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CITY OF HEROES

TRADING PLACES

Part 1

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PRINTED IN CANADA

SIREN'S CALL WAS ONCE A POPULAR WATERFRONT DRINKING AND DINING DESTINATION IN PARAGON CITY...

...UNTIL THE HERO KNOWN AS SUNBURST INADVERTENTLY UNLEASHED A MASSIVE NUCLEAR EXPLOSION UPON THE SMALL-TIME BURGLAR HE WAS PURSUING-- INSTANTLY VAPORIZING BOTH OF THEM AND DESTROYING AN UNSUSPECTING COASTAL COMMUNITY.

OH, YEAH. HEY FINISHLINE, REMEMBER THE LAST TIME WE WERE HERE? WHEN CRAZY UNCLE JESSE THREATENED TO MAKE YOU WALK THE PLANK OF THAT SCHOONER?!

JEEZ-- LOOK AT IT NOW!

YEAH, IT'S REALLY SOMETH--

CHECK IT OUT, JACK! I TOLD YOU THIS PLACE WOULD BE WILD!

WITH ITS WAR WALLS DAMAGED BEYOND REPAIR AND ELEVATED RADIATION LEVELS, THE CITY DECLARED THIS AREA A HAZARD ZONE--OFF LIMITS TO CITIZENS AND HEROES ALIKE.

RECENTLY, THOUGH, RUMORS OF STRANGE ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA HAVE LURED SOME HEROES BACK.

HANG ON, PIT STOP.

THERE'S SOMETHING WEIRD OVER HERE.

I'M STILL NOT SO SURE ABOUT BEING HERE. AND WILL YOU PLEASE REMEMBER TO CALL ME BY MY HERO NAME? I AM YOUR MENTOR, AFTER ALL.

FINISHLINE AND PIT STOP ARE TWO SUCH HEROES, TRYING TO DISCOVER WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON IN SIREN'S CALL.

HUH?

BUT MAYBE SOME MYSTERIES ARE BEST LEFT UNSOLVED.

JACK-- LOOK OUT!

THE BURST P-CHN





TRADING PLACES

Part 1



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



M EANWHILE...

SOME DAYS I HATE TO COME TO WORK.

AN ABOMINATION IS WHAT IT IS.

THE USE OF DEADLY FORCE IS EXPRESSLY FORBIDDEN, MANTICORE. WE'RE HEROES-- OR HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT?

THE MAN SPEWING ALL THE HYPERBOLE IS CALLED STATESMAN. AND, IN MY DEFENSE, I DIDN'T KILL THE VILLAIN IN QUESTION, I KINDA TURNED HIM INTO GOO. BUT I KEEP THAT DISTINCTION TO MYSELF.

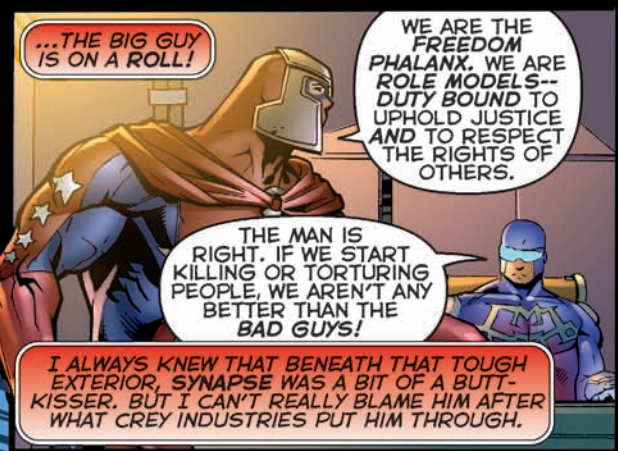


AND IF YOU HAVEN'T GUESSED, THE GUY GETTING BROWBEATEN IS ME.

NO, SIR.

C'MON, CHIEF. AREN'T YOU BEIN' HARD ON THE GUY? I MEAN, PROTEAN WAS AS BAD AS THEY COME! YOU CAN'T EXPECT US TO JUST--

THAT'S SISTER PSYCHE. SHE ALWAYS HAS MY BACK. I'M NOT SURE IF I TELL HER OFTEN ENOUGH HOW MUCH I APPRECIATE THAT. NUMINA AND CITADEL, ON THE OTHER HAND, DON'T HAVE MUCH TO SAY-- BUT WHO CAN BLAME THEM...



...THE BIG GUY IS ON A ROLL!

WE ARE THE FREEDOM PHALANX. WE ARE ROLE MODELS-- DUTY BOUND TO UPHOLD JUSTICE AND TO RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS.

THE MAN IS RIGHT. IF WE START KILLING OR TORTURING PEOPLE, WE AREN'T ANY BETTER THAN THE BAD GUYS!

I ALWAYS KNEW THAT BENEATH THAT TOUGH EXTERIOR, SYNAPSE WAS A BIT OF A BUTT-KISSER. BUT I CAN'T REALLY BLAME HIM AFTER WHAT CREY INDUSTRIES PUT HIM THROUGH.



YOU WEREN'T THERE, STATESMAN. BACK ALLEY BRAWLER TOLD ME PROTEAN WAS ABOUT TO KILL HIM! MANTICORE SAVED HIS LIFE*!

FOR GOD'S SAKE, HE HAD NO CHOICE.

WELL SAID, MS. LIBERTY.

*SEE LAST ISSUE FOR DETAILS.



THERE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE. EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY WE ARE FACED WITH CHOICES THAT COULD POTENTIALLY DETERMINE THE FATES OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE! WITH OUR GIFTS COMES AN OBLIGATION TO MAKE THE PROPER CHOICE. TO UPHOLD-- AND OBEY-- THE LAW-- AT ALL COSTS!

FOR THE ALTERNATIVE... IS A DARK, DARK PLACE INDEED.

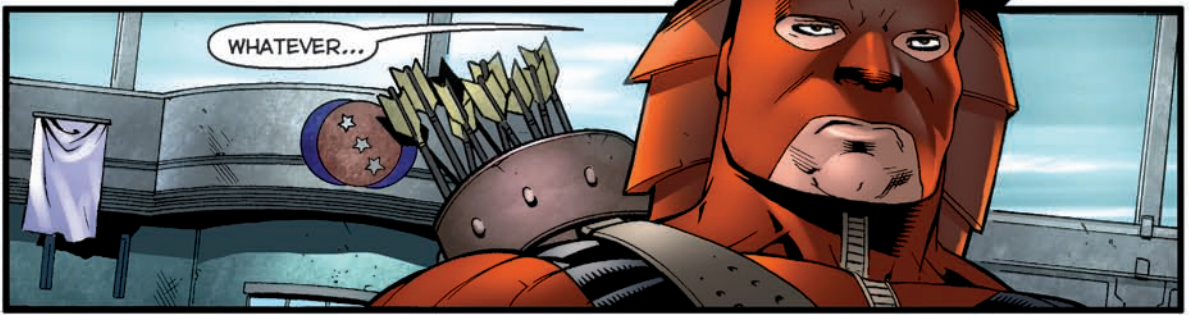
THIS DEBATE IS OVER. I'VE MADE MY DECISION.

MANTICORE,
YOU ARE HEREBY
SUSPENDED FROM
ALL CRIMEFIGHTING
DUTIES...
INDEFINITELY!

YOUR BOW,
PLEASE.

≡GASP≡





WHATEVER...



:KOFF: SIR?
MANTICORE.
:KOFF: SIR?



PLEASE-- PLEASE-- I
NEED YOUR HELP! MY
COUSIN AND I-- WE-- WE
WERE AT SIREN'S
CALL-- AND THIS THING
CAME DOWN AND-- IT
KNOCKED HIM OUT-- IT
AND I JUST RAN--
AND RAN.

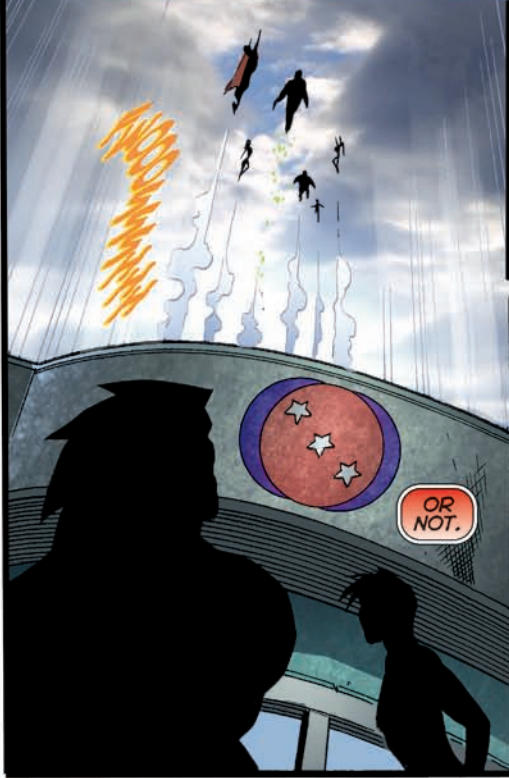
YOU NEED
TO GO
THERE! ALL
OF YOU
GUYS!



LOOK, I FEEL FOR YOU,
KID. I REALLY DO. BUT
UNFORTUNATELY I CAN'T
HELP YOU.

WH--
WHAT DO YOU
MEAN?

JUST GO IN THERE
AND TELL SOMEONE
YOU NEED HELP.
THEY'LL HOOK
YOU UP--



OR
NOT.



I-- I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO
DO, SIR. SOMEONE NEEDS
TO LOOK INTO IT!

I-- ALL
RIGHT.
DON'T
WORRY,
KID.



I'LL
TAKE CARE
OF IT.

WITH ITS ENTHRALLING COMBINATION OF OLD-WORLD ARCHITECTURE, FRIENDLY NEIGHBORS, AND THE MASSIVE MOTH CEMETERY THAT DOMINATES ITS LANDSCAPE, DARK ASTORIA WAS ONCE A BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBORHOOD.

BUT IT WAS IRREVOCABLY TRANSFORMED WHEN THE BANISHED PANTHEON ATTEMPTED TO FREE AN ANCIENT EVIL THAT WAS IMPRISONED DEEP BENEATH THE CEMETERY.

THE PANTHEON FAILED IN THEIR ATTEMPTS, BUT THEIR DARK MAGICKS TOOK THEIR TOLL ON DARK ASTORIA, TURNING IT LITERALLY INTO A GHOST TOWN, WHERE BANISHED PANTHEON HUSKS ROAM THE STREETS, UNABLE TO EVER FIND PEACE.

AND FOR THE VILLAIN GROUP KNOWN AS *FREAKSHOW*, IT'S BECOME A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN TAKE PART IN ONE OF THEIR FAVORITE PASTIMES-- *ZOMBIE ROUNDUP!*

WELL, BOYS, IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER THAN THIS!

THAT'S TWO MORE FOR ME!

CAN YA BEAT THAT DISTANCE, KARL?

MIND IF WE HAVE A GO AT IT, CLAMOR?

GREAT...



...IT'S THE
**FREEDOM
PHALANX!**



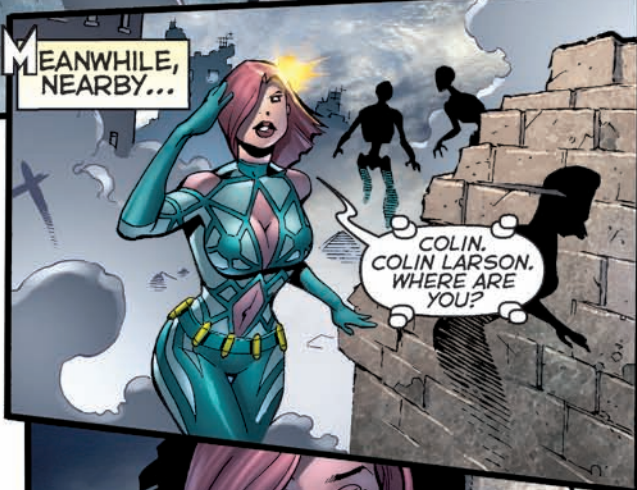
YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO RUIN A GOOD TIME, HERO.

JUST DOING OUR JOBS.

I LOVE TAKING ON THESE FREAKS!

KEEP TALKIN', CHUMP.

MEANWHILE, NEARBY...



COLIN, COLIN LARSON. WHERE ARE YOU?



SISTER PSYCHE. I HEAR YOU. I'M SORRY. I WAS JUST MONITORING THE FREAKSHOW-- WONDERING WHAT BROUGHT THEM HERE-- BUT THESE ZOMBIES-- THEY'RE EVERYWHERE!

IT'S OKAY, COLIN. I'M GLAD YOU CALLED US.



I'LL HAVE YOU OUT IN A SEC.






I JUST
NEED A LITTLE
BREATHING
ROOM.



SOME MASS
CONFUSION
SHOULD
DO THE TRICK!



C'MON!
I'LL TAKE YOU
SOMEWHERE
SAFE.



THIS'LL
DO. I'LL BE
BACK WHEN
THE COAST
IS CLEAR.

THANK
YOU, SISTER
PSYCHE.
THANK ALL OF
YOU...BUT...
WHERE'S
MANTICORE?



LONG STORY.
SUFFICE IT TO
SAY THAT HE'S
BEEN A BAD
BOY...

"...AND PAPA STATESMAN GAVE HIM A TIME OUT."

PART OF ME THINKS I SHOULD JUST BE A GOOD SOLDIER AND FOLLOW STATESMAN'S ORDERS. ACCEPT MY PUNISHMENT. DO MY TIME.

NAH. THE PEOPLE NEED ME.

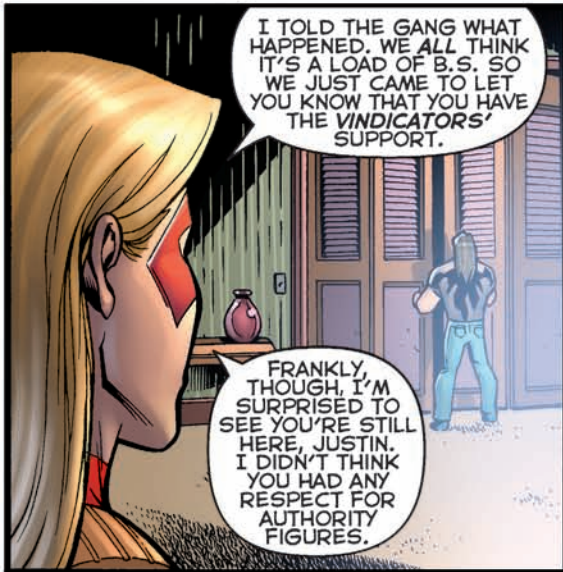
AT LEAST I CAN TELL MYSELF THAT.

DOESN'T ANYONE USE THE FRONT DOOR ANYMORE?!

MIND IF WE COME IN?

MIND IF I ASK WHY YOU'RE HERE?





I TOLD THE GANG WHAT HAPPENED. WE ALL THINK IT'S A LOAD OF B.S. SO WE JUST CAME TO LET YOU KNOW THAT YOU HAVE THE VINDICATORS' SUPPORT.

FRANKLY, THOUGH, I'M SURPRISED TO SEE YOU'RE STILL HERE, JUSTIN. I DIDN'T THINK YOU HAD ANY RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY FIGURES.



I DON'T.

I TOOK A NAP.



BUT NOW I HAVE SOME BUSINESS TO TAKE CARE OF.

AND, TO BE HONEST, I WOULDN'T MIND SOME BACKUP.



YOU GUYS IN?



I CAN'T SPEAK FOR STATESMAN'S SIDECICK OVER HERE, BUT I'M IN.

IN THIS CASE, THE PUNISHMENT DEFINITELY DID NOT FIT THE CRIME. I'M WITH MYNX. SWAN?



MANTICORE ALWAYS HAS MY SUPPORT.

I'LL TELL THE OTHERS.

ELSEWHERE...

YOU OUGHTA
LIGHTEN UP A
LITTLE, STATESMAN.
SEE HOW THE...
NGH... OTHER
HALF LIVES...

NO,
THANK YOU,
CLAMOR.

WAIT. HANG ON A SEC.
THIS MAY SOUND TRITE-- BUT
SERIOUSLY-- YOU WOULDN'T
HIT A WOMAN, WOULD YOU?

NO.

HMPH...

... I'M
INSULTED!





NOW'S ABOUT THE TIME WHEN YOU TURN YOURSELF IN AND SAVE US BOTH A LOT OF TROUBLE...

WHY DON'T YOU JUST...

...EAT THIS!

KZZAPPPP



YOU DON'T GET TO READ MUCH, DO YOU?

'CAUSE IF YOU DID, YOU'D KNOW THAT THE ONE THING YOU SHOULD REALLY TRY TO AVOID USING AGAINST ME IS THIS.

YEEEAAGGHHH!

OH WELL...

...MAYBE NEXT TIME.

WHAM!



CHECK THESE OUT, HERO!



AIN'T YOU GONNA DEFEND YOURSELF?

ARE YOU FINISHED YET?

GOOD.



AIN'T NOBODY EVER SURVIVED THAT BEFORE. YOU AIN'T HUMAN!



NO. I'M NOT.



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GET 'IM!

I MUST ADMIT I FIND ALL THIS ATTENTION FLATTERING...



... BUT I'M AFRAID I MUST ASK YOU TO STOP!



NO.



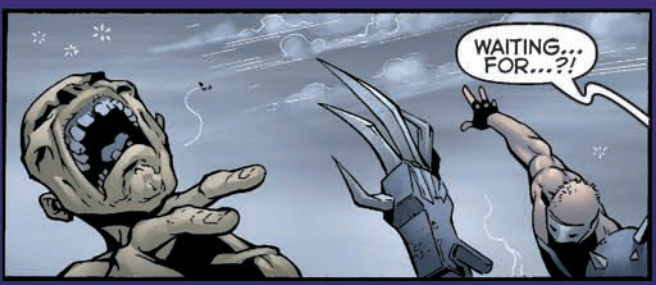
NO!



...IT'S NOT OVER YET, DAMMIT.



TAKE COVER!





WHA--
HOW DID YOU--
YOU--



SISTER
PSYCHE. I
SHOULD'VE
KNOWN.
I'LL BET
YOU'RE ALL SO
PROUD OF
YOURSELVES...



I'D
HAVE TO
SAY...



...YOU'RE
RIGHT!



I KNOW WHAT
YOU'RE THINKING,
SHALICE, AND
YOU'RE RIGHT.
WE MAY
HAVE WON TODAY.
BUT IT'S NOT THE
SAME WITHOUT
HIM.

WHICH
REMINDS
ME...



"...I SHOULD PROBABLY PAY HIM A VISIT!"

HMM. THIS TECH LOOKS VERY FAMILIAR.

ARACHNOS.

HEY, JUSTIN, HOW'RE YOU HOLDING UP-- HEY-- WHAT'RE YOU DOING OUT?

OH, YOU KNOW, THE USUAL. SAVING THE WORLD AND WHAT NOT.



SERIOUSLY, SHALICE, YOU GUYS WERE BUSY AND SOMEONE CAME LOOKING FOR HELP. I PROMISE I'LL GO STRAIGHT HOME AS SOON AS WE'RE DONE HERE.

OKAY-- BUT I'VE GOT MY EYE ON YOU.

SPIDERS. I HATE SPIDERS.

BUT WHY WOULD ARACHNOS BE HERE--?!



LET'S ASK THEM...



SURREEEE

BRANKK BRANKK

BRANKK BRANKK



MANTICORE! WHAT'S GOING ON OVER THERE? DO YOU NEED HELP?

I--NO--IT'S ALL UNDER CONTROL.



I LOVE WATCHING THESE GUYS. IT REMINDS ME OF THE WAY THE FREEDOM PHALANX USED TO BE, BACK IN THE EARLY DAYS.

GREAT SHOT, INFERNAL-- OH-- MALAISE-- LOOK OUT!

THESE GUYS WERE ONCE JUST SIDEKICKS OF OURS, AND NOW THEY'RE FULL-FLEDGED HEROES, THEMSELVES. AND GOOD TEAMMATES, TOO.

DID I MENTION HOW MUCH I HATE SPIDERS?

HOLD THAT THOUGHT, MYNX...



... 'CAUSE IT LOOKS LIKE THEY HAVE FRIENDS.



OUCH.

NOW THAT WAS UNCALLED FOR!

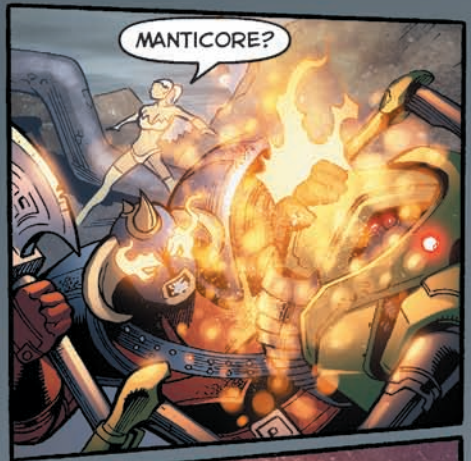


VERY GOOD TEAMMATES.

WHICH MAKES ME FEEL EVEN WORSE ABOUT WHAT I'M GOING TO DO NEXT...



MANTICORE?



MANTICORE? WHERE ARE YOU?



THAT'S TWO DOWN...



HNH?!



ONE TO GO!

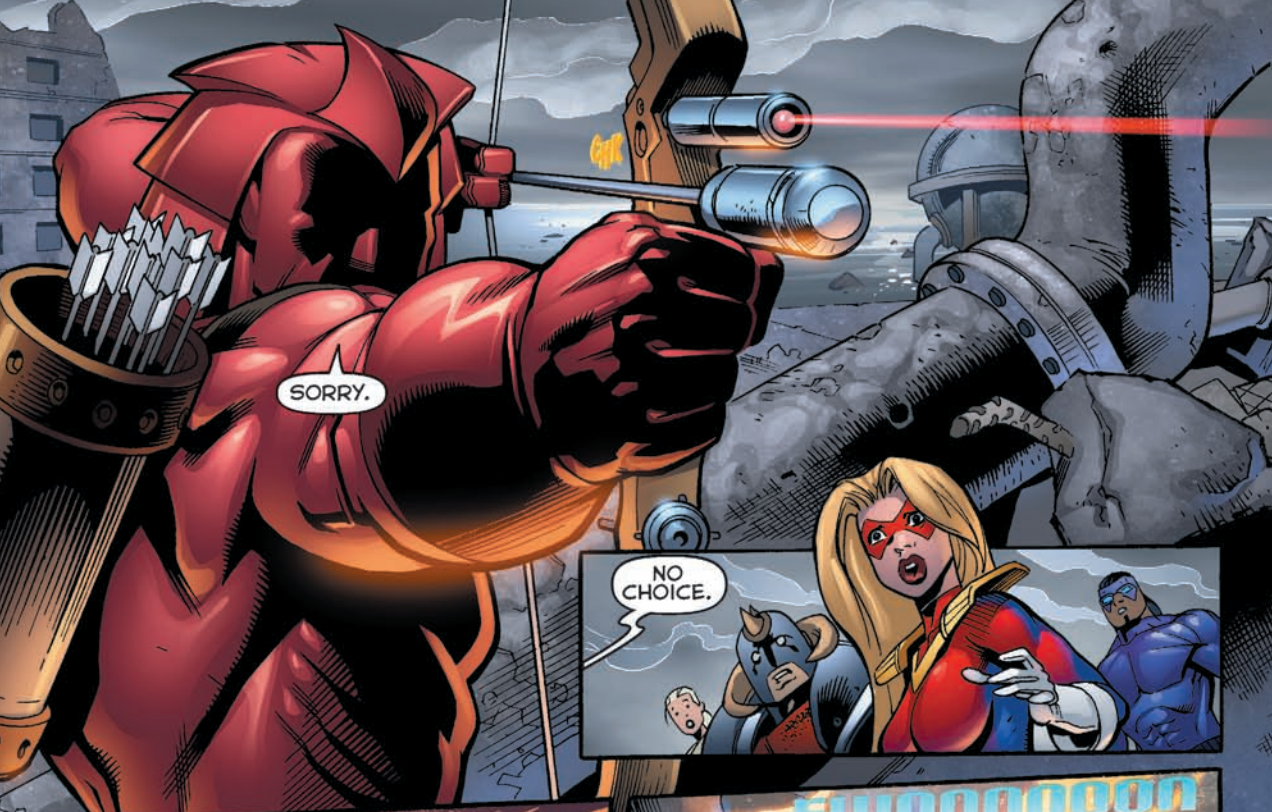


MANTICORE?!

JUSTIN???

WHY?





SORRY.

NO CHOICE.



LET'S GO.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Paragon City's *ONLY* source for the TRUTH



FANTASTIC FAN ART!
from the City of Heroes Community. PAGE 6

THE PARAGON TATTLE

March, 2006

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The Hardest Part of Becoming a Hero...



ZOT ARRIVAL: PART 2
PAGE 2



TURN THE OTHER COAT

PAGE 4

THE FURTHER MISADVENTURES OF
Q-4ORCE

PAGE 7



Zot Arrival: Part Two

By Robert Bergeron (Roughtrade)

“Name?”

“Elisabeta Mechitbayeva.”

She looked up at me and sighed. I shrugged. Tan’ari jostled the desk, receiving a sour look from her that had him scuttling back a step or two.

This time I noticed the tag, which read “Lydia, Administrative Hero Helper” pinned to her sweater. She leveled her gaze at me. “Is that really the name you want to be known by?”

“Umm ... no?”

“Well then, what would you like to be known as?”

“What was it you called me before?” I asked her. “Miss Mecha.”

“Sorry.” She said after she tapped at the keys. “It’s taken already.” She hit another key. “So are several variations on it. Ms. Mecha. Missus Mecha. Mecha Maid. Mecha-underscore-Maid and even Mecha Made.”

She looked up at me. “What’s your second choice?”

“Ummm ... I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about this part.”

“No one ever does.” Lydia sighed. “Oh you heroes complain about it. ‘Why can’t we decide on our names first?’ But do they really put any thought into what they want to be called? No.” I winced as she sighed again. “Never mind, we can come back to it. What are your powers?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re going to be a super-powered hero, right? That is why you’re here?” She said, looking up again. “How do you plan to do it?”

“Tan’ari has thorns! Many thorns!” The imp hopped ecstatically before she glared at him, wordlessly sending him back a step as he snapped his mouth shut with a click.

“Oh, well my suit is armored, high impact resistance and insulation.” I replied quickly, before he could get into more trouble. “And I can generate an electrical current up to a terawatt--”

“Hold on a second.” She interrupted. “You’re only being granted level one security access at the moment. You can’t just go blasting out a terawatt of power, not until you’ve proven yourself. Keep it down to 10 or 12,000 volts if you don’t mind. When you move up in classification, you can crank up the amps.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I responded, quietly deciding to not mention the stasis field generator I was working on. “Until the people of Paragon know that I’m not more of a threat than the ones I’m arresting, I

understand that there will be some restrictions.”

“Tan’ari can--”

Lydia snorted harshly and turned a withering glare on Tan’ari, stopping him before he said another word. He clapped both hands, paws, over his mouth and I wondered if “Glare” could be her own personal super power. It certainly seemed handy.

“Uh-huh. Anything else your power suit does?” She asked, pulling her gaze up to ignore Tan’ari, and once again smiling politely at me.

“Well beyond the protective features and a small amount of muscular amplification, not really.” I told her, hoping to not be on the receiving end of one of those scornful frowns. “It has a radio receiver, but most of my auxiliary functions were damaged when I came through the portal from my own home. I’m working on fixing the stealth field generator, and my gravitic compensator barely lifts me more than half a foot.”

“Good.” She answered. “We prefer that lower security personnel restrict themselves to ground level anyways. But that’s all explained in the handbook in your complimentary apartment.

“Standard issue for all heroes, you will receive a modest allowance, deposited in a blind trust. Your security card permits you to draw funds from any ATM, but do not lose it. There’s a code key required so it will be difficult for someone to access your account, but the paperwork to replace them is complicated.

“The quarters are nice, if a bit bland,” she continued. “You will also be issued a radio transceiver, which you can integrate into your personal systems if you like. It has several modes of operation.

“Broadcast mode is open to everyone, though it is blocked by the War Walls. You can look for other heroes who might be out and about, try to find friends, or solicit advice from more experienced heroes. Then there is the Request Channel, which is higher priority. We ask that you restrict chatter on Request to calls for help or true emergencies, but nothing really prevents you from asking for help in Broadcast or trading cookie recipes in Request. Please refrain from discussing politics or religion on either channel.

“The transceiver is also capable of limited multiplexing that allows for you and up to seven others to establish a private channel. This permits you to coordinate tactics and keep track of each other without spamming the airwaves. Team channel is very useful for small groups.”

I mentally filed the information and resolved to convert output from the transceiver into a print mode for my heads up display. No way was I going to actually listen to a hundred odd heroes all talking at the same time. If anything important was said, I

could always have my internal computer highlight and scroll it back for me.

“Now then, we still need a name.”

“Huh?” I had become distracted.

“You need a name so I can finish filing you on the server.”

“Server?” Tan’ari chirruped. “Am here to serve, not be served.” And then he ducked behind me before Lydia could fully focus her stunning stare on him.

“Yes, yes.” She settled for shushing him. “I’ll get to you in a moment.

“We have eleven supercomputers here at City Hall to track all the heroes contracted. There are redundancies, of course, but your primary information is going to be kept on Liberty, which is the

“What about Zot?” Realizing he was safe from Lydia’s Evil Eye, Tan’ari continued to try to be helpful. “Lightning goes ZOT!”

“Only in cartoons.” I scoffed.

“It’s not taken.” Lydia said, blinking in surprise. “I can’t believe it. Zot is available.”

I looked at the grinning devilkin, who smiled even more broadly. What the heck, why not. “Sure. I’ll take it.” I told her. “Zot. It’s easy to remember.”

“Tan’ari helped Blue Armor Lady!”

“Favor for a favor.” I nodded at him as Lydia entered it. There was a bright flash as the camera on her monitor took my picture and then the printer on her desk hummed and spat out my ID Card.

Tan’ari tried to follow when I got up and in the

end I stayed to help with registering the impatient imp. He appeared to have adopted me and his blissfully merry attitude made it difficult to turn him away. We were issued passes to board the tram for the Hot Zone where he went a little nuts and captured over fifty of the infected thugs wandering loose in the streets. Coyote issued us a special citation, proving in the process that he was as nice, and as flirty, as gossip in the Ladies Room had predicted.

We passed the initial tests, and were transported back to Galaxy City where I volunteered for an assignment against the Clockwork. I had to know if my suspicions of them were true.

Three months ago I had arrived in this Paragon City, a refugee from the Rikti domination of my home. It was very possible that my father in this dimension was a lunatic king of wind-up toys, that my mother had died before they ever met and that I had never been born. I was a stranger in a familiar land. I was homeless. But as I watched Tan’ari launch himself into a trio of Helions, bouncing off of them like a pinball, I realized I wasn’t friendless. I had a purpose, a quest, and my own personal attack imp. What more could any self respecting blue armored lady ask for?



name given to the server that is connected to my system here.

“But before I can register you and give you your Identification Card, I need a name.” She sighed. Her sighing was like an art form, or possibly her defensive power. “Before you ask, just about every variation on ‘Lightning’ is already taken. Every bad spelling, hyphenated, scrambled and suffixed thing one could think of has already been done.”

“Why not name of Blue Armor Lady?” Tan’ari asked. “Is how you look.”

“I don’t think so.” I rolled my eyes.

Turn the Other Coat

By Aron Liaw

Giulio lit his next cigarette from the embers of the last. The last few rattled softly in the pack as he stowed it in his coat, and he wondered how long he'd been here, stamping his feet against the cold night fog that rolled in over Crey Cove. Several smokes worth, that much was certain. On nights like this, it was hard not to smoke, as a panacea against the damp and chill if nothing else.

No amount of nicotine could calm his nerves tonight, though. Every time a car rattled along the bridge overhead, every time a distant headlight or blinking buoy momentarily illuminated the roadside shadows

where he stood, his heart skipped, and a shiver ran down his spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

Giulio kept telling himself this was the right thing to do. The honorable thing. Before he died, Boss Carmine had always said that the Family looked after everyone; that was why they were a Family. The police, they just looked after the rich folk and corporations. The Family was there to represent the interests of the other people. And that was why Boss Carmine had never gotten involved with these newer gangs; their interests were, so to speak, out of the scope of the Family's interests. "No good can come of it, Giulio," he'd said.

But Boss Carmine was gone now; even he couldn't beat old age. And almost as soon as he'd gone, the Superadine had started rolling in. Giulio had seen the effects of 'Dyne on those addicted to it – convulsions, psychoses, mutation. And that was for Superadine that was pure – the contaminated gunk that came out of the jury-rigged Troll and Warrior street labs produced effects that were the stuff of nightmares.

Despite that, 'Dyne remained all too popular

among the kids in the neighborhoods, the ones that hoped to take a quick and easy road into the new Boss's favor with a few flashy super powers. Too many of them reminded Giulio of himself as a kid, hanging with his crew and doing legwork for the Button Men, before his gang grew up and joined the Family proper. And too many of them were getting seduced by the lure of 'Dyne, and not growing up at all.



It was one thing to disagree with the direction your Boss was taking you. It was quite another, though, to take the step that Giulio was taking, and call the Paragon Police. "Informant" was the dirtiest word the Family knew – a betrayal of every principle the underworld had.

Yet that was what he was now. Or soon would be, as soon as his anonymous police contact showed up. Many sleepless nights had gone into this decision – he was betraying men whom he might have called brother, in happier times. He was betraying his Family, selling them out. At least he wasn't doing it for something as dirty as money, not like that rat fink Johnny Gambini, who was now sleeping with the fishes somewhere out there in Independence Port's black water. Giulio fought to tell himself that this was the principled thing, repeated it to himself over and over in his head. Fat Tony wasn't doing right by the Family. This isn't what the Family stands for. This isn't right. I'm doing the right thing, he insisted. I'm doing what Boss Carmine would have told me to.

His own life was the least of his concerns, which was fortunate, since turning stoolie guaranteed an early grave if he were found out. Giulio

worried about the younger kids in the Family, about what might happen to them when the police and heroes started cracking down. He also worried about his blood relatives – his aunt in King’s Row, his sister and her husband and kids down in New York. They’d be dead too, if he were discovered – the Family made sure the consequences of betrayal were well known.

He heard a new sound above the rhythmic slap of waves against the bridge pylons. Giulio squinted out at the water, before realizing that the sound wasn’t coming from out there at all, but

Giulio ground his teeth. “Boss Carmine woulda tossed gimps like you out long before you could disgrace his name.”

“Boss Carmine ain’t boss in these parts any more.” The Capo’s voice grew hard now, and one of his henchmen flicked out a switchblade with a harsh, sibilant hiss. The blade caught a stray scintilla of light, almost appearing to ignite for a second. “Boss Antonio calls the shots now – just a shame not everyone can get that through their heads.”

“Fat Tony?” Giulio scoffed. “He’s still a



rather from the shadows further along the path where he stood. Three men emerged from the shadows, not ten feet away, and Giulio’s blood turned to ice in his veins.

“Giulio, Giulio, Giulio,” the lead one chanted softly, an unpleasant smile on his crooked lips. “It’s mighty cold out for a constitutional, wouldn’t you say?” He shrugged deeply into his long woolen trench coat theatrically.

“I got nothing to say to you mooks,” Giulio said with a slight sneer. Somehow, the knowledge that he was dead had brought with it a certain calm. There was no indecision – there wasn’t any going back now.

“Course not, Giulio,” Capo Manolo continued, conversationally. “But I bet you’d have had a lot to say to the cops, hmm?”

Giulio’s hand closed around the butt of the pistol in his pocket, more for reassurance than anything else. Maybe he’d be able to take one of them with him. “How did you know about that?”

“Oh no, my friend,” the Capo tsked in reply. “Can’t give away all of the Family’s secrets. I could tell you, of course, but then – I’d have to kill you.” He and his men shared a brief, nasty laugh.

dirtbag – just a dirtbag in a cheap suit now.” The three men bristled, and the one with the knife ran the flat of the blade menacingly over his unshaven cheek.

“You’ll die quick, Giulio, one way or another,” he said. “But your sister and her kids ... we’ll make sure they scream.” Manolo snapped his fingers, gesturing to the knife man.

“You always were a punk, Manolo,” Giulio growled, and went for his gun.

Giulio never got it out of his pocket. Without warning, Manolo’s henchman gave out a surprised grunt and slapped his free hand up against one of the wooden pylons, then drove his own switchblade through it. The knife sunk into the wood with a sickening crunch. The henchman’s scream of pain was cut off abruptly, though his mouth continued to work soundlessly, his lips forming curses and cries of pain. Then, as if jerked by an invisible string, he snapped his head forward viciously, slamming it into the pylon, before passing out, dangling obscenely from one hand like a broken marionette.

Continued page 8

FANTASTIC FAN ART!



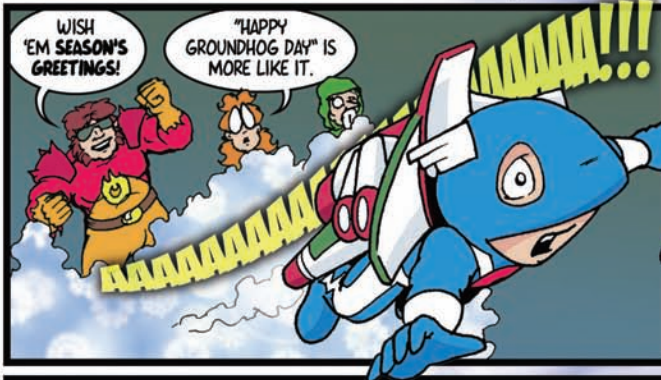
**Super Group:
Safe Harbor**
By Ross
(a.k.a. Antaeon)



Al-Djinn
By Tristan Erickson

The Cape
By Sharon
(a.k.a. Star of America)





Coat

Continued from page 5

“What – ?” Capo Manolo looked around in shock, his own pistol out but pointing aimlessly at whatever unknown enemy had incapacitated his companion. Manolo looked to his other henchman, but he was curled up on the path, covering his head in his hands.

“No...” the big man blubbered, shaking and weeping like a child. “Please ... no ... no more monsters...” Bewildered, the Capo stared at Giulio as if expecting him to somehow be doing this, but then his face went blank. Manolo’s eyes crossed grotesquely, and his gun slipped from nerveless fingers. A moment later, both he and the pistol hit the ground with a solid thump.

Giulio stepped forward cautiously, still in shock. Slowly, his senses returned, and he became aware of a car engine growing louder. “Your contact is here, Giulio,” a soft voice said just over his shoulder, and he whirled, raising his gun.

A slender figure melted out of the shadows before his eyes, a ghostly form in black and grey, almost a shadow itself. It was a man though. A dark hood and blue crystal visor obscured his eyes, but an enigmatic smile played across his lips, and he lifted a gloved finger slowly. “Put the gun down,” he said, and Giulio’s hand opened of its own accord, his fingers refusing to obey him.

“Where did you come from?” he demanded, his voice quavering only slightly.

“Been here the whole time, actually,” the man said, kneeling to gather up the weapons from the

incapacitated gunmen. “I just haven’t let you see me.” Giulio leaned over him, peering intently at his hooded face.

“I heard of you,” he said slowly, wagging a finger that was now back under his control. “They call you Spyware. Tommy Francone saw you – you busted him and his whole crew when they were doing a deal last month in Platinum Lake. They went down and turned themselves in – begged to be locked up. Jimmy the Geek’s still in hospital – thinks he’s a dog.”

Spyware nodded. “Your friend Tommy has a strong mind – I couldn’t fully erase his memory.” He stood up, the edges of his armored suit hissing slightly as they glided over each other. “Oh, and for what it’s worth, I think you’re doing the right thing, too.”

Giulio’s mouth worked soundlessly for a moment – he felt the irrational urge to plug his ears with his fingers, as if that might stop his thoughts leaking out. Instead, he said haltingly, “Hey ... my family –

– had the sudden urge today to go to the police and place themselves into protective custody,” Spyware finished for him. He pulled the edge of his hood down a little, turning away.

Giulio stared down at the whimpering Button Man for a long moment, watching him curl into a fetal position and start sucking his thumb. “Hey,” he called after Spyware, “hey ... thanks.” His voice was lowered now, in gratitude. “Thanks – I won’t forget this.”

Spyware shot a half-smile over his shoulder. “Sure you will.”

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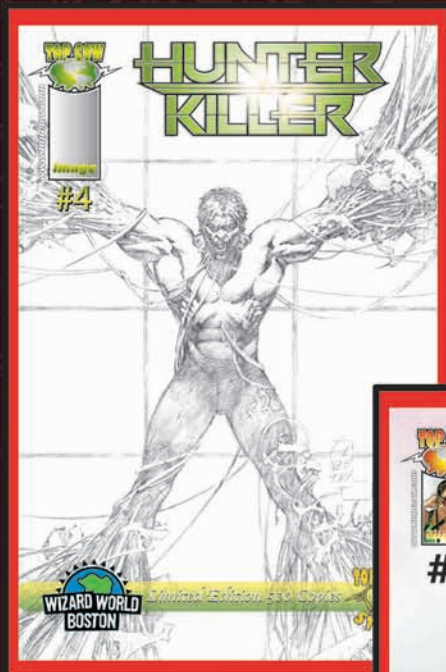
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