

GUARDIANS OF THE DAWN



"THE GUARDIAN EXILES"



PARAGON CITY: THE CITY OF HEROES! THE ONLY PLACE IN THE WORLD WHERE THE HERO-TO-PROBLEM RATIO IS ALMOST ONE-TO-ONE. IF YOU NEED A HERO IN THIS CITY, YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK AROUND THE CORNER.

BUT NOT ALL HEROES ARE THE SAME. SOME ARE MORE MERCENARY THAN THE OTHERS. BUT THERE ARE SOME WHO SEE THE CALLING AS A SIGN OF BRIGHTER DAYS AHEAD FOR ALL MANKIND. THESE ARE THE HEROES WHO FIGHT FOR SOMETHING BETTER. THEY ARE THE...

GUARDIANS OF THE DAWN



Guardian Exiles



**Galatea Powers
Super-Strength
Invulnerable**



**Ryder Lightning
Electricity
Kinetics**



**MidKnight X
Dark Melee
Willpower**

APRIL, 2007...

IT WAS AN ORDINARY DAY IN THE CITY OF HEROES.

HELLIONS WERE BURNING DOWN ANOTHER BUILDING IN STEEL CANYON. WENTWORTH AUCTIONS WERE STILL GOING WILD. STEEL CANYON UNIVERSITY WAS HANDING OUT INVENTION CERTIFICATES LIKE THEY WERE FREE CONCERT TICKETS. COSTUMES WERE FLOCKING OFF THE DIGITAL SHELVES IN ICON.

SURE THERE WAS GRUMBLINGS OF A NEW RIKTI INVASION, BUT THEY HAD REMAINED QUIET FOR ALMOST FIVE YEARS TO THE DAY OF THEIR FIRST INVASION, AND ASIDE FROM SOME UNEASY FEELINGS FROM VANGUARD, THERE WASN'T ANY HINT THAT IT WAS GOING TO CHANGE SOON.

BUT IT WAS ON THIS PARTICULAR DAY IN APRIL THAT ALL HELL WOULD BREAK LOOSE FROM ANOTHER UNIVERSE...

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THE GUARDIAN EXILES

- A CITY OF HEROES STORY BY DAVID 2

(THE FOLLOWING STORY TAKES PLACE IN THE CITY OF HEROES NOT LONG AFTER THE RELEASE OF ISSUE 14: ARCHITECT)

- YEAR: 2007 -

[CITY HALL, ATLAS PARK]

Alarm sirens blared in the portal chamber. Technicians were scurrying about the huge room checking readings and trying to secure the power lines.

Rick Davies, director of the Department of Advanced Technological Applications, was on the phone immediately.

“Positron! We have a Level 5 emergency here! Something has taken over the portal generator and severed our connection to Recluse’s Victory. It’s creating havoc here in the portal chamber.”

A surge of lightning struck one of the technicians. He was flung against the far wall before falling unconscious. Freedom Corps agents were quickly running to his aid.

“Positron! This connection is unstable and we can’t shut it down! We need you here!”

[STEEL CANYON]

“I’m on my way!” Positron said into his earpiece.

As the armored hero took off from his perch in Steel Canyon, he saw a swirl of energy and electricity near the security wall of the city zone. The sensor readings in his containment suit were spiking. He re-opened the communication line to D.A.T.A. Director Davies.

“Rick, I’m seeing a free-forming portal coming into being on the east side of the city. Can you confirm these are not Rikti-generated?”

“The wavelength frequency is off the scale,” Davies said. “These are levels that we couldn’t even begin to imagine!”

As Positron approached the free-forming portal, he saw the skies all around it turn blood-red. Lightning shot out.

He turned towards the pedestrians and magnified the external speakers of his helmet.

“Clear the street!” he ordered in a loud voice. “Everyone get to shelter NOW!”

He opened up his communicator.

“This is Positron, issuing an Epsilon-Level Emergency. I need Freedom Corps operatives to Steel Canyon along the eastern wall in the Fool’s Gold District just south of Siren’s Call. We have a free-forming portal of immeasurable power. I need crowd control immediately!”

Valkyrie, who normally works with Positron at the giant statue in Blyde Square, soon arrived along with several other heroes. Agents from Hero Corps also came running over from their nearby headquarters.

“We’ll take care of crowd control,” she announced, then turned to the other arriving heroes. “Keep these people out! We need a cordon around this whole block! Nobody else in!”

With the civilians being herded away from the area, and more help from the Freedom Corps agents assigned to Siren’s Call coming in, Positron was able to focus his attention on studying the portal itself. He activated one of the miniature probes he carries on his armor and sent it towards the portal. It shorted out six feet away and fell to the

ground.

“Positron, this is Gaussian of the Vanguard.”

“Go ahead,” he said as he opened up the communicator.

“We’re monitoring the dimensional activity from Vanguard HQ. These are NOT Rikti Incidents, nor are they Shadow Shard. The dimensional frequency is nothing we have ever encountered.”

“Are these the only incidents?” he asked.

“We’re reading several smaller portals forming all through the city. Most are about the size of a dime, but there’s a larger one forming just now in King’s Row. I’m sending a Sword unit to City Hall now to help with D.A.T.A. and their portal chamber, and a team to King’s Row to investigate that one.”

Another voice joined in the conversation.

“This is Dark Watcher. I have taken over the investigation from Davies. Vanguard Helm units are already in position and are working with the portal technicians. We confirm that this is an extra-dimensional portal. Repeat: this is an EXTRA-dimensional portal.”

A chill was felt down Positron’s spine. Extra-dimensional energy was always theoretical. Even Dark Watcher, with his decades of experience between dimensions, could only guess what sort of force would be needed to piece the boundaries of the whole universe itself.

Suddenly there was activity in the free-forming portal in front of him. The energy started to swirl and bolts of electricity started coming out.

“This is Positron,” he said into the communicator, “the portal here is starting to coalesce. We now have a maw vortex forming in the center.”

Just then the space around him felt very crowded. Positron had an intensely claustrophobic moment, as though there were hundreds of people all around him and inside his armor. He looked around and saw Valkyrie, the Freedom Corps and Hero Corps agents, and all of the heroes aiding them were experiencing the same feelings akin to being smothered.

The bolts of lightning intensified around the portal. Sounds of thunder were heard, and then a distorted rumbling that got closer and closer. It became rhythmic, as though... someone was... running?

Suddenly an earth-shattering explosion erupted from the mouth of the portal. The shockwave of that explosion was so intense that it completely shattered Positron’s armor and hurled the other surrounding heroes and soldiers back several yards.

Doctor Raymond Keyes picked himself up from the remains of his Positron containment suit. He thanked himself for having a prototype bodysuit on underneath it, and that it was not damaged in the explosion. The prototype suit would help him keep his absorbed antimatter energy intact until he can get to his backup armor at the Freedom Phalanx headquarters.

He looked up and saw the portal dissipating, but not before something had crossed through. He saw a trail of fire and electricity that started in the mouth of the portal and proceeded down the street. He checked on the status of a nearby downed Freedom Corps soldier and then borrowed his communicator.

“This is Positron” he said into the communicator as he started to make his way down the street. “I’ve borrowed a Freedom Corps agent’s comm-device. My armor was destroyed when something came through. The portal appears to be dissipating here. I’m following the exit trail.”

The indentions were still fresh in the concrete, smoking and full of arching electricity. They were small and familiar.

“Whatever it is that came through,” he said, “it appears to be humanoid.”

Then, at the bottom of the turn, a figure was seen in the road. The concrete retaining wall that kept the hill from eroding into the road had a ringed indentation as though something tried to pass through the concrete but couldn't get past the molecules. The figure had instead bounced back off the wall and collapsed on the asphalt. Positron cautiously approached the figure.



An unconscious man was splayed out on the road, still vibrating, with minor electrical arcs coming off him. He wore a shredded red bodysuit, with the remains of what may have been gloves or boots near the indentation of the retaining wall. His hair and his beard were long and stringy, as though he was marooned for months, if not for years.

“I have a downed humanoid being,” Positron said into the communicator. “I need medical units here NOW!”

[KING'S ROW]

The figure that dropped out from the portal was surrounded by dark mists. He cursed the mists as he would curse himself for having to use them.

As he shakily got to his feet, he noticed that his black-and-blue outfit was badly damaged. His cape was gone, his mask was shredded, and even his gloves were badly damaged. He was also hurt internally. He had cuts and at least two broken ribs, and possibly was bleeding internally. He would need to get to a hospital soon or else he would die.

Then he realized that he wasn't alone.

Two groups were watching him like rival animals stalking their prey. The first appeared to be a grotesque group of hack surgeons with minions that looked more like Frankenstein's patchwork monsters than human beings. The second group, however, appeared to be completely human, albeit wearing white skull-shaped face paint.

“Lookie-lookie,” said one of the hack surgeons. “Spare parts.”

“He's Skull property,” said the gang member with the black jacket and skull-shaped paint. “He's our trophy.”

“No,” the stranger said as he stood up. “I am nobody's trophy, and if I'm going to go down, it'll be fighting.”

“Well then, Mister Stranger, any last words before you become our property?” said the Skull leader as he drew his knife.

The dark swirling mists surrounded the stranger and gave him renewed strength. It wouldn't last for very long, but it would be just long enough to do what he needed to do to survive for the next few minutes.

“I am the Knight...” he said menacingly. “And you're practice!”

[CITY HALL. ATLAS PARK]

Dark Watcher stared out at the swirling chaos that was normally the portal to the extradimensional area known as Recluse's Victory. Beside him two Vanguard technicians were taking readings from the maw of the portal.

A young woman wearing a red-and-blue dress and carrying a sword approached them.

“I have Freedom Corps soldiers at the entranceway upstairs,” said Ms. Liberty. “We've evacuated the building and have heroes assembled outside for backup.”

“They will be of no use against this,” Dark Watcher said ominously. “This is beyond their power. This is beyond our power.”

The swirling maelstrom of red energy with shooting bolts of electricity began to coalesce. Giant golden hands reached out from the maw, seemingly ready to pull the opening further.

A face could be seen in the maw, looking in as one would look inside a grocery bag. A young man with short hair is seen giving a judgmental look at the world he sees before him.

“NO” said the young man in a booming voice. “THIS WILL NOT DO.”

The metallic hands retracted from the maw, but not before a figure was thrown through the portal, crashing into the far wall.

Once the giant hands pulled away from the swirl of extra-dimensional energy, the portal device shut down completely. The room is engulfed in darkness and all is silent.

Emergency generators engaged and backup lighting was activated. The Freedom Corps and Vanguard forces rushed over to the figure that came through the portal. As the smoke and debris were cleared, they discovered that the object that came through was that of a badly injured and mostly-nude woman.

- YEAR: 2009 -

[STEEL CANYON]

“Appearance, my dear Kara, is everything!”

Serge, the metrosexual owner of the Icon clothing store, gave a disapproving look at the practice mannequin in front of them. His new apprentice was trying to design a costume that would be used by a mutant defender, but he did not like what she came up with.

“What’s wrong with this?” Kara Hamilton asked.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Well, I suppose it would work if you’re blind, which I’m guessing would be the reason behind the owl-like goggles, but the conflicting colors of red-and-green... Kara, darling, that only works during the Winter Holiday, and even then only by large bearded men that go by the first name of ‘Santa’.”

Kara gave a frown. She was inspired by a vision she had the other night of someone wearing that very outfit, as were the visions she had previously attempted to turn into new costumes. A Controller wearing blue-and-gold with a full helmet was deemed “too Statesman-like”. A female Scrapper wearing a black skin-tight cat-like outfit was deemed “too simple”. A Blaster with a puffy red shirt with green slacks and black cape was “too swashbuckling”. Everything she came up with these past few days seemed out of place to the master designer.

Serge looked at his watch. “Tell you what... it’s almost time for the second shift to come in. I’ll store this pattern for now, but you sleep on it, and when you come back tomorrow morning, have something better to work with, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied slightly dejected.

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Kara, darling, you have the skills. Something tells me that you designed plenty of outfits in your time. It just needs to be tweaked, that’s all.”

Kara punched out on the time-clock at the back of the store and then left through the service door. Making sure that there were no onlookers, she spun around rapidly as she changed into her other “work” clothes.

Gone were the grey skirt and jacket with the white blouse. Gone were the wire-rimmed glasses that she really



didn't need to use. In their place was a white bodysuit along with a gold-and-red jeweled belt, red gloves and boots, and a flowing blue cape that was clasped by a broach over her right shoulder.

Kara Hamilton was gone. Now she was Galatea Powers.

"Kara Hamilton", of course, never really existed. Her name, as well as her birth certificate, Social Security Number, high school diploma, and all of the other documentation used to validate her existence, were all meticulously-flawless fakes. They were the clever creations of an international group called the Vanguard; designed to help her assimilate into the world that she's in.

But these things really weren't her, and she knew it. She had little idea who she really was prior to two years ago.

Even her job working in Icon was considered a stretch for her. She wanted to work with computers, but computer support in this world required a level of technological understanding that even her own advanced knowledge couldn't compensate for. Costume designing, on the other hand, was something she seemed to have some skill in, but apparently not to Serge's standards quite yet.



As Galatea Powers took to the skies, she thought back to the day when she woke up in the Chiron Medical Center in Atlas Park. The doctors and attendants were ogling her perfect physique, even as the injuries that she had sustained were healing at a remarkable rate. But she took it all in stride, even accepting one doctor's pet name of "Galatea" as her own. Somehow, the name seemed right for her, along with the last name of "Powers".

Her HeroID chimed. She knew it was time for the meeting. The supergroup Tesseract portal in Blyde Square was just a minute away by air, give or take a few gang muggings that needed some quick interventions.

[SUPERGROUP BASE]

Passing through the Tesseract portal to the Guardians of the Dawn base was almost like falling sideways for Galatea Powers. It was a feeling she could never get used to. One minute she was standing next to a swirl of lights and darkness beside a huge statue of a fallen hero, then she feels herself being pulled sideways into the swirl, and she emerges in a room full of black bricks and arcane symbols. The banner of the Guardians, red-and-yellow with a starburst insignia, was on the far wall surrounded by two torches.

She turned right towards the infirmary and the newly-installed teleport chamber, only to find a wall where there was once a passageway.

She cursed the group leaders for once again making design changes without letting anyone know, then made her way back around the portal entrance, into the assembly hall that was rarely used, and down past the row of trees to the Guardian Lounge. Like the teleport chamber, the Lounge was also relatively recent, reflecting the personal needs of the members to relax from the hassles of work.

The large plasma-screen TV and C-shaped couches were the first things she saw on the other side, along with a figure in black fiddling with the instruments.

"Caught you by surprise too?" came a voice from her left side.

Ryder Lightning, dressed out in his usual red-and-yellow outfit, was busy fixing drinks behind the bar.

"The changes," he commented as he raced around the bar to hand Galatea a drink. "The new painting."

There was a huge mural on the other side of the plasma screen TV where there was previously an opening with stairs. The couches were also new, replacing the two leather chairs that previously stood there.

"Nice to know they keep us up-to-date on these things," she commented before taking a sip of her drink. "Hmm..."

berry-banana smoothie?”

“With just the right twist of orange, like you ask,” he said.

“I like your haircut,” she commented. “It was past time you trimmed that down and got rid of the caveman look.”

“Took a while to get used to,” he said, “but it’s a little easier to maintain now that I’m getting back up to speed. I think I’ll keep the goatee as well. I don’t remember if I ever had one before.”

“Can we get this over with?” said the figure in the black jacket in front of the TV. “I don’t like being here. I’d much rather be cracking Skulls in King’s Row.”

Galatea Powers and Ryder Lightning sat down in the C-shaped couch. The figure in black joined them after putting the TV on mute.

“I miss watching 24-hour instant news,” he said. “If I had the money, that’s what I would be starting up here.”

“Jason, I though you said you weren’t comfortable having money,” Ryder commented.

“I said I liked things SIMPLE,” Jason replied. “The streets are simple. It’s not hard to figure out what makes a criminal act. Rich people just make things complicated.”

Galatea tried to get the conversation back on track. “Okay... all three of us are here because we agreed to meet every year at this time to...” she was suddenly distracted by the presence of someone else nearby. “Hold on,” she said, and then flew up and over to the assembly hall.

“You know, if you’re going to listen in,” she said to the figure in maroon sitting at the conference table, “then you had might as well do it in the lounge.”

“Oh I wouldn’t want to be rude,” said Doc Tor in his impeccable British accent. “I’m perfectly comfortable right where I am.”

“Hardly anyone uses the conference table,” she said.

“Exactly,” he said with a smile. “So why not put it to use?”

She frowned. He did have a point. “Uh, guys? How about we move the meeting up here?”

Ryder raced over in a blink of an eye, but gave a cautious look at the new member.

“What’s he doing here?” Jason asked as he made his way past the row of trees.

“Well you might say I have a similar reason to be here,” Doc Tor said with a smile. “By the way, when you’re in that outfit, is it ‘Jason Knight’ or do you still prefer to be known as MidKnight X?”

“Jason Knight,” Jason replied. “MidKnight X is only for when I’m in my work clothes.”

“Of course, thank you. These names and codenames and secret identities can be a little confusing at times. Speaking of which,” he said as he turned back to Galatea, “how goes the job with Icon?”

“It’s frustrating,” she replied. “But balancing hero work with civilian work helps. I’m not busting skulls every two minutes, and I get to help design outfits for heroes. Now it’s my turn to ask you why you’re here with us right now?”

Doc Tor stammered for the right answer. “Oh... well... you might say that I’m here because I’m in a similar situation. I mean, I’m an exile like you. Not from the same reality as you all came from, but still just the same I’m here. And it’s been... what is it? Almost two years to the day that you three all arrived here?”

The three of them eyed him suspiciously.

“All three of us agreed to meet at this time to see if any of us knew what had happened,” Ryder said.

“You two agreed,” Jason muttered. “I just went along with it.”

“The point being,” Galatea interjected, “none of us asked to be here. We were ripped from our homes, our families, our friends, and forced to come here. We don’t know who did it, or why, and we don’t know who we really are. The names we are all using... they’re not real. They’re a close approximation or a reflection of ourselves, or as close as we think they are, but they’re really not us.”

“But something tells me that our friend here knows more about this all than he’s letting on,” Jason said suspiciously.

“You know, everyone says that about me, and I don’t know why that is,” Doc Tor said with a grin. “Maybe it’s because of the name.”

“Or maybe it’s because your status as a so-called ‘exile’ has more to do with keeping an eye on us for the people responsible for us being here,” Jason said accusingly. “You seem to spend a lot of time watching your fellow Guardians than in helping us out.”

“You know, as paranoid as he sometimes sounds, he does have a point this time,” Ryder said. “The last time you and I talked you were interested more in what I know before I came here than in helping me out with my missions.”

“And last December you spent more time talking with Omega Shift and Midnight Arachnia than helping either of them on missions,” Jason added.

“Something you want to tell us about yourself, Doc Tor?” Galatea asked as she leaned in.

Doc Tor gave a worried smile as he fiddled with his maroon hat. “Well... you are right about me watching out for you. But not the part about for whom.”

“Then why don’t you come out and tell us?” Jason said as he readied to stand up. “We’ve been here for a year now, struggling to make sense of it all. We’re all supposedly part of the same team, right? So start talking.”

The mysterious observer paused for a minute, seemingly weighing his options. It was only when Jason started to shift his body in an aggressive way that Tor blurted out “Okay, okay... I didn’t want to say who it was, because I was specifically asked to keep it a secret. But I must point out that he is not the one responsible for you three being here.”

“WHO?” Jason said as he pounded on the metal desk. Streams of dark energy trickled up from the impact spot.

Doc Tor turned to face Galatea. “It’s your cousin,” he said.

Galatea’s jaw dropped open. “My... cousin?”

“If you want, I can arrange for him to meet with you,” he said. “But he has been very secretive about his presence here, partly out of concern for you, and partly because he’s been getting at the heart of who was responsible for all three of you being here.”

“I’d like to meet with him as well,” Jason said as he narrowed his eyes.

“Same here,” Ryder added.

“Sorry,” Doc Tor said as he turned to face the others. “This can only be for her. Even I can’t be there. But I will say that once she meets with him, things should start to make sense.” Then he turned to Galatea again. “Do you want to meet with him?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Absolutely.”

“Fine,” he said as he stood up. “Then if you don’t mind, I’ll make the arrangements and will contact you when they are ready. Unless you’re going to ask some more questions.”

They all shrugged.

“Nope, go make the arrangements,” Galatea said.

They waited for Doc Tor to leave, then Galatea nodded to Ryder, who shot out of his chair in a blur of lightning.

[POCKET D]

Ryder Lightning appeared in the special VIP area of the Pocket D nightclub. Quickly racing out, he caught a glimpse of his quarry heading upstairs in the blue-side of the nightclub. He ran as fast as he could across the main dance floor and then up the ramp just in time to see Doc Tor turn around the bend towards the medical teleporters. But once he turned the corner...

The room was empty.

“Excuse me,” said a voice behind him.

War Witch stood there behind Ryder, her black leather outfit making the green highlights in her hair stand out even more.

“Were you looking for someone?” she asked the speedster, swirling the ice in her glass.

“I thought I saw a friend head into here,” he replied.

“Sorry,” she said, “but most people arrive via the medical teleporters; they don’t head to them. You sure he came this way?”

“I... I guess I was mistaken,” Ryder said. “Thanks for your help.”

War Witch smiled and headed back to her perch overlooking the dance floor.

“Sorry,” Ryder said into his communicator back to Galatea. “I know he went into the medical bay. I saw him enter, but...”

“That’s okay,” she replied. “We probably should have expected it. Come on back to the base. We just have to play this by his rules for now.”

[ATLAS PARK]

Two days had passed since their meeting. Two days that seemed to stretch into an eternity for Galatea Powers.

In her civilian guise of Kara Hamilton, she finally came up with a design that Serge approved of. Ironically, it was an outfit that she had considered wearing herself and rejected. It was a midnight blue bodysuit made of buckled leather with metallic red shoulder pads, matching spiked gloves and wrist guards, and belt. It also had a yellow Chinese symbol for “Power” on the chest. It was just too dark for her to consider using it, but Serge somehow liked it. He saved the pattern and said that there might even be a buyer for it.

As the day ended, though, she finally received a message from Doc Tor to meet at the Atlas Park Tesseract portal, promising that “some” of her questions would be answered. He specifically asked her to not use the Atlas Park teleport in the base, but to travel through the security zones. She didn’t know why he would request that, but figured it had to do with whatever arrangements he needed to make. Fortunately, her powers of flight allowed her to cover the area rather quickly.

Once clear of the security cordon, she quickly took to the skies to avoid any of the usual near-ground traffic. Whatever was waiting for her, she would approach it from the skies.

The sprawling garden of mammoth statues in Atlas Plaza surrounded City Hall, providing a seemingly eternal guard against all threats. Galatea had to give a certain amount of respect for Doc Tor in his choice of meeting places. No place else was there ever a sense of humility for a hero than right there, in the midst of those giant statues.

In the northeast corner of the plaza, near the Tesseract portal, she could see a figure waiting for her. Most heroes that were at the Tesseract portal would only be there long enough to use it to enter their respective bases, but this figure was clearly waiting for someone.

Her enhanced vision abilities still weren't restored, and she cursed herself for not having them available, but there was something familiar about the person waiting for her at the portal. Not only that... but that she had made that kind of approach before.

Coming in from the sky, as the sun was setting... only it wasn't in a city. It was, instead, in a desert canyon.

"Doing good," he said proudly. "Now, remember when you land to land gently. Don't just come crashing in."

She *remembered* that day! She remembered that she didn't land gently. She ended up impaling herself two feet into the hard desert ground. She remembered him laughing as she struggled to clear the sand and rocks from her boots.

It WAS him! It was her cousin!

But he appeared older than she remembered. And his outfit was certainly different. He wore a tech-designed black bodysuit, but she couldn't ignore the red-and-yellow triangle shield on his chest. It was almost as iconic as she remembered him to be.



"Kent?" she started to say softly.

"Hello Karen," he replied with a huge grin on his face.

She landed gently on the concrete base.

"It's good to see you've improved," he said. "I remember when you couldn't make a landing without cracking something."

"I've had plenty of practice," she said hesitantly. "It IS you, right? This isn't some illusion or game or..."

He opened his arms wide. She came rushing to him, hugging him tightly with tears of joy streaming down her face.

"Sssshhhhh..." he said gently. "You're not seeing things, Karen. I'm really here."

"I thought..." she said between sobs, "I thought that... you were gone. I thought that I was all alone."

"You weren't alone, Karen," he said as he put a comforting hand on her head. "You were never alone. You had Jason and you had Bart with you."

She laughed. "Bart! That was his name!" She pulled back and grinned widely. "Bart Alan Wallace! You know, for the past year we didn't know what his real name was! He and I could only think of 'Buried Alien Walking!'" She laughed hard. "The Runner. That's what he was before this! He was called The Runner!"

"And how about Jason?" Kent asked.

She thought for a moment, trying to access the memory that seemingly was just unlocked. “MidKnight! That never changed. Oh... now he goes by MidKnight X. He didn’t know why he needed to add the X next to his name, but he said it just seemed to fit.” She laughed again. “Oh my god... his last name! He goes by the name ‘Jason Knight’ here, but back then it was ‘Jason Rich! We were laughing because he said that he believed it was a ‘rich’ man’s name. I remember it now!”

“That’s good,” he said, “because you’re going to have to let them know it as well.”

She pulled away from him. “Why? Why can’t you come with me and we can tell them togeth-...?”

“Because my work is just too busy,” he interrupted. “Karen, I want you to show you what I’ve been working on, but first you need to turn off your Supergroup mode.”

“Why?” she asked. “We’ve been struggling for the past year trying to piece these things together and...”

“Karen,” he said gently. “Please. I can answer some of the questions you may have, but first you have to turn off the Supergroup mode so I can actually show you. It will be a whole lot easier than just me telling you.”

She was hesitant to do it, even though everything inside her was telling her to. There was a part of her that was still skeptical. She wanted to believe, but she had been manipulated for so very long...

She retrieved her HeroID and clicked on the Supergroup icon to turn it off. As she did, she saw the Supergroup Tesseract portal change color, from its normal powder blue to almost white. She had never seen that kind of a transformation before.

Kent extended his hand. “Come on,” he said with a smile.

She took his hand and they entered the portal.

[ELSEWHERE]

The room was empty. There was a sense of up and down, but no real floor or ceiling.

“Where are we?” Galatea Powers asked.

“It’s a little complicated,” Kent said. “Remember when I disappeared?”

“Actually, no... it’s all still a little fuzzy.”

He touched some controls on his suit. “Don’t worry; this will try to make sense of it.”

A holographic globe appeared in front of them. Then several globes followed behind it.

“You’re familiar with the concept of multiple universes, right?” he asked.

“They talk about those in this world,” Galatea said. “They refer to them as dimensions.”

“They have no idea of the full extent the Omniverse,” Kent said. “There is one master universe called the Omniverse, but within that there are smaller clusters of universes. The universal cluster that we are in right now is referred to as the ‘Paraverse’, named after Paragon City. It’s what they all have in common with each other.” One of the spheres hovered close to them and opened up to reveal a series of other smaller spheres. “Within that cluster are various universes and dimensions and alternate continuities. It sounds all confusing, I know. That’s why I spent so much time working here, trying to make sense of it.”

He clicked on another control and the sphere returned to its original place.

“In 2006 I was recruited by a cosmic observer that said that I would be needed to help stop a very powerful being from destroying all of creation. This being saw himself as a god. We defeated him, but... afterwards...”

He paused for a moment, then tapped on his controls again. “Karen, does this face look familiar to you?”

A figure appeared. A young face with short hair and a very determined look.

Galatea gave a shocked expression. “That’s HIM! I remember him!”

“What do you remember?” Kent asked.

She struggled to remember the events. “I remember the skies changing colors. There was a rip in the universe. There was lightning, but no clouds. Then these hands... and that face! And then... something. I don’t know what.”



“Can you describe the ‘something?’” he asked his cousin.

She struggled to recall the events. “We saw the opening... Jason and Bart and I were the closest to it. Photonis as well. Jason said that the boundaries of time and space were unraveling. We didn’t know how he knew that, he just did. Then... he said something about wanting Bart to run as fast as he could to force the breach closed. Photonis was killed. I saw the hands, and I tried to punch them back in, but... I couldn’t. I couldn’t reach them. Then... did you ever have that feeling of déjà vu? I did, only it was for things that I never did. I saw Bart, and I saw a thousand versions of him, all running as fast as he was. In fact, I saw him moving

faster and faster... faster than he’s ever run in his life. And then... I think I saw myself as well. Or a different version of myself. And then...” She put her fingers to her temples. “It’s maddening. I try to figure out what happened... but the next thing I know, I was in the Atlas Park hospital, hurt and bandaged and almost powerless.”

“Our world is gone, Karen,” Kent said solemnly.

She turned to face him in shock. “What?”

“Those hands, that face... they belonged to a young man of enormous power. He used machines, devices from the first beings that discovered and monitored the Omniverse... the one universe that holds all others. He used the ancient devices combined with his own cosmic power to rip into the Omniverse in search of worlds. I found out about him afterwards. They said they had to take me ‘out of sequence’ because of it, only I didn’t know what they meant by that. It was afterwards, when I tried to return home, did they tell me what happened.”

She grabbed hold of his shoulders. “Kent, tell me... what did he do to our world?”

“He came from a universe that no longer exists,” he explained. “He was working with another exile as powerful as us to find their lost worlds. And when he couldn’t find the right universe, he combined the ones he could reach to try to recreate it. He smashed various universes together, hoping to get the right combination. Then he destroyed the ones that didn’t fit.”

She pulled back in horror. “No...” she whispered.

“He did it to countless worlds like ours before he was stopped,” Kent said. “But... it couldn’t bring those worlds back. Nothing could.”

She wanted to run away. She didn’t want to hear any more.

“He destroyed our home, Karen,” Kent said. “Our world. Everything and everyone we ever knew. They’re gone. They’re all gone.”

“No...” she said with tears streaming down her face.

“I’m sorry, Karen...” he said as he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder.

She wanted to do something. Anything. She wanted to hit something. But right now, all she could do was just cry.

[SUPERGROUP BASE]

Galatea Powers broke the news to her fellow exiles. She was the only one that could.

Ryder Lightning tore down his mask and put his hands to his temples. “I can’t believe that... they’re all gone? We couldn’t... we couldn’t stop it?”

“According to Kent,” Galatea said, “nobody could. Not from where we were.”

“I remember running,” he said. “And suddenly I could move faster than I had ever been able to. But it... it wasn’t enough. Oh God... Kris. My wife! She’s gone! I can’t believe that I didn’t know her name until now!”

He immediately shot up from his chair and ran as fast as he could back to the Tesseract portal. He needed to just run somewhere... anywhere...

Jason Knight, MidKnight X, simply sat there in the chair. His red domino mask, which he originally wore since he started anew in Paragon City, was already removed and in his hand.

“He took it pretty hard,” he said. “I don’t blame him.”

“How about you?” Galatea asked. “To know your real name, your past... weren’t there people that you missed?”

“Anyone that was ever special in my life was already dead by then,” he said gravely. “The old man, Damian, he gave his life to fight crime. I tried to carry on his mission in the way that he did... in the way that everyone wanted me to carry on. It was never enough. That much I remember. At least now I know that I don’t have to pretend to be him. I can do things here my way. If you’ll excuse me...”

He stoically stood up, fixed his mask on again, and walked back to the Tesseract portal.

Galatea followed Jason, but only got so far as the portal when she saw Doc Tor at the infirmary sitting on the couch.

“So you’re watching us again?” she asked him suspiciously.

“Sorry, goes with the territory,” he said apologetically with his somber British accent. “I may not have been from your world, but I do know what it’s like to have been torn from your reality and shoved into another one. Actually that’s happened a couple of times in my lifetime... which says something since I’ve been around for about a millennia or so.” He took off his hat and held it in his hands. “Speaking of which, how are you holding up?”

“As expected, I suppose,” she replied. “Especially after being told everything and everyone you ever knew no longer exists.”

“Yes, but at least you still have your friends, and your cousin. Of the three of you, I noticed that you’re the one that has been the most adjusted,” he observed. “You have your own life apart from what you do. The others are still spending their time on patrol in their outfits.”

“They don’t...” she paused. “I don’t even know why I’m confiding this with you... they don’t know what it’s like to have their lives ripped apart like I have. There’s still a lot about myself that I don’t know, but I do know that I’ve had my own memories messed with on more than one occasion. I can’t say that I’m... used to it by now... but I know you have to work with what you can.”

“So... are you going to stay with the new identity?” he asked.

“The Vanguard put a lot of effort to create Kara Hamilton,” she said. “I think it would be wrong to waste that

effort. I've gotten used to being called 'Kara' instead of 'Karen'. And I never really had a secret identity before. I guess I can understand why Jason keeps the two identities separate."

Doc Tor smiled.

"Well," she said looking at the watch under her glove, "if you don't mind, I do have to show up at work."

"Of course," he replied.

[POCKET D]

Doc Tor returned to the second level of the interdimensional nightclub and leaned over the balcony rail next to War Witch.

"You know you were almost spotted the last time you were here," she said. "I covered for you."

"Really?" he said. "Well then I suppose thanks are in order."

"I suppose they are," she said coyly. "So are you going to say the words or will I have to take your smug British tone for a poor substitute?"

"Thank you," he said politely.

"You're welcome," she said with a grin. "Go ahead, he's waiting for you."

Tor fished in his vest pocket for a set of keys as he went behind the partition of medical teleporters. He put one of the keys in the door at the end of the room and opened it. The doorway was pitch-black at the entranceway. He walked on through and into a room that was blindingly white. With practiced skill he made his way to the other side of the room, into a small corridor, and into the adjacent room.

The room on the other side of the all-white door resembled that of a newspaper editor's office. Stacks of papers piled high on an old wooden desk surrounding an old-fashioned cathode-ray computer terminal. On top of the antique monitor sits an old-fashioned copper nameplate with the words "**He Who Chronicles**" engraved on it. It was an accurate description of the middle-aged man that was sitting behind the desk.

"Well you'll be happy to know that your 'Guardian Exiles' have apparently accepted their new origins," Doc Tor said as he took off his hat and sat down in the couch along the wall. "Galatea has accepted that the man she encountered was in fact her long-lost cousin. And, of course, once she did that, then the others started remembering their own revised histories."

"It's funny how revisions work like that," the Editor said with a smile. "They came here in a group; therefore their revisions would work best when one of them in that group begins to remember."

"I still feel a bit of regret that the deception would have to involve Galatea," Tor said. "She's told me how she's had her memories and past changed several times before coming here."

"Luck of the draw," the Editor replied. "Whether it is fortunate or unfortunate is how you see things. Besides, that's why she's more receptive to revisions, because it has happened to her before."

"And I suppose there is no chance that any of their previous existences will return?" Tor inquired. "If there is one thing that I do know about repressed and altered memories, especially first-hand, is that if you're not careful, they do have a way to come back when you least expect them."

The Editor gave his associate a curious glance. "Yes, I suppose you WOULD know more than anyone else about that, wouldn't you? Well that is part of the reason why 'Icon Powers' will be more of a peripheral participant in your



group's activities. He'll take part when needed, but he'll serve more as the control point for our three exiles. In time, when the revisions become more firmly rooted, he'll come out of his so-called 'semi-retired' position. Until then, he'll keep Mister Asher and the 'brothers' from looking in."

"And of course we can't have that, can we?" Tor said. "After all, it would mean certain oblivion for them if they did. Their own world is gone. It can't come back. Asher's friend Alexander saw to that. Transplanting them to any other universe would be just as much of an effort for them as it was for you."

"I think you underestimate what the 'brothers' can do," the Editor said. "They have a little more power than I do, or for that matter what any of the other editors can do. But you're right... they would either be creating paradoxes or condemning them to oblivion. Or, worse yet, relegating them to some cameo role along with that one character that shrinks down to become a bluebird. But... as long as the revision holds, they should be just fine here."

The Editor grabbed a stack of files and put them into a folder marked "Guardian Exiles" and put them in a drawer.

"In the meantime," he continued, "I want you to spend some more time developing your skills in Paragon City. The others are right to be suspicious of your attention on them. You know, there was a time when you used to be known for just doing your own thing."

"Yesss..." Tor said as he got up from the couch. "And we both know how that turned out, don't we? After all, that's how the 'Guardian Exiles' really got here in the first place... me 'doing my own thing' and all."

"For what it's worth..." the Editor said as Tor reached the door, "there was no way you could have know that your banishment would have that result."

Tor said nothing as he exited the office and walked back down the all-white corridors to the Paraverse. The Editor was right, of course. He WAS the reason for the cosmic anomalies cutting through. But he still couldn't help but feel guilty about it.

- END -

To save the light, he must embrace the dark.



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