

Table of Contents

JLA/Avengers - Prelude	2
Avengers/JLA - Prelude	19
JLA vs Avengers #1	43
Avengers vs JLA #1	61
JLA vs Avengers #2	77
Avengers vs JLA #2	105
JLA vs Avengers #3	126
Avengers vs JLA #3	159
Avengers vs JLA #4	179
JLA vs Avengers #4	230
Avengers vs JLA #5	258
LOST Part One	309
LOST Part Two	324
JLA vs Avengers #5	353
Closing Remarks	398



JLA/Avengers Prelude: JLU 2001

Manhattan:

It was cold...

Not quite autumn, but there was already a fierce chill in the air, a cool breeze rolling through the high granite canyons of Manhattan. Everyone had bundled against the cold, wrapping in coats and hats cursing at the winds threatening to strip their layers away as they struggled through the streets. Still, the crisp wind was a welcome relief from the heat and humidity of summer that usually lingered well into fall and had only vanished the day before. The bizarre and devastating storms of a few months prior were being blamed for the current weather pattern, raging tempests that had sprung up instantly all around the Tri-State, blasting through the city and then just as quickly dispersing leaving New York flooded and drenched in their aftermath. A strange weather pattern in the Middle East was apparently the culprit some said. Others blamed El Nino.

Richards knew better...

“Any change?”

Reed Richards lowered his binoculars with a sigh, wiping at the fog misting the lenses with his thumb as he glanced back at the man near his side. Special SHIELD Agent James Woo seemed unperturbed by the sudden cold snap dressed in a trim black suit and tie without the additional layers of an overcoat of any kind. He was simply standing there staring out across the rooftops at the building in the distance, one hand in his pocket, the other flicking ash from a smoldering cigarette. He did not seem concerned in the least, with the cold or- more importantly- why they were there. He simply kept staring, smoking cigarette after cigarette, his eyes hidden behind the shadowed lenses of his dark Ray Bans.

“Nothing,” Richards said, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the thermos that they were sharing. It was almost empty, but there would be another along soon enough, hopefully with some cream and sugar this time. Sue would be pissed of

course, but Reed needed the pick me up. He was getting tired and starting to ache.

“He knows we’re here, and he’s watching us. He doesn’t seem to care in the least.”

“His kind rarely do, Professor,” Woo said, chaining a fresh cigarette and tossing the other to the tarmac of the rooftop, crushing it out underfoot. “Megalomania generally makes them feel superior to us lesser men. As you no doubt well know.”

Richards smiled slightly, twisted, nodding as he held the binoculars out to his impromptu partner. “Indeed I do,” Reed said, “all too well, unfortunately.”

James Woo shook his head, declining the binoculars. “My eyesight is rather exceptional,” he said taking a long drag off of his cigarette, “I can see the building well enough, and most of what is happening. I have an aversion to sunlight however, a slight problem of photosensitivity of late.”

Richards nodded, sipping at his coffee as a strong wind whipped and tugged at the tails of his long coat. He shivered, remembering how he had not even wanted to wear the thing but Sue had insisted. He was glad now that he had listened. Still, he tugged at his collar and folded it up against the wind slicing at his ears and neck. Only in New York...

“I wish I knew what it was that he expects to gain from all of this,” Richards said, turning his gaze back towards the tall building in the distance. On the outside it really did not appear any different from any other building on Manhattan Island. It was tall and dark, a thing of steel and stone and glass molded to the specifications of a designer no doubt long dead. The Keystone Building however was a simple façade on the outside. The interior, at least the upper floors- above the numerous legitimate businesses that operated throughout the first seventy-odd stories- housed one of the many bases of a world-renowned businessman, and criminal mastermind.

Doctor Midas had been around for years, unknown and ignored as he gathered information and technology, creating an empire of sorts equivalent to the likes of Stark, Hammer, Trump and Shaw. The man was a wily wizard in the ways of business, and more so in the procurement of those things that he desired, spending millions on a whim if need be. According to the West Coast Avengers, Midas was a madman- albeit an extremely wealthy one who had somehow actually bought an old and abandoned suit of the Iron Man’s armor. It was his trademark now, the obsolete and cumbersome golden suit that the man never seemed to take off. He was eccentric, apparently, a billionaire with delusions of grandeur and dreams of glory and power. It was those billions that had

purchased him the abandoned lot of ground that had once been the Baxter Building and all the air space around it.

“Power, Professor,” Woo said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “The West Coast Avengers logged many files focusing on Doctor Midas and their encounter with him and his daughter, his machinations. He wants what he considers to be real power, far and beyond what he might muster from stolen armor and patents. He wishes to be a *Marvel*. Worse of course, he wishes to be *the* Marvel; the most powerful of the cosmic entities. Again, a mind set you are probably well acquainted with.”

Reed Richards, Mister Fantastic and leader of the world famous Fantastic Four nodded, shivering again as he sipped at his coffee. He remembered Doom—painfully flexing the fingers of his almost useless hand— and all of his mad schemes, most of which had almost succeeded but for his own brilliant mind or sheer dumb luck. He remembered when Doom had actually stolen the Cosmic Powers of the Silver Surfer and how close they had all come to annihilation but for Victor Von Doom’s vanity and pride. Midas by all accounts he had heard and read was barely a notch below Doom in that respect.

“But what does he want?” Richards asked, staring at that spot almost midway between where he stood and the Keystone Building. If he stared hard, squinting slightly he could almost see the sparkling energies that marked the Zone of Distortion, the opening that led to the Negative Zone. “There’s nothing there. In all my studies and explorations I have never found a single thing within the Negative Zone that would be worth all his effort. Midas is after power, and granted, there is energy there abounding, but in all my efforts I’ve never found a way to contain the vast power resonating within the Anti-matter Realm. I can hardly believe that he has—”

“Never underestimate insanity, Professor Richards,” Woo said flicking another cigarette to the rooftop. “Poe was on edge when he wrote the Raven, and many people wonder just how sane Einstein was when he discovered the secrets of the universe. Doctor Octavius, Doom, Magneto...”

“Where does one draw the line between sanity and savant?”

“You’re getting just a bit metaphysical for me, Agent Woo. My reality, my sanity is based in what I can prove and experience. Midas too I imagine. He might have delusions of grandeur, but I doubt he would throw it all away on a whim of half-baked theories. He’s after something concrete, I just can’t imagine what it might be.”

You will,” Woo said, sparking another cigarette to life. “SHIELD has faith, Doctor Richards.”

“I wish I did...”

Reed Richards shrugged and tossed his crumpled coffee cup to the rooftop. He sighed again, adjusting his stance, repositioning his cane as he raised his binoculars to his eyes once more, staring at the rooftop far away, just over a mile distant, searching for that curious glint of gold that he knew would be there...

Watching him...

“Idiots...”

The man called Doctor Midas lowered his binoculars and took a long, hard drag from his cigar. He stared hard at that building just outside the area of Restraint, just over a mile away. SHIELD knew its limits even if Richards did not. Legal had done a spectacular job of limiting the efficiency of the Fantastic Four, SHIELD, the Avengers and all the other government agencies that might have come sniffing around. He would have to remember that come bonus time next Christmas.

Midas stepped up to roof's edge, lowering the polarized shields in his helmet that would cut the stray glare of the noonday sun and allow him to once again view the spectacular majesty seeping from the Negative Zone. He cast his gaze skyward, towards that spot just a few dozen feet above, half a mile away where the energies of two opposing universes collided and made magic. It was beautiful...

Richards was a fool to not see, and not find a way to tap that potential. Luckily, Doctor Midas was made of sterner stuff and greater vision.

It had been a long hard row to hoe, not only to acquire the desired property but to get it in such a way as to keep all the offending parties away. Aside from Richards there had been a bid from some family named Janus not to mention the government of Wakanda. Midas had had to use not a few of his favors to garner the site, and then to convince the city that his intentions were sound. A few greased palms in the right places had helped speed along that process, though at no little expense. In the end however, it would be well worth the price. If not for the West Coast Avengers-

Damn Stark and Barton! Damn them to hell!

It had taken forever, though he had set the wheels in motion years ago. Ever since he had first seen that creature on the news. Annihilus! Such a stupid name...

Doctor Midas saw the potential though, and more, he had seen the Rod. The Cosmic Control Rod...

Wasn't the Internet a wonderful thing?

Richards and his family, and the Avengers had beaten the creature from the Negative Zone back through the portal, but at what cost? Midas could not believe the stories he had read in the Blogs, the conversations he had eavesdropped on in the Chat Rooms. The power...

Doctor Midas shivered, biting down on his inner cheek as he tried to regain his center. He took a long drag from his cigar, stale blue smoke roiling out of every orifice in his golden mask-

"Sir..."

"What!" Midas shrieked, spinning on the little man in the black kevlar and jackboots. The soldier- one of his own snapped to attention, stuttering-

"D-D-Doctor Harris n-needs you in the R-ready Room, sir..."

"Of course he does," Midas sneered, flicking the butt of his cigar over the roof's edge. He glanced back across the expanse, striking a heroic pose for Richards and his Spook. He placed his hands on his hips, cape cracking and fluttering in the breeze-

"Great minds think alike," Doctor Midas said, staring at the building across the way, then glancing at the portal to the Negative Zone a final time before turning towards the elevator-

It was beautiful...

"Lead on, soldier..."

A cloud of blue-gray smoke roiled from the elevator car as the doors rumbled open, spiraling slowly up and away caught on the internal air. It was cold in the aero-tech laboratory, the air conditioning set low to better stave off summer's humidity should it rear its ugly head again and damage any of the delicate machinery within the vast room. The huge lab was crammed full of machines, some old and almost obsolete, others state of the art, each with a unique and designated purpose and all focused on the experiments centered in the room. There were almost as many people in the room as machines, again each with a special purpose, their jobs focusing on the experiments of Doctor Midas in one way or another. Scientists lined the walls and scurried about the room,

monitoring the machinery, taking notes, adjusting dials and pushing buttons as lights flashed and pinged. Security Guards were scattered about the room as well, interspersed among the scientists and monitoring them; guns held high and stoic faces hidden behind the dark Plexiglas of their crash helmets.

All eyes turned as Doctor Midas strode from the elevator car, smoke billowing in his wake, parting for him as though he were a man of Biblical proportion. In a way, perhaps he was. He strode proudly out amongst his people like some ancient Pharaoh, his eyes flitting about the vast room taking in everything as his footfalls echoed, resounding off of old and yellowed tiles. His armor seemed almost to whine with every step as the archaic magnetic compensators strained just to hold the heavy armor upright let alone decrease the mass factor. Doctor Midas did not seem to notice or care and most eyes quickly averted back to their tasks as he made his way through the throng of his employees, bee-lining for one in particular; Doctor Harris, Project Annihilation's Director.

Before he reached the director however, a lithe form intercepted him, hugging him in an almost inappropriate, albeit improbable display of affection-

"Daddy," Oubliette squealed, sheer pleasure and pride crackling in her otherwise sultry voice. Her dark emerald eyes seemed to spark as she stared up into the similar eyes of the man in the golden armor, her hands roaming wildly across the coldness of his metallic back plate beneath his cape. Behind the cigar wedged into the mouth slit of his helmet Doctor Midas afforded a smile for the most important thing in his life- other than himself of course.

"Oubliette," he said pushing his daughter back to arm's length as his gaze drifted over her well-rounded form. She was dressed, not in her usual leathers of black hood, corset and stilettoed hip boots, but rather a snug and form-fitting containment suit that had been developed by NASA for their Star Core scientists several years before. It was less cumbersome than a standard NASA space suit and had been further adapted by some of the most brilliant and easily greedy of the world's best aerospace engineers. It was designed to withstand the rigors of prolonged exposure to solar radiation as experienced by those poor souls sentenced to Star Core One, but the well-paid scientists in the employ of Doctor Midas had improved on that immensely, incorporating safeguards against theoretical dangers that might be faced within the Negative Zone as recorded by Reed Richards himself in a paper for the Scientific Journal of America. His daughter made it look good-

"What seems to be the problem this time?" Midas asked, his gaze lingering for a moment on his daughter's breasts before turning towards the Director of his special project. Doctor Harris was a man in his sixties with thin, wire-rimmed glasses perched atop his head and almost lost within the last straggly wisps of his abandoning gray hair. He was thin and gaunt; usually with a fierce look of determination in his steely blue eyes- a look that others often considered being

madness. In truth, Harris was the quintessential image of the Hammer Film's Mad Scientist, Peter Cushing with a hangover. He would have been well respected in his chosen profession if not for his drinking problem. Now he just looked pathetic and scared as Oubliette ratted him out-

"Harris is having trouble with the Power Couplings, Daddy," the Exterminatrix sneered with a cruel smile, piercing Harris with her dagger like gaze. She clutched onto Midas' arm lovingly; caressing her cheek against the rough material of his cape as both father and daughter stared at the old man. He looked pale, almost quaking under their scrutiny-

"Is that true, doctor?" Midas asked, rolling his fresh cigar to the edge of his mouth slit in a cloud of smoke. Harris licked his lips and shifted his own gaze momentarily to the handsome man all but locked into the huge frame of the secondary experiment in the room. That man was handsome if not distinguished, his dark hair tinged with the slightest gray at the temples, his bare muscles rippling as they flexed to support his weight upon the St. Andrew's Cross-like apparatus that held him. He smiled to see Harris squirm, a nasty thing.

"It's not my fault, Doctor Midas," Harris whined stepping forward. Immediately two guards stepped between their boss and the scientist, guns leveled at the old man's chest. Oubliette tittered and hissed in her father's ear, but Midas waved them away. The guards stepped back as a fresh wave of sweat rolled from Harris' bald pate-

"N-not my f-fault, sir," Harris squeaked, wiping perspiration from his brow and wrinkled throat. "The couplings won't penetrate his skin, won't attach securely enough to get a proper reading."

"So it's Nefaria's fault?" Midas asked, mockingly, glancing at the Count as he smiled, strapped to the cross. He looked just a bit like the Christ, or perhaps the anti-Christ rather as if all went well he might just prove to be Midas' salvation.

"To be fair, Midas, perhaps my atomic structure has altered once again. The ionic energies within me are in a constant state of flux after all. The couplings would have worked, and should have worked as per my last physical." Count Nefaria smiled knowingly, but Midas knew that for all his big talk it was all a bluff. Nefaria was nothing more than a glorified rich boy extricated from some meaningless and forgotten principality that had been overrun in some forgotten war. He knew nothing of science, be it technicalities or energies or barely basic physicalities and thus surrounded himself with those who did. Throughout the years he had been extremely lucky, following his mad quest for immortality and being granted vast power based on the original experiments of the late Heinrich Zemo. He had become a veritable Superman via a modified version of Baron Zemo's original Ionic Converter, that device that had originally empowered both

Wonder Man and Erik Josten- once Power Man, the Smuggler, Giant Man and now Atlas. Unfortunately, due to Midas' own unique DNA and a detrimental side-effect of his own many quests to gain power that same experiment would not work on him.

Midas had seen the potential in hiring Nefaria for his own projects however. The Count Nefaria was not usually one to be 'hired', but his own strained budget and waning powers had outweighed his vanity and the promise of revitalization and wealth undreamed had been more than enough to put the Count on Midas' payroll. Nefaria's almost unique physiology and near god-like powers made him perfect for a quest into the Negative Zone. Unfortunately he was an arrogant ass and expected to be treated as an equal. He often reminded Midas that he had fought the X-Men and the Avengers, gone toe-to-toe with Thor. Midas often reminded him that he had lost.

"Be that as it may, Count, Harris is getting paid well to compensate for those contingencies," Midas answered, turning again to face Harris, "isn't that right, Director?"

"Yessir," Harris swallowed, wiping at his brow again, "b-but-"

"If I may, sir?"

All eyes turned towards a young man striding forward, his hands raised placatingly as the security guards stepped to the fore once again. Doctor Midas let them stand this time as the handsome young scientist skidded to a quick stop-

"Who?" he whispered just loud enough that only Oubliette might hear. His daughter ran a gloved hand over his chest plate as she leaned closer-

"One of the lesser technicians," she cooed softly tracing a finger about the light beacon on her father's chest. "Name's Janus, and his uncle has been to the Zone before, a one-time friend of Reed Richards I think. That's why we hired him mainly, though he's fairly adept at his craft."

"Yes, Janus?" Doctor Midas said puffing on his cigar. It always helped to appear to know the staff, even if you didn't. Gave them a sense of self worth and they tried harder because of it. The young man seemed stunned that he was actually known, beaming slightly as he pointed to Nefaria-

"From the readings I noticed that the subject's density and mass were altering again. I haven't finished calculating the exponential's, but I believe I have a solution."

"Which is?"

“Inventory records show that you have Mark I Mandroid Armor mothballed in one of your warehouses-“

“True, but it was mothballed because Iron Man originally exposed the weakness of that version. It’s basically useless in a firefight-“

“That’s true, sir, but we aren’t going into a firefight. The weakness won’t come into play, and we can easily modify the internal circuitry to adapt to Count Nefaria’s rather unique physiology. Too, the Mandroid armor comes equipped with external cameras and a sensory web that would allow us to discard the bulky apparatus that Harris designed that Count Nefaria was to initially carry, thus freeing up his mobility by seventy percent at a rough guess. We can modify one of the Star Core suits just a bit to give the Count a sufficient amount of protection against the Negative Zone’s queer radiations as well, just in case. The internal suit shouldn’t disrupt any of the Mandroid Armor’s functions.” Janus smiled expectantly as Midas glanced from the younger man to Harris. The director really looked nervous now, like he just shit his pants-

“Harris?” Midas asked, already knowing the answer by the doctor’s overwhelming anxiety. “Will it work?”

“We-“ Harris squeaked and cleared his throat, “we’ll have to run some tests, study the armor and how Nefaria’s body will react to-“

Doctor Midas waved his hand to shut Harris up and the security guards shifted their aim to the project director. There was a loud crack and a flash of energy as Oubliette stepped away from her father, her whip snaking away from the bloody mark on Harris’ cheek. The old man whimpered, staggering back as his hand went to the bleeding gash. Midas looked at Nefaria who nodded and smiled, then back to the young scientist-

“How long?”

The handsome young man appeared to think for a moment as his eyes drifted over the curvy form of Oubliette. He suddenly focused however, looking Doctor Midas squarely in the eyes-

“Six hours at the extreme,” he said with confidence, looking at Nefaria. “I will need an updated report on his current make-up, then a bit of time to power up the Mandroid Armor and adjust its settings to play off of Count Nefaria’s current physiology, and what it will be expected to be over the next twenty-four based on the last twelve. If the energy flux spikes as expected when he enters the Zone of Distortion we’ll need to compensate on the fly. Richard’s notes are not specific as to everything that we might expect, nor were your Drone Probes. Sorry, sir, but-“ Midas waved the young man’s fears away-

“Make it so,” Doctor Midas said as he turned back to Harris. The old man looked positively green as fear, anger and envy distorted his face-

“Harris,” he said, and recognizing the tone in her father’s voice, the way he stood Oubliette the Exterminatrix cracked her whip again. Harris yelped, his other cheek bleeding now and a dark stain appearing in the crotch of his high-water pants. Oubliette giggled-

“Give young Janus all the help and information he might need to get HIS project up and running,” Midas said, turning to the guard that had originally come to the roof to get him, “and you,” the guard snapped to attention, “accompany the two doctors. If Harris does not comply- kill him!”

“Yessir!” the guard saluted and raised the barrel of his weapon, training it on the aged doctor. Harris’ eyes went wide as he started to tremble. His glasses slipped off of his forehead and settled on the tip of his nose. Midas motioned them to get on with it as Nefaria chuckled.

Six hours then...

Doctor Midas watched as Janus and Harris trotted off, the security guard hot on their heels-

“I love it when you give the death sentence,” Oubliette cooed in his ear, grabbing at his arm again. “It makes me hot all over.”

“Get some rest, daughter,” Midas said as he looked to Nefaria, the technicians releasing him from the cross. “I want you at your best when we are ready to roll. I don’t fully trust Nefaria, or this Janus. You need to be at one hundred percent.”

“I always am, Daddy,” his daughter said coyly as she coiled her whip and hooked it to her belt. She blew him a quick, affectionate kiss and strutted away towards a rest area, shaking her ass and glancing back with a smirk. He could hear Nefaria and saw the older man’s eyes staring at his daughter’s swaying ass and legs. He had a lecherous, longing look in his dark eyes as he smirked at Midas.

Midas took a long drag on his cigar and finally strode from the room. There were other things to attend to, not only Nefaria’s ability to survive the Zone, but the Star Core Shuttle’s ability as well. The old battered ship that his crews had salvaged from Jamaica Bay had seen better days, but it had proven itself a worthy craft. Doctor Midas had spent millions to refurbish the thing and patch the damage caused not only by Jean Grey but the Living Monolith as well as he stumbled about battling Thor and Spider-Man of all people. The Star Core Shuttle that had carried the X-Men from the old SHIELD Orbital Platform after a battle with Stephen Lang and his Sentinels had served its purpose but had seen better days indeed. Still, Midas’ people had made the craft worthy once again,

refitting the outer tiles to deal with the queer energies of the Negative Zone, redesigning the interior to store the mass quantities of energy that Midas hoped to gain and gather should the shuttle not find Annihilus, or Nefaria not be able to take the Cosmic Control Rod from him. There were so many variables...

Midas sighed, taking a long drag off of his cigar once again as he waited for the elevator doors to rumble shut again. His mind was racing as he listened to the building's musak, trying his best to calculate the possible percentage of contingencies as an Instrumental of 'Like a Virgin' echoed inside his helmet. Too, he wanted to look at Richards again, maybe flip him the bird this time.

Six hours...

A lot could happen in six hours...

JLA VS. THE MIGHTY AVENGERS!

Prelude Un!

The Time Stream: Some when just short of the end...

The Cosmic Treadmill bucked, rattling and shaking as a wave on force rolled over it, buffeting it about. It swayed oddly and everyone grabbed their support bars tighter trying to ride out the turbulence. Colors swirled and flared as the pale green shield wavered under the onslaught and all within stared in awe at the majesty passing by before the screen went opaque once again.

"What the hell was that?" Lois Lane yelled over the steady whine of the spinning treadmill. She could see sparks flying from the machinery as the Flash ran on, his body little more than a red blur, a ghostly image at the fore of the machine.

"Magic," Zatanna said, holding on for dear life as the treadmill bucked again, forcing some of the occupants to their knees. "Something mystical just swept by, a powerful force like... I don't know..."

"I felt it too," Lois looked up staring at her husband standing on the far side of the platform near the still forms of his unconscious parents. Lois wanted nothing more than to run to his side, hold him and have him hold her in return but of late he had distanced himself from her, actually announcing that they would be divorced. Too, any affection on her part would reveal more than he wanted to

share with his allies. Of the League, only a handful knew of their connection; Batman, Wonder Woman, maybe the Martian Manhunter. It was probably hard for him too to stand there and not seem worried about his very parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent.

They had been kidnapped by a being called the Time Trapper and stolen away to some dark citadel at the very end of time. So had Lois for that matter, and Superman as well. It was all very strange, but the Justice League of America had traveled to the future in force to get them back. Lois was already forgetting all that had happened, the details of the resolution already gone other than that the heroes had won, and the rest was disappearing as the group made its way back to the Twenty-first Century under the power of the Flash' speed on a modified Cosmic Treadmill through the Time Stream.

They were all there, the entire compliment of the JLA's current roster, plus Zatanna the magician, daughter of Zatara. Superman of course stood at the fore of the machine, just behind the Flash who's link to the Speed Force was all that seemed to keep them going, traveling through time. Behind her husband, the Man of Steel stood Earth's current Green Lantern, his ring ablaze as he held up a force shield to protect the occupants of the treadmill from the devastating forces of Time itself. Too, he focused on a slim green strand of energy that stretched all the way back to the Twenty-first Century and the like-minded ring of Alan Scott, the first Green Lantern, now Sentinel. Scott was their link to the past, but as Lois watched she could see the glowing green tether wavering, whipping about in whatever was causing the raucous turbulence in the Time Stream. The Green Lantern was sweating bullets, his face a stern grimace of determination as he tried to hold onto Scott's lifeline. Lois bit down on her lip, glancing about the platform to see if anyone else seemed worried-

The Batman looked totally calm and collected of course, hanging onto his support bar and watching the Flash run.

Wonder Woman and Aquaman stood over the Kents ready to save them if need be. Diana seemed worried as she held her Magic Lasso tightly, the glowing rope stretched to its limits and wrapped about everyone to help hold them in place. Aquaman seemed almost bored.

Firestorm stood near the side of the platform, his hands glowing as he used his powers somehow, hoping to hold the treadmill together no doubt. Beside him stood the Red Tornado, the slightest breeze ruffling his cape as he used his powers to try and compensate the turbulence, his flat and generic face showing no emotion.

The Black Canary, Plastic Man and the Atom hung on for dear life as tightly as Lois herself. Atom's eyes sparkled with the wonder of it all, but Black Canary

and Plastic Man really looked terrified. This was just as beyond them as it was her-

“Flash?” she heard Clark ask as another wave of force rocked the treadmill, “Do you need help? Are you-“

“Fine,” Flash shouted as he ran on. His legs were churning, a blur to Lois as she held tight to the treadmill, his body a wispy blur of red and lightning flickering in the distance.

“J’onn and I can help,” Superman said stepping forward, “we can add our speed to yours-“

“N-no...” Flash said, his voice cracking from the strain. “Fuck up the rhythm...”

The treadmill tilted over forty-five degrees and everyone screamed! Well, Lois screamed anyway. Zatanna was mumbling something as Green Lantern grabbed his wrist and focused on his ring’s energy-

“Losing it...” he said, his face awash in sweat, his eyes locked on the glowing green tendril that stretched on towards infinity. “Something,” he stuttered, “something’s blocking the lead!”

“What?” Batman shouted, his hand on the Lantern’s shoulder. Lois felt the treadmill shudder again and heard a cracking sound-

“Jesus...” the Atom said as he stared at a crack exploding across the platform. He pointed and everyone else looked-

“Firestorm!” The Batman shouted and Firestorm stepped up-

“On it!”

Lois Lane watched as Firestorm’s hands glowed and the crack in the platform seemed to mend itself and disappear. She heard Zatanna scream then, saw her husband catch her still form as she collapsed-

“Wally!”

“D-dunno...” Flash responded, a disembodied voice that swept about them, “n-never... I don’t... Hold on...”

The treadmill rocked again and Lois heard a crack as though the world had exploded. She saw the League leap into action, some protecting the Kents, Superman and J’onn J’onzz leaping onto the treadmill itself to aid the Flash. Wonder Woman was shouting, but Lois could not hear what she said as the

Cosmic Treadmill bucked and burst, the platform breaking apart as a wave of energy washed over them again. Green Lantern screamed and Plastic Man was suddenly at her side, wrapping about her and enveloping her in his body-

“I got’cha Lo-lo, not to worry-“

Lois found it hard to breathe as Plastic Man wrapped about her. She saw the Atom growing as lightning flashed about them, crackling, breaking up the platform. There was no thunder oddly. She found that strange-

“No...” she whined as Plastic Man enveloped her and expanded, his pliable body shielding her from damage becoming plush and spongy. Her last sight was of the Martian Manhunter and her husband running full tilt, their bodies blurring as they faded from existence and joining the Flash in the Time Stream...

She heard something, a muffled explosion...

She smelled fire and brimstone, the stench of magic-

“Clark...” she said, but her cry went unheard as the world shifted and went away...

The Watchtower:

Talia stared down at the immobile bodies of Jay Garrick, Max Mercury and Alan Scott. They were smoldering, scattered and unconscious about the JLA’s Conference Room in the Watchtower. Only Garrick and Mercury were smoldering slightly actually. Sentinel was glowing green.

Odd...

Talia stared at the strange and shattered contraption that lay in their midst. It seemed vaguely familiar, but she was not certain just what it might be. It was a huge construct with running platforms as well as an area set aside for passengers. Mobile then, though she could see no means of propulsion in the remains; no wheels and only the tread that seemed the power source somehow.

Strange...

Still, she took pictures, her digital camera quickly filling a memory card, and a second before she moved on. Whatever the members of the Justice Society were up to was no concern of her. They were secondary to her father’s objectives and best left to their own rewards. She had her own mission to

contend with. She nudged Garrick with the toe of her boot but he did not moan nor move. He was out. They all were...

Talia left the three unconscious members of the All-Star Squadron behind and made her way deeper into the complex. She was surprised to not find a single member of the League thus far in residence and on Monitor Duty. Relieved but surprised. She was of course prepared for confrontations, but hoped to avoid them if possible. The small bit of manufactured Kryptonite burned in the pouch at her hip...

The Monitor Womb seemed to sparkle before her in all its glory. The Host chair waited, the images of a thousand news feeds flickering up far and away into the central shaft that made up the Womb. She did not care about the state of the world of course, and the recent news was of no import but this was her final destination- that place where she might best access the JLA computers unmolested.

She knew that she had already been accepted by security, her form disguised as Sue Dibny, an honorary member of the JLA and accepted by all, her statistics fed into the main computers, her form remembered at every embassy around the world and at the Watchtower itself. Talia knew that the wife of the Elongated Man and Financial Coordinator of the Justice League Europe had access to all the JLA's most private secrets, all the embassies no matter they were dysfunctional, all the computer records up to a point. Everyone loved and trusted Sue Dibny...

Everyone loved and trusted Talia as she sat in the chair of the Monitor Womb and keyed in the vital statistics of Ralph Dibny's wife, waiting as the computer cycled and acknowledged her presence as acceptable. It took almost ten minutes, but Talia had learned patience long ago...

A holographic box appeared before her as the floating chair in the Monitor Womb slowly turned...

PASSWORD...

Talia smiled. The same word of access would not have worked in the Bat Cave, but here on the Moon security was lax. They were far above humanity after all. Her beloved had set up the initial security, but it had degraded under the watchful eye of the Martian Manhunter. He was far too trusting-

"Pennyworth."

Talia's smile grew as the files of the Justice League opened to her spoken command. All of their secrets, their hopes and dreams, their weaknesses were just a word away- a click of the mouse-

“Open File 18329, ‘Fallacies’,” she said settling into the chair. She watched as the Womb cycled, the images flickering and changing to accommodate her command. Little did the League know what the Batman really thought of them.

“Download,” she said, “Transfer and copy files to Server 187 426 999 Demon...”

Talia saw the surge of power as the computers sifted the commands she had given, then settled in to comply. Knowing how long-winded her beloved could be, she relaxed in to wait...

Talia shifted forward as the computer suddenly stalled, the Download Box stuttering as something intercepted her information and slowed everything to a slow crawl. She stared at the holographic options, her brow wrinkling, failing to see a command that would free her from the current problem-

“Abort!” she said with a frown, then-

“Divert!”

Nothing...

The screens winked out one by one, growing dark as she watched, commanding the Chair to lower her to the floor. Something was most definitely wrong, but she had no idea what-

“Refresh...”

“Reboot!”

Nothing...

Talia stood as soon as the chair touched down, biting her lip as she looked about. Maybe Garrick or Scott had woken up and discovered her- but no. If that were the case she would be bound head to toe in green energy or cord of some sort, a victim of Garrick’s ungodly speed.

Something was happening...

Something was going on...

But what?

Talia did not know, nor did she care. It was time to go. Let her father sort it out. Ra’s AI Ghul was the smartest man on the face of the Earth save perhaps for her beloved. He would know.

He would deal with it.

Talia ran...

To be Continued...

Next Issue: Head on over to Marvel 2000 for the next chapter, the second prelude in the Greatest Crossover of all Time! Be there for Avengers Vs. JLA Part Deux! A view from the other side of reality...

Story © Curt F

Plot © Curt F and Chris Munn



JLA/Avengers Prelude: Avengers United (M2K)

The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:

It was cold...

Not the simple cold of winter or that bitter chill that the first winds of autumn bring, but the devastating, deathly cold that only the purest lands truly experience. The air outside was crisp and clear, a stiff breeze washing over the mountains and swirling the newfallen snow into great, misty clouds. The sun was dazzling, huge and bright in the clear blue sky doing little to warm the icy wastes of the Himalayas, rather sparkling golden rays over the frozen sheets of crystalline white.

In the relative warmth of his Aerie, the Demon's Head did not care. True, like all of his citadels scattered about the world he had chosen this one secreted deep within the wastes of the rocky Himalayas for not only its solitude but also its stark and barren beauty. Another day he might stand there, outside and hip deep, naked in the freezing snow to marvel at the great beauty that still could be found-even now- in the ravaged world. Another day he might have watched the bloated sun crest the great mountains and sigh in awe at the majesty of Mother Earth as she was reborn. Another day perhaps, but this day however, he was preoccupied.

Ra's Al Ghul barely moved as he stared at the computer screen, his right hand twitching only slightly as he quietly scanned the procured files scrolling across his monitor screen, his left stroking the hybrid African Lynx just behind its tufted ears as it curled up beside his chair. The great cat purred at his touch, growling only slightly as he paused to consider something on the screen in greater depth. Like so many of the animals at the Aerie and his other citadels scattered throughout the world, the particular African Lynx at his side was the last of its line, the last of its breed. When this one was... gone, there would be no other. That pained him more than anything, really.

So much of the world's natural beauty was lost due to the ravages of mankind; its flora and fauna pressed into extinction by the six billion human carrion that devoured all in their path. Even the land itself was failing; the very atmosphere spent more every second. The blight left in the wake of humanity was devastating, the blasted, broken lands taking decades to recover. It was debatable if the air and waters ever would, but it was definite that the animal kingdom would suffer the most so long as mankind stormed their way across the face of the Earth. Like the Do Do and the Ring-tailed Cat, the African Lynx would fade away barely remembered by a select few, those poor fools that pretended to care- and himself...

"Shhh..." he cooed, ruffling the cat's fur as he focused on the screen before him, the Lynx stretching and snapping as he shifted position slightly, leaning closer. He saw discrepancies in the Martian's physiology and wondered if the Detective had noted the anomalies. Scrolling down the page of course he found the appropriate notations concerning the fluidity of the alien's molecular structure. The Detective was thorough of course. He had done his work well, as had Talia.

The Daughter of the Demon had braved Olympus, stealing into the very stronghold of the self-proclaimed defenders of the Earth, the Gods viewing the world from on high from their own unattainable citadel on the surface of the moon. She had stolen their secrets, their most dark wants and needs and desires. Like Prometheus she had brought fire down from the mountain, a fire that would ultimately burn them to the core.

The Detective himself, one of their trusted own had been gathering information against his pantheon, his allies. 'Just in case', Ghul imagined, a contingency plan that had come to sprout its foul seed after the intrusion of the alien Agamemno. That particular alien had transferred the identities of the hero's worst foes into their superior forms and reciprocated, placing the hero's collective beings into the bodies of the villains. The result of course had been pandemonium, and humanity ever quick to turn believed that their icons had turned evil. It had not lasted long, and in the end the heroes had triumphed of course, but the seed had been sown- not only in mankind, but in the Dark Knight as well.

As a result, the Detective had gathered information on all of his allies and comrades, not only in the Justice League, but those others as well. In his arrogance he had created failsafe files that mapped out in detail the most expedient way to eliminate all of his peers.

All...

Those files now- thanks to his daughter- belonged in full to Ra's Al Ghul!

He would use them of course. A diversion at least while he implemented his latest scheme to pare the Human Race to a more manageable size, a lesser percentage of mass that he might guide and lead to a better world. If a few of the Meta Gods died along the way, all the better. Most were beneath his contempt, fools and idiots with delusions of grandeur, aliens and freaks distorted by their own foul sciences gone awry. Those select few who were worthy of his notice- like the Detective- would either concede his brilliance or be eliminated with the rest. Simple enough...

Ra's AI Ghul stood, his hand brushing the sensitive keys before him, transferring the accumulated data of his enemies throughout his own computers the better to implement his plans. It took seconds for the Detective's files to be analyzed and absorbed and all about the world within instants his subordinates set about the task of creating the Batman's fail-safes. Within the space of days, perhaps hours he would be ready-

"Are you pleased, Father?"

Ra's AI Ghul turned and saw his daughter standing just a few feet away. There in the shadowy corners, her dark hair loose and flowing she seemed almost an angel, a specter awaiting his final breath. The Demon's Head smiled-

"Of course, daughter," he said, striding forward to take her hand in his own. "You have done well, as always. We are free to proceed."

"Then you will implement 'Babel'," she asked, glancing at the monitors that displayed the many regions of the Earth that her father desired to watch. She saw the gleaming constructs, towers erected of metal and plastic scattered about the Earth that would be the downfall of Humanity with the implementation of her father's latest scheme.

"Of course," Ra's AI Ghul smiled, following his daughter's gaze. "Mankind must pay for the damage they have done to the world. They must be culled, pared to a manageable population, which I might direct lest they destroy us all."

Talia sighed, staring at the imagery of Manhattan displayed, the teeming crowds going about their daily, day-to-day lives without a clue that their world was soon to change. She had never agreed with her father on all things, nor agreed totally on his means to achieve the ends he so desired. She did share his goals; a better world where all lived in harmony, but to wantonly slaughter so many in the process to achieve that end.

Too, there was more. When she had infiltrated the Watchtower she had been surprised to find members of the All-Star Squadron there rather than the Justice League itself. She had listened of course as she had gone about her task, surprised that those older heroes gathered were waiting- somewhat impatiently,

worriedly for the return of the League from the future. What they were doing there she had no clue, but the fact remained- they were gone. Forever perhaps? When Fate had changed, attacked his fellows; Sentinel, Flash and Max Mercury he had stated as much. 'A disruption in the Time Stream' he had said, 'an anomaly in the Speed Force'. Ra's Al Ghul would want to know that. Use it-

"Father," she began, licking her lips, not quite sure just what she had to say or how to say it. "I-"

Light!

Brilliant, glaring light erupted throughout the chamber. A blinding glow that made her eyes water even as she turned away, a silver radiance that seemed to sooth even as it burned it was so pure. Talia staggered, gritting her teeth as she raised her hand to shield her eyes, staring up at the source of the brilliance. She saw her father doing the same, and more...

He seemed perfect, one of the blessed with his bronzed, silvery skin rippling with an unearthly light. He was standing in midair above the floor, his bare feet not sullied by the dirt of the land, his great wings barely fluttering, holding him aloft. He wore armor, slight but effective, a helm and breastplate gleaming. He held a sword of flame licking at the air as his eyes scanned the chamber, considering almost, finally falling on the Demon's Head-

Ra's Al Ghul... The Lord has promised that there shall be no other tests until the final days, he said, his voice low and melodic. The promise is the Rainbow, yet you seek to thwart the Plan and Order. Why?

"And who are you to question me?" Ra's said rising from his chair to confront the intruder. "I have seen you about," he gestured at his monitor array, "and I know you arrived from space some time ago landing in Siberia in a star ship of sorts. You faced the Justice League and their Russian counterparts Red Square, but again- who are you?"

I am but a simple messenger, Herald and Harbinger. I am Zauriel of the Eagle Host and again I ask you- why?

Ra's Al Ghul stared at the winged being hovering before him, his eyes finally adjusting to the sudden brilliance. "Your Lord has abandoned his children," the Demon's Head said, stepping forward defiantly, his daughter at his side, clutching at his arm. "His great plan is a failure, his order lost to Chaos. His favored run amok. Change is needed."

Who art thou who knows the Will and the Way?

“Just a man,” Ra’s said bowing slightly, “But a man with vision. A man that might bring your Lord’s true plan to fruition given the means. Your Lord- if he is the Lord of Man has suffered his children before, long ago. Sodom and Gomorra, the great Flood, the Crusades, how many more acts of man can be attributed to your master’s whim? I seek only to aid, to further the dream-“

For your own ends...

Ra’s Al Ghul smiled slightly, “The sheep will need a shepherd. Those that remain will need guidance. Who better than I? Perhaps I am simply a part of your master’s plan, in the end.”

It was the winged man’s turn to smile, and when Talia saw the coldness there she could not help but shiver, clutching at her father’s arm.

“Father-“

Ra’s Al Ghul ignored his daughter, pulling from her grip as he stepped to his computers. “I have already set into motion the means to cull the masses. As soon as I distract those who have set themselves above Humanity so they might not interfere with my plan-“

“They are gone, Father,” Talia said, her voice a whisper and hoping that the Angel- if that was what he truly was, as he appeared to be- would not hear. He turned however too at the sound of her voice.

“What?” Ra’s Al Ghul asked, obviously surprised, and Talia suddenly wished that she had held her piece. “Daughter, what do you mean- gone?”

Talia nodded, “Truly, while I was on the moon I saw members of the Justice Society; Sentinel, the original Flash and Max Mercury, Doctor Fate. They spoke that the League was on some mission in time, in the far future.”

“Why did you not tell me this before, daughter?” Al Ghul asked, his face stone, his dark gray eyes smoldering. She knew that his mind was spinning, contemplating how this news might benefit him best.

“I was about to-“ Talia started then glanced at the being Zauriel. He was still hovering there above them, listening his silver eyes sparkling in wonderment. “When I passed the Hall of Justice again I found those JSA members defeated, on the ground and unconscious at least. All save Fate, and he was changed.”

“How so?” her Father asked and Talia thought a moment, remembering-

“He seemed almost another,” she began, “His very body was tall and gaunt, dark-skinned and damaged, his costume and raiment were gone. All save the medallion and the Helm, and that seemed dented and charred-”

Nabu... the being said with almost reverence. His gaze seemed to drift. I had not realized...

“What do you know of this, Herald? Tell me! Ra’s Al Ghul would know!” The Demon’s Head strode boldly forward, right up to the ‘angel’ without pause or care. Zauriel looked at him, but Talia thought that the alleged ‘Messenger of God’ was not really seeing her father at all.

Look to the stars, mortal, he finally said, his body glowing brighter as he slowly drifted skyward. Talia had to raise her arms again, splaying her hands to shield her eyes from the glare.

Seek Redemption if you would truly follow the WORD! Ignore thy petty ambitions and save thyself! Your judgement will soon be at hand...

And he was gone...

Ra’s Al Ghul stared at the spot where the emissary had been, watching the tiny spots of silvery lights that danced and winked out in his wake one by one. When he finally turned Talia shrank back and away to see the tiniest spark of madness blazing in her father’s eyes. He had the look of the damned, that look that came over him whenever he first emerged from the Lazarus Pit.

“Put ‘Babel’ on standby daughter, but tell Kant to continue his work,” Ra’s Al Ghul said as he locked his hands behind his back and strode towards the door. “In fact, redirect resources to aid Kant’s efforts in Development. Regardless of Babel’s status, his work in establishing counter-measures can be employed in any number of ways.”

“And what of you, Father?” Talia asked, watching as he father strode from the room. She knew his many moods well enough after all these years to know when he was in deep contemplation.

“I have much to consider, daughter. I shall be in my retreat, not to be disturbed.”

Talia said nothing more as the great doors to her father’s private council chamber slammed shut behind him with a metallic echo that was a long time fading away. She wondered at the words of the supposed ‘angel’, and just how much of his cryptic words her father truly believed. She wondered too just where the Justice League might be, when they might return.

And of course she worried for her beloved...

JLA VS. THE MIGHTY AVENGERS!

Prelude Deux!

Space The End of Forever, Near the Edge of Reality:

Once he was the most feared being in the known universe- almost...

There was a time when the intelligent races knew what his sudden appearance meant, what it did portend. They might cower and hide to see him, to hear that he drew near. They would try to escape their fate, dread and despair their only companions. Some might even try to fight- futilely- for a time. Once upon a time there were few that might stand against him, a handful that might dare. Once...

But that was then, a time long past.

Sleek and swift the Silver Surfer soared along the endless expanse there at the very limits of the cosmos, the so-called End of Forever. It was calm there, peaceful, a place in the vastness of space that few came, a place where any that might brave the journey might think and consider, undisturbed. The great construct deterred most that dared venture so far into the endless depths and those that did brave the rigors of the cold and heartless void often left swiftly, humbled and disgraced by the sheer magnitude of that final barrier there at the end of all. Occasionally there would be someone of course. Space is not so infinite after all, but they were few and usually fleeting, defeated by something far greater than they could possibly comprehend or defy.

The Great Wall was simply that; a massive, infinite edifice stretching far and wide into the known realms. It was a construct obviously composed of the calcified remnants of a bygone age, the detriment and refuse of what had gone before. Built by someone, but so enormous as to defy description, stretching seemingly forever it was almost beyond comprehension. Who might have built it, and why, the Silver Surfer had no idea. The star-spanning Celestials perhaps, to keep something out- or in, he corrected himself. It was all point of perspective. No matter the rhyme or reason however, it was there and would thus always give him pause to wonder.

So he soared along its length again, his shadow flitting across the rough and crude surface worn by time and erosion on a cosmic scale, a fleeting flicker of darkness barely a speck beside the enormity. He came here often for the solitude simply to contemplate as was his way. The journey was not long for one who sailed the solar winds, one who spanned the spaceways and could bypass that flickering harbinger of Time. Lesser men shunned the Wall, and those that dared did not tarry or linger, many all too often dying in the attempt, the journey simply to reach their final destination. There were fewer still that dared to stay when that goal was at last reached, such was its imposing, overwhelming presence. Fewer yet, a mere handful were there that might dare strive to breach the Wall, but it seemed that there were always signs that someone had tried since his previous visit. There, the remnants of a starship that had strayed too close, and there the charred markings of some weapon that had failed to pierce the barrier like so many before. How many had tried he wondered in the eons since-

“Norrin Radd...”

The Silver Surfer turned drawing his gleaming board about to pause, his concentration broken to hear the voice- more so to hear the voice speak his true name there in the void of space. He had not heard the intruder’s approach, and that in itself seemed miraculous for one who could perceive the rage and fire within the core of a star or the sifting of sand on a deserted asteroid, the soft breath of the cosmic winds. The Silver Surfer turned, his shining form glistening in the majesty of far off stellar light, the crackling fires of escaping energy dancing across the Wall, his gaze fixed on the approaching form, a most unexpected visitation and visitor even here.

“Thor...”

Earth’s Norse God of Thunder nodded slightly as he spiraled closer, his hammer spinning wildly at his direction, slowing his approach until the Thunderer was floating near. The Surfer noted that he seemed somewhat different since their last encounter. His armor had changed slightly of course, but his very being seemed changed as well. He wore a beard now barely hiding a scar, and he seemed somewhat pallid, almost gaunt though still a being of imposing might and glory, though perhaps just a bit overwhelmed. It was as though the weight of the world now rested on his broad shoulders, and the Surfer would know why. The Silver Surfer stepped back, offering his shining board as a place for his old ally to rest and recover from his long travels.

“I am... surprised to find you here, Odinson. So far from the Earth, what brings you hence?” The Surfer saw the Thunder God sag just a bit, shrugging, almost unnoticeably. He sighed-

“I have had my fill of mortal affairs of late, Surfer. Mine best efforts were for naught it seemed, unappreciated by those I do favor most. Too, the halls of fabled Asgard were not to my liking. I sought the solitude most often found here so far from all else where I might consider my future in peace. Some time alone...”

Norrin Radd nodded in understanding, “Then I shall not distract you, as I too have come so far, though my own contemplation is not quite so involved as your own it would seem-“

“Nay, wayfarer,” Thor said, his hand falling on the Surfer’s shoulder. “I had thought that I did require solitude absolute but upon espying thee here I do now realize that the Son of Odin would share thy company, if not thy wisdom. The Norns themselves must have led me hence to find thee waiting. It is fate indeed.”

“How so, Odinson? What wisdom might I humbly impart to one such as you?”

The Mighty Thor turned his gaze sweeping along the unending Wall, his expression soft and filled with wonder for a time. Finally though he turned to regard his old comrade, his friend. They had battled before, side-by-side and against one another and Thor knew that the shining Silver Surfer was both a vaunted warrior as well as a staunch and true being. He had seen much as the Herald of the Great Devourer of Worlds, and perhaps even more since he chose to break from his old master, Galactus!

“Decisions I have recently made have found me wanting. For a time I did lead the Mighty Avengers, but mine abilities at such caused much turmoil and left the team in whole bitter and resentful. Too, mine own personal affairs, my duty to the Golden Realm have I neglected and ‘pon my recent return I did find my brethren seemingly guarded against me, almost jealous ‘twould seem.” Thor sighed again, his gaze shifting to the far away stars. “I know not the reason for the Asgardian’s hauteur. I know not what I might have done- or not. My question to thee; thou were’t once Herald to mighty Galactus! Thou were’t once shunned above all, yet you continued unwavering ‘pon your course, thy task never forgotten nor faltering. How did you cope, Surfer? What fire spurred you on to ignore the slings and arrows of thy fellows?”

The Surfer stared at the Son of Odin, his gaze fixed and penetrating, though confused. It was strange, almost as though the Thunderer was addled. The answer was obvious-

“I had no ‘fellows’. I had no peers. In all the galaxies there was only one Herald of Galactus, one Silver Surfer. One Norrin Radd, and as the Surfer shunned his past and emotion to soar the stars and learn the final truth, so too did Norrin Radd shun his past- his love and life to save the world of his birth. That Zenn-La

might survive, Norrin Radd sold his soul and the Silver Surfer knew no emotion, and no regret. At least until he met the tender vision of a delicate blind woman on Earth...”

“Aye,” the Thunder God nodded in understanding. “Earth and its inhabitants have captured mine own heart as well in a way that my fellow Asgardians might never understand. I have loved a mortal woman, and I have allies there that I would trust with my very being, and have. In truth it was this reason that I chose to lead that mighty assemblage. Rather than see the hallowed name of the Avengers fade into obscurity I sought to lead a new team to greater glories. I failed...”

Norrin Radd smiled slightly, returning his own attention to the Wall. There seemed to be a growing unease about him, a building sense of energies emanating from the construct. A natural enough occurrence, he had sensed the like before, and yet...

“We all fail, Thunderer. It is in those failings that we grow. The death of billions upon billions rests upon my shoulders, yet that burden pales beside the mistakes I have since made. With each failure however comes insight. With age and experience comes wisdom. Of course in the end none of it will matter.

“Take this Wall, for instance. Whoever created it, built it, has been lost to the annals of time. They are forgotten, a mystery to all who live here and now. Is it some divine act of Creation? The last act of a mad god or the simple device of beings so far advanced as to make our greatest seem infantile?” The Surfer shrugged. “Even mighty Galactus does not know. My former master came here often though as he sensed that particular spark, the sustenance to end his craving beyond, mayhap forever. Galactus is perhaps the greatest being of our lives, the eldest being originating from that time before our own, yet his best efforts paled as he sought to breach the Wall time and again. Whatever spark he sensed remains unmolested beyond. I sense Chaos there, seeping through the slim cracks, that primordial essence that dominated just before the birth of this reality. I have encountered it before-“

“And your point?” Thor asked gruffly, his voice impatient.

“Life goes on, Thunderer,” the Surfer said, his eyes focusing on a small point on the Wall. “Despite our best efforts, all we do now will be forgotten one day. Earth will fall, swallowed by a cold and bloated sun. Our friends will die. There will be other heroes to take our place, others who will ask our same questions. Hopefully we may strive to make their answers more easily found. Hopefully they will learn from our mistakes. We are all but a small piece in a gigantic puzzle, a part of the overall plan.”

“Thy words ring of truth, Norrin Radd,” Thor said turning his gaze to the Wall again, that point that so fascinated the Surfer. There seemed to be a dazzling display, energy coursing, flaring skyward as though something beyond were about to erupt and break through, though that of course was impossible. “My Father, Lord Odin spoke often of this barrier beyond the stars. It was his belief as well that the very spark that first created life exists beyond that great edifice, its very power forever growing until that time when it might burst free once more wiping away the old in order to create a new and glorious existence on the ashes of what had gone before. ‘All we do in life prepares the way’ my Father has oft said, and when Ragnarok one day claims us all, others will stride forth and continue the struggle. Let us hope that day is yet far away-”

There was a sound, a cracking noise as the shattering of eggshell, the snapping of a dried twig that caused both Surfer and Thunderer to turn to the great Wall. Light came streaming from some small point, a spot barely visible as they were yet so far away, a blinding light exploding forth that made Thor wince and squint, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Zounds! What devilry is this-“

Norrin Radd stared into the radiance, his mouth slacking, open and agape as he saw the bubbling wellspring of Creation itself spewing forth from a crack in the Wall. It was slight, but he could see it growing as pinkish dark energy flowed forth burning, blasting out into space, the force of the primordial energy wiping away whatever lay in its path. It was light, blatant and pure, yet also an absence of light, a radiance of alternate energy. It was the glow of lack of substance, a negative, anti-matter without form and mass, a devastating flood of something that was not.

It was Chaos unleashed...

That he should be here, now, to witness this! To be here at the very rebirth of all reality- for what else could it be that might breach the Wall that had stymied so many? The Thunder God was correct. It was fate-

“Surfer!” Thor shouted over the rising wail of energy released and unbound. The floodtide of negative energy, the wave of Chaos unbridled was spreading quickly with a building, deafening roar, nothing to stay its path. “We must stop this! Join me! Together our combined powers might stem this flow of decimation.”

Thor was right in that there was decimation. Wherever the energy spread and touched, that that was vanished, wiped away as though it never had been. There were no words to describe that lack of ‘being’ that remained in the wake of the devastation. It was a null, an empty place quickly filled by whatever sprang forth, that crackling anti-energy swelling to fill the vacancy. It was awesome-

“Surfer!”

He had to learn more. Here was the answer to all. He had to know!

“Norrin Radd!”

The Silver Surfer shot forward, his Power Cosmic boiling within as he called upon his energies, engulfing himself in all that Galactus had bestowed so long ago. He heard and ignored the screaming curses of Thor as he left the Thunderer tumbling behind, spiraling away from his board before the wash of spreading annihilation. Mighty was Thor, a God perhaps in truth if not in name, but he was not the greatest Herald of the Devourer! Thor was the Son of Odin, but he was not the master of the Power Cosmic. The smallest spark of Galactus' flame and fire yet burned in the Silver Surfer's breast as was decreed. A punishment once upon a time, now and forever both bane and boon. Now he would know...

Now he would learn the ultimate truth...

“Nooooo!”

Thor watched as the Silver Surfer vanished into the growing maelstrom. The raging storm swallowed his glistening form, a point of light dwindling into the inferno spewing from the crack in the Wall. There was no explosion, no fanfare to mark the warrior's passing but a simple sparkle of light flaring in the growing shadow. The Surfer would find his answers it appeared, if not in this life then the next.

The God of Thunder hefted M'Jolnir, gripping the strap and started to swirl the mighty hammer. The Silver Surfer would not be lost without a fight, and the Son of Odin, the Lord of Lightning would not allow one so esteemed to simply vanish. With the Uru Hammer burning, blazing with unbridled might Thor drew closer, the power of the gods at his beck and call as he espied the crack, the widening breach in the Wall at the End of Forever.

He saw the shadows then as he drew near. They scurried from the hole, flitting, fleeting forms that skittered about the ancient surface. Dark and slick they were, scurrying about, monstrosities birthed of the edifice so old, or perhaps from the Chaos beyond. They were born of the Wall, that barren life that would mold the greatest warrior to survive its deserted wastes. Their numbers were small but formidable in their own stature, Predators created to protect the Wall, and more-

Thor stared as another came through the breach, huge and foreboding, grappling with the Predators. He was armored, his body cast in a gray fur so dark and deep as to appear almost black. He was a brute, huge with a wild mane glistening in the abhorrent glare of Chaos unbound. He screamed, beams of energy firing from his thick fingers as he struggled to pull his great, muscular

form from the crack. Energy crackled and spat about his eyes as he surveyed the void before him seeking aid perhaps, sanctuary from the dark creatures trying to drag him down. He screamed again to see the Thunder God there, drawing near, even as the jet-black monsters of the wall drew blood- and that was enough.

Blastaar disappeared in a tide of ebon bodies and slashing limbs. Even from so far away he could hear the denizen of the Negative Zone's cries of agony as the Predators rent his flesh. Thor spurred forward, but he knew that he was too late as the creatures calmed. The Thunderer paled, realizing soon enough. Blastaar was dead and the creatures were devouring their kill...

Manhattan:

Saunders glanced up, his meditation broken. There was something wrong in the realities, an angry wave of energy sweeping through the realms. He sensed the devastation, the annihilation springing forth. It was not magic, but it whispered of the arcane, the slightest essence caught up, carried along in the tide.

Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts, the Sorcerer Supreme stood and strode to the glowing, pulsating orb that hovered in midair just a few feet away. He whispered something as he approached, words long forgotten by mortal man and the radiant sphere sparkled, misty clouds of eldritch energy coruscating within. He stared in disbelief, his skin growing cold as he realized what was happening, what had been unleashed.

He swore to gods long dead and forgotten...

Milwaukee:

Richard Ryder ripped the helmet from his head, screaming as the sudden noise and static became unbearable.

He wore the armor of a Centurion, a warrior and protector of Andromeda, one of the fabled Nova Corp. His was the power of the human rocket, great strength and speed, near invulnerability. He could fly, but all of that was as nothing as his mind flooded with the horrific cries of the masses, the screaming of people he had never met but had sworn to protect when he had accepted his mantle.

Something was sweeping out across the universe. He could hear them dying in his head by the millions, billions! There was nothing that he could do.

Richard Ryder, Nova hovered over the great devastation that had once been the city of Milwaukee, the huge, gaping pit where millions had once lived and thrived and he shivered. A cold, creeping hopelessness washed over him and he paled, hopeless...

London:

John Constantine looked up, his hands shaking, the flame of his lighter wavering in the breeze. He trembled as a wave of hopelessness washed over him, something devastating that his meager magicks could not begin to combat.

He bit at his cheek, trying to stop from shivering, to hold the tip of his Silk Cut steady in the flame. He breathed deeply, exhaling finally a swirling cloud of wispy blue smoke that dispersed on the wind. He cupped his hands over the cigarette's tip against the surging breeze.

It was starting to rain...

Coast City:

The silent man clad in black and shadow glanced up at the new star that suddenly blazed, growing in brilliance there in the black of night. He sighed, tipping back his fedora as his eyes became distant and soft, the darkness edging away as tears welled, running down his face.

"So soon..." he said, his gaze locked on the radiance above.

The ghosts cried out about him, millions screaming for revenge.

Souls spiraled upward, free at last.

There was a spark of green flame but he ignored it. Someone called his name, but the word fell on deaf ears. He knew no one here. He was after all...

A stranger...

Los Angeles:

Hawkeye sighed as he drew back the string of his bow, pulling it tight, taut against his cheek. His arm was steady as he aimed, the point of the arrow unwavering as he held his target in his sights. He smiled, laughing-

"Give it up, Creel!" he shouted over the blare of sirens, fire trucks and police cars converging on the scene. Smoke roiled up caught on the warm breeze and blowing away towards the ocean, caught in the backdraft of the Santa Ana winds. The fires raged, the Absorbing Man's rampage having destroyed cars and buildings as the West Coast Avengers fought to stop him. The man was brick, a walking façade of the building's rubble, his ball and chain hanging limply at his side.

“How many times do we have ta put you away, Crusher?” Hawkeye smirked drawing a bead on his foe. “When are you gonna learn?”

“Fuck you, asshole!” the Absorbing Man raged pulling his weapon in close. Hawkeye noted that his target was tensing, his muscles bulging as he let the ball and chain spin ever so slightly, twirling in his grip. He was getting ready to attack. Hawkeye the Archer licked his lips, focusing on his target.

“Carol?”

“I got him...”

Warbird hovered over Creel, standing in midair seemingly, the sash of her belt fluttering in the wind, her long blonde hair wild. She was unafraid, the likes of the Absorbing Man far down on her private list of potential threats. She could have taken him alone, but glancing about the scene of carnage that Creel had created in trying simply to rob an armored car she saw her allies in the West Coast Avengers ready to help. The Beast, Hank McCoy formerly of the X-Men sat perched and ready to spring at Hawkeye’s command. Iron Man hovered in the background and she could hear the power building in his armor, his Repulsor Rays brimming with energy. Crusher Creel, the Absorbing Man was surrounded, and at his slightest move would be beaten down by the heroes without hesitation. He had destroyed stores and cars, created a mess in the street without a care on Rodeo Drive in the simple hope of scoring a store of cash and jewels to stoke his coffers. He would never learn.

“We all got him, Hawk,” the hollow voice of Iron Man echoed over the scene. Creel glanced up and saw the Golden Avenger aiming his metallic gauntlets at him, saw the building power within the gloves. He looked away, sweat on his brow and saw the Beast ready to spring.

“We’ve done this before, Creel. Why not simply surrender? The Clippers are playing the Knicks tonight, and if you give up I guarantee you’ll be in Central Booking in time to see the Tip-off.”

“Fuck you too, ya Mutie freak!”

Crusher Creel crouched, his hand probing the ground at his feet for something that he might absorb. Something stronger than brick. Hawkeye shook his head slightly, and with a sigh he fired.

The arrow struck Creel full in the shoulder and the Absorbing Man screamed. It was not the pain, but the process as the Absorbing Man’s powers kicked in. He had been about to absorb steel, his fingers brushing at the wreckage at his feet, but the arrow had pierced his skin as he had started to concentrate, the brick fading to flesh as he drew in the properties of the arrow-

First titanium designed to pierce stone, then fiberglass...

Crusher Creel looked up in shock and horror as he heard Warbird's raging scream of triumph. He saw the fist driving at him, but it was too late. His Norn-born powers were surging as his body took on the aspects of Hawkeye's pseudo-wooden shaft. His skin morphed, shaping and shading as the mass of brick faded away only to be replaced by some form of prevaricated wood. It almost felt like plastic, just for a moment as Warbird's fist smashed down into him too fast to avoid or change. He screamed as his body splintered, exploding with the force of her blow. He heard the hum of Repulsor Rays as Iron Man scattered his remains, his consciousness fading towards oblivion...

"Well, that was a bit anticlimactic," the Beast said as he dropped to the charred and broken asphalt. Water spewed from a shattered hydrant not so far away and Tiffany's roof collapsed as a fire raged through the buildings behind him. He drug his long fingers through the shattered wood, kindling that had been a man just a few heartbeats before. "Not a fate I'd wish on my worst enemy, I dare say."

"He'll reform," Hawkeye said as he plucked his arrow out of the ground. He ran his thumb over the blunted tip, frowning. "He always does—"

"Unfortunately," Iron Man said as he floated down to earth. His boot jets churned with the effort, one of Creel's blows having upset his internal gyros. "Creel's one of those foes that we'll never get rid of," he said, a panel opening on his gauntlet as he tapped out commands on a tiny keyboard starting a diagnostics on his system. His propulsion was off just a bit, and his Repulsors were only running at eighty-three percent. The Absorbing Man had done some damage, apparently. Nothing serious, and nothing that could not be fixed.

"Well, I think we did good work," Carol Danvers said as she stepped through Creel's splintered remains, kicking at the debris as her high-heels broke more of the tiny fragments beneath her feet. "Despite the damage," she said, hands on her hips as she surveyed the damage along the streets. The local fire department was moving in now to contain the blaze and the police were in the process of moving the crowd back. "It could have been a lot worse."

"Indubitably," the Beast agreed as he slipped his glasses onto his nose to better examine a shard of wood up close. "Luckily mister Creel decided to leave his better half at home. I suppose it is inevitable that Titania will eventually come to call however."

"We can take her," Danvers said with a conceited smile, brushing her long blonde hair back over her shoulder. "Hell, right now I feel like we could take anybody. I didn't even work up a sweat with—"

“Wish not for greater foes, warrior, and celebrate in thy victories no matter the ease lest thy wishes be granted!”

As one the Avengers moved into action at the sound of the booming voice coming from on high. They ignored the sudden gusts of swirling, driving wind, the pounding rain and darkening sky. They ignored the peal of thunder booming in they background as Iron Man and Warbird both took to the sky arching up and around to encompass the new attacker. Hawkeye drew an arrow from his quiver, charging right into open ground to draw fire as he swept his gaze skyward, his shaft easing back on taut string. Hank McCoy, the blue-furred Beast leapt aside, his form ricocheting across the rubble caused by their recent battle with the Absorbing Man until he finally came to a defensive rest atop a stalled city bus, ready to spring to the attack or leap away as needed.

They all scanned the sky, their eyes locking finally on the target, the source of the voice and it was Hawkeye that at last ordered them to stand down. He sighed slightly relieved, finally recognizing the booming, basso voice, the speech and words sinking in and making sense. There were few men he knew that spoke like that, with such an overblown confidence and authority, though of those the mighty Thor was perhaps the last he expected to see.

He came down from on high, his arms outstretched, his magic hammer spinning rapidly overhead to slow his descent. His huge crimson cape was fluttering out behind him, flowing in the backdraft and Hawkeye could not help but notice that it appeared ripped and tattered, charred in spots. The Thunder God's armor was battered as well, and this was the heavy-duty armor he had taken to wearing from time to time with the reinforced leggings and armbands, the thicker chestplate. One of the wings had been snapped off of his tarnished, dented helmet.

“Jeez, Goldilocks,” Clint Barton joked as he lowered his bow. He left his arrow notched however, noting the raging storm behind the Thunderer, the swirling, diminishing hole of purplish energy. The Asgardian had been dimension hopping apparently, and Hawkeye knew that the Avenger usually saved the spectacular entrances for the bad guys. “Give a little warning, would'ja? You about got your godly butt skewered from four sides.”

“Hawkeye's right, Thor,” Iron Man said, his own hollow voice booming over the roar of thunder that had yet to diminish. Seeing that things were in hand the Asgardian Avenger would usually have turned down the fireworks by now. Something was definitely wrong. “You know the protocol. Hell, you helped write it! What's going on?”

The West Coast Avengers gathered about the Thunder God as he landed in the midst of the carnage that was Rodeo Drive. Warbird noted that the huge Avenger seemed even grimmer than usual of late, his eyes dark and his brow

knitted with worry. Iron Man too saw that there was something troubling his friend. Of them all- of all the Avengers- he had known the Mighty Thor the longest, along with Henry Pym and Janet Van Dyne, and of course the Incredible Hulk. Tony Stark however felt that he and Thor were friends at the very least as throughout the years they had shared far too many adventures together to be considered anything but. They had guessed each other's secret identities years ago, long before the rest of the Avengers had divulged them willingly. They had saved one another time and again. They had shared much, and now at a glance, despite the pyrotechnics of the grand entrance the Invincible Iron Man could see that something worried the Thunder God. Almost scared him...

"Forgive mine abrupt entrance, Avengers," Thor said as he knelt to one knee, tapping the haft of his war hammer to the ground to still the raging storm that followed in his wake. Almost immediately the wind and driving rain slowed, the dark clouds started to disperse, the hole in mid-air closing with a wink. Thor stood, shrugging his shoulders to shed the water from his cloak. "In mine haste I did not think, did not e'en consider that you might be preoccupied. I fear recent events far and abroad have clouded my best judgement."

"No harm, Thunderer," the Beast said glancing at the queer sparkling effect left behind in the sky where Thor had stepped back into real space. Henry McCoy was a scientist at heart, a biologist really, but still he had that inherent need to always learn more. Since he first learned of his mutant powers and joined the Uncanny X-Men years ago he had seen the effects of teleportation in many of its miraculous versions. From his initial encounter with the Vanisher, to his ally Night Crawler years after, and even Thor himself he had wondered at the physics of it all. He understood the principals based on Einstein's early theories of course, but all that had been thrown out the window the first time that the Fantastic Four had journeyed to Andromeda and the very heart of the Skrull Empire. Since then matters had been complicated by the appearance of the Kree and later the pilfered expertise of the Shiar and their interstellar Warp Gates and Jump Drive. Add into the mix the technicalities of time travelers like Kang and Immortus, Doom and even Bishop and the scientific applications became mind-boggling. Even more so with Thor whose powers were derived from magic rather than science. It was confusing, but in all his experience the Beast had never quite seen the after effect that he now witnessed:

There seemed to be a blank area where the Thunder God had appeared. A negative, null zone bereft of light and color that he could not quite focus on. It pulsed oddly, and he could only denote it in his peripheral vision, but it seemed to be there none the less. What was it, McCoy wondered, but his question went unanswered as a member of SHIELD ran forward, two men in Guardsmen armor just behind and equipped with some type of vacuum-like devices strapped to their backs-

“Avengers!” the agent shouted as he ran forward, his eyes lighting on each before settling on Hawkeye, known leader of the West Coast branch of the Avengers. “Agent Hunt; SHIELD! I hate to interrupt,” he said as he looked about the scene with worry, “but we must start clean-up procedure. The fire department needs total access to the area, and we do need to ‘contain’ what’s left of the Absorbing Man before he reforms any further.” The agent of SHIELD pointed to the ground and they all saw that the splintered wood that constituted Crusher Creel’s form was already inching along the broken asphalt, larger pieces forming from the smaller remains. Carol Danvers frowned and stepped back-

“Eewww, gross!” she said, stepping aside as a piece of slimy, liquefied wood slithered over the toe of her boot.

“I agree, Avengers,” Thor said nodding to Agent Hunt and all saw the SHIELD agent sigh in obvious relief. “What I must needs say should be for thine ears alone. We should make haste to thine West Coast Compound and in truth let the call ring forth once more, as I feel that powerful as thee might be, e’en thy combined might will pale beside the evil that now confronts the very fabric of the universe.

“Avengers Assemble!”

The West Coast Avengers watched as the God of Thunder spun his hammer overhead and swiftly shot skyward. They looked from one to another then; Hawkeye the Archer, the world’s greatest marksman, Warbird imbued with the former powers of the Kree warrior Captain Marvel, the bouncing, bubbly Beast, former X-Man and Mutant, and Anthony Stark, billionaire and the armored Avenger known as the Invincible Iron Man! Together they were the core of the West Coast branch of the Mighty Avengers. There were others of course, but at the moment they were the heart and soul, and together they all knew that they would follow the Thunder God to the ends of the Universe if need be, to the very Gates of Hell itself!

Of course they hoped it would not come to that...

The African Nation of Wakanda:

Klaw whimpered as he stared at the stub of his arm. His Sonic Horn lay just a few feet away, severed from his being and mangled, a twisted wad of metal, useless. He felt no real pain of course, there was no blood, but the psychic trauma of watching as his arm was cut from his body had sent him into a fit of panic and hysteria. Worse, the damn savages were not through...

T'Challa, son of T'Chaka, Chieftain of all Wakanda and the Avenger known as the Black panther stood over the self-proclaimed Master of Sound. His face was grim, his countenance a stony mask as he stood over his foe, his regal robes fluttering in the warm breeze. The monarch of Wakanda hefted the battle-axe in his hand, considering, the golden Vibranium blade glittering in the dying sunlight. A light rain was falling and the steamy jungle was all but silent as though anticipating the horror to come.

"You can't do this!" Klaw cried out, screaming and squirming in the grip of the African warriors. He had come to Wakanda once more hoping to steal the mythic metal Vibranium from the savages as he had in the past. He had heard that the panther was away and had thought that he would have an easy time against the blacks, but his information had been wrong. They had been prepared, actually waiting for him. They had beaten him easily, the Black Panther not even sullyng his hands as he directed his minions with their Sonic Dampeners and their Null Weapons to cancel out sound. One of them had sliced away his horn, another, a mere slip of a girl smashing his weapon into pulp while the warriors wrestled him to the ground, holding him, binding him with cord woven from strands of the Wakandan mystery metal. Klaw had struggled of course, fought as best he could but they were too many, too strong. Then the Panther had strode forward finally, his Vibranium axe in hand-

"The time has come to end this, Ulysses Klaw," T'Challa said without emotion. "Time and again you invade my sovereign realm, ignoring my laws, flaunting your own nationality with immunity. Never again, as I have had enough."

T'Challa raised his axe high, his dark eyes smoldering with hate as Klaw whined and screamed. The Black Panther almost smirked as he stared down at his oldest foe, "Burn in hell, murderer-"

"My Chieftain!"

T'Challa, Son of T'Chaka paused as his most trusted aide ran forward. Taku was a childhood friend, one of those that had learned abroad, returning later to the land of his birth to help further Wakanda and help bring the nation into the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. T'Challa trusted Taku with his life and thus paused in his rightful duty, glancing back at his friend-

"Forgive me, Milord, but I have received an A-1 Priority Alert on the special frequency of the Avengers. You have stated that you should be informed of this at any time, no matter the circumstance."

T'Challa stared at his old friend curiously, "Really..." The last such call had gone forth when Korvac threatened the very fabric of reality. To implement that distress alert, "Who sent the call?"

“Thor, Milord...”

T'Challa lowered his axe, rolling the haft in his grip. Thor had quit the Avengers the last he had heard. In fact it was that very reason that T'Challa had returned to the ranks and even accepted the mantle of leadership. If not for the current troubles in his homeland, Wakanda, he would be there now. What might spark the God of Thunder then to gather the assemblage after he had left?

“Respond affirmative, Taku,” T'Challa said as he stared down at Klaw. The villain seemed at sudden ease, thinking he had earned a reprieve. “I shall answer the call accordingly after I have concluded my duty here.” Taku nodded as T'Challa raised the axe once more and Ulysses Klaw started to whimper and squirm once more-

“No!” he screamed, trying to break away but the Wakandan warriors held him fast. “No! You can't-“

“Shut up...” T'Challa said as he brought the axe down silencing the Master of Sound with one swift blow...

Hopefully forever...

San Francisco, California:

Janet Van Dyne frowned to hear the all too familiar beeping noise of her Avengers ID card. She sniffed, glancing about as she held up the flimsy negligee before her body admiring the lace and detail, the way the sheer fabric accentuated the color of her eyes and the way that the silky weave laid smoothly over her bosom. It was Dior, the latest from Paris imported by Victoria's Secret and quite risqué. It left little to the imagination, accentuating her more obvious attributes in the process.

Hank would love it...

Her frown turning into a scowl, the Wondrous Wasp tossed the flimsy nightgown back over the clothes rack and reached into her purse. She heard a whimpering, whining noise as her hand drifted into the dark confines and with a quick grin her fingers brushed against the tiny, shrunken form of her ex-husband. She glanced down and saw Henry Pym writhing, bound hand and foot by dental floss, gagged and struggling as her fingernail scratched at his four-inch frame, arousing his helpless form. It was a little game they played, one they both loved, a fetish that Hank had developed over the years and one that excited her no end. Janet let her huge finger drift between his bound legs, scratching just a bit before her fingers closed on her Identity Card and withdrew leaving her tiny, helpless husband screaming for release. She giggled, folding the flap of her bag closed, muffling his cries.

“Sorry, lover,” she said as her thumb keyed up the distress signal, her eyes focusing on the abrupt message that was displayed at her touch. An A-1 Priority Alert! She wondered what could make Thor panic to the point of calling that and knew immediately that her vacation was over.

They needed her again, and like they said, ‘Once an Avenger’...

London:

Dane Whitman dug through his bureau trying to find the source of the annoying, beeping sound. He knew exactly what it was though he could not believe that the Mighty Avengers would stoop so low as to call him again- and so soon. He found it hard to believe that they were so desperate as to call on the Black Knight!

He found the ID Card finally, buried in a drawer back behind his stockings. It was blinking and beeping, the image of Thor’s symbol flashing as the one who had sent the call. It was A-1 Priority he saw at a glance- something threatening the very fabric of reality. Kang proportions no doubt, or Ultron...

Whitman passed his thumb over the card to silence the alert and tossed the card back into his drawer. The audacity they had after the Kree/Shiar War. He still remembered the aftermath of that, their grandiose opinions and the way they had all- almost- chastised him for what he did. He had only done what had been necessary, but they as a whole, holier than thou had not seen that. He had slain to save the universe, but all that they saw was that he had slain.

Hypocrites all...

They were Avengers in name only. And still, yet, he had given them another chance. Once again- Once an Avenger...

It would be a cold day in hell before he answered their call again...

Wundagore:

Pietro Maximoff stared at the blinking card in his hand, wondering just how the humans could be so callous and uncaring. Granted it was Thor, and the Thunderer had never been one to consider the feelings of his mortal comrades beyond the task at hand, but still...

Quicksilver was officially on leave from the fabled ranks of the Avengers, his time better spent with his wife and child amongst the Inhumans in far-off Attilan for a bit. He had thought that he had made that perfectly clear. Too, his sister had taken a leave of absence from the ranks after the recent fiasco as well as the

death of her one-time husband the android Vision some time ago. Did they have no heart, no soul?

“Pietro?”

Quicksilver spun about at the sound of his Mutant sister’s voice. Like he, she was possessed of great power, hers perhaps potentially far greater than his own super speed with the ability to alter reality at a whim. In truth the Scarlet Witch was one of the most powerful beings on the planet except that her powers were fragilely sporadic and untrustworthy. There were times when Wanda’s powers had deserted her all together, and other times when she seemed almost unstoppable. Thus was the legacy of their father he supposed, the two of them the progeny of debatably the most powerful Mutant on the face of the Earth; Magneto!

“What is that sound, my brother?”

Pietro Maximoff-Magnus glanced at his sister, his thumb sliding over the slim plastic card in his hand. He depressed the cancel button, hoping that his speed had not failed him-

“It’s the Avengers, isn’t it?” Wanda asked as she stepped lightly forward running a towel through her long auburn hair. She had another towel wrapped about her body, her skin glistening with water after her hot, steaming bath. “Calling you home already?”

“It is nothing-“ Pietro said, but despite his great speed the Scarlet Witch was able to snatch the card from his grip. He frowned as her eyes focused on the emergency beacon and he knew just how she would respond. It had been easy for him to cast aside his old life, but his sister’s was too tightly intertwined with the ways of the Avengers; the Vision and Wonder Man, Hawkeye and Captain America. She would want to help, to answer the call. She looked up at him with a worried look and Quicksilver sighed, nodding-

“Respond then, sister,” he said, flopping into an over-stuffed chair in disgust. “If you don’t I know I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Brooklyn, New York:

Steve Rogers depressed the thin stud on the plastic card without hesitation. He had severed all ties with the Avengers not so long ago- as he had before, but he was never able to cut them entirely from his life it seemed.

They had saved him after all.

He still remembered that day, awakening in their submarine after he had been plucked from the frigid Atlantic wrapped in ice. He had been trapped, suspended in time after his final confrontation with the Baron Zemo- at least up until then. Bucky had died, but he had survived the explosion of the experimental Drone Plane, his unique physiology keeping him alive and young throughout the years following World War Two. The Avengers had saved him from his icy imprisonment, dragging him kicking and fighting from the ice, allowing him to join their hallowed ranks with little question. He had joined them likewise.

What else did he have to do?

The Mighty Avengers had been a major part of his life since his rebirth and he had been at their side, at their forefront for what seemed now like decades. He had led them time and again, through their best and worst. Lately however their had been some doubt, some question...

He had left the team, following a life that he had later learned was all a façade, a dream. He had no wife, no son. The life he had built was a joke, a shambles, a mockery presented by one of his oldest, greatest foes. He had nothing now,

Nothing...

Nothing but the Avengers. He had returned, again, as he always had. Forget the past, he had to look to the future once more and as they had been in the past the Avengers were there. As always...

If they needed him again, needed him now, he would respond as he had in the past...

As he always would...

Avengers Assemble!

To be Continued...

Next Issue: Things start to heat up as the Mighty Avengers assemble to deal with a universe-threatening disturbance. But just what does Ra's Al Ghul have to do with the Avengers, and what might Annihilus be up to with his scurrying little Predators? For the answers head on over to JLU 2001 and read the next chapter of the greatest cross-over of all time-

JLA vs. the Avengers continues in one short month over at JLU 2001! Be there or be square...

Story © Curt F
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F



JLA Vs. the Avengers #1 (JLU)

Manhattan:

Thick-gloved fingers danced over the control board, the slightest movement flicking switches, twisting dials and knobs. Her eyes watched the display monitors intently, watching as needles fluttered to and fro, shifting from dangerous red to green and just as quickly back again. There was a chime of bells, annoying, a claxon on top of that and a metallic buzzing.

Oubliette felt the shake and rumble of the modified Star Core shuttle as she brought the outdated ship to life. The gantry was vibrating wildly with the barely restrained thrust building in the archaic atomic engines. She gritted her teeth as her fingers flew over the console, silencing the warning lights, bells and whistles as quickly as she could, almost as quickly as they came to life.

She had been training for this day for some time now, and she had not even tried to hide her pleasure that it had finally come. She was getting bored with the learning, the countless drills, and even though she knew the hours upon hours of dry practice runs were necessary, if not for her love of her father she would have slain her instructors long ago, no matter how much they had cost.

The Exterminatrix sighed, licking her lips as she waited for the internal pressures to rise to meet the pumping levels of oxygen and even out. A moment's reprieve, she stretched her arms and popped her neck as best she could strapped thus into the command chair in the shuttle's cockpit. She could hear the voices of her father's various scientists babbling in the background of her helmet's internal radio. Occasionally she even heard her father's voice, conferring with that cute Doctor Janus that had made this all possible. She hoped that she would get a piece of that when all of this was over- but that was up to Daddy of course.

Oubliette cracked her knuckles, waiting, barely able to feel her fingers in the thick NASA suit. It had been modified to withstand the rigors of the Negative Zone, but as far as looks went it did little to inspire. It was huge and bulky, cumbersome despite her best efforts and did little to accentuate her figure. It served its purpose she supposed, but she hated it. It made her look fat.

Bad as her own space suit was however, it had to be worse for the man sitting beside her in the co-pilot's chair. He was sealed head to toe in the over-sized Mark I Mandroid armor that her father had bought years ago from Stark Industries- initial patents et al. Despite his legendary strength, Oubliette knew that the man within the archaic, obsolete armor could barely move with all of the additions that Doctor Janus had jury-rigged in the last few hours. The bulky energy converters alone had to weigh tons, and add to that the boot jet apparatus and the redesigned sensory array it had to be hell. Despite it all however, when the Exterminatrix glanced at her companion she saw the golden gauntlets of the armor gripping the arm rests of his chair fiercely and the face barely visible in the view port of the helmet looked grim and determined, pale and covered in sweat. Oubliette giggled-

"Nervous, Count?" she asked, wincing at the raspy sound of her usually sultry voice as her helmet radio mangled her words. The Mandroid armor shifted ever so slightly but could not turn to face her.

"Only slightly child." Oubliette was pleased that Count Nefaria's own basso voice seemed just as distorted as her own. "I've had several bad experiences in air craft over the years, usually resulting in explosions. I will be fine once we are under way."

The Exterminatrix nodded in understanding even as she sprang back to action, her hands dancing over the command console as a fresh series of lights flared to life demanding her attention. She flicked the proper switches, "Shouldn't be long now," then adjusted her radio-

"All systems go, Daddy!" she said with a smile and glee in her voice. She could feel the excitement growing within her, hear the excitement in the voices of the scientists. Nefaria simply oozed anticipation, even through his armor.

"Good!" Oubliette's heart swelled to hear her father's approval. His metallic voice rang in her ears and she could hear the pride in what she was about to do- pilot a ship into the very heart of the Negative Zone. She was going where few had gone before; the Fantastic Four, the Avengers. She almost felt like a hero.

Something on the console 'pinged' drawing Oubliette from her reveries and she saw a series of lights shift green. She glanced at the power ratio indicator and saw it topping into the lower half of red. Her radio was abuzz with static and dozens of voices babbling in her ears. She licked her lips again, her hands grabbing the steering column almost lovingly. The countdown had reached fifteen... ten...

"Good luck, daughter," she heard her father's voice almost cracking with emotion. "Do me proud."

Whatever her response it was lost in the roar of the engines as the old, rebuilt Star Core shuttle lurched in its gantry and began to shake madly even as it started to rise in its track. Oubliette had little to do but hold the course until they actually passed through the hole, the rip in the air that Reed Richards had created years ago that led to the Negative Zone. Once there she would have her hands full holding the course as the craft passed through the Zone of Distortion. There would be a few wild seconds, but then the scientists assured her that it would be no more difficult than flying a normal plane through normal skies. She had her doubts of course- they had been wrong before, but she was hopeful.

She felt the gantry fall away as the shuttle's engines raged. Within seconds the old ship was flying free, gravity trying to hold it back as it steadily, slowly climbed in arch towards the wavering sparkle of light that was the doorway to another universe- an anti-matter universe. Oubliette tried to relax, unclenching her teeth and arms as she scanned the console watching the indicators. Power was still touching the red, but all suppressors were in safe zones. Oxygen was good, and internal pressure was adjusting within acceptable standards. Atomic batteries to power- turbines to speed...

Thunderbirds were go!

Nearby...

Reed Richards watched as the obsolete Star Core Shuttle rocked and spat exhaust as it forced its way skyward. It was shaking madly, and just for a moment he thought that the old, battered ship might explode in its berth but miraculously it took to the air- albeit complaining- and continued to rise.

He watched as the scientists on the roof began to scurry about in the ship's wake, some pointing after it, others going about their duties. He saw Doctor Midas there on the roof as well, his golden armor sparkling in the sunlight only slightly tarnished from the great plumes of burning exhaust spat out by the shuttle. Apparently when Stark built something, even as ancient as his second-generation Iron Man armor, it kept working.

He saw Midas watching as the ship climbed and returned his attention to the shuttle and the hole beyond. He cursed to himself, wishing that he had taken the time to close the hole above Manhattan that led to the Negative Zone, or at least he should have kept abreast of the property where the Baxter Building had once stood. Times were hard though, and he had put off a payment on the tax referral and Midas had pounced like a lion on the Veldt. It was over before Richards even knew what had happened. This was all his fault.

Still, he hoped that Midas knew what he was getting into. He hoped that the shuttle was properly shielded for the rigors of the Zone. He hoped that they were prepared for the strange and unique wildlife that they would encounter- the

denizens of the Negative Zone were fierce and often fatal. He hoped too that they could find their way back, remembering many of his own trips into the Zone-

“Now we must hope for calamity.”

Reed Richards, Mister Fantastic turned to stare wide-eyed at the SHIELD agent standing slightly behind him. Jimmy Woo’s face was bland and impassive as he watched the shuttle’s climb, a cigarette hanging limply from his lips. His dark almond eyes turned towards Richards and the agent shrugged.

“They get what they deserve. Megalomaniacs like Doctor Midas should be locked away, Professor. Their very existence threatens our lives daily, the lives of the people we seek and strive to protect. The least we can hope for is that the crew of the shuttle never returns and Midas never achieves his goals.”

Richards shivered, returning his attention to the shuttle. It was almost to the hole. In seconds it would be gone. “That’s why we’re here, Woo; me and my team and you and yours. We have to show the likes of Doctor Midas the errors of his ways.”

“Perhaps that is on your job description, Professor,” Woo said, flicking his spent cigarette at a corner of the roof where a small pile of butts was accumulating. “It is not on mine...”

Whatever Reed Richards was about to say was lost as there was a flare of light in the sky. He shielded his eyes as he watched the Star Core shuttle vanish into the rippling hole in the sky, and just as quickly it was over. It was almost anti-climatic after the long and drawn out activity to get to this point.

Richards watched the hole for a few moments, then turned his attention to the rooftop of the opposite building. He could see the scientists still, the technicians going about their collective duties in the ship’s passing in a flurry of activity. He could see Midas too, puffing on his telltale cigar. He saw the Golden Doctor turn-

And flip him the bird...

Reed Richards blinked, unbelieving. He might expect that from one of the villains they faced so often; the Sand Man or the Trapster- even from Ben under the proper circumstances. But from one of his peers? And all things aside, Doctor Midas was a peer. He turned to Woo-

“He flipped me off!” Richards said, blinking and Woo just shrugged, lighting another cigarette.

“Welcome to my world, Professor.”

Into the Breach!

JLA Vs. the Avengers Part I:

The Zone of Distortion:

There was just enough play in the thick metallic gauntlets of the Mandroid armor for him to firmly grip the armrests of his chair. The tiniest bit of comfort, support as he gritted his teeth, half from the shattering racket and shiver of the obsolete shuttle, half from fear. He clenched his eyes shut as the hulking craft rumbled and swayed, the roar of the engines blotting out the static in his ear piece, but that was no help at all. He still saw the damnable Indian whenever he closed his eyes. The snarling, determined face, the fists hammering through the windscreen of the jet aircraft, he could still hear the explosion, feel the burn, the pain as he teleported away.

Gods, how he hated to fly.

Count Nefaria opened his eyes, willing the image of John Proudstar away, out of his mind's eye. It was no better with his eyes wide open however, staring at the approaching, sparkling rip in the very sky. He had no doubt that they would survive with Midas' daughter on board, but there was of course a chance of calamity. Not that Doctor Midas would not sacrifice his daughter in his lust for power- Nefaria would do the same in his own quest for immortality- but he knew that the Doctor had invested much in this excursion and would see it through to the end. Barring accidents, they were safe for the time being. Still...

Nefaria tried to focus on anything other than what lay beyond the reinforced windows before him. He felt the slightest tingle as the nose of the shuttle passed into the rip and started to blaze. He could hear Thunderbird screaming at him, pounding on the jet-

Light flashed and flickered as energy coruscated throughout the cockpit. His skin felt hot, burning. He was sweating bullets now, sweating like a peasant in the fields as the world tore itself apart. His stomach churned, lurched as all he knew, all that his body and soul were fell away as they passed through the dimensional barrier.

Nefaria sucked air through clenched teeth focusing his gaze on a charred panel overhead, burned by radiation no doubt years ago when the Phoenix had been

born. He tried to remember Richard's thesis and articles on the Negative Zone, he had read them enough that he should know them by rote, but Thunderbird was still screaming in his ear, hammering on the hatch...

They were passing through the 'Zone of Distortion' as Richards had dubbed it, that area where positive matter and energy was transformed into the negative; anti-matter. Richards theorized of course that this was the only way that anything might survive in negative space. It was a null void that he himself had created, patented. Nefaria wondered just how much he had made off of that.

He could feel something happening. He could feel the tingle in his body growing, raging as his very structure was changing to accommodate the brave new universe he was entering. He licked his lips, remembering when his body had been first enhanced by ionic energy, energies stolen from Power Man, the Whirlwind and the Living Laser. It was not so different he decided. Whatever the new universe was doing to him, he could endure.

But the sights might drive him mad. As his vision began to clear with the fading explosion of light and energy he tried to focus on the swirling array of shapes and images. There- a cube rotating, spinning madly. There- a starburst that swelled and receded like a thing alive. A band of solid light seemed to swirl and stretch far away, lost to the distance. Things floated by, some whizzing past too fast to discern, others seemingly exploding as they came too near. It was dazzling, boggling as he tried to comprehend a fourth dimension in terms of the third dimension that he had known all his life.

He could hear the girl too, her breathing erratic and gasping, rising in pitch with her moans and movements. Nefaria could not properly turn to see her, but the noises she was making, it almost sounded as though she were nearing orgasm. And why not? He was feeling better himself as the craft fared deeper, finally bursting through the final barriers of Subspace!

And they were through...

He could hear the girl's breathing slowing now, gasping even as her hands started to flow over the controls. He could feel a gravimetric pull tugging at the shuttle, drawing it into the ebb and flow of the matter and debris speeding towards some central source. If Richards was correct that source would be Earth, and the drifting matter of the Negative Zone would be forever inexplicably drawn towards that beacon only to explode in the world's positive atmosphere; the Exploding Atmosphere! Within moments however he felt the strain of the shuttle's engines as it pulled away from the current and held a course that would leave them orbiting the untouchable Earth until they got their bearings. The girl was good.

"Still with me, Count?"

The girl's voice was sultry static but he could hear the condensation behind her mock concern. He felt the fool at his inadequacy- damn the Mutant bastard that had instilled the phobia. He felt good now though, stronger than he had in months since he first noticed that his stolen powers were starting to fade once again. He felt revived here in the Negative Zone, almost rejuvenated with the flow of transposition of his molecules, his very being to anti-matter.

"Of course, child," he replied, his voice laced with his own special arrogance. Damn the bitch that she had seen his weakness, his fear. He watched as she guided the craft through the detritus and debris of the Zone. He could see the Earth, the Exploding Atmosphere far and away in the distance, but as the ship banked, slowly turning away there was another blaze that caught his eye.

"Now we just have to find Annihilus," the Exterminatrix continued. Her words were almost lost however as Nefaria gazed at the spiraling, spewing display of power far in the distance. It was like a giant whirlpool of energy seeping into another hole not unlike the one they had just passed through. There were explosions, a dazzling display of light being sucked away as though into a Black Hole. It was a rip he saw, a tear like back in reality, back on Earth, anti-matter flaring as it poured through. But to where?

There was no way to judge just how far away the other rip might be, time and space seemed meaningless here. It might be a few miles or light years for all he knew. Nefaria knew however that that was where they needed to go.

"I do not think that finding Annihilus will be a problem. I believe that he will find us."

Nefaria pointed at the rage of energy and was satisfied to hear the girl gasp. More so as she began to guide the sluggish craft towards the phenomena. This was something new, something that Reed Richards had never noted in his papers. A new rip in space, beyond perhaps another dimension, unexplored and favorable. Richards had called the Zone the 'Crossroads of Infinity'.

Nefaria hoped that Mister Fantastic was right...

Elsewhere:

The Flash was the first to wake of course, the fastest.

Even as he woke he cried out, his leg muscles screaming in agony, vibrating madly still. He churned, his body convulsing, his hands a blur as he massaged his legs trying to ease the flaring pain and spasms.

Tears in his eyes, Wally West, the third Flash scanned the platform of the Cosmic Treadmill. He felt his breath coming in short, choppy gasps. His heart hammered in his chest. He was hyperventilating, fear clogging his throat as he stared at the remnants of the device that he had helped to build. It was a shambles.

The Treadmill had been ripped in two, unable to withstand the turbulence of the Time Stream that they had encountered on the trip back from the very End of Time. Wally could see bits and pieces, shrapnel from the machine floating nearby. Energy arched from shattered conduits, wires whipping wildly in the backdraft of their movement, drifting from momentum, lost in space-

Wally's eyes went wide!

He sucked in a lungfull of air, springing to his feet and wincing in pain as his leg muscles rebelled. He held it, glancing frantically about as he counted heads. They were in space- open space! Any second now they would all blow up like balloons and explode. He had to do something- anything! He had to save them! He had to-

Nothing...

Wally West exhaled, almost collapsing over what remained of one of the support struts that had lined the Treadmill. They had not exploded, had not died, and that meant that either someone else was awake and saving them or they were not in space as he first thought. It looked like space, though he did not recognize any star patterns, and there seemed to be a lot of asteroids flowing past. There were planets in the distance, big rocks really looking totally desolate. There were stars too, big blazing stars that just did not look right. There were clouds of gas and oddly shaped geometric forms flitting past-

Where were they?

"W-Wally..."

The Flash turned, surprised to hear the sound, any sound, shocked to hear his name. Again he scanned the remnants of the Treadmill, his eyes shifting quickly, lightning flaring as he tensed. He saw them there, splayed and spread on the platform, defeated. Dead? He hoped not.

"God no..."

He saw Kyle Rayner raise his head, his hand pulsing green and figured that they were all alive due to the efforts of the Green Lantern! The Lantern's ring was sparkling, crackling with energy as Kyle struggled to his hands and knees. Wally saw him heave and retch suddenly, the verdant energy flaring at the extra effort.

The Treadmill shook then, and the Flash saw the slight tinge of green that surrounded them all at last, weak and flickering, fluctuating. It was Kyle keeping them alive.

Flash was at his friend's side instantly, helping him to sit up and focus. Kyle Rayner hacked again, coughing up phlegm at the sudden movement and Wally saw traces of blood in the spittle.

"Easy, man," Wally West said as he eased his friend against one of the bent support struts. He could see the impressions someone's fingers had made in the warped and twisted metal and swiftly glanced about the rest of the fallen heroes as Kyle sagged, moaning. "Stay here Kyle. I have to see to the others. See-"

Wally's voice caught in his throat as he stood once more and surveyed the damage. His skin paled as he started counting heads, a chill racing along his spine. Whatever force had struck the Cosmic Treadmill in the Time Stream and ripped it in two had also torn the JLA in half.

He saw Plastic Man; his pliable body a gooey soup that seemed to spread over the platform like sewage backing up in a basement. There were thick chunks of the man piled in the corners, sheets of him oozing about the machinery, his elongated arms flowing, wavering in the cosmic winds trailing behind what was left of the treadmill. Plastic Man had been using his body to help hold the passengers together during their wild ride through time, and West could only imagine what the sudden assault had done to the man looking at the charred stubs where his hands used to be, waving in the breeze. He must have tried to hold onto whoever was now missing, even to the end.

Wonder Woman too had been trying to hold the travelers together. She had entwined her Golden Lasso around everyone, anchoring it and herself to the machine, but apparently the force that had struck the Time Stream had been too much even for her magical rope. The indestructible cord was still glowing, faintly, but it almost looked as though it had been severed and like Plas' arms was now whipping about the treadmill's slipstream. The remainder of the rope was still loosely coiled here and there in bunches, but almost useless by the look.

He saw the Martian Manhunter face down on the platform, his arms spread around the Black Canary and Zatanna laying to either side. The women were breathing Wally saw, but J'onnn J'onzz was still as death, though that meant nothing in the Martian's instance. Wally had heard the man sigh, often repeatedly and heavily when dealing with the likes of Booster Gold or Guy Gardner, but he could not actually remember even seeing the big green man breathe.

Superman however did breathe. Wally knew that the man of Steel was really not so different from the rest of them, at least in that respect. The Flash could see

the Kryptonian's chest heaving even now, luckily, as he had endured the worst of their trip to the far future. It had been he that the Time Trapper had kidnapped along with Lois Lane- the reporter from Metropolis and Superman's one time media dubbed girlfriend- and an elderly couple from Kansas- coincidentally Clark Kent's parents. Coincidence? Wally did not have time to wonder as he saw now Lois Lane-Kent wrapped protectively in the arms and cape of the Man of Steel. Her in-laws however, the Kents were gone!

Wally West spun about, his eyes wide and frantic once again as he looked to the rest. He saw a boy just a bit younger than himself that had to be Ronnie Raymond, the alter ego of Firestorm the Nuclear Man. Why the kid had powered down Flash had no idea, though maybe unconsciousness brought about the change. Firestorm had been in the League longer than Wally had, but still he knew little about the Nuclear Man, and not a clue as to how his powers worked.

And that was it...

Wally West, Fastest Man Alive slowly stood in place circling, watching as his friends and teammates began to move and moan, began to wake up and recover, hopefully. But what of the others? Red Tornado, Atom, Aquaman and the Batman were gone!

"West..."

"Gaww!"

Wally West shouted, spinning about as his heart started hammering in his chest, racing as adrenaline sped through his body spurred by shock and fear. He was trembling as his eyes tried to quickly adjust to the new view, his vision blurring as light tried to catch up with his Speed Force enhanced sight. The dark, fluttering silhouette slowly came into focus, the glaring white slits scanning him in return, looking him up and down appraisingly before turning away and ignoring him.

"Batman!" Wally gasped feeling his own pulse still fluttering in his wrist. "Jesus, I thought you were-"

"Have you inspected the treadmill?" Batman said, ignoring the Flash as he waded through what was left of Plastic Man and crouched beside the Martian Manhunter and the two women. Wally heard a 'pop' and smelled ammonia for a split second before Zatanna and Black Canary started coughing and choking.

"No, I-"

"Do so!" Batman ordered, his voice cold and brooking no argument. He was taking charge of the situation again- thankfully- and for once Wally did not mind. He saw the Batman moving on quickly and silently to Wonder Woman, then to

Superman and finally to Raymond. He was ignoring Green Lantern and Plastic Man, but thinking on it there was nothing really that the Batman could do for Plas. Wally could not even see the man's face in the goop at their feet. Kyle on the other hand seemed to be almost recovered if just a little shaky, trying to stand. Wally offered a shoulder to lean on as he did as Batman had 'asked' and scanned the wreckage. It was hopeless.

As Flash held onto his friend he saw the others recovering one by one. Too as they came around each slowly turned their gaze skyward, a look of awe washing over each face. All save one as Superman held Lois Lane protectively, a mask of sorrow contorting his visage. Was he crying?

"J'onn," Batman's grim voice caught Wally's attention. "See what you can do to help O'Brien." Even as the Manhunter nodded Batman turned his own attention to Green Lantern, "Lantern, are you well enough to keep us shielded from the elements?" Kyle Rayner nodded-

"Yeah," he said, his voice rough and croaking. "There's atmosphere though, so I don't-"

"Just do it!" Batman said gruffly, turning away then glancing back. "Keep us shielded for now, just in case. At least until we've assessed the damage and determined where we are."

"And just where is that, Batman?" Black Canary asked her own voice hard and grim. She had a swollen lump on her forehead that was coloring a nasty shade of violet. "This doesn't look like space to me."

"Nor to me," Zatanna added. She seemed no worse for wear but her voice was quivering, sounding fearful almost. "I sense no magic here, wherever here is."

Wally West felt a cold shiver run up his spine again, felt Kyle jump at the same time. Both looked down to see Plastic Man's body slithering and flowing, coagulating almost as though he were coming together again. It was sickening to watch however and both men quickly looked away, Rayner gagging again.

"I feel we are not in normal space any longer," J'onn J'onzz said, his head cocking as he scanned the area no doubt shifting his sight through a variety of spectrums that only Martians could see.

"We're not," Superman said with a heaving sigh as he laid Lois Lane-Kent at the feet of Wonder Woman. He had the reporter wrapped snugly in his cape and he gazed at the Amazonian Princess who nodded in return as some unspoken thought passed between the two. Wonder Woman stepped protectively over the other woman, looping the good end of her lasso about the reporter then began to

study the frayed end in confusion. Superman looked to J'onzz and then to the Batman-

"We're in the realm of Qward I believe; the Negative Universe. I recognize the feeling, the absence and entropy, the loneliness."

"Hmmp," Batman shrugged, glancing at the Martian Manhunter who again nodded in confirmation. Flash too recognized the surroundings then, vaguely. He had been there before, during the Crisis and the battle against the Anti-Monitor just after Barry had... died...

"A feeling I'm familiar with," Batman continued, "and dealt with for quite some time. I suggest you all do the same so we can concentrate on getting home."

"Wait-" Flash started, but the Raymond boy was even faster-

"What about the others?" he said stepping up, actually standing in front of the Dark Knight, and looking up at him defiantly. "What about the others; Aquaman, Atom, Reddy? What about the Kents?" Ronnie Raymond glanced at Superman but the Man of Steel had his back to them all, scanning the stars.

"They're gone..." he said, his voice catching. "They're nowhere within my line of sight."

"Nor mine," J'onnn J'onzz added, "nor within the range of my telepathy. They could be still within the Time Stream, or even back home for that matter. Perhaps they are elsewhere within the Negative Universe, but if so they are lost to us. At least for the time being."

"We have to look for them!" Black Canary shouted almost in unison with Ronnie Raymond. "We have to try to find them-" she continued.

"They must need help!" Zatanna added, but the Batman seemed to ignore the outburst.

"All three men are capable and powerful," he said and Flash saw his hand slip into his cloak, his JLA Communicator sliding almost invisibly back into its compartment on his Utility Belt. Batman had been searching as well, after all. "Aquaman is a born leader. Atom is perhaps one of the smartest men I know and Red Tornado one of the most powerful. If they are all together they'll safeguard the Kents," did Batman glance at Superman, "and then they will carry on as we have to. First order of business is survival." Batman scanned the protestors for any further sign of descent but each in turn backed down, though not one of them seemed too happy to do so.

"Lantern," the Batman said barely breaking stride. "The original League once fought a being known as Aquarius. Hal Jordan and Alan Scott defeated him by tricking him into the Negative Universe through a hole in the 'Corridor Between Realities' as they called it. Can you find that hole?"

"I don't know," Kyle Rayner said truthfully. He held up his ring, "The information's in here. All the victories and defeats of the Green Lantern Corp are recorded for me to tap into, but you know as well as I do that a lot of Alan's power is based on magic. I don't know if my ring alone can do the job."

"Try," Batman said with a frown, turning his back on Earth's Green Lantern. Wally West felt his friend tense at the snub- as though he was something less than Hal Jordan, Earth's first Green Lantern. Insult or no however, Wally saw the ring blaze to life as Kyle started searching the greatest weapon in the universe for the answers they needed.

"J'onn?" the Batman asked, turning to the Martian.

"I have only visited this realm with aid, Batman. With the Monitor's devices at the time of Crisis for instance, or through the Psychic Plane. I fear I have no solution." Batman nodded, turning to the Man of Steel.

"I'm sorry," Superman said, his voice still heavy. "Like J'onn, I've only been here by artificial means. I was here for that final battle with the Anti-Monitor, and I've fought the Weaponers here too, but I always had help crossing the dimensional barriers."

"What about the Cosmic Treadmill, Flash?"

Wally West almost jumped to hear his name. Licking his lips he glanced about the remnants of the machine again. "It's wasted, Batman. No way we can repair it without some kind of material to replace what's missing. Hell, I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Firestorm can create the material, West," Batman said staring at Ronnie Raymond again, waiting. Raymond snapped his attention once more to the detective-

"You don't think I've been trying to change?" he screamed, his voice cracking. "There's nothing there! The power's gone!"

"It's the universe, Batman," J'onn J'onzz said in defense of his young friend. "Like Zatanna, Firestorm's powers are based firmly in our own reality. The laws of physics differ here in this realm, and the elements are widely varied. Perhaps it is for the best, for even if Ronnie were able to call upon his alter ego, the

Nuclear Man's powers would be greatly altered and perhaps devastating to us. If he could fathom a new and obscure set of elements at all."

Batman sighed, his face going grimmer by the second as he turned back to the Green Lantern. "Then it's up to you Rayner. Find us a door-"

"Right," Kyle said, his eyes ablaze as he 'communicated' with the glowing bauble on his finger. His face was awash in a green glow as the collected memories of hundreds flooded his thoughts, the ring translating all into some pattern of logic that he could assimilate and understand. Kyle Rayner seemed almost in a trance, his face going slack eventually, his mouth agape.

"Ohhh..."

Wally West looked to the source of the new voice and saw Plastic Man more or less whole, sitting on the platform with a rubbery arm wrapped about a leg of Zatanna and Black Canary respectively. His hands seemed back to normal, though still a bit red from burn and Wally could not help notice that he was running his fingers over the smooth skin and fishnets of each woman with his tongue lolling from the corner of his still elongated mouth.

"Anybody get the number of that Death Star ran me down?" he joked, his face morphing to take on the image of Sir Alec Guinness. "I felt a disturbance in the Force. As though a billion souls hit me with the ugly stick at once-"

"Welcome back, O'Brien," Batman said, cutting off the man before he could start rolling. "J'onn, update him, then do what you can to help Lantern-"

"Don't need it, Batman," Kyle Rayner said finally stepping away from the Flash to face the Dark Knight on his own two legs. "I found what you said, and the ring found the 'hole' in question-"

"Good work-" Batman said, but Green Lantern cut him off.

"I'm not done. The ring is registering a surge of power at that hole that's off the scale. It's not just the collision of positive and negative matter, energy, whatever, there's something more that it can't identify. Something that it's never encountered- at least in its recorded history." The Batman nodded-

"Can you get us there?"

"We've been drifting that way all along," Kyle said as he focused his will power again, his mind setting aside the information he had been fed for future reference, "along with everything else. It's like a huge black hole drawing everything in, in that direction." He pointed, "You can see it now, that pinkish glow there." All eyes turned in the direction that Green Lantern indicated and as

one they all seemed to gasp. They stared, a feeling of insignificance washing over them, memories flooding their mind's eye as each in turn remembered the worst time of their lives.

They saw the image that their minds created, a construct that allowed their fragile psyches to comprehend. It was huge, staggering, a great flowing band that seemed to bend and fold back in on itself, encompassing infinity. It was like a gigantic Mobius Strip, a gargantuan, endless mass of solid energy there at that point where the universes collided. Explosions rocked the space about it as positive matter and energy met negative. Great crimson clouds roiled, expanding and laced with lightning. A booming sound of thunder rolled incessantly, deafening though oddly not overwhelming. Plumes of cosmic force spewed out in churning geysers about the strip, along its mind-boggling length. There were holes, rips in the very fabric of space radiating a queer, fluctuating strobe of light.

"God no, please..." Flash said as he stared trying to take it all in. "Not again..."

"It's the Crisis isn't it?" Zatanna asked, her voice barely a hushed whisper yet heard by all. "It's happening again. It never stopped..."

They all thought of their friends then, lost in the battle against the Anti-Monitor; Dove and Kole, Barry Allen, how many more? How many lives had been altered by the Anti-Monitor's plot to shift reality? How many more would have to die now?

"It's just special effects," Batman said trying to quell their fears but all heard the odd edge to his voice. He was not sure, not certain, and that worried them more than anything. "The effect of positive and negative colliding, it's no crisis unless we make it one."

Batman looked to Superman and the Martian Manhunter. "We need propulsion. Can you both survive out there?"

"We have before," Superman said casting a final, longing look to Lois Lane-Kent, still mercifully asleep. "We will again."

"Then you two hold us steady until the Lantern finds our hole. I don't know what that is, and I don't really want to, but somewhere within that maelstrom is our doorway home." The Batman turned then to the Earth's Green Lantern, the frown still in place but the voice suddenly softer, not so cold.

"Save us Lantern- Kyle. Get us home."

Kyle Rayner blinked, swallowing a lump that had risen in his throat. He stared at his power ring for a moment, the greatest weapon in the universe and finally nodded,

“You can count on me, Batman,” he said, holding his arm out straight as he began to probe the anomaly that was drawing steadily closer. Superman and the Martian Manhunter were outside his protective field now and guiding what was left of the treadmill, slowing its inexorable approach to the Event Horizon, giving Kyle time and space, buying him the precious moments to find the way home. Could he do it?

Yes! If Hal Jordan could do it, so could he. Batman trusted him. They all did...

He would get them home...

**Earth,
Somewhere:**

He was the first to respond of course. He always was.

Fastest man alive, fastest being on the planet...

He shut down the alarm claxons first; the noise was deafening, annoyingly slow to his ears. He had been against creating a Trophy Room. It seemed stupid, asking for trouble assembling the weapons of their greatest foes, artifacts that could kill them all and rend the very fabric of reality together all in one room, but the others- most of the others anyway- thought that it would be a quaint idea. They needed the boost to their egos apparently, a push in the right direction. In the end he had conceded, grudgingly. Now he wished he had stayed adamant.

His hands were a blur as he shut down the alarms and redirected the defenses, his eyes flitting over the monitor array to determine what had gone active amongst the dormant junk that they had gathered over the years:

American Eagle’s Starlight Shield...

Brainchild’s Reality Converter...

Master Menace’s Cosmic Annihilator...

Finally he found it, just a sparkling twinkle within the framework of the Scarlet Centurion’s Dimensional Escalator. The Cosmic Stairs were rolling upward, invisibly to the naked eye, but of course he saw things that the others never would in the span of their lives. It was moving slowly, but it was moving, which meant that something was trying to step between realities. The Centurion was dead he knew, so hopefully it was something benign, maybe a friend-

It was probably the Avengers.

Stanley Stewart watched as the Escalator rolled on, waiting for something to appear. There was no way to shut the damnable thing down that any of them knew once it got going. It was the Scarlet Centurion's master construct, designed to pluck personages from the Time Stream, used of course to defeat them in the past. They had fought beings like Heracles and Goliath, Merlin and Cagliostro over the years, any time that the Centurion got a hard on to attack. It had proved annoying at best, but if the Centurion was back in action somehow with some new plot he would find them ready-

"What is it, Stan?"

Stanley spun about, staring at his friend. Mark Milton looked half-asleep, which was odd in itself, his thick-lensed glasses askew at a rakish angle. His 'new' eyes seemed to work fine, but he still had problems at times; psychosomatic more than likely. Zarda was right behind him, pulling on her uniform, her hair wild with sweat sheening her skin. It did not take much to imagine what they had been up to-

"I dunno," he said, returning his attention to the Escalator. "It just seemed to be running when I got here. Something's coming, but I don't-"

They all three stared as the image took shape, the familiar dark silhouette forming on the steps of the Time Stairs. They recognized the billowing cloak, the stance of determination and confidence. They saw the pointy ears of his cowl-

"Kyle?" Milton said, blinking behind the thick lenses of the glasses that once enhanced his sight to a Radar-like quality allowing him to see in an odd way, now simply easing strain when he slept. He saw the shadowy figure on the stairs tense, the hands flitting to its sides in a way that seemed all too familiar.

"I don't think so," Zarda said as the figure leaped, twisting and spiraling into a defensive crouch. It was almost Kyle, but the costume was dark in grays and blues, not quite a bird, more a bat. There was another on the Escalator forming behind. Someone big...

"It's not the Avengers..."

The others were there, gathering at the alarm, at the door. But for every one of them that appeared, someone new stepped from the Dimensional Stairs, another doppelganger it appeared. They all saw the similarities:

The big, muscular guy in the cape...

The slick man in the skin-tight costume...

The man with the glowing stone...

They were not the Avengers. They were someone else...

"The Squadron Sinister," Hyperion whispered, not quite able to see their costumes, not really.

"I don't think-" the Whizzer said, but he was ignored.

"Squadron Attack!"

And the battle was joined...

To be continued...

Story © Curt F

Plot © Curt F and Chris Munn

Next Issue: Okay, who saw that coming? No one hopefully. Be right here next month as the battle of the century commences when the JLA takes on the Squadron Supreme, but first check out Avengers/JLA over at Marvel 2K for the flip side of this adventure, and the next part of the greatest cross-over in Fanfic History!

Surprises and guest stars abound!

Really...



Avengers vs. JLA #1

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Ra's AI Ghul watched as the images flickered and flitted past, his steel gray eyes bright as the world passed before him. The pictures appearing on the monitors showed various places scattered about the globe; the major cities of course like Gotham, Tokyo, Metropolis but also less inhabited places. The rain forests of Brazil where the constant stripping of trees wiped away the years of evolution as another plant or animal was erased from existence, the atmosphere despoiled a little more with every choking breath of every machine. China, where the Yellow River steadily rose, submerging flora and fauna alike the better to provide the chattel with more power. Nearby Quarac where men worked feverishly night and day to produce more and more weapons of mass destruction to use against their neighbors. A tanker near the Mariana Trench dropping drums of radioactive waste. A volcano erupting on Iceland.

They were satellite images for the most part, his own computer technicians pirating the signals broadcast around the world locked down by a dozen different countries. Some were news broadcasts- he had stock in CNN and WGBS after all, not being a fool. There were images however that were of his own design, his own cameras broadcasting pictures from around the world of things that caught his eye and interest. Three of those were centered in the array of monitors even now, side by side, the better that the Demon's Head might focus his attention.

The three monitors showed relatively the same image, though the broadcast locale of each was almost as far from the next as it could possibly be within the planet's atmosphere. Rips, tears in the very fabric of the sky.

Roiling, reddish clouds of negative energy seeped from each, though only one was visible to the naked eye. One, the largest was centered over Antarctica about the geomagnetic South Pole though nearly a mile over the continent. The next was high over the Pacific Ocean, above Kiribati and the tiny isle in the Phoenix chain named Orona, nearly the center of the legendary Circle of Fire.

That one was just at the edge of the stratosphere. The last and smallest was over Manhattan, just a tiny rip spewing crackling, pink energy for those that could see it and nestled just a few yards beyond the reach of the tallest skyscraper. Red clouds. Crimson skies.

It appeared that the Crisis had returned. It seemed different however. Not the sweeping storms of several years past that had swept across the sky and land decimating and eradicating anything in their path. These were isolated events and seemed more to be streams of anti-energy escaping from somewhere. But from where? Qward perhaps, or that mirror universe that held those odd and evil doppelgangers of the Justice League that they had fought some years past? Somewhere else? Impossible to say without more information.

It was interesting however, and no doubt deadly. He had already sent volunteers to investigate the two more remote locations, fodder to sacrifice but laden with more than enough equipment to relay the information he needed before they expired. Manhattan was a bit too congested to examine up close as yet. He would keep that particular rip under close scrutiny from afar however, and have his agents gathered nearby just in case. He would send his daughter-

“Talial!” he called into the intercom on his desk. He received no reply, but he knew that she was on her way. She was ever at his disposal, ever ready to please and follow his slightest whim in all but one aggravating circumstance. That being the Detective of course.

The Batman was gone however, luckily, fatefully. He would not be a distraction to Talial this time, nor would he disable the grand schemes of Ra’s Al Ghul again. The Detective and his allies had been a collective thorn in his side for far too long, but with most of the League apparently missing- lost in time according to Sentinel and the original Flash- The Demon’s Head knew he would suffer no resistance, no defeat. It was almost pitiable knowing that there would be no test of skill this time, no matching of wits. He would simply implement his plan and succeed. At last.

At long last...

“Father?”

Ra’s Al Ghul spun about in his chair, his eyes quickly adjusting to the darkened room that had been at his back. Queer shadows danced and stretched along the walls and floor, shifting and changing as the monitors flashed behind him. The room was sparsely furnished; a Victorian Age table with refreshment on a sterling silver setting, a communications console cast in gun metal gray, a map of the world as it is, was, and hopefully would be one day. And there was his daughter.

Talia stood in the doorway, an angelic silhouette cast in shadow from the brighter florescent of the sterile hallway beyond. She was dressed in skintight lycra shaded blood red and black, gloves and short boots of tough leather, her hair tied back in a tail. He had interrupted her training session apparently, her sparring. Drops of blood fell from her knuckles as she loosened the velcro straps lacing her wrists.

“You wished to see me?”

“Yes, Talia,” Al Ghul said as he turned back to the monitors. Lightning split the sky, trailing from the rip over Antarctica. “I wish you to take a team to the United States, to New York City to monitor the rip in the sky first hand.”

“Of course,” the Demon’s Daughter said as she strode forward peering at the myriad screens. Her brow wrinkled to see the energy unleashing into the sky. “I shall take my squadron, technicians for study. I...”

“It is impressive is it not?” Ra’s Al Ghul said with a grin, his eyes sparkling, reflecting the flickering displays. “All that power just waiting, waiting for someone to tap it. Use it. Negative energy whose merest breath of contact could wipe away the world if left unchecked. In the proper hands, the ability to erase God’s greatest, growing mistake.”

“But, how to contain it?” Talia questioned, leaning forward on the back of her father’s chair. “Surely such devastating energy is beyond control.”

“Only for the moment daughter,” Ra’s Al Ghul sighed easing back in his chair and steepling his fingers beneath his chin as he contemplated all that he saw. His mind was awl with ideas swirling and already a plan was taking gel, formulating, growing.

“Only for the moment.”

The Mighty Avengers

VS.

The JLA

Accentuate the Negative!

Los Angeles, California

The Avengers West compound:

“Though he be the basest of villains when he doth appear in our worlds, Blastaar is a warrior in his own realm. This I know, and would not stand idly by to see him overwhelmed by the foul, dark creatures that did assault him.”

The Mighty Thor stood before the oval table, his great hammer upended, the head resting on the top of the huge red ‘A’ adorning the shining surface. His wounds had been treated, though his own uncanny ability to heal- an act of gods- had dealt with the worst of the damage. Still his left arm was wrapped tightly in a long bandage of gauze and a padded poultice was taped to a weeping gash just below his chin. His heavy armor of plate and chain had been patched in the worst spots, but it still had charred marks from burns and dents that mere mortal tools could not hammer out.

He stood before the assembled heroes, obviously tired and near beaten yet there was still an air of magnificence about him, a bearing that made those others sit up and take note, paying careful attention to his tale. Thor was not known for his ability to spin a yarn, he was no bard but a warrior through and through. Still, when he spoke it was for good reason and all would listen.

The Norse God of Thunder cast his gaze about the great table, locking eyes with each of his comrades in turn. He knew them all, knew them well he thought and it gladdened his heart that these- his allies- had answered his call, and so quickly.

Hawkeye the Marksman sat at the far end of the table as was his right and honor. As current leader of the West Coast branch of the Mighty Avengers he had led his team to great victories and even greater glories. He was dressed in his usual fair of black and purple; his cowl cast back among friends as he waxed resin on his bow. He seemed preoccupied, but Thor knew that he heard all, the brash and arrogant archer well aware of his station and duty.

To his right sat Iron Man, one of Thor’s oldest mortal friends on Midgard- Earth. Iron Man had helped found the Avengers, one of the original members now in his armor of red and gold, but more in his alter ego of Anthony Stark he provided the financing for the awesome assemblage; their halls and crafts, their weapons and more.

To Hawkeye’s left was Carol Danvers, Warbird. She was an old acquaintance of the Avengers, once being an ally to the exiled Kree warrior Captain Marvel. Fate had decreed that she might carry on that proud warriors’ name and granted her great power and knowledge too. The Danvers woman had had many trials over

the years, many tests of heart and soul yet she had always triumphed, and was thus a true Avenger proven.

Next to her sat Henry McCoy, the Beast. He was a Mutant by birth, granted abilities beyond mortal ken yet setting him apart in the eyes of humankind. Once he was an X-Man, one of Xavier's greatest pupils, but he did strike out on his own and was dealt an even more bitter hand. His body mutated even more, becoming in kind more beast-like; sprouting fur and fang in a devilish mane. Undaunted however, McCoy strove on and now found himself an Avenger once again and more than welcome.

To Thor's immediate right sat the beautiful Scarlet Witch, his most recent comrade in the eastern version of the Avengers. Thor had been that group's leader most recent, and Wanda Maximoff had been a staunch ally by his side. Despite their efforts however, that group had stepped down that another might take its place. Thor had returned to fabled Asgard, and the Scarlet Witch had simply tried to blend into a normal life for a time. Of all the Avengers, her life had been perhaps the most convoluted. Like the Beast she was a Mutant, her power to alter probability. Too she was a witch in skill as well as name, commanding the Chaos Magic. Her powers had never truly been stable however, mirroring her own troubled past. For a time, she and her twin sibling- Quicksilver- had thought themselves orphaned, then children of the legendary heroes the Whizzer and Miss America, then the offspring of a gypsy named Maximoff and finally the get of that Mutant Master of Magnetism, Magneto! She had married the Avenging android, the Vision in turmoil. They had sired children, which were apparently manifestations of her very powers. Those two boys had died, and later the Vision as well. Her life had been a mass of confusion and heartbreak, yet there she sat awaiting Thor's words and commands- if only after a brief recent visit with her brother and sister-in-law. A true hero.

The last member at the table was another of the five original Avengers. Janet Van Dyne had been called the Winsome Wasp once upon a time due not only to her ability to shrink in stature and sprout gossamer wings thus to fly, but due to her spirited attitude as well. Over the years the heiress had proven her worth and ability time and again, both as an Avenger as well as the partner to Henry Pym and his ever-changing guise. In time the Wasp even led the mighty assemblage through some of their darkest hours and proved herself to be one of their finest leaders ever. Of late she had retired, but when the call to assemble rang forth she had been one of the first to answer the clarion.

Thor stared at them all, each and every one, his friends and allies. He was honored that they had come at his bequest, and he was proud that they might stand at his side. Truer comrades he might never find-

“So these... creatures... were swarming over Blastaar and you went to help.”

Thor blinked, turning his attention back to Hawkeye at the far head of the table. The archer was sighting his arrows now, replacing the fantastic heads created by the likes of Stark Industries and Wakandan Technologies over the years for his sole use. Hawkeye- Clint Barton looked up with a slight smile, his face and body totally relaxed as was his demeanor. A far cry from the angry man he once was years ago.

“Aye,” Thor said with a nod, sighing again as he thought back on the battle just a few hours past. “I could see even from afar that Blastaar’s concussive blasts were waning, losing power. The warrior himself was beaten and bloody as the dark creatures did swarm over his form. He struggled valiantly, but I pledged then and there that he would not fight alone. I did hurl mighty M’Jolnir and hie my way through the barren limits of space, speeding to his side. I was not half way there however when I saw that mine efforts were for naught.

“The creatures did rip and tear, flashing ebony claws slashing at the deposed king’s very flesh. His blood did fly free as the monstrosities bit deep and drank of his blood and life’s energy. I heard his screams of agony, of desperation, but I was found wanting as before I could reach the brave warrior I saw him fall.

“It was then that the creatures did espy mine approach and threw caution to the wind. They did spring forth to meet mine advance in force, just a handful of their seemingly countless growing numbers disappearing in the Wall’s breach with the devastated body of Blastaar. I met their numbers head on, filled with rage and the fury of the storm as is my right. The monsters sprang forward, riding the cosmic winds propelled by their own muscles and force. They were on me in instants, and though I swung my hammer as ne’er before I did quickly realize that I had never faced a foe of the like.

“They were savage, animals with little mind beyond their desire to rend my form. Their lust for death and destruction seemed without bound, and though I did fight like a warrior of Asgard, as the Son of Odin must I quickly found myself in the direst of straits, mine own fate in question. Many a foe did fall before my might mind, but their sheer numbers and ferocity were overwhelming even to a scion of Asgard blessed. In truth I had hoped to beat my foe aside, simply to follow Blastaar and the Silver Surfer before him, both who had disappeared back into the chaotic breach. Even as I struggled however I saw more of the creatures spring forth to scurry over the Wall, others springing forward and out into the very rigors of barren space to join in the assault on my personage. It humiliates me to admit that they were too much for me alone.”

Thor was silent for a time, and none of the gathered Avengers seemed willing to break into his thoughts and melancholy at first. It was the Wasp who finally reached across the table and put her hands over Thor’s.

"It's okay, Thor," she said with a frown, perfect white teeth worrying her lower lip. "We understand. We've all faced overwhelming odds before. That's part of why we're a team, remember? To deal with those foes that no single hero could defeat." Thor forced a slim smile on his lips, nodding-

"Aye, Janet Van Dyne. There is wisdom in your words, as always."

"I just can't get over the fact that there's actually a wall at the end of reality," the Beast said. He was leaning back in his chair at a hazardous angle, his huge feet flipping through the pages of a star atlas as he adjusted the slim glasses positioned on the tip of his nose. "It boggles the mind when those things we have taken for granted suddenly come crashing down around us. I was taught through many sources that space is infinite. To hear that at some point it actually ends... " he shrugged. "And the Silver Surfer went beyond. *For the world is hollow and I have touched the sky...*"

"Shakespeare?" Warbird asked looking up.

"Star Trek," Beast answered with a wide grin. "Never discount the current media."

"Be that as it may," Iron Man interjected, "Just what is our next move? The Silver Surfer is lost to us, and Blastaar as well apparently, but by your description Thor, these Predator creatures don't fly and seem little more than hive-like drones. They're at the far end of the universe and little threat to us. At least for the moment."

"For the moment, aye," Thor agreed. "But do not underestimate their guile, old friend. We would do best to hie to the Wall and stop their advance while we still may."

"And just how are we supposed to get there?" Warbird asked, splaying her hands. "It's one thing for you to bop around the universe, but it's a little bit harder for us 'mere mortals'."

"The power of M'Jolnir may transport us all to the battle, where we might face the dread creatures and stem their tide with our righteous wrath. I am prepared to bridge the gap at a moment's notice-"

"That might not be necessary," the Beast said, spinning his chair about as he glanced at a monitor screen that had sprung to life behind him. The monitor showed a scene just over Manhattan's skyline and a spewing geyser of energy situated in the skies over Midtown. "By your description Thunderer, I would say that your 'Wall' is a line of defense against the Negative Zone. Your colorful descriptions of the coursing energy aside, the clincher was Blastaar's unfortunate appearance. I might theorize that beyond your 'Wall' is that universe of negative

space that Reed Richards discovered several years ago. If that is indeed the case, we might be better off taking that short leap cross country to New York and coming at this problem from the rear, entering the Negative zone from Mister Fantastic's patented portal."

"That makes sense, Beast," Iron Man said even as he glanced at the monitor in question. "Granted Thor could get us to this 'Wall' in the blink of an eye, but I think these Predator creatures are just a symptom of a greater disease. It appears that something is coming out of the Neg Zone, manifesting in energy that's off our scale to measure. Whatever it is, I think it's inside, and I vote we head for the source."

"What he said," the Wasp added with a smile. The conversation in general had gone over her head for the most part. She was familiar with the Negative Zone; Blastaar, Annihilus, the Mad Thinker's Awesome Android. Rick Jones had been trapped within the Zone when he had been linked to Captain Marvel for a few years, at least until Mar-Vell had transferred the Super Adaptoid to the Zone and freed his friend, the Avenger's side-kick. The science and physics of it all were a bit much however, and Janet Van Dyne was not too proud to say so.

"Shouldn't we contact Reed Richards then?" Warbird asked. "Seems he should have some useful input."

"Already on it Carol," Hawkeye said, his hand casually flitting over the Communications Console. "He's already on scene, with SHIELD. Seems our old friend Doc Midas sent a ship into the Zone not so long ago. Not too long after the hole over Manhattan started spitting negative energy to beat the band. He's keeping watch."

"Curiouser and curiouser..." the Beast said as he stared at the monitor, adjusting his spectacles. "There seems an inordinate amount of energy spewing from Richard's portal, where the Baxter Building used to be. One assumes that Professor Richards has the situation well in hand, but-

"Richards lost the lease on the Baxter Building site awhile back, Hank," the Wasp said, turning to the monitor as well. "Susan told me that Midas, or one of his corporations bought the property outright, debts and all."

"I remember that," Iron Man added. "Stark Industries tried to block the purchase, but Midas seemed to have unlimited funds for the transaction. Reed's stock holdings weren't enough to override the shareholders, even with outside backing. Midas purchased the property where the Baxter Building once was as well as the 'Fly Zone' above it- that area over Manhattan that allows for FAA stipulation."

"So Midas has the Negative Zone portal," the Scarlet Witch finally said. She seemed almost disinterested as she glanced at the monitor, then back to her

fellow members. “I can’t imagine that Forge would allow him to have domain over that. SHIELD must have protocols. Where’s the rest of the Fantastic Four?”

“Milwaukee,” Warbird said, and that was enough. The Scarlet Witch nodded.

“Cap’s heading to the scene, Wanda,” Hawkeye said turning from the Communication Console, “along with your brother. He just called in. The Panther’s en route too, but it’ll be awhile before he gets to New York.”

“Cap’s back?” Wanda asked, sitting a little higher in her chair. Her dark brown eyes seemed to sparkle as a smile crept across her face. “Pietro didn’t say anything-“

“Apparently so, Witchy. For a while now,” Hawkeye smiled slipping his arrows back into his quiver, each in its own special slot that he knew by touch. “Cap’s kooky quartet’s about to have a reunion, and then some.”

“A most auspicious occasion,” the Beast said with a laugh, and one by one the others made their jokes, laughing. All save one.

Thor stared at his friends, his allies and comrades and wondered where and when they had gone wrong. Now was not the time for levity. Now was the time for all good warriors to come to arms. To fight. To die!

It would be a glorious battle. Of that he was certain.

He would make sure...

Manhattan:

Reed Richards held the small device in hand, his dark brown eyes smoldering with concentration as he scanned the tiny liquid display screens on the surface of the compact energy analyzer. He had cobbled the thing together years before, redesigning a much larger machine with technology he had invented prior combining the latest advances at the time not only in ether-spectroanalysis but also in micro-technology coming out of Japan and his own computer expertise implementing the robotic achievements of his old friend Henry Pym. The advancements in those fields since had been phenomenal of course, but some times the old ways were still the best.

The readouts on the handheld analyzer were widely varied along the entire spectrum of known light, both visible and beyond the human eye’s ability to perceive. Oddly there was a spike in the Gamma wave, and an equivalent jump of gargantuan scale in what had been determined ‘cosmic’ rays; the fluctuating combination of various energies that had originally helped to create the Fantastic

Four among others. All monitors showed a rise in output, thus accounting for the sporadic displays of ambience, but the thing that concerned Richards the most was the negative display- or lack there of. He had created a way to monitor the wavelength of anti-energy some time ago, after his first ill-fated journey into the Zone of Distortion that had ended at the Exploding Atmosphere with the death of the mysterious man that had taken the place of the Thing. The disturbing thing was that though there seemed to be a steady flow of negative energy seeping from the untended hole between the two dimensions, the resultant flare-ups could not seem to be fully analyzed and deciphered. It was as though the bulk of the energy was of some form that Richards had never before encountered. Not necessarily a unique event, however a troublesome one.

Worst of all, Doctor Midas who had instigated the entire affair by sending a ship into the Negative Zone seemed oblivious to the potentially hazardous situation. As far as Reed Richards could tell the man had put up no safeguards of any kind to protect the city and its inhabitants should conditions grow beyond his ability to control. Should a wave of negative energy be unleashed with any overwhelming proportion it was quite probable that not only Manhattan, but also a good portion of the entire Eastern Seaboard of the United States might be washed away as though engulfed by a tsunami. If left unchecked, that wave could possibly grow exponentially, theoretically. Where or when it might cease was a quandary that even Richards could not comprehend without more data. Like it or not, he was going to need help this time.

“More problems, Professor?”

Reed Richards almost jumped at the soft sound of the now familiar voice. He had been so lost in thought- a bad habit according to Susan- that he had all but forgotten that he was not alone on the rooftop facing the construction site where the Baxter Building once stood. Richards turned and saw his associate looking him over with the slightest concern, his dark brows slightly arched over slick black glasses.

Special SHIELD Agent James Woo had been assigned as liaison to Mister Fantastic not even a week past when both Richards and SHIELD first, separately, formed an idea as to what Doctor Midas might be hoping to accomplish. SHIELD had been monitoring Midas' activities for some time apparently, even before his last encounter with the West Coast Avengers some months ago. They had tracked his purchases on a global scale, the redistribution of exorbitant amounts of capital, all directed into the holdings of Argos LLC, a shadow corporation that owned the Keystone Building across the plot of land between here and there. Argos was one of Midas' many front companies Richards had come to learn, all of which, around the world were designed with the sole purpose of filling the Doctor's coffers to better finance his needs. His quest for power. The clincher that had first drew Richard's attention was the salvaging of the old Star Core shuttle out of Jamaica Bay in Brooklyn. Had

Midas not been quite so flamboyant Richards might never have even noticed until it was too late, but that particular shuttle held a special and dreadful significance. It had once been the ill-fated tomb of Jean Grey, Marvel Girl of the X-Men, and it had also served as cocoon and chrysalis for her transformation into the Phoenix.

Did Midas somehow know that? Was he hoping that some residual energy still resided within the damaged shuttle, or was there something more? Doctor Midas was well known for acquiring disused and obsolete mechanisms and artifacts once related to Marvels. His very armor was a modified version of a type once worn by Iron Man years ago when he had first helped form the Avengers. Everything that Midas did of course was some integral part of his mad scheme to gain personal power on a cosmic scale. He wanted to be a Marvel- *the* Marvel, and he would stop at nothing. The lives of millions meant nothing to him should he succeed.

“Your expression changes with the wind, Professor, yet puzzlement seems the dominant mask,” Woo continued, lighting a fresh cigarette. Reed Richards puzzled over the fact that the man never left his side yet he never seemed to run out of cigarettes despite his tendency to chain one after the other. Several times Richards had considered explaining the ill effects of the bad habit to Woo, but he refrained. It was his life, after all, and second-hand smoke aside none of Richard’s business. “Should I be worried?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Reed Richards returned his attention to his analyzer yet nothing had changed, at least not enough to mention. The energy readings still fluctuated within a moderate margin of safety. “The most spectacular energy flares don’t seem to register oddly, and that more than anything gives me pause. There seems to be an unknown quantity within the bursts of negative energy that I cannot account for- something unknown and far beyond anything that I’ve ever encountered, even on a larger and more comprehensive spectrograph. Unfortunately,” he added, holding up his hand-held, “this is all we have to work with at the moment.”

“Perhaps SHIELD has something more advanced,” Woo said flicking at a bit of ash clinging to his trim black suit. “Forge is not without his own resources and well-respected for his ability to create on a whim.”

“Maybe,” Richards said staring at the device in his hand. The current Director of SHIELD was a Mutant with the ability to create scientific and technical wonders. Once upon a time he had created a device to null mutagenic properties, shutting down the very gene that sparked mutation somehow. It was nothing Richards had ever investigated, though perhaps he should have given the numerous failed attempts at reverting the Thing back to Ben Grimm over the years. Forge was a genius, but since taking over SHIELD, Richards wondered just where his loyalties truly lay. The man was no Nick Fury after all.

“Regardless,” Richards continued, “I believe I will need some assistance in this situation. The bulk of my technology went with the Baxter Building and Four Freedoms Tower. Given time I could recreate what we might need given any circumstance that might arise, but it’s a matter of time, or lack of it to be precise. Whatever Midas is truly planning may come to fruition at any moment and I just don’t have the ready resources on hand to create on the fly.” Richards shifted his weight on his cane, wincing slightly at the technological debris littering the rooftop; analyzers of various specification, viewers and scanners, a laser beacon. Nothing really of any significance if push came to shove. Richards frowned, rubbing at his arm, which was feeling stiff again. The cold was starting to get to him.

“Not to worry, Reed,” another voice said from behind. Both Richards and Woo turned, the SHIELD Agent’s hand dipping into his jacket as Reed Richards willed his body to go pliant- well, the side that still slightly could. Both men froze in mid-motion however as they saw the two familiar forms across the rooftop, stepping from the stairwell. The closest had the silvery white hair of his father, that same look of knowledge and determination. His sleek, muscular body was clothed in blues and white, a silver lightning bolt emblazoned across his chest. His name was Pietro Magnus, the son of the debatably strongest Mutant on the face of the planet, Magneto. The world however knew him better by his avenging nomenclature; Quicksilver! Behind him by just a few steps despite the Mutant’s super speed strode perhaps the most recognized Marvel on the planet. He was all pride and glory wrapped in the flag as he was, displaying the red, white and blue colors of the country he loved so much. A fierce white ‘A’ stood out on his cowl and a brilliant white star upon his massive chest over a band of red and white stripes. In his hand he carried a shield painted in the patriotic colors as well, that same star shining, one of the greatest weapons ever created. It was this man that had spoken, and though it had been some time, Reed Richards would always know this man, his voice. He had no real powers to speak of; he was simply the best that he could possibly be, the best of them all-

“Captain America...”

Captain America stepped forward with a tight smile and shook Reed Richard’s hand, forcibly not looking at Richard’s disability; the twisted face and limp arm barely clutching the cane planted on the rooftop. He glanced to the side and nodded to the SHIELD Agent as well, Jimmy Woo standing aside and aloof but nodding, almost bowing in return.

“Captain,”

“Hello, Agent Woo,” Cap said, his smile never faltering. “It’s been awhile.”

“Too long,” Woo responded, his head shifting as he eyed the Mutant Quicksilver standing at roof’s edge and staring at the spectacle in the sky. “Not since our brief encounter in the Deltite Affair?”

Captain America nodded, his own gaze shifting to the hole in the sky. There was a constant flow of dark, pinkish energy trickling from the anomaly in the sky and that made the Avenger nervous as he pointed.

“Why is that still happening?” he said, looking to Richards for some explanation. Reed Richards swallowed, glancing in turn at the energy flux.

“Legally there’s nothing to be done at the moment. The energy pouring from the portal is non-threatening as yet, and Doctor Midas is not without his own resources. He attained all legal permits for everything he’s done thus far; the FAA, FTC, Homeland Security, even the Department of Energy. Midas has a team of lawyers that are really on the ball-“

“But there’s obviously unstable and potentially dangerous energy leaking from- what- the Negative Zone? Surely you have the authority to shut him down?”

“My patents have lapsed, actually. I still own the rights concerning the portal itself, but the Zone is considered ‘undiscovered country’ much in the same way that Antarctica and the Savage Land are viewed. Anyone with the ability to access the Zone has the right to explore, mine, salvage, whatever they want. It was a long and tedious battle that I lost Cap, and the Zone was designated as ‘open sea’ much like the oceans beyond the twenty-mile limit. Congress in its infinite wisdom never assumed that anyone would ever pierce the veil so to speak. Of course, at the time I had not considered that the Baxter Building or Four Freedoms Tower might be destroyed. My mistake I suppose.”

“No harm done, Reed,” Cap said, his gaze scanning the far rooftop of the Keystone Building. “At least not yet. What’s Midas doing?”

“Nothing that I can see, Cap,” Reed said, turning his own gaze across the expanse. “He disappeared into the building some time ago. We haven’t seen him since. He sent his ship through the portal and not long after the energies started flaring from the hole. I assume he has some grand scheme to gain power, but what that might be...”

“No matter,” Cap said with an air of authority. “We’ll stop him as we always do, as we do all of them. Never fear Reed. The Avengers are on hand now.”

“Glad to hear it, Captain,” Woo said as he flicked his cigarette butt away. “I have to question just what you and Quicksilver might do, however.”

“Don’t sell us short, Woo!” Quicksilver snapped spinning quickly back from the roof’s edge to stand with the group. “Captain America *is* the Avengers, and there’s not a crisis he can’t conquer.”

Woo snuffed, lighting another cigarette. “I am the last to question Captain America’s abilities, Magnus,” Woo said with a sneer looking the Mutant up and down, “but this reeks of a cosmic calamity, and frankly Captain America and yourself are not fitted to deal with the like.”

“Others are en route, James,” Cap said cutting across the two before Pietro might escalate the discussion into an argument. “Thor contacted several members with a high priority alert. I’ve received word from Hawkeye that a full compliment is flying in from the West Coast, and the Black Panther is returning from his native Wakanda-“

“T’Challa?” Reed said.

“Yes. He had some business in his homeland, but I imagine that between you, he and Iron Man, this situation will soon be well in hand. Still, I would feel better if we could secure the area.”

“I have a SHIELD Assault Team at my beck and call, Captain,” Woo said pulling a cell phone-like device from his pocket and flipping it open. “Give the word based on your government clearance and we can shut Midas down in minutes.”

Captain America stared at Woo for a moment, then turned back to the building across the way. He wondered what Midas might have in reserve, what forces he might employ should they attack. The man was mad, not stupid. He had to think of the populace he was sworn to protect, the innocents that might be harmed in a full-scale SHIELD assault. The thought however, and the decision were quickly taken from him as Quicksilver shouted, pointing-

“Look!”

Energy was spewing from the hole suddenly, a great roiling pink cloud expanding from seemingly nowhere, engulfing all. Cap saw a bird vanish into oblivion as it flew too close, the strange mist, lightning crackling as it expanded, thunder rolling in its wake. The portal grew brighter, an eerie light emanating from the rip in the sky. The air seemed charged with static, and Cap could feel his short hairs standing at attention. “Reed?”

“I don’t know,” Mister Fantastic said, holding his analyzer skyward again. The readings were spiking off the scale all across the spectrum. “I hazard to guess, but I suspect something is coming through the portal. The shuttle perhaps-“

“Or something worse maybe,” Quicksilver interjected. “Lord knows there’s plenty of villains in the Negative Zone; Annihilus, Blastaar, is the Super Adaptoid still trapped there?”

“No,” Cap said, shielding his eyes from the glare with the back of his hand. He stared at the portal, wincing at the brilliance, his eyes starting to tear. He saw shadows moving about, taking shape, and becoming sharper, closer.

“There’s something in there,” he said, his shield slipping into hand casually. “Something’s coming. Some one...” His eyes widened as the flickering silhouettes swirled and took shape. Distinction. Cap recognized the lead form, a huge burly man in a cape flying in the lead. Behind him was another man in a cloak, trimmer and athletic. A woman, two more men all glowing green...”

“It’s the Squadron Supreme!” Quicksilver said as the silhouettes thickened, the swirling, crackling light receding as they got closer coming from their alternate reality. Cap stared.

“I don’t-“

“Supreme?” the voice rumbled as the lead form stepped from the light into reality. He was huge, muscular dressed in blue with a red cape that swirled and billowed behind. “Maybe supreme- definitely- but we’re not a squadron,”

Beside him was another who took a defensive stance immediately, crouching, his eyes scanning the rooftop they were landing on, his gaze focusing on Cap finally. He started to smile, twisted and cruel-

“We’re a syndicate,” the big man continued floating down to hover next to the other, not quite touching down. He could fly, apparently. Behind him the others came forth, other shadows taking shape and form; a woman in a tight swim suit-like costume of black leather, high, spike-heeled boots and a cape, a man dressed in red that was a blur, hard to focus on, another man garbed in green and black, verdant energy crackling about his hand, a tall creature with ashen white skin and an elongated head, his body rippling and morphing as he descended with the others-

“The Crime Syndicate of Amerika! Please, don’t surrender.”

Captain America stared at the six beings that had joined them on the rooftop. He sighed, shifting his shield ever so slightly, easing his weight to attack or defend as needed. They were impressive, but he had faced worse odds, sensing his allies tensing behind him, ready to fight; Quicksilver, Mister Fantastic and Jimmy Woo. Not the Avengers- two out of three- but men he trusted.

“Surrender?” Cap said, a smile creeping at the corners of his mouth. “Not in my vocabulary, son.

“Avengers Assemble!”

And again the battle was joined...

To be continued...

Next Issue: Okay, the inane drone is over. Time for the BIG BLAZING BATTLE issues to commence! Head on over to JLU 2001 for the next installment as the JLA takes on the Squadron Supreme! Then come back here to M2K where the Avengers assemble to confront the Crime Syndicate of Amerika! Be there!

Story © Curt F

Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F

Editing © Chris Munn



JLA VS the Mighty Avengers #2

Utopia Isle: Squadron Compound

Superman

Superman staggered back. His jaw was throbbing and he could feel blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Blood! How long had it been since he had been hit hard enough to draw blood?

He fell back against the cold stone wall, amazed that the blow had not driven him clean through. The room was fortified, apparently defended and as he quickly scanned the area he saw the obvious reason why. It was a weapon's room of sorts. He saw the rack upon rack of guns and swords and other even more archaic weapons lining one wall. Oddly it reminded him of the Hawks.

The red-haired man was stepping forward, his fists raised and was dressed now in a costume of red and gold. He was a speedster as well, apparently, as when he had slammed his fist into Superman's face he had been wearing just his pants and boots, the rest of his clothes in hand. His face was twisted, angry, and Superman knew that he wasn't ready to listen to reason. Not yet at any rate.

The big man had said something when they had first appeared on that strange escalator. He had called them something, the Squadron. 'Sinister' he had said. A case of mistaken identity, apparently. This group- whoever they were- thought that the JLA were someone else, villains. They had to change their minds.

Superman's head started ringing as it slammed back into the wall again. The red-haired man made his vision swim, and he had felt a tooth crack with the blow. He was strong, fast, but apparently new to the hero's lifestyle. It was common practice that someone simply standing there and willing to take the punishment could not be all bad. This man however saw Superman's lack of defense as an opportunity, one that he was willing to exploit. Playing the willing punching bag was not going to work this time.

The man struck again, but the Man of Steel ducked, the red-garbed man's blow smashing into the wall. He cursed, obviously in pain and Superman lashed out taking the opportunity, a hard shove to the man's chest that sent him flying across the room and causing the woman with the wings to take to the air while the strange green alien twisted his body aside not unlike Plastic Man, or J'onn J'onzz. Kal-El, last son of Krypton had a moment to take stock and catch his breath as he straightened, the hard wall still behind him, supporting him.

Everyone seemed paired against his or her doppelganger. Superman had to wonder just where they were and how these people seemed so much like them. Batman was fighting the young man with the bird motif. Black Canary squared off against the woman with the wings. There was a speedster for the Flash, but both men had disappeared in a blur of black and scarlet. Ring against rock, lasso against shield, even Plas was fighting some strange creature that seemed pliable. It was bizarre to say the least.

Who were these people?

JLA Vs the Mighty Avengers

Enter: The Squadron Supreme!

Martian Manhunter

J'onn J'onzz went desolid as the strange alien's arm stretched, lashing out at him. He could 'see' the creature's own mass intensify, his fist becoming almost rock-like as it passed through his own chest harmlessly to strike the solid wall behind. J'onn saw the alien's eyes grow wide at the act, apparently something that he could not do in turn. Good.

Invisibility then. What else could he not do?

The Martian Manhunter faded away, a pale green breeze that swiftly disappeared. He watched the other, his own eyes adjusting as light rays bent around him, making him vanish. The alien seemed confused only for a moment, spinning as J'onn floated behind, expecting a trick. J'onn J'onzz did not wish to fight- especially one so unique, yet so like him, his people. J'onn J'onzz, the Manhunter from Mars wished to learn.

He flowed back, fading slowly into the dense wall behind him as the alien scanned the room. The wall was thick, the mass great and forced the intangible Martian to slow his movement, to ease into the complex structure. He stopped just short of vanishing completely, his own expanded Martian sight shifting through the spectrum of light both visible and unknown as he tried to comprehend these strange folk. He opened his mind...

Pain!

There was much pain in each and every mind, as though everyone of them had suffered greatly- and recently. In truth they were not so different, not so bizarre after all...

Hyperion was an alien not unlike Kal-El, his microscopic world destroyed when this... Earth unleashed their first atomic bomb. He had the power of the atom; strength, endurance, speed. So like Superman. Oddly he remembered nothing of his origins. Yet it was right there for the taking, just beneath his subconscious mind. Were there no mentalists on this world?

Nighthawk fighting Batman was the adopted son of the first, one Kyle Richmond who had been a world leader for a time. Neal 'Richmond' was the biological son of the first Nighthawk's arch foe, the Huckster, and when the original Nighthawk had slain the psychopath he had adopted the boy, trained him. He was raw and filled with angst, trying to fulfill a destiny that should not have been his.

The Whizzer had a life, a family. He was the fastest man this world had to offer, and he felt uneasy in his role as a hero yet he did what needed to be done. This is the man Barry Allen might have been, should he have lived.

Doctor Spectrum had been an astronaut- Joe Ledger. He was the first man to encounter an alien on this world, the Skrull that stood before J'onzz. Ledger had saved the alien, and in return the Skrull had given the fearless astronaut a prism that granted him great power; the ability to make thought reality in the form of solid light and thought. So like Green Lantern, especially Hal Jordan.

Power Princess would have been an Amazon on Earth- the Earth of the JLA. Her own Utopian Isle seemed identical to Thymescira in its way though its inhabitants had left their Earth some time ago. Too, Zarda of the Utopians was far too similar to Wonder Woman except that she had married at one point in her

history, her husband dying over the years while she remained almost immortal. There were differences to be sure, but they were slight, and but for a thought, a desire, Zarda could be Diana.

Skylark, Linda Lewis had been a popular vocalist before an accident claimed her true voice. A villain, Doctor Decibel gave her that voice back and more. Powers not unlike Black Canary; a sonic cry on multiple levels. Too, she had adopted the wings of her former lover, this world's apparent version of Hawkman; the Blue Eagle.

Arcanna Jones, Moonglow was every bit the sorceress that Zatanna was, and she seemed to be the closest that this world might claim as a psychic. Her defenses were strong, regardless, but J'onn J'onzz was the greatest mentalist on his adopted world. He sensed pain in the woman, and fear for a family secreted away.

The man called simply Shape had been a criminal at some point. J'onn could just sense the memories behind a massive 'wall' set into his mind. Astounding defenses for one so simple minded, so free, so...

No!

They had changed him somehow. They had altered his way of thinking. 'Behavior Modification' they had called it, making him one of them, fighting the good fight- as they saw it. The original Nighthawk had broken the modification, or so he thought, but there was still so much there, psychic switches and barriers, doors and walls to seal away his true self...

And there had been others...

Ape X, Doctor Decibel, Fox Fire, Lamprey, Quagmire...

So many had died. So many had been altered to suit their needs in some bid to make the world a better place in their eyes. In their ideals!

"There is more, alien."

J'onn J'onzz focused his attention on the battle raging before him. The alien, the Skrull was staring at him- right at him...

"Yes," the Skrull said, his eyes glowing slightly, "I can see you now. It took some time, and some effort, but I can."

The Martian Manhunter stepped from the wall, becoming solid and visible in the space of a heartbeat. His ruse had worked for a time, which was all that he had

wanted, all he hoped. He knew his enemy now, knew how they might win, but perhaps there was still time to talk.

“I am Skymax, the Skrullian Skymaster! I was the first- and last of my kind. Biogenetically engineered to be the greatest of a mighty band of warriors to be used in an intergalactic war, the first of a new breed. I was never used alas, as my race was wiped away by the Great Devourer before my breed could be implemented. I am the last of my people, off-worlder. The Earth is my adopted home, and these are my friends, my family. To preserve them I will fight you to the last.”

J'onn J'onzz saw the Skrull morph, his body shifting as it shrank, compacting into the form of a strange little creature. He was dark, furry, with a long spiked tail and a long snout that snapped as it opened as though yawning.

J'onn screamed as he was engulfed in a gout of fire!

Batman

The Dark Knight raised his arm, grunting as he barely deflected the high-kick. The youth, Nighthawk went sailing past, springing off the wall and twisting to land in a defensive crouch, ready to attack again.

The boy was good. He had seen the momentary distraction, Batman's attention drawn away when the Martian Manhunter had screamed in the rage of fire and he had attacked. The assault was static however and full of rage, no finesse despite the boy's skill. He had problems apparently, luckily, or Batman might have been concerned.

It was almost like fighting Dick, the apprentice, the side kick all grown up and trying too hard to prove himself. He had the moves down, but the motivation was misdirected and lost with far too much emotion. Focus was the key, something that Dick would never have. He was good, but he would never be good enough.

Batman stepped away, watching his foe warily. Best not to get overconfident. End this pointless battle and get to the bottom of it all. They had to find the others, Aquaman and the rest lost in the Time Stream. They had to get home.

“You're good,” the boy said, his face twisting in a cruel smile as he shifted his weight ever-so slightly. Batman followed suit. “But I was trained by the best. The greatest fighter on the face of the Earth. I may not be half the man he was, but I'm more than enough to take you down, Bat.”

“Batman,” the Darknight Detective corrected, his hand sliding over the compartments of his Utility Belt as he stepped to the side, shielding his movements with his cloak. His opponent shrugged-

“Whatever. I guess you Squadron Sinister types got tired of stealing our rep. Good thing too. That would be just one more reason for me to take you down.”

J’onn had been right then, a case of mistaken identity. This Squadron Supreme thought that they were some off-world doppelgangers, not unlike the Crime Syndicate of Amerika no doubt. This whole fight was pointless then. These were heroes despite the psychic imagery that J’onn had broadcast before the fire overwhelmed him.

Still, they had enforced their will on others acting as judge, jury and executioner. In their heads they had been trying to help a world that had been devastated by corporate corruption, but what they had done had been little better. They were not gods to impose their rule, casting decision from on high...

Batman paused.

Nighthawk slammed his fist home, the Batman barely easing back, rolling with the blow. He felt blood running freely from his nose, the sudden shock of pain as he staggered back blocking the follow up attacks. He had lost his focus, let the boy get too close as he had been trying to consider their options. He had let his guard down and the boy had seen his opening, again.

Batman snarled as he reached out, grabbing Nighthawk’s fist in mid-swing. He squeezed, pulling and twisting and making the boy stagger forward to meet the heel of his palm driven into his nose, then his chin. Batman jerked, keeping his hold and swung his elbow high into the youth’s temple, pulling him quickly around to drive it into his back right between his shoulder blades. The Batman drove his heel into Nighthawk’s leg, just behind the knee and forced him to the ground. He twisted the arm he still held higher, spinning until he heard an audible ‘pop’, shifting the shoulder out of joint. Nighthawk screamed and Batman drove his fist into the back of the boy’s neck, just below the skull. He let go his hold and stepped away.

Nighthawk staggered, struggling to his feet and actually turning before his legs gave way. He slammed to the stone floor on his knees, his legs useless, his arms hanging limply at his side as his eyes rolled back into his head. The boy moaned lightly and pitched forward, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Batman stared at the boy for a moment, thinking of Dick as he wiped at his nose. Then he looked away, concentrating...

J’onn, concentrate...

Flash

He remembered when he was younger, just a teenager as he raced alongside Barry. Barry had always held back, trying to teach him something with every step he took, never simply blowing him away as he could have, leaving him in the dust like the Road Runner did to the Coyote. He could have, easily, because he was Barry Allen- the Flash- Fastest Man Alive...

But he was Barry Allen- the Flash- Fastest Man Alive, so he never did.

This guy was Barry, or he could have been. Wally could sense it, feel it. He wasn't a part of the Speed Force, but he was fast, fast as hell, next best thing. Wally wondered where he got his speed from. Couldn't come from within- no way. He'd burn up. Nothing could hold that kind of power, the power to keep pace, the speed.

But this guy- this Whizzer was fast. Fastest Man Alive, at least on his world. Wally was impressed. They were on their twenty-third circuit around the huge island and the man was still keeping pace. Wally could tell that he was breathing hard- one breath per ten circuits roughly- but Wally had yet to take one. Still, Wally kept a step ahead, his own speed overwhelming the older man.

Aside from being fast however, the man was good. Wally had tried to steal the Whizzer's speed at the very first, but whatever spark burned within his power it was way too different. Wally had groped for the Speed Force within and around the man and his protective aura, but there was nothing there. He had to resort to the old tricks then, all those little things that he used to do as Kid Flash; vibrational differences, reverse walls of back blast, cycloning his slipstream.

The Whizzer seemed to have an answer for every one though, leaping and twisting, changing his own vibratory pattern. He had stumbled once or twice, but he was fast enough to recover before Wally could exploit his lapse. He was good, but not good enough.

Wally West poured on the speed leaving the older man behind as he raced on ahead, rounding the curve of the beach and out of the Whizzer's line of sight. Once around the bend, hidden by the huge boulders that dotted the tropical shore, the Flash cut back and forth, his arms spiraling, whipping wildly as he cut into his own slipstream, weaving a wall of backdraft that would be almost solid for a heartbeat or two. Just long enough if the Whizzer kept his pace.

Lightning crackled as the cross winds mingled, and through the hazy crimson Wally saw the blurred black form of his opponent running forward. Wally hesitated, vibrating in place to keep his rhythm just in case, but the older man simply ran on, right for the wall, not breaking stride. Wally worried the Whizzer might break his neck suddenly, he was not slowing down. He did not want to kill the man. He almost cried out.

But the Whizzer's form faded suddenly, blurring just as it should have hit the wall of wind, the vibrational barrier. The Flash blinked, wondering what had happened. Had he vibrated into the ground? Had he jumped planes somehow? Gone invisible? Wally licked his lips, running forward as his wall vibrated away, the speed burnt-

The sand pebbles hit him like a hailstorm, stinging at first, then burning, hurting. Even as he started to vibrate away he knew what the Whizzer had done, those times he had 'stumbled', every circuit. He had been gathering dirt and grit off the beach, dropping it into his slipstream, and as Wally changed his vibrational pattern faster, slower, feeling the pelting storm he knew the man had sent each handful through at a different speed. He had known what Wally would do- called it to the letter, and he had been prepared.

Just like Barry.

Wally back-pedaled, trying to outdistance the storm but it was growing caught up in his own wake. He could not see, felt scratches on his face, rips in his costume. The sand was blasting him apart, millions of tiny bullets waiting at whichever speed he adapted. He could not get away.

Wally froze, shutting down the speed, letting the storm whiz past. His eyes were watering as he blinked, trying not to rub, trying to listen. He was almost blind, had to get away. He felt his breath catch, choke in his throat.

He saw the hand vibrating wildly poking through his neck. He could not breathe and his vision started to gray as the hand, the arm solidified. He felt an intense pain in the back of his head as his oxygen was cut off, his blood flow stopped. His eyes went wide, then darkness washed over him-

Stanley Stewart dropped to his hands and knees and heaved into the golden sand, hacking and coughing. He was gasping for breath as his world swam, his head spinning with the sudden rush of adrenaline catching up to him.

The boy had been fast, but he was arrogant thinking his greater speed was the end all. Experience though was what had won the race, and the Whizzer had plenty of that. Still...

Stanley wondered just what it must be like to be that fast as he crawled forward and checked the boy's pulse. Faster than light, faster than thought. He was faster, his pulse erratic but there. He would live.

Fastest Man Alive...

J'onnn... Focus!

Wonder Woman

The other was good, maybe better. Maybe. A warrior born, she was fast and quick-witted, easily adapting to Diana's every attack, quickly countering with her own. There was an edge about her though, hard and determined. She had seen much death this one, much misery and pain. It showed in her every movement, her every blow. Her rage was vast, barely held in check as though she were not only fighting her opponent, but her self as well.

"Sister-" Diana gasped, barely raising her arms from the bashing shield of the Power Princess, barely deflecting the blow. Still the force of the onslaught drove the Amazon princess to her knees, gritting her teeth from the clash. Power Princess screamed-

"I- am not- your sister!"

The woman slammed the shield with every blow, the force of each stronger than the last. Wonder Woman blocked as best she could, angling with the impact, deflecting the force off to the side as she maneuvered for leverage. She had fought enough brutes in her career to recognize when they her foe was in the grip of a battle rage. Diana had no idea what sparked the other woman's anger, but she could see her skill evaporating with every assault, each blow. She was hammering, intent on the kill. That would be her downfall- if Diana could survive.

Wonder Woman spun about as the Power Princess reared back for another blow. Diana dropped in her spin, kicking out with her sweeping legs to catch the other's in heel and behind the knee. The Princess yelped, her eyes growing comically wide as her feet were suddenly swept out from under her. Diana whipped about, spinning on her shoulder to right herself, sliding into a crouch even as the Power Princess tried to whip around in mid air. Half successful, she slammed hard onto her shoulder, slapping the hard ground on Impact, trying to absorb the brunt, to displace the fall. Diana sprang-

Zarda gritted her teeth and heaved her arm up, even so barely blocking the warrior's assault. Even through the sparkling energies of her force shield- designed to absorb such impact- she could feel the strength and power behind the blow. Wincing she shoved up and out using the woman's own momentum to carry her beyond. Quickly Zarda rolled, spinning about in time to see the warrior land lithely, though skidding to a stop on her feet.

Behind her, the Power Princess could see the others battling just as desperately. Shape was literally locked in combat with the 'other' Squadron's shapeshifter, the queer, grinning man in red, their arms and legs entangled like a mass of spaghetti. Skylark was in the air though the close confines of the Trophy Room kept her from fully utilizing her wings. Still, Zarda and she had trained often enough together in similar conditions, and even hovering Linda was quite

capable of using her acrobatic and martial prowess to defeat the blonde woman that had chosen her as a target. The blonde was good as well, however. Zarda could see the slightest edge to her stance, the way she fluidly moved angling just so, easing back and bracing before moving again all the faster.

Oddly, Moonglow was barely moving at all- not fighting or so it seemed. To the untrained eyes at least. Zarda could see her lips barely moving, her fingers twitching as a purplish glow flickered lightly about her body. Her opponent- the woman in tuxedo tails and fishnet stockings was more active, her hands gesticulating as she muttered some incomprehensible language. Light flared between the two women. Butterflies appeared where moments ago a desk had been sailing through the air. Water washed down from the ceiling to douse a sudden fire. Magic-

Power Princess dodged as a golden rope sped past her face only to flop uselessly to the ground. She stared, wondering what it might have been too late realizing what it was. A distraction!

Zarda raised her glowing shield too late, bringing it to bear even as a slim arm slipped through her defenses. The blow caught her fully on the chin, snapping her head around with a violent crack, throwing her off-balance. The Utopian Warrior reached out to break her fall, only to see her hand land within the loop of the rope on the ground. The snare quickly wrapped about her wrist before she could pull away, the other jerking it tight and pulling her arm out from under her. Zarda slammed to the ground feeling her arm being drawn back even as she cursed her own stupidity. This warrior woman was far too good to let the other battles distract her so. Her own foolishness, and now Zarda would suffer for it-

She felt the knee driven into the small of her back as the Wonder Woman landed on her, straddling her. The warrior pulled her arm, she having the leverage as Zarda struggled uselessly. The other laid almost full on her back, pinning Zarda as she grabbed the Utopian's free, flailing arm, dragging it back as well. She leaned in, hissing into her ear even as Zarda slammed her head back, wincing at the impact but smiling to hear the other's grunt of pain.

"There is- no- need for this," the woman snarled as she roughly jerked her golden rope wrapping it tightly about Zarda's crossed wrists, pulling it taut loop upon loop. "We are not who you think we are! This is pointless!"

Zarda kicked, bucking under the other's weight, but it was useless. Finally she felt the Wonder Woman's forearm against the back of her neck, forcing her face to the dirty floor. Zarda cursed and snarled, gnashing her teeth as she felt the increasing pressure, kicking her legs against the tiled stone. Finally she felt fingers snake into her hair, jerking back. Zarda looked up through her rage to see the other hovering over her, her free arm drawn back, blood drooling from the corner of her swelling lips-

“I would not humiliate you further,” the warrior said and Zarda could see the sincerity in her eyes. Still, her fist hovered, ready to strike the final blow. “Surrender, sister...”

“I am not your sister,” Zarda hissed, adrenaline pumping still, but her rage and anger draining, no where to vent. “Still... I-“

Zarda felt the heat as twin beams of energy lashed out, splashing across the woman’s chest. Too late, and probably by habit her arms dropped into a cross to block the beams, but the damage was done. Zarda could smell seared flesh as the woman flew from her back, screaming with pain as the fires of atomic energy branded her. The Wonder Woman sprawled as she tumbled back, slamming headlong into the wall then bouncing to a heap right next to Nighthawk and the man dressed as a bat. Zarda almost felt sorrow as she stared at the still form, her gaze drifting to the Bat-man crouching beside her. He seemed shaken-

“Zarda?”

Hyperion was at her side, that same look on his face but more so. Was it love on the face of the Bat, or simple concern for a fallen teammate? Was that the key to victory? Still, it seemed strange for a group of villains calling themselves ‘Sinister’. Perhaps the Wonder Woman had been-

“Ungh!”

The moment lost, Zarda peered at Hyperion as he strained mightily at her bonds, trying in vain- apparently- to snap the thin golden strands. His face was twisted from the effort, sweat dripping from his nose and Zarda could see purplish splotches spreading from his own battle with-

“Hyperion!”

Too late, Zarda barely saw the lightning fast blow that slammed across her love’s face. She saw blood fly as Hyperion went sailing through the air, the big man that had struck him stepping up with the momentum of his attack. He gave her a casual glance and she could see the anger on his face, but then he just as quickly dismissed her. Being bound, apparently helpless he considered her no threat. His mistake-

Zarda kicked, spinning over and about, mimicking the very move that had been her downfall as employed by the warrior woman. Even bound Zarda was more than a match for this man, despite his apparent strength. She scissors-kicked, sweeping the man’s legs out from under him then just as quickly slamming the heel of her boot across the bridge of his nose before he even hit the ground. She

heard the crack of bone as his head spun aside, he tumbling even as she righted herself, easing back to spring to her feet.

He was too fast though as again his arm shot out, his hand wrapping about her ankle in a vice-like grip. Zarda winced as he squeezed, fearing for a moment that he might actually break her ankle, then whooped as he spun her about. With a casual ease he flung her and Zarda cursed as she went skidding and skipping across the floor like a stone on water.

Zarda slammed into Moonglow's legs, the impact not only knocking the mystic from her feet but breaking her concentration. Zarda heard her friend yelp in surprise as she fell, her momentum carrying her right through the doorway to smash through the far wall beyond in the outer hall, Moonglow tumbling behind.

Damn it, J'onn! We need you!

Zatanna

Zatanna gasped for breath as the woman fell, staggering on her heels as sweat stung her eyes, plastered her long, black hair along her face. A moment's respite- barely- and one she had to exploit before the woman could regain her senses and renew her attack.

The magic was strange here, but Zatanna thanked the gods that there was magic at all. After so long in that odd, anti-matter space, and the time before at the end of everything where there had been no arcane energies at all- well...

It had been horrible. She had never felt so cold and alone since her father had died years ago. She could not imagine a life without the fires of magic burning within her. She could not stand viewing the dull drab world through the eyes of one that did not have the 'sight'. She never wanted to experience that loss again- like someone had cut out her heart or soul. She knew however that she would have too all too soon.

This was not their world. She had known it the second she had stepped off of that queer machine, that cosmic escalator that had brought them to this mirror-world Earth. The magic was there, but odd, strange, and she had to struggle and strain, grope for every spell that she wanted to cast.

Still she had held her own. The other woman- Moonglow J'onn had offered- was well in tune with her planet's mystical resources. Zatanna half-suspected that the mystic was indeed the equivalent of Doctor Fate rather than her own doppelganger; the Mistress of this continuum's Mystical Arts and defender of the Magical Plane. Far out of Zatanna's league-

But for a twist of fate...

“!peelS” Zatanna whispered, forcing her will into her words as she directed the mystical energies at the woman on the ground before her. Moonglow looked up, her eyes still blurry from her sudden, unexpected fall and the shock of being ripped from whatever fugue state she had been trying to achieve. Zatanna did not even want to know what the woman had been planning to do to her, but a simple ‘Sleep’ spell should do the trick if she was unprepared.

Zatanna cursed, watching as her spell splashed against the woman’s hastily erected shields, only a trickle of energy seeping through to affect the sorceress. Zatanna saw the woman’s eyelids droop, her face struggling not to stretch into a yawn as she tried to speak, to utter a new spell.

Zatanna eased back on her high heeled pump and swung her long leg up and about. The point of her shoe caught the woman under the chin, snapping her jaw shut with a clack as her teeth slammed together. Luckily the woman’s shields went up to protect her from any spell and she was not defended against a simple kick upside the head. Her father would have been furious- and proud.

The woman’s body arched back, the force of Zatanna’s kick actually raising her off the ground a bit. Apparently, like Zatanna, the mystic was not used to fighting physically. Luckily however, Zatanna had had simple martial arts forced upon her by two of the best. Zatanna stepped forward as the woman moaned, rolling over-

“!gag emoceb riA”

The woman’s eyes popped open as her mouth filled with something seemingly invisible. The air hardened, blocking her oxygen as it clogged her gaping mouth, spreading her lips wide. Moonglow raised her hands, though whether to claw at the gag or to attack Zatanna did not know, or care-

“!sdnob emoceb epaC”

Zatanna wiggled her fingers, directing the flow of the woman’s cloak already wrapped about her arms and legs, her body from her struggles to rise. The cape glowed briefly, and Zatanna thought for a second that there was more to the cloak than she realized, that the spell might fail. Then it seemed to bend to her will of a sudden, enveloping the woman and wrapping her in its layers like a mummy. The woman grunted into her gag as her struggles grew less desperate, less effective, the cape encircling her tighter and tighter with every wrapping. It almost seemed endless.

At last however it was over and the woman lay still. Zatanna could see the woman’s body heaving slightly, breathing, but with only her nose barely showing

from the folds of her bonds she was helpless; her fingers trapped tight, her voice silenced, blind. Still-

“...peels” Zatanna whispered again, touching the woman on the head and easing it to the floor as her breathing slowed and evened out. Fast asleep at last, Zatanna breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed, exhaustion enveloping her like a blanket...

J’onn!

Yes...

Firestorm

Ronnie Raymond was scared. Not of the fight of course, not of the battle raging around him. He was ready to fight, but...

But this was a different world, a different universe altogether. An entirely new and unique plane of existence, and what Ronnie Raymond- Firestorm- the Nuclear Man was afraid of was the things that he could not see. What if this world was too far removed from his own? Just how different was it?

He had seen Zatanna struggling with her powers and spells, and that had been enough to give him pause. Just enough to make him hesitate unleashing his own energies. Like her, he had been cut off in the odd, anti-matter universe. The negative realm had been far too weird for him to dare try and use his powers except at the extreme- and with Batman’s urging. He had no idea if what he saw- that Hydrogen Atom for instance- was actually what it was.

He was breathing, so there had to be oxygen, but what if it was slightly different? What if the air was just different enough, and when he tried to- say- form a block of lead around the big red-head that was hammering on Superman, what if that simple act started a chain reaction and blew up the world? What if there was something unknown and volatile in the air, something unique and dangerous to this dimension?

What if he killed them all?

Ronnie Raymond licked his lips, his gaze narrowing as he scanned the air on a myriad of levels, investigating every atom, every new molecule that he could see. Mentally he took them apart, sorting the base elements, identifying them all cautiously, slowly. He had to be sure, certain beyond a shadow of a doubt before he did anything less his desire to help his team turn to disaster.

Hydrogen... Oxygen... Carbon Dioxide...

There was something-

Ronald...

Something odd...

Ronald!

“J’onn?”

Concentrate, Ronald. Focus...

Firestorm looked to the Martian. J’onn J’onzz was on his knees, his body still ablaze as he struggled to rise. Ronnie could hear the fear in his mental voice and he could not imagine what it was taking for the Manhunter to push through the pain and the fear. Too, the little dragon-like creature was skittering all about, continually spitting fire on J’onn, keeping him aflame. He had to do something-

No! No- I am... fine... Pay attention. Watch... and I shall give you... what you need...

“But J’onn-“

Focus, Ronald! Look...

Against his better judgement, Ronnie Raymond focused, squinting as the imagery of some unique element to this dimension swirled before his special vision. He did not recognize whatever it was, though it did seem vaguely familiar, like-

“Kryptonite?”

No...

Argonite...

Black Canary

Dinah Laurel Lance cartwheeled across the floor, the sonic blasts ripping up stone and tile in her wake. She could feel the chips of flying stone and the vibrations set her teeth on edge as she cooed, trying to match the frequency and thus lessen the effect.

She bounced to the wall, then sprung back out somersaulting as the woman in the purple armor went skidding past on the floor and out the door. The flying songbird was distracted for just a heartbeat, concern wrinkling her brow as she

watched her teammate crash into the wall outside and Dinah used that to her advantage. Flipping she turned her midair tumble into a flying kick.

The woman- Skylark- was fast too though, twisting as the Black Canary sped past, leg extended. The woman swung her arm, connecting even as Dinah tried to roll, tucking again, tumbling with the impact. Spiraling and twisting the Canary straightened out just as she hit the floor and slammed up against the wall with a huff and a wince. Pain shot through her shoulder as she looked up to see Skylark swooping in for the kill.

They were too evenly matched Dinah thought as her arms flitted about, blocking the other woman's rapid series of blows. Their sonic abilities were almost equal, her Sonic Scream easily as powerful as Dinah's Canary Cry, and both were at least resistant to the other's assault. Dinah figured that she had the edge in martial arts, but the woman could fly and managed to use that to stay more or less out of reach even in the room's close quarters. The twelve foot ceilings did not allow Skylark the advantage of full flight, but it was enough to make the Canary work all the harder to connect.

The Canary flipped up, kicking out in a sweep that just barely caught the woman in the chin. It was not enough to hurt really, but enough to drive the flying woman back a bit. Dinah landed and rolled away, coming to rest behind Skylark. She leaped up, drawing her arm back, ready to strike even as the other whirled about, the tips of her wings slamming into Dinah, throwing her off and knocking her from the air. The Canary hit, rolling with the force of the blow and righting into a defensive crouch as Skylark dove, her legs extended to ram with a double-heeled kick.

Dinah ducked and Skylark's feet slammed into the stone instead. The woman was quick however and spun about even as Dinah launched herself forward, the winged woman's spinning kick sweeping the empty air where the Canary's head had been just a second before. Dinah tumbled across the room and rolled into a crouch again, but this time the woman was simply waiting, and watching-

"You're good," Skylark said, using the break to wipe her sweat-stained face.

"The best," Canary said with a smirk, nodding her own respect in return. Skylark was no Shiva, but she could have taken the Huntress by now.

Skylark chuckled. "Pity you're on the wrong side. We'd make a pretty good team otherwise."

"Birds of Prey, hunh?" Dinah asked, smiling. She stood, letting her hands ease out at her sides. "Listen, we don't need to do this. There's been some misunderstanding." Dinah tried to seem calm, unimposing and she thought she saw the Skylark relax, just a little-

“Okay,” the winged woman said, still wary. “I’m listening.”

“We’re not-“

Something small and dark whizzed through the air. Dinah barely saw it until the slim shape smacked Skylark in the temple, bouncing away. It was a batarang.

Skylark slumped back, her wings lowering her unconscious form slowly to the ground. Dinah saw a line of blood trailing down the woman’s cheek as she crumpled. The Canary turned and saw the Batman folding his weapon, slipping it back into the folds of his cape.

“Why-“

“We’ve no time to play, Canary. Take them down fast and we’ll sort this later.”

She was about to respond, but the Batman simply turned his back and moved on...

Plastic Man

“So then Booster says, ‘Let’s spritz old Mt. Baldy’s wardrobe with Ode de Skunk le Pew’.”

“Bwah-Ha-Hah!”

The man called simply Shape laughed loud and hard at that, despite the fact that Plastic Man had his arm wrapped tightly about the other man’s neck at least two dozen turns. Shape’s neck just seemed to keep stretching and stretching no matter how tight the strangle hold became. Doesn’t he have to breathe?

Probably not. Plastic Man didn’t.

Plas stared at the odd fellow’s face, watching as the big man chuckled, his joke rattling around inside the other’s apparently half-empty head. Shape seemed a simple man, but he matched Plas move for move, and as a result their arms and legs were stretched for yards, intertwining about one another and tied up in knots like the best Chuck Jones cartoon.

“You funny,” the Shape said, grinning as he squeezed. “Make Shape laugh!”

“I’m happy for you,” Plas said, grinning in return. It was just a bit annoying that he couldn’t seem to get the upper hand, though he had never had such a captive audience that was so easy to impress. Time to try something different-

Plastic Man stuck his thumb in his mouth and blew, expanding, his body blowing up like a balloon. He saw Shape's eyes go wide for a moment even as he giggled as his limbs thinned and stretched, trying to compensate. He did, letting whatever his body was made of go limp to keep the balloon body entangled. Plas blew again, his goggled eyes bulging and vibrating as Shape started to guffaw again. He was easily amused, and slow. That was the ticket-

"Nice and slow, see..."

Plastic Man elongated his hair, making each strand spring up and stretch to attention, waving as he willed his face into strange, weird and exotic contours. Shape sniggered, watching as his limbs snaked out and around the balloon body of Plastic Man, holding him fast.

Plas went liquid, letting his body melt from the grip of the other man to splash across the floor, puddling then reforming.

"Wha-" Shape said as he fell, curling and bouncing like a rubber ball. It was what Plas had expected, was waiting for-

Plas hardened, coiling into a spring and shooting up. he caught Shape in mid-bounce and carried him at rocket speed towards the ceiling. At the last moment he sent the balled hero up and out, pistoning like a pinball machine's plunger. He heard the Shape yelp as he went careening off the ceiling, quickly ricocheting back down even as Plas shifted shape again. At the speed of thought he took on the shape of a bat-

"Batter up!"

He slammed into the spherical Shape and sent him flying towards the door. Quickly however the Shape unfolded, flapping out into a sail to stop his momentum. Plas was waiting for that too. He shifted into the shape of an arrow, launching at the thin, floating sheet of Shape.

There was a ripping sound as Plastic man pierced the other shapeshifter. Shape screamed, his body quivering as Plas yelled, "Bulls eye!", his body molding and flowing again to bounce off the far wall as a spring. He twisted in midair, letting his own pliable form flatten and spread, flowing into a sheet himself, wide and red and tattered into points on one end- like a cape...

"Holy Bat Sheet!" he mocked as he dropped onto Shape, the man almost liquid as he tried to close the hole in his belly, his hands pushing his flesh back together. Plastic Man enveloped the other, stretching as Shape struggled, compressing every time the other changed, trying to adapt, getting smaller...

Smaller...

Shape screamed as something thin snaked into his ear. He felt pain, screaming again. He wet himself as he kicked in the shroud that was Plastic Man, not understanding what was happening or why. He started to cry.

“Don’t hurt Shape...”

“Don’t...”

Plas heard Shape choke, his voice cutting off as something turned wet inside his head. Suddenly he just stopped moving. Plastic Man hesitated, counting, then slowly withdrew, reformed...

Shape’s eyes were wide and staring. Drool dribbled from the corner of his gaping mouth, his breath slow and labored. His body had reassembled, pulled back to something humanoid though soft and lumpy. He was barely moving, but alive. Plas stared down at the other and sighed-

“Sorry pal...”

Green Lantern

“You’re good kid,” the man called Spectrum said, but Kyle could not tell if he was mocking or not. Doctor Spectrum’s multi-colored suit covered him completely, head to toe and hiding his face. The only breaks in fact were where the glowing prisms were imbedded into the backs of his hands, and the stark white slits that were his eyes.

“Quite the imagination, Yessir.”

Was that a compliment?

They had traded energy ‘blows’ for awhile once they had squared off, but it soon became apparent that the room that the League had appeared into, despite its long size and high ceilings, was about to become cramped. Especially when two dozen-odd Metas decided to fight a Monday Night Raw Battle Royal! Spectrum had decided to play tag and took the battle outside somehow creating an opening in the super dense wall of the compound. He had flown through the hole, taunting Kyle to follow and Kyle- being Kyle- had done just that.

He was beginning to have second thoughts however.

As Earth’s Green Lantern, Kyle Rayner controlled one of the greatest weapons in the known universe. Mark that known because he was fairly certain that he was no longer anywhere in the vicinity of Kansas. With that ring, anything that Kyle might imagine became real- in a sense- a construct of both his imagination and

willpower, fueled by a green flame crackling a billion light years away. Kyle, being a cartoonist and commercial artist often called on his artistic talents and a childhood immersed in comic books and Manga to create those constructs. Case in point-

Kyle was encased within a green, glowing suit of armor straight out of the best Japanimation that he could imagine; big bulky boots and gloves, shoulder pads a yard wide on either side and a demonic looking helmet. He held a verdant katana blazing with green fire in his right hand and a crackling buckler of energy was situated on his left. He did look impressive.

Spectrum on the other hand ignored the trappings, fighting in the raw so to speak. He was like Jordan in that regard, or maybe more like Alan Scott as he seemed to rely simply on his prismatic force field while creating giant hands and boxing gloves, a baseball bat or simply a beam of energy that sparkled like a rainbow.

Despite all that they seemed evenly matched, at least in power. This Doc Spectrum obviously had years of experience under his belt though, because no matter what Kyle tried, what innovation the man in the skin tight clown-colored suit seemed to be one step ahead of him, countering his best with ease.

“You must be the Sinister Spectrum’s apprentice or something, right?” Doctor Spectrum said as shot out a volley of short blasts that ripped through Kyle’s armor. The ring protected him, mending the rents but to think he had pierced the defense so easily- Was Spectrum playing with him? “You’re a little young to be the original. And Jeez, son... Why green?”

Kyle ignored the other man’s banter, concentrating as he willed a laser cannon to appear on the arm of his armor. He blasted quickly, wildly, but Spectrum simply flew up and about, easily evading his best.

“More power maybe? Your boss know something I don’t?”

Kyle knew that the man was trying to rattle him, distract him. Hell, it was a tactic Kyle liked to use himself, when he wasn’t simply talking to keep the fear at bay-

What a laugh that was. Kyle knew that Ganthet had chosen him as Hal Jordan’s successor because he dealt with his fear, supposedly had none. But lately, after all he had been through with the League, and on his own he was starting to wonder. It had not been that long ago that an other world version of Hal Jordan had almost killed him- and that had scared him more than anything. Would he ever break out of Jordan’s shadow? He was wondering that too-

A giant fist suddenly enveloped him and Kyle winced as pain shot through his body, his armor seemingly being crushed by the pressure.

“Best keep your mind on the job at hand, boy,” Spectrum laughed as he willed his twin prisms to double and redouble the bands of energy that wrapped about Kyle. Spectrum was cocky to be sure, but he had a right to be. He was damn strong.

“Can’t imagine how Iron Man ever had a problem with the likes of you- or your old man. I haven’t even worked up a sweat.” Spectrum swooped up in a wide arch, soaring higher and dragging Kyle with him as he taunted. Kyle strained trying to force the huge glowing fingers to separate.

“You could always just surrender, y’know,” Spectrum mocked as he finally stopped to hover about a mile over the island that housed their headquarters. Kyle Rayner could see the vast compound below, the remnants of a city spreading out beneath them. It looked like the Caribbean, the idyllic island, the blue seas and gently rolling waves. A nice place to visit...

“Nobody has to know, son. Just lower your guard and I’ll knock you out. Just a love tap, no harm, no foul, no pride lost. You gotta know you can’t beat me. Surrender...”

“Not- an option...” Kyle said through gritted teeth.

He concentrated on the ring, on the power within. It had not been so long ago since the JLA had been on Oa. Granted it was an Oa at the End of Time, and the Prime Flame there had grown weak and corrupted thanks to the Time Trapper, but the power had been there just the same. Kyle had recharged his ring at the source- not that he had needed to as his ring did not ‘run out’ of energy as the older versions once did. It had just seemed right- proper. The Green Flame burned within, he could feel it. There was no way this arrogant ass could beat that. No way!

Kyle focused...

“What?”

Kyle Rayner, Earth’s one, true Green Lantern felt the first sign of hesitancy, the first chink in the armored fist that held him fast. He focused on that, concentrating, guiding his will to beat on that weakness, to push. He heard something snap, felt the fingers loosen just a bit and tried all the harder-

“Hold on now...”

Kyle burned, feeling the anger, the humiliation sometimes of forever being compared to Jordan and Scott, to Stewart... to Gardner for god’s sake. Kyle screamed!

The rainbow-colored fist exploded in a shower of light as Kyle Rayner burst free. But that was not enough. Green Lantern soared higher, above, his ring blazing as he fired bolt after bolt of verdant energy at the back-peddling Spectrum, his will and anger fueling the fire, his assault shattering the man's shields as fast as he could put them up. Spectrum was good, but he was on the run now, firing behind him, on the defensive. Kyle pressed his advantage, forcing the other man down, back to earth.

The Green Lantern rained bolts of energy down on the fleeting form of Doctor Spectrum. The Doctor raised shields as he fled, flying in wide, swooping arches to avoid the assault, to no avail. Rayner was on his game, anger and pain driving his attack. He could feel the power welling in the ring, crying for release. Who was he to deny?

Kyle aimed letting his will explode...

Stanley Stewart, the Whizzer just had to laugh to see Zarda bound and on the floor of the hall, struggling to undo unreachable knots that held her arms fast behind her. She prided herself on her skills and abilities, yet someone had done the worst; not only beating her but humiliating her as well-

"Need a hand, Princess?" Stanley joked as he dropped the speedster, the Flash to the floor and sped to Zarda's side. He had beaten the boy so easily that he had not even imagined that the others would be having a hard time. Apparently he was wrong.

"Shut up Stewart, and release me before-"

Zarda suddenly glanced upwards, staring at the ceiling as she cocked her head, listening. Stanley Stewart followed her gaze but he heard nothing.

"What-"

"Quiet!" she snapped, and he could see she was straining to-

"Mommy?"

Stanley Stewart whipped about to see one of Arcanna's daughters at the far end of the hall. She was still half-asleep, rubbing her eyes, her teddy bear cradled in one arm.

"Katie..."

Stanley Stewart, Fastest Man Alive started forward to rush to Moonglow's daughter, to take her away. Where was her father? Where was Maddy and Tina- his own family? Why was Katie wandering into the middle of a firefight? They all knew the drill- get to safety, lock the doors, and set the shields. He took a step and time seemed to freeze...

Hyperion screamed as the uneven block of Argonite suddenly enveloped him, appearing right out of thin air. He felt the pain as the radiation seeped into his body, sucking at his powers, his life. He felt himself slipping away, helpless.

It was the boy, the one with fire for hair. He had done it. He had wiggled his fingers and the world had changed.

His doppelganger stood before him- the Hyperion of the Squadron Sinister. His disguise did not matter; the blue costume, the black hair. He almost seemed sorry as he drew his arm back. Hyperion cursed, spat. He would not beg or surrender.

He would not give the bastard the satisfaction...

"Change... Back!"

J'onnn J'onzz held the creature at arm's length, trying to ignore the blaze of fire that had erupted about his hand, creeping up his arm. The little dragon-like thing squirmed in his grip, spewing fire and raging, gasping for breath as the Martian Manhunter shifted his fingers and tightened his grip.

J'onnn winced, grimacing as a new gout of flame washed over him. He held his ground, blocking the pain, the fear- mostly.

He was shivering, shaking...

"Change..." he snarled.

The Skrull, Skymax appeared at the end of his arm, just like that. A swirl of green, as flesh stretched and morphed, scales and coarse fur receding with claws, the softer, muscular form growing, taking shape. J'onnn J'onzz watched and wondered if this was how the others perceived him.

"This is pointless," the Skrull said, gasping, not even trying to escape. His dark eyes scrutinized the Martian, and J'onnn in turn nodded, staring back.

“As I said. We must seek a-“

Both men turned at the sound of the explosion in the outer hall.

J’onn reached out with his mind, touching the other’s, trying to ‘see’ what had happened...

Both men paled to learn...

They were winning.

Batman surveyed the battle scene, his keen mind quickly tallying the damage, assimilating the situation- all situations. Plastic Man had beaten his foe as Batman had expected he would. He was surprised that he had had to help the Canary, but the outcome was acceptable. Diana had beaten her doppelganger, though not quite as swiftly as he might have expected. J’onn had the upper hand with the changeling again, at least for the moment, but there were no worries there. The Manhunter knew his duty. Even Firestorm had done his job, aiding Superman in the end.

The Batman had been just a bit disappointed in Clark. He should have beaten his foe easily, he being the stronger and more experienced. Had he been holding back?

Zatanna had won by a stroke of good fortune, Wonder Woman’s unwitting aid. That was good. She was always a variable, but an ace in the hole as well. Still no word from Flash or Green Lantern however.

J’onn... Status on Flash and-

J’onn!

Batman heard the explosion even as the Martian turned, his dark eyes glassy and sad...

Kyle Rayner hovered over the hole that peered down into the Squadron’s Utopia Compound. He had not meant to become so enraged, but the man- Spectrum had been taunting him, somehow knowing just which buttons to push to get him riled. He had lost it, he knew. Letting the anger overwhelm him and fuel the ring, giving him that added push he had unleashed his power in a surge that would have made the Batman proud.

He had won, after all...

Doctor Spectrum lay in the rubble beneath the opening, the hole. He was out, and Kyle could see that his leg was shattered by the odd angle that it curled up under him. That image alone would have been enough to make him sorry- to make him retch. It was nothing...

The speedster- the Whizzer was kneeling in the carnage where the roof had blown in with Spectrum's impact, Kyle's attack- kneeling right in the midst of it. The woman was standing just behind him, her head hanging low, and even Diana was there. She was looking up at him in shock. He had never seen that look on her face before. There was a man too- just a guy with red wavy hair and a beard, dressed in his pajamas. He was kneeling in front of the Whizzer as the speedster handed him the still, broken body of the little girl...

Kyle felt his heart swell up, rising into his throat threatening to choke him. His vision was getting blurry, clogged with tears. His will power wavered and he almost fell.

He had not meant...

He did not know...

The man with the beard was wailing now as the Whizzer stood. He cradled the shattered body, his hands gently brushing the fine golden hair from the dusty, bloody face. The little head lolled at an odd angle, the girl's arms and legs twisted and limp-

"Phillip..."

The speedster put his hand comfortingly on the man's shoulder, but the man- the girl's father simply shrugged it off, holding the body tighter, whimpering her name over and over...

"Katie..."

Kyle drifted down.

"I- I'm sorry... I-"

He did not even see the Whizzer move, but as soon as he was within reach he felt the man's fists battering at his shields. The ring protected him for the most part, but he could still feel the force and fury behind the man's blows as he battered and batted. He could feel the pain-

"Bastardthatcouldhavebeenmydaughteronofabitchkillyoudammitkillyou!"

Kyle fell to the floor and the man was on top of him, his fists a black and orange blur, his body all but invisible as he hammered, kicking and punching. Only his face remained clear and distinct, tears streaming down his face-

“Sorry... I’m sor-“

The room erupted in a glow of pink.

Kyle heard J’onn’s scream as his ring blazed, enveloping him in a stronger shield. Blood splattered as the Whizzer’s fists became raw, his gloves ripping, his hands cracking as bone’s popped and snapped. Kyle Rayner ignored it. He ignored the startled gasps and the sudden surge as friend and foe alike crowded, spilled out of the doorway to stare at the strange light sparkling in the hallway.

It was a pinprick at first, blazing, and a brilliance that eventually swirled and coalesced, taking on form. It hovered over the scene, the carnage, the death, taking form and becoming solid. No one moved or spoke. They barely breathed...

The child looked down at the man, cradling the dead child. He was young looking, not five or six at the most with a wild mane of red hair and a soft glowing face. A child full of wonder, so perfect and pure, innocent. Kyle could see the resemblance to the red-haired man, vaguely, but the child’s eyes were golden, blazing and golden, full of awareness.

FATHER...

The child’s voice was high-pitched and rich, full of youth but booming just the same. The red-bearded man looked up, his eyes rimmed red with tears-

“Benjamin...”

I FELT HER PAIN. HEARD HER SCREAM, HER DEATH GASP. I HAD TO COME.

The child drifted down, his arms outstretched to accept the little girl. The bearded man hugged her close, then finally nodded. He held the lifeless, broken body out at arm’s length and the child took it.

THERE IS NOTHING I MIGHT DO. SHE HAS FLED. I AM SORRY, FATHER...

The boy, Benjamin turned to Kyle then, and the Green Lantern felt his balls shrivel at the look of pure hatred.

YOU HAVE KILLED MY SISTER!

The child's voice echoed throughout the hallway, the room beyond. Kyle felt the fear then and there- for the first time. He was dead, he knew...

YOU CAUSED MY SISTER TO DIE, AND YOU WILL PAY! I'LL MAKE YOU-

"It- it was an accident!" Kyle said backing away. "I didn't mean-"

Batman was there at his side as Superman flew forward. Faster than a speeding bullet. Fast as lightning, he shot past, right through the child, slamming through the thick stone walls beyond. Kyle saw Diana struggling to her feet-

"Stop. This is wrong..."

And J'onn. Kyle could hear the Martian screaming mentally, trying to make the child hear.

"Stop!"

All heads turned at the sound of the voice, both Squadron and League alike. There was a man there, dressed in a long, flowing coat detailed with strange markings, a wide-brimmed hat that cast his face in shadows. Everyone seemed to hesitate, even the child as a golden fire crackled about his eyes.

"Lightner-" the Power Princess whispered as she continued to struggle with her bonds. The man looked at her.

"Once that was my name, as I have told you before. Things have changed and the world has moved on. Now and forever, I am Mysterium..."

"This travesty has gone on long enough," he said looking to the broken girl in the child's arms. "Too long. It must end."

IT WILL, ANTITHESIS, MY OTHER.

The golden child turned to the League, those that had finally gathered in the hallway. They were battered and bruised all, some unconscious, bleeding. They were ready to battle.

YOU SHALL PAY!

The child raised his spindly arms and Kyle saw a spattering glow of pinkish flame sparking along his frame. There was a rush of air, and he heard his ears pop, sweat rolling down his back and face. The air seemed to rip and coruscating pink energy crackled forth.

There was a flash...

Epilogue

Hyperion stood staring at the wreckage, the place in the hallway where the roof had caved in. Shape was sitting in the corner, tears in his eyes as he rubbed at the swollen pink stain on his chest. Joe was moving the rubble out with his prism. Stan was gone, with his wife and daughter. Phillip was holding his wife's still sleeping form. They had taken his daughter's body away. He would have to tell Arcanna. Tell her they had lost another child.

"There was nothing to do," Zarda said putting a hand on his shoulder, finally free of the golden bonds as they had mysteriously vanished along with the Wonder Woman. "It happened so fast. Unexpected-"

"We tried," Neal said, staring at the blood-spattered floor. "That's all we could do."

Linda was in the Infirmary, Skymax tending to her wounds, the concussion. Mysterium turned, his coat billowing with his movements.

"Where are they?"

"They are gone, Mark Milton. Benjamin has sent them on their way."

Hyperion stared at the man called Mysterium. Once he was called the Nth Man, and he had used his cosmic powers to destroy entire universes. He had made a pact with Benjamin Jones however, Arcanna's son; he taking the latent magical abilities of the child as his own, the boy taking on his own powers and destiny to alter fate. It had seemed a fair trade at first. Apparently Benjamin had heard his sister die and come home.

"Where? Where are they? Did he send them home?" Hyperion asked, clenching his fists. He wanted revenge for what they had done- the Squadron Sinister!

Mysterium shook his head. "Not home...Where Katherine's death will be avenged. Where they belong..."

To be continued...

Story © Curt F 2005

Next Issue: Head on over to M2K for the next chapter! If you think that the JLA had it bad taking on the Squadron Supreme, wait until you see how the Avengers handle the Crime Syndicate of Amerika!



Avengers Vs JLA #2

The Keystone Building, Manhattan:

Doctor Midas stood safely in the shadows of the rooftop stairwell watching intently the scene unfolding just a few blocks away. His recovery team was still scurrying about the tarmac roof cleaning up after the launch of the Star Core Shuttle just a few hours before. A flurry of activity as they prepared the launch mechanism and landing area for a potential return of the shuttle- not that they were counting on it. Midas had already written off the obsolete shuttle as a tax break and loss for Argos Corp, not really expecting it to make the return trip in anything resembling one piece.

It was not important of course in itself. It had served its purpose years ago. Its contents were of a bit more concern, however. Midas had filled the spacecraft with every conceivable form of energy analyzer and consumption device that he could think of. Better, every machine that he could get his hands on, beg, borrow or steal. There was an obsolete Ionic Converter that he had purchased through the Latverian Embassy years before that had never quite lived up to its potential. There were bits and pieces of the original Cosmic Distortion Device that he had bought at an auction when AIM was in need of finances. There was the Stane Stabilizer he had purchased on E-Bay for a song just last month. Bits and pieces of rag tag equipment in general, each with the potential ability to make his dreams come true given proper circumstance. He had yet to put the pieces together however, and circumstance remained ever elusive.

Too, possibly the most important equipment on the shuttle was his daughter, Oubliette- and the Count Nefaria of course. His daughter was piloting the Star Core craft, right into the heart of Richard's Negative Zone in hopes of finding both the vaunted and dangerous Exploding Atmosphere- where the Neg Zone met reality and Earth, and/or the self-proclaimed ruler of the Anti-Matter Universe, Annihilus himself.

It was not Oubliette- his Daughter Exterminatrix that held the key to success this time, but rather Nefaria, for once playing the flunky rather than the vision- the antagonist in this little drama. Nefaria had been bathed in Ionic energy years

ago; a reconfigured experiment based upon the original designs of Heinrich Zemo himself that had created Wonder Man even years earlier. That same experiment had proved too unstable to use on Midas himself, unfortunately, but it did leave Nefaria with a sampling of powers stolen from the likes of Power Man, the Living Laser and that Mutant freak, Whirlwind. Nefaria had been transformed into a veritable Super-Man, and though his powers had waned over the last few months his body was still like a sponge, simply waiting to soak up raw power under the right circumstances. Hopefully those circumstances would present themselves in the Negative Zone, in the form of Annihilus and his Cosmic Control Rod.

There was always the chance that Nefaria would choose to betray the mission, to steal the sought powers for his own ends. Little did he know however, was that the modified Mandroid Armor that he had been fitted into was designed not only to defend him against the rigors of the Zone, but to transfer those energies he encountered into a similar apparatus housed in one of the more secure laboratories deep within the Keystone Building. A simple signal from Oubliette and Midas would hurry to the machinery downstairs, strap himself into the exoskeleton and receive Godhood. Oubliette would then dispose of the nefarious count in the best, villainous fashion.

Midas chuckled, drawing on the cigarette hanging from the slit in his golden helmet, watching in fascination as the sky beyond sparkled a dark and girly pink. It was beautiful, but not truly the source of his good humor. He knew that even if the Mandroid Armor failed- for whatever reason- there was still the Cosmic Control Rod that Oubliette would return with, if she knew what was good for her. There was also the pure and unadulterated force of Anti-Matter itself, should the count be unfortunate enough to get himself drawn into the Exploding Atmosphere. His own morphing Ionic energies would channel that power back to Midas' machines in transition. There was no way in all the Nine Hells that this plan could possibly fail.

He had prepared for every contingency, at the figurative cost of an arm and a leg. Maybe his own first born, but he could live with that with success. And he could not fail, that was the beauty of it all. There was no way-

A crackling, thunderous noise drew his attention from his reveries and Midas casually glanced back across the expanse towards the far building, beyond where the Baxter Building once stood, where the Portal now sparkled. Gouts of energy were spewing forth, the pinkish red mist cracking lightning as a great cloud came swirling forth. Shadows stretched and danced, an eerie glow sweeping over all. Midas spat his butt away and strode forward, grabbing close the first scientist he passed-

"What the hell is that?" he shouted, his amplified voice echoing around his golden helmet. "What's happening?"

The scientist shuffled along in Midas' grip as his employer dragged him towards the roof's edge. Midas could sense the man's anxiety, smell his fear in getting closer to the strange phenomenon, but he did not care. He was paying damn good money and he wanted answers-

"Th-there seems to be a radical spike in the energy curve, sir," the man said trying to free his arm from Midas' grasp. "The Anti-Energy in particular seems off the scale, resembling the energy we recorded in Palnau some years back. And there's a pulse beneath the Gamma signature that we have never recorded-"

"And what does all that mean?" Midas snapped, finally releasing his lackey with a shove. His gaze was fixated on the energy spewing from the portal, only glancing at Richards and his SHIELD agent and the two recently arrived Avengers in his peripheral vision. He could taste the power seeping out of the portal. Wasted power that was simply evaporating...

"Something's coming through-"

"Oubliette?"

"No sir," the scientist said shaking his head as he stared at a bulky hand-held display. "I read five, possibly six separate entities."

Midas watched as the Portal erupted, the scientist's droning voice fading into the background as figures began to come through from beyond. There was a big and burly man dressed in blue with a red cape, swiftly followed by another man in darker grays and blues. A woman in a swimsuit and cape, stiletto boots and a whip- no a golden rope. A man dressed in all red with a big, bulky helmet, another in black, his hand surrounded by a green glow that tinted a few of the others with a protective shield. The final was an alien, with pale, sickly white skin and an elongated head. Who were these? Where had they come from?

"Dammit!" Midas cursed as his hand shifted to his helmet, activating the parabolic receptors built into his audio receiver. Captain America had stepped up he could see, probably dictating his democratic banter to the burly man.

"Surrender?" the Captain said, his voice crackling with static as Midas adjusted the gain. "Not in my vocabulary, son. Avengers Assemble!"

"Shit..."

Midas cursed as all hell broke loose...

The Mighty Avengers **VS** ***The JLA***

CSA and Punishment!

Ultra Man took a long deep breath of air in this brave new world and smiled. He could taste the pollution, the stench of industrial smog filling his lungs. He could see it there on the horizon, the corruption lingering, roiling on the wind. He could feel the fear, the hatred boiling just on the edge, ready to burst forth at the slightest provocation. This was a world he could understand. Not the pristine Alter-Earth of the Justice League, but another in the myriad parallel universes recently restored by the odd force in the cosmos that had so recently repaired their own continuum. The Man-Killer had been right after all...

“You see?”

Ultra Man sneered at the raspy, scratchy voice that hissed in his ear. The breath was almost more than his Ultra Smell could stand, but he turned to the sickly white freak and nodded, giving the skinny alien that much credit. The Martian Man-Killer was almost giddy with his success, thinking this might free him from banishment. Little did he know.

“I was right! A new world to plunder!” The Martian squealed in delight, his long, spiky tail flicking, his forked tongue lashing about, licking his lips. Ultra Man smirked. His fist shot out at Ultra Speed, his hand wrapping about the slimy alien’s throat, squeezing just hard enough to get the creature to squirm and gasp.

“You got lucky, Sm’t’h,” he snarled, flexing his fingers cruelly. “Don’t push it. I have the means to send you back.”

“Yesss...” the White Martian hissed, squirming, gasping for breath. “Yesss...”

Ultra Man smiled and released the alien, ignoring it as it skulked away, turning his attention to the little man standing before him on the rooftop. He was dressed in a flag; red, white, and blue. That was obvious. No one dressed so gaudily unless they were espousing their dedication and beliefs. There had been a vigilante back on Earth Two years ago that had wrapped himself in an archaic

flag. Major something... Major Pain in the Ass Man they had labeled him. He had burned well.

Ultra Man shifted his Ultra Vision, scanning the combatants before him for potential threat. He could have simply shifted to Flash Vision and disintegrated them all of course, but where was the fun in that? They had leaped through the bizarre portal that had opened on the satellite hoping for adventure after the whining Martian had told them of the odd happenings in the N-Zone; strange energy fluctuations and scabbling critters flitting through space. Something was up, in the air, and it would not leave the Crime Syndicate of Amerika behind.

Not like the Crisis...

That had been a disaster. But then there came that other odd battle on the Justice League's Earth where they had gotten a new lease on life. That had been a disaster too, in the end, but they were alive again and back on the world they knew. In charge, everything was right with the universe again. Boring as hell...

When S'm Sm'th, the Martian Man-Killer had sent his psychic message from his banishment in the N-Zone they had been hesitant. It could have been a trick, but then they had slaughtered the bulk of the White Martians before. What was one? They had listened, and S'm had prattled on about the strange energies in the Zone, the fleeting form of the silver man he had seen as well as the strange creatures that were flowing forth like ants from the Barrier at the edge of all. He had seen other worlds- or so he claimed, through rips in the very fabric of space. New worlds that they had not seen before. As one they had jumped at the chance for a bit of excitement.

New worlds to conquer. Another Earth with new heroes...

The Flag Man was nothing. Just a man, top of the line, but nothing special. The shield he held was an anomaly, composed of metals apparently unique to this Earth as they did not register to his special sight. No worries there.

The silver hair was a speedster. He could see the man vibrating, itching to move. Energy warped and crackled about him, and he was moving fast enough that Ultra Man had to look twice. Not a slug, definitely-

"Quick," he said, scanning the others. "The one in blue with the silver hair- he's yours."

"Yowsa, boss..."

Ultra Man sneered as Johnny Quick and the other Earth speedster vanished in a violet blur. Junkie bastard...

The older man in the blue suit with the '4' on his chest seemed bursting with power. Something was blocking him though. His body had failed him. A stroke maybe, or heart attack? It did not matter. He was crippled and useless, perfect.

"Owl Man," he said with a chuckle. "Take the cripple."

"Son of a bitch." He heard Wayne grumble under his breath, but move forward none the less.

The suit however, he was an anomaly, a mystery. He did not read, like he was dead almost. Fine, let the rest figure him out. That would leave the patriot to him. "Super Woman, Power Ring, Man-Killer... take the dweeb in the suit. Flag Man's mine..."

"Think you can handle him, big man?" Lois sneered as she unlashd her magic lasso. He could hear the contempt in her voice, but ignored it. She would not egg him on today. Ultra Man planned to enjoy this...

Make it last...

Captain America could hear the high-pitched whine as the red-suited speedster confronted Quicksilver. They exchanged words, like gnats buzzing in his ear, but before he could react they were gone in a streak of violet-

"Pietro, wait..."

Too late. Too late all around.

The villains- the Crime Syndicate moved forward choosing their opponents. The man in blue and gray headed towards Reed. Cap glanced at Richards, backing away, stumbling. Cap had little faith that Richards could meet the man physically- not since his stroke. His powers were suppressed, and even his limited movements were handicapped. Still, Reed Richards was the smartest man on the planet and leader of the World's Greatest Fighting Team. He would hold his own.

He was more worried about Woo. The SHIELD agent was just a man after all, but for some reason three of the antagonists had chosen him for prey. Why? Oddly, Jimmy Woo did not look concerned in the least. He had not even bothered to draw his weapon, rather continued smoking his cigarette.

PAIN!

Cap winced, whipping his shield about to block the twin rays of heat raking his body. Hovering above him, just out of reach, Ultra Man laughed.

“C’mon, ‘son’,” he chortled, eyes blazing. “Keep your mind on your work. Your fight’s here.”

“I know that,” Cap said, standing and ignoring the pain. He could feel the burn of his chain mail through his undershirt, but he had to blot it out. He tensed. “I’ve been fighting authoritarian thugs all my career. You’re just one more in a long list.”

Cap reared back, shield in hand. He flung his weapon, the red, white and blue disk spinning forward at blinding speed to slam into Ultra Man’s throat, rebounding away even before the man could react. He heard the alien choke, gasping as he clutched at his throat, leaping forward even as he floated back and away. Cap slammed the heel of his boot into the man’s neck, the wound. It was like kicking a brick wall.

Captain America flipped and arched back, landing ready to defend or press the attack. He held out his hand and his shield slid into his grasp, instantly slipping before him to guard. The alien’s eyes were wide, but there was no time to respond. He had to press the attack.

Cap threw the shield again, aiming for the man’s genitals even as he dashed forward. He was ready this time however, and the alien’s hand whipped down to catch the shield before it hit its mark. Cap stopped short as the Ultra Man smiled.

“Nice shield,” he rasped, holding the disk up in both hands. Cap watched, holding his breath as the man applied pressure, squeezing. He was trying to compress the shield, mangle it, something that too many others had failed to do; Hyde, Nefaria, the Hulk. This Ultra Man was a stranger however, an alien with a variety of bizarre powers and there was always a chance he might succeed. He heard the alien grunt-

“Wha-“ Ultra Man stared at the disk in his hands, marveling that it was still whole and in one piece, not even bent in the least. “Incredible,” he said, his voice still sore, looking at Captain America with a newfound respect. “This is some piece of work, Flag Man.” Ultra Man laughed and heaved, flinging the shield away. Cap watched as his weapon sped off into the distance, arching as it dwindled, vanishing from sight.

“Let’s see just how good you are without it.”

Cap watched as the alien stretched, flexing his fingers at arm’s length, cracking his knuckles. He was arrogant, this Ultra Man, and that would be his downfall.

Quicksilver let the bricks and rocks, sticks and stones come closer before he plucked them from the air.

In the distance, Johnny Quick's arms were a blur as he gathered debris, flinging it in his direction. He was fast, probably faster, but there was no finesse in his attack, no style at all. He was doing things that Quicksilver had done years before while fighting the X-Men.

It was pathetic, really. The man was pathetic. Quicksilver could not tell if he derived his powers from within, or from some drug that he took. Pietro had seen the man pop pills a half-dozen times already, though nothing seemed to change other than the man's blur seemed to focus just a bit-

"You're fast, shiny," Quick said as he chucked bricks. "F-f-faster n' the Flash maybe. I'll give ya that..."

"Not faster n' me, though."

Quicksilver watched as the man disappeared in a scarlet blur, shunting the last hail of brick safely to the ground before giving chase. It would not do to let the debris fly free. At the speed it was flying, unattended, it could kill any that it encountered, destroying all in its path. The man, Quick, had no conscience apparently.

He was easy to track though, even with a head start. His trail was clear, staggered footprints pointing in his wake. Quicksilver had to beware however, as perhaps the man was not as stupid as he seemed. He doubted, but there was always that chance.

They raced uptown, through Times Square, the blazing neon of Disney guiding their way. Through the thickening traffic of oncoming Rush Hour, drivers and pedestrians not even aware of their passing until both speedsters were long gone.

Past Central Park, through the Sheep's Meadow and up around Belvedere Castle, along the Reservoir then, arching out onto Fifth Avenue, weaving in and out of cars, more traffic seemingly standing still.

They shot through Harlem, past the new Pathmark and veering west along 125th. They ran by the Apollo, heading north again, Quicksilver gaining inches with every step. They crossed the Harlem River, racing up and around Yankee Stadium twice before Quick shot across the Bronx.

They ran back down the Grand Concourse, people screaming in their wake at the sudden wind of passing. Johnny Quick led them back down through the South Bronx, through the blur of debris and devastation, Quicksilver hot on his heels. Closer with every step...

Closer...

Almost, Quicksilver was reaching out, trying to grab his foe, throw him-

Quick stopped. They were on Second Avenue, back in Manhattan. His momentum simply ceased, his backdraft billowing past as he braced, his arm jutting out. His elbow raised, shooting backwards at lightning speed. Quicksilver's eyes went wide as he tried to dodge, to sidestep. The elbow arching back-

Pain as Quick slammed his elbow into Pietro's nose. It took a moment to register. He heard the sound of bone snapping as his momentum carried him on. He staggered, falling, skipping along the concrete. Blood trailed behind as his vision blurred and he felt the pain in his neck and shoulders as his head had snapped back. Gray washed over him as he skidded to a stop, his eyes blinking, trying to focus.

"Bitch..."

Quick was standing over him, sneering and leering, looking down. Quicksilver tried to move-

"Not shit... Nothin'!"

Quick dropped, his hands a flurry as he rained blows on Quicksilver, pummeling him into the ground. He tried to fight back, but Quick had the upper hand, leverage, batting his blocking hands away.

It was over in a heartbeat. Johnny Quick stood, looking down at the smoldering form at his feet. He crouched, slipping a hand into his boot pouch and pulling a hypodermic free, staring at the compressed amber liquid within.

He jammed the hypo into his arm, shooting the 'Rush' into his veins. He felt the surge of power, energy, speed...

Johnny Quick sighed, quivering as he gathered his fallen foe over his shoulder and sped off towards Midtown. He was ready to rumble...

“So,” Super Woman hissed, hovering there above, playing out her rope. She smiled cruelly at the skinny, yellow skinned man. Smirking as she kept her partners at the edge of her sight. Power Ring floated back and out of reach, throbbing green and distracted, probably listening to the mocking babble of his ring. The Man-Killer was holding back as well, licking his lips and clicking his long claws. His tail whipped about anxiously, smelling the coming kill, but he was nervous and tense she could tell. Afraid of going back to his prison, not that she could blame him. “Just what are you supposed to be? A psychic of some sort, or a magician maybe? I know. A spook...”

The skinny man said nothing, simply kept puffing on his cigarette as though not concerned in the least. He did not smile or even breathe heavily like most men did to see her. He just stared, his dark eyes flashing slightly from behind the dark glasses. It was almost unnerving, his coolness, like he did not even care he was about to die. She would have to make it hurt then-

“You’re under arrest,” he finally said, exhaling a thin cloud of blue smoke. She saw him glance at the other two, quietly returning his gaze to her. “All of you. I suggest you surrender peacefully.”

Lois Lane, the Super Woman of Earth 2 laughed. The balls on this one, she actually felt a tear in her eye it was so funny. She let her lasso dangle at her side, willing a loop to form on the trailing end. She cocked a hip, showing some leg-

“I like you. You make me laugh,” she chuckled, her leather gloved fingers flexing about her rope. “Tell you what, you surrender to me and maybe I’ll keep you- for awhile. Until you bore me...”

Super Woman tossed her magic lasso at the thin man, the loop dropping easily over his shoulders and torso. She jerked, just enough to cinch the bonds tight, pinning one of his arms to his side, that hand still in his pocket. He glanced down at the rope, ignoring the cheers and heckling of the Ring and Martian and took another drag from his cigarette before finally flicking it away.

“You had your chance,” he said, and just for a moment Lois saw his eyes crackle the slightest red. She gasped, a dread clutching her heart, making it skip a beat. She almost came, goosebumps rising on the skin of her legs and arms. She had not felt such a... passion, not since Clark had taken her that first time.

“Wha-“

“What’ssss he doing?”

Lois Lane felt the rope go slack in her hands. She stared, trying to focus and saw that the man was paling, his slick black suit fading to gray as his body turned

to mist. The glasses fell away leaving the burning red coals that were his evil eyes-

“Oh shit...”

“Vampyr!” she heard the Martian scream as the mist swirled past; ignoring the breeze as easily as it ignored her swatting hands. She spun about in time to see the gray envelope the Man-Killer, the alien screaming in panic as he writhed trying to hold the monster at bay. Vampire! She should have seen that one coming.

The Martian tried to shift, and apparently that was what the thin man had been waiting for. Lois watched, intrigued as the mist swirled, seeping into the White Martian’s near liquefied form. She saw S’m Sm’t’h’s glassy eyes bulge as his body started to spasm and jerk, panic washing over his face. The Martian screamed...

That quickly it was over. The Man-Killer fell to the rooftop with a wet thud, his body and tail twitching, long tongue lolling. Lois had no idea what the Vampire had done, but she suddenly wanted no part of it. She reeled in her rope as she backed away, as the mist started to rise again like an early morning fog. She shivered to see those glowing eyes lock onto hers-

A glowing bubble of green suddenly encircled the mist. Lois glanced back and saw Power Ring drifting closer, that sniveling cackle just escaping his lips, knowing he had done something right. She paused, watching as the sphere contracted, compressed, compacting the fog into a smaller and smaller space-

“Watch this,” the Ring sneered as he held his arm, steadying his aim. There was a sudden flare of light- almost blinding and she cursed rubbing at the spots dancing in her gaze.

“Idiot!” she snapped, blinking and she heard the fool’s tight apology. When she could finally see again however, she saw the thin man lying next to the puddle that was the Martian, his body steaming in the alien’s excrement. His skin was pale, scorched in spots. He looked dead.

“Concentrated sunlight through the Ring,” Power Ring giggled. He was very proud of himself. “Cute, hunh. He was a Vampire so I figured-“

Lois drifted away, ignoring the idiot’s raving. He had stolen that kill, and now she was mad- and hot. She needed to find another foe, and quickly...

Owl Man looked at the cripple before him. He was thin, weak looking. He could barely move as he leaned on his cane, half his body twisted from some disease or a heart attack, perhaps a stroke. He did not seem scared though, to his credit, though he would be.

The Owl Man thought of the many devices in his belt that he might use to take the man out, but even as he inched closer he paused, his hand wavering. Why waste the ammo? The man looked as though he would crumple with the slightest tap. Owl Man grinned-

“What’s that ‘4’ on your chest for? Some insignia I assume?”

The skinny cripple nodded, his face twisting as he tried to smirk. “Something like that.” He raised his hand, holding a gun of some type, small and paper-thin. A gadgeteer then. Owl Man gripped the edge of his cloak, ready to throw it up to defend. The man fired-

Owl Man batted the missile away, just barely; the kevlar mesh laced into his Owl Cloak protecting him from the burn. He watched as the tiny rocket veered off wildly, spinning into the sky where it finally exploded with a bright, lingering flash of magnesium. A lopsided ‘4’ drifted lazily in the thickening light, dropping below the roof’s edge and out of sight.

“That could have hurt,” Owl Man sniggered, returning his attention to his foe. “Nice try though,” he said stepping forward and grabbing the man by his shirt. He drew his fist back, preparing to end the fiasco when the man grunted.

His face twisted in sudden pain as he sucked breath through clenched teeth. His body spasmed in Owl Man’s grip, his hand jerking as his cane clattered to the rooftop. He choked, gasping, then dropped limply in Thomas Wayne’s grasp, dead?

No, Wayne felt the pulse, fast but weak in his throat. He was alive, but unconscious, useless. A waste of time.

Owl Man dropped the limp form to the roof and shook his head, turning finally to Ultra Man and his foe; the man in the flag. He saw Quick appear on the rooftop then, depositing the silver haired one by the man in the suit and Sm’th. Ring and Lois were drifting closer to Kent, flanking, hyenas ready to pounce. Apparently Flag Man was the last of the pathetic little group- what did he call them- Avengers? Well, if there were any more of them they were about to have something to avenge all right.

Owl Man was about to join the others for the final act when a sound crackled to life on his long-range radio receiver. He tapped at the controls at the ear cap on his helmet, turning slowly, trying to gain a fix on the noise. He blinked, his visor

shifting through the light spectrum, skipping a few bands not evident here and zeroing finally on something far down beneath the bottom of visible light-

“Magnify, ten... twenty...”

It was a ship, small and fast, cloaked. All but invisible, he could barely make out the outline of the swift, compact craft. He could see a black shadow moving within, but no heat registered and it was all but noiseless even though it had to be approaching the speed of sound.

Best of all, it was aimed at Ultra Man, and Kent and the others were far too wrapped up in taunting the flag. They had not even noticed.

Owl Man smirked, and ducked behind the rooftop’s stairwell, crouching low for protection.

“This ought’a be good...”

Ultra Man let the Flag Man have his little moment of glory. Now that he had his measure, he knew that the little man was no real threat. Granted, he was a good fighter. He was probably better than Wayne in that respect. Despite all his high kicks and chop suey however, the little man just did not have the strength needed to really hurt Ultra Man when he was ready.

He did have to admit that his neck was a bit sore. He would have to look for that damn shield when this was over.

The Flag Man was dancing about him now, his blows obviously aiming for pressure points, a few of them actually tickling on impact. He did persevere, the Flag Man. Ultra Man smirked, watching the ballet until he heard Lois rasp.

“Need a hand, big man?” Again...

Kent looked about him and saw Quick and the Ring watching, laughing. Lane was smirking too, showing her contempt. He saw that the others were down-including the Martian. No loss there. Oddly he did not see Wayne, and that worried him more than anything. Time to end this.

Reaching out with Ultra Speed he grabbed the Flag Man by the throat, squeezing just enough to cut off the oxygen to his brain quickly, causing him to blank out just long enough. The star-spangled body went limp at the end of his extended arm until Kent eased his grip just enough, jiggling slightly to wake him back up. he wanted Flag Man to see it coming. He wanted to hear the man beg and scream.

“Look’s like this is the end, ‘son’,” Ultra Man said with a chuckle. The Avenger blinked, trying to draw breath and clear his head. Kent felt a kick to his groin and winced, unprepared.

“Never the... end...”

“Little shit,” Ultra Man snarled, flexing his fingers. “I could pop your head like a grape. Beg and I’ll do that- give you that much respect. C’mon...”

He squeezed, just a bit for emphasis and heard the man gasp. His lips flapped as his eyes rolled back. He was trying to speak, staring off...

Behind...

“Avengers... Assemble...”

“What?”

The vectors were correct, locked into place. Momentum sufficient for the task. T’Challa flipped the switch to steady the pitch and clicked the auto pilot into place, compensating for the sudden decompression to come. He took a final look ahead and jettisoned.

The hatch exploded, shooting out and up, hopefully to land in the Hudson blocks away. The pilot’s chair followed quickly in the blast, arching high and carrying T’Challa along with it, already clawing at the safety harness. His costume protected him from the sudden wind and pressure, the heat of the explosive charges propelling the Ejector Seat, but he had to be out of the straps and ready for action before the anti-grav disks initiated to carry him away to safety. Captain America needed him.

He strained as the chair rose to apex, watching as the ship ran on its deadly course. He saw the big man holding Cap turn, but unless he was smarter than most villains he would be caught flat-footed by the ship coming out of stealth mode. That was T’Challa’s greatest edge in any fight. He was fast to be sure, but it was not always about speed and power. It was about reaction time, and he and Captain America both excelled at that, where most villains were woefully lacking.

He freed himself from the chair’s restraints even as the big man realized what was about to happen. His mouth opened in shock, but as T’Challa had anticipated he moved too slowly to react, holding Cap conveniently behind him as the jump ship careened straight at him. The villain would take the brunt of the

blow, his very body shielding Steve Rogers while the extraneous backwash of the impact took out the others- hopefully without fatality or injury to any bystanders. Hopefully too SHIELD had cleared the area.

The Black Panther leaped, his body stretching like the great cat that was his namesake, his icon. He angled for the roof's far edge, his lithe form sailing as he heard a scream of denial and rage. He chanced a glance sideways, watching as his ship slammed into the big man holding Cap, wincing as the light of explosive fire blotted out the sky...

Kent shook his head, his ears ringing after the sound of the explosion. The ship had just appeared out of thin air, too close to even do anything about it was moving so fast. It had hit him harder than anything had in a long, long time.

He blinked, his vision dancing with spots from the resulting explosion. He could not hear a thing, and the odors of smoke and sizzling grease clogged his Ultra Smell. Even his skin was tingling. He cursed, rising higher, trying to blink his sight back, and knuckling his eyes. He had lost his grip on the Flag Man, dammit!

He saw vague shadows, slowly, blurring into clarity. There was a rushing sound as his hearing started to clear, the ringing echo diminishing ever so slowly. He blinked and saw Lois struggling to rise on the rooftop, tiny flames flickering here and there, smoldering debris scattered everywhere. Power Ring was on his knees, shaking his head and vomiting and Quick was whining, a jagged chunk of chrome jutting from his thigh. He still did not see Wayne.

The Flag Man was there though, and he had been joined by another; a man in a black cat's costume. Ultra Man sneered. Good, he needed a challenge.

"Brought- brought in reinforcements, eh?" he said, shaking his head, cupping his ear, almost recovered. "Bring an army, it won't help."

"We don't need an army- Ultra Man was it?" The Flag Man stood tall with the help of the cat man. He was shaky, his voice weak, but he still radiated pride. "Just some friends..."

Ultra Man turned to see where his two foes were looking. He saw the odd jet in the distance, just before he caught a glimpse of the hammer that slammed into the side of his head.

Kent hit the rooftop like a ton of bricks, the impact of the first ship forgotten at the fresh pain that washed across his face. He spat blood, his tongue automatically

drifting to the shattered remains of his tooth. He glanced up, squinting as his face started to swell about his eye.

The new man was tall and muscular, wearing some form of dark armor and big, golden boots. He wore a stupid looking winged helmet on his head, barely containing his long wild mane of yellow hair. He was hefting a huge, stone hammer in his over-sized fists, slamming it over and over against his palm. He looked pissed...

“Pray to whatever gods might listen to thine whining, cur, that thou hast not injured mine allies. If thou hast, mine vengeance will be swift and fierce and ye shalt surely know why we are named... Avengers!”

Like he needed this. Kent spat... stood...

“Bring it, long hair.”

Owl Man watched wondering, marveling at how the tide of battle could turn so quickly.

The big man with the hammer was strong, and easily beating the shit out of Kent. No loss there of course, but with Ultra Man out of the picture the CSA would be done. These Avengers fought like a team- something that the Crime Syndicate would never manage to do. It was the Flag Man. They all listened to him with some type of awe and respect that he had never seen before. Something that Owl Man could only dream of.

The obvious solution then. Cut off the head, the body would die. Owl Man drew his side arm, the Teflon .44 more than enough to pierce the man's chain mail. He checked the chamber, catching a whiff of powder and oil. Aimed...

The hand appeared out of nowhere, dropping from above to encircle his fist suddenly. It was small, slim; a woman's hand. It squeezed. The Owl Man screamed to hear the bones of his hand shatter, the metal of the gun cracking underneath. The shells exploded and he felt new pain, burning. Owl Man looked up through tear-filled eyes at the smiling face of the beautiful blonde hovering above him.

“Ah-ah,” she grinned, wagging a finger in his face as she squeezed his burning, broken hand all the harder, driving him to his knees. “Momma doesn't like guns,” she mocked as her other hand slammed into his jaw. He saw gray, fireworks as he reached for his belt-

Owl Man dropped unconscious.

Johnny Quick was whimpering, holding his leg, crying. Blood was gushing from the ragged wound around the chunk of metal rammed into his thigh, though not pulsing. He had heard somewhere that pulsing blood was bad.

He saw the others coming, piling from their jet as though in a dream, moving, swimming in slow motion. The blonde woman sexy as hell, a man in gold and red armor, a gorilla in a bathing suit, even some guy with a bow carrying some hot chick in scarlet. A fuckin' army all right.

He had to get up, get away. Ignore the pain and run before they caught him, screw the others. He was shaking though, his vision blurring in and out again. He needed a hit, but he was out. Rush...

Quick braced, trying to lever himself up on his good leg. He would fucking hop away at super speed if he had to, but-

The arrow slammed him back down, the big metal clamp locking his leg to the rooftop and bending the shard stuck in his leg back at an odd angle. He fell on his ass, blinking as he watched the shaft vibrate, the blood gushing forth all the harder. Then he felt the pain. Johnny Quick screamed.

The huge, hairy fist slammed squarely into his nose. It just came out of nowhere, and Quick saw a scarlet haze of blood spew out. He blinked, his eyes rolling back into his head as he tried to focus, staring at the mocking leer of the big, blue gorilla with the sharp teeth. He saw a blue blur as the beast cocked his fist back-

"Good night, sweet prince-"

Johnny Quick fell back, mercifully unconscious. The second blow did not even strike.

They were falling apart, damn it! Ultra Man had led them to failure again.

Lois Lane cautioned a quick glance about the scene, the war zone of the roof top. There was burning debris everywhere, the remnants of the aircraft that had slammed into Ultra Man and taken him down initially. Credit due, he had stayed awake, but Lois knew him well enough to know that he was rattled, and now the big, muscular, gorgeous hunk of long hair was bashing him mercilessly with his hammer. God, she loved it. She hoped the brute killed him. Life would be so much simpler for her and Thomas if-

She saw Owl Man lying unconscious, his body slumped up against the stairwell in the midst of charred tarmac and the bodies of Sm'th, the suit and the cripple. The blonde bitch that had crushed his hand had already flown off to help the armored man that was blasting away at Ring. Power Ring was holding his own, but the metal man had reasoned that some form of light- other than green- was probably the Ring's weakness. He was hovering there now, shifting through the spectrum while Blondie hammered on Ring's force field. He was done, just a matter of time.

Quick was done too, and he would be lucky if he ever walked again, let alone ran. The gorilla and the archer had taken him out no problem, and now they were looking at her, bow cocked, ready to pounce. Lois fingered her lasso-

"How about it, Legs?" The archer smirked, an arrow pointed at her chest. "Care to take the easy out? I won't tell your friends you surrendered."

"She doesn't seem the type, Hawk," the gorilla said, grinning as he hunkered, his eyes drifting up and down her legs. Automatically, Lois cocked a hip, striking a pose.

"You're right, monkey," Lois sneered, feeding out line, shifting her grip as she licked her lips, letting her ample bosom thrust forward. "I like it rough."

"I tried it rough once," a tiny voice said, buzzing in her ear. Lois swatted at empty air, the slightest flash of light bringing sharp pain to her cheek. "I didn't like it much, but to each her own I guess."

A miniature woman with wings flitted past, her hands sparking as she fired stinging blasts at Lois' skin. Lois staggered back cursing, more annoyed than hurt. The blasts were blinding though, the little flickers of light bringing spots to her eyes-

"Stop it!" she shouted, swinging blindly, but the tiny winged woman was too fast. All she needed was to connect. Just once-

The arrow slammed into her wrists, locking them together as the gorilla leaped over her head, his fist smashing down on her skull. Lois screamed her rage, straining, flexing to pull her hands apart as the monkey flipped her cape over her head, his big foot slamming into her back, propelling her forward. She staggered, breaking free of the arrow that had clamped about her hands, ready to fight, to kill-

The world twisted away...

Lois stumbled, flailing blindly as she tried to keep her balance. She could feel her magic bonds wrapping up and about her legs, her thighs with every step.

The rope was snaking as though alive, and no matter what she did, how she moved it got tighter and tighter. She felt her arms pinned, her legs useless as she tottered on her heels, the lasso binding the cape over her face as an effective blindfold-

"I'd hide my face if I had your hairdo too, sister," she heard someone say.

Stars exploded in her blocked sight as something smashed into her nose. Again, something connecting square in her mouth. She felt blood, her lip split.

"The bouffant is so dead, dear." The tiny woman again, buzzing.

"Stop taunting her," another voice said, another woman. "End this."

"Your wish, Witchy," the gorilla...

"Our command!"

Something slammed into her stomach and a shock of electricity wracked her body. Pain washed over her, her teeth chattering. She bit through her tongue, spitting more blood. Lois fell to the ground, spasming, flopping about in agony like a fish out of water-

She saw stars, then nothing at all...

Ultra Man saw Lois fall and knew that he was alone. Fine! He didn't really need those losers anyway. He had taken long-hair's measure now, sucked up his best, healing. A little Kryptonite and this would all be over. He saw the long-hair winding up for another blow.

Kent reached up, caught the hammer. It felt like his arm had shattered with the impact but damned if he would show this faggot weakness. He looked up, struggling to rise, pushing the hammer back.

"That... That the best you got?"

He saw the long-hair's eyes widen with awe and that gave him all the more power. He could smell the shock, the fear. He was done, he knew it. Kent would take that hammer and shove it up his-

Flag Man was there, his hand on the big man's arm. Long-hair looked at Flag Man and just stopped, just like that, stepping back. Kent looked at the Flag Man and smiled, spitting a bit of tooth at his feet.

“Finally realized you can’t... beat me, hunh? Fuck you! Too late! You’re all dead...”

Flag Man stepped over to the side, angling slightly as he frowned. “I told you before, son,” he said, glancing at the sky. “Surrender’s not in my vocabulary.”

He heard the whistling, his Ultra Hearing detecting it first. It was a simple sound, pure and sharp. It took him a moment, something he had heard before, and as he was turning about he realized what it was...

The shield...

It hit him full in the face, the force of his own strength driving its momentum. He had hurled it away, but it had come back, the setting sun sparkling off its gleaming surface as it arched back down out of the crimson sky. Ultra Man simply sagged, nothing to do, nowhere to go, no time to even gasp. He was done...

Owl Man felt the surge of adrenaline as it coursed through his veins, forcing him awake. His eyes snapped open, quickly closed to slits again as he scanned the rooftop. Things did not look good for the Bad Guys...

The Avengers were standing about, obviously wondering what to do next, two of them just inches away from where he lay, unmoving; the scarlet bitch and a woman he had not seen before, short in a stylish costume. They were fawning over the cripple, trying to bring him around- or kill him maybe, it was hard to tell. The suit was sitting, back against the stairwell, watching as he sucked on another cigarette. His eyes shifted, looking in Owl Man’s direction.

Owl Man tried not to move, his eyes focusing on one of the tiny devices before him, one of the gadgeteer’s weapons- one he recognized. An energy analyzer; it was beeping and Wayne could see the energy bands spiking, fluctuating wildly on the liquid display. He glanced up.

“I know you are awake...”

Wayne ignored the man in the suit, watching as energy flared, crackling from the rip in the sky. Something was happening. Something was coming through. He looked at his body, his hands and knew what was about to happen. Nothing he could do, he was starting to fade away...

“You may have beat the second string, Avengers!” he shouted, struggling to rest on his side, wincing with the pain. He hoped the transfer would heal his hand back. “But here comes the cavalry!”

“He’s awake!”

“Watch it!”

“Fan out! Stand ready!”

Blah... blah... blah...

The man in the black suit was staring at him, his lips twisted in a knowing smile, like he knew what was happening. He blew smoke...

“The Justice League... Our boys... kick your ass...”

Flag Man was running up on him, but it was too late.

“They’re disappearing.”

“Some sort of trick-“

“Molecular transfer-“

“Spread out- pair up!”

“What’s happening?” The woman in scarlet was helping the silver haired speedster to his feet. Her eyes were wide, staring...

“Eat shit, suckers...” Owl Man said as he winked out of existence.

“Well that was fun, and pointless,” Hawkeye said staring up to the crackling portal. “Anyone got a clue?”

“The First String, Hawkeye,” T’Challa said as he stared at the portal. Pink energy flashed and crackled, spewing forth. “The Justice League...”

“They’re coming...”

To be continued...

Next Issue: Head back to JLU: 2001 for the Battle of the Century! Finally, the Justice League of America meets up with the Mighty Avengers and all Hell breaks loose. Be here for the one you’ve been waiting for- written by Chris Munn! You miss this issue you will be kicking yourself for the rest of the year!

Story © Curt F 2005

Plot © Curt F and Chris Munn 2005

Editing © Chris Munn 2005



JLA vs. the Avengers # 3/ JLA # 32

The Keystone Building Manhattan:

Pulling back with all his strength, Clint Barton could feel the tension of the bowstring against his musculature, his arms tensed and coiled like a spring ready to snap. He'd chosen the arrowhead currently ready to launch with careful precision, knowing that the force of the arrow's impact would cause a detonation the size of a small hand grenade. There was no reason to take a chance, to throw caution to the wind, after taking an eye to the beings that had mysteriously appeared at the base of the damaged and devastated Keystone Building. There was a buzzing at the back of his skull, a sense of dread that filled within him as he watched them descend. He felt – *knew* – that these people were enemies...he just couldn't put his finger on *why* he felt such a thing.

An eye narrowed, Hawkeye carefully took aim, moving his bow infinitesimally at the ten beings that were slowly hovering down to the ground. He could take out three – possibly four, if lady luck was on his side – before the rest could even register that they were being attacked. He was that confident in his speed, knowing that his arrows would be drawn by instinct, the right ones for the right opponents with no thought getting in the way of the movement. Of course, if these newcomers were anything like he suspected, he knew exactly which ones he'd need to fire upon first.

"Psst, hey, Jan," Clint whispered to the tiny flitting form of Janet Van Dyne that was buzzing to and fro between her teammates, "these guys remind you of anybody?"

"The Squadron Supreme," she answered, her own voice sounding empty and light, the result of her small size.

Hawkeye returned to his targeting. "Good. Not just me, then."

He watched anticipatorily as Captain America and the Black Panther stepped forward to confront the visitors. His first thoughts were of equal treatment, that – as the Chairman of the West Coast branch of the Avengers – he should be beside his two old friends. But the protest was pushed aside in his mind, Barton

recognizing that there was no one better suited to the task at hand than Steve Rogers.

Allowing himself a moment, Hawkeye took a glance at the Avengers assembled at his side. His first concern immediately went to Carol Danvers, Warbird, a woman he'd grown to care about during their recent tenure on the West Coast. He knew her history of violent impulse, having witnessed her outbursts himself on several occasions. Would she jump the gun before Cap gave the word? Danvers' furrowed brow and stressed scowl told him that the answer would probably – unfortunately – be “yes”.

Henry McCoy, the blue-furred and brilliant Beast, was the complete opposite. While he, too, had a look of worry upon his face, the emotion was undoubtedly overcome by his sense of wonder. The great tear in the sky above them, the mysterious other-dimensional beings that had emerged from within, all of it was a mystery that begged to be solved by the mutant scientist.

Hawkeye wondered if perhaps Tony Stark felt the same sense of curiosity, but it was a question that couldn't be answered by a look at the industrialist's face. Encased in the armor of Iron Man, the Golden Avenger, Stark held only the stern metal face of his helmet. Standing directly behind Cap and the Panther, Clint surmised that Iron Man was in “business mode” then, as ready to strike as any of them.

Quicksilver, on the other hand, was still standing on shaky legs. He had been bested by another speedster, Johnny Quick in red that had quite clumsily allowed himself to be crippled in the midst of battle. Still, the guy had to have been fast to get the best of Pietro, a man to whom everyone else moved in slow motion.

And then there was the Thunder God. His hammer gripped tightly in his hand, Thor was seething with rage, or maybe indignation, whatever it was that Asgardians felt when faced with a repeated threat. Even Hawkeye could tell that these new guys were similar to the ones that had done a quick fade out moments before, the so-called Crime Syndicate of America. The guy with the owl mask had told them their “big guns” were coming to take their place, the Justice League or some nonsense. Clint smirked at the thought of a bunch of bad guys going around with *that* name. At least something like the Masters of Evil was fairly accurate in description.

Finally, Barton's glance fell on Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch. Starting when the Squadron League (or perhaps Justice Supreme, as Hawkeye had yet to figure out which name sounded the most ludicrous to call them) came through the dimensional portal, the Witch had looked ill at ease, sweat collecting on her brow as if someone unseen was affecting her. Could one of the flying jokers be a telepath or something, poisoning the mind of one of their most powerful members?

“We want answers, Mister,” Clint heard Captain America demand, an accusatory finger pointed at the Hyperion wannabe in blue. *Yeah, you tell ‘em, Cap,* Hawkeye thought to himself as he looked over the villains’ expressions. Although the similarities to the Squadron were there in some of the members, others were question marks to him. There was the Dr. Spectrum decked out in green, the Nighthawk with the same permanent scowl on his face, the Power Princess with the much more revealing costume and stars on her panties, and a look-alike to the aforementioned Johnny Quick that had faded out with the Crime Syndicate. But there was also the blonde woman draped in the leather cat-suit, the girl in the top hat and fishnets that just had to be a magician, and the goofball shape changer that had went through probably about every inanimate object known to man in the brief moments since they’d arrived. There was the guy with the big puffy sleeves and blast furnace for a head, and the green bald alien...the one that had too much of a passing resemblance to the Vision for him.

“We don’t owe you answers for anything,” the obvious leader of the League, the one in the red-and-blue cape ensemble, replied harshly, “especially since we were just attacked for no reason just moments ago.”

“That’s it!” the Scarlet Witch yelled, pointing into the air at the League. “Thor, the boy in green! Now!”

“Wanda?” Cap asked desperately, turning around to look at her with a look of alarm and worry. He was going to tell her to stand down, to wait for the answers he’d asked for, but by then it was too late. Hawkeye grimaced as Mjolnir began to swirl in the air, gripped at the leather strap by the God of Thunder.

“Aye, fair Wanda, the Son of Odin doth see it as well,” Thor shouted, lightning and thunder cracking and booming around him, “and the Avengers shalt not countenance a murderer of children!”

And when Hawkeye saw the mystical hammer fly toward the Justice League, he knew that there was no turning back...

The battle had started!

The JLA
vs.
The Mighty Avengers
All-Out War!

The Negative Zone:

It had not been light years, but close enough.

Count Nefaria stared in wonder at the 'rip' in the very fabric of negative space. Dark, pinkish energy swirled about the tear, spewing forth as well as spiraling back within. There were red clouds billowing about, almost like a storm, lightning crackling. He could hear the thunder as well, feel it, and that made him more nervous than anything, reminding him of explosions.

He drifted closer, feeling the pull, his safety line growing taut as the Exterminatrix jockeyed the Star Core shuttle into better position, trying to keep the craft from getting sucked into- what? The gravity well, he did not know. He was no scientist, not really, and on this trip he knew that he had been hired for his muscle and unique physiology. And no wonder-

He could feel the energy coursing through his body. The strange energies of Reed Richard's Negative Universe were interacting with his own Ionically laced cells and giving him a feeling of power that he had never known before. At least not since his initial change after his body had been altered with the unwitting help of the Lethal Legion. He felt the old strength returning, the powers of the Living Laser, Whirlwind and Power Man building up again within, threatening to burst. He had never felt so alive...

"How you doing, Count?"

Oubliette's static voice cut over his reveries, pulling him back to the present. He focused on the rip, watching as the storm churned, gouts of energy flaring in spectacular brilliance. The woman- Midas' daughter was waiting for him to send the data, which the Mandroid Armor had gathered from his EVA. She was becoming annoying with her familiarity, and it was only her devastating beauty, which kept him from shutting her up.

"I am fine, child," he said, his eyes scanning the internal monitors of the suit. Most were designed for gathering information on the various radiations within the zone, a few for monitoring his vital signs as well as what passed for meteorological information and the lesser sciences. "Preparing relay in three... two... send!"

He heard the whine of chirps and whistles as the information was converted to digital emission and sent over laser pulse to the ship, there to be stored, reformatted and sent back to the other universe via FTL beacon- another of

Richard's inventions. His job done for the time being, he returned his gaze to the tear...

There were moments of clarity in the storm. Clear patches, as the clouds of energy parted and he could see beyond. He saw space, a swirling black, and oddly too there seemed a glowing, crackling planet just beyond the rift. Perhaps it was some mirror-like reflection of the Earth, or a planet that simply resembled his home. It was like the Exploding Atmosphere though, glowing brightly, ablaze as the detritus entered its atmosphere and disintegrated. He wished that he could-

"Incoming!"

Nefaria gasped, discharging the propulsion pods attached to his armor, spinning about. He scanned the space of the Zone, trying his best to ignore the strange and twisted landscape that floated inexorably towards him and the devastation just out of reach. He could see the shuttle of course, just fifty yards distant at the end of his tether. The old and battered craft had seen better days. The hull had been patched but there were still markings from its final decent, burn markings from solar radiation gone wild. He could see Oubliette in the cockpit, a shadow behind the tinted glass motioning, pointing-

"Three o'clock..."

Nefaria turned.

"No, your other three o'clock."

Nefaria cursed and spun about to see an all too familiar figure streaking his way. He had hoped that it would be Annihilus so that they could end this and he might return with his newfound strength. Or at least Blastaar, who could hopefully point them in the proper direction. The form speeding towards him- them however was not anyone he might have expected, or wanted to see. He had never met the man, but Nefaria had seen his image often enough.

"The Silver Surfer..."

Nefaria watched as the silver man on the gleaming board soared closer, riding the strange currents of negative space as easily as he might the norm. The wonders of the anti-realm must have meant nothing to him. But what was he doing here- now?

The once herald of Galactus sailed right up to Nefaria, his blank silver eyes holding the count firmly in his gaze.

“You are from Earth,” he said, though there was the slightest confusion in his voice. “I recognize the technology. How have you come to be here, now?”

Nefaria had to smile. The great Silver Surfer was as confused as he was. He was about to ask the Surfer the same question when he heard the Exterminatrix on the sub space radio again-

“Nefaria! It’s him!” Oubliette’s voice was near frantic as she screeched over the radio. Nefaria spun about, looking, searching and saw the Surfer do the same. There was nothing though. Nothing.

He came sweeping in like the angel of death, his great bat-like wings spread wide, arms outstretched, claws raking, grasping. He swept up from behind, using doomed, floating debris for cover until he was close enough then swooping in right behind the Surfer. Nefaria yelled as the creature wrapped his arms about the once herald; claws raking silver flesh, his fangs sinking into glistening throat. The Silver Surfer screamed.

Energy flared about the pair as Annihilus held tight, feeding- or something close to it. Nefaria backed away as the Silver Surfer writhed, squirming in the monster’s grasp. He fired off bolts of cosmic energy in a blind attempt to break free, and Nefaria could see that with every blast his energy was draining. The self-proclaimed Master of the Negative Zone was leeching the cosmic energy of the Surfer like a Vampire!

“Get Him!” Oubliette screeched over the radio. “Get him while he’s distracted.”

“Are you insane, girl? That’s the Silver Surfer being slaughtered. I’m no where-“

“Dammit! Daddy wants the rod! Get it while that freak’s distracted... Before he gets too powerful!”

That made sense, in theory. But as Nefaria saw the Surfer’s struggles lessen, heard his cries diminish he knew that he stood no chance in hell of defeating Annihilus, and he was not about to try. He drifted back, starting to turn. If he could make it back to the ship-

“YOU...”

Nefaria felt his blood run cold as he froze at the rasping, grating voice. Annihilus was done feeding apparently. The Count Nefaria glanced back, his eyes wide and stinging as sweat trickled down his face, fear clutching his heart.

Thunderbird hammered on the cockpit...

“You are from the other side... Earth! You will take me back!”

“I-“

Annihilus howled, his insectile like face twisting in exuberance. Energy crackled, spitting freely from his Cosmic Control Rod, situated just beneath his throat in the thick armor he wore. He looked bloated, ready to burst.

Casting the Surfer adrift he swooped forward, arms outstretched. Nefaria screamed, watching in horror as the Silver Surfer, his board tumbling aimlessly was caught up in the current of the rift, and the explosive positive space beyond.

Annihilus was in his face, hissing and raging. Nefaria felt the creature’s claws, grabbing at his arms, rending the metal. Nefaria jerked, trying to pull away and felt the energy conduits snap and tear, his suit’s power ebbing at the end of the dancing cables. Annihilus screamed-

“I sense power in you, Earthier, but it sickens me. Makes my stomach turn.” The monster glanced back, peering through his beating wings, ignoring Nefaria’s screams of fear as the Mandroid armor ruptured beneath his claw-like grip. “But there is another...”

Nefaria followed the creature’s gaze, saw that it- he was staring at the Star Core shuttle, the shadowy figure of Oubliette flitting about within. She was in the process of turning the ship, trying to get away. Abandoning him! Nefaria tried to struggle.

He felt the creature’s claws rake through his lifeline...

“You...” the monster spat, hissing in his face. “You are worthless to me.” The monster reared back and Nefaria felt the world, the universe spin about him...

“Oh... God...”

He screamed as Annihilus chucked him towards the rift, following in the wake of the Silver Surfer as he was caught in the pull of the gravity well. He flailed, trying to right himself, but the pull was too great, and the monster’s force too powerful for the pitiful power of his thrusters to compensate. He felt the world start to burn and explode about him, his body rocking in agony...

* * * *

Oubliette licked her lips, eyes wide with wonder as the Count spiraled away, kicking and thrashing as he vanished into the rip. There was a huge flare of pink energy as he entered, lightning crackling outward as he was swallowed, washed away into the void beyond. Oubliette was breathless...

She was panting. It was hard to focus, sweat dripping into her eyes as her hands drifted across the console before her. She had to get away. Daddy wanted the rod, but with Nefaria out of the picture, well, she knew that she had no chance in hell on her own. She adjusted the pitch, firing the shuttle's temperamental thrusters, trying to turn the hulking craft. She scanned the Zone...

"Shit!"

Annihilus slammed into the view plate, his claws piercing the windscreen. Cracks spider-webbed across the triple-paned plastic, and Oubliette gasped to hear the sound of air escaping, the sound of the monster clawing his way in. She stared hard, backing away as the creature broke through-

Oubliette screamed!

* * * *

Thirty seconds was all it had taken. Thirty seconds, and the earth shook with the force of the two clashing armies, each Avenger choosing their comparable Leaguer as they threw themselves into battle. "Avengers Assemble!" escaped their lips, from all but Captain America, who still rankled at the thought of his own team being the one to start the conflict. He was thankful that Woo had taken the opportunity to remove Reed Richards from the area, as the death of one of the smartest men in the world would be an unacceptable loss.

He stood back for a moment, assessing the battlefield with the skills of a master tactician. Thor's hammer had already returned to his hand, the force of Mjolnir enough to stagger the one that resembled Ultra Man, whom the Captain had unsuccessfully fought in the previous battle. Iron Man, Quicksilver, the Beast...all had immediately gravitated toward their most recognizable counterparts on the field of war.

"Cap, watch it!" Hawkeye shouted from a few yards away, an arrow nocked and launched in the Captain's direction. As Hawkeye fell to the ground from the sideways momentum of his shot, the arrow struck several feet in front of the two men, causing the man with the bat cowl to jump backwards to evade the concussion blast.

"Cap, we've got about thirty seconds before these guys wise up to us and take us down," Hawkeye stated as he took to the Captain's back, standing behind him and shouting over his shoulder.

"What do you suggest, Clint?" Cap asked, acknowledging Hawkeye's own sense of leadership and stratagem.

“Switch up logical opponents,” Hawkeye said with a smile, “show these clowns that the Avengers can take ‘em in our sleep while going with the unexpected.”

“Do it,” Cap said before charging back toward the battle, “but don’t underestimate them.”

Nodding affirmatively, Hawkeye glanced over the firefight. His own target chosen, he, too, took off back to the battle.

* * * *

The Black Panther dove into the air, pouncing on all fours when he again reached terra firma. The blonde woman had immediately chosen him as her target, and had kept him on the defensive since the attack had begun. T’Challa didn’t enjoy running from an opponent, though he indeed acknowledged the necessity of such an act. Better to learn what the enemy could do before engaging them outright, a tactic he wished Thor had learned throughout the years.

“Not really a chatty kitty cat, are you?” the Black Canary asked mockingly as she jumped and performed a somersault into the air. Landing in front of the still-crouched King of the Wakandas, the Bird of Prey immediately followed up her stance with a round house kick.

The Panther flipped backward, easily evading the sweep of the woman’s leg. “No need for unnecessary words,” he answered her, a casual toss of his arm producing three energy daggers from his belt. He watched as she flipped to the side, escaping the arc of the daggers – just as T’Challa had predicted. The enemy had an edge, one he had yet to decipher. Until he could, it appeared that he would remain on the defensive.

Suddenly, an arrow shot through the air, a duck of her head the only thing from keeping it still attached to the Canary’s shoulders. Was it an intuitive reflex of hers that allowed her to be a step ahead of them? While the woman’s attention was focused on the approaching Hawkeye, the Black Panther allowed himself a look around. In every battle, he saw the same motions being repeated by the members of the Justice League.

A telepath. One of them was a *telepath*.

“Take a powder, Panther,” Hawkeye stated as he drew another arrow from his quiver and took aim at the Canary, “legs here is all mine.”

Dinah took a backward glance at the Black Panther, and surprisingly watched him acquiesce to the archer’s wish. Instead of double teaming her, as they easily could have done, they were allowing the fight to proceed by gentleman’s rules.

Could these Avengers, who had attacked them without provocation, adhere to a code of honor? She would have taken the time to ask J'onzz through their mental link, but she found her time better spent dodging the next volley of arrows launched in her direction.

A tear gas arrow whizzed by her vaulting form, followed immediately by a grappling hook arrow that she barely managed to evade. Her somersaults were getting her close to the purple-clad bowman, who remained in his one position: stooped down, one knee resting on the ground with the other foot firmly planted for balance as he shot. Why, oh why, did there have to be an archer with these people? A little too close to Ollie, as far as she was concerned.

The girl moved like Bobbi, Clint mentioned mentally as he watched her move closer to him through the wave of arrows. At the rate this was going, he'd be out of arrowheads by the time she got close. Within seconds, the Black Canary was within a few feet, and with a downward scissor motion of her leg she caught the bowman on the wrist, knocking the weapon from his hand.

"Hey now, no fair!" Hawkeye yelled as he lunged back, barely missing another roundhouse kick from the blonde bombshell. She was pressing her attack, forcing him to move back away from his fallen bow. She thought he was a one-trick pony, and she had no idea how wrong she was.

"Sorry, babe," Clint said as he caught the Canary's leg underneath his right arm, "but I've been trained by the best fighter on the planet." Pushing forward with his greater weight, Hawkeye toppled the Canary onto her back, shoving an elbow into her face as they fell. He felt cartilage give and bone snap from the force of his strike, and both of them hit the ground hard.

"Fine, if that's how it's going to be," Dinah muttered as she kicked up with her legs, pushing the Avenger off of her body. Jumping to a crouched position, the heroine implemented her secret weapon: her Canary Cry. Pure sonic force erupted from her vocal chords, the physical assault enough to knock Hawkeye off his feet. He landed a few feet away, blood running from his nose and ears as he lay unmoving in the rubble.

Dinah slowly crept to the prostrate body of her opponent, wondering if perhaps she had acted too harshly. There wasn't anything superhuman about the archer, and for all intents and purposes he appeared to just be an athletic baseline human. Leaning over him, she noticed his shallow breathing, and prepared to call an end to the fight for fear that she'd seriously injured him...

...when his eyes popped open and a smirk materialized on his face. In a blur of motion, his arm shot up to her face. Gripped in his hand was an arrowhead, popped open by his thumb and forefinger to reveal a spray of sleeping gas. "Sorry, darlin'," he said as she fell to the side, choking and gagging while the gas

took effect on her nervous system, “but I’ve been deaf for years. All you did was blow out my hearing aid.”

Standing on sore legs, Hawkeye was pleased to find the Canary out cold from the effects of the gas. He still needed to retrieve his bow, but he was happy nonetheless. The battle had its first victory.

Avengers – 1; JLA – 0

* * * *

T’Challa’s eyes narrowed beneath his cowl as he looked to the sky. The green-skinned caped one was hovering above the battle, any attempt to attack him failing due to his apparent intangibility. He was the one, the telepath that was giving their enemies the edge, the Panther decided. He felt safe in the sky, protected by a seemingly insurmountable power that allowed everything to pass harmlessly through him. An overconfident foe is an easily defeated foe, the ruler of the Wakandas thought as he tapped into the communication equipment concealed within his mask.

“Tony,” He said through the open communication channel, “the green one is the key to winning this battle, a telepath. We have a Vision scenario.”

Immediately after speaking, T’Challa saw both Iron Man and Warbird break away from their individual battles, arcing through the sky toward their new target. Hopefully this would be all over in a moment, the Avenger wished, but he also knew not to be overconfident himself.

He felt the wind from the blow a millisecond before being struck, allowing him to roll his neck with the fist striking the back of his head. He fell forward regardless, his senses screaming with pain as he rolled into a defensive position. Turning, he saw the dark-clad enemy that had first attempted to fight Captain America, his large cape billowing as he ran forward.

The Batman’s face twisted into a fierce scowl as he pressed the attack on the cat-like Avenger, but each blow placed was expertly blocked by the man’s forearms. Batman twisted at the waist and launched his foot forward, finally breaking through the Panther’s defenses while striking him hard in the midsection.

T’Challa flipped backward as he attempted to regain the breath stolen by the Leaguer’s strike. The man was very good, well-trained to a dangerous point. Had the Panther been a lesser man, he would have chosen to pawn the Batman off to Captain America, who – with no sense of self deprecation – was easily the African’s superior when it came to physical combat.

But the Black Panther was the ruler of a nation, and he had never backed away from an honorable battle. The Avenger pounced forward, his golden claws slashing across the bat logo that rested on his opponent's chest. Another slash swiped against his right cheek, thankfully deflected by the thick material of his cowl.

"Enough," the Batman stated as he threw up an open palm, striking the Panther on the bottom of his jaw. The Avenger was an excellent fighter, savage yet restrained by logic at the same time. Wayne knew he had to end the fight quickly, or there was a slim chance he wouldn't win at all. Dodging another swipe of the claws, Batman crouched and pivoted, sweeping his leg against the Panther with enough force to knock him on his back.

The Batman was long tired of the other-dimensional fighters, this one on top of the Nighthawk boy previously. His hesitation against the Squadron Supreme had almost lost him that fight, so he knew that there was no time to consider any other options for fear of a similar distraction. His fist connected brutally with the Panther's jaw as he rose up from his back, once again knocking him hard to the ground. T'Challa was unconscious after two more similar blows to his face.

Batman rose from his defeated opponent and looked across the field of battle. The telepathic link to his teammates was down, something had happened to the Manhunter. The individual Leaguers were on their own, against an enemy just as deadly as themselves...

Avengers – 1; JLA – 1

* * * *

Good thinking, Carol, Warbird thought to herself while flying as fast as she could, pick a fight with the most powerful one in the group...

The man in red and blue was stronger than her...faster than her...and a hell of a lot more powerful. Superman had shrugged off her energy blasts like they were mosquito stings, and now he had her on the run. Thor was busy beating up the kid in green – with more fury than she'd ever witnessed in the Asgardian – and she was afraid that the man chasing her would possibly be too much even for the Thunder God.

Suddenly, Danvers heard a roar of engines below her, and she knew that the tide would be changing her way. She stopped her flight on a dime, throwing back her elbow as Superman continued to streak forward. Her elbow caught him directly in the jaw, her own physical strength considerable enough to knock him momentarily senseless. Then she soared into the air, leaving the Kryptonian to wonder just what was happening.

And the invincible Iron Man arrived from below, blasting the caped JLA leader with as much power as his repulsor blasts could muster. Superman flew across the sky, smoke billowing from his body as he fell toward the ground. Warbird soared back to her armored teammate, who was already moving away from the recovering Leaguer. "Warbird!" he said through the loud speakers in his helmet. "The one in green, Vision Plan C!"

Warbird nodded and changed direction, following several feet behind Iron Man as he streaked toward the floating Martian Manhunter. She watched as Anthony Stark flew around the intangible foe, unsurprised in the slightest at the alien's seeming unawareness. His eyes were closed as he guided the JLA in their individual battles, protected by his wraith-like power. What the Panther had counted on, however, was the fact that Iron Man's helmet was proofed against telepathy. Stark was a flying blind spot to the Manhunter's power.

Iron Man changed trajectory after his first pass around J'onzz, raising his hands toward the preoccupied enemy. What came from the armor was not fury, but pure sound - a sonic attack that assaulted the Martian, causing him to scream in pain as he raised his hands to his ears. His concentration was broken, both telepathy and intangibility a non-issue as he focused his strength in deflecting the sonic screamers in Stark's armor.

And that's when Warbird moved in, colliding hard with the Manhunter's now-tangible form. "I got this, Iron Man," Danvers yelled to her teammate as she placed a powerful punch to the side of the alien's head, "go help one of the others!"

"Affirmative, Avenger," Iron Man replied, saluting to the woman as his bootjets propelled him elsewhere on the battlefield.

"Brace for impact," Warbird teased into the ear of the stunned J'onn J'onzz, holding him tight as her flight turned to a nosedive into the ground. The two figures collided with the stone ground, causing tremors that were felt by the other gladiators strewn across the area. Smoke and dust hid the impact crater, refusing to reveal the fate of the two warriors that had crashed so violently into the hard earth. A few of the other combatants paused in their fights to watch the rising clouds, curious as to who would emerge first - if either would emerge at all...

Another crack of thunder sounded from the parting waves of smoke, and Warbird flew into the air though a power not of her own volition. The Martian Manhunter immediately took to the air after her, his knuckles scraped after the furious punch he had landed against the woman's jaw. "You will find," J'onzz stated as he approached the recovering Danvers, who was now hovering shakily in the air, "that I am much more than simply a telepath." He attacked fiercely, his fists pummeling Warbird's chest before she could register his movements.

After the rapid volley of hits, he threw his fist in a backward arc, connecting again with the Avenger's jaw. This time, she fell toward the ground like a meteor, and the impact with the ground nearly jarred her into unconsciousness. Her eyes fluttered open as she laid on her back against the ground, just in time to see the veteran member of the JLA bearing down on her with fury burning in his eyes...literally, to her surprise. Concussive energy exploded from the Martian's eyes, and as the beam struck the woman he was confident that her defeat was assured. As he landed to the ground, he looked over the woman's seemingly unconscious body. The power in the Manhunter's eyebeams had been too much for her - though nearly too much for him as well, for such an ability was incredibly draining on his mind and body, especially when still reeling from the armored one's sonic assault. His mental abilities had yet to return to him, as the grogginess he felt in his alien brain had not subsided, so he was unable to read her thoughts. However, he mused while leaning toward her, if she was indeed defeated...then why was she smiling?

"Urrk!" the Martian choked out as the woman's hand shot forward, grasping him by his throat. Crushing his neck, she slowly stood to her feet, winking playfully at her foe.

"You almost had me, Green Genes," Carol stated as she forced J'onn to his knees, "until you shot me with your eye blast. I absorb energy, sunshine...soak it up like a sponge."

The Manhunter's eyes rolled skyward while she pulled back her free hand, forming it into a fist. "Now say good night."

Her blow came down with tremendous speed, but to her surprise it did not connect. The alien's own hand had risen quickly, catching the woman's fist before it could collide with his face. The two were at a stand-off, but during the test of strength Warbird realized that she was nowhere near as strong as he. The Martian Manhunter narrowed his eyes as he twisted her arm painfully. "Good night."

With his other hand, he placed a hard uppercut to the woman's jaw, sending her flailing backward into the air. When she landed on her back, several feet away, she did not get back up again.

Avengers - 1; JLA - 2

* * * *

"!uoY evael regnA"

Zatanna muttered curses under her breath as her spell fell on deaf ears, the din of battle drowning out the vocal effects of her power. She had hoped that the woman in red, whose gypsy clothing marked her as a sorceress of old magic, would be the easiest - and most crucial - defeat of the war. When the red-haired Scarlet Witch turned her attention toward her, however, the daughter of Zatara felt her hair stand on end.

The Scarlet Witch gestured into the air, causing a burst of energy to flare from her fingertips. The ground shook violently beneath Zatanna's feet, knocking her on her backside as she clumsily attempted to maintain her balance. Things were not faring well, and it appeared that the home team had a sorceress that was much more powerful than Zatanna. The Witch was also angrier, as if something had goaded her into attack...the mystical being on the last world the League had visited, the one with the doppelgangers, had marked them somehow with a taint of evil. Zatanna could feel it in her own aura, and it was obvious that these other "heroes" could feel it as well. Had they all been duped into waging war upon each other?

"You killed a *child*, you and your so-called *Justice League*," Wanda Maximoff declared as she walked toward her fallen foe, chaos energy flaring across her body, "and the Avengers are going to make sure you pay for your crime."

"Oh, shut *up*," a voice from above commanded, the words followed by a flash of energy that struck the ground beneath the advancing Witch's feet. The concrete amazingly transformed into tar, allowing the woman to sink several inches, sticking to the long cloak that hung across her body. Zatanna looked up to see Firestorm descending toward her, his hand still outstretched in preparation for another attack.

"Get out of here, Zee," he said, watching the stuck Avenger like a hawk, "find Batman and Superman, and find us a way out of this stupid dimension. I'm ready to go home."

Zatanna rose to her feet and started running (why, oh why, had she chosen a costume with high heels?), leaving her friend to deal with the sorceress. Firestorm nodded toward the struggling Scarlet Witch. "Don't even think about it, red."

So it wasn't just the Avengers that had heightened aggression, Zatanna realized as she made her way across the battlefield. Firestorm was usually less brusque than that, and she could feel her own desire to fight beginning to overpower her despite her wishes. Superman was her only real choice to approach if she wanted the fight to end, because she knew that Batman's lust for violence could possibly have overcome him. As she ran, she could feel an insect fluttering around her, prompting her to swat her arms in the air.

"Hi there," a thin female voice said into her ear, "I'm the Wasp!" Zatanna's forward movement was then stopped by an energy burst that struck her neck, causing her to fall in a heap against the ground. "And you've just been stung!"

Zatanna rolled onto her back, only to find the tiny, winged figure of Janet Van Dyne hovering over her face. "Wow, you're small," the stunned sorceress muttered as the Wasp took flight back into the air.

"You know," the winsome Avenger began as she again assaulted the woman with her bio-electric stings, "we really don't appreciate having to fight identical assault teams. I absolutely *love* your costume, though."

"!Em dnuorrus sdniw" Zatanna chanted. In reply, the elements leapt to her command, a fierce whirlwind surrounding her body as she stood to her feet.

The Wasp shouted something as she was caught in the wind storm, but her words were lost above the roaring sound of the magician's attack. The half-inch tall Van Dyne fell hard to the ground, skidding several times across the dirt from the force of the winds that had tossed her away. It was several moments before she regained her wits, and it was then that she noticed the shadow falling over her.

Zatanna towered over her fallen foe, a wide grin on her face. "Finally," she taunted, "someone that I can beat rather easily."

The Wasp's ever-present smile faded into a scowl as she jumped to her feet. Her mass expanded rapidly, shooting her to a larger size in the blink of an eye. Zatanna's head craned skyward, her eyes widening as her gaze rose. She watched as the Wasp now towered over her, her height increased to an immense sixty feet.

"I'm sure you're a nice person and all," Janet said as she reached down with her giant fist, pounding it at the ground as Zatanna leapt to her side, "but I've been beating up lame bad guys like you since I was a ditzzy teenager."

Zatanna scrambled to her feet and broke into a run across the battlefield, desperate to get some distance between her and her giant opponent. She had to think of some way to take away the woman's advantage, to equal the playing field. While the tremors of the Wasp's footsteps stalked behind her, the idea came like a light bulb turning on over her head.

"!Ezis ruo lauqe" she shouted, turning back over her shoulder with an outstretched palm. Magic flared from her fingertips, striking the advancing Giant-Woman as she neared closer with large strides.

“What’s going on?” Janet asked as she rapidly shrunk to her normal size, momentum carrying her to a standing position directly in front of the League’s resident sorceress.

Zatanna immediately threw her fist forward, connecting hard against the Wasp’s jaw. The girl fell backward into unconsciousness, unprepared for the physical attack. Zatanna breathed a sigh of relief while wiping the dust and dirt from her top hat.

Batman would have been proud.

Avengers - 1; JLA - 3

* * * *

Nuclear fire danced across the top of his head, echoing the lightshow that was playing out in the sky high above the Keystone Building. Ronnie Raymond had the girl in red trapped in a pool of tar, ensnaring her large cloak to the point where she was nearly immobile. The battle was taking too long, Firestorm decided, so it was probably a good thing that he’d defeated one of their foes so quickly.

“So what’s the good word, lady?” Firestorm asked, mockingly, as the Scarlet Witch attempted to free herself from her cape. “You like attacking lost, confused people for no reason at all?”

Wanda Maximoff closed her eyes and ignored the youth’s taunts. Burying her hands elbow-deep into the puddle of tar, she began to whisper under her breath, causing Firestorm to raise a curious eyebrow at her actions. Suddenly, the muck exploded outward, the Scarlet Witch’s hands erupting in a violent explosion of unpredictable magic.

“Okay,” Firestorm admitted as he took the air, avoiding the wave of slime that was thrown his way, “so it’s not as easy as I’d hoped. We can deal with that.”

The Witch remained silent as she climbed from the hole in the ground, leaving her coated cloak behind her. The flame-haired boy had an obvious advantage against her with his ability to fly, and she honestly had no idea on how to level the playing field. Her fingers contorted into impossible angles as her arms extended skyward, crossed at the wrists.

“Huh, that’s weird,” Firestorm noted in reply to the woman’s gestures. As he arced across the sky in a circle around her, the world suddenly turned topsy-turvy, a wave of dizziness washing over him to the point of making him nauseous.

He attempted to climb into the air, but his sense of direction had been reversed by the Scarlet Witch's hex, causing him instead to crash head-first into the ground. "Okay, that wasn't fair," he rambled while lifting his face from the dirt.

"I'd suggest staying on the ground," Wanda said as she slowly approached, her fingers still contorted into bizarre formations.

"No problem, babe," Firestorm replied as he extended his own hand, sending out a flare of energy from his open palm. The blast struck harmlessly at the earth directly in front of the Avenger, causing her to jump back in surprise. The Leaguer smiled as the iron snares shot from the ground, earth and sand transmuted into a trap by the Nuclear Man's molecular powers.

The Witch's fingers again pulsed with chaos magic, however, and the iron shackles parted for her, tangling amongst themselves as she strode through them with confidence. "Oh, come on!" Firestorm shouted, again blasting with his molecular bolts. He had intended to entrap the woman within her own costume, to transmute it to dense lead that would inhibit her movements. She was faster, to his disappointment, and his energy attack was met by a hex sphere released from her fingertips.

The result was unexpected, to say the least. The probability-affecting hex bolt met the molecular transmutation blast, and the two did not agree with one another, a massive explosion that rocked both combatants to the ground providing a most dangerous result. Blown back roughly ten feet from her former standing position, the groggy Scarlet Witch rolled onto her side and slowly opened her eyes, her body wracked and battered from the concussive force. Her eyes caught the battle happening not far from her, and she saw poor Janet brought to size by the enemy's spellcaster.

"I have a suggestion of my own," Firestorm's voice was heard from above her, prompting her to roll onto her back, "let's not do that again. Once I turn back, I'm gonna be covered in bruises on places I'd rather not know existed."

And that was the key, the idea coming to her after having witnessed the Wasp's defeat only moments earlier. "So what are the odds," she said while crossing her hands against her chest, looking up at her enemy, "that you would "turn back" now instead of then?"

"Buh?" was the only word that came to Firestorm's lips as the nuclear transformation suddenly overtook him against his will. He was no longer superhuman, just plain ol' Ronnie Raymond, and he fell to the ground thanking his lucky stars that he hadn't been floating very high in the air.

"Any chance we can just call this a draw?" he asked meekly as the Scarlet Witch began to glow with eldritch energy. The blast that escaped her hands was weak,

purposely so, sufficient enough to knock the boy off his feet and rob him of consciousness.

Despite everything these people had done to the Squadron Supreme, Wanda thought as she looked down at the defenseless Raymond, she still couldn't bring herself to murder another human being. But this way, at least, the Avengers could finally gain another much-needed victory.

Avengers - 2; JLA - 3

* * * *

Why does every superteam have to have a speedster, Wally West thought to himself as he raced ahead of the white-haired Quicksilver, *is it like a union rule or something?*

The two men had lapped the battlefield several times since the war had started, the Flash always several long leg strides ahead of the Avenger. It was obvious that Pietro Maximoff wasn't as fast as the Flash, even had he not previously underwent a massive beating at the hands of the Crime Syndicate's Johnny Quick. He was tired, badly fatigued and sore all over, but he refused to give up. His *ego* would not allow it.

"This is retarded," the Flash mumbled to himself, realizing that nothing could be gained if he kept with his current strategy. He had hoped to simply outlast the other runner, but for some reason the guy just wouldn't give up. West made up his mind as zoomed past the archer that had defeated the Black Canary earlier, an arrow launched from his bow missing the scarlet blur by a mile. The Flash cornered as sharply as he could and took off through the middle of the battlefield, hoping that one of his standing teammates could take out the fleet-footed opponent behind him.

He didn't notice the blue-furred gorilla until he was mid-leap, and by then it was far too late to chance his direction or speed. The Beast grabbed onto the Flash's shoulder with his right hand, momentum carrying him along as he locked arms and legs around the Leaguer's body. "I don't suppose I could convince you to stop, could I?" the Beast asked rhetorically as Wally frantically attempted to dislodge him. "Might I suggest halting your quickened movements, sirrah?" *Comprende ingles? What if I said please?*

"Gah, can you shut up?" the Flash asked as he sped even faster through the battlefield, having decided that if he couldn't dislodge his foe he'd just take him on a ride he'd never forget.

“Well, if we’re gonna run the Kentucky Derby,” the Beast commented with a toothy grin from behind the Flash’s right shoulder, “let’s at least make it interesting.”

And then he placed his large hands over the Flash’s eyes, completely obscuring his field of vision. “Are you out of your mind?” the Flash bellowed as he vainly tried to pry Henry McCoy’s fingers from his face. Wally knew he couldn’t stop, because if he did he’d assuredly get pounded into next week by the strangely literal and unbelievably heavy monkey on his back.

“Now this is a ride!” the Beast shouted as he peaked over the scarlet speedster’s shoulder. “But watch out, we’ve got some stuff in the way up ahead. Veer left...no, no, *my* left! (Though I surmise that would indubitably be *your* left as well.)”

The Flash grunted loudly as he changed trajectory to the left, narrowly missing the Batman, who had taken action to dive out of the way. “I got two questions, fuzzy,” he said to the whooping and hollering Avenger piggybacking him, “**a**) you realize that if we hit something, we’re both paste, and **b**) are we in New York City?”

“In order of asking,” the Beast replied into the Flash’s ear, “the danger is what makes it so much fun, and yes, Manhattan to be exact.”

Great, West thought as he cut a sharp right turn, *a city I know by memory. Let’s hope there aren’t any major changes in architecture.* The Flash then sped up even faster as he headed through downtown Manhattan, the Beast shouting directions to him so as to avoid any cabs and/or pedestrians. It wasn’t much concern to Wally if he did hit something, because at the speed he was going he’d simply vibrate straight through it, passenger included. Regardless, he didn’t really want the thought of someone having a heart attack after he whizzed by on his conscience.

“Oh...my...stars...and...freaking...garters!” the Beast yelled as the wind from their velocity threatened to rip him to pieces. Friction had started to affect him, singeing his fur as they flew down the busy streets. However, despite his verbal idiocy, McCoy’s genius brain was going through calculations almost as quickly as the Flash’s feet beneath him. He couldn’t hit the Flash while they moving, because that would probably hurt him just as much when they tumbled down the asphalt. Similarly, he couldn’t hop off, because the speedster would have him pummeled into a coma before his feet hit the ground. So, where would he have the advantage?

Indoors, somewhere small.

“Hey, Road Runner,” the Beast said as he threw his momentum to the left, forcing the Flash to turn in that direction as well, “pull it over. I just saw a café and I could *really* go for a cuppa joe right about now.”

Wally nearly stumbled as he veered to the side. He hated being blind, but there was nothing he could do about it...but then the Beast removed his hands from the runner’s eyes. “Peek-a-boo!” the Avenger yelled, giving the Flash a brief glimpse of the apartment building door that he was running straight toward. The stumble he’d made earlier had lost him previous velocity, meaning that he was no longer at a speed sufficient for intangible vibration.

Translation: he hit the door *hard* and kept on going...

...straight out the back of the building, heading out toward the docks. The Beast now had a hand free, and he grasped wildly for anything he could use as a weapon during their whirlwind jaunt through the cluttered building. What he’d managed to grab, to his dismay, was a spiral-corded telephone. “It’s for you!” the Beast announced jokingly as he rapped the Flash about the head with the plastic phone receiver, causing nothing but an even larger annoyance for the racer.

They were heading toward the water, the Flash realized, the absolute last place he wanted to end up. Turning sharply once again, he narrowly avoided the edge of the piers, racing parallel with the waterline. A bit of inspiration hit McCoy as he tossed the telephone’s cord at the Flash’s feet, tangling them enough to finally trip him up. They hit the water at their side with a thunderous fury, knocking the breath out of both men, causing them to sink beneath the depths.

No land beneath his feet, the Beast deduced, and a speedster is effectively useless. Having finally been removed from West’s back, the former X-Man attempted to swim his way back toward his enemy, but realized too late that he had seriously underestimated the Flash’s ingenuity. Having recovered more quickly, Wally began to thrust his legs forward in the water, just as the two broke the surface. Wave after wave of salty liquid assailed the Beast, gagging and choking him. Changing strategy, the Flash then began to swim with as much speed as he could muster around the Avenger, catching him in a tidal pool that drug them both back under the waves. When they emerged to the surface a second time, the Flash was holding the unconscious Beast in his arms.

Yeah, I think I’m just gonna float here for a minute, Wally decided as he thought about the long journey back to the battlefield.

Avengers - 2; JLA - 4

* * * *

Steve Rogers was upset – nay, *angry* – at what was happening during the war. The Avengers weren't acting like a team, and because of that he'd watched most of them fall to their arguably more powerful adversaries. He observed through narrowed eyes as the Beast clutched onto the scarlet speedster, and he'd hoped that Quicksilver would be able to press his own attack. He sighed in dismay when he saw Pietro fall for seemingly no reason at all, tripping over something along the ground.

This wasn't right, Captain America decided. While these people indeed were mirror images of the Crime Syndicate, they almost seemed hesitant to fight. Had Thor not jumped the gun, there could possibly have been an understanding met between the two teams. But it was too late for talk, he knew, as he saw the two individuals flying toward him.

"Surrender now!" Superman ordered from above, his eyes blasting with fire several inches from the Captain, who stood unmoved with his shield brought to the fore to block any attacks. "We don't want to hurt any of you!"

Wonder Woman hovered alongside her teammate, but no pleas for surrender escaped her lips. The warrior's fury was raging inside her, enflamed by the spell placed upon the heroes by the strange child that had removed them from the Squadron Supreme's universe. Some had been affected hardly at all, as evidenced by the Kryptonian's desire for peace between the combatants, but Diana's Amazon blood made her one of the easiest to manipulate.

"You've invaded our dimension without invitation," Captain America called back, his head held high while speaking to the two senior members of the Justice League, "but can we lay down arms enough to talk this out? I think someone's made a grave mistake."

"You have made the mistake," Wonder Woman announced, an accusatory finger pointed downward at the Avenger, "in thinking that true heroes will ever stand down to those who would attack us without provocation!"

"Diana, I don't think..." Superman began, only to have the woman's silencing hand placed in front of his face.

"Fine," Cap said as he raised something concealed in his hand to his mouth, "I can't say I expected you to listen to reason, anyway. Now, Iron Man!"

Superman and Wonder Woman both snapped to attention at the Captain's order, but were too late to defend against the awesome repulsor blast of the armored Avenger that had been approaching from behind, his cloaking field masking both sound and sight.

Superman logically recovered first, his cape burned and smoldering from the second attack by Iron Man that he'd weathered. Iron Man took off, higher into the sky, propelled by his bootjets. Kal-El flew after him, while the shaken Wonder Woman turned to join him.

"I don't think so, lady," Cap said from his position on the ground, his arm held back far behind him. The shield left his grasp with as much strength as his muscular form could offer, striking the Amazonian in the back before she could follow Superman in pursuit of Stark.

Attacked by surprise for the second time, Wonder Woman fell out of the sky in a spiral pattern. Rogers went into a series of flips and jumps, making his way to where his shield was rebounding. With the grace of a lifetime spent in training, the shield slid effortlessly onto Captain America's arm as he landed one final somersault. He turned, shield brought in front of his chest, just as the woman's fist extended outward.

Wonder Woman had recovered quickly, her near invulnerability providing a soft landing after she'd fallen from the sky. She'd expected the flag-wearer's shield to crumble under the strength of her fist, but discovered that it was made of sterner stuff that she'd assumed when her hand struck flat against the metal and refused to buckle. "By Hera," she said as she threw her other hand backward, again striking the shield with enough force to send Cap staggering backward, "your weapon will not save you."

"I've had worse than you threaten the same," the Captain remarked as he ducked under another wide swing from the warrior woman, "and this shield has never let me down."

While on his haunches, Cap sprang upward. His shield caught the woman directly on the chin, striking her jaw and sending shockwaves through her skeletal system. Continuing his movement via momentum, Rogers flipped over the rattled Wonder Woman and landed behind her. Again going into a crouch after landing, he threw back his arm, allowing the edge of his shield to collide with the back of her knees.

She fell onto her back, invoking the names of her gods as she landed. Captain America was upon her in a heartbeat, his shield again being used as an offensive weapon. His hands gripping it along the sides, he brought it toward her face, hoping to end the fight with one more blow. Diana was unbelievably fast, however, and her crossed wrist gauntlets caught the shield and blocked the attack.

Wonder Woman kicked her legs up, knocking her foe into the air behind her. When she returned to her feet, she was disappointed to see that the man had landed perfectly on his heels, and had already turned to face her again. "Be

warned,” she said with her hands placed confidently on her hips, “I will not hesitate to hurt you quite badly if you persist in this.”

“Consider me warned,” Rogers answered, following the statement with a strange action. He threw his shield to his side, again releasing his hold on it, and allowed it to be tossed away into the air.

Wonder Woman began to advance after realizing that he had thrown his only weapon away. There was something strange about his tactics, she noted, because the man did not strike her as stupid or suicidal. When she saw him smiling as she approached, she realized what he’d done.

Cap scowled slightly when his strategy failed, the returning shield being caught in her superhumanly strong grasp by an outstretched arm. He’d hoped to again take her by surprise, but she’d outsmarted him. *That*, he decided, would *not* happen again.

“This will be ended,” she said as she dropped the shield to the ground and placed her foot atop it. She removed the tattered and broken golden lariat from her side, and with blinding speed tossed it through the air. Cap attempted to dodge the lasso, but was unable to keep from being caught, wrangled like a steer by the woman’s shimmering rope.

Diana wrapped the lasso around her hands as she pulled him toward her, his back facing her while being drug through the dust. “You will tell me what evil you people have perpetrated on this planet,” she commanded, “and you will tell me no lies. The golden lariat will only allow you to speak the truth.”

His arms tied to his side, Cap was brought directly in front of the woman that was slowly choking the life out of him. He could feel her breath on his neck, but it was her words that angered him enough to act. “Lady,” he said as he pushed himself back into her, “I haven’t told a lie since 1941.”

The Living Legend of World War II tossed his head back, allowing the top of his skull to crash as brutally as possible with the bridge of the warrior woman’s nose. Her head jerked back from the force of the blow, and her hands went lax, allowing the lasso to fall around him. He dropped to the ground and retrieved his shield, quickly looping the lasso tightly around the adamantium disc.

Wonder Woman, recovering from the surprise blow, lunged forward, only to find herself flipping head over heels by the man’s hand on her midsection. As he threw her to the ground, he locked his legs around her head and began to squeeze. He knew she wouldn’t pass out, but it was buying him precious time. Wrapping the other end of her own lasso around her wrists, Cap released his leg lock and jumped away, tossing the shield away from him once again as he leapt.

“What madness is this?” Diana demanded to know as the shield arced around her, whipping her tied hands around her body. When the shield finally returned to the triumphant hands of Captain America, Wonder Woman was tied and tangled by her own weapon, pulled taut by Rogers’ own muscle.

“Now,” he said as she shot him an angry look, “why don’t you tell me exactly what’s going on here?”

Wonder Woman said nothing.

“Fine. We’ll talk when you wake up,” Cap stated as he struck her with the side of his hand directly behind the ear, a blow sufficient to knock her unconscious.

Avengers - 3; JLA - 4

* * * *

Pietro Maximoff sneered as he watched the Beast leap upon the speedster that he’d been pursuing for the entirety of the battle. The man could not be faster than him, it was a possibility that Quicksilver refused to entertain, and the thought that his teammates believed him unable to catch the Flash was like a slap to his face.

He pressed his leg muscles even harder as he saw the Flash’s futile attempt to remove McCoy from his back. Pietro would catch this enemy and prove his worth, without the help of any other Avenger...he would show that he could prevail against any foe set against him. No matter what.

In his determination, he failed to notice the thin red cord that had extended at level with his ankles, and he hit it hard. He fell into a head-over-heels tumble across the war zone, shocked and amazed that he had actually been tripped up by a stray piece of litter that had fallen in his path.

After only a second or two of confusion, Quicksilver was back on his feet, turned toward the object that had felled him. Landing in a runner’s stance, he was prepared to launch himself forward once more, but he paused his action to cock a curious eyebrow at the “rope” that had tripped him. The red and yellow strand had taken the form of a man whose body flowed like liquid, a goofy smile adorning his goggled face.

“Now it can’t be said that I don’t believe in fighting fair,” Plastic Man remarked as he changed his shape into another costumed man, one with the words “Fair Play” emblazoned on his tunic, “but I do know that ganging up on poor ol’ Flash just don’t cotton.”

“A poor man’s Reed Richards?” Pietro quizzed with a smile. “Oh, fate is being *too* kind.”

Quicksilver shot off like a bullet toward Plastic Man, confident that the fight would be over in no less than 20 seconds. He ran circles around the malleable Eel O’Brien, placing blow after blow against his body. Plastic Man, however, had been prepared for such a tactic. His forearms were raised and stretched around his whole upper body, protecting his face with an impenetrable shield of stretched skin that Maximoff’s rapid volley of blows pounded against harmlessly.

“This is a move I was taught by a guy named Ted Grant,” Plas said from behind his makeshift barricade, “called a rope-a-dope. People will say that Ali did it first, but hey, us superfolks have to have each other’s backs in important arguments like that.”

Quicksilver was wearing a trench into the ground around the Leaguer’s immovable body, and he stubbornly began to realize that the fight would not be won as easily as he hoped. He’d been unable to breach the comedian’s defenses, but he was determined to keep trying.

Plastic Man, too, realized that the battle would not be won with him on the defensive. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to wear down the mutant any time soon, so it was time for a new plan. While Quicksilver flew around him in the same circular pattern, fists outstretched with each pass, Plas bided his time...and then struck. He folded his body outward, hollowing it out as it enveloped the fleet-footed Avenger in a perfect sphere. Within a moment, Plastic Man was rolling gently across the ground, Pietro trapped helplessly inside the cavity of his body.

“Now, uh, I don’t know how much air you got in there,” O’Brien commented as he rolled to a stop, able to feel his foe’s confused movement against his body, “but maybe that archer you guys got will come along and try to shoot you some breathe holes.”

Quicksilver grunted loudly in the dark sphere in which he’d been trapped. He had nowhere to go, and his blows were harmlessly absorbed the annoying one’s plastic body. How could speed help him when he had no room to maneuver. And then the idea came to him, and he smiled mischievously.

“Hey...man, what’re you...hey! Cut that out!” Plastic Man yelled as he felt his imprisoned enemy begin to move faster and faster inside him. He was building up pressure by running in place, increasing his velocity to the point where Eel couldn’t stretch any more for fear of rupturing. With an agonized yelp, the elastic crusader went flat, releasing Quicksilver from the sphere and allowing him to race away.

“I’ve had enough of this foolishness,” Quicksilver stated as he rushed past the recovering Plas, “so let’s just cut to the chase, shall we?”

As he ran by, the Avenger grabbed hold of Plastic Man’s elastic arm, pulling it with him as he turned and ran in an arc around his enemy. In much the same way that Captain America had defeated his opponent, Maximoff ran circles around the Leaguer, grabbing a different body part with each pass around.

“Now,” he said as he finally halted his movement, stopping on a dime in front of the immobile Plas, “that’s much better.”

Tied in knot after knot, Plastic Man puckered his bottom lip and sobbed. “What a revoltin’ development.”

Quicksilver immediately began to ignore O’Brien’s pleas to untie him, his eyes darting quickly around the battle. “Now where did that Flash person get off to?”

Avengers - 4; JLA - 4

* * * *

His sensors were screaming in his ears, but Anthony Stark ignored the clarion bells that his armor was relaying to his brain. He was pushing his boot thrusters as hard as they could go, as high into the air as they would take him. The fellow chasing him was understandably upset, having been on the receiving end of not one but *two* sneak attack repulsor blasts.

And make no mistake, Superman was highly angered. He was gaining on the man in the high-tech battle suit with every passing moment, climbing higher and higher toward the strange storm that was building above the Keystone Building. He had hoped that Diana would be with him, but she had apparently decided to stay behind with the shield-bearer. He knew he shouldn’t worry, as Wonder Woman was more than capable of handling a mere costumed athlete, but still...

Time to see just what this suit’s made of, Iron Man thought to himself as he changed trajectory, falling into a headfirst diving arc behind the advancing Kryptonian. Superman had allowed his thoughts to distract him, and now the Golden Avenger was below him, his repulsor bays in his palms surging with power.

The force blasts exploded against Superman’s body while he turned in his flight, heading on a collision course with Iron Man. Stark grit his teeth and narrowed his eyes as the distance closed between the two men of steel, his repulsors splashing off Superman’s chest and face, refusing to stop him. The champion of Metropolis had taken their measure earlier, and would not be beaten by them again.

The two men collided with the sound of thunder, Superman's fists slamming hard into Iron Man's chest plate. "What is wrong with you people?" Superman asked as he smashed his fist into the side of Iron Man's helmet. "We don't want to fight you, we come in peace!"

An explosive backhand from the Kryptonian sent Iron Man flying through the air, his retro-thrusters immediately attempting to halt his erratic movement. Stark grimaced while spiraling across the sky, the displays of his armor's weapon system projected into his retinas. His head was still ringing from the punch to his helmet, the vibrations nearly enough to rattle the fillings from his teeth. "Guy's got a funny way of showing his reluctance to fight..." Tony mumbled to himself.

Iron Man finally halted his flight and turned back toward his enemy, only to find that Superman was pressing his attack a lot more quickly than expected. Colliding hard into the Avenger's midsection, more vibrations ran the length of the armor. Stark couldn't believe the man's strength, and silently commented to himself that the stranger would perhaps be too much for even Thor. Iron Man was obviously outclassed.

"Why won't you just give up and let us talk?" the Kryptonian asked as he wrapped his massive arms around the Avenger's body. The pressure was beginning to build inside the armor, and Stark was afraid that perhaps the suit would crack.

"Something you might want to consider," Iron Man said smugly as he toggled through the operating systems with his helmet's chin rest, "when fighting for your life, knock off the negotiations."

Pinned face to face with Superman, Iron Man's Uni-beam that rested in his chest-plate flared to life, hitting his foe square on the large S that was blazoned on his uniform. Superman released his grip around Stark as he was pushed backward from the force of the Uni-beam, a grunt of pain passing from his lips. "Another thing," Iron Man continued as he raised his hands into the air, "on my world, the heroes have to fight dirty."

The armored hero's palms came up directly in front of Superman's open eyes, and two repulsor blasts exploded point blank into the Leaguer's face. Kal-El screamed, something he had very rarely done in his lifetime, and his head jerked backward, sending him into a tailspin toward the ground. Iron Man's bootjets returned to life, and as he dove toward his opponent he couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt for what he'd done. Cap would assuredly be disappointed in him, but the victory was what mattered. It was war, Stark decided as he shot the falling Superman with another volley of repulsors, and he had to do whatever it took to win.

Smoke filtered from Superman's eyes as he attempted to block out the pain he was feeling and stop his fall. He was beginning to slow his descent, and the armored one's pulse blasts were barely noticeable to him. He'd underestimated the Avenger, foolishly trying to reason with someone that would obviously not listen to his pleas for the battle to stop. Now hovering in place, shaking his head from side to side in a desperate attempt to get his sight working again, Superman felt helpless.

He was blind, and the advantage had gone to his opponent in the span of a few moments.

Iron Man activated his stealth field as he flew around his foe, knowing that if he was blind the only thing he had yet to eliminate was Superman's sense of sound. His bootjets were silenced by the null-sound field that cloaked his invisible war suit, and he continued to fly around the alien in circles of varying widths, constantly bombarding him with energy. Would he be able to wear the invulnerable Superman down, even in his weakened state? Or would the armor red-line before his foe fell?

Superman's vision was blurred as he attempted to get a bead on his enemy's direction. Iron Man had again turned invisible, and had somehow eliminated the sound his jets made when zooming by. All the Kryptonian could do was float there, weathering the brutal assault. If he couldn't see or hear the Avenger, what could he do to win the battle?

The scent hit his nostrils immediately, his super sense of smell picking up on the noxious fumes emitted by Iron Man's jet thrusters. The scent got stronger every few seconds, splashing against his face as the Avenger around his body. Superman smiled slightly, knowing that he'd found the edge he needed, and all he had to do was be patient.

This guy just won't fall down, Iron Man thought to himself as he made another pass. His armor was yelling in his ear to slow down, to conserve his energy, but he knew he had to keep pushing. He was better than this clown...smarter. He was varying his speed and direction as he circled, hoping to keep his flight pattern random and unpredictable. He was going to beat him, thank god, he was going to win...

And then Superman's hand shot out, superhumanly strong fingers digging into the shoulder plate of Iron Man's armor. "Oh, shit," Stark said as the smiling Superman halted his flight and drew back his other fist. The man from Krypton brought his fist down square with Iron Man's face plate, denting the steel and driving the Avenger down to the ground far below.

Iron Man's alarms shrieked as he hit the ground, creating a small crater around his body. Stark was unconscious before landing, however, and the sensors fell

on deaf ears. Superman floated cautiously to the ground, his vision slowly returning to him as he touched down on the Earth.

“Now don’t you wish you’d just stopped to talk?” Superman asked the immobile Iron Man, really not expecting a reply.

Avengers - 4; JLA - 5

* * * *

“Have at thee, villain! A craven coward thou may be, the Son of Odin shalt not halt no matter how far thou flee!”

Kyle had been on the defensive ever since the fight had started, and he’d barely managed to keep from getting hit by the giant mallet that the bearded guy kept throwing at him. *All of that*, he thought, *and now he tosses bad poetry at me?*

“Listen, man,” Rayner said as he flew through the air, his body covered in emerald light, “I don’t know how you found out about that kid, but trust me – it was an accident! I never meant for it to happen, and I feel awful enough about it without you trying to beat me to death!”

Thor’s anger raged even stronger at the boy’s words, his own body lifted high in the air by the twirling hammer. “Liar! Basest of villains, to deny the guilt of thy actions! By my father’s beard, let Hela welcome thy broken body into her bosom!”

He released his hold on the hammer’s leather tong, allowing it to sail furiously through the air. Green Lantern braced himself for impact, deciding that he couldn’t keep evading forever. It was time to see just how hard the weapon could hit. He immediately regretted his decision as the hammer struck the shield he’d erected with his ring, smashing through it as if it weren’t there. The stone hammer slammed into his chest, breaking ribs and pushing the air from his lungs with the force of its strike. Kyle fell from the sky, barely conscious, watching as the hammer impossibly turned in the air and returned to the hands of the so-called “Thunder God” that was now standing anchored on the ground.

Okay, Kyle thought as he staggered to his feet, *that wasn’t fun at all*. He stood as tall as he could, ignoring the pain in his chest and the broken bones that were rubbing together as he breathed in, and faced down the giant Norse deity that was slowly walking toward him. “Teach me to try and reason with someone so big,” he said as he raised his ringed hand above his head, “so let’s dance. I’ll lead.”

Thor’s eyes widened as the ring erupted in green energy, creating above the boy a fiery emerald dragon possessing three heads, all belching pyres of flame downward. The Asgardian halted nary a step, however, and swatted the flames

away with a wide sweep of his hammer. The flames broke and sparked as the enchanted weapon dispersed them, and Thor paid no attention to the burning fire that made it past his defense. "I say thee nay!" he bellowed as strands of his golden hair burned away.

Green Lantern then took back to the sky, flying as high and as far from the God's hammer as he could. "This guy can't be that tough," he said as he kissed the ring of Oa that rested on his finger, "so let's get physical."

He fell into a dive, heading straight for the enraged Thor, willing his ring to create an all-encasing suit of green armor around him. In the hands of the armor was a sword twice the young man's size, crackling with jade light as he brought it in a downward stroke at his enemy. Thor blocked the sword strike with the handle of his hammer, but the force was sufficient enough to drive him to one knee. Moving with more grace than his weight should allow him, Kyle moved fluidly around the thunderer, but found yet another of his sword blows blocked by the ever-present mallet. Lantern decided to switch tactics mid-swing, and the sword transformed before the Avenger's eyes into a chain that wrapped tightly around his thick body.

"What magic hath bedeviled me?" Thor raged as he flexed his muscles, straining against the Lantern's chain. Rayner pulled tighter on the chain as a smile crept on his lips, his expression hidden by the green helmet atop his shoulders.

"Sorry, wing-head," Kyle quipped in triumph, "but nothing can break those bonds as long as my willpower is keeping them strong."

"Thou darest to match wills with the Son of Odin?" Thor asked as he flexed his muscles again, snapping the ring-produced chains with as much strength as he could muster. "Prepare to witness why Thor hath been named the Lord of Storms, whelp!"

The Asgardian brought the hammer down and struck the ground with the fury of an earthquake, and lightning exploded from the strike point, electrifying the very air around the two men. Lightning struck Kyle's armor dozens of times as he was blown backward, cracking and shattering it with the elemental force produced by Thor's assault. The Green Lantern's protective covering faded away as he hit the ground, dazed and disoriented on the flat of his back.

"Now thou shalt pay for thy crimes," Thor said as he picked Kyle up by the front of his shirt, holding the Lantern up to his bearded face.

"'n brightest day, 'n blackest night..." Kyle mumbled confusedly as he placed one last ditch punch against Thor's face. The Thunder God's eyes narrowed in furious anger at the child's display of insolence. Still holding him by the shirt with one hand, Thor brought the end of his hammer across Rayner's face, sending

blood and teeth flying across the ground. The boy's green mask broke in jagged shards as he went limp in Thor's arms.

By all rights, Green Lantern should have been dead as he was dropped to the ground by the Asgardian. Consciousness had been lost, and it was only his tremendous will power that was keeping him from dying on the spot.

Avengers – 5; JLA – 5

Thor brought the hammer high into the sky, preparing to deliver the deathblow against the Green Lantern's skull. "Thou shalt die on thy knees, craven jackal," the Stormbringer commanded as he plunged Mjolnir downward. The hand that caught him at the wrist halted the hammer's strike, straining to keep Thor's strike at bay.

"Who dares?" Thor raged as he pulled his arm free from the person that had risked their life to stop his killing blow. Standing beside him was Captain America, angered in his own right at the act he had almost witnessed.

"Stand down, Thor," the Captain ordered as he stood toe-to-toe with his teammate, "the Avengers are not murderers. The day that happens is the day I die."

"Captain, I would follow thee into war against dread Surtur himself," Thor yelled at the top of his hefty lungs, hammer waving in the air as Rogers stepped between him and the gravely injured Green Lantern, "but thou doth dare much to stand in the way of vengeance true and right!"

"This young man may very well die from what you've done to him, Thor," Cap said as he crouched down to check Rayner's pulse, "and the thought of that makes me sick to my stomach. Calm down and back off, or else."

"It's too late for that," the voice of Superman said from a few feet away, his face contorted into an expression of anguish and anger after having seen his teammate's condition. Thor immediately went to speak, his hammer already beginning to spin in his hands, but Captain America instead leapt between them, his arms outstretched to keep both men at bay.

Before any from either team, Avenger or Justice Leaguer, could continue their battles, the sky above them exploded with light. A shrill scream pierced the air as everyone's attention was given to the black portal that hung just above Keystone Tower. The assembled heroes watched in confusion as a hideous creature tore his way through the rift, his huge leathery wings beating furiously against the storm that his crossing had created. A woman was clutched in the monster's grasp, struggling with all her might to break free, but the fight was for naught.

“Finally, after all these years,” the green metallic insectoid shrieked into the air, “Annihilus has breached the barrier! Annihilus is free to conquer...free to **destroy!**”

To be Continued...

Next Issue: The crossover of the century moves back over to Marvel 2000 in the pages of Avengers # 39! Two worlds are under the threat of crisis, and with the mightiest champions of both Earths embroiled in their own conflict other residents have decided to take up arms and do what they can to save reality!

Special Thanks is given to Mike Rasbury and Matt Pierce, who both helped me in the difficult task of plotting the individual fight scenes in this issue.
~Chris Munn



Avengers VS the JLA #3

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Ra's AI Ghul stood on the windswept slope, the cold just edging through his layers of protection, watching through fog-misted binoculars the activity on the slopes of Everest miles distant. The sun had just crested the Himalayas, the air fresh and clear, clean at the top of the world. Even without the glasses he could see for miles- leagues, but he was keenly interested in the operations on the world's tallest mountain, and he wanted a closer look.

A Grav-Pulse freighter was just departing, the last of the non-essential personnel aboard, the extraneous materials that would no long be needed for the project; steel and circuitry, plastic and the excess Promethium from the core containment shell. He watched as the ship tilted wildly in the wind, fearful of a crash that might scar the mountainside, lose delicate and expensive hardware. His fears were premature however, and unnecessary. The pilot was the best of his followers in the particular skill, totally devoted and willing to die for the cause of the Demon's Head. He watched as the transport swiftly righted, soaring out and away from the jagged slopes of the Everest relay station and started the long, sweeping curve back to the Aerie's lower holding facility. Still, there had been that brief moment of tension, almost exciting-

"Master?"

"Yes, Ubu?" Ra's AI Ghul did not turn at the sound of his servant's chattering voice, his clacking teeth. They were dressed the same- more or less- yet despite his body guard's additional bulk the giant Ubu sounded as though he were freezing-

"Lund h-has signaled, Master. H-he is ready t-to commence."

AI Ghul nodded, sweeping his magnified gaze over the mountainside until he centered on the small specks that were his riggers. They stood in the shadow of the slopes, the Tower rising high above them, a monument to one man's

ingenuity- His own. Its original purpose had been to broadcast in unison a series of hypersonic pulses that would effect various brain activities in the bulk of humanity. It had been his idea to blanket the Earth with his otherwise harmless harmonics designed to attack humanity; to shut down those centers of the mind that controlled man's ability to communicate. The ability to speak, to read would be forfeit, and the resulting chaos would quickly cull the masses; the weak and helpless, the timid. Mankind would be reverted to trait, once more ranking low on the food chain by sheer stupidity and their inability to cope in a world that they could not understand. They would slay one another, inadvertently at first, then on purpose, finally as a matter of gene. Man was an animal, and the least desirable in the visions of Ra's Al Ghul. The plan had been sound, and would have worked, especially with the Justice League suddenly missing. It was a plan worth saving of course, just in case- there was always a margin of error.

Things had changed...

The Demon's Head watched as Lund led his team away from the Tower proper. The Babel Tower had been converted- quickly- for a new and singular purpose, based on recent events. It was a simple matter really, using data gathered and transferred from an operative working within the more secure areas of STAR Labs. STAR had done the groundwork, and in end had provided a majority of the raw data on the current anomaly. Ra's Al Ghul tilted his head back, his gaze falling on the roiling storm building from a pinprick in the clear blue-sky overhead.

He watched the pink, churning clouds pouring from the tear in the very fabric of space. He saw the darkening patch of sky, a slash of blood on pristine blue. The crackling, arching lightning that flashed magnificently, thunder rolling after. He had been fortunate indeed that a rift had appeared so near, that point where the ground met the sky there above the Himalayas; a stone's throw from his home. It had been a simple matter thus to erect one of his Towers atop the spine of the world, converted to draw the strange negative energies into his grasp, for his use. It was so similar to the Crisis effect of several years past, yet at the same time different. In most cases, the world at large, the bulk of humanity was not even aware as yet that anything was amiss.

They would be however, and soon...

"Master?"

Ra's al Ghul sighed, "Commence, Ubu."

Ra's Al Ghul returned his view to the Tower, most specifically the control rod situated at the very pinnacle. There was a moment's hush, then he saw the gouts of steam as the internal mechanisms of the machine began to churn. There was a sparkle of dazzling light as the Tower's crystalline prism began to

refract the varied negative energies passing through; collating data, coalescing and converting power. The deadly, dark pink energy began to swirl-

Al Ghul winced as a flare of light exploded within his gaze. He staggered back, his binoculars falling into the knee-deep snow as thick-gloved hands went to his eyes knuckling at the spots flashing there. He felt Ubu's hands on his shoulders, his bulk keeping him upright-

"Master!"

The Demon's Head blinked, hissing, "What- what was that? Get Lund!"

"He is calling now! He wants!"

Blindly Al Ghul ripped the headset from his servant's head, his eyes watering, tears freezing in the sub-zero winds as he jammed the earpiece to his ear, shouting into the microphone-

"Lund!" he snapped, still blinking, his sight a white, swirling blur. "Lund! Report!"

He heard static. Turning away he wiped at the tears in his eyes, trying to see. There was a flashing, swirling pink high above and he could hear the thunder churning, echoing off of the high mountains.

"...surge! Nega... off the scale!"

Lund's voice sounded frantic, panicked. Al Ghul winced again as a thread of lightning etched itself upon his inner eye. He cursed, something he rarely did, hating not knowing as he adjusted the gain on the radio, trying to clear the feed of static-

"...man. Fell through the hole!"

"What?" Ra's Al Ghul shouted into the microphone. "Repeat that! What man?"

"He fell from the hole, smoldering. Landed almost in our midst, unconscious. He seems injured, dead!"

"WHAT MAN?"

"The silver man..."

The Mighty Avengers **vs.** ***The JLA***

The Cosmic Bond!

The Edge of Infinity...

Eric Arcane stared at the... the rip in the very fabric of space, the tear in the air. Except there was no air, or ground for that matter. No skies of blue or fields of green, just the endless cold black of the void.

And the Wall...

He had heard rumors of course. In his line of work- if you could call it that- there were always stories of the Realms Beyond; alternate dimensions and worlds within worlds. Hell, he had been to Dream on occasion, stood face to face with Nightmare once. Of course he had heard of Dormammu, and to hear Frank Drake tell the story, the Dark Dimension was a cold, miserable place.

It had nothin' on the Wall though...

It just stretched on, impossibly, forever in every direction. The last great barricade at the end of infinite space, huge could not begin to describe it; gigantic, gargantuan, and vast. Nothing compared, there were not words. Still he stared, his gaze sweeping, his neck craning as he looked up and down, left and right trying to take it all in. It boggled the mind.

Eric Arcane winced, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose trying to ease the pain of his suddenly throbbing head. His mind was swirling, trying to comprehend, his brain threatening to explode with the overload of input that his senses- both natural and magical could not process. It was too much-

"Impressive, is it not?"

Arcane looked to his left, trying to focus on the dark and ghostly image at his side. Doctor Strange smiled that cool practiced smile he had and drew on the filter of his cigarette. He was dressed in black, a dark woolen longcoat hiding his apparel of office, his black hair slicked back with the silver at his temples

sparkling in the eerie gloom. His face was all arrogance and omniscience, his well-trimmed mustache shifting only slightly as his condescending smile became an all-knowing smirk, as though he had seen it all before. Just another day at the ranch for the one-time Sorcerer Supreme and Master of the Mystic Arts.

Doctor Eric Arcane was no slouch when it came to sorcery and mysticism of course, but he was no where near the same league as Stephen Strange. Arcane was a Hedge Wizard, all of his spells learned and remembered as needed, kept in his throbbing head and scattered memory as intelligence allowed. His learning had been the quick and easy route, the best course of action at the time, not the long and laborious process that the likes of Strange and even the Baron Mordru had taken to learn their craft. There was no discipline, no honor, just instant gratification that of course took its toll in the long run. Every spell took a bite out of Arcane's essence, his soul. Every Conjuring or Feeling, every Flame and Lightning Bolt tugged at his lifeline, snipped just a little more from his thread. Now, the simple spell of Projection- even with the aide of Doctor Strange- well, Arcane was feeling his age.

His hands appeared withered and pale, though the ghostliness was an affect of the Astral Projection. His own long overcoat seemed ratty and worn, old blood stains glowing as his spirit struggled to hold form, drawing power wherever it could. He could see the tails of his dreadlocks, snow white and frizzed. He was tired, and needed to get back-

"You all right? Holding up?" Strange asked, but did not really seem concerned as he returned his gaze to the hole in space.

"I'll live," Arcane answered, "but we need to get back soon I think. I-"

"Just a few moments longer, Eric," Strange said. "Humor me."

"I don't even know why I'm here," Arcane said, his voice starting to rasp. He needed a cigarette of his own, but he could not conjure one here for some reason. "No way I have the kind of power to deal with that"

Arcane pointed at the rip even as a gout of pink energy spewed out like a geyser. Dark clouds churned forth amidst crackling bolts of lightning that stretched far and away into the void. Oddly, he heard the 'thunder' that followed, some side effect of the Astral spell no doubt. He felt the pain, it was all in his head.

As overwhelming as the Wall was, Arcane imagined that Strange had brought him to look at the hole rather. That was the true anomaly, the apparent danger waiting to happen. He could see the results of the queer energy that had been pouring out for no little time it seemed. The void near the Wall was spotless of the usual debris and dust that clouded space, and even the edifice itself seemed charred and cracked in areas. The pink storms had scoured the Wall, scorching

the surface. He could see blank white spots and cartoon like craters where spacecraft had been imbedded but were now missing. The odd metal gleamed in places, reflecting the crackling energies, while in other spots was black like soot and crumbling, breaking away...

"It's eating away at the Wall, isn't it?"

Strange turned, that smile back in place as his dark eyes sparkled. He nodded, reaching into the folds of his coat and producing another cigarette, which he lit with a touch and handed to Arcane-

"Very good, grasshopper," he smirked. "You see, we are not so far apart as you care to think. I believe recent failures- alleged failures on your part have clouded your judgement and self-esteem. Once you put your mind to it, however-"

"What is it?" Arcane asked, impatience lacing his voice, sighing as he took a long drag off the imaginary smoke. The pain in his head seemed to ease a bit as he pointed at the hole. "The energy I mean. It's coming from the other side, right? But what is it? I can't get a fix, though I can see some traces of magic in the mix. It seems old."

"Older than space itself, at least as we understand it in our limited way. Perhaps older than time as well. That is the primal magic you see, the last lingering spark of one small part of what came before, that uncontained maelstrom from which all else sprang; Chaos..."

"The Wall you see is that first and final barrier that holds back the powers of creation and calamity. Beyond resides all that was and will be again, one day. The Wall too replicates itself, ever twisting and winding throughout the multiverse, recreating itself in every dimension that sprang from the one as Chaos is unique and central-"

"Hold it," Arcane said as he clenched his eyelids tightly, wincing as he rubbed at his temples. "Too much data, old son." He heard Strange chuckle-

"It's simple really," he said flicking ash into the void, watching the sparkling, cosmic light show. "Science actually has the right of it, with their 'Big Bang' theories, they simply do not understand the full scope and magnitude. Our one universe is just a drop in the cosmic sea, a grain of sand on the beach of infinity. And beyond that Wall, and the myriad duplicates in countless other realms lies the one true unique quality that all share. The 'Cosmic Bond' so to speak."

"Chaos..." Arcane said finally understanding. "Chaos is breaking through."

Strange nodded. "Recent events in this reality- as well as others- have weakened the Wall. Your own inclusion, the battle with Dracula trying to pierce

the veil and return his beloved, the recent activities of the Dark Dimensions and stages of Hell trying to break through, and more. Like circumstances elsewhere have done equal, if not greater damage; to the Wall as well as space and time itself. These rips in the fabric of space are appearing everywhere with a dramatic frequency, the Negative energies of Chaos eating away at the very being of Infinity, bringing the other realms closer with every heartbeat.”

“Merging?”

“No, Eric,” Strange said shaking his head. “Should the dimensions breach, the opposite energies would clash, the resulting ‘explosion’- for lack of a better term- ripping asunder reality as we perceive it. It would be the end of everything, Eric. The pink storm of anti-energy is the first sign as the negative wave spills forth like a tide, rising then receding. Eventually it will swell to a flood when the barrier cracks and the Walls come tumbling down. Already there have been near misses, crossings of beings that do not belong. Your own Frank Drake nearly caused the calamity during his jaunt through his Dark Dimension of the Obsidian Mirrors. The Silver Surfer too-“

“And others, Strange...”

Arcane actually saw Doctor Strange flinch, his head turning just a bit quicker than normal. His own heart was hammering in his ethereal chest as he turned to follow Strange’s gaze to see the other man who had joined them without a sound, snuck right up on them-

“Mysterium...”

He was tall, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that cast his face in shadows for the most part, a long trench coat of his own trimmed in gold and dotted with archaic symbols and runes. He had those glowing eyes of awareness and that same look that Strange usually wore, like he knew a helluva lot more than he was letting on-

“Doctor Strange,” he said, his voice cold and hollow. “We meet at last.”

“Under dire circumstance of course. Such is usually the way.”

“It’s our lot in life, Doctor...”

Arcane gasped as a woman stepped from behind the man, though he would have sworn that this ‘Mysterium’ had been alone. She was pretty, though she looked weary and worn, like the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. Her long, blonde hair seemed faded, her skin pale and her frame thin bordering on gaunt though she was dressed in a bulky wool overcoat, the apparel of fashion for the edge of reality apparently.

“Our kind draws calamity and death like a magnet, both for ourselves as well as the ones we love.”

Strange frowned, nodding. “I heard of your recent loss, Miss Jones. I am sorry.”

Miss Jones nodded in return and Arcane could sense the hitch in her voice as she sighed, trying to keep her composure. Who was she, and the man too for that matter? Things seemed to be spiraling out of his reach at a quick pace.

“I fear that my alternate has taken steps, Doctor, steps that shall inadvertently quicken the disaster we all fear. Oddly, it goes against my own once purpose, the calling of restoration that he has taken upon himself.”

“The Nth Man...”

“Benjamin,” the woman said like she knew him- whoever the Nth Man was.

“I don’t-“ Arcane started, but the man Mysterium cut him off.

“The Squadron fought the wandering heroes when they appeared, drawn by the Scarlet Centurion’s Cosmic Escalator. There was a death, and my replacement took a hand, rather directly.”

“I sensed the recent surge,” Strange said in understanding, ignoring the sudden flare of light spewing from the rip overhead. “That was the heroes?”

“Benjamin shunted them to your world through a convenient tear, passing them back through the Negative Zone ignorant of the consequences. Their passing did not go unnoticed, I fear. He is just a child after all, despite his metamorphosis-“

“Just a baby...” the Jones woman said, near tears. Arcane could not stand it.

“What the fuck are you all talking about?”

“Forget it, mate.“

“Ahhh!” Arcane spun about at yet another voice and saw three new forms taking on a ghostly shape before him. They were misty however, ephemeral, all wearing long coats: a man in a hat holding what looked to be a Hypno-disc like they used to sell in the old comic books he read as a kid, another taller man in black hat and coat wearing a golden medallion, the third blond and ragged with a cigarette butt dangling from parched lips. It was he that spoke.

"I been dealin' with the 'Trenchcoat Brigade' longer 'n I care t' recall an' they don't never give a straight answer." The blonde man smirked, taking a drag off his cigarette as he glanced sideways at his two companions, then shifted his gaze to the Jones woman, his eyes lingering.

"Who the hell are you, now?" Arcane asked stepping forward. He seemed the only one taken aback by the sudden appearances, though he saw the blond man scowl and shake his head.

"Bloody 'ell... 'Ere we go..."

"Many think that they know me, Eric Arcane," the tall man in black said. "But in truth few do. To most I am, and ever shall be-"

"Here it comes..."

"A stranger..."

The blond man hissed, shaking his head as he strode forward. He extended his hand, ready to shake with a smile as the man Mysterium shouted warning.

"Do not touch! The contact could-"

"Piss off, ya ponce," the blond said with an annoyed sneer. "You think bein' civil's gonna bring down the house y' great git? Maybe if you'd shook a few 'ands in yer day we wouldn't be in this bloody mess in the first place." The blond turned back to Arcane, taking the black mage's astral hand despite his hesitation, shaking it as he leaned in to whisper.

"Y' gotta put these poofs in their places once in awhile, luv. They do tend t' get uppity, know what I mean?" Arcane nodded feeling more lost and confused with each passing moment.

"John Constantine, mate," the blond continued, stepping aside as he chained another cigarette, then another that he handed to Arcane when he noticed that his own had vanished in his confusion. He motioned with a thumb over his shoulder.

"The tall bloke's the Phantom Stranger. Don't get him started though. Me other mate's Doc Occult. He's alright, though a bit fixated with monster bashin'." The blond stared at Arcane, raising his eyebrows.

"I'm Eric Arcane," Eric finally said to the growing crowd of apparent mystics. "Doctor Arcane, and that's-"

“We have no time for this!” Mysterium said, his voice booming. “While we exchange pleasantries the very fabric of reality unravels. We must unite, band together to fix this before we and all we know are wiped from existence!”

“An’ jus’ how d’you plan on doin’ that little bit a’ prestidigitation, son? Chaos came rainin’ down in our reality already. The people are rememberin’ the red skies, n’ they’re scared shitless,” Constantine said.

“Truly,” the one called Doctor Occult added. “One of our own- Doctor Fate added to the trouble. He’s been defeated, but he ripped the ‘hole’ bigger in the process.”

“It was Nabu, actually,” the Stranger interrupted, “one of the old Lords of Order who turned to Chaos in the end. The result however is the same.”

“The negative energies threaten to burst through the Wall, like a dam ready to crumble,” Strange added.

“We all know all of this,” Miss Jones said. She looked old and tired suddenly, her voice full of tears as she hugged herself. “What do we do about it?”

“The actual battle is out of our hands, I think,” Occult said, watching as the little disk in his hand spiraled. “The heroes will deal with the villains- as they always do. It’ll be up to us to try and mend the damage to the Wall I think-“

“An’ jus’ how are we supposed t’ do that, mate?” Constantine said, chaining a new cigarette and flicking the spent butt into the void. “The Wall’s leakin’ like a sieve all over creation. We’d need a shitload a’ Dutch boy’s t’ plug this dike.”

“Be that as it may, John Constantine, we must try.” The Phantom Stranger looked at each of the assembled mystics, waiting for support, or at least response. Finally Occult nodded, and Strange gave his blessing. Mysterium frowned but agreed, the woman at his side simply shrugging and looking away with a fresh round of tears swelling in her eyes. All but her then turned to Constantine and Arcane.

The man, John Constantine eyed Arcane with a conceited smirk, raising his eyebrows again as he blew a cloud of smoke into space. He shrugged.

“Fuck it, lads,” he said. “You only live twice, right?”

“Most of us, John Constantine,” the Stranger said with a grim smile, turning finally to Eric. “And you, Doctor Arcane? Do you stand with us in what might well be our final hour?”

Arcane was petrified- scared shitless. This was way beyond anything he had ever encountered. For some reason however, Strange had brought him into the mix. He had faith in a simple Hedge Mage and Arcane wondered why for a heartbeat. Then he simply shrugged-

“What the hell,” he said, his head finally clear since he had entered the Astral Plane. He flicked his spent cigarette away, watching as it spiraled up and up, disappearing into the pink, crackling energy. He turned towards the others.

“I got nothin’ left to live for anyway...”

“Welcome to the club, Arcane...” the Jones woman said, her face stony cold as she stared at him. Eric Arcane shivered wondering just what he had gotten himself into this time...

Titan- Somewhere in the Negative Zone...

Genis-Vell stood at the grave of his father, lost in thought. He had not been back to the world of his birth in some time, too long, and he regretted that. With the recent upheaval in the ranks of the Avengers however it seemed a better time than not to take a short sabbatical and return.

The grave was undisturbed. The flame still burned. The monument was well tended as the people of Titan, those that remained that had not melded with their fellow Eternals or gone off to explore this realm, honored their saviors well. He was glad of that. Glad that someone cared, and remembered...

The feeling came over him suddenly, in a wave. His vision clouded even as his face darkened, becoming one with the cosmos. He staggered as the images poured in, his hands reaching out, settling on the tombstone for support...

There was a Wall composed of giants, gargantuan beings long dead and calcified, blinding light pouring from their wide eyes and gaping mouths. There were cracks in the Wall as it flaked away, dark, crackling energy seeping through. Energy he recognized and knew too well. One of the giants shifted, a stony faced god breaking free-

Marv?

The creatures scurried forth, consuming all in their path. They were horde, countless in number, their black skin-like armor glistening as they scrambled across the galaxy, world to world just ahead of the storm. They devoured all in their path; slaying, ravaging, and multiplying like locusts. A swarm coming ever closer. A wave, unstoppable in their sheer mass. Creatures of Chaos...

Yo, Genis...

He saw Doom, his armor rent and smoldering, the demons of Hell striving forth...

He saw a silver ship with a crystalline skull-like head riding the crest of the storm, tentacles groping beneath...

He saw a boy with an owl running scared as the world swam with pink at his heels...

Marvel!

He saw Galactus amidst the Chaos, laughing in the heart of the storm...

He saw Thanos...

Captain Marvel turned, energy flaring from the Nega-Bands on his wrists as the grim-faced mad Titan smiled down at him. Genis-Vell knew the face well, so similar to the face he had seen on the giant, yet different as well.

Behind Thanos were others that he knew. Pip, the ugly and obnoxious little Troll that was usually fodder for the mad Titan. Gammora the green-skinned assassin, debatably the most dangerous woman alive. Finally, Adam Warlock, the being created by the Hive years before to be Mankind's future, one step below God. Together, they were the Infinity Watch, each possessing the powers of one of the Infinity Gems, those stones that when combined could alter... anything. Just how they had retrieved the Gems or Thanos for that matter was a mystery, even to one with Cosmic Awareness, apparently. The last he had heard, the Mad Titan had been rotting in a cell in another dimension, the prisoner of yet another mad god.

"Greetings, boy," Thanos said, his voice gravelly and cold as a grave. He was still smiling, condescending.

"What do you want, Thanos," Genis snapped, ready to fight, "here of all places? I thought you respected-"

Easy Marv...

Genis heard the familiar voice in his head even as Thanos raised a warning hand, Adam Warlock stepping forward in a swirl of gold and black.

"We are not here to battle, Genis-Vell," the gold-skinned man said, his long cloak swirling about his tall, muscular frame. The Soul Gem affixed to his brow seemed to sparkle and glow as his eyes turned dark and distant just for a moment. "Rather, we are here to warn-"

Don't trust him, Marv. He stabbed your dad in the back. He'll do the same to you to get what he wants.

"Quiet, Rick," Captain Marvel said, the others ignoring his outburst, knowing that Genis-Vell spoke to Rick Jones- his other half trapped in the Zone but with the Eternals elsewhere on Titan. Marvel was not welcome there, with that group, but still he felt the need to visit the grave of his father on the world of his birth. It just seemed right, and he had the ability to do so undetected- at least by the Eternals, apparently.

"Jones speaks wisely, boy," Thanos mocked. "You should listen to him when he does. It happens so rarely."

"Call me 'boy' again and I'll-"

Adam Warlock stepped between Thanos and Captain Marvel, his hands raised to ward or defend, attack if necessary. "We are not here to battle you, Marvel. We are here to help. A crisis stirs even now, its horrors spreading whilst we bicker. The progeny of Chaos draw ever closer and will soon be upon us. Titan I fear will be the first front of the war, though the true battle lay 'pon the Earth."

"I saw this 'progeny'. Ugly critters devouring everything in their path, but if the battle's on Earth, shouldn't we be there?"

"The Avengers are at the forefront of that conflict," Warlock interjected. "I fear their natural distrust of us would simply distract. Better we make our stand here. We may turn the tide."

"I doubt that, Warlock," Thanos said. "But it's out of our hands. Our war is here in the midst of Chaos, in the Negative Zone. Perhaps the Infinity Gems can turn the tide in our favor-"

"Why do I doubt that?" Gammora said, staring daggers at the dark-faced Titan.

Thanos chuckled, "A little faith, child. Have I ever let you down?"

"Hoo boy," Pip the Troll laughed, setting flame to the tip of a good, thick Cuban. "This is gonna be a blast, I can see that."

"More than you know, Pip," Adam Warlock said, his gaze meeting Marvel's for just a moment before turning away towards the distant sound of rolling thunder.

"More than any of us might ever know..."

The Florida Everglades...

The creature stopped, pausing in his aimless wanderings. Huge red eyes stared uncomprehending at the strange pink energies that bubbled from the murky waters, boiling light and smoke.

He heard the screams but did not understand.

Somewhere back in the dim recesses of his mind, Ted Sallis shouted, memories of another time raging. He recalled fire and flame, the bitter stench of burning flesh and chemicals. He remembered endings.

He remembered beginnings as well...

Finally, almost shrugging, uncomprehending, the Man-Thing moved on...

War World...

The terraforming was almost complete. Soon life would sprout from the cold hard surface of the mechanical world that had been created with the sole purpose of destruction in mind. Life from death- it was only fitting.

Ganthet walked the plains, examining the soil, fingering the dirt he had created from the Flame. The Green permeated the earth, rich with life in its basest form and potential. The air was thin he noted with a deep breath, but rich with content on the cusp. All that it would take was a spark. Soon...

"It is remarkable what you've accomplished here. A new beginning, a pity it will come to an end so soon."

Ganthet- last of the Guardians, or the first depending on your point of view- turned and stared at the other old man that stood beside him. The Highfather was looking to the sky again, as he had so often of late, his face grim with melancholy. Shazam the Wizard of course had wandered away.

"Not if I can help it," Ganthet said tossing a handful of soil back to the dirt at his feet. "I've worked too hard to see it all fail now." Highfather, late of New Genesis shrugged.

"We've all worked hard old friend. All for naught it seems at times. The prophecies still come true."

"Bah!" Ganthet spat, walking on. Overhead the thin atmosphere sparked and crackled. A chill wind smelling of ammonia wafted past, ruffling his skirts. "We hold too much with the stale old prophecies, visions of long dead fanatics always spouting doom and gloom. I have faith in my warriors."

“As do I,” Highfather agreed. “But evil stirs and the old threats rise. The Hounds of Chaos are scratching at the door. Your brave new world will be the first line of defense- here at least.”

“We shall endure, my friend. Just as we always have.”

“You have more faith than I, I fear.”

“And therein lies our main difference...”

“Faith.”

Renria in the Shiar Empire...

He had found a dead and lifeless world when he arrived. There was destruction, devastation everywhere. The cities were afire; buildings collapsed and in ruin, the outlying communities devoid of life. It was as though war had instantaneously swept the planet, destroying it in the space of a solar day, a few short hours.

He had heard the cries, the call, his Cosmic Awareness almost overwhelming as though a billion souls were crying out for help at once. He had sped away, Quantum leaping through dimensions as quickly as possible, but it had still taken the better part of a day to reach Renria.

He had been too late.

Bodies littered the streets, clogged the buildings and tunnels, the fields and streams. Half devoured, ravaged and lifeless he found no one spared, not a soul to remember the glory that had been Renria on the fringes of the Shiar Empire. The stench of death and offal clogged his senses, that final act of the body to defend against predators. It had not seemed to matter.

Quasar leaned against a building, vomiting before the carnage turning his stomach. He had never seen such wonton destruction, senseless death with no apparent purpose. It sickened him.

He saw the first creature as his stomach calmed. He simply looked up and it was there, staring, considering him. It was huge and gangly, with black plated skin and long claw-like fingers, a barbed, twitching tail. It had an elongated head with a set of jaws that looked able to bite through adamantium. Its huge dark eyes stared at him quizzically, almost comically.

“Who-“ he rasped, his voice cutting short as he saw the others, all but identical. They were few at first, doubling, trebling as they scrambled into view. Soon they

were dozens, then scores, a horde, a swarm clacking and scrabbling, inching closer.

Quasar swallowed, backing away, taking to the air as they surged forward in mass. Snapping and howling they leaped at him, forcing him higher and still they came, hundreds. Hundreds leaping and clawing, snapping at his heels. He had never seen the like.

HE was there, suddenly. Quasar had been distracted, but still- how could one so huge move so silently. HE stared at the creatures as they swarmed at his feet, his strange dark eyes sparkling, turning towards Quasar. HE was almost smiling.

Strange...

Stranger still was that Galactus had even appeared at all. It was well known fact that Galactus had been defeated by various entities, Infinity and Lord Odin of Asgard not the least. He had been turned and delivered to the Skrulls for 'trial', though there were few that did not know that that meant execution really. Galactus had devoured the Skrull Home World years before, and only he knew how many lesser planets in their empire over the centuries. The Skrulls had demanded retribution, and through a strange twist of fate and divine intervention, were expecting it soon. How Galactus had gained his freedom would remain a mystery however, in the light of crisis.

Quasar stared in awe as Galactus ignored the creatures swarming at his feet, scrambling up his legs. The great force of nature raised his arms, his fingers twitching ever-so slightly as machinery appeared, swirling and forming from the very molecules of the air. A strange apparatus appeared about him, a harness of sorts as an even more magnificent machine began to take shape before him. Quasar licked his lips and soared higher. He had seen this before...

Renria was dead, and Galactus was about to feed on the carcass.

Quasar had no idea what the creatures were that had overrun the planet, nor did he care really. They were scavengers and killers, and now they faced the Devourer of Worlds. Galactus would deal with them by sucking the energies of life from the planet itself. Right or wrong, in the end Renria would be avenged.

But what were those creatures? Where had they come from, and more, where were they going? Were there more?

Quasar paused at the edge of the planet's atmosphere, concentrating, looking outward with all his essence. He called on his Cosmic Awareness...

He saw nothing...

Not that he did not get an image- just that it was an image of emptiness, a void where nothing remained. Anti-Life... negative space... void...

Quasar shuddered. He needed help. This was far too big for him alone, and since Eon was his usual silent self, he was on his own. It was not a hard decision, of course.

Quasar watched as the planet started to quake, its volcanic line the first to suffer the ill-effects of Galactus. Fires spouted across the globe, the clouds darkening quickly as ash and soot filled the air carried on the wind. It would not take long before Renria was just another memory, lost but for the few that recalled, a notation in some Shiar log.

The Avenger called Quasar watched a moment longer, then called upon the power of the Starbrand engraved in his skin. He felt the surge of Quantum energy, so similar to his own as space folded at his whim. It would take time, but he would be home soon.

Back on Earth, amongst friends...

New Genesis...

Orion stared at the words emblazoned on the slick white wall. Pulsing in flame they had appeared almost a full day before, the great hand remaining motionless since though not disappearing as was normal. Occasionally it tapped, waiting...

"What do you suppose it means?" Lightray asked again for the umpteenth time. Orion sighed.

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it's a joke," Barda offered, shifting her stance, her hands in the pockets of her shining Dockers.

"The Source does not joke," Orion grumbled, wishing that it did. He glanced at Scott Free, but the Master of Escapes and ruler of New Genesis simply shrugged.

"Don't look at me. I haven't a clue."

Orion sighed again, returning his attention to the slab where the Source made contact with the children of New Genesis. Usually the great hand only appeared to give warning of dire events, some shattering, imminent catastrophe or prophecy. It spoke in riddles too, but nothing that the High Father Izaya could not decipher, or Metron at least. High Father was dead however- moved on, and

Metron had not been seen in days. It was up to Orion, get of Darkseid and ruler of Apokolips to interpret and guide.

He sighed again...

"Prepare the ranks for war," he said turning to the others; Lightray, Mister Miracle and Big Barda, Fastback and the Bug. They stared in anticipation, Barda turning her shock rod in her hands with a slim smile, Lightray frowning at the news.

"You're certain?"

"No," Orion said, glancing at the Source Wall once again hoping that it had changed. "No, but better prepared than not. Go! Spread the word."

They filtered out, one by one, his friends- such as he had. Lightray was the last, turning back.

"It can't be your father. He's done. Dead."

"Is he? Prophecy says otherwise. Whatever, New Genesis will meet this threat with passion and pride. New Genesis will not fall..."

Lightray shrugged. "I hope not..." and he was gone...

Orion turned back to the Source again. The finger twitched but wrote no more, seemingly pointing at the last words inscribed...

FOR YOU...

What in the name of the Fire Pits did that mean?

Manhattan...

Peter Parker woke, his head pounding, buzzing...

His Spider-Sense was going wild! Danger was imminent! But what- where?

He leaped out of his bed, springing to the ceiling and concentrating, trying to focus. The buzz was devastating, overwhelming. Something huge was coming, but what? Peter

Head pounding he winced, gritting his teeth as he turned towards the bed. It was empty of course, but he had thought... He had heard...

"Arrgh!"

Peter Parker dropped to the floor of his apartment, fell to his knees in agony as his head threatened to explode. There had been a faint buzzing from his Spider Sense for days now, ever since the storms and the rats that had swarmed through the streets. He had never really learned what had happened that day, but he had felt the unease ever since, and now...

Now he was apparently going crazy. He would have sworn that he had heard her, Mary Jane calling to him. She was dead though. He knew that. Dead and gone for some time...

And he was going insane with the loss and the constant nagging in the back of his brain, like a toothache causing just enough pain to distract and occasionally overwhelm. There was no dentist to help him though.

Richards had his own worries and problems and was apparently dealing with some Avengers situation at the old Baxter Building site. Parker had gone to see Strange, but his manservant, Wong, had simply said that 'the doctor is unavailable'. That could mean anything from meditation to off in some dark dimension battling some butt ugly thing that no one else even knew existed. And it was the same all over. There was nowhere to turn. There was no one to help.

But of course, that's the way it usually went in the life of 'your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man'.

Parker sighed as the buzzing and pounding slowly began to recede again. He knew that it would not last long, but hopefully it would be long enough this time. Long enough for him to find out what was happening.

He got up off of the floor, slowly, standing on shaking legs and taking a long look at the empty bed before finally pulling on his costume. He had to get out. He had to get away, and there was only one real way for him to do that, he knew.

Within moments a thin strand of webbing shot through the open window of Parker's apartment, followed by a familiar form. A lithe figure clad in red and blue swung up and away, swiftly disappearing into the stone canyons of Manhattan...

Manhattan...

Raven gasped, feeling the shift of emotion. People were dying by the thousands somewhere, by the hundreds of thousands. She could hear their screams of agony in her mind. She could feel the death and devastation. She could sense the hopelessness...

It was not Trigon...

“Wallace...”

“Raven?”

Raven turned, blinking to see Koriand'r standing before her, a look of concern and compassion on her face, twisting her brow with worry. “What’s wrong?” Starfire asked, stepping closer, sitting too close. Raven licked her lips.

“I- I don’t...” She took a breath, long and deep, exhaling slowly. “I sensed Wallace- Flash- in pain, confused, reaching out-“

“But why, after all this time?” Starfire crossed her arms over her breasts, shivering as she looked to the ceiling, seeing beyond? “He’s with the League now. He’s left us behind, again. Why would he contact you?”

“I don’t know,” Raven said, her gaze following Koriand'r’s, staring at the tiled ceiling. There was nothing there. “I don’t know...”

Kori placed her arm about Raven’s shoulders, the other woman tensing even after all the years. She was still tentative, aloof. She had to be.

“Wallace...”

A chill wind blew through Titan’s Tower...

And across the world...

To be continued...

Next Issue: The battle resumes as the JLA Avengers take on Annihilus as you’ve never seen him before. And just what does Doctor Midas have to say about all this. Be back soon at JLU: 2001 for the next chapter...

Story © Curt F and Chris Munn 2005
Editing © Curt F and Chris Munn 2005
Plot © Curt F and Chris Munn 2005



Avengers Vs JLA #4

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Talia folded her arms over her breasts hugging herself. She shivered despite her best efforts, not from the cold but from the feeling of impending...

Glory!

She stared through the thick safety glass watching the flurry of activity beyond. Her father's best scientists and technicians were working feverishly, at his whim of course, to adapt the standing machinery of the Babel Towers to accommodate their 'gift' from the heavens. It was cold in the anti-chamber where she stood of course; the sciences demanded it be, the better to enhance the electricity needed and to stay the faults of some of the technology. Still, dressed in her uniform and vest, the cold was not a problem that she could not endure.

It was far worse for those in the sealed lab beyond. The machinery within required almost sub-zero temperatures for efficiency, but Lund had insisted that his crew be braced for radiations, and the full, bulky yellow suits did little to fend against the cold. They were designed to ward against those rampant energies that Lund expected to encounter as well as common static and the detrimental effects of the Towers' original purposes. Her father had agreed of course, bowing as he rarely did to Lund's expertise and advice.

She watched as they scurried about, ignoring their frantic worries knowing full well the price of failure. They were far too close to achieving her father's goals for him to show lenience for stupidity or clumsiness. There was much to do, converting the Towers feed to accept the queer energies they would soon experience, and little time to do it, if the skies were any sign.

Talia vaguely remembered the Red Skies and the storms, the roiling, churning pink clouds and the black bolts of lightning. Her father had told her of the Crisis, what it was and why but it was all a blur, beyond her. She knew of the war against the Anti-Monitor. She remembered Pariah and the woman Harbinger.

She remembered the brief time on the Monitor's ship, but then the memories blurred afterwards. There was a great battle, a war against the Anti-Monitor and his shadow beings, and many had died- heroes and villains alike; the Titans Kole and Dove, the Flash...

She remembered the feeling of anticipation throughout, and now with the 'rips' in the sky vomiting the pink energies again, with the black rains that were spreading across the face of the planet, she felt that feeling once more. And it scared her.

Talia licked her lips, watching as the technicians went about their business beyond the safety glass. She stared at the still form, the center of their activity, glad that her father had delayed her departure to Manhattan. The 'rip' in the sky here above the Himalayas was apparently more curious than any, or so it appeared. More advantageous at any rate, at least at the moment.

It had of course given them the silver man...

He was beautiful even in repose with his perfect body cast in a silver sheen. He was an angel, perfect physically in every respect that she could see. Obviously a man, but so much more. She bit down on her lower lip, remembering how her breath had escaped her when they had brought him down from the mountain; Lund and his men. He had fallen almost literally into their laps, his shining body charred and smoldering. He had been awake, barely, addled and dazed surely but his eyes were clear and searching, almost curious. He had not spoken, even strapped to the secure conveyance, Lund and his technicians as well as her father's followers surrounding him. Their eyes had met.

Only once before had she experienced such emotion, such passion in meeting anyone. That had been the day she had first encountered her 'beloved'; the Detective, the Batman. He had traveled the world that day, following the manipulations laid down by her father, an effort to save his ward and partner, and she as well. It had all been a lie of course, but the Batman had followed the course until the end and she had professed her love for him upon salvation-

Like a child...

Still, her passion was love. She knew that, her devotion to the Detective knowing no bounds, even to the point of defying her father's will time and again. But she had felt that passion stir once again as she stared into the piercing eyes of the silver man in passing, when their gazes met for one brief moment. She had felt her heart skip, her breath rushing out. Her legs had grown weak as her body seemed to shiver. It had been...

What?

"He is beautiful."

Talia gasped at the sound, the cold voice from behind. Was she so lost that her skills had failed? Someone had strolled discreetly behind her as she gazed longingly, close enough to touch or kill. Luckily she recognized the voice and turned slowly, with respect-

“Father?” she asked, tilting her head ever so slightly in reverence, showing her father and lord the honor that he deserved.

Ra’s al Ghul let a smile curl the edge of his lips as he gazed at her, his cool eyes probing before shifting his attention to the activity in the room beyond. He stepped past her, and Talia turned to follow, both before the viewing window close enough for the breath to fog the cool glass.

“Our guest,” he said, his gaze sweeping the lab beyond, watching intently the activity. Talia could see that preparations were almost complete. The silver man had been locked away in a clear tube no doubt constructed of Plas-steel at least. The tube in turn was connected to the machinery lining the perimeter of the lab, the man himself laden with monitoring devices; probes and catheters, simple adhesive leads. She could see that his vital functions- such as they were- were being carefully monitored. She saw too the screens that analyzed and controlled to some extent his energy output, and the readings were bordering the machine’s ability to monitor. Too there were scales that she did not recognize, waves of mysterious energies that she had never seen before-

“He is beautiful,” her father continued, “perfect almost. Is he some future step in Evolution we might all look forward to one day, or perhaps something more? Is he a strange visitor from beyond, not unlike the Kryptonian and the Martian? I think perhaps the latter.” Ra’s al Ghul glanced at her from the corner of his eye, no doubt looking for reaction. She tried to remain calm, passive.

“His unique body and physiology are similar to base human, and he is obviously a Meta, but there is so much more. There are differences of course; minor things, but his body exudes an energy that is as yet undiscovered. The closest resemblance is in the data you recently retrieved from the Watchtower and the Detective’s files concerning Captain Atom. There is a power within the silver man that boggles definition.”

“Then how-“

“How can I possibly use him thus? He is fodder, daughter.” Talia heard the sudden chill in her father’s voice and looked again to the silver man. He was still awake, conscious, but he seemed complacent and oblivious as to what was happening to him, or would be all too soon. “He is not of Earth. He is an alien, thus an aberration, an abomination like the Kryptonian and the Martian again.

He was sent unto us at the most opportune time, his purpose intertwined with our own destiny. He is here for us, a sign. An omen..."

Talia shivered to hear her father speak so. She believed in his dreams of course, his goals, but to hear him? She looked again to the lab and saw Lund directing his people out, the scientist himself completing the final preparations. Lund turned in his bulky, radiation suit, waved. Her father touched a stud on the control panel at the base of the viewing window and she heard the staticky hiss of air-

"Proceed!" Ra's al Ghul commanded and she saw Lund nod. Quickly the scientist ran from the room, already the glow of energy conversion radiating from and about the silver man's confinement. He was strapped down, but she saw his neck crane against his bonds, his head turning until his gaze met her own once again.

The silver man screamed...

There was a bright blinding flare of light forcing Talia to turn away and shield her eyes with a hiss. She heard her father as well doing the same. It was an explosion of energy as she had never experienced as the technology of the Babel Towers situated about the globe tapped into the unknown powers of their 'guest'. Her father's plan was to use the energies of the silver man to contain and control the negative power seeping from the rifts; the Crisis energies as she had come to know them. He wanted to use those negative powers to cull the masses as he so often did, the Tower's strange mechanics seeking out those worthy of surviving in his opinion, those that could withstand the original purpose of disabling some of the base human lesser functions; the ability to speak and understand language, in layman's terms. Those same functions, or lack thereof, would segregate those amongst Humanity worthy to survive in the brave new world that her father envisioned. The silver man's strange energies he hoped would allow his discretion in picking and choosing within mankind's best, wiping away the chattel and leaving a stronger unified culture behind. A world and people that Ra's al Ghul might direct towards a golden age.

Talia blinked, willing the dancing, flowing spots from her eyes. The visage of the silver man was etched into her sight, black face and jet eyes imploring, pleading for release. A negative image drifting through her vision that she would carry to her grave. She heard her father laugh-

"It's working," he said, gloating. She saw Lund's blurry image beyond, directing in the Control Room. The silver man writhed, his body arching as electricity ran rampant over his form, sparking and singing. She felt her hairs stand on end, a sheen of cold perspiration on her arms, trickling down her back. Her heart was hammering, pulse racing-

“Father...”

“Shhh...”

Talia went silent at her father’s command, staring at the silver man, the man trapped beyond lost in the glare of power.

“Tomorrow is ours, daughter,” he said smiling. “It’s over at last...”

The Mighty Avengers VS the JLA

Part Nine

DREAMS of GRANDEUR!

The Base of the Keystone Building, Manhattan:

“Holy crap...”

Clint Barton stared up at the receding form, and despite his years as a hero, and all the things he had seen since he first became an Avenger so long ago, he still struggled to suppress the shiver that raced along his spine. He licked his lips, flexing his arm as sweaty fingers loosely gripped the arrow that he had notched, one of the few he had swiftly gathered up after his fight with the blonde. He bit his lip, watching the huge green bat-like wings swell and fold, the purple armor glistening in the crackling energy that spewed from the Negative Rod affixed to the creature’s neck. He had fought the monster once, but he- IT had never seemed so merciless, so... horrible.

He had almost seemed a joke then, that other time; he and Blastaar both. But of course Hawkeye had been surrounded by the Avengers then, along with the Thing and a few others, and against those odds anyone might seem a joke. Annihilus... Blastaar...

But of course Thor said that Blastaar was dead now.

Hawkeye licked his lips again, his mind taking swift inventory of the number of arrows that he had left, what type of special heads still unused in his bandoleers and more importantly, which might work against... that.

“Easy, Hawk...”

Hawkeye felt the hand fall to his shoulder more than heard the words, and just like that the indecision, the wave of terror passed. Hawkeye glanced to the side and saw him standing there, just as he always had and, God help them all, he always would be.

If Captain America was afraid he did not show it. Armed only with the familiar shield of red, white and blue shifting on his arm, little better than the best a man could hope to be he stepped right to the front of the crowd of gathered heroes, and stared up at death on the wing, unflinching. And the others- even the aliens- seemed to draw strength from his very presence.

Like old times he saw the Scarlet Witch just beyond, beautiful still in her gypsy attire, her long red cloak flapping in the cool breeze. She supported her brother, the mutant speedster Quicksilver, exhausted and barely able to stand but ready to fight none the less. It seemed ages since the four of them *were* the Avengers, and so much had changed since those simpler times. It seemed like decades.

And there was Thor. Almost the rock that Captain America was to the group, the Thunder God stood there seething, his muscles still tensed with rage from the battle that had just come to an abrupt halt with the appearance of a far greater threat than the Squadron Supreme wannabes. He gripped his magical hammer tightly, and Hawkeye could see the Asgardian’s fist twisting and grinding on the shaft of the Uru mallet with impatience. His face shifted from anger to confident expectation as he awaited the chance to strike, the call to battle.

“Give the word, Captain,” Thor said grimly, and even Hawkeye could hear his booming voice barely held in check above the approaching storm. “Sound the call- “

“Wait!”

Hawkeye turned as the others did, looking back at the alien dressed in the blue with the big red and gold ‘S’ shield on his wide chest. He was the leader of the Justice League- as they called themselves. A pretentious name for so-called heroes that killed children. Hawkeye frowned though, glancing at the kid in the green and black armor and the funky ring still lying off to the side, unmoving. If he had killed a kid, he would regret it- when he woke up. Thor had seen to that.

But... there had been times when Avengers had killed too. How many had Cap killed in the war, and there was that Flag-Smasher agent a few years back. And

what about Hercules and Thor? They lived by their own set of rules. Then there was Hank and...

And Bobbi...

Hell, he had killed EggHead himself. It had been an accident of course, but...

Hawkeye frowned. There were always extenuating circumstances it seemed. Maybe the green kid- Green Lantern- was that his name? Maybe it had been an accident too.

Hawkeye cursed under his breath, glancing first back to the big blue alien, then to Annihilus still spiraling overhead, but picking up speed. They didn't have much time. He wished he could hear better what was happening...

Superman strode forward, glancing at his friends and comrades as he approached the star-spangled man with the shield who appeared to be the leader of the group- the Avengers- who had attacked them. He saw the man shift ever so slightly, his stance changing, edging into defense as he adjusted his shield. He moved like Bruce in a way, always at the ready, prepared for anything, though apparently unlike the Batman, this- Captain America chose the spotlight.

Batman was hanging back for his part, sticking to the shadows on the fringes. He had held Superman back when the creature had first come through the rip carrying the girl. First instinct was to fly up, save the hostage and ask questions later, but of course Bruce had other ideas. It was always odd that the quietest among them was most usually the voice of reason. Superman knew that his friend was scanning the other group and biding time for the others to recover, as well as watching the threat that continued to swoop and soar overhead. One less thing for the Man of Steel to worry about then. Wasn't there enough?

Quickly he scanned the battlefield. No one- on either side was hurt too badly, save Green Lantern. He could hear Kyle breathing, his heartbeat strong despite the beating he had taken at the hands of the huge blonde man with the hammer. Clark could not understand the man's rage at first, his fury as he laid into Kyle, but little by little the pieces fell into place. How these people- heroes or not- had heard about the accident with the little girl on that other Earth did not matter anymore. Superman wondered just how he might have reacted had the situation been reversed, but that did not matter either. Luckily Zatanna and the Avengers' own resident magician had done something to ease the rage that had gripped them all over that catastrophe. Poor Kyle had paid the price however for that, and if Superman did not get some answers and make some kind of peace- and soon- they might all pay the price in full when that creature overhead finally decided to attack.

They were all tired of course, and hurt. It had been a long journey from the far end of Time itself and their long battle to stop the Time Trapper's mad schemes, and none of them were one hundred percent. He still ached himself from his battle with the being called Hyperion not so long ago, and the damage they had taken in their confrontation with these Avengers had not helped. Half the team was hurt or unconscious, and of their ten there were now only five standing at the moment.

Batman seemed none the worse for wear, as did Zatanna. The Flash however seemed as exhausted as his other-world counterpart in blue. Superman could not imagine how Wally West's speed had been affected by the rips in Time and Space, or how- even if he was still somehow linked with the Speed Force on this strangely similar yet vastly different world. Wally was a hero though, proven time and again, and though he appeared exhausted to those who knew him best, he put up a brave front. Barry would be proud.

The biggest problem however, was J'onn. The Martian Manhunter was up, but he was staggered, and try as he might Superman could not hear the Martian's voice in his head. The Avengers had somehow stymied his telepathic powers and left J'onn J'onzz staggered and weak with an effective assault that had driven him from his intangible form. He was on his feet- barely- but Superman knew that he would be little help if the battle resumed.

He had to end this.

"Wait!"

He saw the Avengers tense, suddenly ready to attack again as he approached Captain America- or defend? They were like a well-oiled machine despite their own losses, maybe better than the League in that they did not have a Martian telepath guiding them in battle. He eased his hands up, trying to ward them off as he stopped short, trying to show that he did not mean to fight again.

"I want-" he began, but the big man with the hammer was suddenly before him, blocking his path.

"Back, cur! Thy 'wants' be not our concern, and thy treachery shall not be tolerated. The Son of Odin shall-"

"Stand down, Thor."

There was a long, thick heartbeat of tension as Captain America stepped beside Thor. Superman saw the shield-bearer simply place a hand on the other's arm, and though the 'Son of Odin' shot the much smaller man a look that might have killed for a fleeting moment, the alleged god stood back. The Man of Steel let out

a slow breath, realizing that his own fists were clenched and ready to defend. Just what kind of respect did this man garner?

"I hope we've come to the same conclusion- Superman, was it?" Captain America asked, his voice calm and sure. Clark could hear the man's heartbeat, steady and strong. The Man of Steel nodded.

"Captain America- yes, I think so." Superman glanced upwards and saw that the creature was still stretching his wings, but spiraling downward as though inspecting a new territory for prey. "Whatever our misunderstanding, that," he said pointing skyward, "is the true threat." Captain America nodded with a frown.

"Just what is that thing?" the Flash asked with impatience, suddenly beside them. Superman saw Captain America shift again, his shield moving to block the potential opponent that had simply appeared, though he was too slow. Wally would have gotten the first blow in with time to spare. Clark however saw a quick grin as Captain America's gaze flitted over the red-garbed speedster, sizing him up.

"*That* is Annihilus. He's the self-proclaimed ruler of the Negative Zone- that anti-matter universe there on the other side of the Rift that you all came through before. He is also one of the vilest, merciless killers that we've ever encountered, bent on nothing but destruction and conquest for his own personal lust."

"And you let something like that exist?" Zatanna asked as she moved closer. Her face was pale and aghast as she stared up at the creature.

"The Avengers do not kill, miss," Captain America said coolly, staring at Superman. The Kryptonian simply stared back, his icy gaze narrowing, but before he could speak-

"We don't kill either, Captain," the Batman said still keeping a distance aside from the group. "Despite what you may believe- or were told- Green Lantern murdered no one. There was an accident- and we would have helped, even prevented it had we been allowed, but other 'forces' saw fit to intercede. Regardless, if that 'Annihilus' is as ruthless as you seem to fear, we would have dealt with him long ago."

"Sayest thou that the Avengers do not handle their own?" Thor snarled, turning on the Batman. For his part however, the Dark Knight did not even flinch as the Thunder God stepped up again. "Know thee, rodent, that better than thy lot have fought the Annihilator and beaten him back time and again. It is not our way to-

"Stand- Down!"

Captain America put his hand to Thor's chest stepping between the Thunder God and the Batman. His face brooked no argument as he stared down the bigger man, and Thor finally eased off again, though he was less than pleased.

"We do not have time for this," Cap said, turning to the Dark Knight this time, and Superman saw his friend scowl- just a slight twitch of his lips, but nod as well. Captain America turned back to Superman then, his gaze sweeping the battlefield there at the base of the Keystone Building.

"Both of our teams are hurt and tired. We could use your help- if you're willing. If not, then stay out of our way."

"We'll help," Superman said without hesitation, trying to match the timbre in the other man's voice. "If that creature is the threat you say, then he has to be stopped. And if he is indeed the ruler of that void we passed through, then I imagine he holds the key to our getting back-"

"Uh... guys?"

All eyes turned to Hawkeye then. He wore an anxious look, if not a bit confused, and Cap recalled that he had probably not heard a word that had passed among them- as he was all but deaf. He was about to tell Wanda- the Scarlet Witch to relay, but Hawkeye nodded skyward.

"Tea time's over, guys and gals. Here come 'da Judge..."

Annihilus laughed...

It was a cold, horrid thing, the hideous cackling of a monster, but with the overlaying dread of intelligence gone mad. Worse, it was the maddening laugh of a being whose dreams had finally been realized. A being that held no pity or remorse, that lived simply to kill and to conquer. You could hear it, like the sound of glaciers cracking, worlds starting to crumble and shatter.

Energy sparked and crackled as he swept from the Rift, the forces of the Negative Zone swirling about him in great roiling clouds spitting lightning in his wake that cut through the darkened sky like a jagged, broken shard of glass. Thunder rolled with his passing, as his mighty wings beat a staccato rhythm of triumph, riding the booming chorus singing his glories and praises as he soared to even greater heights. The sparkling lights of the city stretched out through the darkness beneath him as a chill wind caressed his shell-like skin. Even here so far above the insects and chattel, the denizens that scurried for shelter far below, he could hear their screams of terror.

It had been so long.

So long since he had last passed the threshold from his own conquered, dying universe of desolation and despair and sailed into the virgin skies of this bold new realm that had ever been just out of his grasp. Forever, ever so slightly out of reach. Oh he had penetrated the barriers before. He had passed the dreaded Zone of Distortion over and over, but his every attempt to gain purchase in this other world- this Earth- had ever been thwarted by Richards and his get. Too many times the Earthman had found some trick or treachery to throw Annihilus back through the portal and into the Zone once again, defeated and screaming his indignities. Oh, there had been others; the other gaudily clad Earthers, the heroes of their world, but in the end Annihilus knew that they all answered to Reed Richards, the self-proclaimed Mister Fantastic. It was he after all that had first breached the barrier years before. It had been he and his companions; the fiery boy and the bestial Thing that had first threatened his rule and dominion. It had been they that had braved the Zone with the very audacity to actually steal that, which made Annihilus both Lord and Devil of his own Hell.

Annihilus chuckled, swooping about, his great wings flaring wide as he shifted the struggling, shrieking burden he carried in order to finger that very device at his throat. The Cosmic Control Rod was seething with power, literally spewing the energies that it was absorbing from the very heart of the Negative Zone. It crackled with a brilliant radiance, a fitting display to the glories of the Devil come to Earth. So much power, almost too much for even the Annihilator of Worlds to absorb and contain. Almost-

He did not know why the power had suddenly come to him in boundless exuberance. He did not know why the skies of the Negative Zone had suddenly ripped asunder, nor why the two Earthers had entered his realm before- apparently seeking him out. He did not know why those others had appeared, trespassing in his realm, passing through and showing him the way. Nor did he care.

He did not care as he sailed higher, up to where the very air was frigid, almost non-existent. He did not care as he dropped, the icy racing wind waking the girl in his arms again, kicking and screaming. He did not care as he saw the fools- Richards' followers gathering below, marshalling their forces, rising swiftly to meet him head on. He knew... Knew that he would slay them all. He was the Devil...

He was the Annihilator!

He knew his time had come at last!

The Roof of the Keystone Building, Manhattan:

Doctor Midas stared up into the flashing storm. His eyes were wide behind the slits of the golden helmet he wore, though anyone close enough to see would not have seen fear, but wonder.

He watched the roiling skies, the furious clouds of pink and red flashing as great arcs of lightning blasted from the Negative Zone Portal, lighting the night. So close to the tear in the very fabric of space, the booming thunder seemed endless and rattled and shook the building on which he stood. The wind whipped and clawed at his cape, swirling the pale blue smoke from his cigarette back into his face. He did not care, simply chaining a new one to life and flicking the spent butt into the wind.

“It... it’s awesome...”

Midas grimaced, turning slightly to see the cowering figure of his scientist- Janus pressed back into the shallow of the elevator’s car. It seemed the best place to stand in the fury of the storm, secure and unobserved as he watched his plans come to fruition. Not quite the way he had planned of course, but beggars could not be choosers. He had allowed Gideon to join him there- the man after all had seen the way to make all this possible, but his incessant talking and cringing was distracting in Midas’ moment of glory.

It had been Janus that had compensated for the inept bumbling of the project’s original director- Harris was it? The young scientist had devised a way for the unique energies of Count Nefaria to survive and capitalize on the dangers within the Negative Zone, the better to find Annihilus and procure the legendary Negative Rod- the Cosmic Control Rod from that freak of nature. Young Janus was even apparently the nephew of Reed Richards’ old colleague, and the original Janus at one time had breached the Zone. And gone mad of course, as so many scientists did in the end. The nephew however had insight, and an untapped brilliance that Midas had put to proper use, thus he was allowed to witness the culmination of their efforts first hand, right at his side. He just would not shut up.

“The negative energies are... astounding!” he shouted over the thunder. He was trembling, but whether from the booming thunder or the chill or his own fear, Midas did not know. Nor did he care for that matter as he swept his gaze higher once more, trying to spot the Devil once again.

Annihilus had come sweeping out of the portal, shrieking and cackling with his own unique madness, and that was probably the only reason that Midas had even seen him. That, and of course the sudden flood of energy that had preceded him and followed him through. Midas had been so absorbed in

watching the Avengers get their collective asses kicked by these new aliens that he had lost track of his true goal for a moment. It had been glorious. Better than the Super Bowl!

“God! Did you see that?”

Midas sighed, looking up and waiting as the helmet’s internal sensors shifted to a light sensitive screen that would allow him the best view as well as shield his sight from the near-blinding display. Finally he focused on Annihilus, watching as the freak circled, riding the winds of the storm. Energy blazed from the rod at his throat- so near. The internal monitors were off the scale, and Midas grew hard just thinking of the power almost within his grasp.

Of course too, there was Oubliette to consider.

Midas saw his daughter- the beautiful and deadly Exterminatrix struggling in the creature’s clutches. It was like a scene from one of the old Hammer Horror films, the poor, beautiful damsel in distress being taken by the monster with some sinister yet misunderstood purpose in mind. Reverse that...

Still, his luscious daughter had known the risks when she had ‘volunteered’ to pilot the acquired Star Core Shuttle into the Zone. Hell, she relished the risks and sought them out with a lust that rivaled his own quest for the Power Cosmic- or any omnipotent power for that matter. He was not picky. She had known what she was getting into, and what might happen. She had not cared, and Midas just had to smile at that. He had raised his daughter well.

It would be a pity if she died, but casualties of war and all that. Just like Nefaria, apparently. There was no sign of the good Count. Not a clue as to whether he had even encountered the Annihilator, or survived if he had. Annihilus seemed none the worse for wear. The shuttle was gone too, which was annoying. He could write that off at the end of the year he supposed, but a lot of time and effort had gone into salvaging the thing out of Jamaica Bay and refitting it for the rigors of the Zone-

“Incredible...”

Doctor Midas sighed and plucked the cigarette from the slit in his helmet, considering it. It had gone out in the wind so he flicked it away, wishing that he had brought a cigar. He turned to Janus and sniffed-

“Janus,” he said, waiting for the man to turn his wide eyes and offer his full attention.

“Y- yes...” Janus finally said with a swallow.

“If you do not shut up, I shall surely snap your neck.” Midas grinned to see the man’s eyes grow even wider, bulging as though about to explode. He looked almost like a cartoon character there for a moment. Still, he got the message, and just in time too.

Midas turned and stepped back into the shadows of the elevator, watching as Thor and the alien in the red cape came flying up beyond the edge of the building and into the line of sight. Glancing up he saw that Annihilus was finally coming down as well, the histrionics apparently at an end.

The offal was about to hit the oscillator, and Doctor Midas would be there to pick up the pieces...

Captain America had taken charge, directing his people and not even questioning that the League would follow his orders as well. They would of course, at least to a point. The Avengers knew this Annihilus, and it was their world being threatened after all. The Justice League would defer to that, at least for the time being.

Still, Superman had to question the man’s tactics, if in his head if not out loud. Captain America had told Thor and Superman to take the point, the initial assault, which made sense. Of those able to fight Superman had to acknowledge that he and the... god, were probably the strongest without J’onn in the mix. They were the only two flyers also, at least until some of the others came around. They were the only ones that could take the fight to the creature.

Superman had no problem with that. His worries lay with the woman that Annihilus still carried- his hostage. He had scanned the girl with his Telescopic Vision, describing her, and the Avengers seemed to recognize who she was. Oubliette- the Exterminatrix- daughter of a villain called Doctor Midas who had apparently set these events in motion somehow, according to the Captain. Of course, whether the girl was the daughter of a villain, or one herself did not matter. At the moment she was in danger, and he would see to it that no harm- no further harm came to her at the hands of the creature.

Inadvertently, watching as Annihilus came closer his thoughts drifted back to Lois. It was a scene that had replayed itself too many times throughout his life over the years, and the woman in the clutches of the creature reminded him of his own wife. The Man of Tomorrow grimaced as he wondered where she was now; she and his parents as well as the missing members of the Justice League. Aquaman, Atom and the Red Tornado had been separated from the rest when the Flash’s Cosmic Treadmill had been destroyed in the storms that had first thrown them to the Squadron Supreme’s world. The Leaguers could take care of themselves, but his parents... and Lois...

Where were they? Were they even-

“Thy mind strays from the battle, alien!” Thor shouted over the booming thunder. He was right, but Superman did not need this blowhard pointing that out to him. “Turn thy attention to the task at hand or begone! The Mighty Thor does not require thine assistance regardless!”

“You just do your job, Thor,” Superman shouted back, trying to keep his anger in check. “I’ll do mine!”

If the Asgardian had more to say it was lost as a blast of searing anti-matter flashed between the two. Unprepared... Distracted, the Man of Steel screamed to feel the burn. It was not magic, not Kryptonite, but he could feel the similar radiations scorching through his very being. Too, there was a physical force involved that bowled him over and blew him back, forcing him to concentrate just to stay in flight.

Thor fared no better as the blast sent him sprawling and tumbling away. He was falling Superman saw, the energies- if not hurting him at least throwing his attention enough that he stopped whirling the hammer that seemed to hold him aloft. The Man of Steel winced as the Avenger smashed in and through the wall of the closest building, hoping to God that it had been evacuated.

Quickly he scanned the rubble, watching as those on the ground scattered before the falling debris. The building seemed empty but for a few straggling civilians and luckily none of them were near Thor’s forced point of entry. He saw the Thunder God as well pushing out of the rubble two floors below, shaking his head as he struggled to rise. He was shaken and smoldering, but apparently unhurt for the most part. Good.

Superman barely turned in time, barely discerned the changing rush of wind amidst the deafening roar of the storm. He saw a flash of violet as the creature streaked past, clenching his teeth at the sudden pain of the monster’s claws as they raked across his back. He whirled about, following the alien as he laughed, keeping him in sight as he swooped and soared higher again. Superman’s eyes flared red as he grimaced, feeling the dampness on his back.

He saw the girl though, still in Annihilus’ arms. Her eyes were wide with... terror? It almost seemed as though she were enjoying this somehow. Ridiculous, but...

Superman let the fire die in his eyes. He could not take the chance that Oubliette might be hurt by his Heat Vision. He would have to meet the Devil head on and get the girl out of harm’s way before he could unleash his full power. And without a thought to his own safety, he flew higher...

“Superman’s back in the game,” Captain America said as he stared up into the storm of energy. It seemed to be growing in fury, and flared when Annihilus had first attacked. He had seen it. Was there something in that? “I don’t see Thor yet though. Pietro?”

As if by magic the Mutant Speedster appeared at Captain America’s side in a swirl of pale blue. He was breathing hard Cap noted, favoring his right leg but still at it. “Any sign of Woo and Richards?” Cap asked, and Quicksilver shook his head.

“I searched as quickly as I could, as many buildings as I could while helping the civilians still in the area get to safety. I didn’t see Woo or Mister Fantastic though.”

Captain America frowned. James Woo, Agent of SHIELD had gotten the injured leader of the Fantastic Four to safety when the battle with the Justice League had begun. Reed Richards had been the victim of a stroke some weeks before, and in trying to use his powers against the Crime Syndicate had had a relapse of sorts. Annihilus was a regular foe of the Fantastic Four though, more so than the Avengers and Cap was not too proud that he could use Mister Fantastic’s insight.

“Nothing for it at the moment then. Get up there and see if Thor’s all right. Help however you can. Superman will have to hold his own for the moment.” Cap barely saw his fellow Avenger nod before he sped away again, dust and paper flying up in his wake.

“Superman can take care of himself, Captain.” Cap turned at the cold voice of the Batman. He had not even heard the man’s approach, and got a better understanding then of how he had beaten the Black Panther. “I can’t speak for your ‘Thunder God’, but it’ll take more than that to stop the Man of Steel.”

“You’ll find Thor’s no light weight himself, Batman,” Cap snapped back instantly regretting it. He sighed, “And he’s no slacker. If he’s able, he’ll fight to the last. Can we stop this now?”

Batman stared silently, his face grim until he finally sighed himself. “You’re right. We’re all tired and on edge, but we need to focus. Flash...”

As Quicksilver had just seconds before, the Scarlet Speedster known as the Flash suddenly appeared at the Batman’s side. He looked as exhausted as Pietro had, breathing hard and sweating.

“Any luck, Wally-“ Batman grimaced, more tired than he cared to admit letting the Flash’s true identity escape- not that it mattered here, a universe away from home. “The Speed Force-“

“Sorry, Bats,” Wally West said trying to grin between breaths as he heaved in oxygen. “Maybe it’s the trouble with time, or that storm? Maybe there just is no Speed Force here, I dunno. I can’t siphon speed here though- I’ve been trying while clearing the crowds like the Captain here told me and tinsel top to do. There’s nothing there, and it’s effecting me too. I’m beat. It’s like running through water- like I was normal, y’know. I’m still fast, but slow...”

“You should rest, son,” Cap said and saw the red-clad hero snap almost to attention.

“I’m fine, man. What do you need me to do?” That last was directed at the Batman, and Cap deferred to the other man for the moment, turning his attention towards Wanda and the other woman- Zatanna.

The two women were seeing to the injured, trying to rouse the unconscious members of both groups. They could use the help, the additional fire power, though Cap could not count on it.

“Get up to the roof, Flash, and do what you can,” the Batman was saying. “Keep trying to siphon Annihilus’ speed, but if that fails then see if maybe you can use the storm to our advantage. Disrupt his flight, or-“

“On it!” the Flash said, vanishing in a blur of scarlet trailing lightning. Cap smiled as Batman turned towards him.

“He seems a good kid,” Cap said, and Batman nodded.

“He’s a hero... Just like the rest of us.”

“!LAEH”

Zatanna gasped as the magic flared, flowing from her fingers and seeping into the temples of the Martian Manhunter. She saw him wince at the sudden tingle, his dark eyes flashing as he gasped as well before pushing her away-

“Enough!” he shouted as Zatanna stumbled back into the waiting arms of the Scarlet Witch, catching her. She saw J’onn J’onzz stagger away clutching at his brow.

“J’onn?” she gasped out, winded and weak herself, and happy for the support of the other woman. The Martian waved her off though, his eyes closed as though concentrating.

“You’ve... done enough...” he grimaced, massaging his temples, then, “I... will be fine. I’m not... human, Zee.” He heaved a sigh and she saw him sag for just a moment. “You’ve done enough. I must do the rest.”

Zatanna Zatara forced a slight smile, looking back at the auburn haired woman that supported her, seeing her smile in turn. She held on though, at least until Zatanna found her balance again-

“I used to wear heels,” the woman- Wanda she had said- joked. “Learned my lesson when one got caught in a street grating. Almost broke my ankle, and my neck when Whirlwind took advantage.”

“My fans expect it,” Zatanna said, tugging at her coat tails. “Image is everything in my line of work.”

Wanda smirked in understanding, and it amazed Zatanna once again how easily they ignored that Hell was unleashing around them and made jokes. Perhaps they were not so different after all.

Back to work, she saw that J’onn had stumbled to a fallen piece of rubble, sitting and almost in meditation as he tried to quicken the healing that she hopefully had started. His skin bubbled and she could see things shifting and swelling underneath. She had to turn away.

“Can’t you simply do a mass Healing Spell?” Wanda asked. “I assume that’s what you’ve been doing individually.” Zatanna shook her head.

“Normally I could, but the magic’s... different here. I can sense it. I can tap into it, but it seems to be surging, and a lot of it’s dark. Or what would appear to be Black Magic on my world. I don’t dare try anything bigger than one on one, for fear the power got away from me and did more damage than good. It’s chaotic.”

The Scarlet Witch nodded as though understanding, glancing skyward again to see that they were still out of danger for the moment at least. “My powers don’t work in the way yours do, I guess. My magic taps into the chaos and that in turn amplifies and accentuates my Mutant Hex Powers.”

“Mutant Hex?”

“My inherent abilities to alter probabilities. Unfortunately, in the midst of all this, if I tried to simply heal someone I’d probably do more harm than good too. The

negative energies are throwing my powers off as well." The Scarlet Witch shrugged as they scanned the wounded together.

Zatanna had gone to Kyle first. The Green Lantern was the worst of any, as the Thunder God of this reality had beaten him to a bloody pulp. She had done what she could, and he looked better, but he was still unconscious. Zatanna hoped to hell that there was nothing wrong internally, but too she imagined that the slight green glow about her friend meant that the ring was doing what it could to help its master as well.

The others seemed to simply be unconscious or incapacitated. Like J'onn, Plastic Man's physiology was far too strange to tamper with. She had tried to simply unravel his tangled form, but the magic had waned and nothing had happened. Plas was resilient if nothing else however, and she had to hope he would spring back, eventually untying himself. Diana too had simply been knocked out, but she was the Wonder Woman after all. She was alive, and her own God-given powers would aid in her recovery.

She had managed to wake up Dinah. The effects of the archer's knock out gas had left the Black Canary groggy though, and she had yet to find her 'sea legs'. She needed a few moments, as did Firestorm, still reverted to the form of Ronnie Raymond. Whatever had made him lose his heroic form had left him addled as well, and he had yet to find the concentration to call back the Nuclear Man.

The Avengers fared little better though. Of them all, only the Black Panther was on his feet and ready. He had quickly assessed the situation however and realizing that he would be of little physical use against Annihilus, he was trying to revive the blonde woman, Warbird. The blue-furred Beast was coming around too after his dunking, though Zatanna doubted that he would be much use against the energies flying around overhead. Still, she had learned long ago not to judge a book by its cover. Any one of them, whether Avenger or JLA could hold the key to victory. Better they were all up and about, just in case.

"Zatanna?"

Zee turned to see the Scarlet Witch carrying the unconscious form of the Wasp and shivered. Like the Atom, Zatanna could not imagine how the woman went into battle being so small and fragile in her shrunken state, and then to be able to grow as she had. It was incredible.

"Can you help her?" Wanda asked, biting her lip. That she could do, as it had been one of her spells that had put the woman to sleep in the first place- along with a good, solid punch. Zatanna nodded and reached out, gently placing a finger to the woman's temple-

“!EKAW” she said, casting the spell that would reverse the effects of the blow that she had delivered. She felt the sudden surge as the magic shifted again, but luckily it was simple and worked. She saw the woman stir and writhe in the Scarlet Witch’s embrace, her eyelids fluttering as she moaned, coming awake. “She’ll be fine,” Zee said with a smile, and Wanda smiled in return, nodding as she looked to her friend slowly waking.

Both women jumped, looking up as a scream ripped above the sound of the storm. Lightning flashed and the sky lit up and Zatanna gasped to see Superman grappling with the creature...

Losing...

Hawkeye shivered as he felt the sudden wind wash over him. He knew the feeling all too well, though he was a bit perplexed by the flickering red images that faded as he tried to see. He had thought that it was Quicksilver racing past and kicking up dirt, but it was apparently the JLA’s speedster instead- the Flash?

Hawkeye cursed and picked up his pace, climbing the stairs in the speedster’s wake. Ass-hole couldn’t even stop and take him along. They were supposed to be working together.

Cap had told him to get higher, try to get a shot, though he had no idea what he could do to Annihilus. He could hit him of course- that wasn’t the point. But he didn’t think that he had an arrow in his repertoire that would make a damn bit of difference.

On the shafts he had gathered he had re-headed another Gas arrow, a Grapple and a Pulse. With Shell-Head down for the count he figured he could take the chance. He had a handful of normal arrows too, still in his quiver, along with the Adamantium head and the Parachute arrow. That last had gotten him out of more than one scrape and was well worth the extra space it took up in his quiver. Still, it was the Adamantium arrow that he had nocked, and was betting his money on as he rushed up the final flight of stairs. It was probably the only one that would pierce Annihilus’ armor- if he could pull enough force. Didn’t really matter how sharp the head was, or how powerful if it did not have the momentum to do the job.

Hawkeye stepped out onto the rooftop of the Keystone Building, feeling the wind immediately, the static of the storm making his skin crawl. He slammed back against the stairwell, taking stock and scanning the roof. He could see Superman and Annihilus trading blows out in mid-air.

Annihilus was still cackling, still hanging onto Oubliette and forcing the Leaguer to hold back while the ruler of the Neg Zone continued to do his damage. Hawkeye could see that the alien was hurting under the onslaught, Annihilus shifting from blasts of negative energy to simply clawing at the man. To his credit, Superman was still fighting.

He did not see Thor, but the Flash was standing at the rooftop's edge. His arms were a blur, and Hawkeye could see that the Scarlet Speedster was trying to redirect the winds. Whether to make Annihilus simply fall, or trying to do damage the archer had no idea. Whatever, Hawkeye knew that he could not fire while that was happening. His arrow would go wild in the wind long before it got to the target. He was about to charge forward, tell the kid to stop when he saw a shadow step out of the elevator's kiosk.

"Midas..." he whispered, immediately recognizing the shining golden armor that had once belonged to Tony Stark. Doctor Midas was a scavenger, buying or stealing whatever he could, cast off inventions that had lost their patent and become public domain, salvaged from old battles, sold on E-Bay- whatever. Doc Midas had gotten hold of one of Iron Man's old suits of armor years back. One of the original Marks, that Tony had worn in the early days.

Hawkeye watched as Midas eased forward, trying to be stealthy and actually succeeding what with the roar of the cosmic storm blowing about them. He was heading to the speedster- the Flash- no doubt looking for a rabbit punch. Hawkeye smiled...

Finally something he could shoot.

Hawkeye stabbed the Adamantium arrow into the rooftop and swiftly drew and notched another. One that would work. He smiled and raised his bow, drawing the string slowly back to its limits.

Then he heard Oubliette's screams...

"Thor?"

Quicksilver whipped his hands at blinding speed, stirring the air and filtering out the dust still swirling from the Thunder God's impact. He did not know if the Asgardian actually had to breathe, but he figured that this was more help than patting the man on the back as he doubted his meager strength even made an impression. The Lord of Storms coughed finally, spitting before placing a massive hand on Quicksilver's shoulder and rising to his feet, almost driving the Mutant to his knees.

“Quicksilver?” Thor said, coughing again. “What-“

“Cap sent me to help,” Quicksilver said stepping away and massaging the ache in his shoulder from Thor’s grip. “He feared you needed help- and the alien definitely does.”

“The Superman?” Thor said, looking back up at the hole he had made with a frown. “Truth, I fear that Captain America puts too much faith in these strangers, and yet I do see the wisdom. Annihilus is a threat we do know and must be smitten. Then shall we deal with the threat of these strange visitors. Now stand ye back, good Pietro!”

Quicksilver barely had time to move before the God of Thunder started to swing his hammer, only to smash through the closest wall heedless of anyone who might be below on the street. “Thor! Wait!” he shouted, but too late as Thor was already on the brink, standing in the hole that he had created, ready to attack.

“Annihilus would seek to rend the world with his magicks! Hast he forgotten that Thor is the true Lord of the Storms? Any storm?”

Pietro Maximoff- Magnus watched as Thor’s mystic hammer became a blur, whirling at speeds that even he could not comprehend. Energy flared and crackled from M’Jolnir’s head, blinding power and static that made his hair stand on end. Then suddenly Thor knelt and drove the hammer into the steel and brick of the building’s façade. Quicksilver heard a rage of electricity, a crescendo of thunder as rain suddenly fell in driving sheets without. Lightning flashed in quick succession, bolt after bolt writhing as though wrenched from the sky, twisted by the Asgardian’s command.

Pietro heard a blood-curdling scream somewhere outside, and he feared the worst.

Superman screamed as the lightning erupted about them.

He heard the creature’s screams as well, but his attention focused on the girl’s- Oubliette’s- She sounded in agony.

He looked up, eyes squinting, teeth rattling, as the storm seemed to explode about them. Lightning flashed continually, the thunder rolling over and over. He screamed again as he burned, electrical energy dancing across his body. That he could even feel the effects in the first place meant only one sure thing- Magic! A normal storm was as nothing to him, but this...

Superman dropped back and away from the creature, watching him writhe in the grips of the storm's fury. He saw the girl too- her only protection the remnants of the space suit that she wore. She was squirming in Annihilus' grip, eyes and mouth wide as the lightning scored her body, making it spasm and shake.

"Fear not, alien!" he heard Thor, saw the man float from the second jagged hole in the side of the near building. "The Lord of Storms has rejoined the fray and taken hand!"

Idiot!

Didn't he know what he was doing to the girl? Didn't he care?

Clark watched as lightning struck the beast again and again. Rain suddenly swept in on the wind, washing from the churning clouds in waves that obscured his normal vision. He could only see the creature Annihilus by the strange energies pouring from the odd cylinder affixed to his throat. Could that be the source of his powers? Some type of conduit for the negative energies that he wielded so freely?

There was not time to decide. Superman had to save the girl before the lightning storm fried her, or the creature lost his grip and she plummeted to her death. He would have to ignore the magic and struggle through- as he always had.

With a deep breath and a prayer, the Man of Steel shot forward again...

"Oy..."

Henry McCoy sat up shakily, his ears ringing, his head spinning from the near drowning that had laid him low. Remarkably he felt better than he had a right to feel, and as he squinted into the driving rain he could see the probable reason why.

Not so far away he could see the shadowy silhouettes of the Scarlet Witch and the figure of the other woman- by the legs it had to be the magician in the cute little tuxedo jacket and fishnets. He imagined that they were trying to rouse the rest of the troops, working together? Had a truce been called in his absence from the Land of the Living? Hopefully...

"You with us Beast?"

McCoy looked up to see the grim face of Captain America hovering in the rain above him. Far above too he saw the flashing, crackling discharge of negative energies amidst a driving storm that had all the ear marks of the God of Thunder.

He knew then why his ears were ringing, hearing the perpetual rumble of thunder crashing down. He shielded his eyes as lightning flashed, lighting up the sky in stark reality.

“Aye, Mein Capitain,” he joked with a quick salute; flipping to his feet with ease, though taking a moment to steady himself. He wiped the freezing rain down his face, trying to focus his attention. Cap put a reassuring hand to his shoulder to help steady him.

“Good. We need all the help we can get. Thor and Superman are barely holding their own against Annihilus-“

“Annihilus? Who invited him to the party?”

“No time McCoy,” Cap said as he scanned the rest of the group. The rain seemed to be aiding Wanda and... Zatanna? in their efforts. He saw the woman dressed in her own version of the flag standing, gathering the remnants of the golden rope she used. The green man- the Martian was kneeling over the boy that had had the fiery hair with Zatanna beside. Wanda was helping Warbird to her feet, though Danvers still seemed shaky, while the Wasp and the blonde woman that Hawkeye had taken down were seeing to the Panther. Good.

Of them all, only Iron Man and the boy with the ring still seemed down. Cap knew that Iron Man’s energies were depleted, and it would take some time before his batteries were charged enough to move let alone fight. As to the boy, he had no idea. His body seemed to be glowing a pale green- some defensive mechanism of that incredible ring he wore no doubt. But he had taken a maddened beating from Thor and survived, apparently. Hopefully he would be all right. Hopefully they all would.

“Listen up people!” Cap shouted over the storm, and slowly all eyes turned to him as he moved to a more central location so that all could hear. “Superman and Thor are up there fighting Annihilus! I have Quicksilver, the Flash and Hawkeye flanking in the surrounding buildings, but I don’t know how much they’ll be able to help in this storm! I need everyone who can fly- and survive in that,” he said glancing at the Wasp, “to get up there and help drive the creature down to a level that we can coordinate an assault!

“Annihilus draws his power from the Negative Zone, and whatever’s causing that energy flux has increased that power dramatically! He’s too strong for even Thor and Superman combined! We have to put aside our differences and work together in this, or we’re all through!”

“Say no more, warrior!” the star-spangled woman said above the thunder. Her face, her very being exuded sheer confidence as she approached Captain

America. "The Justice League stands ready, at your side." She glanced about at the others, saw her teammates nod in agreement.

"Tell us what to do."

"See to Iron Man, he says..."

Henry McCoy bounded through the storm, heedless of the lightning crashing down in his wake and dropping softly beside the unmoving red and gold armor still imbedded in the pavement. There was a small crater about the metallic shell from the impact, and though the armor itself seemed cracked in a few small places, it was still in relatively good repair.

"Is it my fault I can't fly?" the Beast continued as he leaned in, peering through the dark eye slits for any sign of life from Anthony Stark trapped in a sudden prison of his own making. McCoy leaned in, finally tapping lightly on the unmoving, dented helmet. "Hello... Can Tony come out to play?"

"Please don't do that."

The Beast had to grin at the hollow echo of the voice drifting out at him. Stark sounded fine, if embarrassed. "You okay in there, my friend?" He saw the whites of Stark's eyes then, piercing him with a dark gaze.

"I'll live Beast. As long as you stop pounding on my head. What's going on?"

Quickly the Beast relayed the situation between the two teams and the unexpected arrival of Annihilus. Stark interrupted only twice to ask questions, and the Beast stopped paused in his recitation only once upon hearing the low moan coming from nearby.

"Oy..."

Glancing over with a grin, he saw the tightly tied body of the elastically enhanced Plastic Man wiggling a bit, trying to undo the very knots that Quicksilver had bound him into with a rather remarkable display of Mutant speed and acrobatics. He was about to offer assistance when the strange man simply seemed to melt into a red puddle right before his eyes. Beast gasped, then gasped again as the man swelled and expanded, reforming into a standing semblance of humanity.

"You!" Plastic Man shouted, his arms immediately becoming pliant and stretching forth as the Beast flipped up and about, dodging. He landed as the arms looped around him, ready to draw him in as he raised his own arms in a warding gesture-

“Pax!” he shouted, waving his hands. “Peace my pliant opponent! There’s been a truce!” McCoy felt the arms tighten about him, but he let them, doing nothing more to save himself hoping that the Plastic Man would see the dire situation that they were all in himself.

Plas looked up as lightning came crashing down about them, his big black goggles bulging as his mouth opened to a mammoth absurdity, his tongue flapping long and wild. McCoy felt the grip of the arms loosen, watching then in fascination as they began to unwind and recede-

“Oh my stars and garters!” Plastic Man shouted over the roar of the rain and thunder, and the Beast had to chuckle.

“Brudda, you said a mouth full!”

Superman felt the creature’s grip on his throat as he pounded seemingly uselessly at the thick, purple armor. The monster was big, his reach longer than that of the Man of Steel, and he seemed strong enough to withstand Clark’s strongest blows. He felt the bones popping in his neck as he struggled to move, to break away. He felt blood again and the creature laughed all the harder as he tightened his grip.

Even still he could hear the girl’s screams.

There was a flash of red as Superman unleashed his Heat Vision finally, fully into Annihilus’ face. He heard a hiss, but it was more surprise than hurt as the creature’s face sizzled and glowed. Annihilus did not relinquish his grip, however, and if anything squeezed all the tighter. Superman clenched his teeth and began hammering again, his eyes drifting to the girl.

She was wearing some kind of space suit, sans the helmet if there had ever been one. He could see her face now so close, her huge green eyes and full pink lips wide, staring. Piercing... Despite her struggling and cries of panic for help, she did not truly look afraid. Rather she seemed... excited? Clark did not understand, but it did not matter either. He had to save her, to get her away from this monster so that he could unleash his full power.

“I see...” the creature hissed, his claws digging into Clark’s throat. “You... You are one of this world’s defenders! A hero, yes?” Annihilus laughed again, a hideous thing that sent a shiver racing along Superman’s spine. Annihilus was easily as merciless as DoomsDay, as Darkseid himself!

“More concerned of the chattel than your self,” Annihilus continued, his voice a brittle crackle. Acidic spittle splattered Clark’s face, burning. “You come to save the girl...”

“N- Nnn...” Superman gasped, sensing what was to come. He hammered on Annihilus’ arm all the harder-

“Then save her!”

“No!”

Superman screamed as Annihilus simply threw the girl away. The Man of Steel redoubled his efforts, thrashing wildly, kicking, and all pretense of true fighting gone as he struggled to break free. Annihilus simply laughed and brought in his other hand about the Man of Steel’s throat, clutching, crushing.

Superman could feel the pressure increasing as the monster’s claws dug into the tender flesh of his neck, feeling to the wash as blood mingled with the rain. His vision started to dim as he watched the girl flailing helplessly, tumbling down through the air until she disappeared into the dim of the storm-

“Have at thee, villain!”

There was a resounding crash as Annihilus’ grip finally loosened and fell away. Superman shoved out, floating back with the sudden, unexpected freedom, clutching at his throat as he stared at the creature. His wings were beating madly as he shook his head, trying desperately to spin about and confront whatever had struck him.

Coughing, Superman saw, watching almost awestruck as lightning sprang from the huge stone hammer as it swung down in a mighty, sweeping arc. The hammer struck again, splaying the creature wide with astounding fury. Thunder exploded with the impact as lightning danced over the Devil’s armor. The monster shrieked- this time definitely in agony as the blow propelled him downward into the low, thick clouds.

Superman stared, licking his lips only for a moment as he looked at the Thunder God in his element, all his glory. He was hovering there, his hammer spinning wildly overhead, holding him aloft in the winds, staring back. A smile finally creased his face as he nodded.

“Let us renew the battle... Superman!”

The Man of Steel nodded in turn, but he could not afford a smile himself. He had lost the girl.

Together then, they dropped through the clouds, pursuing the Devil...

Wally West blinked to see the girl suddenly appear, falling out of the sky. It had to be the girl that the monster was carrying- Oubliette? Weird name...

He had been standing at roof's edge, his arms whipping madly as he tried to redirect the winds that were coming at him with an almost gale force intensity. He was soaked to the bone, the freezing rain drenching him and obscuring his sight as he tried to watch up into the storm, tried to catch a glimpse of Superman and the other so that he could help- somehow.

His arms were a blur as he directed his own cyclonic force up into the raging winds, but he thought it seemed that he was really doing nothing. Unless he was making matters worse. The clouds seemed to roil and churn even more. Lightning still flashed overhead, brightening the thickening clouds already alight from the crackling negative energy. And the damn thunder still boomed. He could feel the whole building shaking. Or was that his knees?

Seeing the girl the Flash quickly redirected his assault. He arched the twin cyclones that he was creating, trying to create a buffer zone, hoping to catch the girl, or at least stop her fall. She was screaming he could hear, even over the thunder, and kicking and twisting in a panic.

When his winds hit her she spun about, twirling wildly. He cursed under his breath as a huge bolt of lightning erupted up in the storm, the thunder right on its heels and almost bowling him over, still dropping him to his knees. He shook his head, ears ringing as the winds doubled, then doubled again, blowing the woman away-

"Hold her steady, Red!"

He barely heard the voice shouting over the storm, but he saw the arrowhead as it inched up in the corner of his sight. He glanced back, a queer feeling of Déjà vu, and saw the Avenger's archer poised above him with his bow stretched to its limits. He had thought it was Ollie for a moment.

"Hold her still..." the archer said again, his gaze focused on the girl and Flash quickly returned his attention to her as well. He concentrated, forcing his arms to whip all the faster, moving his fingers in a fine manipulation to redirect the winds that he was generating and control Oubliette's wildly thrashing form.

He was already exhausted, and feeling so slow. His arms were aching as they never had before, feeling they might fly off at any moment. Sweat was dripping into his eyes, washing across his face with the sweeping rain.

“That’s it!” he shouted, feeling he had reached his limits, then tried all the harder. “Take the shot!”

He saw the purple-clad archer flex, just the slightest movement. He saw the string slide smoothly forward, the thickly wrapped shaft moving slowly. Picking up speed as Wally looked on, watching as it shot forward, faster and faster. It strayed only slightly as it arced on its course, flying straight at the woman.

The shaft hit her squarely in the back, and like a car’s air bag exploded on impact. Wally West watched in strange fascination as great sheets of white silk billowed out, almost seeming to explode in the clutches of the fierce winds-

“Get her in!” the archer shouted and the Flash saw him brace against the short wall that surrounded the building’s edge. He jammed a foot against the brick, his massive arm muscles straining as he heaved on a thin, metallic cord affixed to his bandoleer harness. Wally saw him wince as the line slid through the leather of his gloves, slicing at his flesh.

The Flash quickly, without another thought reversed the direction of his gyrating arms. The cyclones he had been blowing died for just a fraction of an instant, not even a heartbeat and then began to flow back upon them both, but drawing the girl closer. The parachute that the Bowman had fired billowed full behind her as it whipped around in the sudden suction. The Flash waved his arms, the crossing winds forcing the still struggling girl along at a rapid clip while the archer reeled her in through sheer brute strength.

The line snapped as a flailing Annihilus suddenly dropped from the clouds, his claws flashing, cutting through the metallic cord as though it did not even exist. Wally saw the archer suddenly fly backwards to crash hard onto the rooftop even as the monster fell out of his line of sight. He heard the girl scream.

She was still flying at the building, but the stronger winds had hold of her now and the very parachute that had helped to save her just seconds before was now dragging her at breakneck speed towards the building. Flash could see that she was going to miss the roof, just by a few yards, but enough. The impact would kill her instantly, unless...

Without a thought Wally West, the third Flash in what was supposed to be a long line was up on his feet and running. Back home, before the chaos that had erupted it would have been simplicity itself to simply run along the side of the building, defying gravity until he could think of the most spectacular save he could imagine. It was all about the image, after all.

But he was tired. Exhausted to the point of collapse, his arms and legs aching as they never had, and he felt so... damn... slow...

There was no time to worry though, no time to think. He was a hero, and he had to save the girl. It was in the rulebook. The Flash through caution to the wind as he started to vibrate, almost crying at the pain as he raced along the side of the building. The girl was almost there, almost a stain on the wall, as Wally skidded, slipping as he shot off, up and down and running madly in a circle. He was breathing hard, the mere fact that he could hear and sense that he was breathing grating on his nerves.

So... slow...

He sensed the girl's momentum slow ever so slightly, the new winds that his tight race generated creating a buffer. She was struggling, the silk of the parachute billowing back on her again, the winds threatening to catch her once more and rip her away. Closer, he had to time it just right.

Flash leaped as the girl came within reach. His stomach churned as he lost traction with the building, feeling the strain in his arm as he stretched. He barely felt the girl as his still vibrating hand wrapped about hers, but he made a fist, letting his own body still, hoping that his momentum would be enough.

He whipped past her, his grip tightening as he went up and over, jerking her body. He felt a 'pop', but he did not know if it came from his arm or hers as centrifugal force spun him down and centripetal sent her flying askew. They whipped about together in a strange figure eight, another heart beat as Wally eyed the building and finally let go.

The girl screamed again and arched upwards as Wally churned his legs, trying to right himself as gravity took hold once again. And again he stretched as his descent slowed just enough, his fingers clawing at the trailing silk of the parachute even as the girl disappeared over the rooftop to land with a silent thump. Anchored, Flash held onto the chute as he swung towards the building, kicking his legs at a blinding speed, scrabbling and scrambling with contact. Finally traction...

The Flash shot up the side of the building, the parachute acting as a guide and he came to a smoldering stop, rolling right up beside the girl. His body was screaming, muscles aching in places he did not even know existed. His eyelids hurt for God's sake.

Wally West reached out, a shaking hand on the girl's shoulder as he struggled to his knees. After all that he had to be sure that she had survived. She had a nice curve he noted, even in the space suit, and her hair was as deep a red as his own, matted sexily by the rain, caught in her lips as she turned over with a smile. Huge green eyes sparkled at him as her lips went all pouty. He knew the look-Hero Worship- he had just saved her life and she was enamored.

“y-you... okay?” he asked, his breath heaving, his voice shaking. He forced a smile as she pursed her lips, shifting closer and trying to rise as she draped an arm about his neck. He could hear the archer shouting something as he charged closer, saw a flicker of gold behind him, drawing his attention-

“My hero...” the girl whispered as she leaned in for a kiss-

Wally West screamed as he felt her jab something in his stomach and suddenly electricity was dancing about his body. He tasted blood as he bit into his tongue, his eyes wide as he stared at the beautiful, smiling girl before him as she ground some type of stick into his gut, holding him in place. His body spasmed from the shock as she laughed.

Then thankfully everything went black...

“Eat that, freak!”

Warbird shouted as she rammed her fist into Annihilus’ insectoid face again and again. Her gloves were starting to shred from the continued pummeling and she could see blood flying from her aching, bruised knuckles. She ignored the pain though, letting her rage drive her on. She hit him again.

She could feel the wash of heat as the Superman flew by in a strafing run on one side, the big green Martian mirroring his efforts on the other. Alone neither had been able to generate enough heat to hurt the creature, but together they were making him burn. Carol Danvers ignored that however, holding on for dear life as she continued to pound.

The Wonder Woman was there suddenly, her gold rope wrapped about one of Annihilus’ legs as she whipped about like a kid playing Crack the Whip, kicking and hitting whenever her momentum brought her close enough. She would swoop away then, only to smash in from the far side. Carol knew that they could do some massive damage if they could coordinate their attacks and hit him together, but she was far too caught up in the battle to worry about that. Better to just keep hitting until the freak went down.

Thor’s hammer slammed home, Annihilus’ armor ringing like a bell and sending them all tumbling again as the mallet bounced away. Carol smiled to hear the creature scream, finally starting to hurt. She hit him again.

And again!

Annihilus screamed in anger as he thrust his body wide, his arms and legs outstretched. Energy exploded from the rod at his neck, lighting up the sky and sending shock after shock through her body. Her own screams joined the monster's, but hers were pure pain. She could see the Wonder Woman thrashing about on the end of her tether, her muscular form flashing negatively as the energy danced along her rope. She held on, to her credit, and Warbird knew that she could do no less herself.

She saw Annihilus' backhand just before it hit. The pain did not register until she was flying away and she realized just how lucky she was that the blow had not taken her head off.

She struggled to remain conscious, fighting even harder to right herself in the storm, the winds threatening to carry her away. Lightning crackled down from the dark heavens, a bolt searing the air so close as to make her hair stand on end, making her choke on the burning ozone. She hoped that no one was hit down below, her eyes dazzled as a blinding flash erupted from the ground.

Spots danced before her eyes as she hovered, straining to hold her place in the winds. She could hear Thor's bellows of rage, could hear him hammering on Annihilus' shell even over the thunder and the ringing in her ears-

ARE YOU WELL?

Warbird gasped to 'hear' the cold voice suddenly in her head. She whipped about in mid-air, trying to will her sight clear, looking for- expecting the new attack.

CALM... THIS IS... THE MARTIAN MANHUNTER... CAN YOU FIGHT?

The Martian...

It was the Martian in her head. He was a telepath, and apparently recovered enough from the assault that she and Iron Man had given him before.

"Damn straight I can fight!" she shouted and heard the mental wince in her head. She blinked, and slowly the dancing spots began to fade. She could see him there in the distance; a pale green shadow with a swath of blue whipping behind. She thought of the Vision for a moment.

ON MY MARK THEN. HIT HIM LOW...

Like she needed him to tell her that. But she knew what was coming- the coordinated attack. She could see Wonder Woman and Superman drifting into position as Thor went toe to toe with the monster, trading blows in the midst of the storm of lightning and negative energy.

She glanced up at the Rift and saw the red and pink clouds swirling in a vortex, spewing power into Annihilus' damnable rod, and making him stronger by the second. If they could get that-

STEPS ARE BEING TAKEN... HIT HIM...

Warbird shot forward as she saw the others move in, the Martian included.

NOW!

The clash was deafening as they all five hit the Annihilator at once. Thor smashed his hammer across the monster's face as Superman and the Martian Manhunter hit him from opposite sides. At the same time as Warbird swooped up and slammed her shoulder into the creature's midsection and the Wonder Woman slammed into his back, driving her heels into the spot between his wings.

Annihilus screamed as they all rebounded away, even Thor falling back, whirling his hammer overhead to stay aloft. The creature seemed to hang there for a moment, until gravity grabbed hold and started to drag him down-

"Yes!" Warbird shouted, righting herself in flight, seeing the others do the same. They all hesitated for a moment, watching the results of their combined fury as Annihilus dropped...

As his wings beat...

As he laughed!

"Fools!" he shouted, and the darkened sky erupted in an explosive brilliance of stark white energy...

"You sure this is a good idea?" Plastic Man said as he fed the exposed wires from the street light down to the Beast.

Henry McCoy simply shrugged as he in turn fed the wires to the Black Panther, the Wakandan Monarch hurriedly attaching the wire's ends to the exposed nacelles of Iron Man's battery pods. The Panther simply nodded, involved in his work.

"I've been working with Thor for years," they barely heard Stark's voice echoing from the shell of his helmet. "You think in all that time I wouldn't insulate my armor from his attacks, or devise a way to use his power? Believe me, you three

hook me up as I said and I'll be up and running with power to burn. Just get that pole wired to attract the next bolt of lightning."

Plastic Man looked up into the storm as he jerked more wire from the exposed tip of the pole. The sky was flashing like a bad movie, and he could almost see the battle raging far above. "Seems to me we're gonna have lobster on the menu real soon."

"Oh ye of little faith," the Beast quipped as he summer-salted up, his huge feet and long toes finding purchase on the rain slicked pole. "Yet haste, lest we include fried monkey and tomato soup to the main course."

The two men laughed as they went about their task, the Panther glancing up to check their progress before turning back to Stark.

"You're certain your batteries can absorb the power, my friend?" he asked, looking skyward quickly as the sky flashed and the rain swept by. "The energy coursing above is astounding, and most of it from the Zone. It could kill you."

"Won't know until we try, T'Challa. I can't just sit here though."

"I do understand, believe me. I think we are ready."

"Then stand back and-

Even before Stark could finish his sentence a bolt of lightning came crashing down through the clouds. The Beast leapt away as his fur stood on end, smoldering as the electrical discharge struck the light pole. Plastic Man screamed as his body arched up and out and away, blowing in the winds that rode behind the bolt. The whole area erupted in a brilliant glow of white as the energy danced along the pole, tripping along the water-laced ground, flowing into Iron Man's battery pods. They heard Stark scream...

"Break the contact!" T'Challa screamed over the din of booming thunder. "Plastic Man!"

Without a thought to his own safety, Eel O'Brien stretched forward, his arms flowing together into the form of a giant pair of scissors as he dove at the exposed wires that they had attached to the armor. He slammed his arms together, cutting the wires and severing the circuit, screaming as the electricity arced through his body and into the ground.

The Beast leaped up again, striking Plastic Man across the chin, knocking him back and away to break the contact. He felt the surge himself as he plummeted, landing hard. He saw the Plastic Man seemingly melt into a puddle not so far away before he looked to Iron Man.

The Panther had backed away, shielding his eyes at the blinding glow as McCoy watched the Golden Avenger rise. His armor was alight, spewing energy as he slapped his battery pods closed and back into place at his hips. Iron Man afforded a quick glance before he shot up into the sky, a comet in reverse.

The Batman watched from the shadows of the rooftop as the girl pulled a whip from her space suit and jammed the handle into the Flash's stomach. Wally West screamed as the taser effect danced over his body, quickly rendering him unconscious as he was far too tired to react or fight back. This world had taken its toll on him- on all of them, and he had paid the price.

He watched too as the man in the golden armor slipped from the elevator again. He drew a batarang from his utility belt, expecting the man- Midas- to attack the archer as he faced down the woman, to strike from behind. He had approached Hawkeye before, but the archer had turned to save the girl instead of stop the threat and Midas had retreated back into the shadows for a time. Oddly now, he slipped off to the side however. Trying to escape?

Even as Batman started forward to help Hawkeye he saw the other man step from the elevator's relative safety to follow the first. He was dressed in a lab coat, a sure sign that he was a scientist of some sort. All the better.

Captain America had given them all a swift layman's version of what he thought was going on, but odds were that a scientist in employ of the antagonist would know more details. He glanced at Hawkeye, debating whether to help, but the archer had an arrow notched and did not seem overly concerned. He could hold his own then, at least for a moment.

Batman crept forward, staying to the shadows as he slipped up behind the scientist. He did not see the armored man now so he would have to stay alert. The scientist however was slow and confused, afraid. Good.

He could use fear...

"Quicksilver!"

Again the Mutant speedster simply appeared. Captain America paid him no heed, glancing at the others. The Green Lantern was still unconscious apparently, and the boy they called Firestorm had yet to revert to his super heroic form, but the others were well and ready to fight.

"It's coming to a head. We need to get up there, as it seems the fight's not coming to us."

"I can't carry everyone, Captain," Pietro said as he stood catching his breath.

"You won't have to." He turned, pointing at Plastic Man. "Your powers are similar to Mister Fantastic's. Can you mold yourself into a platform- carry us?"

"Sure," Plastic Man said with a wide smile. "But I've got the proportionate strength of a... man. I can't lift everyone."

"You won't have to. Wanda?" Cap turned to the Scarlet Witch. "Can your powers get us all up there?"

"You put a lot of faith in random probability, Captain," she said as she considered. "Give me a moment."

"Just a moment." Captain America turned to the Beast. "Get the Green Lantern. No one gets left behind if this pans out." Then to Zatanna. "If I interpret your powers correctly, you can do basically anything given the proper circumstance."

"To a point," Zatanna said, wiping her hair from her eyes. "But the magic of this world is... chaotic. It comes in waves that I can't control. I don't-"

"I'll need you to stop the storm. Just long enough for me to see, once we get up there. Can you do it?"

"I... " Zatanna licked her lips, looking first to the stormy skies and then back to Captain America. She almost shivered to see the resolve in his eyes, the faith. "I'll do it. Of course."

"T'Challa, I want you and the boy to safeguard the Lantern," he said, turning to Ronnie Raymond, "unless you care to contribute?"

Ronnie scowled, staring at the man but knowing better than to lip off. "I can't. I've been trying to change but-"

"No problem, son. Help protect your friend. Do what you can. Jan?"

"Yes Cap?" the Winsome Wasp answered, her tiny form flitting close to Captain America's face.

"I can sense the murmur of the telepath- the Martian I assume?" he asked looking for acknowledgement. Zatanna and the Black Canary nodded. "I need you to fly ahead- do your best in the storm. I know it'll be hard, but when you get close enough, project to him my plan and tell him to relay."

“I’ll do it Cap. You can count on me.”

“I know.” Captain America watched as the Wasp shot skyward, quickly disappearing from sight before he turned to the Black Canary.

“I saw you have sonic powers, true?”

“Yeah,” the Canary said quizzically, nodding.

“Good. You’re with me. Follow my lead and when I say so, hit Annihilus with everything you’ve got.”

“O- okay...”

“This could well be the final stand, people. Let’s get it right the first time.” He turned to the Scarlet Witch even as Plastic Man stretched out into a disk-like platform. “Wanda?”

“I’m ready, Cap,” the Scarlet Witch said with a sigh, raising her arms and face to the storm. She touched her thumbs together over her head and the sky seemed to erupt in a cacophony of light and sound.

“Go!”

Doctor Midas eased around the backside of the standing hut, which housed the elevator car and paused. Taking a deep breath he lowered the power input on the magnetics that had allowed him to slip swiftly and silently about the building when he had first caught sight of the shadowy form that had been creeping up on him and Janus. It had been one of the aliens- the one in the bat costume, and normally Midas feared no man, but the strange visitors were still an unknown and he did not wish to take a chance. Not with victory so tantalizingly close.

Luckily it appeared that the bat-man did not have any special super powers, no freak Mutant abilities that let him hear really well or see through walls. He was a quick and efficient fighter though, by the looks of it. At least in a league with the Black Widow, or maybe even Captain America himself. Midas watched from the safety of distance and shadow as the alien crept right up behind Janus and subdued him- not that that was a major accomplishment. But after Janus had whined and pleaded, then promptly spilled his guts, the bat easily knocked the sniveling scientist unconscious with a quick jab to the throat. The dark alien then simply cuffed the man and moved on, closer to what was happening with Oubliette by the roof's edge.

Ah, dear sweet Oubliette. Midas simply had to smile with pride.

She had taken out the red-garbed alien- the speedster- with the taser built into the butt of her whip using her own special brand of hard love. Now she was keeping Hawkeye- the damnable- Marksman occupied and distracted as she gave him a strip tease, sloughing out of her now useless and cumbersome space suit. The Avenger had an arrow notched of course, ready to fire, but he was an idiot- and a man. He should have fired on Midas when he had had the chance.

Midas glanced at the bat-man a final time before returning his attention to the storm. The Rift was still spewing a cascade of energies just waiting to be utilized. The roiling clouds of pink and red, the arching bolts of dark lightning, the perpetual rumble of thunder all coupled with the storm that the pompous braggart Thunder God had called up simply made him lust all the more for the power. It was right there. All that he had to do was reach out and take it.

Damn Nefaria for failing. Midas hoped that whatever had happened to the arrogant bastard that he was suffering grandly. Of course the absence of Nefaria left his immediate future and goals in the hands of the self-proclaimed heroes. Midas had no grand delusions that he would stand a chance against Annihilus; not with the power he was exhibiting. It was, therefore up to the Avengers and their uneasy alien allies to do his job for him. Let them take the lumps. Let them beat Annihilus.

Doctor Midas would be there to pick up the pieces...

MOVE!

The Martian Manhunter winced as he shifted his form to intangible, watching as the others spiraled up and out and away as quickly as possible.

With a scream of compact engines, the sound of overtaxed jets, the armored Avenger- Iron Man- came rocketing up to the battle at break-neck speed. He took the befuddled Annihilus completely by surprise, smashing headlong into the destructive creature as it swept its claws after the retreating forms that it had just engaged.

J'onn J'onzz had barely heard the roar of the jets over the unending thunder, but when he had turned expecting some new threat his eyes had grown wide to see the armored form streaking skyward like a missile. Iron Man was glowing, brimming with electrical energy as he rocketed up and up, picking up speed to the point that the Manhunter from Mars had barely had time to unleash his psychic warning.

The Iron Man smashed into Annihilus, his great momentum taking the monster by surprise and knocking him from his own erratic flight. There was a resounding 'Kra-ka-ka-toom!' that shattered the remaining windows for miles with the collision. The two energies as well exploded in a blinding glare that blinded the Martian in so many of his multitude of senses. He heard the screams of shock from his allies, still far too close and even intangible he felt the resulting burn, the wave of heat emanating out from the opposing forces.

Shifting through his special sights, J'onnn J'onzz found a shadowy spectrum of light that allowed him to scan the area even as he reached out for his allies telepathically. Warbird was unconscious. Both Superman and Thor were dazed and starting to fall, but a gentle mental push got them moving again. He heard Diana then-

Looking up he saw the streaking form of Iron Man still racing higher, trapped by his own inertia. The man within the armor was conscious though and trying to compensate, though it would be precious moments before he made his return. J'onzz ignored him, scanning the skies for Annihilus- and Wonder Woman!

He saw them then, locking onto Diana's mind. The creature had been knocked aside in Iron Man's move through, but incredibly he was still conscious. He appeared stunned and dazzled by the explosion, but his wings were still beating, holding him aloft as he righted himself, clawing at his eyes. And Wonder Woman was right there with him-

"Diana!" J'onzz screamed as he started flying towards the pair with all the might he could muster. Wonder Woman was still attached to the creature by the ragged remains of her golden lasso. The rope apparently still retained some of its magic and strength as it appeared to be relatively unscathed. Diana was gripping the trailing end of the cord furiously, slowly pulling herself higher so that she might engage the monster again. J'onnn could see that she was struggling, tired and weakened from the blast. Her skin appeared burned in places, and her hands were slick with her own blood, yet still she struggled on.

J'onzz flew faster as lightning flashed down, heedless of the danger. He saw Diana reaching up, trying to snag the creature's ragged, flapping wing. He saw Annihilus shake his head then and peer down with a wicked laugh.

DIANA! WAIT!

The creature's claw swept out at blinding speed, his fist wrapping tightly about the Amazon's wrist, encompassing her fist. J'onnn heard Diana's pain in his mind, though amazingly she did not scream as the creature squeezed, shattering her hand. Still kicking and struggling, J'onzz could sense her mind slowly fading out with the pain as the monster drew her up and close.

The Martian's eyes went wide to see Annihilus' free arm draw back, claws flashing in the lightning...

"C'mon, Oubliette," Hawkeye said, squinting into the driving rain. "Just surrender, hunh? Do the right thing for once."

Hawkeye stared at the girl, the Exterminatrix as she slinkily stepped from the crumpled remains of her space suit now piled at her feet on the rooftop. How she got her stiletto heels into the bulky boots he had no idea, but he tried to ignore what she was wearing, what she was doing the better to keep his arrow trained on her.

Not so far away from her slim, leather-clad form, the Flash still lay unconscious from the stun she had given him with her whip. He was breathing but out, and Hawkeye knew from past experience with the Exterminatrix that he wouldn't be up any time soon. He glanced back to Oubliette, but she was simply standing there smiling and licking her lips as she dangled her long whip by her side, flicking the end. She blew him a kiss and he concentrated on her full lips.

"Make me, big boy," she cooed, the archer reading her lips as best he could. It was still hard, but her intent was clear. He flexed his arm, angling his bow as he aimed. He had a gas arrow out, the most non-lethal of what he had left in his dwindling arsenal. In the wind though, he was not sure just how effective it was going to be.

Despite that she was a villain, he did not really want to hurt her. Sure she was vicious and sadistic, probably a killer, but everything she did was purely for her own pleasure and usually by her father's orders. Which made Hawkeye think- where had Midas slithered off to?

Something small and black whizzed past his head at near blinding speed. He barely saw it out of the corner of his eye, ducking uselessly on reflex. If the thing was meant to hit him it would have as he had totally ignored his back. He saw Oubliette though, her eyes popping wide just before the thing hit her squarely between the eyes. She blinked as the thing bounced away like a boomerang, her thick pink lips forming an 'O' of surprise as she promptly crumpled to the rooftop atop her space suit.

Hawkeye spun about, his bow quickly up and finding the new target. He saw the Batman standing there, the sleek black thing- a boomerang indeed, but shaped like a bat- in his upraised palm. The man strode forward with a quick glance from the Flash to Oubliette, and then back to Hawkeye as he stepped up to the roof's edge.

“You-“ Hawkeye started to say, lowering his bow at ease as he stepped up beside the other man, but the Batman simply cut him off.

“Midas’ scientist explained to me that the creature’s power comes from the small cylinder attached to his armor near his throat. It’s some sort of conduit for the energies coming from that ‘Negative Zone’, which we passed through to get here. Captain America said much the same, though in less detail. Can you make the shot?”

Hawkeye stared at the man, not having heard a word and only ‘reading’ a few, at least until he had turned to face him. ‘Can you make the shot?’ he understood, he had been asked that most of his adult life. Clint Barton turned back to the storm to try and understand just what the Batman meant for him to shoot at.

He paled to see Annihilus again, still flapping out there in the void. How he had survived Iron Man plowing into him, the archer had no idea. He was far stronger than Hawkeye had remembered, to take the combined battering that he had over the last few minutes. Energy was still spewing from his Nega Rod, apparently still feeding him power and keeping him up. Hawkeye ignored that however as he saw the creature reeling in the curvy chick in the bathing suit. He winced as Annihilus just reached out and crushed her hand in his. He saw the big green guy then, flying forward, but he knew he wasn’t going to be in time.

“Can-you-make-the-shot!”

He had turned, feeling the Batman’s hand on his shoulder and saw the man standing there holding up one of his arrows. The Batman had affixed his little bat boomerang to the shaft and was speaking slowly- enunciating the words. He knew...

“Hey, do rats have wings?”

Quickly Hawkeye took the arrow, letting it roll across his palm, checking the balance then sighting down its length then notching it, all in a heartbeat. He raised his bow, right arm outstretched as he sighted down the shaft, feeling the wind as it whispered past, flexing his legs with the thunder and the shaking of the building. He licked his lips, drew a steady breath as he eased the string back just a bit more. His hands were screaming murder from the cuts he had received trying to save Oubliette’s life; slick with blood and rain and sweat.

He aimed, watching as Annihilus reared back to strike, planning to gut the girl with his claws. Lightning flashed and he counted, letting the thunder roll past.

He loosed...

“How is she Beast?”

Henry McCoy stood over the unconscious form of Warbird as Plastic Man molded a bit of the platform that he had become about her to hold her steady and secure in the turbulence along side the Green Lantern. The man was incredible, his powers easily surpassing those of Mister Fantastic as he seemed to have total control of his molecular structure, able even to become a liquid of sorts. He had become a disk-like platform for them all to stand on, then the woman Zatanna had uttered a spell to make him float. They were all rising steadily higher now, albeit slowly, propelled by the combined efforts of Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch; the prior generating an updraft beneath them while the latter did her best to sway the storm to their benefit.

When Warbird had broken through the clouds overhead the Beast had leapt without thought, reacting faster than any of them. He had agilely flipped and twisted, snagging the unconscious Avenger from mid-air, springing then to the wall of the Keystone Building before rebounding back to land lithely on the platform again.

“She’s fine I think, Cap,” the Beast said sounding a bit concerned. He and Carol Danvers were old friends he knew, and had grown even closer as fellow Avengers. “She’s burned and rattled, but her base Kree physiology should help her pull through.”

“Good.” Captain America was relieved, but he had no time to show it. Looking up again he could see they were breaking through the layer of clouds at last. The brief snatches of the overhead battle had been frustrating, and he had wanted to be in the thick of it. They all did. But his first concerns had to be saving the innocents and getting them to safety away from the lightning and continual shower of shattered glass and rubble, not to mention the battle zone itself. Too, he had needed to rouse the wounded in their own ranks, to gather as much help as he could muster. He hoped that he had been right. He hoped they were not too late.

He heard Zatanna whispering a spell again, hopefully trying to help Warbird’s natural healing along. He did not have time to look however as the scene above took even his breath away...

He saw Thor and Superman first, both obviously stunned and barely conscious. He could see that it was taking every bit of Thor’s concentration to keep his hammer spinning and thus hold him aloft. Still, he was doing it, though barely as Cap could see that he was drifting slowly downwards and towards the neighboring building's rooftop.

“T’Challa,” he said, and without a word the King of Wakanda leaped into space, almost gliding on the winds. Everyone watched as the Black Panther slammed hard into the Thunder God, using his own momentum to force the bigger man sideways. With a crash they landed hard onto the nearby rooftop across from the higher Keystone building. They tumbled, and Cap saw the Panther rolling, taking the brunt of the impact from the already injured Thor. They finally tumbled to a stop, and after a moment- though he did not get directly up- the Panther waved that they were fine.

“He’s good.” Cap heard the Black Canary whisper from his side, and he nodded.

“The best.”

Cap saw they were nearing Superman now, Wanda forcing the winds to drive them closer but the Avenger’s attention went even higher. He watched as the Martian raced skyward and saw the reason.

Annihilus had the Wonder Woman by her rope and was reeling her in. The Martian was intangible, flying far too slowly while trying to avoid the lightning still crashing down, probably knowing that if he was struck he would not reach his goal at all.

“Pietro!” Cap shouted, sliding his shield down his arm. “We need more lift!”

“That’s it, Cap!” The Mutant shot back and Cap could hear the catch in his voice, the disappointment and exhaustion. “It’s all I can do to keep us this high.”

“Wanda?”

“No...” the Scarlet Witch moaned through gritted teeth. “The storm...”

Cap glanced back at Zatanna, but she was reeling dizzily, almost collapsed. “Chaos...” she whispered, “shifted...”

He looked to the Beast, but McCoy shook his head. Too far for even him to leap. Iron Man, Hawkeye, Batman and Flash were nowhere in sight. The shield then-

“On it!”

Cap heard the Wasp’s tiny voice as she zipped back and past his head and quickly dwindled from sight in the distance. She was fast enough normally, but the winds were blowing against her. Cap drew back, his shield in hand, knowing that the winds would effect his throw as well-

He blinked, seeing the arrow fly...

Wonder Woman's hand was sheer agony, caught in the creature's steely grasp. It took all of her will not to show weakness as she watched through tear-filled eyes as Annihilus drew back, his claws sparkling in the flashing storm. She struggled, tried to fight but she was just so tired...

She looked up bravely. She had done her best, but...

Annihilus screamed as the arrow smashed into the crackling rod at his throat-

No! Not into the cylinder, but beneath it. There was a flash of energy as the creature reared back and the rod ripped away from his armor, caught on the black head of the shaft. A batarang!

The arrow swung wide, knocked from its course only slightly by the impact. Diana watched with a grim smile, her dazzling blue eyes following the energy trail as it arched out and away, heading back to its point of origin. Briefly she saw the Batman waiting for the return, standing side by side with the Avenger's archer, Hawkeye. And there was someone else too... She saw gold-

Wonder Woman gasped as she was whipped away with the creature's thrashing. She felt his hand open, and then the pain of her shattered hand hit her in full. She felt a wave of dizziness and nausea as she started to fall, trying her best to grab at the creature herself. She could not concentrate to fly, and she doubted that she would stay conscious long enough to glide.

Her broken hand swept through empty air however as the world started to go gray about her. And suddenly she stopped...

"Rest easy, Princess. I have you."

Princess Diana of Thymescira smiled as she looked up into the concerned visage of the Martian Manhunter. She should have known...

Hawkeye felt a shudder as the Batman collapsed at his side. There was blood coming from his nose, and the Avenging Archer knew at once what had happened. Sonics...

He spun about even as the makeshift boomerang arrow came streaking back only to land in the waiting hands of Doctor Midas. The man looked down at the shaft and Hawkeye could see the maniacal glint in his eye-slits as the Nega Rod still spattered and spewed energy. He could feel the heat from where he stood, like sparks of burning pitch or oil lighting his skin.

“I’d forgotten you were deaf, archer. My bad- Heh... Believe me however, had I not had to set my other gauntlet’s magnetics to attract rather than repulse we would be calling you Swan-eye right about now...” Midas looked up, but Hawkeye stared at him blankly, licking his lips as he eased a hand back to go for an arrow. “Swan-eye as in Swan Dive... Dammit!”

Midas shook his head, and Hawkeye knew that he was probably gloating and revealing his grand scheme to take over the world. They were all the same; Doom, Graviton, Kang. They would talk a fight to death, which was fine.

Hawkeye dove to one side, one hand cradling his bow close while the other snatched an arrow from his quiver. He rolled and came up in a crouch, notching and aiming, trying to ignore the throbbing, burning pain in his hands. Midas was staring at him, holding out the Nega Rod in his direction, the nozzle on the tip pointing his way- and still babbling even as the archer drew back.

“You dance pretty, arrow head,” Midas chuckled, fingering the cylinder in his hand, locked in place by the magnetics of his suit. “But I do a mean Electric Glide myself. Now let’s see what this thing does, shall we?”

Hawkeye saw the man in the golden armor start to move, extending his arm and the rod. He let the shaft loose, only then realizing which arrow he had blindly plucked from his quiver...

“Go!”

Cap braced, the Black Canary right at his side as the Plastic Man propelled them into space. He had created a springboard with a quip about faith, and just like that the two were shooting up into the midst of the fight.

The Martian had flown out of Annihilus’ reach as soon as he had caught the falling Wonder Woman. They were out of harm’s way, and the displaced ruler of the Negative Zone still seemed lost and confused, clutching at his throat as he thrashed and spun wildly about, hovering right before the Rift, though still a goodly distance away.

The flow of energy seemed almost out of control now; the negative clouds gushing out of the hole in space. The lightning flashing forth was hot and black, making Cap’s skin crawl. He did not think what might happen if he or the Canary were struck. It did not matter. There was a job to do.

Captain America shifted the shield on his arm, drawing back as they drew closer. Annihilus turned, seeing them both. He hoped that the Canary was good enough to follow his lead. He struck-

Annihilus screamed in agony as Cap slashed through his wing, the shield easily slicing through the thick, leathery membrane. He rocketed past, flipping out of the line of fire as he heard the Black Canary's sonic cry. Annihilus went sprawling back as though he had been hit by a battering ram, shrieking his pain and rage as he spiraled out of control on one wing. Right at the Rift...

Cap saw the Canary falling backwards as the force of her assault stalled her own momentum. She had done the job however, and he had to rely on the hope that one of the others would save her.

And himself he mused as he arched out over open air...

There was a collective gasp as the world seemed to explode...

Superman looked up, his eyes still dazzled, his head still ringing. Still he saw Captain America falling and without a thought as to his own safety flew to help.

"Up! Up and away!"

Light blossomed from the Rift, a swell of white that threatened to engulf them all...

J'onn J'onzz saw Annihilus, his form suddenly char black dissolving in the glare. He thought at first that the creature had been destroyed, but as his sight shifted to spectrums beyond human conception he saw the monster's body stretched to infinity, disappearing into the hole. J'onzz turned, trying to protect the unconscious Diana as the wave of white engulfed him.

The white expanded, washing forward slowly, or maybe it was that Time had finally given up...

Dinah Laurel Lance smiled as she saw the wave of white light swelling towards her like a tidal wave. "This is it, girl," she whispered, falling. There was nothing to grab, nowhere to leap. It would be over in a heartbeat... two...

"I'm coming, Ollie..."

The little woman with the wings just suddenly seemed to appear before her. She had seen the Atom grow often enough to understand however as the Wasp

reached out and snagged her belt, grunting as her tiny, silken wings fluttered all the faster.

“Gnnh!” she grunted, but Dinah felt her fall cut short. “Time for a diet, dear...” the woman grimaced as she started to descend. Dinah had to laugh...

The white flooded the sky, growing in size and brilliance...

“Cease! Thor commands thee!”

The Black Panther watched in awe as Thor shouted and bellowed to the very heavens. The Thunder God slammed his mystic hammer down to the rooftop and just like that the winds died down, the lightning flickered and slowed. There was a break in the roll of thunder.

He saw the expanding white then, his eyes growing wide. It seemed vaguely familiar, but before he could remember, reason it out the white started to retract. The swirling clouds of chaos and negativity seemed caught in a vortex, spiraling inwards towards the Rift somewhere within the white.

“Thor?”

“Tis not mine doing, Avenger. There be other forces at work beyond the Odinson’s ken.”

There was nothing to do but watch...

And the white started to recede. And the skies screamed in agony...

Hank McCoy watched in awe as well. In his time he had seen many things; been to other worlds, other dimensions, battled creatures and gods, he had touched the stars.

He had not been so afraid since he had fought the Dark Phoenix. His friend...

“Hank?”

He felt Carol grab his leg and looked about. He saw Wanda and Pietro staring up into the phenomenon in wonder, holding each other close. Zatanna had passed out, thankfully, and Plastic Man had wrapped about her to protect his friend. The man himself was remarkably silent, hovering underfoot with his goggles wide and staring from the platform that he was. He saw Carol looking up at him- past him-

“What’s...”

Henry McCoy smiled, crouching down and grasping his friend's hand. She smiled back.

"I dunno," he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Whatever, it's out of our hands now."

The platform suddenly erupted in a green glow, and as the Beast looked about he saw the boy- the Green Lantern rising up shakily higher from the platform and hanging onto the other kid- Firestorm. He looked grim, and barely conscious. His face was battered and bruised, swelling, but still he engulfed them all in a protective sphere.

"I don't usually do bubbles," he said as he flowed through the green, encompassing the Plastic Man, collapsing back with the others. "But... I figured I'd make... an exception..."

And the white started to return, taking back what it had expelled...

Tony Stark eased to hover, watching as the storm clouds started to swirl back into the sudden flare of white. His armor's internal displays were flickering and flashing as he tried to get readings, tried to understand what was happening. One by one they overloaded, flashing 'ERROR' in his peripheral vision.

He shut them down.

The massive white flare resembled a huge bubble in a way. It also looked remarkably like the Negative Zone barriers that he had encountered in the past- and the Time Bubbles. Strange...

He had no desire to fly into the thing, but he did not see as he had a choice. He could not see any of the others from his vantage and he had to assume the worst. That they had already been drawn inside.

Anthony Stark sighed and shifted in his flight path. Kicking in the thrusters in his boot jets, he shot down into the white...

The clouds swirled, sucking back within, caught in the receding tide...

Hawkeye attached the magnetic clamp to his harness out of habit as soon as the grapple arrow struck Midas and exploded about him. The grapple itself clanged to the ground as Doctor Midas stared down at the thin cable suddenly wrapped about his midsection. Then he looked up.

"That the best you had?"

Hawkeye felt something wrap about his own waist then, and looking down he saw the metal, woven mesh of Oubliette's whip swirling about his stomach and chest, tangling with his own line. He glanced back and saw her standing there, licking her teeth with a grin.

"Hey, lover..."

Hawkeye dropped even as Midas unleashed the power of the Nega Rod. He had been doing this long enough to recognize a distraction, but when he looked back to the villain he was surprised to see the negative energy spiraling skyward rather than frying him to a crisp.

"What the..." he said, but did not hear Midas or his daughter echo his confusion.

He felt a sharp tug on his grapple line and looked up just in time to see Midas fly by overhead. He was flailing, the rod still adhered to his golden gauntlet and being dragged along as he shot towards the weird white soap bubble floating in the sky.

"Aw, crap..."

Too late Hawkeye realized what was happening, just enough time to grab the AP arrow still imbedded in the rooftop as he was suddenly ripped from the roof and dragged along in Midas' wake. He braced, watching as his line grew short, knowing what was coming next.

He almost heaved as the whip of the Exterminatrix grew taut about him. He felt her weight getting dragged along as well. She was heavier than she looked.

Midas screamed as he vanished into the White. Hawkeye heard that, trying to watch and see what was happening. In the split second that he had he saw the Rift still glowing within, waiting like a wide, gaping mouth to swallow them all. Oddly, within that he saw more- like a city shimmering in the distance. He saw what looked like Saturn...

Then everything went white...

Captain America stared into the dawn's early light...

The storms had vanished; the lightning and thunder, rain and winds, all simply gone thanks to Thor. Off in the East the sun was rising, the first golden rays of a glorious new day cresting the horizon. He could feel the warmth, the hope rolling past on the warm morning breeze. They had won. The world had survived to see another day.

But at what cost...

“Captain?”

Captain America turned, only a little surprised to find the Black Canary standing at his side. She looked... pretty, refreshed with the sunlight sparkling in her freshly washed, golden hair, trying to force a reassuring smile. None of them had managed to sleep yet, except those that the SHIELD Medics had said should; Wonder Woman and Green Lantern, the boy that was Firestorm as well as Zatanna and Wanda and Pietro, the Flash. The Chaos storms, the magic and negative energies had taken their toll. They had showered though, and licked their wounds under the scrutiny of Forge’s task force.

Woo had appeared after the calamity, carrying Richards. Both were fine, thank God.

“It was... a Negative Sphere... ” Richards had said, obviously in agony though Cap knew enough to let him talk. Reed Richards was perhaps the smartest man on the planet, and if he had any insight-

“You remember... Maximus created them... sealing away the Great Refuge... years ago...”

Cap nodded, remembering the early days of the Kree-Skrull War. Black Bolt had shattered that barrier- and one before that if he recalled correctly.

“The Negative Zone... the source of Annihilus’ power took... took it back. Redirected somehow... somewhere.... “

“What do you mean, Reed?”

“They’re alive... “

SHIELD had taken him away at that, when he had passed out. Woo reported what Forge had relayed- the other tears had sealed after showing a similar surge that SHIELD was labeling the ‘White Event’. There had been damage of course. The expanding spheres of Negative Energy had simply erased parts of buildings, shearing them off here in Manhattan and around the world. At other Rifts, entire mountain tops were gone, villages and cities, thousands of people...

It would be weeks, months perhaps before they had a full accounting of those lost, but a simple head count here confirmed four. The Martian Manhunter and Wonder Woman, Iron Man...

Hawkeye...

He had seen it, Hawkeye, Midas and his daughter being sucked into the White. Swallowed...

He heard the sounds of Bulldozers moving through the streets. Damage Control had arrived.

“Just wanted to say that... well... I’m sorry.”

Cap looked down at the woman, the Black Canary smiling up at him. She had her hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him in his loss.

“Canary, I-“

“Dinah. My name's Dinah.” She smiled, looking away at the sound of machinery, her hair blowing across her face. “Doesn’t really seem to matter here, now...”

“They’re alive, Dinah.”

“What?” He felt her grip tighten on his shoulder. He did not know what she wanted to say- though he suspected, but now her eyes went wide with wonder-

“How- how do you...”

“Reed Richards told me, and there is no man on the face of this world that I trust more to tell me the truth. They’re alive.” He turned to her and smiled, his hand brushing hers, giving it the slightest squeeze. “Go. Tell the others to rest. We leave as soon as we can.”

Dinah Laurel Lance nodded, smiling as she turned away and ran back to the others. Her eyes were filled with hope again.

They would need to stop at the Mansion first. There was a device there that would help, hopefully, if the Panther could make it work again. Then they would be on their way.

“We’re coming Tony... Clint... We’re coming...”

To be continued...

Next issue: The Avengers and the Justice League cross the void and take the battle to the next level. What will they find in the Justice League Universe, and what is the fate of their missing members? Join us again in one short week to find out!

Story and Plot © Curt F and Chris Munn 2005



JLA Vs Avengers #4

Titan- Somewhere in the Negative Zone...

“They’re leaving...”

Mentor raised his arm, shielding his eyes from the harsh white glare that was swiftly receding through the Rift. The strange cascading energies that had been spewing from the tear had slowly vanished as well, sucked through the hole in a spiraling vortex, like filthy water down the drain. And thankfully, with the storms and lightning, the red skies and the white bubble, so too went the creatures of Chaos.

They had been trapped in the Negative Zone for months now, the Eternals of Earth and Titan, trapped on the latter when the very moon had been shifted to the anti-matter realm to save them all. It had been a hard existence. The Zone was a cruel and thankless mistress, yet it had never been so harsh as in this, what they all had thought to be the final battle. When the dark skies had turned red and the very fabric of space had ripped asunder, when the creatures of the Wall born of Chaos had come streaming through the Rift there had been many that foresaw their doom; the end.

But now the skies had reverted, returning to the strange and swirling brilliance that they had once been before. Truth, Mentor had never seen the space of the Zone so stark in all their months of exile. So barren and... clean...

“It would appear that we have won.”

Mentor turned to look at Thena as she stepped to his side. The beautiful ruler of Earth’s Eternals was wounded, her golden armor ripped and showing skin and blood. Her right arm hung limply at her side, yet she stood tall and uncomplaining, proud.

“I do not know,” Mentor replied, casting his gaze upon the devastation. The great city that they had been constructing lay savaged and in ruins about them. Many

of the mighty spires lay toppled or burning. The Great Hall was shattered, smoke rising from the broken, ivory dome. All about them too lay the dead. There were so many.

“Rather, I believe the battle has moved on, passing us by. We have done all that we could, but-“

“We have done all that was expected, Mentor of Titan.”

Both Mentor and Thena turned to the sound of the all-too familiar voice and saw Adam Warlock descending into their midst, his Infinity Watch at his side- and one other- Rick Jones, partner and link to the hated Genis-Vell, the son of the Captain Marvel. They appeared as battered and bruised as the rest of Titan, scarred and bloodied. In truth, Pip the Troll was unconscious, held by Gamora the Assassin. Even Thanos the Mad Titan and son of Mentor himself seemed shaken, recently freed from his own imprisonment at the hands of a dark god. Only Warlock seemed unperturbed as he landed in a swirl of ragged cloak, planting his staff to earth for support. The green Soul Gem on his golden brow glistened in the queer light.

“We have given our all. We can do no more.”

“As always, you speak in riddles Warlock. Have we won, or-“

“We are safe, at least for now. As you suppose, Mentor, the battle rages on without us.”

“Marv says that the storms have moved beyond Shiar space as well,” Rick said, stepping within the select group. “Worlds vanished from the quadrant, but the ‘fabric’ survives, whatever that means.”

“And what of his vaunted ‘Awareness’, Jones,” Thena said with a sneer. There was no love lost between the Eternals trapped on Titan in the Negative Zone, and the so-called Protector of the Universe. “What, pray tell does that tell you.”

Rick frowned, gazing up at the Rift in the Zone and raking his fingers back through his hair. Not so far away he could see the fluctuating energies of the Exploding Atmosphere, that gateway to Earth that defied their passing. “He says ‘the energies yet burn, but elsewhere’. He can feel them swelling and spreading, but somehow being contained like...”

“He says he senses Norrin Radd.”

“The Silver Surfer?” Starfox said, limping up to the crowd. Eros, the other son of Mentor stared at his brother with a flicker of hate- an oddity for the one-time God

of Love- before returning his attention to Jones. “How is the former Herald of Galactus involved in all of this?”

“He says he can’t pierce that veil, Eros. He simply ‘hears his agony’.”

“That particular veil was never meant for even Genis’ father to pierce, Jones.”

There was a collective gasp as all eyes turned skyward again, staring at a strange rippling in the fabric of space. All save one feared that a new tear was forming, that the disaster was renewing, yet as they watched something seemed to form. It was large and oddly chair-shaped, and sitting in it, a man. He was grim-faced and dressed in blue, his costume flickering with unearthly streaks of light and energy-

“I am Metron,” he said simply and with certainty, as though that explained all. Starfox and Gamora leaped to the front, ready to attack but both Mentor and Warlock stayed their rage.

“Stop! This is no foe.”

“Nor is he truly friend, Mentor,” Warlock said and the being simply nodded.

“You are indeed wise, Adam Warlock, but hark. I have much to say, but my time here is limited. It has taken all the energies and power of my Mobius Chair to cross the threshold, and it is only by the very disaster we all seek to avert that I was able this time.”

“Speak then, stranger,” Mentor said taking charge to silence uneasy murmurings of the gathering crowd. “What have you to tell us?”

“Little that your wisdom has not already gleaned. Know however that steps are being taken to repair the damage that has been done. Even now a conclave of Mages struggles at the very edge of reality to repair the Wall, trying to ultimately hold back the floodtide of Chaos itself. Too, beings struggle at the dimensional crossings; the Avatars of Earth in all dimensions seek to control the surge of anti-matter, to keep it at bay. The very Gods of all worlds strive against the creatures of Chaos; the Asgardians and Olympians, the Titans of Old, the Gods of New Genesis that are a mirror of your own Eternals. The war has come to my home reality however, and it is there that the ultimate battle will be fought.”

“Then we have to get there, Metron,” Starfox said. “Show us the way!”

Metron shook his head as a scream of agony cut through the air. All eyes turned to the source and saw Pip the Troll staring wide-eyed into space, his chest falling as his final breath fled his body.

“Pip!” Gamora shouted, running back to the creature that had inadvertently become her friend over time. She was an assassin by trade, created by Thanos for his own dark schemes. She had seen Death in all her glory and knew even as she crouched at the Troll’s still form that he was gone. She looked up and about, wiping away a single tear, almost surprised to find it there.

“His Gem is gone- stolen!” then, “Where’s Thanos?”

Everyone turned, all searching for any sign of the Mad Titan, nowhere to be seen. All save Adam Warlock who stared at Metron, watching as the strange visitor began to fade.

“There are other worlds...” Metron said as he vanished, his image fading on the wind.

“Other worlds to conquer...” Warlock added, finally turning away...

The Mighty Avengers **VS.** ***The JLA***

Last Stand!

The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:

Ra’s al Ghul squinted into the brilliance of victory.

Even from miles distant the Babel Tower gleamed, crackling with power as it drew in the strange negative energies of the storms that had spread across the planet. Ra’s al Ghul watched with barely contained excitement as the power pulsed and throbbed, the Tower itself wavering, barely able to contain the devastating anti-matter that would soon be released across the globe in a cleansing wave that would cull all of those not worthy to reside in his Utopia to come.

He could hear the agonized screams of the silver man, that being that had fallen from the stars and had brought his dreams to the cusp of realization. The cosmic Powers contained within that one creature, that alien were vast, and all that Ra's al Ghul needed to capture the crisis and turn it to his favor and goals. Truth, the silver creature was barely visible in the pulsing flare of energy erupting within the Control Room, the machines of the demon's Head stripping away his abilities and powers, using both to his own ends. Soon...

"Ahhh!"

Ra's al Ghul turned to the new cry, his eyes scanning the shielded room beyond to find Lund struggling at his controls. The scientist was expendable of course- they all were- but he MUST finish his duty before he succumbed.

"Lund, you fool!" Ra's al Ghul snapped as he depressed the button on his own console. Immediately he heard the roar of uncontained power beyond, the screams of his chosen scientists as they burned for the glory of the Demon's Head. "If you cannot control-

"Not my fault!" Lund shrieked, his hands a flurry of motion as he adjusted the controls. The actual mechanics of the machinery were lost on al Ghul, though it had been his brilliance that had conceived the final glory. His 'Babel Towers' had been positioned about the world, his original goal to throw humanity into chaos by taking away their ability to communicate. Only the strong would have survived that, only those worthy. With the advent of the red skies however, and the silver man, his plans had been changed, and the Towers converted or shut down to further his new scheme. Here in Nepal, his Babel Tower drew in the chaos of the storms, the unbridled energies held in check by the powers of the silver being. When the time was right, Ra's al Ghul would unleash the Negative Energy upon the world in devastating effect, wiping away those that deserved a quick death and would not fit into his ideals of the world. He would control those that remained, guiding them into a new, golden age...

"The energies are spiking, coming in too fast. The Tower can't contain... there's something... Nooo!"

Ra's al Ghul grimaced, actually flinching, staggering back in momentary worry as the room beyond flared white. He heard Lund's scream- the terrified screams of all of his scientists as a wave of anti-matter washed through the fortified Control Room, wiping away the unworthy; Lund and his minions. They all simply faded away, the negative images of their skeletons lingering momentarily in his mind's eye.

"Father?"

Talia was at his side, but he paid her no heed as he stared into the room. The silver man had survived, but the scientists were gone. In their place however were three others, lying on the floor and connected by charred bands of steel and leather, smoldering and hurt- though alive!

“Ho... Holy... Holy shit...”

Hawkeye raised his head, immediately regretting it as the world swam and spun about him. He lowered his head quickly, but too late as his stomach churned and lurched and whatever was left in his stomach spewed out across the floor.

He lay there a moment, gagging and hacking as he tried to get a grip, tried to focus. He was in a lab- he had seen that much before the world went screwy. It looked like one of Doom’s labs- or Reed Richards’ with a thousand whirring and clicking machines just to make a cup of coffee. Somehow though he imagined that whatever the lab’s purpose with all its gleaming machines and gear lining every free space of wall, it was a bit more complicated than that.

He looked up again, struggling to get up off the dirty tiled floor, his bow a familiar piece of reality in his hand. He had seen something else before his last lunch had come rushing back- something that he recognized-

“The Silver Surfer?”

Clint Barton stared at the former Herald of Galactus. The man was trapped, secured inside some kind of tube and writhing about like someone was sticking pins in his brain. Why, Hawkeye did not have a clue, but he knew that he had to get the man out. No way he was there for any good purpose.

Against all odds Hawkeye struggled to his hands and knees, trying to rise, trying to get to his feet. To his credit, he almost made it before leather coiled about his throat and a jolt of electricity shot through his brain.

Oubliette stood on shaky legs and high heels as she looked down at the archer spasming at her feet, dangling the coils of her whip wrapped about Hawkeye’s throat. She smiled, then frowned quickly as she looked to her father just a few feet away, trying to rise. The Exterminatrix stepped over Hawkeye’s prone form, her heels clacking as she ran to her father-

“Daddy?” she said, kneeling beside her father, Doctor Midas. He seemed weak as well, confused as he struggled to his knees. He still held the Negative Rod in his hands, and Oubliette gasped as she stared at the small metallic cylinder that they had received from Annihilus- in a round about way. It was still crackling with energy, pulsing even more vibrantly if possible, as it seemed to be drawing in the

energies that danced about the lab. She had no idea what was happening, but she could see the glory reflected in her father as he hugged the rod to the golden chestplate of his armor. He was ecstatic.

Midas stood and held the Rod out, laughing as the energies flared and coruscated about the nozzle of the cylinder. Oubliette could see the very air shimmering as the Nega Rod sucked up the energy in the room, lines of power arcing out and away to the machinery and the writhing body of the Silver Surfer. She shivered, licking her lips-

“Daddy?”

“It’s here, daughter- finally!” Midas cackled as his hand started to glow, caught up in the energies of the Rod. “Power! Right here...”

Oubliette stared at the machinery, at the Surfer squirming in agony. Where were they? She had no idea as she slowly turned, trying to take it all in. Finally she saw the people beyond- the old man and the woman both wearing the dark goggles, watching them from beyond the thick safety glass in another room. She heard the crackle of an intercom.

“Who are you?”

Midas turned, staring at the man beyond the thick glass that was staring back with equal intensity. Doctor Midas laughed-

“I?” Midas said, raising the Cosmic Control Rod high overhead and Oubliette felt the sudden surge of power, making her hair stand on end with a crackle of electricity, and more...

“I AM...”

And the Control Room exploded...

**Manhattan,
Avenger’s Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 2
Storage Vault:**

“It should be here somewhere...”

The Black Panther crouched, his keen eyes swiftly reading the labels on the many boxes that lined the shelves and corners, every bit of free space of the storage area. There were years of memories here; machines and tokens, mementos from past adventures all stacked and stored away for future use or future generations. There were weapons here as well, devices taken from

defeated villains and locked away for study. Weapons they had created. Too, there were monuments.

“Here,” Captain America said drawing everyone’s attention. “I think this is it.”

The Panther moved closer, inspecting the small crate that his friend had found, reading the label as the Batman stepped near as well.

“It’s smaller than I would have imagined,” he said, eyeing the crate as Captain America pried it open at T’Challa’s nod.

“Power is not often measured in size, my friend. At least not on this world.” Batman smirked, nodding.

“Touché.”

The three men turned then as Captain America cradled the machine, heading for the door. Thor and Superman waited patiently, both knowing that they were out of their depths in Avenger’s knowledge and sciences. There were many similarities of course, but then too there were multitudes of differences. Thor stared at the small machine however, his eyes sparking with a glint of recognition as the Panther once again secured the vault door.

“I do recall yon device now,” he said, following as the small group made their way back up the stairs and out of the sub-basements of the mansion far beneath the streets. “Twas when our allies- Goliath, the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver and... the Vision were lost to us for a time.”

“On the Squadron Supreme’s world,” the Panther said remembering the adventure well. He had been called in by Stark to help create the very device they now carried. “It was the first time we learned the truth behind the Squadron Sinister’s origins. Not our first journey to other dimensions, but an enlightening one.”

T’Challa, Son of T’Chaka and King of all the Wakandas listened only partially as Thor recounted the tale of the Black Knight’s quest as they walked. The quest to cleanse the Ebony Blade of its Blood Curse, of their battles upon Arkon’s world against the Enchantress and the resulting separation of the team upon attempting to return home. When the four afore-mentioned members were lost-tossed to the strangely similar world of the Squadron Supreme for the first time.

There had been other battles between the two teams of course, since, and many monumental. It almost seemed second nature now traversing the gap of dimensional space for the two teams to meet. Were that that was the case now, but it was never simple it seemed.

They passed up the flights of stairs, and T'Challa watched their new, erstwhile companions. Superman seemed almost intrigued, actually smiling on occasion to Thor's recounting. Yet there was some deeper mystery troubling the 'Man of Steel'. Something bothered his heart. The Justice League had recounted their most recent tales of being cast into the Negative Zone and their own encounter with the Squadron Supreme. Their battle with the being they called the Time Trapper before that, and more importantly the alleged 'murder' of the child of Arcanna. To hear their side it had been an accident, and in truth- to the Black Panther at least- that seemed the way of it. Whatever the circumstance had fueled the rage they all had felt over that had passed it seemed. Grudges remained of course, and memories, but that however was not what held Superman's true attention. There was something more.

The loss of their comrades in the Negative Zone perhaps? The League had said as much, though not in great detail. Six were lost, presumed dead from their initial travels. Was there one there special to the Man of Steel? Or was it simply the dire threat that they all still faced? The recently missing Martian Manhunter and Wonder Woman- along with Hawkeye and Iron Man- two of the Avengers' own? Perhaps the very fate of their own home world lost to them for so long?

And what of the Batman- what was he thinking?

His grim façade barely ever broke. The Panther had yet to see the man sleep, let alone eat or simply rest. And his eyes never stopped moving, taking in everything. Even now he scanned the grand hallways of the Mansion, taking note of furniture, noting the many pictures and portraits, marking the windows and doors to memory. What drove a man to such extremes? His peers often considered the Panther grim and stoic, but he was nothing compared to this man from another world.

"Jarvis..."

The Panther looked ahead, drawn from his pondering to see Captain America speaking with the Avenger's butler. Jarvis had been with the Avengers from the very beginning, and nothing ever seemed to disturb his sense of dignity and duty. Not even the sudden intrusion of eight unknown heroes from another dimension. The aging butler stood proudly in his own version of attention, nodding slightly to each man in turn, returning his attention then to Captain America-

"I have presented Brunch for your pleasures, sirs," Jarvis stated matter-of-factly. "Though beyond coffee and light breads, most seem content to simply rest and exchange pleasantries. Master Beast is still in the Medical Labs tending to Masters Flash and Green Lantern?" Jarvis looked to Superman for reassurance as to the names and the Man of Steel grinned, nodding. Jarvis smiled in return, "and I believe Miss Wanda and Miss Van Dyne are giving Miss Zatanna an impromptu tour of the upper living areas and recreational facilities."

“Thank you, Jarvis,” Cap said, and with a nod of his head the man smartly stepped about his serving cart and headed back towards the kitchen. Cap turned and saw the Batman watching the receding retainer with some interest, but whatever he was thinking remained a mystery behind the white slits of his cowl.

“We should get set up as soon as possible, Cap,” the Panther said before the group could enter the parlor. “I’ll have to give the machine a diagnostics. It has been years since we last used it, after all. I wish Iron Man was here,” the Panther said with a sigh as he took the dimensional gate device from Captain America. “It is his creation, more than mine.”

“I have some experience with electronics, Panther,” the Batman spoke up. “If I can be of any help...”

“Any assistance would be appreciated, Batman. And best you come as well, Thor. As you will recall, we will need the power of M’Jolnir soon enough.”

“Aye, my friend,” Thor said with a nod. “I stand e’er ready to thine aid.”

“Call us when you’re ready, T’Challa,” Cap said as the three men were departing for the Science Labs. “We’ll be here working on morale.”

**Manhattan,
Avenger’s Mansion-
Third Floor
Living Quarters:**

“It’s very impressive,” Zatanna said as she walked alongside the Scarlet Witch and the Winsome Wasp. All three women had taken the time to shower and freshen up, now awaiting Jarvis’ announcement that their uniforms were cleaned and repaired as well- except for the Wasp of course. Zatanna had been truly dazzled by the woman’s wardrobe, which took up one of the smaller rooms in itself. A pity she was shorter than the other two women were, as Zatanna would have loved to swap clothes, if just for awhile.

Still, she was glad for the downtime as the three strolled the wide, lush halls of the mansion’s upper floors. Wanda had said that it had once been the residence of Anthony Stark’s parents- the Iron Man. She could easily see that the man had to be in the league of Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor when it came to money, if those artifacts and relics littering the halls were at all close in equal value to their duplicates on her own world. She marveled at the décor; the furnishings rich but in excellent taste, the extravagant pottery and paintings, statues and simpler busts by masters both old and new. There were many statuettes by a woman named Masters that were truly extraordinary, and all the more so as Janet said that the woman was blind.

She stared at the many portraits as well. Members past and present of the organization she supposed, recognizing those that she had only just met. She paused, sipping at her mug of coffee as she eyed a collage of reproduced newspaper and magazine articles touting a 'new' assemblage from years before. Captain America stood in the center of Wanda, her brother and a brooding Hawkeye. All had been villains apparently, at least at one point, and the media seemed to doubt the team's legitimacy. It was so unlike home...

"Those were hard times," Wanda said as though reading the other magician's mind. Zatanna glanced at the Scarlet Witch, hearing the almost longing in her voice, but saw the smile as well. "The best of times as well. We were all so young and arrogant and so eager to prove ourselves, both to the world as well as those that came before." Wanda grinned, feeling Janet Van Dyne's hand on her arm.

"We always had faith in you," the Wasp said, her own memories coming to fore. "We never would have accepted you if we didn't see the goodness within, and it was that very arrogance and eagerness that helped you all prove yourselves... eventually."

"It seems your past was as hectic as the League's," Zatanna added in understanding, "and as uncertain at times. I didn't join the League until much later, but I remember my father sharing many of their adventures with me, reading from the paper in the morning. There were too many times when it seemed the public had doubts, but we- the League always prevailed in the end."

Both Wanda and Janet smiled, knowing exactly what the other woman meant. "We always do," the Wasp added after a moment. "But hopefully not in our house coats," she said with a grin. "Let's go see if Jarvis needs some help with the laundry."

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 1
Medical Labs:**

"We hardly ever use this device," the Beast said as he swiveled the telescoping extensor arm out over the table, aiming the lens over the Flash's leg. "Though why I can only imagine. It's not a catch-all per se, no miraculous healing mechanism, yet it does speed the process remarkably."

"Seemed to work for me," the Green Lantern said as he massaged his shoulder. "At least to a point." Kyle Rayner winced as he felt a popping of bones in his neck and shoulder. The Avengers' Ultra-Rejuvenator had done a seemingly

miraculous job of healing some of his minor injuries that had swelled and colored after the beating Thor had given him. Luckily there had been no internal injuries- or if there had the Ring had taken care of them. What the Ring could not heal though, the Beast's machine had for the most part. At least now he could move again without moaning.

"Goggles up," the Beast said as he stepped behind the protective screen to operate the machine. Kyle held the dark goggles over his eyes, watching as Wally West forced a smile before doing the same. The Beast was not certain if the machine would help the Flash as his own aches and exhaustion was speculated as a result of being cut off from the Speed Force coupled with his own efforts to compensate. Wally had simply pushed himself too hard. As Kyle watched, squinting into the intense violet light he could see his friend's face relax just a bit. It did seem to help, and as the Beast shut down the machine's power the Flash actually collapsed back in a sprawl.

"Whoa... baby," Flash said with a contented smile. "Give me one of these things and I might swear off sex for life." Kyle and McCoy both laughed, stepping back up beside the examination table and the young speedster.

"It is refreshing," Beast said as he slid a stethoscope pad along the Flash's chest, listening intently. "You're heart rate's still fast, though I assume that's normal? How's the legs?"

"Good," Flash said as he swung his feet to the floor and tried to stand. He wavered a bit, his legs quivering, but the other two men were both at his side to support him. "Or better at any rate. The pain's gone but I still feel shaky."

"Maybe some food," Kyle suggested. "Like the old days?"

"Not a bad idea-"

Both men felt the quick breeze as a scarlet streak vanished through the suddenly open door. The Beast grinned, glancing at the Lantern.

"That certainly brings back memories from my youth. Quicksilver and I used to be at odds quite often, and too many times-" But before the Beast could finish his statement the Flash had returned and piled plates of food up on the exam table. He faded into view with an empty plate in hand- then suddenly it was full again.

"Better dig in guys," he said around a mouthful of eggs almost too fast to understand. "This is great, and thirds are definitely on the menu..."

And he was gone again...

“Oh, definitely,” the Beast chuckled, moving off to restore the Medical Lab to a ready condition. Rayner grinned, not really knowing why, but understanding none the less.

**Manhattan,
Avenger’s Mansion-
Main Floor
Parlor:**

“Coffee, Cap?”

Steve Rogers turned from the window; his own thoughts and reminiscing interrupted by the soft voice at his side. Outside on Fifth Avenue the streets were abustle again, already. There was damage of course, but repair crews were already well at work, Damage Control and SHIELD over-seeing the worst. Traffic rolled along what was once known as Museum Mile, and beyond in Central Park he could see the usual crowds of people out enjoying the relatively good weather; the calm ‘between’ the storms as it was generally called. It seemed that it took more than the potential devastation of the cosmos to put Manhattanites off their stride for more than a New York Minute.

Cap smiled down at the Black Canary, accepting the steaming mug that she offered him. “I usually don’t. I’ve had trouble with addictive narcotics in the past, but I’ll admit that today I can use the caffeine.” He took a sip, immediately feeling the very slight rush, then frowned as he saw the blonde strike a match to a cigarette. “You smoke?”

“When I’m anxious,” Dinah Laurel Lance said, waving the match out and dropping it into the ashtray situated on the windowsill. She sat in the window seat, Cap still standing over her as she blew smoke out the open window. “I started young for awhile, mainly to annoy my mother. I start and stop,” she said with a shrug. “I was surprised to find a humidior on the table, and a cigarette case. I’m surprised your butler allows it.”

“Jarvis does his job well, and there have been a few smokers in our ranks. Stark himself,” Cap smirked, “and even me for a time, back in the war before we knew better.”

“It’s weird,” the Canary said changing the subject, watching the smoke spiral out the window and drift away on the breeze. “Not so long ago- on my Earth- I was right here, exactly. This building is a Justice League International embassy on my world. Mostly just a place to crash now, but it’s an odd sense of déjà vu.”

“It’s a mansion on the Squadron’s world as well,” Cap added, sipping at his coffee. “At least it was. I suppose there are some constants in all dimensions.”

"I guess," Dinah agreed as she crushed out her cigarette. Cap noted that it was barely half smoked. "I wish we could get moving. I hate this waiting."

"I know what you mean." Cap nodded, glancing about the room. He saw the Plastic Man simply content apparently to relax and eat. Cap wondered if the man's strange metabolism required extra nourishment- or any at all for that matter. He seemed a truly unique individual. Not so far away the boy- Ronnie Raymond sat watching the television, absorbed in the news of the strange world he was on apparently. He had yet to change back into his other persona- Firestorm- and Cap wondered if he had been trying, or if he could not. On the far side of the room he saw Warbird rubbing down Pietro's legs with liniment. It was an odd sight to see Carol Danvers involved in such a mundane task as she had recently been volatile to say the least. He remembered though that like he, she was ex-military and knew full well the benefits of downtime. Quicksilver for his part had declined to join the other speedster in the Med-Labs. He knew that as beneficial as the Ultra-Rejuvenator was, it could potentially be as addictive as any drug and as a rule of thumb it was only used for emergencies. A simple massage and ample rest and Pietro was usually fine.

Cap saw a shimmer of red as the Flash appeared again, but before he could even move the speedster was gone again with more food. Apparently the healing was going well.

Captain America downed the last of his coffee, setting down his mug. He had eaten lightly and felt fit and rested again, ready to go. Like the Canary however, the waiting was getting on his nerves. He glanced at the beautiful woman sitting before where he stood and found her looking up at him. She reminded him of Sharon Carter in a way; skilled and dedicated, determined and independent. Just as attractive, the same smile, huge blue eyes...

"Cap, I-"

The intercom buzzed and Cap heard the Panther's voice in the proverbial nick of time-

"We're ready..."

War World...

Gantheet staggered and collapsed, breathing heavily as he swayed on his hands and knees. His power was waning, he could feel it. The Flame still burned brightly he knew, but the negative energies, which threatened the very existence of the universe itself were cutting him from the source. It would not be long before his own reserves were totally depleted.

And still the creatures came.

He heard the roar of power, the blinding flash of light and saw Izaya not so far away still engaged in battle. He could tell that the Highfather was weakening as well, and so was Shazam. The magic like the Flame was in flux, surging at times and then barely a spark. If the creatures should mount an attack at their ebb, they would all be done.

Luckily however the monstrosities born of Chaos on the Great Wall were, for the most part, unthinking, unorganized killing machines. They swooped in like locusts, but a devastating swarm without guidance, their only purpose seemingly to devastate any and all in their path. Luckily too, individually they seemed to fall before the powers of the three.

There were just so many...

"Ganthet!" Highfather said, stepping closer. Light flared from his shepherd's staff and another of the creatures fell. Another took its place however, scrabbling closer. "Are you injured?"

Ganthet shook his head, struggling to rise. "No, old friend. Tiring, but I fight."

Both men turned at Shazam's scream, watching as the old Wizard fell beneath a writhing mass of slick black.

"Shazam!" Lightning flashed at Ganthet's panicked shout but fizzled with nowhere to strike. The Guardian of the Universe saw Izaya's powers flare, blasting into the sea of creatures swarming over the Wizard and quickly steeled his will, adding to that power with the Green Flames of Oa. The creations of Chaos screamed and writhed, burning under the onslaught, yet still they could not see the Wizard.

There was a shimmering, a rippling as though the very fabric of space had suddenly been stirred, and just as suddenly the creatures were gone. The nearest swarm at least. Both Highfather and Ganthet stared at the still form of the old Wizard, bloodied and battered yet heaving for breath. They glanced at one another, both puzzled by the strange effect, but as they started for the old man-

"Darkseid..." Izaya gasped.

"Mongul!" Ganthet shouted, yet both knew that they were wrong even before their startled echoes died away.

The man kneeling at Shazam's side resembled both, and neither. The same size and monstrous shape, the same stony visage, yet there was something different

about the blue-clad figure that neither would-be conqueror could match. There was an air of Death about him.

The stony-faced savior stood as the two older beings approached. Both were wary, and too both watched the skies for the next swarm of Chaos unleashed. The being however simply smiled, raising his hands.

“Peace, gentle beings,” the man said, his voice gravelly, as etched in stone as his face. “I bring good tidings,” he continued, the Wizard at his feet slowly beginning to stir. “I bring victory...”

The man gestured skyward, and Ganthet’s eyes boggled at the sight. He wondered how he had not seen it before; it was so huge. It was a star ship the size of War World itself on which they all stood. It appeared spherical and white; smooth with distance save the one huge aperture on one hemisphere from which what appeared a gigantic lens protruded. Ganthet knew the wonders of the universe, yet there were few man-made structures that could compare with the might and majesty of War World. Yet this...

“I bring Galactus!”

Metropolis, The Daily Planet Building:

Iron Man soared higher, swooping up to blast at the creature climbing the side of the building. He could hear the strained whine of his over-taxed Repulsor Rays, adjusted the gain just a bit from the boot jets to compensate as he let gravity do the armor’s work for a few seconds. He had the solar receptors wide, letting the power cells feed what energy they might collect though sunlight was scarce with the roiling clouds churning overhead. The electrical pins were doing a better job but the computer was having a hard time sifting energy from the anti-matter.

He watched as the monster screamed, dropping from its perch and flailing as it fell to the streets below. Hopefully that was one more down, though he doubted it. It took a head on shot of the Repulsors to actually hurt one of the creatures, and from what he had seen they could survive a simple fall.

Kicking in his boot jets once more he sailed higher again, turning in a wide arc as he scanned the building. This one seemed secure enough for the moment, at least on the outside, but the rest of the city was still under siege by the creatures. The streets were crowded with the panicked and injured- and the dead. Smoke was rising from fires raging everywhere, whether sparked by the storms or the monsters he had no idea. Not that it mattered. The once pristine city was overrun and in shambles. Its huge towers were charred and crumbling, though surprisingly none had collapsed yet. Iron Man could see that it had been a beautiful city once; huge and stretching into suburbs dwindling in the distance.

Even the slums seemed... clean, but for the war raging in the streets. He wondered just where he was.

He had simply appeared, spit from a tear in the sky so like those that had appeared on his own world. It had taken a moment simply to recover, a frantic few moments as his onboard computers rebooted to at least the point that he could control the armor again. He had brought up his Nav-software, but the system could not place his position, and simply looking around he could see that he was in no city that should exist on his own world. He saw the gigantic glass tower in the shape of an 'L' almost in the city's center, and the other building, older and smaller with the huge golden Saturn-shaped globe on top. No, not his world at all...

The Justice League's Earth then. Had to be.

He had been scanning the city, searching for some sign of the others when the creature's started appearing. They were the same monstrosities that had come swarming from the Negative Zone on his own world. Slick black and armor plated, with nothing but destruction on mind they came tumbling into the city, ravaging everything in their path. There was little to do but try and help.

He saw others doing the same. There was a man dressed in blue and gold racing through the cityscape firing blasts of energy. There was another with the same color scheme carrying a shield and struggling through the streets. There was a machine shaped like a gigantic insect floating overhead...

He needed answers, but knew enough not to approach the city's heroes in a moment of crisis like this. Here he was the unknown, and past experience led him to believe that sudden appearances usually led to obligatory fights. Too, approaching the local authorities would probably have the same result. No doubt the city's emergency units were stretched and stressed to their limits and did not need a man in armor flying in to distract them. That left the newspapers. If anyone knew the state of the world- back home at any rate- it would be J. Jonah Jameson and his Daily Bugle. Here in this city, Iron Man hoped that this 'Daily Planet' was the closest equivalent.

"Well," he said to himself, checking his battery readings a final time before sealing his armor and shooting towards what appeared to be the 'City Room', "nothing ventured- nothing gained."

He heard the obligatory screams as he sailed in slowly through the window. He cut the power to the jets, landing lightly to the floor as his scanners had read the structure as remarkably reinforced. Still, the dying winds roared scattering papers in a flurry, the heat of his over-worked jets making the worn tiles under his feet smolder.

He saw people ducking out of sight with little panic after his initial, dramatic appearance. Oddly, as a whole the newsroom staff seemed to have their 'duck and cover' routine down to a tee, as though armored men flew through their windows on a regular basis. There was one man however that did not run, though he did put a desk between them. He was older, overweight with thin and graying hair and chomping down hard on the butt of a cigar-

"Great Caesar's Ghost..." he exclaimed as he tried to split his attention between the intruder and his people. The armor was reading too a sudden surge in cell phone activity, along with a strange ultrasonic signal that seemed to be coming from a red-haired boy snapping pictures. No present danger that Iron Man could see as he raised his hands, hoping to appear friendly.

"I... I come in peace." Tony Stark grimaced beneath his mask, glad that his armor was all encompassing. He could feel his skin flush red, burning with embarrassment. "I'm... My name is Iron Man. I mean you no harm."

"Then what in the name of thunder are you doing here, man?" the older man said. He was obviously Jameson's counterpart on this world, or at least in this city. "Don't you know where you are?" Tony Stark shrugged.

"Actually, sir, no. I'm from... out of town, but that's not important. I'm looking for the Justice League."

"Well, you came to the right place then, son," the old man said with a grin. He pointed to the window behind Iron Man, and the Golden Avenger turned, half expecting the worst.

He saw Wonder Woman there, perched in the window frame, one shapely leg stepping down to the floor. Iron Man sighed with relief to see a friendly face at last, then grimaced to see her right hand wrapped tightly in some kind of metal brace. He looked up to her face then and saw her smile.

"Hello, Iron Man," she said, even though they had yet to actually meet.

"Welcome to Metropolis..."

Earth's Moon, The JLA Watchtower:

As a scientist, Anthony Stark always marveled at the art of teleportation. It was a science that he had never managed to get a grasp of despite his best efforts and the accomplishments of his peers. Doom had managed it, as had Surturion, but even studying the workings of the latter's armor- though he could copy the process he could never quite find the breakthrough to patent a version all his own. It was annoying to say the least.

But as he appeared on the platform that Wonder Woman had quickly described his scientific frustrations were swiftly forgotten. He had little to do in those first seconds as his computers rebooted yet again, recalibrating from the sudden flux of spatial transition. Little to do but stare in awe at his new surroundings...

He wished that he had more time as he ignored the rattling and 'pinging' of his internal workings. He wished that the world- the very universe was not about to come crashing down around them all so that he could simply walk through the grand, sweeping halls and savor every inch of the headquarters of the Justice League. The Wonder Woman had a remarkable gift for understatement, having called their Moon base simply that, but as he craned his neck and stared trying to take it all in he knew that he was in Wonderland- or Olympus.

The walls were stark, sparkling in metallic cleanliness yet bristling with machinery that appeared baffling even to his genius at a glance. The floors were pristine tiles of white stretching out and dulling the sound of the station that seemed almost to vibrate in its glory. He could see the Earth, a great sweep of red flowing over Asia in waxing glow of earthshine, storms crackling with pinpoints of flashing light. There was a tower rising in the distance; some communications array no doubt, perhaps a beacon for ships and the transporter mechanisms. His audio sensors were filtering a babble of newsfeeds broadcasting somewhere within, and his sensors- as they popped to life one by one- quickly gave readings on the atmosphere and power output swirling about him.

"Iron Man?"

Tony Stark blinked to see Wonder Woman standing just ahead and waiting for him. He felt foolish, like a kid in a candy store and oddly started to blush again. Twice in so short a time, it was embarrassing.

"Sorry," he said as he stepped fully from the transporter pad, still looking about but trying not to ignore his beautiful hostess. "It's... impressive. I've built my own space station, and worked on one for SHIELD and NASA, but this is truly remarkable. The technology is extraterrestrial?"

"In part," Diana smiled, amazed that the man in the armor was learned enough to recognize that at a quick glance. "It's a combination of Martian and Thanagarian technologies mainly, though everyone who could contribute did. No little effort was provided from Earth itself; funding and technology, including certain things from my own people."

"You're not from Earth?"

"Yes," Wonder Woman corrected. "I'm what is called an Amazon."

"We have Amazons," Stark said. "I've encountered a few."

"As for it sounds," she said, walking on, her soft footfalls almost inaudible on the strange acoustical tiles.

"More often than not," Stark said as he raised his hands to the collar of his helmet. "Mind if I take this off for a bit? I could enjoy the opportunity to refurbish my supply and breathe some fresh air."

"Please." Wonder Woman watched as the man in the armor depressed hidden studs and opened locks. Soon, with a hiss of compressed air he tilted the golden faceplate and pulled the skullcap off and back while the neck bracing receded into the main torso. His hair was matted to his head, his face covered in sweat and some sort of gel, but she was pleasantly surprised to see how handsome he was under the armor. His smile was truly dazzling, and might have melted her heart in another time and circumstance. He held out his hand, still wrapped in heavy metal.

"Anthony Stark," he said with a grin, almost embarrassed. She started to take his hand, then held it up, showing him the shattered remains in the metal brace. He blushed again. "Sorry,"

"No apologies," she said, reaching out to embrace his wavering hand with her left. "I am Diana, Princess of Themyscira." There was that smile again.

"Charmed..."

"Diana?"

And the moment passed.

Wonder Woman turned and saw the familiar form of one of her oldest friends. He was dressed in his old red and black costume, his red hair in disarray as his neck stretched forward to an ungodly length, his nose vibrating madly. She saw his wife and her dear friend standing in relative safety just a bit behind.

"All's well, Ralph," she said, signaling the all-clear sign to stand down, a simple wave of her fingers in position. "This is a friend." She turned back to Stark and saw his face alight with curiosity, making her smile. "Anthony Stark, meet Ralph Dibny- the Elongated Man, and his wife Sue. Ralph, Sue, this is Anthony Stark- the Iron Man."

Pleasantries were quickly exchanged as Diana stepped to the wall and the closest communicator. She was glad to have found Ralph, and more especially Sue here at the Watchtower when she and J'onnn J'onzz had arrived back on their own world, miraculously more or less unscathed after their travails. They had

appeared in Gotham, remarkably, and luckily had quickly found one of the Batman's teleport pads secreted on top of the Wayne Foundation Building. It was a simple matter from there to get back to the Moon.

They had found Ralph and Sue there, holding down the fort so to speak. Both were old friends, Ralph a long-standing member of the League so it was only mildly surprising. As they rushed her to the Medical Wing, Sue Dibny explained what had been happening in the relatively short time that they had been absent. It felt like months to the princess, but in actuality it had not even been a week in full. The strange oddities of the Time Stream had wrecked havoc with her senses apparently. Sue explained what had happened; the betrayal of Nabu and the Chaos war when the red skies had reappeared. The Justice Society had beat back Fate with the help of the Spectre and the combined efforts of the heroes of the world. No sooner had one earth-shattering catastrophe ended however, that the next had begun.

The red skies had remained, along with the strange rifts. The storms had spread, and now it seemed that strange creatures had invaded, coming through the Negative Zone. If that was truly where the tears in space led. The creatures themselves seemed oddly familiar as well, though she could not quite understand why. She had never encountered their like before this. Something from the files then?

While Ralph and Sue worked to mend her shattered fist –crushed on the other Earth by the monster Annihilus- the Martian Manhunter flew to the Monitor Womb to view the world's state, and hopefully find some sign of their still-missing friends. Not only those that they had left behind on the Avengers' Earth, but those lost to the Time Stream in the beginning; Aquaman, the Atom and Red Tornado along with Superman's parents and wife, Lois Lane. It was there that he first reported the ultrasonic alarm of Jimmy Olsen's Signal Watch. It was there that he saw the Iron Man...

"J'onn," she said over the intercom, knowing that his mental abilities were probably straining to their limits at that moment. She hated to interrupt. He had been injured himself in the battle with the Avengers, and his time in the Womb was probably his first best chance to rest. Still...

"We're back. It was only the Iron Man alone."

"Pity," she heard J'onzz say, his voice sounding heavy and tired. "I had hoped this might be simple, but it never is."

"J'onn, you should rest. I can take over-"

"You need to rest as well, Diana. More so perhaps, and the Iron Man as well. I can go longer without sleep. I shall be fine."

“But, J’onn-“ he cut the signal.

Diana turned to find the other three watching, waiting. Finally she sighed.

“J’onn is doing all he can to search for any sign of our friends that may have come across. There is little we can do at the moment, so we should rest.” She directed the last to Stark, then turned to the Elongated Man. “You take the duty, Ralph. Keep abreast of the situation down below. I have every faith that the world’s heroes can hold the tide, but stay alert in case things change. Anthony, I can show you to a guest room where you can rest.”

“Actually,” Stark said smiling at Sue. “Ralph’s wife offered to give me the nickel tour, and believe it or not that would be more beneficial to my state of health than sleep. If there’s someplace I could plug my armor in though, maybe freshen up a bit?”

“Of course,” Diana said, considering. “Steel’s workshop I believe. Sue?”

“I’d be happy to, Mister Stark,” she said, crooking her elbow, which Stark automatically took.

“Anthony, Sue. Please...”

Ralph Dibny’s head stretched forward, hovering just beside Diana’s as the two watched the pair stroll away towards the elevators. The Princess could not help but smirk to see the Stretchable Sleuth’s nose vibrating madly.

“Why do we always meet the smoothies, Diana? I really hate guys like that.”

Diana smiled, knowing full well that Ralph and Sue Dibny were perhaps the most happily married couple she had ever met. If Sue seemed flirtatious, it was simply out of good humor for her husband’s sake, having left her alone at home for far too many nights whilst he was playing the hero and detective.

“I don’t know, Ralph,” she said with a smile as she turned to her friend. “He is quite attractive however, I must admit.”

“Arrgh...”

Diana afforded a laugh as her friend receded, and finally she too walked away...

**The Aerie,
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

“Lund! Lund!”

Ra’s al Ghul shouted into the intercom knowing full well that he would receive no answer. There was nothing left beyond the thick, cracked safety glass separating him from what was once the main control room of Project: Babel. The vast array of machinery was simply gone. The walls, floor and ceiling had been blasted clean down to the reinforced neutronium shielding. The very plexiglas through which he stared was now warped and twisted from the heat of the negative energy that it had barely contained. Of his technical staff- and Lund- nothing remained but charred shadows etched on the walls and floor, a twisted visage of shock etched into the glass.

The room beyond was not empty however, nor still. Energy still crackled and sparked, the flickering illumination the only thing lighting the surrounding nearby labs. The entire section had shut down with the sudden surge and was dark and swiftly starting to chill. Al Ghul wondered if the entire facility had been affected, but swiftly dismissed his concern, knowing that his many followers would see to any catastrophe beyond. Smoke drifted in aftermath of the blinding blast of anti-matter that had scoured the room as well. Yet there was movement.

The silver man remained, though no longer constrained by the special machinery and devices that had encumbered his form before. The machines were gone, and he lay unconscious, smoldering on the barren floor. Too, there were the strange new comers-

The odd man garbed in purple and blue lay still on the ground, one hand yet clutching the strand of leather wrapped about his throat, the other cradling his bow. An archer then- probably a hero though not of Green Arrow’s progeny nor the assassin, Merlin. Some unknown then, perhaps hoping to make a name for himself in light of the worldwide calamity.

The red-haired woman dressed tightly in leather was on her knees retching but remarkably conscious. Ra’s al Ghul stared, squinting into the flickering light trying to fathom her special powers- her Meta, but she seemed no more outstanding than the unconscious archer. How had they survived?

But then he knew. He saw it. The woman had reached the last, the man in the golden armor and had been in contact when the surge had ripped through the room destroying months of work and preparation. The golden man stood close to the woman yet, and she in turn was linked to the Bowman by the whip. Somehow the man had protected them all. He still held that small cylinder that he had been clutching before, and it was still leaking energy, but there was something different as well. Ra’s al Ghul had seen the like before.

He was glowing. His eyes were red and wild with a sudden madness. He shivered and hunkered, clutching the rod whilst the energies washed over him.

They almost seemed a part of him now, somehow and he was almost giddy with the power...

“Father?”

Talia had come up behind him and he was so distracted that he had not noticed. He needed to focus, and quickly, or this would all run away from him.

“Status, daughter?”

“I-“

“Status!”

“The Aerie is running on emergency power- eighty-seven percent in the upper levels, less here. Thirty-eight dead when the batteries overloaded and erupted. Another fifty-two injured directly, and over two hundred exposed to the radiation before the reactor was contained. Breach in Sections thirty-one through forty-two and flooding in eight through twelve-“

“The Tower?”

“Shut down. Without the control machinery the energies are blazing skywards like a shaft of light. They are being channeled into the Rift, though why or how is unknown.”

Ra’s al Ghul leaned forward resting his fists on the control panel on his side of the glass. The woman was struggling to rise now, but the man in the golden armor seemed unconcerned, or perhaps simply unaware. His thoughts were elsewhere, his gaze lost to something beyond-

“At last...” his voice boomed, echoing through the room, crackling over the intercom.

“Daddy?” the woman said. Ra’s al Ghul could hear the terror lacing her voice.

The golden man looked down at the young woman, his face lost behind his helmet’s mask. His eyes crackled with an internal fire. “I’ve done it, Oubliette...”

He held up his hands and Ra’s al Ghul saw anti-matter dancing between his fingers like lightning. He dropped the rod, forgotten.

“Power...” he whispered watching the dancing lights, making them flare and grow. “POWER!”

“Initiate Project: Nullify,” Ra’s al Ghul said, squinting into the light. “Start with Template: Steel. It probably won’t work, but try none the less. Then shift to Firestorm. If that proves ineffective I shall have to reconsider. And find out just where that energy is funneling to.”

Ra’s al Ghul heard his daughter on her communicator, static crackling through the outer chamber. She would initiate the contingency plans, he had no doubt. He only hoped that the Detective’s countermeasures meant to incapacitate his teammates would work against the man in the golden armor.

Seeing the power, the raw energies rippling off of the man, the Demon’s Head had his doubts. He would have to take measures of his own...

**Manhattan,
Avenger’s Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 1
Science Labs:**

“Thor?” Captain America asked seeing the sudden strain wash over the Asgardian’s face. The Thunder God grimaced, but his arms remained steady and the flow of energy uninterrupted.

“I sense...” Thor said through clenched teeth. He was sweating, his arms shaking as he held his hammer out, a coursing stream of mystical energy funneling into the Trans-dimensional machine that they had taken from storage. “There was a surge of strange energies, and it has taken mine entire mettle to hold M’Jolnir fast and true.”

“A surge?” the Panther asked as he stared at the machine’s displays. The energy readings were all topped into the red and off the scale.

“Aye. ‘Twas the foul stench of Annihilus.”

“Annihilus?” Superman asked, some worry in his voice.

“Thor speaks in prose,” the Scarlet Witch said with a grim smile. “It takes some getting used to. He means that the energy reminds him of Annihilus.”

“Anti-matter then?” Batman suggested, and the Panther nodded.

“Most likely. My monitors are off the scale. Something is definitely influencing your dimension. Whatever was here is there now, but multiplied by astronomical proportions.”

“So we can’t get back?” Plastic Man asked. “That sucks BIG time.”

“I did not say that. The journey will be hard, but-“

“The Son of Odin stands ready to do his part. Fear not, thy assemblage shall traverse the dimensional gap and return to thy home in safe passage. I shall stand fast to guarantee thy safe journey. The portal shall remain open.” Thor settled in, standing fast as he rolled M’Jolnir in his sweating palms.

“That might not be necessary...”

All eyes turned to Kyle Rayner as he spoke up somewhat nervously. Thor himself eyed the Green Lantern with some suspicion, the word of the Nth Man lingering in the back of his very being. The Flash stepped up, suddenly at Rayner's side, his hand on his friend's shoulder.

“What do you mean, Kyle? What-“

“I can funnel the magic, the energy coming from... his hammer. I can see it through the Ring. It’s... It’s just another form of light.”

“Are you absolutely certain, Rayner?” Batman asked. The science was almost beyond him, and the strange magicks pouring from the seemingly simple stone hammer were baffling and confounding to say the least.

“It’s easy,” Kyle Rayner said, his eyes sparkling in the glow. “I can make a construct that’ll redirect his energies in a cycle. He can come too that way,” Kyle said with a shrug, looking at the rest of the assemblage- some of the greatest heroes he had ever seen or known. “Figure we’ll need him. Long as I’m conscious- and the Ring doesn’t run out of power...” Kyle shrugged again.

Thor stared at the boy that held one of the greatest weapons in the universe at his command. Kyle Rayner, Earth’s last Green Lantern tried to smile, but it was forced and hollow.

“So be it. Do what you must, boy. Thor stands ready!”

Kyle Rayner looked; first to his ring, then casting his gaze to the assembled heroes. Thor stood at the rear of the small machine, his hammer channeling energy to create a portal before them all. He peered into the shimmering light but saw nothing beyond. The Thunder God seemed certain however, and the others trusted him; Batman and Superman, and the Avengers' Black Panther and Captain America. They had seen it all. They were the best. If they did not have faith...

He looked to each. Wally, probably his best friend- at least in the Meta World nodded quickly. Plastic Man grinned widely, nodding just the same. Zatanna-Zee smiled warmly, and Dinah gave him the thumbs up.

The Avengers seemed just a bit less certain. He saw the blonde- Warbird whispering to the Beast. The Scarlet Witch seemed aloof, and Quicksilver nervous, shaking at breakneck speeds. The Wasp lighted on Captain America's shoulder and waved.

They trusted him- all of them. Even Thor- Even the man that had beat him to a pulp and left him for dead. He would have been but for the Ring- he knew that. He accepted that, accepted it –at least from the other side. Accident or no, he had killed a little kid. He had killed- at least inadvertently. He had killed, but the Ring had saved him again.

“Work thy Magic's, boy,” Thor snarled as the energy spurred again, lighting the room. “E'en the Odinson is not without limits.”

Kyle Rayner nodded, licking his lips. He concentrated, extending his arm- the one with the Ring, his other hand gripping the off wrist to hold it steady, keep it from shaking in terror. He held sixteen lives in his hands- him and the man... the God that had tried to kill him...

He had to get this right...

**Earth's Moon,
The JLA Watchtower:**

I HAVE THEM...

Wonder Woman staggered, slamming into the wall as the telepathic message of J'onn J'onzz almost bowled her over. Her hand went to her head and she winced again as she put pressure on her injured hand.

“J'onn...”

THEY'RE COMING...

“J'onn... I can't...”

HAWKEYE! I SENSE HIM, BUT...

“J'onn!” The princess pinched her eyes at the bridge of her nose as she hugged the wall, the world spinning...

THERE'S MORE! SPIKE! THERE'S...

“J'onn...” Diana dropped to her knees with the psychic assault. She heard Sue Dibny's screams...

NEFARIA...

To be continued...

Next Issue: At last, the conclusion. Be here to find out why and what, where and who. All answers will be revealed as the greatest battle of two universes comes to a dramatic conclusion as the Avengers and JLA play...

ENDGAME!

Be there...

Story © Curt F
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F
EIC: Chris Munn
2005



Avengers Vs JLA #5

War World...

"This is all the fault of your Justice League, you realize..."

Thanos, the Mad Titan smirked as he watched yet another gigantic piece of mysterious machinery appear from the very ether and slowly float into place as directed. Whether they were being manufactured from the very molecules of the air or simply transported from the gargantuan ship beyond he neither knew nor cared. That it was being done was enough, and sooner, faster than expected. All the better.

"How so dark one?"

Thanos glanced back at the trio of ancients gathered at his back. Old men, wise men allegedly, and yet they did not have a true clue as to how the universe worked. They were battered and bruised from their battles against the creatures from the Chaos Wall, yet somehow managing to strive on. The old wizard-Shazam- stared wide-eyed at the vastness of the planet-ship of the Great Devourer, stroking his long, grizzled beard, watching as the ship slowly spun into place yet millions of miles distant. Beside him stood Izaya, the Highfather, once ruler of the world New Genesis in this plane. He was the closest resemblance to Thanos' own father, in prestige and power if not in face, and so like Mentor in deed. Forever waiting, seeking the peaceable route until the last, he simply watched the Devourer in his task, saying naught but all-seeing. Did he know? Certainly Ganthet did not. Eldest of the three, yet easily the most naïve. Even a dimension away Thanos had heard tales of the travesty that was once the Green Lantern Corp here in this dimension.

"Well," Thanos began, returning his own attention to Galactus even as he answered the diminutive Oan. "One must suppose they were trying to do the right thing, or at least thought that they were. Their ilk is like that of course- fight first, think later." He could see the Devourer, brother to Death herself here, she whom the Titan worshipped and loved as he guided the huge piece of machinery into place, just a minute part of the even greater whole. It was almost finished, or

so it appeared to the dark one, but then who might truly glean the true measure of one of the Trinity. He had to simply wait with the others, bide his time.

“They apparently bulled their way through Time and Space, to the very End of All in the hope of saving your Earth’s greatest champion. He had been kidnapped by a being known as the Time Tripper?”

“Trapper,” Izaya corrected and Thanos chuckled.

“Whatever. The name in turn was a façade, a masque for the eld being’s true name and identity.”

“Destiny,” Shazam gasped, wincing as energy flared about the machine being assembled overhead. “One of the Endless.”

“Yes,” Thanos nodded. “Those who were and are and ever will be. We have the like. Regardless, your League went to maddened Destiny’s Keep at the End of Time and a battle raged for the fate of Superman. In the end the JLA won, though not without help, and a bit of Divine Intervention.”

“We know the story, Titan,” Izaya said, his voice edged with impatience. “We know the prophecies. The world as a whole is born at a touch, a flash of the magnificent Fire, runs its course, then fades at Death’s final touch only to begin anew.”

“Of course,” Thanos agreed, “But that Ending, like the Beginning- and some say that point is indeed one and the same- was never meant for Man to behold. Yet in your continuum there seems to be a never-ending supply of witnesses. Your League, a blind magus, your World Mage, and Kronus at the least. Worse, the very champion of the Speed Force was there, as was one of your progeny-“

“I don’t see-“ Ganthet began, but Thanos cut him off.

“No, you do not. Your Lantern was the one that led the return. His lifeline to the past opened the floodgates for Crisis. Your League ripped through time and space, rending destiny and dimension with their mad plunge, thinking nothing of the consequences of their actions. Their Cosmic Treadmill tore through those barriers set when the multiverse last tried to heal itself, barriers that were never meant to be breached. The Speed Force flooded the Time Stream in the wake like water spewing through a ruptured, cracked pipe. All of that energy then funneled directly through to your present conveniently following the ‘bread crumbs’ left by your Green Lantern, Kyle Rayner. And with that energy came beings of course; the Mad Child, the Avatar of the Speed Force, Lords of Chaos gone insane...

“Of course your world- precarious as it is- was unable to contain what befell, and like a steaming, covered pot, that energy finally exploded through the neighboring dimensions when it could no longer be contained. Despite your secondary champion’s debatably ‘best efforts’ in stopping Nabu, the Chaos driven energies burst through the Anti-Matter Realm that you call Qward and we name the Negative Zone next. It threatened the very Wall, and you fools let it!”

“There was nothing to be done,” Shazam said with a sharp tug of his beard.

“You could have slain your League in the beginning. Let Destiny have his dementia, his moment of grand delusion and stop the League from saving their friend. Any of you have the power.”

“They are champions. They fight for the good of all.”

“Others would rise to take their place. The Multiverse is full of martyrs and fodder.”

“Regardless,” Izaya said trying to direct the discussion back on track. “The damage was done. The negative energies of the Anti-Matter Realm threaten to sweep the cosmos clean again, born on the Speed Force and the rushing river of Time. How is this giant- Galactus- going to stop that from happening?”

“Galactus is perhaps the oldest being in the Multiverse. He is the last of a great race that existed before the last upheaval. He is from that time beyond-“

“Impossible!” Ganthet snapped. “At the last Ending, nothing remained but Chaos, and That Which Is. It was HIS will.”

“I will not debate theology or the origins of ALL with you, Oan. I know what happened as was told me by SHE that I love. Galactus is the sole survivor of what was before; older than my own universes’ Elders, older than your Endless, older even than Death and Infinity, his siblings in my realm as they were reincarnated. He is one of the Trinity. His purpose overall is to judge worlds and races and let them prove their worth in the grand scheme of things. Those that he finds wanting are destroyed, the worlds sucked clean of the very life force that contains them. Many civilizations have fallen to his insatiable hunger, his driving cravings that lead him on his quest and duty. In truth, I only know of two worlds that have stymied his will and proven worthy in all his ages, time and again. There has been debate recently that he is simply a victim of addiction, but I am of the belief that he does serve a greater purpose.

“It is said however, that once his appetite is appeased, that ‘God’ will close up shop and start again.” Thanos chuckled.

“Then your plan...”

“My plan will save us all. You see, I do not believe in God. Just in myself...”

The Mighty Avengers **vs.** **The JLA**

END GAME!

The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:

Hawkeye woke, his eyes blinking wildly, trying to wash the blinding light from his mind's eye. Spots danced through his sight, hazing his view of the surroundings and by force of habit he tried to raise his fists, knuckle his eyes clear. He quickly found he could not move.

He was strapped down to a table, a gurney by the look and feel of it and in some kind of makeshift medical facility. He could see people moving about, flickering shadows at first that slowly came into focus if he winced just so. They were dressed in yellow radiation suits, all busy and bustling about the room, which was cast in a dull red that Hawkeye figured must be emergency lighting. Too, he could hear the low drone of an alarm that fairly eliminated any hope of him hearing anything else.

He flexed, testing the canvas straps that held him to the table but his arms, legs, neck and midsection were all held secure. There were leads attached to his bare arms, another at his chest and two more on either temple of his bare scalp. Whoever had strapped him down had pulled back his mask- not that that really mattered.

Clint Barton glanced to his right and saw the Silver Surfer, surprisingly. He vaguely recalled that he had seen the Surfer before, when he and Doctor Midas and Oubliette had appeared here on what he assumed to be the Earth of the JLA. There had been others- scientists he imagined, or techies at least, but then

something had happened to Midas, and the Exterminatrix had shocked him into a dull daze with that damn whip of hers, and then all hell had broken loose-

Hawkeye jumped as he felt the soft touch of leather on his arm. He looked back from the Surfer and saw a beautiful woman standing over him. She looked Asian- sort of- with long brown hair and tilted almond eyes, but she seemed more Western than Eastern, sort of like 'Tasha oddly. She was saying something- he could see her lips moving.

She twisted her mouth, almost pouting as she raised her hands and thought for a moment. Her hands and fingers flashed as she 'signed' but Hawkeye continued to stare dumbly. He had never taken the time to learn Sign beyond a few words, relying instead probably too much on his hearing aid. He knew a bit, but he did not think that 'I love you' would go over very well.

He saw the woman sigh and frown, placing her hands on her hips in annoyance. Barton tried to shrug, but she simply walked off and spoke with one of the techies who in turn scrambled off and out of the room, returning just a minute later. He handed her something and went about his business as the woman returned with a tiny device in her hand. She was doing something with it, twisting dials or pushing buttons maybe, then suddenly leaned in and jammed the thing into his ear canal. He winced with the sudden pain, and there was a tingling sensation that swiftly passed as the young woman stood back to watch.

"CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW!"

"Gah!" Hawkeye shouted as her voice boomed through his ear, far too loudly. He could hear everything suddenly; all the activity in the room, the footfalls, the talking, the blare of the alarm-

"TOO LOUD!" he shouted, quickly regretting it. The woman smirked cruelly and leaned in again. He felt the leather of her glove brush his cheek as she tapped on the device in his ear.

"HOW IS That? BETter yet? Tell me."

"There," Clint Barton gasped as the noise dwindled. It was still loud- louder than his hearing aid had been, but oddly clearer and he found with a bit of concentration that he could weed out the unnecessary background noise.

"Who are you?" the woman asked when she saw that he was finally settled and back at ease. Barton looked her in the eyes.

"Who are *you*?"

Hawkeye saw the woman sigh again and shake her head. One of the techies ran up and showed her something on a computer pad. She nodded and as he ran off again she turned back-

“My name is Talia. I am the daughter of Ra’s Al Ghul, he whose dwelling you now reside within.”

“Hawkeye,” Barton said, wondering just how much he should give away. The woman was obviously ‘in the know’, at least to a point, and the Med Lab he was in was high-tech, but did she need to know the whole story? What part did she and her father the Ghoul play in all this?

Fuck it...

“I’m an Avenger. I come from another Earth in another dimension.” The woman smiled then, nodding.

“We assumed as much. A hero then?”

“Yeah, you could say that. What’s-“

“Who is the man in the golden armor?” she asked, cutting him off. “Who is the woman with the whip?”

“That would be Doctor Midas and his daughter Oubliette, the Exterminatrix.”

“What are their goals?”

“Goals?” Barton asked, confused. “Midas wants power and immortality. He wants to rule the world, and his daughter pretty much wants what he does. They’re both a little psycho.”

“He seems to wield power well enough. He devastated the laboratory where you all appeared.”

“Midas is a nut,” Hawkeye began. “He wants to be a Marvel, to have powers like... well... powers of cosmic proportion. He’s richer than Trump an’ buys up every little bit a’ tech he can get his hands on- like his armor. He wants to live forever an’ his girl helps him as she can. It’s a little... weird. He got hold a’ somethin’ that apparently worked for him finally-“

“The metal cylinder,” Talia said, nodding in understanding.

“Yeah. It belonged to a creep outta the Neg Zone, name of Annihilus. I dunno how he got it ta work, but I guess he did somehow.”

“Nor do I, but he now controls the Anti-Matter energy of Qward- what I assume is our interpretation of your ‘Neg Zone’. He has apparently achieved one of his goals and is even now ravaging his way through this complex. My father’s followers are trying to stop him, but they fall before his might. You can stop him?”

Hawkeye laughed. “Cosmic villains are a bit outta my league, Sweetie. Hell, I’ll try, but you’d be better off wakin’ up the Surfer.”

“Surfer?” Talia asked looking confused again.

“The Silver Surfer,” Hawkeye said, looking to his right at Norrin Radd’s unconscious form. “He’s about as Cosmic as they come.”

Hawkeye saw the woman sag a bit as she leaned in and started to undo the canvas straps holding him to the gurney. “If I understand you correctly, the ‘Silver Surfer’ is drained beyond any ability to help. My father... Your Surfer will be unconscious for some time. You, I’m afraid, are our best hope.”

Hawkeye had to laugh as he sat up on the gurney, flexing his muscles. “I got news for you darlin’. Without my bow and a quiver of special arrows I ain’t gonna do squat against Midas if he has anything like real power. Last I saw I had two arrows in my quiver; an EMP and a... Armor Piercing arrow. I doubt those are gonna do much against Doc Midas now.”

“Yet still, you will try,” Talia said, producing his bow and an ebon quiver full of black-fletched shafts. “My father has employed archers before. These are simple I know, but-“

“Hey, lady,” Hawkeye grinned as he swung his feet to the floor, taking his bow and the quiver in hand, “Knowin’s half the battle...”

There had been pain.

He remembered the sensation vividly, burning, searing pain as he fell and fell. It had felt as if every atom, every molecule of his very being had been set to white hot flame, individually burning endlessly, over and over as he tumbled through the void. It was a pain, which he had known before, when his body had first been touched by those ionic forces employed originally by the late Heinrich Zemo-Baron Zemo!

His scientists had modified Zemo’s initial apparatus, all the better to further his own goals; his quest for power and immortality. The ionic bombardment had transferred the powers of his then lackeys, the so-called Lethal Legion of the

Whirlwind, Power Man and the Living Laser, magnifying those powers a thousandfold. For a time he had been the most powerful man on the face of the planet.

And of course the Avengers had defeated him. They, and a helpless aging hero that had shown him the truth.

Life was fleeting.

There had been battles since, defeats, but that sentiment had remained. Evergnawing at his soul and being, he would need to defeat Time itself if he was to win. But the powers had begun to fade, his own body oft rebelling, fighting against the ionic energy that laced every fiber of his being.

There had been pain, and the world exploded. He had thought that he was done when Annihilus had ruptured the Mandroid armor that Midas had given him to survive the rigors of the Negative Zone. Done when that realm's ruler had hurled him flailing into the dreaded Exploding Atmosphere. There had been pain and his eyes watered in the rising glare, watching as bits of flotsam disintegrated about him, negative matter meeting positive energy. The sound was deafening, but his own screams had overwhelmed his hearing, rattling him to the very core.

He had burned as the Mandroid armor erupted, his skin sizzling and smoldering as his body was purged of the metal shell. He had passed through Reed Richards' Zone of Distortion, the first step towards survival in negative space, and the armor had been altered, transformed by that unique journey, as had the shuttle and the inhabitants itself. He was anti-matter now, somehow, he knew. He did not understand the science of it, but he knew enough that he was going to die.

There had been pain, but oddly, Death did not come for him. He had felt the burn, the clashing of negative and positive energies. Too, he had felt the ionic energy of his own being mingling, fanning the flames. He could not think, could not even breathe, but he could scream in agony as his body fell through the sky trailing fire. The world swam and swirled far below, a myriad of colors and design swelling within his sight. His skin snapped and sizzled, popping as he fell into and through the atmosphere, the frigid air now searing his charred red flesh.

Still he fell, and still he screamed. His mind spun as his body flailed trapped now by gravity. He could not fly, but he knew he could die. Life was fleeting after all.

There had been pain on impact, but not from smashing into the mountainside. The pain had come from the cold as his tender pink flesh crackled, fire and ice meeting. Steam rose from the crater, and a rumbling like thunder as an avalanche of snow fell away racing to lower lands. Ancient rock lay split and cracked from where he had fallen, the stone face etched away and blasted clean.

Slowly he stood. His legs were weak, like jelly, and it took time for his senses and muscles to return to his control. It was cold, frigid but he did not seem to mind. He did not feel it now. The air was crisp, clear and thin, but he did not breathe. He could see for miles, leagues from his vantage, the wash of crimson still raging through one of those strange slashes that had appeared in the sky. Lightning, sharp and ebon crackled, cutting to the horizon. True thunder rolled, shaking even the mighty range of mountains on which he stood. Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed. Count Nefaria raised his hands, staring at the fading burn, watching as old scars disappeared, the lines of age fading away. He flexed, curled his hands into fists, feeling the power coursing through his veins, the strength in his arms. He could see the spark and crackle of the ionic energy dancing at his whim, the flare sparkling with his desire.

Nefaria cast his gaze out across the land. The vast majesty of the Himalayas rose about him, jagged peaks stabbing for the stars while lush, snow laden valleys stretched out below. The storm continued to rage overhead, waves of negative energy erasing the sky as dark bolts slashed in cacophony with echoing thunderous roar. It was fitting somehow, a grand tribute to his return-

No! His rebirth...

Count Nefaria smiled. He had come home...

The WatchTower
The Monitor Womb
Earth's Moon:

"You see," J'onnn J'onzz said pointing at the hovering displays. "There, and there. The energy flares are strikingly different, yet familiar."

The Martian Manhunter's face seemed even grimmer than usual as he swiveled the suspensor chair about. His visage was cast in an odd mix of shadow bathed in the eerie flickering glow of the dozens of two and three-dimensional displays, which floated about him in an ever-shifting dance of sound and light.

Princess Diana of Thymiscira gazed up at her old friend and frowned to see the obvious concern etched in the lines and contours of his face. He wore a grim mask, but she could see the traces, she knew him well enough, the slightest tinge bordering on fear. Truly the situation was grave, but the Justice League of America had faced worse in their day. What had he seen that she could not?

"Ionic energy..."

Wonder Woman glanced to her side and saw the man in the crimson and golden armor staring up at the display with equal concern. He had his helmet withdrawn, and his handsome face was creased with worry, his dark brows knitted and his dazzling eyes sparkling in the queer light. He held up his gauntleted arm, a small panel opened on his armored wrist and she saw his gaze shift.

“I’ve encountered it often enough, and employed it myself on occasion. An incredible power source if you can contain it, and a deadly one if misused. One of our own Avengers is a being of pure ionic energy contained in the shape and memory of the man he once was,” the Iron Man said, the light emitting from the diodes imbedded in his wrist display flickering wildly. “These readings are off the scale though. Whatever’s causing that spike is brimming with power, and if left unchecked-“

“It could scorch the Earth...”

Diana could hear true fear now in the voice of her friend. She saw him sag in the floating chair, almost as though defeated.

“J’onn?”

“I too have encountered this ‘ionic’ energy before,” J’onzz said with a heavy sigh. He stared at the display, watching as the energy flared above the Himalayas, a strange chorus to the far more dominant storm raging over the mountains. “The great Plague of Fire that swept the world of my birth was laced with this energy. It had been an ever present but harmless background radiation, which we employed in utilitarian tasks, lighting and such, minor power supplies. H’ronmeer forever changed that.”

“What happened?” the Iron Man asked, unknowing.

“The plague destroyed Mars, its culture and civilization, its population. J’onn was one of the sole survivors through haphazard chance. He is the last of his race.” Diana stared at the Golden Avenger, seeing that he understood well enough and would not push, opening old wounds. She wished that there was more time and pleasanter circumstance where they all might simply relax and share stories of their all-too similar histories. She could see that Stark was bursting with questions, as was she, but there was just no time.

“We are lucky to even be viewing these events, given their location,” J’onzz continued, changing the subject. His voice had grown cold and hard, and Diana could tell that he was trying to steel himself against old memories.

“It’s the Himalayas isn’t it?” the Iron Man asked. “Your Earth’s version at any rate. I see K2 in the distance. Why-“

“The area in question is within the domain of Ra’s Al Ghul,” J’onzz answered the unspoken question, and continued as though reading Stark’s mind for the next. “He is a madman of his own sort. A man of great resources, which he most often employs towards his goal of world unity and utopia. Unfortunately his version of paradise on Earth most generally includes the culling of those masses that he deems unworthy. He has been defeated many times, most usually by the Batman.

“Unfortunately, though we know he holds base there within the world’s highest peaks, his resources stymie our best efforts to divine his machinations. He is quite intelligent, and surrounds himself with an army of followers; mostly those that share his cause but too mercenaries of various endeavor that he employs to further his ends. His retreat has forever been cloaked to our scanners, even our base powers of enhanced perception, Superman and myself. The Batman has been within of course, and has marked it, but-“

“He’s somehow outside your jurisdiction I take it.” Anthony Stark shrugged and smiled, shaking his head. “I’ve seen the like, and if we ever get through all this and we have the time I’ll tell you a few stories about a man called Doom.”

“I look forward to it,” J’onzz said forcing a slight smile himself. “I think-“

“J’onn!”

Everyone froze at the sudden shock of static that cut through the air, the shrill voice laced with excitement. “Something’s happening in the Hall!” Ralph Dibny shouted over the intercom. “I think they’re coming finally. They’re coming home!”

J’onn J’onzz concentrated, and Diana knew that he was merely shifting his attention. When he had first called to them all, his Psychic cry echoing, shrieking through all of their minds he had said that he had made contact. He had been scanning the world for any others that might have crossed over, both through the use of the Monitor Womb as well as his own telepathic powers. He had ‘shouted’ that he had sensed them finally, later saying that he had received a garbled flicker of thought from Zatanna. They were attempting to return.

He had also sensed the Avenger, Hawkeye. J’onn had said that the archer was here already, but the flash of essence had been fleeting, severed by a psychic scream that had overwhelmed the Martian Manhunter. One word- a name...

Nefaria!

Iron Man had explained who Nefaria was- at least on his world- as they had all raced to J’onn’s side in the Monitor Womb. J’onzz then explained all he knew to

them, sending Ralph and Sue Dibny to the Hall of Justice to await any sign of the others so that J'onn could more easily go about other tasks.

There were heroes all about the world still fighting for humanity and Earth. Heroes that had to know that help was here, and hopefully more on the way. The Martian Manhunter had made contact quickly with as many as he could, either mentally or through the WatchTower's communications array-

In New York City the Titans battled the strange alien creatures that had sporadically poured through the various Rifts about the planet- at least according to Nightwing. They were vile, horrid creatures, seemingly endless in number though thankfully not overwhelming as they appeared singularly or in packs. They were black-shelled, their skin almost an exoskeleton of sort with elongated heads and tails, savage teeth and razor-sharp claws. Iron Man had said that they resembled an alien race his friends had encountered- the Brood- along with a different race of demons. To Diana they reminded her of a creature that Kyle Rayner and Connor Hawke- the Green Arrow had fought some time ago. Regardless, the Titans were worn and frazzled, but they continued to fight, as did the Justice Society-

The ranks of that fabled team were spread thin and scattered across the globe. Jay Garrick and Max Mercury battled creatures in Keystone and Central City alongside Superboy. Sentinel fought in Gotham in the absence of the Batman, doing what he could to stay the crimson storms, the wash of negative energy that threatened to sweep the globe. Both Jack Knight and his father fought valiantly in Opal City, Ted Knight, the original Starman leading his son and that city's heroes ever forward. So too fought the rest; Sand- the one time ward and partner of Wesley Dodds saving lives in Washington, Nuklon- Atom Smasher now- doing the same in San Francisco, Jade in New Jersey, and more.

The team of Young Justice too, was doing their part, working from their headquarters, once the cave where the JLA operated. Impulse, Robin, the Star-Spangled Kid and even the newer members like Arrowette were doing all that they could against seemingly overwhelming odds. And there were reports of others as well.

There was a new Spectre apparently, and a new Doom Patrol of sorts, somehow intertwined, battling separately in Russia...

The team of Booster Gold and Blue Beetle, along with the likes of Supergirl and the Guardian were doing what they could to safeguard Metropolis...

The Marvels were protecting Fawcett City where a large Rift had opened for some reason...

Oracle was coordinating the efforts too. She was using her vast network to keep the heroes in some type of contact, deploying help where needed, withdrawing others from areas that were deemed safe- at least for the moment. It was amazing...

And all apparently futile.

A massive Rift had opened above Siberia, near the River Lena. The resulting storm of anti-matter had swept across the land and simply erased everything in its path before dispersing. The vegetation, the land forms, the people- all were gone. Oddly, Diana recalled that that was the same area where they had first encountered the Russian super team Red Square and the 'angel' Zauriel. Was there some connection?

There had been other occurrences too however; in Africa, Australia, Europe and the United States as well. In South America where the Sand Superman, the alien from Quarrm had repaired a dam had met a similar fate. Was there a pattern? There was no time to think though.

"We must go," the Martian Manhunter said as he vacated the suspensor chair and floated down towards the floor. She watched as his body faded, becoming immaterial and vanished through the floor. She heard Iron Man's gasp.

"Are you all right?" she asked, seeing that he was suddenly pale. He turned to her and forced a smile.

"Fine, Princess," he said as he lifted his helmet back into place. "Just, when he does that it reminds me of an old friend. Shall we?"

The Iron Man bowed slightly that she should take the lead and together they rushed through the WatchTower towards the Hall of Justice and destiny...

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Ra's Al Ghul sighed...

He watched stoically as another squad of devoted followers fell before the might of this 'Doctor Midas'. Already the floor was littered with the dead, bodies burnt and twisted, cut down before the onslaught of the strange energies wielded by the alien. There were dozens, fallen for the cause, and Midas seemed none the worse for wear for all the bloodshed. It was a pity really.

The Detective's Failsafe Protocols had thus far proved ineffective. The EMP that had been designed to stop John Henry Irons- Steel- had failed to stop the

megalomaniac. The man, Midas was far more than a simple man in powered armor. The Pulse had shut down the armor for a heartbeat, but Midas had simply shrugged and continued his assault. Too, that which the detective had designed against Firestorm proved useless. The 'Dirty Nuke' had washed the immediate area in radiation, but had failed to slow down the man in the golden armor at all. Whatever the Batman had planned against the Nuclear Man had proven ineffective against this new threat.

The processed 'Red' Kryptonite would be useless, as would the fail-safe's devised to counter the Lantern and the Amazon, the Martian and the Atlantean. He doubted too that liquid nitrogen would affect the man, Midas. Perhaps the bullet meant for the Flash, or maybe lead-

"Father?"

Ra's Al Ghul turned to see his daughter, Talia, standing at his side. Behind her was the other one, the bowman clad in purple, his eyes wide and staring as Midas waved his hand and killed another score of men and women in a fiery blast. He had his bow and a quiver of arrows that looked to have been left behind once by Merlin of the League of Assassins. He had yet to prove that he could actually use the shafts, but they would surely see soon enough.

"Daughter. Report!"

"The silver man- the Silver Surfer is still unconscious," Talia began, glancing back at the bowman. Ra's Al Ghul nodded in understanding, that she had learned things from the archer. "Emergency power has been restored to 37% of the complex, mainly in the upper levels. The screening defenses are still under repair however."

The Demon's Head frowned. That particular news was not necessarily good. Granted the walls of the Aerie had been constructed and treated to keep out certain prying eyes, but the Null Screens were effective against far more. Those yet remaining of the JLA were not the most innovative or intelligent, yet one had to assume that even the likes of Booster Gold and the Elongated Man had been schooled in proper procedure. Too, Dibny was not the Batman, but he was a detective in his own right and had been known to properly connect various dots on occasion. It would not be long, no doubt, before they would receive unwelcome visitors at the Aerie.

"I have received reports from the outer markers as well," his daughter continued. They all winced as light flared beyond and screams ripped down the tunnel. After a moment Talia went on, "There are reports that another has fallen from the sky-"

"That Rift is proving-"

“No father,” she interrupted and Ra’s AI Ghul cocked an eyebrow in surprise. Talia bowed her head ever so slightly in apology. “Not from the Rift, but simply from the sky. An older man by all accounts, yet in splendid form, and blazing energy. Initial scans read the output as Ionic, though slightly altered.”

“The anti-matter?” Talia nodded and Ra’s AI Ghul sighed. “I assume he is at the Babel Tower.” At his daughter’s nod Ra’s AI Ghul turned towards the battle and strode down the hallway. There was no hesitation in his step, no fear in his stride as he followed the path of carnage and destruction left in the wake of the man called Midas. Scorched and scarred bodies littered the floor, some little more than ashes stirred by his passing. The stench was sickening and he could hear the archer’s gagging as he jogged after along with Talia-

“Who are you bowman?” Al Ghul asked as he stepped over the bodies of his fallen followers. They would all be mourned, but later, having given their all for the cause.

“Name’s Hawkeye,” the bowman said, hurrying along. Ra’s AI Ghul could hear him breathing hard, no doubt still weak from his earlier encounter with Midas. “You’re...”

“I am your host at the moment, archer, but obviously we have no time for decorum. I assume you can use that bow with some expertise?”

“Yeah, but against Midas now?” He could sense the bowman’s shrug of doubt. Ra’s AI Ghul paused at a fork in the corridor, listening to the raging battle, watching the flare of light coming from around the corner. He could feel the tingle of power dancing in the air.

“Look, I got an EMP arrow and an Adamantium armor-piercer,” the archer continued, wincing slightly as though regretting something, he and Talia hugging the wall at the Demon Head’s side. “From what I’ve seen, the EMP isn’t gonna do squat. Midas is way beyond the need for armor, near as I can figure. It looks to me like he somehow sucked out the Surfer’s Cosmic Power, and back where I come from the Silver Surfer was in the Top Ten power wise. My AP might slow him down, but it definitely ain’t gonna stop him.”

Ra’s AI Ghul considered the archer for a moment, looking him up and down. He seemed no different than any of the other so-called heroes, the Metas of this world. He was brash and confident, not unlike Queen before his death, with no real powers to speak of, yet he did not shy away from the danger. A warrior at least, but a hero? That had yet to be proven.

Ra’s AI Ghul slipped a hand into his cloak and withdrew the small metallic cylinder, which Doctor Midas in his arrogance had casually cast away. He held

the object up, his thumb rubbing the obvious nozzle-like device affixed to one end. Its power had been spent, presumably connected now with the madman in the golden armor that was destroying his dreams and his life's work. Ra's Al Ghul glanced at the archer again and afforded the man the slightest smile.

"You will stop him," the Demon's Head said as he handed the rod to Hawkeye. "Or you shall die in the effort..."

The Edge of Infinity...

SANARE!

Silver fire flashed from the withering hands of Doctor Arcane even as he dropped to his knees in exhaustion. His sight had decayed to the point that he could barely see the target, just a massive yellow blur off in the distance. He winced as he saw the impact however, tears running down his face from the glare. He heard another scream.

"Like hittin' the broad side of a barn, eh? Can't bloody miss if you wanted to."

Arcane looked up, breathing hard and trying to focus on the wavering image standing at his side. The man was tall and thin, blonde and surrounded in a haze of blue, swirling smoke, but of course it was the accent that gave him away.

"Constantine..." he croaked, his voice grating as phlegm and mucous rose in his throat. He spat. "Are we... winning?"

"Well," Constantine said raking a hand back through his hair, "we're not losin'. There's somethin' in that I suppose. You okay, son?"

Arcane sagged, feeling the weight of years forcing down his shoulders. He had been burning his magic for how long he did not know. He had aged though. His hair had thinned and grayed, his body stooped and aching, his vision almost gone. He was burnt, exhausted. He needed to rest and recover, to heal, but would it matter?

He glanced about the wide flat rock from which they had made their stand. The best, greatest wizards and sorcerers, magi of three dimensions at least. Spinning there at the edge of space on a bit of debris tossed from the wreckage they had gathered, hoping to save all that was.

The man with the disk lay just a few feet away. Doctor Occult- was that his name? His chest had been opened by one of the creatures that had suddenly appeared, slashing and ripping. Steam rose from the cavity, his long coat drenched in blood. His eyes stared up and away into the black void of space, unblinking...

A few yards beyond stood Mysterium, straddling the prone form of the Witch, Arcanna from the Squadron Supreme. She had fallen, giving her all to protect the lot from a wave of anti-matter that had burst through the wall. Her shields had barely been enough, the queer radiations washing over them all, staggering them, but in the end she had prevailed. Mysterium had stepped to protect her then as she fell to the dirt, her mystical fire extinguished. Arcane could see her chest rising and falling- barely. She still lived, but for how long?

Beyond Mysterium stood Strange. Both men were directing their energies at the Wall, their hands encompassed in blazing balls of mystical fire. They appeared staggered and weakened, sweat ran down Strange's face, but neither man was willing to admit defeat. Both were injured, bleeding from the assault of the Wall's Spawn that had suddenly, simply started appearing, adding to the catastrophe.

Light spewed from the Wall, a deep rumbling resonating as the aftershocks of ancient stone shattering swept through the void. There was movement, a great shifting and cracking as Arcane heard the shouts of the Magi, Strange and Mysterium redoubling their efforts.

"Bloody 'ell..."

Arcane saw Constantine run forward, but what he did was unclear, as he did not seem to call forth his mystical flame. The rumbling ceased however, and the shifting form of a giant trapped within the eons old barrier settled in to sleep once again.

And still Chaos poured forth...

The roiling, crackling storm of anti-matter flowed through the breach in the Wall where one of the Promethium Giants had once been held. It was a gaping wound, comically shaped in the form of a man as though ripped from a Warner Brother's cartoon. Arcane had no idea as to what- or who- had been trapped there, but he was gone now and whatever was beyond was racing to escape through the gap.

Arcane hunched forward feeling the bile rise in his throat. He vomited as a wave of exhaustion washed over him again, forcing him to his hands and knees. There was nothing left as he gasped for breath. He was done, and all their efforts had been pointless-

"Think not of failure, Eric Arcane. The final victory was never for we meager souls to decide. Ours is but to stay the onslaught of change, and in this, we succeed."

Arcane looked up at the tall man dressed in black. He had not seen the Stranger lift a finger throughout the fight, and his tuxedo and cloak were as dark and spotless as when he had first arrived. His eyes glowed as he watched the magical bolts striking the hole in the Wall, his face emotionless and cast in shadow.

“Easy for you to say... Stranger,” Arcane hacked and coughed, trying to get the words out as he struggled to his feet. He stared at the eruption there, far away in space where magic and anti-matter clashed. “Occult’s dead, and Arcanna may as well be. I can see that Strange and Mysterium are getting tired too. I’m done, an’ Constantine...”

“John Constantine does what is needed in his own way.”

“Yeah, well, whatever that is... it don’t seem ta’ be enough. One solid eruption and we’re gone. How many of those Giants are free already?”

“Five...”

“Five...” Arcane sighed, pulling a cigarette from his coat pocket, using a last flicker of his magic to light it. He swayed on his feet; breathing in the smoke, realizing it was all in his Astral Form and simply for show. “How many more before we’re done? How many more will die?”

“No more, Arcane,” the Stranger said. “My Faith wavered once, never again.”

Arcane followed where the Phantom Stranger pointed and saw a shimmering in the void. It was a blur at first and he knuckled his eyes to see, then gasped, wishing that he had not.

The thing was huge and white like chalk, swathed in green. It was the biggest being that he had ever seen before, dwarfed only by the Wall itself as he strode across the black. His face was grim, and his eyes were dark, little skulls blazing in the shadows of his verdant hood. He reached out his hand and covered the hole in the Wall. He screamed...

“Good God...”

“Not God, Eric Arcane, but HIS right hand and avenger. Behold the Spectre and more...”

The Stranger gestured and Arcane saw another form. It was like a shadow moving along the Wall, shaped like a man and black as pitch in the night. It moved to another hole and enveloped it, stopping the flow of the storm.

And there were others...

Along with the Spectre and the Nth Man, there also appeared the In-Betweener and a being composed of starlight, Lord Order and Master Chaos, a mage of huge proportions and ebon tresses, and a man of gold dressed in browns and orange- a robot...

And more, there were beings of light, wispy and gossamer wielding swords blazing with fire. There were men in armor, old and new and powerful directing warriors in legion. There was a woman-

Arcane gasped to see the face. It was vast and so far away, so huge that he had not noticed it before, encompassing all. Its form was the void and stars, dust shading its grim visage as the heavens swirled about, he reaching forward...

"Eternity..."

"And more..."

Arcane glanced at the tall shadowy man. He saw the flicker of a smile as he cast his gaze askance-

"There are many who might call me ally. Fewer that would call me friend, but there are those that I know and are known to me, and it is those that to which I shall ever remain..."

"A stranger..."

And Eric Arcane just had to laugh...

The WatchTower
The Hall of Justice
Earth's Moon:

He could feel the magic coursing about him, tingling. It made him nervous- not afraid, but he knew that the mystical energies that were swirling about could just as easily slay him as get him home. And those energies were massively powerful, far greater than he had ever experienced when facing the likes of past villains. And no wonder-

"!keeS"

He could hear Zatanna, her screams as she directed her magicks, trying to lock on, to find some link or anchor to their home dimension. She had sensed J'onzz before, back on the Avengers' Earth, but the contact had been fleeting and brief. Still, Thor had said that that would be enough.

He had powered the device without hesitation, whirling that awesome stone mallet overhead to gather his own energies. For the briefest instant he had created a storm right there in Avengers' Mansion, right there in the Science Lab. The room had crackled with power for a heartbeat, more, and the Man of Steel had felt the mystical power flood the chamber before the Asgardian- the God had directed that power through the Trans-Dimensional device that Iron Man had created years before and opened the portal.

Kyle had created his construct then, using the emerald energies of his own awesome weapon to build a machine that would somehow contain the power and redistribute it. If Green Lantern was right it would allow Thor's efforts to linger, anchoring them to the Avengers' dimension as well as expand those energies to more easily transport the entire group- Thor included. So far it seemed to be working, because just like that the world had changed-

"Can you feel it?" Clark Kent heard the frantic shouts of Wally West and turned. The Flash was just a scarlet blur beside him, a wavering image that seemed to stretch on for miles. Lightning sparked and snapped within his form.

"The Speed Force!" West continued. "I can feel it again, but... it's... in pain. Damaged!"

There was a flash of silver and Wally was gone. He could see Bruce in the distance, just a great dark shadow of a huge bat, unmoving save for a restless flutter. He could see the Scarlet Witch, her arms extended overhead, light dancing from her fingertips as a flicker of silver swirled about her- the other speedster, Quicksilver.

Plastic Man had grown to envelop those that needed protection; Firestorm still trapped in his form of Ronnie Raymond, Dinah and the Panther, the Wasp. And there stood Captain America, the colors of his uniform blurring, his shield sparkling as he stared ever forward, ready...

He saw images flickering on the fringe, the edge of sight. Memories almost, twisted reflections of a shattered mirror vanishing as quickly as they came...

A boy- himself- flying into the heart of a storm, dying...

Himself, older and crying, holding the limp, shattered body of Matrix- Kara...

Clark Kent standing in mourning over twin black coffins...

He saw Diana...

And it was simply over as the world faded into view about him. Superman recognized the familiar surroundings of the Hall of Justice in the WatchTower

immediately. The furnishings had been cleared to accommodate, but the walls, the very room itself was a known and welcome sight.

He saw J'onn not so far away even as Diana rushed forward with tear-filled eyes to embrace him. He hugged her back enjoying the familiarity and the reassurance of home.

"Thank the Gods, Kal," Diana whispered, knowing he would hear. "I- we were so worried." She looked up at him, her eyes huge and watery as she smiled. "Welcome home."

Kal-El smiled, whispering something in return as he glanced about the room. He saw Iron Man and Captain America conferring to one side, shaking hands like old friends would. He watched as Plastic Man unfurled his form allowing the others to stagger forth just a bit disoriented from the wild ride. He had to smile as Plas dropped to his knees and stretched his lips to kiss the floor, happy to be home again.

Wally seemed suddenly whole again, and fit. Superman knew that the Speed Force was still disrupted, but back in their home dimension he had to be closer to the source once more and thus stronger. So too was Kyle, his ring flaring green with energy, though Clark knew that he would need to recharge his ring to reaffirm his link to the Green Flame of Oa.

"It's so... structured." The Man of Steel glanced aside to see Zatanna standing with the Scarlet Witch. Zatanna seemed refreshed suddenly as well, and the Witch had a look of almost awe on her face as she stared at something that only the two of them could see. The speedster, Quicksilver stood close by as well, ever-ready to protect his sister apparently. He was looking at his hands however, his own expression somewhere between awe and curiosity.

"This is what it's like for you all of the time?" he asked turning towards the Flash. Wally grinned and nodded. "It's... fantastic..."

Clark turned as a hand fell on his shoulder. He saw J'onn J'onzz flash a quick smile before his face turned grim once again-

"Would that we had time to rejoice, my friend, or simply relax. The crisis however has yet to pass." The Martian Manhunter nodded towards the view port and Clark gasped-

The Earth was almost full, huge in the black velveteen backdrop of space. It was a sight he usually enjoyed, and in quieter times he would often simply stare for hours, watching the slow rotation, the swirl of clouds blanketing land and sea. Now however the sight sent a shiver of fear and almost panic racing along his spine. The clouds were pink, swirling red and enveloping most of his adopted

planet. He could see lightning flashing sporadically as the storms surged and churned. The Rifts still littered the view, great gaping tears in the very fabric of reality. He saw the worst, a swell over Asia that was spiraling like a hurricane, the eye flaring with a strange radiance over the Himalayas-

“Ra’s Al Ghul.”

All conversation stopped as the Batman spoke, though his voice was barely above a whisper. The Dark Knight stood before the port, watching the storms and had apparently deduced the center of the worst before them all. Clark knew that his friend was right, knew that the Demon’s Head was based there. Was he the true cause of all of this?

“The Rift’s been there for days,” Ralph Dibny said as he stretched his head- nose twitching madly- up beside the other detective. “The weird energies just spiked not too long ago.”

“Weird energies?” the Beast asked, bounding towards the window and pointing at the source in question. “Looks ionic to me- like Simon on a bad hair day.”

“Close Beast,” the Iron Man said as the others all gathered around the port. “But it’s not Wonderman.”

“Nefaria,” Captain America said knowingly even as Iron Man nodded in confirmation.

“But far stronger than he’s ever been. The readings of his power are off the scale.”

“It matters not,” Thor said as he stepped to the group. He looked tired, but he still stood tall, ready to continue the fight. “I know not who this ‘Ghoul’ may be, but if Nefaria dost be involved then he shall face the wrath of Thor and our twain legions assembled! He shall pay, this I vow!”

No one said anything to dispute Thor’s statement. They all knew what had to be done, but-

“Has there been any word from Clint?” the Wasp asked as she flitted above the heads of the others. Superman could hear the catch in her voice, the worry for her friend-

“If you mean Hawkeye, I sensed him,” J’onn said. “Briefly but...”

“He’s apparently there,” Iron Man continued, pointing at the swirling nexus of energy. “Right in the middle of it.”

“And Midas?” Cap asked, but Iron Man shrugged.

“I assume he’s there too, with his daughter.” Cap nodded, his gaze drifting over the gathered heroes. They were twenty all told including the boy who had apparently regained his ability to transform into Firestorm again along with the stretching man that he had yet to meet. Seeing the display of power however, he wondered if they would be enough.

“We need to share information people, all the way around. We need to organize, but I need to know who this Ra’s Al Ghul is, and you of the League need to learn about Nefaria and Midas. Far too much lies on our success and we can’t afford to go into battle blind. And we need to hurry. I assume there are other heroes down there fighting in your absence?”

J’onn J’onzz nodded and Clark had to smile. Of course there were others.

“Good,” Cap continued, and if any had any problem or doubt with his ability to take command of the situation they did not voice it. “We’ll have to hope that they all can hold out for a little longer. I have a rough idea of what to do, but it will involve our total cooperation.”

“Just tell us what you need, Cap,” Superman said, deferring his own leadership to the other without reservation. “Lead us. We’ll follow.”

“To the very Gates of Hades if need be!” Thor shouted!

“JLA Avengers Assemble!”

All eyes glanced up to see the inflated head of Plastic Man hovering over them, a red Bat Cowl with a wide ‘A’ imprinted over his huge goggles, tiny wings flapping on the side of his head. His wide grin slowly faded as he saw everyone staring at him.

“What?” he said, his head shriveling suddenly like a balloon losing air...

“Someone had ta say it...”

The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:

POWER!

It was incredible. In his wildest dreams he had never known it could be like this. It was delicious, awesome. Better than money, or a good strong piss. Better than sex...

Doctor Midas laughed as he held the man at arm's length, watching as his life drained away. He was struggling, kicking and screaming as Midas plucked his molecules away like feathers from a chicken. There were little pieces missing from the queer little man, the agent of the complex with the strange demonic insignia. He didn't know what it signified, and frankly he did not give a rat's ass. Whatever it was- what it stood for and meant, it was done. Dust in the wind...

"Please..."

The agent squirmed at arm's length, pleading as Midas cosmically pulled a bit of matter from his thigh. The man screamed, feeling the pain, but Doctor Midas simply squeezed his hand and cut him off, choking the shrill voice in mid-cry. He relished the little human's agony, but his whining was a bit detracting from his moment of glory.

And he WAS a god now, so he could savor his ascension any way he damn well pleased. Midas chuckled-

The man dissolved, sifting through his gold-clad fingers like sand through the hour glass-

"So are the days of our-"

"Daddy?"

"What? WHAT?"

Midas turned to face his daughter. Oubliette the Exterminatrix looked damn fine decked out in her leathers and heels, her whip dangling at her side. She looked hot- sweating actually, her red hair matted down and clinging seductively to her golden skin. Breasts heaving, licking her lips...

"Someone's coming."

Doctor Midas blinked, chasing away his urges as he stared down the dimly lit corridor, watching the shadows play on the cold stone walls. He could hear the steady stride, the clack of heels on the floor. He could smell fear, sense the very change in the air as someone drew closer with determination and hatred. Is this what it was like all the time? Is this Godhood?

An old man rounded the corner. He was tall and thin but in good shape, Midas could tell. He could see the muscles beneath the billowing shirt, the tight jodhpurs. This was not a flunky, not an agent or red shirt. The man had the look of intelligence about him, the look of knowledge like Richards and Doom- like he

had seen it all before. Midas remembered the man, vaguely, from before. He had been on the other side of the safety glass when he had first appeared.

The man stopped just a few feet away, planting his feet and striking a pose with his hands behind his back. There was no fear in him- that was still around the corner. Midas sensed anger, and annoyance.

“You will leave my home,” the man said. His steely gray eyes swept the scene, lingering briefly on the dead littering the hallway, noting Oubliette in the background before focusing on Midas.

“What if I don’t want to leave?” Midas scoffed, chortling. “What if I like it here?”

“You slay my followers,” the old man sighed, “destroy my house. You shatter untold dreams. Leave or die.”

“You’re pretty brave for a norm. You have no powers. There’s something odd, granted, but...”

“Daddy!”

Midas turned to see a beautiful Asian looking woman attacking Oubliette. Where had she come from?

He watched, eyes wide as the attacker chopped at his daughter’s wrist even as the Exterminatrix drew back to strike with her whip. Oubliette moaned as her hand spasmed, the whip clattering to the floor. She backed away, but the other woman was upon her looking tight in her little uniform. Midas licked his lips.

The woman kicked high and wide, her heel slamming into his daughter’s cheek. That would leave a mark for sure. Oubliette staggered back, teetering on her heels and blocked the next spinning kick rather well, jabbing out with a quick thrust that caught the woman in the kidney as she regained her footing.

Oubliette dove, her weight and momentum hitting the woman full and off balance and they both tumbled to the ground, kicking and punching. Oubliette grabbed a handful of brown hair and yanked, but the other woman did not cry out, instead ramming her palm into his daughter’s chin. Midas winced at the impact.

They tumbled, rolling across the floor as Midas watched on. He did love a good cat-fight, but-

Midas turned at the sound of the whistle.

“Hawkeye. My old friend...”

Midas stared at the archer and knew where the fear was coming from. It was rolling off of the archer with every bead of sweat, every drop of perspiration. Still, the marksman stood his ground, an arrow notched and pointing, muscles rippling as he held the bow's line in check. It was a simple arrow, a simple pointed head designed to kill. Midas laughed.

"You have got to be kidding me, Barton," Midas said with a chuckle. He noted that the old man had stepped to one side to give Hawkeye a clear shot, not that it mattered. Midas planted his fists on his hips and laughed. "Take your shot, bitch. Do your worst!"

"Hey Midas," Hawkeye grinned, and Doctor Midas saw the archer's fingers twitch, the arrow shooting forward. The Avenger was already moving, reaching back to his quiver for another arrow as the first flew. "Eat shaft!"

Midas felt the prick. There was no pain really, but still he was surprised, gasping slightly as he looked down to see the wooden shaft sticking out of his golden armor. It vibrated, but beyond that...

Midas grasped the shaft and pulled it free, tossing it aside. He looked back to the archer.

"What the fuck was that supposed to-"

He saw the other arrow flying his way. It was wooden, black feathers for fletching, but this one had a strange cylinder attached to the head. It was long and metallic, and looked vaguely familiar. It rammed into the hole in his chestplate, the rent in his armor.

"What?"

Midas screamed as light flared. Too late he realized what the cylinder was, and what it was doing. He tried to move, to grab at the arrow but the armor was suddenly far too heavy. He felt weak, drained and worse with each passing second. He was losing it- losing power!

The fucking archer had beaten him again...

It just wasn't fair.

He had had it-

Had it all...

Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Never-ending, the power flowed forth burning all. His eyes blazed and there was no depletion. The energy just kept coming and coming. Ancient stone crumbled in his grasp.

Steam rose in the wake, wherever he happened to glance. He could hear the screams, the cries of agony from those that he slew, vanishing in a wisp of smoke, ashes blowing on the wind.

He was supreme!

Nefaria laughed as he raged, loosing the beams of energy from his eyes and decimating the ranks of his opposers. Little men all, of less consequence they fell like wheat before the scythe. Were there none to oppose him? None to give him the slightest pause on this pitiful reflection of his Earth?

Not that he was complaining. An uncontested conquest would be most welcome after so many defeats on his own world. What if he were the only... Marvel here? What if he were supreme? Well, he was, obviously, but to achieve victory without a struggle.

Nefaria spied another group struggling their way up the icy slopes. They were well equipped he noted, and skilled. And determined as they climbed, trying to reach the great silver tower that would soon become a tombstone for them all, a monument for that first clash when Nefaria fell to Earth. Perhaps he should spare just a few for his future use...

No. Lackeys were always aplenty. There would be more. Nefaria laughed, squinting just so and let the fire rage forth.

IMPACT!

He was falling, spiraling through the air uncontrolled. Panic filled his breast as the last dregs of useless breath left his altered body. The world spun blue and gray and white as he started his rapid plummet to the snowy slopes.

“I can fly...”

Count Nefaria stopped his descent, righting himself as he tried to regain composure. There was no pain, yet he had felt the impact- sensed it really, now he thought. A strange sensation indeed. What had hit him though, with enough force that it might register? A meteor? Nefaria licked his lips, remembering the Vision...

He saw them then, hovering above but not so far away. He recognized some- they had followed him. The damnable Avengers; Ms Marvel- no- Warbird, and Iron man, Thor, but there were others as well, others he did not know. There was a woman scantily clad and draped in the flag of the United States. There was a man whose head seemed to be aflame. A boy in green and black, his hand glowing green as well. An alien obviously- again green- with a flowing blue cloak. A man dressed in red and blue, a huge 'S' shield on his chest. It was he that had struck the blow.

Who were these fools?

"Nefaria!" Thor bellowed. He hung there in the sky, twirling his damnable hammer overhead. Nefaria could see the storm clouds rolling in, the flash of lightning on the horizon. The Asgardian's own storm was struggling for dominance against the red clouds and black lightning of the Negative Zone, but he seemed unconcerned. "Captain America did demand we give thee one chance to surrender! Do so now, cur, or face our unfettered wrath!"

The man was insane. Count Nefaria blinked, watching as the 'heroes' flitted about, jockeying for position in the sky above. Did they not know who he was? He would let them know.

"Braggart!" Nefaria shouted as he called forth the power boiling within his form. It was a song- a crescendo of glory shouting for release. "Insidid dolt! You face Nefaria! You know nothing of wrath!"

Count Nefaria laughed as he watched the Thunder God writhe in the blazing onslaught of his eye beams. The radiation burned the Asgardian's skin, stripped away his raiment. It made him scream!

Once upon a time Nefaria thought that Thor had held the secret to immortality. Now...

"Burn, Asgardian..."

"Burn!"

And the battle was joined...

Wally West charged up the steep slopes of Mt. Annapurna, his fleet form little more than a wisp of scarlet trailing lightning behind. He would hear the clap of thunder eventually, if he was still near enough, but he hoped not to be. He hoped to be far away...

He held the two men- one under each arm as he dashed back down the slope. He could feel the friction burning into the rock behind him, a melting trail that spewed steam in his wake. He could see flashes of light overhead as the battle raged, but he ignored it. He had his job- his duty. Captain America had told him to save lives, and for some reason he just did not want to disappoint the man in charge.

“Two more...”

He heard the high-pitched buzz, saw the flash of quicksilver as his fellow speedster dashed past heading back up the mountain. The Avenger had adapted to the Speed Force, erratic as it was- and was thriving on the boost.

It had been hell on Quicksilver’s world. Everything had been so slow and methodical. He was dying just trying to move, and every step had hurt. How the other speedster had managed in that ‘molasses’ was beyond Wally West’s ability to understand. But now, back in touch with the Speed Force- even damaged- it was like... Like...

He could not express it.

“Two more!” he shouted as he passed Quicksilver on the slope again. It had been seconds- less than seconds...

Dozens saved. Dozens more to go...

“He’s strong...”

Batman stared up the slope, watching as the battle raged in the skies over the Himalayas. The Black Canary was right. The alien had flashed some form of Heat Vision at Thor and they had heard his cries even here more than a mile away. The being had taken a ramming blow from the Man of Steel yet seemed barely fazed. Almost annoyed.

“Count Nefaria is perhaps one of the Avengers’ strongest foes,” Captain America confirmed. “One of the first times we fought him in a ‘powered’ state it took a full compliment of some of our strongest members to bring him down. Now, his power levels seem almost incomprehensible compared to then.”

“Any foe can be beaten,” the Batman countered as he moved along the slight trail leading up to Ra’s Al Ghul’s Aerie. The battle above was out of his league, and most likely the league of his companions. There was concern of course, but they had their own job to do. And if the likes of Superman and Thor could not stop

Nefaria, they could at least keep him occupied while the real work was done. Count Nefaria was not the problem. It was Ra's.

Captain America had compiled a good strategy he had to admit. Let the heavy hitters deal with the threat of Nefaria, keep him busy while cooler heads made the way into Al Ghul's stronghold to find Midas and the Avengers' archer, and to deal with the true threat. Meanwhile, Zatanna and the Scarlet Witch would be plying their trade, using their strange sciences- magic- to try to stem the spread of the Rifts and storms of anti-matter. Too, while the Flash and Quicksilver used their great speed to play clean up, the Beast, Plastic Man and Iron Man would link up and investigate the strange tower that Ra's Al Ghul had built.

There was little doubt in the Batman's mind that that tower had been constructed by Ra's Al Ghul and was the true key to the current crisis. The solution was simple of course. Find Ra's and get answers. Shut it down-

The Beast and Plastic Man have reached the base of the tower, Captain. Iron Man is en route to join them, though he dislikes leaving the main battle.

"Good J'onn," the Captain responded to the mental message. He had taken one idea from the JLA, using their resident telepath to keep him 'linked' to all the teams throughout the assault. He had mentioned in the quick strategy meeting that they had tried something similar with one of their own members once, but it had not worked out well. "Iron Man will do his part. Don't worry. Keep me appraised."

They all flinched as a loud boom shook the deep snow about them. Batman quickly surveyed the upper mountain, watching for avalanche while the others scanned the sky for the source.

"Jesus..."

The others followed where the Black Canary pointed to see Warbird's body spiraling towards the horizon. Nefaria was streaking skyward trailing radiation like a comet as both Thor and Superman swooped down to meet him. The entire mountain seemed to shake when they three finally clashed.

"There!"

The Batman pointed up the slope to a clearing and a huge set of metallic doors clearly disguised with a white primer of paint. The doors were open partially, billows of smoke roiling out and drifting skyward on the wind. Too, the Agents of the Demon's Head were pouring through the opening, both in and out in an almost frenzied state. Batman could hear the dim and distant echo of weapons being discharged within.

“We need to clear the path,” he said, but even as he got the words out he saw Captain America’s shield spin past, the Black Panther and the Canary running forward in pursuit. Something flitted by on the opposite side- the Wasp he assumed as he hurried forward then as well. He almost smiled- almost. He was not used to being last...

“It’s an incredible construct,” Iron Man said as he swept lower within range of the hearing of Plastic Man and the Beast. “I’d love to talk to the man that imagined this.”

“Yeah, well,” Plas said stretching his neck so that his head was level with the Golden Avenger. “Maybe after we bring it crashing down you an’ him can look at the blue prints over a cup a’ latee’. Right now this thing’s about to destroy my home, so let’s focus, hunh?”

“I am focused,” Iron Man replied just a bit coolly. “However it’s drawing in the anti-energy from the Negative Zone, that’s not why it was originally constructed. I see definite bits of technology similar to the Encephala tech that was used both by the Grim Reaper and Ultron.”

“What’s an Ultron?” Plastic Man asked, his goggles huge as he watched the Beast climbing the side of the tower apparently uncaring of the energy pouring from the huge, light-bulb looking thing at the top.

“Big, nasty robot,” McCoy answered as he heaved on a panel bolted in the side of the tower. He peered within once he tossed the metal plate away. “Hell-bent on obliterating humanity in favor of a more mechanically inclined population. His Encephala Ray shut down certain portions of the brain, putting the recipient in a death-like coma. Speaking from first hand experience, let us hope that this tower was not constructed for a similar purpose.”

“I doubt it,” Iron Man said, spiraling down from another circuit about the tower. He came to a stop near the Beast, hovering as he flashed a bright beam of light from his chestplate within the panel that Hank McCoy had opened. “From what Diana and J’onn told me about this ‘Ra’s Al Ghul’, simply putting the world in a coma seems a bit blunt for him. More likely the original intent was something a bit subtler.” Iron Man looked at Plastic Man for confirmation, but the hero simply stared a goggle with his mouth wide and flapping-

“Wonder Woman lets you call her Diana?” he shrieked. “I’ve known her for months, and she doesn’t let ME call her Diana.” Iron Man shrugged as best he could and returned his attention to the machine.

“It’s a moot point really,” Iron Man continued ignoring Plastic Man’s sullen mumbling. “They’ve taken the original broadcast tech and inverted it somehow, adding an array of power receptors and a load of dampers to channel the anti-matter into some battery device hidden somewhere I imagine. Still, even the adaptations and modifications are state of the art for something that was cobbled on after the fact. It’s reminiscent of some of the things I’ve seen that Doom had put together. In fact, it reminds me of the schematics of Doom’s Cosmic Power Transferal Pack, which he used when he originally stole the powers of the Silver Surfer years ago. Reed showed me the design once over...”

“Oh my stars and garters...” The Beast’s head suddenly popped up and out of the panel and both Iron Man and Plastic Man saw the look of shock and understanding on his face.

“What?” the two heroes said in unison.

“Didn’t Thor say something about the Silver Surfer disappearing into a Rift when this whole thing started?”

“Good Lord... you’re right.”

“What’s a Silver Surfer?” Plas asked, his legs molding into a surfboard while his costume shifted to red Bermuda shorts.

“Ex-Herald of Galactus,” the Beast offered, “big-time space guy.”

“And what’s a Galactus?” Plastic Man asked morphing his body into a red facsimile of Robbie the Robot.

“He eats planets.”

“Sorry I asked.”

“Cap?” Iron Man said, hoping to focus on the mental link provided by the Martian Manhunter. He heard Captain America’s response, but he seemed preoccupied. Never the less, Iron Man pressed on-

“Cap. We may have another problem...”

“The Surfer...”

Wanda Maximoff-Magnus licked her lips as she stared skyward. The storms still churned. Lightning still cut the sky and Chaos seemed to swell from the Rift. It was so strange.

She could see it so clearly- the Chaos. It was exact, precise and beautiful, like crystal from Tiffany's, as though sculpted and molded for perfection. And she could feel it. It almost seemed to call to her, a rich, deep voice echoing-

"Wanda?"

The Scarlet Witch gasped, almost yelping, jumping to hear the voice in her ear, the hand on her shoulder. Suddenly she felt the cold again, shivering.

"Zatanna."

"Are you all right?" Zatanna asked, smiling but concern on her face. How she was not freezing to death Wanda had no idea, dressed in her magician's stage costume of fishnet stockings and tuxedo jacket. At least she had put on some boots. "You seemed distant for a moment..."

"I'm fine," Wanda said with a grim smile. "You heard?"

"Cap's message? The Silver Surfer? Yes. It sounds bad."

"It could be," Wanda said with a sigh, wincing as she saw Superman take a smashing blow to his handsome face, swiftly plummeting to crash into the side of another mountain miles away. After a moment she heard the crack of the blow, then the rumble of the impact after that. The boy, Firestorm and Green Lantern were quickly positioning to take the Man of Steel's spot in the assault against Nefaria, and she saw a crimson blur that must be the Flash racing towards where the Superman struck earth. She wondered where Pietro was.

"If only I could get a better 'grip' on your Chaos Magic. Perhaps I could use my Hex Powers to alter Nefaria's composition somehow. Cut him off at the source of his powers." Wanda bit her lip, watching as the boy, Kyle tried to contain Count Nefaria in a green 'safe'. Nefaria burst free easily, sending the Lantern spinning away. "Your Chaos seems so... ordered. It's unintelligible, but there's a bizarre structure to it all, regardless. I can't fathom it."

"It's an Age of Order," Zatanna offered, her own gaze following Wanda's as Wonder Woman flew in closer to renew the attack. She saw both Superman and Thor streaking back again as well, though Warbird had yet to recover. Firestorm was doing something, but as always reality warped about him in a nuclear glow making it hard for her special 'sight' to discern. She did not see J'onn.

"Chaos is submissive to Order's laws. There is a balance," Zatanna explained, her eyes focused on Firestorm as an idea started to form. "Chaos is amongst us as always, but... It's... incomprehensible..."

"We're going about this all wrong, I think," Zatanna said, stepping forward and raising her hand to shield her eyes against the snow glare.

"Oh?"

"Shhh... I think I have an idea... J'onn?"

War World...

"When shall he start?" Shazam asked as he strained to see the shadowy form of Galactus against the glare of conflicting energies rippling from the Rift. It seemed to the ancient wizard that the being from that other realm simply floated before the hole in space as though basking in the summer sun. He glanced at his three comrades; Izaya the once Highfather of New Genesis, and Ganthet, last of the once famed and fabled Guardians of the Universe. They, like he, were almost awestruck at the sheer magnitude of their plan, or rather, the plan of the fourth in their impromptu quartet.

Thanos.

There was a twinkle in his eye, a spark as the Mad Titan turned from the spectacle to grin at his trio of allies. "He already has," Thanos rumbled, his voice low and rough.

"Many are the mysteries of Galactus, but this I know, HIS is the will and the way, the final voice and decision. It is HE that has the final say, and the final word." Thanos gestured towards the heavens again. Galactus had not moved. "Whether we witness history in the making or the end of all we shall know rests on HIS ability now. HIS fate."

"I do not like this, Titan," Ganthet said with a frown. "The fate of all reality should not rest in the hands of one unknown being no matter how powerful they might be."

"Tell that to Hal Jordan, Guardian..." Thanos chuckled coldly. "Oh. That's right. You can't. Well ask Rama Kushna then, or Rao, or even whomever it is that your Spectre serves these days."

"Do you really wish to debate theology with the likes of us Titan, especially at a time like this when we all are quite possibly mere moments from meeting our respective maker?" Izaya said stepping forward.

Thanos smiled and shrugged, returning his gaze to the Rift. "I suppose not. We'll save that for a time in the future- if there is a time, when we are all, old

and... gray. I do wish to point out however, though I said the ultimate decision lies with Galactus, I never said that he would not have assistance.”

And Thanos simply disappeared.

The three old men looked from one to another in momentary confusion, then one by one all turned towards the skies again. They could see the Devourer still, unmoving, floating like a child in the womb. Too, suddenly, they saw another...

I AM PREPARED, TITAN.

Thanos stared up at the glory of Galactus. The Devourer of World's eyes seemed glazed as his skin burned before the onslaught of radiation and anti-matter rippling from the giant tear, so alien to his very being- and to that of Thanos as well. Even with the preparations that he had taken himself he could feel the burn at his back. The strange combination of negative energy combined with this dimension's Time Stream and Speed Force run amok, the pure essence of Chaos unbound all intermingling to create a conflagration that might wipe out existence as a whole. If left unchecked, but then, that was the very purpose of their being there.

Thanos' gaze quickly scanned the alien apparatus, which Galactus had donned. It was a strange web work, a lattice lacing and inter-lacing again, criss-crossing the entirety of the Devourer's more familiar armor of purple and blue with strands of white. It was something created years before by the Earthman Reed Richards when the human had actually saved the giant from Death herself, earning the ire of the universe in the process. Thanos had suggested modifications of course, which Galactus easily implemented, linking all to the workings of his Planet Ship in the preparation of 'feeding'. Now, with his armor ready and his machinery in place there was but one final step.

“As am I, Galen...”

Thanos ignored the Devourer's gaze as he produced a small gem from his own armor. It was one of a set, one of the two that he currently possessed, and the one Infinity Gem that was his by right- The Reality Stone. He held the gem high and out that the Devourer might see it as well, their eyes meeting as both focused on the sparkling stone as it shifted in color with its surroundings. Galactus almost seemed to shrug as he looked away and Thanos smiled at the conceit.

I EXPECTED AS MUCH. I AM A BEING OF ABSOLUTES, AND ONLY THE UNKNOWN MAY CHANGE THAT.

“If the results are positive, Devourer, does the path to success matter? We have the opportunity to save reality and sate your great hunger all in one fell swoop. How shallow are we not to at least try?”

I AM ONE IN THE GREAT CYCLE, TITAN. THE END SHALL COME FOR US ALL, EVENTUALLY. OFTEN I CRAVE ITS ARRIVAL AS I CRAVE SUSTENANCE. ONE OUTCOME IS MUCH THE SAME TO ONE SUCH AS I.

“Oh, but for the grace of God, eh? Pity I want to go on living or I would leave you to your fate.” Thanos floated forward easily, flowing through the aeyther and storm to confront the Devourer, face to gigantic face. “I could you know,” he said as he held forth the Infinity Gem, “but I have seen the Other Side as have you- and not. Eternal peace is not for the likes of us.”

Galactus said nothing as the Mad Titan reached out and placed the Reality Gem into the cradle within the helmet at the Devourer’s brow. Thanos drifted back, watching in satisfaction as the latticework, exo-skeleton slowly started to glow. Brighter, ever brighter as the Devourer of Worlds slowly began to shift and squirm. Thanos could only imagine the strange sensations that were coursing through the body of the being more than twenty billion years old. He who came before...

It had been a gamble, the idea to convert the strange energies seeping from the Rifts into something, which the Great Devourer could consume. It had been Thanos’ idea to use the Reality Stone to simply do it, but of course Adam Warlock- ever the voice of reason- had pointed out the errors in his plan. Granted the Stone could do the job, but as Galactus himself had pointed out, HE was unique in the cosmos. HIS was a specific purpose, and to tamper with the Grand Design was to tempt the ultimate fate. However, when the Way is seemingly endless and the Will is weary...

It was the very thought of Galactus that reminded the Titan of the mechanism constructed by Reed Richards. A brilliant piece of work- for a human- and a simple matter to adapt that to in turn adapt to the unique energies that the Infinity Gem would soon commence pouring into the very being of Galactus.

An inspired plan, a marvelous theory that might satisfy all. But would it work? Thanos had no idea actually, and in truth he only cared a fraction of a wit. There were plans within schemes within plots of course, and as always the Mad Titan was far and away beyond any other in his thinking. ‘Outside the box’, as they say, or perhaps more accurately-

Outside the cube...

The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:

“I can smell their fear.”

The Black Panther paused, motioning for the others to do the same as another group of agents of the Demon’s Head charged past, running for the upper levels and freedom. The panic on their faces, in their eyes was evident. Something up ahead was sending these and many more before them fleeing for their very lives.

“Let them go,” the Batman said edged back against the wall and watching them stream past. It was pointless to fight them. They would just be a delaying tactic. “It’s Ra’s we want.”

Captain America nodded his agreement, stepping back into the main corridor when it was clear, the others following in step. He glanced at the Black Canary standing at his side as they were bringing up the rear. She seemed almost impatient to continue, eager in a way. He wondered why.

“The way’s clear.”

The Batman glanced up at the tiny voice almost lost in the din of battle echoing through the halls. He saw the Wasp flitting overhead, zipping in close enough to be heard.

“There’s definitely something big happening up ahead,” she continued, lighting on the Dark Knight’s shoulder, deferring to his expertise in the surroundings rather than Cap’s own strategic savvy. “I saw Hawkeye. He’s okay, and Midas and his daughter too, though the Doctor was flat on his back with an arrow in his chest. The man you described was there too- Ra’s Al Ghul- and some other woman fighting Oubliette, and about a score of agents still on their feet. There’s a lot of dead too. It’s like a slaughterhouse.”

“Ra’s has no problem sacrificing his followers to achieve his goals,” Batman said grimly, motioning for the Panther to take the point again, swiftly falling into step. He could hear Cap and the Canary guarding the rear, rather, the Canary guarding the Captain as his attention was divided, directing the other teams. It had taken some time to get him to ‘think’ his directions rather than speak them, knowing that J’onn J’onzz would ‘hear’ regardless. Not that it mattered if the group inside were discovered. Resistance within the Aerie had been minimal, and the assembled team incredibly adept at working in unison, quick, quiet and efficient.

“I don’t think it was your Ra’s that did the killing,” the Wasp countered, taking a short respite on the Batman’s shoulder, clinging to his cowl. “I think it was Midas. I...”

The Batman raised his hand for silence as he glanced into a room off to one side. It was a Lab he knew, but for what purpose was beyond his ability to determine. He could see the remains of the heavily shielded partition, the reinforced room beyond, but the rest of the area had been blasted clean. There were shadowy images etched and burned into the walls where machinery had once stood, and people as well. He could smell the devastation, a rotting odor like burned ozone and sulfur.

“You feel it too,” the Panther said as he silently eased into the room. “The tingling, like static electricity, and the smell.”

“It seems familiar,” the Batman agreed, “but I don’t...”

“Ohmigod!”

Both men turned at the sound of Janet Van Dyne’s outburst. They saw the tiny Avenger hovering in the space of the shattered window, her hands covering her mouth in shock for her cry. Easing forward they saw the reason.

“The Silver Surfer...” the Panther said as he leaped through the window’s frame easily avoiding the jagged remains of the safety glass. He landed noiselessly, crouching next to the unconscious form of the former Herald of Galactus, touching a hand gently to the man’s shining throat. “Alive, though faint. It’s hard to tell, but...”

“Bring him then!”

The Batman turned and stalked from the room not even considering that his order would be questioned. He passed the Captain and Canary in the doorway, noting the Star-spangled Avenger’s slightest nod, though he seemed lost in thought, no doubt relaying the information through J’onn’s mind link to the others.

Fine!

If the Beast were correct, then finding the Surfer meant that they were getting closer to the root of all this, and finally the end. The Batman had no doubt that Ra’s Al Ghul was that ultimate root, no matter Midas and Annihilus and Nefaria. It was Ra’s somehow, implementing one of his schemes to cull humanity and recreate the world in his image, according to his focused and limited delusions. There was no calculating the damage he had done, but there was a cost to be certain-

And he would pay...

“Magnificent!”

Wonder Woman stared unbelieving as the Count Nefaria simply smiled, shrugging away, ignoring her mightiest blows. She was breathing hard, her breasts heaving and her body aching and the man hardly seemed winded though he had suffered assaults from some of the most powerful heroes that she had ever encountered. Thor seemed power unbridled with his mystical hammer, and Superman was, well, Superman. And Nefaria seemed totally unfazed.

He vanished then, and just as suddenly she felt the burn of his radical energies at her throat, grasping her already injured arm. She winced as he squeezed ever so slightly and pain shot up her arm and through her body. He was so fast.

“You are truly worthy of my glory. The ultimate woman for me, the ultimate man,” he whispered, his voice crackling in her ear. She could hear her hair sizzling with his proximity, her skin feeling afire. “Come. Be my queen and I shall end this quickly.”

“You-“ she gasped, the heat stealing her voice, burning her throat. “You’re insane...”

“They say that about every man with vision,” he said, laughing, “at least in the beginning. Napoleon... Einstein... Edison... Hitler- Well, he was. Bad example, but you get the general idea I’m sure. I however, unlike those men of the past, have the power to make my dreams reality.” He pulled her closer, his lips scorching her throat.

“Join me...”

“Never!” Diana screamed, struggling against his iron grip to no avail. Finally though Nefaria shifted her about, changing his grip to easily encompass her throat and hold her at arm’s length.

“Then die, bitch!”

Diana, Princess of Thymscira and the Wonder Woman felt his grip tighten on her throat, cutting off her air. She could hear her skin starting to sizzle, to burn, and she could not get her breath. Spots appeared as she struggled, kicking out at empty air uselessly, her strength and determination waning, dwindling...

She gasped as air flooded her lungs suddenly. She could feel the frigid air racing past as she fell, easing her pain and discomfort, cooling her burned skin. She

flailed as she fell, as consciousness and clarity returned. She slowed, concentrating, catching the wind until flight returned with thought, soaring up again to see Kal-El locked in combat with the dazzling monster that was Nefaria.

The two men were trading blows, Nefaria looking as though he actually felt some of them. Superman however felt more, but he fought on as the true hero that he was. He was bleeding and bruised, and Diana knew that he was hurting. The energies that were the core of Nefaria's power were laced with so many things that could kill them all. Magic to stymie both Thor and Superman and she as well. There were radiations flowing through his form, whether Kryptonite or not she did not know, but solar for certain and no doubt of the red end of the spectrum, anathema to the Man of Steel. The ionic energies to thwart J'onn, and somehow Kyle as well. And it was Nefaria's very sentience that stopped Firestorm from being effective-

Perhaps not...

"J'onn? What-" Diana looked up at the Martian Manhunter, the Green Lantern hovering near to defend their ace in the hole, he that was connecting everyone mentally.

Zatanna has an idea, but it will involve a unified assault to get Nefaria to press his powers to their utmost. I must analyze his make up thoroughly in order to guide Firestorm in his efforts-

"Me?" Firestorm said, swooping close to Wonder Woman. "I can't do anything to him. He's a person, despite his energy form. My powers don't work that way-"

"Not if I've figured Wanda's powers correctly, Ronnie," Zatanna said, her voice an echo in everyone's head. "She effects probability with her Mutant Hexes. Couple that with her Chaos Magic, and a little direction from me, and I think you're the trump we need to defeat that maniac."

It shall take a combined effort from all of us to succeed, including the trio at the tower as well as the speedsters, but it is our best chance thus far. For the sake of all, we must try. But of course the final decision remains yours, Ronald. You will be the key element.

"I can't," Firestorm said. "I can't affect life, no matter the form."

"You will, Firestorm," the Scarlet Witch said in his head, in all their minds. "A little faith..."

Superman felt blood again as Nefaria's fist smashed across his face. His head snapped about with the force of the blow and he heard another tooth crack. The world swam for a moment, and Nefaria struck again-

He was falling. Dazed, he tried to remain conscious, though it would be so easy to surrender. Nefaria was incredibly strong, and it was only the fact that he seemed to be toying with them that they had survived so long. The man was arrogant to be sure, and that would be his downfall if only they could press that fact and use it to their advantage.

Focusing he slowed his descent, blinking as he saw something streak past. He tried to focus, to make the world stop spinning and saw Warbird rejoining the fight.

Energy flared from her hands, a devastating blast that hit Nefaria squarely in the chest. It drove him back a bit, but he otherwise seemed unaffected, laughing as he braced against her attack-

"Is that your best, woman? Go back to the kitchen where you belong!" Nefaria laughed as Warbird cursed, taking the obvious bait. She rocketed forward-

"Son of a bitch!" she shouted and Superman winced. Not that he could blame her. She slammed into Nefaria, but he held his ground, energy flaring about him again. He simply batted her away.

Superman watched as the Avenger tumbled off, finally righting herself in flight, waiting. Lightning flashed, striking Nefaria and Kal-El saw Thor flying forward again.

The Thunder God was burned and battered, his uniform in shreds as he whirled his hammer wildly. Even from half a mile away Clark could hear his grunt as he hurled the mystical mallet, lightning crackling, thunder booming in its wake as it streaked towards its target...

Nefaria caught it. Just like that he simply put up his hands and stopped the hammer's momentum dead. Oddly however, Superman saw the villain wince as he tried to hold the weapon, his arm sagging as he strained. Finally he was forced to release his grip as the 'weight' of the hammer started to drag him down.

Cursing Nefaria turned towards the Lord of Storms, his eyes blazing-

"Burn!"

Thor screamed as fire erupted about him. His skin lighted ablaze, the last of his armor swept away in a cleansing conflagration that made his skin peel and boil. His long, golden hair burned off in the fire, his body writhing as he started to fall.

Nefaria's gaze followed the god all the way to the ground, steam rising in great clouds as the Asgardian hit the side of the mountain and started the long tumble down the slope...

And suddenly the hammer was there...

And Superman reached out, snatching M'Jolnir from its arc, saving it from its plummet to the ground...

Clark Kent gasped as he felt the sudden surge of power that flowed through his body. He had never imagined, never dreamed just how powerful the God of Thunder had truly been. He felt the tingle of magic, but it was good. It seemed to enhance him somehow, making the pain a distant memory. He had never...

Never...

Clark...

Superman shot skyward. He saw the glow of Green Lantern's ring as Kyle attacked again, Nefaria laughing and shrugging off his best efforts. Maybe it was the yellow coursing through Nefaria's form. Maybe Nefaria's will was stronger. Maybe Kyle was hesitant after what had happened before with the Squadron Supreme, or simply tired, running out of energy. It just did not matter. He kept trying, fighting to the last. Could Superman- could any of them do any less?

"Arrgh!"

Finally, reaction...

Nefaria grunted as the Man of Steel struck, all of his might pushing behind the hammer. He had not struck such a blow, let loose with all his might since he had fought Doomsday. There was always that tiny bit of conscience holding him back, but now, hammer in hand, that was clear. Nefaria had to go down, whatever the means. There was no more holding back-

"Up, up and away!" he shouted, swinging M'Jolnir out before him as he flew after Nefaria. It seemed appropriate...

"You're looking for a series of Mother Boards, two hundred at least lined up in a circuitry array that-"

"Un-Hunh..."

"Little squares that are full of processing chips and wires that-"

“Un-hunh...”

“Plas, listen-“

“Call me Snake...”

Plastic Man chuckled as he wormed his way deeper into the inner workings of the tower. It was all Greek to him, as he had tried to explain before he ‘volunteered’ to save the world. He had been born in the early part of the Twentieth Century, and his high-tech worries had ended with colored television and the Frigidaire, but Iron Man and the Beast had either not been listening or else they had more faith in him to get the job done than he had in himself. He was starting to wonder.

He had no idea just what he was looking at, or looking for, for that matter. A long row of data cards maybe, that he was supposed to rearrange to reconfigure the tower’s output somehow. He had no idea. He really needed to catch up with the rest of the world. It was annoying. He was not stupid, just ignorant, and it was his own fault. Before he joined the League he had never needed to know this stuff. Bag the villain, pop off a joke or two and he was done. Now they expected him to think? That was Batman’s job.

But they were depending on him, and damned if he was going to fail...

“Okay,” he said as he gathered enough mass to reform his head and speak. “I’m in an area with a whole lotta little 3x5’s lined up and blinking like a Christmas tree...”

“That’s probably it,” Iron Man said through J’onn’s mental link. “Each of those cards represents a faction of the human brain- if I’ve read this monstrosity right. We need to rearrange the cards so that it broadcasts a gathering signal rather than a repellent. The subliminal orders to the brain of the world populace will then yada yada yada...”

Plas sighed and started pulling the individual cards from their respective slots. He had no idea what he was doing, but the general rule was to ‘fuck up’ the villain’s machine, foil his plans and then laugh about it later, preferably over a beer and porterhouse. Seemed a good rule of thumb that applied.

“Great Scott!”

“What?” Plas asked to hear the Beast’s exclamation. “What’d I do?”

“The tower just started to flare like a lighthouse, shooting energy back into the Rift.”

“Oops... My bad...”

“No, Snake-“

Plas chuckled. “Eel. My name’s Eel. You don’t see too many movies do ya shell head?”

“No, Eel. No I don’t. But keep doing what you’re doing. And pay attention. Put card 34 into slot 27. Card 18 into slot 91...”

Plastic Man listened and did as he was told. He had no idea, not a clue, but he knew that it had to be done. And he was the best Plastic Man for the job...

Ra’s Al Ghul planted a boot on Midas’ chest as he grasped the arrow’s shaft and gave a mighty tug. With some effort the arrow slid free. Remarkably the broad head was free of blood, the cylinder affixed to the wooden shaft still crackling with energy leaking from the nozzle tip. Ra’s Al Ghul glanced down as Midas moaned, smiling. The fool would live, apparently, at least for the moment. At least until-

Ra’s Al Ghul turned at the sound of screams. His daughter straddled the other woman there on the far end of the hallway, the red-headed daughter of Midas. A fitting end as Talia hammered blows down on the other- her counterpart in a twisted way. An open palm thrust slamming across the cheek. A simple right cross against the nose. A driving left that bounced the back of the woman’s head against the floor.

The woman, the Exterminatrix sagged into unconsciousness as Talia sagged herself with exhaustion. Her long, brown hair hung damply, matted to her face with sweat as she glanced askew. She smiled ever-so-slightly with her triumph, and Ra’s nodded his approval.

“Okay...”

Ra’s turned again at the sound of the voice. It was the archer of course. The hero...

“Just drop the rod, man and walk away.” Hawkeye had a simple shaft notched and aimed at the heart of the Demon’s Head. Ra’s al Ghul smiled, his gaze scrutinizing his foe. The archer was sweating as well, tired. His muscles were straining to hold the bow taut and steady and Ra’s could see the slightest quiver in his stance. “We can end this without a fight.”

"I agree, archer," Ra's said as he gripped the Cosmic Control Rod and pulled it free of the shaft. The archer had done his job, downing the idiot Midas, and Ra's Al Ghul could feel the swell of power boiling within the cylinder, burning his fingers. Such power... Marvelous...

"We can end this now." Ra's raised the Nega Rod, pointing the nozzle at the archer even as Hawkeye loosed the shaft. A lesser man might have died, but then Hawkeye was not Green Arrow- he was not Oliver Queen, and Ra's Al Ghul was not a lesser man. Ra's saw the archer shift his aim, and by the same token he shifted his stance. Ra's Al Ghul was enhanced- not a Meta, mind, but far and removed from the sheep. The Lazarus Pits had made him the best that he could be, easily the equal of the closest, best man- the Detective. More than a match for the marksman.

Ra's Al Ghul snatched the arrow from its path, right out of the air.

The second arrow drove into his shoulder, striking bone.

Ra's Al Ghul cursed as the tingle shot down his arm. His hand spasmed, going numb as he lost his grasp on the Nega Rod, the metal cylinder bouncing, clattering across the warm stone of the floor. He glared at the archer, and the buffoon just grinned, another arrow notched.

"Don't be stupid," Hawkeye said, licking his lips. "It's over. End it."

"I am never stupid, archer. Do not insult me," Ra's said as he rubbed his arm. The shot had been clean, the bleeding minimal. He had not meant to injure but subdue. He was not Queen.

Ra's smiled as his daughter slammed the butt of the Exterminatrix's whip into the back of the archer's head, electricity dancing about his body. Hawkeye's eyes rolled up as the bow and arrow fell from his grip, and he fell to the floor. Talia slammed her boot's heel into the archer's temple as she stepped over his prone body, then gasped-

"Ra's!"

Again Ra's Al Ghul turned, knowing and recognizing the sound of the raised voice. He knew it all too well. He had heard the voice and the tone attached too many times in his recent past. He smiled with satisfaction.

"Detective..."

The Batman stood there as always, looking menacing and macabre all in one. His body was hunched slightly, his cloak hanging as he blended with the shadows, the white slits of his eyes gleaming, dazzling. Truly superb...

There were others behind him, as they should be. There was a man draped in the American flag, a patriot of sorts standing tall and proud and holding a shield emblazoned with a star. Another man swathed entirely in black, hunkering like a great jungle cat. There was the Black Canary; beautiful and deadly. And something... small, flitting about just out of sight. The JLA, and more, friends of the archer.

"A pleasure as always," Ra's said, bowing slightly. The rod was in reach, but the detective was fast and the others unknown, perhaps faster. He straightened and saw then that they had gathered the silver man, left him sprawled in the darkness beyond.

"It's over, Ra's," the Batman said with certainty. "Surrender."

"Surrender?" Ra's said with a sweeping gesture. "For what? I've done nothing."

Ra's smiled to see the Detective grimace, but it was the man with the shield that spoke up with arrogance.

"Treason... Kidnapping... Intent to commit mayhem..."

Ra's laughed. "That's absurd. I do not know you, or from whence you come, but there are rules here as the Detective knows all too well. I am beyond his reach, and yours, sir. You in fact are trespassing, but if you leave now--"

"Not likely!" the Black Canary shouted as she leapt forward. Ra's barely turned aside as she shot past, but her flying kick struck Talia unawares and as he turned about he saw his daughter hit the floor. The Black Canary landed gracefully, spinning- magnificent.

The blow hit hard, staggering him. Ra's stumbled, unprepared, slamming and slumping against the wall holding his still numb arm.

"Honor be damned," the black man said. "You will stand down."

The man draped in the flag scooped up the rod. A woman appeared at the side of the archer, cradling his head and trying to revive him.

"It's over Ra's. Beyond you," the Batman said. "Cut your losses and live to fight another day. My allies do not hold to my code."

Ra's Al Ghul stared at the Detective, locking eyes with the only man in the entire world that he considered even close to being an equal. He was bluffing... maybe... but...

“Take the rod.” Ra’s stepped away from the wall, stood sure and proud. “Control of these events has slipped from my grasp. There are too many variables, too many contingencies to account for. There will be other opportunities. I defer...”

Ra’s bowed again, smiling as the Detective grimaced. He had won in a way. Not ultimately, but that would come eventually. He still had the Protocols after all, and the Babel Towers. Too there was the Ruby of Revival.

His time would come...

“Just relax, Ronnie,” Wanda said as she squinted, trying to eye the energies flowing about her, to sort them out. “There’ll be no pain.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not on the receiving end.” Wanda, the Scarlet Witch afforded him a quick smile.

Firestorm glanced skyward as the sky flared green. He saw Kyle hovering there, standing in mid-air and directing the blazing energies of his ring at the Nefaria. There was a green cannon firing green energy, and though Nefaria staggered, he laughed. It was nothing to him.

Warbird’s hands blasted fire...

Wonder Woman’s broken lasso looped about his throat...

Superman slammed Thor’s hammer upside his head...

Count Nefaria shrugged it all away. And he just kept laughing.

Firestorm turned towards the tower just a ways up slope and saw the Beast and Plastic Man helping the Iron Man attach leads from his amazing armor to the construct. Without a thought Iron Man had opened up his armor and started to scavenge bits and pieces, hooking up to the tower’s circuitry. There were wires trailing from his chestplate and the power pods open at his hips. His wrists were spewing circuits and gears, the inner mechanisms glowing as he stared at the open panel before him. He was standing barefoot in the snow on the frozen stone, his red boots little more than piles of metal now, taken apart for their circuitry.

Firestorm turned back to the witch, hearing her moan. Zee was behind her, her fingers at the other woman’s temples as she leaned in close and whispered sweet something’s into her ear. Ronnie did not understand the few words he caught, and those he quickly forgot- magic. It was the same as every time that he worked with Zatanna. Still he stared. It was a scene, as both women were

heaving with the effort of what they were about, thrusting and striking dramatic pose. Zatanna was gorgeous of course and the Witch...

Focus, Ronald...

Firestorm licked his lips and glanced at the Martian Manhunter. J'onn smiled thinly, then went back to his own work. He was sweating, trying to sort through his many visions, the sight of a Martian able to see far beyond the spectrum of a human, and even that of the Nuclear Man. Ronnie could see a lot, but without Martin Stein- the other whom had once shared the persona of Firestorm- Ronald Raymond could not understand. He was not a scientist, not brilliant by any stretch of the imagination. He was just a young man- a kid with a shitload of power. J'onn J'onzz would have to sift through the information, the molecular make-up of Nefaria to see best how to counter the energies flooding the man and shut him down after relaying that info to Ronnie. Hopefully whatever Zee and Wanda were doing would allow the Nuclear Man to affect the sentience that was Nefaria.

Hopefully Ronnie would survive the encounter too. That would be nice...

"I'm... I'm ready," the Scarlet Witch gasped as Zatanna stepped away, nodding. Both women turned and gave him that look that women get when they know something you don't, and Ronnie felt it shrivel just a bit as he swallowed.

"What?"

"There will be pain, Ronnie," Wanda said as she raised her arms high overhead. He watched as she touched her thumbs together and the world seemed to shift for just a moment. Light went dark, and gravity flew out the window. He felt something churn within the bowels of his stomach as acid washed up his throat. He gagged.

"I lied," the Witch said, her hands disappearing in a wash of the purest white light that he had ever seen. "Sorry..."

And the world fell away...

"It won't work."

The Black Panther glanced up to see the woman, Talia standing near. He was crouching next to the unconscious form of Norrin Radd, the Silver Surfer with the Nega Rod in hand. He had hoped that restoring the Surfer's Cosmic Powers to him would revive the ex-herald, yet the woman seemed contrary.

“Explain,” he said.

“Say nothing, daughter.” Ra’s Al Ghul stood without concern, watching intently. “Let these heroes fend for themselves. Offer no aid.”

“You don’t seem to understand that if we don’t stop this somehow, we all die,” Captain America said as he stood. Beside him Hawkeye sat up, the Wasp easing his effort and holding him steady. “You, me, everyone everywhere will die. It’s a crisis of cosmic proportions that will eventually wipe away everything in existence.” Ra’s Al Ghul shrugged.

“Perhaps it is destiny. Fate- time to start anew.”

“You cling to life just a bit more than that, Ra’s,” Batman said as he stepped beside the daughter of the Demon. She looked to him and T’Challa could see the look of love pass between them. “What do you mean Talia?”

The woman paused; swallowing hard as she glanced at her father then quickly looked away, blushing. “The silver man’s power is not in the rod, but in the tower. The construct was converted to redirect the negative energy and the Surfer’s power was such that we could determine those that might be effected. His ‘Power Cosmic’ was utilized to convert the anti-matter wave we were hoping to spread, to redefine its base attributes into something we might manipulate, thus culling the trash from the face of the Earth.”

“Genocide,” Batman said turning to the father. “Killing the weak and ignorant, all that did not fit in your vision of Utopia.”

“You would be spared, Detective,” Ra’s said with a wicked grin. “Most of your allies would ‘make the cut’ as well. The world would be a better place.”

“With you in charge,” the Black Canary added, spitting in disgust. “People like you make me sick.”

“Your sickness would be short lived woman. Your shortsighted vision would be...”

“Enough!” T’Challa said, standing. He turned to Captain America, holding out the Nega Rod. “What do we do with this then? How do we recharge the Surfer?”

“It’s all connected,” the Wasp said as she flew close to the Panther. “Don’t you see? We need to trade the anti-matter in the Rod for the Cosmic Power in the tower, then get that back into the Surfer. Once the Power Cosmic is out of the tower it’ll be able to redirect Nefaria’s energies back into the Zone. It’ll drain him...”

“Like the Super Skrull,” Hawkeye added, understanding. “His power is broadcast from some space station- at least according to Reed Richards. Nefaria’s the same. He’s sucking up the energies of the tower being redirected from the Negative Zone.”

“We need to get the Surfer to the tower then,” Cap said, but Talia shook her head.

“No. If he is truly a being of cosmic proportion then the power will find its way home. Stop Nefaria...”

“Easier said than done,” the Panther countered.

“No,” Cap said as he stared off into the shadows. “Steps are being taken.”

Nefaria turned, snapping his head back into position as the Man of Steel battered him to no ill effect. His blows hurt- Thor’s damnable hammer caused him some pain, but he could deal with that. The alien was strong, but no where near powerful enough, even with the hammer. Nefaria smiled-

His backhand sent Superman spiraling away. The Man of Steel was tiring and weak, far too weak to effect the grandeur that was Nefaria. There were none amongst their legion to give him pause.

He saw the boy fly forward, the Green Lantern with a blazing fist of verdant energy.

“You go down now, asshole!”

A shimmering of green and the boy seemed to ‘bulk’ up, his mass increasing as a field of green flame enveloped him. He looked like the Hulk in an odd way, ready to smash. Time to end this. It had been entertaining getting some modicum of revenge and satisfaction against his past oppressors, but there were worlds to conquer-

Nefaria stepped forward, feeling the Speed Force take hold. The power of the Whirlwind within multiplied a thousandfold and he was before the Lantern- in a flash. He reached out as the boy’s eyes widened in shock. Nefaria grabbed his arm, ignoring the burning emerald fire and placed his other hand on the boy’s chest.

Nefaria pulled...

The boy's screams were music to his ears as Count Nefaria ripped the boy's arm away at the socket. Blood gushed from the wound, the child's eyes rolling up as shock swiftly set in. His mouth flapped, trying to speak, to scream. His concentration and will broken, the Green Lantern began to fall. Nefaria laughed as his eyes blazed, following-

"Burn..."

Kyle Rayner vanished in a white hot flash, his body disintegrating without a thought. Nefaria smiled, still holding the severed arm of the last of the once-fabled and apparently overrated Green Lantern Corp. He ripped the ring from the dead flesh and cast the useless arm away...

Tightening his fist, he crushed the ring. He casually brushed the debris from his hands as he then turned to face the others. He smiled.

"Next..."

To Be Continued...

Next Issue: *SHOCK FOLLOWS SHOCK* in the FINAL, FATAL Finale to the Greatest Crossover in Fanfic history! Head on over to M2K in one short week for the final chapter that we just had to call...

GODHOOD'S END!

One to go people...

Story & Plot © Curt F 2005

Editing & Plot © Chris Munn 2005



JLA #29

Some... when...

“Clark...”

Lois Lane opened her eyes slowly, her lids fluttering at first straining as she tried to focus. Her head was pounding; a throbbing rhythmic beat pulsing behind her brow. She moaned, her entire body aching as she tried to move, to sit up, and found remarkably that she could.

“Easy...”

The voice was rough static, a blaring whisper over the screaming winds that seemed to drown her hearing. There was light dazzling and sporadic, a myriad of flashing colors making it even harder for her eyes to adjust and focus. Her last thoughts before she had blacked out from the pressure was the silence and dark, but now- no... There had been red.

One of them had enveloped her, smothered her almost in a desperate attempt to protect her, keep her safe. She remembered the security, the heat. It had been soft, spongy and... red-

“Plastic Man?”

“No.”

She looked up, finally finding form to go with the deep sure voice. Blurry at first, she thought that it was her husband, but that was wrong. She saw the beard, the wild mane of blonde hair and the stern brow, the grim visage. Not Clark at all, nor Plastic Man either.

“Aquaman...”

He almost smiled just before giving her a final look of concern and standing. He looked tired and worn, his Atlantean armor torn and charred. She remembered that he had worn some diadem, a crown before, but that was missing and his

thick blonde hair was an unruly mess matted in clumps with sweat and dirt. She saw too that his prosthetic was bare, his right hand ending in a battered, golden stump. She looked up to his face again and saw him turn away, motioning for her to stay where she was. Not likely.

Lois Lane-Kent was the star reporter for the Daily Planet, and she knew instinctively when there was a story brewing. She tried to rise, reaching out for support, grasping at the warm metal behind her. It was almost too hot, but she grimaced, holding on as she struggled to her feet. Her legs felt like jelly as she swayed with the motion of wherever she was- they were, and she felt bile rising in her throat as she tried to focus on her surroundings. Lois gasped.

They were in space, but it was nothing like she had ever seen before. The background was black, dark matter filling the void and distance but it did not seem stable. It was swirling almost, strange areas of spiraling gray pulsing as it flowed and washed away like the waves of a vast ocean. There were stars; huge blazing suns that crackled and spat fire, some almost close enough to touch. There were great clouds of pink roiling through the emptiness, chunks of matter, planets and asteroids floating aimlessly. Far, far in the distance she saw a fiery world that seemed on the verge of exploding. And there was a hole, a rip in the very fabric of reality that spat long gouts of fire and lightning, devastating...

Awesome...

She tried to move, to turn and take it all in and felt a tug on her waist. Looking down she saw a golden rope wrapped and knotted about her, looped about the metal bar that blocked the edge of the platform- the Treadmill!

Slowly she started to remember, to recall as she looked about the Cosmic Treadmill, or at least what remained. It was broken, shattered, the treadmill part actually gone though she could see where it had been ripped from its moorings. There were jagged rips in metal that looked as though melted like butter at the same time. Wires danced and sparked spewing energy of some sort, long cracks rippling through the platform itself.

Lois tugged at the rope, trying to move and see just how secure it was- she was, and saw that it was laced around what was left of the damaged machinery. She saw on the far edge two older people, the android form of the Red Tornado hovering over them, what was left of his tattered and burnt cloak billowing in the winds that he was generating, trying to hold the people steady despite the rope.

"My god..." she whispered, recognizing the couple as the woman's head lolled to the side. Immediately she tried to rush to them, the damnable rope drawing her up short again. Aquaman's good hand fell firmly to her shoulder, holding her both steady on the rocking platform, and in place.

“Easy, Mrs. Kent,” he commanded. “No sudden moves until we determine how stable we are.”

“But Martha... Jonathan!”

“The Kents are fine. The Tornado has them safe, and thankfully unconscious. Better they don’t see all this. Not until they have to.”

Lois stared longingly at her in-laws, her fingers plucking at the knots that held her tight. She recognized the frayed rope, the dull golden color that seemed bleached out almost. The glow was gone, but it was definitely Wonder Woman’s Golden Lasso, but broken somehow. She saw the far end trailing in the space beyond the platform, the torn end whipping in the wind. But that was impossible!

She remembered that the Amazonian Princess had wrapped the magic lasso about everyone on the Treadmill as they made their way back through time. The images started coming fast and furious in her mind’s eye; seeing the Flash and Green Lantern guiding them home. The Justice League... Superman!

The JLA had traveled to the very End of Time to save them; the Kent Family including Lois and even Clark from the Time Trapper- at least according to the Batman. She herself had been captured by the man in the decaying purple robes- she remembered that, but that was all. She had been blissfully unconscious through whatever happened after, and when she had awakened on the Cosmic Treadmill they were all already on their way home, back through the Time Stream. But there had been trouble of course. There was always trouble.

Something had interfered, had intercepted their journey and knocked them away, damaging the Treadmill in the process. The JLA had jumped to action immediately, but it had been too little, too late. She remembered Batman shouting orders, Firestorm and Zatanna using their powers to hold the platform together, most of the others just trying to hold on, protecting her and the Kents. The Martian Manhunter and Clark had leapt onto the Treadmill to help the Flash, vanishing in a blur of lightning. Plastic Man had enveloped her then to keep her safe, smothering...

Suffocating...

Lois Lane-Kent gasped, her heart racing as she staggered, grabbing hold of Aquaman’s arm for support. He met her gaze and she saw a moment’s concern before he turned back to the task at hand. She held on, a wave of fear washing over her, her nails digging into his thick skin.

“Where are we?” she asked, cursing herself at the catch in her voice. She needed Clark, but she would not cry. Aquaman gave her a final glance, his eyes cold and gray in the sparkling dim before he returned his gaze to space.

“I wish I knew...”

The JLA in...

LOST

Chapter 1: The Lost

A JLA/ Avengers Tie-in

Lois watched as the Sea King cast his gaze about, pulling his arm free as he turned in place. He lingered on the ‘rip’ in space, watching as a strangely familiar pink energy boiled forth amidst a bolt of dark, jagged lightning. She furrowed her brow, trying to remember just where she had seen the like before as the binding knots about her waist finally gave loose and fell away.

When she looked up again the Atom was suddenly there, though she had not seen him before. Grown from microscopic size she surmised, as she let the loops fall to the platform and stepped beside Aquaman again. She looked quizzically at the hero, his blue and red costume as ripped and burnt as Aquaman’s. He seemed short, smaller than she in fact. No doubt the largest that he could become before his costume vanished if she recalled how his powers worked correctly. It was not his size that made her stare however, but his age. The last she remembered he had been regressed in age to that of a teenager- and had been working with that new group of Teen Titans in fact. Now, despite his size, he appeared an adult again. A mystery for certain, but one that could wait as the Sea King spoke up again-

“What’s the verdict, Ray?” Aquaman glanced at Lois, his frown returned and in place, but the other hero chuckled.

“No worries, Arthur,” the little man said stepping forward, actually pulling down his mask as he extended a hand towards Lois. “It all came out in the divorce.” He smiled, shaking Lois’ hand. “Ray Palmer, Mrs. Kent. Welcome back.

Aquaman tends to fall behind on current events, staying underwater as long as he does.” The Atom returned his attention to his teammate then, a frown touching his own lips as pleasantries aside he got back to business.

“The platform’s holding, but just. We get another wild ride and we’re toast. Reddy’s keeping it together, but between doing that and keeping us on and in atmosphere he’s about done. Now would be a good time for a miracle.”

Aquaman sighed. “What about the Kents?”

“They’ll stay out for awhile.” Palmer shrugged, glancing at the couple huddled together in the most secure part of the battered platform. Lois could see the winds coursing over them, the broken lasso wrapped several turns about their bodies. “I applied a little pressure here and there,” he said looking sheepishly at Lois. “Sorry.”

“It had to be done,” Aquaman offered, his cool gaze turned again to Lois, waiting for her to complain. She simply nodded in understanding, knowing it was for the best.

“So now what?” she asked, dividing her attention between the two men. “You don’t know where we are, so how do we get home? How do we find the others?”

“Better bet is to hope they’re looking for us, Lois,” the Atom offered. “We’re all good in our way, and Reddy’s got untapped potential, but short of Black Canary we’re probably the last three members of the League that you’d want to get stranded on an interdimensional island with. However...”

The Atom turned and pointed to the rift. It seemed closer as Lois looked up, or maybe the storm spewing out of the hole was getting bigger.

Storm?

“That look familiar to either of you?” Palmer asked looking first at Aquaman, then Lois.

“Yes-“ she said, and Aquaman cut her off-

“The Red Skies...” Atom nodded.

“The Crisis.”

Lois gasped, staring up in horror. She remembered the storms and the red skies, the flowing pink energy that killed people by the thousands. It was caused by the Anti-Monitor, and many heroes had died trying to stop him and his shadow creatures. Some kind of anti-matter energy, but she could not recall exactly what

had happened, just that the combined might of all the world's heroes had won out in the end.

"That's anti-energy; that same negative effect that the Anti-Monitor was using to wipe parallel dimensions from existence--"

"What?" Lois asked, her head starting to spin. It sounded vaguely familiar, and she remembered the Batman saying the same thing not so long ago. But why was it so hard to think? She felt the Atom's hand on her arm, steadying her.

"Sorry," he said with a reassuring smile, holding on until she found her 'sea legs' again. "I know it's hard, but try to remember; the storms, the red skies, the battle with the Anti-Monitor. I remember it all thanks in part to our recent battle with Extant. And Batman figured some way to remember too, you know how anal he is. And the Time Trapper knew- used it all somehow. I can explain the physics behind it all, but the magic, the Speed Force and the Time Stream..." Atom shrugged. "That's beyond my ability to grasp. I'm a scientist, after all."

"We're in Qward, aren't we?" Aquaman said staring at the growing, approaching storm.

"Or somewhere very like it," Atom agreed, nodding. "This is some kind of negative zone, an anti-matter universe between dimensions. I think that the Speed Force and the Time Stream cuts through areas like this, somehow, and that's how Barry and Hal used to traverse it all and travel through time. It's like tunnels, shortcuts that lead from one time to the next; wormholes through time itself."

"That's all well and good, Ray, but--"

"But how do we use that to get back?" Lois cut off Aquaman, and the Atom simply shrugged again, pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the rip in space.

"I think that's the doorway home..."

Somewhere Else...

Fixit stared at the stars, the nighttime sky a velveteen black speckled with brilliant, sparkling points of light. He had been there before of course, many times. Back when he was stupid; stupid and green.

He watched, enjoying the peace, the stillness of the night. It was strange there with Manhattan looming in the distance out across the bay. Usually the sky about the city would be aflutter with all manner of vehicles, from simple helicopters to military aircraft to the SHIELD Helicarrier on occasion. And there was always noise. Ships horns from the harbor, sirens from emergency vehicles,

a constant din of car horns no matter the hour. In all his years, all the worlds he had seen he had never seen New York City so quiet, deathly still.

But of course it would not last. His peace never did.

Joe Fixit saw the flare, the first sign of the woman as she returned. Like a comet trailing her fiery tail the ball of fire that enveloped her grew larger with proximity. He stared, his eyes unblinking as he gazed into the building glare. It was nothing to him. He could feel the rising heat- she was burning hot for some reason, perhaps pushing too hard- but again he ignored it. He had survived the nuclear fires of atomic explosion. There was nothing that she could do to him.

So he waited, watching as she flew closer and closer, finally swooping high and damping the flaming aura that surrounded her as she landed lithely on her feet just a few yards away. The dead grass sparked and flared in her passing, but she recalled the heat as she strode softly towards him.

“Well?”

“Nothing..”

Susan Storm sighed as she sagged to a broken piece of rubble, the cornerstone of an old building that once sat atop the hills of Staten Island. There were skeletal frames of several buildings stretching down the leeward side of the hills all the way down to the Atlantic, though the side facing Manhattan Island was stripped bare as though some intense force had sandblasted it. There were signs of fire yet, intense heat and for some reason the vegetation had not started to reclaim the land. The city was worse.

“There’s animals; bugs and vermin mainly, rats. I saw some birds, but no dogs or cats, no wildlife to speak of. No humans at all.” Fixit watched as the Human Torch crossed her long legs and pulled off her boot, started massaging her foot. She looked tired, burnt. Her big blues eyes seemed sad and haunted.

“No skeletons?” he asked, pulling a cigar from his jacket, lighting it with a flare of a Zippo he had taken from one of the bodegas near the projects on the far side of the island. It would be gone when they finally left- shirts on their backs.

“A few,” she said with a shrug. “Not nearly as many as there should be with a plague, so we can rule that out. Most were in cellars and secluded areas, but there were a few out in the Jersey Marshes as well, right out in the open.”

“Hmmp,” Fixit said with a huff, blue smoke clogging the air about his face as he exhaled. “Wonder what might cause that? It’s like some massive Neutron Bomb, devastating life but leaving most of the structures intact.”

“A *what* bomb?”

Fixit shrugged, “After yer time, kid. It was outlawed, but it doesn’t explain the rats. They’d be just as dead from the radiation.”

“Some Nazi Death Ray...”

Both Mister Fixit and Susan Storm turned at the sound of the young voice to see Steve Rogers stepping up the rise. He was dressed in the colorful garb of his station; the star-spangled blue chain-mail half shirt draped over his muscular frame, the red and white stripes rippling about his washboard belly. He had his mail hood pulled down, his helmet under one arm as he flexed the other that bore the new shield he had ‘found’. Fixit had to wonder at that ‘coincidence’, wondering if the Timebroker wasn’t somehow still pulling their strings even without the *Tallus*.

“Rumors from high up on my world was that there was some madman named Zemo working for Hitler’s goose steppers. He was a scientist, a lunatic of course, but on a par with Reinstein himself. Classified data I was briefed on was that he was creating a ‘Death Ray’ of some sort. Maybe-“

“Heinrich Zemo was an obsessed bigot,” Fixit said with a snort, “an’ you killed him... eventually.”

“On your world maybe, but-“

“This one too kid. Take a look around,” Fixit said gesturing at the remains of the city in the distance. “The buildings are too new, closer ta my world more than either a yours. An’ Hitler was all about the myth an’ prophecy and the grandeur of the alleged *Master Race*. Ain’t no flags or statues, no towering monuments to Aryan glory. Naw, this wasn’t the Nazi’s doin’.”

“There’s another possibility...”

Again all turned as the final two members of the squad rejoined the team. Fixit watched as the alternate reality Mimic and Spider-Man bounded up the hill towards the group, pleased that both Storm and Rogers jumped to the defensive at first, only relaxing when they saw who approached. It was an attitude that would save all their lives at some point, and hopefully get them all back to their respective homes, eventually.

Cal Rankin landed gracefully amidst the group, his Mutant powers shifting his body easily from a facsimile of the Beast and back to his own youthful appearance; blonde and handsome in a form-fitting uniform modified from the original blue and yellows of the X-Men’s. He was not the Mimic that Fixit recalled, though granted his years spent as the ‘dumb’, green Hulk were often

sketchy at best. He had fought a Mimic that was dying- had died of cancer- alongside the Beast coincidentally. That mimic had been an older man with brown hair and gifted with the abilities of the original X-Men. This younger version had more powers than that; imprints of anyone he had ever come in contact with and the ability to mimic them by taking on their form. Impressive, but slow at times with the shifting compared to having a squad of X-Men at your beck and call.

The other late arrival was Spider-Man. At least he had been at one point. Something had happened to the man in his own reality, though exactly what the one-time hero had never said. A death maybe, a loss too close to the heart, or some failure perhaps? He would say eventually, not that it really mattered in the end as long as he did his job and held up his end of their bargain. He wore the alien symbiotic suit that he had gained in the so-called 'Secret Wars', on the Beyonder's patchwork world where a gathered group of heroes fought a gang of selected villains on a near god's whim. That black living suit that had belonged to a killer named Venom in Fixit's world eventually, coupled with the man's own spider-like abilities made him deadly in itself, and add to that the cold-blooded madness that was the result of whatever had changed him made him dangerous. If there was anything left of the hero that Banner recalled it rarely showed. If it was even Parker under the alien skin. Fixit had his doubts.

"Yeah..." Fixit said taking a long, final drag from the butt of his cigar before flicking it away, watching as it arched up and up, finally falling far away into the bay. "It could'a been Phoenix-"

"Rachel wouldn't-" Susan Storm started to say, but Mimic cut her off.

"No, Rachel wouldn't, but Phoenix would. Dark Phoenix at least. She's on a level with Galactus."

"Who?" Captain America said glancing at the equally confused Human Torch. She simply shrugged as Fixit sighed. Both she and Rogers had been plucked from their timelines at early stages in their careers; Rogers not so long after he had been transformed by the Super Soldier Serum, but before his training had begun in earnest, and Susan Storm from early in her deviated history. She had encountered the Hulk, but apparently not Galactus.

"After your time too. Galactus was- is the Devourer of World's, an' according to the files the Avengers shared with the FF on my world after he finished dinner there wasn't much left of whatever world was on the menu. He sucked the life force outta whatever planet his herald would find, then crack the world and drain off all the useful minerals leaving behind the worthless rock. From what I heard, Phoenix would do about the same. Those two are cut from the same cloth; higher forces in the universe."

"I suppose you're right," Mimic admitted with a shrug. He stared at the skeletal skyline of Manhattan in the distance for a moment, longingly, as though considering. "What then? What did this? Why are we here?"

"I just hope it's not vampires again," the once Spider-Man said as his mask flowed away from his mouth to allow him to sip from a water bottle; part of the supplies they had scrounged for their stay on this dead world. First order of business was to survive. "I am so sick of the undead."

"Unfortunately, Stalker," Fixit said the name with a grimace remembering all the good 'his' Peter Parker had done, "it looks like that's a good guess at the moment. Granted the devastation's a bit beyond Dracula's scope, but—"

"There was a time, I recall on my world," Mimic began, "when Dracula gained god-like magical powers to rival Strange. That might account for the devastation as well as the lack of bodies and the vermin too. Not to mention the queer radiation."

"What radiation?" Fixit asked, glaring at the young Mutant. Rankin smiled sheepishly, raking a hand back through his greasy hair.

"Sorry. I shifted to Rachel- against my better judgement of course- but knew that she could see things that the rest of us couldn't; both radiation as well as on the Psychic Plane. I sensed some life, but it was like... I dunno... hopeless I suppose. Weak and inert, maybe, almost asleep. Too, there was a strange radiation lingering around hot spots in the city and Westchester; the crater where Xavier's used to sit."

"There was a hole that used to be Avenger's Mansion too," Susan Storm added, nibbling on a candy bar that had not quite gone outdated. "And that Four Freedom's Tower you told me to check; the upper floors were blasted away. That house in the Village too, burned to rubble. There was no Baxter Building."

"That narrows things down then. If this world's Fantastic Four were still living in Four Freedom's Plaza I can get a set on the time frame. That was after the first run-in with Dark Phoenix, and after Richards saved Galactus. On my world around that time Dracula was dead- no vampires at all."

"Mine too," Mimic agreed and Stalker nodded as well.

"There were plenty of world-beaters around though to fill the void," he went on morphing his mask back into place. "Thanos, Apocalypse, Doom... Jeez, the list is endless. Makes me wonder how we all survived as long as we did."

Fixit shrugged. "We're heroes kid. We gotta win."

“Be that as it may,” Steve Rogers said, “where do we go from here? We need to figure out why we’re on this world, and more importantly, how to get off-“

“Well, you just take your right hand and-“

“Shut it, Stalker. Rogers is right,” Fixit snapped. “I wish I could get a look at that radiation. That might be the key.“

“Ask and ye shall receive,” Rankin said as he placed a hand on Fixit’s shoulder, motioning him to look skyward.

As one all eyes followed where Mimic pointed, to a flickering light that had appeared over the dead city of Manhattan. A pinkish energy flared and sparked, and a ‘rip’ in the very fabric of the sky seemed to have appeared, getting bigger as they watched.

“Jeez, if that ain’t a neon arrow I don’t know what is,” Stalker quipped, and even the awed Captain America had to smile.

“Let’s go people,” Joe Fixit said with a sigh, “and leave the gear. Hopefully that’s our ticket home.”

Somehow though the man, the monster that had once been Bruce Banner and the Incredible Hulk had his doubts...

Else... when...

Lois grunted as Aquaman tugged at the frayed remnants of Wonder Woman’s lasso. He had wrapped the cord about her upper torso and arms, despite the fact that it had lost most of its magical properties it was still virtually unbreakable. At least they hoped so, and would thus render her some protection.

“I’m still against this,” the King of Atlantis grumbled as he knotted the ends of the cord about Lois’ waist. “I wish you would listen to reason and join the Kents.” Lois frowned, shaking her head.

“Not on your life. This is probably part of the biggest story of my career since Superman...” She could not finish the thought, taking a deep breath to hold back the sudden flow of tears. “I’m in, Arthur. You need all the help you can get for this.”

“But-“

“Leave it, Orin,” the Atom said as he reappeared at their side, growing out of nowhere seemingly. “I for one agree with Lois. And we both know she can hold her own. She’s hardly helpless.”

“Granted, but-“

“It’s done, Arthur. The Kents will be safe at microscopic size within Red Tornado. Lois has an insight into things that the three of us might miss. She stays.”

Aquaman scowled looking to the Red Tornado for some support, but the android simply stared at him.

“I shall... guard... the Kents... with my very... being.”

Aquaman sighed. “Fine. I may be a king, but I know when the people have spoken. You hold your own though, Lane.”

“I always do, Curry.”

“Hey,” Ray Palmer said stepping between the king and reporter, his hands raised to ward them apart. “At ease, folks. Let’s do this. Are you ready... Reddy?” The Atom smiled, but again the android simply stared.

“I am... prepared...”

Ray Palmer nodded, giving a final glance at the other two. “See you on the other side,” he said and dwindled from sight once again.

The plan was a simple one. The Kents would be reduced to microscopic size and stored within the almost indestructible body of the Red Tornado. The Atom would reduce himself as well, and hide within Lois Lane-Kent’s body, which was wrapped with the remains of Diana’s magic lasso. She and Aquaman would simply huddle together and ride out the storm so to speak as the Red Tornado used his powers to protect the remnants of the Cosmic Treadmill while he propelled it through the beckoning ‘rip’ in space. Hopefully they would survive the trip as well as whatever awaited them beyond. Aquaman wrapped his arms about Lois, and after a moment she returned the gesture, the two crouching together in what little security they could find on the battered and broken machine that had become their life raft.

“Go ahead, Tornado,” Aquaman said as he hunkered down, trying not to feel Lois Lane’s softness and warmth. He glanced at her and found her huge brown eyes gazing intently at him. “What?”

She licked her lips and her body started to tremble. “Guess I’m not as brave as I like to sound,” she smiled. “I’m sorry,” she said, licking her lips, her voice almost catching in her throat.

“Me too... I-”

Whatever he was about to say was lost as the treadmill lurched forward towards the crackling tear in space. Aquaman closed his embrace, feeling Lois do the same as she buried her head in his shoulder and closed her eyes. She was holding her breath in anticipation as the whistle of the Red Tornado's winds started to whip about them. He felt the air pressure increase- the Tornado's attempt to shield them as their speed increased. Aquaman squinted, looking up as the glowing portal loomed ever closer.

"Hang on!" he shouted, trying to engulf Lane with his own body as the air seemed to spark and crackle about them. Electricity danced over the broken Treadmill, a gale force wind howling as their speed seemed to increase. There were flashes of energy and light, strange images coalescing and fading from their sight, even with their eyes clenched shut. Orin saw writhing entities straining in bondage, chained spread eagle to a massive wall that stretched away into infinity. He saw sickly dark monstrosities ravaging whatever came before them, like locusts. He saw a giant floating amidst the rubble of devastation, bloated and serene. He saw a dark, shadowy shape swooping across the cosmos...

"Star Breaker!" he shouted, but it was gone as strange geometric shapes rose and fell in his mind's eye. Swirling masses of rock and metal that defied description and made his head scream in agony as he tried to focus. Stars exploded and died. Comets blazed past and meteors pummeled him. He heard the scream of the dying, felt something scratching just beyond reach. Something evil, insectile with wings on their heels...

They were falling...

Aquaman's eyes snapped wide as he tumbled and he saw Lois Lane still in his arms, falling as well within the remains of the shattered Treadmill. He saw buildings racing past as they plummeted together, the broken blacktop of the street still far below but quickly rising to meet them. He might survive, but...

The wind blasted about them, a swell in pressure as their decent was slowed. Arthur Curry looked up to see the misty form of the Red Tornado hovering above them, his body almost lost within a cyclone of his own creation.

"I... have you... Fear... not..."

They swirled, and Orin held tight to Lois, trying to keep her safe as his teammate carried them on his winds to the top of the building that was closest beneath the rip in the sky. Aquaman noted that the energies had stopped spewing on this side, a simple glow replacing the roiling pink storm. As he touched down he released Lane, stepping away.

“You all right?” he asked, his gaze sweeping their surroundings. It looked to be Manhattan, but it was devastated to a point. Buildings stood as skeletal frames, melted, the windows shattered. The very building upon which they stood had been sheered away.

“Fine,” Lois gasped, struggling to stand as she gripped the edge of the broken brickwork. “I’m fine. Where are we?”

“Manhattan I think,” Aquaman stated as he glanced about. He could see the melted remains of the Statue of Liberty in the harbor, the shattered towers of the Brooklyn Bridge. He looked to the East River but did not see the Titan’s Tower.

“Are we back home?”

“I don’t think so,” Aquaman said trying to spot anything familiar beyond the city’s normal landmarks. “And if we are, things have changed for the worst.”

“It’s like when Trigon appeared,” the Atom said as he grew beside them. He pulled the remnants of his mask down and wiped at the sweat drenching his face even as the android landed beside him.

“Trigon?” Lois asked, looking confused as she stared at the devastated city.

“A foe of the Titans,” Atom said. “He took over the world for a time, years ago now. It looked a lot like this-“

“I don’t remember that,” Aquaman said with some skepticism, but the Atom simply shrugged.

“One of those things I remember, thanks to Extant. The less you know the better, Arthur.” Ray Palmer smiled, looking up to the still sparking rip in space. “I guess we better figure what to do next. This isn’t our world- I hope. We need to go back.”

“Back to what?” Aquaman asked, the irritation obvious in his voice. “We can’t survive in Qward forever. And even if we could, we can’t just randomly jump from hole to hole. We need a plan.“

“Uh, guys...”

Aquaman felt Lois Lane’s hand on his arm, her nails digging into his tough skin. He glanced at her with some annoyance but saw the sudden shock on her face and shifted his gaze to parallel her own. He heard Atom’s gasp.

“Who the heck are they?”

“I have no idea...”

They were five; a woman aflame, a gangly man in black swinging on a slender rope, a man with wings carrying another that had a shield and was swathed in the American flag, and a huge, gray brute dressed in a pair of shorts that looked like underwear. The last was in the lead, and he seemed to be in mid-leap, heading right at them.

“...but they don't seem happy. Scatter!”

The entire building rocked as the gray creature slammed down, shaking it to the core. He quickly vanished down into the lower levels, but the others of the strangers spread, the man with the shield dropping right down in front of them while his friends dispersed strategically. Arthur looked to Lois and the Atom. Lois Lane-Kent was standing her ground for all that she had no Meta powers. Atom had vanished, dwindling, and the Tornado hovered on the verge of hurricane. Arthur looked to the man with the shield, noting the others still in sight. The flaming woman and the winged man hovered, ready to fight.

“Who are you? We're strangers here and-“

“Stand down, Ratzis!” the man with the shield said, pointing at them accusingly. “Whatever your plans, forget them. You're through!”

“What plans? What are you-“

“Danger! I sense-“

“Arthur! Look out!”

Aquaman screamed as the remnants of the upper floor of Four Freedom's Tower erupted in a blaze of searing fire...

To be continued...

Next issue: Head on over to Avenger's Reborn for Part Two of The Lost! We're just getting started True Believers, in this Crossover within a Crossover. Don't miss an issue, or you might get 'Lost' yourself...

Story © Curt F 2005



Lost #4.5

Joe Fixit pried himself from the rubble of the upper floors of what was once Four Freedom's Plaza. It had probably been a stupid idea to go plowing into the burnt out structure, but the effect had been dramatic, and he had to have at least a little faith in his team. As he looked about the remnants of the upper-most floor however, he was having his doubts.

He saw Captain America; the Super Soldier closest squaring off against the woman wrapped up in some gold-colored rope. Probably a bad pairing as this Cap was from the Forties and not caught up on the intricacies of the modern day woman. Just looking at her clothes Fixit could see that she was from a later era; no doubt one full of ERA and authority. He had his doubts that Captain America; barely trained and with an unfamiliar shield would be able to hold his own, brought up to respect women. He had not fought Warrior Woman yet, or Sun Girl. He had yet to meet the Wasp...

Farther back a one-handed, blonde-haired man stood his ground against Susan Storm, the Human Torch and Calvin Rankin, the Mimic who was still in the form of the Angel. What was he thinking? Fixit shook his head in disgust as he heaved his massive frame from the wreckage, cursing as the bit of brace fell away under his immense weight.

Far across the remains of the building's devastated rooftop, Stalker bounced about; throwing webbing on the man that reminded Fixit of the Vision, oddly. He was armored and in red, but he had that same blank and stoic expression as though he were not quite a man. He seemed unperturbed by Stalker's antics, but the Spider-Man did not seem to notice as he leapt and shot his organic webbing.

His allies were underestimating the foe. Fixit could see it. Storm was wide-eyed and throwing random fireballs. Mimic was hovering cockily, flapping his huge wings and waiting for an opening. Stalker was done, laying on the webbing and making snide jokes. Cap was the only one that seemed cautious, but that was because he was facing off against a woman, which was a no-no in his era. Rosy the Riveter aside, to this Cap, a woman's place was in the home and Steve Rogers had yet to learn that the female was the deadlier of any species.

Joe Fixit needed to take a hand...

Hulk needed to smash!

But first he needed to *get outta this fuckin' hole...*

The LOST in...

LOST

Chapter 2: Earth A

Part One

A JLA/ Avengers Tie-in

Steve Rogers had to question Fixit's tactics. It seemed perhaps that they should have approached the group that they had finally found in good faith rather than with an aggressive posture. They had no idea who they might be, after all. It was possible that they were just as lost as the 'team', maybe even victims of the mysterious Timebroker's queer ideas of fixing the universe. It was all so bizarre, and Steve Rogers had no qualms to admitting that he was out of his depth.

He had barely begun his training when the Timebroker had plucked him out of existence. The whole notion of being America's first- and only Super Soldier was still just a wild fantasy, and he was little more than a green kid that wanted to do his part in the war effort. He was just a private in Uncle Sam's Army, and even that was a joke; a title. He had not even gone through Basic Training yet, had only learned the bare essentials of hand-to-hand combat like Ju Jitsu and some Karate from the Orient. He had learned quick ways to kill with a shield that he no longer had.

Captain America held up the new disc-like shield that he had gained on the world of vampires that they had visited not so long ago. Fixit had said that it was Captain America's shield from any number of different timelines; a version that he would have probably earned in his own right eventually. It felt incredible on his arm, its weight negligible and so well balanced, but aside from his basic

ability to use it as defense, he had no clue as to how to use it properly. To his best advantage. Fixit said it could be thrown, that it would come back like a boomerang. He said it was indestructible, one of a kind. How could he throw it then? What if it didn't come back?

Rogers was afraid, and so was the woman.

She was wrapped in some kind of gold-colored rope; about her arms and torso. Some type of strange armor no doubt, armed with miraculous powers. He could see that she was wearing some type of normal garb beneath, but of course that meant nothing. Susan Storm was a fine example that nothing was as it seemed. The woman before him however had yet to attack, had yet to display any hidden powers beyond her obvious knowledge of some form of hand-to-hand martial art. She stood there defensively, at an angle to make herself the slightest target, knees slightly bent and ready to spring into action, be it to attack or defend. He could see her nervousness though, her unease in the sweat on her brow, by the way she kept licking her lips. She was shivering slightly, but hiding it well to her credit. No more than he-

"At ease, ma'am," he said, trying to keep his own voice calm and steady. "Stand down. There's no reason for us to fight." He felt like an idiot using the military jargon that had been drummed into his head by his trainers. He hoped that she could understand.

"You first, mister."

Rogers had to smile. She put on a brave front, and probably for good reason. She was older than he was, by a few years maybe, and probably loaded with experience that he could only imagine. He should take her down quickly, or try to, but she had yet to attack him. And she was just a woman after all-

Suddenly the matter was out of his hands as a wave of fire rushed across the rooftop. Captain America sprang back, flipping away while still trying to keep the woman in sight. Through the sudden swell of smoke and waves of rippling heat he saw her dive off to the side, rolling to relative safety.

Cap dropped quickly into a crouch, his shield raised as he scanned the rooftop. The fire had come from Susan Storm of course. As the Human Torch she was arcing through the air over the battle strewn remains of the rooftop, hurling fireballs and actual streams of flame at the blonde man. He was doing his best to keep out of harm's way, but the heat and flame seemed to be taking their collective toll. The blonde was slowing, and Cap could see the tension etched on his face.

"You got it, Susan!" He heard the Mimic shouting over the sounds of battle. Calvin Rankin was something called a Mutant with the odd and wondrous ability

to duplicate the powers and form of anyone with which he came into contact. Right at that moment he was blessed with angelic wings and wearing a beautiful body, though aside from his obvious ability to fly he had yet to display any other powers. He seemed little better than a heavenly cheerleader, shouting encouragement to Storm. Perhaps he was holding back as reserve, but why not swoop in and end it. The blonde was obviously on the ropes and-

Rogers gasped as the blonde man leapt up and out of the fire swept area. He was powerful, his leap arching up some thirty feet at least, well within range of the startled Cal Rankin. The blonde saw and pressed his opportunity, a mighty right cross cracking across Mimic's face, spinning the Mutant's head and spewing blood. Cap winced to hear the sound of the blow, watching as Rankin's body twisted in mid air and began a slow, winding spiral that led him down beyond the roof's edge and out of his line of sight. He was probably still conscious, barely, but he would have to fend for himself for now as the blonde man landed gracefully, if a bit haggard right in front of Rogers.

The man was big, well muscled and hurting, sweating bullets. He was heaving for breath as his steely eyes swept over Rogers, then glanced quickly to the side to make note of the Torch as she soared out over the building's edge to see to Mimic. As soon as Storm vanished from sight beyond the building's rooftop the blonde man returned his attention to Cap.

Captain America noticed then the metallic stump on the warrior's left hand as he raised it. A weapon of some sort? It had a hole in the very end, as though something were missing from the apparatus.

"I don't know who you people are," the big man said almost breathlessly, "or why you attacked us, but your intentions are clear as a crystalline sea. I'll give you one chance to surrender."

Captain America licked his lips, debating. The man was obviously super strong, probably stronger than Cap himself. But to simply surrender? He saw the woman in his peripheral vision, moving about, edging away; but to escape, or attack? He raised his shield higher, shifting it, trying to decide when suddenly the decision was out of his hands.

"Aw, blow it out your hole, big man, and suck on this for awhile..."

A thin stream of liquid came splashing out of seemingly nowhere to encompass the man's stump in a sticky goo. Captain America knew immediately that Stalker had arrived, hopefully to save the day as his thin black frame came bounding down, his fist slamming into the blonde's mouth in a mirror-like reflection of what the big man had done to Mimic. The blonde however was apparently made of sterner stuff than Cal Rankin as his head quickly snapped back with only the slightest sign of a bruise.

“Whoa...”

Almost too fast to follow the warrior lashed out with his good hand. His fist wrapped about Stalker’s ankle as the man-spider leapt from the rooftop already spewing webbing into the distance to create a new swing line. The blonde was fast- faster than Cap as when he and Stalker had sparred in practice Rogers had rarely connected. Stalker was like lightning, his reaction time phenomenal as though he could actually anticipate an attack before it was struck. With a scream that sounded more irritation than anger, the blonde whipped Stalker about and flung him away only to watch as his line connected to a neighboring building, thus saving himself. Cap knew Stalker would be back, but it would take a few moments- moments that Rogers might not have as he realized that he was suddenly alone.

Cap glanced about the rooftop. The red man was covered in Stalker’s webbing, but seemed to simply be standing there, not even trying to escape but shivering. Rogers could see the glow of Storm’s fire beyond the roof’s edge, but she and Mimic were still out of sight. Stalker was swinging away in a widening arch trying to veer back. There was a hole where Joe Fixit, their leader had landed but the gray-skinned brute himself was nowhere to be seen. Just like the fourth member of the villains who had simply vanished from sight. And the woman-

Pain exploded in Cap’s neck as his feet were suddenly swept from beneath him. He flailed as he fell, trying to land as he had been taught but his shield slammed against the roof with a piercing clang and sending another jolt of pain through his arm. Cap gritted his teeth, cursing at his stupidity, his inexperience. There had been too many of them, too much happening around him and he had let the woman sneak up on him, hitting him with a karate chop and a leg sweep that left him aching and vulnerable. But not helpless...

Cap spun about on his back, spiraling and flipping up to his feet as he swept his shield out in a deadly curve. He caught a glimpse of the woman ducking back and away, but his spin caught the big man in the thigh, forcing a grunt of pain through his clenched teeth. Cap leaped to the side as the blonde automatically bent to grab at the wound, the woman scrabbling back still. Cap could see her breathing hard, her eyes wide as though excited more than tired. Had she simply gotten lucky?

Captain America barely raised his shield as the big man’s web-enshrouded fist slammed down. Rogers blinked as he felt nothing, like the man’s great strength had been absorbed by the disk, or dispersed. The man had not even managed to move Cap, and he seemed just as surprised, blinking at the shield. Cap knew opportunity when he saw it.

He lurched forward, slamming his shield full and strong into the big man with a move that he had learned- been learning with his old triangular shield. He felt no pain or strain on his arm, remarkably, but his blow was strong enough to propel the blonde up and back off of his feet and onto his buttocks a goodly distance away and almost into the hole that Fixit's impact had made. But only almost.

"Argh!"

Cap stumbled forward as he felt the kick, the heel of the woman's loafer slamming into his kidney. It could have been a crippling blow on a lesser man; if not for the Super Soldier Serum coursing through his veins as she had caught him beneath the chain mail. The stitched cotton weave of his undershirt was colorful but was squat in way of protection save a chafing from the metal link armor. Still he staggered, spinning about as he rubbed at the bruise, trying to keep an eye on the blonde as he considered the woman. He would not be distracted again.

"Nice shot," he said. Maybe distraction was the key he needed himself? She grinned-

"You're pretty good yourself, pal," she responded, but he could hear the edge in her voice. "But I've faced down way worse than you in my career, and I'm not even a Meta."

"A what? Meta..."

"I don't know who you people are," she continued, ignoring his questions and confusion, "but we have no beef with you. We're just trying to get home."

Cap relaxed just a bit. "Then, you're victims of the Timebroker's manipulations as well?"

The woman blinked but did not lower her guard. "Time Trapper, mister. I don't know any 'Brokers' this side of E.F. Hutton."

"What?"

There was movement at his feet, a strange flare and even as Cap looked down he saw the enlarging swirl of red and blue. It was the missing man, growing right before his eyes, his fist-

Lois Lane-Kent winced as the Atom grew right before her eyes, right at the feet of the man draped in the American flag. Ray Palmer's fist smashed up into the protruding cleft chin on the shield-bearer with a resounding crack. The force of

the blow snapped the man's head back, lifting him off his feet and back to where he slammed down just as harshly on the remnants of what was now the building's roof. It looked as though he hit his head on impact, and his body sprawled, unmoving. Lois licked her lips, waiting anxiously, but finally his head lolled to one side and she saw his breathing, slow but steady and stable. He was alive, and thankfully unconscious.

"You okay?" the Atom asked turning his attention from the foe to her. She nodded, trying to calm herself. She was hyped on adrenaline, caught up in the rush of the battle. She had never quite experienced it like this before, and she felt her pulse racing, her heart hammering in her chest. It was a natural high to her, and she wondered briefly if Clark still saw it so.

"I couldn't hear what you were saying- it's a booming at tiny size- but you kept his attention focused. Just enough for me to catch him off guard. Good work!"

Lois blushed, smiling slightly as she glanced about, remembering they were in the midst of a battle. How the Atom could simply take it all in stride she had no idea, but he did, his gaze casually sweeping the rooftop as he spoke to her.

"I don't think these people are villains, Ray," she began but saw the Atom had focused on something. She followed his gaze and saw something huge and gray gripping Aquaman about the throat, holding him aloft at arm's length.

"Uh-oh!"

"Atom!" Lois said stepping forward to grab her friend but her fist closed on empty air as the Atom shrunk away into apparent nothingness again. He was already on his way to help the sea king, caught up in the fight himself and now too small to hear her words.

Lois turned to the man dressed in red, white and blue, still unconscious and at her feet. He had seemed hesitant throughout their fight- if you could call it that. In the end it was only dumb luck that she had won, and that because of the Atom. The remains of Wonder Woman's magic lasso had protected her to a point; basically keeping her from injury as she had rolled around on the rooftop trying to remember her self-defense classes. She felt fine, but knew she was way out of her depth in this fight. Not that she wanted to fight of course, but she needed an edge.

And of course, that was right there at her feet...

Arthur Curry scrambled back to his feet, grimacing at the pain in his back and chin. He worked his jaw, ran his tongue along his teeth happily finding them all in

tact. The star-spangled warrior had hit him far harder than expected, but he had survived and was healing, albeit slowly. The fiery woman had done the real damage.

He glanced towards the building's edge as he stepped away from the massive hole that the gray-skinned brute had created on impact. Hopefully the creature had smashed through the weakened frame of the building all the way to the basement and was thus out of the picture for the time being. They hardly needed his input, as his teammates were doing just fine without him, holding their own. They were unorganized and inexperienced for the most part, luckily. Arthur could see it in the way they fought haphazardly, randomly picking opponents and throwing down where they felt like it. Had they staged a coordinated assault, Aquaman feared that the Justice League would have been floundering in their net already-

Aquaman sighed, trying to catch his breath, willing the burn away as he forced the 'fish' thinking out of his head. Had he sunk so low, to the depths-

"Stop it!" he shouted. He tried to focus, tried to take command of the situation. Glancing quickly about he saw first the glow of the flaming woman. It was brighter now, but she was still beyond the building's raggedy rooftop, no doubt helping her comrade; the winged man. Still out of the picture, as was the man in black. Arthur saw him still swinging on his thin ropes, trying to change his direction and get back to the battle, but a ways away. He had a moment's respite then, but-

He barely heard the moan of the rooftop as a great mass shifted behind him. Arthur Curry shifted himself, lunging forward as though in a fencer's thrust, spinning about as a massive gray arm swept by overhead. The force of the blow's backdraft was more than enough in itself to topple him, the King of the Seven Seas rolling with the near miss, trying to put distance between himself and the brute now towering before him.

His skin was gray, his massive body bulging with muscle and barely contained in the straining, skimpy shorts that held him in check. He was smirking as he lumbered forward, almost laughing.

"Yer quick, punk. I'll give ya that. Ain't many can touch Stalker, let alone get the better of 'im." The brute seemed unperturbed as he stepped up, Arthur rising to his feet to defend. The creature's best point was his strength, obviously, and Aquaman wanted no part of that. He seemed slow though, his mass weighing him down luckily, and that would no doubt prove to be Aquaman's edge. He needed to hit hard and fast, stay out of the brute's reach and grasp.

The creature reminded him of Doomsday in a way; the color of his skin, his size and sheer bulk. Arthur wondered briefly if this was yet another of Darkseid's

creations, some twisted monstrosity bent on destruction. He hoped not, after what Doomsday had done to the League, and Superman.

"I've got no quarrel with you, monster," he said as he glanced to the Red Tornado hoping for back up. Reddy however was simply standing there, vibrating. Arthur noted that the webbing was slipping away however. The Tornado was trying to escape apparently, but he was slow in the process. "I will fight you though if you don't- glck!"

Aquaman's eyes widened as the hulking creature's hand shot out, his fist wrapping about his throat. Without seeming effort the brute lifted the sea king into the air, dangling and kicking at the end of his outstretched arm.

"You remind me of an old friend, Blondie," the brute sneered, chuckling at Arthur's struggles. "Same arrogant attitude, like you was the king a' creation instead a' the ocean. You got gills, boy?" The creature squeezed and Arthur choked, gasping for air as his vision swam.

"That's it, Joe! Hold him!"

Aquaman shifted his graying vision to see the flaming woman come soaring up over the roof's edge. He was already passing out though, seeing double as another sailed just behind...

No! There were two of them...

The creature they called Joe looked their way with a frown as they circled, flying to flank.

"No!" he shouted. "Wait-"

"Fire's his weakness!" the first shouted, and the second blasted.

An inferno engulfed the rooftop as the second blazing woman joined in the attack. Aquaman sagged, moaning as the heat and flame took its toll, but oddly he felt the brute's grip loosen. He could breathe again, though the heated air scorched his lungs.

"Wait ya stupid-"

Arthur heard a moan and creak as the creature's eyes widened. The fire was too much for the rooftop already over-burdened with the monster's mass. Arthur grimaced, trying to focus in the fiery haze, finally rearing back and kicking out with all the strength he could muster. Right between the monster's legs-

Far from honorable, but well worth it as he saw the brute's eyes glaze over, his hand opening as it shot to between his legs. Aquaman dropped to the roof and stumbled back even as the structure gave way. The look on the monster's face was almost comical as he fell from sight cursing. Arthur heard the subsequent smashing of the floors below.

The two fiery women looked on in confusion and embarrassment, only then realizing their mistake. Arthur gasped, trying to regain his strength before they regained their own composure and renewed their twin attack. He doubted that he would survive another.

It was quickly taken out of his hands however as the sudden gale-force wind whipped past and bowled him over. Aquaman tumbled across the rooftop, finally slamming against a jutting bit of girder, tired and aching, depleted. It took all of his dehydrated energy to simply raise his head and watch as the Red Tornado came flying forth.

Cyclones spewed from his arms kicking up dirt and debris, but thankfully engulfing the two flaming women as well. Arthur watched as they struggled to stay aloft and aflame, the vacuum that the Tornado was creating about them threatening to eat the very air and snuff their fire as well as their breath.

His skin burning, singed and parched, gasping for breath, Aquaman hoped that Reddy did not kill them. Then he collapsed, unconscious...

Calvin Rankin clutched at his throat as he gasped for breath in the sudden cyclones. The winds whipped past, ripping the very air into a vacuum with their opposing forces, buffeting him and Sue Storm in the process. He could see already that the Human Torch was fading. Her fiery armor was flickering, the dying embers of her flames barely sparking with the last of her concentration.

Finally his doppelganger moaned and went limp; the last of her fires dead as her oxygen was depleted. Ironically, the very winds that had sapped her breath and flame still held her aloft, gently rocking her as she was lowered towards the ground. She was done, at least for the time being, and Rankin being in her image wondered then just how much longer he might last.

He had to change, but into what?

Mimic stared at the strange, stoic man in red, his high-collared cape fluttering madly behind him as his arms vanished into the twin spiraling wind tunnels that he was apparently creating- or manipulating, Rankin corrected. He did not seem human, or Mutant. His armored face did not change expression in the least, not even to speak, not that he had. Perhaps he was a mute, or maybe an alien that

simply did not know the language. Oddly, he reminded Rankin of the Vision, so maybe he was an android or some other type of automaton. Not that it mattered, living or dead, man or machine he had to be stopped. And Rankin thought that just maybe he had an idea.

He concentrated, hard as it was. He was almost on the verge himself, but he pictured one of the dozens of templates he had engrained on his psyche, sifting quickly through the useless images that came to mind. He needed a body with powers that could match the creature's fierce winds. A speedster perhaps, but even as Quicksilver popped into mind the Mimic pushed the thought away settling on another. In the end, the answer was obvious.

Storm...

Easier and easier, his body was already female. He thought, concentrating on the image of his old friend and comrade, his mind sifting through the DNA templates forever rifling through his memories, his very being. He felt the slightest strain as his feminine form shifted, lengthening to accommodate the height of Ororo Monroe, the taller and more obviously endowed figure. A subtler effort to shift hue and color; his skin darkening, the hair growing longer, fading. Then came the power...

He felt the swell of rage grow within as the elements seemed to beckon. The air was first of course, given the situation. He could hear the winds crying in his soul, screaming in almost agony at the vile touch of the red thing. He- IT did not belong here, an alien raping the very environment with its vile touch. In the back of his mind he could hear the growling rumble of thunder in answer, the wicked flash and crack of lightning snapping in agreement. The storm was roiling in answer, awaiting the call. He felt the first drops of chilling rain and smiled.

"Now then, creature," he shouted over the churning winds, laughing almost as the song rose within. "You think you're some kind of Elemental? Let's see how you handle the powers of a goddess!"

The red man hovered, his face a silent mask void of emotion. Rankin noticed that he had deposited the unconscious body of Susan Storm gently to the rooftop, though he had done nothing to stifle the cyclonic winds spiraling from both his arms.

"No... reason... to fight. We... just wish... to go home..."

"Don't we all, freak?" Calvin Rankin rode the winds higher, marveling at the simplicity of how 'Storm' could control the elements. A simple wiggling of 'her' fingers and the fury of the storm churned for him; the winds simply diverting, changing course, the rains drizzling, then pounding with the gale. The sky was

darkening as clouds raced to her call, lightning arching across the horizon. It was glorious.

“Do it!”

Mimic blinked to see the dark, lithe form of Stalker swing between the two. The alien’s wind storm had blown him back and away, apparently a struggle from him to return to the battle, and now-

“Stalker, you idiot!” Rankin shouted as the man-spider spewed his webbing at the red man, the winds and storm sending it wildly on the wing. “Get out of the way! He’s more-“

“Yeah, yeah!” Stalker jeered as it tugged on his web-line, flipping at ungodly angles that would shatter a normal man’s bones, firing another strand of his unique organic webbing through his legs to propel his body even higher. “I was facing down the likes a’ Doc Doom and Thanos while you were home eatin’ Pop Tarts and watching Pokemon in your PJ’s, ex-man. Remind me to tell you about the time I fought Speed Demon sometime, son.”

Stalker laughed as he flipped backward, his spine almost folding in half as he stretched his arms full length, firing twin strands of webbing at the red man. The armored alien simply stared as the strange fluid streamed at him, whirling as it was caught within his cyclone to whip and spiral about his form. He did nothing as the sticky fluid looped about again and again, strand after strand. Rankin watched as Stalker continued through his long, graceful leap, actually using the strong winds to carry him along in his arch until he landed on the brick façade of a nearby building. The Mimic raised his arms, ready to help and guide the storm, watching as the arachnid braced, clinging to the wall and finally heaved on the strands.

The webbing tightened about the armored man, the loops becoming bonds and pinning his arms and legs, pulling them from the winds and back into solid reality-

“Shoot him now! Shoot him now!”

Mimic called on the storm and the rains shifted, hammering now, freezing to hail. Thunder rolled as the air charged with static, lightning flashing in the background. He could feel the power within his form, straining for release. He stared at the armored man, the villain simply hovering there...

Waiting...

There was pain! Daggers in his brain, sharp and piercing, Calvin Rankin screamed as the world seemed to swirl and swim about him, turning upside

down. His voice was high and shrill, trapped between the feminine and masochistic as stars flashed in his graying sight; white, red and blue...

Ray Palmer grew to a few inches at her feet, stepping from the unconscious body of the man that had crashed to the rooftop- after she had slammed him full in the face with the star-spangled shield. Whatever he had been about to do, the Atom had stopped him... her... hopefully in time.

Lois Lane-Kent adjusted the shield on her arm as she watched the strange metamorphosis occurring at her feet; the dark-skinned woman shifting back to the form of a man. She had seen strange things throughout her career, had been at the heart of the wondrous world of the Metas since the first appearance of Superman himself, but she still found some of the things that happened around them to be awesome. Maybe it was a naivete, the human factor that she was not a Meta herself, or maybe it was just the reporter's ink running through her veins but she hoped that she would never stop marveling at the wonders of the universe.

Lois blinked, still looking down but shifting her gaze at the tapping on the toe of her shoe. The Atom was there waving up to her and she quickly focused, crouching down to better hear his miniscule voice. He smiled, glancing at the fallen foe. He was little more than a boy, really.

"Nice shot, Lois, but concentrate." The Atom gestured at the unconscious young man, fully reverted to form and even bereft of the wings that he had worn when the other group had first confronted them. "Stick with the League, kid. You'll get used to this stuff in no time. Now get with it. There's one left."

Lois stood, turning even as the Atom dwindled from sight once again. He had apparently entered the shape-shifter's body at microscopic size and done something within- something more severe than just knocking him unconscious as he had to keep the Kent's safe and blissfully unaware of what was happening around them all. Now he was hopefully going to do something likewise to the strange spider-man that was still attacking the Red Tornado.

Lois looked on, squinting to see through the still raging storm that had so suddenly sprung up about them. The pounding hail and whipping winds, the freezing cold made it hard to see, not to mention the glare of lightning drawing nearer with every heartbeat, but still she could see Reddy slowly drifting towards the other. He was still trapped in the weird webbing that the man-spider had shot from his hands, that creature himself straining to drag the Tornado closer, within striking distance.

Lois chewed on her lower lip, wondering what she could do to help, wishing that whatever the Atom was going to do he would do it quickly. She was no Meta, and all she had to help was the broken lasso of the Amazon Princess wrapped about her upper body like a flak jacket, and the star-spangled man's shield. And of course, her wits.

She screwed up her courage and charged forward, hoping that the edge of the shield would be sharp enough to sever the line holding the Red Tornado captive. She gasped as her shoes slipped and skidded on the suddenly icy rooftop, almost losing her balance. She almost screamed as lightning flashed within inches of her, making her hair stand on end in passing as the arc averted and disappeared up into the rip in the sky that they had come through before.

Breathing hard, her eyes wide at the knowledge that she had just barely escaped an electrifying death, Lois skidded to an abrupt halt. She stared up and about at the raging storm; flashing bolts warping and twisting through the hole, dark thunderclouds swirling with the strange pink fog spilling from the tear. She looked to the Tornado again but he was lost to the darkness and hail, a shadowy image that she could barely see.

“Jesus, what am I doing?”

“If I was you, I’d be surrendering.”

Lois yelped, startled at the sound of the deep, gravelly voice. Unconsciously she raised the shield up before her as she stared at the huge, hulking figure that towered over her. His short hair was matted down to his head, ice seemingly clinging to his massive, gray muscles as he popped his knuckles with a deafening force. He grinned.

“That shield belongs to a friend of mine,” he growled. “I’d appreciate it if you’d be so kind...” The creature’s grin widened as he calmly extended his hand wide open for the shield’s return. Lois licked her lips. She heard a scream somewhere off in the storm, but did not know whose. She was shaking with fright- excitement- but she knew what she had to do.

“You want this shield, big man?” she said, trying not to shiver, to keep her teeth from chattering. “Take it!”

Stalker cursed under his breath, straining as he both heaved on the webbing and willed it to reel in, dragging the alien with it. It was working, and the effort was not why he was cursing, but rather that it was working at all. He could sense the power in the creature- the danger. His head was drumming to beat the band and

the alien symbiote that was every bit a part of him now was screaming a warning just a few decibels shy of ultrasonic.

He had seen the alien go sort of desolid, like some poor man's version of the Vision. He seemed to command the winds. God knew what else he could do; fly obviously, but if he was some other world android with little better fashion sense than the Vision had, then he should have been pulling powers out of his ass.

But he just hovered there, drifting closer as Stalker drew him in like a big red fish. Almost like he wanted to get...

"Shut up!" Stalker shouted. "I can't think!"

Distraction! That's what it was. Stalker braced, focusing his attention on the whining symbiote and probed, concentrating. Finally he found it, something trying to get in. One of the aliens no doubt, but his own alien was fighting against him- her- it. Protecting him like a lover.

Stalker glanced at the android and saw no change, then shifted his will, a little effort and thought, some psyche to the creature that covered him, protected him, joined him in a way that Gwen or Mary Jane could never do. They were one, and what tried to hurt the host, first had to get by the symbiote- and that would never happen.

There was a scream as a man erupted out of the second skin he had now worn for so long. The creature, the alien lover he had bonded with on the Beyonder's patchwork world had found the attacker, and that extra, added push by Peter Parker was enough to turn that attack back, Jack! The symbiote was able to repel the assault of the microscopic man trying to get past the bond. His own tough luck as the black spat him out like a blob of chewed, used tobacco-

Stalker's eyes went wide as his own internal Spider Sense kicked up a notch. He leaped just as the façade of the building was shorn away by an intense blast of wind and hail, like the spray of an Uzi. He flipped in mid-air realizing at last that the windy android had simply been stalling to allow the little man to make his move. Now the tiny guy was done, the red man was back in the picture. Fine!

Stalker twirled, spiraling in pirouette as he released one of the intertwining web lines, firing off another to anchor himself as he dropped. With the symbiote's natural skill backing his own the web wavered in the winds but hit its mark, and Parker tugged, then heaved-

Still no reaction as the android suddenly shot forward, propelled by Stalker's spider-enhanced strength combined with the alien's. Stalker reeled the red man in even as he himself shot towards the building, drawn to the anchor where he landed, perched, then leapt again.

Twisting about Stalker slammed full, feet first into the plummeting armored man. He felt the force of the blow throughout his body even as he released the grip on the web line that held the android, laughing as the red man rocketed away...

Only to slow and eventually hover there in the wind.

"Nuts, man," Stalker whined, dropping back to the rooftop. "What the fuck are you?"

"I...am... wind..."

Stalker screamed in surprise as his bit of roof suddenly ripped up, a great chunk that he had anchored to shooting skyward. He tensed, springing away and shot his webbing, too late realizing his mistake as the winds seemed to close about him. He started to spin, faster and faster as the cyclone enveloped him, his stray web line caught up in the cycle, encircling him as he had done to the android earlier. Stalker knew that he could simply absorb the webbing, if only the world would stop spinning just for a second so that he could concentrate-

His body slammed back to the rooftop.

He was whipped back up into the air, spinning now in the opposite direction.

"J- just like... Coney-"

He saw the rooftop coming up at him again and tried to brace for the impact...

"Oyo, that's gotta smart."

Joe Fixit was unconcerned both as he watched Stalker slam face first into the rooftop, and at the woman's feeble attempt to hit him with Captain America's shield. Stalker was a conceited ass, and high time somebody got the better of him. Except of course that that left Fixit the last man standing on the team. No problem really. He'd faced worse odds.

He looked back to the woman. She was pounding away, swinging with just a little skill, but she was getting tired too, and the force of her blows barely registered through his thick hide. If she had any super powers, she had yet to use them, so Joe Fixit assumed she was a normal that had gotten caught up in all of this by some accident. She was a scrapper- he would give her that- but that simplified things on his end. He reached up and simply caught the shield in mid swing.

“Gimme that,” he said, jerking it away from the woman, smirking as she blinked in surprise. Later for her, as it would take nothing but a pinky bop to drop her. Fixit turned to the red man.

Sure enough the android was drifting closer, riding the strong winds silently. Joe Fixit had noticed the similarities to the Vision as well, so he had no qualm at all as he shifted America’s unbreakable disk in his grip and reared back. He hurled the shield like a Frisbee, his aim true as it shot forward at blinding speed. Windows shattered as the disk broke through the sound barrier, not even slowing as it sliced through the armored red form like a hot knife through melted butter.

The android looked down in surprise- or whatever most closely resembled that emotion on its mask-like face- watching as its lower half tumbled and spiraled within the cyclone that it generated to keep it aloft. Fixit smirked, watching too just where the shield traveled, knowing that if it was left undisturbed it would eventually arch back to the hurler. That would take some time with the force that he had thrown the thing, and unfortunately the disk was quickly gone, lost in the storm washing about them. Rogers was gonna be pissed.

The red man seemed undisturbed though with the loss of its legs. The severing would have stopped the Vision probably, so maybe this thing was not a machine after all. Then what-

Fixit saw a flicker of gold pass in front of his eyes, a slight sudden weight on his back. It was the woman he saw, glancing back. Apparently she had undone a bit of the strange cord she was wrapped in and was trying to strangle him with it. He chuckled.

“Please.” Reaching up he grabbed the slim rope in his fingers and tugged, only a little surprised that it did not break. He should have expected that- and did he supposed, but still he had to try. Still smiling he shifted his grip and quickly stretched his arm out, catching the woman by surprise. He felt the impact as her face collided with the back of his head, happy to feel her slump against his back, dangling as he released the cord. He heard her moans, but she was dazed, allowing him to concentrate on the greater threat; the android. He looked up-

The world exploded in white as everything flashed into negative. Black became white and vice-versa as Fixit winced, his hands raising to shield his eyes too late. He blinked, staggering back a bit as he tried to erase the drifting swirls washing through his sight, after images of something huge and winged swooping up behind the android, black energy crackling at its throat, the source of the new assault. It took a moment to register what he had seen, to focus as well as remember. To be fair, he had never actually met the creature, but he had seen the pictures.

He squinted, trying to see as something hit the rooftop near his feet, his eyes focusing on the charred and hollow shell that had been the red man. He heard a triumphant cackle, a rage of energy crackling over the suddenly dying storm. A softer voice whispered in his ear; the woman-

“My god...”

Joe Fixit looked up as the creature came swooping in, mighty bat-like wings flapping as negative energy sizzled from the nozzle of the control rod fastened to his throat. The insectile head was alight with a gleeful madness, the twisted mouth wide with laughter as he hovered aloft, just out of reach.

“Aw, crap...” Fixit sighed as everything; the devastation, the lack of life, the state of Four Freedom’s Tower all finally connected. He knew the Earth, the timeline that he and the Lost had fallen into. It had been a catastrophe that the combined forces of the Fantastic Four and the Avengers had diverted in his own reality, months before he had joined the latter. He heard the woman’s question at his ear even before she asked it, and answered glumly. It was just her and him now.

“It’s Annihilus...”

Part Two

At last...

It had been so long...

Oh there had been the occasional animal to prey upon. A soft skin, like Richards and his mate, at least in form, or one of the lesser creatures. But there had been none to give challenge, none to fight and conquer. The last of this world beyond’s creatures were little better than mindless bore-worms, groveling for succor and salvation at the end. Pitiful and mewling, disgusting things that needed a swift end to their existence.

In truth, the world beyond had been a disappointment. After the initial assault when he had faced down Reed Richards and his ragtag army of powered, freakish aliens, there had been little challenge at all. The glory of seeing Richards burn, his trio of followers writhing in death’s grip; especially the brutish Thing had been the grandest victory. The others of course too; the long hair and the sanctimonious shield-bearer. He had enjoyed ravaging the green woman even as he had the Thing’s blind mate. He had relished peeling away the red and gold armor of the metal man to reveal the succulent morsel within.

There had been others though. They were like the Ilions; swarming and stinging, biting with their puny weapons. And of course the remaining freaks had banded together in the end for a final confrontation. They had been legion there at the end, haggard but unafraid, as though knowing they had nothing to lose. It had been glorious...

The little animal with the claws had actually hurt him, and the one with the red beams coming from his eyes had banded them all together to capitalize on the wounds. They had fallen of course, in the end. All of them, though it had taken the force of the Cosmic Control Rod unleashed, the heart of the power from home to wash across the face of the world for that final cleansing.

And even then some had survived, but that of course had given him sport- at least for a time...

The armored one across the waters. He had tried to wrest the Rod away.

The silver one that came from the sky. His grief made him easy prey.

The big green brute that so resembled this gray hulking monstrosity. He had been delicious, perhaps the hardest of all to slay as he kept healing. He had been great sport, finally flayed and broken by the negative energies unbound, his skeleton left to rot in the cursed sun and sand outside the cavern he had called home.

Annihilus truly hoped that this creature was similar in that respect as well; virtually unbeatable. Life as the conqueror was boring after all. Where was the glory of lording a dead world and hunting down its verminous refuse? Where was the challenge?

There...

Joe Fixit stared up at Annihilus as he hovered there, no doubt preparing to attack. He had never met the creature, but he had read the files that the Avengers shared with the FF on his own Earth and he quickly speculated that this ravaged world had come about in aftermath of the time when Annihilus had finally found his way through the Negative Zone portal and attacked the combined teams. His memory was sketchy on the confrontation, but the heroes had won in the end, though the battle had left its scars; most notably in Alicia Masters, the Thing's girlfriend. Or was she the Skrull in disguise then?

Fixit pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think. It did get confusing.

“Who... What is that?”

Fixit glanced over his shoulder at the woman still hanging from his neck. She was sturdy apparently, as well as a scrapper, and had come to her senses quickly. A good thing she wasn't a Marvel.

“That, chicken, is Annihilus, self-proclaimed ruler of the Negative Zone and one of the baddest mothers you're ever likely ta run into. Now, any chance you can let me go before he decides to attack?” He felt the woman kicking, scrabbling to gain purchase on his back as he reached around. Fixit smirked as he copped a feel, hoisting her up so that she could take the golden cord from about his throat, then let her drop to the rooftop.

“I dunno what yer wearin' sweet heart, but that gold rope ain't gonna do much if Annie decides ta blast his Neg energy. Best you get under cover.” He saw the woman back away, but surprisingly she did not run for shelter. Fixit shrugged, “Yer funeral, babe.”

The storm was receding thankfully. The hail had turned to a fierce rain, then a drizzle as the temperature rose and the stray winds took hold and blew the clouds out to sea. The flashes of lightning were out over Staten Island now, no longer arching into the rip- god knew what that was doing- and the peals of thunder were becoming scant, few and far between.

Fixit noticed that the one handed man was stirring, the rain apparently reviving him. He was a Namor clone after all. Good. Stalker was still out though, as was Rankin and the shrinking man- if that was his power. Storm looked to be close to waking, though she was soaked to the bone through and through. Johnny Storm would know how to deal with that, but Sue was still too green. No help there then.

“What's the plan, Fixit?”

Joe Fixit looked at Captain America, standing there without his shield just in front of the woman that had kicked his ass- protecting her. Give the man his credit, he was a hero.

“Ain't no plan, Rogers,” Fixit smirked, “cept hit the bastard till he drops. Ain't no mercy there.” Fixit pointed and Annihilus laughed again, a hideous sound that would haunt them forever, however long that might be.

“We understand one another then, monster,” Annihilus spat.

“Who you callin' monster, freak?”

Joe Fixit flexed his leg muscles, crouching slightly. He leapt-

Arthur Curry moaned, relishing the life giving water as it rained down, restoring him. His parched and cracked skin melted back, his flesh mending with every drop that washed over him. He raised his face to the receding storm, his mouth wide as he drank deep of the replenishing liquid- his life's blood. It was then that he saw the thing hovering there.

It reminded him of Star Breaker, and he recalled the vision of something dark sweeping over the universe. Was this that? Was this creature some twisted reflection of that alien vampire that had confronted the League years before, the ravager of worlds, the leech of the universe?

Probably.

Fate was like that; one big joke. He had learned that long ago. It just meant that he had to try all the harder.

He looked about the rooftop, trying to determine what help he might have in stopping this new threat. He saw Lane standing with the man draped in the American flag. He saw the big, gray creature squat and leap, smashing into the creature with little effect. The bat-winged monster clawed at the other, the two grappling blow for blow. Reddy was down, sliced in half. The gray man's allies were little better off; the shape shifter and the spider-man both still unconscious though he saw the blue-garbed woman stirring, trying to sit up. She wielded fire, which could help if she could get it together. Ray was normal-sized and unconscious, dressed in a checkered shirt and slacks- whatever he had been wearing when he had originally been called to action against the Time Trapper. He looked dead, until Arthur finally saw him breathe- labored as it was. That was it-

A big gray brute, a star-spangled fighter, a half-dazed blonde girl, a one handed king and a reporter with no powers beyond aggravation. They were doomed...

Annihilus laughed as his claws sank deep into the gray brute's skin. He was not as strong nor resilient as his green counterpart, but he was strong enough to be a challenge. Green blood sprayed from the wound, and Annihilus saw the flesh struggling to mend as he took another pound in a rake of his claws, shivering at the monster's screams of anguish.

He laughed again as the creature's fist slammed home, turning his head. Glorious pain as they each relinquished their holds, the brute falling back and away, clutching his throat in agony. The others sprang to action then-

Annihilus paused just for a moment as the one dressed in blue made him think. He was dead, Annihilus was certain. He had ripped the warrior's chest open, feasted on his heart. How-

The one-handed man smashed his metallic stump against Annihilus' head. He was strong too, that one, though the monster was stronger. Annihilus backhanded the blue man away with one hand, his other shooting out to grasp the blonde hair by the throat. Thor perhaps? No...

Annihilus cackled as the human struggled in his grasp. A simple squeeze and he would be dead. The Rod was crackling with energy here, so close to the Zone-home- and the power rippled through his form. He was unbeatable here. King, the monarch of all that he surveyed. He bared his fangs, inching closer.

He would feast well...

Steve Rogers shook his head, trying to regain some composure. He had never imagined facing such threats when he had agreed to become America's first Super Soldier. He had expected to fight Nazis, at the worst the likes of the Baron Zemo, or the Red Skull; Hitler's newest creation, the Nationalist answer to America's best. This though- this was frightening. Vampires and aliens, the sheer scope and power was mind-numbing.

Still, he had to do what he could. He had been created to fight evil- in the form of the Nazis true- but this was even worse. He looked to Fixit, but the brute was clutching his throat, glowing green blood oozing between his fingers. He looked wasted and pale. The other alien with the stump for a hand was struggling in the winged creature's grip, the monster looking for all intents and purposes like he was about to take a bite out of his prisoner. He saw the Human Torch steaming far across the rooftop, and the woman that had beaten him hanging back, not certain what to do. The rest were down for the count by the looks. It was up to him then...

His blood boiling, pulse racing Steve Rogers leaped at the monster again. While it was focused on the other man with the stump, he had his opening and locked his arms about the creature's wings.

"What?" the monster hissed as they all three started to fall to the roof. They hit hard, though they were not too high up, the creature turning the blonde under to take the brunt. Cap rolled away on impact, quickly springing to his feet and charging forward again. His roundhouse connected solidly, but though the monster's head snapped to the side he seemed unharmed.

“Fool!” he shouted, energy crackling at his throat as he swung. Cap blocked the blow, feeling the strength behind it as he staggered back. The monster stood, ignoring the blonde writhing at his feet. “I killed you once. I shall enjoy doing so again.”

“Bring it!” Rogers shouted defiantly, taking up a boxing stance. He wished that he had his shield.

Susan Storm watched as Captain America did his best to fend off the monster’s attack. The creature was too strong though, a simple raking blow knocking Cap back and away, dazed. Fixit was down as well. So too the blonde man with the stump of a hand, and his woman friend was useless apparently.

“Flame on!” Susan shouted, cursing as the fire danced over her skin, steam rising but the flame flickering out again. She was still too damp. She could not concentrate.

She glanced about, looking for help, wondering what to do. Mimic and Stalker were still out, and Cap would be dazed for a few. She saw Fixit clutching at his throat, the blood still flowing though not as swiftly-

“The rod...” he gasped, and Susan blinked. She saw the other woman glance at Fixit as well, just as confused.

“At his... throat...” Fixit’s voice was raspy and weak, but finally Susan knew what he meant- and the woman as well. They both looked to the crackling cylinder at the monster’s throat. Was that the source of his power?

“Flame on!” Susan shouted again, and this time the flame stayed. It was slow and weak at first, but eventually it grew in intensity. Her body swelled with the fire as her Cosmically induced powers engulfed her, her fiery armor erupting in a blaze. The monster turned to her even as she turned to him.

“You’re dead!” Annihilus screamed, and it seemed more a statement of fact than certainty. Susan shuddered imagining what he had done to this reality’s FF; Johnny and Ben, Reed...

“Not yet I’m not!” she shouted as she lifted into the air. She called on the flame and sent an inferno down onto the rooftop. Screw the woman, and Cap too. That monster had to die!

Lois Lane-Kent dove for cover as the flaming woman unleashed her power, engulfing the rooftop in a blazing conflagration. She could feel the heat. She heard Aquaman's screams as she hit, rolling out and away. Fire would drain him, parch him again and suck away at his strength. She wondered about Atom and the rest; the winged man and the spider...

God! The Kents!

What had happened to Clark's parents when the Red Tornado was beaten?

Lois rolled to a stop, slamming against a broken edge of the rooftop and saw the creature writhing in the flames. The heat was intense, but though the monster was hurting she could see too that he was surviving. He was strong apparently. Stronger than the woman's flame.

Lois gasped as she felt the heavy hand on her arm. Turning she saw the big gray man, still holding his throat. His eyes were fierce, determined as he gasped.

"The rod," he croaked, wincing in pain. "At his neck, dammit! Get... the rod."

Lois looked to the monster, watching as his wings unfurled, flapping as he swooped up and raked his claws across the flaming woman's chest. She screamed and fell back, her wounds cauterizing even as she hit the rooftop unconscious. The monster turned, his wings beating slowly as he surveyed the battlefield.

Lois saw the rod at his neck, spewing energy and sparking. If that was the source of his power- his focus- then she would have to get it. She was the only one left to do the job. She shuddered, hoping that Wonder Woman's broken lasso would protect her. She bit down hard on her lip as she charged forward, watching as the creature laughed again.

Joe Fixit watched as the woman dashed forward.

Annihilus just hovered there, flapping his wings and unconcerned, letting her come. Laughing, the bastard.

The woman got close and leaped, but Annihilus simply grabbed her wrists and held her out, kicking and screaming at arm's length. He laughed.

"Pathetic animal! You would dare offend your master?"

Fixit heard the woman's screams as Annihilus squeezed. He heard the sound of breaking bones, saw the woman jerk in the monster's grip. Annihilus laughed again, leaning in close.

"I shall devour you," he cackled, holding her out again, his gaze sweeping the rooftop. "devour you all! I shall feast on your-"

Fixit struggled to rise, blinking as the woman kicked up and out. He gasped- actually gasped as the toe of her loafer connected to the Negative Rod. There was a cracking sound as it broke free, arching up and away.

"No..."

Fixit staggered forward. He was weak- loss of blood- and he was not yet healed, but he had to help the woman. He would be damned if he would let her die after trying so hard, no powers and all. Just a person trying to survive, damn it all...

When had he developed a conscience?

Rogers looked up as the little metal tube bounced at his feet.

The world still swam in his sight but he was not so far gone that he did not recognize victory when he saw it. Fixit had alluded that that cylinder was the key, and it had literally bounced into his lap.

Damned if he would give it up now...

Annihilus cast the woman aside.

Damn her! Damn her to hell, she had kicked the rod loose.

He was bereft. He could feel the power slipping away.

Captain America had it, but he was weak, different. Different as the brute; no challenge.

No challenge at all.

Annihilus leaped...

Lois winced as the gray brute slammed his massive fist into the monster's back, slamming him down. Annihilus sprawled on the rooftop, obviously hurt. The big gray man was still hurting too though, unfortunately.

The star-spangled man had the rod though, and he was smart enough to hang back. Maybe they could win after all. Maybe-

Lois screamed as the monster slashed at the gray man. He screamed, dropping to one knee even as the other monster struggled to rise. Damn he would not stay down.

Lois turned to the star-spangled warrior, but he was done, staring off into space. The rod he held was sparkling and crackling and apparently had overwhelmed him. Useless.

The others were still out as well. Aquaman and Ray Palmer, the opposition. They were all alive, she could see them stirring- all but the Tornado- but there was no way that they could help.

The gray brute picked up Annihilus by the wings, holding him out and he too looked off into space. What was she missing?

She saw it then, a glint, a reflection in the distance. She felt the winds rising again as Annihilus struggled in the gray hulk's grip, trying to writhe free. Did he see it coming? She would never know.

The shield severed his head as it returned, slashing through his purple armor before imbedding into the roof just like that. The head went flying away, bouncing finally. No great explosion of power, no revelations. It simply bounced, finally coming to rest not too far away. She looked up at the others.

The Tornado was there, his upper torso hovering, his winds holding the headless body. The gray brute simply relaxed his grip and the armor clattered to the rooftop, void of life. The star-spangled warrior sighed. Across the roof, the man-spider chuckled.

"Well, there's something you don't see every day, Chauncy..."

All eyes turned to the black-garbed Stalker, waiting for the punchline...

Oddly, it never came...

Epilogue

There was something wrong.

Susan Storm looked from one to the other of her fellow members; the Lost, but they seemed as hesitant as she felt. She brushed her hair from her eyes and settled back on the roof's edge, waiting for resolution, or at least explanation. They had yet to vanish as they had in the past, so something was left unfinished. What she had no idea...

Stalker was hunkering in the background, waiting.

Mimic too seemed at a loss for words, standing there aloof. He had shaken hands with the strangers as they had made amends, but after that he had distanced himself with a smile and a far away look. What was he about?

Rogers and Joe were right there though, up at the front. Cap still held the rod close to his chest, no doubt wondering the same questions that she felt- where do we go now? What happens next? Fixit stood before the others; the man with the stump, the little man in blue and red, the upper torso of the android that hovered there, and the woman. They all seemed confused. Lost...

"I dunno," Fixit said as he looked up at the rip in space. It was still spewing energy, but with Annihilus' defeat it seemed less somehow. "We all should have vanished by now, so somethin' ain't done yet."

All eyes turned to Rogers.

"I imagine it's that thing," the one handed man said, pointing at the Rod that Rogers cradled in his arms.

"Unless I miss my guess it controls the Negative energies somehow," the man called the Atom said. Fixit nodded, but Susan had no clue.

"Yeah," Joe said, agreeing with a nod. "The Neg Rod draws on the energies in the Zone somehow. Somewhere deep within is the source of Annihilus' powers."

"It could be our ticket home," the Atom said. "I wish I had the chance to study it. It must be at least as powerful as the Spear of Destiny. We need it though..."

"I figured," Fixit said, looking to Rogers. Captain America adjusted the shield on his arm, looked to the rod he held then finally held it out.

"If you need it," he said, "it's yours."

The one armed man took the Rod and immediately Susan Storm felt an all too familiar tingling sensation. They were moving on...

“Joe...”

“Yeah, I feel it...”

Joe Fixit turned to the man with one hand, extending his own beefy mitt. He took the hand of the woman.

“Kick ass, Lois,” he said, grinning as he faded away. It was over and his team was finally moving on. The Rod apparently was meant for the others.

And they were gone...

Aquaman stared at the Cosmic Control Rod in his hand. It seemed useless, just a bit of metal, but apparently held the secret to their return home. He looked at the others...

The Red Tornado hovered there, half a man...

Ray Palmer stood too, thinking...

Lois Lane-Kent was the one that asked the obvious question-

“What now?”

Arthur smiled. With the reassurance that the Kents were still well she seemed all about the mission, and getting home. He looked up, pointing at the rift, the tear in the sky.

“I think we need to go back there, back into- what did Fixit call it?”

“The Negative Zone,” Ray Palmer said, shrinking slightly, just enough to make his ragged uniform reappear. He looked to the rod.

“That appears to be a receptacle of some kind, designed to contain the negative energies of that zone. I think we need to use it somehow. It’s gotta be important.”

“But how?” Lois asked looking from one to the other. The men shrugged, and the Tornado simply stared.

“The answer’s there,” Palmer said, pointing at the rift. “Somewhere in there. That’s where we need to be. That’s the way home. I’m certain.”

They all looked at him, nodding in turn.

“The Kents... are... safe...”

Red Tornado- what was left of him stared at them, his gaze distant and cold.

“Lois?” Aquaman asked, and she nodded.

“Let’s do it.”

Atom smiled, nodding as he dwindled, vanishing.

Aquaman tucked the rod into his belt and reached out to take Lois’ hand in his good one. He tried to smile too, but it was forced. She felt the wind then, and the ground fell away.

And they were gone...

To be continued...

Story © Curt F 2005

Next Issue: Head back to JLU: 2001 and M2K for the next chapters of this mini series within a maxi series as the JLA’s **Lost** try to make their way back home. They have a long road to travel, believe you me...



JLA Vs the Avengers #5

War World

Ganthet screamed and dropped to his knees, gasping for breath, clutching at his heart. Izaya and Shazam were at his side immediately, having nothing better to do but wait.

“What?” Izaya said, his hand on Ganthet’s shoulder.

“What’s happened?” Shazam asked, stroking his long, gray beard in worry.

“Kyle Rayner is dead,” Ganthet wheezed, trying to catch his breath.

Ganthet looked up, his ancient eyes brimming with tears as he looked to his comrades.

“I’m sorry,” the old Wizard said.

“We have lost a great warrior,” Highfather said as well and Ganthet stared, breathing hard and on his knees. He shook his head in despair.

Thanos smiled as little by little...

Bit by bit...

Everything fell into place.

He glanced at Galactus, watching as the energy swirled.

He looked to the Rift...

He looked to Galactus...

The energy swirled, swelling as it flowed to the Devourer. It was working. He was consuming the excess negative energies, fueling his appetite and the Rifts were starting to heal- to close. He would need more energy- forthcoming all too soon so long as the 'heroes' did their part.

Thanos pulled the cube from thin air, teleporting it through the Gem of Space stolen from the annoying and aggravating Troll. He held it high, watching it sparkle...

Soon...

The JLA VS The Mighty Avengers

GODHOOD'S END!

**The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

Firestorm flew higher, watching as Superman hammered on the threat of Nefaria. The Man of steel was crying, screaming, battering with all his strength.

Kyle was dead...

Warbird was blasting Nefaria with her energies- star powers Ronnie could see clearly now, the radiations of the sun. Nefaria ignored her best, and Superman's too. He was beyond their abilities- even the hammer. He was so strong...

Kyle was dead. Dead and gone...

"Bastard..."

Firestorm raised his arms, pointing his fists at the crackling form of Nefaria. The man was laughing as he slapped Wonder Woman aside without a care. Ronnie

saw her head twist abruptly before she tumbled away, slamming into the mountainside. There was a flicker of silver at her side.

Ronald...

Firestorm returned his attention to Nefaria. He could see the strange energies dancing about the man now, and knew them for what they were. He knew how to shut him down.

Do it!

He could understand. He knew what he had to do.

He did it...

They moved through the complex swiftly and silently, each to their own thoughts. There was nothing to say really. Nothing that each of them had not heard before.

Bucky, Oliver, Jason...

The list was endless it seemed. Ever growing, and now the name of Kyle Rayner had been added to it. Possibly the names of Aquaman, the Atom, Red Tornado, Lois Lane, the Kents as well. They just did not know. There was no time. They would mourn later, and bury their dead when- if they could.

The Batman tried to ignore his feelings, pushing them aside for the time being. There was still a job to do, and worrying about Rayner was simply a distraction at the moment that he could not afford. He had the point, Ra's Al Ghul cuffed and in front of him as he led the group up through the maze of corridors again, back towards the surface.

J'onzz had relayed the plan to all of them, as the Captain had in turn relayed their success inside the Aerie. There had been some debate as to what to do next, and in the end the general consensus was to gather, and Iron Man had suggested that both the Rod and the Surfer be brought to the tower. Whether either man or machine would prove integral remained to be seen, but it seemed the logical choice.

There had been the unconscious Midas and his daughter to consider as well. Wake them and move them along, or drag them behind? Leaving them was obviously not a decision. Captain America had the strength to lift Midas in his armored bulk, but to carry it the entire way- even with the help of the others would be a Herculean task. It was the Wasp actually that solved that particular problem.

Using something that she called 'Pym Particles' she simply shrunk Midas and his daughter to an easily manageable size. She then scooped up the still unconscious villains and dropped them into an empty compartment in Hawkeye's bandoleer, safe and sound at least for the time being. They would not simply regrow at their own discretion should they wake prematurely, but were at the Wasp's mercy to return to their true size. Probably not the most humane solution, but there was no time for niceties.

"There!"

Batman glanced up from his thoughts at the first hint of natural light streaming down the corridor from around the far bend. The Wasp zipped back to the group, scouting ahead with no sign of fear.

"The entrance is just like we found it," she said, "open and not a guard in sight."

"Good," Captain America said as the group gathered closer, heading for the exit. The Panther took the rear, keeping Talia ahead of him and moving with the Black Canary and Hawkeye taking turns flanking. Captain America took the point alongside Batman, both men watching as the Wasp dwindled in the distance ahead, scouting advance. "Don't get too far ahead Jan, just in case. Stay alert everyone, and brace for the shift in light. Shield your eyes against the glare."

One by one they finally emerged, each in turn stopping dead in their tracks and staring at the scene that met their eyes. The tower of Ra's Al Ghul dominated the mountainside, the strange apparatus at the top glowing hot with a blinding light as energy poured forth shooting back into the Rift cutting into the sky. The dark, pinkish clouds still roiled and churned, black lightning arching across the sky and spiraling up into the massive tear. Thunder rolled on and on.

They saw Nefaria then, still flying; the center of attention as the others still battled him. Even from the distance they could see that the combined might of the Avengers and the Justice League was doing little more than occupying the villain. Superman held Thor's hammer- the Thunderer nowhere to be seen as the Man of Steel battered away at the Count. Energy flared with every mighty blow, and they could see Nefaria stagger only to swiftly recover for the next. Warbird continued to unleash her own star bursts, blasting at the man to no effect as Wonder Woman flew strafing assault, hitting in fly by before circling wide for another pass. Firestorm was near, but beyond the battle. His fists were aglow as he trained his nuclear energies on Nefaria, though to little or no result apparently.

On the ground near the base of the tower they saw the others. The Scarlet Witch and Zatanna were manipulating their magic, though to what effect the Batman could not guess. He could see the blurring images of the two speedsters, Flash

and Quicksilver running in unison and creating a gale-force wind, a funnel that twisted upwards towards the main combatants and to the Rift beyond. Iron Man, the Beast and Plastic Man were at the tower as well, the Golden Avenger's armor stripped to the bare minimum, the pieces cobbled into the tower itself, connecting the man directly to the mechanism. There was no sign of the Martian Manhunter- or of Kyle of course...

"Fools."

The Batman eyed Ra's Al Ghul, watching as the Demon's Head stared skyward, his face a grim mask. Perhaps sensing the Batman's own gaze upon him, Ra's turned.

"You will destroy us all in your attempts to stop that madman. The tower is overloading. It was not built to withstand such a flow of power."

"Just what was it built for, Ra's?" Batman asked, scrutinizing his old foe. Ra's Al Ghul was one of the most dangerous men alive in his opinion, and he knew whatever the true purpose of the tower it would only benefit the Demon's Head in the end. Still, if Ra's was concerned, perhaps there was a chance. Ra's Al Ghul returned to silence however, unwilling to offer more.

"It was dubbed the 'Babel Tower', beloved," Talia answered. Batman saw her father snap his head about, staring daggers at his daughter. Talia frowned, looking away but continued.

"One of several scattered about the globe. They were designed originally to assault the human mind, those parts of the brain in particular that effect the ability to comprehend speech, to read and articulate thought. The plan was to shut down those areas and throw the world into disarray, the resulting chaos culling a large portion of Humanity, the rest surviving to be manipulated by my father in the Utopia that would follow."

"Incredible," the Black Panther said as he lowered the still unconscious form of the Silver Surfer to the ground. The Batman saw behind him that the Wasp was restoring Midas and his daughter to normal as well, Hawkeye and the Canary on guard just in case.

"The sheer scope of such a scheme," the Panther continued, "the magnitude... The death toll simply from accidents would be staggering. The loss of life from unreadable signs and directions, labels on medication, hazardous materials..." the Panther's gaze narrowed, focusing on Ra's Al Ghul.

"And you call Nefaria a madman-"

“We can debate that later, T’Challa,” Cap said as he stepped up to the young woman, Talia. “How do we shut it down?” Talia stared at the Avenger for a moment as though judging the man’s worth before she turned to the Batman.

“I fear you cannot-“ she said even as another voice cut her off in turn.

“Nor do we wish to,” J’onn J’onzz said as his form faded into view in their midst. Batman heard Hawkeye and the Wasp gasp, but glancing their way it did not seem a startled reaction, rather one of recognition, or memory. Why-

“Iron Man and the Beast directed Plastic Man in reconfiguring the tower’s signaling mechanics to broadcast once again, rather than receive. The various energies, which it gathered, are being sent back into Qward. Apparently that is doing something to heal the fabric of space as I received word from the Elongated Man that the Rifts scattered about the globe are sealing, the resultant storms starting to disperse. Unfortunately Nefaria is situated by the largest Rift remaining and easily accessing even greater power now that it is focusing. He becomes stronger with each passing moment. Our initial plan to alter Firestorm’s abilities through the Scarlet Witch’s Probability Hexes and magic worked to a point, however Nefaria is far and away beyond Ronald’s power in his present form. Nefaria is gathering energy faster than Firestorm can drain it away, and I fear that what he has siphoned off is simply returning in a cycle.”

“Fools, as I said.” Ra’s Al Ghul sneered at the gathered heroes, then focused his gaze once again on his daughter. A look passed between them, something like shame crossing over Talia’s face as Ra’s glared.

“Watch...”

Too late, the Batman cursed, distracted by the events. Ra’s Al Ghul kicked out even as Talia spun, lashing out. Batman blocked the kick, but the Demon’s Head dashed quickly out of reach as Talia’s elbow slammed into the Panther’s neck, staggering him. She shoved the Panther aside as she continued her fluid movement, dropping to the ground to sweep her leg at Captain America. The Avenger jumped clear however, already in motion, responding as he hurled his shield at Ra’s Al Ghul’s legs, knocking him to the ground.

As planned, apparently, as Ra’s tumbled, rolling with the blow and over the edge of the cliff...

The Wasp and the Martian Manhunter were over the edge immediately in pursuit, but Batman did not bother. He knew what they would find. Ra’s Al Ghul left nothing to chance.

Batman turned back to Talia, locked in Captain America’s embrace as the two heroes returned. Empty handed as expected.

“He just vanished,” the Wasp said, J’onzz confirming.

“Teleported perhaps, or some secret entrance back into his base where his mind is shielded from my probes. Given time-“

“He’s no longer important, J’onn,” Batman said, staring at Talia. “His plans are ruined. He’ll turn up again, eventually, if he has the opportunity. If we can stop that...”

All eyes turned skyward again, just as the world seemed to explode...

War World...

Galactus screamed!

Thanos watched intently as the gigantic body spasmed, glowing brighter as it swelled with energy. It shifted back and forth, positive and negative as the Devourer consumed the fluctuating energies that swirled about him. Or tried to. Thanos was starting to doubt that even the mighty Galactus could contain the unbridled power of a galaxy.

Not that that was ever the true plan, of course.

The Mad Titan afforded a quick glance back to War World and his erstwhile companions still gathered there below. Trusting fools that they were, they all three stared up in awe, uncomprehending as to what was happening before their very eyes. All the better that they remain mute and dumbfounded. He did not need their interference now.

Thanos held forth the cube, watching as Galactus writhed with a fresh wave of anti-matter washing over him. The strange energies dissipated as the Devourer fed, taking in the negative. Thanos saw the Rift shrink minutely every time and knew that the other breaches about the galaxy and especially on this dimension’s Earth were closing as the power was redirected here. To the old men below the plan seemed to be working. And it was in a way.

Thanos chuckled, licking his lips in anticipation. He was saving the universe... again...

Mentor would be so proud. So would Izaya.

Now, it was just a matter of time.

Waiting...

**Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

"It's not working!"

Firestorm screamed to no one in particular as he kept going, pouring on the power. He could 'see' Nefaria's make up, his cellular composition and he was doing his best to alter it even though it was messing up his head to do so. It was weird! His powers just should not work that way, not against something living- and Nefaria was that no matter what the others said.

But it was not working.

His nuclear powers were rearranging Nefaria's base composition. He was converting the ionic energy into other things, less harmful elements but as fast as he converted the man's body seemed to shift and change, sucking in more and more power. Where was it all coming from? And how was the Count containing it all? It was ridiculous!

And he was getting tired. Ronnie Raymond wondered just how long he could keep up the pace. Nefaria did not seem tired in the least, or weakened. If anything he seemed stronger. It was like trying to stop the tide, or a hurricane.

Hell, he could do that. This was worse.

He could hear Nefaria's laughter as he hammered away, pounding on Superman. The Man of Steel was out on his feet so to speak, moving on instinct as he continued to fight back. Firestorm could see the bruises on the man's face, the blood-

God, Superman was bleeding...

He could barely stay aloft it seemed, barely hold the hammer of Thor, but somehow he did. They all did. Warbird, Wonder Woman, all the others on the ground, doing whatever they were doing. They all kept fighting, and Firestorm would do no less.

Firestorm winced to see Nefaria's fist slam down onto Superman, sending the Kryptonian falling. He heard the boom of the impact as he watched Wonder Woman and Warbird streak skyward to take up the direct battle again. Ronnie gasped as Superman hit the snowy slopes far below a moment later, he himself inching skyward to join the fray head on. Maybe he could make a difference up close and personal somehow. Maybe-

No!

Firestorm yelled to hear the Martian Manhunter's cry in his head. He paused, glancing down.

"J'onn?"

Hold position, Ronald. Employ your powers as planned. Help is on the way.

Firestorm looked about, licking his lips as he did as instructed. Where the necessary help was coming from he had no idea, but he had faith in J'onn. He would do what he had to do.

No matter how useless it seemed...

Captain America grimaced, watching as Superman slammed to earth. The mountain seemed to rumble with the impact, or it could have been the thunder it was hard to tell.

"T'Challa?"

The Black Panther crouching at his side scanned the far away spot, watching as plumes of snow billowed, steam drifting on the winds stirred by the speedsters. The Panther was silent for a time, but Steve Rogers knew that T'Challa's sight was far better than his, perhaps better than any of them for a normal view and the Martian had enough to concentrate on.

"He's moving." Finally the Panther stood. "He's hurt, but alive." Cap nodded.

"Pietro," he said, his thoughts relayed by the Martian Manhunter instantly. "Get to him. Get him here. We need to regroup." Cap glanced skyward.

"Wonder Woman," he said again. "Join us. Carol," Directing his thoughts to Warbird, "it's up to you for the moment. Keep him busy. You and Firestorm. Flash keep up your cyclone. Keep the funnel redirecting the energy towards the Rift as best you can. Just a little longer, people."

Quicksilver appeared within the perimeter, the Man of Steel at his side, the Mutant Speedster supporting the other's weight. Pietro seemed only a bit out of breath, winded from his non-stop movement, but the mere fact that he was still on his feet after so long was astounding. Superman on the other hand looked as though he had been through a ringer. The alien's left eye was swollen shut and his face seemed more bruised than not. He still held Thor's hammer, remarkably, though it dangled at his side, the strap looped about his wrist. Cap recalled that one brief time when he had wielded M'Jolnir. It was an honor

afforded to a very select few. Cap watched as the Panther took the Man of Steel, then turned to Quicksilver-

“Any sign of Thor?”

“He’s there,” Pietro said, pointing at a mountain in the distance. “Unconscious and far too heavy for me to lift, let alone carry back. He’s in a bad way.”

“Go back. Try to wake him,” Cap ordered and Pietro vanished even before he could finish. “We need him,” he said to the empty space where Quicksilver had been standing. He saw Wonder Woman land softly, if not gracefully not so far away. She looked only a little better than the Man of Steel. Oddly it was the Batman that stepped to her side to offer support. Cap saw the woman Talia frown at that, held in check still by the Black Canary.

“Tony?”

‘Beast here, Cap,’ Captain America ‘heard’ in his head. ‘Shell head’s a little busy at the moment trying to keep his armor from going ‘BOOM’. You would not believe the power generating in this tower. It’s astronomical. I don’t know where it’s coming from.’

“I do,” Cap said as he glanced at the unconscious form of the Silver Surfer. It was the only logical explanation, having gathered all the bits and pieces, all the fragments together. “Stand ready, McCoy. Be ready to free Iron Man from his connections.”

‘Will do, chief.’

A flare of light from above and he saw Warbird flailing, struggling to stay aloft. She had done something- Nefaria was shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, but she had hurt herself in the process. Firestorm kept up his assault, but the boy would not last much longer. They had to hurry now.

“Superman?” Cap said not daring to look at the Man of Steel. He knew whatever he asked the man would do or die trying. He was a hero, ready to give his all, and that was what Cap was about to ask of him, of them all.

And himself of course. He could do no less...

Carol Danvers screamed as Nefaria squeezed, crushing her hands.

Her starbursts were done, depleted and useless so she had taken the fight to him again. She had to buy the others time. Cap had needed her to hold the fort,

keep Nefaria occupied and she had. She had gotten in a few solid blows before count Nefaria had simply blurred and grabbed her fists in mid-swing. He was just too damn fast.

Tears swelled in her eyes with the pain. Nefaria simply laughed and squeezed all the harder. Her vision started to gray, to dim-

“Let her go!”

She barely heard the boy, Firestorm. He was shouting, his powers exploding over them both and the pain eased just a bit as Nefaria winced. Warbird saw him look up and away, his eyes glowing.

“You annoy me freak,” Nefaria said as his eyes blazed, beams of fire shooting forth and sweeping the sky in Firestorm’s wake. “Dieeee!”

She was free suddenly, tumbling through the air. She forced herself to concentrate, to think past the pain and right herself, to fly. A new wave of pain washed over her as blood rushed back into her shattered hands, remarkably pulling her from her daze. She screamed again, but cut her cries short, gritting her teeth as she focused on the pain. She looked skyward, for Nefaria, tears running down her face.

The Superman was back, pounding relentlessly on Nefaria with Thor’s mystic hammer in hand. He was actually driving Nefaria back, not giving the villain time to breathe, to think. Hammering mercilessly. She saw Nefaria’s eyes blaze again.

And Wonder Woman was there, wielding Captain America’s shield. She swooped right in, blocking Nefaria’s eye beams with the shield, bouncing them right back at him and it was Nefaria’s turn to scream as he was bathed in the heat and radiation of his own assault.

She saw Firestorm again, floating in the background. He was still blasting away with his powers, and more. There was the Martian, his eyes aglow in the dark shadows of his brow. He was doing something, and Carol realized that the telepathic link was gone. This was it...

Nefaria shook his head, swinging wildly as the Man of Steel kept hitting him with the hammer. The Wonder Woman was right there too, at his side deflecting blows, striking with the unbreakable shield. The Martian was fucking with his head while Firestorm continued to leech his power...

Thunder slammed down over them all as freezing rain fell like a sheet from the suddenly dark sky. Warbird strained to hold position as the winds trebled. She

strained simply to see, blinking the after image of lightning away, blotting her vision.

She saw him then, hovering there. He was naked, his armor stripped away, his hair burned and his body charred and blistered from Nefaria's assaults. He was flying without the hammer, but she quickly understood. He didn't need a hammer. He was a god.

"Nefaria!" Thor shouted, and Carol Danvers cringed at the anger lacing his voice. "Villain, thy time hast come! Though grim Hela claim my soul this day, that dark mistress shall take thine hand as well and lead thee to the lowest depths of her domain!"

Thor raised his hands and the very air seemed to tremble. Static washed over her, making her hair stand on end. She saw Superman and Wonder Woman squinting into the growing storm, struggling to hold position. Firestorm was gone, and even Nefaria finally seemed put out. He almost looked afraid.

Thor lowered his arms and lightning sprang forth, dropping from the heavens like a jagged wall of light. Thunder slammed into them all like a tidal wave. She thought that she heard Nefaria scream.

But maybe that was herself...

Cap stared up into the storm, squinting against the glare, the sudden rain that chilled to the bone. He saw the occasional glimpse, a shadow in the sky but who or what he could not tell. That battle was beyond him.

He hefted the Nega Rod in his hand, splitting his attention between the rod itself and the Silver Surfer on the ground at his feet. He hoped that he had judged it all correctly. He hoped that he would at the very least revive the Surfer, adding another soldier to the ranks. Even better that the act would drain away at Nefaria's seemingly inexhaustible power source.

Of course he was quite possibly about to kill a man as well, one way or another. But then, if they did not succeed odds were that they would all be dead before too long. Nefaria would not be merciful, should he win.

Cap knelt beside the Surfer. He licked his lips, a final consideration, thinking.

Praying...

"I'm sorry," he said as he plunged the nozzle of the Nega Rod into Norrin Radd's chest...

War World...

Now!

Thanos saw the surge. He felt the shift as a wash of power came suddenly flooding through the Rift and enveloping Galactus. The giant screamed again as his body writhed. Light bent about him, his form taking on black shadow of anti-matter for a moment and Thanos knew that his opportunity had arrived.

Using the Infinity Gem of Space he willed the cube into the very negativity, that, which had been the Devourer of Worlds and was now his opposite. He winced, watching as the power flared with impact, his construct lost within the elder being. The null that was once the end, now too the beginning.

Alpha and Omega clashed. Darkness and light, chaos and order, whatever it was or would be, there was the spark. It was that thing, which Kronus had sought. It was that sight lost on the blind man, the paradox that confused the World Mage.

It was HER desire he knew now after so long.

It would be his gift to HER...

Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Nefaria screamed to feel his soul ripping away.

He felt the winds. He felt the storm, the never-ending rain of blows as they assaulted him over and over, wearing him down. The alien with Thor's hammer. The woman with Captain America's shield. The God of Thunder himself! He could not think, could not respond. Damn, he knew now what the boy was doing.

The power was fading, siphoning away and back into the Negative Zone. Whatever had held it in check was gone, fluttering skyward towards the Rift, caught on the wind churned up by the speedsters. Damn them! Damn them all!

He should have killed them when he had the chance instead of toying with them.

Now. Now it might be too late.

Or he could run. He could run back into the Zone. True, Annihilus was there, but he had enough power remaining to deal with that freak of nature. And somehow he knew that if he could reach the Zone again, he would be safe. They would not dare to follow him there, being only human as they were.

Nefaria screamed again, shooting skyward and lashing out as he flew for the Rift. He felt his arm slam home, brushing aside soft flesh in passing. The Wonder Woman? He did not care, did not stop as he rocketed to safety, oblivious. His eyes blazed clearing his path-

And something slammed against his chest.

Count Nefaria glanced down and saw the Cosmic Control Rod planted squarely in his chest, but that was not what captured his attention. Rather it was the tiny man dressed in shreds of red and blue. He was barely a few inches tall, his arms looped about the rod as he struggled to twist the nozzle. He glanced up with a smile and Nefaria blinked.

“What-“

And one more time the world exploded...

The Negative Zone...

Aquaman winced as he raised his arm trying to shield his eyes from the sudden, dazzling display of light. He hissed, sucking air through gritted teeth as he felt the burn, shifting to shield Lois from the brunt of the explosion. He still heard her cry out from behind.

It had been a desperate, fantastic shot; a throw that few might have made. Maybe Ollie, Bruce of course, any number of villains naturally. Well, perhaps it had been the Atom that had guided his throw more so than his own unerring aim. Palmer would have used his powers to help guide the cylinder on target, adjusting his mass as needed to make certain that the Rod flew true.

Still, the job had been done. The strange energy rod had struck the apparent villain squarely and the Atom had managed to activate it. That they had even come upon the scene, that they had found the proper hole in the number of Rifts that still littered Qward was astounding in itself. Arthur wondered if perhaps some god might be on their side after all.

They had lost all track of time within Qward, and in truth it really seemed as though there were something wrong with the very fabric of reality. Red Tornado had felt the effects first, not so long after they had escaped that first world where they had fought the strange creature called Annihilus alongside the equally bizarre heroes they had encountered there. They had decided to try their 'luck' and accept their collective fate back within the anti-matter universe, and not so long after that the Tornado had simply shut down.

Even Ray had no explanation for it, save perhaps his extended absence from his true realm. They were none of them sure exactly just what the Red Tornado had become over the years; an android, an Elemental, some queer combination of both? Whatever, he had collapsed after a time and with him had gone their only means of propulsion through Qward.

How long they had drifted they had no idea. They had passed rifts and holes, tears leading somewhere though no place that seemed familiar by the brief, bare glimpses they received...

There had been a world that seemed composed of mechanical doppelgangers of the League. Another that depicted them all as knights and wizards, damsels and kings.

They had witnessed a world where Batman ruled as a vampire. Another where he was old and battling Superman while wearing a massive suit of armor. Ollie was in that one, one-armed and bald.

There was a reality where the seas had overtaken the land, but Arthur was surprised to find his brother ruling there, lording over all like a dictator.

There were many that were simply scenes of devastation; melted buildings or barren deserts, a world of ice and darkness...

Finally they had found 'this' Rift, drifting closer. They saw a world in the not too distant distance that seemed on the verge of perpetual explosion, but the rock on which they rode avoided that explosive atmosphere and sailed lazily towards the hole and potential survival. They drifted close, straining to see...

There was Superman, but wielding a hammer.

There was Diana but carrying a strange shield resembling the one that Captain America had held in that first reality.

There were others that they did not recognize, all battling some glowing paragon of a man that seemed akin to a god himself the way he was battling his foes about.

"This can't be it," Arthur had said, shaking his head glumly. "Too many there that I don't recognize."

"Clark..."

They had looked at Lois then, he and Ray Palmer. She looked tired and weak, still wrapped in the remnants of Wonder Woman's broken lasso. Her eyes were

wide and staring as she licked her lips, watching as the Superman beyond attacked the paragon.

"It's Clark... Superman!" She looked up and about, her gaze shifting between Atom and Aquaman. Her voice had been near frantic.

"Lois," Aquaman had said calmly, sighing as he looked to her, obviously lost after their drifting through Qward. "Look again. There's so many there that we don't recognize. This can't be—"

She was up and on her feet, her fist pounding Arthur Curry's chest. "It's Clark, damn it!" she shouted, tears in her eyes. "You think I don't know my husband?"

Aquaman looked to the Atom, and Ray Palmer in turn looked through the Rift. "If it was Jean..." he said, his lips twisting. He looked to Arthur. "You'd know Mera."

Aquaman glanced back through the tear again, then looked back to Lois, nodding.

"You're right. But what do we do?"

"We have to help them!" Lois shouted, and Arthur found his hand on her shoulder, holding her back before she simply leapt into the void.

"Agreed," he said, pulling her back from the edge of the small asteroid that had been their home for so long. "But we cannot just jump blindly into that. Whoever that man is he's easily holding his own against several obviously powerful Metas; Superman and Wonder Woman among them. Much as I am loathe to admit it, I am not in their league power wise, and neither is Ray."

"But we have to do something. We have to help!" Lois was near hysterical by then. Arthur Curry blamed it on their time of seclusion, their aimless wanderings away from their loved ones. He blamed it on the desolation of their surroundings. He blamed it on her worry over the Kents, still unconscious and hopefully secure within the inert form of the Red Tornado. He looked to Ray hoping for some support and saw the Atom considering the strange metallic cylinder, rolling it in his hand.

"It's this," Atom said holding the rod up. "I'm sure of it. The Hulk said this was some kind of containment vessel, and it seemed to empower Annihilus somehow. This is the key to that," he said, gesturing at the scene beyond, on the other side of the Rift. They all looked as if on cue and saw lightning flashing, ripping through the sky and striking the glowing man. He seemed only slightly perturbed.

"We need to affix this to him somehow," Palmer continued. "Somehow I think this will either drain him of that power he seems to be brimming with, or divert it some way- back into Qward maybe, maybe even back to Annihilus." The Atom shrugged. "I dunno. I'm just guessing, mind, but it 'feels' right."

Aquaman nodded. "I've come to trust the feelings of my teammates, Ray," he said glancing at Lois Lane-Kent. "All of them. What do you suggest?"

It had been a desperate plan. Aquaman would hurl the rod, the Atom guiding the throw through his mass manipulation, riding the momentum. It would strike the glowing man and Ray would activate the rod, sucking the power away. The glowing man would lose his power and they would win. They would go home.

It had seemed simple enough at the time...

Nefaria cursed, spitting as he felt the power wane.

He stared at the Cosmic Control Rod jutting from his chest, his eyes wide as he watched the ionic energies dancing from the ass end of the nozzle. He tried to reach up, to grasp the metal cylinder and yank it from his chest, but his arms were suddenly all too leaden and solid, his very body weighing him down as weakness washed over his form. He stared...

His eyes sparked and the world faded to red as he focused on the rod. He saw the blaze as he willed the energies from his eyes, the concentrated blast of ionic energy coalescing on the weapon. He screamed in agony even as smoke and steam billowed skyward, the metal of the rod wavering, bending in the intense heat that his eyes were generating, redirecting.

His head spun about, snapping as the alien drove the hammer home. Some form of plasma spat from his lips.

Thor waved his hand, made a fist and lightning swelled, striking, ripping through his body. He staggered.

The woman slammed Captain America's shield, edge against his throat.

They were trying to kill him.

Count Nefaria looked up, shaking his head. He swept his gaze about, burning them all, weak as it was. Still they screamed, writhed at his whim. But he was tiring, his strength was eking away, siphoning into the rod, and beyond. The little man was gone- if he had ever been there at all- but the damage was done.

He felt the wind then, the cyclone flowing up from the ground trying to force him back. More, there was another, the force of a hurricane coming from above. He glanced skyward and saw a man cast in red commanding the winds of the storm. Who was that?

It did not matter. He was too close. He would not be defeated now. Not by the likes of these...

“Help!”

The Superman looked up at the sound of the voice. It was all too familiar. He had heard it so many times over the years. His eyes flashed, his amazing sight scanning the heavens, his X-Ray Vision delving into the Rift.

“Lois...”

He saw her then. His wife, the woman he loved more than life itself as Nefaria cast his burning gaze into the rip in the fabric of space. She was there with Aquaman and the Red Tornado, and Nefaria’s own Heat Vision destroyed the asteroid that they were standing on. Arthur and Lois fell back into the real world, the Red Tornado simply hovering there in the void between.

“Lois!”

He caught her. Simply, no fanfare, no outstanding feat, he just caught her and held her close, tight...

“Lois...” he whispered. He ignored the golden cord wrapped about her upper torso. He ignored the fact that she seemed twenty pounds lighter and smelled of sulfur, her skin parched and dry. He simply held her, pulling her close as she in turn wrapped her arms about his neck. Her lips were soft, cracked. Her breath was hot as she buried her face into his neck.

“Clark...”

He did not care. It did not matter.

“Lois...”

Thor reached out as M’Jolnir fell within reach. He grasped the hammer, the mystic Uru metal vibrating at his touch, the power instilled by Odin himself rolling through his form once again.

He smiled briefly. He had been surprised- just a bit- that the Superman had proven worthy, one of those select few worthy to wield the might of M'Jolnir. A true warrior then, a brave and bold soul. One of the world's finest.

'Thor?'

"I stand ready, Captain. Nefaria falters. What needs be done?"

Carol Danvers tried to focus past the pain. Her hands were shattered, crushed, but she would be damned if that would stay her hand if she was to deliver the final blow.

She called on the star power, the forces from beyond that she had wielded so freely when she had been Binary. It was hard now, the energies often escaped her, but she had enough for one more assault today. She could feel them swelling now, a song in her mind as she tried to focus, to draw the power of the stars to her beck and-

'Carol...'

"I'm ready, Cap..."

The shield was fantastic. It was light, and so strong. Easily as indestructible as her own lasso. More so apparently.

Diana still grimaced however as she adjusted the straps, angling the disc between her and the form of Nefaria, trying to stay the effects of his energy discharge. She watched, trying to judge, trying to decide when best to strike, and knowing full well that when she did it might be the last.

'Wonder Woman...'

Diana gasped, hearing the voice in her head.

"I understand..."

It was time...

'Tony!'

Iron Man glanced up at the strange sensation. He 'heard' Cap's voice in his head and knew that his leader was sending the final word. They finally had the opportunity, the means to take Nefaria down.

"You heard?" the Beast asked, craning his neck and peering up at him. The open panel in the tower sparked and crackled with the Beast's renovations. Plastic Man's head came snaking out as well, his goggles wide with wonder.

"I heard," Iron Man answered as he adjusted the circuitry in his gauntlets, watching the read outs scroll past once again. They would probably never be ready, but they were as ready as they were going to be.

"Let's do this," he said as he sent a surge of power coursing into the tower. He had maybe thirty seconds of energy left, once he purged his power cells- if he was lucky. The back up battery array would burn out quickly, and he would be dead weight soon. Hopefully it would be enough.

"Once more into the breach," McCoy said as he stuck his head back into the circuitry, racing to adjust the tower's output.

"Here come 'da Judge..." Plas echoed, his body shriveling and snaking, worming its way back into the tower as well without a care to his own safety.

Stark just had to smile...

Ronald Raymond poured on the power.

He did not know what he was doing- not anymore- but he kept doing it. He could see the power, the ionic energy fluttering skyward, converting at his whim. How... Why... He had no idea.

He felt the surge. Ionic energy converting to something less, something simple and beneficial...

Helium...

Oxygen...

Lead...

It was incredible. Whatever the Scarlet Witch had done had pushed him over the edge. He could effect sentience. He could effect god...

Hell, he WAS God!

'Firestorm...'

Ronnie Raymond blinked, looking about. It was Captain America, but where?

"Wha-"

'Listen, Firestorm. Listen to J'onn...'

Ronnie licked his lips, concentrating as a wave of energy seemed to wash over him- over the whole range of mountains. He forced the power forward. He saw Nefaria shift...

"Faster!"

Wally West shouted over the whine of the wind, the continuous rumble of sonic boom as he raced the path he was swiftly burning into the eons old rock of the Himalayas. His course was afire, steam rising and swirling in his path, frozen in the heartbeat that it took to make the circuit once more. Only slightly changed the next, and the next.

He was hot, sweating and tired. His lungs felt ready to burst as he raced ever faster. The Speed Force was stabilizing somehow, he could feel it, feel the song. But it was not quite right yet, still fractured and out of sync. Just a bit.

"Faster!"

He saw the streak of silver blur past, lightning flickering as Quicksilver drew near for less than a microsecond. He was good. Keeping pace. Not as fast of course, but then Wally had been the slower in HIS world. Tit for tat. Yin and yang. It was only right. Only expected.

"Faster!" he shouted again, not knowing if the Mutant Speedster could even hear him in the roar and rumble. He could feel the shift though; the blast as the vortex they created writhed skyward to encompass the power mad maniac that had killed Kyle.

"Kyle..." he whispered. His eyes were watering, from the burn of course, from the pain of the push, the race. His throat hurt.

The wind shifted again and he chanced a glance skyward. The Rift was rippling, and there was something within, a shadowy form casting crimson in the flashes of lightning. The Red Tornado, had to be.

The others were back and Reddy was adding his awesome cyclonic powers to their own, taking their vortex and directing it through Nefaria and then into the Rift. He could hear the whine of conflicting elements, the sizzle of pure power unchecked as Reddy's vortex moved counter to the one they were creating, ripping at the killer, the murderer.

Kyle was dead...

"Faster!"

"He's adapting."

J'onn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter looked away, rubbing at his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to drive the lingering images from his vision.

"Mutating, I don't know. Whatever the Atom did, he was starting to weaken, but he seems to be drawing power again, changing."

"He's growing as well," Cap added, passing the borrowed bat-noculars back to the Batman. "And his skin seems to be burning away. He's become a being of pure energy, like our Wonder Man. If he completes his metamorphosis we may not be able to beat him."

"You're idiots."

The gathered heroes turned to see Midas, still lying on the ground, his huge metallic head resting in the lap of his daughter.

"You tell 'em, daddy," Oubliette said with a smirk, flipping Captain America the finger. He ignored her, directing his attention to Doctor Midas.

"Why are we idiots, Midas?" Cap asked, his slightest movement a signal to Hawkeye to keep the armored villain covered. "Do you have something to contribute?"

Midas shifted slightly as his daughter placed a cigarette into the mouth slit of his helmet, lit it. Midas exhaled with a long sigh, blue smoke drifting on the trailing wind.

"The Nega Rod," he said, glancing up and at Nefaria again. "It'll redirect his energies- the negative energies. Whatever the little man did with HIS Nega Rod, that's what's fucking his positive energies, throwing him in a state of flux. I can

see it through the helmet. The conflict between the two will send half his power back into the Zone, wherever the source of Annihilus' powers originate."

"There is what appears to be a 'Nega Rod' imbedded in Nefaria's chest," J'onn confirmed. Midas nodded.

"Plug your Rod into him too, blow that tower and you'll overload him. While he's still partially human, he's vulnerable. Wait too long and we can all kiss our asses goodbye."

Cap stared long and hard at Midas, trying his best to read the man, but his golden armor hid much. He turned to the Batman, but the detective simply shrugged.

"Your call, Captain," Batman said, looking to Talia, but she had nothing to offer. The Panther too was little help.

"It sounds feasible. Midas has nothing to gain."

Captain America glanced skyward again. He held the fates of so many in his hands. He quite possibly might kill Nefaria if he gave approval. But how many more would die if he did not?

"Tony..."

"Arrgh!"

Nefaria screamed as he felt the burn. His body seemed to boil and swell as he was bathed in a wash of solar radiation. Still, he steeled himself, trying to focus. He saw the alien, the Superman-

Stellar energy ripped through his form, sending him tumbling. Before he could right himself he felt his body shift again, the boy with the flaming hair. He was changing him somehow, altering him, and his energies were flowing towards the rift, caught in the vortex.

He needed to focus. He needed to-

"Gahhh!"

His brain seemed to explode. Sizzling tears swelled from his eyes as his head threatened to burst from the pain. Psychic, he knew the feeling.

Shift again- the boy.

Something slammed into him. Power! He felt power and something solid. His ears were ringing, hard to think, to concentrate.

The Silver Surfer shot past. Where had he come from? And there was a woman riding the back of his board, the blonde. She was screaming.

“Ahhh!”

Lightning ripped through him again, piercing, frying his core. Thor, damn him. Damn him!

They were hitting him en masse, as one. Coordinated somehow, blasting him with a myriad of energies at once. Fools, they could not stop him now. Not now. They were only making him stronger.

A flash of silver as the Surfer passed and Count Nefaria stared down at the sudden pain. There was another rod jutting from his chest. Another! Where...

What...

Now Tony!

LIGHT!

Bright and pure, white as the driven snow. The tower seemed to glare as a beam of white energy raged forth, rushing in a wave that enveloped Nefaria, washed over him and pulled him away. He could feel the sudden pain, as though his body were being stretched to its limits, torn apart and pulled towards infinity.

“No...”

They were watching. All of them just watching as the light cascaded skyward, caught on the winds of the sucking vortex, directed back into the Zone. He could feel his body starting to fade and disperse, to slip away as the power retreated.

“No!”

He was too close. He had come too far. He would not let the power, the divinity slip through his grasp now. Not now! Nefaria concentrated, gritting his teeth, tensing his muscles as he fought to draw the power back. They would not win.

They would not-

NOT...
WHITE

**The WatchTower
Earth's Moon
Later...**

There was pain. Pain and darkness, though in truth the darkness was paling. Swirling. There were sounds as well, muffled and distant, but if he focused he could make out things that he understood. Things that he recalled.

“Captain?”

Captain America opened his eyes and immediately tensed. The surroundings were vaguely familiar, though he could not recognize them at first. Sterile, metallic walls, the smell of antiseptic and lemon, a bright light glaring overhead.

“Welcome back.”

There was a woman above him. Probably one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen in his long and tired life. She had kinky red hair pulled back into a loose bun and a pleasant smile, sparkling blue eyes contrasting her dusky skin behind wire-rimmed glasses. She flashed a thin beam of light in his eyes.

“How do you feel?”

“I-“ his voice croaked and he had to clear his throat before he could answer. “I’m sore. Burning. Who...”

“My name is Paula,” the woman said returning her slender pen light to the breast pocket of her long white coat. “I’m a friend of Princess Diana. She brought me here to help.” The woman extended a finger and held it before Cap’s face. “Follow,” she said as she directed her index finger back and forth in front of his eyes. A doctor then. Cap obeyed.

“Where am I?” he asked as the woman stopped the finger movement and adjusted something overhead. He heard a metallic ‘click’ and was suddenly washed in a soft violet light.

“You’re on the JLA’s WatchTower, in the Sick Bay to be precise.” She reached up after a minute and turned off the light.

“You’re fine, Captain,” she said with a smile as she jotted notes onto a paper on a metallic clipboard. “You’ll be feeling a sunburn for a few days, but otherwise you’re probably the best specimen of manhood that I’ve had the pleasure to inspect. Thank you.”

"You're welcome," Cap said as he sat slowly up. His head was spinning a bit, as though he were suffering from too much heat and sun. He glanced about the room as he waited for the lab to stop spinning. The doctor, Paula, had shifted to the adjoining table.

He saw the Batman. The man's skin was red, but otherwise he seemed fine at least as far as Cap could tell. His cape and shirt were missing, though he still wore his cowl, not that it mattered he supposed. But he had thought that they were all among friends. He remembered the early days of the Avengers though, and the secrets they all kept for a time.

When the doctor moved on again, towards the Black Canary and the Panther beyond, Cap smiled at the detective, noting that the man seemed as dizzy as he had moments ago. "You all right?"

"I'll live." Batman sat up, looking about, feeling his bright red face. "Yourself?"

"I've suffered worse. What happened?"

The man who was Batman smiled grimly. "We won." His slight smile quickly faded however. "We suffered our losses though. J'onn was here before you woke up. Green Lantern of course. And the Atom is missing."

"The tiny man." Batman nodded.

"He gave his all, apparently. Showed us the way. He has the habit of showing up, however. If he's alive, I imagine he shrunk into a microscopic world to escape damage. We'll find him, when he's ready to be found."

"The others?" Cap asked. He found his shield beside the Med-Lab bed, slipped it onto his back and wincing at the pain from the burn. Batman slipped his shirt over his head, starting to dress.

"No other casualties. We were lucky. Most of us, those at our power level suffered burns, heat stroke or its equivalent from the excessive radiation. Aquaman suffered the worst because of his unique physiology. He'll be in the 'tank' for a few days at least as he and his group suffered even more. They were apparently stranded in Qward- your Negative Zone- for some time. Longer than we were hopping dimensions. The Time Stream I expect. At any rate, Diana, Wonder Woman called in her experts from her homeland to help us out, help us heal. The damage was more mental I think."

"We'll heal," Cap said as he eased off the gurney. He was tired and aching, feeling as though he had gone through a ringer. He hurt, but he would survive.

The Batman stood as well, hissing through clenched teeth at the pain. He looked to Cap, forcing a smile. "You did good. You took an army and directed them- us, in the worst situation. You gained our trust, and trusted us in dire circumstances. I'm impressed, Captain."

"Steve," Captain America smiled, extending his hand. "Call me Steve."

The Batman took the hand without hesitation, shook it, almost whispering, "Bruce..."

Epilogue One: The Edge of Infinity...

Eric Arcane looked up to the WALL, watching as the Spectre began slowly to fade away. He was the last of the 'special' people, the extra-special entities that had appeared to help in their direst need. The In-Betweeners, Lord Chaos and Master Order, the Nth Man, Aquarius, all of them had left without a word or thank you. Assholes all.

Arcane reached into his coat and produced a pseudo cigarette, lighting it with a slight flare of magic. He drew in the smoke, letting it fill his astral lungs as he stared at the great gaping holes still etched in the Wall. Nothing spewed forth, as they had been sealed somehow, but they were a reminder.

"Well, it's been a thin slice a' heaven, lad."

Arcane turned, looking at the Constantine. He looked none the worse for wear, his hair more or less in place, his long coat just scorched a bit about the fringes. He had a Silk Cut dangling from his lips, his hand hanging out waiting to be grasped. Arcane sniffed.

"That's it then?" he asked, breathing deep of his cigarette. He had healed a bit, but he was still older than he should have been. His dreads were flecked with gray and his skin was lined and sagging, pale. He was only just a little happy to note that Strange looked worse; weak and feeble, his gray temples just a bit more streaked. His eyes were dark and rimmed with red.

Mysterium had departed, taking Arcanna- what was left of her at any rate- with him, back to whatever reality they had originated from. Occult still lay there steaming, staring into the void.

"Don't be like that, son," Constantine said, flicking ash from the butt of his cigarette. "We done good here t'day. You ought'a be proud. 'Appy at least."

Arcane stared at the WALL, floating there in space at the edge of reality. It had been healed to a point, but there were places where beings had been, now

sealed but vacant. Arcane knew that there were five, FIVE creatures out there that someone would have to deal with eventually. "We failed..."

"Not 'ardly, son," Constantine said, flicking his butt into the void. "The Wall's still there. Sure a couple bad asses got loose, but that's why God made 'eroes. The BIG guns'll take care a' that. We're done."

"Are we, Constantine?"

Strange stepped forward, staring up at the Wall as well. He seemed almost lost as he stared on, longingly. "I can only imagine that we will be called upon again to right this."

"Yeah, well that's why we get paid the BIG Bucks, Stevie. Suck it up."

Strange frowned, then looked to Arcane. "Will yourself back..."

Strange vanished, his form fading back into the Astral Plane.

"Bloody ponce," Constantine spat, lighting another cigarette. He looked to Arcane, grinning that 'eat shit' grin he had down so well. "Steer clear a' that one, son. You got potential. You don't need 'im-"

"We all need friends, Constantine."

John Constantine moaned, shaking his head. "Bloody 'ell, mate. This is where I came in." He glanced at the dark man that had stepped up to their fading group and shook his head. He smiled at Arcane.

"Keep yer nose clean, son."

Eric Arcane watched as the astral form of the man, John Constantine slowly faded away. With his passing he felt the rock that had been their base start to crumble away as well as it headed towards the Wall. It would disintegrate in proximity, eventually, and that would be it. He turned to the dark man who was staring off into space.

"So we won?" he asked, and the man almost smiled.

"In a sense. We have helped stem the tide, Eric Arcane. We suffered true, but life goes on."

"And the Giants, those that escaped? What can we expect from them?"

“They will do what they need to do.” The man turned, his eyes sweeping the Hedge Mage. “There shall be contest Arcane, ever. This is how we grow. The Maker has his plan.”

“And that’s it then?” Arcane spat, flicking his spent butt into the void. He noted that the form of Occult had finally vanished. “So long and thanks for the fish?” The dark man chuckled.

“What do you want, mage? A medal? You live. You will see another day. You have made friends, allies. Would that I might say the same...”

Eric Arcane groaned, trying to will himself away. Constantine was right.

He started to fade but too slow. He still heard it.

“Despite our efforts. Despite the victory we have achieved, I remain alone. As it was and shall always be, forever I shall remain...”

A stranger...”

Epilogue Two: War World...

Thanos smiled.

He stared up at the form of Galactus trapped there floating between dimensions, his eons old body shifting back and forth, positive to negative, black to white. The energy flowed freely about him, the anti-matter of the Negative Zone clashing with the positive reality of this fractured mirror universe. It had worked.

The Devourer of Worlds had been so engrossed with gorging himself, sating his never-ending appetite with the never-ending energy that he had not even realized what was happening. As Thanos had expected, the heroes of the two worlds had done their part at the proper time. They had defeated whatever villain had sprung from the turbulence in the Time Stream and the Speed Force. They had beaten back the Spawn of the Wall. They had dispersed the swelling energies and stemmed the tide of the cosmic storms, which had threatened to wipe out and wash away all of existence. They had averted the Crisis and had managed to seal the rifts.

All but one.

It was that one, which Thanos had coddled, molded and swayed to his favor. That one tear in the fabric of space that he had chosen to make his play, bringing the mighty Galactus into the very heart of the storm and into the midst of the very energy that would be his salvation as well as his downfall. He had watched with

a smile, almost giddy as the rift had closed on Galactus, sealing him in a non-existence, hopefully for eternity. Forever feeding yet never filled. He had fooled the doddering ancients of this universe into letting him 'help' them. He had fooled the Devourer. He had won.

All for HER.

Thanos raised the Cube he had created with the Reality Gem, staring curiously at the strange flickering trapped within the crystalline structure. Just a spark of the Primal Force made whole. A dash of Speed, a stitch of Time, a little bit of Chaos and the clashing power of Is and Is Not. All locked away, in hand, at his beck and call.

It was Life, the beginning, that elusive thing that Kronus had searched for and that Galen had survived. In the palm of his hand, he held the future of reality, not death, not genocide. That was not what SHE wanted.

SHE did not want tribute, countless deaths in HER name, for HER love. They all belonged to HER already. That had been his mistake before. That was what he had never quite grasped. The Anti-Life Equation...

Thanos stared up at Galactus, watching as the giant shivered in ecstasy. He would never hunger again. He glanced back and away, gazing at War World there in the distance and the three old men standing there watching him in turn. Ganthet, Izaya, Shazam; did they know or even suspect? Probably not as they had their own problems to worry about, the mundane and maudlin diversions of their own limited vision.

"Let them enjoy their struggles while they can, my love," the Mad Deity said to the void. He returned his attention back to the cube in his hands, watching the rage and sparkle of Creation, feeling the warmth burning therein. Thanos smiled as his form shifted, altering. Death held the key. Thanos had been right, Darkseid knew. It had been an effort to wrench the secret from the Titan, but in the end he had been true.

"Genesis. For you..."

**Epilogue Three:
The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal...**

"Two Hundred and thirty six all told. That includes those killed when Nefaria first appeared, as well as Midas as best as we can estimate. There are still several unaccounted for. The injured are remarkably less, oddly."

“Midas was not merciful, reveling in his newfound power. We were lucky, much as I am loathe to admit to chance.”

Talia shrugged, but did not disagree. The death toll could have been far worse, if not for her beloved, and the League of course, and those others. “There are also the long term effects to consider. There were many simply exposed to the strange radiations being expelled by Midas and Nefaria, not to mention the anti-matter.”

Ra’s Al Ghul waved his daughter to silence as he strolled on. Repair crews had long since began repairing and cleansing the Aerie. It would take some time before the station was up and running to full potential, but for the most part his plans were on hold, so he had time. Time to plot and plan, and to consider.

“Should I reestablish Project: Babel?” Talia asked, though she was certain that she already knew the answer. She watched as her father stopped and bent to pluck something from the floor, though she could not see what. It sparkled as though metallic in the dim repair lights strung along the corridor.

“The League will no doubt disable the other towers as soon as they remember. And they will, or at least the Batman or the Martian will. No, Babel is scrapped. I wish to reopen research into the Protocols however. I was not pleased with the final result. We shall find a way to counter all Metas now, for the future, stymie all powers. I do not wish to rely on haphazard chance again. Call up Team ‘Dhal’ and establish them here.”

“It will take time, father,” Talia said, not liking the direction that her father now seemed to be thinking. “The labs-“

“We have time, daughter,” Ra’s Al Ghul said as he stopped before the shattered windows of one of the many Science Labs within his complex, his home. He stared at the shadowy image etched into the far wall, the silhouette of a man with arms raised in terror. “Remember our recent efforts in Gotham. And perhaps I shall finally afford myself time to look into the Ruby of Revival.” He held up the bit of metal and considered it, and Talia saw it then for what it was; an arrowhead, sleek and indestructible, ever sharp. Hawkeye’s Armor Piercer, it had stopped Midas- Adamantium...

“We have nothing but time.”

Talia nodded as her father favored her with a smile and walked on. She knew when she was being dismissed. She knew too that she did not like it.

**Epilogue Four:
The WatchTower
Earth's Moon
Later...**

"It's truly impressive, I have to admit. We have a Monitor Room of course, but this is beyond anything I could ever envision." Anthony Stark stared up the long metallic shaft, watching as the myriad of two and three-dimensional displays flickered and blurred, ever changing as they spanned the world. "It's alien holographics of a sort I assume, fed by that multi array antennae you showed me earlier?"

"Yes," J'onnn J'onzz smiled, the anti-grav suspensor chair spinning slightly as he scanned the changing images. The world apparently was moving on, picking up the pieces after yet another Crisis. He wondered just how many had died as the waves of anti-matter washed over the face of the Earth. How many had died as the Spawn creatures had appeared and ravaged all in their path? How many had died in the panics and the riots, the devastation both here and on other worlds. They would probably never know. There were so many areas on the planet now that had simply been wiped clean by the storms; in Africa and Brazil, Siberia, Mexico, so many more. "It's Thanagarian mainly, with a few Martian innovations. The Thanagarians are immersed in anti-grav technology. The same Nth-Metal incorporated into your peripherals was created there, brought to Earth by a Hawkman years ago."

Stark raised his hands and flexed, watching his rebuilt gauntlets as they flowed about his hands. The armor was light, as J'onzz had added technology from his Mars and Thanagar, someplace called Rann and Tamaran. Strange, unfamiliar names, worlds that did not exist in his own universe as far as he knew- except for Mars of course, a dead world. There was a good chance that the cobbled adaptations would not even work back home. They had seen that the physics of the two worlds were just different enough. Still, if they did, if he could reproduce the Nth-Metal...

"Thank you."

"The very least," J'onnn J'onzz said, his gaze sifting through the images before him. The world seemed at relative peace, at least for the moment, which was just as well. It was almost time.

The Martian Manhunter shifted the view of one of the images to the Medical Wing, internally. He generally had no reason to review the internal scanners, and he loathed simply scanning mentally, the invasion of privacy, but he was curious as to the state of his fellows, and his guests. It had been over a day since the Crisis had ended, and most had been healed for the most part. Too, friendships had formed.

“Perhaps you might tell me of that man you mentioned before. We appear to have a bit of time left. Doom?”

Tony Stark laughed. “That’ll take more than a ‘bit of time’ to give Doom credit, but sure...”

J’onn J’onzz listened in wonder as the Iron Man started his recitation. He mused briefly if Stark imagined how similar he sounded to the other as he continued to scan the world’s monitors as well as the internal scanners, flexing his mind.

He focused on Thor...

“How is thine arm, Princess?” the Thunderer said as he approached.

“Better,” Diana said, unconsciously flexing her fist. When she had contacted Paula, the Amazon surgeon had first insisted on helping her, then the woman called Warbird who had similar injuries. Crushed hands. Paula had used the Purple Ray to add to both their recoveries, though here on the Moon for some reason the healing factor was not as effective. It eased the pain, and allowed the bones to be reset without a major cast, but there was stiffness yet, a little pain. Diana smiled, looking up at the Thunder God.

His skin was still pink, but his hair had started to regrow already. His body was covered in scars, dressed in a cut away jumpsuit with the JLA Insignia emblazoned over the heart, the sleeves ripped away to allow his movement. Nefaria had burned away the Thunderer’s armor, and a good layer of skin, and though Thor was not embarrassed to be walking the station in the nude, the others were a bit intimidated.

“I am gladdened by this. Warbird too seems almost fit. Thine Healing Ray seems miraculous.”

“Not that you needed it,” Wonder Woman said with a smile.

“Did I hear my name?” Carol Danvers said as she approached. Her hands, despite the Healing Ray were swathed in cloth bandage and plastic bracers.

“Only in the best reference,” Diana said, smiling at the blonde haired woman. They were both warriors, and she had seen Warbird give her all to the call of duty. She would have been a proud Amazon.

“I wanted to ask,” Carol said, gesturing at the frayed rope hanging on Wonder Woman’s hip. “I saw you use that golden rope, but-“

"It was broken in the Time Stream, the strange forces there apparently too much for it somehow. I'll need to get it repaired, but that task may be involved. It was a gift from a Goddess," Diana said, looking to Thor's Uru hammer, "not unlike your hammer I assume?"

"A gift from my father, Lord Odin of Asgard," Thor said as he hefted the hammer. "'Tis enchanted, and a very select few might wield it."

"So I heard," Diana said, eyeing the hammer, M'Jolnir. "Superman said it's a truly powerful weapon. And I have to admit too, that Captain America's shield was fantastic."

"Aye," Thor smiled, rolling the haft of his hammer in his hands. "There be similar weapons to M'Jolnir made, but in all the Nine Worlds there be nothing to compare to the shield of Captain America."

"Ain't that the truth," Warbird said as she gave Diana a curious glance. "You want to hold it don't you?"

Diana actually blushed. "Well, I was hoping..."

Thor knelt and placed the hammer at the feet of Wonder Woman without pause. He looked up as he stood, smiling at Carol. "Please."

"Good luck," Warbird said, smirking.

Wonder Woman licked her lips, glancing from one to the other Avenger as they watched her. She looked down at the hammer, wondering why it seemed so hard to just bend down and pick it up. She was sweating.

Finally the Princess Diana of Thymscira crouched and extended her still good left hand. She licked her lips again as she felt the tingle of static wash over her as her fingertips brushed the cold stone. She reached down and gripped the haft, making a fist as she stood- or tried to.

"Unngh!"

She heaved with all of her might, but try as she would, she could lift the haft but the head would not rise off of the floor. She heaved and grunted for a time, then finally surrendered. She heard Thor's bellowing laughter.

"A worthy attempt, Princess," Thor said, grinning widely. Diana heard Warbird laugh as well, felt her hand on her shoulder.

"Don't let it get you down, Diana," Carol Danvers chuckled. "We've all tried. Cap's the only other one, and Superman."

“Methinks it be thine divinity,” Thor said as he scooped up M’Jolnir once again. “Our Pantheons, let alone our origins be too different. Mine followers art Vikings; ravagers and pillagers. Thine be scholars.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true. You see...”

Carol Danvers turned away as the two Gods started to discuss theology. Her hands were aching and she wanted to get home. JLA Earth was nice- at least their Moon Base Alpha was, but it was BOR-ing. Time to go, definitely.

She scanned the Hall of Justice, Thor and Wonder Woman starting to drone in the background. She saw Wanda, talking to Zatanna...

“Your gesticulation is fine,” Zatanna said as she held Wanda’s hands out lightly, adjusting her outstretched fingers marginally. “I think it has to do with the way the magic operates in your world. It appeared so- thick to me while I was there, blunt maybe, I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Zee,” Wanda replied, practicing the gestures, which Zatanna had taught her. “Everything here seems so crystal clear and exact, and not just the magic. The air, the sunlight, the sounds, everything seems so pure. You started to explain it before, an age of Order?”

“Yes. Our universe is full of- well, deities for lack of a better word. Among those are the Lords of Order and Chaos who’ve been vying for dominance of our reality since Time began. Chaos has ruled many times, in the beginning of course, more recently in the last Ice Age and the Dark Ages. Order has been ascendant since then. Everything, even the Chaos Magic, which you draw power from is very structured, thus clear as crystal- ordered.”

“I see,” the Scarlet Witch said, nodding. “It’s so hard to manipulate on my world at times. Not complaining mind, but I’ve been through hell in my learning process, and it conflicts with my Mutant Hex Powers often enough that it’s annoying. My teacher in witchcraft- Agatha Harkness told me once-“

“Uh...”

Both women turned at the hushed, embarrassed voice and saw Firestorm standing nearby. He seemed nervous as he split his gaze between the two women, licking his lips as he edged closer.

“What’s up, Ronald?” Zatanna asked, noting his awkwardness and wondering why. Maybe he was just shy around them, maybe not wishing to interrupt their discussion. She smiled, trying to put him at ease but making him blush instead.

“I’m,” he said, hesitating, almost stuttering, “what you did to me. I’ve lost it. I can’t see the... organic structure anymore.”

“It was never meant to be permanent, Firestorm. My Hex Powers effect probability, and my Chaos Magic plays off of that, but it does not last usually. I can for instance alter the numerous outcomes of an incident. Say a building, it’s old and in disrepair. There is a chance that it will remain standing. There is also a chance it will collapse. I use my powers to push probability in the direction that I desire. In your case, there was a slight chance that your abilities might affect organic, sentient life. With Zatanna’s help and guidance, and the Chaos Magic I was able to shift you in the proper direction. For a time at least, because the physics of your universe righted with our victory; the Time Stream and Speed Force, and apparently the elemental powers that you wield.”

“Yeah, well,” Ronald Raymond said as he rubbed the back of his neck in confusion. “It’s just that it’s like trying to remember something that you know you know. It’s like it’s on the tip of my tongue but it just won’t come.”

“This too shall pass,” Wanda said with a smile. “Don’t worry, Firestorm. You’ll be fine.”

Firestorm forced a smile, hoping she was right. Zee smiled too, and oddly that was all the confirmation that he needed. If she was good, he was good. He just wished that he would either remember or forget altogether.

He turned with a thank you, leaving the two mystics to swap spells or whatever they were doing, wishing this was over with. He liked the Avengers, they had turned out to be good people, but he had a life to get back to.

He saw Plas speaking with the Beast and the Dibny’s, both Ralph and Eel stretched to a certain extent as they were in the midst of explaining something to Sue and the Beast...

“Plas is obviously the more versatile,” Ralph Dibny said as he stretched about his wife, eliciting a giggle from Sue Dibny as she pushed him away. “The Gingold formula makes me stretchable, but Eel is like liquid almost- or ‘Silly Putty’ though we both hate that term. He’s much more malleable and can actually change his form to a degree that I can’t.”

“That’s okay, Sweetie,” Sue Dibny said as she brushed Ralph’s cheek, blowing him a kiss. “You stretch in all the right places.”

“Sue!” Ralph said, blushing even as he grinned.

“Well, you are both quite incredible,” The Beast said with a grin. “The resident expert on elasticity in my realm is a happy medium between the two of you I

should think. I've seen him pull some amazing stunts, yet his powers seem only limited by his intellect, which is vast."

"Yeah, well," Plas interjected, his body shifting to mimic the Beast's with a decidedly red hue. "My power's only limited by my imagination." Shifting swiftly to a good facsimile of Han Solo in Storm Trooper armor, "and I can imagine quite a bit..."

Henry McCoy laughed, always enjoying a good movie quote. "I wonder though," he continued, "the strange chemicals that altered Plastic Man. Have you ever investigated the base? Is there a connection to your Gingold, Ralph?"

Ralph Dibny's nose suddenly started to vibrate, to twitch quickly. "Y'know, we never have. I wonder..."

"Well, thank you Henry," Sue Dibny said, her voice only marginally acidic, dripping with sarcasm. "I've lost him for the foreseeable future. Thank you very much."

Henry McCoy smiled as the three started comparing notes. He saw Superman and the reporter walking with the Wasp and the Panther...

"I can't begin to thank you, Janet," Superman said as they all four reentered the Hall of Justice where they were all starting to gather. It felt so good to have Lois back, at his side, on his arm. And his parents-

"I couldn't have done it if not for the Red Tornado," Janet Van Dyne said with a shrug. "And you and T'Challa of course. My husband- my ex-husband is the scientist, and he invented the Pym Particles. I just used them, after you found the Kents, with Reddy and T'Challa's help. I'm surprised it worked. I know Hank's never tried to enlarge something so small and not originally reduced by his particles."

"It seemed logical," the Black Panther added. "There seemed no reason that it should not work, after initially finding the targets. Luckily your Red Tornado knew exactly where they were and directed us."

"Along with Superman's Microscopic Vision," Lois Lane added. She was dressed in a station jumpsuit like Thor's, her own clothes soiled and reeking from her time spent in the Negative Zone and that other Earth that she had visited with the others. "I just wish we could find the Atom as easily."

"Ray tends to escape into the Microcosm when the world gets intense. He's done it before. I have every faith that he's fine, and we'll find him when he wants to be found." Superman smiled, squeezing Lois' hand and she nodded in understanding. She was so close to this Meta World, living on the fringe but

never truly a part of it. It was annoying at times, her reporter's instincts wanting to take over, to batter them all with questions, but she had her husband back and for the moment she could live with that.

"Well, Doctor Paula's given them a clean bill of health. Apparently they were out of the loop from the beginning. I can't imagine they'll even remember what happened when they wake up." The Wasp strolled on, glancing about the huge room as they finally paused. Almost everyone was there, except the Flash and Quicksilver, Iron Man and the Martian.

"They appear unharmed throughout," the Black Panther said. "I cannot imagine what you all went through, or why they should have been taken initially, but they will recover well."

"I agree," Superman said, scanning the room. It was almost time, time to say goodbye. "I'll take them home after you all leave. Hopefully there'll be no problems."

"I doubt it."

Janet Van Dyne looked to Lois Lane and smiled as the two men started talking shop. Hank was the scientist, not her. She knew what to do, but not the how's and why's of why it worked. Lois returned her smile, but shrugged. She was simply happy to be back with her husband. Janet envied that.

She wondered where the others were and finally spied Cap and Hawkeye talking with the Black Canary...

"A Boxing Glove Arrow?"

Hawkeye smirked, slipping the arrow back into the wide green quiver, handing it back to the Canary. She shrugged, setting it aside. She would return it to the trophy room later.

"I don't feel so bad about my Parachute Arrow now. He actually used that?"

"A lot," Dinah Laurel Lance chuckled, smiling as she remembered happier, simpler times. "Towards the end he started to use simpler arrows, just regular ones. I..."

Captain America put his hand on the Black Canary's shoulder. He understood. He knew loss, but then too so did Hawkeye. Dinah smiled up at him.

"I want to go back with you."

“What?” Hawkeye sputtered, and Cap was speechless. Where had that come from? He had almost sensed a connection before, but this...

“Dinah... Canary... I don’t think-“

“There’s nothing for me here,” Dinah Laurel Lance said as she looked between the two men. “The man I loved is dead. I don’t really have a life here. Sure, I have a few ideas, but, well, the League’s just too big for me. I feel second rate in the shadow of Superman and J’onn, Batman, hell even Plas. I’m a fifth wheel here, but your Avengers seem more open, more diverse.”

“Well,” Cap began, glancing at Hawkeye. “We’d be honored of course, but-“

“Hell, Di, the WCA would love to have you, but believe me, you don’t want to chuck your life away.” Clint Barton stepped up and held Dinah at the arms. “You’re a helluva fighter, and you’d fit in no doubt about it, but our world ain’t for you. There’s people here that love you. Believe me, I know. I lost my wife a few years ago, and you’re a lot like her. You have friends here that’ll see you through that. Let ‘em. Quit the League for awhile if ya have to. Take some time off and get your head together. You’ll see. You’re more important, an’ better than you give yourself credit for. Hell you gave me a run for my money.”

“You beat me in the end,” Dinah said, smiling.

“Yeah, well, I’m Hawkeye.”

Cap watched as Clint talked to Dinah. He seemed to understand what she was about, and he was glad of that. His own personal life had been a joke of late- a dream. The last thing that he needed was another fan, and he was seriously thinking that there was something closer to the Black Canary to that than a simple peer. He let Hawkeye talk her down, glancing about the room. He saw the Batman stepping towards the View Annex...

“Are you all right?” Pietro Maximoff-Magnus asked as he stood beside the Flash. The younger man seemed somber, his cowl down as he stared into space, watching as the Earth spun in the distance. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, almost a whisper.

“I need to tell Connor.”

Pietro looked at his new friend. He did not know who ‘Connor’ was, but he understood. He had lost many friends over the years.

“He’ll want to know. Kyle’s dead. Gotta tell him.”

“He will appreciate that,” Quicksilver said, not quite knowing what to say to ease his new friend’s pain.

“They don’t care,” Wally West said as he stared off into space. “No one, they’re not even concerned. He wasn’t Hal. They don’t care...”

“We care, West.”

Pietro jumped at the cold voice that cut the queer silence. It was like crushed glass, or stone rolling through a rock grinder. He turned instantly and saw the Dark Knight standing there in the doorway. He seemed hunched almost, his cloak about him, lost in the shadows.

“We simply mourn in our own way,” the Batman said as he strode up to the View Port alongside the Flash. “We will mourn as a group later. For now, we have to heal and get the Avengers home. For now we all deal with it, as best we can. Kyle was a good man, a hero. He was a good replacement for Jordan. I liked him, and I’m sorry that he’s gone.”

“I didn’t know him,” Quicksilver said, not quite knowing what to say. “But...”

Wally West smiled.

“I know. He was my friend. Like Barry and Hal, maybe. Me and Kyle,” Flash said with a shrug. “I have to tell Connor, and Donna too.”

“Soon enough, Wally West.”

They all turned as the Martian Manhunter spoke, passing through the ceiling, then phasing just as swiftly through the floor.

“Thor is ready...”

They gathered then, there in the Hall of Justice, the meeting room of the Gods there on High Olympus where they watched over us all. There had been times when other gatherings were more numerous. Times it seemed when the entire Meta Community had banded together to avert an Invasion, or a Crisis, some ultimate calamity or war destined to doom the world. It was debatable whether there had ever been a greater assemblage of heroes, however. They were the best of two worlds- the very best. It was all in the point of view, of course.

They had put Ralph and Sue Dibny on Monitor Duty. The Kents were still asleep in the Medical Wing some floors away, and of the heroes officially part of the current JLA present in the WatchTower only Aquaman was absent there at the

last. All were patients still and under the tender care of Doctor Paula, the Amazon brought in by Wonder Woman, Princess of Thymescira to help us all heal. She had been miraculous, easing our pains and injuries with her extraordinary skills and machines. The Kents had been blissfully asleep since the very beginning- months it seems at times- since they had been kidnapped by the Time Trapper.

I missed most of that as well, remembering only garbled bits and pieces blurring together and out of sequence. In a way I hope to remember it all some time, as I hate not knowing. It's the reporter thing, something in my blood I suppose. However, a part of me never wants to know the horrors there at the End of Everything, the End of Time. Clark says that he will tell me whenever I'm ready. An edited version of course, and one that he got from J'onn J'onzz as Superman was out of the first half of the fight even longer than I was. It was his being replaced with a doppelganger from yet another dimension that set this whole thing off, just a little over a week ago according to the calendar. The 'Sand Superman' he was dubbed, a being from Quarrm J'onn had said. He saved us all there in the end, at the End of Time.

I missed most of the latter half as well, being separated from the rest of the League with Aquaman, Atom and the Red Tornado along with the unconscious Kents. We had adventures of our own while the JLA and the Avengers struggled to save the universe. It's all connected somehow, in some strange way. It was there in the anti-matter realm that Aquaman had started to suffer, being burned and dehydrating in the queer environment, then back on Earth just in time for that final, searing explosion. Doctor Paula sentenced him to a few days in the WatchTower's water tank in the depths of the base in a healing solution. He would be watching on monitor, and most of the Avengers had said their good byes and thank yous in person earlier, as did I.

I was standing in the background, along with the Red Tornado. He was as silent and stoic as ever, despite the time we had recently spent together. He had been acting strange since he had reawakened there in Qward, at the edge of the Rift when he had started his mighty winds to create a vortex, adding to the efforts of Flash and Quicksilver. He seemed different somehow, though I never really knew him well enough to say exactly what was different. I stood near, but away, more interested on the upcoming departure.

They gathered and spoke, some smiling, laughing, shaking hands a final time. Some showed their faces there, just before the end. Captain America was handsome and apparently old we had learned, having been 'created' in World War Two on his Earth by his America. A pity that Alan Scott and Jay Garrick, the rest of the JSA weren't here for this as they probably would have enjoyed some of his war stories. Iron Man was handsome too, removing his golden faceplate to give his share of good bye smiles and kisses, which were truly dazzling I might add. The Black Panther was African I learned, a king of a country on his world.

Warbird was beautiful, named Carol, ex-military so we shared a bit. Actually only the Batman stayed in character, or in costume rather though he seemed friendlier than I had ever seen him- or imagined he could be.

No one seemed concerned about the Atom's disappearance. All were confident that he would turn up eventually, though they would look for him I knew. It was the death of the Green Lantern that seemed to hang over what should have been a celebration. No one said anything beyond expressing their sorrow, but I knew that they were all hit hard by it. They had all lost loved ones over the years in one way or another. Death was a reality ever present in the lives they led as Heroes, but of course there was the other thing as well. They did not speak of that either, but I knew too that it was eating away at the back of all their minds.

The Green Lantern had killed a little girl on an alien world. It had been in the heat of battle, and Clark said it had been an accident, that the girl had simply appeared at the wrong time in the middle of a tense situation, but still I knew. It was the one line that they all hoped never to cross. They were heroes, trying to uphold law and order, trying to set an example really, and they did not kill.

But they did. Barry Allen, perhaps the most beloved of the second generation of heroes had killed the man that had killed his wife. There was more to it of course, but the result was the same. Hal Jordan, Earth's second Green Lantern had killed. There was Hawk, the ex Teen Titan. Even Clark...

He had executed three criminals of extraordinary power that had decimated their version of the Earth. That was another piece of the Time Trapper's intricate plot that seemed to span centuries. It's all connected somehow. Another world, destroyed by criminals apparently from some alternate Krypton. They were vile, evil creatures according to Clark, threatening to bring their terror to our Earth. Clark believed them, and in the end crossed that final line. Matrix had been there- Supergirl, and she had told him everything, gotten him involved initially, changed his life inevitably. He never speaks of it, not since he told me that first time, and I never ask even when he wakes screaming at my side in the middle of the night. Or crying...

He did what he had to do. I told him, and I'm sure that whomever he shared the tale with told him the same, but still it eats away at him. I know. I know the man I love.

I did not know the boy- the man that had become Green Lantern, but he had been chosen to take the place of many others before him. He had been a hero, and I did know that whatever the circumstance of the little girl's death, he would have taken it to heart, and to the grave. They all knew that as well, even though they said nothing of it. They would mourn I'm certain, each in their own way, in time.

I watched as they started to separate, the League shifting to the near side of the vast hall to give the Norse Thunder God room. The Avengers gathered around him, not too close as well, probably knowing better than we what was to come. The beautiful shining man- the Silver Surfer stood with them, his powers restored. He was holding the man in the golden armor- Doctor Midas and his daughter in some form of stasis so they could not disrupt the return home.

Energy sparkled and crackled from Thor's awesome hammer- named M'Jolnir I had learned, that reporter thing again- as he swung it round ever faster in an ever-widening arc. The hammer started to glow eventually, and he finally simply stopped the swing of momentum and grabbed the haft, holding it aloft before him. I saw a wavering in the air, like heat rippling on a desert highway in the distance. We all felt a gush of cool wind and saw flickering images of another room fading in and out of sight.

"The construct created by thine fallen comrade hast faded with his passing, or perhaps the destruction of his mighty weapon, the emerald ring. I know not which, yet this I do know; where 'ere Thor has tread, he doth know the path to return. I sense that thy Time Stream and Speed Force, the very dimensional barriers, which we all fought so valiantly to repair dost try to bar the way, yet they reckon not with the Will of Almighty Odin, and the determination of his chosen son."

"He's stubborn," the Beast interjected with a grin, and Thor smiled, nodding.

"Aye. Regardless, 'tis taxing holding yon portal wide. Time slips away, as must the Avengers. Justice League, it hast been an honor to fight at thine side."

"The honor was ours, Thor," Clark said stepping closer. I saw his restored cape fluttering in the wind of the storm that the Thunderer had whipped up. His eye was still swollen shut, but a faded, ugly purple now. Zatanna had used her magic to fix his teeth, thank God. He had been starting to lisp. "I only hope that we can meet again one day, only under less dire circumstance."

"Something tells me we will." Captain America looked to the JLA and saluted, a corny gesture to be sure, but somehow when he did it, it just seemed right, fitting.

And that was it. There was a final group smile and wave, a few parting comments as the storm simply swept over them all, enveloping them, obscuring them, and they were gone. We watched as the light and energy faded away, the winds dying to the slight breeze of the air conditioning within the Tower. Silence...

I watched, staying quiet as I was still just a guest there in their most intimate moments as one by one they all just drifted away. The Red Tornado was gone when I looked back. I don't know if he had remained throughout or not. Flash

was next, vanishing in a flicker of scarlet. The death of the Green Lantern had hit him hardest of all I thought. They had been friends.

Plastic Man, Zatanna and Firestorm left together, next. Zatanna and Firestorm seemed to be discussing something while Plas walked behind, his eyes focusing on Zatanna's legs, if not a bit higher. I heard J'onn call the Black Canary's name, glancing at the BIG three before they too left and suddenly it was just Clark and I, and Batman and Diana.

There was a moment of silence, oddly awkward between them as I knew they were friends. Diana smiled at me warmly, and I realized that they were hesitant to speak in my presence. Clark put his arm around my shoulder, kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"No more secrets," he said, looking at Batman. "Lois almost died because of me. She fought in our name according to Aquaman, helped us win."

"And what?" Batman asked, and I could hear the sarcasm in his voice. "You want to make her a member? Maybe we should call Snapper Carr."

"I'm serious, Batman. Things have changed dramatically. Life is too short."

Batman looked to Wonder Woman. Her skin was burned like the rest of us, her arm in a plastic brace to protect her crushed hand, her golden lasso in tatters. She nodded in agreement and with that the Batman finally sighed.

"You're right, Clark," he said, turning his back to us. He seemed hesitant, and I was about to say that it was not necessary, suspecting what he was about to do, but too quickly he reached up and pulled back his cowl.

I gasped when he turned around. I recognized his face of course, and I had suspected for some time- that reporter thing again. It did make sense.

"Things have changed. I think we all realize that, just as we realize that this is probably the end of the League as we know it." I gasped again at Bruce Wayne's cryptic statement. The end of the League?

"J'onn may stay on, and probably Firestorm, but I know that Dinah will be leaving, probably permanently. Zatanna will be going with her, though she wasn't officially a part of the latest group. Flash and Plastic Man will be taking extended leave I'm certain. Atom's missing. Kyle's dead. Aquaman has affairs of state that we snatched him from, and who knows the turmoil in Atlantis after his being gone for two weeks after healing. The Red Tornado?" Batman shrugged.

"That leaves us."

“I’ll need to leave for a time,” Diana said, holding up her injured arm. “Too, I need to return to Thymscira, to see to this.” She patted her hip and her frayed lasso hanging from her golden belt. “I may be gone some time.”

I felt Clark stiffen just a bit. “I’ll probably do the same.” He looked at me, smiled. “You all know what we were going through before all of this started. There are things in Metropolis that need to be dealt with, that require more of my attention.”

“As in Gotham.” That was all that Bruce offered, but we all knew what we meant. I looked from one to the other, licking my lips, wondering if I should say anything. I was actually sweating.

“But what about the League? The world needs you.”

“Not us,” Batman said as he pulled his cowl on again. Oddly, his body seemed to shift, his stance and bearing, even his voice as though he had just become someone else. In a sense I suppose he had.

“There are other heroes, Lois; the JSA, the Titans, even that new group of Outsiders. And just because we’re leaving does not mean there are no others to take our place.”

“You don’t mean...” I gasped again and Batman scowled.

“No. Not THEM.”

“J’onn will gather a group if he remains,” Clark assured. “And if not then we will before we leave. The JLA will go on.”

There was another awkward silence, at least until Diana finally hugged Clark and I, long and hard. She kissed Batman, the first time I actually saw him flustered. She tried to speak, but in the end simply smiled before turning and walking away.

I saw Clark’s smirk as Batman watched her. Then the frown returned.

“If you need me, Bruce-“

“I won’t.” Batman smirked, then he too was gone.

We stayed at the WatchTower for a time as the others drifted away, leaving, one by one. As expected, J’onn was the last, except for us. The Dibnys would return, rejoining, the first to fill the sudden vacuum in the membership. Who else would return was still up in the air. Clark would not, at least for a time. We would take his parents home, and then return to Metropolis and it would all, finally be over.

Still, as I write this knowing that no one will ever read it, probably not in my lifetime at least, I can't help thinking that I was witness to the end of an era. Really, it had not been so long since the JLA had reformed, and now it was over again, at least in another incarnation.

I wondered if the Avengers were going through the same type of thing back on their world. If they actually got home. We assume that they did, but would we ever really know? Would we ever see them again?

Captain America thought so, and oddly I did too. It just felt right.

I suppose ultimately however that as this began, only Time would tell in...

THE END

And now a word from our sponsors...

Finally...

You cannot imagine my relief that this is finally done. Don't get me wrong, it's been a blast! The Avengers has always been my favorite comic since I was in grade school. Hell, the first comic book I remember owning was Avengers #20 or so (I forget without looking) where the Swordsman is pushing Cap off the construction site. To finally get a chance to write the Avengers, and to write the story that pits them against the JLA to boot- a story I waited over 20 years to see in the comics... It doesn't get better than that.

Working with Chris has been great as well. He's a genius and technically the best writer I've seen from an Editor's view. And hopefully soon enough we'll get the chance to work together again. Maybe a sequel? Don't hold your breath, though the set up is there for anyone to pick up the baton.

I want to thank everyone that had a hand in this as well, or even just a finger... Dino Pollard for his input and Headshots. Mike Raz for his advice on the story and Web work. Dave Ingram for input. David Wheatley for posting assistance and the use of M2K. Brent Lambert for allowing us to shunt his own Avengers run back a bit. Gary for running the side issue at his own site. Steve Crosby for continually reminding me that he was excited to read it. And all those folk who got a sneak peak here and there like Derrick Ferguson, Matt Hrubey, Matt Pierce... This was indeed a communal effort. Thanks to all!

All that said, I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing this monster. It's been fun...

Curt F: July 29, 2005

First off, I want to say that this story would not have happened if it wasn't for Curt. He took my meager plot ideas and transformed them into one of the best (no hyperbole!) comic – not just fanfiction – stories I've ever read. If I'd had it my way, the credits would involve his name in full capital letters and mine in tiny unreadable print. That's how essential he was to this story.

I think it's safe to say that everyone knows just how big of a fan I am of the mighty Avengers. To me, they are the epitome of super-hero icons, and I relished the opportunity to work on such an epic story involving my favorite heroes. As for the JLA, I admit that I didn't know as much about them when we started, but I quickly learned to like them pretty well as well.

There are a few people who deserve thanks on my end. Mike Rasbury and Matt Pierce, for helping me out during my time of crisis while scripting the battle issue between the two teams. Had it not been for them, those fights wouldn't have been hardly as cool as I hope they turned out. I, too, want to extend thanks to David Wheatley and Brent Lambert for allowing us pretty much full reign with the AVENGERS title at Marvel 2000.

While my editorship role at M2K has been over for a while, this project first began during my term as EiC. It was my last wish that the project still see the light of day after I stepped down from the position, and it feels so damn good to finally see it out there for all to see. It was a lot of hard work (Curt, maybe we should do a DVD-extra style interview for a future cyberback, going over all the crazy ideas that popped into our head during the plotting...Lex Luthor and the Cosmic Cube, baby!), but it was totally worth it.

In closing, I think the following statement sums up this experience fairly well: if I'm to be remembered for anything when it comes to fanfiction, I hope it's this.

Chris Munn – 07/30/05