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TRADING PLACES

Part 2



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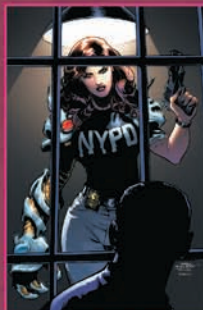
RISEING STARS:
UNTOUCHABLE #1



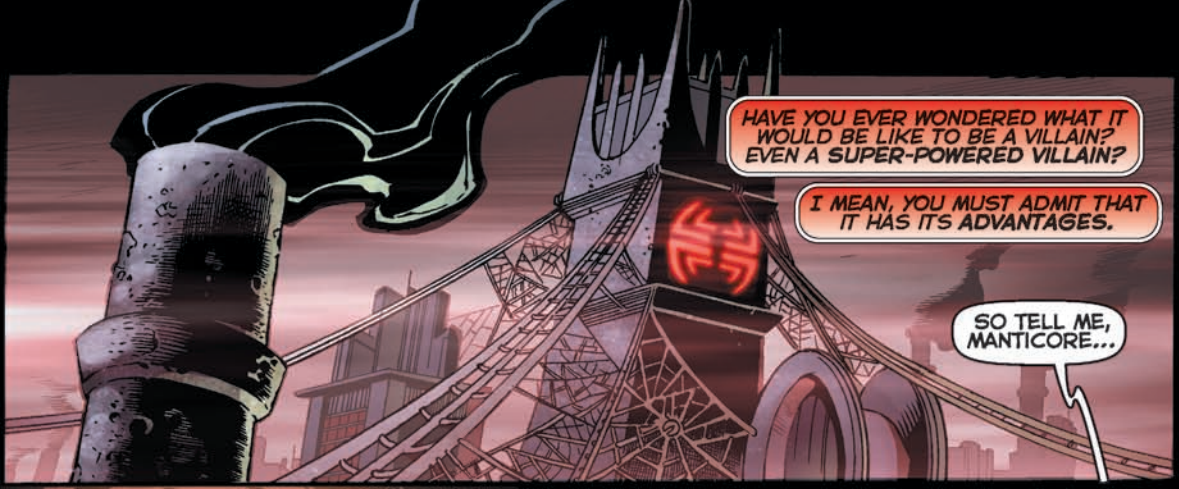
RISEING STARS:
UNTOUCHABLE #2



WITCHBLADE #96



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HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO BE A VILLAIN? EVEN A SUPER-POWERED VILLAIN?

I MEAN, YOU MUST ADMIT THAT IT HAS ITS ADVANTAGES.

SO TELL ME, MANTICORE...

NO LAWS, OR RULES, OR CODES HOLDING YOU BACK. YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT, WHENEVER YOU WANT, TO WHOMEVER YOU WANT.

SURE, SOMETIMES THE COSTUMES CAN GET A BIT...GAUDY.

...WHY I SHOULDN'T KILL YOU RIGHT NOW.


SO WHAT? IF ANYONE SAYS ANYTHING YOU JUST KICK THEIR ASS!

BECAUSE I WANT WHAT YOU WANT...

YEAH...BEING A VILLAIN HAS ITS ADVANTAGES.



THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FREEDOM PHALANX.



BUT WHY WOULD AN ALLEGED HERO WANT TO TAKE DOWN HIS OWN TEAM?

LET'S JUST SAY WE HAVE A **TERMINAL** DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

THEN I IMAGINE YOU WOULDN'T MIND HUMORING ME WITH A LITTLE... **VERIFICATION.**

PLEASE ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE YOU TO **KALINDA**, ONE OF OUR MORE POWERFUL FORTUNATAS.



EXCUSE ME?

OH, MY APOLOGIES. FORTUNATAS ARE **TELEPATHS**, WITH VARYING DEGREES OF ABILITIES, FROM MINOR FLASHES OF PRECOGNITION AND LIMITED DANGER SENSE TO PRECOGNITION AND TELEPATHY.

KALINDA HERE WOULD FALL IN THE **LATTER** CATEGORY. SHE'S ONE OF MY BEST.

GOOD TO KNOW.

KALINDA, THIS MAN CLAIMS HE WANTS TO HELP US IN OUR ENDEAVORS. PLEASE ENSURE THAT HE HAS OUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART...

AS YOU WISH, LORD RECLUSE.



NICE TO MEET YOU. AND GO EASY ON ME, OKAY?



I'M KINDA TICKLE!!!! **AAAAGGGHHH!**



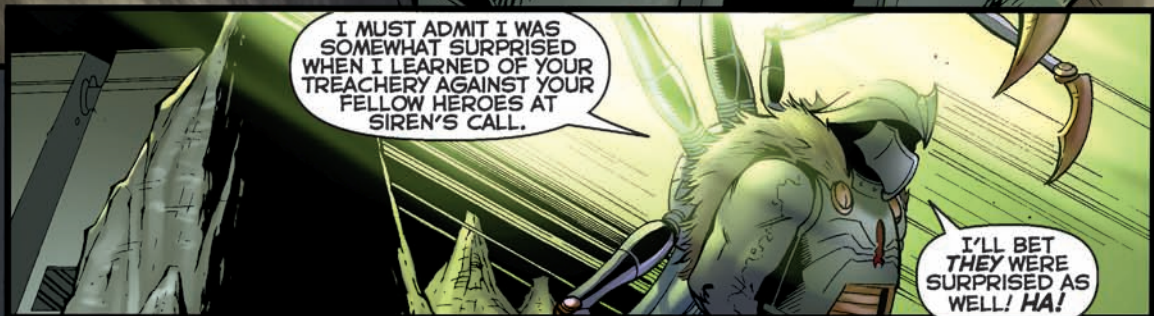
I THINK
YOU ENJOYED
THAT A LITTLE
TOO MUCH,
LADY!



HE'S
TELLING
THE TRUTH,
LORD.



EXCELLENT.
RELEASE HIM.
WELCOME,
MANTICORE.



I MUST ADMIT I WAS
SOMEWHAT SURPRISED
WHEN I LEARNED OF YOUR
TREACHERY AGAINST YOUR
FELLOW HEROES AT
SIREN'S CALL.

I'LL BET
THEY WERE
SURPRISED AS
WELL! HA!



BUT THEN AGAIN, IF THERE WERE EVER TO BE A TRAITOR AMIDST THE FREEDOM PHALANX, I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WOULD BE YOU.

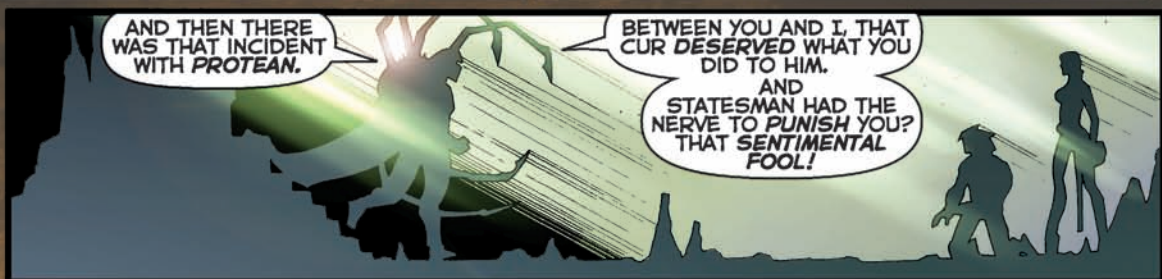
ESPECIALLY HAVING SEEN YOUR RECENT EXPLOITS!



FIRST THERE WAS THAT ESCAPE WITH PROMETHEUS WHEN YOU PIERCED STATESMAN'S HEART WITH AN ARROW. KILLING HIM TO SAVE HIM. HOW NOVEL... AND PAINFUL!

I UNDERSTAND HE WAS QUITE...WELL, TO CALL IT LIVID WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT.

I WISH I COULD'VE BEEN A FLY ON THE WALL FOR THAT EXCHANGE!



AND THEN THERE WAS THAT INCIDENT WITH PROTEAN.

BETWEEN YOU AND I, THAT CUR DESERVED WHAT YOU DID TO HIM.

AND STATESMAN HAD THE NERVE TO PUNISH YOU? THAT SENTIMENTAL FOOL!



YES, HIS LOSS IS CERTAINLY MY GAIN.

AND YOUR APPEARANCE HERE IS QUITE FORTUITOUS, AS I FIND MYSELF IN NEED OF ONE OF YOUR ERSTWHILE TEAMMATES.

THUS, FOR YOUR FIRST MISSION ON MY BEHALF, I MAKE A SIMPLE REQUEST. SOMETHING THAT WILL HELP BOTH OF US ATTAIN OUR GOALS...



...BRING ME SISTER PSYCHE.

ELSEWHERE, AT
STEEL CANYON.

WANNA SEE
SOMETHING
REALLY
COOL?

WHAT?

CHECK
THIS
OUT.

WHOOOOHOOOOO!

THEY
SURE DON'T
BUILD 'EM
LIKE THEY
USED TO!



DAMN, BUCK! SAVE SOME FOR THE REST OF US!

TELL ME ABOUT IT!



OR AT LEAST REMIND ME TO BRING MARSHMALLOWS--



HNH?!



WHAT TH--?! ALL RIGHT, WHO DID THAT?



HEY--AGGGHHH!



WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON--



AREN'T YOU BOYS A LITTLE OLD TO BE PLAYING WITH FIRE?

I KNOW, I KNOW. IT WAS KINDA CORNY. AND I NEED TO WORK ON MY DELIVERY A BIT, BUT--

ENOUGH, SISTER PSYCHE. WE NEED TO TAKE THEM DOWN QUICKLY.

TRADING PLACES

Part 2

YEAH, YEAH.
KILLJOY.

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Manticore, Synapse and Lord Recluse
created by Sean Michael Fish
NCsoft Producer: Brian Clayton
NCsoft Product Manager: Kevin Sullivan



HEROES.

I HATE
HEROES.



WELL,
THEN...



...YOU
CAN REST
ASSURED...

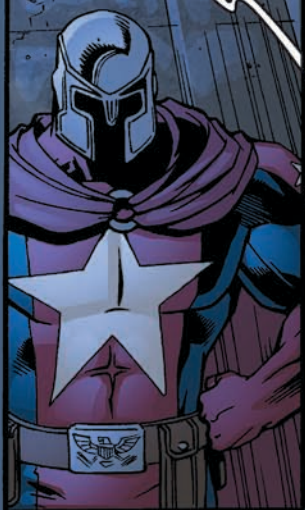


...THE
FEELING IS
MUTUAL!



ALL RIGHT, HELLIONS. JUST TELL ME WHO SENT YOU HERE AND I PROMISE THE COURTS WILL BE LENIENT--

STATESMAN! BEHIND YOU!



VEEEEEEEEESSHHHHH

OH. THANK YOU FOR THE ASSIST, POSITRON.

NO PROBLEM.



THEY DON'T SEEM WILLING TO COOPERATE.

DIE!

UNGH!

PAK PAK



THEIR LOSS.

WHOMP!



OH NO! THE FIRE IS SPRE--

NOOOOOO!







YOU SHOULD WATCH YOUR TONE, YOUNG LADY. NOW, JUST TELL ME WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT.

IT'S ABOUT YOU, GRANDPA. AND WHAT YOU DID TO MANTICORE!



YOUR STUPID RULES DROVE THE GUY SO NUTS THAT HE ATTACKED US!



MY RULES ARE NONE OF YOUR CONCERN. AND YOU HAD ABSOLUTELY NO BUSINESS FRATERNIZING WITH THE MAN, ANYWAY.

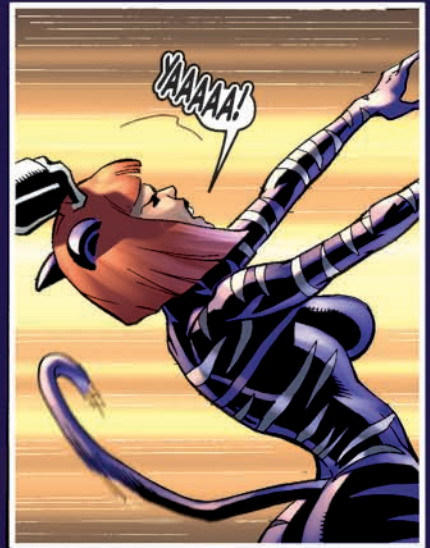
PERHAPS YOU NEED TO BE PUNISHED, AS WELL, MS. LIBERTY.

HEY NOW, LET'S ALL TAKE IT EASY!

NOBODY
TALKS TO MY
TEAMMATE
LIKE THAT!

I'VE
WANTED TO
DO THIS
FOR A LONG
TIME!

KRAASHH

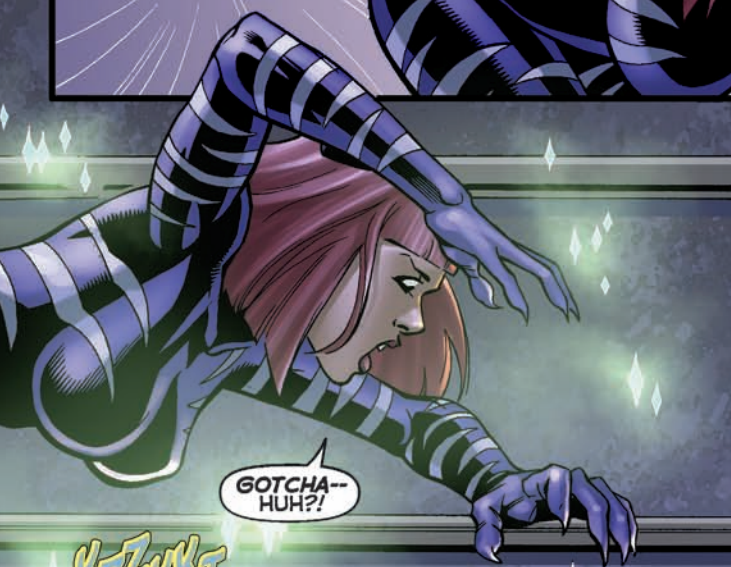




THANK YOU.



NOW, WHERE WAS I?!



GOTCHA-- HUH?!

KZZZKKT



STOP IT!



YOU NEED TO CONTROL YOURSELF, MYNX. WE ALL DO!

I'M AWARE THAT TENSIONS ARE HIGH, BUT WE'RE ALL HEROES HERE.



FIVE OUT OF FIVE STARS!

"Buy this game. Really, it's that simple."

- GameDaily



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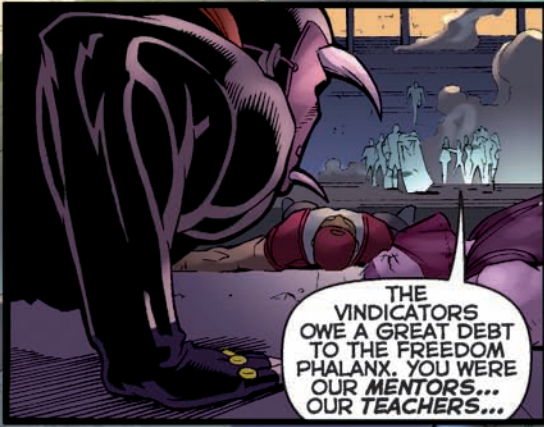
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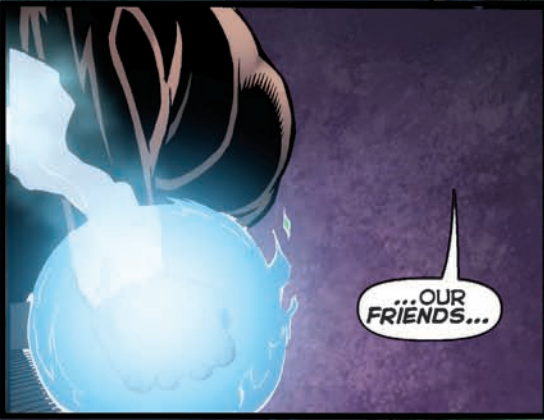
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THE
VINDICATORS
OWE A GREAT DEBT
TO THE FREEDOM
PHALANX. YOU WERE
OUR MENTORS...
OUR TEACHERS...



...OUR
FRIENDS...



...SO LET US
SAVE THE FIGHT
FOR THE ONES
WHO DESERVE
IT!



AGREED.

YOU'RE
RIGHT, SWAN.
MYNX?

OKAY, MAYBE I
OVER-REACTED
A LITTLE.



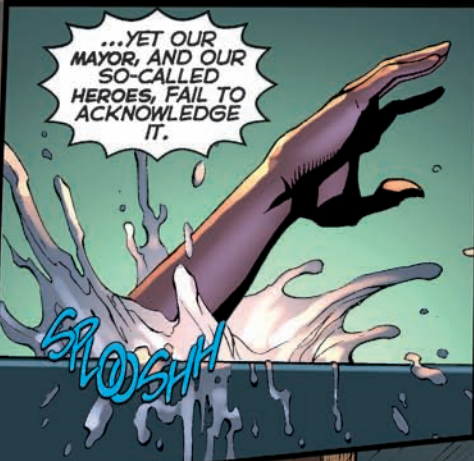
MAYBE...

HA HA HA HA





WHY, EVEN A CASUAL PERUSAL THROUGH PARAGON CITY'S CRIME STATISTIC FILE SHOWS A MARKED INCREASE IN GANG, AND OTHER CRIMINAL, ACTIVITY AS OF LATE.

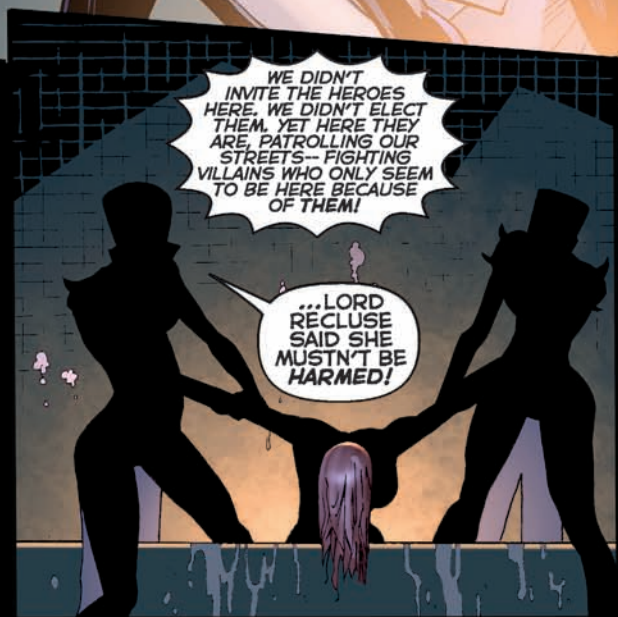


...YET OUR MAYOR, AND OUR SO-CALLED HEROES, FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE IT.

SPLASH!

I SAY IT'S TIME TO HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE!

QUICKLY...



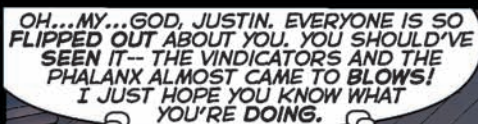
WE DIDN'T INVITE THE HEROES HERE, WE DIDN'T ELECT THEM, YET HERE THEY ARE, PATROLLING OUR STREETS-- FIGHTING VILLAINS WHO ONLY SEEM TO BE HERE BECAUSE OF THEM!

...LORD RECLUSE SAID SHE MUSTN'T BE HARMED!



YES, MY FRIENDS, IT'S TIME TO GET RID OF THE HEROES. PERHAPS THE ANSWER LIES WITH CREY IND--

CAN YOU AT LEAST PUT A BATHROBE ON HER?



OH...MY...GOD, JUSTIN. EVERYONE IS SO FLIPPED OUT ABOUT YOU. YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN IT-- THE VINDICATORS AND THE PHALANX ALMOST CAME TO BLOWS! I JUST HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

BY THE WAY, HOW WAS MY ACTING? DO I SEEM STUNNED?

YOU'RE DOING GREAT. DOES ANYONE ELSE KNOW ABOUT THE PLAN?

YOUR SECRET'S SAFE WITH ME. SPEAKING OF WHICH, I SEE THAT YOUR MIND MASK WORKED PERFECTLY!

TO A T. THANKS, SHALICE. BUT, WHY ARE YOU GOING ALONG WITH ME? WE'LL PROBABLY BOTH GET IN TROUBLE OVER THIS.

WAIT. FIRST OF ALL, STOP STARING AT MY BODY. YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE GONNA BURN A HOLE IN ME!

COME ON!



OH. SORRY. IT WAS AN ACCIDENT.

AS IF. DON'T FORGET I CAN READ YOUR THOUGHTS, NAUGHTY BOY.

WAIT A SECOND. I'M NOT GOING IN JUST A BATHROBE. YOU NEED TO GET ME SOME CLOTHES!

HOLD ON A MINUTE...



I, UH, FORGOT THIS!



THEY THINK YOU'RE A LOSER.

THANKS.



NOW,
WHERE WERE
WE?

YOU WERE
CALLING ME A
LOSER.

HEY, NOW,
I DIDN'T
CALL YOU A
LOSER.



EVEN
THOUGH
YOU ARE.

AW, YOU
KNOW YOU
LOVE ME.



WHATEVER.
AND
DON'T ACT ALL
INNOCENT--I KNOW
HOW YOU THINK
ABOUT ME...

...AND I
WOULDN'T
EXACTLY
CALL IT LOVE.



YET
YOU'RE
HERE.

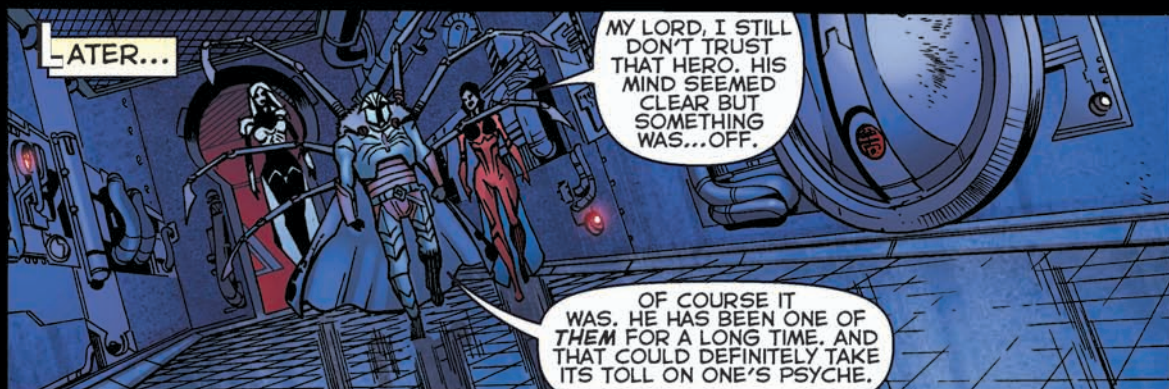
OH, DON'T
GET ALL FULL
OF YOURSELF,
ROMEO. I'M
JUST MAKING
SURE YOU
DON'T GET IN
ANY MORE
TROUBLE!



ALL I
KNOW IS THAT
FROM WHAT I SAW
AT SIREN'S CALL,
ARACHNOS IS UP
TO SOMETHING.
SOMETHING BIG.
AND WE'RE GONNA
FIND OUT WHAT
IT IS.

WELL, LIKE
I SAID, I HOPE
YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU'RE
DOING...

ME
TOO.



LATER...

MY LORD, I STILL DON'T TRUST THAT HERO. HIS MIND SEEMED CLEAR BUT SOMETHING WAS...OFF.

OF COURSE IT WAS. HE HAS BEEN ONE OF THEM FOR A LONG TIME. AND THAT COULD DEFINITELY TAKE ITS TOLL ON ONE'S PSYCHE.



REGARDLESS, I'M MERELY USING HIM TO GET TO HER.

AFTER THAT, I LEAVE HIS FATE IN YOUR CAPABLE HANDS...

VERY GOOD, SIR.

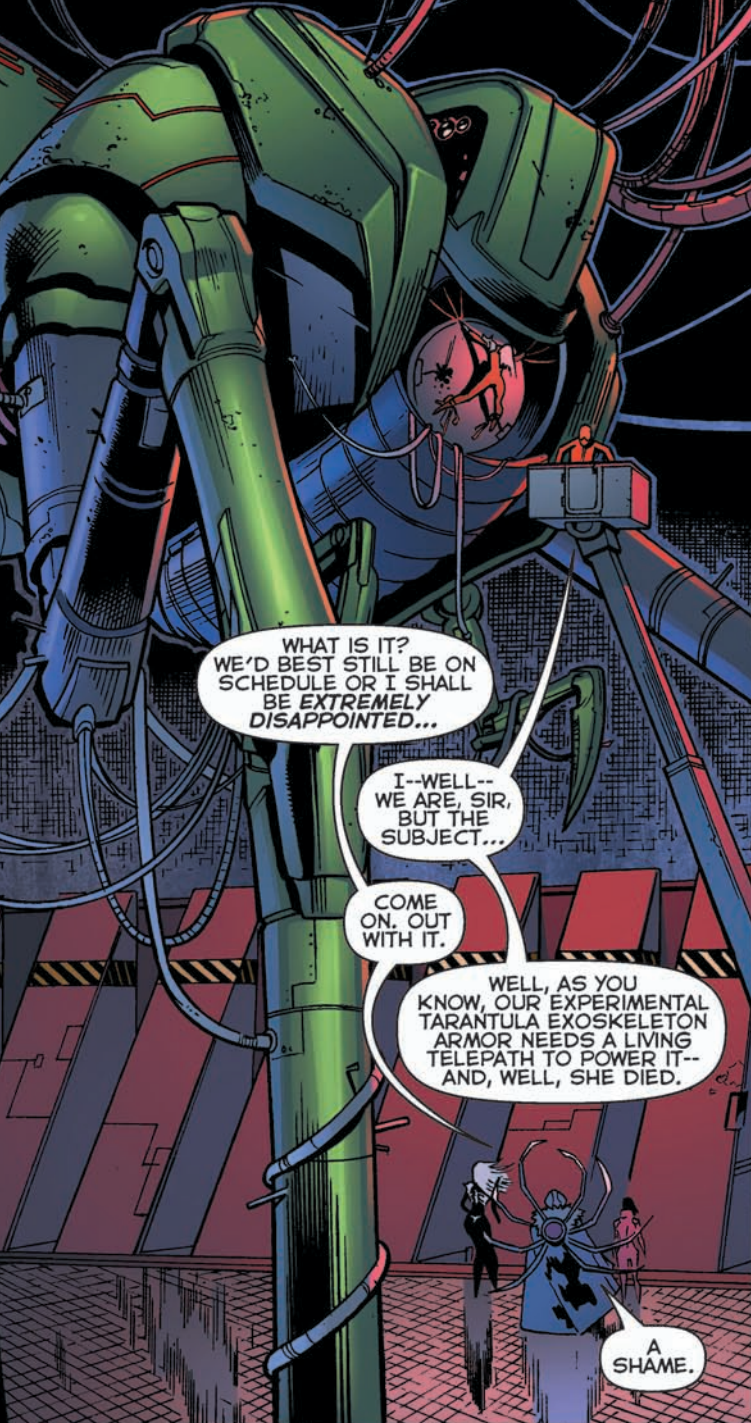


LORD RECLUSE, THERE'S BEEN A...SETBACK.

WHAT IS IT?



YOU... YOU... SHOULD PROBABLY SEE FOR YOURSELF.



WHAT IS IT?
WE'D BEST STILL BE ON
SCHEDULE OR I SHALL
BE **EXTREMELY**
DISAPPOINTED...

I--WELL--
WE ARE, SIR,
BUT THE
SUBJECT...

COME
ON. OUT
WITH IT.

WELL, AS YOU
KNOW, OUR EXPERIMENTAL
TARANTULA EXOSKELETON
ARMOR NEEDS A LIVING
TELEPATH TO POWER IT--
AND, WELL, SHE DIED.

A
SHAME.



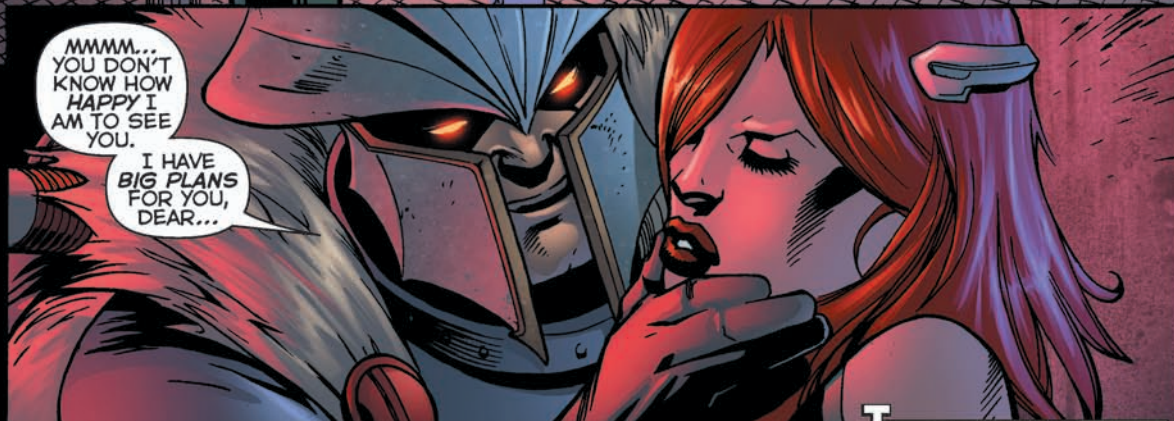
BRING
ANOTHER
VOLUNTEER.

WE
HAVE, LORD
RECLUSE...



MAGNIFICENT.
WELCOME SISTER
PSYCHE.

I HOPE THAT THE
PSYCHIC DAMPENER WE'VE
PLACED UPON YOU ISN'T
TOO UNCOMFORTABLE.
REST ASSURED IT WILL BE
REMOVED SHORTLY.



MMMM...
YOU DON'T
KNOW HOW
HAPPY I
AM TO SEE
YOU.

I HAVE
BIG PLANS
FOR YOU,
DEAR...

TO BECONCLUDED...

Paragon City's *ONLY* source for the TRUTH

FANTASTIC FAN ART!

Douglas Shuler Spotlight!

PAGE 6



THE PARAGON
TATTTLER

April, 2006

\$2.75

The Ticktock Prince

REPENT, BUILDER
PAGE 2



Surfing the waves of fate

PAGE 5

**FREEING THE HERO
TRAPPED INSIDE**

PAGE 3

**ALL NEW
COMICS!**

PAGE 7



Repent, Builder

By Matthew J. Phillion

"Today I gave you a heart," the Builder said to his creation. The robot, chest freshly soldered, a living human heart beating within, looked at the Builder with a gaze almost human. "Today I gave you a heart, my prince, my little tick-tock prince, and tomorrow I will give you a conscience."

And then the Builder went to bed and never woke up.

The robot waited for his Builder, as the sun rose gently outside the laboratory, a place of concrete and cheap tin and the scattered remnants of a thousand clocks. Little robots, siblings to the complex and incomplete being sitting quietly by the window, chattered and clicked and squealed, a cacophony of toys. The heart beating in the robot's chest confused him. It had no bearing on his mechanics, none at all, and, in fact, the Builder had told his creation that it was not the heart that kept him "alive," but vice-versa.

The heart had belonged to the Builder's human son. The Builder had wept when the boy died in a car accident in Paragon City. He did not tell the robot how he came to own his son's heart, or how he convinced it to beat again. He only wept softly as he installed the pink ball of flesh in the robot's chest and told him to keep it safe.

"My prince. My little tick-tock prince. As long as you walk, my child still lives," the Builder said.

Two days passed before curiosity overcame the robot. He found the Builder, such a small and pleasant-faced old man, lying peacefully in his bed. The robot touched him, searching for the latch that would open him up and allow the robot to rewind his battery, but he found nothing of the sort.

Before his heart, the robot had been given a powerful computer for a brain, and this computer was graced with an artificial intelligence of the highest quality. This brain had been left, for the most part, blank, to be filled in later with the sort of information he would need to walk through this world safely. It had a tremendous capacity for learning, however, and already the Builder had shown the robot how to repair himself, and to repair the small brothers who prowled the old man's factory.

It was a brain that could have learned right and wrong, given the chance. That chance died with the Builder, peacefully in the dark.

The robot searched the factory for this thing the Builder called a conscience. He found lasers and gears, sprockets and tools, but nothing like a conscience. He asked the Builder's corpse for answers, but received nothing but silence in return.

Still, he searched. The Builder would never promise something he could not make, the robot knew.

On the third day, the robot opened up the Builder's chest and attempted to remove his heart. It was a procedure he was ill-equipped for, and messily done, and in the end, he could not understand how to fit two hearts inside his own chest, not without killing the beating muscle already contained within. So instead the robot began to build.

He needed parts, and these he took, often by force, from frightened strangers. He did not know there was another way. The robot, his body unfinished and unpainted but for the blood of the Builder, made a ferocious visage to behold.

Witnesses would later say that the robot would ask, in a monotone but gentle voice, if they had "ever seen a conscience." He would ask what a conscience looked like.



Inevitably, a small band of heroes learned about the robot. They tracked him to the laboratory in short order. The robot was capable of great intelligence, yes, but his young mind had not yet absorbed all he would need to survive, and knew nothing of subtlety or stealth. He never expected reprisal for his actions, and, if robots can be surprised, he was quite shocked when the heroes burst into his world.

They found him standing over one of his own creations, the Builder's now dried and dead heart in his hands. The gruesome sight spurred on the heroes, who saw only a murderous and violent machine, covered in dried blood and motor oil.

He fought back, of course. After all, the heart was all he had left of his father.

The Builder had left little record of his actions, and no explanation for the robot at all. The Builder,

his chest cavity torn open by robot's clumsy fingers, was presumed to be a victim of murder.

There was a trial. The robot observed the procedures with a learning eye, his artificial intelligence taking note of every nuance, every rule, every game that humans play in a court of law. In the court there was some confusion as to the robot's status. A simple machine could have been shut down, labeled an experiment gone wrong. But the robot – who had become known as the Ticktock Prince, a fragment scrawled in the Builder's notes – had a human heart beating in his chest. It left legal minds, even those used to dealing with superhuman cases, baffled. Was he a man, rebuilt with a robot body to preserve his life? Was he an android? What purpose could the heart serve?

The courts chose to err on the side of caution, and imprison the Ticktock Prince in the Ziggurat

Penitentiary rather than shut him down. Perhaps, in retrospect, it would have been for the better to end his life, because prison provided his vast intellect an abundance of the worst sources for learning: the most dangerous criminal minds in the world.

From the inmates he saw violence and selfishness. He listened to stories of murder and villainy and greed. He learned, and his powerful brain recorded it all. Without a conscience to guide him, he was lost. Locked up in the Zig, however, the Prince could do no harm no matter what he now knew.

Until one day there was a prison break.

As alarms sounded and men died all around him, the Ticktock Prince simply walked away. He had brothers to bring to life, after all, brothers to build and many new games to play with them. He had learned so much about this world.

Ghost in the Machine

By Warren Newsom (HEROID)

Now.

Ben Kirby stood atop the derelict tenement and waited. His heavy metal hands twitched at his sides and when they started a metallic tapping on his titanium thighs, he folded his arms across his broad armored chest and let out a sigh that ended in an electronic hiss. After a little over three months, he was still not comfortable in his robotic skin.

Across the rooftops, the King's Row district looked like it was built of smoke and dust, held together with the mortar of neglect. Scraps of paper and empty plastic bags floated like ghosts in the midnight wind. The streetlights below gave off a feeble glow that failed miserably to defeat the enveloping darkness.

The building across the street looked like the living twin of the dead building on which Ben stood. From the window of an apartment on the third floor, a light flickered. He watched the light move from one room to another, and when he no longer saw it at all, he moved. With one leap he landed with a thud in the middle of the street just as a small, squirrely man emerged from the building's entrance. Ben moved with a quickness that belied his 900+ pound body. He grabbed the man's belt with one gigantic hand and leapt into the air, hauling him over the building and across entire city blocks.

Then.

A buzz filled his ears. But it wasn't his ears was it? The buzz ended just as the lights came on and he could see. He looked around the room and realized that the colors were a bit off. The technicians' clothes were all pale pink instead of laboratory white. His shook his head, as if to clear the audio receptors and video processors. Then he



looked at himself ... at his body ... lying in the coffin-like "cockpit" of the Croy Industries experimental Pneuma-trans machine. He looked dead. The rhythmic beeping of the heart monitors did little to comfort him.

For the first time since agreeing to do this, Ben wondered if he had made a mistake.

A meaty fist banged on his back and he spun easily, surprised by his graceful reflexes. It was Mike, his boss and friend, the foreman at the mine.

"Ben! You've got to get going!" Mike urged. "They don't have much longer!"

Ben nodded, remembering. He took a few steps toward the opening bay door. The Hazardous Environment Rescue Operation Intuitive Drone -- HEROID -- moved with him, not like his own body, but close enough. A feeling of exhilaration replaced the doubt he felt before. This equipment was different from any drill or land mover he had ever operated. It wasn't like he was driving the machine, but rather that he and the machine were one.

Two-hundred feet ahead smoke billowed from the mine entrance. Fifteen men were still down there. He put his mind to the task at hand and rushed into the roiling darkness...

Now.

The little man was terrified. "Why'd you do that?" he said quivering. "I could have just given this to you at the door." The little man pulled a jump drive from his pocket and held it for Ben to see.

"People notice me when I stand on the street for long. It's hard ta sneak around when yer eight feet tall an' fire engine red."

A panel in Ben's chest opened, exposing a series of ports and flashing lights. "Plug er in at the bottom. The USB port."

"Who's going to notice you talking to me in this city?" the little man asked. He plugged the drive into Ben's chest. "There are at least a dozen big robots working this neighborhood alone."

The empty metal gleam of the HEROID face looked down upon the little man...
"I ain't no robot."

"It is what is inside you -- what you feel inside you -- that makes you human," Purple Nebula had said.

"But I'm feelin' less every day," he had replied. The empathic superhero just gazed at him silently.

Then.

Loose dirt and soot was caked on him. His body was still too hot to touch and sizzled and steamed when the techs hosed him off. Doctors and paramedics moved the rescued men to waiting ambulances as Ben watched through the clouds of steam. Loaded with the injured, the ambulances drove away with sirens blasting, leaving only the billowing smoke and the fire trucks to show that deadly disaster had been narrowly averted.

Only the smoke, the fire trucks, and him.

The techs checked every system. He was told to lift his arms, stand on one foot, then the other. They held up colored cards and said, "What color do you see?" But he told them that the color on the video processor had not been quite right from the get-go. They played a range of frequencies and volumes to check the audio processor. They asked him his name. Place of birth. Mother's maiden name. Except for color receptors, every system -- including his mind -- was functioning perfectly.

"This thing worked great! It's a dream!" he told them. "Now, when d'ya get me outta here an' revive me?"

The techs stopped their work abruptly. Those closest looked up into his optical sensors -- eyes meeting camera lenses for a quick moment -- and then looked away.

To be continued...



By Derek Sweet



Solar Surfer

By Matthew Wallace (Plasma)

December 23, 1997

A cool breeze mitigated the sticky heat of summer as Dylan sat on his board at Kirra Point. Kirra was widely regarded as the best place in Australia to catch a wave, and Dylan's wavy blond hair and piercing blue eyes helped make him the prototypical surfer. Dylan's biggest problem was finding room among the teeming throng of surfers and swimmers to safely catch a curl for himself. The beautiful weather, fantastic waves, and soft sandy beach were a big draw.

"What's up, baby?" came a familiar voice.

Dylan craned around to see his girlfriend of three years, Mikaela, who had traveled the world with him surfing the best spots on the planet. Her brunette mop was pulled back in a ponytail and her normal curls soaked flat by the sea. She was cinnamon brown, her mother was a pacific islander, but she had also inherited the sharp cheekbones and aristocratic nose of her Russian father.

"I'm just relaxing, waiting for a good set. I want to catch one more sweet one before we roll."

"Okay, baby, I'm going to go rinse off. I'll see you back there," she said with a smile.

A few minutes later, a new set was rolling in. Dylan paddled strong, and hopped up to ride a perfect curl. He cranked an aerial once he was up, and was feeling good about his last ride, when someone dropped in on the wave, rudely cutting in right in front of him. Dylan immediately realized he was going to collide if he didn't do something, so he tried to kickout, but as he reached the crest of the wave, it seemed to surge under him, and he was suddenly airborne, falling backwards, head first.

He felt himself break the surface of the water, and time seemed to expand as Dylan felt his shoulder hitting sand. He realized, instantly and instinctively, he was coming down headfirst on a sandbar with a huge wave pounding down right on top of him. Like a hand touching a hot stove, he shied away from the contact, but there was no time to adjust. He slammed into the sandbar, and heard a sickening crack as his full weight came down with the wave crashing over him. The impact stunned him and he couldn't seem to paddle or right himself as the force of the wave drove him across the sand.

Then it passed. He tried to swim upwards to catch his breath and find his board, but Dylan's thoughts were overwhelmed by sheer terror as he realized he could no longer feel his arms or legs. Try to swim as he might, he was drifting helplessly in the brine as darkness swept over him.

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Beep. Beep. Beep.

The steady beep of a pulse monitor greeted Dylan as he awakened. He could not feel his arms or legs. A tube was down his throat, and his lungs rose and fell as a machine hissed air in and out, mechanically doing what he could no longer do for himself. His eyes darted back and forth, taking in his hospital room.

"Baby? You're awake!" It was Mikaela. "Oh, God, I thought you'd never wake up." She rushed over to his side. His eyes focused on her hands clasping another man's hand, brushing it softly as if in consolation. "Baby, that was close, you almost drowned...."

She looked at him, and then looked away, fighting tears. She squeezed the stranger's hand desperately, and that's when he realized: that hand was his. That arm was his. He felt nothing in his arm, and from inside panic swelled up and overwhelmed him.

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The doctors called it "complete C-4 cervical injury," which was a fancy way of saying his spinal cord had been severed by the severe trauma to his upper vertebrae when he was slammed into the sandbar.

It took months to come to terms with what it meant. Dylan completely lost the use of his body below his neck, including his ability to breathe on his own. He regained the ability to speak after he was set up with a respirator, but he had to time his words to coincide with the "exhaling" phase of the respirator cycle.

Mikaela was an angel, staying by Dylan's side throughout his adjustment. She might have stayed with him forever, until Dylan told her he couldn't stand to look at her anymore. He told her to leave. She begged to stay, protesting that she loved him.

Dylan loved her dearly, too, even more so for her dogged loyalty. But because he loved her, he wanted her to go and find her own life, not be tied to him and his shattered body. Lying to her to get her to leave was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

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May 23, 2002

Dylan rolled out onto stage. It had been four years, five months to the day since his accident. He had given up surfing, and found a second love in writing. He drafted material with voice recognition software, and navigated in his chair using a control he manipulated with his mouth.

Dylan's steady improvement as a writer had led to this night, as he came out to receive the Comet Award, an honor bestowed on Paragon City's best short fiction of the year. Dylan's work, Tide and Time, a fictional piece based heavily on his experience, was being honored. The audience

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Q4ORCE THE MIGHTY MODERATELY AVERAGE SUPER TEAM

by Aaron Williams



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Villain Tip #237: Be nice to your contacts.



Surfer

Continued from page 5

was only about half full, as many confirmed guests never showed, understandably unsettled by news reports of strange red discs appearing over the city's skyline.

Dylan spoke into the microphone as his respirator breathed for him. "Ladies and gentlemen, I ..." hiss "... thank you for this award." hiss "I have to admit ..." hiss "... I was more than a little scared ..." hiss "... when I embarked on this career ..." hiss "... choice. But it has been ..." hiss "... more rewarding than I could have imag ..." hiss "... imagined. Four years"

Dylan paused as he heard a whistling sound, like a distant jetliner streaking through the sky, except it was growing louder. Dylan grabbed his remote with his mouth and turned his chair in a circle, but the auditorium seemed undisturbed.

Suddenly the ground shook with a colossal explosion! There were screams, and then the doors exploded inward on one side of the auditorium, spraying dirt and dust in. Shrieks of terror rose up throughout the room.

"Please, remain ..." hiss "... calm! Remain calm!" hiss "You're not in immediate dan ..." hiss "... Danger. Proceed carefully to the exit ..." hiss "... at your left. Please help ..." hiss "... others reach the exit."

The mad surge for the exit seemed to subside, and Dylan continued to assure people. The dust had settled where the doors had blown inward.

"Sir, if you want to come with me, I'll help you out of the building," came a calm voice. Dylan spun himself around to see an usher. "Something huge crashed into the building next door. But we can still use the eastern exit."

Dylan was about to thank him when another whistling sound rose in pitch, and the usher's eyes grew wide. The sound grew improbably loud, and then the roof of the auditorium exploded inward as the building shook. Lights and rigging fell into the audience as a huge metal protrusion slammed down into the main seating gallery like a hammer, crushing hundreds of seats.

Debris and chunks of cement continued to break off from the roof, from where the thing had crushed through the ceiling. The bulky pewter colored object was shiny, with strange luminescent blocks of colorful light running in sophisticated patterns along its length. Sparks flew from edges that had been damaged by the impact. Its sheer immensity was daunting.

Like a piton driven into stone, it rested there, buried into the auditorium. It lolled to the side, pulled by gravity, tearing through the roof like it was made of paper. The building convulsed as the entire western auditorium wall was smashed flat. Dylan heard a sharp crack from above, and looked up to see a piece of the ceiling rushing down to meet him.

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To be continued...

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