

T W O

THE first thing Spider-Man thought as he entered Stamford was: *This is a hell of a first mission as an Avenger.*

On the outskirts of the city, ambulances squealed. People stood outside their homes, chattering fearfully. A few businessmen stabbed at phones, frustrated; cell service was overloaded. Everyone kept glancing north, toward the thick black cloud at the center of the explosion.

Spider-Man stopped at an intersection, glanced up. The smoke had thinned out now, but a dull artificial haze blanketed the whole city. The lenses in his new costume could probably analyze that fog's composition, but somehow he didn't really want to know.

Spidey knew he needed to be here. But Tony wasn't answering his calls, and as embarrassing as it sounded, he didn't know how to reach anyone else in the Avengers. So he'd hopped a ride on a northbound truck and, when traffic slowed to a stop, he'd hoofed it the last three miles.

An Avengers quinjet whizzed by overhead, heading toward Ground Zero. Spider-Man raised his arm, shot a strand of webbing up to wrap around a lamppost, and set off after his new teammates.

Half a mile out, a line of police barricades blocked the main road.

Beyond, Spidey could see devastation: collapsed buildings, flashing emergency vehicles, shards of cloth wafting down rubble-strewn streets. Frantic civilians argued with cops, threatening and cajoling, desperate for news of their loved ones.

Just outside the barricade, a small crowd had gathered, pointing upward. An old four-story library building, topped with an ornate cupola, creaked and tottered. Spider-Man focused his lenses and spotted the cause: a shard of concrete projecting from one wall, apparently flung there from all the way inside the disaster zone. An old woman and a man on crutches straggled out of the library's front door, urged on by local police.

But that wasn't what the crowd was staring at. Along the side of the cupola, near the top of the building, crept the deep red form of Daredevil, the Man Without Fear.

Spider-Man tensed and leapt. He almost overshot—the muscle-augmenters in the new suit had kicked in automatically. But he pivoted in midair and, in less than a second, touched softly down on the outer wall. His fingers clung easily, spider-style, to the brick facade.

If Daredevil was startled, he didn't show it. His radar sense had probably warned him. "Peter," he said. "Is that you?"

"In the flesh, Matt." Spider-Man paused, tapped a finger against his metallic eye-lens. "And steel, I guess."

Beneath them, the building creaked and lurched.

"There's a kid trapped inside," Daredevil said. "Back me up?"

"Always."

Daredevil grabbed at a window latch, tried to pull it open. Locked. Spider-Man tapped him on the shoulder, then—concentrating—reached out with one of the tentacles protruding from his costume's back. The tentacle quavered before the window, then *rapped* it hard, just once. The glass shattered.

Daredevil turned to him. “Where’d you get the suit?”

“Fellow named Anthony Stark built it for me. Perhaps you’ve heard of him?”

Daredevil frowned, his mouth grim beneath his red cowl. Then he turned and dove into the building.

Spider-Man shrugged and followed, using his tentacles to sweep away the glass remaining in the frame.

The office was bare, quiet. No power; computers sat dark on a pair of paper-strewn desks. “You know where this kid is?” Spider-Man asked.

But Daredevil was concentrating, sending his radar sense fanning out through the floor. He pointed toward the door, and again Spidey followed.

“Matt. How you doing, anyway? I know that whole identity thing’s been a strain for you.”

Daredevil didn’t answer right away. Six months ago, a tabloid paper with organized crime connections had outed his secret identity, revealing him publicly as Matt Murdock, crusading attorney. This had led to a flood of civil suits and public harassment. Matt had made the risky decision to deny everything, to publicly swear he was *not* Daredevil—which, of course, was a lie. Spider-Man wasn’t sure he agreed with his friend’s decision; the morality seemed pretty murky. But Matt had made a persuasive case that it was his only workable option.

“I’m all right,” Daredevil said. He didn’t sound convincing. “Hey. Hey there!”

In a room full of cubicles, a seven-year-old girl sat cowering on the floor against a barrier. The building lurched, and she whimpered.

Then she saw Spider-Man, and screamed.

Guess not everyone’s used to the new look, he thought.

“Let me get this one,” Daredevil said.

Five minutes later, they were back down on the ground. Daredevil

handed the girl over to her mother, while a brace of cops watched carefully. The woman cast suspicious eyes across Daredevil, then Spider-Man. Then she took off at a run.

“Gratitude,” Spidey said.

Daredevil turned back to him. “Do you blame her, after what happened today?”

“I don’t *know* what happened today.”

“It’s bad, Peter. For all of us.”

Spider-Man frowned. “Can I get a tiny little clue here?”

“I’m talking about the Superhuman Registration Act.”

Spidey shrugged helplessly. With both arms and four tentacles.

Daredevil shot a look upward, and Spider-Man followed his gaze. The red-and-gold figure of Iron Man streaked by, headed for Ground Zero.

“Ask your new BFF,” Daredevil continued.

When Spidey looked down, Matt was gone.

SWINGING over the barricade proved no problem. A cop yelled up at Spider-Man once, halfheartedly, then returned to his duties. The Stamford police had more than enough to deal with today.

Inside the barricade, the streets turned quickly to chaos. Some houses had collapsed inward; others lay fallen under piles of rubble. Emergency crews bustled all around, transferring the dead and injured to ambulances or, where the roads were too rough, to hastily outfitted Jeeps.

And the sky...the sky was filled with ash, with a gray haze. The sun shone through weakly, casting no shadows, a dull red orb barely visible through the cloud of dust.

A flutter of wings caught Spider-Man’s attention. The Falcon, a muscular black man costumed in red and white, fluttered downward a block away. Spidey followed his descent and spotted Captain America, in full

costume, speaking with a couple of medics.

Cap and the Falcon had been partners, off and on, for years. They exchanged a few terse words—Spidey was too far away to hear—and then set off at a run toward a still-smoking house.

“Cap,” Spidey called.

Captain America turned, squinted at Spider-Man, and flashed him a quick frown. Then he turned and resumed course for the burning building.

Spidey shook his head. *What was that about?* He raised his hand to fire off a webline, planning to follow Cap and the Falcon—

“Hey. You an Avenger?”

A rescue worker had lowered his breathing mask. He looked exhausted, impatient.

“Yeah,” Spider-Man said. “I guess I am.”

“We could use some help.” He pointed to a collapsed pile of stone, the remains of an old city administrative building. “Motion detectors are picking up something, twenty feet down. But we don’t got our diggers here yet.”

“I got it.” Spidey leapt through the air. “Clear a little space, guys?”

Time to give this new suit a workout.

And then he was digging, using his tentacles to clear away stone and mortar, the splintered remains of desks, walls, collapsed ceilings. He reached ground level and kept burrowing, down into the building’s basement, then its sub-basement. Climbing down carefully, steadying himself with web-braces, sweeping the tentacles around to clear debris and punch through layers of flooring. In the old days, he would have had to do this the hard way, lifting ceilings with his webbing and forcing his way through blocked passageways using muscle power alone.

This seemed easier. More natural, even.

Almost before Spider-Man knew it, the rescue workers had followed

him down on grappling ropes. They fanned out around the sub-basement, while Spidey reinforced the creaky ceiling with layer after layer of webbing. When they'd located all five survivors, they rigged up rescue pulleys and began lifting the injured out. The civilians had inhaled a lot of dust; one had a broken leg. But they would all survive.

Peter crawled back up to ground level, to scattered applause from the rescue workers. And two other figures, too: Tigra, the catlike werewolf, and Luke Cage, Power Man.

Tigra reached out her arms and half-hugged, half-hoisted Spider-Man up out of the building. Her furry body was warm and muscular; her bikini costume barely covered her at all. She held Spidey close, just a little too long.

"Welcome to the Avengers." Tigra smiled, ran flirty eyes down Spider-Man's thin frame. "Bout time we got some hot guys in this group."

"Thanks. Wish it was under less..." He gestured around. "Well, less horrifically apocalyptic circumstances."

"The Avengers saved my life." Tigra seemed serious now. "After my transformation. Cap and Iron Man...if I hadn't had this team for support, I don't know what would have happened to me."

Cage, a working-class hero from Harlem, wore dirty jeans, a black muscle shirt, and shades that hid his eyes. His dark face was covered with dirt and soot. He clapped Spider-Man on the back.

"How 'bout you?" Spider-Man asked. "Being an Avenger, has it been good for you?"

"Only been a couple months. This was prison, I wouldn't even be eligible for parole yet." Cage lowered his shades, peered closer at Spidey. "Interesting threads."

"It's a Tony Stark designer original. They'll be selling it at Target next year."

“Come on,” Tigra said. “Let’s see if we can help Cap out.”

She set off on all fours, picking her way over downed stoplights, across fallen telephone poles. Cage gave Spidey a quick nod, and together they followed.

Straight ahead, a single, freestanding brick building still raged with fire. Goliath, the latest in a long line of size-changing heroes, stood twenty feet high, picking debris off the roof. He reached down, recoiled from a blast of flame, and grabbed a loose chunk of tar. He threw it high into the air, and Ms. Marvel swooped down under it. She fired off a blast of radiant energy, incinerating the roof chunk instantly.

Spider-Man frowned. “Is that a firehouse? On *fire*?”

“Former firehouse.” Falcon swooped in for a landing in front of them. “Now it’s condos. Well, *now* it’s a disaster area.”

Cage stepped forward, gave Falcon a half-hug. The two had grown up in the same neighborhood. “Cap’s inside?”

“Straight up. Said to hang tight out here.”

“Where are the firemen?” Spidey asked.

Falcon gestured around, at the chaos and flashing lights. “On their way.”

A middle-aged man stumbled out of the building, coughed, and dropped to his knees. Falcon rose up into the air and whistled; a pair of medics came running.

Hawkeye the marksman followed the man out of the building, balancing two small children on his wiry arms. His purple costume was singed and torn; one of his quiver’s straps had been burned clear away. He deposited the kids in the medics’ hands and staggered, dizzy.

Above, Goliath picked another piece off the roof. “Gas fire,” he called down. “It’s still burning.”

Falcon landed next to Hawkeye, led him over to Spidey and the others. “Good work, Hawk. Where’s Cap?”

Hawkeye coughed, grimaced. “Still inside. I thought we got everybody, but he said...he insisted—” He burst out hacking again, doubled over.

“You oughta see the medics, too.”

But Hawkeye slowly straightened, a playful look creeping into his eye. He grabbed an arrow from his quiver, reached out and poked Spider-Man in the chest with it.

“And miss this mook’s hazing?” He smiled. “Welcome to the Avengers, Webs.”

For once, Spider-Man found himself lost for words. He stood for a long moment...

...and then an explosion burst forth from the firehouse. Flames flared out the door. Goliath took a giant stride back, almost fell. Ms. Marvel swooped backward in midair, watching with the others in horror.

“Cap,” Falcon said.

Then a figure appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the raging fire. A tall, muscular man in a tattered red-white-and-blue uniform. Captain America, the living legend of World War II, took one careful step after another out of the inferno, carrying an unconscious woman in his strong arms.

Medics swarmed around him, took his burden from him. “Third degree burns,” one said. “But she’s still alive.”

“Get her into the Jeep.”

“Cap!” Tigra cried.

Cage, Falcon, and Hawkeye followed her toward the building. Cap coughed once, waved them off. He smiled at Falcon, clapped Hawkeye on the back, and rested a steadying arm on Tigra’s slim frame.

Then he turned toward Spider-Man, and his face turned dark.

“Spider-Man’s just arrived,” Tigra said. “It’s his first mission as an Avenger.”

Still glaring, Cap held out his hand. Spidey took it, unsure, and felt Cap's strong grip as they shook.

"Not the look I was expecting," Cap said.

Behind them, a fire engine finally squealed up. Firemen unrolled hoses, began aiming them at the burning building.

Cap held Spider-Man's hand for a long moment. Cage and Falcon exchanged a look. Hawkeye rubbed his neck, uncomfortable.

Beneath his mask, Spider-Man frowned. He felt like he was back in high school, fidgeting under thick glasses while some popular kid stared him down.

"I, uh, I should check in with Tony," he said at length. "Anybody know where he is?"

WHEN Spider-Man reached the crater, he realized the true extent of the devastation. An area covering one-and-a-half city blocks had been totally flattened, reduced to ash and hard-packed dirt. Half a school building stood at the edge of the blast zone. Its other half had been incinerated, fallen off into the dead hard ground of the crater itself.

The Avengers' quinjet sat parked in the bowl-like depression, alongside the Fantastic Four's custom-built plane. The haze was thicker here, seeming to shroud the crater in an eerie midday twilight.

Spidey leapt over the quinjet. "Boss," he said.

Iron Man held up a hand to Spider-Man: Wait a minute. Tony stood talking to Reed Richards, Mister Fantastic of the FF. Reed had assembled a makeshift network of laptops, Wi-Fi nodes, and sensory detectors, right in the dead center of the crater. Ben Grimm, the Thing, strained his orange-rock biceps to lift a massive computer system out of the plane.

The other members of the FF stood watching them: Sue Richards, Reed's wife, known as the Invisible Woman, and her brother Johnny

Storm, the Human Torch. Johnny's eyes were wide; he almost seemed in shock. Little fires flared on and off, involuntarily, across his arms and shoulders.

A sudden motion caught Spider-Man's eye. He turned to see Wolverine, crouched down over by the crater's far lip. Sniffing the air.

"...think that's all the survivors," Reed said, peering into a screen. "There weren't too many, this close to the blast."

"What..." Johnny stopped, caught himself. "What caused this?"

"The New Warriors," Tony replied. "I just watched the footage...it was broadcast remotely to their studio. In the name of *ratings*, they tried to take down a gang of villains way above their power level."

"Well, they paid for it." Reed was grim. "I read no survivors in the blast zone."

"I confirm that," Wolverine called. "No livin' scents."

"Not even Nitro?" Tony asked. "He set off the explosion."

Spidey frowned. "What kind of crook blows himself up, knowing he'll die along with his victims? Do we have *suicide bomber* super villains now?"

Tony turned glowing eye-slits toward Spider-Man for the first time. "If I could ask him, I would. But that doesn't seem to be an option."

"Kids," Johnny said. He held up a shred of blue-and-gold cloth, a tiny piece of Speedball's costume. "They were just kids."

Spider-Man crossed to Johnny, lay a hand on his old friend's shoulder. "Matchstick. You okay?"

But Johnny shrugged him off, grimaced, and burst into flames. He took off, wordless, into the gray-fogged sky.

Sue grimaced, turned toward the FF's plane. "I'll follow him, make sure he's okay. You can catch a ride home?"

"Sure," Reed replied. Their eyes met for a moment in profound, silent understanding.

Spider-Man found himself wondering: *Could I ever be that close to a woman?*

“Reed,” Tony said. “I’m gonna need all the data you can assemble. The Senate hearing is next week...this is the worst possible time for a disaster like this.”

“Tony,” Spider-Man called. But Iron Man was already in flight, arcing up and out of the crater.

Spider-Man followed, unsure what to do next, at a slight distance. Behind him, Reed Richards turned to the Thing, began setting up some new piece of machinery.

Captain America stood just outside the crater, watching the last of the casualties being loaded into an ambulance. Tony touched down next to him. “Cap.”

Captain America turned slowly toward him.

“All these children, Tony.” Cap’s voice was hoarse, even deeper than usual. “The FEMA chief said there could be as many as nine hundred casualties. All for a TV show.”

“They should have called us,” Tony replied. “The New Warriors, I mean. Night Thrasher knew they were out of their league.”

Cap stared at him for a moment, then turned away. He strode quickly over to an ambulance, began speaking with the driver.

Spider-Man stepped forward. “Tony,” he repeated. “I’m at your service. Tell me what to do.”

“There’s nothing *to* do, Peter—I mean, Spider-Man. Get your tux out of the closet and prepare to be respectful. We’ve got funerals to attend.”

“But—”

“This isn’t a crime to be solved, or an adventure, or a villain to be fought. It’s just a tragedy.”

“Or an opportunity. Right, bub?”

Wolverine had crept up behind them, silent. His face was hostile, but not with animal savagery. This was something deeper, more personal.

“You’re headin’ for Washington soon, right? To talk to Congress about the state of superhumans in this country.”

“That’s right, Logan.”

“Well, I don’t give a rat’s whisker what you do with these clowns.” He gestured up at Falcon and Ms. Marvel, hovering just above. “But I got a message from the X-Men: We’re neutral. The mutant community’s stayin’ out of this scrap.”

“You’re also an Avenger, Logan.” Tony stepped toward Wolverine, repulsors glowing.

Immediately, the mutant fell backward into a defensive crouch. Unbreakable claws burst forth from his hands, stopping half an inch from Iron Man’s chestplate.

Behind Tony, the other Avengers had gathered: Goliath, Cage, Hawkeye. Tigra crouched low, growling softly.

Captain America stood off in the distance, over by the ambulance. He looked down at a stretcher, shook his head at the body.

Tony rose up a few inches off the ground, right at the lip of the crater, and stared down at Wolverine like a god. When he spoke again, his voice was a metallic hiss. “Maybe you should take a leave from the Avengers.”

Wolverine turned and strode away. “Way ahead of you. *Boss.*”

“Watch your step, Logan.”

The mutant turned, snarled. “You think about comin’ after me, Tone, you better watch *more* than your step.”

Then he took off like a wild animal, loping away at incredible speed.

The Avengers seemed to all exhale at once. They looked around awkwardly, watching as the last of the rescue vehicles rumbled away.

“Tony,” Spider-Man said. “What *are* you gonna say to the committee?”

Tony Stark made no reply. He just stood, staring out over the crater, as the black-gray mist slowly faded to reveal a low, setting sun.

Spider-Man stood with him, with his new teammates. He was an Avenger now; this was supposed to be his new beginning. But for nine hundred residents of Stamford, Connecticut...

“...it’s the end,” he whispered.

Tony turned sharply toward him. For a moment, Spider-Man had the crazy idea that Tony was about to snap at him. But the armored Avenger just looked upward, activated his boot jets, and flashed silently up into the blood-red sky.