

"...at the twilight's last gleaming?"

My name is Steve Rogers. I was born on July 4th, 1917. In 1941, I underwent a radical treatment that remade me, that changed me inside-out. I became the fighting embodiment of freedom and the champion of the American Dream. I became Captain America. As amazing as these things sound, these are things that I know, things that I put trust in.

I also put trust in Doctor Henry Pym. He's my friend and ally, we've been through Hell and back together. Through the good times and the bad, he's always been there. Regardless of that trust, the things that Hank now tells me are not and cannot be true. In this hour of happiness*, Hank is telling me that everything that I know is a lie...

*See last issue.

**See Avengers Vol. 1, #4--if you don't know that story, why are you reading this? :)

"Steve, please--it's painful, I know. Believe me, I know pain but you have to put it past you--I did." Hank Pym rubs his brow, sits down in his chair and continues digging through the computer system."

"Hank, I think you better take a break from that computer...."

"Why Steve, so that we can play make believe? Hm? Jesus, Steve--it's been sixty years, get over it."

"I don't think I like your tone, Hank."

"I don't like your act, Steve! I have two words for you, 'drop' and 'it.' If you want to do something productive, get me some coffee."

Steve puts his powerful hands on Hank's shoulders. "Who are you and what have you done with Hank Pym?"

Frustrated, he takes a deep breath. "My name is Hank Pym and I'm digging through the Volksnet looking for a site with information on the new KR-19 Retrovirus--but I can't find a site in English. Right now, however, I'm about to get mad and grow into a very large man. I'm then going to break your skull, that is unless you let...go...of...me!."

Steve relinquishes his grip. "No, you were looking for a file on Mutant genes. I repeat: Who are you? What's going on here and who is behind it?"

Steve raises his voice and walks around the room. "Hydra? A.I.M.? Skull? You're dead Skull, but that never stopped you before! End this charade now!"

"Steve...first off, who are you talking to? You're Captain America...not Captain Senility, act like it. Second, The Red Skull isn't dead...though he has to be over eighty years old. Did you take your medication--?"

Steve cuts Hank short. "Details."

"Details...? Oh, no. No, I'm not playing along."

"Details. Now."

Hank sighs, "if it will shut you up.... Where to begin? Yeah, yeah, the beginning... After you hit the deep freeze back in--what was it? '42, '43? There was nothing to stop the army of German Supersoldiers led by The Red Skull. The United States never officially declared war against Germany, threats of the German Super Weapon kept us at bay. It was the Atomic Bomb. We finally developed our own but it was too late. France was in ruins. England fell. The rest of Europe followed. Eventually, Germany turned on its allies and claimed Europe and most of Asia as part of the new Fatherland. Hitler ruled half of the world...until he was usurped by The Red Skull. In February of '45, The Skull signed a treaty with President Roosevelt...signed it in Winston Churchill's blood. It was the darkest day in American history but it guaranteed peace between The United States and the new German Empire. We've had peace since. Any of this ring a bell, Steve?"

"No, Hank. It doesn't. But it gives me an answer...The Red Skull."

"The Red Skull stuff again, Steve? That fight between the two of you was a long time ago. I went to school with Sandra Bullock, you don't hear me accusing her of stealing my newspapers...though that would explain a few things..."

"Where's Tony?"

"Dead, just like he's been for the past ten years."

"What...?"

"I guess you'll ask about Thor next?"

"What about him?"

"He's--."

Hank's response falls on deaf ears...Steve's mind is inundated with pain, pain so great that he falls to the ground, unconscious.

He wakes up on a platform.

"Steve, I don't know how to put this, exactly...you had a mild stroke."

"Hank...?"

"Yes, it's me. Steve. I ran a biopsy...and the results are not what I was expecting." Hank turns on a computer monitor. An element in your blood has become active. I've noticed it before and have researched to no avail. It's not an element...in the practical sense. It's actually a binary compound, two elements are bonded together...in a way that just shouldn't be. One is Carbon...and the other is something entirely new, just off our Periodic Table. This shouldn't be but, the compound is indivisible, I cannot isolate the second element from the Carbon...and after these results, I'm not sure if I want to. All of a sudden, this has become highly unstable and it's ravaging your blood-cells...it's like it's eating its way out, breaking your blood down as it goes. Steve...by these results, you only have four days to live..."

"What...?"

"It gets even more strange. The radiation that this element is emitting is the same as normal atmospheric radiation. Normal background radiation...for Germany."

"What? Normal for Germany?"

"Yes, as long as I've remembered, Germany has had strange levels of radiation emitting from it and its possessions."

"That's...not normal, is it?"

"That it hugs the political boundaries? No but nothing is normal, is it? There could be something that the German Government does that creates this unique pattern of radiation. Nuclear tests, radiation screenings? Who knows? No one, that I'm aware of, has determined why this phenomenon exists."

Steve turns over on the platform, to get a better look at the monitor. "Hank, I want maps and a diagram of this binary chemical. I want all of the information that you can give me."

With a few keystrokes, Hank complies.

"Germany controls more area than I thought. It wraps around the world, only the US, Canada and Mexico are not German controlled?"

"That's right. German territory begins right there," Hank points, "to Northern Canada."

Steve gets up.

Hank warns, "No, Steve. I wouldn't get up, not in your condition."

"Whatever this is, Hank, I can't just let it kill me. I'm getting to the bottom of this, now."

"Steve, I may act like a jerk sometimes, but I respect you...and I'm sorry for acting like I did a while ago. It's not like me. Why, why am I acting like this? Why doesn't this...feel right?"

"Hank...none of this is real... The Red Skull is not some global dictator. He's a madman who likes to inflict pain and suffering. You, you're wrapped up in your experiments and you are a good man. You're one of my closest friends. And Tony, Tony's not dead."

"He is here...as is Thor and the rest of the Avengers. We're all that's left."

"What happened to them?"

"The business. Iron Man fell during a fight with Ultron IV. Thor, he was turned to glass by Thanos. My poor, beautiful, Jan...she and Wanda were...liquified. Everyone of us, even our reservists, all dead...one greusome way or another."

"Hank, none of this is real, I can assure you that."

"You may be right. I would be most grateful if you were...but that disease which I diagnosed you with, the radiation eating away at your body. That's real. This pain that I feel deep inside, the empty feeling I get when I wake up. That's real too. If somehow, you can fix both of those things, I'm at your disposal."

"...the first thing we need is a plan. The map, again, please."

"Here you go."

"Wait...before, German territory ended at Northern Canada. Now it ends at the Canada/US border...just miles from here."

"Steve, Canada has always been under German control."

"I'm...not going argue. I'm just going to take you at your word. Do the Quinjets still work here?"

"Yeah, why?"

Steve gets up and walks runs towards the elevator, "because I have a trip to make. I need answers before I make a leap of faith. The Red Skull is behind this. No ifs, ands or buts about it. I have to find his location, I have to gather all the telemetry I can."

"Steve, where are you going? What if it's not the Skull"

Steve responds with a grin. "I'm going to look for answers"

"But where?"

"Where I was before everything went crazy...The Pentagon."

Next: Questions, answers...and The Incredible Hulk?!