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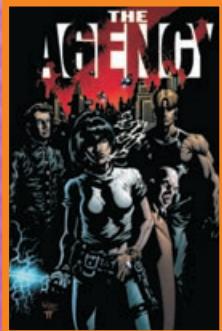
THE DARKNESS:
LEVEL 3



WITCHBLADE #104



THE AGENCY
VOL. 1 TPB



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LADIES' NIGHT

ANTI-MATTER
...CAN YOU HEAR
ME NOW?

WHILE THE FREEDOM PHALANX WAS ON PRAETORIAN EARTH RETRIEVING A STOLEN DIMENSIONAL NAVIGATION MODULE, MS. LIBERTY AND THE VINDICATORS SPENT THEIR TIME SAFEGUARDING PARAGON CITY.

UPON RETURNING TO FREEDOM PHALANX HEADQUARTERS, MS. LIBERTY DISCOVERED THAT STATESMAN BROUGHT SOMETHING ELSE BACK WITH HIM. HER GRANDFATHER HAD "RESCUED" DOMINATRIX, MS. LIBERTY'S PRAETORIAN DOPPELGANGER, IN ORDER TO SHOW HER A DIFFERENT LIFE IS POSSIBLE.

UNFORTUNATELY, EVERY PLAN HAS ITS FLAWS. AFTER SEVERAL DAYS OF UNSUCCESSFUL DISCUSSIONS, STATESMAN HAS ASKED HIS GRANDDAUGHTER TO TAKE DOMINATRIX ON AN EVENING TOUR OF PARAGON CITY, TO SHOW HER WHAT PARAGON CITY IS LIKE.

MS. LIBERTY, THIRD GENERATION SUPER. DOMINATRIX, JAGGED LITTLE PILL.
A POTENTIALLY VOLATILE MIX FOR A NIGHT ON THE TOWN...

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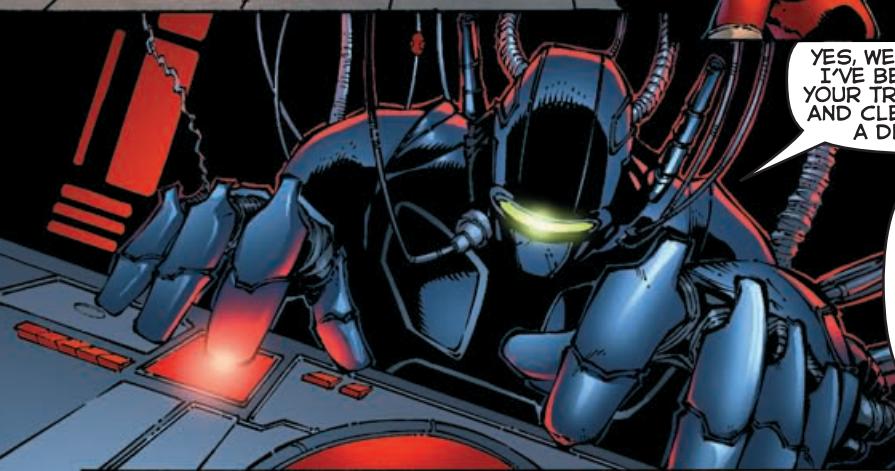
OF COURSE
I CAN HEAR YOU,
DOMINATRIX. I DESIGNED
THE COMMUNICATOR
YOU'RE WEARING.



THAT WAS
SUPPOSED TO BE A
JOKE, A-M. SOMETHING
I HEARD ON THE
TELEVISION. NEVER
MIND.



I JUST
WANTED TO MAKE
SURE THIS THING
WAS STILL WORKING
BEFORE MY BIG
NIGHT ON THE
TOWN.



YES, WELL... IT'S WORKING.
I'VE BEEN RECEIVING ALL
YOUR TRANSMISSIONS LOUD
AND CLEAR, DESPITE BEING
A DIMENSION AWAY.



ARE YOU
SURE THEY DON'T
SUSPECT YOU'RE IN
CONTACT WITH ME? MY
TECHNOLOGY PREVENTS
THEM FROM INTERCEPTING
YOUR TRANSMISSIONS AND
THE MENTAL BLOCKS
MOTHER MAYHEM PLACED IN
ALL OF US SHOULD KEEP
SISTER PSYCHE OUT OF
YOUR HEAD, BUT I STILL
THINK I SHOULD JUST
PULL YOU OUT
OF THERE.



ARE YOU
TRYING TO BE MY
GRANDFATHER, TOO?
TWO OF THOSE
ARE ENOUGH
ALREADY!



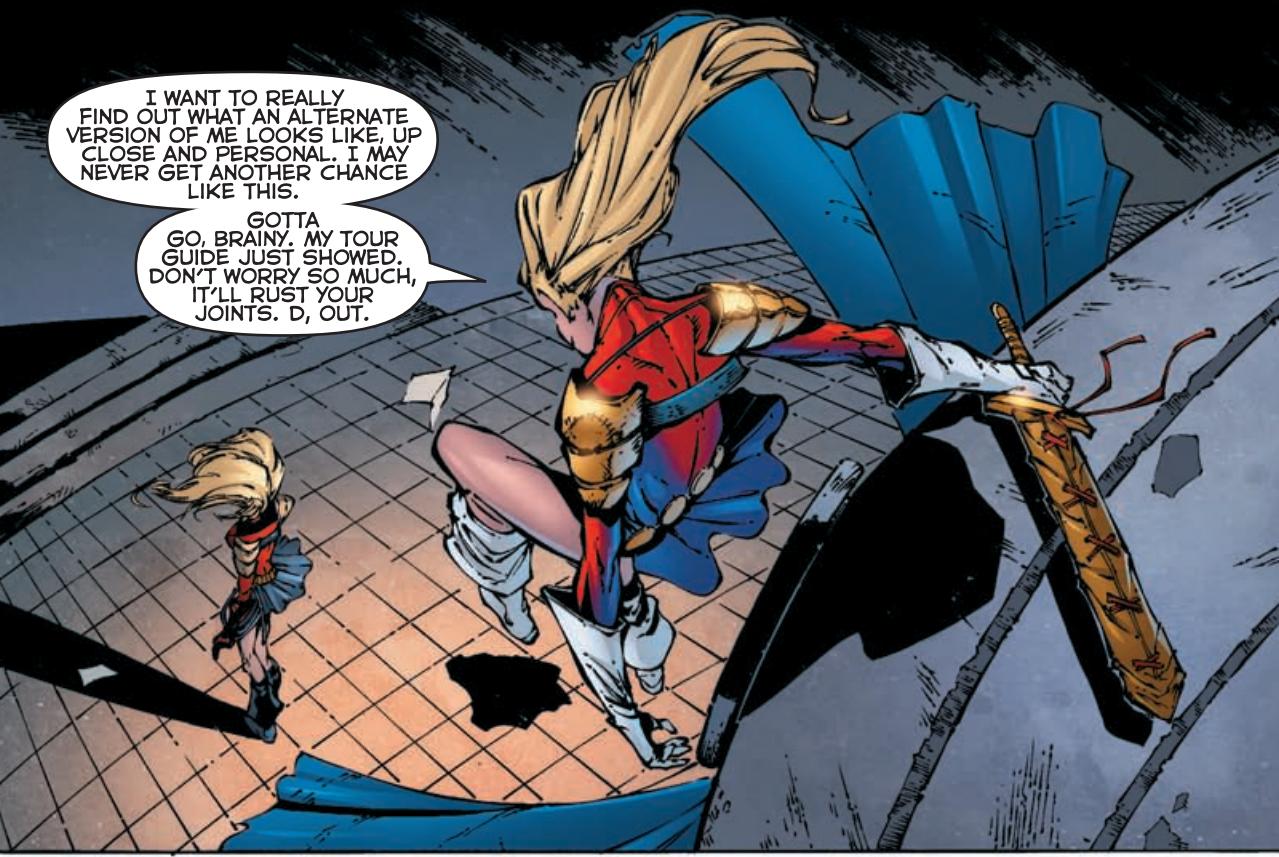
THEY DON'T HAVE A CLUE
I CAN LEAVE WHENEVER I WANT. I
WAS A LITTLE WORRIED ABOUT THAT
MANTICORE BOZO AT FIRST. HE'S GOT
A LITTLE OF THAT SPY-GUY VIBE THAT
CHIMERA PUTS OFF, BUT GRANDDADDY
STATESMAN TOLD HIM TO BUTT
OUT. SO IT LOOKS LIKE CLEAR
SAILING FROM HERE.



JUST WATCH YOUR STEP, DOMI. I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY YOU ARE SO INSISTENT ON STAYING.

I WANT TO REALLY FIND OUT WHAT AN ALTERNATE VERSION OF ME LOOKS LIKE, UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL. I MAY NEVER GET ANOTHER CHANCE LIKE THIS.

GOTTA GO, BRAINY. MY TOUR GUIDE JUST SHOWED. DON'T WORRY SO MUCH, IT'LL RUST YOUR JOINTS. D, OUT.



WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE FILLY OF FREEDOM. READY FOR OUR HOT DATE?

LOOK, I'M NOT ANY HAPPIER ABOUT THIS THAN YOU ARE, BUT LET'S JUST TRY TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT. OK?



AU CONTRAIRE, SUFFRAGETTE, I COULDN'T BE MORE EXCITED ABOUT TONIGHT. WHERE TO FIRST?



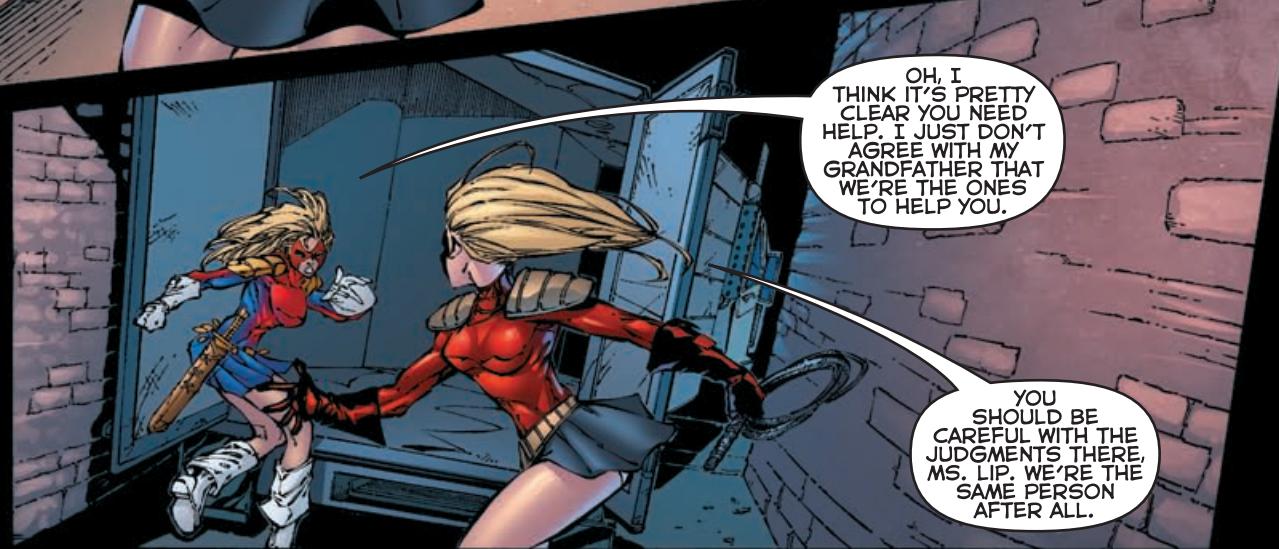
TO A CLUB CALLED POCKET D. WE'RE MEETING SOME OF THE VINDICATORS THERE.



RIGHT, YOUR LITTLE SUPERGROUP. THAT SOUNDS FUN. SO...WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU THINK STATESMAN HOPES TO ACCOMPLISH HERE?

I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW. I THINK HE'S OPERATING UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT YOU CAN BE REHABILITATED. PERSONALLY, I THINK HE'S DELUSED.

I AGREE. WHO SAYS I NEED REHABILITATION?



OH, I THINK IT'S PRETTY CLEAR YOU NEED HELP. I JUST DON'T AGREE WITH MY GRANDFATHER THAT WE'RE THE ONES TO HELP YOU.

YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL WITH THE JUDGMENTS THERE, MS. LIP. WE'RE THE SAME PERSON AFTER ALL.



LET'S GET ONE THING CLEAR RIGHT NOW. WE ARE NOT THE SAME PERSON!

MY, MY. WHAT SHINY, RED, CANDY-LIKE BUTTONS YOU HAVE. THIS IS GOING TO BE FUN.



LET'S JUST KEEP MOVING. THE OTHERS ARE WAITING FOR US.



YOU GET TO THIS PLACE FROM THE BACK OF A TRUCK? WHAT KIND OF CLUB IS IT?

IT'S IN A POCKET DIMENSION CREATED BY THE OWNER, HENCE THE NAME.



WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE DYSFUNCTIONAL DUO. WE WERE STARTING TO WORRY YOU TWO HAD TORN EACH OTHER APART.

SETTLE DOWN, MYNX. WE'RE TRYING TO HELP THE SITUATION HERE, REMEMBER.

SWAN'S RIGHT. BESIDES, WE HAVE SOME DANCING TO DO.

GOOD CALL, LUMINARY. LET'S GET INSIDE.

NO FORMAL INTRODUCTIONS, LIBERATION LASS? DON'T FORGET THAT TO ME THESE THREE LOOK LIKE BOBCAT, BLACK SWAN, AND NIGHTSTAR FROM MY WORLD. WELL, SORT OF LOOK LIKE THEM ANYWAY.



WE JUST SAID ALL OUR NAMES. HOW DUMB ARE YOU? AND BY THE WAY, IT'S MY JOB TO MAKE FUN OF MS. LIBERTY'S NAME.



OH, REALLY? AND WHAT DO YOU USUALLY CALL HER.
STATESMAN'S SIDECHICK.

MYNX!

SIDECHICK!
THAT'S HILARIOUS!
I HAVE TO SAY
YOU'RE MUCH
LESS FERAL
THAN BOBCAT.

DON'T
PUSH ME OR YOU'RE
GONNA FIND OUT
JUST HOW FERAL
I CAN GET.

AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE TO SEE
THAT, WHY DON'T WE HEAD INTO
THE CLUB INSTEAD?

DON'T LAG,
'TRIXIE, YOU'LL
MISS ALL THE
FUN.

HEY,
LUMINARY, DID YOU
KNOW THAT THE VERSION
OF YOU FROM MY WORLD
IS CALLED NIGHTSTAR AND
IS PATTERNED ON MY
PERSONALITY? SO FAR THIS
WHOLE ADVENTURE IS A
BIT LIKE TALKING TO
MY MIRROR.

SO, ARE
YOU THE
FAIREST ONE
OF ALL?

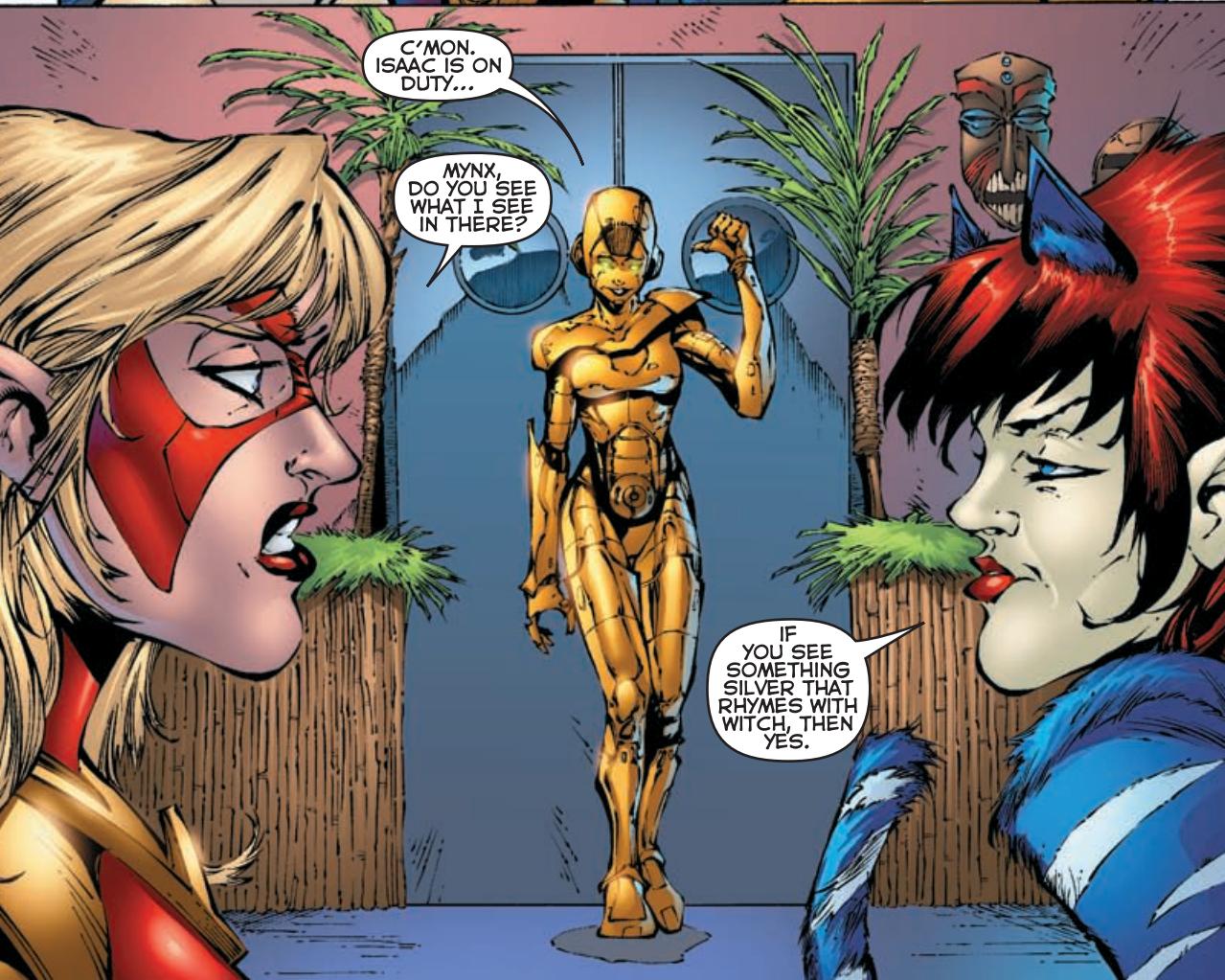
OF
COURSE...
BUT I ALREADY
KNEW THAT.

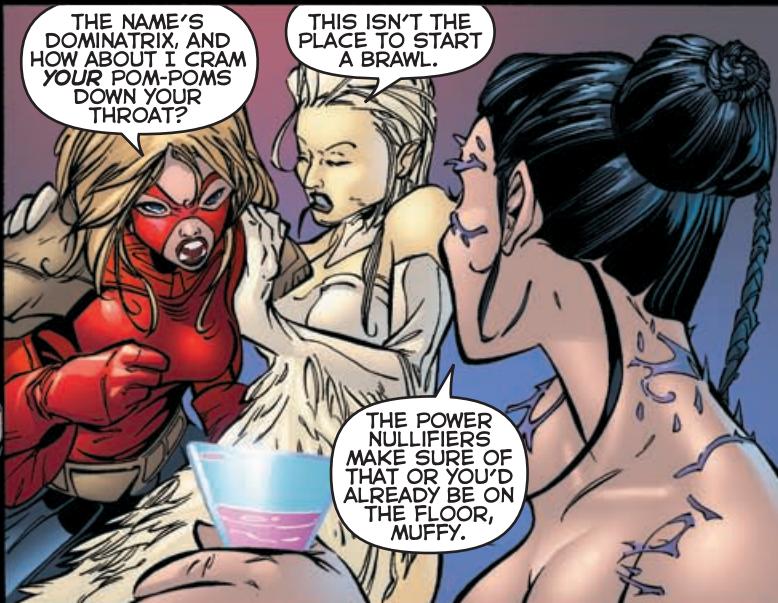


♪ N-TSH...
N-TSH...
N-TSH... ♪

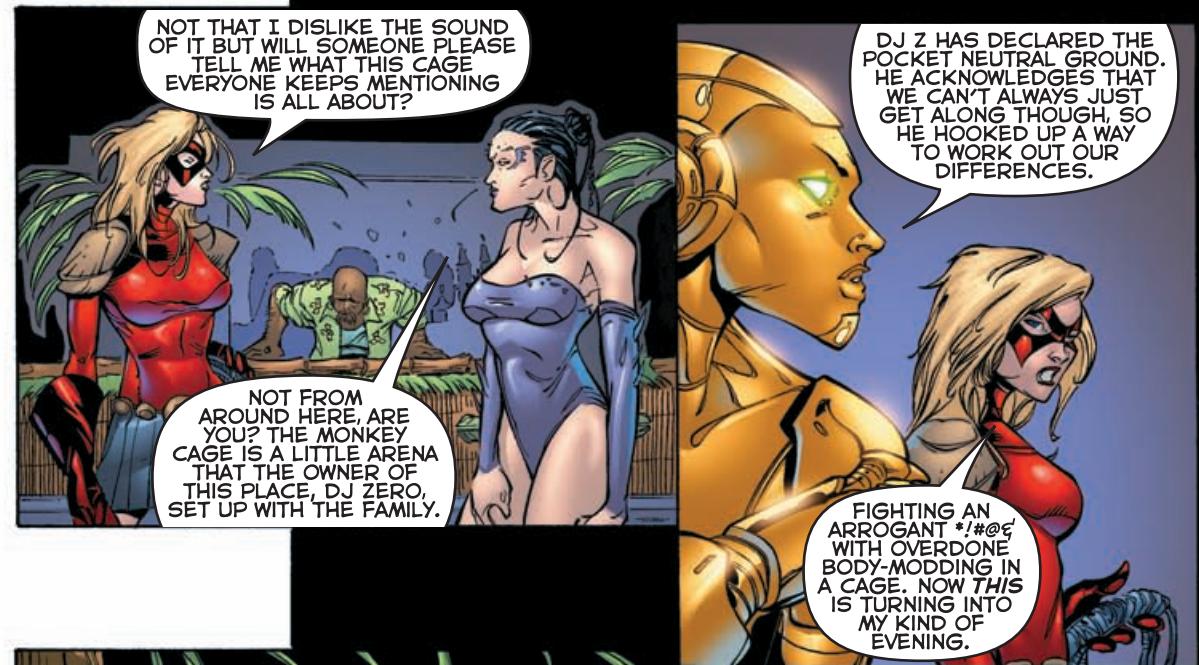
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♪ N-TSH...
N-TSH...

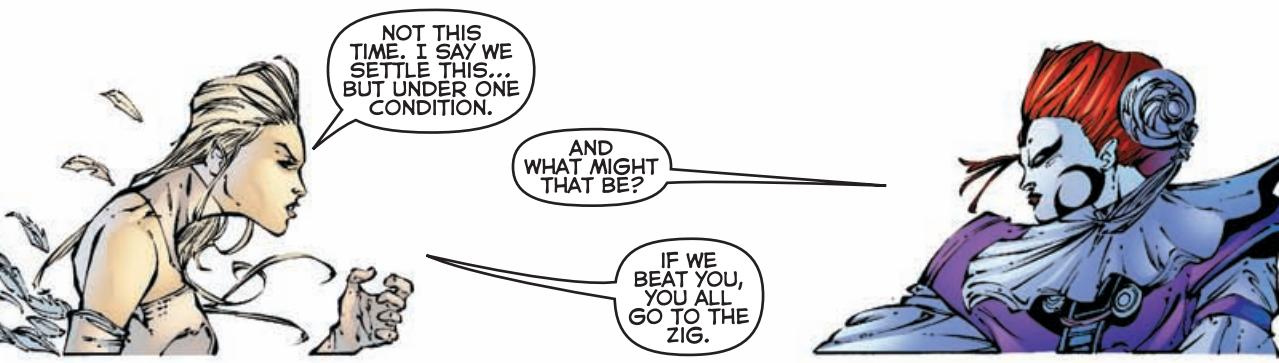
N-TSH... ♪
♪ N-TSH...
N-TSH... ♪

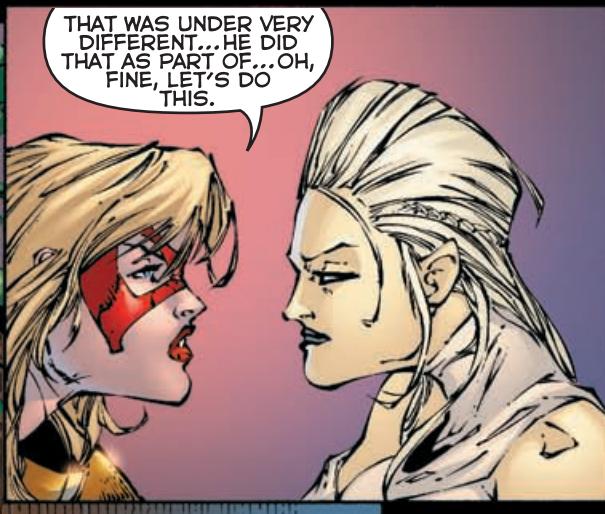
















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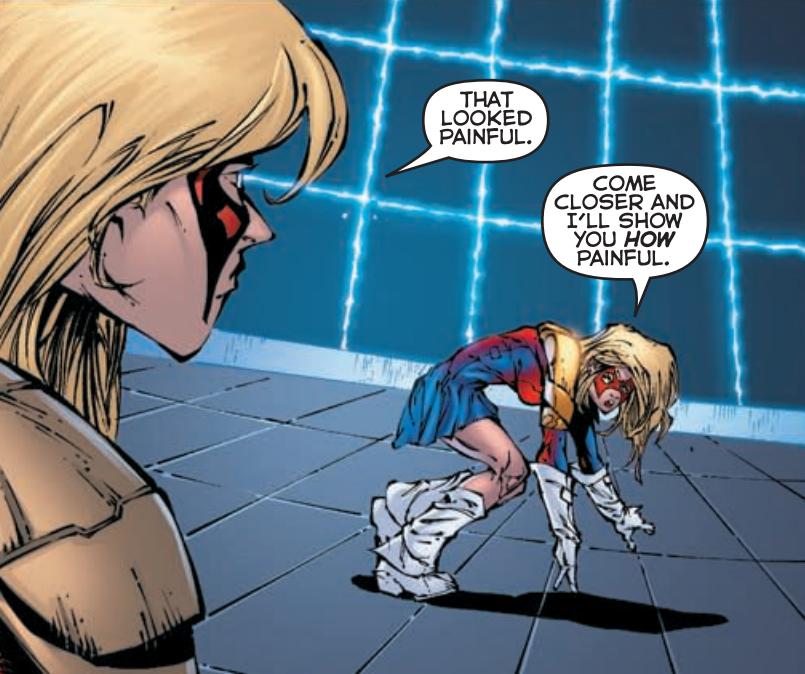
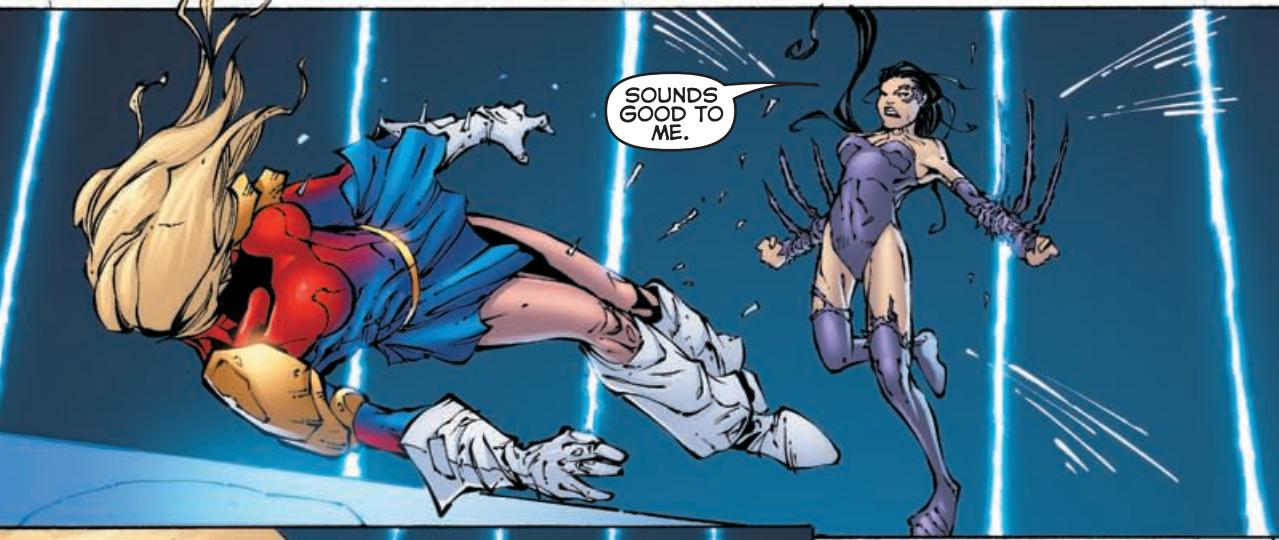
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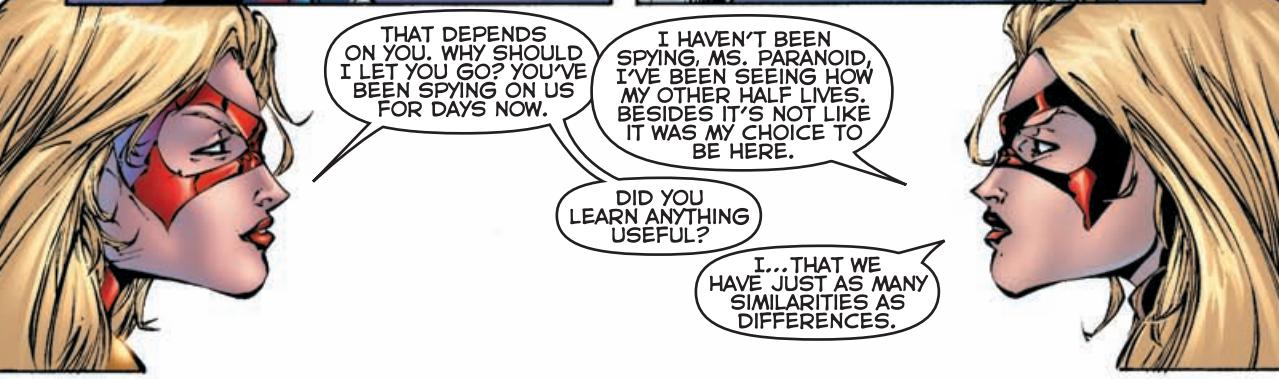


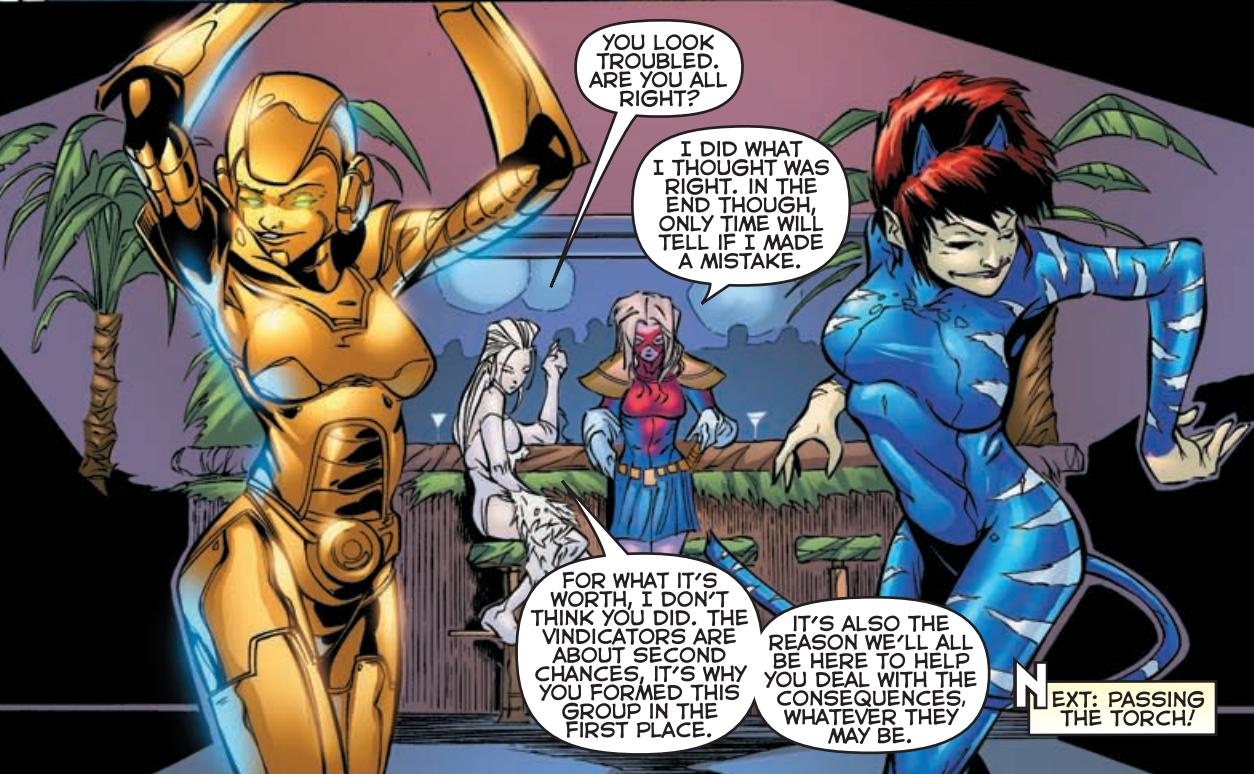
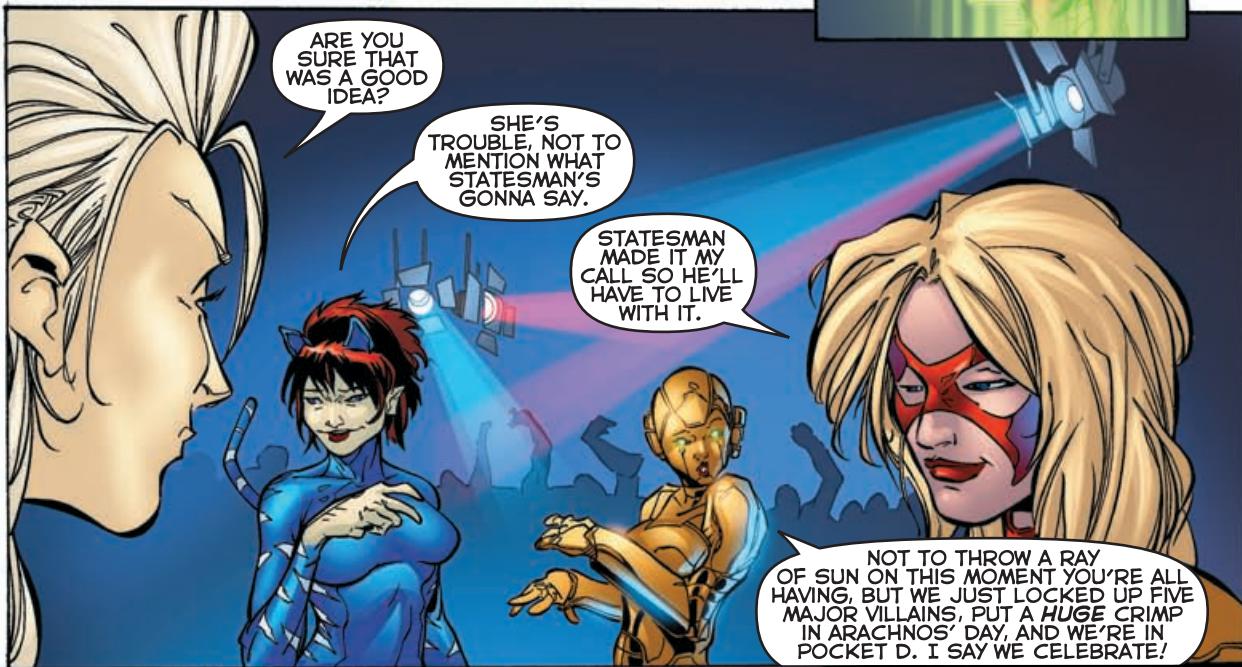






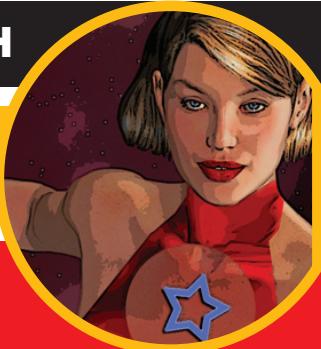






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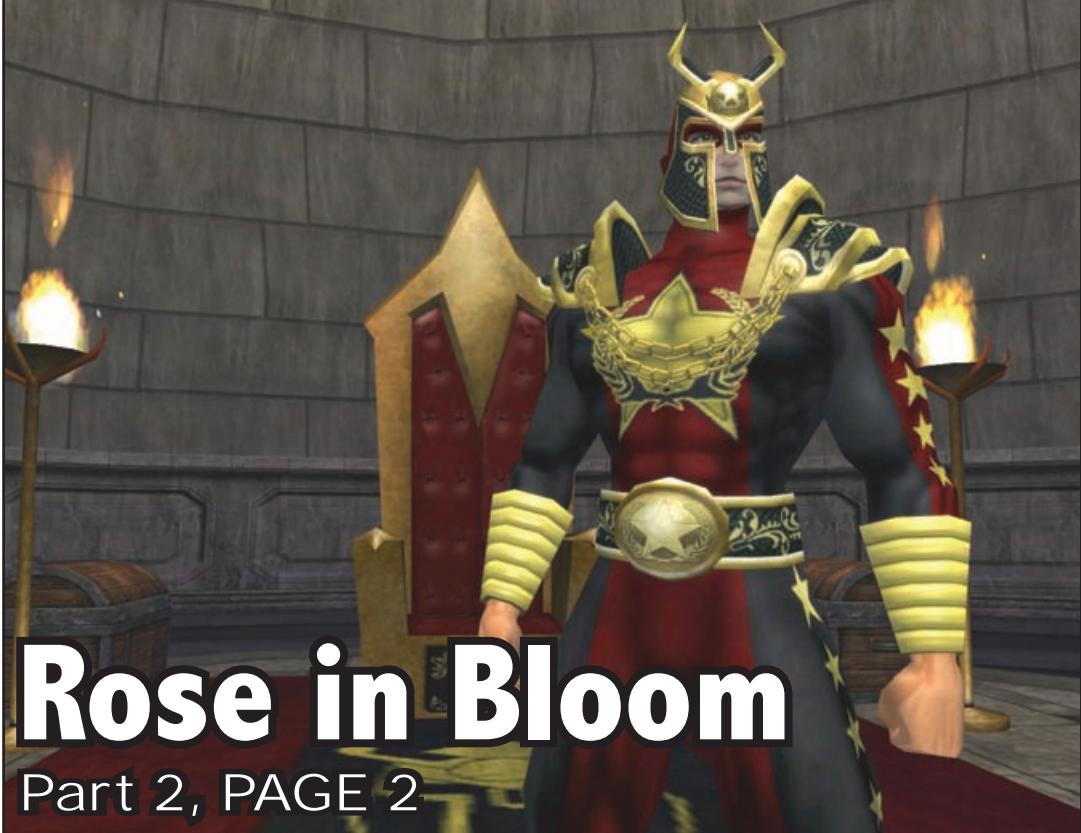
FANTASTIC FAN ART!
from the City of Heroes Community. PAGE 6



THE PARAGON **TATTER**

March, 2007

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Rose in Bloom

Part 2, PAGE 2



Paladine

Part 1

He floated in the night sky over the ocean...He was troubled.

PAGE 4

THE FURTHER MISADVENTURES OF

Q-40RCE

PAGE 7



Rose in Bloom, Part 2

By Robert Bergeron (Roughtrade)

"I said RUN!" Bobcat's laughter rang out, chasing her through another nightmare...

For over a year Rosa's nights had been haunted by the same horrifying dream. That Bobcat would remember the mouse that got away and would come to correct the moment of mercy.

Rosa came awake with a start on a cold metal floor under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights. She was in a cell of some kind, wearing only a loose gray tunic and metal shackles that gouged her wrists and ankles. How had she come here? Her memories were a chaotic jumble. Screams, men laughing, the smell of her building burning, of people burning. Rosa vividly remembered waking to the voice of Malaise, Mother Mayhem's sycophantic servant, as leather clad men dragged her out of bed.

"Bring the girl. She is Tyrant's property," he had proclaimed. "Kill everyone else in the building. Burn it to the ground.' Then Rosa had collapsed.

The cell door opened, breaking through Rosa's horrible memories and bringing her to an even more terrible present. It was Bobcat who pounced from the doorway to crouch over Rosa's limp form. "Well, well, well. Your smell is a familiar one. Where have we met before, little mouse?" She purred, her whiskers tickling against the nape of Rosa's neck.

For a moment, Rosa wildly hoped it was just another dream. But here was Bobcat purring, the hot breath of reality whispering in her ear. The hybrid feline woman lightly traced Rosa's cheek with an inhumanly clawed fingertip.

"Better, I think, to have killed you on that day." Bobcat's feral slit eyes almost softened for a moment. "Unlucky little mouse."

Then she snatched Rosa by the arm and hauled her out of the cell. Still in a state of shock, Rosa was barely aware of her surroundings. She stumbled along steel corridors that gave way to tunnels hewn out of solid rock. The air grew warmer. Rosa was brought into a chamber decorated with human skulls and lit by the red-hot glow of molten magma. Bobcat tossed her limply at the feet of Tyrant's throne.

"Our Lord and Master, who rules in glory, Tyrant is his name." Rosa gibbered the opening line of the prayer that every child was taught since the day he

had proclaimed himself king.

"Childe, do you see how worthless your cause is?" The words were spoken softly in a voice that was melodious, deep and resonant.

In her darkest nightmare Rosa had never imagined she would hear Tyrant's voice. Had she tried, she would have thought it a harsh sound, agonizing and painful as his rule had been to the world. She was wrong. It was cultured, beautiful even. The voice of a god; a cruel and unjust god, perhaps, but a god nonetheless.

After everything she had been through, Rosa could make no sense of his words. She struggled to raise her eyes and saw the true focus of Tyrant's attention. The prayer caught in her throat. A woman hung in manacles, suspended from a column beside Tyrant's throne. And though her skin was a deep blue color, and her eyes naught but glowing pits of indigo fire, Rosa knew her. Impossibly, the woman was Rosa.

"Scorpio Rose," Tyrant sneered. "Statesman grows desperate to send such a pitiful wretch on his errands."

Tyrant reached out and pulled the broken heroine's face up to meet his glare. In return she gave only an enigmatic smile. Her eyes suddenly swirled with violet sparks. A haze of energy coiled with throbbing black radiance surrounded the prisoner, Tyrant and the cowering Rosa at his feet.

Panic struck the room. Bobcat hissed, backing away and spitting while the handful of her pack turned tail and ran. Mother Mayhem and her lap dog, Malaise, shouted orders, readying the guards for some final attack from the prisoner. Only two in the room did not react to the energies, Tyrant because he feared nothing, and Rosa because she was already too terrified to move.

The manacles on the woman crackled with black energy, and she groaned in exertion...but the luminous fog abated. She slumped in defeat.

"I know you heroes too well. Your powers are nothing compared to my tools," Tyrant said, shaking the prisoner violently before changing the focus of his conversation.

"They told you this was a 'mirror universe' of your reality?" he asked almost solicitously.

"Yes," the woman replied in a voice that was soft as velvet. "They said everything was a warped reflection here on Praetorian Earth."

"An insulting terminology," Tyrant's voice sharp-

ened with anger and he backhanded her, splitting her lip. "This is my Earth. Mine! The Praetorian Guard simply enforces my will."

Tyrant regained control of his temper. "No doubt you thrilled at the thought of combating your darker self, of overcoming it. A representation in microcosm of the changes Statesman wishes to somehow bring about on this world which I rule."

The prisoner's head lolled forward, she seemed barely conscious.

"Pay attention, childe, I have done you a favor," he still spoke to her as he reached down and hauled Rosa up with an iron grip on her throat. "I have brought you your other 'self,' hero. Look at the wretched thing you wish to save."

Tyrant held them both for a moment, and Rosa's eyes met with the impossible blue balls of flame that had long ago replaced the eyes of Scorpio Rose.

Rosa fell to the polished rock floor and curled into a ball as Tyrant released her. In the moment that her eyes had met the prisoner's gaze, something had passed between them. Something cold and aching, something that was awful and terrible and yet it had also been something comforting. Rosa felt an inexplicable calm settle on her soul, like the supportive hug of a sister.

"Are you listening to me, hero?" Tyrant stepped over Rosa, grabbing Scorpio Rose again. Her body was limp in the chains, expression senseless with eyes dark and empty of any fire. Angrily he shook her, slamming her against the pillar repeatedly. Bones broke, shattered, and the body turned grayish and cold.

"She's dead, My Lord," Mother Mayhem said.

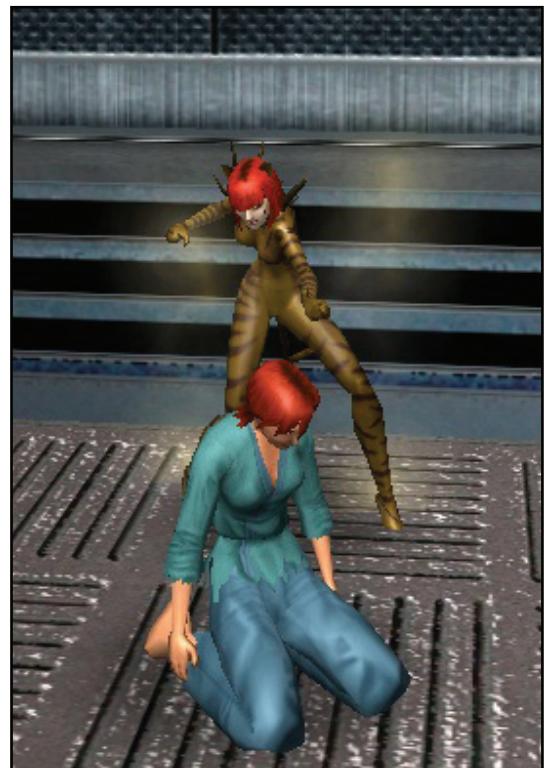
"I can see that., he growled. "I'm not certain which angers me more, that she died of fright, or that my enemy sends such flimsy pawns to offend my rule."

"What of the mouse?" Bobcat asked, crouching over Rose, claws digging into her shoulders and drawing blood. "Can I feed her to my pack?"

"No," Tyrant replied, assuming his throne and stroking his chin in thought. "You have previously encountered this citizen?"

"Yes, My Lord," Bobcat purred. "The Bramble incident. She witnessed his final demise."

"Good." He nodded sharply, gesturing for guards to take Rosa. "Clean it up."



"She has seen what happens to those who challenge my will in our world and from other dimensions. Toss her back to the streets; let her tell my citizens. They will know that I meet defiance with utter destruction."

Hands grabbed her, but Rosa drifted into unconscious again. Alien thoughts filled her mind and she dreamed. A dark, cold, dream of other worlds, of freedom. She dreamed of the girl who had been Scorpio Rose.

In this dream Rosa saw a world where Tyrant was known as Statesman. Rose had visited the Paragon Museum of Natural History on a school field trip. She had snuck away, slipping into a side room to smoke a cigarette. Curiosity or mischief, which inner force drove her more is immaterial. Rose had felt compelled to pick up an oddly glowing artifact that was on a shelf and died. Three hours later she sat up on the autopsy table, embodied with dark powers that could harm or could heal.

Rose took a new name and became a hero. She saved the helpless mice of her world and then she had been chosen. Because she had died, because she was not living in the same sense other people were, and because Numina had a vision that Tyrant would force a confrontation, Scorpio Rose had come to find Rosa.

Paladine, Part 1

By Goth_Angel

He floated in the night sky over the ocean, serene in repose. Listening intently to the distant lap of the waves, he allowed the white noise of the surf to consume his conscious mind. He was troubled.

They all wanted something from him, not for who he was, but for what he could do for them. At one time, he could not conceive of the loneliness that was possible when surrounded constantly by others. The idea still seemed ludicrous to him on its surface, but now he had a better understanding; not of people, per se, but of what it meant to be around them.

These people were still a paradox to him. At once paranoid and fearful, yet defiant, brave, questing for answers in a universe that seemed hostile to them and their kind. They embodied the very best of their ideals, yet typically exemplified the worst possible behavior at every turn. They were all saints and sinners, personified within each being.

He still could not understand them, even after all this time, yet he strove to do so. Paladine was honest enough with himself to admit that this was something he wanted, needed from them.

**

In their searches of alternate dimensions, they had located it, though they did not realize it at the time. It had existed in a formless void, a null space. At the time of their intrusion, it was without form, a potentiality floating in a white nothingness. Tabula rasa. It became aware of consciousness when it became aware of their presence. Their entrance into its world had brought entropy into what would later be described by their scientists as a "pocket universe," a universe where God had never started the arrow of time, a completely static dimension. Their entry gave its being a direction.

It followed them back through the portal, and they were unaware that it had "hitched a ride." As a being of pure thought, it did not register on their senses or instruments. Its elemental nature escaped the notice of their mages and telepaths. Without true conscious thought or real volition, it was essentially background noise.

It observed their efforts to probe other-space, their researches into the unknown. It watched the scientists, the heroes, the technicians. It learned. Fast. They first became aware of it thanks to the exceptional talents of a young witch who died early in the senseless war with the Rikti. While attempt-

ing to probe the heavens in order to find the home dimension of the alien invaders, she touched its raw, unformed being. Shocked and fearful, she turned away and sought the help of her fellows. They quickly came to Portal Corporation's laboratories and extended their magical aerials into the ether. In all their experiences, they had never contacted such a raw, primitive being -- a creature of unadulterated power and innocence.

Their probing did not harm it, but did arouse its curiosity. Taking the first tentative steps at true identity, it answered.

**

Paladine had spent years "fighting the good fight," as it were, to help the people of Earth. Untold countless battles, constant strife, and never-ending hope, all directed to giving peace to those who could not protect themselves. But now he was tired in spirit, a condition he had never experienced before.

He lay on his back, floating. His cape swayed in the breeze, sighing gently in the gulf separating him from the water below, while his arms rested lightly upon his chest. His normally determined face was clenched in a frown of frustration. He lay with his eyes closed, his forehead furled in thought.

Musing to himself, *This must be what self-pity feels like...*, he floated further out to sea.

Even though he had successfully completed his last mission, it still perturbed him. The mission had taken him to a parallel Earth, one on which all the humans were dead, where only their spirits remained. The scientists at Portal Corps were understandably curious and worried that what had happened there might happen here. He had been sent to discover why that world lay in ruins, its dead never knowing rest.

After stepping through the portal, he had attempted to talk to the shades, but they had instantly attacked him, indeed had done their best to destroy him. Thousands of the wraiths had swarmed him, clouding his vision, choking his breath, so thick was their ethereal presence. He had taken to the air, moving with his preternatural speed, spinning as he rose to impel their essences from his body. As he ascended into the heavens, they clawed at his face, his costume, clung stubbornly to his cape. He flung each from him as he fled, setting a pace the dead could not match. Remembering his mission, he avoided the dead, but searched for clues as to the cause of this world's demise.

His search led him over much of the remains of an analogue Paragon City. The decaying remains of this world, haunted by the spirits of the vengeful dead, filled Paladine with a dread he could not name. Finally, he alighted atop a statue of some long-dead hero. The statue had been half-blasted from its foundations, leaving its remains tilting at a severe angle. From the air, he had spotted something lying at the base. Scanning the area to assure himself that there were no wraiths nearby, he leapt to the ground. At his feet were the remains of a human, the only such remains he had seen in his fly-over of the city's remnant. A mummified skeleton partially obscured a small, steel lockbox. Gently edging the box from underneath the remains, he looked for some sign of the contents or the owner. He pried the lid from the vault, finding an old journal inside. He looked around to ensure that no spirits had followed him to this place, and then opened the journal to see what the last living inhabitant of this world had left.

**

The entity was able to communicate with the witch and her companions only at the most basic level, that of raw primitive emotions, such as: curiosity, desire, longing. They fed it with their own curiosities, sensing no malice within the thing. It soaked itself with their thoughts, their feelings, their attitudes, their memories, and it grew. The young witch who had first sensed it and had been so frightened now helped shape it more than the rest. Her power shown to it like a beacon. Her zesty life-force called out to it with her desires. It materialized before her before it even realized it was capable of such a deed. At first it was simply a luminous white mist, barely visible before the awesome energies of the portal. Then it slowly coalesced into a human shape, as if summoned by the will and desires of those who sought to communicate with it.

Slowly, the entity took on the dimensions and shape of a man. It clothed itself in the shapes of those present, a little from each, but the thoughts of the young witch directed its final form the most. It assumed the face, the body of a lover, long lost. She gasped as "he" stood for the first time, inhaling deeply in a first breath. His eyes snapped open, and his cry rent the air. The first cry of the newborn.

**

Paladine could barely see as he sped back toward the portal exit. Tears of shame and rage poured from his eyes, blinding him in his speed. More by luck than skill did he elude the ghostly host that pursued him



in his mad dash through the heavens and over the blasted earth. He stumbled through the portal back into his own world. One of the technicians caught him as he exited the portal and almost fell over the protective railing. They dragged him away from the portal, asking what had happened. But he was too distressed to even speak. Tears choked his throat and he kept his eyes screwed shut. Never before had anyone seen Paladine in this state. He thrust the journal away from him and fled without a word. He flew up through the huge arched doorway. Punching through the elevator doors, he shot past the complicated detectors at the security desk and blew out the glass front doors. He retreated into the skies, away from humanity.

The phone he carried in his belt buzzed with Jill's ring-tone. He tried to ignore it as he shot away from Peregrine Island, then habit and duty made him pause to answer it.

"Paladine, are you alright?" He could hear the concern in her voice, could almost see her face though she was miles away.

He realized he was sobbing as he tried to answer her. He couldn't utter a single coherent sound, and was incapable of stopping the tears.

"Pal, please... Come back to the island. Let me help you..."

His sobbing finally subsided, and he choked out, "Jill, it was me...I can't come back! I might do terrible things." His voice hitched, and then he whispered, "I was the one that killed them all. I destroyed a world..." He shut the phone hard.

With the sunset at his back, he flew into the night, chased by demons.

FANTASTIC FAN ART!

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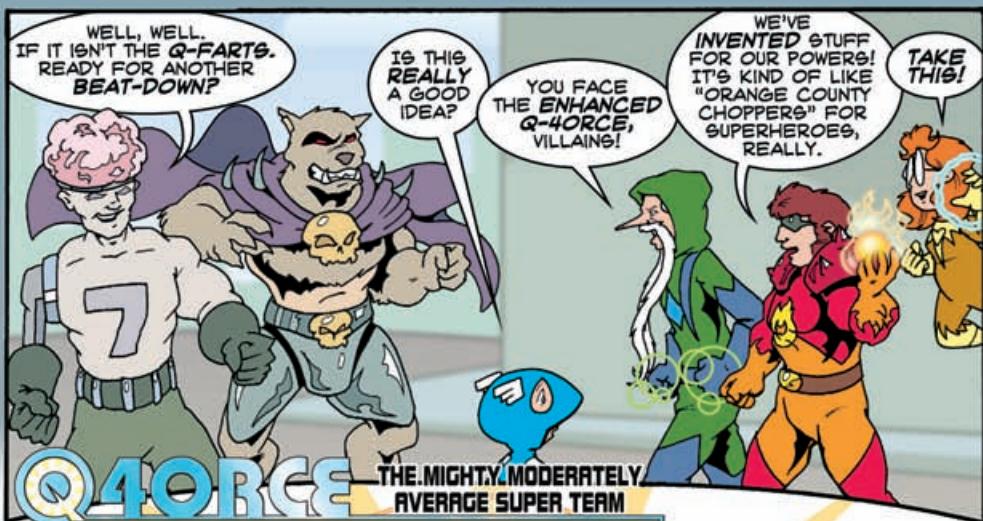
Cat Stryke

By Lunaseas



The Best Mind

By Anthony Goodsell



THWICKABOOOM!!!



Rose in Bloom

Continued from page 3

Slowly Rosa came to terms with the changes. Her eyes were blue, but not her skin. She did not really possess the soul of the dead woman, just her memories. They were memories of a life well lived and of a sacrifice freely given. Rosa also had the powers of darkness and shadow that the woman had wielded. She could heal herself by draining life force from others. She could step into a shadow on one side of the street and cross effortlessly to the other side of town.

There was something more powerful still that Rosa had to keep her courage strong. Rosa knew that Tyrant was not perfect, not infallible. She knew that there were others in her world that fought against Tyrant. She knew there were heroes on another world that wanted to help her world be free.

Heroes who were willing to die, so that her world could be free.

Rosa, Scorpio Rose, was a Praetorian now, a different version of a hero from another world. And she would bring hope to her own world, or she would die trying.



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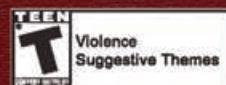
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