As were the three other bodies sprawled next to him. Logan noted the first, in his red and blue spandex skivvies, with a scowl, before the second, a gray-skinned monster in a tailored suit, brought a smile to his face. Reaching into Joe Fix-it's jacket, he extracted a fresh Cuban cigar from the inside pocket. Clipping the tip with his claw, Logan then kicked the third man with the toe of his boot. "Wake up." Ghost Rider stirred, his head reigniting like a struck match. Logan used it to light the cigar.

He felt better already.

Groaning, Spider-Man carefully sat up and massaged his temples. "Looks like we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Logan grumbled. His own head was hurting, his tongue felt funny, and now these people. Maybe he *should* give up drinking after all.

"Well, what do you know," Joe groused, eyes narrowing at the discovery of one of his imported cigars in Logan's mouth. "Didn't think you could get any smaller, runt."

"Cute. Like your taste in shoes by the way."

Joe looked down to find his shoes had shrank faster than him, splitting at the seams and leaving his feet bare. Custom made Italian loafers. Shredded. He growled to himself. "Aw, for Christ's sake..."

"I think that's a good look for you myself," Spider-Man said. "Very Hulk-esque. But then I also miss the jazzy purple pants."

"Given the fruity way you go around, I ain't even surprised."

Spider-Man tsk-ed his disapproval before turning back to Logan.

"So...any idea what you got us into?"

"Nope. 'Sides, it ain't really my fault..."

"But, ah, you *are* the one who broke into Reed's lab and dropped his shrinking formula, right?"



"Maybe," Logan conceded, blowing a puff of a smoke, "but ya see, I was drunk..."

"...which is an awesome excuse, I'll grant, but..."

"...and you're the one who called us to together. Seeing as the one basically led to the other, the way I figure..."

Spider-Man nodded slowly. "My fault. Naturally. As ever, your logic is unassailable..."

"Glad you see it my way. S'alright though. I forgive you."

"Gee, you're too kind. Oh, by the way, this is for you." The webslinger produced one of his communicators, holding it between thumb and forefinger so Logan could see the 4 emblazoned on the front. "Not that you deserve any gifts, mind you..."

Logan extended a claw and jabbed it through the center. "What is it?"

"Ruined," Spider-Man answered dryly, watching him pry it from his claw tip. "Lucky for you, I've got a spare..."

"Good." He stuck his claw through the second one with a smile.

"Stop doing that!"

"Okay kids," Joe called, tossing the remains of his shoes aside with the mournful expression. "Cut the stand-up. Hot chick in a goofy costume."

He pointed towards a panel that had opened up on the dome, through which a woman was now entering, flanked by a trio of helmeted guards carrying heavy pikes. She was dressed in a gold metal cuirass, her legs bare, with white leather sandals laced up to her knees. A white ermine cape trailed behind her and an elaborate hat shaped like a golden cocoon rested amongst her thick red curls.

Logan had to concede the point. It *was* a goofy costume. And on a decidedly hot chick at that.

He always had liked red heads though.

---

This one's name was Pearla, Queen of Sub-Atomica. She didn't seem that happy to see them.

"And you are again?"

"The Fantastic Four," Spider-Man explained for the fifth or sixth time, trying his best to sound calm and collected. Responsible even. He was the team leader, after all. Sort of. Nobody had said he wasn't at least. Unfortunately, there was something about gorgeous women in elaborate costumes that made him tongue-tied.

Actually gorgeous women in pretty much any type of costume had that effect come to think of it.

"I mean, ah, not *the* Fantastic Four but, um, the *other* Fantastic Four. The new one!"

"The new one?" Pearla repeated with a gasp of alarm. "You mean something's happened to the Richards family? What a terrible day this is f-"

"Well, no, um, they're probably okay. I think. They don't keep in touch that often to be honest. In fact, I didn't even get a Christmas card last year, which is not cool, because I know *I* sent one. Admittedly they don't have a proper address for me, but is it so hard to..."

Pearla looked understandably confused. He struggled to rediscover the point.

"Anyhoo, we just sort of step in when they're busy."

"Busy?"

Spider-Man shrugged. "On vacation?"

"The Fantastic Four have taken a vacation during our hour of greatest need? Is this possible?"

"Um...maybe? Probably not though. Actually, we didn't even know it was your hour of greatest need. We're here by chance. Wolverine, that's the short guy with the funny haircut over there..."

Logan tipped his cigar in their direction with a wink. Pearla's guards stopped staring in abject terror at Ghost Rider just long enough to bristle over his lack of respect.

"...sort of brought us here by accident. But we are happy to help!"

"We are?" Joe asked. "Who says?"

Spider-Man forced a laugh. "Ignore them. They think they're funny. They probably had difficult childhoods..."

"This is all very distressing...Spider-Lad, was it?"

"...*Man!* It's Spider-Man!"

Pearla ignored his frantic corrections. "...for when we received news that visitors had appeared in Micro-Tron Eight, we prayed it heralded the arrival of the true Fantastic Four. We were worried that our distress signals might have been intercepted and thus not reached your homeworld. The situation here is dire. We are all in great danger, even now. I'm unsure how much longer my people can hold out against - "

The next thing Spider-Man knew he was hurtling through the air in a cloud of black smoke. The world around him spun as the dome shattered, sending down a rain of glass and sparks. By the time his ears stopped ringing, he

found himself pinned beneath the remnants of a lighting fixture. He could no longer see Pearla or his teammates anywhere in the chaos.

The only figure he could make out stood directly above him. A giant in heavy black armor, with spikes growing from the crown of his head and an immense sword clutched in his gauntlet. His eyes glowed a dark red, burning through the acrid smoke surrounding them like hot coals.

"Greetings interlopers. My name is Baron Karza. Welcome to my newest conquest."

His spider sense started tingling again.

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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### **Author's Note:**

For continuity types, I'll just note the New Fantastic Four was introduced back in Fantastic Four #347 as a part of Walt Simonson's much heralded run on the title. Princess Pearla and the world of Sub-Atomica (now a part of the larger Microverse) originally debuted in Fantastic Four #16. The issue marks the first appearance of both Pearla and the New FF within M2K continuity as far as I'm aware. Baron Karza of Micronauts fame (or is that obscurity?) last appeared in M2K in Marvel Fanfare #14.

In terms of continuity vis a vis other site series I would simply suggest the Mystery Science Theater 3000 credo. Remember it's just fanfic and that you really should relax. If that doesn't work Ghost Rider probably visited sometime between Ghost Rider #5 and #6 (thanks Dale!), and Fix-it probably following Incredible Hulk #6. For Fantastic Four, I'd suggest sometime before Fantastic Four v2 #7....and as for the others well, heck, I don't know. Make up your own timeline. I can't do everything, damn it!

But thanks for reading.

- Alan

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

## **Fantastic Four**

### **#15 (Volume 2)**

#### **"small timers"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

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The man looked like a shaved gorilla.

He was tall, stooped, with wide shoulders and splayed feet. Even his face was abnormally broad, with nostrils large enough to fit a smaller man's knuckle. Yet despite this thuggish appearance, he was easily the best dressed figure in the room in his crisp pinstripe suit and fedora.

"So tell me why exactly it is ya called us here," he demanded, lowering himself onto a bulky steel chair. "And it had better be good."

His name was Joe Fix-it and *here* was the conference room of the Baxter Building, home to the Fantastic Four. It was air conditioned and well-furnished, with a panoramic view of the New York skyline along its eastern wall. Still Joe found it hard not to squirm. There was just something about the place that made him uncomfortable, something...hokey, for lack of a better word. Whether it was the potted ferns next to the screen marked "Battle Monitor" or the fact that the faces of the owners had been stamped onto the wide oak table, he couldn't say.

Probably the faces though, he thought, glancing down at the one in front him. The cartoonish visage of the Thing grinned back up at him. How could anyone put up with that?

"Of course it's a good reason," said the one who'd called them here. He was hanging upside down from the ceiling in in s clingy suit of red and blue spandex. Somehow this image failed to inspire confidence in Joe. "I felt it was time for a reunion. You know, to touch base."

"Touch base," Joe repeated drably.

"Exactly! We are the official reserve for the Fantastic Four, after all. It's important that we stay in contact, I think."

"I really hope," he said with a scowl, "you're kidding. At the very least, the world had better be on the verge of ending..."

"Technically...not yet. But it could happen any day now. That's why I wanted to make sure everyone was accounted for and in tip-top condition."

Spider-Man delivered that speech as though expecting a hearty nod of agreement. If so, he was sorely disappointed.

"Now how about you Ghostie?" he continued, undeterred, rotating on his webline so that he could face the third guest. Garbed in riding leathers and chains, he looked a bit like something off an old *Guns N' Roses* album cover. "You doing okay? We worry. Your head's on fire..."

The Ghost Rider merely crossed his arms and stared straight ahead. Never a great one for conversation.



"Do you have any idea how rare it is for me to get control of this body?" Joe indicated the torso in question -- his own -- with a growl. "And you're wasting my time like this?"

"Oh, boo hoo," Spider-Man said, "Ghostie here has the same problem and I never hear him complaining."

"I thirst for Vengeance," the spirit intoned.

"See?"

Joe continued to scowl. If he was closer he may have taken a swing at the wallcrawler.

"Now, onto the first order of business. You would not believe how hard it was for me to get a hold of you guys. Sheesh, I mean, couldn't ya at least leave your digits with the Avengers or somebody?"

Nobody said anything. Somehow Spider-Man took this as encouragement.

"Well, anyways, no more worries." He dropped down on the tabletop with surprising lightness, failing to so much as rattle the fruit bowl. "Problem solved."

Joe looked down as Spider-Man sent something skidding across the table to stop in front of him. It was a small brass circle the size of a belt buckle. The words *New FF* were inscribed on it in silver trim.

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"I just hope ya didn't make these yourself," Joe said, refusing to even touch the metal discs, "'cause that might be the most pathetic thing I'd ever heard..."

Spider-Man seemed at a momentary loss for words before scooping up the extras and dropping them into a pocket of his suit. "Um, no...of course not. Like I have that much free time? Please..." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Which reminds me -- where is Wolverine anyhow?"

Joe had been wondering that himself. It didn't seem like much of a New Fantastic Four reunion without the runt here, even if it did improve the smell of the joint. "Got me, pal."

Spider-Man sighed.

"Why does he always have to be late?"

Meanwhile in another wing of the Fantastic Four's sprawling headquarters, a fourth man stalked the hallways. An air of danger -- or at least something sour smelling -- hung about him as he stumbled from room to room, grumbling curses.

Physically, he was a less than imposing sight. Short, hairy, dressed in a sweat stained wife beater and jeans, the most notable thing about him was his hairdo. It flared out from each side in wings, both coming to points at the back of his head. No one was quite sure who styled it like that but it appeared to be a professional cut.

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"Good afternoon, sir!" it offered in a cheery voice. "This is the lab storage wing. May I help you?"

Logan growled reflexively.

"I'm sorry, your response did not register properly, sir. Would you please repeat yourself?"

"Move," he said, swiping it aside with his arm. The robot bounced off a wall, rolled across the floor, and came to stop at the foot of a drinking fountain. Logan grunted and walked on.

A moment later HERBIE was hovering quizzically at his side again. "If you tell me what you're looking for, sir, perhaps I may assist you."

"Beer."

"Beer?"

"Beer."

HERBIE seemed puzzled by this unusual request, his arms twitching nervously in the air. "Did you check the kitchen?"

"Do I look stupid?" Logan snarled.

Wisely, the robot chose not to answer that.

"Hey. What's in here?" He'd come to a stop before a heavy door with a window of reinforced glass placed at eye level. Logan had to stand on his tiptoes to peer inside. His eyes quickly latched onto a large white freezer standing in the room's corner. "Bingo."

"Sir? Sir! I must insist that you refrain from entering that r--"

"Shaddup," Logan said, casually slicing the robot in two, before doing the same to the door lock.

Inside, he discovered a laboratory storeroom filled with boxes of strange equipment, most unidentifiable to his eye, although a few pieces reminded him of enormous microscopes. A number of glass cases had been arranged along the walls, housing what appeared to be miniaturized models of futuristic cars and toy spaceships. Some were so tiny he could barely see them, even standing just a few inches from the glass. On a table near the center of the room, he found a row of empty beakers. They had a peculiar, but not unpleasant, odor as he passed them under his nose.

Finally, he came to the fridge. It opened with a hiss, a cool blast of air striking his face. Row upon row of tantalizing bottles waited patiently within, each filled with a familiar-looking amber liquid. Logan smiled as he picked

one up. A coat of frost on the bottle's surface made it slick though, and it slipped through his clumsy fingers.

The glass shattered as it struck the floor, splashing the bottle's contents across Logan's shins.

At which point, the room began to change...

---

Another ten minutes had passed in the meeting room. Spider-Man had finally run out of words to babble while Ghost Rider sat like a statue, arms still folded, head threatening to set off the smoke detectors any second. Joe Fix-it contented himself with checking and re-checking his wristwatch. Just five minutes more, he decided, and he was calling it a day.

Suddenly Spider-Man dropped down from his webline, landing squarely in the center of the table. He was not so gentle this time. The force of the impact nearly dumped Joe's cup of coffee into his lap.

"Heads up everyone! My spider sense is tingling!"

"It is huh?" Joe said with a smirk. "I think I passed a bathroom on my way in if that's what you're getting at..."

"No, that is *not* what I w-"

The shriek of an alarm interrupted them.

“Hey, hear that? See! See! It doesn’t lie. Never doubt the spider sense!”

Joe frowned, praying the alarm would stop just as suddenly as it started, but no such luck. Perfect. Just what he needed. This is what he got for agreeing to meet-up with these clowns though. They were always trouble. Drew disaster like flies to stink.

They followed the shrieking alarm out of the room and through a series of hallways, eventually finding themselves gathered outside a storage room in one of the Baxter Building’s many lab wings. The remains of a robot, bearing familiar claw marks, sparked nearby and the room’s door was screeching fitfully as it attempted to seal itself. Someone had punctured its control panel.

A bright yellow warning light flashed from within.

Stepping cautiously over the threshold, they discovered the source of the confusion standing in front of an open refrigerator. Their fourth teammate. Logan was cursing a blue streak as he slowly, but undeniably, shrank down to the floor and then disappeared from sight.

“Huh,” Joe noted dryly. “Well, how about that? Shall we call it a day then?”

Spider-Man held up a hand. “Actually, we should probably investigate...”

“I don’t really see why.”

"Call it a bad habit..."

Joe grumbled under his breath as the webhead led them over to the open fridge. Where their teammate had been standing moments ago was a puddle of amber liquid and shards of broken glass. He reached down to pick up the broken half of a bottle.

"Um, maybe not a great idea there, Joe...I mean, we should probably wait until, ah..."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to investigate so bad, right? Well, I'm investigatin', so shut it."

Pulling the kerchief from his breast pocket, Joe used it to wipe clean the label. It read: 'Twenty-Four Hour Reduction Formula', the words written in the kind of happy balloon-letter font usually reserved for children's birthday invites. A second line added the warning: 'Apply with Caution!'

"Hmph," Joe noted, rubbing his thumb over the letters. "Guess the shrimp shrunk. I..." He heard a sharp intake of breath, and glanced up at Spider-Man. Up. *He* -- the Hulk -- had just glanced *up* at someone.

"Oh, *goddamn it...*"

---



He was the first one to wake up because he was *a/ways* the first one to wake up. That was one of the many benefits of a vigorous healing factor. Another was how fast one could go from stinking drunk to relatively sober. By now, the only lingering effect Logan's bender came in the form of a very mild headache. Not even a proper hangover really.

Of course, there were other aftereffects worth considering.

For example: the enormous glass dome Logan now found himself inside, its ceilings lined with blinding white neon lights. A large plaque standing nearby read: 'Welcome to Sub-Atomica.' Below it was a city map, its roads laid out like the spokes of a wagon wheel, and next to that a height chart. An arrow pointing to just a few feet above Logan's head informed him: 'You must be no taller than à to exit the Micro-Tron.'

So that was kinda curious, he reflected.

As were the three other bodies sprawled next to him. Logan noted the first, in his red and blue spandex skivvies, with a scowl, before the second, a gray-skinned monster in a tailored suit, brought a smile to his face. Reaching into Joe Fix-it's jacket, he extracted a fresh Cuban cigar from the inside pocket. Clipping the tip with his claw, Logan then kicked the third man with the toe of his boot. "Wake up." Ghost Rider stirred, his head reigniting like a struck match. Logan used it to light the cigar.

He felt better already.

Groaning, Spider-Man carefully sat up and massaged his temples. "Looks like we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Logan grumbled. His own head was hurting, his tongue felt funny, and now these people. Maybe he *should* give up drinking after all.

"Well, what do you know," Joe grouched, eyes narrowing at the discovery of one of his imported cigars in Logan's mouth. "Didn't think you could get any smaller, runt."

"Cute. Like your taste in shoes by the way."

Joe looked down to find his shoes had shrank faster than him, splitting at the seams and leaving his feet bare. Custom made Italian loafers. Shredded. He growled to himself. "Aw, for Christ's sake..."

"I think that's a good look for you myself," Spider-Man said. "Very Hulk-esque. But then I also miss the jazzy purple pants."

"Given the fruity way you go around, I ain't even surprised."

Spider-Man tsk-ed his disapproval before turning back to Logan.

"So...any idea what you got us into?"

"Nope. 'Sides, it ain't really my fault..."

"But, ah, you *are* the one who broke into Reed's lab and dropped his shrinking formula, right?"

"Maybe," Logan conceded, blowing a puff of a smoke, "but ya see, I was drunk..."

"...which is an awesome excuse, I'll grant, but..."

"...and you're the one who called us to together. Seeing as the one basically led to the other, the way I figure..."

Spider-Man nodded slowly. "My fault. Naturally. As ever, your logic is unassailable..."

"Glad you see it my way. S'alright though. I forgive you."

"Gee, you're too kind. Oh, by the way, this is for you." The webslinger produced one of his communicators, holding it between thumb and forefinger so Logan could see the 4 emblazoned on the front. "Not that you deserve any gifts, mind you..."

Logan extended a claw and jabbed it through the center. "What is it?"

"Ruined," Spider-Man answered dryly, watching him pry it from his claw tip. "Lucky for you, I've got a spare..."

"Good." He stuck his claw through the second one with a smile.

"Stop doing that!"

"Okay kids," Joe called, tossing the remains of his shoes aside with the mournful expression. "Cut the stand-up. Hot chick in a goofy costume."

He pointed towards a panel that had opened up on the dome, through which a woman was now entering, flanked by a trio of helmeted guards carrying heavy pikes. She was dressed in a gold metal cuirass, her legs bare, with white leather sandals laced up to her knees. A white ermine cape trailed behind her and an elaborate hat shaped like a golden cocoon rested amongst her thick red curls.

Logan had to concede the point. It *was* a goofy costume. And on a decidedly hot chick at that.

He always had liked red heads though.

---

This one's name was Pearla, Queen of Sub-Atomica. She didn't seem that happy to see them.

"And you are again?"

"The Fantastic Four," Spider-Man explained for the fifth or sixth time, trying his best to sound calm and collected. Responsible even. He was the team leader, after all. Sort of. Nobody had said he wasn't at least. Unfortunately, there was something about gorgeous women in elaborate costumes that made him tongue-tied.

Actually gorgeous women in pretty much any type of costume had that effect come to think of it.

"I mean, ah, not *the* Fantastic Four but, um, the *other* Fantastic Four. The new one!"

"The new one?" Pearla repeated with a gasp of alarm. "You mean something's happened to the Richards family? What a terrible day this is f-"

"Well, no, um, they're probably okay. I think. They don't keep in touch that often to be honest. In fact, I didn't even get a Christmas card last year, which is not cool, because I know *I* sent one. Admittedly they don't have a proper address for me, but is it so hard to..."

Pearla looked understandably confused. He struggled to rediscover the point.

"Anyhoo, we just sort of step in when they're busy."

"Busy?"

Spider-Man shrugged. "On vacation?"

"The Fantastic Four have taken a vacation during our hour of greatest need? Is this possible?"

"Um...maybe? Probably not though. Actually, we didn't even know it was your hour of greatest need. We're here by chance. Wolverine, that's the short guy with the funny haircut over there..."

Logan tipped his cigar in their direction with a wink. Pearla's guards stopped staring in abject terror at Ghost Rider just long enough to bristle over his lack of respect.

"...sort of brought us here by accident. But we are happy to help!"

"We are?" Joe asked. "Who says?"

Spider-Man forced a laugh. "Ignore them. They think they're funny. They probably had difficult childhoods..."

"This is all very distressing...Spider-Lad, was it?"

"...*Man!* It's Spider-Man!"

Pearla ignored his frantic corrections. "...for when we received news that visitors had appeared in Micro-Tron Eight, we prayed it heralded the arrival of the true Fantastic Four. We were worried that our distress signals might have been intercepted and thus not reached your homeworld. The situation here is dire. We are all in great danger, even now. I'm unsure how much longer my people can hold out against - "

The next thing Spider-Man knew he was hurtling through the air in a cloud of black smoke. The world around him spun as the dome shattered, sending down a rain of glass and sparks. By the time his ears stopped ringing, he

found himself pinned beneath the remnants of a lighting fixture. He could no longer see Pearla or his teammates anywhere in the chaos.

The only figure he could make out stood directly above him. A giant in heavy black armor, with spikes growing from the crown of his head and an immense sword clutched in his gauntlet. His eyes glowed a dark red, burning through the acrid smoke surrounding them like hot coals.

"Greetings interlopers. My name is Baron Karza. Welcome to my newest conquest."

His spider sense started tingling again.

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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### **Author's Note:**

For continuity types, I'll just note the New Fantastic Four was introduced back in Fantastic Four #347 as a part of Walt Simonson's much heralded run on the title. Princess Pearla and the world of Sub-Atomica (now a part of the larger Microverse) originally debuted in Fantastic Four #16. The issue marks the first appearance of both Pearla and the New FF within M2K continuity as far as I'm aware. Baron Karza of Micronauts fame (or is that obscurity?) last appeared in M2K in Marvel Fanfare #14.

In terms of continuity vis a vis other site series I would simply suggest the Mystery Science Theater 3000 credo. Remember it's just fanfic and that you really should relax. If that doesn't work Ghost Rider probably visited sometime between Ghost Rider #5 and #6 (thanks Dale!), and Fix-it probably following Incredible Hulk #6. For Fantastic Four, I'd suggest sometime before Fantastic Four v2 #7....and as for the others well, heck, I don't know. Make up your own timeline. I can't do everything, damn it!

But thanks for reading.

- Alan



**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**Fantastic Four**

**#16 (Volume 2)**

**"reduction absurdum"**

*Written by Alan Strauss*

---

Pain. Overwhelming pain. Sometimes he wondered if anyone even realized that. How much this crap actually hurt. And it never got easier. Not even a little bit.

See, the thing about having a healing factor, one that purged his body of every infection and fixed any wound with a miraculous speed that defied all reason, is that every part of him was maintained equally well. It was not just the gaping wounds that knit back together. It was the torn muscles, the severed arteries, the weak spot in the enamel of his left incisor, and, yes, his nerve endings. So no matter how many times he was shot, stabbed, burned, crushed, blinded, or filleted, it felt just like it had the first time. There was no possibility of growing numb to it. His nerves were very likely the best in the world, certainly for anyone of his advantaged age, and his sensitivity to pain was equally acute.

Which was bad enough. The thing that gnawed at him most though was the sense that he was the butt of some enormous cosmic joke. As if the universe itself understood he had a healing factor and was having a laugh at his expense. Because nobody in his immediate vicinity ever seemed to take the kind of damage he routinely did. Every single time out, never fail, he took the worst of things. If someone was going to get strafed by henchmens' bullets or have a ninja's shuriken buried three inches deep in their pectoral, you could damn well bet it wasn't going to be the guy the size of a barn or the conspicuous lunatic jumping around in day-glo skintight pajamas. Nope. It was going to be the old canucklehead.

And people actually had the gall to wonder why he was never too keen on joining teams?

Like now for instance. As the smoke cleared from the Micro-Tron's shattered glass dome and his vision gradually returned, Logan was able to pick out his other so-called teammates from the evolving chaos. There was Joe smashing together a pair of armed assailants as if they were toy soldiers, nothing more out of place on him than an askew necktie. Nearby, Ghost Rider was whipping his chain overhead, not so much as a scratch visible on his shiny leather motorcycle jacket. Even Spider-Man was already swinging merrily overhead, spouting his usual groaners, injury kept to a slightly jaunty tuft of hair poking from his torn mask.

Meanwhile Logan, at his best rough estimate, counted something like two dozen jagged glass shards peppering every exposed surface on his body. Not to mention a length of curled rebar protruding from his stomach like the hook on some perverse Christmas ornament. It wasn't fair. It didn't even make sense. Not that he was going to whine about it. That wasn't his way. Even if the universe was out to get him and every woman he had ever loved ended up dying in his arms and...

No, not going to cry. Suck it up. You're a tough guy, remember? Just slowly work that piece of rebar loose, take a deep breath, pop your claws, find the nearest hostile, and growl...

"Okay, bub. My turn now."

Killing something always made him feel better.

Presenting the New and Improved Fantastic Four!

The Fast and Four-iest!

Because nine out of ten dentists agree that Four fists are more effective than one! Eh. No. That wasn't quite it. He really should be better at this sort of thing too. After all, he had the gift of gab, the soul of a wordsmith. Well, compared to the rest of his teammates, anyways. Those guys couldn't order a pizza without it sounding like a death threat.

So if someone was going to come up with a catchphrase, a suitably memorable battle cry for the New Fantastic Four it was going to have to be him. The Amazing Sensational Friendly Neighborhood Wallcrawler. See, stuff like that was his forte! Best in the business, hands down.

Of course, he had to concede -- somersaulting over a pair of vibro-pike wielding lunatics -- that maybe this wasn't the ideal time to be working on it. The environment might not be conducive to his best work. At least not his best catchphrase minting work. It was, on other hand, pretty excellent when it came to swinging off exposed scaffolding, barrel-rolling in mid-air, then planting both feet squarely into some slack-jawed grunt's upturned face work.

They ought to put that in the Olympics. Wouldn't little Mayday would be thrilled to see her pop sporting a gold medal? Or was wearing them in public considered tacky? What if it was just around the house? Whoops, better focus Peter, he reminded himself, spider sense redirecting him out of harms way yet again, an electrified net dropping just inches from where he'd been standing. An electrified net! Really. Where did supervillains *buy* this stuff?

Reversing his line, Spider-Man swung back around, catching his would-be ambusher with some netting of his own, a glob of sticky webbing directly to the gob. Poor schlub would be picking it out of his nostrils for weeks. And nine out of ten Dr. Octopuses agree that that always freaking sucks.

"Say, was that the last of them?" The battlefield had grown still. Only four men were left standing among heaps of jumbled bodies, and each looked only marginally inclined to kill him. Normal in other words. "And here we were just starting to enjoy it, am I right? I think we were really beginning to gel as a team there towards the end too. Did anyone else notice that?"

Fix-it grunted, wiping his hands against his now ash-stained slacks. "Huh. All I noticed is us getting caught with our heads up our rears. This despite one of our teammates' supposedly fabled spider sense and another's always boasting about having a nose like a blood hound. Best there is, huh? Not a big field I'm guessing."

"Didn't exactly here you hollering out, Joe. Cept maybe when the building fell on your head."

"Yeah, yeah. Just nice of you to wake up in time to clean up my leftovers, squirt. Maybe next time--"

"Okay! So maybe not exactly gelling then," Spider-Man amended, positioning himself between the two heroic sociopaths, "but, still, we won, right? Although, actually...has anyone seen that lady we were talking to? Queen, um, Opal or, ah..."

"Pearla," Wolverine corrected him. "And, yeah. The clown in the gaudy black armor ran off with her once you three started tossing his men around. Way I figure, she was probably the real target in the first place."

"Um, maybe you could have done something to stop him then?"

"I had a girder through my gut. Excuse a guy for tucking his liver back into place before saving the day."

"More information than I needed, but I do see your point! You must have seen what direction they left in though, so we'll just mosey on after him and..."

A loud moan wafted up from somewhere down near Spider-Man's spandex covered feet. The soldier he'd just incapacitated moments ago had managed to clear the webbing from his face. Gasping for air, he began to flail around for his weapon, until quickly realizing he was surrounded. A resigned yet strangely superior smile spread over his lips instead.

"Too late, off-worlders. The micro-bomb is already in place at the palace. Lord Karza has won. Mirworld is ours for the plundering! Glory to the dimensional conqueror, praise to the--"

Spider-Man rolled his eyes and painted the man's face with another shot of webbing. Double-thick this time. Just in case.

"Okay. Guess we split up then!"

There were more of Karza's dog soldiers gathered around the palace, naturally. Probably a full squadron or two, however many that amounted to. Didn't really matter. There was nothing their weapons could do to hurt Joe. At best they'd do further damage to his clothes and those were already rags at this point. A twelve hundred dollar suit, rags. Never should have answered that call about a New Fantastic Four reunion. What was he thinking?

Hard to guess. Spider-Man on the other hand, well, Joe had a pretty good idea what was going on in his brain, what little there was of it. He figured: who knew better about giant bombs than Bruce Banner? Defusing one ought to be a cinch, right? So why not send Ghost Rider along with Fix-it, because he looks like the Hulk, just a bit grayer, and that must mean Banner's along for the ride, and so problem solved. Just add in an inane pop soundtrack and a sense of humor equivalent to a twelve year old's Mad Libs, and there you go, Spider-Man's thought process in a nutshell.

Only one problem.

"Listen to me, will you?"

"Oh my God," gasped their self-appointed leader, his already reedy voice sounding ever thinner through the speakers, "You're using one of my comms, aren't you? What did I tell you? They're awesome, aren't they?"

"For crying out loud, just shut up for a minute! I think I see the bomb. Ever seen a photograph of Fat Man?"

"Have I ever seen a photograph of a fat man? What kind of kink are you into, Joe?"

Fix-it growled, barely managing not to crush the tiny communicator in his football sized fist

"I'm kidding! Why can't you have fun with this team-up? Of course I know what Fat Man looks like. Didn't he used to be on the Great Lakes Avengers? Ha, another joke, don't hit! The Nagasaki bomb."

"Well, it looks a bit like that, but with a lot more gizmos popping out of it and about ten times the size."

"So snap a photograph for our Facebook page and defuse it then? Seriously, I have a princess to save here, classic hero stuff, although bomb defusing is pretty good too, really...maybe a bit less sexy..."

"That's just it, you nitwit! I don't know how to defuse it!"

"But you're a nuclear physicist and stuff!"

Joe plowed his way through another phalanx of bewildered soldiers, taking grim satisfaction in the fact that at least them he could smash. Spidey, as he actually called himself, believe it or not, and seemingly without any hint of self-loathing, was sadly out of his current reach.

"Banner is a nuclear physicist. I work as a bouncer. The only physics I know are the ones employed when I bust someone's skull open with my fist." An experiment he wouldn't mind demonstrating for the man right now.

"Well, then think of something! How hard can defusing a bomb be? Cut the red wire!"

Joe swatted aside the last of the men standing between him and the bomb. Upon reflection, he wondered if maybe he should have held off on swatting the one in the lab coat, guy might have known something, but given how he was already arcing his way over the ramparts to land head first in the palace's moat, that bridge had been crossed. Especially considering the moat was drained.

So it was on to the next option. Fix-it started tearing open panels wherever he could find one. Quite a few seemed to expose wires actually, although none were red. They were all made of the same clear material through which an amber fluid coursed. Not unlike the liquid in the vial Wolverine had dropped, actually, the bit of eventful idiocy that had started this whole mess.

"Hold on. What have we here..."

A mess of cables tied together to form a tube thick as Joe's forearm could be seen trailing from the device cradling the bomb to a row of loudly humming structures shaped like upturned pyramids. Batteries maybe? Some kind of portable energy source?

"Yeah. Must be. So what if I just kind of pulled the plug..."

He grabbed it in both hands and gave a tremendous yank. Cables came loose on both ends to an explosive shower of sparks. A bright red light immediately flashed from one of the opened panels and then went dim. Not a bad result, Joe told himself. Not a bad result at all.

*Ronesian Converters disconnected*, intoned a mechanical voice from somewhere inside the bomb. *Countdown engaged. Ten...nine...*



More like a terrible one.

"Cripes, cripes, cripes!" Joe flung aside the useless cables and turned in desperation to his teammate. Ghost Rider was occupying himself near the palace's damaged walls, a group of weeping soldiers were now lined up before him. Masks of terror covered each man's face as their eyes were caught within his soulless gaze.

"Your sins shall be washed away in a torrent of suffering!"

"Um..."

Oblivious to the horrified shriek that ripped ripping from one of the soldiers just before the man passed out, Ghost Rider slowly turned his ghastly visage in Joe's direction. Silently he waited, hellfire licking about his bleached white skull.

"Actually, ah, never mind. I...I got it, GR. It's fine. You just...you keep on doing what you're doing there..."

*...five...four...three...*

---

Madness reigned over Sub-Atomica. Fires raged unchecked as explosions rocked the streets and sent sprays of shattered glass down on the sidewalks below. Small units of imperial guards waged running battles against clusters

of Karza's blood crazed dog soldiers as the chaotic assault continued. Amidst such disorder, the passage of two off-worlders in unusual garb drew little attention. All considered Logan felt they were making good progress. That didn't keep his partner from complaining, unfortunately.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?"

"Told you, once I get someone's scent, I don't lose it."

"Well, not seeing any captive maidens or menacing dark lords is all I'm saying. Maybe the smoke has got your sniffer all conf--" Spider-Man's words caught in his throat as something metallic and pointy suddenly popped into being just inches from his own nose. At the same time, with the hand that wasn't threatening to skewer him with its exposed claws, Wolverine directed his attention towards a nearby building.

It was another glass dome, a Micro-Tron, like the one that brought them here, or had reconstituted their molecules on the sub-subatomic scale, or however it worked. Crazy science was neither man's specialty. Fortunately, they didn't have to understand how it worked to understand what it was for, it clearly being a kind of teleportation system that brought people into the Microverse and perhaps moved them through it. A number of soldiers had gathered tensely about the perimeter while a woman, hooded and restrained, was being forced inside.

"That's her, isn't it? Queen what's-her-face? But, ah, where's the guy in the Darth Vader get-up?"

An answer came swiftly in the form of red plasma, a bolt of searing hot energy that left the cement where they'd been standing a pool of steaming slag. Baron Karza, lord of the Unmen, scourge of the Microverse, emerged from the wreckage behind them. Twice the size of either hero, a suit of

heavy coal black armor covered him from head to foot from which his eyes glowed like burning embers.

"So you followed me. How bold. How foolish. Still, a bit of amusement before finishing my conquest may be worth a moment's distraction. Let us see how long an earthling can scream."

Another bolt of plasma burnt the air as Spider-Man hurled himself off his feet, casting a web line onto the nearest light post and hauling his body out of harm's way. Another victory for the spider sense. Followed rapidly by another, and then another, and so forth, as Karza tracked him doggedly across the skyline. Each new shot seemed to get that much closer. He could actually feel the heat radiating off of them.

"Um, Wovie, you still there? Not real big on the screaming thing. Little help!"

Which is exactly what he got. While it didn't happen nearly enough to suit him -- he was after all a magnet for tissue damage -- every now and then one of these egomaniacs with their towering physiques would underestimate Wolverine. They'd try to ignore the little guy and concentrate on what they assumed must be the real threat. Karza's education came in the form of three twelve inch claws plunged directly into his molded metal chest plate.

The tyrant bellowed in agony, cuffing the smaller man aside with his gauntleted fist. Wolverine rolled with the sloppy punch, coming up into a crouch, ready to hurl himself forward again in relentless attack. Instead one of Karza's stray blasts caught in him across the left arm. Flesh immediately began to bubble and steam as the smell of burning meat filled the air. Ignoring the green ichor pouring from his wounds, the tyrant readjusted his aim, hoping to finish his withering opponent.

At which point three blinding wads of grayish goop splattered against the faceplate of his helmet.

"Impertinence! Off-world filth! Why must someone always meddle with my plans?"

"Oh, quit your bellyaching! I swear, every time you scratch the surface of one of these would-be despots, you find a moaner. Yeesh, it can't all be military parades and erecting giant stone statues of yourself, you know! Once in awhile somebody has to fight back."

Spider-Man elegantly twisted his body through a fresh fusillade of beam attacks. Many came perilously close to nicking him but luck and agility managed to keep him alive long enough to serve his purpose. With Karza distracted yet again, Wolverine, smoke still wafting from the blast he took, launched himself into his opponent with an enraged growl, claws a flurry of animal savagery.

By the time Spider-Man pulled him free there was little left of Karza beyond ragged shards of black metal and a pile of broken gizmos and lubricant. The suit itself was empty.

"What? Just a robot? Talk about your cheap Doom rip-offs..." \*

\* (Baron Karza is in fact composed of pure psychic energy and can resurrect himself into new host armors upon death. He also really dislikes being referred to as a cheap Doom rip-off - AI)

Wolverine seemed less put out by the results. Instead he was gingerly testing the raw flesh of his still smoldering wound. "Didn't even get hit did you, webhead?"

"Huh?" Spider-Man waved his hand dismissively. "Of course not. I'm careful. Say, does that hurt? Oh, hey, look, the soldiers are fleeing! Now we just need to grab the queen and mission accomplished, New Fantastic Four for the win, son. Wonder how the others doing?"

An enormous rumble shook the earth, jarring both men off their feet. In the distance a dark black plume rose up to fill the horizon with the distinct shape of a mushroom cloud.

"Oh."

---

Later.

"...so, yeah, that's when I figured my best bet was to throw it into the ocean."

Queen Pearla, swathed in diaphanous gold robes, a ringlet of silver balanced atop her elaborately arranged hair, once again sat upon the royal throne. Despite that being due largely to the efforts of the four earthmen now standing before her court, she somehow looked less than ecstatic. Brow furrowed, mouth compressed into a thin line, she struggled to process what they were now telling her.

"You...threw it into the ocean?"

Fix-it nodded. "Way I saw it, that would be the safest bet, right? I mean, compared to letting it go off in the palace, there's gotta be a lot less damage it can do out there, right?"

Her elegant white fingers tightened ever so slightly around the arms of his chair.

"You do realize what a micro bomb is capable of? That it shrinks the mass of its surrounding environment? It is Baron Karza's habit to collect the capitals he subjugates by preserving them in miniature."

"Huh . Real interesting hobby, that. But, see, I stopped him..."

"....by throwing the bomb into the middle of Sub-Atomica's largest ocean, reducing one of our world's most beautiful natural resources into a thirty thousand mile crater?"

"Oh my god," Spider-Man whispered, "what about all the poor little fishies?"

Wolverine shrugged. "They're probably okay. Just a little smaller, is all. Like anchovies."

And Pearla's scowl deepened.

Later still.

The kitchen of the Baxter Building was large enough to accommodate a fulltime staff even though it rarely ever did. Mrs. Richards preferred to keep things as personal as possible within her own home. When she didn't cook herself -- which was frequently given her hectic lifestyle -- someone else would step in. Lately the job had fallen to live-in nanny and overall family caretaker Yoshi. It was a chore she didn't mind at all. In fact, she'd come to think of the kitchen as one of her places now, which is partially why she was ending her day here. That and the fresh roast turkey promised a perfect late night snack.

Yoshi was in the middle of spreading on the mayonnaise when they trooped through. Four men in tattered costumes reeking of something foul. They left a trail of black tarry footprints on the hardwood floors as they passed.

"Don't ask."

"Don't ask."

*Growl.*

"I thirst for Vengeance."

Confused but amiable, Yoshi offered the last one a dubious smile, reaching out to carefully peel one of the feathers off of Ghost Rider's jacket. She dropped it into the wastebasket while he stared down at her with hollowed eyes.

“Um...turkey sandwich?”

His gaze shifted towards her plate. The bread quickly shriveled into ash.

“Maybe a glass of water then?”

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**THE END**

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**Author's Note:**

Check in with M2K's Fantastic Four to see more of the exciting adventures of...oh, wait, no. None of these characters will likely ever appear together again, actually. Never mind.

And to those perhaps wondering why I'm still posting issues even though I finished my run on FF a while back, the reason is that this New Fantastic Four two-shot was originally slotted to serve as a special or annual halfway through my run. In my mind, anyhow. Unfortunately, I didn't finish them or my other issues in time for that to really be feasible. So instead they've been posted as a kind of fill-in story between my completed run and whoever takes over the title next, which hopefully will come sooner rather than latter.



So thanks again for reading. This will honest to goodness be my last FF issue. Unless, like, I get around to writing that Christmas special I had plotted, in which case...

- Alan