TOP COW®

WOHL CLIQUET HABERLIN STUDIOS BLOND

CITY OF HEROES®

AWAKENINGS PART 3

www.topcow.com

image

15 $2.99 US $4.60 SEPT

IMAGECOMICS.COM

7 09853 00302 1 01511

The Darkness® Compendium

GARTH ENNIS

PAUL JENKINS

MARC SILVESTRI

JOE BENITEZ

50 issues of Darkness AND Tales of the Darkness in one volume!

SEPTEMBER

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM TOP COW PRODUCTIONS

CYBERFORCE #6

CITY OF HEROES #15

E3 DARKNESS #1 VARIANT

WITCHBLADE #102

WITCHBLADE, DARKNESS, and CYBERFORCE are © 2006 Top Cow Productions, Inc. City of Heroes is © 2006 Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NC Interactive, Inc. "Witchblade," the Witchblade logos, and the likeness of all featured characters are trademarks of Top Cow Productions, Inc."Cyberforce," the Cyberforce logos, and the likeness of all featured characters are trademarks of Top Cow Productions, Inc. All rights reserved. "The Darkness," the Darkness logos, and the likeness of all featured characters are trademarks of Top Cow Productions, Inc. NCsoft, the interlocking NC logo, City of Heroes and all associated NCsoft logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation. City of Heroes is a registered trademark of Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NCsoft Corporation. Cryptic Studios is a trademark of Cryptic Studios, Inc. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

MOTH CEMETERY, DARK ASTORIA.
THERE COMES A TIME IN EVERY HERO'S LIFE WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES WILL FORCE THEM TO ASK THE QUESTION: AM I REALLY CUT OUT FOR THIS KIND OF WORK?

DON'T GET ME WRONG. I'LL BE THE FIRST TO ADMIT THE PERKS CAN BE COOL.
BUT BETWEEN THE DOUBLE LIFE, THE LONG HOURS, AND THE CLEANING BILLS, SOMETIMES I WONDER IF I SHOULD HAVE JUST STUCK TO RUNNING A BUSINESS LIKE A NORMAL BILLIONAIRE.

STATESMAN, I'M FEELING SOME SERIOUS EMANATIONS COMING FROM THIS AREA.
CAN YOU PINPOINT THE SOURCE, SISTER PSYCHE?

UMM... DOWN THERE?
RRRRMMMMBBBBLLLLE

DEFINITELY WOULD'VE BEEN LESS STRESSFUL.

City of Heroes® Vol. 1 Issue 15, SEPTEMBER 2006. FIRST PRINTING. Published by Image Comics Inc. Office of Publication: 1942 University Ave., Suite 305 Berkeley, CA 94704. $2.99 US, $4.60 CAN.
City of Heroes is © 2006 Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NC Interactive, Inc. NCsoft, the interlocking NC logo, City of Heroes and all associated NCsoft logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation. City of Heroes is a registered trademark of Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NCsoft Corporation. Cryptic Studios is a trademark of Cryptic Studios, Inc. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. The contents of this book are © 2006 Top Cow Productions, Inc. All rights reserved. The characters, events and stories in this publication are entirely fictional. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted in any form without the express written consent of Top Cow Productions, Inc. PRINTED IN CANADA.

WRITER: DAVID WOHL PENCILS: RONAN CLIQUET
INKS: HABERLIN STUDIOS COLORS: BLOND
DESIGN: CHAZ RIGGS LETTERING: TROY PETERI
PRODUCTION: ROB LEVIN
COVER: RODOLFO MIGLIARI

Plot Editing Assists_Sean Michael Fish Statesman and Sister Psyche created by Jack Emmert Positron created by Matthew Miller Manticore, Synapse and Lord Recluse created by Sean Michael Fish NCsoft Producer_Brian Clayton

For Top Cow Productions, Inc.
Marc Silvestri - Chief Executive Officer
Matt Hawkins - President and Chief Operating Officer
Renae Geerlings - Editor In Chief
Rob Levin - Managing Editor
Chaz Riggs - Production Manager
Phil Smith - Trade Paperbacks and Submissions Editor
Annie Pham - Marketing Director
Peter Lam - Webmaster
Lena Leal-Floyd - Intern

...BUT I HAVE MY OWN PROBLEMS TO DEAL WITH RIGHT NOW.
AGH! WHY COULDN'T I KEEP MY BIG MOUTH SHUT?!

YOU MUSTN'T BEAT YOURSELF UP OVER IT, MANTICORE. THE SHAMANS WERE ALREADY AWARE OF OUR PRESENCE.*
*SEE LAST ISSUE FOR DETAILS.

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT IS TO FOCUS ON THE MATTER AT HAND...

ANEE ZANOO

ANEE ZANOO
ANEE SHAKTEE
FWOOOOOSSSHH
...SURVIVAL!

WITH THESE BANISHED PANTHEON SHAMANS, THAT'S EASIER SAID THAN DONE!

FROM WHAT LITTLE I KNOW ABOUT THEM, THEY HAVE PLENTY OF WEIRD TRIBAL MAGIC AT THEIR DISPOSAL.

KA-THOOM

SLLRRSHHH
IT'S AN AWFUL FEELING TO NOT BE IN CONTROL OF YOUR OWN BODY.
TO BE MANIPULATED LIKE A FREAKING RAG DOLL.
DEATH SPIRITS!
I MUST--
I...:KOFF:...SHALL HELP THEM, NUMINA. YOU MUST FOCUS YOUR...:KOFF:... ENERGIES ON THE SHAMANS.
ORANBEGA IS A FERTILE ZONE FOR MAGIC, AND OUR OPPONENTS HAVE BEEN GREATLY EMPOWERED BY IT.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WORSE. BEING IMMOBILIZED LIKE THIS, OR HAVING TO RELY ON THE BAD GUYS TO BAIL ME OUT.
BARON ZORIA IS RIGHT, MANTICORE.
IF THEY CONSUME TIELLEKKU, THEIR POWER WILL INCREASE EXPONENTIALLY!

SO THEY MUST BE STOPPED NOW!
YARROOSHHH

FWOOMMM

KRAKKKOOOOSSHH

OKAY, WELL, THAT DIDN'T SEEM TO GO EXACTLY AS PLANNED!

AND SOMETHING TELLS ME THAT IS TIELLEKKU.
ALOO SELAA TIELLEKKU
WHICH MEANS THEY'VE SUCCEEDED...!
ALOO SELAA TIELLEKKU
...AND WE'VE FAILED!

ELSEWHERE...
ALL RIGHT, PEOPLE, LET'S MAKE THIS AS QUICK AND PAINLESS AS POSSIBLE. WE HAVE A *SCHEDULE* TO KEEP!

KRAK
MUSIC TO MY EARS, CHIEF!
SMAK
THWAK

SYNAPSE BETTER SAVE SOME OF THEM FOR *US!*
I THINK THERE'S *MORE* THAN ENOUGH TO GO AROUND!

NOT IF *I* HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT IT!

HMM.
HMM?

SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING, CITADEL.
YOU MEAN BESIDES US BATTLING ZOMBIES IN A CEMETERY?
UNFORTUNATELY, YEAH.
I THINK NUMINA AND THE GUYS HAVE RUN INTO SOME TROUBLE...
...AND IT'S HEADED OUR WAY!
FOR THE SAKE OF OUR TEAMMATES, LET THIS UNFORTUNATE TURN OF EVENTS NOT DETER US!
WE'LL DO OUR BEST, STATESMAN.
AMEN TO THAT, CITADEL...
...AMEN TO THAT.

MEANWHILE...

...NNGGHH...
...NO...

...EVIL SHALL NOT DEFEAT US. NOT *THIS* DAY!

THWKKOOMMMM

THAWWOOOSSHHH

NNNNGGHHH... OHHH...MY HNNHH?!
PLEASE... ALLOW *ME*!

AAAIIIEEKKSSHHHH

THANKS FOR THE ASSIST, FOLKS!
NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME...
...IT'S TIME TO GET TO WORK!
WAKEY, WAKEY, SLEEPY-HEADS!
THWIPPP
WHOOSHH
-GASP- -- TIELLEKKU NEEDS OUR HELP! THEY'RE KILLING HER!
SHE'LL NOT LAST MUCH LONGER.
FWOOOSSSHHHH
<GREAT GODDESS TIELLEKKU...CAN YOU HEAR ME?>
<MY NAME IS NUMINA...>
<...AND I'M HERE TO HELP YOU!>

<AHHHHHH! MUCH BETTER!>
<NUMINA, YOUR FRIENDS WHO ARE BATTLING ELSEWHERE WILL SOON BE IN DESPERATE NEED OF OUR HELP...>
<BUT FIRST...>
VARRROOOMMM

MOTH CEMETERY...

NNNGGHHH... HOW DO WE *STOP* THESE GUYS?! THEY KEEP COMING AND COMING...

...AND...WHAT HAPPENED?

I THINK THEIR POWER SUPPLY WAS CUT OFF.

SO, UH, DOES THAT MEAN WE CAN GO HOME NOW?

UNFORTUNATELY...

...NOT YET.

EVERYONE STAY ON YOUR GUARD. THERE IS NO TELLING WHAT THESE VILE CREATURES WILL THROW AT US.

THANK YOU, SIR. YOU ARE VERY KIND.

THAT'S WHAT BEING A HERO IS ALL ABOUT.

★★★★★

FIVE OUT OF FIVE STARS!

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

- GameDaily

NEARLY INFINITE COSTUME CUSTOMIZATION OPTIONS

BUILD MASSIVE FORTRESSES ROOM BY ROOM

BATTLE MONSTERS, HEROES AND OTHER VILLAINS

© 2005 Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NC Interactive, Inc. All Rights Reserved. City of Heroes, City of Villains and all associated logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of Cryptic Studios and NCsoft Corporation. NCsoft, the interlocking NC Logo, and all associated NCsoft logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation. Cryptic Studios is a trademark of Cryptic Studios, Inc. Pentium, Intel, and the Intel Inside logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Intel Corporation or its subsidiaries in the United States and other countries. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA Logo, GeForce and "The Way It's Meant to be Played" Logo are registered trademarks and/or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. All other registered trademarks or trademarks are property of their respective owners.

CITY OF VILLAINS™

Forge your villainous identity, then claw your way to dominance through heists, abductions, and other nefarious activities. Stand alone as a force on the streets or build a lair for your coalition of evil. Do you have what it takes to become infamous? Lord Recluse™ is watching.

WWW.CITYOFVILLAINS.COM

BECOME INFAMOUS WITH INTEL® TECHNOLOGY!

CAN I PLAY WITH THIS ONE FOR A WHILE, LUGHEBU?
OH, YES, ULLUTAY. MAKE HIM SUFFER.
THESE CREATURES MAY HAVE PREVENTED US FROM FREEING MOT, BUT WE ARE MORE THAN CAPABLE OF ANNIHILATING THEM AND THIS HORRID CITY.
LOOK AT THEM, LEAPING TO THE AID OF THEIR FALLEN COMRADE...

...BUT MERELY RUNNING HEADLONG TO THEIR DOOM!
RAMBETU, MY DEAR...THE SPOTLIGHT IS YOURS!
KRAK KOOOOOM
SKRIPPPP
NOOOO!
IT FEELS GOOD TO BE IN BATTLE AGAIN, DOES IT NOT, M'TERU?
KRANNKKK

SPLOOSHH

DON'T WORRY, GUYS!

YOU'LL BE OUTTA THERE IN A SEC--OOOLLPPHHHH!

HEY! YOU JUST JUMPED THE *WRONG GIRL*, MISTER.

HAHAHAHAHA! I SHALL ENJOY THIS...

AH, THE INFAMOUS STATESMAN. CHAMPION AMONG CHAMPIONS. YOUR PROWESS IS *LEGENDARY!*

BUT THEN AGAIN...

...SO IS *MINE.*
IT SEEMS TO *ME* THAT YOU'RE JUST ANOTHER IN A *LONG LINE* OF *BLOWHARDS.*

THAT IS TRUE, HERO...

...THERE DEFINITELY ARE *QUITE A FEW* OF US!

YOU VILLAINS NEVER LEARN, DO YOU?
IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU THROW AT US-- GOOD WILL PREVAIL!
GOTTA HAND IT TO STATESMAN. EVEN WHEN THINGS COULDN'T LOOK ANY WORSE, HE STILL DOESN'T GIVE UP HOPE. THAT'S ONE OF THE TRAITS THAT MAKE HIM A GREAT LEADER.

WIN OR LOSE, HE'LL ALWAYS CONTINUE TO FIGHT-- FOR HIMSELF AND HIS TEAMMATES.

KNOWING WELL THAT YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN THE TIDE WILL TURN.

WHEN A GODDESS YOU'VE NEVER MET WILL COME TO YOUR AID IN YOUR DARKEST HOUR.

WHAPPPPP

THOOOSHHHH
<WILL YOU NEVER LEARN?!>
<NO... IT CAN'T BE...>

<MUST I REPEATEDLY TEACH YOU THE ERROR OF YOUR WAYS?!>
<VERY WELL...>
IT DEFINITELY FITS THIS PARTICULAR SCENARIO:
VNNNNNNNN
THERE'S AN OLD SAYING WE ALL KNOW ABOUT HOW YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW.

VNNNNNNNN
THE BANISHED PANTHEON HOPED THAT THEY COULD TAKE TIELLEKKU'S POWER AND LEAVE HER FOR DEAD.

THE ONE THING THEY DIDN'T COUNT ON WAS THE FREEDOM PHALANX-- AND OUR FRIENDS.

PLEASE ACCEPT MY MOST SINCERE THANKS. THE BANISHED PANTHEON SHALL TROUBLE YOU NO MORE.

AND YOU, NUMINA, SHALL ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE IN MY HEART.
BUT GODDESS, WHERE WILL YOU GO NOW?

HOME.
EVEN BARON ZORIA DID HIS PIECE.

I GUESS THE PROSPECT OF THE END OF HUMANITY MAKES STRANGE BEDFELLOWS.

I JUST WISH HE'D STAYED AROUND FOR THE FESTIVITIES.

AFTER TIELLEKKU TOOK CARE OF THE SHAMANS, SHE AND ZORIA HAD A BRIEF EXCHANGE-- HE ASKED HER ABOUT ERMEETH OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. I DIDN'T HEAR HER RESPONSE BUT HE TOOK OFF...LAUGHING...
TOO BAD. I WOULD'VE LIKED TO THANK HIM.

AFTER A VICTORY LIKE THIS, IT'S IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ALL YOUR TEAMMATES... AND FRIENDS.

BECAUSE ONE THING ABOUT BEING A HERO IS THAT IT'S DEFINITELY A TEAM SPORT.
END.

Paragon City's *ONLY* source for the TRUTH

FANTASTIC FAN ART!

from the City of Heroes Community. PAGE 6

THE PARAGON

TATTLER

July, 2006 $2.75

Strike Hammer

Part Three of Three

PAGE 2

CLOSURE

Bayani chooses to confront his hunter!

PAGE 4

THE FURTHER MISADVENTURES OF

Q-40RCE

PAGE 7

Strike Hammer

Part Three of Three

By Lucien Soulban

It might have been one blow or a dozen, but Troy felt like he was fighting an angry jackhammer. Synapse fought more like an artist, however, darting in to land a succession of blows before darting back out to admire his handiwork. Troy tried to materialize a pulse rifle in his hands, but Synapse fired a crippling surge of electricity that left Troy twitching on the debris-strewn ground.

Troy's body ached, his muscles numb with fatigue and his joints screaming at every inconvenience. His muffled senses felt like he saw and heard everything as though underwater. The HUD flickered and sputtered, his armor fighting hard to discharge the residual electricity.

"Get up!" Synapse said.

Troy tried, but Synapse ran by, kicking out his legs from under him. His armor cushioned some of the blow, but not enough. Troy spun like a discus before crashing to the ground.

Can't go under, Troy thought. If the Arbiters hadn't disabled Citadel's hack yet, he'd be transported out and likely into a Zig sapper cell.

Can't fail this early! Troy's hands shimmered as he reached into one of his tesseracts.

"Hey!" Synapse snapped. In a streak, he rushed in and caught Troy's hand with lightning's grace.

"Too late," Troy said, his voice barely a whisper. The small mine he'd dropped on the ground burst with a muted thump and spread a noxious green cloud through the air. Troy switched to his portable rebreather.

Synapse dropped Troy and backed away. He surrendered a single cough and no more.

"You gotta be kidding me," Synapse said, shaking his head. He grabbed Troy under the arm and lifted him to his feet. "You seriously think that some second-hand smoke's going to stop me?"

"Wasn't trying to stop you," Troy said. "Just distract you."

A small spark discharged off Troy's chestplate. Synapse immediately unleashed an electric surge through him.

Troy's muscles clenched into a single knot, his teeth slamming together. He struck the ground with the elegance of a plank.

"What was that!?!" Synapse demanded. "What did you do?"

It took Troy a moment to speak, his muscles relaxing instantly, but his capacity for speech still shorted out. "Fried--" Troy managed, finally. "Fried my mediport transponder. Emergency beacon won't transport me out and you won't kill me."

"You sure about that?" Synapse said before unleashing lightning from both fists. The wild bolts shattered the earth on either side of Troy's head.

"Calculated risk," Troy admitted, stalling. "Besides … you have other things to worry about."

Synapse heard Brutallia's heavy step; a split second later, her fist cratered the ground where he'd been standing. Behind her, more villains emerged from the mists, their bodies wreathed in the nimbus glow of their powers.

"You expecting these Rocky Horror rejects to save you?" Synapse asked, darting between the incoming blasts of frost and plasma, earth and radiation.

"No … just convince you that you're not taking me back alive."

Within seconds, the assembly of villains descended on Synapse, each one eager for their share of the trophy. To his credit, Synapse wove past most blasts, avoided most blows. It was the culmination of the smaller hits, however, that got to him; and it was through attrition of Synapse's lightning charged blows that one villain after another fell.

Troy knew he had precious few seconds to act. From the tesseract, he pulled a jet injector with a drum barrel of liquid-filled vials, and rapidly pumped five pressure-driven shots into the medpatch slot in his leg armor. Quick clotting agents to stop the bleeding, adrenal cocktails to override the fatigue, calcium-ceramic micro-filaments to repair bones, poly-composite endorphins to numb the roar of pain and synaptic boosters to accelerate his hand-eye coordination.

In the span of seconds, Troy felt like a new man … or rather, an entirely different person. More villains fell to Synapse, their bodies contorted by electrical surges or by his machinegun blows and mach-one clothlines.

Brutallia struggled to stand, her costume shredded more than normal, her plated eye bleeding so profusely that blood coated her face. Troy ran to

her, jet injector in hand. He pumped shots into her neck, bringing her back from the brink of collapse and mediport.

"I'm okay," she muttered.

"She can't help you, traitor!" Synapse said. He dodged the blows from his two remaining opponents, and while his step wavered, he still fought.

A demonic-like creature fell next. "None of these losers can!" and with that, Synapse electrified a woman covered in quills.

"Probably not," Troy said, standing to face Synapse. "But it's still a stalemate."

Synapse moved too quickly for Troy to register. Troy felt the blow a second before he realized the speedster had budged.

Troy landed on his side hard -- but he was still conscious.

"It's a choice," Troy managed, struggling to his feet. "Carry me out. Or fight them."

Synapse paused long enough to glance at the circle of villains unconscious on the ground. Some rose on unsteady legs, ready for Round Two. More villains appeared through the mist, ready to join the fray.

"But I'm betting you can't do both," Troy concluded.

And for the first time in the fight, Synapse hesitated.

Nobody moved. The villains waited for one another to land the first blow, and likely be the first to fall. Brutallia stood, waiting by Troy's side while Synapse considered his options. They all knew he could fight them one and all, but Synapse's advantage had evaporated; he appeared to be skirting exhaustion, unable to fight multiple opponents while still bringing Siege Engineer to justice.

"You're right," Synapse finally admitted. "I can't do both and I won't kill you either. You won. But you should know I'm a sore loser … worse than Manticore. Be seeing ya!" And with that, Synapse exploded into a dead run, straight for Troy.

Troy struck the ground unconscious from the mach-speed blow that propelled him a dozen yards back.

***

The vid-display hovering over the holograph table flickered before the image of the oil tanker vanished. Troy turned to Brutallia and nodded.

"Tell the War Crows to get ready. We attack in an hour."

Brutallia nodded before exiting the room. Troy sighed and sank into his chair, the drone of computers welcome company tonight; he let the noise wash over him.

"How's the jaw?" a woman asked.

Troy spun around his chair and stood, his rematerialized pulse pistol pointed at the shimmering form of a woman who stood before him. She wore white thigh-length boots, a tight one-piece bikini of a costume and a half-shawl of feathers.

"You can't shoot an astral projection," she said.

"Sure I could," Troy replied, his gaze darting to the sides of the room. "Just wouldn't do me any good, right?"

"You're alone," she said. "Your lieutenant is out of earshot."

Troy dropped the gun after a moment, allowing it to vanish as it slipped from his grip.

"I was getting worried, Swan," Troy said. "I hadn't heard from you in a while."

"I thought it best to let you get settled into your role. How's the jaw?"

"Fixed. Bastard broke it in five places."

"Synapse doesn't like to lose. Are you in Lord Recluse's hierarchy yet?"

"Not yet," Troy replied, sinking back into his chair. "They don't trust people that quickly and my brother's gone that extra mile to 'test' me. It'll take months … maybe years."

"Can you stay the course?"

"I have to," Troy said. "Recluse has to be stopped and you folks need all the inside help you can get."

Swan nodded. "Are you all right? In here, I mean," she said, touching her temple.

"Not really. I betrayed the people I care about on both sides of this conflict. If my family knows what I've done, I'm a dead man. And now, even the Freedom Phalanx thinks I'm a traitor."

Swan smiled kindly. "It's necessary. Not everyone is shielded against mind-readers."

"I know," Troy replied. "Just as long as you and Statesman know about Operation Strike-Hammer, that's okay."

A moment of silence passed between them.

"How's Michelle? She wasn't hurt too badly?"

"Only her pride," Swan said. "But she doesn't know she owes you her life. Using your powers to repair her damaged mediport transponder was a good thing."

"Then why don't I feel that."

Swan smiled and reached down, her hand hovering above Troy's. "Nobody said being a hero would be easy."

"Haven't you heard," Troy said, laughing. "I'm not a hero."

"Just because someone doesn't know what you've done for them, doesn't make you any less the champion. Heroism is based on action, not accolades."

Troy nodded. "Thanks," he said.

Swan smiled. "They're coming back."

"I know," Troy said. "You better warn that oil tanker Longbow's using as a secret base off the Pit. We're coming."

"I will." Swan was about to fade away when Troy looked at her.

"You know that day Synapse attacked me," Troy said. "I was hoping he'd win."

"I'm glad he didn't," Swan replied. "Now … go out there and be the hero."

With that Swan vanished just as the room's double doors swung open."You ready, boss?" Brutallia said, striding in.

"Yeah," Troy responded, standing. "It's time to play the villain."

THE END

Closure

By Bayani

The red blur leaped with calculated ease from the electric high wires to the crumbling window ledges, never glancing back at the energy bolts that singed each of his jump points. The path Bayani wove through Warburg would have been challenging enough normally, but the winter ice and wind made each perch downright treacherous. Bayani never stopped to contemplate how risky his strategy was; the slightest hesitation would give his adversary a clean shot.

Bayani chose to confront his hunter in Warburg rather than Paragon City in order to avoid property damage and casualties. The papers described Bayani as "cold" and "aloof." The last thing he needed was for them to add "careless" and "foolhardy" to the list. Bayani's mentor had trained him to follow his instincts and focus on the present moment. Coupled with confidence and a dry wit, Bayani's persona tended to alienate many of his peers, though he never truly cared much about impressing others to begin with. Bayani considered saving lives the only real priority. There were many things he could never outrun, no matter how fast or high he leaped. Failure was one. The Paragon Protector on his tail was another.

The blue and gold streak pursued Bayani across the industrial skyline, matching Bayani's breakneck speeds and determination. Countess Crey was not one to be trifled with, but that had not stopped Bayani from investigating Crey Industries. While the general public believed Paragon Protectors were heroes for hire, Bayani had discovered the real truth: Crey Industries cloned the Protectors from stolen hero DNA and deployed them for a variety of unethical practices. And despite Bayani's efforts to avoid conflict until he planned his next steps, the Countess had different holiday plans in mind.

"You know, a lump of coal would've been an easier gesture!" Bayani taunted as he somersaulted to the next rooftop. That last torrent of energy had

missed him by mere inches.

The Protector may have been frustrated, but Bayani could not tell. She never spoke and wore a faceless helmet that masked her expression. Noticing that he was about to run out of cover, Bayani switched gears and dropped straight down onto the beach, using his agility to avoid the Protector raining death from above. As he danced through the onslaught of energy, the sand began to stir, giving Bayani the inspiration he needed.

Bayani somersaulted high into the sky and blasted the banks of sand with fire, obscuring his chosen battlefield with a makeshift sandstorm. He disappeared amidst the swirling clouds before springing like a leopard at his surprised opponent. Bayani staggered the Protector with a fiery uppercut in mid-air. As gravity took its course, Bayani pulled his stunned opponent down with him and continued to pummel her with a dizzying array of fire and energy until they were grounded. Gripping his assailant by her collar, Bayani blasted her helmet off then pulled her back up for a knockout strike. As the sandstorm dissipated, Bayani eyed his unmasked opponent and inhaled sharply.

"Bree?" he whispered. Bayani dropped the Protector as painful memories resurfaced. Struggling with guilt and remorse, Bayani turned to the easiest option available. He ran.

But the Protector was already rising and found her opportunity. The concussive energy numbed Bayani's reflexes, causing him to buckle from the shock. As Bayani reeled, the Protector crushed him with a thunderous blow and sent him crashing into

the short cliffsides that bordered the sandy shores. The impact caused the wall of rock to shake violently. Before Bayani could struggle to his feet, the cliffs imploded, burying him in an avalanche of boulders and dust.

Seeking to confirm the death of her target, the Paragon Protector blasted through the rubble to retrieve Bayani. Upon finding her quarry, she yanked the unconscious Filipino by his collar from the landslide, tearing a strip of red cloth from his jacket in the process. Bayani's breathing was shallow and blood flowed freely from an unsightly gash on his forehead.

Still clutching a shred of Bayani's costume in her fist, she charged her deadly energy and prepared the final blow.

And yet…

Despite her Crey programming, the clone paused. She was overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu. She glanced at the red cloth in her fist and then at Bayani. Her blue eyes fluttered with confusion as strange memories flooded her mind. The memory transference programs to complete the cloning process had been an all or nothing deal. To avoid potential issues, Crey locked the memories that would otherwise debase the clone's servitude. Bayani's barrage had loosened her memory locks, but it seemed that fate took care of the rest. As days rushed through her mind in mere seconds, the Paragon Protector broke her silence.

"Why does this seem so familiar?"

***

Five Years Ago…

The sun splashed the sky with a blaze of orange and red as two college students soaked in the beautiful view. Kris and Sabrina spent the entire afternoon on that beach, but exchanged few words that day. Their relationship had developed past the need for any. For over eight years, Kris and Bree grew up as rivals, friends, and soul mates. After a few more quiet moments, Bree fetched a red headband from her pack and tied it around Kris's head.

"I made this from my old costume from that time I beat you in the tournament," she grinned as she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and kissed his cheek. "It'll bring you luck."

Kris smiled softly, his new headband fluttered in the breeze a bit. He relaxed in her arms as he recalled that battle. They trained together for the tournament, but ended up meeting in the finals. While evenly matched, her experience had been the key.

"I didn't lose on purpose."

"I know. But remember what you said to the reporters afterwards? You said, 'Yes, she was the only woman to compete. But don't cheapen her success and say the men took her lightly. Sabrina fought challenging odds and beat everyone.' "

"I remember. My shoulder still aches, you know."

She giggled and punched his left shoulder gently, before settling into a more comfortable position. The chemotherapy left her weak and tired, but she was able to relax in Hawaii, far away from the hustle and bustle of New England. Sensing Sabrina's discomfort, Kris shifted positions and cradled her in his strong arms. Bree sighed contently and leaned into his chest as he kissed the top of her white bandana.

"That's when I really knew that I wanted share the rest of my life with you," she smiled, looking up into his eyes. "How do you say 'hero' in Tagalog?"

"Bayani."

"My bayani," she sighed melodramatically. A hint of mischief crept into her smile.

"Like you need a hero, lady," Kris smirked. Growing up, Bree had a chip on her shoulder but he always admired her strong will and candor. Bree was no damsel in distress, even in spite of her battle with leukemia. She was always quick to point out otherwise, with an energy blast or two.

Bree laughed with him, though her strength was fading. Feeling disoriented, she closed her eyes to ward off the sudden vertigo. She battled with everything she had against the fatigue that overwhelmed her, but despite how hard she fought, her end drew closer.

"Kris?" she whispered softly.

"Yes, Bree?"

"I'm … sorry," she mumbled as her last breath escaped her lips.

"For what?" he asked quietly before he realized what was happening.

***

Continued page 8

FANTASTIC FAN ART!

Ascension
By Liz

Statesman Rendering
By Anthony Goodsell

Transformation
By Lynn Daniel

Korr
By Timmy Poe and Colors By Arnold Soriano

Q4ORCE
THE MIGHTY MODERATELY AVERAGE SUPER TEAM
by Aaron Williams www.ps238.com
YOU'RE BACK! DID YOU DEFEAT THE LEADER OF THE FIR BOLG?
WE SURE DID!
IT WAS EPIC. YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN IT!
ACTUALLY, WE JUST DUG A PIT AND SET UP A SNARE--
SHUSH. DON'T BORE HIM WITH DETAILS.
THIS... SUPERNATURAL THING IS WHAT'S BEHIND CROATOA'S TROUBLES?
NOT QUITE, BECAUSE THE HEAD OF THE FIR BOLG IS REALLY...
PROFESSOR HYDE-WHITE!
A DISGUISE? I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WHY?
HE JUST DRESSED LIKE A FIR BOLG CREATURE TO SCARE EVERYONE AWAY WHILE HE STOLE REMBRANDT PAINTINGS FROM THE COUNTY MUSEUM.
AND I WOULD'VE GOTTEN AWAY WITH IT IF IT WEREN'T FOR THESE MEDDLING KIDS!
HE'S NOT BUYING IT.
DO I STILL GET MY TWENTY BUCKS?
DID ANYONE TELL YOU TO SAY SOMETHING?
FOR THE RECORD, THEY SAID IF I TOLD YOU ABOUT THIS SCHEME, MY NEW HERO NAME WOULD BE "KRAKEN CHOW."
I THOUGHT THIS MISSION WAS TOO EASY. I SWEAR, HALF THE TIME I THINK YOU BOYS ARE WORKING FOR LORD RECLUSE'S DUMBER BROTHER OR SOMETHING...

Closure

Continued from page 5

There were no memories for Bree to recall after that moment, save for the disjointed ones Crey developed for her since her creation. As for Bayani, his race had begun that fateful evening. The moments that followed have been a blur as he raced to distance himself from the pain.

The Bree clone discharged her energy harmlessly and knelt behind the fallen Bayani. She tore off a strip of gold cloth from her pants leg and tied it around Bayani's head to stem the bleeding. Time grew short for Bree again as the broken memory locks inadvertently activated the fail-safe device in her cerebral cortex. Crey's safeguards ensured the Protectors would never leak classified information should they be captured. As the device caused her nervous system to deteriorate rapidly, Bree managed to finish dressing Bayani's wounds.

Afterwards, Bree wrapped her arms around Bayani and rested her head on his shoulder. Her quiet sobbing caused Bayani to stir. His muscles ached horribly but Bayani summoned his chi to dull the pain and rebuild his strength. As he regained his senses, Bayani grew alarmed and struggled in Bree's arms.

"Shh … it's ok. We … you'll be ok," the Paragon Protector said as tears streamed down her cheek. Her body began to convulse and twitch violently as the deterioration continued. "Just hold me, please?"

Bayani touched the makeshift headband and looked up at copy of the woman who got away. Thrusting aside his misgivings, he tugged his gloves off and warmed his hands with soft, soothing energy. He slipped his arms around Bree gingerly, and comforted her as best he could.

"I'm sorry, Kris. I've let you down, haven't I?"

"Never," Bayani replied firmly, shaking his head. He brushed the sand and tears from her cheek. "I miss you, though."

"I know … I'll miss you too," she choked, closing her hands over his. She squeezed gently as Bayani's energy slowed her seizure. She closed her eyes and drew tighter into Bayani's arms.

"You never let me down either, Kris," she whispered, struggling through the pain. "Just promise me you won't forget that I …"

I love you too, Bayani mouthed, interrupting her. Her blue eyes sparkled brilliantly while she read his lips. With the last of her strength, she gave him a lingering kiss to remember her by. Bayani ran his fingers through her chestnut brown hair as she grew still in his arms. He closed her eyes, shedding tears of his own as he buried his face in her shoulder.

The race ended and this time, Bayani stopped.

The Paragon Tattler Fan Art & Fiction Submission Guidelines are now Online! FOR THE SCOOP ON HOW YOU CAN BE A TATTLE-TALE TOO VISIT US AT http://www.cityofheroes.com/community/fansubmission_guidelines.html

---

The Fine Print

You acknowledge that by using the software that NC Interactive, Inc. ("NCI") makes available (the "Software") from our web site, currently http://www.cityofheroes.com (the "Web Site"), for a massively multiplayer subscription-based comic book hero role-playing game service (the "Service") you will have access to graphics, sound effects, music, animation-style video, content, layout, design, files, data, characters (and items and attributes associated with characters), game objects and text (collectively, "Game Content"). Neither NCI nor Cryptic Studios, Inc. ("Cryptic") pre-screens Game Content as a matter of policy, but has the right (not the obligation) to remove at any time Game Content that it deems harmful, offensive, or otherwise objectionable.

You acknowledge that NCI, Cryptic and their Game Content providers have rights in their respective Game Content under copyright and other applicable laws, and that you accept full responsibility and liability for your use of any Game Content in violation of any such rights. NCI, Cryptic and their Game Content providers grant you the right to use the Game Content for noncommercial, personal purposes, including in connection with creating fan fiction or fan web sites regarding the same. However, you acknowledge and agree that you shall not reproduce, prepare derivative works based upon, distribute, publicly perform, or transmit any Game Content for commercial uses without first obtaining the express written consent of NCI. For clarification purposes only, "derivative works based upon" Game Content are works that are substantially similar, both in ideas and expression, to the Game Content. If a work created by you or someone other than NCI or Cryptic (or their Game Content providers) is likely to bring to mind the Game Content, then it is likely that such work is a derivative work of the Game Content, which may not be used for commercial purposes.

You can upload to and create content on our servers in various forms, such as in selections you make and characters and items you create for City of Heroes, and in bulletin boards or similar user-to-user areas ("Member Content"). By submitting Member Content to or creating Member Content on any area of the Service and/or throughout the world, you (a) warrant that your Member Content is your own original work, which does not violate any rights of any third party (including, without limitation, any patent, copyright, trademark or other intellectual property right, or any privacy, publicity or publishing rights), and (b) acknowledge and agree that such Member Content is the sole property of NCI and Cryptic Studios and assign to NCI and Cryptic Studios all right, title and interest, including copyright, in and to the Member Content. NCI or Cryptic, in their sole discretion, may edit and modify the Member Content. To the extent that NCI cannot claim exclusive rights in Member Content by operation of law, you hereby grant (or you warrant that the owner of such Member Content has expressly granted) to NCI and its related Game Content providers a non-exclusive, universal, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free, sublicenseable right to exercise all rights of any kind or nature associated with such Member Content, and all ancillary and subsidiary rights thereto, in any languages and media now known or not currently known.

The Paragon Tattler: Community Section
Editor: Jesse Scoble; OCR, NCsoft Design: Hoss Fatemi, Andrew Hunter and Jessi Marshall; Creative Services, NCsoft®

WWW.TOPCOWSTORE.COM

PRINTS • CONVENTION EXCLUSIVES • BACK ISSUES & MORE

LIMITED EDITIONS

ALL AVAILABLE NOW!

VISIT US ONLINE AT **WWW.TOPCOWSTORE.COM**
FOR MORE EXCLUSIVE MERCHANDISE

© 2006 Top Cow Productions, Inc. "Witchblade," the Witchblade logo, and all related characters and likenesses are registered trademarks of Top Cow Productions, Inc. "Cyberforce," the Cyberforce logo, and the likenesses of all featured characters are registered trademarks of Top Cow Productions, Inc. All rights reserved.

Diabolical Physics

In-game PhysX-driven footage

PhysX™ by ageia

Make It Real.

With the AGEIA™ PhysX™ Processor powering leading gaming systems from Dell™, Alienware™ and Falcon Northwest™, as well as PCI expansion cards from BFG and Asus, the future is bright for advanced gaming physics. Titles like NCsoft's City of Villains™ are pushing the gaming experience to the limit with AGEIA PhysX as their exclusive physics solution. In addition to AGEIA PhysX driving physically-based interaction and motion at the server level, players with AGEIA PhysX boards will now experience amazing smart particle effects, pervasive object destruction and debris, delivering a whole new level of realism to multiplayer villainy!

AGEIA PhysX boards are available now from PC makers and board manufacturers.

TEEN T Violence Suggestive Themes

CRYPTIC STUDIOS

NCSOFT

physx.ageia.com

© 2006 AGEIA Technologies, Inc. AGEIA and the PhysX logo are trademarks of AGEIA Technologies, Inc. All Rights Reserved. All Trademarks are property of their respective copyright holders.
© 2005-2006 Cryptic Studios, Inc. and NC Interactive, Inc. All Rights Reserved. City of Villains and all associated logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of Cryptic Studios and NCsoft Corporation. NCsoft, the interlocking NC Logo, and all associated logos and designs are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation. Cryptic Studios is a trademark of Cryptic Studios.