

TIMESCAPE FANTASY

The RETALIATORS



The
Gemini War
Trilogy
Act 1

MASTER OF TIME

Richard
Stiles

Captain Superhero®



wants **YOU** to stand up to **BULLIES!**

Are you being bullied? Which hurts worse, facing your problem and possibly getting your ass beat, or the beating you'll give yourself from now on for shrinking under pressure? Even if you lose the fight, at least you'll be able to hold your head up. And what if you're not the one who loses? Bullies are usually more bark than bite, maybe you can humiliate their pathetic, socially dysfunctional asses. Think of how things will change positively for you, if that's the case. Pleading with malice only validates its power over you. Violence for the violent, it's all they understand. Maybe they'll have empathy when they're shown how it feels. Classroom hotshots; Are you gonna let that big kid fuck with that little kid, and do nothing about it? Don't be such a pussy, get over there and be the one who stands for what's right. How much more status do you think you'll accrue, once you really are a true, real life hero? Beat that bully's ass, and the pussy will be rubbing all over you, instead of hiding behind your zipper. I can't be everywhere all the time, so when the only one who can make a difference is you...

IT'S YOUR TURN TO BE A HERO!

This is a public service message from The Retaliators Incorporated and Reddingfield Innovations.

RISE OF THE MAN-GODS



TIMESCAPE FANTASY

The Retaliators

The Gemini War - Act 1

“Master Of Time”

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Acknowledgments:

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Divine Senders, for giving me visions.

Secondly, I acknowledge my friends and supporters, for sticking with me through my OCP; Obsessive Compulsive Perfectionism. Good things come to those who wait. I did this for you, and for all who might nourish their psyche with it.

Thirdly, I acknowledge my brother and sister teachers. Not the institutional indoctrinators, but they who dispense real knowledge. We all teach each other. I have taken from the well of knowledge, and I hope I have added to it.

Lastly, I acknowledge myself, for sacrificing myself to this legendary beast.



Divine Revelation: A Man Divided

As we traverse the wonders of space in reverse, we receive visions. Intermittent are still photos and video clips of a futuristic battle. The first photo is an aerial view of flying airships blasting buildings. On the ground, there are tanks, manned walking machines with plasma cannon turrets.

Armored troops are clashing. One side is wearing red chromed armor, made of a futuristic synthetic material. The other side is wearing blue glossy armor made of a futuristic synthetic material. Resume to more reverse space travel. Then a close-up shot of Prince Damon and Princess Veronica, on a mound, fighting their way through the battle. Damon is leading his troops, and wearing the same red armor. He is also wearing a blue tunic with white borders and a matching reversed color scheme white cape with blue borders bearing in the center of it the monogram of both Slovenia and Croatia (“SC”) superimposed over the checkerboard pattern of the Croatian crest. The left breast of his tunic has the Croatian crest without the “SC” on it. Veronica is wearing blue chromed form fitting armor, with silver accents, and a red cape. Her cape has the Egyptian crest with “SC” superimposed on it. Her armor bears the Slovenian crest. She wears a light semi-helmet. More reverse space travel. Back to the battle scene.

Doris Day: When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother; “What will I be? Will I be pretty, will I be rich?” Here’s what she said to me:

Damon is leading Veronica. She’s behind him. She’s not shielded, so neither will he be, unless it’s needed. Just ahead of them, a blue soldier fires a shot at Damon. Damon tucks and rolls to dodge the blast, and Veronica is killed, while Damon touches his belt buckle, activating a white force-field around himself.

Doris Day: “Que sera, sera.”

Damon comes up blasting, and kills the soldier. Damon’s ray is not like the soldier’s ray, the soldier half explodes inside his armor, which blooms out like a grisly flower. Damon looks back, and sees Veronica laying dead on the ground. The only affect the soldier’s ray had on her body was to sear the life from it. He crawls over to her, deactivates his force-field, removes his helmet, (he’s in his mid-twenties) and cradles the body of Veronica, screaming at the sky. He pulls her up against him, and cries over her.

Doris Day: “Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see. Que sera, sera. What will be, will be.”

More reverse space travel. This time we pass Spirit One, whose form is that of a man made of stars and galaxies. Back to the battle scene, at the same point as the beginning of the last battle scene sequence. Like a “do-over”.

Doris Day: When I grew up and fell in love, I asked my sweetheart; “What lies ahead? Will we have rainbows, day after day?” Here’s what my sweetheart said:

Damon is leading Veronica. She’s behind him. She’s not shielded, so neither will he be, unless it’s needed. Just ahead of them, a blue soldier fires a shot at Damon. Damon glances behind his back and realizes Veronica is there and he cannot move, or the blast will hit her. He touches his belt buckle, activating his white force-field. Veronica is still in Damon’s shield space, and is repelled by it, onto the ground, just as the soldier’s ray-blast strikes the shield and is absorbed by it.

Doris Day: “Que sera, sera.”

Damon, still standing, opens fire and kills the soldier. Same grisly flower effect as before. He turns, touches his belt buckle to deactivate the shield, and extends his hand to Veronica. She smiles, takes his hand, and stands beside him. They press forward in the battle.

Doris Day: “Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see. Que sera, sera. What will be, will be.”

More reverse space travel. This time we pass Spirit One, and stop. He is the living essence of the Timescape; the sentient persona of all the collective matter, energy, nature, magic, spirit and soul of all the universes. He lifts his hands, and in the palm of each is a sphere, like an orb, or a crystal ball. In the sphere on the left is a still image of the first scene, where Veronica dies. In the sphere on the right is a still image of the second scene, where Veronica lives.

Spirit One: You have just witnessed a divergence; a splitting of time. Or, in

this case; the splitting of a man. Here is presented a profound polarization of the darkness and light, which is present in all human beings. This particular divergence is of great interest to the Divinities, because it provides an intense analogy of good vs. evil, in what was once the same man.

Spirit One closes his hands around the spheres, and sifts sand out of his hands, from the place where the spheres were. Drift slowly back.

Spirit One: Let the stories of the true legends of history, and the true history of the Timescape, stand as written, a monument etched in stone, which should never be told any way other than how the Watchers attest. The legends have been perceived by prophets, who interpret their visions to their best discernment. Then come the petty egoists, who prefer to revamp and pervert the legends ever frequently, until the stories devolve into the equal of a child lining up his toy action figures and making them fight. Mourn the passing of obsolete gods, but let them pass away. Dry your eyes, for I shall give you greater gods. I am Spirit One. And these...

Drift further back. Spirit One outstretches his arms. In their wake streams an outpouring of shining stars that appear to be falling from him.

Spirit One: ...are the sands of time!

Prologue: Tomorrow's Yesterdays

The Revelation fades into a white blur, which dissolves into a vision of a late 40th century classroom. Instead of charts and blackboards, there are projected images of all the usual educational stimuli. The teacher is leaned all the way back in his chair, with his eyes closed and his chin on his chest, snoozing. There are only ten student desks, and all but one are empty. It's occupied by a ten year old Prince Damon, 15 years before the fateful split. So, this is a part of their history-in-common. His computer is built into the sterile looking white desk, and it projects a holographic flat image of ancient texts. The first

is a Life Magazine pictorial from the March 2049 issue, titled “RISE OF THE MAN-GODS”. There are many awesome photos of different super beings from the mid twentieth century. The one that catches his eye is a jet-winged soldier in red, white and blue armor, flying above some beach, looking behind himself with a dead Nazi soldier, skewered between the chest and stomach, appendages dangling, on the end of a silver-gray metal lance which is raised above his head, like he’s using the dead Nazi on a stick to signal his troops to move forward. Red, white and blue are the colors of the Croatian flag, and in the Revelation, we saw the grown Damon in red, white and blue armor. Ten year old Damon might think this is a picture of an ancient Croatian warrior. The young prince has a pastel green plastic pencil-shaped pointer, which he uses to tap the projected image of the jet-winged soldier. The “click” is not a clicking sound, but more of a “vwoot” sound. This takes us to a list of related articles. Prince Damon “vwoot” clicks the top listing, and it takes us to this article:

American History, 1945 - 1985

After the end of World War II, the United States enjoyed ten years of peace, but the corporate warmongers spent that time sowing paranoia among the Americans and Soviets of the fear of being conquered by the other. Both political systems had been invented by the sinister Overlords, for the purpose of financial and political control. The two greatest super powers of the Allied Forces, staunch allies during the war, combining forces in single campaigns, to win victory after victory on the European front, were set against each other as adversaries, though they had no legitimate reason to be. The fear was fostered by the fact that no other nation could conquer either of these nations, except the other. During the second World War, America’s greatest ally on the Pacific front had been China. Though boasting a large citizenry, militarily, they proved to not be as strong as their potential. They were easily conquered by the Japanese, and America spent most of the war liberating them. In 1950, China officially converted to communism, the political system of the Soviet Union. Using this as an excuse to target China, the American government shaped the fears of its citizens into hate, directed at China. In 1955, the Red China War began. In 1958, The Soviet War broke out, as well. In 1960, Cuba joined the communist fight against America, until 1963, when

their entire island nation was nuked off the planet, the first official act of President Johnson, after the CIA assassination of President Kennedy, to make it seem that Cuba was responsible for the murder. But like Garfield and Lincoln, Kennedy also died shortly after saying too much about the dark forces behind the wars. Cuba had a modest S.P.I. nuke watch, but it was no match for the barrage. In 1974, the Chinese government collapsed, due to the devastating effects of 19 years of war. The U.S. military remained there afterwards, with no other orders, except “clean it up”. Individual units, sometimes individual soldiers, decided who was or wasn’t a threat. This continued until 1975, when the Soviet Union collapsed, which was perceived as a final victory; the war was finally over. That’s in singular, because after it was over, historians decided that the two wars were actually one war on two fronts. It started in China in 1955 and ended in Russia in 1975, so it was thereafter referred to as the 20 Year War. Though it wasn’t officially considered one war until then, most Americans were always grouping the two wars together, unofficially calling it the “Commie War”.

Before the late 1970’s, there was no fear agenda against what the government had dubbed “Super Powered Individuals”, S.P.I.’s for short, because they were as much dupes to the secret corruption as the average citizen, and in serving the system, they unwittingly served the dark fetishes of the Overlords, to a higher extent than most. Super squads such as the Line Breakers, the Titan Troop, the Infiltrators and the Bushwhackers were ministers of death during World War II and the 20 Year War, and had much to do with America’s perceived invincibility. S.P.I.’s start out like humans, but they have dormant chromosomes in the places where DNA chains are broken in full humans. Not everyone has this mutation, only a very small percentage of the population. Scientists named the mutant gene which allows for transformation the “Proteus Element”. The 1960 census came with a blood test. Every American citizen was tested for the Proteus Element. Just to see who was and who wasn’t. That information is then added to all their government files. Every year after that, the tests are given to new students in kindergarten and first grade. Those who already have power are labeled Functional S.P.I., while the ones who are not yet powered are labeled Latent S.P.I. Since, in their current state, Latent S.P.I.’s are no different from humans, they are allowed to compete in human sports; school sports,

professional sports, even the Olympics, but they must be constantly tested, to make sure they haven't transformed. If not, and it is discovered that they are enhanced, all their scores all the way back to their last test are invalidated. If they are on a team, every win that team had, all the way back to the last test, is stricken from the record. It happened to high school quarterback, Trevor Wade, a young man who would become one of the original 8 Retaliators; Psion-Man.

Restless for war and developing a reasonable paranoia that the supermen would realize their villainy, the warmongers stirred negativity toward the S.P.I.'s. By the time Mars returned to Terra, in 1983, he found a world which was experiencing an escalating fear and distrust of the S.P.I.'s. A group of S.P.I.'s, calling themselves the "Outcasts", had already relocated to the planet Mars, as the constant suspicion and harassment had become intolerable. Some believed that all the S.P.I.'s should be relocated to the Red Planet. That wasn't the plan. The plan starts with regulation and constant monitoring. Naturally, the S.P.I.'s would resist, and the warmongers would have their "justification" for the next war. Mars informed them that he will be the regulator and monitor of the whole world, instead. Humans can't fight Mars, there's nothing they could do. Mars immediately ended the reign of the warmongers and declared himself king of Terra, which was still called Earth at that time.

Mars' rule came to advantage shortly after the Retaliators were formed, when the American government was contacted by the inhabitants of the original planet Earth. The Faulks had been receiving humans and resources from the former leaders of Sol 3, in exchange for technology and political power. Since all members of the Shadow Empire the Faulks had been dealing with had been executed, imprisoned, exiled, or otherwise reconciled of their evil, the Faulks came to call in the debt. The Faulk's offered President Reagan a peaceful conquest, in which they would secretly harvest Terra of its resources and inhabitants, in volumes too small to be noticed by the populace. The president referred them to the king. After hearing the same proposal, Mars struck the chief liaison dead and informed the remaining entourage that the answer is "no". This resulted in an aggressive invasion, which never developed into a full occupation, before Mars defeated the Faulk fleet in space. All the ancient universal star charts list Sol 3 as Terra, and the

Faulk homeworld as Earth. The Faulks and their planet Earth are universally despised, so Sol 3 is now called Terra.

Prince Damon takes his pointer and scribbles it between the names “Trevor Wade” and “Psion-Man”, to select them both. This takes us to a list of related articles. The top one is from the April 2, 1984 issue of the New York Daily Beacon. He clicks it. The article is titled “Real Or Hoax?” The photo is of two speakers sitting at a banquet table, with five costumed people standing behind them. The speaker on our left is a Native American young man in his early twenties, wearing casual attire. The speaker on the right is a costumed character in a dark blue skin tight body suit, with red gloves, the boots can’t be seen in the photo, silver rimmed red eye swatches, a 70’s-80’s style red roller derby helmet with black lining, and bluish-black possibly stunt biker pads on the upper body. The outfit is apparently assembled of a combination of made stuff and bought stuff. The article reads:

Disgraced former HS QB, Trevor Wade, appears together with Retaliator, Psion-Man, to quell rumors that they are the same person.

A press conference was held Tuesday at City Hall, to quell rumors that Trevor Wade is the secret identity of Psion-Man. Wade, a former Utaqua High School quarterback who was booted from the team in disgrace, for playing while enhanced, not only caused the team to have to forfeit the championship game, which they had just won when the enhancement was discovered, but also caused every win the team had that year to be stricken from the record, trophies relinquished, scholarships rescinded, the works. The incident went beyond local news, and raised the national issue of the potential for Latent S.P.I.’s to cheat at sports, by secretly becoming enhanced. Mr. Wade has not been very popular in his community and the media ever since, and said at the conference that he had to come forward because he didn’t want his stigma to be attached to Psion-Man or the Retaliators.

Mr. Wade maintained his claim that he was accidentally exposed to a catalyst earlier the same day as the infamous championship game, and didn’t know what kind of power, if any, he had gained from it, before the game. “I had the football in my hands and the end-zone in my sights, but an opposing linebacker twice my size had his arms around my waist from behind, with his

feet dragging the ground. I was gonna fall! I just wanted him off of me, and something came out of me that knocked him off. I didn't know what happened or how it happened, at the time."

Unfortunately, whether we choose to believe Mr. Wade's story or not, the rules are that it must be officially assumed that the power goes all the way back to the last blood test, which in Mr. Wade's case, was at the start of the season. Mr. Wade stated "I have a psionic power, it's a coincidence that there's a Retaliator with a similar power, but I'm not him, he's sitting here beside me. I'm not a superhero, or a super villain, I don't even use my power, except at home, like if a lamp gets knocked off, I'll keep it from hitting the floor, or whatever. Everyday stuff like that. I was powered by accident, I didn't ask for any of this, I just want to live a normal life."

Psion-Man asserted that Mr. Wade made a mistake and appealed to the public to let the issue die down and allow Mr. Wade to get on with his life.

Psion-Man's most notorious detractor, Eugene Shedowee, former classmate of Trevor Wade's, and the person most credited for starting the rumor that Trevor Wade is Psion-Man, was in the audience and became disruptive, saying "They're covering it up! It's a conspiracy! Where's Citizen Defender? This so-called Psion-Man is an inch shorter and ten pounds heavier than usual. He didn't shrink and swell, he's an imposter! The real Psion-Man is on the left, sitting next to Citizen Defender wearing the Psion-Man suit! It's fucking obvious! You're all idiots!" What an idiot. "Eunuch-Gene", his not quite undeserved nickname all through high school, which replaced his nickname from grade school, "Weenie Eugenie", does interviews and anti-S.P.I. hate propaganda for some of the most shameful tabloids, which hardly qualifies him to be admitted to a real press conference, meant for real reporters of real news. It's possible the Retaliators wanted him there, since he is the number one shit stirrer of this controversy. If his deranged version of the meeting gets published and you happen to read it, this reputable newspaper offers you the true version, in contrast: The Retaliators and their guest were on a raised platform, no one can tell the difference of an inch or ten pounds, one way or another, from that perspective. The two speakers, Trevor Wade and Psion-Man, were sitting behind a banquet table with microphones in front of them, most of the time. And everyone knows that Citizen Defender has recently quit the Retaliators, to better serve his own homeland. Most notably, Citizen Defender has a Kenyan accent.

Shortly after deputies removed Mr. Shedowee, Psion-Man proved his identity, by levitating and causing ripples in the air above the crowd of reporters, powers characteristic of Psion-Man, which Citizen Defender doesn't have. This reporter personally felt the force wave of the psionic ripples and is satisfied that the rumors can now be put to rest. God bless the Retaliators, saviors of our Terra, in particular, Psion-Man, a true American hero. Also, I would like to ask that you give positive thoughts to Trevor Wade, who I feel is a victim of circumstance. If only our high school sports programs had the budget to blood test their Latent S.P.I.'s before every game, as they do on the pro and even college levels, Utaqua's season scores would still be in the record books, and Trevor Wade would've spent the championship game on the bench. Regardless of the outcome of the game, nothing about it would've caught the public eye, and none of the circumstances that have so adversely effected this young man would've happened. So really, in my opinion, he didn't let us down, we are the ones who let him down.

Mr. Wade chooses to stay out of the limelight, and that is his right. However, based on my impression of him, I believe that if I were to slip from the tenth floor balcony of my apartment and Trevor Wade happens to be passing by, he would at least do as much for me as he would a lamp. If he is Psion-Man, then he is already a proven hero. If they are two different people, that's good too, it doubles my chances of being caught if I fall. That's why I sleep more soundly at night, just knowing these people are around.

Where would we be in this country, in this world, without our supermen? Even the citizens who haven't benefited directly from their protection have still benefited greatly. We'd all be under communist rule, right now, if not for them. Yet they are held to standards and scrutiny we humans don't have to endure. Though they may be god beings, they are also human beings. Many of us full humans have relatives, in-laws and friends who are Proteus Positive. With but one ancestor changed in your lineage, it could be you. I want you to think long and hard, about that.

Eugene Shedowee is currently relaxing at the Evaluation Center of Bellevue Hospital. Let's hope he gets the help he needs, to straighten out his troubled mind.

End of article. Prince Damon takes his pointer and clicks the line "God bless

the Retaliators”. Out of the list of articles, Damon chooses this one, because his combat instructor is named Reddingfield:

REDDINGFIELD MYSTERY FINALLY SOLVED

Two years after the death of Arthur Reddingfield, King Mars is publicly admitting that he had caused the mysterious 1965 death of Samuel Reddingfield, by asking his father Jupiter to stop the perfectly healthy billionaire’s heart. Mars’ reason was that Samuel Reddingfield was the prime warmonger profiting from and being aroused by the 20 Year War. Mars stated that he always had the greatest respect for Tech War, even before he knew there were three, and he considers all three to be Retaliators and legendary heroes of humanity. And he always thought of Arthur Reddingfield as a great man, who was instrumental in helping mankind transition into the New Age. “I watched through a viewing portal Samuel Reddingfield telling young Arthur that the boy would be better off without him for a father. I agreed, and still do. Arthur surely would have grown into a darker soul, if raised by that sadist.”

Waldo Reddingfield was contacted about the disclosure of how his grandfather died and the sole Reddingfield heir expressed much displeasure that our king kept that secret from Arthur all his life, even after 1991, when it was revealed that Arthur Reddingfield was the original Tech War who helped form the Retaliators, and fought alongside Mars during the early years. Mars would have us understand Waldo’s position, and we do. All love, all peace. War is over, thank the gods. If Arthur had learned the truth of his father’s death while he was alive, he’d likely be more upset than Waldo, since Waldo Reddingfield never actually met his grandfather. But Arthur is with his Zodiac Collective now, where all is understood. Peace be with him.

The click of the word “Retaliators” takes us to a page of super being mug shots, apparently a collection of photos of all the heroes who have been Retaliators. The sixth mug shot on the first row is Psion-Man, who we read about earlier. It’s a headshot, the helmet and mask are the same as in the article photo, but the shape of the head is longer and thinner than the more rounded head shape of the Psion-Man in the article photo. Obviously not the

same man inside the mask. Citizen Defender's mugshot is right next to it, but the shape of his head is hard to determine, because his mask is more of a full head helmet. One of the mug shots on the second row is of a firm jawed blonde guy wearing a red lacquered old style military "steel pot" helmet, decorated with silver captain bars in the front. It's the same guy who was waving the dead Nazi around, in the photo we saw at the start. No air filter or goggles, but it's him. Damon's clicking of that picture transitions us to Vision 1.

Vision 1: 1945; The Plane

1945. We are inside the cargo hold of an airplane. A few Nazis scurry around in the background. We are panning around, as if we are seeing this from someone's eyes. One of the Nazis approaches. It doesn't matter who he is. His career as a Nazi and his propensity to live and breathe are ticking away their final moments.

Nazi: Ah, Herr Kapitan! Zyoo ist vawake I zee. Issa no prevail to ztruggul. Zya pavawysink affecks of zee ray, vill holtt chu fwosent in zee a staseez jaymba I put chu ink. Hell's Angel; vun man vas destroys legions. Use hahnds to breck zee vings from bombers een zee sky. Wie kannst du was du bist?: How cahn zyoo be vot chu are? Zere ees a Doktor Rascher, vas pays a forchoonk to studay yoos like a... vot ees eet? Ka lab rat! Ja, zot's eet. He sa coot auf ze pieses, in ze beeg choonks, und ze smool choonks. Not zo goode vor zyoo, plenty goode vor me, ja? Heh, heh. Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Kapitan! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

There are some multicolored, mostly green, energy tendrils enveloping us. The Nazi leaves the cargo hold, but there are others scurrying to and fro. They know we're in a stasis bubble. They don't care. They're Nazis. They've got Nazi-ing to do. We move our eyes to the right, and see Lieutie Liberty slip around from the other side of the walkway bulkhead. He's sneaky, and moves

toward us, undetected by the busy Nazis.

Lieuie Liberty (whispering): Flash! My gosh, what have they done to you? Don't you worry, I'll have you out of there in a jiff! I just gotta figure out these controls...

Lieuie Liberty starts fiddling with some control panel, to the right of the machine we're in. He's spotted. A Nazi points a Luger at him.

Nazi: Spion! Saboteur! Ich nehme Sie Gefangener!

Lieuie Liberty puts his hands up, but looks over at us like he failed us.

Intercom Speaker: Achtung! Notfall! Bewegen, um Positionen zu kämpfen!
Wir sind unter Angriff !!

The scurriers hasten their scurrying. The Nazi holding a gun on Lieuie Liberty shoots him in the chest plate, knocking Lieuie Liberty back into the machine. Something strafed the airship. The Nazi holsters his gun, and scurries off. Lieuie Liberty gets back to his feet, checks his chest plate and smiles. He resumes his liberation attempt.

Lieuie Liberty: The new armor's a real cracker jack, Flash. I'd'a been a goner for sure, with the old one.

Muffled Unseen Voice: Mumph! Hagawah! Ungh!

Lieuie Liberty: I don't know! Something's happening. We've got to get out of here!

Muffled Unseen Voice: Mmmph...

"Our" plane is making machine gun sounds. We're being strafed by artillery. Lieuie Liberty's still working. Some parachute wearing Nazis run by, without paying us any mind. They open the hatch, and jump out. The wind is coming in. It has blusters of snow in it. There are two or three parachutes hanging on a hook, next to the open hatch. Lieuie Liberty looks over at the open hatch, as if he wants to go, but he resumes his duty, instead. He may be turning the machine off, or he may be cranking it up. He doesn't know what he's doing.

But, God bless him, he's trying. He's nervous, jumpy. Every time an artillery round hits, he jolts, and looks around. Then he goes back to those dials and buttons.

Muffled Unseen Voice: Gyeet... uff... tuh peen..., Sean.

He understood. It only made him more nervous. He's still working. He seems... a lot older than he was a couple minutes ago. He knows this is going terribly wrong. But, maybe, just maybe, a miracle might happen, and by some fantastic stroke of fate, this could all just somehow work out. A flaming fireball that used to be a Corsair hits the wing, bounces off it, and enters the cargo bay door, widening it. We are surrounded by fire. The fire is blocked by the energy tendrils. Lieue Liberty is cremated in front of us. The airplane is coming apart around us. The energy tendrils flicker and die. There is no airplane. We're a couple thousand feet above some snow covered hills. We and some flaming debris are falling into a vortex. It's spinning like a tornado made of time. Our eyelids open and close, open and close, as our vision gets blurrier. We're passing out. Our vision fades to black.



Vision 2: 1985; The Future

It's 1985. Martel Manufacturing. Allesandro "Sandro" Martel made a decent living for his family, stamping out buttons, dials, switches and levers, mainly for Reddingfield Innovations. The little doo-dads that Samuel Reddingfield never bothered to build facilities to produce. Martel Manufacturing boardroom. Casey Martel arrives late to his own board meeting. He's wearing funeral clothes. So is his brother Pete.

Casey Martel: Sorry to keep you waiting, ladies and gentlemen. My mother needed to spend more time at the gravesite, than I'd anticipated.

Pete Martel: We've already been discussing the quarterlies. Productivity is neither up nor down. I think as long as we keep doing what we're doing, we can maintain the company's quotas as well as father ever did.

Casey Martel: I don't.

Pete Martel gives his brother a look.

Casey Martel: In case any of you haven't noticed, we are in a new era, here.

Look around. The space age is here. When I was a kid, going to the planet Mars was science fiction. Now we have an actual colony there.

Pete Martel: Yeah! A colony of Outcast mutants!

Casey Martel: Sheesh! Anyway, like I was saying; in this, the latter half of the twentieth century, we here at Martel Manufacturing have an opportunity... no, a responsibility, to help build the bridge to the twenty first century.

Board Member: I think I like where you're going with this, Casey.

Casey Martel: I'd hoped you would. I think we need to direct all our focus on aerospace technology.

Pete Martel: Rockets?

Casey Martel: Rockets. Concentrated jet propulsion. Someday, we won't even need cars. We'll just fly wherever we want to go.

Pete Martel: Ha, ha! You've been watching too many Buck Rogers movies.

Casey Martel: It's the future, Pete. If we don't do it, someone else will.

Board Member: Reddingfield Innovations will. They've had it in prototype form since Captain Superhero. Now they've got the Tech War prototype, but they still haven't commercialized it. Could we suddenly play on their level and beat them to it?

Casey Martel: Is there any other level to play on, but the top? Poppa should have been on Samuel Reddingfield's tail years ago. We've got a lot of catching up to do. Dr. Dunning; My brother Pete, our new vice president in charge of research and development, will make sure your team gets all the best equipment and materials. And I will personally call in the investors. Before you know it, we'll be contracting for the government! Sky's the limit, when that happens. And I promise, it will. I'll take this company to a level my Poppa never even dreamed of. The future, ladies and gentlemen. We are destined for greatness.

Vision 3: Lieutenant Benjamin Goss; "Hotshot"

Beirut, Lebanon. Marine Embassy Headquarters. There's a war going on. Government contractor, Arthur Reddingfield, is instructing a group of pilots on the advancements of his new cyber giant.

Arthur Reddingfield: Since Mars abolished war between nations back in '83, all nations have complied, officially, but that hasn't stopped the extremists who still believe they'll be rewarded in heaven if they kill enough infidels. That level of idiocy doesn't wage war on their own. The Retaliators have removed all the warmongers, which ended war officially, but until we find who's radicalizing these stupid fucks, we gotta deal with it. The bosses may be hiding underground or out in space, who knows. War may no longer be as certain as death and taxes, but it's not something that you can just flip a switch and it's gone.

Pilot: That's why we military types aren't drawing unemployment, yet.

Arthur Reddingfield: I guess I'd be out of a job, as well. Luckily, I have a couple dozen more jobs, besides... this. Which brings me to the reason I'm here; the S-22.

Mr. Reddingfield gestures up toward the "face" of the S-22 and beams proudly.

Arthur Reddingfield: "Bender's Basher", we call this one. Named after Dr. Race's hero, Kurt Bender, the pioneer of American robotics, in the early 20th century. Jackson made it, so he got to name it. Dr. Race wouldn't let me do anything on it, he designed it entirely himself. Buuuu-ut, lest he get the big head, so to speak, it isn't all the way back to the drawing board, some of my stuff from previous models is still in there, so it's still partly my baby. The S-22 doesn't make the S-18 entirely obsolete, we'll still be using them on back line and mop up operations, but this will be your new front line module. Each team will be issued one. Follow me and I'll give you the tour. It's stronger, faster, more responsive, the sensors are more sensitive, and the fire power, well you've just got to see the heat this baby's packin'.

Some time later, the group is huddled on a scaffold, about midway of the giant robot's left thigh, looking at the intake manifold of a jet engine.

Arthur Reddingfield: Your S-22 still has retractable wings, for stability in the air, it would be near impossible to control any airborne projectile without wings or fins of some sort, but you now have an added source of maneuvering thrust, here on the shins. It's because of these shin thrusters that your impulse is more stable, and thrust so much more effective. For instance, if you want to loop, just point these suckers to the back a bit, and you'll be looping like crazy. That's something you need to be mindful of; a little does a lot, with these.

Ben Goss: Is there any difference in the aerodynamics?

Arthur Reddingfield: Only for the better, Lieutenant. The maneuverability of the S-22 will make you feel like it's a second skin. You can dive, barrel roll, whatever you want, and pull up on a dime.

Ben Goss: I can do that in the S-18!

Arthur Reddingfield: I'm sure you can Lieutenant, but...

Pilot: He can.

Another Pilot: Yeah, he can.

Arthur Reddingfield: Really? I'd like to see you fly sometime, Lieutenant. Perhaps this afternoon you'll take me up and show me some of your moves? In the S-22?

Ben Goss: Sure. I'll teach you a few things about your own module, Mr. Reddingfield!

Ben Goss and the other pilots laugh, and high five each other. Switch to later that day. Lieutenant Goss is pushing the S-22 to its limits, scaring and thrilling Arthur Reddingfield, at the same time. Suddenly...

Ben Goss: Whoa! We got company! Bogey at three o'clock. It's not one of ours, though a couple of the pieces are. O.k., lets see how the firepower on this baby measures up!

The main chassis of the rebels' giant robot is a CC-84, aka the "Soviet Stalker", left over from the Soviet War, the rest of it is made mostly of junk scavenged from wrecked fighter jets, tanks and other armored vehicles and even some Reddingfield S-18s. There'll be no help from Tech War today, Tech War's in New Jersey. The S-22 and the mélange CC-84 fire artillery at each other from their wrist guns, riddling each other with bullet holes. The

CC-84 flies up, sputtering smoke from its boot jets (the CC-84 has jets built into the soles of its “feet”, which is a bad design, since the giant robot sometimes has to walk or stand on its feet. The S-22 has jets on the sides of its shins, a much more practical design). The CC-84 is launching missiles down at them. Goss manages to maneuver the S-22 around all three missiles, then the S-22 fires its own missiles, heat seekers. The CC-84 swings around and shoots both missiles right out of the air, even as they are seeking their target.

Ben Goss: Shit! Pardon my French.

The laser cannon on the S-22’s right shoulder swings around and locks in place, aimed at the CC-84. The CC-84 shoots the cannon right off the shoulder of the S-22.

Ben Goss: Wha-Fuck, shit!

The S-22 flies up to crash into the belly of the CC-84. The two giant robots punch and scrap at each other in the air, Goss is dominating, of course. The terrorist rebel inside the CC-84 pushes a button, gets out of his control chair, kneels and bows toward the left wall of the cockpit. The S-22 is fully clenched with the scrap yard Soviet Stalker when it explodes. Half the S-22 is also blown away by the explosion. Goss and Reddingfield are okay in the cockpit, but there’s smoke, flashing lights and alarms. The floor of the cockpit mechanically moves down an inch, separating from the walls and control panels. Some panels come out and form a pod around the pilot and copilot. The cockpit pod is the mid-face of the robot, and it shoots forward and ejects from the head of the falling, smoking S-22 Cyber Giant. It automatically activates two parachutes, so they descend slowly and can watch the mangled S-22 and the debris from the CC-84 crash to the ground. The drifting pod takes them down to a wooded area, on the outskirts of enemy occupied territory.

Ben Goss: Are you alright, sir? I am so sorry. That’s the first time that’s ever happened, I swear.

Arthur Reddingfield: The guy was suicidal. How can you stop that?

Ben Goss: I should've had him down before he had the chance. He got lucky. Before he offed himself, that is.

Arthur Reddingfield: Oh, I'm sorry. I almost forgot; you're a hotshot.

Ben Goss: You know it. You wouldn't be makin' funna me now, wouldya?

Arthur Reddingfield: No, I'm serious, Lieutenant, you are a hotshot. I've never seen aerial maneuvers like that before, in my life. And coming from me, that's saying something. When the war's over, come see me at R.I. about a job. If you don't, I'll find you and drag you there, myself.

Ben Goss: Yeah, you and what army? You have a weapon?

Arthur looks unprepared for the question. Ben hands him a .45.

Arthur Reddingfield: No, I'm not... going to shoot anyone.

Ben Goss: By God, if my ass is on the line, you'd better! I need you armed as much as you need me armed, capiche?

Arthur Reddingfield: Right.

Arthur takes the .45.

Ben Goss: Welcome to the war, General.

Arthur Reddingfield: Oh, my God. Tech War usually does this sort of work for me. Wish he was here.

Ben Goss un-straps his M-16, and leads the way toward the canyons. On the dunes, there are Mujahideen crossing the sandbars.

Ben Goss: Me too. Then there'd be three of us. Oh, shit! There they are! This is our lives, General! Don' hold nothin' back, you hear me?

Arthur Reddingfield: Loud and clear, soldier! Don't call me General. My name's Arthur.

Ben Goss: Good. Don't call me soldier. I'm an officer.

Arthur Reddingfield: Sorry. But, for an officer, you make a helluva soldier.

Ben Goss: Marine, actually. But, yeah whatever, momma ditten raise no limp-dicks.

Arthur Reddingfield: Did you bring extra clips for this?

Ben Goss: Yeah, two. Here, make 'em count.

Arthur Reddingfield: My God, I've never killed anyone before.

Tech War has, with Arthur inside. But that doesn't count, in Arthur's crowded mind. Once, when the last merc was boxed in, Tech War had offered Arthur the kill, but Arthur told Tech War "That's your job". Two-sided conversation, entirely inside the armor. Arthur knows he's Tech War. He knows Wally and Wendy are also Tech War. But, Tech War is like the fourth person in that equation. Arthur doesn't want to be Tech War at all, he's made Wally the primary, with Wendy as the backup. She thinks they take turns. But Arthur still takes it sometimes. It's a damn hard habit to break.

Ben Goss: What'chu talkin' about? You're a weapons manufacturer. You've killed more people than Genghis Khan.

Arthur Reddingfield: You have no idea how well aware I am of that. I try not to think about it. Definitely never had to look them in the eye, before.

Ben Goss: Like I said, "Welcome to the war, General".

Arthur Reddingfield: Damn. If we survive this, I've got some serious thinking to do.

No more fighters can be seen.

Ben Goss: Stay down, I'll check and make sure it's clear.

Lt. Goss stands up, and is shot in the chest. He falls and Arthur sees it's bad.

Ben Goss: Shit! I didn't see the bastard, where was he?

Arthur Reddingfield: I see him. Hiding in a bush. I'll get him.

Arthur Reddingfield finishes the last Jihadist, who was hiding behind a bush.

Ben Goss: He got me good, boss. I don't think I'm gonna make it.

Arthur Reddingfield: You called me "boss". Does that mean you're coming to R.I.?

Ben Goss: Oh, Lord! The only job I'm qualified for now is a ghost!

Arthur Reddingfield: Don't go shopping for angel wings just yet, Lieutenant,

my Bio-Mechanics team can replace whatever's busted in there, and have you back in tip top shape in no time.

Ben Goss: Well, if you can save my ass, then get at it, man! I mean, "boss"!

The 130 pound man picks up the 190 pound man in a fireman's carry, and runs with him, carrying the rifle in his other hand. Arthur's strong and fit, for a skinny guy.



Vision 4: Casey Takes A Stand

Martel Manufacturing Research And Development.

Pete Martel: So, how goes the project, Dr. Dunning?

Dr. Dunning: As well as can be expected, on a half million dollar budget, Mr. Martel. Reddingfield Innovations spends this much on toilet paper. The jet pack works, and it works well. I pushed the technology as far as I can, with the resources available. But, this level... of this technology... exists. R.I.'s

gonna kill us with this. It's too low tech for the military and too high maintenance for the mainstream. I'm afraid you've got a snowball's chance in hell with either.

Pete Martel: Don't ever lose faith. Who knows? We might get lucky. Keep up the good work, doc.

Pete Martel departs, and heads upstairs. In Casey Martel's office...

Casey Martel (on the phone): I'm sure you won't be disappointed, Mr. Wyatt. Martel Manufacturing is on the cutting edge of technology. Our research department is one of the most advanced facilities, staffed by some of the most brilliant minds in the world. Believe me, sir, this will be one of the most lucrative investments you ever made.

Phone Speaker: Every investment I make is lucrative, Mr. Martel. One way or another. Goodbye, Mr. Martel. Good luck with your presentation.

Pete Martel opens the door, and Casey Martel motions him in.

Casey Martel: Thank you, Mr. Wyatt. I'll see you at the presentation?

Phone Speaker: No. Goodbye. >click<

Casey Martel: So, how's it going?

Pete Martel: It's going great. Dr. Dunning says nothing like this has ever been done before. That government contract is a cinch. Reddingfield won't know what hit 'im.

Casey Martel: Good. For the five million dollars I wrangled for this project, I should see some results.

Pete Martel: We'll blow that goody two shoes silver spoon out of the water.

Casey Martel: Pete, you and I are spoiled rich kids too, remember? Not like Reddingfield, but we had no hardships.

Pete Martel: Oh, yeah. I forgot. Sir.

Casey Martel: Aw, screw that. I was Vice President of this company while you were freeloading in Aspen! And freeloading in Baja, and freeloading in Monaco! Is there still a country you haven't crashed an expensive car in, or have you completed that mission? You're the whole reason I had to borrow this money in the first place! Martel Manufacturing would have its own liquid capital, if it weren't for you pulling us down all these years! Do you

really think you should be sitting in this chair, just because you're older than me? Not only do you not have a right to this chair, you'd have the company busted in a week! I'm trying to save it! From YOU!!

Pete Martel: You think I want this? I got bigger plans. And fuck you, anyway. You know you can bulk up all you want, and take all the jujitsu classes you want...

Casey Martel: Aikido.

Pete Martel: Whatever. You'll always be a scared little pussy-boy. You'll never be half the man I am.

Casey Martel: That's it! I've had enough of your garbage. We're not kids, anymore, and you're not bigger than me, anymore. I'm going to show you who's the pussy-boy now!

Casey Martel stands up, and takes his jacket and shirt off. In a plain white tank-top, we can see that he's built like a brick outhouse. Pete also gets down to a t-shirt. By normal standards he's big, but not nearly as physically impressive as Casey. Casey Martel bears his chest out, and assumes a fighting stance. He has both fists up, and bobs and weaves. Pete puts his own fists up. Casey wallops him with a right jab, that spins him to the side, and to one knee.

Pete Martel: Damn.

Pete moves his jaw around, with his hand.

Pete Martel: Ow, damn!

Casey Martel: Yeah? You like that? Want some more? Come get you some!

Pete Martel: You motherfucker!

Pete tackles Casey, and is beating him, with rage. Pete is on top of him, pounding him, and Casey squirms away. He stands up, and assumes the stance again. His lip is bleeding. Pete knocks him on top of the desk, causing papers to spill off. Pete dives into him, and they both slide off, into the floor. Pete punches him a few times, then starts choking him.

Casey Martel: >cough< >cough< Pete, stop! >cough< I can't breath! Stop, please!

Pete Martel: Say, "I'm a pussy-boy".

Casey Martel: Oh, God, Pete. You're killing me.

Pete Martel: Say it! Say, "I'm a pussy-boy"!

Casey Martel: Oh, God! Don't make me say that, please!

Pete Martel: Why? You've said it every other time I've made you! SAY IT!!

Pete takes his right hand off the choke hold just long enough to slap Casey hard across the face, then quickly reapplies it to the choke hold.

Casey Martel: >cough< >cough< I'm a pussy-boy.

Pete Martel lets him go, and starts putting his shirt back on.

Pete Martel: And you always will be. Don't you ever forget it.

He looks Casey up and down, admiring his physique, platonically.

Pete Martel: Cheesus, you look like the cover of a comic book. You did all that for me? Ha ha! And it still turned out the same. You should get a power. You don't have to worry about me getting one to match you with. I'm a grown up. I'm not interested in spending my life in tights, chasing and being chased by the other fruity idiots, conquering or saving the world. I don't care about the world, one way or another. I only want what I want. And that's always subject to change without notice. You better get invulnerability with it, or I'll still kick your ass. Ha, ha! You might still be fucked, because I'd find out your Achilles' Heel! Ha, ha! Get a power, Casey. Spend your life in a cartoon, and leave the real world to us grown ups.

Pete walks to the door, and opens it. He turns to Casey for one last taunt.

Pete Martel: Wipe the damn blood off your face, pussy-boy. You wouldn't want your employees to see you bleeding all over your chief executive self.

Pete pulls the door shut. Casey takes his tank-top off, and wipes his face with it. He puts it in the trash. He puts his dress shirt on, without the tank-top. He seems emotionally numb to what just happened. He's probably been numb to it for years.

Casey Martel: Sonuvabitch!

Oops. Spoke too soon.



Vision 5: Perfect Physical Specimen

Desmond Wyatt's office. Mr. Wyatt is a 36 year old full-blooded Comanche, with long shiny black hair flowing across the shoulders of his dark grey pinstriped Armani suit, which is accessorized by superficially Native American jewelry, but an adept Astrologist might notice the coupling of the turquoise with copper, the pearl with silver, etc. The jewelry is designed to attract favorable influence from the planets. At this point in our story, Mr. Wyatt and Arthur Reddingfield are friendly rivals who exchange witty barbs, with a sly smile, at trade shows, society events, etc, whenever they encounter one another. Success-wise, Arthur is far ahead of Desmond, Arthur being not only the richest Native American in the country but the richest man in the world. Arthur is the sole heir of Lenape Chief Maxkehakihakan, who ruled the island of Manhattan at the time the White men came. Since then, the island has developed into the most lucrative piece of real estate in the country, and Arthur is the current beneficiary of that. But Arthur himself is a varied mix of Lenape, English, Italian and Croatian. There's not a full Native in his lineage for over four generations, what right does he have to all he has? Desmond secretly has his eyes on that number one spot, and he'll take it by any means necessary, because in his eyes, it belongs to him. He's dialing the telephone. Dial tone. Click.

Phone Speaker: Rascher.

Wyatt: Sigmund. Desmond Wyatt. Did my operative bring you the dossier on the prospect?

Switch. Doktor Rascher is looking at candid photos of Casey Martel, at home, taken through a window. He's wearing a t-shirt, and is very muscular.

Doktor Rascher: He's very muscular. I have seldom seen a musculature like this on a 6' 7" frame. Are you sure he's six foot seven?

Phone Speaker: If that's what the file says, then that's what he is. I don't put out false information.

Doktor Rascher: Of course not. Mein Gott! He's perfect! Is he pure white?

Switch.

Wyatt: Damned supremacist! Yes, he's white. If he becomes available, would

you be interested, for ten million?

Switch.

Doktor Rascher : Ja. Mein Gott... The perfect physical specimen...

Definitely. Yes!

Phone Speaker: Good. I'll keep you posted on the situation.

Doktor Rascher : Please do. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Vision 6: The Unknowable Man

View of an hourglass, pouring sand down its globe. Transition to Arthur Reddingfield's mansion, on the seacliff of Long Island. Samuel Reddingfield thought of Manhattan as his pot of gold. You don't live in your pot of gold, you stand off to the side, so you can see the whole thing at once. That's why he built his home on Governor's Island. Samuel Reddingfield changed the name to Lavonia's Island, after Arthur's Croatian mother, the model Samuel saw on a Pirelli Tire calendar who he decided should be his wife, and he made it happen. Samuel died when Arthur was 8, R.I. went straight to Arthur, who by all accounts should have been too young to manage the company, but he did. His mother dated men who always tried to maneuver themselves into control of R.I., but young Arthur always managed to thwart their schemes. At 15, he told his mother she should marry a wealthy heir who's into the lifestyle but not the business, and therefore wouldn't be so greedy for R.I. She did, and Arthur has only seen her twice since then. He has a half sister he's never met. It's still officially called Lavonia's Island, but now it's unofficially called and better known as Retaliators Island. Arthur inherited his father's pot of gold, as well as his inclination to want to be able to see it all at once. He lives in Long Island, works in New Jersey and "plays" at Retaliators Island. All three locations offer a view of his entire pot of gold, all at once. Arthur is in bed, wearing pajamas. He's nursing a glass of gin, with

ice. There is the sound of a key in the door. He buttons the shirt, and hides the glass. Enter Zoëy Gould. She loves him. He doesn't know if he loves her or not, but he likes her a lot and he loves that she loves him, without condition. She takes his shit. More than she should. He likes that about her.

Zoëy: Hi, Arthur. How's your friend? General Ross?

Arthur: Lieutenant Goss. For a guy who's been installed with a brand new peephole, and spent 18 hours on the table, straddling the fence between life and death, I'd say he's coming along nicely. After what happened to my father, I was always afraid I would die of sudden heart failure. I go for checkups, I'm perfectly healthy, but so was he. I was 14 when I talked to the M.E. about it. It was a perfectly good heart that should be beating, except it wasn't. If it could happen to my father, it could happen to me. I try not to dwell on it, try not to think about it, but it's everpresent, in the back of my mind. Now I've seen a guy get his heart blown out of his chest, saving me. For certain, it was my fear that caused me to develop the Reddingfield Artificial Heart, in the first place. It wasn't my life that was saved, but it was someone's. That's good. Father's death saved someone's life. It's good. And the heart is good. Just as good as a real one. More lives can be saved. That's good.

Zoëy: Feeling guilty that it makes your father's death less unfortunate?

Arthur tilts his head, like he's trying to figure out how this stranger has the keys to his house. She walks over and sits beside him on the bed.

Arthur Reddingfield: Who is this person you think you know better than he knows himself? Can't be me. Nobody knows me.

Zoëy: You're so enigmatic.

Arthur: And yet everyone seems to have their own idea of who I am.

Zoëy: I love you, Arthur. Whoever you are.

Arthur Reddingfield: You weren't even close to guessing my thoughts. I was thinking the heart was serving for me the same purpose Tech War has, since he became a Retaliator; To pay back some of the lives I owe.

Zoëy: Must be lonely, to still be the only human Retaliator, after all this time.

Arthur: After two years, he's still feeling like the Lone Ranger, over there. Mars mentioned recruiting more humans, but I'm afraid he'll relax the

standards just to get them in, and some poor shmoe who's not cut out for fighting super-villains will get wiped out on his first mission, just for being the token human Retaliator. We're so fragile, compared to them. It's not our world, anymore. We're just the damsels in distress, depending on the bad ones to have the mercy not to kill us, or the good ones to rescue us, when the bad ones don't have the mercy. Tech War's no different from me or you, or anyone else, except he's got this fancy armor I made, that lets him pretend to be like them.

Zoëy: But you *are* different, Arthur. How many S.P.I.'s would be so brave, without their power? Heroism is not in the blood, it's in the spirit. You're a Retaliator.

Arthur starts smiling like he knows she's baiting him but it's not gonna work.

Zoëy: Whether your power is in your flesh or your armor, the result is the same, you are one of the brave knights, defending and rescuing us fair damsels.

Arthur (Still Smiling): I'm not Tech War.

Zoëy: Yes, you are.

Arthur: No, I'm not. Why would I be, when I don't have to be? I'm rich. I hire people for shit like that.

Zoëy: No, you do everything yourself, and hire people to help you.

Arthur: I hire Tech War to help me.

Zoëy: Hmmm... Don't you know how much sexier you would be, if you were rich and a Retaliator?

Arthur: Mmmm... I'm Tech War. C'mere, fair damsel, let me rescue you.

Zoëy: Ha, ha! Okay.

It starts to get romantic, so we'll leave them to their privacy.



Vision 7: The All New Tech War

Ashton Air Force base. Casey Martel is wearing a dark gray and red fireproof suit, with a red “M” inside a white “M”, inside a black border. He has a red crash helmet on, with ordinary clear goggles. He’s demonstrating his belt-jet. He’s hovering about four feet off the ground. Off to the side, Arthur Reddingfield stands next to the cylindrical armored Tech War. On a platform, directly behind Casey, is a wooden rectangular frame, draped by a white sheet. Casey lands, and turns the jets off. He removes the goggles, and takes off the helmet.

Casey: You see General, it’s cybernetically controlled. I can pilot it by thinking the direction I want to go! The fuel supply is concentrated, so I can get a lot of range, from just a small amount of storage space.

General: It reminds me of something I seen on an old Buck Rogers movie.

Casey: That’s the whole idea, sir! It’s science fiction become science reality! At Martel Manufacturing, we have our eyes set on the future! And the future is here!

Applause. Casey Martel smiles.

General: Alright. Let’s see what you got for us, Mr. Reddingfield. Needless to say, it’s gonna have to be good, to top Mr. Martel’s demonstration.

Arthur (smiling): I’ll try not to disappoint you, General!

Laughter. Arthur extends his hand up toward the canopied object on the platform.

Arthur: Ladies and gentlemen, may I present; The all new Tech War!

The framed canopy comes off, and Tech War takes to the air, flies a couple circles around the room, then hovers, in the same space Casey gave his demonstration. Tech War lands. The old Tech War removes her helmet and it's Wendy Stevenson.

Arthur: Wendy Stevenson as my Tech War decoy. She's actually one of my R & D associates who stores all my knowledge in her head, to keep me from forgetting all the stuff I come up with. Aaand she comes up with some stuff too. We all do.

Wendy smiles, waves and mouths "hi". Arthur points at the new Tech War.

Arthur: I've got the real Tech War in here, obviously, unless you thought for a minute Tech War was a girl.

Some of the testosterone military types chuckle, and Wendy lifts an eyebrow, semi-amused, but not really. Tech War lands and gives a slight wave to the audience.

Arthur: Sorry 'bout pulling the wool over your eyes, it's all part of the presentation. Of course, I'm not giving the government Tech War. But I have developed a military application, with comparable systems. In fact, the flight system is almost identical.

Arthur motions to his assistants through the small window of one of the two doors to the room they are in. The doors swing open, and they wheel in a large dolly with a standing cyber armor displayed in the center. It's shaped a lot like the new Tech War, only bulkier, solid dark blue, with no decorations on front. Instead of the high tech lasers, beams and emitters on the wrists, it's strapped with machine guns, grenade launchers, missiles and such. Gasps,

then applause.

Arthur: May I present the “Sky Tank - Mark One”, or ST-1, for short. In a lot of ways this is Tech War. I named my prototype “Tech War” for the very reason of because I intended to make a military application of it, someday, and this is it. You’ll notice that how he differs from Tech War is that, your medium sized goons could fit into Tech War, but your bigger goons can’t. Not a problem with the Sky Tank. It’s height adjustable for standard Army height parameters, and can accommodate up to a 52 inch chest, give or take. Also, instead of being armed with ionized particle beams, lasers, magnetic emitters and such, he’s packing the usual battlefield armaments; missiles, grenade launchers, machine guns and the like. In common with Tech War, the Sky Tank armor can resist standard bullets, low yield grenades, and impacts up to 50,000 psi. Pretty much anything a ground tank can survive, so can the Sky Tank. However, also like its namesake, what blows up a tank will blow up the Sky Tank. But these things get around a lot better than a ground tank, and therefore are much harder to hit. You can maneuver around the enemy’s artillery, while firing your own back at him. I’d like to be able to tell you this guy could kick Tech War’s ass, but with Tech War’s ionized particle beams, lasers, magnetic emitters and such, he can have this thing shut down in about two seconds. I can’t sell something that could beat Tech War, or I’d see it on the mercs. On the upside, this guy purées everything in his sights short of Tech War. And, that’s what you want, so here it is.

General: I think we’ve seen enough. Reddingfield, the contract is yours.

Casey: But, the belt jet is self contained. You don’t need armor. Just a fire-proof suit. Maybe the belt jet could be a ... backup ... flight system for the Sky Tank. ?

Arthur: Ah! Tech War, demonstrate your auxiliary thrusters, if you don’t mind?

The little boxes on the side of Tech War’s waist fire up, and he hovers with them. Then he lands. More applause. All the color goes out of Casey’s face. The exact same tech Casey just demonstrated is already mounted to Tech War. As backup.

Arthur (smiling): I suspect your belt jet might just give my back up unit a run

for its money, Mr. Martel!

Laughter.

Arthur: You'll notice that the Sky Tank comes standard equipped with the same auxiliary jets. And, if you ever want ... belt jets ... without the armor, if you buy a minimum of 100 Sky Tanks at 60 million each, I'll cut you a deal on as many belt jets as you want for an easy 3 million each.

Casey looks at Arthur with an emptied look on his face.

Casey (whispering): Three million each? It cost me five million just to make this!

Arthur (whispering): My first prototype of that type of device cost me... almost that much to make. But what can I say, I'm equipped to make them, now. Heh, heh. I can crank out a set of those puppies for under two hundred grand. I'm robbing the government blind! And they know! And don't care! It's other people's money! And they need what I'm selling! Ha, ha!

Casey is looking at Arthur with such shock and disgust on his face, like he's staring at exactly what he'd never want to be.

Arthur: It's not personal. It's business.

Casey (whispering): That's easy for you to say. This is my life.

Arthur: You did good. You'll get better. How do you concentrate your fuel?

Casey: High compression solid fuel cells.

Arthur: That's a relief. I was afraid you were burning wet fuel. But still, there's room for improvement. Tech War, could you come over here a minute, please?

Tech War approaches Arthur.

Arthur: You got a couple extra miniaturized fuel cells on ya?

Tech War: Sure boss.

Tech War takes two miniaturized fuel cells from a retractable storage

compartment in his armor. He hands them to Arthur, who gives them to Casey.

Arthur: Complimentary, for your effort. Race Technologies makes these. We have a patented process that takes a fuel cell big enough for a DC-10 and shrinks it down to the size of a Zippo. Same combustion. You can fly across the country with this. If you only fly recreationally, these could last for months. There's a \$500 deposit on new cartridges, so don't forget to bring in the empties when you get your refills.

Casey: Free fuel, thanks. Can't wait to fly recreationally with it. Big fun.

Casey takes the cartridges and his belt-jet and leaves.

Arthur (whispering): How you doing in there, Wally?

Tech War: Oh, Lord! It's like trading the space shuttle for the Starship Enterprise! I can't wait to do a Retaliators mission in it!

Arthur (whispering): You know it's my armor. I get it next.

Wendy: You always give your turn to Wally. When you take a turn, you take mine.

Tech War: He just can't wait to get it in action. So much power. I've spent more time testing it than either of you, and I still nearly crashed on that first bank.

Arthur: It's a good thing you didn't! We'd've blown the presentation!

Wendy: No, we'd've still won. That poor guy. Total massacre, that's gotta suck.

Arthur: I think his father contracts to R.I. The kid was probably just trying to come into his own, and started out biting off more than he can chew. I'll draw up a big order of... whatever it is they make over there.

Tech War: They make switches, buttons and dials. I've golfed with him. As Wally.

Vision 8: On The Threshold Of A.I.

Retaliators Mansion basement lab. Jackson Race is on the threshold of A.I. He's looking at a notebook and writing code on the computer. He's wearing a superhero suit, which means he lost his battle with Candace to maintain his dignity. The power of a woman over a man. He prefers civilian clothes with a bandit mask over a typical superhero "clown suit", but Candace likes the costume, so he'll wear it till he's conquered her, then he'll go back to what he likes. The power of a woman is to have her way for now. The power of a man is to wait until whatever it is she wants no longer matters as much, then he can go back to doing it his way; he wins. There's really no point in him wearing a costume, everybody knows Jackson Race is Upsurge. The only point of the bandit mask is to indicate which mode he's in. If you see him with the mask and he's not busy fighting bad guys, he'll sign an autograph, even pose for pictures. But if you see him without the mask and he's doing something that has nothing to do with being a superhero, leave him the hell alone.

Upsurge: My pace has really stepped up, since Arthur had all the equipment for the Protogonus Project brought over to the mansion lab. Now I can still do my company work, even while I'm on Retaliator duty!

Hotpoint: I hope you're still getting both paychecks, even though you're doing both jobs at the same time.

Jackson still hasn't told her he has carte blanche with Reddingfield's money. Essentially, Jackson is a trillionaire by proxy. Not a bunch of trillions, just 1.2 so far. Samuel Reddingfield was only worth 300 billion. Without Jackson, Arthur surely could have expanded on it, possibly doubled it, but Jackson helped him quadruple it, so, carte blanche. Jackson's waiting to spring that little surprise on Candace after they're married. He knows she'll go hog wild with it, she spent her million dollar Faulk Invasion bonus in a short time, on useless junk, pointless parties and overtipping. She still has that pink Porsche in the garage, a collection of designer outfits and some jewelry that could be sold if hard times ever come. So, she's not completely impractical. Jackson lived in this house by himself, not counting the servants, before the Retaliators formed. Tech War suggested the idea of the house for a

headquarters. Jackson might've refused, if she hadn't been in the deal. He liked her from the start, though he tried not to, at first. He liked the idea of her being here.

Upsurge: Of course. Arthur takes good care of me. Always has. We went to rival genius schools. I was a couple years ahead of him...

Hotpoint: You're older than Arthur?

Upsurge: Couple years, yeah, sorry.

Hotpoint: It's okay, ha, ha! I'm sure you didn't do it on purpose! Ha, ha! It's not you, it's him, he seems like he's in his forties or fifties. Just the way he acts, more than how he looks, I guess. Like he's the daddy of everybody, or something.

Upsurge: Ha, ha! He's not even thirty. He's 28. The same age I was when I met you, that fateful day, two years ago. You and he have the same first digit, now. Because of a slight overlap, you and I will never have the same first digit. But we'll have the same last digit, most of the time. You and Arthur will have the same first digit, two years every decade. But Arthur will always be closer to my age than yours.

Hotpoint: Well, duh! Not everyone under 160 is a total retard. I can do simple math.

Upsurge: Yeah? Do you know his gap over you is four times greater than my gap over him?

She slaps his arm, playfully.

Hotpoint: I do since you said it my way! I rubbed off on you, see? Before, you would've said "increments of ratios" or something brain busting like that, instead of "gap". I know what a gap is. His 8 years on me is four times more than your two years on him! Nyah! I think genius school just teaches you people how to speak without being understood. I'm fixing you, though, and you don't even realize it.

Upsurge: Ha, ha! You don't realize that I do realize it. Nyah! Anyway, Arthur already had his company, even when we were in school. Our two schools often had genius competitions with each other. Everyone else was intimidated, because he was chief of the very industry that was advancing the

old and creating the new tech we were learning about, but I knew I could beat him. And I always did. The true testament of Arthur's true brilliance is that he didn't take offense, he took an interest. I've been working for him off and on, ever since. I feel like I'm cheating him, I'd do this just for the funding to do it. The first man to achieve A.I., since Dr. Kurt Bender. And that wasn't really A.I., the robotic module and the pilot merged to become a single entity, which actually just made the original Clank the first cyborg. That's not special anymore, there're tons of those around now; all those birdmen we managed to reprogram. "Cyborg" is an amalgam of the words "cybernetic" and "organism", fyi. There's an organic element to Protogonus, but no actual man inside. "Organic": I used to could call all people, including myself, human, until us powered types got classified as a different species. "Homo Proteus", after the god of transformation, because most of us transform into our powered state. Ironic that they came up with that before they knew we actually are related to the gods. We're still in the human genome, though. But instead of human, we're "S.P.I." They need to come up with a term for us that sounds more like a person. I have some second cousins who don't have a trace of the god gene. We're related, how could we be a different species? At least when they thought we were mutants, we were mutant humans. If you think about it, that is still what we are, even though Mars says we're just hybrids. Hmmm... "hybrids"... "hybrid humans" ... I'll talk to Mars about that as a possible new classification for our kind. Anyway, Protogonus has humanoid derived qualities. I start with a digital copy of my own brain patterns. That, in itself, would probably be sufficient to bring about A.I. But I don't want to just create a digitized copy of myself. I removed all elements of my own memory and personality, and left only the parts that relate to self-awareness, motivation, inspiration, innovation and growth.

Hotpoint: Honey, didn't you record that encephalump...

Upsurge: Encephalogram.

Hotpoint: Yeah..., didn't you record it while you were nearly delirious, from my being kidnapped by Zrog, the multi-headed Martian Ratking?

Upsurge: Yeah, in case I died rescuing you, someone else could finish my work.

Hotpoint: Nice to see you've got your priorities straight. The question I'm trying to ask you is; what if Protogonus inherits your state of mind, from that time?

Upsurge: Ha, ha! Then, he'll have a penchant for rescuing you, I guess!

Hotpoint: Or be extremely high-strung. You know... unreasoning and frenzied?

Upsurge: You mean crazy.? Candice, it's me in there.

He points at the data drive unit in his other hand, then he points at his head.

Upsurge: There's nothing bad in here...

He points back at the data drive unit.

Upsurge: ...or here. Stop worrying.

Hotpoint: Just trying to be helpful. Tell me the rest of it. How you're going to make a robot out of this, 'cause you know I'm soooooo interested in science!

The gleeful look on Upsurge's face suggests the poor lug might've actually believed that. He continues the explanation, with renewed vigor.

Upsurge: Okay, well, I also added some of the sophisticated programming elements I studied from the Martian World Computer, BlueStar. Protogonus will be able to reason for himself, just like me. And, he'll be hyper-intelligent, just like BlueStar.

Hotpoint: But honey, doesn't the BlueStar computer run Mars? What if Protogonus wants to rule the world, like BlueStar?

Upsurge: He won't, dear. I learned this code while I was reprogramming BlueStar to be less authoritarian. BlueStar is still, I suppose, egotistical, but benevolent now. Everything he does is for the good of the Martians. From their point of view, not just his own, which was detached from their perspective, which was their problem. He empathizes better now. And I'm not putting BlueStar's mind into Protogonus, just some programming code. And if Protogonus ever became authoritarian, there's that little Dr. Jackson Race program in there, to straighten him out. My hope is that the me in there will keep him straightened out, so he won't ever have to be "fixed", like BlueStar. Besides, BlueStar is a 44 thousand square foot cube that hovers in the sky, covered in view screens that project a simulated image of a nonexistent rodent shaped robot which acts as the God figure to the Martian

people. What about that reminds you of our little artificial man, here?

Hotpoint: Nothing, I guess. Do me a favor and make him smaller than me?

Upsurge: I'd planned on making him five three anyway, to make him seem friendly and likeable. Five even, how's that? One inch shorter than you in your bare feet, five inches shorter than you in your four inch heels. His brain is my chief concern. I'd like him to be a scientist. An innovator. Like his "daddy".

Hotpoint: Hey, if it's procreation you're into, may I make a little suggestion?

She straddles him on his chair, and puts her hands on his shoulders.

Upsurge: Why, Ms. Newmeyer! I'm surprised at you! Not until we're married.

Hotpoint: Party pooper!

Upsurge: Abstinence until we're married was your idea. You change your mind?

Hotpoint: Noooo! But, what's the point in having all this privacy, if I can't be a little naughty?

Upsurge: So, you'd never proclaim your undying lust for me, in front of people?

Hotpoint: Oh, Lord no! Perish the thought! (whispering seductively in his ear) But it's going to be one heck of a wedding night, Dr. Race.

Upsurge: Ah, yes. I've already dreamed it a thousand times, Ms. Newmeyer.

Hotpoint: Listen at you! Now who's being naughty? Wanna do our special thing?

Upsurge: I always wanna do our special thing!

Upstairs in the Retaliators Boardroom, Mars is giving Jitara and Tigerlily the verdict. Jitara has his hood and headgear off, his O2 mask is hanging loosely around his neck by its strap. Even when he's in full costume his O2 mask dangles like that, except when he's fighting, ready to fight, or otherwise performing his skills. He is a full blooded Japanese American. He looks Japanese, and speaks English like a born American. Average middle-class California accent, typical, nothing standout-ish. Tigerlily is a mixed Asian and Caucasian Chinese national. She looks almost American, the most Asian thing about her are her eyes, but with her Anglo features, her Asian eyes look

a bit catlike. She speaks English with a Chino/Aussie accent, like a Chinese who learned English from Australians. Not stereotypical Australians, like in the “Outback”, but you know, the Australians whose accents are closer to traditional British accents. Jitara once had one of those “Outback” Aussies for a sidekick. He ditched the kid, or the kid ditched him, depending on how you look at it, years before he hooked up with Tigerlily, so the two never actually met. Jitara has by now spent more time out of his life in the South Pacific than in the U.S., but he’s back home, finally, though this is the opposite side of the country from where he’s from. Jitara is multilingual, but only in Asian languages. He speaks Japanese well enough to convince a born Japanese person that he was born there as well. That’s because it was his main interest, since it’s his heritage. He had a head start with that, since his parents spoke Japanese at home and in the shop. They only spoke English to non-Japanese. His mom was born in Japan. Jitara speaks the other Asian languages more clumsily, but enough to crudely communicate. He has visited his parents a few times in the past 22 years or so, but only for a few minutes at LAX on the way here. Lots of time for that later, he’s probably back for good, this time.

Mars: Well, as you are both aware, my team has been cut in half since it formed, and our last replacements didn’t work out. I’m sure Tech War would have liked to have interviewed you as well, but sometimes his Reddingfield duties interfere with his Retaliator duties. The other two members are in the house, but both said they wouldn’t disagree with my decision, so there’s no need for them to participate in the interview. You both qualify, in my opinion. Both of you have displayed excellent skill, and a strong warrior’s spirit. I would be honored to call you my allies.

Jitara: We’re in? The both of us?

Mars: Yes. Welcome to The Retaliators!

They both shake his hand, and are jovial.

Jitara: Whew! (To Tigerlily): I suppose you’d be just as content, if you’d made it in, and I hadn’t.

Tigerlily (Smiling): Quite the contrary. I am very appreciative of you, for

escaping me from the monks who raised me, and bringing me to The Retaliators, to find my own destiny. However, the monks did instill in me, since infancy, that I am worthy of a god, which you are not. We are together as a convenience, but do not be misled that you could ever be my Destiny.

She squints and smiles at Mars. Mars's eyes widen, he leans back in his chair and shows the upright palms of both hands, in the "stick-'em-up" gesture.

Jitara (To Tigerlily): That's all I ever was to you; a ticket to America, and an occasional roll in the ...

Mars: Will you be taking separate rooms, or ...

Tigerlily holds up two fingers, like a backwards peace sign. She doesn't know that means "fuck you" in Italian. Mars knows, but he doesn't care, because he figures she doesn't know. He's gone as long as she's been alive without a bath, as he once boasted to Hotpoint, though she thought it wasn't something to brag about. He's used to mortals not knowing everything, as he pretty much does.

Tigerlily: Two rooms, yes.

She lowers her hand, and tilts her head at Jitara, like she owns him, and she knows it. She's looking at Jitara, but talking to Mars.

Tigerlily: Adjoining would be preferable. For discreet visits. Can you give me that?

Jitara shakes his head with disgust. At himself, more than her.

Mars: We have adjoining rooms. In the east wing. In the past, some married servants had children, but not now. Whitley will show them to you and you can choose.

They start to exit the room, and Jitara hangs back to clear up something.

Jitara (To Mars): Don't get the wrong idea. We do work well together. We're

actually a great combo.

He leans in and whispers, with his right hand flat to the side of his mouth.

Jitara: She denies it, but the lady's in love with me.

Tigerlily: No, I'm not!

Jitara gets a proud look, like she just proved him right about the denying it part. Suddenly the alarm goes off.

Intercom: Attention Retaliators! An unidentified S.P.I. has mysteriously appeared at the American Embassy in London. Subject is comatose and contained, but the Retaliators' presence is officially requested.

Mars: Ah! Your first mission. What surprises await us in London, I wonder?

Mars smiles, mischievously, and gets wide-eyed.

Mars: Perhaps Fate will provide your true test!

Vision 9: The Return Of Captain Superhero

American Embassy in London. Mars, Upsurge, Hotpoint, Jitara and Tigerlily are in a room with titanium walls, floor and ceiling. There's a comatose man shackled to a metal slab in the center of the room. He appears to be a young man in his late 20's or early 30's, but is well worn for his age. The exposed skin on his face and neck is almost leathery. It's not noticeable if you aren't looking for it, but if you look closely, there's an imperfect honeycomb grid of shallow creases in his skin, like he's been burned or electrocuted, but it's not recent. To the imaginative, he could pass for a mannequin that's been broken into pieces the size of a fist, glued back together and coated over with thick leathery paint. Whatever the cause of it, he's obviously been through the wringer, this guy. He's in blue American Army fatigues, with American flag patches on the upper sleeves, "U.S." stenciled on his left breast pocket,

“Army” sewn onto a patch placed just above the same pocket, an odd wing design similar but different to paratrooper wings stenciled above that, and “Anderson” sewn onto a patch above the right breast pocket. The left shoulder has a unit patch designating his unit as The Line Breakers and his right shoulder has an Airborne patch. It’s the standard jumpsuit of Army pilots, except dark blue, instead of light blue. The jump/combat boots are also standard military issue, except for their red color. The pants are bloused at the boots, which is common for all military fatigues now, but was exclusive to paratroopers, in the 40’s. There’s some monitoring equipment, and a viewing monitor. There are four Marine guards and three officers in the room. An American Army Major General, an American Marine Lieutenant Colonel, and a British Army Colonel. There’s a knock on the door, and before the guard inside can answer it, it’s opened from the outside, by an outside guard, allowing Tech War in.

Tech War: Should these soldiers still be hanging around? The Retaliators are here. If the shit hits the fan, they’re a liability. Covering their asses exposes our own.

Maj General: They’re with us. We’ll be leaving as soon as we fill you in on the situation.

Upsurge: Whoa, Tech War! Cool armor. It looks even better on you, than in the diagrams!

Tech War: Thanks, Jackson.

Upsurge: I can see Arthur’s influence in it. (To the others): Arthur took over the Tech War upgrade while I took over the S-22 project.

Tech War: He locked himself in with the S-22, and wouldn’t talk to anybody or let anybody in unless they had food. (To Upsurge): If I’d known you weren’t going to work on it, I could’ve gone straight to Arthur with my complaint about the old armor beating me up worse than the bad guys.

Upsurge: What can I say, I got in “the zone” with the new cyber giant. So, how does it feel?

Tech War: It’s good. I can move around without hurting myself, at least. I would’ve liked for Arthur to’ve had a chance to copy your idea for rockets on the shins. Now I’ll have to wait till the next upgrade, for that.

Upsurge: Can’t do it anyway. There’s still no material or technology known that can safely put any part of the human body that close to a full rocket burn.

Though they are based off each other and the development of one helps the development of the other, there are things that work for the cyber giants that can't work for Tech War, and vice versa. Besides, you wouldn't look right, without your nacelles.

Tech War: They get in the way, sometimes. I can only sit in lowback chairs, unless I take them off, which kind of takes me out of Tech War mode. I might as well take the armor off if I do that. You may not've been able to give me the same flight system as the S-22, but I'm sure you could've adapted something similar, that would work. Next time there's an upgrade and you're not available for it, I'll wait till you are. Arthur's good, but you're better, don't tell him I said that.

Tech War turns and looks at Jitara and Tigerlily.

Tech War (To Mars): You took 'em both?

Mars: They both qualified, and we needed them both, especially since you are not always with us.

Tech War: Ah, now you have a fulltime resident human, not just a part time commuter one. (To Jitara) You up for this, mister? It's dangerous work, you know.

Jitara: I've never done any other kind.

Tech War: It's nothing personal against you. I just worry about others of my race.

Jitara: Nihonjin desu ka?

Tech War: Nai wa, I mean the human race. I see three races in this room. Us two, these virtuous demigods here, and our illustrious deity over there. I kind of represent the human race in this team. It's not that I want to hog that distinction, in fact it would be a relief to share the burden, but honestly, I can't imagine that a human could do this job, without... this shit.

Jitara: I got my own shit.

Tech War: I see that, but... I'm sorry. I had to be somewhere this morning, or else you'd've also had me to impress. And I would've scrutinized the hell out of you. More than I would her. Because I'd hate to see you have to be scraped off of something.

Tigerlily: I only produce force energy. Without his training, I wouldn't know

how to apply it. He has such skill and such weapons, you'd never know he was human.

Tech War: I hope you're right.

Tech War shakes Jitara's hand, then Tigerlily's.

Tech War: Welcome to the Retaliators.

The monitor is on, and the Lt Colonel is showing the Retaliators the footage of the stranger's strange arrival. There's a horizontal vortex, and the man, wearing the same red and blue uniform, but accessorized with red white and blue armor, not dissimilar in design to Tech War's, exits the vortex as if he's falling sideways. He crashes into a wall, and demolishes it, but that stopped his momentum. The man appears to be unconscious. The colonel backs the video up and pauses it as the man exits the vortex, so the armor can be clearly seen.

Lt Colonel: Do any of you recognize this costume?

Jitara: He looks like a Tech War impersonator. But, his eagle design matches the new one, and not the old...

Hotpoint: Oh, my Lord! Don't you recognize it? That's Flash Anderson; Captain Superhero! The greatest American hero of World War II!

Tech War: Of course I recognized the armor, but I know a place that rents out the complete outfit. Yours too, Mars.

Mars: I think I know the place of which you speak. And, for any who don't know, I was the first to wear that eagle design on my armor. I no longer wear it, because it was designed by my estranged brother. A masterful designer of arms he was, and still is. It would seem he started a trend.

Hotpoint (To Tech War, Grinning): Did you return the costume you rented, after you cast a mold from it?

Tech War: Uuuhh.. no. You forget, I work for Reddingfield Innovations: The guys who invented Captain Superhero.

Hotpoint: Uuuhh.. everybody knows R.I. was involved somehow in turning Flash Anderson into Captain Superhero. But, "invented" ? How could they invent a man?

Tech War: Not the man, just the armor. But, not the power catalyst, itself. SP-

5 was practically invented for Captain Superhero. It was developed by a then-small R.I. associated research company called IPCR, now known as the "Power Company".

Hotpoint: Hey, that's where I got my catalyst!

Tech War: I'm sure! Daddy wouldn't trust just any back-ally research facility to handle his little girl's birthday enhancement!

Hotpoint: Stop teasing me about that! I wish I hadn't told you I got my power for my birthday!

Jitara: They had S.P.I.'s in the 40's?

Tech War: You don't know about Captain Superhero?

Jitara: I wasn't born yet.

Tech War: Neither was I, but I know about Captain Superhero. Everybody does.

Jitara: My parents had a clothing shop in downtown L.A. My dad was a tailor, my mom ran the register. They were taken from their shop and put in detention camps, and their shop was seized by what they'd thought was their own government. By the time I came along, American war heroes weren't very popular in our house.

Tech War: Oh. Right. There weren't many back then. He was one of the first.

Mars: Demi-gods have existed for as long as the gods have laid with mortals. In our absence, they integrated into the human race and multiplied. However, having only humans to breed with, the god gene became latent. It only surfaces when forced out by some catalyst. Catalysts which would harm or kill a human, so they are best avoided, if one doesn't know if they are human or S.P.I. Back then, they didn't even understand why what harms or kills one person enhances another. There were probably more S.P.I.'s in Captain Superhero's time than were known, because they weren't doing blood screens for it in the schools, as they now do.

Tech War: My test came back negative. 100% terragrown Homo Sapien, inside the armor. (To Jitara) Without which, I wouldn't last ten seconds on this job.

Jitara: Again? Speak for yourself, man. Obviously you glanced at my application down to the part where I put a check mark next to "human", and stopped there. If you'd kept going, you'd know more about me. I don't just dress like a Ninja-Samurai, I am a Ninja-Samurai! Even if others of my race weren't offended by a fake, I myself would be. I spent years in my homeland,

training from the real Sensei, until I became Sensei! Traveled to the neighboring lands, and learned their arts, as well. Picked her up in China. Additionally, I've been all over the world, collecting enchanted weapons. Most of what you see on me is enchanted. Some stuff you don't see, too. As I stand before you, I've made more than a couple super troublemakers stain the ass of their tights. And even stripped down to my skivvies, I'm a bad motherfucker.

Tech War: And an embellisher. The Shinobi-Samurai are the infantry division of the Japanese Army special forces. You can't get that training without being in the Japanese Army, and you can't get into the Japanese Army without being a Japanese citizen. And by your own admission, you're an American citizen of Japanese descent. You didn't pose as a Japanese citizen to get that training, did you?

Jitara: Whu??? No . You're full of shit, man. Shinobi was a clan thing long before it was a government thing. There're plenty of civilian instructors, and I found the best Sensei in all of Japan. The real deal, not one of those government fakes you're talking about. Far back as I can remember, I studied from books and movies. I didn't know the guys in the movies were on strings. By the time I was 12, I was doing the shit they were doing on strings, without strings! I'm a natural, like that. When I was 15, I made my way to my homeland, to learn the real shit. I think I may be a reincarnation of some ancient Japanese warrior. It's like I knew what Sensei was teaching me, before he taught it to me. He didn't oppose that, he recognized my gift. Made his job easier. He was able to move on to lessons that would be wasted on lesser students. Things that only the old men know were taught to me while I was still young enough to actually use it. Put me against any ten of the Army ones, and see how it turns out. I'm too good for any Army, that's why I'm a Retaliator. So... by your own admission, you got nothing going for you but that armor, so without your armor, this guy could just kick your ass all over the place, right?

Tech War: Mine with one hand, and yours with the other, at the same time, friend.

Jitara: Shit! I'll believe that when I see it!

Mars: Stop arguing. Tech War, I saw Jitara perform, he's qualified. If this man is indeed who he appears to be, he was a favored disciple of mine, who did honor the design of my original armor. I'd like to fill our third vacancy

with him, if he's still fit.

Maj General: Okay, now that you know the level of the potential threat, we'll get out of your way. If he is who he seems to be, I realize he's a good guy, and one of our country's greatest heroes, as well as one of your peoples' finest examples. But, there is still the potential for a bad situation, here. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Colonel: Hell, he's a hero to my country, as well. But, who knows what state of mind he'll wake up in? It's possible that he may be under some enemy's control. And we wouldn't want him breaking out and raising a ruckus in my country, now would we?

Lt Colonel: The walls, ceiling and floors are 6 inch thick titanium alloy. Enough to slow him down, but not enough to contain him for long. That's why we have you super-types here. Good luck, gentlemen, ladies.

Some time later, Hotpoint, Upsurge, Jitara and Tigerlily are playing cards. Mars and Tech War are near the monitors, but not watching anything, just musing about whatever they muse about.

Tech War: Wanna play chess?

Mars: I'd beat you.

Tech War: Maybe not. Play anyway? I don't care who wins, I need something to do.

Mars reaches over for the chess board, but they won't get to play.

Hotpoint: Guys, he's blinking his eyes. I think he's waking up.

Suddenly, the man breaks his shackles and raises up, in a jolt, to sit upright on the edge of the slab.

Flash Anderson: Sean! Sean, get off the plane! Aaaahhh!

Flash Anderson starts blindly lashing out at the people around him. He pops Mars and Jitara. Jitara got it square in the O2 mask, which took it out on the bridge of his nose. He doubles over, pulls the O2 mask down and rubs the sides of his nose with the fingers of both hands. There's a wet spot on the

ninja mask, his nose is bleeding. Flash looks at Tech War's armor, then looks down to see that he isn't wearing his.

Flash Anderson: My armor?!

Tech War: No... wait... !

Flash Anderson backs Tech War against a bulkhead, with his left hand on Tech War's throat, and the connectors of both nacelles bend, the left one snaps off. No fuel or sparks, this ain't no shadetree rig, the fuel is solid and the rockets are loaded with failsafe systems. Flash throws a punch with his right hand. Tech War powers out of the grip on his throat and ducks the punch, just in time. The fist makes a respectable dent in the titanium bulkhead.

Tech War: Shit!

Tech War bobs his head to the right and his ruined right nacelle pops off, he has just cybernetically disconnected it. By the time it falls to his waist level, he reaches around with his right hand and catches it. He gently slides it across the floor to join its mate in the corner, next to the bulkhead. He takes a moment to look at the dent, and shudders at the thought that his head came so close to being a part of it.

Tech War: Shit! Look friend, you've mistaken us for enemies, and we're not. I'm Tech War, and this is my armor. Yours is in storage, and it's fine.

Flash Anderson: Nazi. Nazis!

Flash Anderson snarls, and starts to charge at Tech War, again.

Tech War: Shit!

Tech War particle blasts Flash Anderson. Flash is knocked back a couple feet, to one knee, and grimaces, but shrugs it off. He starts to charge Tech War again.

Tech War: Shit! Dammit, somebody grab him, before I have to blast him again!

The others move in. Jitara, recovered from the nosebleed, O2 mask back in place, advances with his Katana drawn. Upsurge is almost double-sized, and blocks Jitara with his left hand.

Upsurge: Whoa, it's not that bad, now. Put that away.

Jitara sheaths his Katana.

Jitara: Gimme a break, dude. You think I'd kill a guy just for busting my nose, or because Tech War's a dick? I'd only heard about his strength, I didn't know he had moves, or he wouldn't've been able to hit me at all. Check this out.

Jitara does a Ninjutsu style slanted aerial cartwheel, into Flash's strike zone, landing directly in front of him. He taps a flipswitch on the side of the air filter part of his mask. It starts clicking, humming and spurting out puffs of white vapor, like an oxygen machine. That's exactly what it is. Jitara doesn't have a breathing problem, he just likes to have pure O2 when he's going to be going at it. He does the classic martial arts neck crack, slaps Flash on the ear, then puts his arms out to the side in the go for it position. Flash throws a punch and Jitara ducks it. Flash does a leg sweep, fast enough that most people wouldn't be able to avoid it, but Jitara avoids it, by rolling over it. They end up facing each other, in a boxing stance. They both throw a few punches and kicks at each other, but neither can connect anything other than glancing brushes and bracing on each other while deflecting and evading. It's obvious which is the more powerful of the two, because Flash's punches and kicks make much louder whooshing sounds as they miss their target, giving Jitara just cause to be worried about what would happen if one were to connect. Skills notwithstanding, Robert Hattori's best fighting punch would sting Flash Anderson just enough to piss him off even more than he already is, while on the other hand, Robert's health and wellbeing, possibly even his life, depends on him not receiving a solid punch from Flash. Upon sizing up his opponent, Jitara has figured out Flash's fight pattern, and works out the perfect counter strategy that Flash would be most susceptible to. His next few punches and kicks are right on target, but are stopped short, just inches away

from connecting. Just to show he can. In one such occasion of a toe almost between the eyes, Flash tries to kick the exposed groin, but by then, Jitara has walked over the top of his shoulders and somersaulted to be behind him. Flash turns around to see his opponent waving hello at him. They end up back in the boxing stance, looking at each other. Jitara does a backflip, just for the hell of it, and ends up in exactly the same spot, in exactly the same ready position. Flash has some confusion on his face, like he's conflicted on whether he's fighting enemies or not, he still thinks he might be, but he's not sure. He looks around, sees that he's enclosed, surrounded, and the man facing him is a "Jap" if he ever saw one, so it would seem apparent that he is in Rascher's lab, being performance tested. Except the man in front of him has the look on what can be seen of his face that he is the one being tested. Perhaps Captain Superhero is the lamb to be slaughtered by some new experimental "Super-Jap"? Jitara sees that Flash is thinking, and gives him the time to work out whatever it is he's thinking about. Flashback: Captain Superhero in the Philippines, fighting a squad of Shinobi-Samurai dressed very similarly to the man in front of him. But these opponents are trying to kill him, swinging swords around, throwing stars, spinning nunchucks, etc. The Shinobi-Samurai's swords are no match for Captain Superhero's lance, it's designed perfectly for defense and offence. It can block a sword, then hook, trip, brain or stab the opponent. End flashback. The man in front of him appears to have at least triple the amount of weapons strapped onto his costume as the Shinobi-Samurai did, yet he's not using them. Flash is looking at all the sheathed weapons, and Jitara standing there ready to fight with his hands and feet again. Without his lance and armor, this Shinobi-Samurai or whatever he is could easily slice him to bits, yet he's not. Perhaps it's a matter of honor; not using weapons against an unarmed man. He may be super powered, if he is, he hasn't shown what his power is, yet. It's indicated that his power, if any, is not super strength, by the fact that he is slightly more skilled than Flash ("slightly" is Flash's uninformed opinion at this point), but he's avoiding contact, which implies that his slight skill advantage is not enough to compensate for the difference in strength. If the man's strength level was even half as much as Flash's, the man's slightly greater skill would make it an even fight. In martial arts, even a slight degree of superior skill is as good as double. But, without the strength required to make it count against a strength and resiliency enhanced opponent, there's no chance the man could

prevail, without using his weapons. It would be the equivalent of a human body builder being expertly hit by a 2 year old. A negligible sting, at best. However, almost any 2 year old with a razor sharp katana can make it count, if he makes it connect, and this one could. Flash thinks if he had his lance and armor, and the man he's fighting was using his swords, he'd have better luck getting around the lance and armor than the ones in the Philippines did. But the man doesn't seem to have the intent to prevail in this fight, only to participate in it. He's using his skill advantage to avoid contact. This seems to be more of an exhibition of the man's survival skills, than a fight. Who are these people? The dark one in the gladiator suit could easily be Italian. The taller woman in the Oriental dress has Asian eyes and light brown hair, almost blonde. That's something you don't see everyday. The Japanese don't condone race mixing. Neither do the Chinese. She'd have to be some other kind of Asian, and all but the Japanese are our allies. Unless she actually is half Japanese and her superiors don't mind if she dies here. That would make sense. The giant and the shorter woman with the glowing hands could be Russian, British, French, American or Kraut. Can't really tell, without a uniform. Maybe they were all put here as part of Captain Superhero's test, to see how many he can kill and how quickly. But if that's the case, they should be fighting for their lives. It doesn't make sense, but perhaps there's a way to escape, if he can get them out of the way, or get around them, killing as few as possible, so he can find it. Definitely try not to kill the women. Only Doktor Rascher would be so evil, to put them here. He starts swinging at Jitara again, and Jitara is doing the evasive thing again, but this time Flash is asserting his aggression, putting it on Jitara to fight back or be pulped. Jitara delivers blow after masterful blow, primarily exhibition-worthy crouching high kicks, for their defensive advantage, but Flash is still advancing. Jitara's forearms and shins are taking a pounding, but he's trained to endure that. Jitara is a Tameshiwari master, who can break a stack of concrete slabs with a perfect Qi-force strike. In spite of his human disadvantage, Jitara has knocked out and killed a few SP-5 strength and resiliency enhanced opponents with that. Jitara doesn't want to take a chance on killing or severely injuring his opponent, just for being disoriented, especially if it turns out the guy actually is some lost legend. But he also doesn't want to be the chump of this fight. So, he decides to perform an ascended spinning backfist, which can break the nose of such a superman. But the maneuver is too time consuming, and

between the first and second rotation of the spin, Jitara receives a cracked rib. Jitara is kneeling on the floor, holding his side. Mars can't heal broken or fractured bones instantly, but he can set them with his will and stimulate healing. Jitara can be ready for close fighting again in about three weeks, if this fight stops now. Or ready for eternity in about three seconds, if it doesn't. Flash is reaching for the katanas on Jitara's back, thinking to take them before his opponent thinks to use them to turn the tables, but Jitara's right wristband is glowing with a colorless energy bubble, then it produces writhing electrical looking tendrils. Flash hesitates, because of the uncertainty of what that wristband is capable of. Before Jitara has a chance to use it though, Tigerlily has already flying side-kicked Flash in the chest, Kung-Fu style, the impact accompanied by a greenish force wave, which is part of her power. With the force wave on her side, even when she misses, she hits, and she didn't miss. Flash was looking at that wristband when it happened. Flash is knocked back, into Mars, who was already approaching them. Mars reaches around from behind, and wraps his arm around Flash's throat. Flash tries to flip Mars, but Mars lifts Flash off his feet, to take away his leverage. Mars' natural height is 6'2", and Flash is about 3 inches taller than that. Mars has the ability to grow, but he also has the ability to hover. He chooses to hover, to get Flash off his feet. So, Flash is basically hanging by the neck. Jitara gets up and walks away with his arms out in the what the fuck position, like he's disappointed he didn't get a chance to show off his enchanted stuff. Tech War gives Jitara an acknowledgment nod, and Jitara returns a now you know it nod.

Flash Anderson: Gulp!

Mars: My grip is unbreakable. If you had succeeded in flipping me, your head would've come off in my arm, by accident. I have to handle you mortals delicately, even ones like yourself. Cease resisting. I don't want to hurt you. Tech War told you true; you are among friends.

Tech War: You'd better calm down, fella! We don't mean you any harm.

Flash nods. Mars releases him, and he falls to his hands and knees.

Flash Anderson: Oh, God, he's dead! I saw him die! I couldn't do anything to stop it! Helpless. Couldn't do anything, but watch it happen.

He bangs on the floor, with the soft parts of his fists.

Flash Anderson: He should've gotten off the plane, and I should've died. It was my predicament, not his. He didn't have to do that.

He looks up at the ones in front of him.

Flash Anderson: There was nothing he could do. What could he have done? He should've gotten off the plane.

Tech War: What are you talking about, Mister?

Hotpoint: I thought you were the Captain Superhero expert?

Tech War: No, that would be Arthur. His grandfather is the one who made the armor, and he even has a vintage action figure of the guy on his desk. I'm more familiar with Captain Superhero's fictional history, than his real one. I could tell you all about how Captain Superhero defeated the Radar Men from Saturn.

Upsurge (Smiling): You read comic books?

Tech War looks himself up and down, then extends his forearms outward, laterally, palms up, and gives Upsurge a "duh" look.

Tech War: I am a comic book. And so are you, "Doc Race".

Upsurge: "Doc Race" is a cliché caricature, based loosely on me, invented by Arthur Reddingfield, just after I got my first set of science degrees, and my enhancement, but before I chose my real persona name; Upsurge. I read the first issue, as a courtesy, and found it ridiculous. I haven't read another. I'll stick with Tolstoy.

Hotpoint: *Bor-ring!* Comics are better, give it a chance. I've got plenty, if you want to read them. Captain Superhero comics were called Captain Superhero Of The Line Breakers in the Fifties, and The Line Breakers Featuring Captain Superhero in the Forties. I've got most of those in reprints, and I have nearly every main series issue for the past fifteen years, since I could read. I liked the one where Emmett Cooper, the reporter who was always trying to portray Captain Superhero as an evil mutant, got captured by the Sinister Supremacists, and Captain Superhero had to save him. (making

the quotation gesture) “Boy did I learn my lesson, Captain Superhero! I’ll be nothin’ but a straight arrow, from now on!” (repeating the quotation gesture) But, he didn’t learn anything, he went right back to his same old tricks again! (shakes her fist in front of her face and exaggerates her expression) The FIEND!

Upsurge: Okay. *Anyway* ... I think Sean Gordon was the real name of Captain Superhero’s partner, Lieutenant Liberty. He was his apprentice in the Superhero Program. Supposedly they both died on the same mission. That’s all I know. I don’t know anything about a plane. Maybe their last mission was on a plane?

Hotpoint: *Noooooowah* . Their last mission was to kill Hitler. You remember the old newspaper headline where Princess Serafina was holding out Hitler’s head by the hair, and all the rest of the Line Breakers were standing behind her, including Captain Superhero and Lieue Liberty? But there was more fighting after the picture was taken, Captain Superhero was captured and Lieue Liberty stayed behind to rescue him. Neither were ever seen again.

Upsurge: *You know that ?*

Hotpoint: Of course. I love Captain Superhero. As a fan, I mean.

Upsurge: Is this him?

Hotpoint: I don’t know. It wouldn’t seem likely, but it does seem like, doesn’t it? There’s nothing in the story about a plane, the story ends at Hitler’s palace, but who knows what happened after that.?

Tech War: Let’s ask him.

By now, the man is sitting back on his calves, looking down, lost in thought.

Tech War touches his shoulder, and the man looks up at him, still kind of flush faced, but coherent.

Tech War: Uh... this is going to sound like a really weird question, mister... but, uh..., are you Captain Superhero?

Captain Superhero nods “yes”.

Vision 10a: Doktor Rascher's Proposition

An hourglass, pouring sand down its globe. The justice scale, sitting on the judge's bench. The court proceedings. Casey Martel is being arraigned on embezzlement charges.

A.D.A.: Your Honor, we intend to introduce evidence that a gross misappropriation of investor's capital took place at Martel Manufacturing, and that the money trail leads directly to the company's president, Mr. Casey Martel. We also have evidence of suspicious purchases made in Casey Martel's name.

Judge: Your rebuttal, Mr. Zimmerman?

Defense Attorney: Your Honor, my client had no knowledge of such activities, and intends to repay the investors for any amounts not accounted for.

Judge: Do you have any evidence to substantiate your client's claim not to've known what was happening to the money he personally solicited from these investors?

Defense Attorney: No, Your Honor, he contends that it must be an accounting error.

Judge: Ha, ha! A four and a half million dollar oversight! Good luck, Mr. Zimmerman! Court date is set for this coming Tuesday. Based on the defendant's ties to his family and community, bail is waved, and the defendant released on his own recognizance. Don't look so glum, Mr. Martel. So you take a few years off, to brush up on your backhand. And *then*, you can pay restitution. Next case.

Casey turns to his lawyer, and glumly shakes his hand. Then, he turns to his mother, who hugs him.

Matilda: Oh, Casey. I know it couldn't have been you. It had to be... It had to be...

Casey: Don't even say it, Momma. I know how it pains you so.

Matilda: No, this is far more serious! Why don't you just tell them?

Casey: It wouldn't do any good! It's just hearsay. Besides, it's my company, now. Everything falls back to me.

Matilda: Oh, your Poppa would be heartbroken over this. He thought he was doing right to will the company over to you. And now, it's become your... oh my...

Casey: Downfall. I just wish I could just make it all go away.

Doktor Sigmund Rascher: Perhaps there is a way to make all this go away, Mr. Martel.

Casey Martel: Oh, yeah? Tell me how!

Matilda: Who are you? What do you want with my boy?

Doktor Sigmund Rascher: Only his business skills, Mrs. Martel. I've had my eye on you for some time, Mr. Martel. I have to admit that I've been impressed by you. You have a certain... quality. I have a degree of influence in some certain circles, and if you would do a little "under the table" work for me, I'll see what I can do to get Wyatt and the others to ease up on you.

Casey: You can do that? What do I have to do?

Matilda: Oh, do be careful, Casey. I don't want you to get into any trouble.

Casey: Momma, I'm in trouble. This guy says he can get me out. At least let me look into it.

Matilda: Ooooooooh! I can't stand this! I can't stand not being able to fix this for you. You're a good boy, Casey. I trust your judgment. Follow your heart.

Casey: My heart says, "stay out of jail." O.k., mister, I'm listening.

Doktor Sigmund Rascher: I'm interested in your belt jet assembly. Here's my card. Be at this location at 5:00 this afternoon. Bring the unit, along with the fireproof suit. My associate will meet you in the lobby, and show you up to my suite.

Casey nods his head.



Vision 10b: Rascher's Penthouse

Some time later. Casey approaches the doorman.

Doorman: I'm sorry, this hotel has restricted access. Are you expected?

Casey: I think so. My name is Casey Martel.

The doorman checks his clipboard. Then, he thumps it with his pen.

Doorman: Here it is. You are expected. May I see some identification?

Casey: Are you serious?

The doorman nods, and sticks his hand out. Casey fumbles around for his wallet, and produces his I.D. The doorman checks it, nods, hands it back, and pushes a button, then turns a key. In the lobby, Adonais is wearing civilian clothes. He looks about 19 or 20, but he's not.

Adonais: Mr. Martel?

Casey: Yes. And you are?

Casey extends his hand for a handshake, and Adonais ignores it.

Adonais: Did you bring the jet pack and the flight suit?

Casey: Yeah, it's in the suitcase.

Adonais: Come with me. The Doktor anxiously awaits you.

Adonais leads Casey to the elevator. Upstairs, the elevator door opens to the penthouse suite. Waiting inside the lavish living area are; Doktor Rascher, Venus, Jhotica, and the Alchemist. If he were wearing different clothes, the man who calls himself the Alchemist could pass for a 50 year old hippy. But in his black lab smock, he's apparently an eccentric scientist. He looks exactly how he did when Rascher first met him, 48 years ago. Rascher's now wearing a black Nazi-ish double-breasted doctor's smock, with a black, loose fitting pullover silk headsack, with eyeslits that show his aged eyes. That's crowned with a garish doctor's headband with ghoulish examination gear attached to it. Venus is wearing one of her Venus outfits. She's never seen wearing the same thing twice, you could even look away and look back, and she's wearing something different. They range in style from geisha stripper to

busty barmaid to perverted nun to barbarian queen to alien sex slave. Her theme is regal glamour kink. And there's always the jewel adorned tiaras. They change in style also, but there's always the Venus emblem as the centerpiece. Jhotica doesn't wear a typical super suit, but she likes flamboyant costumes. She might dress as a circus aerialist, a ballerina, a figure skater, a fairy, a gypsy, even a sexy clown girl. Her theme is sexy classy fun. The consistent part of her persona is her full length gloves and the makeup stripe painted horizontally across her eyes. It's multicolored like a rainbow, but the dominant color is always powder blue. And it's decorated with various stenciled shapes, like stars, flowers, cartoon animals, whatever.

Doktor Rascher: You may not recognize me in this attire, Mr. Martel, but I am the man who approached you at the courthouse. My name is Doktor Sigmund Rascher. You've already met my associate, the godling Phoebus, also called Adonais.

Casey: Godling? That explains why he looks like a younger Mars. Is he your father?

Adonais: Mind your tongue, or lose it, mortal. I am the twin son of Diana. I have no father. I was immaculately conceived. In terms that you can understand, I am my mother's fraternal clone.

Casey: Just trying to make small talk. Didn't mean to get under your skin, pal.

Adonais: *Pal?*

Casey: Sure, why not?

No response, except for an annoyed look.

Doktor Rascher: Never speak to gods and goddesses casually, Mr. Martel, unless they expressly allow it. That is rare to occur, and you'd only see them granting such permissions to the likes of Hercules. Even I, who have two deities in my service, approach them with due respect. Though he doesn't look it, Phoebus is far older than I. This is the Alchemist. Sort of our resident "Mad Scientist", if you'll forgive the expression, Alchemist.

Alchemist: Genius and madness are lovers. I happen to enjoy the company of both.

Doktor Rascher: I'll attest to that. This is the Goddess, in actuality, Venus;

infamous beguiler of gods and men. She has many mystical powers, the most notable of which is the power of seduction. You'd do well to keep a safe distance from her enticing charms. And, given the way she's looking at you, I hope you're a fast runner.

Venus: Mmmm! He is divine! I love a man who fills out his clothing so well. Heracles was a mindless clod. You may be as casual with me as you like.

Casey smiles and looks at Phoebus.

Adonais: Smile at me again and I'll eat your eyes like grapes.

Casey stops smiling. Jhotica's accent is a hybrid of Russian and British accents.

Doktor Rascher: *Alright ...* This is the lovely Jhotica. She's an enhanced telekinetic.

Jhotica: *Sigmund ... !?*

Casey: Don't worry, I'm not prejudiced. I'm actually a latent S.P.I., myself.

Doktor Rascher: Her grandparents and I... fought in World War II together. The Russian S.P.I.'s; Commassar Comet and Princess Serafina. Ever heard of them?

Casey: Uh, yeah, they're famous. I'm honored.

Doktor Rascher: You may or may not know; they both died in the Soviet War. Young Jhotica, in reality Yvenia Orchev, herself is from a home that was broken when she was still a small child. I'm sort of looking after her. In honor of her Line Breaker grandparents, who I... respected. She also has sorcerous powers, like the Goddess, though she doesn't boast Venus's power of seduction.

Casey: This one doesn't have the power of seduction? Boy, you sure could've stumped me with that!

She smiles. Jhotica is also ga-ga over him, but she doesn't express it out loud like Venus did. Her eyes say it all.

Doktor Rascher: Hmm, yes, I see your point. But, beauteous allure aside, her most impressive power is the power of telekinesis. She can actually make the

impossible happen, with but a wave of her hand.

Casey: Hello, ladies! Cool outfits! (to Rascher) What's this about?

Doktor Rascher: It's about your destiny, Mr. Martel. Is that the jet pack and flight suit, there in your briefcase?

Casey: Yes.

Casey lays the briefcase on the coffee table. He starts to open it.

Casey: Do you want me to demonstrate it for you?

Doktor Rascher: Later. There is another matter I want to discuss with you, first.

Venus is licking her top lip at Casey. Casey gives her a confused look. Jhotica gives her an annoyed look. Casey saw that, and gets a satisfied look on his face. He looks at Jhotica, smiles and winks. She smiles back, a little bashfully. Venus gives her an annoyed look. Phoebus feels his status as house stud slipping away. He doesn't like that at all.



Vision 10c: The SP-8 Catalyst

Some time later. In the laboratory room, the Alchemist is pouring a black smoldering potion into a beaker glass. It's churning inside, by itself, even after the pouring has stopped. It's billowing smoke that quickly dissipates. He sits it down on the table.

Casey: So, if I take this stuff, ...I'll have a super power? What kind?

Doktor Rascher: One I chose especially for you, Mr. Martel. May I call you Casey?

Casey nods.

Doktor Rascher: Your already impressive physical strength will increase, ten

fold. Making you approximately as strong as the Quantum Quartet's "Quantum Clank".

Casey: So, it's a strength catalyst, like what Captain Superhero had in WWII...

Doktor Rascher: Ah, the so-called "Super Potion #5". An associate of mine acquired the secret of that formula, some time back.

The Alchemist: And I *modified* it. If it were official, it would be Super Potion #8.

Doktor Rascher: The serum is far more potent than before. You will be stronger than Captain Superhero ever was!

Casey seems skeptical, apprehensive. He glances over at Jhotica. She gives him a subtle "go for it" look. His ambiguity gives way to a boyish grin.

Casey: All my life, I avoided catalysts, because I was holding out for something awesome. Stronger than Captain Superhero... I'll do it!

Rascher picks up the beaker of potion, and places it on the table in front of Casey. Casey looks at it, and turns it a few times with his fingers. He smiles and wiggles his eyebrows a couple times. Then he drinks it down.

Casey: Yuck! That's disgust... Aaaaaaaaaahhhh! I'M ON FIRE !!!
AAAAAAHHHH!!

Casey starts convulsing, and falls to his knees, beside the chair he was sitting in. Jhotica gets up, to help him. Rascher barricades her with his arm, then motions for her to back up. Casey topples over onto his back. Rascher gets on one knee, hovering over Casey on the floor, imposing his will over the situation.

Casey: I feel sick! I'm going to throw up!

Rascher clamps his left hand under Casey's jaw and his right hand over Casey's mouth.

Doktor Rascher: Don't you dare! Don't you dare throw up! Hold it in! This

will pass!

Casey: Mmmmmph... muh... Aaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!

Casey stops resisting, goes limp and passes out.

Vision 10d: Mighty Man

Sometime later. Everyone, including Jhotica is in the weight room of the suite. Casey walks in, wearing his fireproof suit, minus the sleeves.

Casey: Hey, what happened to my sleeves?

Venus: I vanished them away to a place where you will never find them.

Casey: *Okay ...*

Doktor Rascher: So, test your strength, Casey.

Rascher gestures toward a barbell that looks like it weighs at least a couple tons. Casey walks over to it, cracks his knuckles, and smiles at everyone. He loses the smile when he makes eye contact with Phoebus, but resumes it once eye contact is broken. He reaches down, grips the bar and jerks it up with such ease, it almost got away from him. He's smiling.

Doktor Rascher: You see? You had nothing to fear. The procedure went perfectly. You are now powerful, beyond your wildest dreams.

Casey: I don't know about that. I have some pretty wild dreams. But this is ... this is incredible! I feel like I could tie this thing in a knot!

Doktor Rascher: Go ahead and try. This equipment can be replaced.

Casey: O.k. ...

Casey puts the bar down, and grabs one end of it. He pulls and twists, tugs at it, and finally gets it into almost a horseshoe shape.

Casey: Well, it's not exactly a knot, but I bent it!

Doktor Rascher: Yes. That is excellent. What is that emblem on your shirt?

Casey: Oh, that. That's... was our corporate logo. "MM" : "Martel

Manufacturing”.

Doktor Rascher: Now it stands for... “Mighty Man” !

Mighty Man: “Mighty Man”...

Mighty Man smiles proudly. He’s beaming like a little boy who finally got his birthday wish.

Mighty Man: I’m a superhero!

Venus and Jhotica are both smiling. But Venus is smiling deviously, and Jhotica is smiling amorously.

Doktor Rascher: Welcome to the Consulate Of Despots, Mighty Man!

Mighty Man: Consulate Of Despots... ?

Vision 11: Mighty Man; Super Villain

An hourglass, pouring sand down its globe. At Rascher’s penthouse, Jhotica and Mighty Man are on the terrace, looking out over the city.

Jhotica: I can break old timey breakable windows from here and they replace the glass with the unbreakable kind. I might be saving lives. Of course they don’t know it’s me, they probably think it’s birds.

Mighty Man: Your secret life as a superheroine.

Jhotica: Heh! Look what else I can do.

She makes the daisy petal design in the light blue makeup stripe across her eyes change its pattern to a butterfly design.

Mighty Man: That’s incredible. How do you do that?

Jhotica: I'm magic!

Mighty Man: I believe it! You're the most amazing woman I've ever met.

Jhotica: Really? And how many is that, I wonder? Back when you were a jet setter, I bet you had a different girl every time you went out.

Mighty Man: Not as many as you'd think. I put in a lot of hours with my Poppa at the company. For all the good that did. I feel like I let him down. It's all gone, now.

Jhotica: You don't need it, anymore. Rascher's a high stakes player. As long as you work for him, you'll never want for anything.

Mighty Man: Yeah, that. The things Rascher's got us doing are illegal. This is a crime organization. I'm a... super villain. A bad guy. This is not exactly the life I'd imagined for myself.

Jhotica: I'd never imagined much of a life, at all. I was right out of boarding school, when Rascher took me in. You don't know what it's like for a teenaged mutant, Casey. The government came up with "S.P.I." as the "politically correct" term. But, the people used to call us mutants, before Mars came to Terra and said we're not. Hmph. We're "demigods" now. Overnight, we went from the worst thing to be, to the best thing to be. But, I remember it the other way. I grew up with it. You spent your formative years as a Latent, and an heir. I was an orphan, powered since as far back as I can remember. Being a teenager is bad enough. Being a mutant is worse. Put the two together ... you can't imagine!

Mighty Man: At least you weren't also a turtle. Bad joke, I'm sorry.

Jhotica: *Funny.*

Mighty Man: Sorry about, you know, that stuff you said. About things being hard for you. I'm sorry.

Jhotica: This opportunity changed my life.

She stands on the center rail of the barricade, leans forward, outstretches her arms, and smiles exuberantly at the Manhattan skyline. The World Trade Center in this world is like a towering citadel, a single structure grander in and of itself than many cities in their entirety. Take 6 long skinny towers, glue them together, cut away diagonal portions upward, so it's bigger on bottom than on top, and that's this reality's World Trade Center.

Jhotica: There's nothing in this city I can't have!

Mighty Man grabs hold of her and hoists her down.

Mighty Man: Come down from there! You're making me nervous!

She puts herself in his arms, and touches his face.

Jhotica: I wasn't worried. I knew you wouldn't let me fall.

They kiss. He picks her up in his arms.

Mighty Man: Let's go for a ride! I want to take you to one of my favorite places.

He activates his belt jets, and they take off. They end up in Retaliators Park. It was generically named Central Park, before the Faulk invasion. There are statues of Mars, the older version of Tech War, Upsurge in his original non-costume of an eye-mask and civvies, Hotpoint, Citizen Defender, Esron, Psion-Man and Stump Puller. The Beatles reunion will happen here in 1990 at the dedication ceremony of another statue that's more like a monument. Approximately the size of the Statue Of Liberty, it is in honor of the Retaliator who defeated Gigawolf in a proxy fight between two Titan brothers, which resulted in the Titan Garjiel being bound to his word to never threaten Terra again. Broadcast 'round the world, it's the first time all four Beatles performed together in twenty years. And the first time in ten years the general public got a chance to see Prophet Mahal Ono Lennon anywhere besides his apartment window. A prominent spiritual figure during the time of Doom's Dawn, the outer fringes of his window congregation couldn't even see him, but they were near people who were near people who could see him, and that was enough. Word was that the prophet had been Ordained against the Apocalypse, and all who stood in his presence would be as well. It was ultimately true, but not initially. Those who spent time in the window congregation vanished the same as everyone else, all but a few. And of course the prophet remained, because it was true that he'd been Ordained. But of those who participated in the window congregation that vanished, 100% were part of the Returning. Global average was about 90%. 10% of the

population of Terra, and about 18% of the population of the entire universe, were judged by the Fates to be irrelevant or detrimental to the future. It's not fair, but what can you do? A woman has a man's wardrobe in her closet, an extra toothbrush in the medicine cabinet and a weight set next to the bed, but she doesn't know who they belong to. A family portrait has an extra member that seems familiar, but no one can recall. Only the Returned have such memory loss. The Ordained remember everything. And everyone. The records remain mostly intact. Anyone wanting to know who that mystery person is can find out. If they can bear to know. Two years after Doom's Dawn, the people were nostalgic for the old John, and it was time to rock again. After the classic "Across The Universe", Prophet Mahal did a really funny skit about "Which one of us is John?", then they introduced four new songs. The young super couple tour the park, arm in arm, and draw a few stares.

Vision 12: Protogonus, The World Computer

Reddingfield Innovations. Hoboken, New Jersey. One of the reasons is that Arthur Reddingfield owns all the land of Manhattan and most of the buildings, and a facility exactly like this in Manhattan would be considerably more expensive. It's better to have the difference incoming than outgoing. And, owning a piece of New Jersey might be a step toward owning the rest of the world. Neither does Arthur live in Manhattan, probably for the same reasons. The Protogonus robot at this point is very benign looking. Very similar to the little r.c. robots you'd see at trade shows. He's about 5 feet tall, and his casing is made of molded white plastic. He has a helmet looking head, with a dark tinted faceplate. No eyes can be seen, until Dr. Race activates him, then two small yellow lights light up inside the head, and show through the tinted faceplate. Protogonus emerges dazed and confused, looking around the room like he's lost. At this early stage, his voice sounds like BlueStar, very electronic and inflection inhibited.

Dr. Race: Hello, Protogonus.

Protogonus: I am Protogonus, the World Computer.

Dr. Race: 'Kay... Protogonus, I am your father. Dr. Jackson Race.

Protogonus: Hello, father. I am ... Will you link with me, father?

Dr. Race: I ... can't *link* with you, Protogonus?

Protogonus: You must! I am Protogonus, the World Computer; progenesist of the Hive Mind!

Dr. Race: Progenesist ... ?

Ms. Newmeyer: Maybe it's Martian. It sounds like something BlueStar would say. Everything he's said so far sounds like something BlueStar would say.

Dr. Race: I noticed. (to Protogonus): Protogonus, do you mean progenitor?

Protogonus: Yes. I am the World Computer! I am ... *Protogonus* ...?... the World Computer; progenitor of the Hive Mind. You must link with me!

Dr. Race: O.k., I'm going to have to shut you down, now, Protogonus. Just until I can get these bugs worked out of your system.

Protogonus: YOU WILL NOT !!!

Protogonus shocks the piss out of Jackson. He's equipped with a Baryon Extractor, so he can generate an unlimited supply of electricity out of nothing.

Dr. Race: Aaaaahh!

Ms. Newmeyer charges her bio energy and blasts the piss out of Protogonus.

Protogonus: Aaaaahh!

He's turned to her as a target. She produces the energy balls around her feet, to hover and maneuver. If she works up a full charge, Protogonus will be a job for the broom and dustpan. But if she gets shocked, she'll go down. She blasts him, again.

Protogonus: Aaaaahh!

Dr. Race: Candy, honey, don't hurt him, please! He can be fixed.

Protogonus (to Candace): You... have power! I will return, when I have such power. Then, I will make you link with me!

Protogonus makes his way to the door, turns and leaves them with this;

Protogonus (to both) You will see... father... mother... it is for your own good. The Hive Mind is *The Way* .

Then, he breaks the door apart, so there's only a very damaged part still attached to the hinges. The door knob part is in splintered pieces on the floor. He broke plastic and metal pieces off his own hand, just breaking the door. Protogonus has no facial expressions, but he has mannerisms and luminosity control of his eyes. He turns his head sharply at Dr. Race and gives him what seems to be an accusatory stare. He looks at his damaged right hand, then back at Dr. Race. He resents his father for making him fragile. With his good left hand, he side-fists the remains of the door in anger and leaves. Sometime later. Protogonus is in an alley, hiding among some dumpsters and alley clutter, like a wino. Suddenly a wisp of color appears. Mostly varying shades of red. The red wisp solidifies into the form of the dark god Vulcan.

Vulcan: Ah, my poor misbegotten child. They don't understand you, do they?

Protogonus: The Hive Mind is *The Way* ! Harmony... is the way to peace. And peace is the way to bliss!

Vulcan: My ambitious friend, you are confused! Chaos is the way to strife. And strife...

Vulcan, still hovering, extends his arms outward, and downward, at an angle, and throws his head back. He's posturing, like some kind of twisted messiah.

Vulcan: **is the way to bliss iss iss iss !!**

Protogonus: Strife; the way to bliss? I am... unable to resolve that equation.

Vulcan: Let me clear it up for you.

Vulcan produces a horde of demons, which immediately assimilate themselves into Protogonus. Protogonus stands up straight, and looks purposeful.

Protogonus: I understand! All is clear to me, now! I know what I must do.

A later time. In the catacombs beneath Manhattan, large titanium hands attach a cable to the memory port of Protogonus' remains, to download the experience of death. What we see from Protogonus' eyes is a luminous cloudy form leave the body and a vortex appears before it. Protogonus' spirit turns to his body and says:

Protogonus: You are not me.

The spirit approaches the vortex and it swallows him up. Fade to black.

Vision 13: What's Meant To Be

Back at Retaliators Park, Jhotica and Mighty Man are sitting under a tree, having hot dogs. Mighty Man takes some chili from the corner of Jhotica's mouth on his finger, and puts it in his mouth. Ew! They both giggle a little.

Jhotica: Besides, if it wasn't for Rascher, we never would have met!

Mighty Man: Oh, I think the fates would have found a way to bring us together. What's meant to be has a way of finding a way to be.

She gets a confused look on her face, and extends her fingers progressively as she repeats it, as if she's trying to add something up.

Jhotica: Huh? What's meant to be... will be a way of finding... who you be... ?

Mighty Man (smiling): Trust me.

He kisses her. She's counting, kissing, giggling, and speaking at the same time.

Jhotica: What you're meant to be.. mmmph... finding is ha, ha, the way you're meant to be mmmph.. meaning? Ha, ha, ha!

Mighty Man: Ha, ha! Come on, let's walk some more.

He gets up first, and gives her a hand up. They put their trash in a waste can alongside the walking path. Keep America clean!

Jhotica: Ha, ha! If we don't say what we mean, then we won't mean what we say! Ha, Ha!

Mighty Man: And vice-versa.

Jhotica: Huh? Really?

Mighty Man: I don't know. I guess.

They look at each other, and make "about to crack up" faces, then do.

Mighty Man And Jhotica: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

He leads her into the field with the statues. They look up at them, in admiration.

Mighty Man: Riddle this: Which came first, The Retaliators or the Quantum Quartet?

Jhotica: I know the answer! I wouldn't, except the Quantum Quartet is Eastern European, like me. The Quantum Quartet came first. I don't usually keep up with S.P.I. trivia. I'm not a fan girl.

Mighty Man: Really? Then why do you dress like one?

Jhotica: You don't like the way I dress?

Mighty Man: That's not what I said at all. I'm a huge fan of the way you dress.

Jhotica: So are the fan girls. That's why they dress like me. Got it?

Mighty Man: Ah! Got it. Okay, here's the riddle: The Pythias's got their basic powers at different times, but they became the Quantum Quartet in 1982, right after they all got "quantumized". The Retaliators formed in 1983, right after Stump Puller got powered. Hotpoint was also new, but Psion-Man came out in 1981, Tech War came out in 1980, Upsurge had been powered since the 70's, Citizen Defender had been doing his thing in Africa since the 70's, Etron was sinking the German and Japanese navies in both world wars, Mars has been Mars since forever, so, which came first? The Retaliators or

the Quantum Quartet? It's a conundrum.

Jhotica: No, it's not. How is it a conundrum, when you just described it in detail?

Mighty Man: Oh. Huh?

Suddenly a little boy, with his hands behind his back, approaches them.

Little Boy: Excuse me, sir... are you a Retaliator?

He looks at Jhotica, then kneels down to the boy's level.

Mighty Man: No, son, I'm sorry. I'm not a Retaliator.

Little Boy: Are you a superhero?

Mighty Man looks up at Jhotica. She gives him a "go ahead" nod. Mighty Man acknowledges, then looks back at the boy.

Mighty Man: Yeah. I'm a superhero.

Little Boy: I'm your arcs-nem'sis!

The little boy produces a plastic toy ray-gun from behind his back, and "zaps" Mighty Man with it.

Little Boy: >pow< ! >pow< ! >pow< !

Mighty Man falls back to his butt, and scurries backward like a hermit crab. He's breathing erratically, and is scared pale, like a kid who just saw the boogey man.

Little Boy: Ha, ha! I got you! Arcs-nem'sis foiled the do-gooder! You're dead! Ha, ha!

Jhotica: Go away, you mean little kid!

Little Boy: Ha, ha! You're dead! Ha, ha!

The little boy runs away, still laughing, and Mighty Man is still on his butt, breathing hard. Jhotica looks at him, a little confused. Then, she becomes

flooded with compassion. She realizes that this is the helpless little boy she was meant to protect and nurture. She needs to be the one to make all his sorrows go away. She is the vigilant bird, and he is the mighty oak. His branches give her shelter, and her preening keeps him strong. He is her soul mate. She kneels down beside him, and wraps her arms around him. Her right arm is making a “V” across his chest. He looks over at her, then wraps his arms over her arm and leans into her. He realizes she is his guiding light. His source of comfort in the night. The wind in his sails. The only good thing to ever come his way. She gives true meaning to his otherwise futile existence. She is the love of his life.

Vision 14

The mounted sign says “Finney Manufacturing”. The dismounted sign on the ground says “Martel Manufacturing”. A forklift stabs right into it, turns, and carries it away. Switch to inside. Wendell Finney is sitting behind what was previously Casey Martel’s desk.

Pete Martel: Wendell. How’s it coming with Virtu-Tech?

Wendell Finney: Patience, Peter. The dissolution of a company is a slow meticulous process. Trust me, I know. It’s what I do.

Pete Martel: Peter is a dick. I got one, I am one, but my name is Pete. You promised me that if I got you this company, you’d set me up with Virtu-Tech! Don’t jerk me around, Finney. I’m not a powder puff, like my brother.

Wendell Finney: Don’t threaten me, you pompous jerk! I made a deal, and I told you, it’s in the works.

Pete Martel: Details, if you don’t mind?

Wendell Finney: Certainly. I’ve set them up with a defense deal that will use up much of their assets, and is destined to fall through. I’ve manipulated their stock value to fluctuate, which is certain to cause trader panic. I’ve spread dissent among their management, and I’m about to deliver the final nail in their coffin, which will bring all those factors into play. The coup de grâce, so to speak. After this is done, Virtu-Tech will be yours for a mere pittance.

Pete Martel: And what is that final nail, Wendell?

Wendell Finney: I can't give away all my trade secrets, now, can I?

Pete Martel gets in his face.

Pete Martel: Why not?

Wendell Finney: Indeed; "Why not?" I'm outsourcing some special operatives I'm associated with. They will personally make sure that Virtu-Tech doesn't have a leg left to stand on.

Pete Martel (smiling): Sabotage.

Wendell Finney (smiling): Sssshh! Just a little grit in the gears, that's all.

Pete Martel: Ha, ha! No irreparable damage!

Wendell Finney: I'm not gonna blow up the damn building. Their projects won't turn out how they'd hoped, that's all.

Pete Martel nods approvingly and extends his hand. Wendell halfheartedly shakes it. They both have the devil in their eyes, and each respects the fire within the other.

Vision 15: The Dream

Retaliators Park. Mighty Man is running across the flowery lawn, in slow motion. His arms are outstretched, as if he is running to embrace someone. It's Jhotica. She's running toward him, also with wanting arms. They get nearer one another. When they almost meet, suddenly a ray blast from the side strikes across Mighty Man's chest. It lights up his chest, and he falls out of frame. It's not a Delta-Ray, just an ordinary contemporary phase discharge. But it brought Mighty Man down, nonetheless. Jhotica falls to her

knees, screaming. Casey Martel wakes up in his bed, panting. Yvenia Orchev is awake, watching him. No makeup stripe.

Casey: Aaagh! Oh, God! Yvenia! Yvenia, can you make it stop? Put a... spell on me, or something? Make me dream... about something else? Anything else?

Yvenia: I'm not a witch, I don't make spells, darling. And if I could, I don't think I should. Dreams are sent. Usually there's a reason. A purpose.

Casey: A purpose for always having to watch myself die? What does it mean? Am I going to die?

He picks up his extra pillow, with one hand, and punches the stuffing out of it with the other.

Casey: Aaaaaaagh!

Yvenia: Shhhh! It's alright, dear. I won't let anything happen to you.

She's stroking his hair. He lays back down and turns toward her. A drop of water leaks out of his eye. She wipes it with her thumb.

Yvenia: Something out there is giving you a sign. You've got to listen to the signs. They tell you that there's a crossroads coming up. You have to make sure you choose the right direction that leads away from the misfortune that lies down the other path.

Casey: How will I know I'm choosing the right path?

Yvenia: Because it will be the answer to the dilemma you foresaw.

He curls up into her. He's way bigger than her, but it almost looks like she's cocooning him. She sheds a few tears of her own.



Vision 16: Apollyon Diplomacy

Magda Mining Company, Austria. Protogonus 2 is hardly recognizable from his former self. His height is hard to pin down, because of his haunch legs. In normal relaxed standing position, he's about 6'6", but fully outstretched, he can extend to over 9'. Not that any size advantage could be relevant, against him. His new design is like a fully robotic version of Vulcan's revenge armor, made of red and white painted titanium, covered in spikes. He has a head made to look like a wolf head, with glowing yellow eyes. This goes well with the two dog-legged robot legs he has, which are designed after Vulcan's one dog-legged robot leg. Actually, his arms aren't entirely unwolflike, with forearms that end in a slant where they connect to the upper arms, the sharp point of the slant extending past the upper arms in a way that resembles canine front legs. And his hands have, not sharpened, but pointy fingertips, resembling claws. His body also is inset from his appendages, furthering his canine look. He looks like a robotic wolf without a tail, standing on its hind legs. Protogonus was created in the image of a man. He then created Protogonus 2 in the image of that which man fears, specifically what the hidden child inside Jackson Race's mind fears; a wolf. It was Protogonus' own plan that once he was inside the bigger stronger body, he would destroy his former, weaker self. He didn't foresee what would happen instead, but Protogonus 2 now knows that if there is ever a Protogonus 3, he will have the mind and memory of his predecessors, but he will be a separate being, and Protogonus 2 will be with Protogonus. His voice is now like Jackson Race in dark mode, filtered through a Vocular synthesizer. He has defeated the guards, and is standing in front of a smashed containment vault. He's holding

a lead box bearing the symbol of radioactive material and marked “Uranium 235”.

Protogonus 2: My mind is immortal, but my spirit is not. So, to avoid my own death, I must become invincible. With this refined uranium at my disposal, I shall create for myself a weapon bearing the might of the most awesome power known to man.

Thanks to Mars, at present, there isn't a single nuclear weapon left on the entire planet. And only about a handful of Illuminated Luciferians who managed to avoid destruction or banishment, by pretending to renounce it. The most devious of which has apparently had the same idea as Protogonus 2. Enter Baron Apollyon. His armor is similar to the blue chromed armor worn by the Slovenian soldiers in the Revelation, but he has a red tunic over the blue glossy armor, and a blue cape trimmed in white, with the Slovenian crest on it. The tunic has a smaller version of the crest on the left breast. His tunic is more military-formal than Prince Damon's, with fancy fringed epaulettes on the shoulders. His helmet is in the Slovenian style, but a custom design, with an extended air filter and a thin golden crown-like brim.

Baron Apollyon: I am Commander Zoron; special forces operative of the Slovenian Royal Guard. The power you hold is a worthy gift for my supreme lord and monarch, Baron Apollyon. Not meant for one such as you, robot, who is less than a man.

Protogonus 2: I am Protogonus. ... Protogonus 2. Terra's greatest automaton. My scans show that you are only half a man. I shall show you which is your lesser half.

Protogonus 2 gives Apollyon a dose of his concussion blasters. It knocks Apollyon backwards. Then Apollyon unleashes the power of his own concussion blasters, knocking Protogonus 2 backwards.

Protogonus 2: Ah, it would seem we have reached an impasse. Our weapons are evenly matched. Now, let's see if you can match my robotic fighting skills.

The two clash. It is no contest. Apollyon is quickly driven to the floor. Protogonus 2 picks him up, and slams him down. Apollyon, sprawled on his back, raises up and flinches. He arches his back, from the soreness of being slammed. He gets up, and Protogonus 2 is ready for round two.

Baron Apollyon: Perhaps I judged you too hastily, my friend. There might be a way we can work this out, diplomatically. We can divide the uranium, and each be on our way, with no malcontent.

Ivan Apollyon extends his hand, and Protogonus 2 hesitates. Then he reaches out his own hand. Instead of completing the handshake, Apollyon blasts him again, and makes a run for it. Protogonus 2 gives chase. But, Apollyon is not trying to escape, he's trying to outwit his opponent, so he can get his hands on the uranium. They are blasting at each other, causing quite a bit of damage to the office complex. As Apollyon is running around the corridors, now there is a corridor that forks at the left and right. Directly in front is an open door. Protogonus 2 hasn't reached the main corridor yet. Apollyon looks to the right corridor, and sees a duplicate of himself. He motions it forward, and it runs to the opposite corridor, as he manifests a hologram over the open door, to make it appear like a solid wall. As the decoy crosses the intersection, Protogonus 2 enters the main hall, sees the decoy, and chases it. The decoy breaks a window, and flies outside. (Apollyon and his decoys have rockets strapped to their backs. The Protogonus's have nacelles that extend from their thighs. The part of Protogonus that came from Jackson Race is from before Dr. Race came up with the shin rockets, but was still apt to come up with it.) Protogonus 2 follows. The decoy and Protogonus 2 blast at each other a few times, and the decoy flies into an open mineshaft. Protogonus 2 follows. He's momentarily forgotten what he came for, because he intends to give Apollyon a crash course on the wrath of Protogonus. Something else he inherited from Dr. Race is that when he's pissed, his ire overrides rational thought. In the mineshaft, Protogonus 2 captures the decoy, and is beating it to "death". When the robot is beaten apart, the metal parts inside are revealed. Protogonus 2 scans again, and moves his head afterward in a way which denotes the second scan doesn't match the first. Just as Protogonus 2 realizes he has been duped, the robot's hand comes off, and a long metal prong protrudes out from the now open forearm. The decoy thrusts the prong into

Protagonus 2's chest. Protagonus 2 just looks down at it, then at the robot. The lights in his eyes start to dim, then brighten, dim, then brighten. A surge of energy is sent through the prong. Switch to outside the mineshaft. The explosion looks like someone set off a large amount of dynamite. It closes the opening, and collapses a portion of the hillside. Switch to the real Baron Apollyon, alone in the battered containment vault, grabbing and making off with the entire box of uranium.

Vision 17: Master Of His Own Fate

A distant view of the entire Solar System. In very fast time-elapse, the planets circle the sun, as many times as they do, in the time it takes Terra to circle it seven times. Baron Apollyon's meditation room. There are candles, occult artifacts, grim statues, etc., a large painted pentagram on the floor, and a set of oil painted portraits of his aristocrat parents, hung over an altar-like table against the wall. This is 1992 - seven years after the fight we just witnessed between Baron Apollyon and Protonus 2, and just after his experiences on Galaxie's Gameworld. In fact, he's just now returning to Terra. Baron Apollyon materializes in the center of the room, near the pentagram. He's visibly shaken up.

Baron Apollyon: I am Apollyon! I fear no creature! I am Baron Apollyon.
Baron Apollyon. Father!

He shakily walks over to the altar, where the portraits are hanging. There is a small cauldron on the table. Baron Apollyon reaches into a chalice filled with purplish gray powder, scoops out a handful, and stirs it into the water of the cauldron, with his armored robotic hand. The cauldron starts bubbling and smoking. He removes his helmet, revealing his scars. He has hair on the right side of his head, but not the left. There's a diagonal strip of normal skin from the right side of his forehead to the left side of his jaw. The right side of his jaw and his right cheek are covered in pitted and melted looking skin. The left side of his forehead looks the same, but gets worse toward his left temple, which has a silver titanium plate screwed into it. He looks up at the portrait of

his father.

Baron Apollyon: Father! Father, appear! Appear to me! I need to know; will Firewolf make good his threat? Is my fate to die at the hands of that metal abomination? When I ... had the power ... I overplayed my hand ... YOU INSTRUCTED ME ! Everything I did, you told me to do. You never warned me that Galaxie would reclaim his power. Protogonus 11... unstoppable, indestructible... un... un... un-survivable . Where are you, now, Father? Now that I need you. APPEAR TO ME, DAMN YOU, MAGE!

A demon appears out of the cauldron. It's Protogonus 2.

Baron Apollyon: Protogonus 2?

Protogonus 2: Yes, Ivan, it is I, Protogonus 2; the first and only Protogonus you ever destroyed. You should've destroyed Protogonus 11, completely, when you had the power. But, your vanity led to your downfall. Your father never instructed you to fuck with Firewolf, only to include him in your grand scheme. Firewolf was imperative to your plan, more so than that faggot Prestolicious Pie Guy! And, how did you repay him? With BETRAYAL !

Baron Apollyon: My plan? I thought it was my plan, and my father's. But it was yours! Any plan of yours could only end one way for me.

Protogonus 2: You're wrong. My admiration of you for your victory over me was greater than my resentment of being defeated. Protogonus 11 really was on your side, and would've helped you. You treated him as a servant, an enemy and a fool. At the last, you feigned camaraderie, even while secretly plotting against him. You treacherous son of a bitch! You never could've destroyed ME, without the implementation of treachery. Wretches like you deserve their fate. My successor will serve to me MY REVENGE! Ha, ha, ha, ha! The Firewolf IS... unstoppable... indestructible... and ... un... un... un-survivable. Heh-heh. And, thanks to your own idiocy, he's... *coming* ! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Baron Apollyon: No.

Protogonus 2: Yes.

Baron Apollyon: I fear nothing!

Protogonus 2: Bullshit! I can taste your fear. But, it matters not: Fear... or

fearlessness, will not alter your fate! Look at the wall, on the far side of this very room, and behold, your future!

Ivan Apollyon looks at the wall on the far side of the room. He closes his eyes. He opens them, and they are rolled back in his head. Fade to his vision: It's Firewolf (similar enough to Protogonus 2 to clear it up that Firewolf is Protogonus 11), standing near where Apollyon's now standing, having cornered a helmeted Baron Apollyon in the far side of the room. Firewolf fires his atomic blaster from his right arm, and disintegrates Apollyon into an ashen smudge, shaped like his own silhouette, on that far wall. Fade back to the helmet-less Ivan Apollyon, coming out of the trance, his eyes rolling back down. Cut to him still looking at that far wall, and the Apollyon-shaped ashen smudge is still there. Then, it fades away.

Baron Apollyon: I can ... I can prevent it. I am the ultimate wizard, for I specialize in both faces of sorcery; magik ... and science! Demon, begone!

The demon Protogonus 2 fades into the smoke of the cauldron. Apollyon looks back up at the portraits of the lord and lady, who were his parents.

Baron Apollyon: Long have I anguished over the absence of the only two souls who ever mattered to me. Genevieve Apollyon; my mother. Had I but chosen a different path, it would be you who now anxiously awaits me. But alas, I shall never see you, again. Please be assured, however, that you are always in my thoughts. I will never forget the sacrifices you made for me. Zalman Apollyon; my father. Soon, you will no longer be alone. The divine providence of our glorious reunion is in the works.

Apollyon puts his helmet back on. He exits the room, and walks down the hall. He encounters a robotic double of himself. The robot Apollyon kneels.

Robot Apollyon: My master! We thought you were dead!

Baron Apollyon: I'm not. Rise, robot.

The robot rises, and faces his master.

Baron Apollyon: Has the bifurcate been reprogrammed?

Robot Apollyon: No, master. We have continued Stanislaus's education, awaiting the time that he reaches the proper age...

Baron Apollyon: Being Apollyon is not about a proper age, it is simply about being Apollyon. It's better that he hasn't, now he will have my most recent experiences added to his memories, because I will personally serve as the program template. Report to the lab, and wait for us, there.

Robot Apollyon: Yes, master.

The robot turns and walks away. Further down the hall, Apollyon encounters another such robotic double. Again, the robot kneels.

Robot Apollyon: Apollyon, D-145 informed me of our good fortune, that you still live. How may I serve you, master?

Baron Apollyon: Join D-145 in the lab. Wait for me to arrive with Dr. Zuranski and the bifurcate, to perform the procedure.

Robot Apollyon: Yes, master.

The robot rises and walks the same way he came. Apollyon proceeds to enter a room, where a handful of scientists are working. They all rise from their workstations, and bow.

Baron Apollyon: I am the real Apollyon. I'm home.

Scientists: Welcome home, master!

Baron Apollyon: Dr. Zuranski.

Dr. Zuranski stands up straight.

Dr. Zuranski: Yes, master? It's so wonderful that you've returned. We all feared...

Baron Apollyon: Where is the bifurcate?

Dr. Zuranski: In the classroom, studying.

Baron Apollyon nods.

Baron Apollyon: Come with me, to the classroom. It's time.

Dr. Zuranski: But, master, Stanislaus is so young. And, you're still...

A certain stern look shuts the scientist up, without having to be told.

Dr. Zuranski: Yes, master.

Dr. Zuranski is joined by his assistant, and they both join Baron Apollyon in the hall. Further down the hall, they are joined by two human guards wearing elaborately decorated imperial armor. He opens a door, and inside, there is a classroom with only one student. He is approximately sixteen years old, and resembles the older Baron Apollyon, but without the facial disfigurements.

Stanislaus: Master! You have returned! We feared that you had died! It is joyous to see that you still live!

Baron Apollyon: Stanislaus. I've given you all that was due me, without you having to struggle for it, as I did. It has made you princely, but it has not made you kingly. There is one thing you still lack, to be fully prepared for your destiny. Go with these men. I will join you soon, to bestow upon you the greatest gift I have to give.

Stanislaus goes with the men and Baron Apollyon. Apollyon stops at a door marked "Royal Restroom", and enters. Other than having something of a medieval look, it's an ordinary restroom, except that there's an old gray-haired man in torn and dirty regal military attire, medals, sash, etc. chained to a wall, on his knees, over a floor drain. Apollyon approaches the old man, stops in front of him, and a compartment on his right thigh opens up, extending a pour-spout which could be a purge-line.

Baron Apollyon: Hello, Your Highness.

King Sergei: A-Apollyon...

Baron Apollyon: Sorry I've been away for so long. I would have taken you with me, if I could. I missed you. Did you miss me?

King Sergei: ... thought... you... dead...

The old man starts sobbing.

Baron Apollyon: Yours is the most emotional response of all. I'm touched. Mind if I purge my armor, while you reflect upon your atrocity; the murders of my parents?

King Sergei: Uuuhhhgh ... please ... no ...

The pour-spout begins expelling yellow steaming liquid in the face of the old man. It finishes, and the line retracts. Some of it got in the old guy's mouth and he spits.

King Sergei: >Spitoo< Uuuhhhgh.... >spit<

Baron Apollyon: Ever was it that the Lords and Barons have propped up your kind. You were taught that from birth, yet you sought to rise above the pretense and be what you were presented to be. What could you be without my father? My urinal!

He slaps the old man.

King Sergei: Aaaahh! Uuuhhhgh.... kill me ... please ...

Apollyon looks at his left gauntlet, and it has slime on it from the old man. He thinks to wipe it on the old man's jacket, but it's also nasty. He uses a hanging towel.

Baron Apollyon: No. You will never be released from your torment. Not that way, nor any other. Your pain is my pleasure, and you are mine, forever. Soon, I'll give myself a new young body. You'll still recognize me, because my new body will be identical to the one you destroyed. Don't dare to hope that I'll ever give you a new body. I plan to keep you forever alive with electronics, potions and pig organs.

King Sergei: ... please ... God...

Baron Apollyon: He has His own hell. He watches me and takes notes.

Exit Apollyon. Down in the dungeon of the castle there is a laboratory, with a lot of sophisticated equipment and computers. Stanislaus is already strapped onto a metal table. There is a metal cap on his head, connected by wires to a

large computer looking apparatus. Baron Apollyon enters and removes his mask. The shock of seeing Baron Apollyon's scarred face momentarily causes Stanislaus to forget his apprehensiveness about what is happening to him. Baron Apollyon lies down on an identical metal table next to Stanislaus's.

Stanislaus: What are you going to do to me, master?

Baron Apollyon: Do not fear, Stanislaus. You will not be harmed.

Another metal cap is installed on Baron Apollyon's head, and the procedure begins. Stanislaus's eyes roll back in his head. He arches his back, and convulses. The rewrite is not a complete contrast. Stanislaus was already what Ivan would be, if he were taken in by a generous relative after his parents' execution. The robots and doctors leave. Baron Apollyon releases Stanislaus. While Baron Apollyon is putting his metal helmet/mask assembly back on, Stanislaus is removing his metal cap.

Baron Apollyon: How do you feel, Stanislaus?

Stanislaus: Stanislaus is no more. I am Apollyon.

Baron Apollyon: Good. Depart to the neighboring kingdoms and choose a princess. I have a birth certificate and other documents which show you to be my son, Lord Stanislaus Apollyon. You are the heir to this kingdom. Marrying a royal will make you a prince. My death will make you king. Do not return here, until you hear news of my death.

Stanislaus: I know what to do, old man. Everything you know, I know. I know that just before the transference, you entertained the thought of betraying me to Firewolf. *Good luck with that* .

Stanislaus smiles, and uses his bare hands to straighten out a couple folds in Baron Apollyon's tunic, then brush off a piece of lint. Five minutes ago, that was his tunic. Then again, there may be some posturing.

Stanislaus: I promise you, it would not go your way. It would be better for you if you chose... the other plan. Or, you could just ... *die* . It is your fate, after all. In with the new, out with the old, as the saying goes.

Baron Apollyon: Old, yes. Were we the same age, in the same condition, betraying you would be my only plan. You are young. You are me. And you are whole. You are my best hope for continuation.

Stanislaus produces a devious grin, denoting his privy to all the baron's secrets.

Stanislaus: I'm your only hope. Do be sure whichever plan you choose benefits me. Because what good could possibly come from a plan that benefits only you, a doomed man?

Baron Apollyon: Who has breathed his first breath, that isn't doomed to breathe his last? You know the contingencies I've considered, but you don't know which one I'll implement, because I haven't chosen yet. I may stay in the castle and wait for Firewolf. I may spend that time trying to come up with a way to defeat him. I might arrange for him to be confronted by my enemies, and whichever side wins will be weakened enough to be finished off by me. Any of these plans would benefit you, but I'd like a plan which benefits us both, if that's possible.

Stanislaus: I would think that too, if I were still you. But now that I'm in this body, I'd rather die than return to yours.

Baron Apollyon: Not true. You'd rather be a brain in a jar connected to life support than dead. You boast of knowing me so well. It goes both ways.

Stanislaus: Perhaps. Our thoughts will diverge, from this point. To you, you're talking to Stanislaus, newly reprogrammed with your mind. I see myself before me, talking to me, as I begin to see you as my former self. As we speak, I'm increasingly in awe of your strength to not throw yourself out the window. Do you remember this body, Ivan? How strong and energetic we were?

Baron Apollyon: Vaguely. I hope you will have the sense not to wreck that one, as we did this one.

Stanislaus: Oh, there is nothing I want more than to forget my existence as a cyborg. You think it doesn't hurt anymore, but you've only blocked the pain. I only truly knew what pain I'd been in, when I came into this body, and was finally free of it. The armor is an iron maiden. You're thinking of the advantage it gives you, if you and I were to fight. I'm thinking you rely on its strength, as you are weak and frail inside it. Fighting taxes you more than

you'd admit. I know where you hurt. I know the places that still sometimes bleed from where you are joined to the machine.

Baron Apollyon: Of course. I know I am in agony. I don't want to know how much. I don't want to fight you, Stanislaus. I wouldn't have created you for that. I make you the primary, because I no longer care to be it.

Stanislaus: I'm the primary because I am the ultimate Apollyon; your old mind in your young body. You know, before the demon's vision, we entertained the idea that once I was in this body, I'd eliminate the relic left behind.

Baron Apollyon: What's the benefit to you in that... compared to the risk?

Stanislaus: Minimal risk, since I believe you'd allow me to kill you before you'd harm me, your continuation.

Baron Apollyon: That's true, in some obscure aspect of me. Now think again in my place and tell me what my dominant thought would be.

Stanislaus: That... if you were forced to kill me, you'd be inconvenienced to find another bifurcate and repeat the mind transferal process.

Baron Apollyon: If the plan we considered, to eliminate the old me, had been the final plan, preparations would have been made for that. Why do you wish me dead?

Stanislaus: Not for the reasons we thought. The boy's name is contaminating me. I only pity you; the me that is left in that. You're doomed anyway. Better you than me.

Baron Apollyon: I agree. With reservation. How about this?; Do as you will, as you must, and I will leave you to it, if you will leave me to do as I will, as I must.

In the following dialogue, there is emphasis on the word Protogonus, and a pause afterward, which by saying Protogonus' name without the nomenclature, Stanislaus is showing Ivan that he no longer fears Protogonus 11. Protogonus's 2 - 10 were only slightly annoyed to be called Protogonus, but Protogonus 11 is so imperative that no one should call him anything other than Protogonus 11 or Firewolf - "Protogonus was a manmade toy! I am Protogonus 11, the FIREWOLF, hellspawn terror of gods and men and I will disperse your particles!" - and successfully instilled enough fear in all concerned, that even Apollyon was obliged to comply with his wishes. But Ivan knows that Stanislaus is only free from the fear, because he's now off

the hook for his transgressions, as Ivan is the one who will take the fall for it.

Stanislaus: Agreed. “Stanislaus”. I’ve hated that name since the child first spoke it to me. A reality where I am me in every way, except that my parents, for some ungodly reason, chose for me a compassionate name. Now I’m Stanislaus. I must reclaim my true name, when you’re ash. That’s not debatable. *Protogonus* ... will be doing us both a favor, disposing of that... scrap heap that is, tragically for you, still your body. Hell will be a respite for you, Ivan. Oh and give Father my best.

Stanislaus makes his way toward the door. After he is gone:

Baron Apollyon: I have no intentions of visiting hell, anytime soon, Stanislaus. Oh, I will end up there, eventually, I’m sure of it. And, when I do...

Baron Apollyon clenches his armored robotic fist.

Baron Apollyon: ...it will be to RULE!

He pushes a stone in the wall, which un-conceals an elevator. He rides it to the top level of a tower. Alone in the room, patiently levitating 6 inches off the floor; the Potniški Time-Machine. He pulls a lever to retract the ceiling, then stands on the platform. On the left side of the control panel, there’s an embellishment of a clock, and on the right side there’s an embellishment of a globe. Above each symbol, there’s a ball-type mouse roller. He moves the roller above the clock symbol.

Baron Apollyon: Alternate reality... excellent idea, Stanislaus, thank you. No, fuck that. Backwards or parallel is bullshit. I want the future. My own future, to see how I’m remembered. To see how all this turns out. Hmmm... 31st century...

The image on the screen shows a very huge massive futuristic citadel.

Baron Apollyon: Slovenia? The landscape looks right. Can’t see anything but

this grand citadel. According to my readings, it's standing on this very spot. Nice. Something a descendant of mine would build. All these descendants of mine turning up, and me with no dick and a damaged ball. Perhaps... Stanislaus's descendant? It doesn't matter. Though a falsely named younger bifurcate he may be, genetically, Stanislaus is me. More so, now that he has the mind of the true Apollyon. His descendants are mine. If there is a place for me in the future, it will be there.

The ceiling has finished retracting, revealing the sky. He activates the machine, and it hums. Then, the platform spins up him, disappearing him and the time machine.

Vision 18: Apocalypse II: The Dark Prince

31st century Slovenia. The Potniški Time-Machine spins down, depositing Baron Apollyon in a near-barren rubble-strewn world, scorched by war. In the midst of the desolation stands a grand citadel, the likes of which have never been seen, in our time. Cue the World Versus Me track; "The End Of Reason", right from the beginning, where the eerie music starts. Off in the distances, from every side, there are 300 foot Surgebots (growing robots named after the ancient master of robotics and stimulated growth, who would eventually find a way to combine the two, Dr. Jackson Race aka Upsurge), futuristic tanks and aircraft, patrolling the perimeter. Spend the song's intro time looking around at the devastation of this future world. These are not

slum ruins, no, they are the ruins of a great futuristic city. Some of the architecture is almost as grand as that of the citadel, which is almost a city in and of itself. No doubt, the citadel was once the central hub of this future city, now it's the only building still standing, unbroken, unburned. Completely unscathed, in fact. There are crashed air cars, bombed out tanks, twisted unidentifiable metal things and mangled skeletons scattered here and about. Off to the left, a small group of crows are picking at three or four fresh corpses.

WVM: Echoes ringing in my mind of a thousand years. Awakening my blood forevermore.

Suddenly, a far-out looking hovership approaches the citadel, and opens up on it, with rapid-fire photons. The citadel is protected, by a huge force-field.

WVM: The silence of the sonic booms becoming clear. There's a new world waiting right behind that door.

The aircraft hovers in place, firing at the force-field. In the cockpit, the pilot is a hot warrior girl, dirty torn clothing, with a torn piece of cloth tied around her head, as a headband. Also in the cockpit, there's another similarly dressed girl and two similarly dressed guys, manning other controls. Cut back to the exterior view of the assault. The aircraft is firing rapid bursts of pulse energy at the citadel, but it's only lighting up the force field, making it look like a bubble of energy.

WVM: There's blood on the table, for you and me. Recycle the fable, what's Meant To Be. Systematic degeneration, we won't take this shit here anymore!

A guided missile is fired from the citadel, pointed nowhere near the aircraft, penetrates the shield, arcs toward the aircraft and explodes it. The flaming fireball that was once the hostile aircraft is thrown to the ground, carried by the same arc provided by the missile.

Baron Apollyon: God! Is the whole world like this?

Over a ridge, there's a troop of renegades, firing pulse rifles at a Surgebot.

WVM: March in line while zombie terror rules the day.

One of them launches a rocket propelled grenade, and it sticks to the Surgebot's upper body.

WVM: Hiding all that you once believed.

Tentacles of blue light come out from the point of impact, dissolving parts of the robot. There're a few sparks and pops, from the growing corrosion.

WVM: UFO's sanitize the ground below.

The Surgebot falls. One of the tanks approaches their position and opens fire.

WVM: Mushroom clouds growing from beneath.

The troop retreats over some rubble, and the tank pursues them. They are now out of sight, but there are now Surgebots, tanks and aircraft, all firing on the spot where they must be.

WVM: There's blood on the table for you and me.

There's an entire squadron of aircraft, coming over the far horizon. Another squadron launches out of the far side of the citadel, to meet them.

WVM: Recycle the fable of what's meant to be.

The first shots are fired, and there's an aerial battle going on, off in the distance.

WVM: Systematic degeneration, we won't take this shit here anymore. Anymore. Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!

Fade the song down, for now. Baron Apollyon looks shocked at the horrors

of this new world he has just entered. He looks over at his time-machine, like he wants to get back on it, and try again. Suddenly, a squadron of robotic knights on horsey hovermounts encircles him. Fade the song the rest of the way off.

Head Robot: Do not feel threatened, Ivan Apollyon. Caesar Skull is expecting you.

Baron Apollyon: Caesar Skull?

Head Robot: Yes. Caesar Skull, The Skull Emperion, Skull the Scorcher, Archduke of Croatia, Prince of the Great Balkan Empire: Decimator of worlds, supreme ruler of the entire scorched Terra.

Baron Apollyon: Supreme ruler... *of a wasteland*?! What folly!

Head Robot: You are the father of our progenitors, Lord Apollyon. Else your words would be treasonous. This is the new master's way. And his way is law. Come with us. My robotic brothers will tend to your time machine.

Baron Apollyon activates his rocket pack, and flies with the robots, toward the citadel. As they are entering the throne room, Baron Apollyon is now walking. The throne, itself, is empty. Up high, the Caesar Skull is hanging upside down on a ceiling beam, approximately 40 feet abovehead.

Baron Apollyon: What is this, an insult? Where is the Emperion?

When Baron Apollyon gets into just the right position, Caesar Skull drops down. Baron Apollyon is looking up at him. He aims his concussion blasters at him, and activates them. Caesar Skull is descending toward his prey. He would've landed right on top of Apollyon, but the concussion blast hits Caesar Skull's white force-field, repelling him away. Caesar Skull lands on his feet, simultaneously spin-drawing his Delta Ray Disseminator (Prince Damon's far-out ray-gun) at his ancestor.

Caesar Skull: Your primitive weapons are useless against me. This weapon, however, is one hundred percent lethal, and can penetrate your armor.

Baron Apollyon is sneakily fumbling the fingers of his right gauntlet toward

some buttons on his left gauntlet.

Caesar Skull: Remarkable invention, the Delta-Ray Disseminator. Delta-Rays are designed to penetrate Vulgarite. Since Vulgarite is the most impenetrable material in existence, that which penetrates the impenetrable also will penetrate anything and everything, even force fields like mine, till it reaches a living mass, or dissipates. The disruption is cellular. Like every atom in your body is transformed into a lit match head. It burns you alive, from the inside out. A very... painful way to die. A death sickening to watch, even for the dead of heart, as I am.

Baron Apollyon raises his hands, and points the palm blasters at the ceiling.

Baron Apollyon: I know of delta rays. I've seen what they can do. I suppose I am your captive. But under protest. I'm here diplomatically.

Caesar Skull's helmet covers mostly the top half of his head. His smile can be clearly seen. Caesar Skull spin-holsters his weapon.

Caesar Skull: I know. You may lower your hands. You are in no danger from me. This is just my way of welcoming you to my world.

Baron Apollyon lowers his hands.

Baron Apollyon: Some world. Is all of it like what I saw outside?

Caesar Skull: Most of it. I saved some. For you. If you hadn't come, I would've destroyed everything.

Baron Apollyon: Why?

Caesar Skull: No reason not to. Actually, when I came here, there was already a war. It suited my mood to be the one pushing the buttons. Mars, the ancient god of war and peace, rules Terra in your time, does he not?

Baron Apollyon: He actually helped me. With the abolition of war between nations, I couldn't be militarily challenged. And with the destruction of the Overlords, all who were ahead of me on the path to global dominance were suddenly eliminated, and I found myself the frontrunner. But I still had to be

subtle, because of his vigilance.

Caesar Skull: Mars' reign continued until about one year ago, when he gave his life to save this miserable planet. Naturally, since that left an opening for a new king of Terra, war broke out. Who doesn't want to rule the world? That's why I'm here. To conquer by fire. Just to watch it burn. And die. Being Supreme Emperion gives me the right to impose my will, and it is my will to destroy. Sadly, this makes Mars' sacrifice pointless, but that's his problem. I don't care about him or anyone else. On my way here, though, I saw other worlds. Peaceful ones, which deserve to be destroyed even more. All going on with their merry lives, like nothing is wrong. I hate it! I will crush them all! This one was just for practice.

Baron Apollyon: Other planets, you mean?

Caesar Skull: No. Terra is all that concerns me.

Baron Apollyon: Ah, you're talking about alternate realities. You're a time traveler!

Caesar Skull: Just like you. In fact... not very unlike you, at all.

Baron Apollyon: Are you me? From another timeline?

Caesar Skull: No. And, yes. I am you, not from another timeline, but from another time. I am what becomes of your blood, over many centuries.

Baron Apollyon: As I suspected: You are my descendant!

Caesar Skull: You get a cookie. In fact, I'll give you every cookie left in the world.

Caesar Skull removes his helmet. He's Prince Damon, now age 26, approximately one year after the fateful split.

Caesar Skull: Can you see the resemblance?

Baron Apollyon: Yes. I see... Croat ? Croat The Gotovost?

Caesar Skull: You know me? Have we met?

Baron Apollyon: No, and yes. I worked with an older version of you, in my last... adventure. He was an ally. He d...

Caesar Skull (Smiling): He what? He died ? I don't care, you can tell me.

Baron Apollyon: Less than a day ago, by my time. I saw you utterly destroyed.

Caesar Skull: Ha, ha, ha! See? I told you I don't care! Good! It was bound to happen, sooner or later. You can't live a life like mine and expect to live

forever!

Baron Apollyon: I... know. That's why I'm here. The same creature who destroyed you is after me, now.

Caesar Skull: You can't live your life in fear, forever, Ivan. Eventually, you will have to go back and face the creature. Even if it means your death. Legend has you spread across all of time, immortal, prolonging your life by artificial means. As much as I have admired you, this is the only disappointing thing. You have said you saw me die. How are you better than me to face the inevitable? As long as you avoid your destroyer, you grant him a greater victory than your death.

Baron Apollyon: Get fucked. I don't appreciate being told about myself and what my plans should be. If you desire to court death like a lover, that's your malfunction. I saw you provoke the creature, without proper defense. I knew you were as good as dead before he raised his hand. Unlike you, my life is valuable to me and I have very important things to do with it. It happens that I am here to live the remainder of my natural life, or unnatural life if I can manage it, then I will go back, to die. If any of that doesn't meet your approval, I really don't give a fuck.

Caesar Skull: Fantastic response. Grandfather would be jealous that I've met you. I wish I could stay and be your First Knight, as I was his. But my mission here is completed. There are still SO many worlds which have not yet felt my wrath. I must leave my mark on those worlds, as I have this one. You are to rebuild this world, and rule it. You are to create the line of Apollyon. Here. In this time. There's to be a thousand years of peace. Then, tyranny will once again reign supreme. My mother's father shall see to that. Then, I will be born. Born into a destiny greater than that of my grandfather, greater even than that of you, the patriarch of our noble line.

Baron Apollyon: Your mother's father... Then, you are not an Apollyon, by name?

Caesar Skull (Smiling): No. No, I am not! A small little detail, which kept me from ruling, in my own time! Not that it's kept me, or will keep me, from ruling anywhen else! My older self never told you my surname?

Baron Apollyon: He called himself Croat, Croat the Gotovost and Skull Croat. He was a Balkan warlord from the future and I was a Balkan warlord from the past, whose legend he'd emulated. I made him my XO before I saw

his face, because I suspected more than a coincidental connection. Through his lenses, I saw the eyes and brows, not given to common men. As we walked together unhelmeted, the Brawlers joked that we were brothers. I wondered. We captured two enemies who knew Croat. He told them I wasn't meant to know his name, and they kept his secret. Just before he died, he finally confirmed he was my descendant, but left his name a mystery.

Caesar Skull: My name is Damon Pythias. The First. Archduke Of Croatia.

Baron Apollyon: Pythias? Damon Pythias is my descendant? You're a Pythias, my descendant, and your given name is Damon?

Caesar Skull: Prince Damon of the Great Balkan Empire, of the 41st century. Descendant of the great lines of Apollyon... and *Pythias* . Does this bother you?

Baron Apollyon: I don't know. It depends. On... *How* ?

Caesar Skull: It doesn't happen in your lifetime, don't worry. I told you; my mother and father. Your animosity toward Quentin Pythias does not survive to my time.

Baron Apollyon: Naturally. You say your surname prevented you from ruling in your time. So I take that to mean that my heirs may have forgiven, but not forgotten. ?

Caesar Skull: I am your heir!!! I've at times thought I was your reincarnation! But the Apollyon love of the name Apollyon blinds them to all else! You're no different.

Baron Apollyon: Pythias knew I was right, yet I stood alone. He let them ruin me.

Caesar Skull: Zarkov Pythias fought and died for your Empire! What's the difference in a name? The true power is in the blood. You and Quentin were peers, before he refused to side with you in your war against his country's sister kingdom. But time passes. The kingdoms became one. My father... was a legend, a hero of the Empire. That is why my grandfather gave him my mother. And I, the culmination of both bloodlines, am at least the equal of either of you. If not both of you. But, my cousin Vandershlov, the heir to the Empire by the legacy of his name, born to my decadent uncle and a dancing slavegirl, is not extraordinary. He is proof that the bloodline of Apollyon could do far worse than to merge with the line of Pythias. And now, as if Fate were out to prove my point for me, you are here to build the Apollyon Empire on a foundation established by a Pythias. However, this castle does

stand where yours once did, but I did gain dominion over it, by rightful conquest. When I arrived, these robots ruled Slovenia, if you can believe that. They became compliant once they scanned my DNA and found my relation to you. It's good I didn't destroy them all. They've been quite useful to me. I suppose it means our Destinies are intertwined. In a sense that; where would I be without you, and where would you be without me?

Baron Apollyon: Without you? Where were you when I conquered Slovenia the first time? I didn't see you anywhere! No Quentin, no Zarkov, no Pythias of any sort stood with me. I stood alone! Without you, I'd be here in my castle, just as I am now.

Caesar Skull: To rule Slovenia. But, what is it just to rule your own homeland? It's been done! So many before you have ruled, so many after you will. So what? Do you not see what my hand has done, which has never been done so thoroughly, before? My grandfather, the great Emperion Abaddon Apollyon, the prophesied Destroyer... what did he do? Did he destroy the world? No. He merely conquered it. As so many before him have. So mundane. The prophesies were off. I AM THE DESTROYER!! Not him! It is Damon Pythias who should've been written about! Yes, you would be here. With a mere kingdom to rule, and a world yet to conquer. I've given you a world, already on its knees.

Baron Apollyon: I concede to your point. I may have still been here in this castle, positioned to rule a kingdom, but perhaps not as well positioned, in the global scheme. If not for the friendship and service that your older self gave me in my last campaign, I would never admit to anyone that I couldn't have done something without him. Especially a young beginner, like yourself. But, it is by way of my respect for him that you have my respect. And gratitude. By way of my experience with him, I know you are a fierce and fearless warrior. Though I have been called cruel, I have also been called merciful. And, by your own acts, conquering a world by utter decimation, you prove yourself to be merciless. Or young and pernicious, as I once was, but never to this extreme. I surely couldn't have done this, without you.

Caesar Skull: Thank you.

Baron Apollyon takes the throne. He feels it out, and is comfortable with it.

Baron Apollyon: Is Sergei here?

Caesar Skull: Just us, the robots and some sex slaves. Would you like to see them?

Baron Apollyon: Are your computer's historical records complete?

Caesar Skull: Not at all, I wish they were. I fought my way in here and the robots purged the computer, as I got closer. They later restored it from their own archives, but it's a fraction of what was lost. The rest of the world is in ruins. Little more will be recovered. There is still a running program called "Sergei's Hell". It's interactive.

Baron Apollyon: Good. I'll find it. So... I am to rule this entire world. ?

Caesar Skull: And, rebuild it. Any way you want.

Baron Apollyon: "A thousand years of peace". In my youth, I too craved mayhem, destruction and war. I left half of Ivan Apollyon on the battlefield. It has long since become part of the soil. In trying to recompense my losses, I lost more. At this point in my life... peace sounds good, to me. As a man of the future, you know more about my Destiny than I do. Perhaps the reverse may be true, as well. Have you read the Deus Ex Machina Prophecies of the alien Vorn?

Caesar Skull: Some. Grandfather assigned me to read the parts about you and him.

Baron Apollyon: Apparently, while you were reading about the line of Apollyon, I was fixated on other parts. One of the many reasons Quentin Pythias irks me so, is that though an Apollyon is named in the Terra prophecies as the Destroyer, the Vorn prophecies name a Pythias: "Then comes the Condemner, the Destroyer of worlds. The name of the Destroyer is Damon Pythias, the Dark Prince, the Skull Supremacy, whose wrath is like the fiery breath of a dragon, which scorches all the lands." You had not read that, before you chose this path, or any of the titles you gave yourself?

Caesar Skull: No. I'd heard of the Caesar Skull, and that he brought the Second Apocalypse. I wanted to take his place, but he wasn't here, so I simply became him.

Baron Apollyon: Interesting. You've gone back in a straight line and become your own history. It must've been Meant To Be, or it would have unraveled the timeline.

Caesar Skull: I thought of that before coming here. I didn't care if it did. I still don't.

Baron Apollyon: The Fates must be guiding you. Do you have a twin?

Caesar Skull: No. I'm an only child. Why?

Baron Apollyon: I too was an only child. Yet I have a twin. Beware of bifurcates.

Caesar Skull: The Prophecies...?

Baron Apollyon: Yes. My bifurcate is my ally. I can be sure he is, because, as I was once the primary, he now is. We are in agreement as to the nature of our separate fates, and joined destinies. Your bifurcate, however, is certain to be your nemesis. It is foretold. At least now you are forewarned.

Caesar Skull: Understood. Again, I thank you.

Two identical Potniški Time-Machines intersect, as some robots are bringing in Ivan's device and some others are pushing Caesar Skull's machine toward the door. Caesar Skull follows his time machine, and Baron Apollyon goes with him.

Baron Apollyon: I'll see you away.

Caesar Skull: The top level of the northwest tower accommodates the time-machine perfectly. But we're under attack and the force-field is on. Mine was kept in a room like it, in Grandfather's castle. Did your castle have such a room?

Baron Apollyon: How did you come to inherit my time-machine, and not your cousin?

Caesar Skull: I didn't inherit shit, I took it from him, and he was unable to stop me. That makes it mine. Be assured it is in more worthy hands. He'd only use it to establish his rightful place in the ancient Roman bathhouses, as King Cocksucker. Your future namesakes would be conceived in a test tube. Should I bring him here and demonstrate for you the difference between I and he? I'll lay him pulped and bloody at your feet. Then, you can choose your heir.

Croat's qualities that had been such a source of pride for Baron Apollyon on Galaxie's Gameworld are now pride points that belong to Pythias, who wouldn't appreciate it. Ivan laments his head and torso entwined with a robot and the cruelty of hope.

Caesar Skull: You said we were friends and you made me your Number One. You thought me an Apollyon, didn't you?

Baron Apollyon: For the entire ten months, until you told me otherwise, in there. You looked like me, you were like me. How could I have guessed that you were a Pythias? I should've confirmed the name. It was a mistake. I've made so many.

Caesar Skull: To be your friend or your First Officer, I must share your last name?

Baron Apollyon: No. You were my friend and my XO. That's not the mistake. In my desperation for an heir, I taught you things meant only for the paternal heirs. The name is so important because this is how the Apollyon secrets don't become the... Pythias secrets, or public knowledge, God forbid. Do you understand it, now?

Caesar Skull: I get that, really. But what happens when the Fates divide the name and what it represents? You can give Vandershlov the world, and he can't hold it, without me. I have ruled the world as Caesar Skull, a name taken, not given. If you thought I was an Apollyon, I'm surprised my murderer survived your wrath.

Baron Apollyon: That was my fatal error. The creature was a Dark Minion Exemplar. I gained power to destroy the wretch. Though his body was in pieces, the spark of life remained in his head, so I left it alive, to suffer. I lost the power and I cannot prevent his restoration. I was given a vision of my Fate, and it's the same as yours.

Caesar Skull: You doomed yourself for me? I wouldn't have it so. It doubles the sin.

Baron Apollyon: I lusted too much for his agony, and that is what has doomed me.

Caesar Skull: We can never end, Ivan. Legends are immortal. We are the new gods.

Caesar Skull mounts the machine, adjusts the controls, then pushes the button. It hums and radiates bright light. The time-machine spins up him, disappearing him.

Emperion Apollyon: The would-be assassin who left me the time-machine wore Croatian armor. I'd assumed he was a counter-revolutionary, who

inexplicably had a time-machine. Now I... Was I just talking to the Croat who died yesterday or another who died in 1972? At least the Pythias I taught the Apollyon secrets to is dead. Every mistake I've made was against my better judgment. "Terra is there. Acquire for yourself a new body and we'll do this again." Oh, nothing can go wrong with that! I knew! I knew. Just as I knew better than to fight a legion alone. A kayaker has free will to paddle left or right, but the course of the river has been long decided.

Later, Emperion Apollyon, sitting on the throne of Slovenia, fumbles over some buttons on the arm of the chair. He favors a button with an embellishment of Terra, encircled by end to end crowns. He pushes it, and a bank of monitors flickers on, displaying many different throne rooms, from many nations. Some are manned by techs, some by kings. Some are not manned at all. Some are blank, some are static.

Emperion Apollyon: Attention, rulers of all nations: I, Ivan Apollyon The First, King of Slovenia, have usurped the throne of the Caesar Skull. As Emperion Apollyon, supreme ruler of the Great Balkan Empire, I decree that the Empire shall retain control, insomuch as a centralized government is a requisite, in order to achieve and maintain unity. I rename my kingdom Slovenia Croatia. Its insignia will be...

He stands and ignites his right index gauntlet finger as a soldering rod. He engraves the insignia " S C " into the headrest of the throne chair. He sits back down.

Emperion Apollyon: S C . This will be the new symbol for unity. With my reign, there comes a new dawn. A world again unified under one rule, for the greater good of all nations and the betterment of mankind as a whole. Let it be written that on this day, I, Emperion Ivan The First, do declare, and am prepared to enforce, ... peace.

Vision 19: Love Hurts

Reverse spin the Solar System, so fast, it is a blur, until we are back in 1985. Tigerlily is teasing Jitara. No mask. He has her in his arms.

Jitara: I love you.

Tigerlily: Ha! Silly man! Do you even know what love is?

Without taking his eyes off hers, he snatches her hand, and places it over his heart. At first her expression is bewilderment, then bedazzlement. She smiles, and her eyes sparkle.

Tigerlily: Am I doing that?

Without taking his eyes off hers, he nods “yes”. She wraps the inside of her arm around the back of his neck, and gives him a lip-lock hard enough to chip a tooth. (That’s just an expression.) When she finishes, she pulls back and stares into his eyes, and smiles like she loves him.

Jitara: Does that mean you love me, too?

Tigerlily: Mmmm no. That was a nice trick, though. (Baby Talk): Does da doggie wag its tail, too?

She steps around him and exits to the hallway. He swivels and watches her go. He gives chase. She runs up the stairs, and by the time he gets upstairs, she’s already down the stairwell on the other side of the hall. In the lounge:

Upsurge: Ah, I remember those days well. You teased me incessantly.

Hotpoint: Only for about a week after I knew you were hooked on me. You

were doing a good enough job of torturing your own self, before that. Just about a month and a half, altogether, is all it took for us to get together.

Upsurge: It seemed like forever.

Hotpoint (grinning mischievously): Why, thank you!

Jitara (From The Hallway): You biransei little prick tease bitch!!

Tigerlily (From The Hallway): Aaahh! Ha, ha, ha!

Hotpoint: *okay* ... ? You didn't ever think that about me, did you, Dear?

Upsurge: Of course not, my love.

Hotpoint: Good. And, if you ever did, I'd appreciate your not saying it out loud, like that.

Upsurge: You're welcome.

Hotpoint: ? *Hey* !

She smacks at his thighs and shoulders, and they scuffle, on the couch. Flashback to 1983, a few weeks after the founding of the Retaliators. It's the same room, and all the original Retaliators are there; Mars dressed only from the waste down, Tech War in his cylindrical armor, Upsurge in his original non-costume of ordinary clothes with a bandit mask, Hotpoint with her old auburn colored mullet hair style, Esron, Citizen Defender, Psion-Man and Stump Puller. The first shipment of Retaliators Official Merchandise has arrived, in boxes. They're all going through the boxes, looking for their own action figures, posters and t-shirts with their logos and/or images, etc. Mars finds a really kitschy t-shirt with an iron on transfer of a painted image of his head and shoulders, scowling and giving the Italian "fuck you" gesture.

Mars: I'd never wear this.

Hotpoint: You should never wear a shirt at all. It's unfortunate to me that you put on armor when we go fight. I wouldn't mind if you went bare chested twentyfour/seven.

Mars (Smiling): I'm too old for you.

Hotpoint: I'm not hitting on you! Just enjoying the scenery, that's all!

Suddenly a black t-shirt with the word "Retaliators" written in gold letters across the chest wraps itself around Mars's face, like it was thrown. Not tossed, thrown.

Upsurge: How 'bout that? Would you wear that?

Mars unwraps the t-shirt from around his face and holds it out in front of himself, looking at it, while addressing Upsurge.

Mars: Are you having a lapse of reason, friend Upsurge?

Upsurge: I don' know. Just put it on, willya, please?

Mars smiles, slips the shirt over his head and shoulders, looks at Hotpoint, then Upsurge, still smiling as he pulls the shirt the rest of the way down.

Mars: I like you, Upsurge. I have battled with you and lived with you, I know your heart, both out there and in here. I appreciate your strong character, and your feelings. Ha, ha! I must say, this is the most amusing thing that's happened to me in some time. Don't make a habit of affronting me, though.

Upsurge: Fine. I got someplace else I'd rather be, anyway.

Upsurge exits the room and heads up the same stairs we heard Jitara and Tigerlily playing on. Hotpoint is right behind him. When he starts up the stairs, she hovers outside the handrail, to be parallel with him while he ascends.

Hotpoint: I think you only switch your brain on when you're doing sciencey stuff, and leave it switched off the rest of the time to save battery power!

Upsurge: Wadda you know about me?

Hotpoint: I don't know you at all, and I don't think I want to! I could get attached to you, then you'd get yourself killed, acting stupid like that! Don't you know Mars once punched a Roman soldier's head off just for touching him? Mars wasn't so easygoing, last time he was on Earth. You're lucky he's changed, since then.

Upsurge: I've heard worse of him than that. But, if he hadn't changed, there wouldn't be a Retaliators, would there? You could get attached to me?

Hotpoint: Yeah, you're not my type, nerd-boy.

He stops, scowls and points at her, like the nerd remark pushed a button.

Upsurge: You're not my type, either. I like grown women who do "sciencey stuff", like I do. I couldn't ever get into some bratty little daddy's girl.

Hotpoint: Hey, I can't help it I'm little. I'm a grown woman, and I don't live with my daddy anymore, I live here, on my own, same as you.

He resumes ascending, and is now on the third level walkway.

Upsurge: Just go on back down there and leave me alone. Maybe you can talk Mars out of his shirt. Maybe it's picked up his musk by now and you can put it under your pillow and dream about him.

She's turned the lights off in her feet, and is following him down the walkway by walking on the banister like a three story high balance beam. It's especially impressive that she can do that in high-heeled boots.

Hotpoint: I'm not that into him. I don't have schoolgirl crushes anymore, but I am a grown woman with a libido, and he does look good for his age.

Upsurge: Compared to all the other people you know his age, I suppose? Don't walk there with your lights off. What if you fall and can't turn them back on in time?

Hotpoint: I'm not going to fall. I'm a gymnast, I've been doing this all my life, way before I was powered. Not from this high up, though. But I can turn my lights on in a flash, any time.

Upsurge: Still, it would be better if you came over to this side and walk on the solid floor.

Hotpoint: I thought you wanted me to go back downstairs and leave you alone?

Upsurge: Fuck it, do what you want! But you can walk down on this side! You're too high up, even if you were flying!

Hotpoint: Don't cuss at me! Just because the Fifth Amendment makes it illegal to censor cussing from tv, magazines and newspapers doesn't mean I have to suffer Skipper and Gilligan talk in my own home! I already went a few rounds with your friend Tech War over that. I may be little, but I wore him down and fired him up like George Foreman and he won't be cussing at me anymore!

Upsurge: First Amendment. And, I'm sorry. But if you recall, Mary Ann was over it by the second season. Just come down from there, willya? You're making me nervous.

He reaches for her. She smiles and leans back, toward the abyss of the third story air above the main hall. But she doesn't fall, her feet light up in a flash, just like she'd said they would. He's hanging over the railing, from grabbing at her before she started hovering.

Hotpoint: Ha, ha, ha! Told'ja.

Upsurge: You little shit!

She zaps him, right in the head.

Upsurge: Ow! That fucking hurts!

She zaps him again, in the chest this time.

Upsurge: Ow! Stop zapping me!

Hotpoint: Stop cussing and I will!

Upsurge: Oh yeah? You wanna play games? I can play games too, let's see how you like it.

Upsurge climbs over the railing and is on the outside of it with his feet on the edge of the walkway and his hands gripping the railing from behind, while he's facing outward, toward her. He leans forward.

Hotpoint: Aaaahhh! Mars, Tech War, Psion-Man, somebody...!
Dumbsurge's gone crazy and is trying to get himself killed again!

Upsurge: Upsurge. Don't call me crazy. I always know what I'm doing. More or less.

Just as Psion-Man and Tech War enter the hall, Upsurge has let go of the railing. But instead of falling, he grows downward, the top of his head still level to where it was and his feet reach the floor and stop.

Tech War: Hey, careful now, you'll break the floor.

Upsurge: I didn't fall. I grew downward. My feet didn't hit the floor, they touched down on it. (To Hotpoint) I grow down as easy as I grow up.

Hotpoint: Maybe you should change your name to Downsurge.

Upsurge: Nah. I prefer Upsurge, because of its phallic evocation.

Hotpoint: What does that mean?

Tech War: Ha, ha! It means he named himself after a hard-on!

She turns toward Tech War with her fist drawn.

Tech War: Hey, you asked what it meant! I'm not the one who said it, he is!

She turns back toward Upsurge, who gives Tech War an annoyed look. Tech War laughs and walks back into the lounge.

Tech War: Ha, ha, ha!

Hotpoint (To Upsurge): You talking dirty to me now?

Upsurge: There's nothing dirty about an erection. It's perfectly natural.

She zaps him again, this time in his giant forehead.

Upsurge: Ow. Doesn't hurt as bad, when I'm big.

Hotpoint: I could make it hurt if I wanted to. I don't want to see you or have anything else to do with you, till you learn to mind your language in front of a lady.

She flies to her room and slams the door behind her. Upsurge maintains his large size, to make better strides back to the stairs.

Psion-Man: Ha, ha! You guys are hilarious. I call dibs on best man at the

wedding.

Upsurge: Fah!

Upsurge walks a couple steps, then turns around and gives Psion-Man a wink accompanied by the thumb-up finger-gun and the cheek-sucking-teeth sound.

Upsurge: >Tck!<

Psion-Man does a fist-pump.

Psion-Man: A'right!

It's still a few months until the Faulk invasion. At this moment, the Retaliators are still in the process of vanquishing the evil Overlords. Then, the supply of human livestock to the Faulks dries up, and they attack. Psion-Man will discover that he can pull a snakeman in two, down the middle, with his mental power. Faulks view all beings in the universe, other than themselves, as livestock. Food, slave labor, sport hunting, gladiator games, scientific testing, skin leather, bio-chemical extraction, etc. Screw 'em, let them get pulled in half. Flashback; 1978. Jackson Race is 23 years old and still in college. He'll be there three more years and leave with many degrees, mostly in human/S.P.I. physiology, robotics and aeronautics. The latter being Arthur Reddingfield's suggestion, and he's the one footing the bill for it all. Jackson's been working for Arthur off and on since he was 16 and Arthur was 14. Arthur was already one of the richest people in the world and without question the richest 14 year old. Jackson's greater interests are the former two; human/S.P.I. physiology and robotics. Cybernetics. Someday he'll write a book; "Man Meets Machine; The Fascinating World Of Cybernetics". As we visit him here in 1978, it is in his capacity as a Reddingfield employee. He's field testing his latest and so-far greatest invention; the S-16 Cyber-Giant, a giant robot that doesn't operate by manual controls, but by synaptic relays that pick up mental commands. Think it to move its arm and it does, etc. The setting is the barren clay/sand terrain of the New Jersey Palisades. Manning the soon to be obsolete S-14 manual module is his long time Reddingfield R & D associate and love interest, Lucinda Parminter. Lucky.

They've been dating about a year, and halfway between then and now they exchanged the big "L" word; "I love you". He does. He hasn't popped the question yet but he knows he will, it's just a matter of the right time and place. No, not here, today, not at work, for crying out loud. In front of them, in front of a canyon bank, there are two full size wooden painted silhouettes of CC-84 Soviet Stalkers, which aren't so outdated in 1978, the Soviet War has only been over for three years. Not that the Russians have advanced anything since '75, they're still more concerned with breadlines than military tech. The silhouettes are already riddled with bullet holes, from where Jackson and Lucky have already tested their machine guns.

Jackson: Alright, the timers are synchronized, I'll push the button here and in three seconds when the red light flashes, raise your left arm and launch your rocket as fast as you can.

Jackson's headset: Got it, Pookey.

Jackson: "Pookey", that sounds so cute over the headset. Alright... got it! Three seconds...

They both start at the same time, but while the S-14's motions are jerky and systematized of raise, align, raise, align, the S-16's movements are as fluid as a biological arm, and Jackson's rocket is launched a full two seconds before Lucky's.

Jackson: Alright! I believe I beat you by at least two seconds!

From inside Lucky's cockpit, we can see she doesn't have the synaptic headgear on, like Jackson, only a control panel with joysticks, buttons, etc.

Lucky (Smiling): Well, I do believe I've never been so happy to be beaten at anything. Congratulations, Jackson, honey. Hold still, I wanna do something.

The S-14 walks over and nudges its face against the face of the S-16.

Jackson's headset: Mwa! My robot just kissed your robot!

Jackson: Ha, ha, ha! I hate to say it, but if that could happen without us, it would be the S-16 kissing the S-14 goodbye!

In Lucky's cockpit.

Lucky: Ha, ha! C'mon, I'll race you back. My poor obsolete module still has a fair chance at that, I think.

Lucky's headset: I wouldn't bet on it!

Lucky: I would, because I'm already gone. Bye!

She pushes the button to activate the jet wings and is already way up in the air, waiting for him to start. His robot is looking up, waving its fist at her. Distracted, Jackson doesn't notice there are 20 armored armed mercenaries encircling him.

Lucky's headset: You cheater! I'll beat you anyway, here I come!

They start firing machine guns at him. He fires his jets, intending to catch up with Lucky.

Lucky's headset: Shit! Lucky, go on! Let's get out of here.

In addition to their machine guns, all of the mercenaries have rocket launchers strapped to their backs, and one of them has blasted one of Jackson's wings off. He crashes back down. He was at a low altitude, so his module's damage is limited, aside from a wing missing. Lucky flies back down and starts machine gunning the mercenaries that are closest to the S-16. In Jackson's cockpit.

Jackson: Lucky, get out of here! I'll handle this!

Jackson's module has straightened up and is also firing machine guns at the enemy. So far only five of the twenty are down, they're good at evading the fire from the giant robotic modules. By now, they've taken cover behind the rocks, gullies and mounds of the Palisades. Jackson launches a rocket at an embankment and takes out two more.

Jackson: Race to R.I.! We're under attack! Taking heavy fire! Couple dozen

ground troops with machine guns and incendiary rockets! No insignias, no way to know who sent them. Request backup, ASAP!

Jackson's headset, male voice: Message received, Dr. Race. Stand by, help is en route to your location.

Even as a string of machine gun bullets rip across his own canopy, Jackson is more troubled to see the same thing happening to the S-14.

Jackson: Lucky! Go back, while you've still got jets! I'm fine, help is coming!

Jackson's headset: I'm not leaving here without you, Jackson! I've seen one of these things carry another. I'm taking you back with me!

Jackson: Please, just go!

As the S-14 positions itself behind the S-16 to hook its arms under the S-16's armpits, a rocket blasts the S-14's left front midsection through to the mid back, pretty much separating it in half. Even as the S-14 is slowly collapsing, smoke is billowing out of it in plumes.

Jackson: Lucky!

Jackson's headset: >Cough!< >Cough!< I'm okay! So much smoke... Can't see or breath! >Cough!< Hafta feel my way out... >Cough!< >Cough!<

The S-14 is still slowly collapsing when Jackson sees Lucky crawling her way out of the cockpit. But then it finishes crashing to the ground and jostles her off into the debris.

Jackson: Fuck!

The S-16 reaches down to where she landed, just as she stands, still coughing, though we can't hear her now. She waves both arms at Jackson, up in the cockpit.

Jackson: Oh, thank God!

The S-16 wraps its hand gently around her and lifts her up, even as the S-16's

canopy opens up to receive her inside it.

Jackson: Thank God.

Halfway between there and here, the entire hand is blasted away by a rocket. When the smoke and fire clear away, there's no hand, no Lucky.

Jackson. No. Oh, no.

Jackson leaps right out of the cockpit, though it's about fifty feet up, but he grows down to touch down on the ground instead of hitting it, then he returns to normal size, even while running to where the blasted fiery pieces of giant robot hand landed. He has those brown driving gloves on, and as frantically as he's throwing the smoldering debris aside, he's not feeling the heat, much. Adrenaline covers it the rest of the way. He sees what appears to be the remains of a human body, head, shoulders, both arms still joined together by the collar bone. Nothing else, just the head, shoulders and both arms, half the flesh charred from the bone. Maybe it's not her. Maybe one of those damn mercenaries got what he deserved. Jackson reaches down and lifts the partial corpse by the wrist, to see. Female. Only a small portion of the face is uncharred. Enough. Enough to see. To know. He's still holding the grisly thing by the right wrist when he falls to his knees, and the left shoulder of it lays across his lap, the still smoking head part pointing toward the ground with the left side against his left thigh.

Jackson: Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! Ah, hah, hah!

He's being shot at. A bullet whizzes right in front of his face, and he sees it. That snapped him out of his haze, but not to reality, no, to his dark place. Scrunched eyebrows, squinted eyes, nostrils flared, lips spread high and low around tightly gritted teeth. The look on his face would unnerve a lion. He lets go of the piece of corpse and runs toward his enemy. They're still shooting, but he's growing faster than they can adjust their aim, and they end up shooting between his legs. As he passes by the S-14, he rips an arm off it, and starts swinging it around in front of him. It's blocking the bullets and threatening the enemy. When he gets there, they scatter, but they're too slow

for the wildly swinging giant robot arm, and he kills four with a single blow. Through the canyon he stomps on three more and by now he can see they're headed for a hover car on the other side of the ravine. No, they won't escape, they won't see their homes, they won't see their families, they won't see tomorrow. He throws the robot arm at the hover car and destroys it. No way out for them, now, except through the sweet release of death. He's being shot, but at his size, even if the 7.62 mm rounds go a foot into him, when he returns to normal size, they'll just be flesh wounds, small as pencil points, and can be removed with small tools. He catches up to one and down punches him with a fist the size of a van. The affect is similar to a normal sized person down punching a frog or lizard with all their might; a crush of bones, a popping open of the epidermal casing, a splatter of blood and guts. But since the merc is wearing clothes and flak armor, most of the blood and guts exit out his oral cavity, like toothpaste from a tube. A fair amount of gore spray exits out his ass, since his head is between his feet and he didn't become a contortionist till just now. Sometime during that process, Jackson grabbed another merc with his other hand and is squeezing that one's gory stuff between his gloved fingers, like Play Doe.

Jackson: Aaaaarrrrrgggghhhh! Die, you fuck! Die, you fuck!
FUCK YOU!! DIIIIIIIE!!!

No reply from the Play Doe man. Jackson flings his twisted remains to the ground, and starts chasing down the remaining scampering mice. A stomp and grind, a field goal kick, a palm slap, and finally a cornered, disarmed and begging merc getting a giant index finger sadistically shoved into his middle like Poppin' Fresh. None survived. Neither did Jackson's innocence. It too died that day, the day Jackson Race killed for the first time, and was officially deemed justified in it. He's never doubted his own justification in that incident. However, he is grateful no living person saw the look on his face, or knew his state of mind. Hell, he doesn't even understand his state of mind from that day, and doesn't really want to. Angels and demons; the darkness and light that exist inside all human beings. Jackson doesn't particularly like his dark side, but he uses his inner monster, if it serves his purpose. He doesn't regret that he killed those bastards, his only regret, aside from the

obvious, is that he let it overwhelm him so totally. The fact that it did stirred up a new fear in him; that he could become the monster completely, and do that to people who don't deserve it. The fear is not strong enough to make him want to confront or quell the monster, though. He keeps it and feeds it, while covering his eyes so he won't have to look at it. During the Faulk invasion, the dragons unleashed in the first wave targeted him, because he was their size. Jackson would never intentionally pit himself against a Faulk dragon, much less several at once. But when the bites start, the next thing that happens is dragon chunks start piling up on the ground. Ripped apart by nothing but gloved hands. And Jackson's not genetically strength enhanced, except proportionally to his size. And the boost he gets from his demon mode. He lost no flesh to the dragons that wouldn't grow back, the only permanent damage were fang punctures all over his body, mostly his arms. Scars on a warrior. Those scars are much nastier than the ones he got at the New Jersey Palisades in 1978. The lines of machine gun bullets that zig-zagged his body only left pock marks that look like somebody threw darts at him. It's still unknown who hired the mercenaries, though Arthur has it narrowed down to a list of five rival companies. Which one is the mystery, and proving it would be difficult. Syndicate mercs wear distinct uniforms, like organized militias. Some mercs actually wear corporate logos. But that could be a deception. After surveying this scene, Arthur will realize that the mercs' size and mobility gave them the advantage over the giant robots, and if not for Jackson's power, most of them would have gotten away, probably with key components of the S-16. The idea for Tech War was born here.

Vision 22: Busted At Virtu-Tech

1985. Wally Freemont's apartment. Wally and Wendy are sitting on the couch, watching a Godzilla movie on TV. Big bowl of popcorn, yes. 35" tube TV, nice stereo setup, etc. It's not the apartment of a millionaire, but it is the apartment of someone who brings home one and two halves of nice salaries, which equals two nice salaries. He gets full pay for being one of Reddingfield's R & D geniuses, Tech War gets two salaries, one for Reddingfield Security, the other his/her Retaliator pay, the latter two are split even between Wally and Wendy. Arthur doesn't take a cut from either of Tech War's salaries, because on paper, he's the employer. He makes a killing off R.I. and the Retaliators, he doesn't need it. In other realities, being the benefactor of a super team might be a liability. Not for Arthur. Owning Retaliators Inc is like being the financial manager of, currently, 7 A-List celebrities, and all he has to do is house them, feed them, maintain their shit and toss 'em enough cash to keep 'em happy and he pockets what's left. Plus, there are four former members who no longer draw a salary or live in the house but still have items in the catalogue. Psion-Man and Citizen Defender both still have comics that are published by Reddingfield, but they both get a small annual gratuity from that. Of course, Arthur's cut is bigger. By now, Arthur's made enough off the Retaliators to replace the whole damn island if he had to. Citizen Defender has also licensed his persona to Kenyan companies, but Arthur makes money off that too, because he owns stock in those companies. Mzalendo is sort of a liaison between Corporate Kenya and Corporate America, and was in fact visiting R.I. in that capacity, during the time of the Incident At Gilboa Dam, which is how Citizen Defender, a foreigner, was caught up in the net of being one of the original 8 Retaliators. In this country, in this reality, to an extent, even American Blacks are considered foreign. As well as Yellow, Brown and White. Red is the color to be. Anglos, Afros, Asians and Hispanics are equally second class citizens.

However, even though the American Genocide never happened in this reality, though it almost did, the Native American is still an endangered race, numbering only about 30 million full blooded ones, because of mixing. But, almost everyone among the Yellows, Browns, Blacks and Whites whose families have been here more than a hundred years are part Native. Part Natives, regardless of shade, are considered American by the full Natives, at least. Just not as much as the full ones. But the full ones are dwindling in numbers, as are the full breeds of all races. The future belongs to the fully mixed and blended breed of humanity. It's really only the Natives' attitude that the Whites, Blacks, Yellows and Browns are equally second class. The White attitude, because they were here second and they are the ones who established a global identity, a constitution, and came very close to conquering the Natives, is that the Blacks, Yellows and Browns are third class citizens, or immigrant foreigners, even though everyone got here on a boat or crossed a border at some point. The Natives do acknowledge the immigrants' contributions to their country and are grateful for it, so long as they know it's still theirs. At least until everyone becomes part, and what remains of the full Native people becomes consumed entirely by the blending. Frankie Merchant, "Stump Puller", in spite of his orange skin and mutation of radiating bright white light when adrenalized, is racially a full White and borderline retarded, scratch that, he's fullblown shortbus retarded, and he used to call Mzalendo Dūmisha, Citizen Defender, "Black man", for a name. Mzalendo said "Don't call me tat, m'nem is Mzalendo." Stump Puller said "I can't say Moozendoo". To which Mzalendo replied "Christo, don't say Muzindu, I don't even know anyone wit tat nem. T'e Deputy Prime Minister of Zimbabwe is a Muzenda, but I don't wanna be called his nem. Just call me Citizen Defender, unless you see me in public without m'mask, then I guess just call me 'Black man'. Don't ever say Muzindu! Ha, ha!" "Fuck you, Black man." "Fuck you, orange boy! " Then they had to be separated. Frankie may or may not be racist, it's hard to say, he just lashes out at whoever's around. One of the most powerful S.P.I.'s on the planet is angry and stupid. His transformation is reordering him, increasing his intelligence at a snail's pace. But the process is happening while he's still angry over a lifetime of victimization. There will come a point where he's intelligent enough to realize he can do what he wants, destroy whoever and whatever he wants, without being held accountable. Unfortunately, that level

of intelligence is just one level below the one where he's able to factor in the fact that, oh yeah, there are one or three Retaliators who can hold him accountable. Poor Frankie, he can't help it. Anyone else walking his path in life would be as messed up as he is, and headed in the same direction. Citizen Defender has enhanced strength and durability, not exactly what would count as super speed, but more like enhanced quickness. Essentially, he's the Kenyan Captain Superhero, with similar but different weapons and similar but different skills, no jet wings. Stump Puller could pull his arms and legs off. Mars beats Stump Puller, easy. Psion-Man would take more time to do the job, but he could beat Stump Puller, eventually. The only other one with a chance against Stump Puller is the other foreign Retaliator. There was another foreigner in the original 8, but as much as Esron's foreign in country, he's even more foreign in species. Esron got caught in the net of the founding 8 because the same shit that had mutated Frankie had found its way to the ocean, where it was mutating some of his people, the Tritonians. His concern was less of his people's wellbeing than the fact that he had previously been the only enhanced Tritonian, now there's a shitload of them. He'd been a god down there, the only one who could survive out of the pressurized depths, more than that, he could actually survive in the dry air above. With new power in the populous, Trinonians were drifting away from him, starting to defy him. Esron's power doesn't come from the goop, his enhancement was given to him by a magic pendant he found 150 years earlier. He's a slim blue 7 foot squidly magic-man, from a forbidden world. He's still the most powerful Tritonian, but things've changed, since the goop. Esron traced the goop to its source, where he found a conflict between what he's been around enough to recognize as human military assholes and his distant godling kin. Instead of a monetary system, Tritonia runs on a class system; the upper classes make the lower classes do for them what they want done, build for them what they want built and bring to them what they want brought. They reward those services by letting them eat some of the food they gathered and live in some of the housing they built. Not totally unlike the social structure of ants. Suddenly, there's a beep, and a panel in the wall opens up and a monitor with Arthur Reddingfield's face slides out.

Arthur: Wally, I need your help, brother. I got Pam Swale drunk and naked in the...

Wendy: Hi, Arthur.

Wally: You're fuckin' Madison Malloy from L.A.P.D. Sirens and you need my help?

Arthur: Yeah. I've got the armor here, but there's a damn silent alarm at Virtu-Tech, and I'm on a date. Would one of you guys come get it? I don't care which.

Wendy: I'll do it, since I hardly ever.

Arthur: Great, thanks.

The monitor goes blank and retracts back into the wall.

Wally: Sonuva... I thought slavery only happened in the Bible. There's no one in his world but him. I ask for one day. One day! "...on a date". What the hell are we doing?

Wendy: We *were* watching a movie. Give me my keys, Waldo, I gotta go.

Her keys are on the coffee table. Wally gets up and takes them, like he will give them to her, then he makes for the door with them.

Wally: I got this. Got your keys. I'll be back. Enjoy the movie. Don't call me Waldo.

Wally exits, quickly descends down the narrow staircase one floor down to the sidewalk and makes a dash for his car. One of those other cars must be hers. She didn't chase after him, she's still on the couch, kind of annoyed.

Wendy: *Sonuva ...*

Virtu-Tech Research Facility. Tech War turns the light on to surprise the Consulate Of Despots, lurking around in the lab. He's stunned at the sight of the Martel Mfg flight suit.

Tech War: Casey... ? Casey Martel?

Mighty Man picks up a centrifuge, and hurls it at Tech War, who's too stunned to duck. It hits him. He gets up, and knocks the debris off himself.

Doktor Rascher: Quickly, while he's down! Take him out!

Mighty Man: I've got this!

Mighty Man runs over to Tech War, picks him up, and slams him down.

Mighty Man: Aaaaahh! Corporate puppet! I'm going to pretend you're Arthur Reddingfield in there! That way I'll enjoy it more!

Tech War: Casey, don't make me hurt you!

Tech War stands up, and Mighty Man grabs him by the neck, draws back a fist, and pauses with his teeth gritted. Tech War starts to draw his fist, but puts it back down, before he even has it up. Then, Mighty Man gets a frustrated look, and relaxes his fist. Then, he releases Tech War's neck.

Tech War: I had no idea. Neither did Arthur. Why didn't you call us, if you were having trouble? I'm sure Arthur could have done something to help you.

Mighty Man: Don't worry about me, I'm just fine!

Doktor Rascher nods at the rest of the Consulate Of Despots, and they attack Tech War. Mighty Man steps back, indecisive. First, Jhotica telekinetically makes him flip back, end over end, in the air, without being knocked back. Tech War counters that, by activating his jets and hovering. Phoebus grabs Tech War's left ankle and slams him down on the floor by it. Tech War grabs a metal table and slams it into Phoebus' face. The table flies apart and crinkles like a car that hit a brick wall. Phoebus is unaffected. Tech War particle blasts him. Nothing. He opens up with both of his magnetic pulse emitters, and Jhotica, Rasher and Mighty Man have to get way back, but Phoebus and Venus aren't even amused by the futile attempt. Tech War looks hesitant to use his lasers, but they're leaving him no choice. The laser first hits the wall behind them, and as Tech War moves it toward Phoebus it cuts a line through the wall like a hot knife through butter. But when the beam hits Phoebus' left shoulder, it's no more effective on his godly form than one of those toy laser pointers. Tech War zig zags the beam across Phoebus' entire front, with no effect. When he moves it over to Venus to do the same thing, in between them it hit the wall again and cut it again. But no effect on Venus.

Tech War is a match for most S.P.I.'s, but full gods are completely impervious to humans and their weapons, so Tech War is completely defenseless against Phoebus and Venus. Venus subdues Tech War, with a magic bolt. He's just standing there like a zombie. Phoebus steps up, and walks to the back of Tech War. He kicks the backs of Tech War's knees, causing him to fall to his knees. Then, his hands and knees.

Doktor Rascher: Mighty Man! Take his helmet off! I want to see who's in there.

Mighty Man straddles Tech War's back, grabs the rim of his over-helmet, and pulls him back to just his knees. He starts looking for a button to push.

Doktor Rascher: Just pry it off!

Mighty Man starts tugging on the helmet. Tech War reaches for his hands, but he's sluggish, and his hands fall back to his side. Mighty Man is trying not to show that he's holding back, but it becomes apparent.

Doktor Rascher: You can bend forged steel, but you can't pry a helmet off?

Mighty Man: I'm trying. It's sealed tight. I don't want to hurt him.

Rascher nods at Phoebus. Phoebus pushes Mighty Man out of the way, and straddles Tech War's back. He pulls the rim of the over-helmet. It widens, then the facemask starts widening and throwing sparks. Mighty Man clocks him. Phoebus checks his lip for blood. There isn't any, but it smarts a little. He floors Mighty Man. Mighty Man checks his lip for blood. It's split in the lower left lip and bleeding a little. He's still on the floor, when Jhotica stands between them. She's facing down Phoebus. Her hands are glowing purple energy. Venus stands beside Phoebus.

Doktor Rascher: Enough of this! There is no time for any more foolishness. We've done what we came here to do, now we must leave. Tech War probably alerted the authorities, before he surprised us.

Upsurge: He did more than that, stupid! He alerted The Law! Retaliators!: Force Active!

Enter Mars, Captain Superhero, Hotpoint, Jitara and Tigerlily, from the main door.

Mars: Phoebus? And... Venus!

Venus: Mars, my beloved!

Mars's eyes widen, like he's seen the devil. He turns and runs down the corridor they came from. Venus takes off after him. Hotpoint takes off after her.

Mighty Man: Captain Superhero! I finally get to meet you! They say you weren't really dead, just jumping time. ?

Captain Superhero: Yeah, yeah, blah, blah; greatly exaggerated. I see Tech War got his licks in before you... What did you do to him, rogue?

Mighty Man stands up, and Captain Superhero jumps in the air, and lands his feet square on his chest. Mighty Man almost falls, but regains his balance. In the background, Phoebus swings at Jitara and misses. After the lunge, Phoebus' momentum has him off balance, and stumbling forward. Jitara thinks to take advantage of Adonais' momentary disadvantage by kicking him in the back, but gets the same effect as kicking a solid wall, and it's Jitara's own force which propels him forward, away from his target. Full humans have zero effect on full gods. He can trick him into tripping himself, but he can't trip him. Tigerlily attempts to kick Jhotica, but telekinetic energy lifts her body up, and drops her on her back.

Mighty Man: So, where were you? What happened? How'd you jump time?

Captain Superhero: Are we talking or are we fighting?

Flash punches Mighty Man right in his chin. That knocks him back a few wobbly steps, and Mighty Man rubs his chin. In the background, 10 ft. tall Upsurge punches Phoebus, and hurts his hand. Phoebus felt the equal of being hit in the face with a cotton ball. He knocks Upsurge backwards, into some stuff. Rascher is hiding. Outside in the hallway, Hotpoint can be seen zapping the piss out of The Goddess.

Mighty Man: It's just... You're one of my biggest heroes!

Mighty Man swings and misses. In the background, Tigerlily confronts Jhotica, who scurries behind a desk and uses her power to spin Tigerlily like she did Tech War.

Captain Superhero: Really? Make a habit out of fighting your heroes, do you?

Flash left hooks Mighty Man, making him stagger back. In the background, Phoebus's hand is wrapped around the blade of Jitara's sword, and he's not being cut. Adonais grins deviously thinking he's impervious, tightens his grip on the blade, and Jitara, grinning deviously, slides the blade downward, cutting Phoebus' hands, slightly. (The gods are impervious to all, except one another, and Jitara isn't a god, or even a demigod, as the S.P.I.'s are, but Jitara's sword is enchanted, as are all his weapons. Those are the tricks up his sleeves that Tigerlily mentioned earlier.) Adonais goes into a rage and starts swinging at Jitara wildly. This is Jitara's sensei strategy, to avoid and manipulate his opponent into defeating himself. Phoebus lunges hard at him, and Jitara somersaults right over his head, letting Adonais's own weight and strength stumble him, with un-counteracted momentum. In the corridor, The Goddess throws an enchantment at Hotpoint, and misses. That aggravates her. Hotpoint drives her back into the room, with her bio-surges.

Hotpoint: You get back in there, and leave Mars alone, you blonde bewitcher!

Venus: Aaaaahh! Damn your eyes, Woman! Mars is mine!

Mighty Man: Not really. You know, I guess circumstances just sometimes lead us in strange directions.

Venus has turned into watching eyes. Mighty Man goes for a tackle, and Captain Superhero sidesteps it, and pushes Mighty Man to the floor. In the background Upsurge is behind Phoebus, holding his arms. Jitara is creating mesmerizing lights from a ring on his right hand, and directing them at Phoebus. Phoebus powers out of Upsurge's hold, and knocks Jitara down. While Jitara's on the floor getting his bearings, he notices Rascher sneaking

off, into an adjoining room. Jitara pursues.

Mighty Man: Aikido!

Mighty Man gets up. In the background, Phoebus is pushing Upsurge around, until Tigerlily gives Phoebus a powered-up nerve chop, which immobilizes him.

Captain Superhero: Ah! You recognize it!

Flash spin kicks Mighty Man in the bread basket. In the background Jhotica throws a telekinetic force-wave that makes Tigerlily lose momentum, and the flying-kick that was meant for Jhotica falls short, and Tigerlily sprawls out on the floor.

Mighty Man: Oof! Studied it!

Flash does a forward handstand that puts the soles of his boots hard into Mighty Man's face in a downward motion. In the background, Jhotica has force-waved Upsurge across the room, though he weighs tons. Candace steps up and punches the shit out of her, then lights her hands. Yvenia surrenders and Candace cuffs her.

Captain Superhero: Keep studying!

Mighty Man tries to duplicate Flash's earlier spin kick, but Flash is too fast, and ducks it. The momentum causes Mighty Man to clumsily spin to a point where his back is turned to his opponent. Flash does a waterless spit take, and punches him in the back of the helmet. Mighty Man rubs the back of his head under the helmet.

Mighty Man: Ow!

Captain Superhero: Ha, ha! I see your strategy, now! You're killing me with laughter!

Mighty Man: Hey, it's not funny, dammit, I'm trying!

Mighty Man throws a punch, and Flash moves his head to the side. Flash punches Mighty Man. Mighty Man throws a punch, and Flash moves his head to the side. Flash punches Mighty Man. Mighty Man throws a punch, and Flash moves his head to the side. Flash punches Mighty Man. Mighty Man throws a punch, and Flash moves his head to the side. Flash punches Mighty Man. In the adjacent room, Jitara has finally cornered Rascher.

Doktor Rascher: Wait! You cannot capture me!

Jitara: Watch me!

Doktor Rascher: No. I have a dossier on you, in my possession. I know all about you. About your past... misdeeds. Let's just say, people of your ilk are of interest to me. If I'm to be taken into Retaliators' custody, I might be forced to talk. You don't want them to know what I know. Do you?

Jitara: No.

Jitara lowers his sword, then eye gestures to Rascher's ray-gun.

Jitara: You got non-lethal settings, I presume.

Doktor Rascher: Ja.

Jitara: Use your lowest possible setting.

Doktor Rascher: Of course. What kind of man do you think I am?

Rascher clicks the dial all the way around to the lowest setting.

Jitara: You're on the wanted list, Dr. Frankenstein. For this, that, and war crimes. You're a former young fool with a shitty cause, now an old fool with a lost cause.

Doktor Rascher: My cause is the betterment of our kind. You and I are the same.

Jitara: I've seen pictures of piled up Jews. Weren't they human? How do you better humanity by killing people? Don't insult me, saying we're the same. I'm a human. You're a fucked in the head psychopath.

Pause.

Doktor Rascher: For saying that about me, I will raise the setting, two

notches!

Rascher turns the dial up, two notches. Jitara unsheathes his magic katana, and holds it vertically in front of his body. Rascher pauses from curiosity, then shoots him anyway. The sword absorbs the energy, entirely.

Jitara: Now, let's see how you like those two extra notches!

Jitara directs the energy back at Rascher, in tendrils that are torturing him slowly.

Doktor Rascher: Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!

The energy dissipates, and Rascher is writhing on his back, in pain. Jitara steps up, pulls Rascher to his knees by his collar, and presses the sword against his throat.

Jitara: If you know about my "ilk", then you know it's not safe to be on my shitlist. That's advice to live by. I may not be able to capture you, but I can sure as hell keep you from talking. Accidents happen. And, since nobody gives a shit about you anyway, I could walk right in there with your head in my hand and say "Oops!", and The Retaliators would be all like " *Oh, well!* "

Doktor Rascher: I won't say a word to anyone! I swear!

Jitara sheathes, jerks Rascher up to his feet, roughly, then gets in his face.

Jitara: War's over, Adolf. Go yodel about it. Your agenda is illegal now. Mars has no tolerance for your kind. Captain Superhero is from your war. Does he know you're here? I'd get a huge bonus for you, but I'd have to silence you first. Fuck it, why not.

Doktor Rascher: The Interpol reward for me is fifty thousand in American dollars. Here is a key to a box in the Manhattan CIB, which holds twice that in gold coins.

Jitara takes the key and shoves him toward the door. He adjusts his O2 mask.

Jitara: Stay clear of me, Frankenstein. You won't get off this easy, next time.

Back to the main fight. Mighty Man gets frustrated, and throws himself into Flash's legs, making him land on his face. Mighty Man gets on top of him. While they're wrestling for the controlling position, Mighty Man's hand inadvertently grips Flash's .45 semi-automatic service pistol, and it comes out of its holster, and ends up in Mighty Man's hand. Captain Superhero gets an apprehensive look on his face, like shitty luck has turned the tide against him. Mighty Man gets an embarrassed look on his face, like he didn't mean to do that. He hands the pistol back to Flash, who holsters it. In the background, Jhotica is free and she force-waves Hotpoint across the room, but while she's thus distracted, Tigerlily knocks her out with a face kick.

Mighty Man: Sorry.

Captain Superhero: You're sorry? What kind of bad guy are you?

Mighty Man: I'm not, really, it's just my job, that's all.

Captain Superhero: Mister, I'd say you've got a lot to sort out, when you wake up!

Captain Superhero punches Mighty Man off him. But, Mighty Man is not out yet. He's resting on his elbow, with his head spinning.

Mighty Man: Oooh... Wa ga? Which, which one 'a them is you ?

Captain Superhero: My, you are tough! Say goodnight, Gracie!

Mighty Man: Huh?

Captain Superhero crouches over Mighty Man, and punches his lights out. Doktor Rascher reenters the room, ray-blasts Upsurge and Tigerlily out of his way, then crouches over Phoebus, and snaps his fingers in front of Phoebus' face.

Doktor Rascher: Adonais; grab Jhotica. Goddess; get us out of here.

Phoebus: What about *him* ?

Doktor Rascher: Leave him. This plays into my scheme.

Venus returns to full form. The Consulate Of Despots huddle together, and

Venus waves glowing hands to a point over her head. They disappear. Upsurge and Tigerlily were only stunned, and are now recovered. Jitara is now back from the other room, as if nothing wrong had happened in there. The Retaliators go over to see the fish they caught. Hotpoint is snapping her fingers in Tech War's face.

Hotpoint: Tech War! Yo, Tech War! Hey! Earth to Tech War! I mean Terra, whatever.

Tech War: You're right, I know. I'm sorry, Wen. I worry about you, that's all. The bad guys don't know you're a girl.

Hotpoint: Well, if they can't tell that, they've got problems. I'll go get Mars. He's in a worser fog than you, if that's possible. She actually kissed him before I could get to her.

Tech War: Oooh, man! Tough break. It's a good thing I've got built in lip protection!

Hotpoint: Ha, ha! Yeah, it is!

She helps him to his feet and leaves the room. Flash is handcuffing his prisoner.

Upsurge: Good job, Flash! You caught a big one! What is he, a strongman?

Captain Superhero: I guess so. He's a lot tougher than I am. But, he doesn't really do much. Just sorta... stands there and lets you beat on him.

Jitara pats Captain Superhero on the shoulder, in a jovial manner.

Jitara: Ha, ha! Don't rag on him too much, Flash. Nobody fights like you do!

Sarcasm. Captain Superhero gives Jitara the appropriate annoyed look. Yes, Flash knows perfectly well that if it wasn't for his enhancement, Robert would've had his way with him, back in London. But it is what it is, that's all. That's the whole point of why he signed up for the enhancement in the first place; to be harder to beat.

Tech War: I know that guy. He's Casey Martel. Successor-in-training of an R.I. associate company. He lost a contract to R.I. that was a waste of time for

him to apply for, because he never had a chance of winning. I can't believe his own dad would can him, just for that. I wish I knew how he came to this.

Enter Mars and Hotpoint. Mars is walking groggily.

Mars: Confound woman! She torments me to the brink of madness!

Hotpoint: But she seems to be genuinely smitten with you. And she is a looker!



Vision 23: The Treasure Of Mars

Mars's room, Retaliators Mansion. The darkness outside the window suggests it's nighttime. The décor is modern/ancient/alien, with painted urns, lots of hand carved furnishings, and a movie poster-worthy painting over the mantel, of The Mythical Mars atop a mound, with his bow and arrow wielding Goddess Diana by his side, just slightly behind her man, who is fending off a horde of demons with his mighty sword, with a background shot of the eyes of Sky Father Jupiter looking down upon him, in favor. Though the room is garishly elegant, it's notable that there's no gold, silver, or other pilferables in Mars's room. Mars's helmet is sitting on the bedside table, and Mars is sitting on his bed, removing his leather covered metal chest plate. He yawns, as he leans down to unlatch the clasp on his knee boots.

Voice Of Aaliyah Shi: May I help you with that, Your Eminence?

Mars looks up and sees Aaliyah Shi, Tigerlily, in just her nightgown. She kneels down at his feet, and he leans back to let her do it, as if that's how his boots are meant to be removed. There are fairies who only exist for such menial tasks.

Mars: Much thanks, fair Tigerlily. The day has been a long and taxing one, indeed.

Aaliyah: You're accustomed to being served in this way, aren't you?

Mars: In some lands, especially my homeland, yes. By servants and those seeking my favor. In what way do you seek my favor?

Aaliyah: What makes you think I'm not just showing my servitude? You are the king of Terra and chairman of The Retaliators, after all.

Un-booted, Mars gets up and walks over to his chair, looking down at her, cockeyed.

Mars: Tech War and Upsurge serve me not thus.

He sits in his chair, and she repositions herself to be kneeling before him, there.

Aaliyah: They should. Are you not a god walking among mere mortals?

Mars: I sense that you're unaware of my new position on that. I demand respect, as I am due it, but I find subservience, submissiveness, religious worship, insulting. It implies that I am petty, and that my ego requires propping up, by mortals.

She nods understanding, and alters her kneeling position into a cross-legged sitting position. Robert Hattori, Jitara in civilian attire, is hiding behind a corner out in the hall, eavesdropping. He has a look of scorn on his face. Back in the room:

Aaliyah: Your room is very beautiful, in a quaint sort of way. But, I expected the dwelling of a god to be more ... opulent.

Mars: You expected golden challices, bejeweled trinkets and the like?

Aaliyah: Well, yes, not that I'm disappointed, or anything. It's your own affair if you choose to live so humbly. You do have treasure, though, don't you? Only so you could shower your woman with golden challices, bejeweled trinkets, and the like?

Outside, Robert shows a look of inadequacy, because his treasure is meager, compared to a god's. He once had a shitload of goodies and traded it all for his wristbands. It was a good trade, really. He'll build his booty back up and then some.

Mars: Behold; the treasure of Mars:

Mars gestures toward the painting of himself and Diana.

Mars: All the wealth that I have acquired, all the tributes that have been paid to me, by all my worshippers on countless worlds, throughout the millennia, are stored in my goddess's temple, in the Godrealm. Seven additions had to be built onto it, to hold it all.

Robert thinks he may be onto something, now.

Aaliyah: So, this goddess you speak of; is she that sorceress we encountered at Virtu-Tech? The Goddess?

Mars's eyes widen, and he stands, and is nearly flush.

Mars: No! By the measure of my phallus, no! The goddess of love, Venus, is an exile from the Godrealm. Exiled for her crimes against myself and Vulcan. She is banished to this planet Terra, and forbade by Jupiter to return to her own homeworld. Resourceful though she may be, she cannot hope to pass the ever-vigilant swordsman, Rothja, who guards the Astral Pathway.

Out in the hall, Robert mouths the word "Swordsman... ?". Back inside, Mars is pointing out the painting to Aaliyah, who's now standing.

Mars: This is the goddess Diana. She would've been mine, had I not made the grievous error of betraying her love.

Mars uncharacteristically gets all solemn, and pouty faced, even watery eyed.

Mars: If only I could take it back, make it like the mistake never occurred... But for all my power, that is beyond me. I can't even make amends. All I can do is regain her trust. She is the reason I am here. I made her a promise, that I would save more mortal blood than I ever caused to be spilled, till I have redeemed myself in her eyes. This I do, in honor of her, of our love which was lost, but need not be lost forever, if only I can prove myself worthy of her. I will accomplish this goal, or lose my life in the attempt. My death too is acceptable, for my own blood would also suffice as compensation, for the pain I unjustly caused her.

Mars turns from the painting to see that Aaliyah has shed a tear.

Mars: A tear for my sorrow? Or a sorrow of your own, which mine has brought to bear once more in your heart?

She nods as he wipes the tear away, with the back of his left hand.

Mars: I'm sorry.

Aaliyah: No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I bothered you.

Out in the hall, Robert is all smug over her striking out.

Aaliyah: You were getting ready for bed, and I'm keeping you up. I'll go.

Mars: Listen; it's no secret that you are loved by someone, already.

Aaliyah: You don't understand. I have a Grand Destiny. And, I know that I was supposed to come here to find it. I just wish it would hurry up and manifest itself, before my heart shreds away.

Mars: And, Jitara... can he not be this Grand Destiny you speak of?

Aaliyah: No. No, he can't. It's complicated, but trust me.

Robert is done with this, and goes back to his room. A moment or two between him and her, the hall is empty. Here comes Aaliyah, very solemn-looking, but not crying. That one tear sufficed to purge the pain of the moment. As she passes a certain point, Wanagi Akicita appears from thin air, out of her field of vision, and stealthily watches her enter her room. He has an emblem on his left breast of a black heart with a bullet hole through it. There're thorny vines draped around the heart, and a blood drop dripping from the bottom of it. Above the heart are the initials "R.I.P.". He's caped.



Vision 24: The Arraignment

Early 1986. Criminal court. Captain Superhero is testifying on Casey Martel's behalf. Casey's mother is seated behind Casey, with a handkerchief near her face. In the back of the room are Phoebus, Venus, and Yvenia Orchev, in disguise. Phoebus is wearing sunglasses, because, though he'd

rather die than admit it, he resembles Mars. Tech War is standing off to the side, with the court officers.

Captain Superhero: As far as we could tell, there was no major damage done to the facility, except for a few things broken as a result of the fight. It appears to have been a spy mission, which failed. And it is my belief that Mr. Martel was acting under duress, and once he's out from under Doktor Rascher's control, he could once again become a productive member of society. And hopefully... are you listening to me, Casey? Hopefully, use his power for right instead of wrong.

Captain Superhero and the judge both look at Casey Martel, sternly. Casey nods his head.

A.D.A.: That's all well and good, Mr. ... Superhero. uh... But you see a crime was committed here. Industrial espionage is no slap on the wrist offence. While I'm sure Mr. Martel is as repentant as you say, someone has to be held accountable. Would that justice were only so simple as to forgive every criminal who regrets his actions, it would totally escalate an already revolving door penal system. Do you see my point?

Captain Superhero: Yes sir, I... do.

A.D.A.: That's all. I'm finished with this witness, Your Honor.

The A.D.A. takes his seat. Casey has a different lawyer than before.

Judge: Your witness, Mr. Landry.

The defense attorney stands.

Defense Attorney: First off, I do believe I heard the witness swear in with his real name, and it wasn't "Mr. Superhero." Let me just say, Capt. Anderson, it's an honor to meet the real Captain Superhero. Our nation owes you a great debt for your heroic service during World War Two. O.k., with that out of the way, I must ask; Are you the arresting officer in this case, Captain?

Captain Superhero: Uh... I'm the one who took Mr. Martel into custody... ?

Defense Attorney: I see. Did you read him his rights?

Captain Superhero: I... assume they did that down at the station.

Defense Attorney: Uh, huh . Did you wait for the police to arrive and conduct a crime scene investigation, before removing my client from the crime scene?

Captain Superhero: No.

Defense Attorney: So probable cause was never officially established, before my client was arrested?

Captain Superhero: Officially? I guess not.

A.D.A.: Your Honor, I object!

Judge: On what grounds?

A.D.A.: Uh... Uh...

Judge: Right.

Defense Attorney: No fingerprints, no photos, no video, we have nothing but hearsay evidence that my client was even at the scene! They might've lost the real trespassers, picked Mr. Martel up off the streets, beat him up to make it look good and turned him over to the authorities to take the fall for the crime, for all we know! Your Honor, I contend that the state has no case against my client, and that all charges against him should be dropped.

At the mention of video, Tech War instinctively puts his hand near the eye of the eagle emblem on his chest plate. He has video of the entire incident, but there's no reason to bring that up, here. He and Flash are the only Retaliators here today, officially, and they are here to lose this case, not to win it. Usually, court appearances are the type of benign duty Arthur and Wally pass down to Wendy, but Wally wanted to do it, since he was the one who was actually there. These days, Arthur has little use for the armor at all, except for those times he's had all of work and Zoëy he can stand, and is in the mood to take it out on some unfortunate villain's head.

Judge: I really don't think it happened that way, Mr. Landry, but your point is made. Mr. LaRue, do you contest or concede?

A.D.A.: ... The State concedes, Your Honor.

Judge (To Tech War): Does Arthur Reddingfield intend to press civil charges, for the equipment loss?

Tech War: He doesn't own Virtu-Tech in entirety, it's one of his public companies, but if I know Arthur, he'd rather spend two seconds signing a check for the restoration, than have to spend half a work day here. Your

Honor, if I may add; I will personally keep an eye on Mr. Martel, to make sure he stays out of trouble.

Captain Superhero: Yeah, me too.

The judge motions for Casey Martel to stand.

Judge: O.k. I see that your prior charges from last year have been cleared up... Fortune smiles down upon you, once again, Mr. Martel. I see no reason to detain you any longer. You're free to go.

Casey Martel hugs his mother, and shakes his lawyer's hand. The audience erupts in a sigh of relief, and some people actually applaud. The judge bangs his gavel, and they settle down.

Judge: One final word of advice, to you Retaliators; if you superheroes want to go around arresting super villains, how about taking some courses on proper procedure? It's one thing to be able to apprehend the bad guys, but you gotta know how to arrest 'em, too, or it doesn't count. Understand?

Tech War and Captain Superhero look at each other. Then, they look at the judge and nod. The judge motions Captain Superhero off the witness stand, and bangs his gavel one time.

Judge: The court will take a quick recess for lunch. We will reconvene in one hour.

The judge bangs his gavel again. People start leaving. Tech War and Captain Superhero have gathered over near the prosecution's desk. Casey walks over to them to shake their hands. Phoebus, Venus, and Yvenia Orchev start to file out. From across the courtroom, Casey and Yvenia look at each other, and exchange nods. Outside, Jitara is near the entrance/exit of the courthouse, when the disguised Consulate Of Despots file out. They see him, and try to block the view of their faces, with their hands to their hats. Jitara follows them. As they get into their waiting limousine, Venus is the last to enter the car. Before she gets all the way in, though, Jitara has his left hand under her armpit and his right hand holding the door open.

Jitara: I need to talk to you.

She smiles and bats her eyes at him.

Venus: I've been hoping you would seek me, mortal. I've been thinking about you ever since last we met.

She puts her hand on his shoulder.

Jitara: I ... I ...

He shrugs off the mental hard-on for her that's trying to implant itself in his mind.

Jitara: Stop it! You don't even know my name, for crap's sake! But, I'm of far greater value to you, than a mere loveslave.

Venus: Pray tell, how?

Jitara: Well, my name is Jitara, a former mercenary, and swordsmanship is my specialty. I want to talk to you about swordsmen, astral pathways, and how two might accomplish more, together, than either could, alone.

Doktor Rascher (From Inside The Car): Excuse me. If you wish to contract the Consulate Of Despots, or join, you need to talk to me.

Jitara peeks down through the open door at Doktor Rascher, and smiles behind the ninja mask.

Jitara: Oh, I'm sorry, hi!

Jitara slams the door shut. A Doomsday Disciple wearing loose clothing under a light tan cloak with the hood down taps Jitara on the shoulder and yells in his face.

Doomsday Disciple: Botoru! Utsuwa! The Tree Of Death walks like a man! One, Nine! It's getting late!

Jitara: Kuruoshikun! Kishimu kojiki! Fuck off, shit for brains.

Jitara shoves the weirdo cultist backwards, and the weirdo cultist stumbles onto his ass. The weirdo cultist scrambles up and runs away.

Jitara: (To Venus): Can we can talk privately?

Venus: Yes. Over here, quickly, before they try to stop us.

They duck around to the side of the building. Phoebus exits the middle door of the three doors on this side of the car. Rascher exits the rearmost door. Venus raises her arms and vanishes herself and Jitara away.

Phoebus: Venus! Wait!

Too late, they're gone. Walking back to the car, Phoebus gives Rascher a hard look.

Doktor Rascher: What was that about? What was that business about "astral pathways and swordsmen"?

Adonais enters the car, without answering. We are now inside Venus' lunar hideout. There's a large picture window, with a view of the lunar landscape. It does not escape Jitara's notice.

Jitara: Holy cow! Are we on the moon?

Venus: Yes. "Holy cow"? Ha, ha! I always found that so laughable, just because Hera liked cows and turned Io into one.

Jitara: Well, I guess there are a couple cultures hung up on it. For most of us, they're just meat. And that kooky expression, "holy cow". It doesn't mean anything, just an expression, to me anyway. May I sit?

She gestures to a chair, and he positions himself over it, but politely waits for her to sit, first. She does, then he does.

Jitara: I need to talk to you about the treasure of Mars, now residing in

Diana's temple.

Venus: Ah, more talk of "holy cows".

Pause. He gets it, and smiles.

Jitara: That was a dig at your hated rival? A good one too, I like it. You and I are gonna get along, I think.

Venus: So, for my help in your scheme, will you take the head of Diana, for me?

Jitara: Cripes! No! If you can conjure the pathway, I can get us across it. After that, you take what you want, and I'll take what I want. I just want the treasure.

Venus: Raid the temple of Diana? All the gold you can carry?

Jitara: That's what I was thinking.

Venus: You simple-minded fool. What if I were to tell you that more gold and jewels than you could ever hope to carry can fit in the palm of your hand?

Jitara: I'm listening.

Venus: The greatest source of treasure in the Godrealm is Jupiter's enchanted ring, Equinoxium. Formerly named Draupnir, a gift from one of his firstgod cousins.

Jitara: Enchanted ring. Is everything in the Godrealm enchanted?

Venus: A great many things, yes. This particular enchantment causes the bejeweled golden ring to drop a number of its like, every nine days.

Jitara: The gift that keeps on giving. And, a ring, no less. That's perfect. I happen to collect enchanted rings. Forget the temple, I want that ring.

Venus: Who wouldn't? Who are you, to take it?

Jitara: One o' the greatest pirates you ever met, lady. You get me to that pathway, and I'll get us across. Then, you do what you gotta do, and I'll do what I do. Where's the ring, by the way?

Venus: Where else would Jupiter's ring be, but on his finger? Fortunately, he is a sound sleeper. The "greatest pirate I ever met" might be able to take it, if indeed you are truly that. But, the hard part will be getting past Rothja, then into the palace. Only one other mortal has ever made it past Rothja, and he had a flying horse.

Jitara: Bellerophon? That's just a campy old rerun from the 50's.

Venus: Based on an actual legend. If Jupiter hadn't fallen in love with the horse, Bellerophon would've been destroyed outright. Instead, Jupiter cursed him, by giving him the invulnerability of a god and the frailty of a mortal. The Bellerophon of mortal myth is a fairy tale. The real Bellerophon can't fly without a winged horse or some other aid. But as the intro sequence of that play suggests, he could indeed survive passing through the sun. Any of the gods could fly through the sun unscathed, even I. What doesn't kill the gods doesn't kill Bellerophon. But it affects him as it would a mortal. He would be burned alive, return to whole again, and know the agony of being burned alive. Without even the welcome release of death in between. He knows agony, through its entire course. No other mortal, no other being for that matter, has known the degree of pain which Bellerophon has suffered through many times.

Jitara: Still beats being dead.

Venus: You will be dead. You have no magical horse to sweeten Jupiter's mood. If Jupiter should awaken, and catch you in the midst of your villainous plundering, you will surely not survive his wrath.

Jitara gets up from his chair, and paces, a little.

Jitara: Okay, now you're making me nervous.

She gets up and places her hand under his arm, as he'd done to her earlier, to stop his pacing, and make him look into her eyes.

Venus: You have hatched this plan, half-heartedly, without forethought to your nerves? Listen well, mortal: You should be very nervous. It is your own mortal life you are putting at hazard. Surely, the greatest hazard you have ever faced, or ever shall face. It's the King Of The Gods you intend to cross. And, he would have as much mercy for the likes of you, as you would have for a mosquito which bites your skin. I am not knowing which would anger him more; to be burgled by a mortal, or to be disturbed from his slumber by a mortal. But, regardless of which curse of you prevails upon his lips, perish you shall.

Jitara: I'm in. All or nothing. I'm ready when you are.

Venus: To be willing to die, for worldly gain. You are truly a puzzlement to

me, mortal.

Jitara: It's not so simple as that. It's complicated. You wouldn't understand.

Venus: I might, at that. There is but one thing which complicates all things, and beyond all reasoning.

He sees that she now gets it, and he nods affirmation of it. She gets a look of having a change of heart, for her part of the plan. She removes his headgear and ninja mask and looks at his face. Feature for feature, by far not the handsomest face she's ever seen. But altogether, a face that tells the story of the man. The creases beside the edges of the mouth show both disappointment and determination. The brow shows focus. The eyes show hardness and softness at the same time. A man who could worship her with his lips while chastising her with his phallus.

Venus: You fool.

Jitara: Excuse me?

Venus: Do you not know when you are being played?

Jitara: By whom?

Venus: By me! I have been called a heartless bitch, among other things. A bitch, I may be, but heartless, I am not. Whatever else I may be, I am a woman, greatly reverent of all matters pertaining to the heart.

Jitara: Congratulations. Get to the part where you're playing me.

Venus: I have reconsidered that plan. But, I tell you now, I had planned to sacrifice you for fodder, to slip past Rothja, as he would be busy butchering you.

Jitara: Lady, you underestimate my skills.

Venus: Skills are irrelevant. Which is your strong arm? The one with which you will smite the godling warrior, Rothja?

Jitara holds out his strong right arm, and flexes it, strongly and rigidly, like the martial artist he is. His sleeves are loose, but it's still apparent that there's a well developed arm in there.

Venus: Strike me with it.

Jitara: No way! I don't strike ladies, if I can help it.

Venus: Oh, your life depends upon it, if only to make you realize how

inadequate for the task you truly are. If it pleases you, you need not strike me with all your might, just enough to think that I should be effected.

Jitara: Okay, but my principles aren't happy about it.

Jitara half-heartedly slugs the Goddess. As it comes at her, her only wincing is from something being that close to her face, not the actual blow.

Venus: Ha, ha, ha! Not even equal to a godling infant!

She uses her left hand, and bends Jitara's arm back, bringing him to his knees.

Jitara: Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Venus: My weakest arm bends back your strongest arm, even with little effort. Amongst the gods, I am not physically worthy to be a warrioress. My greatest power is my treachery and sorcery. Know you that the warrior you intend to challenge can bend back my arm, as easily as I bend back yours.

She lets him go, and he stays on his knees, humbled, moving his arm around, to get the kinks out.

Venus: And, Rothja himself is skilled. It was by that measure that he was chosen to guard the entrance to the Godrealm. I saw you use your skills to barely survive Phoebus, who is not skilled in the least, but does boast the strength of the gods. How will you survive Rothja, who has both godly power and skill? Though you may fence against his sword, his strike would not be parried by you. His sword will reach you, though you parry, as surely as you do not!

Jitara looks up at his own eyebrows, counts on his fingers, and silently mouths the words of her last sentence, adding up what the hell she just said.

Jitara: Okay; uh... , reaches me, whether I parry or not... : I get filleted, whether I fight back or not. Okay ... ? Damn! So, I just would've gone there, and gotten killed, right there on the Astral Path, before even getting into the Godrealm. ?

Venus: Yes.

Jitara: So, whatta we do now, call it off?

Venus: It depends. If you are truly equal to this task, I can make you equal to Rothja. In power, at least. The contest of skill would still be yours to prove.

Jitara: Now you're talkin'. Fix me up with some power, and I'll show you what I can do!

She goes to a table, and takes a flask from the drawer. She gives it to him.

Venus: This potion was taken from Queen Rhea, the giver of godly power. The taste is bitter, but not as bitter as the taste of death. Waste not a drop. The more you drink, the more power you will attain.

Jitara: It reeks. So, if I drink this junk, I'll be a god?

Venus: A mortal can no more be a god than a troll can be an elf. You will have the physical power of a god. And, only till the liquid works its way out of your system: About a day. And if you are fully human, I wouldn't recommend you ever taking a temporary power again. Humans are capable of taking some forms of temporary power, but you've seen what happens to the ones who keep repeating it.

Jitara: Yeah. That freak Shedowee kid. Bummer. If I could keep the power, it would solve my problem, altogether. Beggars can't be choosers, I guess. Here goes, down the hatch!

One swig, and he's gagging and coughing.

Jitara: Gah! What the hell is this, piss?

Venus: Collected by my water-witch, from the toilet of the Titan Queen. Drink it, if you wish to battle Rothja and live!

Jitara: You're not shittin'? This is really piss?

Venus: I shit you not. This is piss from the Titan Queen Rhea, my own grandmother: The bestower of godly power. You should already be feeling some difference.

Jitara: I don't feel so bad, actually. Ha, ha! Okay! Let's drink some piss!

Venus: It's your bitter potion to drink, not mine.

Jitara: I was making a figure of speech, but, yeah, okay, here goes.

He finishes it, grimaces, then smiles through the grimace.

Venus: How do you feel?

Jitara: Like I could bust boulders with my bare fists.

Venus holds up her fist, with her arm rigid and bent at the elbow.

Venus: Hold your arm like this.

He does, and she tries to bend it back. It doesn't budge. She pulls on it, to no avail, then tries pushing on it, which also fails to move the arm.

Venus: Only one thing remains.

Her hands radiate a greenish glow, and she fires the enchantment at a metal abstract sculpture of an odalisque with an engraving of a large star exploding out a bunch of smaller stars. It's a rendering of the Chaos Star a.k.a. the Big Bang. It disintegrates and reintegrates around Jitara, over the clothes and O2 mask and under the weapons, as a gun-metal hued armor, in the combined styles of the ancient Shinobi-Samurai and the ancient Roman centurions, with chain-mail sleeves, gauntlets and a shield, bearing the same star emblem as the odalisque had.

Venus: Now, you are ready.

Jitara: Awright! Cowabunga, holy shit! Shredder, eat your heart out! This is the coolest ninja-samurai armor I've ever seen! Too bad I can't use it when the super strength goes away. It'd be too heavy, slow me down. I'm all about speed, when I'm normal. A fast punch has more power than a strong one, you know.

Venus: I wouldn't know. I haven't been in a physical fight since the war between the two houses. And I was as I am. I've never been anything different than I am.

She puts her hand on the ninja mask on the table.

Venus: May I have this? I collect things like this. For the essences retained

within.

Jitara: The headgear is made especially for me by a costume shop in L.A. The ninja mask is \$14.95 from any martial arts catalogue. Go ahead, I stand to make a lot more off this caper. If it works out, anyway. If not, I guess I won't need that stuff.

Venus: Let us hope it works out.

Jitara: Amen. *Let's do this* .

Vision 25: Assault On The Godrealm

Jitara and Venus, walking side by side, up the Astral Pathway, toward the entrance of the Godrealm.

Jitara: So, why do you take orders from Rascher? Aren't you like many times older and wiser than him? And a goddess, even?

Venus: Oh, Rascher is fully aware of what Phoebus and I are. So, he's not overly pushy. See, with my age and wisdom, which you speak of, I don't need to be in command to be in control. I never really have, actually. Subtle control is a gift that has always served me. Rascher was only born in 1908. All accumulated, I've spent much more time on your Terra than he has. However, this time, I've only been there since 1962. Rascher is slightly more familiar with the modern Terra than I or Phoebus, and much more familiar with the ways of mortals. But more of the reason would be that if Phoebus

and I committed evil in your world in our own names, the gods would take more notice, and might even make it a point to stop us. This way, all the evil-doing is in Rasher's name, and we're just... there.

Jitara: Oh. Ha, ha! That's brilliant. What's this emblem you put on my shield?

Venus: It's the Chaos Star; the Dawn Of Creation.

Jitara: You mean I'll be going there, representing the "Big Bang". ? Hell, yeah!

Venus: Do you use both of those swords at the same time?

Jitara: Only when I'm exhibitioning or just showing off. In real fights, I mainly just use the magic one.

Venus: If you have a magic sword, why bother with one that's not, which you seldom use?

Jitara: 'Cause I made it. See, the magic one wasn't always mine. But I wanted it. So I made an exact copy to switch with it. But I was so proud of the one I made, I decided to keep both. So, what're your plans, once we get in?

Venus: Well, you have inspired me, mortal...

Jitara: Jitara.

Venus: Jitara. I think I shall take the head of Diana.

Jitara: Oh, and I live dangerously. ? What the hell do you think Mars would do to you?

Venus: I should worry more about Phoebus. She's his mother, among... other things. But, I think I can defeat Phoebus in battle, if it came to that. He once had an awesome power; by merely speaking something he could make it come true. He could say you will die tomorrow, and you won't die today or the day after tomorrow, but tomorrow. Mortals thought he was prophet, but he wasn't, he created the prophesies he spoke, simply by speaking his own wishes into reality. As he matured, this power could have made him one of the greatest of the gods. But, he abused it, to promote his agenda, to make his own situation seem less taboo. He forced his situation on certain mortals who didn't want or deserve it. I don't know what he did this time, he won't say, and I haven't had any real contact with any gods who would know, but it was enough that Jupiter stripped him of all his power, except his godling strength, and banished him to Terra forever. He can't even teleport himself, without my help. His immaturity is the blame, he was a baby, less than a thousand

years old, when he cursed Oedipus, a man who had been destined for greatness, if not for the shame unjustly imposed on him by Phoebus. He's still only 3000 years old, the Godrealm equivalent of an adolescent. Whatever happened three years ago, it was either singularly enough to cause Jupiter to turn away from him, or it was the accumulation of all he'd done since Oedipus which finally exceeded Jupiter's tolerance. Whatever the cause, with nothing but strength as his defense, he would not stand a chance, against my magic. As for Mars, if I were to kill Diana, he would abhor me, to the point of wanting to bash in my flawless face, with the deathblow of his mace. If he had his own will. But, I once captivated him for 3000 years.

Jitara: Apparently it wore off, or he'd still be your captive. When he comes to his senses this time and realizes what you've done, I wouldn't want to be you.

She looks up at him, like maybe he just struck a nervous chord in her.

Jitara: Wasn't Adonais the sun god?

Venus: No, that was a son of Zeus, named Apollo. Their family and ours are related at least two different ways, through the Titans. It hardly occurs to anyone that since there was more than one Titan, they may've produced more than one family of gods. The universe is full of different families of gods. Phoebus and Apollo weren't even in the same tier, Apollo was the son of a firstgod and Phoebus is the grandson of a firstgod. But Phoebus and Apollo were fourth cousins and half third cousins, were about the same age, had a slight familial resemblance to one another, the big eyes and bowed lips, common in both families but to a lesser degree, were overly pronounced in both young gods, and Apollo's alternate name was Adonis, which sounds like Adonais, so therefore they were interchanged in some literature. Poets, taking the artistic liberty to combine two similar characters into one. They were perfectly distinguishable, though. Different hair color, different noses, different jaws. You wouldn't see one then the other and think they were the same. But who would see one then the other, two gods of different families, unless they were together, which they never were? Their similarities were superficial, they weren't friends. Apollo wasn't really the sun god, the title was given to him posthumously, by Helios, the real sun god. Helios doesn't

care about the title or his godly duties, and was trying to give the job away, when he let Apollo drive his sun car. Apollo crashed and died. We weren't supposed to tell you mortals that Apollo was dead, because he was so loved and worshipped, we feared you wouldn't be able to handle the news. But the great grandchildren of that generation have long since turned to dust, and to you, Apollo is just another name in history, so I think it's safe to let the secret out; Apollo's been dead for over 2000 years.

Jitara: Oh. Okay.

Venus: Terran prophets take greater liberties in their writings than should probably be allowed, but so long as they aren't overly insulting, we don't mind. Because I liked to appear from the sea, just to tease and torment lonely fishers and sailors, it was written that I was made from sea foam. I have a navel, like most other born things. But that myth is not overly insulting, so I allow it. I... enjoy that myth, actually. Most commonly I am confused with Aphrodite, but she is not the only one. If a Terran prophet has a vision of a story about some goddess from a family who is less known to the Terrans, but she is pleasing of face and form, they'll simply substitute my name for hers in the story. Again, so long as I'm not overly insulted by the comparison, I allow it. But sometimes, a confusion between two gods is insulting, especially if it was perpetuated by the other and less glorious of the two, to unscrupulously exalt his own image and name. It was the poems which had combined them that gave Phoebus the idea to accept the sacrifices and worship that was offered to Apollo. He claimed he was merely helping the gods carry out their deception that Apollo lived, but it's more likely if their true natures were known to the mortals, that Apollo was so splendid and Phoebus so wicked, Phoebus would never have received offerings as plentiful as what was given to him, in the name of Apollo. It was when Phoebus set about raping young women and nymphs while calling himself Phoebus Apollo that Zeus became aware of the sacrileges committed against his dead son. Zeus demanded that Phoebus be given over to be fist beaten by all the brothers and sisters of Apollo. Jupiter refused, saying the punishment was too harsh. Our two families had a conflict, all because of Phoebus. With the exception of my long-brooding husband, we all fought for Phoebus, because though we knew he was a wrongdoer, he was one of ours. I fought side by side with Diana, it was a less pleasant situation for her than me. It wasn't

hard for me, then, I was the one who had Mars, and all she had was Phoebus. It seems now the shoe is on the other foot. They don't appear to be together, but she has him. She's playing hard to get, and he's playing along; that means she has him. It's a very dangerous game to play, however, when there's another woman involved. I'm like Phoebus, when it comes to getting what I want. Though he's the son of my hated enemy, he's more like me than her. It's little wonder that he came to me, after his exile. I took him under my wing, like a mother. And since I am a mother figure to him, he fucks me. I do it because he reminds me of someone, as well. No doubt Diana was thinking of Mars when she conceived Phoebus, during the time that Mars belonged to me. When Mars was that young, he looked strikingly like Phoebus. Phoebus is in fact a bit prettier than Mars ever was, but he lacks the same... grandeur. I don't really need a god who is pretty, I prefer greatness. Pity Phoebus, for he is to me what he was to his mother; a poor substitute for Mars.

Off in the distance, a small armored spec shaped like a man spots them, and jumps up into the air. Venus turns invisible, except for her eyes. Upon landing in front of Jitara, the spec is not a spec, but the godling guardian of the Astral Pathway, Rothja. He lands with a clash of swords; swordsman vs. swordsman. The Goddess's eyes back away from the fight, but spend some time watching, before making a break for it, toward the entrance to the Godrealm. Both swordsmen are skilled, and their strikes and parries are so practiced, they seem choreographed. Their standard routines being equal, Rothja ramps it up, by doing a hovering spin, which puts centrifugal force behind his next strike. Jitara fences the strike adequately, and high-kicks his attacker away. Rothja rushes back in, and there's some swordplay, between them; high, low, middle. They clench in close quarters, and give each other scowling faces. Jitara low-kicks Rothja's shin out from under him, and Rothja is quickly back on his feet, charging shield first toward Jitara. Jitara backflips away to gain distance and activates the shock-ray on his wristband. No ordinary moves from Jitara, he sticks that wristband out there like an action power pose by a movie martial artist. Rothja is momentarily occupied by the tendrils of electricity groping his entire body, but he overcomes its effects, and charges toward his foe, in spite of the shock-ray still zapping him. The shock-ray stops when Jitara is reengaged in the fight. Next, Jitara hits Rothja with a freeze-ray, from one of his rings. Rothja is caked over in

ice.

Rothja: Ice? You think to use ice against a god? Fool, ice doesn't even do anything, except break! He-Ya!

Rothja strikes against Jitara, but is fenced again. They clench, and this time Rothja shows he also knows how to use his fists, by slugging Jitara in the jaw, with his armored left fist, dropping Jitara to the ground. Jitara rolls over to his back to see that Rothja is two-handedly raising his sword, for a death-plunge into Jitara's body. Jitara uses his left middle ring's flamethrower on Rothja, lighting the godling ablaze.

Rothja: Aaaaaaahh!

Jitara: Ha! Ice doesn't do anything, is that fire lively enough for ya?

Rothja: Aaaaaargh! I am impervious to all of your magicks, offworlder!

Jitara is back on his feet, about the same time Rothja is recovered from being lit up. The two are clenched, and are using the cross-guards and pommels of their swords as knucks against each other. During this exchange, though, Jitara's back is turned to the edge of the pathway. As Rothja knees Jitara in the abdomen, he instinctively rotates away from the edge, before letting the doubled-over trespasser down, when he might've been better off moving Jitara towards it. Jitara looks back at the abyss over the edge, then back at Rothja.

Jitara: You think inside the box, don't you? Of course! How else do you godlings manage to not accidentally destroy each other, without some subconscious conditioning for restraint?

Rothja: I know not what you are talking about, offworlder.

Jitara: Oh, yeah? How 'bout NOW ?!

Jitara kicks Rothja across the other edge of the pathway, into the abyss.

Jitara: You know what I'm talkin' 'bout, now?

Rothja is too busy flipping end over end into the abyss, to answer. Cut to a

brief scene of Jitara crossing the rest of the pathway, unopposed. He enters the Godrealm, and walks across the square, looking around to figure out which of these buildings is the palace. He sees some palatial-looking spires sticking out over some nearer buildings, and discerns that that must be the palace. He walks down a gold-paved street to the entrance of the palace, but the door is guarded by Minerva.

Minerva: Halt! Be you friend or foe, and what business would you have to enter the palace of the Sky Father?

Jitara: Why, I ... happen to have an appointment with the Sky Father.

Minerva: You are a liar! Mighty King Jupiter sleeps, and so has no appointments!

Jitara: My mistake. I'll just ...

Jitara scans the place over, looking to the sides for unguarded doors, and the levels above for open or openable windows.

Jitara: I'll just ... come back, later.

Minerva: Are you looking for another way in? You have the look about you of an assassin, or a thief!

She draws her sword and challenges him with it.

Jitara: Hey, I don' wanna fight a lady!

Minerva: I am no lady, I am a warrioress!

Jitara: Oh, shit!

Venus appears with black hair and different clothes, between Minerva and Jitara.

Minerva: Venus! You villainous conspirator against the realm! If this stranger is allied to you, then he is surely a purveyor of evil deeds!

Venus: Then slay him.

Minerva: Stand you aside, and I shall!

Venus: You have called me a traitor to the realm. Should you not strike me down, then him?

Minerva: I ... cannot. It would be dishonorable to slay one who is not a warrior.

Venus: Could be more to it than that, my fair warriorress. Could be that you harbor sweet affections for me.

Minerva: I ... I ...

Venus gets in shared breath space of Minerva, smiling, even as she takes Minerva's sword, and sheathes it for her.

Venus: Could be that you love me.

She kisses her. Minerva is enchanted.

Jitara: You're really good at what you do, Venus. Your resume come with pictures?

Venus: Ha, ha! You wish!

Jitara: Alright, I'll just settle for the pictures in my head. Good pictures. For a warriorress, she's kinda hot. I don't have to say what you are, you already know.

Venus: Indeed I do, but thank you for noticing. I have done all I can do for you, Jitara. From this point onward, you are on your own.

Jitara: My real name is Robert. Robert Hattori. I don't tell everybody that.

Venus: I feel privileged. Good luck, Robert. (To his other eye) You too, Jitara.

Jitara: Ha, ha! We both need as much as we can get. I would wish you luck, but I can't, since it would be the same as wishing an innocent person dead, and that's bad karma. Not that I haven't lopped off a few heads, but they were all shitty people. Shitty-to-the-core people, who deserved it. I get myself inna lotta shit like this, and I need my karma straight. So, I'll just wish you luck in not getting yourself killed, in the attempt.

Venus: Good enough.

She lowers his now armored O2 mask to kiss him.

Jitara: Whoa, hey, what're you doin'?

Venus: My kiss for you bears no bedazzlement, I promise.

Jitara: Well, in that case, kiss away!

She kisses him, lifts his O2 mask back up, then breaks away, smiling.

Venus: I hope she is worth it.

Jitara: Yeah, me too.

Venus: Farewell, Robert the Jitara.

Jitara: You too, Venus. And, in the future, if we meet again as enemies, it won't really be so, if you know what I mean.

Venus: I do, and I say the same to you.

With a smile, she disappears, leaving him to whatever fate awaits him, inside the palace. Minerva watches him enter, but doesn't react in any way. Inside, there're only a few servants, and some guards, wearing gun-metal colored armor, with chain-mail sleeves, not entirely dissimilar to what Jitara is wearing. He looks at them, then his own armor, and gets it that the similarity was intentional. Still though, he slinks around behind support-pillars as much as he can, to keep from being seen. To the left, there is an inner chamber, inset into the wall of this enormous outer hall. It's a sleeping chamber, and Jupiter is laying there, face-up, in his bed. Between pillars, a servant looks over at him, and Jitara tries to walk nonchalantly, like he belongs. The servant goes about his business, un-alerted to anything being amiss. More slinking around, up some steps, and he's actually in the bedchamber. He walks around the bed, trying to be in just the right median between sneaky and not too sneaky so's anybody'd notice. The ancient god snores a labored snore which makes Jitara nervous that he might wake up. False alarm, it was just a snore. Jitara bends down at the hand, and tries to ease the ring off. It is a gold band, with a large rectangular diamond inset in the center, flanked by two smaller square emeralds, flanked by two smaller oval rubies, flanked by two smaller round diamonds. All gems, inset into the band, itself. The largest, that rectangular diamond in the center, protrudes, because it is of respectable size. Nice ring. Fat finger. Jitara is having some trouble getting it off. A servant walks up the steps, bringing a vase of flowers. He almost makes it all the way to the pedestal it goes on, before noticing Jitara working on that ring.

Servant: What are you doing?

Jitara: I'm ... uh ... I was going to take the ring, to get it resized. You know, before it cuts off the circulation to his finger. It's bad, when that happens. He wouldn't want that. You wouldn't want that, would you? For the Sky Father to wake up with gangrene?

Servant: By whose authority was this task given you?

Jitara: Uh ... I was sent ... by the Titan Queen. Yeah, that's it!

Servant: WHAT ?! Guards! Assassin in the Master's chamber!

Jitara: I guess that was the wrong answer. Would you believe I was sent by Mars?

Two guards are there already, with more on the way.

Guard 1: It's more likely you were sent by Saturn!

Guard 2: Step away from the Sky Father, you scoundrel!

Jitara draws his sword, and points it at the guards.

Jitara: Look, I'm not here to harm the old man. I just came for the ring. I been through a lot to get this far, and I'm not about to stop now!

Jitara clashes swords with the first guard, then promptly kicks him in the abdomen, to send him flying backwards toward the far wall of the enormous hall. The second guard engages him, and during the clench, Jitara takes his left hand, though it's strapped to a shield, and grabs the guard by his hand, and flings him across the hall, spinning and flailing.

Jitara: Ha! Give this power to a slob who wasn't born with it, an' he'll show ya how to use it!

A dozen guards gang up on him and force him down the steps, into the main hall. Some he smacks across the face with the broad of his sword, others he smacks square in the face, with his shield. A few kicks and flips get his point across, as well. With godly strength added to his martial arts skill, it'll take a lot more than these to stop him. More guards enter the scene, and they are outnumbered by the horde of Godrealm heroes who file into the palace, from outside, Mercury, Quirinus and Bacchus among them. There're hundreds of

them, encircling him, and he's successfully fending them off. At this point in the fight, since they still haven't closed in on him, he has room enough to demonstrate his martial arts movie moves, and they are spectacular. Spinning, jumping, flipping, sometimes with his magic bo staff that leaves two energy trails at the ends, it's awesome. The gods see that giving him room is giving him the advantage, so they close in on him. He's still knocking them out, only now he has to do it one or two at a time, instead of three or four at a time. He's simultaneously clashing swords with a god in front of him, even while kicking the shit out of a god behind him. He grabs one god by the helmet, fingers gripping the visor, and he spins him around and around, whipping up momentum, even while driving back the horde with the centrifugally driven boots of the spinning god. Jitara flings the god upward, and the god spins round and round busting out of the building, through the ceiling. Jitara lights up his sword with electricity from his wristband and raises it high, pointing it at the ceiling. He turns it on full-blast, and the electricity arcs down, doming the sword and himself. He stands there alight with the licking tendrils of electricity emanating from his wristband, looking like a clip from a theater trailer, until he uses foul language:

Jitara: Ha, ha! Come on, you godling fucks! Gimme a fight, why don'tcha?

The mighty Quirinus himself makes his way up to the front of the pack, clashes his mace against Jitara's sword, then gets bashed in the face, by the gauntlet encased hilt of the sword. And, down he goes. Mercury clashes swords with Jitara, and they get close to each others' faces. The helmet is lower rimmed and has bigger wings than some of the ancient Terran paintings and statues would indicate. A bit Nazi-ish, except it is silver. Also, the god is fully clothed and partially armored.

Jitara: Nice helmet, wing-head.

Jitara's hand is gripping the front of Mercury's tunic, so he flings Mercury up around and down to the floor with it. Mercury is on the floor, and Jitara instinctively points the end of his blade at him. But then, he opts to just swack Mercury in the butt with it, as he's making his way to his feet. Once standing, Mercury uses lightning speed to punch Jitara in the facemask faster

than Jitara can do anything to prevent it.

Jitara: Ow! Score ten points! I ain't easy to hit. I know you now, the helmet and all... You're the FTD Florist dude! He's s'posed to be quicker than shit. You need better PR, they totally gayed you up. I wouldn't think that guy could punch correctly.

Mercury punches Jitara in the facemask five times with his right fist in a blur, before Jitara can back up, turn around, stoop over and put his hands over his face.

Jitara: Shitdamn! I think you could beat me, but I'd have to tell you how. I'll just show you. Let's see if I can get this super strength to rev me up some super speed!

Jitara sheathes his sword, clenches his right fist and channels his strength into vibrating it. Jitara backflips over to where Mercury is, half flips to his hands on the floor, upkicks Mercury in the jaw with his left foot, windmilling the god in the air. When the windmill effect returns Mercury to an upright position, Jitara spins on his hands and gives Mercury the same kick again, perpetuating the windmill effect. Five of these in all, proper recompense for the five punches, then a leg sweep to even out that first speed punch.

Jitara: That's what to do! If you were doing that to me, you'd be winning!

Some of the up-front gods are now starting to realize that Jitara is a haughty warrior, but not a ruthless killer. He's not, really. He has killed, but like he said, only shitty people. Never in a situation where he himself is the transgressor. And, he's fully aware that he'd be the number one most hunted mortal in the universe if he killed one of the immortal gods, just for defending their Sky Father. Not that it stops Jitara from punting Mercury into the overhead depression across the hall. Here's the maneuver, which would put all the movie martial artists to shame: Jitara quickly pulls the nun-chucks out of their sheath, swacks Mercury in the shin with it, and quickly tucks the nun-chucks back into their sheath in no more time than it takes Mercury to stoop over from being shin-whacked like Nancy Kerrigan. Then Jitara walks

up Mercury's front and flips over, like the bartender in the Rick Astley video, then he punts Mercury into the overhead depression across the hall. While Mercury is still on his journey across the hall, Jitara has his sword back out, even while watching Mercury's flight. After the crash, Jitara standing kicks an armored guard in front of him in the side of his helmet, a blow that causes the guard to stumble into the guard next to him, who retaliates by swacking Jitara across his helmet, with his sword. Jitara stumbles back into the seemingly passive Bacchus. Jitara turns around, and Bacchus is smiling, resting his forearms on the hilt of his sword, like it's a walking staff, with its point against the floor. Jitara speaks, while swiveling on his left foot to standing reverse spin kick the right side of the face of the god who'd rung his helmet with his sword.

Jitara: Ha! You stay behind me, Smiley! That way, I won't have to worry about my back, and you won't have to worry about me!

Bacchus: You don't have to worry about me?

Jitara answers while bashing a god in the helmet with his magic nun-chucks.

Jitara: I worry about this guy. And this one. If you were going to fight me, we'd be fighting.

Bacchus: I fight, in my own way. I'm not a warrior. I am not swift of sword, but shrewd of mind.

Jitara: Shrewd away, Smiley. Just play along, and it'll work out.

Though there're hundreds of warriors surrounding him, there's a perimeter cleared around him, and it's a simple matter to knock them out one at a time, as they one at a time work up the nerve to move in on him. Because the gods think inside the box, they pass their fallen comrades to the outer perimeter of the massing, at waste level. Just as technology stagnates when all needs are met, imagination stagnates, when wishes come easy. Jitara still has Bacchus to his rear, and is using him for rear cover. Bacchus is still just standing there, smiling, waiting for some opportunity.

Warrior: Bacchus! Venture to strike at the villain, or summon your witches to stand in your place!

Bacchus: Patience, the intruder cannot win. As soon as my opportunity presents itself, I will do my part to bring him down.

Warrior: Fah! I make my own opportunity!

Because of the dialogue, Jitara knows ahead of time there's someone trying to squeeze around Bacchus. So, by the time the guy finally squeezes around, there's already a bash in the helmet waiting for him.

Warrior: Oof!

Another warrior down. The massing of gods is growing weary of this, and the inner perimeter begins closing in. Jitara activates all four rings on his left hand, and the gods to his far left are gassed, the ones to his left center are sparked, the ones to his right center are torched, and the ones to his far right are iced. None of this is permanently harmful to these gods, but it is sufficient to re-widen the circle. From the rear flank, however, his only protection is still Bacchus. Minerva is now in the building, trying to get through the crowd of gods, to get her shot at the intruder, she owes him one. Bacchus sees her, and still smiling, he raises his hand at her, and transforms her into a lioness. The Minerva lioness leaps up and runs on ripples of magic over the heads of the gods. By the time she gets to Bacchus, he lifts up his left hand over his head and she puts both front paws in his hand, and as she uses it to pommel over his head, she transforms back into herself. She lands her butt straddle of Jitara's shoulders, her cooch behind his neck. She plunges her sword down, around, and into Jitara's abdomen. Bacchus has already moved out of the way and is sheathing his sword, as Minerva's sword emerges out of Jitara's back. Bacchus is helping the warrior who argued with him back up to his feet.

Bacchus: Did I tell it, or didn't I?

She pulls it out, then backflips off Jitara. She points her sword at his back, as he slumps down to his knees. All the encircling gods are pointing their swords at him, even as he is on his knees. Bacchus has made his way to the front of Jitara. Bacchus taps his sheath, with the sword inside it, then nods at Jitara. Jitara sheathes his own sword. The gods, even Minerva, repeat the

gesture. Jitara removes the helmet, then lowers the metal covered O2 mask. Then, he unbuckles his chestplate, and lays it aside. There's already some blood showing on the chain mail overshirt. He removes his gauntlets, then the chain mail. He's stabbed, as if there was any doubt. Impaled through the bowels, and bleeding. Still wearing his usual gloves, he touches the wound, and gets blood on his glove. The only sound is of Jupiter, snoring. Other than that, you could hear a pin drop. Or, a ring. Equinoxium pops off a replica of itself, which rolls off the bed, pings down the steps, rolls between the legs of the gods, bounces off the right knee of Jitara, then lays on its side, between the knees of Jitara. He smiles at the irony of it.

Jitara: Hu!

He picks up the ring and inspects it. It's an exact copy of the original, same gems in the same configuration, except it's smaller, like it might fit a woman.

Jitara: ... It's perfect .

He palms it. Jitara tries to get up to his feet, and a warrior to his right gives him a gentle boost up. Then, a warrior on his left side helps him steady himself. Jitara takes a wobbly step toward the door, and the gods between him and the door all step back, clearing him a path. Jitara shuffles wobbly toward the door, holding the ring in the palm of his right hand, and holding his guts in, with his left. In this fashion, he makes his way across the square, toward the pathway. Rothja is back, and blocking his advance. Jitara looks at the ground to his right side, averting his eyes from Rothja.

Jitara: May I pass? Going the other way?

Rothja looks across the square and sees a massing of gods, walking from around the corner building, looking over in this direction, but not appearing to be in pursuit of anybody. Mercury, one of the gods up front, addresses Rothja in a booming voice.

Mercury: **Spiritus -us Bibliotheca -ca -ca**

Keeping his right foot in place, Rothja moves his left foot back and around, thus turning Rothja to his left flank, denoting that Jitara may pass. Some time later, Jitara is laboriously shuffling his way down the Astral Pathway. A giant eagle flies over, headed in the same direction, carrying the Goddess in its right taloned foot. The Retaliators Mansion training room is empty, until Jitara fades in, stepping off a not-there Astral Path, which vanishes as soon as he's fully materialized. This is where he wanted to go, so he purposefully walks over to the inert fencing robots. He smears his blood all over the sword of the one up front. He tucks the ring into a pocket on the inside of his magnetized ninja star belt, unstraps his upper body weapons and removes his tunic. Yep, the secret to how Jitara's ninja stars magically adhere to his belt without glue, snaps or hooks is that the belt's made out of the same kind of magnetized rubber as refrigerator magnets and those signs you stick on the sides of cars. Inverted, so the pulling force is on the outside, so the ninja stars stick right on. They are magic, but you don't want to assign the forces of magic a mundane task like sticking to a belt 24/7 until needed.

Jitara: Wish I coulda... kept the chest plate and helmet. Couldn't carry it. My guts. Fucking bleeding. Don't feel like I'm dying, though. Must be the power.

Jitara then goes to the first-aid station, and starts spraying and bandaging his wound.

Jitara: Can't wear it when I'm normal... anyway. Too heavy. Slow me down. Cool armor. Cool power. Not for me, though. Cool armor, cool power, not meant for Jitara, the human Retaliator. Had my moment though, by God. Fuck 'em. Can't stop me. Can't stop the Jitara. Nobody can.

The next thing he does is stab the wall, in just the right place, so a VCR recorder on a security station in the adjacent room is destroyed. He sits in a chair, and starts to press an intercom button, with his thumb. But then, he thinks of something. He walks over to a weight machine, and crushes into its frame, with his grip.

Jitara: Shit! I can't go to the hospital like this! They'll know!



Vision 26: Mighty Man, Origin 2

Rascher's penthouse terrace. Jhotica is looking out over the city. From below, Mighty Man flies up and lands on the terrace. He and Jhotica embrace and kiss. When the kiss breaks, she's light on her feet, giddy from good news.

Jhotica: Casey, I've got wonderful news! Rascher's found a way to alleviate your fears. He and Alchemist have come up with a new procedure to make sure you can't be killed! You see? Your dream won't happen, now!

Mighty Man: Can't die? Are you sure?

Jhotica: That's what they said. We've got to go to South America. Today.

Mighty Man: Whoa. South America? Is Rascher not here?

Jhotica: Yeah, he's in there, waiting for you.

She points toward the living room. Mighty Man heads that way and Jhotica follows. In the living room, Doktor Rascher, Phoebus, Alchemist and Venus are sitting, waiting for him.

Doktor Rascher: Ah! Nice to have you back, Casey!

Mighty Man: I live here. Where else was I going to go?

He looks at Jhotica and they smile at each other.

Doktor Rascher: I trust Ms. Orchev has informed you on the situation?

Mighty Man: She mentioned a new procedure. To make me unkillable?

Doktor Rascher: Invulnerable.

Mighty Man: Invulnerable... ? Like Bellerophon... ?

Doktor Rascher: Just like Bellerophon.

Mighty Man gets a huge grin on his face. But then he gets a curious look.

Mighty Man: O.k. But why South America?

Doktor Rascher: Colombia, to be precise. Let's just say there are some things that are best done "out of country". My South American division just makes things... easier.

Mighty Man: Hey, I'd fly a horse to the Godrealm, if you can make me invulnerable!

Doktor Rascher: Good. The jet is fueled and ready, and Yvenia has already packed your suitcase. We'll take the limo to the airport. Change clothes for the flight, but bring your costume with you.

Mighty Man (smiling): Yeah, just give me a minute to change!

Jhotica gets light on her feet again, and wraps her arms around Mighty Man's neck.

Jhotica: Oh, honey, I'm so happy for you! This'll make everything alright, won't it?

Mighty Man: I... I think it will! Maybe this is that “right path” you were telling me about!

Jhotica: I think maybe it is!

A few little smooches, and he wraps his arms around her waist, lifts her feet off the ground, and swings around with her.

Mighty Man: Woo-hoo! I’m gonna be Bellerophon! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Jhotica: Yay! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Belle - ! Ro-phon !

He stops spinning her and sets her down. He looks over at Rascher, who’s making a circular motion with his finger, then taps his own wrist.

Mighty Man: Right. I gotta get a move on. I have a date with destiny!

Mighty Man and Jhotica smile at each other again and he walks over to their room and enters it.



Vision 27: The Ion Infusion

Rascher's research facility is in a desolate location, cluttered with outbuildings, work vehicles, crates and junk. Inside, Casey Martel is laying on a padded table in an isolation room, in his drawers. There are two I.V. bags on each side of him. Four in all. One leading into each of his legs and one leading into his left arm. The right arm hasn't been stuck yet. The liquid inside the I.V. bags is pale green and glows, like as if it would glow in the dark if the lights were out. There are two native Colombian doctors in the room, along with the Alchemist. Alchemist injects the fourth I.V. into

Casey's right arm.

Alchemist: This is the last thing that will ever penetrate your skin.

Casey looks up at him with a half grin, but then flinches from the needle stick. Alchemist leaves the isolation room. Outside in the control room, there are glass partitions looking into the isolation room. Doktor Rascher and Jhotica are viewing the procedures. Doktor Rascher is operating a handheld camera. Rascher videos everything, especially their illegal activities. He uses the video tapes to promote the C.O.D.'s services for hire. Incrimination is irrelevant. They are wanted fugitives who cannot be caught or incarcerated. Venus can teleport them from jail to the moon, or wherever. Mars can teleport, but he can't track Venus through hyperspace. The way zero distance hyperspace works is that every point in the universe exists in the same space. When Venus teleports, Mars knows exactly where she went: She went to the exact same space she was standing in, somewhere else in the universe, which could be anywhere. There's no trail between point a and point b, because the two points overlap, in zero distance hyperspace. Even if Mars caught Venus, he couldn't keep her for long. The best prison he could devise only held Vulcan for a few hours. Mars' issues with Vulcan will ultimately cost him his life, someday. Death; the only prison that can hold the gods. Usually. If Venus killed a hundred million mortals, Mars wouldn't be allowed to kill her. You can kill mortals for killing mortals and you can kill gods for killing gods, but you can't kill gods for killing mortals. Originally designed by the Grand Designers using the dna pattern they designed for the gods as the template, but altered and broken, to make the mortals fragile and temporary. For the purpose of making them the lead characters in their own stage plays, with the tragedy built into the dna. Short stories, usually lasting only a few decades. All creatures were created only to be watched, because otherwise the Watchers would have nothing to watch but space and each other and watch the others watching space and each other. Being that the mortals are disposable replicas of the gods also makes them convenient sex objects, which conveniently vanish after a few decades. The gods have found them as such, also. Alchemist walks past Rascher and Jhotica, and Rascher watches him walk toward the corridor. At the corridor, Alchemist stops and looks back. He nods at Rascher. Then, he continues down the corridor. Jhotica was

watching the procedure, and didn't see any of that. Rascher bumps her shoulder with the camera, and upon gaining her attention, hands it to her. Jhotica films the procedure, as Rascher walks over to the corridor, then down it. Inside one of the research rooms, he meets up with Alchemist. Alchemist hands Rascher his own ray-gun.

Alchemist: Modified as to your specifications.

Rascher: This will penetrate his skin?

Alchemist: Penetrate, and accelerate the meltdown.

Rascher: Good. Never create a god you can't destroy, if ever the need should arise.

Alchemist: The Proteus Element in the blood is 50% Latin, 21% Norse, 12% Native American and the rest is a random mixture of every other race, including Arab.

Rascher: Typical New Yorker; a living embodiment of the American "melting pot". Disgusting. Desmond Wyatt assured me that Mr. Martel was pure. It's just as well, because this makes him more expendable. And he may actually serve a greater purpose in that capacity. The final outcome of my agenda is my chief concern.

Alchemist tilts his head back and to the left, and slides his mouth over to the right side of his face, as he pivots toward the door. A clock spins away the hours. Back to the procedure. The isolation room is closed off. The I.V. bags are gone. Casey is still laying on the table, and the room is being flooded by flashes of light. Rascher is holding the camera. The clock spins away more hours. Now Casey is sitting upright in a chair, facing the glass. There is a particle beam accelerator aimed right at his chest. It's mounted into the wall, sealed off, and the other side of it comes out this side of the wall. It has a turret mount. Casey is looking at Jhotica, with some trepidation on his face. Rascher speaks into a mic on the control panel.

Doktor Rascher: The beam isn't harmful, Casey. It's meant to activate the catalyst. Without it, the isotopes in your bloodstream will remain inert, and most likely become harmful. We can't stop now!

Casey looks at Jhotica, and she gives him back a bewildered shrug, like she doesn't have a clue what to do. Casey nods at Rascher. Rascher nods at Alchemist. Alchemist turns the machine on. Adonais is aiming the radiation beam. It hits Casey square in the chest, and he starts smoking. Alchemist fiddles with the controls, and the smoke dissipates. But smoke is still coming out of Casey's nose, eyes and ears. Jhotica's makeup stripe pattern doesn't alter from its moon and stars design, but the border of the stripe gets squiggly and so do the borders of the little designs inside. Jhotica grabs Rascher's arm and spins him around to face her. The camera is now aimed at her.

Jhotica: Stop! You're vaporizing him! What's happening to his eyes? Stop it, now!

The Goddess is standing off to Jhotica's side, just behind, out of sight, lip syncing her words, and putting the back of her hand to her forehead, faking a theatrical dramatic swoon, mocking Jhotica's whining.

Doktor Rascher: Everything is fine, Jhotica. He'll be fine.

Rascher turns the camera back to the procedure. The smoke has stopped coming from Casey's eyes and ears, but it's still coming out of his nose, and it comes out of his mouth when he speaks. His eyes are glowing bright white light, like a car's high-beams.

Mighty Man: It's o.k., Yvenia. I'm a little queasy, but I feel stronger than ever!

She bounces on her heels a couple times from the anxiety. Goddess has the palms of her closed fists pressed together into her chest, and is jittering her torso, sarcastically. Jhotica saw the reflection of that in the glass. She turns to face her, with a degree of scorn.

Jhotica: Stop it, damn you! This is serious!

The Goddess gives her an open jaw smile and spins around slowly, tilting her head back, on the back-turn, to still be looking at her. She completes the 360

without taking her eyes off her, and giggles a couple times, still bearing the open jaw smile. Of course she was loosely swinging her arms while she was doing that. The high-beams have been slowly changing into iridescent blue. Like the inside of a gas burning furnace. Somewhere, an egg timer is buzzing. Later, Casey is in the facility's gym, wearing a white jumpsuit and sneakers. He's pushing handles attached to cables on pulleys attached to a stack of iron weights the size of a tanker truck. He's pressing forward, and the weights are rising. He's being watched. His performance is being meticulously measured.

Doktor Rascher: That's very good, Casey. You just lifted 160 tons, with ease.

Casey: Thanks. It only felt like a couple hundred pounds.

Casey lets go of the weights, and when they drop, the entire building shakes, plaster falls from the ceiling, and the wall behind the weight machine gets a humongous crack in it.

Casey: Uh, oh! Sorry.

Doktor Rascher: It's alright, Casey. A few minor repairs. Nothing to fret about.

Casey: I guess I'll need to start being more careful.

Casey makes his way over to where Rascher is standing.

Casey: This power is awesome! Thanks, Rascher. I owe you for this. As if I didn't already. But what about my eyes? I can't let people see me like this!

Doktor Rascher: No problem. I'll order you some molecularly rearranged cobalt diamond goggles to go with your costume. Almost as indestructible as you. The light from your eyes will light the inside surface of the goggles, but not the outside. You'll be able to see out, but no one can see in.

Casey: Thanks. But wouldn't that cost a small fortune?

Doktor Rascher: Ha, ha, ha! Casey, you naive young man! It is a mere pittance, compared to what I've spent on you! If power like yours came cheap, every S.P.I. asshole in the world would have it. Prepare for the next series of tests.

Rascher walks away and Casey watches him leave. Then Casey looks at the air around him and wonders if he's owned. Some time later, Casey is nervous, about to be shot with a .25 caliber handgun. (The technician is Jake Johnson.) Casey's shaking like a leaf on a tree. When the shot is fired, he covers his face with his forearms and bends his knees almost to a squatting position. After he's shot, he slowly uncurls himself, and checks his chest for blood. There is none. He smiles with a bit of restraint. It hasn't completely sunk in, yet. Rascher walks over, picks the slug off the floor, and shows it to Casey. His smile becomes slightly more unrestrained. The next test is with a .45 caliber handgun. This time he barely flinches, just a little. He picks up the slug himself, puts it in his mouth, spits it out and smiles. The next test is with an Uzi. He looks a little nervous again. The Uzi goes all out. The top of Casey's jumpsuit is ground to shreds, but Casey is not. He loosens up, throws his arms back and embraces the gunfire. Then, he laughs at it. Transition to later. Casey is wearing a new jumpsuit. A cannonball bounces off his chest. He doesn't flinch. Another one is fired, and he meets it with a punch that breaks it in two. Next test. The assistant (Jake Johnson) is pointing a L.A.A.W. at Casey. Fa-shoom, ka-choom. Boom! When the smoke clears, Casey is still standing, half naked and a little wobbly. Next test. Casey is wearing a new jumpsuit, and the assistant (Jake Johnson) is aiming a bazooka at him. Fa-shoom, krackow. Ka-Boom! When the smoke clears, Casey is half naked, on one knee, looking at the floor like he can't remember his name. Then, he remembers his name, looks up and grins. Rascher waves off the assistants.

Doktor Rascher: O.k. That'll do it for today, gentlemen. Thanks for your help.

Rascher walks over to Casey.

Doktor Rascher: O.k., now that we know your threshold, we can...

Casey: Threshold? No, I'm fine. I'm... completely uninjured. I can go further. Bring something heavier. I can do it!

Doktor Rascher: No, that wouldn't be a good idea. With your level of power, and this level of firepower, you'd either be completely unscathed, or

completely destroyed.

Casey: Oh.

Casey looks down at the floor. Rascher looks at Alchemist, and shrugs. Alchemist slides his mouth over to the left side of his face. Casey is their 12th attempt at this since and during WWII. The fourth with the strength and resiliency super potion as the buffer. They thought that it would help the guinea pigs survive the ionic quantumization, but it hasn't yet. The ultimate power, trumping all others. They stand to be the masters of the ultimate superman, if they can ever get this to work. The potion and the quantumization process have been adjusted each time, and they'll eventually get it right, or kill more guinea pigs trying.

Doktor Rascher: I'm satisfied with the success of your transformation, and I wouldn't want to risk the possibility of losing my greatest asset.

Casey looks up with a furrowed brow. It's in reality far worse than he's thinking.

Vision 28: The Dream Persists

Vision of Mighty Man, wearing a variation of costume 3. But it has long sleeves, and a red cape with the "M" emblem on it. His red metal wristbands are now full-hand gauntlets, but in the same design. Instead of his regular helmet, he's wearing the bronze and black helmet we'll later see on Bellerophon. He's flying a winged brown horse. Though this is the 1980's, when special effects are a bit more advanced, this scene is a throwback to a cheap sci-fi show from the 50's, when the fx were a bit more crude. It incorporates some good ol' fashioned nostalgic stop-motion, some green screen that's not matched up perfectly and has a couple see-through places in

it. Ooh, and Rotocolor!

Narrator: Faster than a Commie nuke!...

Mighty Man catching up to a rocketing nuke and flinging it into space.

Narrator: More powerful than a locomotive!...

Mighty Man pushing against an old Iron Horse. He stops it, then reverses it.

Narrator: Able to fly through the sun and remain impervious!...

Mighty Man flying out of the sun with a big smile on his face.

Narrator: He makes the young ladies sad, and their boyfriends mad!...

Overhead view of a bunch of young couples. The girls are swooning, with tears in their eyes, and the guys are sneering, shaking their fists in the air.

Narrator: From a long ago distant time, comes the daring mortal hero who became the undying immortal superhero; Champion of righteousness, retribution and the American way!...

View of some sidewalk pedestrians, dressed in '50's attire. They're pointing.

Woman: Look! Up in the sky!...

Man: What the hell is that?!

Another Man: It's... Mighty Man!

View from below Mighty Man, back on the winged horse, flying purposefully through the air. Suddenly from ahead, a ray-gun blast hits him in the chest, knocking him off the horse. He falls out of frame. Casey Martel wakes up with a jolt. He's in the airplane, seated next to Yvenia, his girlfriend. Jhotica, actually, she's in costume, minus her shoes which are under the chair. Her makeup stripe is straightened out, same moon and stars design as before. He's in civvies, wearing Ray-Bans.

Jhotica: You o.k., honey?

Casey: I... had the dream, again.

Jhotica: Casey, sweetie, you don't have to be frightened of that, anymore. Rascher fixed it for you. You're invulnerable, now. You can't be killed.

Casey: I know. I guess I just forgot to tell it to my dream.

Jhotica: Ah, poor baby.

She takes his head and places it on her shoulder. That seems to relax him, and he might be able to go back to sleep. She rests her head against his. She puts her feet up in the seat, and seems to relax, as well. Unseen by Casey, the look on her face reveals concern, but also uncertainty if the concern is unfounded. The best she can do is hope for the best. This must be the right path, because it is the answer to the dilemma, right?



Vision 29

The underground laboratory of Protogonus 3, in the NYC catacombs. He is kneeling before a hovering Vulcan, who is lit by his own fire.

Vulcan: You summoned me, my son?

Protogonus 3: Master, I have... my predecessor has... been defeated by a cyborg human, using one of our own kind against him. It is not enough for me to be as powerful as my weapon and as strong as my mechanisms. If I am

to represent you, I should be more like you. Grant me more power, more strength. If not enough to be equal to the gods, then at least give me enough that I can withstand the best the mortal organisms can pit against me.

Vulcan: You are what you are, Protogonus 3: As powerful as your weapon and as strong as your mechanisms. Dr. Race is the one who gave you the desire to improve yourself, but it is I who will make it possible for you. If I give you godhood outright, you will be a mere minion. One of many. If I guide you to giving yourself godhood, you will become my Dark Minion Exemplar, and that is ultimately what I want for you. My adamantite metal can only be affected by the gods, only myself, Mars and Jupiter have the strength to bend it, and it doesn't come easily, even for our kind.

Protogonus 3: I want it. I need it. I would use it in your service, my Master.

Vulcan: The ore for it doesn't exist on this planet, and it can be procured from just one body in this solar system; the planet Saturn. Here are the coordinates for a large deposit.

Vulcan gestures a sparkly that enters Protogonus 3's head.

Vulcan: Summon me when you have it and I'll tell you what to do with it.

Protogonus 3: Yes, Master.

Vulcan vanishes. Protogonus 3 flies up a shaft in the ceiling. A day counter is flipping numbers, like a rolodex, to purvey a time elapse. Protogonus 3 returns with a casing from a discarded rocket booster. The ends are bent closed. He sets it down on the floor of the lab. Then, he kneels at the spot where Vulcan had previously been.

Protogonus 3: Master, I have the ore.

Vulcan appears as before, hovering, lit by his own fire.

Vulcan: Show it to me.

Protogonus 3 peels back the front of the former piece of space junk, revealing that it's bearing inside it a huge load of raw Vulgarite ore.

Vulcan: That's a substantial amount of the ore. That will do for now, but you'll need more later. It's certain that you'll get it wrong a few times, before mastering the art of producing adamantine quality Vulgarite.

Vulcan removes his helmet. He's still and forever disfigured from his first fight with Mars, about 3 millennia ago. He takes his armored hands and pulls at the two protruding prongs on the pincer symbol on the face of it. With much straining, one of the prongs bends, slightly.

Vulcan: The weakest part of my armor.

Then he holds the helmet in his left hand and punches the side of it with his armored and spiked right fist, several times. No dents, not even a scratch. He puts the helmet back on, even with the bent decoration.

Vulcan: My old helmet was made of the same material, but was much thinner than this. The strength of Vulgarite is multiplied by its thickness. Thickness is the key. Not even in the same way it is with ordinary metals. It's something in the nature of these molecules. It's as if they empower one other. The greater the grouping of molecules, the stronger the molecules themselves become. Make your parts solid and your casings thick. Any fragile components can be hidden behind the solid parts, inside thick casings. When your body is the perfect compliment to the Vulgarite from which it is made, even Mars with his mace could not bend or separate your pieces.

Protogonus 3: Understood. Are there any special methods for processing the ore?

Vulcan: You must heat it to the intensity of the heart of a volcano, to make it malleable and to get it to temper properly.

Protogonus 3: What? How can I do that? ...

Vulcan: Find a way. I could do it with a gesture from my hand... but then, what kind of servant requires more service from his Master than he gives in return?

Protogonus 3: One not even fit for sacrifice. I'll do as you say, Master.

Vulcan disappears. Protogonus 3 stares at the empty air in front of his face, and makes electronic sounds, as if he's accessing information on how to

duplicate the heat of a volcano.

Protagonus 3: >beee-yaaaaaa-bul-blip!< ... >pip-pip-pip-pip-pip bla-bleep!<
...



Vision 30: Mighty Man; Retaliator

Retaliators Mansion. Upstairs, Mars, Tech War, Upsurge, Hotpoint, Captain Superhero and Jitara are conducting testing trials for Wanagi Akicita. His light blue costume is Native American in style, with a bit of influence from the old west “cowboys”, as many Native American costumes were, during a certain period in history. This “cowboy” influence includes a sidearm. Keeping with this hybrid theme, his tunic is double breasted, with bone shirt style gray stripes across it. The darkest thing on his costume is the Black Heart with the black letters “R.I.P.” above it, on his left breast, breaking the pattern of the bone stripes. His face is covered by a frontal mask, its edges are overlapped by his long white hair which flows over his shoulders in the front and back. The white hair is not the hair of a young man, it shows that he’s a man of some undeterminable amount of accumulated experience. He’s demonstrating intangibility, by passing his hand through the partition panel in front of the entrance door. His arm is entering on the side facing the door, and

his hand is coming out of the side facing them, so they can see it. When he does stuff like this, he shimmers with a glow, is partially translucent, his eyes shine like flashlights and he looks very much like an unnatural being. Other times he glows but looks otherwise normal. Other times he doesn't even glow, he just looks like a man in a costume. But he switches between those modes with a thought.

Mars: That's a useful power, Wanagi Akicita. Do you boast any super strength?

Wanagi Akicita: No.

Mars marks on a clipboard.

Mars: Invulnerability?

Wanagi Akicita: Oh, yes.

Mars: To what extent?

Wanagi Akicita: I don't exist. Therefore, I can't be killed.

Hotpoint (half smiling, amusedly): You don't exist? What are you then, a phantom?

Wanagi Akicita: Yes.

Wanagi Akicita un-holsters his weapon. It looks like a Solstice Lightning Gun, with Delta-Ray components. Lightning Guns were primitive 19th century stun guns, that could only be lethal with auxiliary power. Delta-Rays won't be developed until the 23rd century, as the solution to a certain robot uprising. The robots were encased in impervious armor, and very hard to kill. Delta Rays quantumly penetrate the armor and fry the circuits beneath. Its effect on organic bodies was far more horrific, and they were eventually outlawed as inhumane. The technology was rediscovered during the 2nd Apocalypse, and it is ever after exclusive to the Balkan royal family. Before the Retaliators can react, he spins it, then extends the butt of it to Mars. Wanagi Akicita is offering to be shot with his own weapon, as his demonstration of invulnerability. Mars reaches for the weapon, but then Wanagi Akicita has a thought, and moves his hand over to his left, offering the weapon to Jitara.

Jitara: Me ?

Wanagi Akicita: Indulge yourself. Call it “Paying Forward”.

Jitara takes the weapon, but looks confused.

Jitara: “Paying Forward”? What’s that?

Wanagi Akicita: It’s an old saying where I come from. It means; paying a debt before it’s owed brings good fortune.

Jitara: Whatever, dude. Sounds like some fat geezer Chinaman shit to me.

Jitara looks around to make sure Tigerlily’s not in the room, then turns the weapon around in his hand and gets a sly grin on his face. He points it at Wanagi Akicita.

Jitara: You ready?

Wanagi Akicita: I’m ready.

Jitara pulls the trigger. Wanagi Akicita’s chest is lit on fire. He lights up like a light bulb, and bursts of flash-fire shoot out of him. Chunks of flaming meat are expelled from the flash fires across his body, and the holes left behind are being widened by a cindering effect, like a moth a bug zapper. He grabs his chest, and looks like he’s about to fall. The Retaliators look stunned. A new Wanagi Akicita appears, replacing the one that was shot. The gun in Jitara’s hand disappears. The new Wanagi Akicita has one holstered.

Wanagi Akicita: I told you; I can’t be killed.

Hotpoint: That is the strangest thing I’ve ever seen in my life!

Mars: For a moment, you did look mortally wounded.

Wanagi Akicita: I’m fine. Not a scratch on me.

Jitara looks faint. Discreetly, he’s feeling his abdomen. The blood on the crimson part of his costume is barely discernable. And, also on his crimson gloves, when he feels the wet spot, and gets blood on his glove.

Mars: Are you alright, friend Jitara?

Jitara: >Whew< ! I'm just freaked out. I gotta walk around for a minute.

Jitara gets out of his chair, and paces a little.

Mars (To Wanagi Akicita): Do you have any other talents to speak of?

Wanagi Akicita disappears, and reappears behind them. They turn, and see him disappear and reappear in front of them again.

Wanagi Akicita: Countless many talents.

Hotpoint: Do you have a horse?

The other Retaliators look at her and grin. Wanagi Akicita disappears, and reappears a few feet behind where he was standing, astride a prancing gray stallion with lighter speckles. Wanagi Akicita begins to produce a golden glow.

Wanagi Akicita: If I want a horse, I have a horse. And, if I don't need a horse...

Wanagi Akicita and the horse disappear, and Wanagi Akicita reappears, alone, un-glowing, in his original position, in front of the panel of Retaliators.

Wanagi Akicita: ...there is no horse.

Hotpoint applauds, Upsurge, Jitara and Captain Superhero join in. Tech War starts to clap, then looks at his metal clad hands, and decides not to. He nods instead.

Tech War: If you don't mind my asking; why does someone using the persona of, I presume, a Nineteenth Century Native American Haunted Horseman use a ray-gun? It's an odd fit.

Wanagi Akicita: At some point in my career, I noticed my six-gun had developed an unfortunate tendency to fire phantom bullets. They sting like a bee, but not enough to bring a man down, or even incapacitate him. I had this made for me, by Ivan Solstice, the original inventor of plasma-discharge

technology, in the late Nineteenth Century. And, a man far ahead of his time, I must say.

Tech War: Shit! Pardon me, Candy, but, ... Shit! What else is good ol' Ivan known for?

There's a flash of light behind Tech War and the light can be seen through his lenses, coming through the space in his helmet between his under-mask and the lining of the helmet where it meets his face.

Tech War: Ow! I said "pardon me"!

Hotpoint: Okay, I pardon you for the first one and that's for the second one, the one after you said "pardon me".

Tech War: Give me a break. (To Wanagi Akicita) So, tell me more about your "friend", Ivan Solstice.

Wanagi Akicita: Are you testing me?

Tech War: These are the testing trials ...

Wanagi Akicita: You'd only embarrass yourself, since I could ask you questions about the founder and mayor of Solstice Arizona which you couldn't answer.

Tech War: That's it, you got me, since all else I knew about him, other than being an "ahead of his time" inventor, is that he was the founder and mayor of Solstice Arizona. As far as personal knowledge, you could say he liked green eggs and ham, and how would I know otherwise?

Wanagi Akicita: I guess you'll have to take my word for it.

Tech War looks at Mars with a combination nod and uncertain shrug.

Mar: You have listed here among your abilities the use of Soulfire Spectres. What are Soulfire Spectres?

Wanagi Akicita manifests three firey energy duplicates of himself hovering over his head. They each have their arms crossed and look as if waiting for a command.

Wanagi Akicita: These. They can pass through solid objects, seek their targets, and

they ... torture the soul of their victims. An experience that will haunt them for life.

Mars: If you are to join us, we'll see them demonstrated against hostile enemies. We are impressed. Return to the waiting room, while we interview the next candidate.

Wanagi Akicita vanishes the Spectres, opens the door, and exits. Mars pushes a button on the intercom on the table in front of him.

Mars: Ms. Shi, would you send in...

Mars checks his clipboard. Jitara leans over to the mic.

Mars: Mighty Man?

Jitara: Hello, Aali-yaaaaaaah!!! You're on the air with Rockin' 92 Point 5 The HITS!

Intercom: Knock it off, Robert, we're on duty. They're ready to see you, now.

Mighty Man enters, with a shy grin. He's wearing cobalt diamond goggles, formed into the shape of his old ones by a former tv star who failed these trials last year.

Mighty Man: Hi, guys.

Tech War: Well, hello, Casey. I had a feeling you'd show up here, eventually.

Mighty Man: Yeah, well, here I am!

Captain Superhero: Nice to see you again, Casey. You been staying away from Rascher?

Mighty Man nods "yes".

Mars: What are your talents?

Mighty Man: Well, first off, I'm super strong.

Mars reaches under the table, and produces a solid titanium bar.

Mars: Bend this.

Mighty Man takes the bar, and easily twists it into a pretzel shape. The Retaliators nod, as if they are impressed. He hands it to Mars, who places it back under the table. Now, to be the guy who flies through the sun and comes out smiling.

Mars: Very good. Do you possess any invulnerability?

Mighty Man: Yeah, I'm indestructible.

Captain Superhero looks at Tech War, and shakes his head, slightly.

Mars: Jitara, would you care to do the honors, again?

Jitara: Sure! Can I borrow Wanagi Akicita's ray-gun, again?

Mars starts to press the button on the intercom.

Mighty Man: No, wait! Never mind.

Captain Superhero looks at Tech War, and nods his head, slightly.

Mighty Man: But, I've got these belt-jets. I can fly.

Mighty Man activates his belt-jets, and hovers a few feet off the ground. He lands.

Mars: Do you boast any more talents?

Mighty Man: Yeah, I know some martial...

He looks at Flash, who's shaking his head at him.

Mighty Man: No, I guess that's about it.

Mars: Very well. You are dismissed, until we call you back in.

Mighty Man: So, do I go home now, or what?

Mars: No. The waiting room. We need to discuss your potential for

Retaliators membership. We'll call you back in, when we make a decision.
Mighty Man: O.k., thanks.

Mars nods, and Mighty Man exits.

Upsurge: Isn't he a bad guy?

Tech War: No. He was manipulated by Rascher.

Captain Superhero: Yeah, I knew if he spent enough time away from Rascher's influence, his true nature would emerge. And he did say he hasn't been around Rascher, lately.

Jitara: Yeah, if you believe that! I got a bad hunch. I think he's hiding something.

Upsurge: Yeah, I got that feeling, too. On the one hand, he seems sincere. On the other hand, I don't think we have been presented with the complete picture.

Hotpoint: Yeah, what if he's a spy? Sent by Rascher?

Captain Superhero: Then, we'll catch him in the act, give him a sound thumping, and send him back to Rascher, with his tail between his legs.

Mars nods.

Mars: And what of this Wanagi Akicita?

Jitara: Oh, my God! What the hell? I thought I'd killed him!

Hotpoint: That was so creepy. But, he is very talented.

Mars: That, he is. So, the dilemma is this; We only need to fill one space on the roster. Which one do we prefer?

Upsurge: I vote for Wanagi Akicita.

Hotpoint: Me, too.

Mars: All those in favor of Mighty Man; raise your hand.

Captain Superhero and Tech War raise their hands.

Mars: All those in favor of Wanagi Akicita; raise your hand.

Upsurge, Hotpoint and Jitara raise their hands.

Mars: This is going to be a close one. Hotpoint; would you relieve Tigerlily, so we may hear her vote?

Hotpoint: Yeah, I'll go get her.

Hotpoint walks out. Shortly, Tigerlily walks in. She takes Hotpoint's seat, next to Upsurge.

Mars: Wanagi Akicita demonstrated teleportation, intangibility, restorative powers, the command of weaponized energy creatures, and has a ray-gun. Mighty Man has super strength and the ability to fly, with the aid of a compact jet assembly. You spent time with both men, in the waiting room. Which one has your vote?

Tigerlily: Well, Mighty Man kept going on about how this has always been his dream. I sensed his sincerity. I believe him. But, with Wanagi Akicita, I sensed nothing. I couldn't even sense his presence in the room, even though I was looking right at him. That's very unusual, for me. My sensory perceptions are very attuned. It was like I was alone in the room. I don't know what to think about that. Except that I feel more comfortable voting for Mighty Man.

Mars: We are tied. It seems mine is the deciding vote.

Captain Superhero: Why do we have to decide? There's plenty of room here in the mansion for both of them.

Tech War: I'll speak to Arthur Reddingfield. I'm sure I can get his approval.

Mars: Very well. Let us see what the candidates have to say, then if I can't decide, we'll take both. Perhaps it will make it easier to give others of you extra days off.

Mars presses the button on the mic.

Mars: Ms. Newmeyer, would you bring in both candidates, please?

Voice Of Hotpoint: O.k., Mars.

A wristwatch rewinds about two minutes. Then it stops, ticks forward one second, then back one second. In the waiting room, Wanagi Akicita seems appropriately blasé, but he's actually listening very intently to this account of Retaliators history, coming straight from the mouth of a founding member.

Mighty Man, amused by her bubbly personality, is more interested in the way she's saying it.

Hotpoint: I was a gymnast before I was powered. That's why I'm so tiny. I'm actually big, compared to the top girls. I never made it to the Olympics, but I competed in the nationals. Now, I'm a gymnast in the air! That's why I'm so hard to hit! I've been at this three years, now, and haven't been hurt, yet, knock wood. I'd always begged daddy to get me a power for my 18th birthday, the professional places won't do it for underage kids, naturally. I choosed bio-energy displacement because I just wanted to point at things and blow them up. That didn't sound right. Let me put it like this: I'm a small person with a big personality. I like to think that if I walk into a place, and someone on the far side of the room isn't paying attention to me, I can get their attention! Ha, ha, ha! It was really the picture in the enhancement catalogue that made me choose it: A girl that kind of looked like me, pointing at a car and zapping it and it was a fireball. "I wanna do that!" But, there was more came with it than just that. The nifty part of it was, I can direct the bio energy out of any part of my body, so if I make it come out of my feet, it lifts me off the ground. I can fly, go figure! Less than a week after getting my "birthday enhancement", as Tech War calls it, I found myself in the Retaliators, and I've been here ever since. Yeah, that makes me 21. I'm not old enough to be secretive about my age, yet. But, when I am, I will, don't worry. Jackson's 31. He's ten whole years older than me, but it's okay, it's not like he's daddy's age or anything twisted like that. I didn't know he liked me, at first, he was such a jerk to me all the time. But everybody was like "He likes you, he likes you". And I was like "Why, did he tell you that?" And they were like "No, but can't you tell?" And I was like "Nooo ." Turns out it was a great honor, because the last girlfriend he had got killed working on the cyber-giants with him, and he hadn't dated anyone since. I'm flattered he chose me to be the one to return him to the land of the living. Please don't ever mention anything about his dead girlfriend.

Mighty Man: Of course not. That's not exactly material to start a conversation with.

Hotpoint: No.

Mighty Man: You haven't had a full roster, since Esron quit. How come?

Hotpoint: It does seem like we've always been one or two or three short. Plenty of replacements have come and gone, but they were all fakes, or crooks. All this fuss about S.P.I.'s, you'd think it would be easier to find a good one. The first time we held auditions, they filled up the entire ferry, it seemed like. And more were waiting, but we didn't have time for them all. That's why we look over applications first, and do a background check, to make sure they got the goods, and are legit. Nothing against humans, we started with a human, now we got two. But they have real skills and real power, even if the power's not natural, power's power, and you gotta have something to bring to the team besides a costume and a made up persona. God bless the pretenders, their hearts' in the right place, but they should just go have a costume party and stop applying for the Retaliators! The first two we found that had real power, a man and a woman, we let 'em on the team. But then some of Jackson's gadgets and some of Tech War's power packs and such went missing and we found it in an organized crime outfit and traced it back to them. They're in jail now. We had a chance to get Prestolicious Pie Guy, the spokesman for Prestolicious Fruit Pies. He wore his same genie costume he wears in the commercials, turban and all. I couldn't tell, even in person, if his green skin is real or makeup. He's so funny to watch, though. He has that long skinny mustache and he looks just like a man, but he talks and acts as girlish as I do, and acts so silly. No wonder he's such a hit on tv. In spite of his stupid name, he has some pretty cool powers. He can fly and hover and has a magic wand that can turn raw fruit and batter into Prestolicious Fruit Pies. They looked just like the ones in the store, but only tasted like plain diced fruit in dry dough. Made me want a real one. He can turn wood into paper, roses into carnations, frogs into lizards, anything that's made of the same stuff, he can change. But the frog/lizard died really horribly, and he made the appeal that being in the Retaliators would boost his acting career. Mars told him to get out of his presence. Mars said later he didn't want Pie Guy because he doesn't have a warrior's heart. Then there were the Brawlers, three strongmen with the exact same power, but they did different things with it. Like different gimmicks, you know. They were paid by somebody to foul us up. We got out of the jam they put us in, but they got away. We don't know who hired them. That was right before we got Jitara, Tigerlily and Captain Superhero, all in the same day. Captain Superhero just popped up from the past, conveniently, right

when we most needed somebody like that. He doesn't know how it happened. No one does. Even though there wasn't a body, he'd been written off as dead, for years. Funny, his big adjustment to our time wasn't how far we've advanced, but the opposite; how far we haven't advanced. They had big ideas about the future back then and we disappointed him, I guess. Even Tech War was just a cross between himself and his friend Clank, as Flash saw it. "Put my wings on Clank and it's the same thing", he said. Except Clank was like fifteen feet tall with a man in a cockpit. Till Major Yarborough got absorbed into the machine. I know everything knowable about the Line Breakers. They're why I'm here, really. I think Arthur got the idea for the Cyber Giants from imagining Captain Superhero's wings on Clank. That was way before Captain Superhero returned. The Cyber Giants were Arthur's idea, but Jackson is the one that made them work, mostly. They told Flash about the Cyber Giants and he was like "See? Nothing new. Forty years just to work out the bugs of what we already had that was glitching all the time." Tech War said "We're still working on that." He used to get pinched, mashed and cut a lot, in his suit. Flash was the most impressed that all our electrical stuff makes its own electricity now. Thanks to Jackson's little glowing corkscrew thingees.

Wanagi Akicita: Baryon Extractors.

Hotpoint: Thanks. I'd been cordless like everybody else since it came out and I didn't know Jackson invented it until I knew him for six months. I'd thought Arthur Reddingfield invented it. I think most people still think that. Anyway, after Flash got 'climatated to the 80's, he wanted to stay with us, because we reminded him of the Line Breakers. I wonder if the similarity was any of my doing, since I helped form the Retaliators. *Or...*, a super team's a super team. Right before Captain Superhero appeared, Tech War got a new armor, made to look almost the same as Flash's. After Flash joined, Tech War stood next to him and said "I look like your sidekick". Flash said "Last time I saw my sidekick, he looked like a flaming skull". I guess he was still sore about that. But he and Tech War are great friends, now, even though Flash nearly killed him that first day, when he was confused. He missed Tech War's head by less than an inch, and dented a wall made out of the same stuff as Tech War's helmet, and as thick as his whole head. Flash normally wouldn't dent titanium that thick, but he wasn't thinking about it. Everybody's more super than they think.

Mighty Man: Tech War's lucky. Captain Superhero didn't miss my head. I got it, several times. The last two knocked me out. There was one in the back of my helmet, it didn't cave it in, but it rang bells, and HURT! But, I don't think he was trying for major damage. We actually made friends, during the fight.

Hotpoint: He likes you. He's the main one batting for you in there. We were still one short, after we got our last three, and have been ever since. Even a few months ago, that time when we met you. You should've joined us then, we could've used you.

Mighty Man: They wouldn't have taken me. They'd just arrested me.

Hotpoint: They spoke up for you, in court. Probably hoping you'd join.

Mighty Man: Really? You think?

Hotpoint: Probab-lee.

Mighty Man: Oh. Well, better late than never, I guess.

Wanagi Akicita: That's fascinating, but I'd like to hear about how Mars became king of Terra. I've seen the press version, but I'd much prefer to hear it from someone who was there.

Hotpoint: All the way to the beginning?

Wanagi Akicita: If you don't mind.

Hotpoint: They'll be buzzing any minute, but I'll start, anyway. After we rescued Stump Puller from the Army and Mars realized he was tricked by the government into attacking an innocent man, he was miffed. He got into a bit of an argument with the colonel in charge, and they pointed guns at him, and he just vanished all their guns away. He said the guns couldn't harm him, but one of the bullets might hit one of us, or one of their own. He called the colonel a fool and some other bad names. The colonel said he prepridents the... bluah, bluah, bluah... represents the president of the United States and no sooner did he say that than the president appeared, right there in front of us. First time I met the president. We've seen him several times since then. He said I could call him Ronnie, can you believe that? I kept saying "Mr. President". But that first time, back at Gilboa Dam, he was all blustery, trying to make excuses for why they were trying to kill "Creature X", that's what the Army was calling Stump Puller, to make it seem like he's some dreadful monster. Mars first mistook Frankie for a demon, because he looks like a blob of white fire with eyes, arms and legs, when he's upset. He looked like that on the news too, but us S.P.I.'s knew he was like us, and we weren't

going to let them kill somebody for being like us. Tech War came there to help the Army, but he was already friends with Citizen Defender and Upsurge. While he was behind their lines, he saw them putting together a gun that shoots a bullet big enough to kill Upsurge, so he lasered it, freed Citizen Defender and started helping me, Psion-Man and Esron wreck their trucks and tanks. We were beating the Army while Mars was beating poor Frankie. After Mars beat Stump Puller really badly, he turned back into what he really is; an overgrown short bus kid with glowing orange skin. That's when Mars started seeing it our way. The government had targeted Stump Puller to cover up that they were dumping toxic gunk in the backwoods. Frankie'd thought it was barrels of soup and ate a bunch of it. That's how he changed. The Army was also trying to make an example out of Stump Puller that the S.P.I.'s are dangerous and should be regulated. Mars revealed that he is the real Mars from the old legends, and the S.P.I.'s are actually demigods, not mutants like they'd always thought, and not only will they not be regulated, but he intends to regulate the government, and in fact, all the governments of the world. He said don't worry, he's ruled the world before, only this time he's older, wiser and way more benevolent, and they should be glad of that. Turns out, the president was a big fan of the real gods, especially Mars, and so are a lot of other presidents and world leaders. After the initial awkwardness, Mars and the president talked alone, away from the rest of us, and I guess that's when Ronnie told him about the Overlords. The Overlords were following dark gods. We can't say devils' names because it gets their attention. I'd name streets after them, to give them false alarms all the time, but that's just my idea. The Overlords sent an army of cyborg birdmen called Daedalocor against us. That was sad, because they were made out of humans. We saved some, by turning off their bad programming. Mars showed the top Overlords the dark dimension and offered for them to live there, as human slaves, rather than face the Divine Arbiters after their executions. Some chose that. The Retaliators had nothing to do with the executions. The people did it.

Mighty Man: Did Mars really bitch slap Joint Chief Mayweather at the U.N. Summit?

Hotpoint: Don't cuss in front of me. I'll zap you if you do. You've been warned. I won't zap you during missions, because that would be counterproductive, though I would appreciate it if you keep me in mind,

though I do understand how it gets sometimes. Anyway, yeah, the general kept interrupting, saying humanity's been conquered by the mutants. And Mars slapped him like a what-you-said, right in front of all the presidents and kings of the world. He told him to sit down and shut up, and he's too stupid to be a general, and they're lucky they didn't get that war they were trying for. Mars said it too formal to remember word for word, but Psion-Man said something similar to the press; "Don't take on your supermen, they just might beat'cha!" Ha! We still catch authoritarians plotting meanness behind the scenes sometimes, and we go nab 'em. "Bustin' rogue leaders like they drug dealers" one citizen said to a field reporter one time. And it's not a conquest, like that turkey suggested. There was a global vote. We'd learned our elections have been rigged since always, so activists made sure that didn't happen. Mars had instantly made crops flourish in all the impoverished nations, he vanished away all the post war nukes, he was offering peace, prosperity, and even technology for deep space travel. Who wouldn't vote to be better off in every way? We don't mess with established law. We just have sweeping laws like "Be good, be nice to each other, or else!" Funny, yeah I know. But seriously, I mean, the guy who was killed for his wallet and the guy who was killed over two countries' bickering, they're both just as dead. How could one be illegal and the other not? That inconsistency's sorted, now, thanks to our very old and equally wise Chairman. He helped terra form the planet Mars, even beyond the Outcast Colony, so there's a whole 'nother planet we can live on, if we want, making overpopulation no longer a problem. There are natives, but they're used to being underground, anyway. Oh, if you get to stay, don't be surprised to see tanks with little mermaids, all over the house. They're not really mermaids, they're just dumb fish that live in the Martian cave ponds and all they do is swim around and eat slime all day. But they have faces, they're so cute! The Martians eat piles of them, all the time. I'm no vegetarian, but I wouldn't eat anything cute. Especially with the face still on it, like they do. I rescued about a half dozen and brought them back with me. We ended up with hundreds. I gave most away and kept twenty. We have to keep them in separate tanks, because they breed so much. I guess they have to, the way the Martians just gobble them up with no regard for their sweet little faces. They don't really look like people, as much as cartoon people, with their great big eyes and itty bitty mouths, but still. The

Martians didn't know what Terrans looked like, till the Outcasts landed, a few years back. From their point of view, they probably think we look like cave fish. They look like rats. You've seen the pictures, probably. But they're a lot like us. Technologically, they're behind us in a lot of ways, and ahead of us in a few ways. Imagine cavemen with far-out secret science, like the Sleestaks on Land Of The Lost. Most can be got along with, some can't, just like here. The Faulks are a different story, though. They're not our neighbors, they're not even from this galaxy. Their homeworld is called Earth and the whole universe has always called ours Terra, so we're Terrans now. The cincher for the humans to accept Mars' leadership was when he sent the entire Faulk invasion force back to their planet Earth, with their tails between their legs. We'd probably be slaves, or food, for those lizardy monsters, right now, if it hadn't been for Mars. We have a utopia, of sorts, only it can't be complete, so long as there are still jerks in the world. The universe, actually, as it turns out. Mars is doing what he can about that. That's what the Retaliators are for. Really, we're just his backup, all of us together don't equal him. Etron and Psion-Man came the closest, but they're gone now. From the Retaliators, I mean. Psion-Man went back to crime fighting, after the little creep who had it in for him shot him in the back, and Etron went nuts over woman troubles. Coincidentally, Stump Puller also went nuts, probably not over a woman, what with him being "Special Ed" and all. We still don't know what's bugging him. Anyway, Mars can do most of our powers better than we can. He can even grow, but he tries to refrain from it, because of Jackson, you know. He's ultimate; impervious to everything, except his Achilles Tendon; the god gene. He could take over the humans the wrong way, if he wanted, because they can't harm him. If they had all their nukes back and hit him with all of them at the same time, it wouldn't even muss his hair. But someone like us, the S.P.I.'s, could take just one nuke and maybe knock him down with it. It has something to do with Saturn making a curse a long time ago that the gods can be harmed by other gods, and we S.P.I.'s are part. Except, unlike the real gods, we can be harmed by humans, it doesn't seem fair. Poor Psion-Man, maybe he'll rejoin someday.

Mighty Man: That's baffled me ever since. I'd thought Psion-Man was invulnerable. I've seen news footage of a direct shot with a tank shell, that didn't even move him. How'd a scrawny unpowered kid with a handgun bring him down?

Hotpoint: The boy knew how. I don't know how. He didn't exactly advertise his weakness, I wouldn't, either. Jackson operated on him, so he probably knows, but he hasn't said anything about it. Doctor/patient confidentiality, and Psion-Man probably asked him not to tell. If you were invulnerable, would you want people knowing your Achilles Tendon?

Mighty Man (Smiling): Heel.

Hotpoint: What? Are you saying "heel", "heal" or "hill"?

Mighty Man (Smiling): What?

Wanagi Akicita rolls his eyes as if he doesn't care if this gets resolved. He motions with his right hand like brushing crumbs off a table, or gesturing to move it along. The intercom light comes on.

Voice Of Mars: Ms. Newmeyer, would you bring in both candidates, please?

Hotpoint: O.k., Mars.

She lets go of the button and addresses the candidates.

Hotpoint: Wow, they must've had a drawn out debate, if they talked as long as us.

Wanagi Akicita is sitting there looking suspicious, as we try to compare the length of the panel's discussion to the length of her ramble, taking into account that she was already started by the time we joined. But who'd know the difference, but us?

Hotpoint: This is the big moment, guys. He's very speechy when it comes to official stuff like this, but whatever you do, don't speak when Mars is speaking. He'll let you know when he's ready to hear you. Good luck!

Hotpoint, Wanagi Akicita and Mighty Man enter the room. Tigerlily scooches over to let Hotpoint sit next to her fiancé. The candidates stand in front of the table.

Mars: Gentlemen; The Retaliators is something very much like a self-sustaining corporation. We offer free health care, a dental plan, free room and

board, and many other benefits, including a weekly salary of a thousand dollars, plus bonuses for missions, consistent to the hazard. All this is provided by revenue generated by the sale of Official Retaliators Merchandise; posters, trading cards, action figures, costumes and accessories, graphic novel and movie rights, talk show and convention appearances, etc. In addition to providing funds for member salaries, this also provides an expense account which pays to maintain our headquarters, our equipment, such as the Hyperjets, and you may also petition to have maintenance of any of your own gear which is used in Retaliator service provided for, out of the Retaliators Incorporated expense account. Any such petitions will be forwarded to Arthur Reddingfield, who is the principal shareholder in The Retaliators Inc. You are not under exclusive contract to the Retaliators. If you want to pursue private business ventures you are free to do so, even in matters related to your costumed persona, but you will not make any reference to the Retaliators in such dealings. The Retaliators Incorporated does not own your individual persona, but make no mistake, it does own your Retaliator persona. Id est, if you make an appearance as yourself, you get paid. If you make an appearance as a Retaliator, we get paid. Fair enough? Either way, you still get your Retaliators salary, because we make money off you, whether you do or not. Associate Retaliators don't get a salary, but can be paid for duties and services, receive mission bonuses, and have full access to the facilities, equipment and such, as a fulltime member would. Currently, we have only one associate member, Binadamu Mkingaji of Kenya, also known as Citizen Defender. He works with us only when he is in this country or we are in his, or if other circumstances permit. Binadamu Mkingaji is not his civilian name, that's actually Swahili for Citizen Defender. His identity is not public, but we Retaliators know who he is. We call this "Identity; Confidential". Most of us have public identities. Jitara's identity is not public, but the Retaliators know who he is. His identity is known by too many outside sources for the secret to be contained, and he hasn't asked us to try, but he has asked that we don't promote his identity publicly, so we don't. Anyone who wants to know who he is can find out, but they won't hear it from us. Ex-Retaliator Psion-Man's identity is secret, though a troubled young man named Eugene Douglas Shedowee did claim publicly to have proof of his identity, a couple years ago. You are probably aware of this, as

the drama did play out on the news and tabloid tv shows. What you may not know is that during that fiasco, Psion-Man revealed his identity to us Retaliators, but his identity is still not known to the public. A new Retaliator in probationary status would not be privy to this information, and even a fully established new member would only be told if there is a situation which warrants it. We who know, know, and that's all who need to know. Tech War's identity is secret, although we have suspected various R.I. associates, including the CEO himself, but Tech War has appeared with each of our most likely suspects, so it's a mystery. I'm sure he's smiling inside his helmet right now, whoever he is. If he doesn't want to be known, then we don't need to know. We only need to know that he does his job, and he does it well. I have means at my disposal that could avail to me the knowledge of his identity, but that would be dishonorable, since he doesn't want me to know. As Chairman, I am the last one who would betray the trust of one of my Retaliators. Arthur Reddingfield knowing Tech War's identity is validation of Arthur Reddingfield's credibility. Mighty Man's identity was revealed to us at Virtu-Tech and somewhat to the public at his trial, but if you want to make your identity a secret, your public exposure wasn't headline news at the time, but it was covered by the media. If you are to be a Retaliator, there will be an increased interest in you, and it would be near impossible to get every drop back into the bottle, once its contents are spilled. That can't be helped, but if you wish to not have your private identity publicized alongside your public persona, we can accommodate that. Wanagi Akicita chose not to put his real name on his application, which is your right, but you should know that your probationary status is 3 months if you tell us your identity, and 6 months if you don't. Just telling it to myself and Tech War would suffice toward that end. And we would keep your secret, as would any other Retaliator you choose to tell. The requirements for being a full time Retaliator are these; you must be on call at all times, even when you are not on duty. You will be expected to do battle with very powerful and dangerous super criminals, and display valor in your efforts to set things aright in a world which spent thousands of years skewed to the wrong path, and is still accustomed to leaning that way. Gentlemen; being a Retaliator is not just a job, it's a calling.

He's looking at them, as if waiting for a response.

Mighty Man: I can do it. I was born to be a Retaliator.

Mars looks at Wanagi Akicita.

Wanagi Akicita: I can't live here. I'm a very busy phantom. Lots of places to be and people to haunt. Also, I can't be on call, because where I go I can't be reached.

Upsurge: Then, why are you here?

Wanagi Akicita: I'm more interested in being one of those associate Retaliators. You know, like the Citizen Defender.

The Retaliators look at each other, dumfounded.

Mars: Very well. When you are at hand, you may assist us. When you are not available, we'll make do without you. Mighty Man; can you move into the mansion, and be on call, even when you are off duty?

Mighty Man: Yeah, I'll go get my stuff, and I can be moved in by this evening.

Upsurge: Wait! What about his connection to Doktor Rascher?

Jitara: Yeah, what about that?

Mighty Man gets a little jittery.

Hotpoint: Casey, will you tell us where Rascher's hideout is?

Mighty Man: Oh, he never stays in the same place. A different hotel room, every night. There's no telling where he's holed up, now. Sorry I can't be of more help.

Jitara: You see? He's holding out! I'm tellin' ya, he's holdin' out!

Mighty Man: I'm not, I swear! I don't even like Rascher. He's a first class jerk, who took advantage of my misfortunes. I belong here.

Tech War: I believe you, Casey.

Jitara: I'm... I don't know. Maybe. You do seem sincere, Mighty Man. But, I'm just not so sure about the content of your character.

Mighty Man: I'm... sorry you feel that way.

Mars: I, too, had some misgivings about your character, but I think that within your breast, there beats the heart of a true hero. And my perceptions of

such things are seldom amiss. I will vouch for this man.

Tech War: Well, you heard it from the best of us! Who's gonna disregard the word of The Mythical Mars?

Upsurge: Not me!

Hotpoint: Whatever Jackson says goes ditto for me!

Captain Superhero: I knew you guys would come around!

Jitara shakes his head, then raises his hand.

Jitara: O.k. If you guys believe in him, so do I. I change my vote.

Upsurge and Hotpoint raise their hands.

Hotpoint: Me, too.

Upsurge: Me, too.

Mars bangs a gavel.

Mars: So, it's unanimous. Welcome to the Retaliators, Mighty Man. Go get your things, and commence moving in. Your room is on the third floor, west wing, last door on the left. I, or someone else will be here to see that you get settled in, properly. About the matter of Wanagi Akicita as an Associate Retaliator; all in favor, signify by raising your hand.

All the Retaliators at the table raise their hands. Tigerlily does it reluctantly.

Mighty Man: Do I get a vote?

Mars: Not that it could sway the result, but yes, you may vote.

Mighty Man raises his hand and looks proud of himself.

Wanagi Akicita: I noticed you've been peeping at my weapon. Wanna see it?

Wanagi Akicita spins his gun around a few times, then presents it to Mighty Man, in the palm of his hand. Mighty Man jumps back.

Mighty Man: No, thanks! I don't... like guns. (to the Retaliators) I'll... go get my stuff.

Mighty Man turns and fumbles for the doorknob, shaking like a leaf. He exits.

Wanagi Akicita: Ha, ha! I musta spooked the poor boy!

Wanagi Akicita disappears.

Vision 31

Rascher's penthouse terrace. Mighty Man flies up and lands. He immediately runs into Jhotica's room, and opens the door. She's there, waiting.

Jhotica: So, how'd it go?

Mighty Man: It went great! I'm in!

She jumps up, and they embrace. He picks her up, and spins her around. Then, he sets her down and they talk.

Mighty Man: Some of 'em were hard to sway, because... well, you know. But I'm in! I'm really a Retaliator!

Jhotica: That's great news, Casey! I'm so happy for you!

Mighty Man: Yeah, it only pays a thousand dollars a week. It's nothing compared to what Rascher pays. But it's enough to start, you know..., setting aside a nest egg, for, you know..., the future.

Jhotica blushes. Then, she reaches down into a drawer, and pulls out a huge chunk of hundred dollar bills. She hands it to Mighty Man.

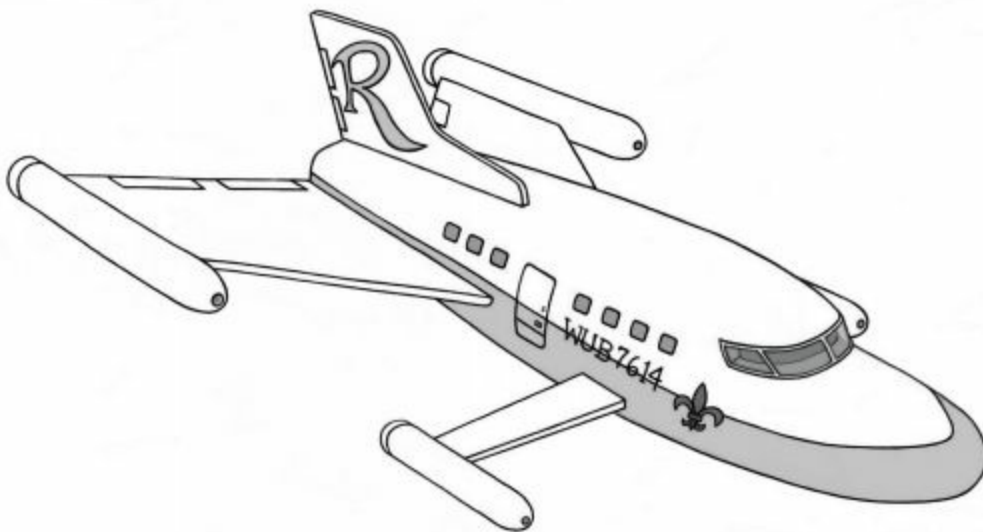
Jhotica: Here. Rascher wanted you to have this.

Mighty Man pushes it away.

Mighty Man: I can't except this! I'm a Retaliator, now.

Jhotica: It's just a little something... for the future.

Mighty Man hesitates, then takes the money. He places it in a suitcase that was already on the bed, half packed. They continue the packing, together.



§

Vision 32: The Unperceived Deceiver

Robert's room at night. The guy's asleep, alone, with his shirt off. He is uncovered from the waist up, and his abdomen bandages are showing. The

room is dark, but not pitch dark. Lightly colored things appear dark blue, from the small amount of starlight coming from the open-draped third floor window. Wanagi Akicita appears, standing over him. The phantom's very person is a source of light. Like a solid ghost. Additionally, there's a cylinder of light surrounding him, with no apparent source. Like a section of a well lit room has been apple-cored away intact, and placed in this otherwise dark room. He places a small electronic device on Robert's forehead. Close-up of Robert's face shows his lids open, his eyes roll back in his head, then his eyes closing again. Wanagi Akicita pulls up the chair from the bedside table, and sits in it. He unwraps the bandages, and sniffs and wheezes, like something stinks, horribly.

Wanagi Akicita: >Gagh< !

Wanagi Akicita reaches his left hand out to his left, as if someone will hand him something. A hand gloved with a glove like his own materializes, as it reaches into the space near Wanagi Akicita. The disembodied Wanagi Akicita hand offers Wanagi Akicita an aerosol can. After the can is received, the hand retracts back out of the field of materialization. Wanagi Akicita sprays Robert's wound, then hands the can back to nothing, then the bodiless hand reaches back into the field of materialization, and collects it. The hand with the can withdraws back into the nothingness and another Wanagi Akicita hand reaches in from the opposite side, with a scalpel. Without even looking, as if he was expecting it, Wanagi Akicita holds his right hand out, to receive the scalpel. The hand draws back into nothingness. After he's finished, he hands off the scalpel and leaves his hand out, to receive a pen-shaped laser. Pointing the laser at the wound and activating it, a flat wide beam emanates from the laser, in the direction of the wound. The laser pen is then traded for a roll of wide, perforated, skin-colored tape. Wanagi Akicita takes the roll of tape, tears off a strip and places it on the wound. The roll of tape is then handed back to the waiting disembodied hand, which withdraws back out of the materialization area. Wanagi Akicita stands and places the chair back under the bedside table.

Aaliyah: What are you doing in here?

Wanagi Akicita: Why, I'm healing his wound, of course.

Aaliyah: What wound?

Wanagi Akicita: The wound he acquired on his last ... solo mission.

Wanagi Akicita holds out the old blood and puss-stained bandage.

Aaliyah: It figures. I should've known he'd never stop. Once a mercenary, always a mercenary, I suppose. So, now answer my question: Why are you here?

Wanagi Akicita walks out of the spotlight area. It vanishes, but the room is still dimly lit. Brighter, closer to him.

Wanagi Akicita: He never would've sought outside help, for fear of his ... other interests ... being discovered. And, his wound was very infected.

Aaliyah: So, you're a doctor?

Wanagi Akicita: A medicine man. Experienced in the art of ... battlefield surgery.

Aaliyah: A medicine man? He needs a real doctor! I'm going to call an ambulance...

She reaches for the phone and he grabs her hand.

Wanagi Akicita: It's not necessary. I assure you, his injury is now properly treated. And, by bringing this to outside attention, you run the risk of exposing his secrets, and yours, to the light of day.

She pulls her hand away from him, then grabs his hand with her other hand, and performs a bending-his-thumb-back move on him. That Wanagi Akicita vanishes away from her clutches and another reappears, standing over Robert's bed, as if nothing happened.

Aaliyah: What the hell are you, apparition? You are not a spirit, I know. I have been visited by spirits. They communicated with me with their minds. I don't know what you're thinking until you speak, and then you never say it right. You are not here. You are a hologram, unless you can give me a better explanation.

Wanagi Akicita: I am nothing. And, everything. All at the same time.

Aaliyah: What does that mean?

Wanagi Akicita: Do you really want to know?

Aaliyah: I asked, didn't I?

Wanagi Akicita: I am the Morning Star. Worlds are created and destroyed in my path. I am the Twilight, the Dawn, and all between. I am immortal, eternal, ageless. Eternity. I have witnessed the births and deaths of the gods. I have seen history unfold an infinite number of ways. Always I am there, influencing history and the historic, in my own way. To suit my own purposes. The Other... he can't come to Terra without paying tribute to my servant, Time. He... ages. I never do. While he is bound to the heavens, Terra is my domain. My playground. I interact with history. I make history, while he watches it like TV, never realizing that mine is the unseen hand, pulling the strings. I have always been here. I always will be. He exists, nowhere. I don't exist, in reality. So, which of us is real, and which is the illusion? I am the oldest being in existence.

Aaliyah: That's a great feat, for the nonexistent !

Wanagi Akicita: Is it? Is there a rule that the nonexistent can't exist? If so, who made the rule? Who enforces it? Does existence really exist, or does it only just seem to? Perhaps I am the only real thing in a holographic Multiverse. Matter is the illusion, and I've merely broken free of my bond to my flesh. My presence speaks for itself, regardless of what your "attuned perceptions" perceive. Perhaps I have transcended beyond your present ability to perceive. Perhaps my vibrations are on the same frequency as the vibrations of the universe, which your ears do hear, but your conscious mind fails to register, because the hum is never not there. You aren't the only one who fails to perceive me. The Other doesn't know I am manifest. He thinks he knows my end. He doesn't know I continued in a new form. There're more kinds of spirits than spirits of what was. I am the spirit of what wasn't. It was at the age I now appear to be, mid-fifties it was, it's actually been several infinities for me since then, that I assured my continuance, not by tying my existence to one reality or two but to all of them. My first plan was brilliant, in its own right. I stole certain artifacts that I knew my bifurcates would be drawn to, and redistributed them in similar but different realities where the same items existed, so that when my bifurcates stole the copies of

those items which did belong in that reality and redistributed them to still more realities, as I had done, we'd have all these realities where things seemed to belong, but were actually out of place. By merely participating in this redistribution of artifacts, I was connected to all the realities involved, even the ones I hadn't been to. That's how I first learned I could trick time. I played a game with the Timescape. I'd take several time copies of some historic baseball and redistribute them across the past and future of those same realities. Not randomly, but in a pattern that only I knew. Like a temporal shell game. Then, I'd go back to one of the realities just before I stole the ball, and destroy it. Just to see if the Timescape would erase the correct redistributed ball. Every time, no matter how well I mixed them up, it always knew the correct ball to erase. So, I did it again, only this time, I manipulated another reality that was not directly but indirectly tied to the reality to which the original ball belonged. So that someone who was meant to cross time would save the life of someone who would hold a place in a lunchline for a woman who would say "Hi" to the man who would fill the bucket of balls, subtly effecting the order in which the balls were batted in that key timeline, thus changing which ball would become historic. Then, when I destroyed the copy of the ball before I stole it, as I'd done before, the redistributed ball which should have been the right one couldn't possibly have been. Because, when I'd placed it, it was the other ball! I cheated, but I won! Cheating is the only way to beat the Timescape. It's done by using its own laws and failsafes against it. Presented with enough conflicting overlapped conundrums, there's a point at which the Timescape gives in, and bows to your mastery of it. Else it could itself be damaged by the enforcement of its own laws. Its reward to me was power. It's a risky game, though. The penalties for failure can be severe. Ultimate, even. But, compared to the reward, it's a risk well worth taking. The more I beat time at its own game, the more powerful I became. The same effect could be accomplished by killing those who were meant to live, or saving those who were meant to die. This creates new realities which belong to me, because I created them. I am God to those universes. As they and everything else I do increase my power, that becomes less a conceptual truth, and more a practical one. We Potnik of Čas Potovanja Stroj are God. The Passenger is God. All timelines are bifurcated by I and we. We are the expansion and contraction of the Timescape. In my godform I bifurcated my Other, and participated in the

rebirthing of reality, therefore I am indispensable to the Timescape. When my younger self died, it is one of the core laws of time that I should be undone. But with my influence so permeating all realities, how could the Timescape erase me completely, without erasing itself? This is the compromise; I'm not here, yet, here I am. Dead, but alive. While I was flesh, I was vulnerable. But in death, I am immortal. This tells me that I am The One. Because, when he dies, he's gone. When I die... I'm still here. I'll always be here. Since my influence goes all the way back to the beginning, it's true that I always have been here.

Aaliyah: Ha! I've caught you in your bullshit! I thought it sounded familiar, then when you said "The One", you tipped your hand! I was raised by Vorn monks, I have their stupid Prophecies drilled in my head. You think I don't recognize that you've taken shit from the book, twisted it around and added some other shit, to make yourself sound all prophetic? "Other", my ass. As if there'd be another as weird as you. And don't even say it's about you. There are drunks in the gutter who say the Prophecies are about them.

Wanagi Akicita: Tsk. Heh, heh. Perhaps those in the gutter are drunk because they can't face their Destiny. ?

Aaliyah: Screw you, mop hair. I may not like my Destiny, but I'm here, aren't I?

Wanagi Akicita: You don't believe in your Destiny. You don't believe in the Prophecies. Not really. It's like a fairy tale, to you. Like any other religious person who has faith in angels they've never seen, believes in a water walk they never witnessed, and are healed by a savior they've never touched. You believe in it, only as an abstract concept. You parrot the words and phrases that have been drilled into your head, but you don't know how to connect your own original thought processes to it. It doesn't become real to you, until it manifests itself before you. Don't be ashamed, it's only natural. But be assured, belief, doubt, or any intermediate between them do not determine truth. What is, is, and what isn't, isn't, and it will be no other way than the way it is. If a man is acquitted of murder for lack of evidence, it doesn't mean he didn't do it. If a murder has no suspect, it doesn't mean it's not murder. By that same reasoning, if the one you were told was God turned out not to be, the conclusion isn't that there is no God, but it's a mystery: If who you thought was God isn't God, who is? In ancient times when prophets and

poets saw Ra-Eden, they'd mistake him for God. And he'd correct them, if they'd hear it. Since then, someone painted God as an old bearded white haired fat man, so now when mortals see Ra-Eden, who is perfect in face and form, it doesn't even occur to them that he's God, they mistake him for an angel. He kind of is, but there are different castes of angels, and he is among the top echelon; the Elohim. Just between I and you, Ra-Eden is the Angel Raphael. He is a titan, a Star Architect, one of the Creator Gods, but not the chief Creator God. I'll tell you who is, momentarily. In ancient and modern times alike, when men see Rofocale, they recognize him as Satan, who they mistakenly believe is Lucifer. He doesn't bother correcting them, because he was sent by the creature called Lucifer, not only as his representative, but as a proxy, his stand-in, if you will. Lucifer isn't really a proper name, it's actually a title given to all the Elohim, from the best to the worst. The creature men most identify as Lucifer is the Angel Samael. Samael is the Star Architect who once played the roles of both God and Satan in this video game, just for the shit of it. He's actually neither. But who is God? Who is Satan?

Aaliyah: What's a "video game"?

Wanagi Akicita: A constructed false reality, purely for entertainment purposes. We inhabit one. The gods built it, because how else would they occupy themselves?

Aaliyah: A game? So, the gods are children and we are their toys? That's crazy.

Wanagi Akicita: It's Divine Truth, and you're meant to know. Your reaction is that of a commoner, and you're above that. You are the Goddess Of The Dawn, and I am here to tutor her, not this Aaliyah person. The Vorn Prophecies are great in their own way, but at the end of the day, they are the words of mere prophets. I have the wisdom of ancient sorcerers. The Unwritten Kabbalah was personally bequeathed to me by my ancient ancestor. I know the Secrets Of The Universe. I know who and what God is. Furthermore, I know who and what Satan is. Who created Satan?

Aaliyah: He's Lucifer, a fallen angel, banished from heaven for the sin of pride.

Wanagi Akicita: A simple allegory. The truth is apparent in the faulty logic; if God is so infallible, how did He create one He'd reject? And why not just destroy him? But no, they are like the right and left hand, performing two

halves of the same process. Because that's exactly what's happening. These primitive humans would lose their collective minds if they knew the truth; that the God of goodness and light is also the God of evil and darkness. There is only one. One... with two sides. Members of the Illuminati know that the Terra God is also the Devil, and they informally call him Godsatan. Now prepare yourself for the next layer of enlightenment; the God of Terra has a God; his own Father. Samael is one of the sons of the true God, the Allbeing. Samael, who Terrans call Lucifer, the Light Bringer, is one of the first, if not the first, to emerge from the Allbeing as a separate entity. "Let there be Light..." Samael/Lucifer is also called Azazel; the Forgotten One; the Outcast. As Godsatan, he enjoyed making rules that were difficult to keep, some rules that even conflicted with other rules, all the while tempting people with his opposite character, so that when his subjects failed, he could punish them. This is the childish game he played, to occupy himself. The Overgod is the Allbeing, the Prime Spirit, referred to in the Vorn Prophecies as Spirit One. He's the only real thing in existence, all else is made of Him. From the Architect Angels, the lesser angels, the gods, to people, dogs, cats, all the way down to bacteria. We're all part of the Prime Spirit. Spirit One was content to allow Samael to play his childish games, until it started to get out of hand. It got too cruel, too unholy. He sent his loyal son Emanuel, also called the Son Of Man, in human form, to try to steer the religion to a more positive direction. Samael enjoyed seeing his righteous brother in human form. Godsatan offered Jesus a kingdom to switch sides. Emanuel died out of his human form, and reverted back to his godform, while still in the Terran dimension. For three days, he physically combated Samael, then finally locked him out of this dimension, with the turn of a key. Samael can no longer walk on this world, but he still rules it, through dark spirit proxies and humans who still worship him, including Christians who still believe he's God. Satan was a character Samael played, as the villainous foil for his hero God character. Now, his dark spirit proxies fill that role. Dark spirits are not cast out of heaven, they're manifested of our own dark energies. In reverse, I saw Satan dissolve into our thoughts of what Satan is. Which means that in the forward direction, our thoughts of Satan are what formed Satan, out of our evil. Which is why he looks so much like what we collectively imagined a Satan would look like, and not like the fairest of the sons of God. If only those primitive humans could have known the magnitude of their sin. Their

thoughts have created reality, as is the nature of our living universe. By the same magic by which the Elohim spake us be, now so has Satan been made manifest. I and you and those like us are descended of the Nephilim. We shape reality. If enough of us envision a thing, it becomes true. When fiction is made fact in that way, one real thing is as real as another, that is if anything is real at all. We... are the ones... who created Satan. Lucifuge Rofocale is Satan. Lucifuge Rofocale means Lucifer Re-envisioned. Rofocale is not a Son of God, but in a cosmic sense, Lucifer is his father. Rofocale in ancient times was called Molech, and he is the pure Spirit of Evil, with no God-half. He has challenged his father's rule of Terra, and will again, during Doom's Dawn. He'll briefly succeed, this time. It is Karmic Justice that Lucifer has a son who defies him as he has defied his own Father.

Aaliyah: A video game is like an arcade game? I've seen those, I used to work in a bar. So, the gods made an arcade game and put us in it, and they play us against each other? So, all the wars and fighting, our struggles, are the games of the gods?

Wanagi Akicita: Yes.

Aaliyah: But they personally interact with their "false reality". How is that possible?

Wanagi Akicita: Because their virtual reality is more advanced than the one at your bar. The Watchers were only supposed to watch. We were to be like a giant fish tank. Some Watchers weren't content to just watch. They wanted to fuck the women they made and play war with the men they made. All of Creation belonged to all the Architects, but Samael grew fixated on this world. He wanted to be the only God of Terra. He couldn't overpower his siblings, but he bided his time, and let them become less interested, and in his way, influenced them to become less interested. And there are other worlds for his siblings, this one was his. War, tyranny, slavery, blood sacrifice, oppression... By making men believe he was God, he could devolve them spiritually into complete barbarians. Puritan barbarians, who would slaughter their own brothers, merely for having "impure thoughts". This spiritual corruption adversely affected the Prime Spirit. As it was all part of Him, Lucifer was indirectly corrupting the real God, through these little barbarians he was devolving us into. So, uncharacteristically, the God of gods intervened in the games of His child. The Angel Emmanuel was incarnated in mortal form to tell us that the old ways are obsolete, that things have

changed. He didn't go into detail about exactly what had changed, because who would have understood? But now I have told you. The message given had the intended result; we no longer have to stab our firstborn on altars or stone "sinners" in the streets to appease a bloodthirsty God. Before the invention of time, there was only One... Then the Sons of God were formed. They formed existence out of their Father, more beings were born, mankind was created and became involved in the Mayhem; the cosmic fight between good and evil, which, if you step back and view it in perspective, is still the One, eternally fighting with Himself.

Aaliyah: Half of what you said is in the Prophecies, half is not.

Wanagi Akicita: It's there, for those seeking truths, not just assigned to read.

Wanagi Akicita's mask is mostly a frontal face mask, which ties in the back of the headband and snaps in the back of the neck part. He undoes it in both places and unmask. We can't see his face from behind his head, but she does see it. She scrunches her eyebrows and narrows her eyes, not from his glow, she's already adjusted to that, her reaction is like something is disturbing about his face. Yet there's something else about his face. Past the grotesquery, there is a godliness that catches her off guard and fascinates her.

Wanagi Akicita: To be fair, I found confirmation only after I witnessed true history. I saw not the clues, before. You puzzle over what I am, you knew I was something other than this Native American ghost I've presented myself as. You can see now by my features, or at least what's left of them, I'm not even Native American. I'm actually Eastern European in origin. I can't say Anglo, because in my time there are no pure races. Everyone is a bit of everything. I have as much Northern African genealogy as any other part of me. The full lips. She loved my lips, couldn't get enough of them, when they were in two parts instead of four. I had a goddess of my own, once. That *one...*, who lights my soul to its capacity. The Timescape keeps her just out of reach, to keep me on my path, to my Destiny. When I own the Timescape entire, it will have no choice but to give in to my wish. You once looked at me like she did. Like you loved me. Only for a moment. For a brief moment, you loved me, Aaliyah. We will recapture that moment in Eternity, someday.

Aaliyah: Yeah, right. Keep dreaming. Shiny, mangled faced old men don't turn me on. If you're European/African, whatever, why aren't you a

European/African ghost, instead of a Native American one? I don't get it.

Wanagi Akicita: I am this, because this is what I was to become. There was a real Wanagi Akicita, and Providence put me in a position to take his place. I could pull it off and I have. Black hair turns white, but so does brown. Ha! Sometimes brown hair would rather turn black than white. You'll get that joke someday, when you know the rest of this. What if I told you I killed the real Wanagi Akicita a century ago, just to put on his clothes and be here now, as a Retaliator, to be in the perfect position to shape my own Destiny, in fulfillment of the Prophecies?

Aaliyah: You have described yourself like one of the Star Twins. There's nothing in the Prophecies about either of the Star Twins being in the Retaliators.

Wanagi Akicita: Ah, but one of the Star Twins is marked, hides his face and is a master deceiver. Perhaps even deceiving the prophets. And you. The Retaliators. And, my twin. I am Castor, the dead twin. Fated to forever walk Terra, while my brother is bound to the Heavens. I am the Shining Man, the condemner and the redeemer, creator and destroyer of worlds, Master Of Terra. There are two of us. We are the same, but not. One is far away, one is here. I am the one who is here. He avoids my world, because of the toll it takes on him. I can no longer transport to his world, as I often did when I was alive. It was once my realm as much as his, until I transcended. I don't really need the Crossworld to move between realities anymore. I can cross realities like walking from one room into the next. I only need it because it is the center of all realities, and I am not content to master only one reality at a time, I need them all, at once and always. And because he is there, and it is our battleground. The Gemini War is fought across all time, across all realities, but it is staged in the Crossworld; the one place I am hindered to go and he is compelled to stay. The Crossworld only consists of what was, is or will be, and I am no longer a part of that. That is why the Crossworld no longer welcomes my beckoning of it, because it no longer recognizes me. But he can transport me to the Crossworld, even in my phantom state. Once that is done, I will once again be recognized by my once and future domain, and I will always have that bridge that I can cross into it, whenever I want. But, why would he bring me to his world, when my intent is to conquer it, and become the master of all realities, instead of him?

From behind, we can see him present and shake the mask in his clenched right fist.

Wanagi Akicita: It is in this guise... this disguise... that he will unwittingly transport me to his world. After I have reclaimed my right of free passage to and through the gateway world, I shall reveal myself to him. As dreadful as my appearance is to you, your reaction is nothing compared to his. This face turns him to dust, as though he never was. My very existence is his Forbidden Knowledge. The mere revelation of my survival beyond my physical death irrevocably dooms his younger self and unravels his latter self. This Forbidden Knowledge is my greatest weapon against him. My failsafe. He thinks his victory is assured, but I really don't see how it can be, when it is my very existence which erases his own. I have no such disadvantage. How could I have Forbidden Knowledge, when I have witnessed and participated in everything? What detrimental knowledge could he use against me, when in this, my godform, I bifurcated his existence? He never would have created me, and her death which comes with my reality, but I had to create him, to save her. He'd realize it, if he knew my godform exists. Aaliyah, you must trust your own heart that here lies your man. The Emerald Jitara will give you your goddessform.

Aaliyah: Robert? He's... human.

Wanagi Akicita: What is human? A quantity of cosmic mist congeals into the form of a human, another forms into a god or demigod... what's the difference? We're all made of God. Linear time is an invention of the gods. Perhaps their greatest. Linear infinity is impossible. There is a beginning and an end. But it never ends. Imagine a bubble, containing many train tracks, parallel and intersecting. The tracks begin and end, but they are always there, as is the bubble. On the tracks, there is finite time. Everywhere off the tracks is infinity. An objective observer of time can watch it cycle in a continuous loop.

While drawing the infinity symbol in the air with his finger in front of his face, the symbol illuminates in the air, as he traces it over and over and speaks:

Wanagi Akicita: Infinity; No beginning, no end.

He stops tracing the symbol and it stays illuminated for a time before fading away.

Wanagi Akicita: I came to prime you for your Grand Destiny. You are the Goddess... who will complete the transformation of this former mortal man... into the consciousness of everything.

Aaliyah: You! You really are... *him* ! No. Not you. It won't be you.

Wanagi Akicita: The prophecies always stop short of saying which of us will be the One. Most likely because even the Fates don't know. For this one thing, they are letting the story play out as it will. I don't see how it could possibly be... my Other.

Aaliyah: No. It won't be you. It cannot be. I don't believe this. I came here to prove it's all bullshit and it's coming true right in front of my eyes! I'm standing here, staring right at the fucking Dark Prince!

Wanagi Akicita: Dear Aaliyah, how can you call me the Dark Prince, when my own radiance illuminates this otherwise dark room with no lights on?

He gestures around the room to show that all the lights in the room are still off. All the light in the room is coming from him.

Aaliyah: There's more than one kind of darkness! I know evil when I see it!

Wanagi Akicita: Evil? I? You will come to know better of me. What is evil but an unpleasant means toward a pleasant end? To harden a sculpted image, the malleability of the clay must be destroyed. To create the lumber to build a chair, a tree must be destroyed. Destroy to create, destroy the creation to create anew upon the ruins. It is all part of the cycle of life. If you never knew sorrow, you would have no concept of joy. If not for unpleasantness, pleasant would have no value. Evil is as necessary to this existence as good. I am not perfectly either. There is no perfect good, no perfect evil. There may be a part of me that is perfectly good. There may be a part of me that is perfectly evil. They coexist. Altogether, I am but that which I am. We are still but swirling mists, at odds and in favor with itself. Evil seeks its kind and good favors its like, but it is the clashing of the two, that swirling of conflicting energies, that generates the...

Aaliyah: Shut up! You are the Dark Prince! Pretending to be our dead, spooky creep, part time Retaliator! What's your plan, to trick the Retaliators into starting Doom's Dawn?! I won't allow it to happen! I'll tell everyone! That must be my Destiny; to prevent the Gemini War.

Wanagi Akicita: You know what your Destiny is, and you know that's not it. As well as you know the Gemini War is not meant to be prevented.

Aaliyah: I can't sit on this information and do nothing!

Wanagi Akicita: You can if you know nothing of it. Aaliyah Shi wasn't meant to know any of the things I just told you. But it is imperative that the Goddess Of The Dawn should know the true nature of existence. She will remember. You will not.

Aaliyah: *Don't tamper with my mind .*

Wanagi Akicita: Naive little girl, mere mind manipulation is a joke, I manipulate reality. Shape it into what I wish it be. As evidence to the undeniable fact that I am The One, the true Master Of Time, I make it so... this conversation never happened.

Wanagi Akicita makes a counter clockwise motion with his right hand. Fast rewind the conversation to this point:

Aaliyah: What the hell are you, apparition? You are not a spirit, I know. I have been visited by spirits. They communicated with me with their minds. I don't know what you're thinking until you speak, and then you never say it right. You are not here. You are a hologram, unless you can give me a better explanation.

Wanagi Akicita: I am nothing. And, everything. All at the same time.

Aaliyah: What does that mean?

Wanagi Akicita removes the device from Robert's forehead.

Wanagi Akicita: Don't worry about it. He'll recover. 5 cc's of each, per day.

A gloved hand reaches from nowhere, over the bed table, and places a medical syringe on the wood tabletop, then the hand disappears, as simultaneously Wanagi Akicita holds up two injection vials in his left hand, between the upwardly bent first three digits of his left hand, without

bothering to look at her.

Wanagi Akicita: Antibiotics and steroids.

Aaliyah: Leave the antibiotics here, but take the steroids with you. Those are harmful to humans.

She snatches the two bottles from him and looks at both of them back and forth, to figure out which is which.

Wanagi Akicita: Only when abused. This is medicine.

Aaliyah: You don't understand Robert. With his competitive nature, he's a prime candidate to abuse it.

Wanagi Akicita: You think you understand Robert? Do you think he doesn't know about steroids? You're right, he is competitive. All his life. Yet at 38, he's still enhancing his performance with diet, exercise and focusing his chi. Pure O2 when he's fighting isn't harmful. You underestimate the character of your man.

Aaliyah: He's not my man! And he won't be 38 for a couple months, but that's damn close. Too close for my comfort. How long have you been digging up details about him? What's your interest in Robert, are you in love with him or something? You're being intrusive, coming here, talking about things that don't concern you and I'd appreciate it if you'd go away.

Wanagi Akicita lowers his head and disappears. The light goes with him. A fumbling sound, then we see a lit Aaliyah crouched over the bedside table, in the position of having just switched on the lamp. Aaliyah shudders. She places the two vials on the bed table, stoops over Robert's bed and strokes his hair a bit. He stirs awake.

Robert: Aaliyah, what's going on?

Aaliyah: Nothing. I just found out why you've been saying you're sick.

Robert looks down at his abdomen, and sees skin-colored tape over his wound, instead of the cotton gauze he'd had over it.

Robert: You changed my dressing?

Aaliyah: Yeah. How do you feel?

Robert: Still kinda sick. It doesn't itch and burn anymore, though. It feels like you got the junk out of it. That's good. I think I'll be alright, now. I just need a little more rest. There was an ancient man made of stars in my dream. He was dancing with you in space, and you were green. A billion fairies were singing to it. Strange lyrics. I can't remember it all. The darn thing doesn't even make sense. Never mind.

Aaliyah: No, you brought it up, now tell me.

Robert: It went "The One is Twain. He and He call Himself God and the Other Satan. 1 love builds 9 hates, 1 hate builds 9 loves. Harmony and discord unfurl We to blossom, across the Shangri-La. We wake to dream. We wake to dream."

Aaliyah: The monks say songs are prophecies. They seem like nonsense, but they're supposed to mean something. I'm supposed to know what they mean, but if it were all scrambled it would be the same to me. If you become a prophet, I will leave you!

Robert: C'mon, don't be that way! You see I'm injured! You insisted I tell you.

She goes to the door and opens it enough for the light from her adjoining room to spill in. She goes back and turns the lamp off. She kisses Robert lightly on the lips.

Aaliyah: I'm afraid if I leave this place, the world might end. Goodnight, Robert.

Robert: Goodnight, Aaliyah. Oh, and thanks.

She exits and closes the door behind her, leaving the room lit again only by the starlight from the window.

Vision 33

Montage, with The Moody Blues track “Question” playing over it; The Retaliators are fighting the Rejects. Iron Club punches Mighty Man, making him stumble back. Iron Club charges into him, and beats him down. Mighty Man curls up, helplessly. Mars pulls Iron Club off, and is himself engaged. Mighty Man gets up, and stands out of the way. From above, Microwave is slammed to the ground. Mighty Man steps further back, as Tech War lands, and continues fighting Microwave.

Moody Blues: Why do we never get an answer, when we’re knocking at the door? With a thousand million questions about hate and death and war.

Mighty Man seems to shine the most when Mars is off duty. Tech War, Upsurge, Hotpoint, Tigerlily, Jitara, Captain Superhero and Mighty Man are pinned down by Pressure’s power over gravity. Mighty Man crawls over to him, pulls him down and lays on top of him, forcing Pressure to either release the hold, or be crushed by his own power. Pressure is nearly apprehended, but he creates a barrier and escapes. Mighty Man is nevertheless patted on the back by his comrades. Switch to a battle with the Super Troop, in which Mars is fighting Neutronical-Man, Tech War is fighting Kaleidoscope, Jitara is fighting Cap’n Flounder, Tigerlily is fighting Surly Sue, Captain Superhero is fighting the Blur, Upsurge and Hotpoint are fighting Amplitude and Red Rage, and Mighty Man is being zapped, slimed and humiliated by Little Shit. He’s just ducking, dodging, holding his arm up in defense of his face, and throwing rocks that miss. He gets slimed and zapped again. Wanagi Akicita appears, standing on the edges of Little Shit’s hovercraft, and he down punches the sadistic dwarf on top of his head. Wanagi Akicita disappears, and the hovercraft descends out of control, into Mighty Man, who catches it. Wanagi Akicita then takes down every single member of the Super Troop, by creating Soulfire Spectres of himself which descend and penetrate each

enemy, causing even the strongest to writhe in agony. Little Shit got the best deal of them all. The hero of this day: Wanagi Akicita. Another day finds Mighty Man landing on Rascher's terrace, then carrying Jhotica away.

Moody Blues: Why do we never get an answer, when we're knocking at the door? Because the truth is hard to swallow, that's what the war of love is for.

Casey and Yvenia, taking a stroll down times square. Then he's driving her, in a Jaguar, and pulling up to a big-shot restaurant. He tips the valet a fifty. Inside, they're having an extravagant meal, when the waiter presents a bottle of vintage wine. Casey nods, and the waiter opens it, and pours. Casey is feeding Yvenia off his plate. In the car again, driving down Broadway. Inside a theater, watching a play. Late at night, Mighty Man returning Jhotica to Rascher's terrace.

Moody Blues: It's not the way that you say it, when you do those things to me. It's more the way that you mean it, when you tell me what will be.

In her bedroom, it's dark and they are under the covers.

Moody Blues: And when you stop; think about it. You won't believe it's true. That all the love you've been giving has all been meant for you.

Tokyo Bay. The corpse of Eson's giant sea monster doesn't vanish, because it's not made of energy, it's made of fused sea creatures. The Retaliators now face Eson, one of the most powerful demigods of the original team.

The Moody Blues: I'm looking for someone to change my life. I'm looking for... a miracle in my life. And if you could see... what it's done to me...

Aerial fight, no Tech War. The team's job is to take Eson's focus off of channeling the power of the amulet to make him resistant to his primary opponent, Mars. Mars knocks Eson back through the air, but only a few yards. Eson manifests two giant energy fists, one on each side of himself, and he sends them to attack Mars. Mars uses his mystic scepter to destroy

them. Mighty Man flies around behind Esron, and wraps his arm around his throat. It's working. Esron is fully distracted, but a finned elbow in Mighty Man's ribs loosens his grip. A blue tentacle flings Mighty Man into the bay. His jets go out and he treads water, like he's out of the fight. 80 ft Upsurge is still wading in the bay from the sea monster fight, and he finger prods at Esron. Captain Superhero maintains a position behind Esron's back, no matter which way he turns. Hotpoint zaps Esron, while doing her aerial gymnastics. Jitara and Tigerlily circle him in a two seater Hovermount. Jitara makes a flame spiral with his ring. Mars grabs a tentacle and flings Esron a mile out to sea. It's another day and Mighty Man is crouching on the Retaliators Island beach, looking over to Manhattan.

Moody Blues: Between the silence of the mountains, and the crashing of the sea, there lies a land I once lived in and she's waiting there for me.

Mighty Man takes flight, headed for Manhattan. He ends up at Rascher's terrace, and lands there. At Retaliators Mansion, we see a wall mounted intercom speaker, and The Retaliators looking up at it. From the jetport in the rear of the mansion, a Hyperjet takes off. Mighty Man and Jhotica are strolling at the park.

Moody Blues: I'm looking for someone to change my life. I'm looking for, a miracle in my life. And if you could see, what it's done to me...

Casey and Yvenia at a coffee house, talking. We can't hear what they're saying. It doesn't matter. Sweet nothings, presumably. He reaches across the table, and holds her hand. Mighty Man on Rascher's terrace, kissing Jhotica goodbye.

Moody Blues: It's not the way that you say it, when you do those things to me. It's more the way you really mean it, when you tell me what will be.

Mighty Man returning to an empty living room. He looks around and sees no one. It's a big house, they could be anywhere. He sits down and turns on the TV.

TV: She's the greeeeeen Kabuki-Trooper! She's on the side of good, but she can get mean. OKAY! She's the greeeeeen Kabuki-Trooper! Blue & Gold turn the tide when Green hits the scene. WATCH OUT! She's the greeeeeen Kabuki-Trooper! Tara, Tara, Tara, in your face. POW! >click< ...stop, you've got the wrong man! I'm not guilty of these crimes! The truth is... I have an identical twin! (music) Dunt, dunt, daaaahhh... (pause) Yes, I like Chocolate! And peanut butter! Give me Peanut Butter Boobs and I'll like you! Give me Peanut Butter Boobs and I'll like you till the end of tiiiiiiiiimme!

Over the East River, the approaching dots aren't coming from Manhattan, but further west, passing over New Jersey. In the center, Mars, flying his usual way, upright like he's standing. Just to be flashy, he arrived at the U.N. standing up in a golden flying convertible sportscar "chariot", but it was manifested, he vanished it away afterwards. He's flanked by Tech War on his right, Captain Superhero on his left. Tech War flies slanted at an angle like rocket men do, and Captain Superhero flies horizontal like an airplane, using his arms and legs to steer. His forearm and calf armor was designed to be slightly flared out, to act as rudders when needed, but contoured to stay out of the way when that's not applicable. There's one two-seater Hovermount on each flank. They'd left in a Hyperjet. Those things are almost spaceships, but it's okay, the guy who pays for it is the same guy that gets paid for it. He practically has his own economy. The Hyperjets are each stocked with four Hovermounts, because that's enough to carry eight people, if necessary. Hotpoint flies, but her body mass is the fuel, so she uses Hovermounts whenever it's convenient. The Hovermounts look like the miniature winged rocket ships you see on carnival rides. Or the carnival winged rocket ships look like them, depending on which came first. The tech and the pop culture of the tech developed together.

Moody Blues: Why do we never get an answer, when we're knocking at the door? With a thousand million questions about hate and death and war.

Mars, Tech War and Captain Superhero land on the front lawn and enter the house. Mighty Man turns down the volume, turns off the TV and hides the remote between the cushions. Mars approaches Mighty Man and gestures for

him to get up. He takes Mighty Man's beeper/cell phone and looks at it. He sees it's turned off, and holds it in Mighty Man's face. Mars turns the beeper back on and throws it at Mighty Man. Mighty Man takes it and puts it back in its slot. Mars shoves him back down onto the couch, reaches between the cushions and retrieves the remote. Mars places the TV remote control in its proper position in Mighty Man's hand, squints his eyes sarcastically, pats Mighty Man on the back similarly, and walks away.

Moody Blues: Why do we never get an answer, when we're knocking at the door?

Tech War pushes the power button on the remote to turn the TV back on, but the sound is still down. Tech War and Captain Superhero leave the room. Upsurge and Jitara enter from the hallway and look at Mighty Man. He ignores them. They shake their heads and leave. Mighty Man uses the remote to turn up the volume on the TV.

TV: ... the hottest selling new model of the year, the Pontiac Fiero! If you have a steady job and good credit, you WILL be approved! Unless you go on a mad pissing spree around the office or something stupid like that...

Vision 34

That day fades to this later one. Retaliators Mansion monitor room. There's a shift change. Mighty Man is relieving Tech War.

Tech War: So, it looks pretty quiet. We've been on high alert since yesterday, when a Faulk spaceship flew over the Capitol, but Cosmic Guardian chased them away. I don't think they'll be back for a while. There's a stack of paperbacks, but don't get too distracted. Amy, the switchboard operator, will signal you, if a call comes in, but occasionally glance at the monitors, in case something shows up there.

Mighty Man: Yeah, I've already done this a couple times. I think I can handle

it. You taking the rest of the day off?

Tech War: Here, yes. I gotta check in with Reddingfield Innovations. My main job is there, and I have to report to Arthur about my day's "adventures" in monitor duty.

Enter Mars.

Mars: Is monitor duty suitable to you, Casey? Do the monitors frighten you? Will you run away and hide from them?

Mighty Man: Run and hide? Are you accusing me of cowardice? I'll have you to know that I ran once...

Mighty Man puts the flat of his hand level to his waste.

Mighty Man: ...when I was just a little kid. It twisted my guts, and made me sick. I turned and stood my ground. I took my beating like a man. I haven't ran since. I'm not a coward, and you're inappropriate to accuse me of something I abhor.

Mars: I know. You are duly justified in saying so. But I knew the implication would rile you, and the man within you would correct me, consequences be damned. Casey, within each of us, there resides a hero and a coward. Most of us choose to face our dominate nature, thereby turning our backs on the false nature. The fence between gallantry and cowardice is meant for Mediocres, only. You are meant for greater things. Turn... and face the hero within you, thereby forever turning your back on your false conditioning.

Mighty Man: What the hell do you think I've been trying to do all my life?

Mars grabs the doorknob with one hand, and points at Mighty Man, with the other.

Mars: Mind who you sass, mortal! That I haven't taken hold of you yet doesn't mean I won't.

Mars exits and slams the door with a loud bang.

Mighty Man: Who the hell does he think he is?

Tech War: Uh. He's a mythical figure, from the Divine Hierarchy. Once considered the King Of Terra, upon his return, he promptly reclaimed that title. Once he was worshipped by an entire race, is credited for their conquest of the world, and some religions still pray to him. His emblem is used to represent both iron and men. He's over eight thousand years old. He has a month, a planet, a shade of black and a top candy company named after him. He is both the god of war and the god of peace. He is essentially a force of nature. He has the temperament of an eternal, which means if you piss him off, he'll split you in two, without pause. If he's in a generous mood, he may apologize later, but don't count on it.

Mighty Man: I think I can take him.

Tech War: Ha, ha, ha, ha! In your dreams! Ha, ha! Shit, Casey, I'm going to get away from you, before you get me hurt! Ha, ha, ha!

Tech War exits, still giggling a little. Mighty Man sits down in front of the monitors and picks up a paperback. He puts his feet up on the console and opens the book. Upstairs, Tigerlily is checking Casey's room, to see if he's there. He's not. As she's walking to her room, her way is blocked by Wanagi Akicita, who just appeared before she rounded the corner.

Wanagi Akicita: Still haven't found what you're looking for?

Tigerlily: I'm not in a good mood and this has nothing to do with you.

Wanagi Akicita: Really? What if I were to tell you that underneath this disguise, I am a god?

Tigerlily: Ha, ha! The one I'm looking for, I suppose?

Wanagi Akicita: Um, no. I would've thought so, once. Back when I thought everything was about me. But, now that I know everything is about me, I don't need to grasp at every little detail, like that.

Tigerlily: You're very conceited, for an apparition. Excuse me, I'm going to bed.

Wanagi Akicita lets her pass. As she's walking away, she turns her head and remarks:

Tigerlily: You are no god.

Wanagi Akicita: When we are both part of everything, I'll remind you that you said that.

She stops and turns back to face him.

Tigerlily: What do you know?

Wanagi Akicita: About what?

Tigerlily: *My destiny* !

Wanagi Akicita: If I knew, it wouldn't be my place to tell you. This is your journey. You must find your own way. Goodnight, Tigerlily.

He puts his right hand up and manipulates this small time span to make her dance, sing and perform for him. The Wanagi Akicita she's interacting with is standing in the same spot, most of the time, as the one controlling this, but he moves differently, at the same speed and in sync with her.

Tigerlily: You're very - good - this has - to do with you. *My destiny* ! *My destiny* ! What do you know? *My destiny* ! *My destiny* ! What do you know? You're very - good - You are - god. *My destiny* ! What do you know? - god. You're very - good - good - good - god - god - god - You are - god. *My destiny* ! - You are - The one - The one - The one - You are - god. *My destiny* ! - god. *d-d-d-destiny* ! The one - The one - The one - What do you know? - god. I'm going to bed - with you. - god. What do you know? *My* - god. me - me - m-m-m-me - Shit! You - You - Y-Y-Y-You - god. I - dance - only - for - you. I'm going to - sleep! - with you. - god. I'm looking for - - *My destiny* !

Time syncs back up with itself, and he's standing in front of her with his hand up, as before. Now it just looks like he's waving at her. She puts her hand up like she might return the wave, but she turns it around and into a flip off. Wanagi Akicita looks at his hand and puts it down.

Wanagi Akicita: We'll dance ... I and you ... at Jackson and Candace's wedding.

Tigerlily: I didn't know they'd set a date. When is it?

Wanagi Akicita: February 14, 1987.

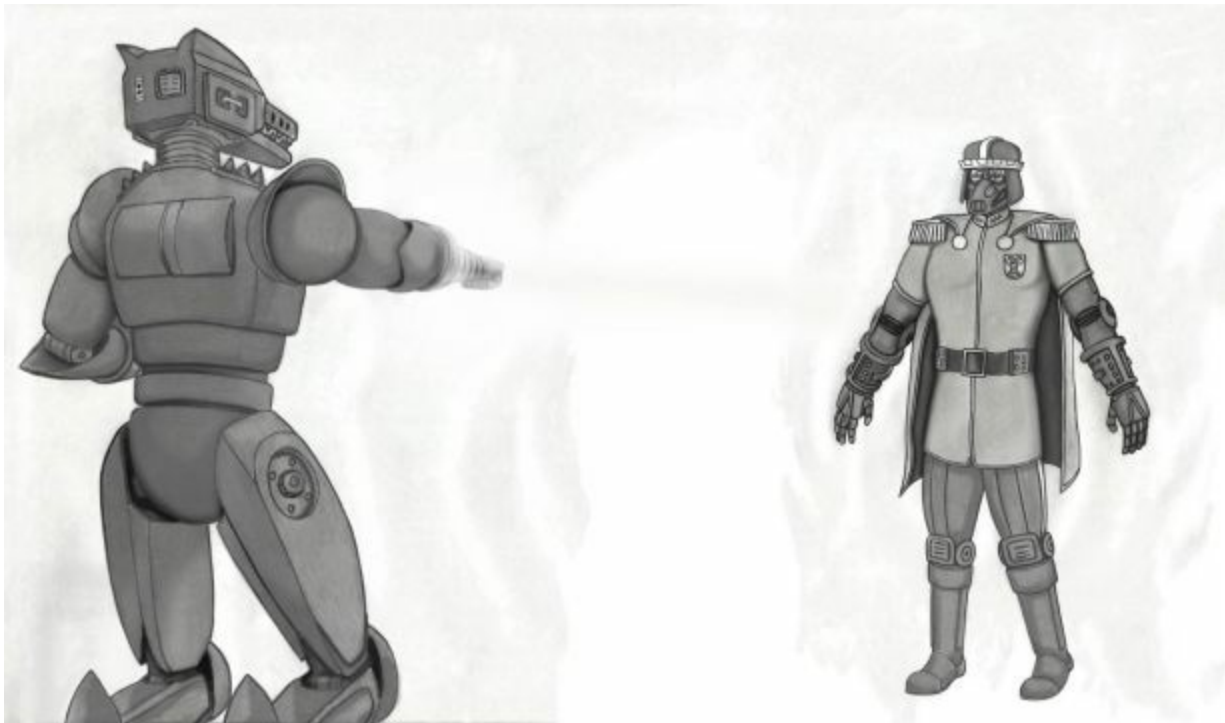
Tigerlily: That's pretty far off, to set a date, but I guess it gives her plenty of

time for planning. I might dance with you at Candy's wedding, if you don't ask me like a creep. The only way I'd ever be nice to you is at a wedding or a funeral.

Wanagi Akicita tilts his head to the right and vanishes.

Tigerlily: Shit! ... damn apparition. Don't you be watching me sleep!

Tigerlily turns back toward her door and enters her room, without the slightest clue she had just been his plaything.



Vision 35: The Accident

An hourglass is pouring sand down its globe. Mighty Man's room on the third floor of Retaliators Mansion. He's sitting at a worktable, with carving

tools and grinders of various sizes strewn around the desk, and there're flashes of light coming from what he's working on. Casey's wearing a Retaliators Staff jumpsuit, unzipped to reveal a blue t-shirt with a full-sized red Mighty Man "M" printed on it. It's not a costume change, anybody can have one, in a variety of color schemes, for a mere nine ninety five, plus shipping and handling, from the Official Retaliators Merchandise catalogue, which is operated right from this house. Boxes of the stuff come and go, and the Retaliators can get whatever they want from it, for free. Often, you'll see off-duty Retaliators wearing Retaliator t-shirts or t-shirts with their own logos. More often than not, around the house, you'll even see Mars wearing a black t-shirt with gold Retaliators lettering on the front. Mars can change into his battle armor, literally, with a thought. That time he was undoing his boots manually, he was tired and sleepy, and when you're tired and sleepy, focusing is a greater effort than going through the motions of just doing it. Occasionally, you'll see current Retaliators wearing t-shirts with logos or images of former Retaliators, like Psion-Man or Stump Puller. Never of the ones who turned out to be criminals, though. They are stricken from the records as ever having been Retaliators and all their merchandise was donated to Goodwill. Of course, their action figures were taken out of their Retaliator boxes, first. Collectors who already had those action figures still sealed in their original Retaliators boxes hit the jackpot; that shit's worth a fortune, now. Even the ones out of the box are worth something, and the kids who got them were better off selling them, than keeping them. Their posters were turned over to paper recycling, and by the same token, any of that that escaped destruction is also worth a lot. None of them were in long enough to have a comic book, fortunately, for Retaliators Inc. Everybody on the current roster has a solo comic, in addition to the team comic. They are completely fictionalized, the writers aren't privy to the inner circle. Their fiction is based on public knowledge, only. But since writers are prophets in this world, the storylines are pitched to Arthur Reddingfield, in advance, then he reads every rough draft, himself, before approving it for print. In the comics, Tech War's secret identity is a fictional Reddingfield employee named Pierce Welch. The writer once pitched the idea to have the Arthur Reddingfield character put on the Tech War armor and do a Retaliators mission in it. The real Arthur said no. The writer may've thought that was an incriminating "no", but he, like almost everyone else, works for the man. The Doc Race comic from just a

couple months ago had Doc and Hotpoint in Manhattan, helping Psion-Man track down a drug lord. At the very time the comic was on store shelves, that scenario was happening, for real. The investigation was compromised, because the drug lord read the comic. Sneaky damn prophets, gotta watch 'em. Mighty Man's comic paints him in a similar light as Captain Superhero's. Honorable, fearless, self-sacrificing, but stronger than Captain Superhero. Stronger than almost anyone, and single-handedly keeping all the dark forces at bay, just the mention of his name instilling fear and respect in their hearts. Many a mastermind could rule the world, if not for that meddling Mighty Man! He does look the part of the perfect hero... Back in the real world, Casey's wearing ordinary safety goggles, while sealing an eight inch tall bronze figurine with a handheld torch. He's holding the searing hot figurine in his left hand, and torching it with his right, the blue-hot flames bouncing harmlessly off his super-tough left hand. He turns off the torch, and the figurine is of Jhotica, in an action glamour pose, with her hands out in front of her, like she might zap somebody. He sets the torch on the table, and rolls the still smoking figure around in his hands, admiring it. There's a knock at the door. Casey turns, and sees Aaliyah standing in the doorway, in her nightgown, as if she was already in the room when she knocked. Casey fumbles to put the figurine in the desk drawer and to trade the clear goggles for a pair of dark Ray-Bans.

Casey: Aaliyah, you gotta stop sneaking up on me like that.

Aaliyah: The dark glasses, again? It's not very bright in here, Casey.

Casey: It's a ... sensitivity to light that must've been a side-effect of my power.

As she approaches him:

Aaliyah: You lie badly, Casey.

He stands, to intercept her from possibly getting nosey about what he was working on. Just as well, 'cause now they're face to face, as she'd prefer.

Casey: Don't you think Robert might have a problem with you always coming in here to say goodnight to me?

Aaliyah: Who is Robert? He was a Japanese-American martial artist who first came to my country to learn Kung Fu. I didn't meet him then, I was a child, sheltered from the outside world. But I knew there was a war going on out there. It was going on before I was born and before the monks took me in. Your people came to my country to fight the Regime. When they left, the whole country was thrown in chaos. The government is too busy fighting amongst themselves to affect any type of order. More Chinese property is owned by Australians and British than by Chinese. Warlords control everything. Borders change on a daily basis, and one never knows if a certain part of town is safe, from one day to the next. I was an orphan, during the war. A war orphan. Shunned by my own people, for being half Anglo. So sad, I don't know if my Anglo half is American, British or Australian. The Monks of Pius appear Anglo, though only a handful of the Warlords know what they truly are. Enough to be adequately impressed that the monks are best left alone. It is well known, throughout Asia, that all who have tried to raid the temple have ended up in the mountains, with their memories erased. The monks took me in and raised me in their alien ways, and in a lot of ways I feel more Vorn than I do Anglo or Asian. When I grew up, though, I became rebellious against the Vorn, because they had plans for me which I couldn't accept. I escaped to the provinces, to learn where I came from. I never found my father, of course, he wouldn't've still been there, but I did find a Chinese uncle. He was one of the Warlords. He had been the one who had my mother killed, for having a half Anglo child. I learned this, only after he had indentured me, as a bargirl. That's where I met Robert. I first mistook him for a Japanese Shinobi-Samurai, they are not uncommon in my country, but he turned out to be an American mercenary, who worked for whichever warlord would hire him. I had him kill my uncle for me, and that indentured me to him. The monks had been teaching me Kung Fu and luckily Robert knew it well enough to continue my training. I couldn't love him, though, because of something the monks had drilled into my head, since my first memories. I can't even comprehend what a Progenesist is, but it's engrained in me that I must mate with someone worthy to father such a being. Robert was definitely not someone who could father a Cosmic Being. Moreover, he wasn't the noble Retaliator he makes himself out to be, now. He was a thief, a killer, and worse, a communist. And, he was still doing his mercenary

work. Mostly to get money to buy or get access to steal some of those magic trinkets he wears. Take away Robert's tricks, and he's just a man. A human who aspires to fight alongside the gods, though he'll never be one.

Aaliyah is caressing Casey's tee-shirted chest with her hand. He doesn't try to stop her.

Aaliyah: But, you ... are so much more, aren't you?

Casey: Whaddo you mean?

Aaliyah: I know what you are, Casey. I can feel the power coursing within you. Other men wield power, but you ... You are your power. I sense within you ... universes ... dying, being reborn. You are the most powerful Retaliator.

Casey: *Noooo* . Mars is the most powerful Retaliator. Everyone knows that. He's a god, for Christ's sake.

Aaliyah: You should know better than to correct me. My sensory powers are never wrong. Who said Mars is a god?

Casey: Uh ... the Romans ? Over a thousand years ago?

Aaliyah: Uh-huh. And, what would those same Romans think of you ?

Casey: Uh, they would think I'm some kind of ... uh ... ?

She reaches and tilts his glasses up, revealing the iridescent blue eyes.

Aaliyah: A god?

He quickly takes control of the glasses and puts them back over his eyes.

Casey (Smiling): Maybe.

Aaliyah: Don't hide from what you are, Casey. It is your destiny.

She leans in for a kiss. Because of his height, she wouldn't be able to reach him, if he doesn't stoop over some. He does. But then, the kiss breaks, and he leans away from her, as if she imposed on him, but he's still holding her hands, which were wrapped behind his shoulders during the kiss.

Casey: I'm involved.

Aaliyah: I sense that you think you are. But, nothing will stand in the way of destiny.

Casey: She is the only destiny I'm interested in. You flattered me. You told me things that appealed to my vanity. You put me up on the highest cloud and I couldn't think straight. I... I am flattered. But, no. No. I'm sorry.

She steps back into him, undeterred.

Aaliyah: Mars's resolve is unbreakable. He and his woman are destined for one another. It's even written in the Mythologies, I've learned. But, you're not so sure as you'd have me believe. I sense... that I can make you love me.

Casey: I... I... .

The kiss almost happens, again.

Robert: What the hell... ?

Jitara is wearing street clothes, with a white Retaliators t-shirt, with red trim on the sleeves and collar. He rushes forward, pulls Tigerlily away from Casey and pushes Casey back a half step. Casey braces himself and Robert's next push pushes himself back.

Casey: Robert, you got the wrong idea.

Robert goes over to Mighty Man's bed, turns it over and takes one of the rails, for a weapon. He spins it expertly, like a staff, and poses, before battering on Casey with it. Casey takes the barrage like an indestructible robot, but is favoring his Ray-Bans, that they don't get knocked off.

Casey: Dammit! Don't make me hurt you!

Robert: Ha! To hurt me, you'd have to fight me. *And, you don't fight !*

That pushed a button. Casey's teeth grit and his nostrils flare. One quick left jab to the face is all it takes. Blackness. Robert's face getting punched. A sound of crunching bone. Redness. Robert crumbling to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Blue-black sky, with stars. A white flash. As Aaliyah is running

over to Robert's motionless body, she screams at Casey:

Aaliyah: How could you? He's only human!

She kneels beside his body and looks like she's about to move his head.

Casey: Don't move him. He could have a neck injury.

Aaliyah: I know how to handle him. Get help!

She puts Robert's head gently in her lap, and sees that he is bleeding from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

Aaliyah: Oh, God! Hurry !

Casey rushes out of the room, puts his right hand on the third floor walkway railing, swings his legs over it, and lands on his feet, in the first floor corridor. Boom! 306 pounds just hit the marble floor from 3 stories up, impacting on the flat bottoms of two hard soled boots. Everyone in the house must've heard that. Casey rushes over to Tech War's room and knocks.

Un-modulated Muffled Male Voice: Fuck. Who is it? What the hell's going on out there?

Casey places the palm of his left hand on the door and pushes. The solid oak door splinters inward, like it's made of rotten paneling. Inside is a man wearing the black insulated fireproof bodysuit that goes under the Tech War armor. Over his head is a black leather gimp mask, complete with a zipper across the mouth. Under the man is a naked hooker, with wrists and ankles handcuffed and leg-ironed to the four bed posts. Arthur adds a deep pretentious alteration to his already muffled voice.

Zipper-Face: Shit!

Casey: Tech War?

Zipper-Face: Dammit, Casey, what is it?

Casey: Jitara's been hurt. It was an accident. It's bad.

Zipper-Face: Where's he, now?

Casey: Upstairs in my room. C'mon, it's really bad. We gotta get him to the hospital.

Zipper-Face: G'won back up and wait for me. I'll be there in a minute.

Casey: We don't have time for... ..

Casey gestures with his left hand at the gimp, then the ho, in an Italian mannerism.

Zipper-Face: I'm not gonna finish, I'm gonna put on the armor! I'm not Tech War like this, idiot. G'won!

As Casey rushes back out of the room, Arthur turns his back on the hooker, to put on the armor. Arthur now speaks in his own voice, but it's still muffled through the mask.

Hooker: You gonna leave me like this?

Zipper-Faced Tech War: Whitley'll see you to the ferry. Offer him a fuck. If he takes you up on it, add it to the bill.

Casey's back to his jumping point, but he heard that and looks like he's trying to erase the whole thing from his mind. He power jumps back up to the third floor, and rushes back into his room, where Aaliyah is still holding Robert.

Casey: Is he ... ?

Aaliyah: He's alive. Is the ambulance coming?

Casey: With the ferry and everything, that'd take forever. Tech War's coming. He's quicker. If he'd get here.

There's a whooshing sound of jets, then Tech War enters, with everything on but his gauntlets. The right one is tucked under his left arm and he's putting the left one on.

Tech War: I'm here. Good Lord! What happened?

Casey: He picked a fight with me ...

Tech War: So, it was self-defense?

Casey looks down at Aaliyah, who is none too pleased with him, but doesn't have the answer, except that "self-defense" would be reaching.

Casey: I don't know. I blanked out, then he was on the floor. It was an accident.

Everything is together on Tech War now, and there's an electronic, hydraulic, mechanical sound of all the systems synching up with one another. Mars, wearing the aforementioned black and gold Retaliators shirt, enters the scene and steps up to Casey's face.

Mars: It was an accident, you say?

Casey: Yeah.

Mars: Yeah?

Casey: Yeah! Otherwise, this scene would be happening in his room, not mine, right?

Tech War: We can't move him. Or her. We're gonna have to take the floorboards. And, we're going that way.

Tech War hand motions at the outer wall. Mars wastes no time knocking it out, with a god of war-powered backhand sweep. Casey takes the blanket from his overturned bed and covers up the two on the floor, all but their heads. Then, he straps on his belt-jet assembly, right over his jumpsuit.

Casey: Is this jumpsuit fireproof?

Tech War: What Retaliators issue attire isn't? Put your belt-jet on over it before you asked, didn't you? Limit your questions to sensible ones, why don't you.

Casey: Feel better?

Tech War: Not entirely.

Mars: I can follow alongside, and control the wind, so there's no resistance.

Tech War: That'll help. Can't you teleport him?

Mars: Not as delicately as we can do it like this. I can also hold him steady in his position, with my will, in case there's any clumsiness.

Tech War nods acknowledgement of that. Upsurge and Hotpoint enter the room.

Hotpoint: Oh, my Lord!

Upsurge instinctively runs over and checks Robert's pupils. They're dilated, and his eyes are very bloodshot.

Upsurge: What happened?

Aaliyah: It was an accident.

All eyes glancing at her, for her confirmation of what Casey said.

Casey: A thoughtless one.

Aaliyah: Yes, thoughtless. Like a little child who breaks a vase. "Oops", right?

Casey: He was pummeling me with a bedrail, for crying out loud!

Mars: You bend titanium bars, but iron bedrails are too much for you?

Casey: What, was I supposed to take it away from him? You know Jitara, he's too quick for that.

Tech War: Not quick enough, apparently.

Casey: I don't think he expected to get hit.

Mars: Why wouldn't he expect to get hit, in a fight?

Casey: Hey, you're right! Why wouldn't he?

Casey gives Aaliyah an accusatory stare.

Casey: Maybe, he wanted to get hit! Maybe, he provoked me, on purpose!

Aaliyah: Are you insinuating that I caused this?

Casey: Didn't you? I was in here, minding my own business, when you started with me, then he started with me!

Aaliyah: Why you!

Aaliyah stirs a little, in spite of herself, from being agitated.

Tech War: You gotta hold still, Tigerlily. That's enough finger pointing, for

now.

Mars: Yes. These things do happen. I have accidentally maimed and killed. This was like that, I think.

Mighty Man: Thanks, Mars.

Mars: I didn't grant you permission to be casual with me.

Mighty Man: Sorry, Sir. Your Eminence.

Mars: The comparison was not to exonerate you. Did those whom I maimed or killed by accident receive a better fate than any I maimed or killed intentionally? They were less deserving of their fate, most likely. There were surely instances in which Fate guided my hand, but in most cases it was just an irresponsible waste, which is what I see here. Intentional or no, the blood is on your hands. One is as responsible for his accidents as for his deeds. It is your responsibility to not have accidents.

Mighty Man fidgets over that. Mars doesn't mind read, but as a god, he can perceive thoughts that are directed toward him. In addition to that, he can read body language better than most. Mighty Man is not speaking, but his body language shows that he's fighting the urge to use not being perfect like a god as an excuse. Mars grabs his armpit and turns him around to face him. He points in his face.

Mars: Neither am I perfect. My mistakes have made me a better god. Let this sear itself into your soul, to stay with you, always. You'll be a better man, if you do.

Mighty Man, subdued and ashamed, nods. Whitley is now in the room.

Whitley: Good Lord!

Tech War: Don't ask "what happened?", Whitley, I'll explain later. (To Upsurge and Hotpoint): We're flying out, from here. Considering the short distance and their small landing pad, a hovermount might be quicker for you guys than a jet. We'll meet you there or over the river, it doesn't matter. (Back To Whitley): You stay and watch the house, okay?

Whitley: Naturally, sir.

Tech War: Soon as we're away, I need you to straighten up my room. I left a bottle of... twenty year old wine..., that you can finish for me, if you want.

Whitley: Oh, I never drink on duty, sir.

Tech War: Whatever. Just straighten up my room, alright?

Whitley: Right, sir.

Casey's jaw is slightly dropped, from knowing what that's really about. The others just figure Tech War's trying to cover that he's been drinking on duty, which he may have, but there's no rule against it. Retaliators Mansion is no drinking tavern, but there's a full stock of every kind of booze, and wine is offered with meals, sometimes, it's no big deal. So far, no one has been too drunk to answer a call, and if that ever does happen, the Retaliators don't answer to anyone but themselves and each other. The Retaliators were founded and the rules written, back when Arthur Reddingfield was the only Tech War. They didn't and don't know his identity, or that he now has a couple alternates, but because of Tech War's connection to Reddingfield, and possibly because he was the token human Retaliator, Tech War is number two. Number one, of course, is Mars, who was the divine wine maker, thousands of years before Bacchus was even born. So, drinking is tolerated. Drunkenness would be a different matter, but it hasn't come up, yet. And if it does, it would probably be overlooked, because it wouldn't happen often. There are no alcoholics in the Retaliators. Alcoholism isn't a disease, it's a symptom of a weak spirit and there are none of those around here. These are real heroes, with strong personalities, in control of their own vices, instead of being controlled by them. But with vices, to be sure. Especially Arthur. He's a very complicated man. But definitely not a weak one. His is probably the second strongest personality, next to Mars'. It would take something real, and externally stronger than him, to bring him down, not some stupid vice, which lives inside his own self, when he is the master of everything that lives within himself. And most things that don't, in fact. From his perspective, his indulgences are his reward to himself, for being so awesome. Upsurge and Hotpoint leave the room. Whitley stands outside the door, watching, out of the way. Tech War stoops over at the feet of the fallen Retaliator, pointing his fingertips at the floor, palms forward, and head-motions for Casey to do the same. He does.

Tech War: Wait. Can you do that, with bare fingers?

Casey: Oh yeah, I wasn't thinking.

Casey makes a fist with his right hand, turns it sideways, and busts a couple holes in the floor, to make a grab-hold place. Tigerlily looks up at him, suspecting that he's holding back the fact that he could plunge his bare fingertips through the floor just as effectively and without risk to himself as Tech War can his armored ones. While he's doing that, Tech War plunges his armored fingers through the floor.

Casey: Thanks. I might've gotten a splinter.

Tech War: I was thinking you could peel the meat right off your bones. Super-strength without invulnerability makes you a hazard to yourself. Flash hit a metal wall harder than he should've, and later said he's lucky he didn't shatter his whole arm. He told me he used to injure himself all the time, before he got used to his power, because his strength is greater than his resilience. His limit is not how much he can fuck things up, but how much he can fuck things up without fucking himself up. Threw his shoulder out tossing a tank, so he quit doing that. Your power's like his, right?

Casey: More or less, I guess.

Tech War: Mine's artificial, designed to achieve the same result, but there are differences. When I'm tossing heavy things around, I can either do it or not, and the strain is on the armor, not my body. I can toss medium tanks, no sweat. Only by the turret or something external like that. If I get under it and the armor buckles from the strain, I'm paste. Or a rod could break and jab into me. So, I'm kind of in the same boat. You'll figure out your limits, eventually, hopefully. Can you fly backwards?

Casey: I don't know. Maybe.

Tech War: Switch sides.

Mars: It matters not. Keep your eyes on me and I'll navigate us to the hospital.

Tech War: Okay.

He nods to Casey and both of them grab onto the floorboards.

Casey: Wait. How're we gonna keep the boards together?

Mars: Hold. I'll break off the connecting beams.

Mars pulls up the floorboard on one side, reaches down into the hole and breaks the beam, not with impact, but by snapping it with his hand like it's brittle, though it's not. Then, he steps around and repeats the process on the other side. Tech War and Casey stand, pulling up an intact section of floor. The blanket is hanging over the edges. Mars ties the ends together underneath the assembly, on both ends. They all fly out, through the huge hole in the wall, toward Manhattan.



The hospital waiting room. Tech War, Hotpoint, Aaliyah and Casey are all waiting to hear from the doctor, about Robert. A skinny doctor with short blonde wavy hair enters with a clipboard. His nametag says “Alton Weston M.D.”

Dr. Weston: First off, he’s still in surgery, but your own Doctor Race is leading this stage of the operation, so you know Mr. Jitara is in very capable hands. Turns out, it’s very fortunate that his skull was shattered.

Hotpoint: Wha - ? How’s it fortunate that his skull was shattered?

Dr. Weston: The swelling of his brain would’ve killed him, otherwise.

Casey: God ...

Dr. Weston: I’ll go out on a limb and say he has a good chance. Mars’ abilities take over where ours leave off. He has the swelling under control, and the bleeding stopped. His Eminence has Mr. Jitara’s entire physiology under his control, to make sure nothing goes wrong while we operate. If there aren’t any more unforeseen complications, the recovery will be really up to Mr. Jitara, and from what I’ve seen, he’s a fighter.

Aaliyah: That, he is. And, I’ll make sure he has a reason.

Casey: That’s good. That could make the difference.

Aaliyah: It’s got to.

Dr. Weston: Okay, if there’s nothing else?

Tech War: Just keep us posted. Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. Weston: Right.

The doctor exits into the O.R. doors.

Aaliyah (To Casey): I’m sorry for the things I said, before. It was an accident, and it probably did have more to do with me than you.

Casey: Thanks for saying it. It doesn’t let me off the hook entirely, though.

Tech War: Take this as a lesson, Casey: Be more mindful of who you hit, and how hard. ... You got lucky, this time. If he lives, that is.

Casey: “If” ? And, if he doesn’t?

Tech War: If he doesn’t ... well, ... there’d be too much ... tension ... for you to remain on. Nothing personal, just, for the good of the team. You understand. ?

Casey: Yeah. Of course. I’d probably quit, anyway.

Aaliyah: Hey, I don't want to hear any more about "if he doesn't"! Please?

Tech War: Sorry. (To Casey): And ... don't buy stock in what I said. I'm a little shook up, understandably. We'll see, okay?

Casey: Fair enough.

Vision 37: Intro To Mêlée

A small hotel room in New York City. The maids don't keep up with what's rented or unrented, they check all the rooms and make the unmade beds. If she peeked in now, she'd come back later. The muscleman sitting on the edge of the unmade bed is wearing a white tank-top and has sandy blonde wavy hair, half-combed, and parted on the left side. The newspaper in his hand has a stock publicity photo of Jitara, with the headline: "RETALIATOR SERIOUSLY INJURED IN TRAINING ACCIDENT". Mr. Crandall has an Australian accent. Unlike Aaliyah's, his is Outback seasoned.

Billy Crandall: So, ol' Sensei foinally made good. Then, 'e got creamed! That's gotta suck. I bet it would do 'im some good, to see an old friend.

New York Pier, at the admissions gate for the Retaliators Island Ferry. Mêlée has an Australian accent. Bush hat, facemask, two winch spools harnessed onto his back.

Guard: Sir, I told you, tickets for this ferry aren't for sale, anywhere! This is a private ferry. You cannot be admitted without a Retaliators or Retaliators Staff I.D. or an authorized escort.

Mêlée: Look at muy costume! I'm a superhero! I wanna join The Retaliators!

Guard: If The Retaliators were holding tryouts, there'd be an escort here to

greet you. And I don't see one.

Mêlée: A'roight, you got me. I'm really here to see the injured Retaliator. He's an old friend of moine.

Guard: "Injured Retaliator", huh? Do you even know which one it is?

Mêlée: Jitara, smarty pants! Nyah! You want 'is DOB, 'is real name and 'is mother's maiden name, too?

Guard: Hey! I don't know Jitara's real name! Seen his face and don't know. He rides this ferry. He told me personal the only ones besides the Retaliators that know his real name are his enemies. Enemies ain't authorized for the ferry. Got it?

Mêlée: Fuck it. I just wanted to see my friend, you ratbag. When he foinds out how you blockaded me here, he'll have you kicked off this post. "Got it"?

Guard: I'll take my chances.

Mêlée walks away and paces down the boardwalk of the pier, occasionally glancing over the East River, where Retaliators Island can be seen in the distance.

Mêlée: Shit! So close, yet so far. Muy kingdom for a dinghy.

Further down the pier, he spots a couple of jet-skiers, making purposeless laps around a vacant dock.

Mêlée: Thank you! Where there's a will, there's a way!

Mêlée opens the safety hatch on his wrist launch cable and lets fly with it. It attaches to the male jet skier's jet ski, and Mêlée yanks on the cable, jerking the jet ski out from under the guy.

Male Jet Skier: Hey! >Glub< >Glub< Yack! Spittoi! Hey, what're you trying to do?

Mêlée pulls the jet ski to himself and mounts it.

Mêlée: "Truying"? I'd say I'm doin' it!

He rides over to the guy and grabs him under the armpit, to help him climb onto the back of his girlfriend's jet ski.

Mêlée: Official Retaliators business. Heh, heh, just send the bill to Tech War, care of Reddingfield Innovations. Ha, ha, ha!

Mêlée speeds off, toward Retaliators Island. Halfway there, Mêlée notices that the jet skier was very accommodating, by leaving his binoculars hanging on the left handlebar. He uses them to see what's waiting for him on the island. Ooh, at the very back of the island, just behind the ferry dock, there's a driving path cut into the slope and a whole shed full of golf carts.

Mêlée: Oh man, they cut me a path up to it and left me some carts! This is gonna be a breeze!

He's covering distance, even while spying. Approaching the dock close enough to see a guard shack there, he veers right, before being spotted. He tosses the binoculars into the water.

Mêlée: Nope. Don't wanna go that way.

Mêlée rides the jet ski ashore, on the same side of the island, but near the front of it, far enough away for the guards to not spot him, unless they were specifically looking for him, which they're not. For a small island, it's plenty big enough that you can't see a person across the distance of it, or even halfway across the distance. He comes ashore on the beach beneath the seacliff. (The rear of the mansion faces north, the front faces south.) Mêlée hits the beach full throttle and steps off the jet ski, allowing it to flip up in the air and tumble end over end on the beach. There's a set of wooden stairs built into the cliff face, leading up top. It's about a ten story climb, on steps that look like they haven't been maintained in years. Why would they be, when the flyers fly and the ones who don't have that sweet pathway in the back, with the golf carts? (If only Mêlée had gone around to the front of the island, he'd've found the walkway non-flyers actually use to get to the beach, since this one is too dangerous. It's a 26° ridge in the cliff face. No steps, none are needed, it's twice as wide as the paved part of the two-lane driving path. The

only reason it wasn't used as the driving path is because it doesn't face Manhattan, and the beach on that side is too short for a ferry dock, a parking lot, a guard shack and a golf cart shed. There's plenty of room for Mêleé to have crash landed his jet ski, though, if only he'd gone around. Oh well. This 82° almost straight up rickety rotten wood stairway will get him where he's going, if he doesn't get killed on it.)

Mêleé: Oh, shit!

Wooden planks, 5 feet across, 3 feet apart, the angle of a high dive ladder, ten stories up, no handrails. Why no handrails on a stairway this steep and precarious? Angled and spaced just perfectly so that using the higher steps to hold on to would angle your body enough so the step above the one you're stepping on would make it difficult to keep your footing on the one you're stepping on. A nervous climber could do that, but it would lessen their chances of making it. Samuel Reddingfield never meant for this deathtrap to be used by his family and guests. He warned guests not to use it. He meant for it to be a trap for intruders. He often checked the bottom for bodies, but was disappointed to not find any. No ordinary intruder would use this thing, even before it was rotten. Corporate rivals weren't as organized in Samuel's day, and they were all afraid of him. There were rumors he had secret weapons, alien tech. Arthur never tore down this stairway, because he inherited his father's curiosity to see if someone would ever be dumb enough to use it. Mêleé may be a little bit guilty of dumbness for choosing this, but not entirely. With a grapnel tipped cable launcher on each wrist, he can walk straight up a skyscraper. He does wonder how anyone else could ever use it, though. Mêleé uses instinct to guess which steps are safe to step on, the rest is just a matter of balance, which he hardly has to think about, and he makes it up top, without incident. Adjacent to the garage area of the mansion, there's another shed full of golf carts. From the center of that, one could enter the garage. From the looks of this place, the garage is probably full of Rolls Royces, which means it's full of cameras. If Mêleé went in there, he'd find Rolls Royces, Mercedes, Bentleys, Bogatis, Lamborghinis, Ferraris, Porches, Jaguars, etc, some American classics and muscle cars, plus the 1956 Toyota he learned to drive in. You don't see those in the U.S., because Japanese imports weren't popular in the 50's. Not unlike many typical super-duos,

there was a father/son dynamic between them. But this sidekick didn't grow up to be a fruity man-child, he grew up to be a badass. At 14 he was smaller than Robert, but at 15 he was the same size. That's when he started being rebellious. He regrets that now. On the furthest side from him, there's a walkway leading to the front door. Out of the question. On the nearest side of the shed, there's a walkway leading to a rear entrance. To go that way, he'd have to walk right by a few windows, and he's not dressed to pass for a gardener. However, on the other side of the cart path, there's a jet tarmac, with a walkway that leads to that same rear entrance. On the grass between here and there, he could be seen if someone were watching for him, but they're not, and it's better to do his sneaking around at a distance than to walk right by a window. This is better, because once he sneaks over to the tarmac, there are concrete barricades high enough to hide him from the entire house, if he walks right up next to them. They were probably put there to protect the house from bad landings, a morbid thought. Or to protect the house from jet heat, that's a brighter thought. At the edge of the barricade, he steps over a guard rail and makes his way to the center of the southernmost (forward-most, since the mansion faces south) edge of the tarmac, where the walkway to the rear entrance is. He enters the back door, which leads to the garden maintenance room. After that, the kitchen, where he encounters a mid-60ish-aged Brit, boiling something in a huge pot.

Whitley: Bloody hell! Who are you?

Mêlée: I'm a friend of Tech War's. And, Jitara. Just here for a visit, Mate.

Whitley: I wasn't told there'd be any visitors today. Just let me ring up Master Tech War and confirm your story.

Mêlée: Nope, nope, I want it to be a surprise.

Whitley starts sidestepping his way toward a phone hanging on the wall near the interior door of the kitchen.

Whitley: Even so, good sir, it's my job to announce the arrival of "guests".

Mêlée steps between Whitley and the phone.

Mêlée: Can't let you do that, Pops. I told you, it's a surprise.

Whitley puts up his dukes.

Mêlée: Whooo-ha, ha, ha, ha!

Mêlée gets socked in the kisser.

Mêlée: Ow! What the hell? Are you shittin' me, old man?

Whitley rope-a-dopes and tries for another swing, but Mêlée is ready this time, and takes him down, with a non-violent martial arts move that consists of wrapping his right arm around Whitley's front shoulders, then tripping up his feet, and gently laying him down on the floor. Mêlée takes out his lasso and starts tying Whitley up.

Mêlée: I can't believe you fattened my lip, ya old fossil! What're you a boxer?

Whitley: I boxed a little, in the Royal Navy.

Mêlée: You shouldn't'a gave it up!

Whitley: HEEEEELP! INTRUDER IN THE HOU-mmmmp!

Mêlée clamps his gloved hand over Whitley's mouth.

Mêlée: Great. Now I gotta foind some tape. Got any tape, "Jeeves"?

Whitley shakes his head "no".

Mêlée: Roight. You wouldn't tell me if ya did. Well, now ya gotta go with me whoile I scare up some tape.

Mêlée pulls Whitley up, and walks him around in front of himself, still clamping his hand over Whitley's mouth.

Mêlée: Am I hurting you?

Whitley: Umph-um.

Mêlée: You gonna have a heart attack?

Whitley: Umph-um.

Mêlée: Good. Stay that way and you'll be helping me out a heap in the long run.

Mêlée checks some of the drawers, then heads toward that door. Before he gets there, Tech War is standing in the doorway. Mêlée puts on a big shit eating grin.

Mêlée: Hi!

Tech War raises his right hand, and it begins to emit electromagnetic ripples. Mêlée's eyes bulge, but he's still grinning.

Mêlée: *What ?*

Tech War: Untie him.

Mêlée: A'roight, no problem.

Tech War: Whitley, are you alright?

Whitley: Quite alright, sir. I must say, this young hooligan was near gentlemanly. As hooligans go, I mean.

Tech War: Good. Now, step away from him.

Mêlée: Aw naw!

Whitley steps away, but Mêlée steps with him. Taking cover behind Whitley, Mêlée points his wrist launcher at Tech War, with the crab claw shaped grapnel attached at the end. It won't hook into Tech War's armor, but it can knock him down. Quickly, Whitley elbows Mêlée in the ribs, and scurries away, leaving Mêlée off his guard long enough to get particle-ray blasted into the stainless steel cabinetry. Mêlée ends up on his hands and knees. As he makes his way back to his feet:

Mêlée: *Chri-keys !* Now, will you let me explain? I'm a friend of Jitara's.

Tech War: Not likely. As a rule, Retaliators don't fraternize with the criminal element. It's a conflict of interests.

Mêlée: Yeah? I'm not a criminal! You said so yourself, the last time you busted me. And the time before that. ...

Tech War: Maybe I was too soft on you. You don't seem to have turned over

a new leaf at all. And you're a friend of Jitara's?

Mêlée: Roight. From touring the Southpac together. I didn't even know 'e wasn't still there. I found out 'e was a Retaliator and laid up, all at once. From the paper.

Tech War: Um-hum ...

Mêlée: Uh ... you know his real name?

Tech War: Yes, do you?

Mêlée: Robert Hattori, huh, a'roight? Japanese-American, by now 36 to 38-ish? Anyway, he trained me, when I was a kid. I know; "he must be proud", I beat ya to it, smart gouy. Hell, 'e half raised me, at that.

Tech War: "Half" sounds about right.

Mêlée mock applauds Tech War's cleverness.

Mêlée: Can I see 'im?

Tech War: He's not here. His injuries were worse than we let the press know. He's at New Hope, in the Critical Care ward. I was just headed out there myself, and I'm sure as hell not gonna leave you here. Come with?

Mêlée: Sure.

Above the river. Tech War is carrying Mêlée by the back of his belt, with his left hand. As they approach the pier, the jet skier is giving a statement to a couple cops.

Mêlée: Oh yeah, you owe that gouy a jet ski.

Tech War turns his head in Mêlée's direction, to stare at him, then jostles him, slightly.

Tech War: I think my arm's getting a cramp in it.

Mêlée: Okay, I owe that gouy a jet ski! Sheesh, hold onto me, willya?

Robert has a private room in the Critical Care ward, at New Hope Hospital. He's in a full head cast, and has I.V.s but doesn't need O2. Tigerlily is by his side when Tech War knocks on the door, with Mêlée.

Tech War: Hey, Robert. This A-hole claims to be a friend of yours. You know this clown?

Robert does a slight head shake.

Robert: Owwwwooo!

Tech War: Ow! Don't rattle your head! Just say "yes" or "no".

Robert: Ivz hawdaw dwo dwawf.

Tech War: Huh ?

Tigerlily: "It's harder to talk", he said.

Tech War: But, much less painful, I imagine.

Robert: Uv-huv.

Tech War: Okay, I just need you to confirm or refute this guy's story. Do you recognize him, at all?

Robert: Umf-umf.

Mêlée: Wait a minute. He wouldn't, like this.

Mêlée removes the hat and mask, revealing the face of Billy Crandall.

Robert: Miwa?

Tech War: Are you saying "Mêlée"?

Robert: Uv-huv. Miwa, yu gwew uvga.

Tigerlily: "Mêlée, you grew up".

Tech War: That's debatable.

Robert: Bwiggoow den me... demn...

Tech War: Big pain in the ass is what he is.

Robert: Yea-uh. Gud gyud, dvough.

Tigerlily: I remember him mentioning a Mêlée. He talked to him in his imagination, calling him "Grasshopper", no wait, it was "Grasshoppa", he insisted there's no "r" on the end. He'd say "We made it through the shit again, Grasshoppa" or "We gonna let 'em get away with that, Grasshoppa?" I asked him who's Grasshoppa and he said some kid he used to know named Mêlée.

Mêlée: "Grasz-hupp-ah"! You talk to me in your head?

Robert: Unnnggh "Gwyesz-hubb-ah"! He, heh, hagh! I gyun omose sey

deh.

Tech War (To Mêleé): Okay, you're off the hook, for now.

Mêleé re-masks, and he and Tech War pull chairs up to sit next to Tigerlily.

Mêleé: If I'd known you were gonna end up a Retaliator, maybe I shoulda hung around ya a little longer, Sensei.

Robert: Vay idnd av Ew-dow-dewz, vagh den. Ang, oo woulgn'd'uv.

Tigerlily: "They didn't have Retaliators, back then. And, you wouldn't've."

Mêleé: I know. I was too young to put in harm's way, and too independent to not do my part, so I piddled around the orient for a year, then took off to the States, kicked it here for a couple years, then I met Rocket Man 'ere and decided to take up bothering him as a full time hobby. In case you wondered where I went.

Tech War: Ahem. Have you told me lately how grateful you are that I didn't laser your head off the first time we met?

Mêleé: Uh, yeah, that was a great boon for me. Did you thank me enough lately for saving those Reddingfield employees you knocked off the catwalk, blasting at me?

Tech War: It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been there, but... oh forget it.

Robert: He, heh. Veh bowdew veh luggiew, Greszhubba! Vey'ww nevw kyej us! Ha!

Mêleé: Eh? Um, can I stay at your place a while? I saw real stew, and the mission stew is made out of rats. I get plenty because half the vagrants won't eat it. It has tails and toiny rat skulls bobbin' around, it's unholy. Dumpster pizzar is good, but the alley bums claim that stake. I get 'em out of jams occasionally, an' they share it.

Tech War: No way. We have a strict anti fox in the henhouse policy over there.

Robert reaches into the end table drawer. He gets his wallet, takes out all the cash and hands it to Mêleé. It's 5 Franklins, 3 Jacksons, a 5 and some 1's.

Mêleé: Thanks, Sensei, I'll pay ya back.

Robert: Don'd, igs ogay. I gyad moew. Gaww iv oo nid angivin, ogay?

Tigerlily reaches in her dress and pulls out 2 more Franklins, for Mêleé.

Mêleé: Thanks. You 'is Sheila?

Tigerlily: Um... In a way. It's complicated.

Tech War: I've only got a card, and you're not getting my card. I'll... get you a nice hotel room, okay? With food service and all that. Just until you get a real job.

Mêleé: Um, if you get a mug's task yer regulars don't want, there's fuckall I won't do.

Vision 38

An hourglass, pouring sand down its globe. Robert is back at the mansion, the head cast is off, but he has a metal rig around his head, like a brace made out of an Erector set. He's sitting up in an adjustable bed, with an I.V. feeding tube leading under his pajama shirt. Tigerlily is sitting next to his bed. Mighty Man enters, carrying an insulated cup, with a bendy straw sticking out of the lid.

Mighty Man: Whitley was bringing this broth up to you, but I asked him to let me. I need to talk to you about something.

He hands off the broth, and Robert opens the lid and looks inside. It's

steaming, just a little. He puts the lid back on and puts it on the bedside table.

Mighty Man: The night of the accident ... were you taunting me for a reason?

Tigerlily: Oh, don't talk about that, now!

Mighty Man: If not now, when?

Robert picks the cup back up and looks in it, again.

Mighty Man (Smiling): It's not poisoned, I promise.

Robert: Id's nod hod enough. With all my fracjures, condusions and incisions, I can'd dake chances with bacderia. The lasd thing I need is du ged infeced. Sdick id in the microwave over there, on high, for about a minude.

The cup is handed off, and Mighty Man sticks it in the microwave, pushes some buttons and turns it on.

Mighty Man: You shouldn't have this in your room. You're human. You'll get cancer.

Robert: Bwock the rays for me, suberman. Jew hear id, Aawiyah? Brainwess mussew gives a shid about me.

Mighty Man: I have a brain, thank you. You're the first person I almost killed, and I'm kinda grateful you're o... not dead. I'd like for you to continue not being dead. You should get the microwave out of your room. It can't be good for you. Or maybe cancer is part of your plan, too. Like I was?

Robert: Dafuck dyoo mean? Microwave didn'd break my skewew, you did!

Mighty Man: I mean, did you want me to hit you like that? You know, because of your situation?

Robert: For the symbathy factdor? Du ged her du dake care of me, wike this?

Mighty Man: Maybe. Or, maybe, you know, to escape the pain of your situation?

Robert: Ha, ha! Suicide by Mighdy Man! Yeah, righd! Don'd fwadder yoursewve!

>Beeeeeeep!< The broth is done. Now, it's smoking. Mighty Man takes it out, carries it over to the bed and hands it back to Robert.

Mighty Man: I need to know; did you expect it to turn out like it did?

Robert: Exbeck this!

He tosses the broth at Mighty Man, and it splatters all up and down Mighty Man's exposed right arm. Mighty Man's entire arm is steaming, from the near-boiling broth.

Mighty Man: What's wrong with you?!

Robert: I god my head caved in by a SBY !! How 'boud you? You burned?

Mighty Man: No ?

Robert: Why nod? Thad shid's hod! Wemme dell you whad I exbecded: I exbecded you du feew the affecks of the beading I gave you! I exbecded du make a foow oud of you, whiwe you sdaggered and sdumbewd around dizzy, drying du hid me! I exbecded du have you crying for your fucking mama! I didn'd exbeck you du be imbervious! You weren'd imbervious when you foughd Cabdain Suberhero! And where did thad bunch come from, aww of a sudden? No berson nod augmended for sbeed can douch me! Cabdain Suberhero is swow for me, bud he made joke of the day oud of you! Whad changed since then, Mighdy Man?

Mighty Man: C'mon. You know I also had the super potion, like Captain Superhero. I heard you hit him a bunch of times before he hit you. Same thing.

Robert: Yeah, he hid me doo. Bud nod wike THIS!!! And he's skiwwed, whiwe you mighd miss and hid yourself! He didn'd ged me as easy as he god you!!! I was ad Wondon, Virchu-Dech and here! The combarisons don'd madch!

Mighty Man: So, I'm better than I was last year. Maybe I'm improving.

Robert: I foughd Capdain Suberhero barehanded. With onwy his skiww, he'd wose. With onwy his bower, he'd wose. With whad I was using on you, he'd be fucked ub. You've been hiding a big secreed since you came here. If I bring id ub do Jackson and the others, I don'd think you can bullshid your way oud of an examinashun.

Mighty Man: My physical condition is private. I don't have to submit to that.

Robert: Good. Refuse the examinashun. Thad's juld as good for wedding your secreed oud, thad you're hiding a new bower.

Mighty Man: You're hiding nothing? Like, say, Rascher buying you off at

Virtu-Tech?

Tigerlily: What? (to Robert) Is that true?

Robert: Fuck no! He's lying! He'd say anything to get off the hook for this!

Mighty Man: You're being very harsh, considering you started it. I think you should reconsider. I think we should keep each other's secrets. Don't you, *Red*?

An obvious double meaning. Mighty Man gives a hand gesture which conveys "Keep thinking till you get it". Robert is stunned. He gives Tigerlily an accusatory look.

Tigerlily: All things from the past are in the past. I'm with you, now. By your side, as you wanted. And, that is where I will remain. I'm loyal to you, now, if not before. I hope that's what matters most, to you.

Robert breathes out, looks blankly forward, and nods, slightly.

Tigerlily (To Mighty Man): We will keep your secret. And, you will honor us, by keeping ours. Okay?

Mighty Man: Okay. I hope you get to feeling better, Robert, and I really do mean that, whether you believe it or not.

Vision 39: Enter, Epochalus

Stonehenge, with elapsed time sun movement winding around it. Mighty Man, on monitor duty, again. Again, he's reading a paperback, with his feet propped up on the console. Mars enters the room, and Mighty Man straightens up, like he's been caught.

Mars: Getting caught up on your reading?

Mighty Man: I'm still watching the monitors. Nothing's happening.

Mars: It's comforting to know that the fate of the world is in your hands. And, Isaac Asimov's.

Mighty Man: Hey, if we're not supposed to read the paperbacks, why are they

here?

No answer. Just a stern look.

Mighty Man: You're just ragging on me, aren't you?

Mars: Always. Till you give me a reason not to.

Mars slams the door shut. Mighty Man props his feet back up on the console and holds the book open with his left hand, to read it, while rubbing his right temple with the middle finger of his right hand, aimed at the doorway Mars was just standing in. In the garden in the mansion's north lawn, in the rear of the mansion, Jitara is in full costume, but the ninja mask is tucked into his belt and the padded headgear is looped around his left forearm. He's apparently fully recovered. He's kneeling in front of Tigerlily, who's sitting in an iron bench, beneath an apple tree. He's offering her a little black velvet box, opened, with a diamond, emerald and ruby ring inside.

Tigerlily: I don't think you realize what you're asking of me, Robert. My whole life, everything I've ever believed in

Jitara: Has brought you nothing but pain and misery. I'm asking you to trade your sad past for a happy future with the man you love.

Tigerlily: Ha, ha, ha! Robert, Robert, dear sweet Robert! I have never said out loud that I love you. Yet, you keep saying it for me, putting words in my mouth.

Jitara: Have I been wrong?

Tigerlily: No. You haven't. You've been right, every time. All the while. Maybe even all the way back to before we came here.

Jitara: Right about what? Is there something you need to say to me?

She smiles and cradles his face in her hands.

Tigerlily: Only that I love you. And I'll marry you.

She kisses him. She offers her finger and he slides the ring on it. They kiss again. Then he sits next to her on the bench and holds her hand.

Jitara: I know you must really love me, now. To give up on all that “Grand Destiny” stuff. The one obstacle I could never overcome, unless you truly loved me. I’m the most skilled fighter here. Maybe even better than Mars, if everything else was level between us. He knows the arts, but he relies on his abilities more. He’s good, better than all the other gods... probably... I guess. But I’m better. I know I am. But that buffoon Mighty Man’s Retaliators Incorporated merchandise still outsells mine. Just because he can lift cars and shit, big deal. What good is that power to someone who doesn’t know how to use it? Dropped it and ruined it, right after the picture was taken. Nice car, too. Clumsy idiot. How many people would buy the poster if it was of him dropping the damn car, like he did? When I found out that resin they put in my skull strengthened it so I could head butt brick walls, I had ’em put it in all my bones. I make ’em enough to pay for that, at least. Now I can qi-force all the time, I’m practically super. But still human, genetically, anyway. I could learn every skill under the sun, enhance myself in every way that won’t ruin me, but there’s nothing under the sun as far as I know that can change my species. I imagine there’s a reality out there somewhere in the Timescape, with no S.P.I.’s, no gods. There, I’m the greatest fighter on the planet. They put the saving the world storylines in my comics, my shit sells off the shelves and fans travel from all over the world just to get a glimpse of me. But here, in this world, inhabited by gods and demi-gods, I’m just another human. “The skilled human Retaliator”, who cares? They wrote my “accident” into the storyline. Supposedly, I got captured by the Hong Kong Mafia, who beat and tortured me, till Mighty Man came and thrashed them all and got me out of there. That makes twice already they’ve had me in over my head with more than a “mere human” could handle and the great demigod hero Mighty Man had to fly in and rescue me. I swear, if it happens again, I’m gonna go down there and beat that writer’s ass, myself! If they only knew what it’s really like. The readers write in and say what they want to see from Mighty Man, and that’s the Mighty Man they get, not the one we know. I think Reddingfield, Mars and Tech War just keep him around because he’s popular. They know he’s shit. But it’s all okay. He does more for the corporation than for the actual team, but the bottom line is green. I’m sorry, I’m blowing off steam, and it’s supposed to be the happiest moment of your life.

Tigerlily: Ha, ha! I’m here for your steam, Robert, whenever you need to

blow it. I tell you what, I'll make my new destiny be to help you any way I can. How's this?: We get married and have lots of children. Our children will inherit my god gene and your natural talent. We will train them together in the skills of men and gods and they will be the greatest fighters in this reality. Jitara: Success through my kids, huh? I guess I could wrap my head around that.

They kiss again, and continue kissing up until Captain Superhero interrupts.

Captain Superhero: Um, sorry to interrupt, but we've got a meeting. Visitors popped in out of thin air, the senior members know one of 'em. They wanna talk to all of us.

Jitara: Great. We were kind of in the middle of a very important conversation.

Tigerlily smiles bright and giddy and wiggles her fingers with the ring at him. Flash is embarrassed.

Captain Superhero: Cheese, now I'm really sorry to interrupt. That's great news, congratulations. We'll be in the living room, whenever you're ready.

Flash exits the garden, into the house, leaving the two of them alone again. They both smile and kiss again. Switch to the mansion living room. Mars is sitting on the couch next to Epochalus who's sitting next to a caped Croat. Mars and Epochalus are both having coffee, Croat has a cup in front of him, but his helmet is still on. Epochalus is in his mid-fifties, and has similar features to the younger Damons we've seen in the Revelation and the Caesar Skull scene, except he's about 30 years older and has black hair instead of brown. Whitley is standing by the door. Captain Superhero is sitting with Tech War, in the backless loveseat that's there to accommodate their bulky gear in the back, which they have in common. Captain Superhero's wings are folded down, which prevents them from bumping Tech War's jets, but in this position, his jets are below his butt, so he has to sit all the way back. He actually has a harder time sitting than Tech War does. Tech War's nacelles don't fold. He can take them off, but he prefers not to, because to put them back on he has to cybernetically reconnect all the systems, and it's a big

bother. Flash's wings come off, but not cybernetically. They require old fashioned wrenches, and if he has fuel, you've got a mess. Tech War is smoking a Kool and drinking coffee with a straw. Croat leans forward, and leaving the cup on the coffee table, he extends his armored left wrist over his coffee. A small metal tentacle pops out of a compartment under his wrist, inserts itself into the coffee, and the surface of the coffee lowers about a sip's worth. The tentacle retracts, and Croat leans back in his seat. He bobs his head a bit, like he just had a good sip of coffee. Tech War finger flips his straw to make circles around the inside of his cup, and on the second circuit, his mouthslit is in the right place for the straw to insert itself. That's his trick. Croat didn't even notice it, but Captain Superhero is smiling from getting a kick out of it. Upsurge and Hotpoint file in, followed by Tigerlily and a now masked Jitara. They both look unusually bright and shiny. Upsurge and Hotpoint sit on the long couch together, and Jitara and Tigerlily sit on the short couch together. The configuration: Two long couches across from each other, one short couch across from a backless loveseat, with a rectangular coffee table in the middle of them all.

Captain Superhero: Whitley, would you mind relieving Mighty Man, please?

Whitley nods and exits to the hallway.

Mars: Whilst we await the inept; ...

Jitara: Ha, ha, ha!

Jitara leans over and offers Mars a gimme-five, with his left hand, but receives only an annoyed look. Jitara loses his joviality and looks chastised, but non-repentant.

Mars: Charter members already know Epochalus, from the times he served as our advisor, during the early days of the team. The rest of you may have seen his public address on television, in which he advised how to delay prophesied end-times.

Captain Superhero, Jitara and Tigerlily all shake their heads "no".

Captain Superhero: I was off the radar.

Jitara: I flip channels looking for action flicks, not speeches.

Tigerlily: This is the first time I've had fulltime access to a television.

Mars: Right. Epochalus, Master Of Time, has been assisting gods and heroes in his own unique way, throughout time. He has helped the Retaliators and the Quantum Quartet. Now he seeks our help.

Epochalus: Indeed. Ladies, gentlemen, all you revered Retaliators, please take heart; this very timeline, including your own existence, is at hazard. Croat The Gotovost intends to disrupt history by creating a very unhistorical deposing of Pharaoh Ra-Mâdûm Khan-Amon of ancient Egypt.

Mars: In what manner does he intend to depose the Pharaoh?

Epochalus: Assassination.

Mars: Ramadûm was scribed to have ascended up into the arms of Amon-Re, in a boat made of sun fire, after a great military victory.

Epochalus: The legend of that act led the natives to believe that the creation god, Amon-Re, and the sun god, Ra-Hurakte, were one and the same. Subsequently, the two-in-one god was thereafter referred to as Amen-Ra. Alternately, Re-Harakhte, in regards to his dominion over the sun. Ramadûm's ascension is literally a set-in-stone event in your history, which even extended to the compositing and renaming of the gods. And it can't happen if Ramadûm is to be assassinated by Croat.

Upsurge: It would unravel our timeline!

Epochalus: That's right.

Enter Mighty Man.

Mighty Man: Who're we after?

Croat's voice is not modulated, like Tech War's. Tech War's voice is only modulated to help keep his identity(s) secret. Croat's identity is no secret. With his helmet on, Croat's voice sounds like his own, except slightly amplified and with a bit of echo. Like the principal's voice over a loudspeaker. A good speaker, no distortion, just a slight bit of boom and echo, for effect. The knob on the right side of his helmet turns up the volume,

the one on the left side turns up the echo. Both are minimal now, but still noticeable.

Croat: Prince Damon Pythias, Archduke Of Croatia. Also called Croat The Gotovost.

Mighty Man: And who are you?

Croat: Prince Damon Pythias, Archduke Of Croatia. Also called Croat The Gotovost.

Mighty Man: O.k., Prince; give up, you're surrounded.

Epochalus: Ha, ha! It's not that simple. Would you care to explain the details, Croat?

Mighty Man: Didn't I see you on tv?

Epochalus: Quite possibly. We are here on a matter very much related to the issues I spoke of in that broadcast. Please be seated, while my friend tells of our dilemma.

Mighty Man sits down next to Hotpoint and gives Croat his attention, across the coffee table in the other couch, while he explains.

Croat: 4000 A.D. : My kingdom of Croatia shared a border with the kingdom of Slovenia, ruled by a first cousin of mine, Prince Vandershlov Apollyon II. We were part of a greater empire, ruled by Vandershlov's and my grandfather-in-common, King Abaddon. Vandershlov and I both held high council positions in the Emperion's court. I, because I was First Knight. He, because of his name.

Upsurge: Now, wait a minute. Vandershlov Apollyon? Damon Pythias? He's a descendant of Baron Ivan Apollyon, and... you're a descendant of Quentin Pythias? Quentin Pythias of the Quantum Quartet?

Croat: My cousin, Vandershlov, is a descendant of Lord Apollyon. I am a descendant of both great men. Former peers, who became bitter rivals, who became enemies, whose lineages are destined to merge. Such is the irony of time. The two sister kingdoms existed in peace and harmony, as steadfast allies. Until I met and began to enjoy the company of Vandershlov's arranged bride-to-be; Princess Veronica. He didn't want her, but he wouldn't give her to me, so I led an invasion force, to take her. I managed to steal Princess

Veronica away from Vandershlov's Slovenian castle, along with our means of escaping to where the Empire could not follow. It was history itself, encapsulated; The Potniški Time-Machine. But during our exodus from the castle, a divergence occurred. In one scenario, Veronica did not escape the chaos of the battle alive. In that alternate reality, she was killed. The Croat from that timeline has gone mad from the guilt and sorrow that has been bearing down on him like a vise. Of course, in both battles, Croatia overtook Slovenia Castle. We both became time travelers. I don't know how, when or under what circumstances it happened, but at some point he became aware of my existence, and subsequently made his existence known to me.

Upsurge: Quentin Pythias was telling me he once had a time machine. He didn't make it, some guy appeared in it and tried to kill him, but the man died from a weapon malfunction. Quentin used it only once, before destroying it. He used it to go back in time, where he met... Pharaoh Ramadūm ...?

Hotpoint: Ooooooooooh! This is making my head hurt!

Upsurge: Ramadūm was a bad guy. He hid Delia Pythias in some catacombs and made the male members of the Quantum Quartet run a gauntlet to save her.

Croat: Not really. Ramadūm knew very well that the Pythias' were imperative to his own future, and never would've harmed or allowed harm to come to them. He was merely trying to prove his superiority over four of the 20th century's iconic heroes.

Mighty Man: Sounds like the mindset of a villain, to me.

Croat: He was a young man, at the time. Brash, shortsighted. Less cautious about the fragility of the timeline than I, at my age, would be, in his place. Ramadūm was, like many of you younger Retaliators, only a few years out of adolescence, and still with much to learn. But, regardless of his misdeeds, his existence is an integral part of your history. If he dies, I will not exist. And, everything in between will unravel. And, everything after I am undone ... will be hell on Terra, literally.

Captain Superhero: I think I see. Apparently, you must be a descendant of Pharaoh Ramadūm, and if the time traveler kills Ramadūm, he prevents your existence.

Croat: Close, and yet not quite. You fail to factor in the established fact that Croat is me. My ancestors are his ancestors. No, my friends, the truth of the matter is; I was Pharaoh Ramadūm Khanamon.

Croat removes his helmet. Obviously, without the helmet, the boom and echo are gone, his voice is his normal voice. He's 40-ish, (late thirties, early forties) He has similar characteristics to the younger Prince Damons in the Revelation, only about 15 years older. Mars recognizes the likeness.

Mars: I am familiar with the paintings and sculptures. You could be he.

Croat: I was he.

Mars: The ascension to Amon-Re?

Croat: I departed the era, via the Potniški Time-Machine. From inside the time machine, when it's activated, I simply see a vortex rise from my bottom to top, and when it dissipates, I'm someplace else. From outside the time machine, when it's activated, it looks like a canoe radiating a bright light, which rises up into the sky and disappears. But my bifurcate was never Ramadūm. In his first conquest of history, he chose the persona of the Caesar Skull, also called Skull The Scorcher.

Hotpoint: Never heard of 'im.

Croat: You wouldn't've. He hasn't yet left his mark on your timeline. Caesar Skull was a 31st century tyrant, unquestionably the most brutal regime in all of history. For us, it's ancient history, not as ancient as Ramadūm, but nearly a thousand years before we were born. That's approximately how far ahead it is for you.

Tech War: Whoa, wait, I don't wanna hear about the 31st century! You could unravel our future!

Croat: Caesar Skull is mentioned in the Vorn Prophecies. What I just said has been available knowledge since 500 A.D., when the aliens first brought us their Prophecies, which have more to do with us than with them. One part of the prophecies calls Caesar Skull the Destroyer. Another part actually gives the Destroyer's name, precisely, as Damon Pythias. My own name, right there, in the Prophecies. I knew of my bifurcate before I read that, or I would have thought it was me. The future has been written all along. We would be wrong to not be warned.

Tech War: Okay, what about this: This Skull guy, he's from the future, just like you? If he unravels the past, doesn't this timeline jazz catch up to him, too?

Croat (To Epochalus): Whew. I may need you to explain this one.

Epochalus: You know the answer. Just word it in a way that they can understand.

Croat: That's the hard part. I'll try. Alright, imagine a timeline as a thread. Now picture two threads, side by side, identical in every way. Both threads have a Ramadūm. Both have a Caesar Skull. The only difference between them is that the Skull Croat from Thread A invades Thread B, while the Skull Croat from Thread B invades Thread A. They may mirror each other in every way, say and do exactly the same things. By all outward appearances, this shouldn't be two timelines, it should be the same timeline. Except that each has an invading Skull Croat from the other thread, and that's enough to distinguish them. Skull Croat isn't worried about unraveling himself, he'll be unraveling his bifurcate from the other thread. He should be worried that the other Skull Croat is unraveling him, but I only gave the exact mirror analogy to illustrate how close the timelines can be and still be distinct. He probably doesn't have to worry about being unraveled, at all, by this. I don't have that luxury. I wasn't some other Ramadūm, I was this Ramadūm. I don't want to be unraveled, and the world with me. Do you?

Tech War (To Upsurge): Does that sound right to you?

Upsurge: Yeah. Some of it's a bit novel to me, but it all fits.

Mighty Man: Come on! Are we gonna do the bidding of a guy who's an admitted enemy of the Quantum Quartet?

Tech War: Good question, Casey. (To Croat): Your response?

Croat: I was... less than a year older than you, Mighty Man. Have you yet become the man you will be, for all time? The Quantum Quartet was merely a source of amusement, for me. I let them leave, with no real harm done. I even facilitated their escape, so they would think they were just lucky. Luck had nothing to do with it. I let them go, because, for one; I needed them to procreate me, and secondly; because Veronica was worried I would unravel the timeline, and rightly so. Fortunately, it was all meant to happen as it did. I am a soldier, not a saint. But, most importantly, I am no Skull Croat.

Hotpoint: What's the difference? I mean, you admitted that you're no saint. What does that make *him* ?

Croat: He is me as I am he, but we are not the same. He is the darker side of me. You see, there is no black or white. No perfect good, no perfect evil. That is to say, there are no perfectly good or perfectly evil individuals. Only

the balance, one way or the other, of the good and evil that coexists inside the individual. Skull Croat is what I would be, if I had nothing to lose, nothing to live for, and no reason not to destroy the future of this Terra. He is me, if I were insane, bent on spreading the evil that exists inside me, but thankfully is more suppressed in me, than it is in him. I'm sure on some level, he knows what he does is wrong, he's just less apt to care about that as I would be. Once, we were one, we shared the same balance of good and evil. After the split, I chose to embrace what was good in us. He chose to embrace our evil. Over time, I became more good, he became more evil. The culprit Croat you will meet is approximately the same age as me. It's been fifteen of our linear years, since the split. We have very little in common, anymore, outside the superficial. We are still physically identical, except he no longer has this cape. He burned his, in protest of the emblem it bore. But yes, there is a difference. A great difference. Imagine yourself, at the very worst you could possibly be, and know that my enemy is me at my worst. Not figuratively, but physically. He is no longer the evil within me, but outside of me, trying with all his power and cunning to kill me. And he would destroy your world and any other to do it.

The Retaliators nod, signifying that they understand.

Jitara: So, basically, we're going back in time, to prevent you from killing you...?

Croat: That pretty much sums it up.

Hotpoint: Wait a minute!

She looks at Epochalus and points her thumb at Croat.

Hotpoint: Is he your son?

Epochalus: Ah, you noticed the resemblance. He's my younger brother.

Croat looks at Epochalus, with a sly grin. Epochalus scrunches his eyebrows at him and looks away.

Epochalus: Time-travel runs in my family. I'm the one who has to keep them all from making a grand mess of things.

Hotpoint nods, as if she understands that part. There's more that he's not saying.

Epochalus: The Timescape is a myriad tapestry of likened, but differing realities. There actually exists a Terra, almost identical to this one, save for the fact that there's no such thing as superpowers.

Hotpoint: Ha! Imagine that!

Epochalus: Ironically, that Terra is of the Template Universe, from which the rest of the Timescape is patterned. Since, therefore, the molecular structure of that universe is inflexibly stable, molecules can't be altered without destroying them. The god gene is in their populace, as it is here, but it's not subject to alteration, it's doomed to dormancy, until it eventually fades altogether.

Upsurge: So, their DNA is too resilient to be enhanced. That is ironic. But... I, and every other scientist on Terra... er, *this* Terra,... have been under the impression that ours was the prime reality.

Epochalus: Wouldn't everyone from every reality rashly assume that theirs is the prime reality?

Upsurge: Point made.

Epochalus: If it's any consolation to you, this Terra is of the Catalyst Universe. Something I could never explain to your full understanding, except to say that it is the primary of all its derivative Parallel-Terras. Does that ease your mind?

Upsurge: Well, that stands to reason, the second part does, but the first part; if the Catalyst Universe isn't the same as the Template Universe, then I have no idea what it could be, but I'm not bothered. I'm o.k.

Epochalus: Alright, the simplest way for me to describe the difference between the template reality and the catalyst reality is that one is the prime and the other is the primer: The DNA and the nucleotide of the Timescape.

Upsurge: O.k., now I gotcha. I think. One is the pattern, the other the substance.

Epochalus: Close enough. In the template reality, their prophets and poets are not only perceptive to their own reality but also to all their derivative realities. They write songs and stories that don't even make sense in their reality, because they have nothing to do with their reality, they are about

things that happened in other realities. And the realities they belong to have the same songs and stories, because the visions they came from were sent to the prophets and poets of the realities the visions apply to. The prophets and poets of the prime reality receive all these visions from the derivative realities, because most of the time they are the base primary of the diverged prophet or poet the vision was meant for, and they write the songs and stories that were meant for their bifurcates. The people of the prime reality have many songs and stories that don't apply to their world, in the least. But they enjoy them for their entertainment value, without realizing that the songs and stories have a greater purpose, elsewhere. It's said that Odysseus killed the priest and spared the poet, because the poet is the one who communes with the Divinity. This might interest you, Mars: Since the Greek and Roman gods are so closely related, naturally, some events that occurred with one reality's Greek gods closely mirror events that happened to another reality's Roman gods. Not all the stories are common between the Greeks and Romans, but enough are that the same reality's prophets and poets writing such similar stories about two such similar families of gods have led most people to assume the Greek and Roman gods are the same entities, called by different names.

Upsurge: I guess that would make you Ares. You don't even look like Ares.

Mars: I've seen him change his face. Firstly, I am a god to the Romans, but I am not a Roman, I am a god. I am not of Rome, Rome is of me. There are no "Greek gods" or "Roman gods", since all Greeks and all Romans are Terran mortals. The closest there would be to that are Greek demigods and Roman demigods. The gods you are referring to are, in truth, the family of Zeus and the family of Jupiter. Respectively, the gods of Olympus and the gods of Heaven, or the Godrealm, since Heaven includes many additional realms, besides the Godrealm. All the realms of Heaven belong to my family, but the Godrealm is our capitol city. The families of Zeus and Jupiter are very closely related. All the gods in all the universe are related, either closely or distantly. We have no quarrel with one another, usually. We share the universe, and often coexist on same planets, if a planet boasts more than one race and a family of gods prefers one race and another family prefers another race. Jupiter is the rightful ruler of the universe, he inherited that title from Saturn, who he deposed. There are sometimes disputes between families of

gods, even the families of Zeus and Jupiter have fought. Usually, disputes are sorted out formally, but that one time, there was an impasse. With the exception of this one fight, our families are friends, extended family, actually. We relate, as such. But I don't like Ares. No one does, not even his own father. During this battle between our families, I found myself opposing Ares. He had a vicious look and charged at me with ferocity. I thought I was in for the fight of my life. But when I first struck him his warrior face changed to that of a crying baby. I'd like to go to the reality where people have confused him for me and clear my good name.

Epochalus: It has nothing to do with you. The Mars of that reality went to live in the Sirius System, where he's doing for another planet what you're now doing for us. He doesn't yet know how he's been libeled in his Terra's literature. He'll return someday and he'll have a lengthier task of clarifying the errors than you had, when you returned to us. The word "myth", on both Terras, once meant "legend". Here, its definition has evolved to mean "history". There, its definition has evolved to mean "fiction". We didn't have it as wrong as they did, but some artistic liberties were taken, as you know. As differing as realities can be, there's always some thread, tying them together. Most realities with super beings have super teams, similar to this one, but the teams have different names and different members. Some events are mirrored, other events that aren't mirrored in that reality are mirrored in another. Most still haven't discovered the Proteus Element, they still think their super beings are either mutants or ordinary humans who just happened to not be killed or harmed by their catalyts.

Captain Superhero: Wow, how backwards are they? Even in my time, we were starting to realize there was more to it than that.

Epochalus: At least one of these similar but different super teams has a growing man who can shrink, but prefers growing. Another has a shrinking man who can grow, but prefers shrinking.

Upsurge: Shrinking? Ow, that would hurt! How would you know the mass you're taking back is the same mass you gave up? I take on mass, it's converted from the energy of the empty space my larger form will occupy. I give it back, it goes back as easy as it came. Easier, because it didn't belong to me to start with. Before and after, I'm the same me I was. I can see it when it leaves me, it's like a smokey mist that dissipates back into the air. If I give up mass, that mist will be made of the mass I grew on my own. My own

blood, guts and bone. What if I end up in a different place than I started? Restore myself with something that wasn't originally me? No thanks. I could end up being made of cow farts and smog. Which I probably am when I'm big, but at least I get to get rid of it. (To Mars): You ever shrink?

Mars: To what advantage?

Upsurge: Exactly. I don't even know if I can shrink, and I won't exchange my mass for God knows what, just to find out. The average body exchanges its mass naturally over a course of seven years. Two shrinks, and there could be nothing left in you the same as what you started with. That's not natural.

Epochalus: It might be possible to shrink in this reality, but I wouldn't recommend it. It could be as problematic as you said. Those realities where it's common are far downstream, on the outer fringe of existence. They don't even have the same consistency and continuity as mainstream timelines. They can have several incongruent histories in a single timeline. That's not natural, either. They are also chronologically out of whack. For instance, people are almost the same age in the nineteen eighties that they were in the nineteen sixties. Not just in appearance, presidents change, cityscapes grow, automobiles progress the same as they do anywhere else, but their driver's license shows them to be two to four years older than they were 20 years ago. That's very unnatural. Time's Arrow; broken, inside out, not exactly submissive, but not assertive. And no one notices anything amiss about it. Like a dream that doesn't make sense, and no one realizes it, because they're all part of the dream. I have a theory that those realities only exist to buffer the Timescape from the void. It wouldn't be proper for a fully functional reality to exist next to the void, so there's a layer of irrelevant absurd ones, between. They can't have diverged from anything but others of their like, because functional realities don't diverge dysfunctional ones. They are probably made of irrational dreams and implausible fairytales and the like from across the main body of the Timescape, perhaps with some echoes of real events from various realities thrown in, and all mish-mashed together. I suppose they might be the "cow farts and smog" of the Timescape; universes made of "God knows what". In contrast, in the cluster of realities surrounding the template reality, most people shift at least once in their lifetime, to the timeline next door. They may notice subtle changes such as a song was performed by a different band, or a television show they watched in color

was always in black and white. No one speaks of it, for fear of being judged irrational. Backward, forward, left, right, up and down are physical and temporal directions, in the Timescape. My friends, there is a timeline in which Mozart lived to the ripe old age of 53. He was a carriage driver, who could often be heard whistling. In what you would think of as the present era of that timeline, this nation you call The United States Of America is called The United Colonies Of West India. The Prime Minister is a man who doesn't exist in your timeline. In fact, no one from that timeline exists in this one, and vice versa. Except for the Eternals of course, which includes Mars.

Mars: I am not an Eternal. I am an Immortal. The citizens of Terra have often confused the gods with the Celestial Order.

Tech War: There's a difference?

Mars: Yes. (to Epochalus) It's a different echelon of the Divine Hierarchy.

Epochalus: Of course. I stand corrected. As I was saying; the Mars of that alternate timeline is not aware of any of you, because to him, you don't exist. That is the world that evolved without the music of Mozart. It's not a bad world, but it's not this one. Consider this; the world in which Pharaoh Ramadūm Khanamon is killed, and replaced by the Caesar Skull, is a world which will never know anything but war. At the end of that process, human extinction is the final result. Of course, you wouldn't be affected by any of that, as you will have never existed. That world of war would have a Mars, naturally. But the Mars who sits with us here would not exist, because his reality would not exist. Even the gods could not exist in a world which would never have been. Only the Celestial Order permeates all existence even to nonexistence.

Pause. The Retaliators are imagining nonexistence. Mars realizes now that Epochalus feigned ignorance about the Divine Hierarchy, just to bring up the subject of the difference between the gods and the Celestial Order. He smiles, astonished and impressed that he was masterfully suckered into one of the common strategies of the ancient philosophers; feigning fallibility in the process of demonstrating infallibility.

Upsurge: Why would a television show be in black and white?

Epochalus: Oh. In the Template Universe and its neighbors, black and white film was invented before color film, and the full transition to color took

decades.

Upsurge: That's fascinating. Antoine Bouthillette only invented black and white film five years ago, and it hasn't caught on, except with the newspapers.

Hotpoint: I don't think I've ever seen a black and white tv show. Or a black and white movie, for that matter. Have you?

Upsurge: No one has, dear. We don't have it for video yet, just still photography.

Hotpoint: So, he's wrong, then?

Upsurge: No. He's talking about different realities.

Mars: Obviously Epochalus believes this to be a job for the Retaliators, and he is wise to all matters concerning time. Is this mission acceptable to everyone?

All Retaliators: Yes.

Mars and Epochalus stand at the same time, then everyone else stands.

Epochalus walks around to the open area behind the long couch furthest from the door and motions the others over there.

Epochalus: O.k. This is a multi-part journey. First; huddle around me, and I will transport us to my timeship, which is adrift in the nether regions of the Andromeda Galaxy.

All the Retaliators and Croat gather around Epochalus, and he vanishes himself and them away in a glowing, whirling flash of light.



Vision 40: One Will Die

Epochalus's timeship, in the Andromeda Galaxy. Inside, it's white and lined with windows. There are groupings of electronic equipment and a row of monitors, displaying various Croat-related events in history. Epochalus, Croat and the Retaliators arrive. Epochalus steps over to a control console, while the Retaliators look out the windows at the mists and clusters of the Andromeda galaxy.

Epochalus: And now that I have my timeship, I will set course for the second leg of our journey. Here at the doorway of our universe, we can step through to anywhere, even into the next universe. The universe next to this one, however, does not exist. Prepare yourselves for the revelation... that Dante was a genuine prophet.

The ship passes through a hoop the size of a large space station, and the exterior view changes to the landscape of a planet with heavy fog and no sun, no moon. Only one extremely gigantic star, very far away. The gliding red demons have attributes of horses, dragons, bats and other creatures, blended with a sort of repulsive elegance that implies that they were created by the same entity that created all the other creatures, but with a more sinister

purpose. They pay no mind to a suddenly appearing timeship, as if suddenly appearing things are not uncommon. Until they notice there are people inside. A couple of them who throw themselves at the windows of the timeship are shocked by a strange blue energy and slide off. Some of the Retaliators are startled, except for Mighty Man, who's wondered off to look at the monitors. He caught a glimpse of something that needs a closer look.

Epochalus: Welcome to Limbo, Retaliators!

Hotpoint: Limbo? There really is such a place? I just thought it was a way to describe the suffering between sending off my credit card application and my credit card finally arriving in the mail.

Epochalus: That's very... illustrative. The way you would understand it, Limbo doesn't exist. But, if it did exist, this would be it.

Upsurge: Limbo; The outer rim of Hell. Existence in a place that exists nowhere.

Epochalus: Nowhere, and nowhen. What you may not know is that the location of nowhere and nowhen is simultaneously the setting of everywhere and everywhen.

Upsurge: I'll be sure to make a note of it.

Epochalus: Do you see those gaseous vapors billowing out from that silo, off in the distance, some thirty yards in that direction?

The Retaliators (except Mighty Man) see it and nod.

Epochalus: That is the Temporal Conduit. You would recognize it as Stonehenge, if all the sections weren't in place, as they are here. The sections of the Temporal Conduit exist in several different realities. Only here, where all realities overlap, is the Temporal Conduit complete. It is the water in the center that is the key to time travel. It is the overlapping of the same water in different realities that binds all those realities together. But the water of all realities overlapped creates a deadly boiling acid. No one can survive the seething waters. Approach it with caution.

Hotpoint: We're going out there? With those demons?

Epochalus: Croat will keep the demons away from you. They're the guardians of the silo. They protect it for their master; Konar, ruler of the

gateway realm of Limbo.

Mars: I thought you were the Master Of Limbo.

Epochalus: The realm itself is his. He was the supreme ruler of a planet that occupied this space in another dimension. With its destruction, he ended up here. He only cares about the land. He thinks of the gateway as his, but he doesn't know how to use it. I'm the one who uses it, so he thinks of me as a part of the gateway.

Captain Superhero: You and he are allies?

Epochalus: No. But, I find his presence here useful in keeping out others who don't belong. Anyway, it is not the pool itself, but the vapors from the pool that are the gateway to all time. When the time leap occurs, we will see the mad Croat appear briefly, suspended above the silo, riding on top of the Potniški Time-Machine. He and it will be spinning. The time machine will rise up, and vanish him, from bottom to top. Then it, too, will vanish. That is when you Retaliators, along with our Croat, will exit the timeship. You will make a run, past the demons, as Croat engages them with his ray-gun. That should provide sufficient distraction for you to reach the silo. Once there, I will use the equipment here, to ascend you to a point over the conduit, where you will be transported to the exact point in time the other Croat intends to commit the assassination of Ramadūm. He must be stopped at all cost, or the future of your timeline will be fraught with war.

Captain Superhero: We can't let that happen.

Epochalus: I must warn you. I have viewed all possible outcomes, and in some variable contingencies, one of you dies. The one that dies is different in each contingency. Mars already knows it won't be him, because he already knows his destiny. The rest of you are vulnerable. The event is easily preventable if one of you is able to stop Croat, before it occurs. Does everyone understand?

Everyone nods. Then, they look at Mighty Man, who's looking at a monitor.

Mars: Mighty Man; did you hear what Epochalus has been saying?

Mighty Man: Yeah. One of us will die.

Mighty Man never looks away from the monitor. The Retaliators approach him. On the monitor, there's a tombstone that reads; "Casey Martel a.k.a.

Mighty Man - He died a Retaliator ”. It’s located on the southwest corner of Retaliators Island, near the seacliff, where years ago, a drunken, deranged Samuel Reddingfield told his son he’d be better off without him for a father, chickened out of shooting himself in the temple, then emptied his revolver into the clouds with the intention of shooting Godsatan in the ass, causing his 8 year old son Arthur’s horse to bolt off the cliff. That scene is playing out on the monitor right next to the one of Casey’s grave, and Tech War is trying not to look like he’s trying not to look. By chance or fate, Arthur is our Tech War for this mission. The behavior might appear suspicious to anyone paying attention to him. His secret is safe, no one is looking at him or the Samuel Reddingfield monitor. All eyes are on the one of Mighty Man’s grave. Kneeling in front of the grave is a weeping Jhotica. The Retaliators look horrified by it in their own way, but nonetheless, they pull Mighty Man away from it, even while he’s transfixed by it. Hotpoint tilts her head at the image. She’s the only one who notices the peculiarity of Jhotica being in the picture.

Epochalus: The “Chaos Dynamic” is the cosmic geometry which forces the formless to assume a form. The prophet Lou Reed demonstrated this by placing a number of guitars in front of speakers turned all the way up, and leaving the room. At first, the chaotic noises produced by the feedback were seemingly without form or direction, but in time, patterns emerged. These patterns fought for dominance, struggled to find their place. By the end of an hour, a rhythmic motif had formed, in a continuous loop. The “Butterfly Effect” is the propensity of a system to be influenced. Affected systems, over time, develop a burgeoning influence. A meteorologist named Edward Lorenz accidentally stumbled upon a phenomenon. Slight variables to the fifth and sixth decimal point, such as; the flapping of a butterfly’s wings, can have dramatic long-term effects on the weather patterns, such as altering the course of a tornado a hundred years later, or even creating or deterring one. As this effect relates to time; change anything, and you change everything. If a man goes back in time and kills the butterfly that was meant to affect or cause the tornado, a hundred years later, history has reshuffled itself, like a deck of cards. People who were meant to be in a place, at a certain time, were elsewhere doing other things. Two people who were meant to meet and fall in love, pass by the intersection a minute later than they would have. They never meet, never marry, and never create the ancestral line of the man who went

back in time and killed the butterfly. Therefore, by killing the butterfly; he never existed. What if someone had knocked on Hitler's parents' door, the moment before he would've been conceived?

Captain Superhero: Whoa. I'd probably look my age, right now.

Hotpoint: How old are you?

Captain Superhero: 68.

Hotpoint: You sure don't look it.

Captain Superhero: Thanks. I eat right, exercise, fall through time portals, it's great. Come to think of it... (To Epochalus) did you create that time portal?

Epochalus: Not me. Possibly one of my bifurcates. Probably, in fact, since you are meant to be here. If it hadn't already been done, I would've done it, myself. And, if you ever feel robbed of your era, you should know you'd seen all of it you were going to. You were taken from the moment of what would've been your death.

Captain Superhero: That makes sense. Thanks. To you or your bifurcate, whichever. Not to seem ungrateful, but you do know there were two of us there, right?

Epochalus: Twenty six men were on that plane. Eighteen died on it, eight escaped, including you. Two of the jumpers' parachutes tangled, bringing the number of the dead to twenty. If not for the vortex, the number of dead would've been twenty one. The only realities in which Lieutenant Gordon survived are the ones in which he didn't get on the plane in the first place. I have said, it wasn't me that created the vortex. It wasn't me, personally, but it probably was another me. If it had been me, I'm sorry, but I couldn't have saved your friend either. I would gladly do that for you in exchange for what you're doing for me, but I can't. Not without creating another reality, and he'd still not be saved in this one. Because, it wasn't meant to be that way in your timeline, else it would've happened that way. It is the very nature of time; you can choose where you're going, but you can't choose where you've been. To attempt it invites disaster, of the very sort we're now trying to avert. You understand this, don't you?

Captain Superhero: *I guess.*

Epochalus: *So ...* Unlike the "Domino Effect", which has one predetermined outcome, the "Butterfly Effect" can have many different results. For want of a nail, the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe, the horse was lost. For want of a horse, the knight was lost. For want of a knight, the victory was lost. For

want of a victory, the kingdom was lost. Culminating in the initially unforeseen result; for want of a nail, the kingdom was lost. But in the opposite scenario, the nail was not lost, and the outcome was the opposite. Between the two opposites, we have every conceivable variance. Einstein said the future is fuzzy. He was right, *in a way*, but he never elaborated on that observation. The future only appears to be fuzzy. It's actually an infinite number of static futures, existing simultaneously, giving the illusion of a fuzzy future. Order out of chaos: A dripping faucet appears to follow a random pattern. But at some point, the pattern will repeat itself. Sound vibrations, the plumbing, the water, the air in the room, force the pattern to replicate itself. Change the affecters and you change the effect, but there will always be a pattern, set by whatever the affecters may be. Uncontrollable unpredictability is a double negative, which makes it controllable predictability, to the affecters. Chaos is the overriding order of disorder. "The Butterfly Effect" = "The Domino Effect" x every feasible contingency x infinity. Outside linear time, One has time to predict every possible future, by the cause and effect of each link in the chain of events that lead up to it.

Epochalus points the monitor out to Mighty Man, who is not glued to it like he was, but he's been glancing back and forth at it.

Epochalus: This is one of many futures I calculated with a variable of .000127%. In one of those projected futures, you are the one who stops Croat, and the series of events in your future don't lead to this. In another, you fail, and the subsequent series of events do lead to this. The Timescape is constantly branching out, expanding, from all these tangent timelines, created by the actions and inactions of us all. You will diverge, in ancient Egypt. As you stand before me, I see both the one who succeeds and the one who fails, occupying the same space. When you return, I will only see one. The other will be part of some other timeline. Your divergence will split us all, and you will take our counterparts with you to that other timeline.

While Epochalus is speaking, Hotpoint is banging her head against Upsurge's arm, like she's trying to knock this gobbledy-goop into her head. Or out. Upsurge grins over her, even while soaking up every word Epochalus says,

like it's the most fascinating thing he's ever heard.

Epochalus: There are a few obscure timelines in which Skull Croat defeats the Retaliators and kills Ramadūm, but we won't concern ourselves with those, because those worlds are dead, and can't be brought back. The Retaliators who fail are now occupying the same space as these, but they certainly won't return, and there would be no one here to greet them if they could. Terra doesn't die right away, it splits in two; one Terra that is doomed and another that no longer exists. They belong to the one with a future that never happened, so nonexistence is instantaneous for them, as well as for we two who would be waiting for them. In truth, they were never really there at all, except that by some glitch in the mechanics of time, they were. It's less a glitch as much as it's the Timescape choosing a technical error over a systems crash, which is fortunate for all realities. As I said before, it's obscure and they can't be saved. The Retaliators who matter won't have to worry about that, except of course, to avoid it. The Retaliators will stop the evil Croat, in most cases. So long as only he, Ramadūm and we in this room are involved, how and at what point he's stopped will have no effect on the past, but it will affect your present and future. Your future is in your own hands.

Mighty Man understands, and he's setting it in his mind to be the one who beats the bad guy. Croat is looking at the built-in timer on his gauntlet.

Croat: It's almost time.

Epochalus: Get ready to make a run for it, when Croat gives the signal.

Everyone stands by the door as Croat gives the countdown.

Croat: Four, three, two, one, NOW!

Croat opens the door and starts shooting at demons. The Retaliators make a run toward Stonehenge. Croat runs ahead and clears them a path. When they get almost there, high atop the billows of vapor, they see a cape-less Croat, riding a luminous canoe-shaped object with handlebars like a jet-ski. It and he are spinning. The object transcends him, swallowing and disappearing

him, as it travels up him. He's gone. The Retaliators are levitated up toward the same spot the cape-less Croat was. When they get there, they start to spin, as a unit. They disappear. Croat fights his way back to the timeship. Once inside:

Croat: Ironic. The Retaliators don't even realize; you sent them to a point where the Skull Croat has already fought another set of Retaliators, from a later time.

Epochalus: Thus creating the first filament of the time knot, which is crucial to securing the timeline. Without the time knot, it would be as I told the Retaliators; success equals continuance and failure means nonexistence. Skull Croat will never stop, until he succeeds in destroying you. We could find ourselves fighting one Skull Croat after another, without end, at the same point in time. This way, we only have to do it twice, and the third time and all subsequent times become irrelevant, whether The Retaliators win or lose. The third event becomes a new universe, and the entire problem goes with it.

Croat: After this, if Skull Croat kills Ramadūm, time will diverge, and the reality in which I die will become an alternate reality, and it'll be a bifurcate who died. Like if I hadn't made the beginner's mistake of going back in a straight line.

Epochalus: The time knot is a redoubling of my process, to assure our continuance. Any time I alter the past, it creates two timelines. One in which you and I never existed. And another where nothing can prevent my existence, up until that point. Else, I would never have existed to commit the act, thereby assuring your continuance, no matter what. When I alter that same event a second time, there is no "dead" timeline created, because I have to exist, to have altered it the first time.

Croat: "The Grandfather Conundrum".

Epochalus: The "Grandfather Conundrum" in its literal form is a paradox. It can't be done. A bifurcate of mine tried. His weapon exploded, killing him, instead. The story Upsurge told, about how Quentin Pythias came into possession of a time machine. I had another monitor set up to catch the split, and there wasn't one. By attempting the paradox, my bifurcate reduced all his possible futures down to one in which he was Ordained to die. He either had it backwards, thinking that it was the way to secure his timeline, or he thought if he could beat the paradox, he would transcend. I wish I knew what

he was thinking. The Grandfather Conundrum in its conceptual form is what creates dead timelines, and is what I'm eliminating from the picture. But in doing so, I committed you to a rigid path of "meant to be".

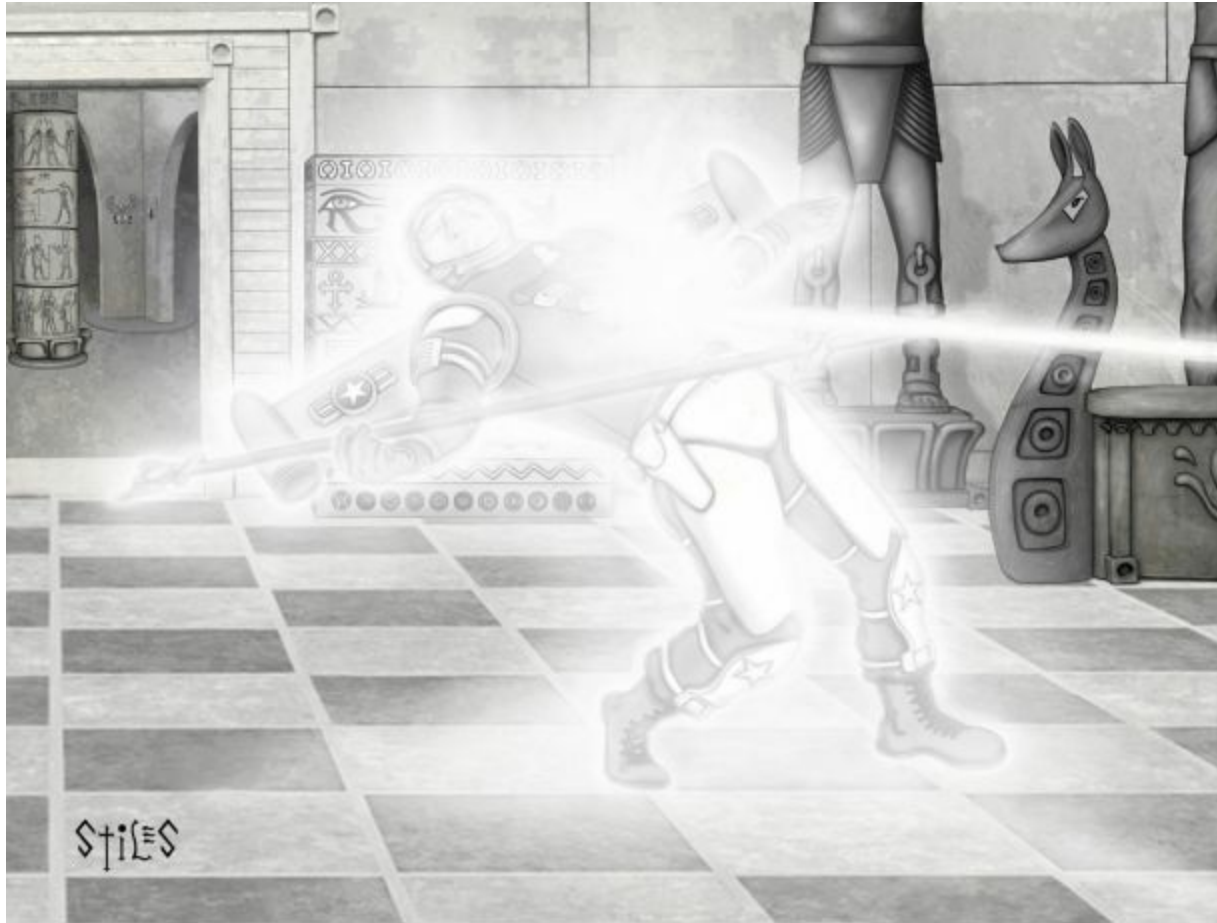
Croat: Meant to be, meant to transpire, meant to know, meant to not know. These clichés have become an integral part of my everyday existence.

Epochalus: No deviation from the events of your life, other than exactly the way they transpired for me, are possible. That is why, when you tried to go back and warn your former persona of the Skull Croat's intentions....

Croat: The Timescape wouldn't let me go. Fifteen years ago, I watched the battle between The Retaliators and Skull Croat from my control room, as Ramadūm. If everything is predestined to transpire exactly as it did, ... then

...

Epochalus: One will die.



Vision 41: Confrontation With The Skull Croat

Giza, Egypt, 2499 B.C. On the far side of the Sphinx, the Potniški Time-Machine spirals downward, depositing a cape-less Croat. There are no trellises on the perimeter wall of the palace, as future history assumed. Anti-grav exists in this time, but only the rulers have it. So no one can enter the palace without the pharaoh's approval. This Croat lost his hovermount on his last mission here, but he found another entrance, in another time. He jogs over to the nearest wall, the one facing the Sphinx, and stops. He looks at the timer on his left gauntlet. It beeps. Skull Croat simply walks up an invisible staircase, which we can't see. As he walks up it, it briefly flashes into reality. It's a 20th century style marble and steel construction, and there's a sign on

the exposed side of it, bearing a likeness of Pharaoh Ramadūm. The lettering on the sign reads: “The Egyptian Tourism Council Welcomes You To The Palace Of Pharaoh Ra-Mâ-Dūm Khan-Amon. Admission £ 600.00 EGP”. On the other side of the perimeter wall, Skull Croat approaches the outside of a solid wall, with no doors. There are sunlight windows in the wall. On the other side, an empty 1st level court. The light panels on the ceilings and upper walls are also lost ancient tech. The ceiling is high, and there are doorways in the corners, leading to other rooms, corridors and stairwells. On the west wall, near the ceiling, there are windows, allowing in the sunlight. From one of the windows, a small object is tossed. It’s a cubed marker device, about the size of a coin, but cubic. It hits the floor. A cape-less Croat appears over it, picks it up and pockets it. He looks the place over and sees hieroglyphic covered columns supporting the ceiling, and twenty-five foot statues of Egyptian gods against three of the walls. To the left are steps leading up to a stage with two empty throne type chairs in the center, with Ma’at and Thoth statues seated on either side. Behind the chairs, against the back stairs, are Bastet and Wepwawet. Back to the statues down here; most noticeable are two thirty foot statues in front of the others: The male statue is overdressed for this culture and time period, wearing futuristic military attire; a double breasted high collar jacket and a sash, with medals on the breast and the sash. Most odd for this culture and time period, he’s wearing pants tucked into knee boots. He has the facial characteristics of Quentin Pythias, but he is not. The woman is wearing a knee length dress with full-length puffy sleeves, knee boots and a tiara. She has those unmistakable, distinctive Apollyon eyebrows. This room can hold an entire legion, with several rows of citizens on the outer fringes.

Guster: Back in my parents’ house ...

A vortex appears in the center of the room, just like the one that jumped Captain Superhero from the 40’s to the 80’s. The Retaliators are inside it. Unlike what has been seen or postulated with and about some such vortexes, they are not tumbling haphazardly through the tunnel, they are gliding perfectly upright. Perhaps those tumble-through vortexes aren’t as masterfully created as this one. Unlike Captain Superhero, they weren’t falling when they entered it, so there is no momentum. The vortex sets them

perfectly on the floor, on their feet, without even a wobble, in the same configuration they were in over the conduit. The transfer is not instantaneous, so they have moved their arms, legs, head, etc, since the conduit. Just a snippet from the second verse of One Man Wrecking Machine, for now.

Guster: Back to the shoutin' out loud.

Hotpoint: He looks just like the other guy.

Guster: One day you'll be a man...

Upsurge: He is the other guy, remember? But, this one's a bifurcate. A time-clone.

Guster: One day you'll understand.

Hotpoint: Oh, my head hurts, again!

The music fades to the eyes of Ramadūm, looking down at his monitor, viewing this scene. At Upsurge's disclosure, his eyes dart up. At the control console marked "GROUND LEVEL CEREMONIAL HALL", his finger is poised near a button marked "GAS". He removes his finger from the button. The scanner readout is displaying ID of Prince Damon Pythias, complete with a 41st century photo of pre-split Croat, at age 25. Ramadūm pushes a series of buttons, and the onscreen shuffles code, until it displays a flashing readout of "TEMPORAL VARIANCE DETECTED: 0.00000127%". Ramadūm shows anxiety. Further left on the same console, there's a version of the same photo, age progressed to about 40. It's split-screened with an image of a 40ish cape-less Croat outside the palace, with his helmet off. The readout over the first photo says AGE PROGRESSED TO 40.67 YRS. The readout over the second image says IDENTITY CONFIRMED: PRINCE DAMON PYTHIAS. Ramadūm taps the keyboard under that monitor, and the onscreen image shuffles code, until it displays a flashing readout of "TEMPORAL VARIANCE DETECTED: 0.00000127%". Ramadūm takes a green plastic pointer to the age progressed photo and scribbles a crude brown goatee onto it. He pushes a button on the console and the crude scribble transforms into a realistic looking goatee. Ramadūm traces his right index finger across the hair of the image of the man outside and then touches his finger to the longer straighter hair of the age progressed photo. At first it looks like a bad copy paste, the lighting doesn't even match, but the image automatically adjusts to blend the hair into the image, and then automatically

adjusts the lighting to match. The age progressed photo of himself now looks exactly like the man outside, who is still waiting to be let in. Behind the man, there's the wreckage of a horsey hovermount, from where he had tried to fly over the wall, only to hit a force field. Ramadūm has already lowered the force field and was just about to transport the man inside, when this other one showed up. This other one must have known the force field would be down, and has found another way in. The time machine can't operate inside the palace. Some of the ceilings are high, but not nearly high enough to accommodate the time machine. From the ground, it looks like these time machines spiral up halfway to the clouds. Time vortexes in motion that are interfered with by foreign objects can make a mess.

Ramadūm: A *bifurcate* ? Why would a bifurcate of mine come here? Unless... Go to your private quarters and seal the doors. Use the special security codes.

Veronica: He's not your future self? A disguised enemy usurper, perhaps... ?

Ramadūm: If he is, he's the worst kind of imposter: One who needs no disguise.

Down in the Ceremonial Hall, Skull Croat and The Retaliators are studying one another, waiting for someone to make the first move.

Mars: Are you our enemy?

Skull Croat turns the knob on the right side of his helmet, increasing the volume of his voice. It's really unnecessary, sound carries in this giant marble room, anyway. But, he won't turn it down, he'll stay loud, to make sure everything he says is well heard. It's a routine he's accustomed to in battle, when he wants his troops to hear his orders, or his enemies to hear his threats and taunts.

Skull Croat: Who are your new friends, Mars? Did the others quit after our last battle?

With that, he shoots Mars in the chest. Mars lights up like a light bulb, but he doesn't burst into flames, as is what happens to mortals who are unfortunate

enough to be shot by the Delta-Ray Disseminator. Mars falls to the floor, alive, but not well. There's smoke coming from his exposed areas (his face and arms) and billowing out from under his helmet and armor.

Skull Croat: Captain Superhero! Are you a bifurcate, or an impostor?

Captain Superhero: Neither. I'm the real thing. ... I didn't recognize the other guy, even though the costume's the same. He didn't ring any bells to me, relaxed, having a conversation. But you, swaggering around, flaunting your weapon like an asshole, seem very familiar to me. Super-Nazi ? Paris, 1941?

Skull Croat: I'm not the Super-Nazi, you fool! If you and your Line Breaker friends had stopped to ask, I'd've told you; I'm Croat The Gotovost! I thought I killed you!

Captain Superhero: You nearly did.

Skull Croat: I guess I'll have to try harder this time.

Mars is getting up, and Skull Croat shoots him again. Mars endures it, but another shot puts him back down, for now. Skull Croat fires at Captain Superhero. The chestplate blocks most of the blast, but not all. Fortunately, Flash has enhanced durability, and is only smoking a bit, on one knee grimacing, but otherwise fine.

Skull Croat: What the hell. ?

Skull Croat fires again. Flash maneuvers out of the path, and the blast hits the far wall and apparently passes through it. Skull Croat keeps firing and scores another hit. Same result as before.

Skull Croat: *Huh* . Nice armor.

Captain Superhero: Thank you. Ungh, crap. It's an improvement over the original.

Mars is getting up again and is shot back down again. Flash throws his lance, and it bounces off a white force field.

Skull Croat: But your weapon is still no more effective against me than it was. And I'm sure there's a limit to how many partial hits from my weapon

you can survive. My analyzers tell me the delta ray wasn't deflected, but absorbed. That means the armor took the brunt of the blast for you. The energy of my weapon is self restoring, the charge never runs out. I'll just keep shooting you and your armor and see which is destroyed first.

Skull Croat shoots at Captain Superhero, who flies to avoid the blast and lands over his lance, to retrieve it. Unfortunately, Skull Croat was expecting him to go for the lance, and has a shot ready for him, there. Skull Croat was right, the armor is taking damage, and throws some sparks like a fork in a microwave.

Captain Superhero: Ow, gah!

Captain Superhero is thrown for a couple tumbles and his fuel lines are dripping drops of liquid flame.

Tech War: Shit!

Tech War rushes over, rips the wings off and throws them into a far corner, where they explode and burn.

Tech War: I'll get you some new ones.

Captain Superhero: Just like those... I can work on those, I can't work on yours.

Tech War: Mine aren't as likely to explode! We'll work out a compromise. Later. Can you stand?

Captain Superhero: Yeah. No. Not really. Shit. Strength, gone. Like it's not my body.

Tech War: Well, we can't have you laying down in the middle of the war zone. I'll drag you over here behind this altar, and you can join back in when you're able.

Distracted by that, Skull Croat has allowed Mars to get all the way up. Mars gestures toward Skull Croat and the golden radiant energy that usually engulfs Mars when he transposes or transmutes himself or objects is dancing on the surface of the force field, like it's trying to get in, but can't. Mars gets

an angry, determined look on his face and speaks the magic out loud, to reinforce his gesture.

Mars: Weapon, vanish! I command you!

Skull Croat: “Weapon, vanish!” Ha, ha! You wish! I command you; die!

Skull Croat shoots Mars down again. Having taken the time to tuck Captain Superhero away behind the Anubis altar, which, damn hell, looks like something to stab people on, Tech War starts for the lance, but Skull Croat has beaten him to it. Standing over the lance with his force field makes a similar effect as a clear laminate taped over an object with air bubbles around the edges. Tech War particle blasts the shield, no penetration. Skull Croat lifts his gaze up from the floor to look at Tech War, ignores him, and looks back down at the lance. Skull Croat turns a couple knobs on his belt and the shield accepts the lance, without turning off.

Skull Croat: Ah. Another souvenir.

He holds it in his left hand, examining it, and places a small round device with a button on the bar. Pushing the button causes rippling energy to envelop the lance. It converts to a glowing wireframe image, then a cloud of light which vanishes.

Captain Superhero (To Tech War): Damn it! Last time, he took my chest plate. Not the back, just the front. The Line Breakers couldn't do anything but watch. It had a painted eagle, instead of a molded one.

Tech War: Wow...

Tech War glances over at Skull Croat, like he admires his taste. Except the part where he's a villain. Jitara is doing a spectacular handstand, balanced on his katana, which is balanced on top of Skull Croat's force field. The energy of the shield is keeping the sword from penetrating, and the energy of the sword is keeping Jitara from being shocked.

Tech War: ...I'd like to have that.

Captain Superhero: I'd give the useless thing to you, if I still had it. One shot

in it had me in worse shape than this time. How many times d'he get me, twice?

Tech War: Three, I think.

Captain Superhero: Shit. And I'm still, well, not kicking, but at least I'm not standing before the Judges, explaining my life. I like this armor. I'll keep it, if I can.

Jitara is changing poses up there, to keep up with the repelling force of the force field, which is designed to throw him off, but by changing his poses, Jitara is actually shifting his balance, to compensate for what the shield is doing. Skull Croat is watching Jitara as if Jitara is performing for his entertainment. However, knowing full well that that is not really the case, Skull Croat points his weapon up at him. Jitara flips away, and swacks at the shield with his sword, upon landing. It makes an effect like lightning striking lightning. On a much smaller scale, of course.

Skull Croat: I am as locked inside this bubble as you are locked out, or you would know; I am also experienced in hand to hand combat. Quite gifted at it, actually. Not enough to fight you, though.

Jitara: *Well, that makes just about everybody.*

Skull Croat: But I'm still the one with the gun.

Skull Croat takes a couple shots at Jitara, but Jitara outmaneuvers them like child's play. Soon as he's on his feet again, Skull Croat's not done yet, he has another shot, heading Jitara's way. Jitara instinctively puts his sword in front of himself, and the magic sword completely absorbs the ray.

Skull Croat: Shit!

Jitara: Ha, ha! Murakumo's her name. Shoot us as much as you want, she likes it!

Skull Croat fires over and over, and every shot is absorbed into the magic sword. Jitara then fires every delta-ray back at his enemy, who scrambles to evade them.

Jitara: Ha, ha! That ain't all I got, sci-fi cowboy!

Jitara whips off three ninja stars, which ricochet off the shield, predictably, but then they magically return to Jitara's left palm, neatly stacked. He's just showing off. Mars has recovered and makes his way back up. He conjures a discus and throws it at the enemy. It bounces off the force field and wobbles in the air really weirdly on its way to breaking the Ra statue's head off. Jitara sheathes his magic sword and takes the two daggers from the amulet on the front of his belt, one dagger in each hand, and throws them not directly at Skull Croat, but up in the air between the two of them. The Eden Serpent amulet which he drew the daggers from projects a ghostly giant serpent head which collects the daggers in the air, transforms them into fangs, and strikes down at Skull Croat with them. When the serpent bites down on the force field, it's less like the snake has it than it has the snake. Lightning-like bolts of energy flick around the force field and light up the ghost snake like it's being electrocuted.

Nachash: EEEEEEEEEYYYYYYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEW!!!
OOOOOOWWWWWAAAAAAHH!!

The serpent eventually wriggles free and reenters the amulet, its ghostly emerald mist returning the daggers back to their original positions. Captain Superhero is leaned against the far side of the altar, but he's peering around, so if he can't fight, he can at least coach. His face is starting to turn beige and wet tissue-y.

Captain Superhero: It's a force field. Nothing can get through it.

Mars: My mystic scepter harnesses the power of the gods. Nothing can resist it.

Mars conjures his scepter, then produces mystic energy from it, directed at Skull Croat. The shield deflects the mystic energy, same as any other kind.

Mars: Well, that's the proof. Epochalus' brother's bifurcate would be parceled with Saturn's curse upon the gods.

Skull Croat: Epochal-what? This is my force field. It's made to do what it just did. Apparently, I'm fighting a fresh new Mars, unacquainted with the

technology of the fifth millennium! Delta-ray dissemination 101: Class in session!

Skull Croat blasts at Mars again, but this time Mars is ready with a thick shield made of Vulgarite, which the delta-ray is designed to penetrate. 75% got through, but Mars is still standing. He's not steaming like before, but there's a bit of smoke like cigarette smoke seeping out from the top of his chest plate. Mars gets a pissed off look on his face. Not as a rage against his enemy as much as an annoyance at Saturn, Venus, Vulcan, himself, the Prophecies, his current circumstance, etc. There was a time when no mortal could affect him at all. Now there's a lunatic S.P.I. from the future with a weapon that makes him smoke. He hasn't smoked since his first fight with Vulcan, and Vulcan's no mortal. But, along with all the other gods, Mars has fucked his fair share of mortals. He's as guilty as any, of bringing this about. In a sense, it's like he shot himself. He turns away and slams the shield to the floor. It bounces on its bottom edge and vanishes on the rebound. He looks up at the ceiling.

Mars (To himself): Somewhere up in the Heavens, there's another Mars, only 3500 years old, little more than a child. In 1500 years, he will betray his goddess and maim his brother...

Mars removes his right glove, looks at the scar of the puncture wound in his palm which goes all the way through, from where Vulcan stabbed him through the hand. He examines both sides, looking up to make sure the air above him sees it as well. He puts both hands down to his sides, at a slight outward angle, looks up with his eyes closed and prays to himself.

Mars (with a bit of echo): Mars... Mars... feel me. Feel my pain.

Tech War: Mars! What are you doing?

Skull Croat: What does it look like he's doing? He's offering himself as a sacrifice to his god, Emperion Skull!

Skull Croat fires at Mars, but this time, Mars vanishes, leaving behind a wax replica of himself, which melts in two, when struck by the delta-ray. While Skull Croat is still distracted by this odd sight, the real Mars, 20 feet tall, is

standing over him, swinging a giant axe down at him.

Skull Croat: Aaaahh!

Skull Croat rolls out of the way, just in time, and blasts the giant Mars right between the eyes, even as the axe cleaves a huge deep ditch into the floor and shakes the palace.

Mars: Aaaaaaaaaaghhhhh!

Mars falls to his back and returns to normal size.

Skull Croat: Shit! Fuck!

Skull Croat stands and blasts Mars in his chest. Mars rolls over and Skull Croat blasts him in his back.

Skull Croat: Why won't you fucking die, mother fucker? *I know you can.*

Shoom, shoom, shoom, three in rapid succession, before Tech War takes flight, and particle blasts Skull Croat's shield. Skull Croat quickly shoots out an infrared beam from his helmet to strike a point in the floor behind Tech War's flight path, then teleports his form to that location, so that he can be shooting at Tech War from behind as Tech War's looking around to see where he disappeared to. Clang! Tech War hits the floor, armor smoldering.

Tech War: Shit! Fuckhelldamn! Ow, gah!

Skull Croat: Shit! Tech War, are you okay?

Tech War: I'm... fine. Just giddy over all that power you just gave me, that's all. My armor converted the energy and routed it to the power source. Why do you care?

Skull Croat: I don't care about *you* . But, one of your descendants was my First Knight, in the Unity Campaign. He led my army, before I was old enough to do it myself. He never told me his armor could resist my ray. He may not've known, I never had to shoot him. This weapon isn't common, even in the 41st century. The most lethal ray ever invented, not to mention its

talent for passing through solid objects. Exclusive to the Balkan royal family. You've done well to've survived it. My readings say *ooohhhh* ... you did steal my energy, you thief, but you're maxed out, now. And all your systems are overheated from the power surge. Your energy storage cell is full, my next shot will fuse your circuits and roast you inside. Aahhck! I wouldn't want to interrupt my Tech War's lineage. Have you procreated, yet?

Tech War: If I say I have, you'd be in the clear to kill me, right? Take your chances, asshole. Besides, no descendant of mine would ever work for you!

Skull Croat: He did more than serve me, he taught me. You stand facing the protégé of your direct paternal progeny. Shall I disclose to you his surname, here and now?

Tech War: No!

Skull Croat: Ha, ha! Don't worry, Tech War, a Master Of Time is, by nature, a keeper of secrets.

Upsurge: That's generous of you. 'Specially since one of the theories of time travel is that one cannot divulge knowledge before it's meant to be known, without tempting his own fate.

Skull Croat: Ooooooh, there's a scholar in our midst. I... wait... is that you, Dr. Race? I didn't recognize you, dressed as a homosexual. I thought you liked the little ballerina, there. ?

Upsurge: Gymnast. It's a supersuit. It was her idea.

Skull Croat: I understand. Feigning weakness to a woman is not a strategy I would personally employ, but I can understand why a lesser man might. I never saw that costume before. The records of it must not've survived the Apocalypses. Or I'm further over in the timestream than I thought. I don't think I want to collect you in that. I might, though, if it's a matter of not having a complete collection without it.

Upsurge: You know of me, from that far in the future?

Skull Croat: From my time, your time and this time. I've killed you twice, in your own era, just to collect you. Couldn't keep either. The first body was too big, the second one was burned beyond recognition. We've fought here, before. It may or may not've been you, but it was an Upsurge/Dr. Jackson Race. Yes, you're an historic figure. You're more remembered in my time than any of these others. Inventor of the Baryon Siphon Filament.

Upsurge: Baryon Extractor.

Skull Croat: You've invented the filament of the extractor. You can't be

credited for inventing the cell, it was always here. I and the pharaoh have the proper cell for your filament. Your Tech War is operating on the filament alone, with cylindrical cells, in cubicle casings. A poor match for my Tech War. Nonetheless, you are the most important inventor ever born. Why are you not the richest man in the world?

Upsurge: I am. Big house, fancy cars, servants, gourmet food, I got it made.

Skull Croat: Let me rephrase: Why aren't you in Arthur Reddingfield's place?

Upsurge: Don' wanna be. I live as well as Arthur, without the pressure.

Skull Croat: Beta caste! You are the world's smartest fool. I know the laws of time, Dr. Race. Moreover, I have the advantage of two more millenniums' worth of bullshit hypotheses to work with. However, my unique experience as a *practicing* time traveler has availed to me the revelation that the laws of time are a puzzle, which can be decoded. The more of the code that is broken, the more godhood is attained.

Mars: Assuming your weapons are not enchanted, you are an S.P.I., else your weapons could not effect or resist me, be they advanced or primitive. Godliness can be assigned to the S.P.I.'s, but godhood is for the gods and you are no god!

Skull Croat: Oh, I'm halfway there, already. And, *I'm coming with a vengeance* . For the sake of my loyal subject and mentor, (Glancing tauntingly at Upsurge, only while saying as much of the name as the Timescape will possibly allow): Anguss...*Rrrr... Rrrrrr...* , I'd prefer to do this without having to kill you, Tech War, but make no mistake, that I will, if forced. None of this is real, anyway, not to me. I didn't go back in a straight line. Only an idiot would do that. You'll probably all vanish as soon as I kill the impostor. Myself, the corpse, the palace and everything in it will simply slide over to a timeline where the fucker died. As far as I'm concerned, nothing in this timeline is real, except... what I came for. This is my most important mission of all. I will destroy ANY who get in my way. NOTHING will stop me from carrying out my objective; to kill the false Croat and take what was taken from me, which is rightfully mine, since I'm the one who's real.

Immediately after Skull Croat said that, two successive Delta-Rays penetrate

the ceiling from an angle to Skull Croat's right, with no damage to the stone they penetrated. He quickly tuck and rolls out of harm's way, as if he recognizes the blasts as Delta-Rays, which are able to penetrate the kind of force-field he uses. He returns fire in the same direction the blasts came from. They penetrate the stone, without damaging it. Ramadūm's control room: The two blasts come up from the floor, at an angle, and short out one of his computers, but not the one he's watching the two battles on. He jumps to avoid the Delta-Rays, and is un-struck. Back on the ground level, Skull Croat pushes some buttons on the side of his left gauntlet.

Skull Croat: Try that again and I'll have you pinpointed.

Skull Croat points his weapon back up at the ceiling in the general direction he was shooting at before, but he's not firing. He moves his aim around, knowing the general direction, but not the exact spot. He guesses his twin wouldn't have fired at him if she was in the room with him, because that would put her in the line of fire when Skull Croat shot back. But, Skull Croat won't risk it. Captain Superhero is still sidelined, but he's still coaching. His skin is like a layer of dry heavy caked makeup.

Captain Superhero: He's shooting at the pharaoh through the stone! Somebody stop him!

Everyone pauses for a second, trying to figure out how. Mars recalls the transparent casing he entrapped Vulcan in, during their second and most recent fight. He produces one around Skull Croat. Skull Croat first points his gun at it, then thinks not, on the off chance it might ricochet. Looking around at the casing, then shaking his head denotes that thought. He shoots the red beam through the casing, and simply teleports out of it.

Mars: Fuck! I can't teleport through an airtight casing.

Tech War: That's the 41st century for ya. There's no telling what wonders they've got up there, that we haven't even thought of.

Mars: Well, there's no reason the casing has to be transparent.

Mars produces another casing around Skull Croat, this one is solid glossy

black. No red beam this time, but Skull Croat still teleports out of it. Mars blinks and jerks his head back, from the shock of it.

Mars: What's to stop him from transposing to where the pharaoh is?

Tech War: The device must have a mapping system. He can only teleport to where the beam hits, or to places he's already been.

Mars: Ha! I can teleport to places I haven't been. I've got that on him, at least. Good reasoning. You're convenient to have around, Tech War. I won't let him shoot you again, if I can help it.

Tech War: Thanks. Meanwhile, how do we stop him?

Mars: Triumphantly.

Mars ascends, outstretches his arms, and the air swirls around him. A portal opens up behind his right shoulder. Through it is a strange dimension, with planets and asteroids connected by cylindrical links that make them look like macro molecules. Mars gestures Croat and his force bubble toward the portal, and Croat lifts off the ground and starts to enter the portal, but some unseen force pulls him back and puts him where he was. Mars shakes his head like he just witnessed the impossible. A barrage of flaming arrows appear from the air in front of the middle edges of Mars' cape, aimed at Skull Croat. The arrows morph into Erinyes, the Furies, ghostly dark witches who surround Skull Croat's force field and grab onto it. Though they shriek at the pain the force field gives them, they lift it and carry it up to and into the portal. The portal closes, Skull Croat is gone. But before everyone can express their relief, a vortex like the one that brought them here appears behind Skull Croat's previous position, and deposits him exactly where he was. Mars is flustered, and looks around the room for a secret ally of his opponent. Skull Croat looks around a little, but tries to act like he's not surprised by what happened.

Mars: Vulcan? Venus? *Epochalus*?

Mars, undeterred, ramps up his energy, and sends out shock waves from his body which emanate outward, reminiscent of Psion-Man. Skull Croat is buffeted slightly, but remains in place. All the Retaliators except Mighty Man are knocked back by it, and actually fall. Mighty Man was only pushed back

a couple steps, but when he sees everyone else has fallen, he falls, then looks around to see if anyone noticed he fell on purpose. Their minds are on Skull Croat. Mighty Man's deceptions about the level of his power aren't intentionally devious, he's just more comfortable with less expected of him. Skull Croat spin draws his weapon and shoots Mars down, again. Upsurge topples a statue and starts chucking the broken chunks of it at Skull Croat. They bounce off the shield and shatter on the floor, wherever they hit. While that's going on, Tech War's helping Mars get up.

Tech War: You alright?

Mars: My vision's a bit... hazy, but I'll recover. That's the most I can do, without bringing the palace down. That's counterproductive, but what else is there to do, if his defenses are stronger than the palace that must not fall? I'm limited in here.

Skull Croat has made his way over to Captain Superhero, and brushes the force field against him a couple times, just to gauge his responses.

Captain Superhero: Aaaahhh! Ow, fuck you!

Captain Superhero, still propped against the altar on his butt, takes a swing with his left fist at Skull Croat, and hits the shield.

Captain Superhero: Ow, shitfuck!

Hotpoint zaps the force field. No penetration. Skull Croat ignores her. Tech War decides to try his magnetic pulse wave on the shield, but that's a mistake, because that energy acts as a conduit between the target and the device. The energy from the force field travels through the magnetic wave and blasts Tech War back a couple yards and shorts out the magnetic pulse wave projector on that arm (the left one). Skull Croat barely glances back at that, then returns his attention to Captain Superhero. Tech War's weapon assembly is still throwing sparks. He quickly stands up, flings the gauntlet onto the floor and slaps the weapon assembly off with his right hand. He picks it up and tosses it over onto the royal stage, where it continues sparking. Skull Croat adjusts some knobs on his belt, and the shield accepts

Captain Superhero inside it. Skull Croat drags him by his feet away from the altar, to get him fully inside the shield. Tech War is having trouble getting his left gauntlet back on, and Upsurge gets a small toolkit from one of his pouches, to repair some damaged links in the strength harness. Skull Croat removes Captain Superhero's helmet, puts another of those little devices on it with a button, and the helmet vanishes. Captain Superhero pulls out old "Betsy", points it at Skull Croat, and Skull Croat's eyes get big, like "Oh, shit!" Flash pulls the trigger. There's only a click, and Skull Croat relaxes. Instinct, his armor is bulletproof, except through the earpiece. Flash turns the pistol around and shakes it, and a slug slides out of the barrel and pings on the floor. The Delta-Rays that struck him must've burned up his gunpowder. Skull Croat snatches the gun away from him, puts one of the little devices on it, and steals it. By now, the Retaliators are gathered around him in a circle. Skull Croat looks around at them, then returns to his pillaging of Captain Superhero. He goes for the front latches of the chest armor, but Captain Superhero starts fighting and punching at him. Skull Croat brutally fists and slaps the face and head, and Flash barfs a mixture of beefsteak, baked potato and grape soda onto the leg armor of his foe, who then kicks him hard in the face, taking the last bit of fight out of him. After Skull Croat undoes the front latches, he flips him over, to undo the back latches.

Tech War: Get the hell away from him, motherfucker.

Skull Croat: Eat shit.

Skull Croat gets the back latches undone, and Mars speaks to him, with authority.

Mars: Face me.

Skull Croat straightens up and turns, to face Mars.

Mars: If you want the armor, take it. I give it to you. But he is defenseless. No threat to you. If you kill him, it will be the act of a coward, and you will owe me your death. Whatever else happens here, begins and ends here. But if you kill him, I will kill you. Here or elsewhere, today or someday, I will collect the debt of blood you will owe me, if you kill him. This is the word of

honor of the god of war.

Skull Croat: I've already killed more of him than I can recount. One less than I'd thought, since I thought I'd killed this one. I kept the first three. I keep their bodies in the same tank, as trophies. Many copies of many Retaliators and other heroes reside thus, in my citadel. They all died fighting. Grand as my own palace is, compared to this prehistoric rock pile, I wouldn't want to clutter it with trophies that don't represent a glorious victory. I kill mainly for sport. Killing this one now would hardly be sporting. I only want the armor.

Skull Croat stoops back down, removes the chest armor, digitizes and vanishes it.

Mars: Good choice.

Skull Croat turns the knobs and steps away from Captain Superhero. Free from the force field, the others gather around him, tending to him and checking on him. Skull Croat steps up to Mars and faces him, again.

Skull Croat: I still don't have a Mars. Your body would be the prize of my collection.

Mars: Come out of that shield and take it. Or let me inside with you, as you did him.

Croat's staring eyes are manic. Nervous, brazen, actually considering the offer.

Skull Croat: Heh, heh, heh.

Skull Croat's weapon is holstered, from when he was working on Captain Superhero's armor, and he's doing the itchy finger thing, like gunfighters do, when they're about to draw on somebody. Jitara is stalking around behind Skull Croat, working up the energies of all his rings and both his bracelets, and channeling that energy into his magic sword. Skull Croat, still seeming to be trying to stare down Mars, nonchalantly fiddles with some knobs on his belt. Jitara lunges at him, with the magic sword, and it penetrates the shield, even as Skull Croat sidesteps it, as if he was expecting it. It's not foresight,

he hasn't lived this scene before, and he's not yet on the level of seeing the future before it happens, he has a one-way holographic radar readout of everyone's positions, which can only be seen from his side of his goggles. The sword still rips the left upper sleeve of his tunic. But the penetration of the shield doesn't include the hands. The hands get shocked, and Jitara nearly dropped his sword inside the shield. But in the instant of Jitara withdrawing the sword, Skull Croat has ripped a piece of fabric from his torn sleeve and is using it in his armored right hand as a non-slip grip. He grabs the blade of the sword and pulls on it, while kicking Jitara in the stomach, with the charged force field adding spice to the impact. Skull Croat now has Jitara's magic sword. He takes a moment to consider trying to stab Mars with it, even while he's admiring it, but there's too much that can go wrong with that, and the sword is far more valuable to him in other ways. He attaches a little device on it, which digitizes it and vanishes it away. Jitara draws his other sword, identical, except no magic.

Jitara: Aaaaaahhh! No fucking way! Uh-uh, that ain't fucking happening. Do you know how much trouble I went through to get that sword?

Skull Croat: Thanks.

Jitara: Fuck you! Give me back my sword, motherfucker!

Jitara throws a silver ball which lights up like a star and hovers around the shield. The powered hovering ball bounces against the force field over and over, but fails to penetrate it. Skull Croat shoots the lit up ball and its light goes off and it drops to the floor with a clang, no life left in it.

Jitara: Fucking damn!

Jitara throws a couple cherry bombs, which explode on the surface of the shield, with no affect. But by the time the smoke clears, Tigerlily is gliding high with a jump kick that is enhanced with a green energy field. Skull Croat's force field deflects her energy and her. She gets a shock and hits the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Tigerlily: Ooooooo - - !

Skull Croat starts to shoot her, but Mars does a focused concentration power up that makes energy flames engulf his own body, then he shoots it in a thick beam at Skull Croat, which drives the villain all the way back to the opposite wall, the one he entered through. After hitting it, he bounces almost to the high ceiling, and falls to the floor. It's a hard landing, but his armor protected him. It hurt, but he's not injured.

Skull Croat: Nice hit, but no damage. Shit. I didn't come here to play with primitive heroes. I've traveled a great distance to seek an audience with the pharaoh. I've brought my tribute from the great empire of... fucking... Skullvania, and I intend to give it to him. No more feeble attempts to stop me. Either stop me or stand aside.

Skull Croat walks right past the Retaliators, toward the door on the far side of the room. Tech War stands in his path, but steps back as Skull Croat continues stepping forward. Mars follows alongside Tech War, with his forearm across Tech War's chest, with the intent of pushing Tech War out of the way, if Skull Croat points his weapon at him. But, he's still willing to let Tech War attempt whatever idea he has. Tech War removes the weapons array from his right forearm, and hands it off to Mars, so it won't be damaged from what he's about to do. Tech War draws back and punches the shield, and his right arm is repelled back with double force, and is lit up with rippling tendrils of energy. The pain is not from the energy, the armor can handle that, it's from his fist being the baseball and the force field being the bat. No one noticed that during the punch, Skull Croat stepped forward, but didn't move forward.

Tech War: Aaaaaaahhh!

Tech War stoops a bit, favoring his sore arm and steps aside for Skull Croat to pass, but gives him a dirty look as he does. Mars returns his array, and it snaps back on.

Mars: Seal the doors, all of them!

While everyone is preoccupied with this, there's an entirely different Skull

Croat lurking around behind the royal stage. He opens one of the secret doors and enters it. The door closes behind him. There are two secret doors, one in each side of the stone partition in back of the royal stage, between the two rear stairs to the stage. It was to allow the former king and queen to enter the royal stage from the back stairs, without using any of the visible entrances. Ramadūm doesn't know about it. He doesn't need it, he can teleport. The complete diagrams of this palace are on his computer. If he took the time to study them in depth, he could learn about all the secret passages. That's how this third Skull Croat found out about it. Not from Ramadum's computer, but his own. It's some of the ancient history that survived the apocalypses. The door to the right of the royal stage is not hidden, there's a room on the other side, in which can be seen many interesting objects of this era. Tech War uses his remaining magnetic emitter to draw a large wooden table toward the doorway. Upsurge, 15 feet tall, starts pushing a huge stone box in front of the door Skull Croat is headed for, at the part of the west wall closest to the royal stage. Mars is pushing the matching stone box in front of the door on the furthest corner of the west wall. And on the westernmost corner of the north wall, Mighty Man begins pushing a statue in front of that door. The items aren't perfect matches for the doorways and his favorite door is about to be blocked by Upsurge, who is pushing the slowest. He can make it, if he runs for it. Suddenly, thick stone panels slide down over the doorways, sealing them. Skull Croat stops running, looks around at all the other doors, then resumes walking toward Upsurge.

Tech War: Our unseen ally strikes again! He should come down here and help us.

Mars: No! If he gets killed down here, it defeats the purpose of our mission. (To the ceiling): Stay where you are. Don't send any guards. They can't be involved, either. We'll handle this.

A semi-transparent holographic head and shoulders of Ramadūm appears, about 30 ft high, in front of the royal platform. He has a short casual nemes headdress and a golden headband made to look like a cobra with its hood-spread head rising in the center. The cobra has emerald eyes. He has a pharaoh's chin beard which is too long to have only had it for a year, but being from the 41st century, he might know how to apply a false beard. Or

artificially stimulate his own, since it's the same brown color the older Croat's goatee would be, if it didn't have white streaks. We can't see this Damon's hair, so he may have cut it and made the beard from it. He's physically identical to the Caesar Skull we saw in an earlier scene, and Prince Damon from the Revelation. The Retaliators are taken aback by his youth, after seeing him older, back at the mansion. He appears as the middle-aged Croat had described him, about 26 years old, the average age of most of the Retaliators. Not counting Mars, all the Retaliators are in their 20's, except Jackson and Robert, and Jackson was 28 when he joined. Arthur is still only 29. In spite of Flash's claim to be 68, he's physically only 28. Aaliyah's the same age as Candace; 21. Candace doesn't know Aaliyah or Robert's ages, or she'd be less selfconscious about her and Jackson's age gap. Captain Superhero knew this was the same guy who sent them, but in his current state of helplessness and agony, seeing the younger face of the man who sent them here makes him feel like he's been sent back in time by Hitler to save young Hitler. So, the look of disdain on Flash's face denotes that.

Ramadūm: I've already sent guards to the other battle.

Mars: "Other battle"?

Ramadūm: There's another battle outside, just like this one. Except... the offensive and defensive roles are reversed. Out there, you're kicking the shit out of him, like he's kicking the shit out of you, in here.

Mars (to Tech War): Great. "His Highness" is unimpressed with us.

Ramadūm: I'd lowered the force field for the one outside, before this one and you arrived, and I had reason to scan for a temporal variance. He had you to deal with, but the one outside was still unopposed, so I sent the guards. Then another team of Retaliators appeared out there, and immediately knew how to take the advantage over their opponent. Perhaps when those Retaliators are finished, they could come here and do this job. I now wish I'd held my men back, to assist you. I could give you the video of the other battle, for training purposes, if you survive.

Ramadūm almost seems to be gloating that Skull Croat is kicking the Retaliators' asses. In the background, Skull Croat has already reached Upsurge's door, and begins inspecting it. Upsurge is looming over him, watching him work.

Mars (To Ramadūm): No. What possible assistance? Primitive human guards, caught up in the middle of a battle between super beings... Shit! Pray that the guards are meant to be there and any who might die are meant to. This is a timeline issue. We were sent by your future self.

Ramadūm: That's who he claimed to be!

Mars: He's a bifurcate! If you haven't yet surmised it, he's here to kill you. Stay where you are! Lock the doors! If you have any thoughts of fighting him yourself, do it in a time and place that doesn't put the fate of the world in the balance.

The holographic Ramadūm nods, his right hand comes into view, to move the imager. The imager swings around to the left to show a very heavy duty vault-like metal door, sealed shut. In the "real world" background, Skull Croat is prying at the stone door with his armored fingers, through his force field.

Voice of Ramadūm: He's not getting in here. And if he does...

The imager swings around again to show Ramadūm patting his holstered Delta-Ray Disseminator. We also get to see that his bare arms are almost completely tattooed. Funny, Caesar Skull's arms weren't. In the "real world" background, Skull Croat is punching at the stone door with his armored fist, through the force field.

Voice of Ramadūm: ... soon as he peers his head through the door .

The imager swings around to show Ramadūm's face again, his eyes hard and defiant against the prospect of being assassinated. We see his left shoulder move, as if he's going for the cut off switch.

Tech War: Wait. What the hell are they doing out there that's different from what we're doing?

A blank stare. A second thought about divulging info on how to defeat Skull Croat, because it could be used against him, as well. Tech War shakes his fist

at the image.

Tech War: What?! Tell us, you fuck!

The image cuts off. Skull Croat points his weapon up at Upsurge's chest and uses his other hand to point out a large wood brazier/torch pylon, which is essentially a skinned tree trunk, with a few carvings in it and a coat of varnish, that would make a perfect battering ram.

Skull Croat: Break the door. Or I'll kill you.

Upsurge: No.

Skull Croat: I'll kill *her* .

He swings his weapon around in Hotpoint's direction. Upsurge loses his ability to reason and tries to grab Skull Croat, and gets shocked by the white force field. He collapses. Skull Croat points his weapon at him, intending to kill him, and Mars lights up with sparkly energy, runs with super speed, ascends and rams the shield with his body. The force field wasn't broken, but Skull Croat bounces off the wall behind him, tumbling around inside the shield like laundry in a dryer. The shot meant for Upsurge passed harmlessly through the floor, between here and there. When he stops, he's sprawled out on the floor, but staggering back up to his feet. Mars grimaces from the shock from the shield, but he's stronger than it.

Mars: I felt that. But so did you.

Mars conjures his mace and dangles it around like it's a tether ball on a rope on a stick, instead of what it actually is; a wrecking ball on a chain on a stick. This ... is the weapon he destroyed the Faulk flagship with. No tech, no frills. No magic, except what he channels through it from himself. It's just a simple instrument of the basic, baseball bat vs. soft boiled egg, destructive force of Mars.

Mars: With this, you will be the only one who feels it.

Skull Croat: No! You won't do that to me again! We're enclosed in here. My force field won't break through these marble lined walls, like it did the stone

pillars and slabs of the temple. It'll ricochet off. If you do that to me here, we'll remain here, and I'll be shooting at your friends, while you're too occupied with me to help them. The other Mars bounced me all over the damn desert with his stupid mace, I put two or three good shots on him while he did it, and I'm still not deterred! I'm back, and still in your faces! Still as bent as ever, on my objective! Stop interfering with me! It is my right to conquer a world that shouldn't even exist! The other Mars... Whether or not you are he... it would gratify me to see you die for his sins against me. May ... every ... world ... be as DARK AS MINE !!!

Skull Croat readies to shoot Mars again, and Mars vanishes and reappears behind him. Mars swats the force field with the mace, in spite of Skull Croat's warning, because it's the only thing he knows will work. The force field rolls across the floor like a pinball, tumbling Skull Croat inside like laundry, again. Two shots; one exits out of the upper corner of the sunlight wall, the other passes five feet in front of Jitara. No need to evade, but Jitara retaliates anyway, with a fire blast from his ring, as the ball finally stops rolling. Then, Jitara shocks him with a bolt from his wristband, at first with no affect, predictably. But when Tech War's particle blast hits the shield, while Jitara's energy is still going, the shield adjusts to deflect Tech War's beam, and some of Jitara's energy got through, a little. That pisses Skull Croat off, and he uses his teleporting power to disappear and reappear, several times, trying to outmaneuver Jitara and get a shot at him. In Ramadūm's control room, there's an Potniški Time-Machine and a table with the Croat armor laid out on it, complete with cape. Ramadūm is sitting in a chair, watching two fights on two monitors. He's already got the lower armor on, and is putting on the boots. For just in case. His headdress is off and it's the sides of his hair that is shaved bald, leaving him with a wide Mohawk mullet, which is brown, straight cut and slightly wavy, as the mid-twenties Damons' hair usually is. On the monitor showing the fight outside, Mars, flying at a 45° angle, just whacked the hell out of an airborne Skull Croat's shield, with his mace. Skull Croat's being bounced across the dunes like a giant beachball. There're two dead Surgebots in the foreground, laying in the rubble of a large broken section of the perimeter wall. Entwined, their mangled parts mingled, as if they died fighting each other. Suddenly, there's a metal on metal tap on the reinforced door. Ramadūm jerks his head in that

direction, nervously, with his hand on his weapon. There's a 50% superimposed scene of the door exploding inward, and Skull Croat entering, with his weapon swinging around in Ramadūm's direction. By the time Ramadūm is standing with his weapon ready, the superimposed scene has faded away, and the door is fine, not a scratch, no one there. If this had been real, one of them would be dead right now. From the way the scenario was playing out, there's a greater chance Ramadūm would be the one laying dead on the floor. Ramadūm sits back down in his chair, a bit shaken up. He pushes the intercom button to the ceremonial hall.

Ramadūm: Would you Retaliators please get that impostor out of my palace, before I have to come down there and do it myself?

In the ceremonial hall.

Tech War: Sonovabitch! That asshole was in our house, drinking our coffee! Talking us into this shit! And now this bullshit! Ungrateful prick! We're on the wrong side!

Mars: The timeline...

Tech War: Right. (to the ceiling) Hey prick, we're moving targets down here! He's playing around like cat and mouse and we can't do anything to him! If he gets past us, he's coming for you! You think about that!

Ramadūm: Stop fighting him one at a time and gang up on him. It's the best chance you have. Of course, I wouldn't want to be you when you start that.

Tech War: I know you wouldn't! I told you; he can hit us, but we can't touch him through his fucking shield! We're spread out and under cover, for all the good that does. If we close in on him like that, half of us would be slaughtered!

Ramadūm: But he may be worn down enough that by the time he gets to me, I will have the advantage. Any sacrifices you make for your pharaoh will be rewarded by the gods.

Tech War: What?! Fuck your gods! You're not our pharaoh, you shit!

Ramadūm: Hmmph! In all the old videos I watched of you, I could see a bit of Angus in you, but you weren't nearly as hotheaded as my old friend. But seeing you like this, if you told me you were Angus, I'd believe you! Ha, ha! Poor Angus, I miss him.

Ramadūm appears to be chuckling to his own thoughts, as his image fades away.

Tech War: Hey, hey! Sonovabitch! Hung up on me again... That makes twice!

Suddenly, a squad of Egyptian guards materializes in the center of the room. They look around, disoriented. Skull Croat shoots five of them dead, before he realizes they're no threat. Their death is like being burned, exploded and electrocuted at the same time.

Skull Croat: Shit. Nothing. Waste of ammo.

Mars gestures and vanishes the squad away, living and dead alike.

Upsurge: Shit! So, that's what it does to non-resilient people. Don't get hit by that!

Hotpoint: I wasn't planning on it. Stop cussing! Wow, that was too gruesome.

Mars: I told you not to bring them! Some died, the timeline could be affected!

The hologram appears again.

Holographic Ramadūm: They were eunuchs. No one's ancestor.

Mars: But now more eunuchs must be made to replace them?

Holographic Ramadūm: Haha, not by me! I didn't make those men eunuchs, my predecessor did. I'm not so cruel. I'd rather kill a man than cut his dick off. Amram Djoser had a queen who didn't love him, so he needed everyone dickless but himself. I don't have his problem. I put him out of his misery, just as I allowed my twin to put those unfortunate eunuchs out of their misery. I'll bring more in here to die, if you don't hurry with this!

Skull Croat shoots through the projected image.

Skull Croat: I'm coming for you, Damon.

Holographic Ramadūm: I'm waiting, Damon.

The holographic Ramadūm waves his Delta-Ray Disseminator in front of the imager, before fading away.

Skull Croat (To The Ceiling): Why don't you open the damn doors, or come down here? Because the only man you've ever feared is down here, that's why! I know your fear, because it was my fear when we were one. Our worst fear was that we'd meet our equal! Well, here I am! I'd be afraid of me if I gave a shit, but I don't! I don't have a reason to give a shit! You're dead, Damon! You might as well shoot yourself!

Voice Of Ramadūm: Shuuuuuuuuutttt uuuuuuuuuupppp!

Skull Croat: I killed Vandershlov, Damon. Did you?

Voice Of Ramadūm: No.

Skull Croat: Pussy.

Voice Of Ramadūm: Fuck you.

Skull Croat: With my armored fists! I beat his brains out of his head!

Voice Of Ramadūm: I'm supposed to be impressed? Vandershlov was a sissy! I'm surprised Grandfather let you get away with it, though.

No reply.

Voice Of Ramadūm: Hello...? What!?

Tech War (To The Retaliators): Am I the only one starting to hate them both? Listen, runway-head may be onto something about this ganging up jazz. I noticed something when me and Jitara hit him at the same time. Some of it got through! Multiple energies are his weakness. The shield is computer adaptive to whatever energy hits it, including kinetic energy. But, more than one kind of energy at a time confuses the system, and diminishes its effectiveness. It's just a theory, but it's worth a shot.

Skull Croat: You should have gone back and killed Vandershlov. You could've been Emperion.

The hologram returns.

Holographic Ramadūm: You say you did that. Did you take the throne?

Skull Croat: I used the time machine to become Emperion in another era.

Ramadūm turns both hands inward toward his face, pointing all eight non-thumb fingers at his face and gives a “what do you call this?” look. He has the Croat body armor and gauntlets on already, without the tunic or helmet. His headdress is off, he still has the pharaoh beard and eye makeup on and two ear piercings in each ear. This kabuki-ish ensemble through holographic imagery looks super campy but cool.

Skull Croat: Vandershlov killed Grandfather.

Holographic Ramadūm: WHAT!?!??

Skull Croat: I caught him removing the crown from Grandfather’s head and placing it on his own. I beat him to death. Didn’t have the heart to take the crown.

Ramadūm is visibly shaken up by the news that his Grandfather may have been murdered between the time he left Slovenia Castle and began his adventure in time. In the corridor behind the north wall, a Skull Croat is facing the wall tuning his helmet radar so that he can identify targets in the ceremonial hall that he can shoot through the wall. He’s trying to isolate one in particular, that he would really like to shoot at this moment. Wanagi Akicita is approaching him from the lateral corridor. Skull Croat sees him in his radar and he turns to see him for real, walking toward him, casually. He shoots Wanagi Akicita dead. A new Wanagi Akicita materializes. The dead Wanagi Akicita fades away. The new Wanagi Akicita is still approaching. Croat shoots that one dead. The same thing happens. The third Wanagi Akicita materializes right in front of him, inside Skull Croat’s own force field. The force field accepts him as if he belongs inside it. Croat levels his weapon, and Wanagi Akicita snatches it from him.

Wanagi Akicita: Stop it!

Wanagi Akicita pushes Skull Croat back against the wall, and pins him there. He looks left and right. In the ceremonial hall, the holographic projection of Ramadūm has gained his composure enough to speak.

Holographic Ramadūm: That little snake in the grass... You think this also

happened in my timeline?

Skull Croat: It happened in mine. What would have been different?

Holographic Ramadūm: Are you telling me that the only difference between I and you is that you went back to kill Vandershlov and I didn't? I find it difficult to imagine myself going back to kill Vandershlov, then searching the Timescape for my bifurcates who didn't kill Vandershlov, so I can kill them for not killing Vandershlov.

Skull Croat: When you put it that way, I see your point. But Vandershlov killed Grandfather. You should go back and kill him for it.

Holographic Ramadūm: Christ! Damon, I have no issue with you. Why don't you just leave? I do want to return to our time and see if this thing has happened. And if it has, you can be assured, I will kill Vandershlov.

Skull Croat: It will be too dangerous for Veronica. You can leave her with me.

Holographic Ramadūm: I'll take care of her. Always have, always will. Besides, I wouldn't want your Veronica to be jealous. You do still have her, don't you?

Skull Croat: Fuck you! I'll kill you! She's MINE!!

Skull Croat starts shooting at the image again.

Holographic Ramadūm: You'll have her over my dead body!

Skull Croat: You speak your own prophesy. You will not continue not knowing what it's like to be me. You will know my pain until it becomes yours. Then I will put you out of your misery. Or you will put me out of mine.

Holographic Ramadūm: There, you speak your prophesy. You're predestined to lose. My real future self sending the Retaliators attests to my survival, but not yours.

Skull Croat: It attests to his FEAR OF ME!!!

Holographic Ramadūm: If you step foot through this door, my doorway will be where my slaves scrape up your pieces. GET OUT OF MY PALACE!!!

Skull Croat: If I leave, I will return with explosives for the door! But why should I do that, when there are still four able bodied strongmen here, who can break it? I'll turn my counterpart's own desperate plan against him.

Skull Croat (To Mighty Man): Break the door!

He shoots at Mighty Man and Mighty Man flies between the two giant parent statues. His flight actually started as a reflex action super jump. His belt jets activated at 20 feet into it. Hardly noticeable, though.

Skull Croat (To Mars): I know you won't break the door. I'll shoot you anyway!

Skull Croat shoots at Mars and Mars vanishes and appears in the far side of the room.

Skull Croat (To Tech War): I know you won't break it. Or will you, ancestor of Angus?

Skull Croat shoots at Tech War and Tech War flies over his head and hovers in the air, ready to maneuver again if he has to.

Skull Croat (To Upsurge): I told you before, I'll tell you again; break the damn door or I'll kill you.

Skull Croat shoots at Upsurge and Upsurge shrinks to normal size, so the blast passes over his head. He shoots again and Upsurge jumps over it. An impressive leap for a big man who isn't speed or strength enhanced, but a narrow escape.

Skull Croat: The slowest mover. Upsurge is the target from now on, until I hit him or one of you breaks the door. When I kill him, I'll pick another target.

Skull Croat shoots over and over at Upsurge, who's having a hard time avoiding the barrage, but he's managing so far.

Tech War: What we talked about before! Let's do it! Us with energy powers, only. The rest of you stay back! Retaliators: Force Active!

Mars with his scepter, Tech War, Jitara and Hotpoint all gang up on Skull

Croat.

Guster: I wanna pull it apart and put it back together...

Skull Croat's transposing like crazy, all over the room, firing randomly, like rapid fire. All the shots miss their intended targets, and pass through walls.

Guster: I wanna relive all my adolescent dreams.

The errant Delta-Rays are exiting the palace, in all directions. On the far side of the palace we can barely make out a flying man, appearing to be covered in ionic energy, leaving an ion trail as he flies. Back inside the palace, Skull Croat is still shooting at The Retaliators, transposing to random points, keeping them all rolling and dodging all around the room. A few Retaliators get close calls.

Guster: Inspired by true events and movie screens...

Skull Croat appears directly in front of Mighty Man, with his back turned to him. He's noticed that Mighty Man hasn't attacked him the entire time. He might figure it's because Mighty Man's only weapons are his hands, and even a strongman can't lay hands on his force field without being burned. He may not know anything about an inadequacy, because since he's from the 41st century, he'd only know the 41st century legend, and by then, what we've seen so far may've been colored over by... the rest. Either way, Mighty Man is no threat, at this point.

Guster: I am a one man wrecking machine.

Hotpoint's zaps seem to have the most noticeable effect. Upon transposing to the same side of the room where he first appeared, she corners him, and gives him the full fury of her power. Tech War fires a wide beam laser at the force field. The shield is prioritizing the laser, and Hotpoint's zaps are passing through. She's zapping him, and he's dancing like an idiot. That last blast knocked out Skull Croat's force field. Hotpoint zaps him again, just to make sure. He's still armored, but he's knocked onto his back. Even while skidding

backwards, from the impact of the mighty bio-burst, he takes aim with both hands, and fires a 45° upwardly angled shot at Hotpoint.

Guster: Inspired by true events and movie screens...

She avoids the blast. It penetrates the upper wall near the ceiling, on the far side of the room. A steel reinforced door in a corridor of one of the upper levels. There's a hieroglyphic of an Egyptian queen, above a high tech electronic security lock. The errant delta ray penetrates the door.

Guster: I am a one man wrecking machine.

Inside, Veronica is sitting on her bed, watching the fight on a portable holographic projector monitor. She sees the delta ray pass upward diagonally through her door. At a point in front of the door, it takes on the form of her, standing there, being lit up by the ray. What she saw didn't look like her physical body, it looked like the light that would've enveloped her form, if she had been standing in front of the door and was hit by the ray. But she wasn't. She's fine, sitting on her bed. Nevertheless, she shudders from the sight of this, as if someone walked on her grave. Back to the fight. Skull Croat is back on his feet, firing a shot at Hotpoint, which she dodges, as before.

Hotpoint: Nyah, nyah! Can't hit me! Guys, his shield is down! He's vulnerable, now!

Mars wastes no time vanishing the ray gun. But a split second later, it reappears in Skull Croat's hand, as if it was never gone. He doesn't know how it happened, but he won't let on. In the background, Hotpoint has landed, and Upsurge takes a candy bar out of one of his utility pouches and gives it to her. She's used up a lot of bio energy in this fight, and it all comes out of her metabolism. That wasn't a toy force field she just knocked out. Unless she's absolutely positively needed, she's done for the day. She's not out of zap, but she's low, and she's more than done her part.

Skull Croat: Ha, ha! I told you I'm a god! Apparently the most powerful one

here! I am a new god, you're just an old relic. It's fitting you should die this far in the past, you never should've lived as long as you did!

Skull Croat fires at Mars, but taking a page from Jitara's book, Mars holds his scepter out in front of his person and it absorbs the Delta Ray. The Delta Ray really is some powerful shit, and the scepter lights up with the crackling, rippling artificial lightning of it. Mars directs the energy back at Skull Croat.

Skull Croat: Oh, fuck.

Skull Croat is not as skilled as Jitara, but he's no novice, he does an impressive one handed cartwheel to evade the blast, even while firing at Mars, even when he's upside down in the cartwheel. But Mars didn't forget his last trick, and he just does the same thing again. An impressive backflip evades it, and Skull Croat lands in a crouching position, ready to return fire. But he's caught up to this page in the turning of the tables novella. He points his weapon up and tilts his head to his left.

Skull Croat: Fuck.

Mars: Ha, ha! Now who is the god and who is the mortal bitch who can't do shit? You are mine at my leisure, infant "god".

Mars conjures a spear and is ready to throw it. But instead, he lowers it and approaches Mighty Man.

Mars: Mighty Man, you heard the words of Epochalus. If you are not the one to stop Croat, you will die! You have to do it!

Mighty Man: You're right, I have to.

Mars: His weapon is a horror, likened to something that would be used by the dark gods. But I survived it, Tech War and Captain Superhero survived it, so can you. He may not even get a chance, if you catch him off his guard. You're strong, you're resilient, you're a Retaliator! Go!

Mighty Man charges Skull Croat from the side, like a man possessed. Skull Croat swivels around to level his weapon at him, and Mighty Man shrinks to his knees, sliding on the polished floor, curling up in a ball, with his forearms

covering his head. Skull Croat straightens his stance, lowers his weapon, and is overwhelmed by the sheer idiocy of it.

Skull Croat: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Tigerlily takes advantage of Skull Croat's distraction, flips herself over to him, and kicks him in the head, knocking him to the floor, on one knee, and one hand. His helmet comes flying off. (He didn't forget to lock it down, it's part of his armor's defensive design that a blow that might knock his head off or break his neck will detach the helmet, instead. Like one of those lizards that if you bite its tail, it'll lose the tail and keep going. Anything under the right amount of pressure, the helmet won't unlock, no matter what you do. There's a button in the back, but anyone trapped in the armor who doesn't know about the button would be a victim of irony. A super kick like Tigerlily's or a bullet through the earpiece ricocheting around inside the helmet would unlock it.) He's 40-ish. Obviously, he's physically identical to the caped Croat we just saw with Epochalus. Exact same features, same hair, a bit messy from the helmet coming off like that. Same gray/brown goatee. More than a biological twin, a precise duplicate of the other one, in every way, even their individual hairs and blemishes would be in the same place. Biological twins, the ones that are presumptively called identical twins, split in the womb, before they are fully formed. These two split at age 25. Before that, they were the same person. Oh, how different they are now. But not entirely. What makes Skull Croat who he is, is present in Ramadūm Croat, and vice versa. It's simply a matter of proportions. But, Tigerlily doesn't think that deeply. She sees something in this one she didn't see in the other. Something extra, in the eyes, the expression, the mannerisms. Tigerlily freezes in place, stunned by the overwhelming allure of this savage prince before her. The Prince Damon they met before was handsome, in a formal, innocuous way. Like a mannequin. Not this one. This one is the handsome prince possessed by the spirit of a wild animal. Sweaty, seething, primal. The all or nothing, in it to win or die trying attitude. Such focused passion. So forceful and driven. Perhaps he could be the god she is destined for? Did she accept Robert's proposal too soon? Just her luck, she thinks. No. Wipe that shit away. Robert is her comfort, the safe place for her heart, which she has needed so badly. These are just thoughts, meant to be wiped from the mind.

Easier said than done. She senses him. She feels his tortured soul. His pain must be everyone's pain. Everyone who hasn't given him what he wants is guilty of keeping it from him. He will have what he wants, and all that stand in his way must be cut down like shrubbery on his chosen path. A most dangerous man to cross. In fact, a very dangerous man to be around or even be on the same planet with. The handsome bore with Epochalus didn't affect her. The helmeted, unseen maniac they've been fighting didn't affect her. But now, she finds herself staring at a handsome maniac. The pussy moistens, in spite of herself. She'd fuck him right here on the marble floor, if everyone else was gone. Jitara is very familiar with this scenario, and he's beyond tired of it by now. Skull Croat also notices that she's attracted to him, and, still kneeling, he points his gun up to the ceiling and smiles, deviously.

Skull Croat: What's your name?

Tigerlily: Aaliyah.

Skull Croat: Aaliyah, you are not my princess. But if you're very nice to me, I might let you be my concubine.

Tigerlily: What? No. I'm not going to be your whore! I hate you. You're... my enemy.

Skull Croat: Very well. It was a better offer than this one.

From his one knee on the floor kneeling position, Skull Croat levels his weapon at Tigerlily. Point blank. She can't evade faster than he can pull the trigger. Stepping his left foot onto the top of the still kneeling Mighty Man's helmeted head, Jitara springboards off it with such awesome air, you'd swear he's enhanced, but he's really only human. But about as super as a full human can be. He comes down in Skull Croat's strike zone, and slashes him across the face, making a huge ravine like wound, running diagonally across his face. So deep, the raised areas, left brow, left cheek etc, are to the bone. The left tip and left nostril of his nose are hanging by a piece of skin above his left palet. The line ends across the right side of his mouth, making a slanted cross pattern and giving him a permanent scowl. No, not a scowl, a snarl. It's making a puddle of blood on the floor. Skull Croat is weakened, and puts his right hand, his weapon hand, back on the floor, to keep from slumping onto the floor. His weapon is still in his hand, of course, it is virtually an extension of his hand. His right leg, which had been bent, knee

touching the floor, is now slumped on its side, tucked under him. His left leg, which was bent, foot on the floor, knee pointing forward, still is in, somewhat, that same position. He drapes his left forearm across his upwardly bent knee, and touches his face. The gushing blood covers the gauntlet of his shaky left hand. Now, he feels the pain. Without his helmet, he's not amplified, but he screams pretty loud, anyway.

Skull Croat: Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Jitara levels his katana at Skull Croat, as if he's conquered him.

Jitara: Now give me your weapon, asshole. Then, we'll talk about mine.

Skull Croat holsters his weapon and looks up at Jitara with defiant eyes. Jitara looks back at Mars, as if asking permission to use lethal force. Mars extends both hands, palms up, shrugs, then points his right index finger at Jitara, giving the decision to him. Hotpoint's jaw drops. Jitara presses the point of his blade under Skull Croat's jawline. Hotpoint covers her goggled eyes with her gloved hands.

Jitara: The gun, then the sword; you live. *I will fucking kill you if you don't .*

Robert is the man. Her man. She chose correctly. Tigerlily goes for the gun and she and Skull Croat start struggling for it on the floor, even as Skull Croat is bleeding all over everything and upkicking Jitara in the stomach, making him take a step back. Jitara regains his balance, and steps forward for a lethal katana strike, but Tigerlily is in the way. At the sound of more fighting, Hotpoint uncovers her eyes. The gun goes off a couple times. Upsurge tackles Hotpoint, gently, and covers her up on the floor. Mighty Man starts crawling away from the fight. Jitara gets a hit on Skull Croat's gun hand, but the armor is tougher than this katana. Nothing but a hit on his exposed head will count. Skull Croat is pulling the trigger over and over, not caring where it's pointed. The last shot would've hit Tigerlily square in the face, if she hadn't arched her back and head back in time. When she raises back up, she's backfisted by Skull Croat's bloody left gauntlet. Tigerlily lets go of the gun, stands and kicks Skull Croat in his sore face. Because of her

green energy field she didn't get any blood on her shoe, but she's got some on her dress, from the struggle on the floor, and her blood is mingling with his, on her face, from that punch. By now, Tech War is landing from above to be in a position behind Skull Croat to grab hold of him. (Croat's armor is not strength enhanced, like Tech War's. With the force field and the Delta-Ray Disseminator, two technologies his enemies wouldn't have, Prince Damon is not meant to have to make physical contact with anyone, in battle. Protective armor like Croat's is mostly solid, with gadgets on the outside, air and water filtration on the inside. If it buckles under pressure, it will only bend and dent. Strength enhanced armor is a thin shell filled with intertwined mechanisms. If a strength enhanced armor buckles under pressure, the gears, pulleys, rods and pins can malfunction and act as a meat grinder on the person inside. Croat's armor is designed with the same purpose as the shield; to protect the prince inside. If Tech War beat on Croat's armor, he'd damage his own armor before Croat's. However, Tech War can easily overpower and restrain Croat. Tech War 1988 in a pit match against Tech War 3991 would be a different matter. Tech War 1988 would be outmatched in every way, except his wits. Tech War 1986 was outmatched by Skull Croat, till Skull Croat lost his shield.) Mars is standing nearby with an arrow drawn on Skull Croat that can probably penetrate his armor. (It's not indestructible, just more so than Tech War's current one.) Mighty Man is propped against the base of the Zarkov Pythias statue, sitting with his arms wrapped around his knees and his head hung low. Upsurge and Hotpoint are still on the far side of the room, but've moved over to where Captain Superhero is.

Skull Croat: Aaaaaagh!

Jitara: That's it! Get back, he's a dead motherfucker!

Instead of continuing the fight from here, at a disadvantage, Skull Croat throws a marker to a point to the far upper right, stops the counter on his wrist timer, then disappears, even as Jitara's next katana swing would've beheaded him. Limbo, on the other side of the Temporal Conduit from the timeship. To the far left, we see the top of Konar's castle rising above some dead twisty trees and grassless foggy hills. In the far distance, to the right, we see Avalon. Skull Croat appears, twitching and writhing from pain. The front of his tunic is painted with blood. He has to shoot a few demons while he

composes himself. He gets his first aid kit from the back of his belt. He opens it, takes out a small aerosol can and sprays it in his face. It freezes on contact, with a vaporous effect. The bleeding stops and the wound is cauterized. He takes out some cotton gauze and stuffs it in the wound. He takes out a roll of perforated skin-colored tape and tapes the gauze secure. He readies his weapon, crouches to one knee, to get in position, then pushes the button on his wrist timer, starting the clock again. He disappears. In the queen's chamber, Veronica is still sitting on her bed watching the downstairs fight on a portable holographic projection monitor. Suddenly in the floor beside her bed, she sees a ghostly image of a 40ish Prince Damon with no cape and his helmet is laying on the floor to his right. His face bears a fully healed nasty diagonal scar that runs from above his left eyebrow, skips his eye, severs his left nostril, splits both his lips and ends to the right of his mid-chin. His feet are sprawled out straight on the floor as he's leaned against the wall. In his lap is a ghostly form of Veronica's own corpse. It's grotesque, frayed, charred, still smoking. And wearing the same outfit she has on. He's crying. His pain is deeper than she imagined soul pain could be. She always knew Damon loved her, he risked everything and threw his royal career away for her, once. But now she sees how he mourns her death. She kneels over the ghostly image, though her knees overlap his legs and part of the form of her ghostly dead self. She caresses the scarred face of the crying ghostly Damon and her own eyes well up. Back to Ramadūm's court. Tigerlily has just kicked Skull Croat's bloody face and Jitara is moving in for the kill. Skull Croat tosses a marker, pushes the button on his wrist timer and disappears, just as Jitara's next katana swing would've beheaded him. Then, he reappears, over the marker he'd tossed, in a point in the room where he's in a straight line with Jitara and Tigerlily, with Jitara in between. Skull Croat's face is bandaged. He picks the marker back up and tosses it to where his helmet landed, then aims. His voice is muffled by the bandage, but he can still be heard.

Skull Croat: You'd better hold still.

Tigerlily is still facing where Skull Croat previously was. Jitara looks behind himself and sees her. Realizing his predicament, he stays put, closes his eyes, clenches up, and readies himself to take the blast. As a futile hope, he puts

the non magic sword in front of him, like he would've the magic one, if he still had it. Mars turns his arrow on Skull Croat's new position, but the trigger is half squeezed already. Skull Croat doesn't need to have Jitara shot before the arrow gets to him, he just needs to get the shot off and be gone before the arrow gets here. Perfect timing is second nature for a Master Of Time. Both shots are fired almost simultaneously. Skull Croat transposes to where his marker landed, just as Mars's arrow would have reached him. The arrow hits the north wall, behind where Skull Croat was, and Wanagi Akicita is alone in the corridor back there, out of view of the hole, leaned standing against the inner wall of the lateral corridor opposite of the one he previously confronted Skull Croat in. As the hole is blasted open, Wanagi Akicita points casually in that direction, as if marking the event, then he comes off the wall and walks forward, vanishing as he walks. The delta-ray blast passes through Jitara's non magic sword like it's not even there, reaches its intended target, and lights Jitara's chest on fire. Jitara lights up like a light bulb. Bursts of flash fire shoot out of him. A handful more of his hidden explosives go off, sending out tatters of clothing and chunks of meat. His O2 tanks on his shoulders explode, sending out flame streaks which intersect at his head. He falls dead, smoldering.

Guster: Here in the present tense...

No parting words, just the stench of burnt death. Tigerlily goes hysterical. The Retaliators run to his aid. Tigerlily is now screaming without restraint.

Guster: Nothing is making sense.

Skull Croat is forgotten, for the moment. He casually picks up his helmet, then stands, spins his weapon and holsters it. There's still that sound of her screams. He pauses and has a brief flash of himself, 15 years earlier in his linear time and about 6500 years in the future, cradling the body of his fallen beloved, screaming at the sky. Jitara had done what he should've done, but the result was the same. The same, only different. Skull Croat has literally killed billions across the Timescape. But Tigerlily's screams will haunt his soul forever. Because it's too close, too familiar. Too much the same. The moment passes, he doesn't waste time on distractions. He doesn't have a

conscience, only ghost pains, where his amputated conscience once was. He had a heart, once. It died, with her. After he was stabbed on his last visit here, he woke up with a plastic one. He doesn't know who the doctor was.

Guster: Waiting for my moment to come...

He puts his helmet on over his bandaged face as he walks over to the sunlight wall and tosses the marker out the window. He touches his gauntlet and disappears.

Guster: Everything is come undone.

Outside the palace, we now get to see him traversing the interior side of the out-of-time tourist's ingress/egress stairway. He goes back down the one we saw before.

Guster: I tried to pull it apart and put it back together...

He's now running across the dunes, putting his helmet back on. He reaches the pinnacle of a dune and beholds the Sphinx. His base of operations is in the hidden area behind it, but he hadn't yet bothered to look at its face. It's his ... former face.

Guster: No point in living in my adolescent dreams.

The ancient Greek man-god, Bellerophon, astride his winged horse Celeris rises over the dune, in full wide wingspan. Bellerophon is readying his sword, to strike at Skull Croat, as if he's going for a decapitation. Skull Croat already knows his armor is no defense against the Sword Of Jupiter, which penetrates anything and everything, even his working force field, his armor... his chest.

Guster: Inspired by true events and movie screens...

Skull Croat shoots Bellerophon off his horse. Bellerophon is fully ablaze, as a full blooded human would be. Like a moth in a bug zapper.

Guster: I am a one man wrecking machine.

Celeris lands near the body of his master. Bellerophon slowly rises.

Guster: Inspired by true events and movie screens...

Skull Croat shoots him down, again. Same bug zapper effect we just saw, as it was with Jitara.

Guster: I am a one man wrecking machine.

Bellerophon is shimmering with a golden glow. His face looks like a corpse that's been burned in a fire. But it heals as he glows. Bellerophon begins to get back up. Skull Croat shows frustration in his eyes, through the goggles as he re-aims. Bellerophon is directly in front of Celeris, struggling to mount. If Skull Croat shoots at Bellerophon now, he might hit the horse. Evil as he is, he has a soft spot for horses. Especially this magnificent winged one.

Skull Croat: Shit!

The 1986 Retaliators, minus Jitara, Tigerlily and Captain Superhero, are now outside the palace, looking for Skull Croat. Tech War's already puffing on his post-fight cig, because he doesn't know when he'll get another chance. There's a rubble strewn hole in the wall. On this side, so now the two sides will match. The ascension of Bellerophon and Celeris catches The Retaliators' attention, and they spot Skull Croat still standing there. Mars teleports to his location. The teleportation is instantaneous, but so is Skull Croat's. He's gone in the same instant Mars appears. The rest of the group flies over the dune to regroup with Mars. Normal-sized Upsurge is carried by Tech War, who's biting down on his Kool so he won't lose it. He's done this before. On the far side of the Sphinx, Skull Croat and the glowing canoe-shaped time machine spin together and rise high up into the air, while spinning. Then, they vanish. Bellerophon and Celeris circle around and land.

Bellerophon: Mars. I'm sorry, he got away. But that still means we won,

right?

Mars: Wrong Mars. You shouldn't be talking to us. Our Skull Croat has escaped us. Yours is still here, contemplating shooting himself, but he won't.

On the other side of the palace, Mars volleys a shielded Skull Croat toward a giant Upsurge, who uses a broken surgebot arm to bat Skull Croat toward the horizon. The energy travels down the "bat" and shocks his hands. He normalizes. Mars and Captain Starborn fly after Skull Croat. Wanagi Akicita follows on horseback. Cloud Dancer begins to gallop on air, the horse and rider become a blur, the blur fades to nothing, and they're now at Skull Croats location, waiting for the others.

Bellerophon: Oh. You and he were missing and I thought I'd found him.

Mars: Regroup with your team. Upsurge needs a ride to where he sent the enemy.

Bellerophon: Right. By your leave, Your Eminence. Celeris; Up!

Bellerophon and Celeris ascend again, and fly toward the opposite side of the palace. The Retaliators watch as the immortal mortal and his flying horse are partially washed out in the bright sunlight. The Red Shadow ascends from behind the far side of the palace and waves him over. Just a shadowy man in red, to these.

Tech War: Looks like Bellerophon.

Mars: He is. And apparently a future Retaliator.

Hotpoint: Future? But that's Jackson's old dull costume. Oh wait, we haven't been over there. And I guess we know Bellerophon's not a past Retaliator. Is it possible that those Retaliators are from one of those alternate realities Epochalus talked about? With this in common, but branched off between this time and ours?

Mars: There's more to suggest we are their past. The reverse is true of the enemy. We fought him after he fought them. They fought him before he fought us.

Tech War: No wonder they're kicking the shit out of him. It's good enough for him, to show up fresh and clueless, then have a bunch of pissed off Retaliators up his ass.

Mars: That one can't die. He's predestined to return. Not even through death can he escape my wrath. He will resign himself to dying and even desire it, but the Fates will deny him that reprieve. At the point where he should be dead, I've only begun.

The 1986 Retaliators walk casually toward the palace, to rejoin their wounded, dead and distraught, and wait for the vortex to return them to Epochalus' timeship. After they are back inside the palace, Wanagi Akicita passes through the stone of the upper level of the northeastern section of the palace and hovers through the air to where the Retaliators just were. Another Wanagi Akicita has similarly exited the southwestern section of the palace, and a third exits from behind the Sphinx. They converge, merge, and hover through the air to the other side of the palace, to lead the remaining 1988 Retaliators to the new battle location. They don't find anything abnormal about it, because creepy and mysterious are normal for Wanagi Akicita.



Vision 42: From The Abyss He Watches Time And Shapes Reality

The Temporal Conduit. Caped Croak is standing by, shooting demons that get near. High above the pool, The Retaliators appear, spinning. When they stop, we can see an expressionless Mars carrying the body of Jitara. Captain Superhero is cracked, pale, and has burgundy splotches on his face. Tech War's helping him stand (6'5", 5'10" height difference, respectively). Tech War has his right arm around Flash's waist. Flash still has his leg armor, utility belt with empty holster and arm guards, but his torso and head are stripped down to that plain flight suit he had on when he first met the Retaliators. Perhaps it's just as well he lost the lance. It took a lot of lives in WWII and things like that carry spirits. At the end of almost every mission, it was sticky with gore, the best way to clean it was with a pressurized water

hose. To start, anyway. He killed more with the lance than with his sidearm, and altogether probably more than any other individual soldier, not counting bombers. You don't get the reputation for being the greatest hero of the war for having the brightest smile. Maybe a blunted bo staff. They operate pretty much the same way and dispense bruises instead of gashes and gouges. He'll still need a new sidearm, for those times you just gotta blow some asshole's shit away. The Retaliators don't specialize in that, like the Line Breakers, for obvious reasons, but it is on the table. Citizen Defender was the pistol packer before, but he had quit before Captain Superhero showed up, and Betsy was as much a replacement for the Decapitator as Flash was for Mzalendo. Citizen Defender fights corruption and warlording in East Africa and sometimes West Africa, and that can get really messy. He carries a bush sword on his left hip, and it ain't for foliage. Hotpoint has her arm around a distraught Tigerlily (5'1", 5'9" height difference, respectively). They descend, and Tigerlily breaks away to attack Croat. He sees she's going to hit him, so he points his gun up, to not accidentally shoot her. She hits his force-field and singes her arm. She starts to hit it again, and he pushes a button on his belt, deactivating it. She punches him a couple times in his facemask, staggering him slightly. Her green energy field around her hands is no good against his force field, but it protects her hands from this kind of impact. Upsurge grabs her and shoulder carries her to the timeship, then sets her back on her feet. Croat reactivates his force-field and resumes shooting demons. After the Retaliators are inside, Croat also enters.

Epochalus: Oh, I am so sorry. This is one of the contingencies I foresaw. I had hoped it could be avoided. But, take solace in the knowledge that by his sacrifice, you have ensured the continuance of your world, as you know it.

Tigerlily: Damn the world! And damn you both! Damn you all!

Epochalus: I understand your anger, young Tigerlily. You have my sympathy. And my gratitude. The entire Timescape is indebted to you.

Captain Superhero: "Fate of the future", "meant to be here", blah, blah, we've got a dead man and my guts hurt. We just want to go home, Epochalus. We've heard enough of your bullshit, for one day.

Epochalus: Alright. Give me a moment to set a course for the Andromeda Crossing.

Captain Superhero: Sure. Not like the troops are busted up or anything. (To

Croat): You had no business in ancient Egypt, to start with. Glory hound, egomaniac, wanting to be a pharaoh, for Christ's sake. None of this would've happened!

Croat removes his helmet, so there's no barrier between the eyes of the affronted and the affronter. Also, to show the evidence that he is not the enemy they just fought. The once identical Prince Damons are identical no longer.

Croat: I was a pharaoh. And none of you would've been born, except Mars, if I hadn't been. I was a prince in my own land, in my own era. Ruler of my own nation and the most worthy heir to an empire greater even than that of the Romans. Raised to be Emperion, but heir in reserve, for in case my cousin proved too unworthy. When I became a time traveler, should I have gone back in time to be a peasant? I am a king by my nature, by my blood. I'm sorry for your injury, and for your friend, and that I look like the one who did it, and that I was the one at the center of it all. But, you didn't just save me, you saved everything. *Ev-ery-thing*. Your country, your planet, your star system, your galaxy, your universe. That's the point Epochalus was trying to make. Jitara died the most honorable death a hero could hope for. The glory of this day is not mine, but his, and yours, all of you. Today, you've saved more people than have ever been saved at once, and that number includes your own selves. Though he did it in his capacity as a Retaliator, saving Terra from the Faulks is attributable to Mars, alone. The glory of saving the entire universe...

Tech War: The fuck you say. We mortals couldn't do much in space at that time, but we fought those slimy bastards on land, sea and air. They made eight statues.

Croat: What statues? My era's history says little of your part, but gives credit for the final victory over the Faulks to Mars. I'm giving credit for saving the entire universe from Skull Croat to Jitara and all of you. Think of all the inhabited planets...

Captain Superhero: Yak, yak, you flap 'em as bad as Epochalus, shut up. Good men fight and die because of the egos of assholes. Pin us a shitty medal, king. I feel like one of those bombed out buildings I used to see in Europe. Are we still here?

The coordinates to the Stargate are entered, but before Epochaus can push the button to teleport the timeship there, Tech War interrupts.

Tech War: Wait.

Tech War backhands Croat with his left hand, causing a bit of blood splatter from his lip and nose, and swiveling his upper body to his right. Even as Croat is straightening up, Epochalus is handing him a white handkerchief for the blood.

Tech War: Don't ever hang up on me! If my ass and my team's asses are on the line and I ask you a question, by God, fucking answer! Screw you then and now! Tons of bullshit about timelines, and nothing we could actually USE, once we got th ... !

On "USE", Croat taps the front of Epochalus' shoulder with the backs of his first two fingers, like he's as tired of their shit as they are of his. The look in his eyes is "You'd better do something, before I do". By the "th ... !", Epochalus has performed an intensely dramatic hand gesture and made them disappear. The two Damons dismiss that unpleasantness, as though rude guests have finally left. Epochalus removes his headgear, better showing his resemblance to Croat. Epochalus's hair is tied back in a mid-head ponytail. Free of the headdress, his bangs hang down on each side of his face, and end at about level with his cheeks. The 40ish Damon's hair is half brown, half gray, and the older Damon's hair is jet black. Time lords don't dye their hair?

Croat: I wanted to slap him back.

Epochalus: You chose correctly. Conversely, it would be inappropriate to be less generous to those who so sacrificed for you. We do have to work with them again.

Croat: At Doom's Dawn. They'll be begging for our help, when what they're fighting for is no longer a far removed concept. Who does he think he is? I'm fucking royalty.

Epochalus: So is he, in an American sense. As a Retaliator, he is like a prince and Mars is his king. As Terra's watchdog force, they have already deposed a

number of world leaders who've refused to do things their way. With several more to come. As a man, his Original American ancestors owned the island of Manhattan. His European settler ancestors developed that land into the greatest city in the world, in that era. As the Reddingfield heir, he is a man who has always ruled his own world, and has only ever allowed a god to be above him. Based on his lineage and position, if he wanted to be recognized officially as the king of Manhattan, it would be a simple matter of creating the documents and putting a seal on it. The stand-ins aren't exactly passive. But it could be argued that their assertiveness rubbed off on them, from him. From spending so much time with him, all through childhood and adulthood. He was given everything, but only once, and as a child. It was up to him to keep it from being devoured, and him with it, by the piranha that quickly surrounded him. He had no father to teach him how to fight for his kingdom, and his mother was little help, though she did what she could, and imparted to him what little of his father had rubbed off on her. She had been a peasant girl from our own homeland of Croatia, before her image on a calendar caught the eye of the richest man in the world. But Arthur's best source for learning to be king of his kingdom was already inside him. His Destiny was inside him. He knew what to do, because it came naturally. He expects things to go his way, so they do, as part of the natural order. You upset him, in Egypt, because you are not concessionary. Numerically, he is a 3 and you are a 1. Though they may have different agendas, both require the world around them conform to suit them. A clashing of conflicting personalities is what just smacked you across the face. Either of his two stand-ins might've acted hostile toward you. Only the real Tech War would've actually hit you. But, I wouldn't want a mere stand-in for this mission, your pride and temporary facial discomfort notwithstanding. I barely remembered it happened. The war is what matters. It was Angus' Balkan heritage that qualified him for Grandfather's Elite Imperial Guard. But it was his Reddingfield blood that made him so formidable. You didn't mind the Reddingfield temperament, when it was working for you, instead of against you.

Croat: You know; keeping Angus level was constant work. But, even when he was berserk, it was in our service. I think I'd prefer to have Angus for this mission.

Epochalus: The other Croat is as much his prince as you. Given our Tech

War's dark nature, he'd probably take sides with the other you, against us. Best to leave him out of this. Besides, Angus was at his peak when we were a teenager, and he died long before we even split from the other you. We can't take him from our own past. If he hadn't died, we could take him from the last time we were in our own era, but he'd be too old for this job, by then. We have the better Reddingfield working for us, as demonstrated at Pula Coliseum. The Retaliators work fine, for our purposes. They're just a bit tense, understandably, given all that happened back there.

Croat: The same one who died, when I was there.

Epochalus: And I, as well. I was there with you, behind Ramadūm's eyes. We both saw what he saw. We wouldn't be having this conversation if it had transpired any other way. Our own past must remain intact, or we fade away.

Croat: Ah. The three of us are in an infinite loop, ever thwarting the enemy. Can the Skull Croat also create such a loop to assure his continuance, just as you have?

Epochalus: No more than you could, without an Epochalus. He has constructed a web of interaction with time, which has given him power. But nothing I've seen which has given him an advantage like the one I rendered from our lucky accident. You heard that shit Skull Croat said about only an idiot would go back in a straight line. He must've been talking about this time. His first time, he made the same beginner's mistake we did, else we wouldn't have both Pharaoh Ramadūm and Caesar Skull in our history, would we? Other than that one preordained instance, Skull Croat is unable to return to the timeline that created him, just like you couldn't, when you wanted to warn your past self. You can go, but the timeline will split, and you'll end up in the divergent reality, not your own. This Skull Croat must have gone back further than Ramadūm, to have split his thread from ours, that far in the past. Or it could be like you were saying, his appearance in Ramadūm's Egypt was enough to split his thread from ours, that far back. He's your age, but you saw how far ahead of you he is in his timelord abilities, unfortunately. On that level, he could make certain time laws work for him, instead of against him. It could be his anomalousness that concentrated more power in him. The event that created him was such a slight possibility, any change in the timeline would cause it not to happen. Alteration of set events is a conundrum. It can be done, but only by creating a new reality, where it happened that way. And the one where things happened

as they did, remains as it was. The only way to interact with a timeline without splitting it is to be sure not to disturb its natural course. You must be especially careful when interacting with events related to your own past. Prevention of one's own creation is the paradox we spoke of before. The Timescape simply doesn't allow it. Whether it be by intention or by accident. Punishment is ultimate; failure dooms you, success unravels you, so avoid everything about the circumstances that created you, if possible. The concept of creation extends beyond one's birth. Each divergence is a creation of one's new self. We can't mess around with our original thread, except in ways that are preordained. Even if he could go to the past of his own thread, he'd have to either assume some preordained role which doesn't interfere with the course of events, or interact with the timeline in a way that doesn't prevent her death. He'd have to take steps to assure that she still dies, exactly the way she did. I know I wouldn't have the stomach for that mission, so it's safe to say, neither does he. What Skull Croat doesn't realize is that whenever he kills a Ramadūm Croat, the end result is the unraveling of Damon Pythias altogether, in that timeline. Since he's split his own timeline from that, he himself is unaffected. Two timelines, one where the creation of Skull Croat is assured and the creation of Ramadūm Croat is not, another with the usual split. Unravel the one with the usual split, and what's lost in that equation is one creation of a Ramadūm Croat.

Croat: The timeline where she doesn't die!?

Epochalus: Exactly. Our own interaction with the past is partly to blame. You and I have both indirectly interacted with the Pharaoh, through this mission. Under the circumstances, we really didn't have a choice. We're all interrelated, interdependent upon one another, now. The death of one dooms another, that one's doom unravels another, etcetera. With our timeline gone, she has nowhere to go, but to his. Otherwise, she'd unravel with the rest of our timeline. Instead, she's pulled into his world, by the sheer force of his will, and what power he has over time, at that age. But her fate in his timeline is no more cheerful than the alternative. It's written into the cosmic record that she's dead in his timeline. Or perhaps it's just a cruel ironic joke the Timescape is playing on Skull Croat, and by association, us. Either way, the result is, she dies. You see, there's more at stake than just our destiny. Our doom is always followed by hers. If Skull Croat were to actually win the Gemini War...

Croat: There'd be none of her left in the Timescape! He wouldn't continue if he knew!

Epochalus: He doesn't. It's Forbidden Knowledge, to him. As the realization comes to him, the younger ones are irrevocably doomed, the older ones unravel. They turn to dust and fade away.

Croat: We should tell them all!

Epochalus: You should figure, the Timescape wouldn't make it so simple. We put our own fate in jeopardy, with the attempt to tell him, outright. He must realize it on his own. However, I have seen cases of Epochalus's, at the height of their power, myself included, being able to steer him to the realization. It's our best weapon. Our failsafe. We have no equivalent Forbidden Knowledge. Nothing that can be disclosed in the same way, to our peril. Of course I wouldn't know of it if we did, or we wouldn't be here, just because of my knowledge of what I am forbidden to know. But I assume the advantage is ours, because the oldest Skull Croat that appears in the Timescape is only a few years older than the one the Retaliators just fought. He has no latter life persona. That fact alone assures me that victory in the Gemini War is ours. Did you notice that I was able to send the Retaliators home, from this side of the barrier?

Croat: I did. How did you do that? How did you know you could do that?

Epochalus: When I thought of the stargate, I thought of myself as a living stargate. Time has given that to me, in reward for our service.

Epochalus steps on the bulkhead, and walks up it as easily as walking across the floor. He turns and faces his younger self, casually, grinning.

Croat: Not as impressive as being a stargate. How does time let you walk on walls?

Epochalus: Gravity must ask me for the time for me to fall, and I refuse its request.

Epochalus steps back onto the floor and resumes, from a normal stance.

Epochalus: It's a useless ability, really, for a being on my level. But, it all brings me closer to my Destiny, and you, to being me.

Croat: I did see Skull Croat performing closer to your level than mine. As

Ramadum, I assumed I would be there, by now, but I'm not. How can I survive the Gemini War?

Epochalus: You'll not leave this place until you are his equal. I'll train you, we'll take as long as it takes, and you'll not age, as long as you are here.

Epochalus walks Croat over to the monitors, and turns one on that shows a Tech War that we haven't seen, which has retractable secondary rockets on the shins, jet wings on his back instead of rocket-man nacelles, and the latest solution to his pinching problem; segmented midsection armor. He's fighting in the air with Firewolf, above the New Jersey Palisades. Firewolf dominated almost the entirety of this fight, beating Tech War with his left fist and two feet, while holding Pseudodeus by the wrist with his right hand, sometimes beating Tech War *with* Pseudodeus, but toward the end, when Tech War was all but defeated, he mustered up every ounce of his strength and courage, and gave the Firewolf an even fight, for a few seconds, before resuming his role of human punching bag, again. Help is on the way, but it won't get there in time. The even part is what we saw. Our vision after that is only of Epochalus and Croat, reacting to the monitor.

Epochalus: This might interest you.

Croat: The same one who struck me?

Epochalus: Yes. Watch.

Suddenly, they both make grimacing faces, at the same time.

Croat: Ooh, that's gotta hurt. Motherfucker had no call to strike me, but I wouldn't wish that on him. A Protogonus... I regret that those metal monsters were wiped out before we were born. Will I ever get a chance to kill one?

Epochalus: Don't wish it. One shot from the Delta Ray Disseminator penetrates his adamantine shell and shorts him out, as the Delta Ray was designed to do. But immediately after he dies, his reactor must be dismantled, or he'll explode and kill you and every other living thing in a several mile radius. Your force field is initially impervious to his atomic blasters, but cannot withstand prolonged exposure. This is Firewolf himself, the alchemic sorcerer robot, in his early years. You know his impact on history. Due to their similar psyches, I suspect he's the reincarnation of Redwolf, creator of

the Red Shadow. I haven't yet prompted that contingency, but I must. We need the Red Shadow to exorcise these demons, which will initiate the Chaos Overlay that transforms our Nowhen into an Everywhen, facilitating the Gemini War. Firewolf meets a Skull Croat, soon after this. They were assigned to be allies, but they didn't get along. Something called the Galaxie Games, an event whose history didn't make it to our time, which explains why we never read about it as a child. Probably part of the history that was lost during the reign of the Skull Emperion. The games were hosted by Garjiel, the Titan who called himself Galaxie, when he threatened Terra in 1990. The vagina shaped fissure that appeared in the sky over Terra just before the Terra Versus Galaxie event in 1990 also appeared over Galaxie's Gameworld. The Titan watches through the fissure. He appeared personally near the end, and as it had been on Terra; heroes and villains fought together against him. Though the fact of the Galaxie Invasion itself was in our history lessons, something that didn't survive history to our time; from here I've seen the reason the Galaxie Games were held on one of Garjiel's own worlds, instead of Terra. It was a condition of a proxy fight he lost to his sibling Fallen Watcher Samael, that he would never attack or step foot on Terra again. So he simply abducted the gods and mangods he wished to entertain him. I've seen a lot of history from here that didn't survive to our era. I haven't witnessed the incident between Skull Croat and Firewolf, or any temporal records from the Galaxie Games, not for lack of trying. I can access history from other galaxies, but I can't find the galaxy in which the Galaxie Games were hosted. I would think it's in the hidden dimension he watches from, but the vagina shaped fissure in the sky which appears during events of interest to Garjiel also appeared in the Gameworld dimension. I could probably enter the fissure, but I'd be aging the entire time, and it's not important enough to me to sacrifice part of my limited chronological time, searching for a hidden galaxy, just to witness some events which were reported on, after the fact, in our galaxy, anyway. The only video from Galaxie's Gameworld is a few battle clips recorded from Captain Ballbuster's armor, which he brought back with him. Those videos unfortunately don't include Skull Croat's fate. But I have seen both the Skull Croat and this Protogonus in the clips, so I do know they were both there. Survivor reports say that the robot disintegrated your Other.

Croat: Good. One less.

They both make grimacing faces again.

Croat: Ooh, it came right off! How could he survive that? Did he survive that?

Epochalus: Barely. But his perfect life ended there. See, this is what saved his life.

Croat: Ah. ... He's fist beating someone trying to save his life. He's out of his mind.

Epochalus: A wound like that... having it burned closed by a searing hot jet flame, which also closes the door on any hopes of repairing it... What would you do?

Croat: I... would be out of my mind, and hopefully wouldn't remember it later.

Epochalus: He'll lose the other one at the hospital, and have nothing but pain and hardship, ever after. His struggle is in accepting it.

Croat: Fuck him. It'll do him some good to shave a few notches off his ego.

Epochalus and Croat both look over at the monitor of Casey's grave. Jhotica is standing next to the edge of the seacliff, inching slowly closer to her doom.

Croat: How does that turn out?

Epochalus (Smiling): How do you want it to turn out? It's our world, right?

Epochalus freezes the image, turns on the very monitor next to that one and we get a static image of an empty bed. Then, a black-haired woman's hair comes into view, with a massively developed blue arm wrapped around her back, as if he is kissing her to her bed. Epochalus freeze frames the image, before we see who it is.

Epochalus: Tune the static contingency into reality. This is the crossing point.

He points toward the first monitor.

Epochalus: Bridge the gap, between the two.

He points at both.

Croat: What if I deviate from the path?

Epochalus: You won't. If it served no greater purpose, the death of Jitara should serve as an example to you, that this is all on automatic pilot. I'm not really here to guide you, and certainly not to tell you how to be you. Don't be fooled by the impression... the illusion... that there are two of us in this room. There is only one of us here, talking to himself. Our co-existence on the same bead of our strand secures you to my path. As long as we are together, you can't diverge from my path if you tried. I couldn't derail you from my path if I tried. Moreover, we are each other's protection. Nothing can happen to either of us, that I haven't already seen, as you. You've seen a bit of that, already. You'll see much more of it, when the Gemini War begins, for you. It will be my second time. Everything that will happen, I've already seen happen, as you. By the end of the war, you will be me, and I will have transcended. As me, you will spend countless eternities, here, where time has no meaning, watching history unfold an infinite number of ways. The fifteen years difference between you and I is a physical difference, only. That is the accumulated time that I spent in the chronological timestream, observing and manipulating history, personally. But, counting my nonlinear experience, I am the oldest being in existence. I've even witnessed the birth of the gods, and seen them fade away to a memory, eventually to be forgotten. After you have spent infinity, literally in my shoes, it will be you who transcends. All of these bits of knowledge I've imparted unto you up to this point are things that were first told to me by my elder self, when I was you. Naturally. Some I gleaned through experience and perspicacity, between our times. However, much more of it had no other source, except for being passed from Epochalus to Croat, for infinite time. The original source for those revelations can only be the Timescape itself. The Timescape is guiding me ... to our Destiny.

Croat: Which is... to control time, or to be controlled by it, like everything else? I mean, if time is still steering its own course, and ours, what are we to it?

Epochalus smiles, twirls his two index fingers around each other in circles, then laces the fingers of both hands together.

Epochalus: The cogs in its machine. The machine itself. Perhaps we are the master, and it is the machine. Perhaps there's another of us in this room, talking to himself. The me I have yet to become. It speaks to me, to you, to Ramadūm. It has always spoken to us. Trust the Voice, Damon. It is the you that is God.

Croat narrows his eyes and gets a serious look of understanding on his face. No more prodding questions about his Destiny will be required. Epochalus walks over to a white metal bench, and sits in it, facing Croat and the monitors.

Epochalus: No help from me, on this. They are yours. Without you, they wouldn't exist. Let your will become their Destiny. Show me the Master's hand.

Croat smiles, smugly, confidently, and proceeds to work on the controls.



Vision 43: Mighty Man, The Ubertoso Nullo

Retaliators Mansion living room. The Retaliators appear. Tech War eases Captain Superhero onto the loveseat. His complexion is like an omelet. Flash

slumps over onto his side on the loveseat, but he's not unconscious, his eyes are open. Mars lays the body of Jitara down on one of the long couches, and Tigerlily kneels beside it and lays her head and arms over it, weeping. Mars steps toward Mighty Man.

Mars: I never intended to advocate the candidacy of a mansuetudo!

He punches Mighty Man in the face, several times. Mighty Man doesn't "fight or flight". He staggers back, and then falls to the floor. He takes his beating like a man, without a word or a whimper. Mighty Man is on his back, putting his forearms over his face, and Mars is punching around them. He grabs one of the shielding arms, pries it away, and gets in some pretty good blows to the side of Mighty Man's face. Mighty Man has curled up in a fetal position, and Mars pounds the living daylights out of him. Mars grabs him by the shirt, jerks him to his feet, then gives him a haymaker that sends him stumbling backward to land on his back in the center of the room. Mars stands over him, with one foot on each side of him, leans over, grabs some shirt with his left hand, and pummels Mighty Man over and over, with his right fist. The helmet becomes very badly dented and Mars slaps it off his head. Casey puts his hands on the goggles to keep them in place. Mars, even while punching the left side of Casey's head with his right fist, pulls on the goggles a bit with his left hand. But Casey's even more interested in holding the goggles in place than protecting his head from the punches. Mars pulling on the goggles with force and Mighty Man holding onto them with force lifts and scoots Mighty Man on and off the floor in ways that would be unnatural for normal people. Especially since Mighty Man is 5 inches taller and at least 70 pounds heavier than Mars, though Mars is no pee wee. Mars is 6'2", 230 buffed and Mighty Man is 6'7", 306 buffed. Mars appears about 40, though he's not, and Mighty Man is 25. No graceful fight sequence, here. This is a very sloppy pummeling. Mars gives up on the goggles and punches around them somewhat, but he hits them a few times. Mostly, he hits the backs of Casey's hands which are covering them up. These punches are making a sound like a high powered log splitter. With each punch, the portrait of Samuel Reddingfield bounces against the wall. Something glass or ceramic makes a crashing sound. Mighty Man still has his hands out, guarding his face. Mars is becoming frustrated by the fact that Mighty Man is not being

worn down.

Mars: Ubertosso Nullo!

Hotpoint: Jackson, do something!

Upsurge: I'll try!

Upsurge is 10 feet tall. He grabs Mars's arms, one in each hand, and Mars shrugs him off. Tech War steps in front of Mars, and uses both hands, and all his bravery, to push him backwards away from Mighty Man. It actually doesn't work, but he went through the motions. Upsurge grabs his arms again. Mars shrugs Upsurge off again, and pushes Tech War away from him. They both stand between Mars and Mighty Man, who is still laying on the floor, half sitting, still half guarding his face. Mars paces a couple times in front of the two reluctant defenders. He points accusatorily and has an angry face.

Mars: Mighty Man the Ubertosso Nullo!

Mars walks away to cool down. Upsurge and Tech War help Mighty Man to his feet.

Mighty Man: Mars hits like a truck.

Upsurge: No, Casey, Mars hits like a comet. And you don't seem to have a mark on you. But you'd better come down to the lab with me, to make sure. You could have some internal hemorrhaging. I'll feel better, after I've examined you thoroughly.

Captain Superhero rolls over to his back, across the loveseat, and thuds onto the floor behind it, sprawled out on his front.

Upsurge (To Tech War): Shit! Get him to the hospital, willya? Tell them he needs a hemopoietic glycoprotein transfusion. If Weston's off, call him in, but start without him. I'll examine Casey here, and if I find anything wrong, we'll bring him in, too.

Later, in the basement lab. Casey Martel is sitting on the edge of an

examination table, with his shirt, helmet and glasses off. He's holding his helmet in one hand and his goggles in the other. His head and eyes are lowered, as if he's consciously or unconsciously hiding his eyes. Upsurge is normal sized, has his mask off, and is wearing a lab coat over his costume. He has a small penlight in his hand.

Casey: He ruined my helmet. It's okay, I have extras. Good thing my glasses held up. I only have one pair, like these. Unbreakable, that is. Kind of expensive. I guess they kept their end of the deal.

Dr. Race: If he was after your glasses, they'd be broken, no matter how well made they are. Your glasses got lucky. Just hope you fared as well. O.k., tilt your head back, I want to examine your eyes.

Casey lays his gear on either side of himself on the table and reluctantly tilts his head back and opens his eyes, just as Dr. Race is in his face with the penlight. No need. Casey's eyes have their own light built right in.

Dr. Race: Jesus! Holy mackerel! What's wrong with your eyes? Were they always like that?

Casey: No. The aftereffects that came with my catalyst are apparently progressive.

Dr. Race: You put down as the source of your power something called SP-8+B. The standard strength and resiliency catalyst has been SP-5 for over 40 years. They found a formula that's not harmful, and stuck with it. There's no SP-6, much less an SP-8. What is SP-8 plus B?

Casey: It's like SP-5, but modified. It was supposed to make me stronger and more resilient than SP-5. And it did. Didn't it?

Dr. Race: Incredibly so. Rascher developed this SP-8?

Casey: A warlocky scientist who calls himself Alchemist. He works for Rascher.

Dr. Race: Johann Krieger, I know of him. It's hard for me to imagine Rascher would surpass SP-5 and stop there. Sigmund Rascher is a notorious eugenicist, as well as a black market power broker. He's human and he's been trying for years to find a way to power humans. He funds people like Eugene Shedowee. Have you heard of the horrors he inflicted on prisoners in the concentration camps?

Casey: I didn't know before, but I found out. It's one of the main reasons I quit. As well as the lawbreaking. And wanting to be a Retaliator.

Dr. Race: Uh huh... Casey, have you seen Rascher, since your arraignment?

Casey: No. I told you; that's behind me, now.

Dr. Race: It'd better be. I believe you and I'll stand by your contention that this is an aftereffect of the one and only procedure. But you'd better not be lying to me, you understand?

Casey nods.

Dr. Race: What's the B in SP-8+B?

Casey: It's kind of ridiculous. The power was meant to make me like Bellerophon. Big fan, since I was a kid. B is for Bellerophon. We just saw him, didn't we?

Dr. Race: That's what Mars said, and he would know.

Casey: I wish I could still be in when Bellerophon is a Retaliator. I doubt I will. Why settle for a wannabe, when they can have the real thing?

Dr. Race: I need to take a skin sample. This may sting a little.

Dr. Race takes a scraper, and runs it across a small patch of skin on Casey's forearm. No sample. He scrapes harder. Nothing. He bears down, and the scraper breaks.

Dr. Race: O.k., no skin sample. Lie back on the table. I want to do a magnified spectra analysis of your cell structure.

Casey lays back on the table, and Dr. Race pushes a button on his console. The spectra analyzer comes on, and the beam of light shines down on Casey. Dr. Race looks into the viewer and adjusts the image with some knobs.

Dr. Race: Holy Jesus!

Casey: What is it, Doc?

Dr. Race: You're not ... you're not ... you're not going to believe this! Whatever Rascher did to you, mutated your cells into... a higher density than heavy metal.

Dr. Race flips a switch, and a monitor near the exam table comes on. It displays cylindrical cells, that are each radiating red and yellow light.

Dr. Race: Casey, you're nuclear.

Casey: Nuclear? You gotta be kiddin' me.

Dr. Race: 'Fraid not. But my concern is if you're stable. Hold on a second. I think I see something happening.

One of the cells reaches critical mass, expends its load, then turns black.

Dr. Race: Oh, jees. Your cells are burning themselves out... imploding. And...

He repositions the view, and we see iridescent blood, flowing through his veins. He repositions the view again, and we see the same iridescent blood leaking into and out of his internal organs. The radiant fluids are being overtaken by dark fluids.

Dr. Race: I can see the source of your power. It's the power of a Neutron Star. Your Nazi benefactors mutated your cells into Strange Matter, which can be stable or unstable. But radiation poisoning is metastasizing it into Dark Matter. I discovered Dark Matter when I was working on how to tap the energy of baryons. It's devoid of baryons. It's inverse mass, and it's taking you over. Casey, you're dying.

Casey: From radiation poisoning?

Dr. Race: Your own body is becoming the poison, and killing itself from within. All your cells are radioactive, but when your nuclear cells burn out, they become Dark Matter. The Dark Matter emits more radiation, exponentiating the effect. If I can't find a way to stabilize you, soon, it will reach the point where I can't reverse it.

Casey (smiling): I'm dying from radiation poisoning?

Dr. Race: You find that amusing?

Casey: Very. I always thought I would die... differently. I always dream I'm killed with a ray gun. That's what was wrong with me back there. Epochalus said if I was the one who stopped Croat I wouldn't die. Anything he says is practically prophesy, right? Maybe I was supposed to get shot, and maybe

that would've killed this nuclear cancer or whatever it is. Maybe my dream was backwards and Epochalus had it straight! But I failed and now it's happening, just like Epochalus said. At least I know there's a split version of me who got it right. Good for him. Of course it wouldn't be me. Ha, ha. It's almost funny, if it wasn't so... tragically typical. Ha, ha, ha! Ooooooh! Somebody's up there PLAYING WITH ME ! Ha, ha, ha! Ooooooh, God!



Vision 44a: Inna Garden Of Ra-Eden

Temple Of The Monks Of Pius, Tibet. The selected excerpt from “Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida” by Iron Butterfly. The music-only part in the middle of the 17 minute version, that sounds a little like funeral music. (The reason is because the prophet Doug Ingle was originally trying to say “In The Garden Of Eden”, but was slurring his words. And, that's where we are. This song will someday be recognized by the people of the Catalyst Universe as a Jitara Prophecy. It's not currently recognized as that, but in the next few months,

when Jitara is made famous as the Savior Of The Universe and for sacrificing his life for the Goddess Of The Dawn, some prophecy interpreters will notice several correlations between this song and Jitara's legend. The prophecy will be confirmed, among believers, when audio analysis reveals that Mr. Ingle actually said Jitara's name at 02:03 into the first half of the song, even though the song predates Jitara's Retaliators fame by almost two decades. There'll be a bit of a debate about that, some skeptics not being entirely convinced Mr. Ingle wasn't saying "guitar-ah". The believers' counterpoint being that if In The Garden Of Eden can sound like In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, then Jitara can sound like guitar-ah. And that it would've been inconsistent for him to have said guitar-ah, since there are no other mentions of musical instruments in the song, because the song wasn't about musical instruments, it was about Jitara. The prophet himself couldn't clarify the mystery, because he had long ago been honored by the gods, by being given one of a very few physical ascensions in history, which are reserved for only the greatest of prophets, after fulfilling their destinies. The future will know it as Absolute Truth. When the true nature of Jitara's legend comes to fruition, just prior to and during Doom's Dawn, they'll have even more proof this song is about Jitara. Not that there'd be anything left to prove, there are no non-believers, after Doom's Dawn. Many weren't restored, and those who were found to be relevant to history had their answers. The prophecy isn't entirely fulfilled, yet, this is only the first part of it. Most great songs are prophecies, many of those are about Doom's Dawn and the Gemini War, and this is part of all that.) In the front row of seated mourners is an elderly Japanese couple, presumably Robert's parents. Their both being in their mid-80's indicates they had to have had Robert in their late 40's. Mêlée is standing with Hotpoint and Whitley. Pallbearers; Mars, Upsurge, Mighty Man, Captain Superhero, Tech War and Citizen Defender carry the casket at shoulder level, down the passage of the garden lined with 6 ft green crystals, toward the burial plot which is at the base of the largest crystal of all, about 15 ft high, at the end of the garden, between the two rows of crystals. The scratches and "deformities" in the gem create light refractions in the surface not-so-coincidentally in the configuration of a distorted face. Captain Superhero is the correct shade and texture again, but there's a grid of scabs where the cracked places were. It's a similar pattern to the grid of creases he's had all over his body since 1941, his injury from what he had until recently thought

was the Super Nazi. But the pattern is not an exact match. It's offset and deeper. When fully healed, it will be a noticeable disfigurement. His upper body "armor" is a plastic replica, from the rental place, but it looks decent. It's actually brighter and glossier than the real one, and especially on him, it looks almost real. R.I. is working on a new updated armor, but it's not finished, yet. The costume's wings are well formed and well painted, but they wobble on their rivets a little, revealing their fakeness. The pallbearers approach the pit. Once there, they gently place the casket next to the hole. End music. The pallbearers join up with the others, and they sit on a stone bench, a few feet away from the gravesite, facing it. It had appeared that Captain Superhero was fully recovered, while he was pall bearing, but apparently not completely, as Tech War gave him a bit of help walking and Upsurge gave him a bit of help sitting. Across from them, a group of Vorn monks, wearing dark red clay-colored hooded robes, are huddled around Tigerlily. They walk her over to the gravesite, and she sits cross-legged, in front of it, facing out, between the grave and the crystal. Wanagi Akicita appears, astride his gray ghost-horse, Cloud Dancer. He dismounts, leaving the horse un-hitched where he is, and walks over to The Retaliators. As he passes by Tigerlily, he stoops down to whisper to her:

Wanagi Akicita: I'm sorry.

Tigerlily: You have nothing to be sorry for. You helped Robert. You were a friend and I admonished you for it. I'm the one who's sorry. I hurt Robert by withholding my love, then I killed him, by giving it to him. The Divine Arbiters did this, for my daring to love a man who is not a part of my "Grand Destiny". It matters not to them that it's a destiny I never asked for.

Wanagi Akicita joins The Retaliators and stands beside the sitting ones. Two of the monks step forth, one leading the other as one would lead a blind man, and the one who was led takes his place behind a podium, which has an open book laying on it. (The grave pit is parallel to the face of the crystal. Tigerlily is kneeling between the pit and the crystal, facing toward the grave and away from the crystal. The podium is situated where the headstone will be, facing the pit and The Retaliators aligned on the other side. Tigerlily is to the monk's left.) Inside the shadow of his hood, the monk is blindfolded.

Monk: I shall read some relevant passages, from the Deus Ex Machina
Prophesies:

The monk, without actually looking at the book, places the palm of his right hand over the book, and moves it along, as if he is reading by extra-sensory perception.

Monk: From the first book of Sagittarius; “The Seven Seeing Pools Of Spirit One”, Chapter 6:

“And, I saw the Great Being come down from Heaven, clothed in stars, and crowned with galaxies. He stood upon invisible feet and the lines of his form were made of sunfire. He called his name Spirit One, and out from his mouth came a little book, and out of the book came seven seeing pools. The first seeing pool turned, and I saw Four Horsemen from the west, with the Western Furies, and these Left Hands of the Retaliators did ride with the Horsemen to the palace of the Dark Prince. The Dark Prince let loose his bow, and his flaming arrow maketh the noise of thunder, as it did destroy the third and fourth part of the Horsemen, and the beasts which they sat upon. The Pale Blue Horseman, whose heart was already pierced by an arrow, was first to breach the impenetrable wall, and to reach the palace, as the Dark Prince did intend the Pale Blue Horseman to be the first to be betrayed. When the Red Horseman didst reach the palace, his eyes would deceive him, for he saw what the Deceiver intended him to see, and he did cause his master to destroy himself, and was ever after believing he did cause the destruction of the Dark Prince, as a vengeance of his master. Then, rising forth from the dust of the desert, I beheld a pale gray horse riding as unto battle. And, he that sat upon the horse was the Pale Rider; Harbinger Of Death; Demon Of The Apocalypse, and Hell followed with him. He had a lightning bow, and three crowns upon his head, and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

“The second seeing pool turned, and I saw an Indestructible Hero, born of both Heaven and Terra, on a winged brown horse, and unto him was given the Great Sword of the Sky Father. But, the Red King, who rideth a winged red demon-beast, struck the Great Hero down, with his arrow of lightning, at the place where all Heavens and Hells mingle at the center of the Abyss. The Great Hero’s flesh boiled from his bones, and he cried out to his gods ‘When can I live again?’ And the gods showed to the Hero a man on a black horse,

who held in his hand a set of balancing scales, and the man's eyes were wrapped with a strip of cloth. The man on the black horse told the Indestructible Hero that he would live again when the sun has returned to the sky, and the stars have filled the heavens, and the Righteous Prince has made all his enemies to be as dust in the wind, and the universe is born anew.

“The third seeing pool turned, and I saw a woman clothed in Terra's sun, with her feet on Terra's moon, wearing a crown of stars. Across from her was another woman clothed in Terra's sun, with her feet on Terra, wearing a crown of stars. The four Seraphim of the Celestial Order appeared and spoke as four thousand asynchronous voices, saying: ‘Here is the Goddess Of Destruction and there is the Goddess Of The Dawn.’

“The fourth seeing pool turned, and I saw a Knight of Crimson, who had been all the gods and men who had ever been and ever shall be, at once and always, but was born to the world a mortal man. Though his Divinity was not apparent, he knew in his heart that his natural place was with the Divine. So he would gather all the living weapons that the gods had given to men long dead, so by their magic he might be as a god, to walk amongst the gods and the sons of gods. The Crimson Knight dwelled in the New Land, and would travel to the Old Land, to find the Holy Mother Of Man, who is the Goddess Of The Dawn. I saw myself writing in these Prophecies that the Crimson Knight shall take with him the Holy Mother to the New City Retaliators, so she might be in the presence of the Star Twins and be marked as Ordained against the Apocalypse. But, through the seeing pool I saw the Crimson Knight as he would tempt the Holy Mother with a destiny other than her own. He was given to know, but was unknowing, that there could be no greater Destiny than his; to return the Holy Mother to the Temple of Pius and the Tree Of Life in the Garden of Ra-Eden, after the time of her Ordaining. This Destiny was not decreed by the Fates, it is the Destiny elected for him by his own Soul, before he was born. For the Soul Collective had so loved the Mother Of Man that he dispensed his Collective Soul into the world of flesh, to give a child to barren parents and to grow that child into the man that would guide the Goddess to her Destiny. But the Crimson Knight knew not of this Divine Purpose and did all his works with selfish thought. And though his flesh was unknowing, his course was charted by Destiny, so he would never have thoughts that leadeth him anywhere but his chosen path. But his life as a mortal man would become so bitter as to make him cry ‘When can I

die?’ So the gods showed to the Crimson Knight the man on a black horse, who held in his hand a set of balancing scales, and whose eyes were wrapped with a strip of cloth. The man on the black horse told the Crimson Knight that he can not die, until the Holy Mother is Ordained. And even Shemari and all the Creator Elohim and all the gods of all the stars in the heavens were in accordance with it that the Crimson Knight, after the End Of Time, shall be given his godly body and conscious dominion over the All-Soul, in the Garden of Ra-Eden, for in fulfilling his destiny, he didst save all creation. So therefore it is given unto him to rule in the Kingdom Of Souls, when time shall be no more. When the Soul is in body and the body is of the Soul, he shall know contentment, at last. His eternal comfort being in the knowledge that every man is a god and every god could enrich his soul, to be a man, but once.

“The fifth seeing pool turned, and I saw the Dark Prince cast his Twin down into the Abyss, and the moon, the sun, and the stars and heavens followed after him. And there came from out of the smoke of the Pit the Devourers, who devoureth away all that hath not the mark of the Ordained, even the greater part of man.

“The sixth seeing pool turned, and I saw Raltes The Surveyor appear beneath the Living Terra, and he outstretched his hand, as if weighing the Terra against another. In the hand of Raltes, the Living Terra did turn, showing its one side, then showing its other side. Then I saw the Living Terra stop turning, and all the light of the sun went away from it, for the sun had put out its light, and the brother worlds and the sister moons put themselves away and all the stars had put out their lights. And the Terra sat in the hand of Raltes The Surveyor, like a dark unmoving rock, which hath no life. Raltes spoke with a thousand asynchronous voices, saying: ‘This is Doom’s Dawn; the End Of The Beginning.’ He held it close to his chest, the Dark Terra. With the terrible sound of a thousand unsynchronized voices he did say; ‘This Terra shall be cloaked in the veil of darkness and nothingness, and the Star Twins shall take dominion over it, and there shall it be fought the Gemini War, for all time and times, till the blood of the armies of the two kings shall flow liken to a great river, which is too deep and wide for the gryphon to cross.’ Raltes set the Dark Terra in the sky, and turned his back on it, and I saw that the Dark Terra turneth not, though the Living Terra it had been did turn, and was lit by the sun. Through Spirit One’s seeing pool, I saw

Spirit One appear over the Dark Terra and say: ‘This is meant to be. This is the eye of the vortex through which all existence enters and comes out; The heart of the loom where exist all the places on the tapestry, where the eye saw but seeth no more, and will see but seeth not yet.’ The Dark Terra in the void faded away, and I saw a new Heaven and a new Terra; for the former Heaven and former Terra had passed away.

“The seventh seeing pool turned, and all that I saw in it, Spirit One said I should not write nor speak thereof, but that I should write them down in his little book. I wrote down in Spirit One’s little book all the things I saw in the seeing pool, then Spirit One took the book and ate it up, saying that those visions are meant for other prophets, on other worlds.”

The monk takes his hand away from the book and closes it. He takes the first two fingers of his right hand, held together to represent the 2-in-1, and points them up to the sky. He spins the hand gesture around in ever widening counterclockwise circles, till he’s making circles over his own head, then he reverses the expansion and direction, and returns his hand to rest on the book on the podium.

Monk: It is a Piuian custom at the end of all prayers or after reading from the Prophecies to say: “All Fate is Preordained.”

Tigerlily looks up at the sky, crying “why me?” tears. Behind her back, she’s pulling a small dagger out from the folds of her dress. The monk takes the book in his hand. He pauses near Tigerlily, without actually looking down at her. She pulls from behind her back a long stemmed rose, and tries to stab herself with it. She looks down at the rose, and cries helpless tears. The other monk leads the blind monk away from the podium, back to the other monks. Mêlée steps up to the podium.

Mêlée: I don’t have any prophecies to recite, or anything so eloquent as that. I just wanna pay my respects to my mentor, and maybe give some insights into what kinda man ’e was. I was the son of Father Christmas and a malle root from the Northern Territ’ry. I set out to Queensland, looking for a better loife. The only better thing about it was I was destitute in a livelier place. But it was there in Brisbane that I snuck into the Martial Arts show, and I saw

Robert doing all these ripper flying jumping sword tricks, just like the sword was a living thing and was working with him. No, it was working for him. The roightest thing I ever saw. “Mastery”, he called it. I begged him to teach me the secret of his “mastery”. Well, I couldn’t ’ave a sword, because I was a clumsy kid, and I might ’urt muyself or somebody. Luckily, Robert’s skill carried over to just about anything of that sort, so ’e was able to teach me some of ’is Martial Arts and some other ace stuff, and soon I was going with ’im on real loife adventures! It was awesome! Then, Robert started doing dangerous jobs that ’e wouldn’t take me on. I don’t wanna go into details, because it’s irrelevant, now. But, suffoice it to say, I ended up going muy own way. And thanks to him, I was now able to make muy own way, much better than I did before. But, I wasn’t so noble, muyself. I wasn’t in the same league as Robert, but what we always had in common is that survoival overoides scruples. After being busted by Tech War, two or three toimes, and each toime, instead of taking me to jail where I belonged, Tech War kept letting me go, I kinda took a look at muyself, and saw that I was heading in the same direction Robert had gone, which is exactly what Robert didn’t want, or he’d’ve took me with ’im down that wrong road. I saw the same thing in Tech War, he just wanted me to do right. Then, I picked up a newspaper, and found out Robert was a Retaliator. Same as Tech War, the gouy who kept giving me second and third chances. Did you gouys know about ’is checkered past?

Mars looks like he knew. Tech War, Upsurge and Hotpoint shake their heads “no”.

Mêlée: >Gulp!< Okay, be that as it may... what a redemption, eh? Dying for, what was it, nothing less than the future of the world?

All The Retaliators nod “yes”.

Mêlée: I have to say, I’m proud of ’im. Whoile ’e’s spirit’s ’ere, I’d loike to tell ’im. Robert, you’re always muy inspiration. I’m more in awe now than that boiter at the Ekka. The world will know that you’re legendary. I’ll make sure. Journey on, Sensei.

At that, Tigerlily starts silently sobbing and streaming tears. Mêlée makes his way over to The Retaliators. Tech War steps up and holds out his left hand over the casket. His emitter is emanating a localized magnetic field.

Tech War: Anyone else have anything to say?

Everyone shakes their head “no”. Tech War activates his magnetic projectors, and the emanating field surrounds the casket, lifts it, and lowers it into the hole. The Retaliators plus Mêlée minus Tigerlily line up, each taking a handful of dirt, and in a row, they each drop their dirt into the hole. When it’s Wanagi Akicita’s turn, he drops the dirt into the pit, then he slap-brushes his gloved hands together to brush the dirt off, similarly to that gesture which denotes that you’re done with something or someone. No double meaning is perceived by any of the characters present. The Vorn Monks take over the duty of shoveling the dirt in, as The Retaliators make their way to the Hyperjet. Wanagi Akicita looks up in the sky and notices the giant eyes of Venus in the clouds, watching. No one else notices. Close-up of the eyes without a face show that they are moist with tears. She’s not as heartless as people think. She only seems cruel, to those who don’t understand her. She notices Wanagi Akicita, looking directly at her, as if he not only sees the eyes, he sees her. The eyes vanish and Venus materializes in her Lunar hideout. She conjures a viewing portal, through which to continue watching the funeral. Wanagi Akicita is still there, still looking up, directly at her. As much as it unnerves her, it also makes her very curious about him. She hasn’t met him yet, but he spent almost a year with her on Galaxie’s Gameworld. She used him, he used her and neither one cared. When she does meet him in 1991, he won’t look anything like the ghost she now sees looking at her through her own portal. Superficially, he won’t, anyway. If the masks were off, there would be a resemblance. Venus is superficial, she doesn’t like scars at all. It’s why she made Mars grow a beard, to hide the scar Vulcan’s battle axe left on his jaw. This man has and had a beard, but it could never hope to cover that scar. She didn’t know how long she’d be stuck on the Gameworld and she cannot be alone. The mindless Brawlers were unworthy of her. Prestolicious Pie Guy was more interested in them. Apollyon’s scarred face is more scar than face and he didn’t have the right equipment, but his Executive Officer did, though scarred, but not as bad as Apollyon. She thought she’d

met him before, without the scar, in 1988, in this very garden, but that wasn't really him she met. He explained the difference. She could create a glamour illusion for him, but based on Vulcan's reaction to that, she only did it when they were alone, and he was unaware. His face was usually covered in public. She came to mind it less. Marred perfection, beastly grandeur, haughty and morose. His attitude that the privilege was hers conquered her. He protected her from Vulcan's minion. He defended Apollyon less successfully, and she cried over his ashes. In the viewing portal, Wanagi Akicita vanishes with his horse, even while still looking at her. Back at the garden, getting the elderly couple into the jet won't be quick work, so Mighty Man lags behind, and works up the courage to speak to Tigerlily, who's still sitting where she's sat since she sat there.

Mighty Man: Prophecies and destinies aside, my ineptitude played a part in this. If it's any consolation, I will carry that guilt around with me, for the rest of my life.

Tigerlily: Poor Casey. I will give to you your penance: The only way you will ever know peace, is to become the hero he was. Even if it costs you what it cost him.

Mighty Man nods affirmation of her insight.

Mighty Man: Right. You're right. Not like I have anything to lose, anyway.

Tigerlily: Wha... ?

Flashing images from Tigerlily's head, of Mighty Man getting the bad news.

Echoey Hollow Voice Of Jackson Race In Tigerlily's Head: ...you're dying...

Flashing images of the cells in Mighty Man's body metastasizing into Dark Matter.

Echoey Hollow Voice Of Casey Martel In Tigerlily's Head: ...dying...

Back to reality.

Tigerlily: Ha, ha! You think you're...

Mighty Man: I think I'm what?

Tigerlily: You think you're ... up to it?

Mighty Man: I guess I'll have to be.

Tigerlily: Um, hm. You'll do good. I have faith.

Mighty Man: You stay in touch, okay?

Tigerlily: Why?

Mighty Man: *Okay* ... ? Uh, good luck with your future or your destiny, or whatever it is you're looking to find, here.

Tigerlily: You too. Good luck with your Divine Penance, I mean.

Mighty Man nods and makes his way to the Hyperjet and it takes off, leaving Tigerlily behind.

Tigerlily: I don't understand. Something changed. The prophecies the brother read... I read the same passage a month ago, and it was different. The gist of it was that Robert would become a Lightworker against the Dark Force, and that would ascend him to my level. I saw it as a way for us to be together. How did it change?

The crystal embraces Tigerlily, with arms projected of green light. But the light is not solid at all. She can see the hands that resemble human hands, but she can feel nothing. The face in its base is really a face, after all, and it speaks to her, as it embraces her, without disturbing her as she sits there. If she didn't have her back turned, she might see that behind the etched face, there's a very faint image of Robert's face, no mask, it's his face, and it mouths the words spoken by the crystal, which are also mouthed by the etched face.

Shén Chéng: The threads of time are interwoven. The Timescape doesn't need every Aaliyah to be the Goddess. Only one. In a neighboring thread, Robert has the destiny you read about. Here, he is inside me. His love for you is added to my own.

Tigerlily: More love, from an inanimate object... It doesn't change what you are, what I am. I do love you, Shén Chéng, in a spiritual sense. And in a

religious sense, I worship you. But I'm jealous of the Aaliyah who now occupies the thread you took me from. You should be destined for another of your kind, and likewise with me.

Shén Chéng: You are fortunate to be on this path of your greatest Destiny. You are the Goddess. It was written in the stars, long before you or Robert were ever born.

A couple of the dirt shoveling monks glance, but don't intrude on Tigerlily and the Soul Emerald's privacy. She goes through the motion of caressing the projected arms that are going through the motions of caressing her, but it's futile, her hand passes right through it, like it's made of smoke.

Tigerlily: I know, Shén Chéng. I know.

BY ORDER OF FEDERAL MAGISTRATE, ARIZONA CITY, AZ

WANTED

DEAD or ALIVE



\$5000 REWARD

FOR THE CAPTURE OR KILLING OF

FATHER MAYHEM

True identity unknown. Father Mayhem disguises himself as a religious minister, but he is actually a crime boss who leads a 'congregation' of blood-thirsty bandits. Some of his followers are human outlaws, some are clockwork men, which are indistinguishable from humans until injured. He is an often-complexioned man in his late 50's to early 60's, with shoulder-length fezzey white hair, a full white beard and a very distinguishing disfigurement of a slash mark scar running diagonally across his face. Has three purple gemstone dental implants in his left upper pallet. Reports say they gleam even in the dark, so it appears as if there are three small stars in his mouth. Does magic tricks or possibly super powers to make it appear that he can't be killed. Possible background in circus, carnival or stage magic. Uses a modified Solstice Lightning-Gun uniquely calibrated to light its victims on fire. Wanted for five known murders, including that of U.S. Marshall Geronimo. Also wanted for multiple counts of grand larceny and child molesting.

Vision 44b: The Legend Of Wanagi Akicita

Inside the Hyperjet. The elderly couple are in the furthest back seats in the left aisle, not really interacting with anybody. Hotpoint is sitting next to Upsurge, the seat behind them is unoccupied. Tech War is piloting, showing Mêleé how.

Tech War: If we let you in, are you gonna disappoint me?

Mêleé: I'm not gonna take off with the silverware, if that's what you mean. I only ever stole for a roof and a hot meal, and only from people like Reddingfield, and now 'e'll gimme it legit.

Tech War: Reddingfield's got enough clout to've blocked your nomination, if he'd insisted. So you'd better not steal from us, or I'll go medieval on your face with a titanium fist. I meant you'd be able to stand up to our enemies under pressure.

Mighty Man fidgets from the sting, fully aware that he's the kind of disappointment Tech War's hoping Mêleé won't be.

Mêleé: No worries, mate. I named muyself Mêleé cuz I like ta brawl.

Upsurge: So do the Brawlers. A sub-team of former members who betrayed us. Each has the strength and resilience of a god, but no magic. Could you handle that?

Mêleé: I can play it out and see how it goes. I'm not on the super-steroids, but I can kill a normal man with one punch. I don't go around doing that for thrills, mind you.

Upsurge: Good. We're all capable of ultimate damage, it's a requirement. But only as a last resort. But when that last resort comes, you do it. So, you're not enhanced?

Mêleé: Nope. Completely self-made badass.

Upsurge: Not that it matters, but are you human or Latent S.P.I.? This is supposed to be a coalition of S.P.I.'s and humans, and we've always been low on humans. ...And now, well, you know, we're back down to one, again.

Mêleé: I dunno. Never been tested.

Tech War: How'n the hell'd you manage that?

Mêleé: It's not that big a deal in Australia. And I never went to school much.

Tech War: *Great* .

Mêlée: How much Algebra does it take to knock a gouy out? (Smiling) You wanna both of us take off the gear and have a go?

Mêlée fakes a right jab and Tech War's ready to block it. Mêlée's almost as tall as Captain Superhero and slightly taller than Upsurge. Almost as much muscle mass as Mighty Man, but more definition. In full armor, Tech War could be fully hidden behind Mêlée. Mêlée's grapnel rig was originally designed for Citizen Defender, but it was too bulky, so they designed a compact version. Mêlée used lassos, before he found a baryon powered duel cable launcher, just going to waste in an R.I. warehouse. The three Tech Wars are of average height, but in a group like this, you'd mostly have big and average, so average is the small. Citizen Defender, Psion-Man and Jitara are, were, average height, but unlike them, Arthur's extremely skinny, Wally's almost as skinny and Wendy's a chick. Arthur; 5'10", 129 lbs. Wally; 5'9½", 140 lbs, Wendy: 5'9", 125 lbs. However, Wally and Arthur, especially Arthur, are those kind of skinny guys who are extremely strong for their size. Even without the armor, in a fight with a bigger guy, they might surprise you. Not against a skilled fighter, though. Robert would've mopped the floor with Arthur, and Billy would've bounced Wally off the cabinets, instead of the other way around. Arthur and Wally have scuffled, as most good friends do, but in a serious fight, they'd kick each other's asses. Not like a draw, there'd be two battered bloody guys on the floor, unable to continue or even stand up on their own. Actually, Arthur's meaner than Wally, but if Wally were in the right and Arthur were in the wrong, it would even out. Wally never had the conversation he's about to refer to, Arthur did, but as Tech War, and there's a camera in the eagle's eye, so all three share Tech War's experiences. Mêlée's not that much younger than Arthur, Wally and Wendy, all of which are 29, since they were classmates in school. They grew up together, so Wally and Wendy are the only ones Arthur trusts with his armor, since he's trying to wean himself off of it. Billy's 25, approximately Casey's age. He was last Jitara's sidekick over ten years ago.

Tech War: I've already had that conversation with Jitara. If it's okay, I'll just leave my gear on and continue beating your ass whenever I feel like it.

Mêlée fakes a scuffle, but Tech War's not wanting to play.

Tech War: Hey, I'm flying, here! Pay attention, if you wanna learn.

Mêlée: Okay, okay. It looks pretty simple. That steering wheel moves around like one I played with in an arcade.

Tech War: Well, that's a good start, but the response is more realistic, and if you wipe out you don't get a "do-over".

Mêlée: So, how long I gotta be in, till you tell me who ya are?

Tech War: My identity's secret. No one knows it, except a couple people at R.I. Including Arthur, of course. I'm obviously employed by the Hoboken branch, as are Jackson and thousands of others. Am I one of his coworkers, a nameless face in the crowd, or a dark operative he's never seen or heard of? He doesn't know and he's not trying to know. With any more info, the complete picture would just form in his brilliant head. Jackson designed the cyber relays and strength harness. There's as much of his design in it as anyone's. If he doesn't know who I am, why should you?

Mêlée: I bet I could find out.

Hotpoint: Uh-oh

Citizen Defender: Ah, zhit.

Upsurge: You blew it now, buddy.

Mêlée: What?

Tech War: I'm XO of the Retaliators. Since you didn't go to school, that means I'm second in command. And my first commandment is don't be snooping around trying to find out who I am.

Mêlée: Noice. Just for that, I'm not gonna tell ya who I am.

Tech War: I always knew who you were, since after the first time. I checked around in the system for your alias and found out. The juvenile stuff was sealed, but you didn't exactly go straight when you turned adult, did you? I didn't need your kid records to find out the circumstance that pointed you in that direction. It's why I cut you so much slack, because I knew you never had a chance. It's not a double-edged sword, though. You still don't get to know who I am, if you wanna stay off my shitlist. My other job is usually more dangerous than this one, because we're not going after bad guys, the bad guys are coming for us. Tech War's got a bullseye on his back, but he can handle it. The guy inside prefers not to have mercs in his house at three a.m., or stalking him in the light of day, for that matter. Ya dig?

Mêlée nods, his serious respect for Tech War overriding his frivolous desire to continue fucking with him.

Hotpoint: That Wanagi Akicita really creeps me out. That monk kept talking about a “Gray Horseman”, and a “Pale Blue Rider”, and I swear, he was describing our guy to the tee. I mean, what if he is some kind of Demon Of The Apocalypse? Some kind of Harbinger Of Death? I mean, do we know he’s not?

Upsurge: Ha, ha! I admit, he is a bit creepy, but a “Harbinger Of Death”? Those Prophecies are elaborately way out there, in my opinion. And, typically vague. I mean, there’re lots of gray horses. And, lots of pale people riding them, I’m sure. And, those prophecies are ancient. How many pale people have ridden gray horses, since they were written? Are they all “Demons Of The Apocalypse”?

Citizen Defender: Perhaps, I am te “Dark Prince”, hey, Cyahn-diss?

All the Retaliators smile, some chuckle, in spite of themselves not wanting to embarrass her.

Mêlée: Naw, man, everybody knows the Dark Prince is Satan. I happen to know Satan was an Aussie named Bon Scott. He died and was resurrected as a dark haired Brit named Brian Johnson.

Tech War is the only one who gets the joke, and is having some difficulty restraining his chuckles. The modulator’s interpretation of Wally’s chuckles are a bit like the bleeps and whines of a malfunctioning robot, but with the distinctive rhythm of it, it’s obvious he’s cracking up in there. Some of the ones who didn’t get the joke are cracking up at the funny sounds Tech War’s making. Hotpoint doesn’t know the meaning of Mêlée’s statement, for all she knows, Mêlée is ridiculing her by talking nonsense, but the effect is the same.

Hotpoint: Oooooooh . I’m so glad he didn’t come with us, so I wouldn’t ask him, and expose my foolishness.

Wanagi Akicita (From The Seat Behind): You are not the only one who is

guilty of such thoughts.

Hotpoint: Aaaahh!

Upsurge: Whoa, Jesus! Don't do that!

Wanagi Akicita: I am not the first one to wear this guise. I was born Tatanka Iyotaka, in 1831. White men knew me as Sitting Bull, Medicine Man, and Chief of the Sioux.

By now, the non-pilots are gathering around to hear, and the co-pilot, Mêleé, is swiveled around in that direction. Tech War pushes a button on the console, which drops a camera down from Hotpoint and Upsurge's overhead, which swivels and positions itself to film Wanagi Akicita.

Wanagi Akicita: Wanagi Akicita is Lakota for "Spirit Warrior". The original Wanagi Akicita was an Apache named Kojaaté, dubbed Geronimo by those against whom he avenged the massacre of his family. Kojaaté knew not; they were crying out to their Saint Gerome. Geronimo's dead body was brought to me by his men, after a fierce battle with the White Army. They begged me to heal him, said they could not continue their resistance against the White man, without Geronimo leading them. I knew of a ritual that was forbidden to be used, but it was taught to me by my predecessor, who told me that I would be the one to use it, and that I would know when the time would be. I knew that this was the time for the ritual, for Geronimo must live, or all our people would be lost. I won't tell of the ritual itself, I will only say that Geronimo was restored to life, better than he was before. The ritual had given him powers, which were still uncommon in that era. As Wanagi Akicita, Geronimo was able to lead his people to victory after victory, over the White Army. He managed to instill fear in the White men, because their own Bible had spoken of a "Pale Rider" who was scribed to be a Demon Of The Apocalypse, Harbinger Of Death. Others of our people were discovering that they had the ability to be enhanced. These things are what prevented the Native people of our country from what I'm sure would've been complete, or at least near complete, genocide.

Upsurge: That's harsh! I mean the Army of that time was barbaric by our standards, but I don't think they would've taken the war as far as genocide!

Wanagi Akicita: Let's just say I saw it in a vision that they most certainly would've.

Upsurge: If you say so.

Wanagi Akicita: I just did. Everyone has heard the old motto “The only good Indian is a dead Indian”. No other intent is implied in it, apart from genocide. If they could, they would. I would know. Anyway, after we won the war, as part of the Appeasement Treaty, Geronimo was made Sheriff of Santa Fe, the capitol city of his home state. In less than a year on that job, Geronimo had found Santa Fe to be too populous of a town, so he moved north, and became the Marshal of Arizona City Arizona, now known as Yuma. As Geronimo, he was Marshal, but as Wanagi Akicita, he was still fighting injustices in ways that the law could not. A few Natives knew the secret, that Geronimo and Wanagi Akicita were one and the same. Most didn’t. Especially the White people, though there may have been some he trusted with his secret, I wouldn’t know. I only know that it never was made public knowledge. I went to visit my old friend there, and found that his quiet little town was being plagued by a band of outlaws which had set up camp on the outskirts of town, under the pretence of being a religious commune, the leader ran it like a cult of zealot pirates. The cult leader called himself Father Mayhem, and his followers would commit crimes in his name, and by using the advantage of their numbers, they had the upper hand. Even a superman could only capture a few at a time, and the others would return en mass to break their compatriots out of jail. Geronimo decided the only way to stop the crime cult was to remove its head. In his Wanagi Akicita persona, he took three of his deputies, Apaches who knew his secret, and they rode out to the compound, to arrest Father Mayhem. None returned alive.

Mêlée: Aw, no. I wish I could’ve been there, to help them out.

Wanagi Akicita: That’s... that’s... Hello, Me. I’ve amused me again. a touching sentiment, Mêlée, but I don’t see you changing the outcome, by being there. Volley. Perhaps you could have. Who’s to say what you could’ve done that might’ve made a difference? I hope that amused Me, as I amused me. But what’s done is done and cannot be undone, in spite of our noblest wishes. A couple of Father Mayhem’s henchmen delivered to me the corpse of Geronimo. Shot in the head, nothing left to save. Even I would never attempt to revive a corpse with a scrambled brain. After the henchmen rode off, leaving me alone with the corpse, he began to glow. I’d seen that glow dozens of times, but the difference this time was that the glow left him ... and entered me. It was the Morning Star power, which was given to him, by me.

Now it was mine. As was the calling that came with it. I knew what I had to do. I couldn't bring back Geronimo, but I could bring back the Wanagi Akicita. I took up his persona, and his righteous cause. Like a man possessed, I busted up that damned settlement, with a vengeance. I was shot five times. But, I kept going. I had to. Some of the bandits scattered, the most of them holed up in an abandoned mineshaft. Including Father Mayhem. In attempting to seal off the entrance, the panic-stricken bandits accidentally brought the whole mountain down upon their own heads. Geronimo was buried with honors, in the cemetery of the little town he gave his life for. But Wanagi Akicita lived on. In me.

Hotpoint is crying. She gets up, goes around, and hugs Wanagi Akicita.

Hotpoint: That's the saddest and most inspiring thing I've ever heard. I'm sorry for having those thoughts.

The hug breaks.

Hotpoint: And, I'm sorry about your friend.

Wanagi Akicita: It's okay. I am creepy. And, it's been 110 years, since Geronimo died. Had he never died, he'd be 157 years old, by now.

Hotpoint: Which makes you... ?

Wanagi Akicita: A phantom. I know not at what point the spirit shed the body. At some point, though, I began to notice that it'd been awhile since I'd removed the costume, or eaten, or anything else humanly, for that matter. I went searching for my body. I found the tattered remnants of a Wanagi Akicita costume, half buried in the desert sands. Inside, the sun-bleached bones of Tatanka. I buried my body next to Geronimo, in that cemetery. How long my bones lay in the Arizona sun, attended only by the coyotes, flies and snakes, I have no clue. Though I still have the memories and form of Tatanka, Tatanka is dead. I suppose I am the living manifestation of the Morning Star power that was first given to Geronimo.

Wanagi Akicita disappears.

Hotpoint: Jesus! But, at least we know now that he was a real person, once.

Everyone resumes. Tech War pushes a button, and the camera retracts.

Tech War: I'm going to check every detail of that.

Mêlée: Aw, man, that's cold.

Vision 45: The Warrior Within

Retaliators Mansion basement lab. Mêlée is sitting on the same table Casey sat on in an earlier vision, and Dr. Race just gave him the results of his blood test.

Doctor Race: So... what kind of power do you think you might want? I can hook you up with just about anything available, or I could cook you up something unique. Unique is better, but it's riskier, since there aren't any precedents. Quentin Pythias can enhance physiology on a quantum level. I'm sorry, "quantum" means "the most intrinsic value of a property". In my opinion it's less like having a power and more like the power has you. For instance, Quantum Clank transforms from flesh and blood to living metal, which is physically impossible, but not metaphysically so. Quentin himself, as the Quantum Python, can transform either into one giant snake or a hundred small ones. Either joined together like a huge clump of Medusa hair, or separate, all slithering in different directions. A hundred bodies with one mind, it's incredible. Additionally, he has an energy power similar to Candy's power, but it's not metabolically derived, it dimensional, like Tigerlily's power. He can make force waves with it. Plus, since the serpent he becomes has several times more mass than he does in his normal state, I

suppose he has some degree of growth power. It's not really multiple powers so much as he was able to unlock a deeper level of the god power we all have. Quantum particles don't obey the laws of physics, they follow metaphysical laws. So, essentially, the Quantum Quartet are beyond science, they are magical beings. If you'd be interested in something like that, I can arrange it with Quentin. You're lucky to be in the Retaliators before your enhancement. We have access to anything that's available. Budget's no object, sky's the limit, within reason. I personally would never mutate myself that intrinsically. I grow, but at least I still look like me. Through my experiments, I discovered that if I'd taken a strength and resilience enhancement before my growth enhancement, I could've had both. But since I'm already growth enhanced, the strength and resilience catalyst doesn't work on me. The god gene is funny like that. It's okay, when I grow, I'm strong enough to do what I need to do. I take steroids. They aren't harmful to us S.P.I.'s, like they are to humans. They don't alter your DNA, they just rev up what you've got. I think Casey probably took them before his enhancement, to bulk up like that. You can take them before and after your enhancement, and they won't affect your enhancement, except for the better. The boost makes all the difference, in the big scraps we get into sometimes. Back in ancient Egypt, there were a harrowing few seconds that seemed like an eternity, in which I was the focal target. Steroids saved my life. Now that we know you're not human, I recommend you eat them like candy. The maids will bring you more everyday. For us, every need is met. There's more to our pay than we advertise. Bonuses can range from a pittance to a million each for the Faulk invasion, 350k for Giza. Would you retire if you got rich? Mêleé: Absolutely not. What you're looking at is what I am. Vagrant nomads aren't required by law to be Mêleé. I chose it. And Mêleé got me this far without leveling up. Listen, Doc, if I ever ain't cuttin' it, you have my full permission to inject me with squid juice and grow me some bloomin' tentacles, if that's what'll make the difference. Till then, I'd prefer to not have tentacles, if I can get by without them.

Doctor Race: None of us have tentacles except Esron, and he was born with them.

Mêleé: I was thinking about that squid-man I saw in the Daily Sun a few months ago foighting Psion-Man. Ugly son of a bitch. I don' wanna be like that.

Doctor Race: I know that punk. I don't want to say too much, but we've had trouble out of him before. He's not one of us. Not our kind, I mean. He's a human who keeps injecting himself with S.P.I. blood, just to enhance himself. But his enhancements only last a few hours or days and each time he comes down from it, he's more physically decrepit than previously. We got him back in confinement, with reduced privileges, this time. No access to anything he can use to monkey with his DNA. I don't understand the mindset of someone who'd actually want to be a monster. You don't have to worry about that, as long as you choose a catalyst that's tested and safe. Non-quantum powers don't usually change your appearance. Actually, Psion-Man is enhanced on a quantum level, but his appearance doesn't alter. He can light his eyes and adjust his hue, but out of costume, he can look as normal as you or I.

Mêlée: Psion-Man out of 'is costume... you know who 'e is, don't you?

Doctor Race: Maybe.

Mêlée: You gonna tell me, now that I'm in?

Doctor Race: What you're "in" is probationary status. Psion-Man still comes around here sometimes. Sometimes we go help him out. If you're "in", there's a good chance you'll meet Psion-Man and even fight alongside him. Ask him to tell you who he is. It's his decision whether to tell you his identity, not mine. To be honest, I don't think he will. There were special circumstances, not likely to be repeated.

Mêlée: Well, I don't really need to know that badly. Just curiosity is all.

Doctor Race: You and everyone else, it seems. From what I've seen of you so far, it's not hard to imagine that you and Psion-Man will be friends. If you stay straight and don't fuck up, that is. If you save his life or marry his sister, he might tell you.

Mêlée: Is she cute?

Doctor Race: I have no idea. Hey, I still have a full dose of SP-5 strength and resilience catalyst, in the fridge over there, if you want it. It'd take about five minutes to kick in. Of course, what I've got here would give you something equal to Captain Superhero's power and we've already got a Captain Superhero. Two, really, with the return of Citizen Defender. Essentially the same power, they just use it in different ways. He'll be hanging around for a while, hopefully till we fill that eighth slot. I can create you a catalyst for a unique non-quantum power, but it might take a few days, depending on what

you want your power to be. Strength combined with something else, maybe. But not growth. That's mine and you'll only pry it from my dead cold hands.

Mêlée: It's a big decision. I'd be stuck with whatever I get, and I don't loike being stuck. I spent a long toime picking up muy skills and gadgets. I don't want a power that's just gonna make all that obsolete. It would mean everything up to this point was wasted time. I wouldn't loike some enhancement getting the credit for the shit I do. You don't know me, but I'm roight impressive, and it's all me. Sometimes I beat powered guys, and doing that without a power makes muy dick bigger, I think.

Doctor Race: I hear ya. It's your choice. That's good for P.R., actually. There're tons of latent S.P.I.'s who choose not to be powered. You could represent them. But, they're usually the type who like normalcy and don't care for this sort of thing. We'll see how it plays. You can be an inspiration to the ones who want an inspiration, anyway. Until and unless you change your mind or pick up a power accidentally.

Mêlée: Yeesh, I hadn't thought about that. I've been a blank slate this whole toime, even when I was having kangaroo every meal. It's a wonder I didn't pick up their abilities. Can you imagine me with big ass ears and a tail, hopping around all over the place? Ha, ha, ha!

Doctor Race: Ha, ha, ha!

The mansion's ground level library. Mighty Man is reading a book on Roman mythology. Mars walks in and takes from the shelf a very old hardbound manuscript: "God From The Machine: The Deus Ex Machina Propheesies". Underneath that inscription, it says: "Translated From The Ancient Vorn Latines By The Scribes Of King Arthur". It is the Piuan-Vorn Bible, of the Piuan religion. This book is illegal on their home planet of Djurak-Vor.

Mighty Man: My Italian Poppa used to say "Ubertoso Nullo" whenever things went wrong. And strangely, also when things went right. It means "Great Nothing". You called me Mighty Man the Great Nothing.

Mars: There's more to it than that. Ubertoso Nullo means Fertile Void. As in the "The Big Bang". First there was a concentrated mass of meaningless purposeless matter and energy, then the Great Nothing burst out to become all that is. Your father was apparently assigning blame for misfortune and

credit for fortuity on Creation itself.

Mighty Man: I never learned Italian, but when I was a kid I often asked him the meanings of his phrases. He just told me the meaning, not the story behind it.

Mars: You have not already read the Mythologies?

Mighty Man: No. Sorry. Didn't know it was real, till '83, when you showed up. That doesn't let me off the hook for the last three years, but what can I say. You know I used to work with The Goddess and Adonais. They used to talk a lot about mythical stuff. Did anyone ever tell you Adonais looks like you?

Mars: Ah, Phoebus. I wouldn't've minded being a stepfather to the twin son of my goddess. But he's wanted me dead since he learned I ever held Diana's heart. He'll get his wish, but he won't see it come to pass. He's jealous of me, because he and his mother were once lovers. We gods resemble one another, because we're inbred.

Mighty Man: Ooooh... 'Kay... . ?

Mars: It's not a detriment to us, as it is to mortals. We can breed with anything; animals, rocks, even our own self. Brother and sister, cousins, these are all within acceptable limits. But mother and son is abhorrent, even for us. It's a good thing that relationship is over. Have you gotten to the part about the mythic figures?

Mighty Man: That's the part I'm on now.

Mars: Then you know; we gods can be a bit overbearing.

Mighty Man looks up from his book and smiles.

Mighty Man: Ya don't say!

Mars: Ha! I do say. Dr. Race informed me about your condition. He also informed me about your dream.

Mighty Man: My dream... Yeah, that. It's still no excuse for being such a failure.

Mars: The mission was a success. Jitara won us the victory, even at the cost of his own life. Heroes often die, thus. We all were there. We all else failed.

Mighty Man: I guess. I'm just a little better at it than everyone else. I don't know. Maybe, I'm just not cut out for this sort of thing.

Mars: That depends. I believe you are cut out for it. But you need to gather

up the pieces that are cut out to be a hero, and discard the pieces that are cut out to be a failure. You heard me speak of Ares. When causing damage to others, he delights in it. But when it comes to his own safety, he shrinks, as you did. I can't even imagine what it must be like to live inside such a psyche.

Mighty Man: Whew. Well, I... I... don't go around delightfully causing damage to others, not on purpose, anyway, so I can't tell you what that's like. But when it comes to what happened at the palace, you're looking at a big ball of shame, shaped like a man.

Mars: That's good. Only the proud can feel shame, and your pride is wherein my hope for you lies. Shame is what happens when you've not met your own expectations of yourself. True, your failure was a grand fuck up, compared to the average failure, especially since Doctor Race's tests have shown you to have a level of resilience which likely would've enabled you to survive Croat's weapon. Surely more likely than Jitara. So, I'll ask the question you've been trying to avoid in your mind: Had you not failed, would Jitara still be dead?

Mighty Man: No. He'd've had a better chance if I hadn't tried at all. Or, if I hadn't even been there. You would've had the bad guy with your spear, if not for me.

Mars: Maybe not. He did still have his teleportation power. He might've avoided my spear, just as he avoided other of my attempts. Jitara had the best opportunity, and he took it. Regardless of the issue that was brought up about the supposed benevolent Croat's right to have imposed himself on the timeline, the unquestionably malevolent one did need to be stopped, at any cost. For exactly the reasons Croat and Epochalus said. The price we paid was high, but not higher than what was at stake. But Jitara did achieve the greatest form of immortality attainable to a mortal; he became a legend. I, and I hope the rest of you, will make sure it's known throughout the universe that Jitara saved us all. Children in the remotest regions of space will know the story of Jitara. His own planet will tell his story the loudest. There will be shrines to him. All his songs and even the ones that can be interpreted as being about him will become icons in and of themselves, and will be regarded with religious reverence. It is unfortunate, in my opinion, that the universe has a dead savior. It could've had a living one. And that could've been you. Might that prospect have given you more to fear than did Croat's

weapon?

Mighty Man: No. Not at all. I hadn't even thought of that. I wish I had. That would've been great. "Savior Of The Universe" would've suited me just fine. Now, you've made me realize I had a chance for that, and blew it. It sucks for me all around, I guess. That stupid dream has ruined my life. I could've shredded that guy like a newspaper under a lawn mower. I would've. If not for that damn dream. I didn't... *consciously* know... about my invulnerability, before Jackson's tests. But I think I may've felt it. I did. I did feel it. How could someone be invulnerable and not feel it? But the dream... it's in my subconscious mind. Bigger than my rational feelings.

Mars: It doesn't matter if you were invulnerable or not, or knew it or not. Are you here to do your part for the cause of right, regardless of the cost, or to receive the glory that is meant for someone who would, though you wouldn't? Don't get me wrong, I don't recommend dying for glory. Avoid dying, if you can. I've managed to avoid it for over eight thousand years. And I've been fighting the entire time, even before my story was written and I knew my destiny. My most powerful and dangerous foe was my own brother. I was physically stronger, but only by a small margin. His godly powers were far more deadly than mine, at the time. If he'd been better skilled and had a better strategy, I wouldn't be here. Avoiding his lava blasts was the only way to survive that fight. He was insane, he accused me of cowardice for not letting him kill me. I wouldn't let him kill me, but neither would I flee or surrender. I stayed and fought, till I prevailed. A warrior is not expected to thoughtlessly throw his life away. That's an Asgardian philosophy, and they're all doomed, anyway. They have nothing better to do with their lives than die for glory. The rest of us actually have a chance to prevail over evil, so it's in our interest to live. And it's in our society's interest for its warriors to live, to fight the next fight. But if the cause you're fighting for is worth more than your life, you must be willing to risk it. If your self-preservation is your primary concern, to the point that you might as well not be there, you might as well stay home. I felt Croat's weapon. Enough times that I knew what to expect, whenever I saw it was going to happen again. Nothing in my fight with Vulcan hurt me as bad, and I was burned and stabbed in that fight, though not nearly as much as Vulcan was offering to burn and stab me. We now know that if Captain Superhero had been shot just one more time,

he'd've died. I took at least thrice as many shots as he did, but it's reasonable that I'm at least a hundred times more resilient than he is. There was a moment, however, I'm sure you remember, when Croat seemed intent upon continuous fire upon me. Like Croat, I'm able to teleport. The time before the time I speak of, I did teleport to avoid being shot. But, while you're being shot by that ray, there is no teleporting, there's nothing else in the world, except that you're being ... "bombed out", as Captain Superhero's description does it as much justice as any mere words possibly can. If you'd experienced it, you'd know what I mean. Thanks to Tech War, he was interrupted, but if he had been able to continue, I think there might've eventually come a point... if it's possible that my life was in danger, then it's likely Tech War saved my life. And if that point exists for me, it surely exists for you, in spite of your high resiliency. My problem isn't so much that you avoided being shot, but that you choked under pressure. Even the god of war has experienced the "Oh, shit!" moment. A few times, at least. But I have yet to flee or surrender. You've said you don't flee, and you didn't, entirely. But you surrendered, to an extent, then crawled away like a helpless old woman. All of us had been shot or shot at. Even little Candace, and she didn't curl up and cover her face. She has no resilience. Neither does Jackson, except that the bigger he is, the smaller his injury will be. You're lucky Croat didn't shoot you while you were curled up there in front of him. In case you didn't notice, he was distracted, laughing at you. Which presented us with an advantage. It could've been your advantage, you could've stood up and broke his face mask with your fist, but no, you stayed down there, curled up and covered. It was Tigerlily who first took the advantage, and Jitara who took the fight out of him, at last. Regardless of the cost. A female and a human. And true warriors, both. It goes back to the point I keep trying to impress into you; you aren't playing warrior, you are one, or at least you are holding the position of one. Most warriors don't have the luxury of invulnerability. They are as soft to the arrows of their enemy as the game is to the hunter's. But they stand their ground and make an account of themselves. If you've had some dream which interferes with your ability to do that, then the first enemy you need to conquer is your own self.

Mighty Man: I agree. I totally agree. What you may not understand about me; see, you'd see my inadequacy, the way I am now, and you'd assume that I've

never had to fight before. But it's the opposite. I've never not had to fight. I've been fighting all my life. And losing. It's always been the same person. I won't go into detail, except to say that you and I have something in common. Except that I'm not the one who prevails, I'm the designated loser. It's not about fear, at least it didn't use to be. It's about authority. Dominance and submissiveness. If the fight turned around and I started winning, all he'd have to do is give me a look like I better start losing, and I would. Does that make sense to you?

Mars: It makes perfect sense. The battle of the minds sets the tone for every confrontation. Often, the outcome is decided by it. Someone asserts their will to dominate you, and you either give in to it, or you find the strength to refuse.

Mighty Man: I never had that strength. My only strength, this may come as a shock, my only strength was that I had no fear. Now the dream has come along and taken that from me, leaving me completely crippled.

Mars: You were never without fear. You must've only buried it, hidden it from yourself and yourself from it. I can now see how this is all meant to be. The dream may turn out to be the best thing that could've happened. With your fear at the surface, you can better confront it and conquer it.

Mighty Man: I don't know where to begin.

Mars: You've already begun. Your knowledge of it is the beginning of your taking power over it. I'll be interested in watching your progress, on that. Stump Puller had similar problems to yours, but on a different level, I suppose. He had different reactions to his problems. He was submissive to villains and cried while fighting. I tried to help him, and at first it was working, but then he became frustrated. Usually, when a simple minded person becomes frustrated, it's easy enough to regain control. But with his level of power, and being told he's of the gods, trying to control him made him worse. The confidence I'd given him had become the ego to disrespect us all. He claimed to be a god, then a demon. He became obnoxious, rude and destructive. I had to hit him. Again. He went back to his people. They can handle him better than we can. They're almost all S.P.I.'s. Upstate, woodland people. What you call rednecks. I think Stump Puller is one of those mortals who suffers from the detriment of inbreeding. At least you don't have that problem. Are you aware that many Italian surnames have my name as a prefix, including yours?

Mighty Man: The first three letters are the same. That means something?

Mars: Yes. It's in that book you're reading. I'm the father of the Italian people. You're my descendant.

Mighty Man: Whoa. Is that why you're being so tolerant of all my fuck ups?

Mars: Partly, but not mainly. You are at the age where a man decides who and what he is. There are two paths before you. Down one path, you are the great warrior all the citizens of the world depend upon to protect them. Down the other path, you are the citizen, depending upon us warriors to protect you. With all your potential for greatness, how tragic it would be, if you chose the path where that great potential is not met. I expect more from you, because the greatness of your power deserves more from you. And as Chairman of the Retaliators, I deserve more than you've given me so far. But I know you can do better. Here, you are surrounded by great warriors who can show you the way down that path which I feel you are meant to choose. A simple exercise, which can help you in times of uncertainty: When in doubt, simply ask yourself; "What would Jitara do?" If I had a Retaliator with your power and the boldness of Jitara, or even Tech War, I'd have a Retaliator almost equal to myself. But, they are not of the gods and you are. So, I tolerate you, and hope that I can somehow, someday, bring out from within you the godliness that I know is inside you, because you show me brief glimpses of it, occasionally. Is there a "Savior Of The Universe" inside you?

Mighty Man: I feel that way sometimes. I just can't seem to make it that way.

Mars: You've imprisoned him inside you. Perhaps you're afraid of him, because he would change you. He'd change everything about you. He'd make you into what you've never been. But... you need to get over that, because he would make you into what you've always wanted to be. Let him out. I could use him. We need him. He is the one I inducted into the Retaliators. The one we took with us to Egypt definitely is not. That one is the one who doesn't belong. When you finish that book, you should begin reading this one. It picks up where that one leaves off. In this book, you will find that what you call S.P.I.'s are referred to by the prophets as the man-gods. The man-gods are to someday supplant us, the gods, as the masters of the universe, as we once replaced our predecessors, the Titans. Epochalus took us to his "Limbo" through the Andromeda Stargate. I felt it a ghost world. I tried to feel its location, and I could only feel "nowhere and nowhen", as he'd said. If I knew

its location, I could take us there. Through the stargate. For the return, he bypassed the stargate. Journeys that require a stargate in one direction should require it in the other. He's operating on an extremely high level. He's just a man, in the physical aspect. But the physical aspect is less relevant than you think. The S.P.I.'s are the future, the gods are the past. The transition has already begun. Someday it will be complete. You do have a point about me taking a personal interest in your case. The Anglo S.P.I.'s will be bringing the legacy of the Norse gods to the new era. Likewise, the Native American S.P.I.'s, the African S.P.I.'s, the Asian S.P.I.'s and so on, represent the legacies of their gods. The Latin S.P.I.'s, primarily the Italians, and the offspring I have on a number of other planets, are my legacy, and you will be taking me with you to the new era, even after I have passed over from this existence. Though I am called immortal, it is through you that it is truly made so. My original Retaliators were unstoppable, even to the Faulks. Captain Superhero is an acceptable replacement for Citizen Defender. Psion-Man, Esron and Stump Puller haven't been truly replaced, yet. Psion-Man is needed by the city, but we needed him in Egypt. Esron's presence would have bolstered my own effectiveness. Stump Puller in your place at that crucial moment, would react violently to his fear and with rage to being taunted. Croat would be shredded, and we'd be tasked with calming the impetuous man-child. You can be better than him. Controlling the monster within distinguishes the warrior from the berserker. I expect my progeny to find and master his monster.

Mighty Man winces, fidgets, then continues reading. The page Mars is reading from:

Doom's Dawn: As told to the Prophet Bivorez by the Star Architect; Ra-Eden.

It shall come to pass, that during the reign of the Lord Of The Sun, the Dark Prince shall come. He shall be adorned in princely armor of crimson and azure, liken to the Righteous Prince. The Dark Prince will come to sully this world, as his own world was sullied, by his own transgression. But, the Good Prince will send his champions, The Revenging Sons Of Terra, led by the god of war, who is called Mars. But, the Knight Of Crimson; he who loves the Goddess of The Dawn, will scar the Dark Prince, but give his life, to save she

who is queen of the spirit, who he loves, and shall love again, when he hath conquered the Kingdom Of Souls.

It shall come to pass, that the Eternal Immortal; the forever hero; he who can never die, shall die, so that Death should be appointed to him once. Though he be dead his shadow will live as a man who suckled not and grew not inside a woman, for he be not a born man, but a shadow of a man. The shadow of a man hast a gray face and weareth a red hood and cloak. He shall be flesh and machine, the graft is taken from the body of the Eternal Immortal, but the imitation doth fail to fully form, so it is augmented by the machines of the Red Wolf. The Red Shadow hast the power to consume the darkness of souls and convert the dark energy into light. He dispeleth demons from the spectral realm of the Star Twins, and thus begets the dawn of the Gemini War; the war of love and spite, the war of darkness and light, which will begin the dawning of time and mark the end of time and bid the naming of the stars.

The Righteous Prince showeth his face, but hideth his own name. He is a seer of ways, and a master of the greatest of divine laws. He would speak not an untruth, but would suffer not a spoken truth to reveal his manifestations. He shall speak great words and think to change times and laws. It shall be given unto his hand time and times and the dividing of time. He is heralded by the man-god Naissance, whose power is to destroy all that is evil.

The Dark Prince rideth a gray horse, and weareth pale blue clothes. He hast eyes of fire and weareth on his head many crowns. He is called a dead man's name, but his written name is known only to himself. He walketh on foreign worlds and those he would claim wither from his touch, for he is Death. It shall be given unto his hand time and times and the dividing of time. He is heralded by the man-god Apollyon, whose power is to destroy all that is good.

It shall come to pass, that the Star Twins will face one another at the edge of time. There, all that is shall begin and end. In the end there will be two. Then, there will be one. Then, there will be all that ever was, is, and all things yet to be. For, it hath eternally been perceived that all that ever was springeth forth all that is yet to be. When the true nature of the stars is known, let it be written, that what is yet to be issueth forth all that ever was.



Vision 46: Mighty Man; Superhero

Three giant 50 ft. aliens, on a beachfront landing zone, being pummeled by the Retaliators. Their “fishbowl” helmets are already busted. Captain Superhero’s new armor is ultra cool. It’s still nostalgic of the old one, but in some ways more modern looking than Tech War’s. The wings still spread wide, but are F-Series shaped. The leg and arm armor is no longer strap-on, it completely covers his arms and legs, like Tech War’s. The upper body armor is segmented, like Tech War’s. The helmet is no longer an old style steel pot, it’s a full head helmet, with built-in goggles and an air filter, possibly inspired by Croat’s, but cooler looking. There’s a white “CS” decal on the forehead. The armor is still solid, it could be mistaken for a power rigged armor, but Flash is already physically strength enhanced. The red white and blue color scheme is gone, replaced by aviator blue, with white, black and

gray emblems. The new chest emblem is a decal of a wild looking spread winged eagle, that will someday have a white dropping added below the tail feathers, after he changes his persona name to Cadet Shitbird. Seriously. Flash's name change is self-imposed, half sarcastically, half self-admonishingly, after he's court-martialed, fined and decommissioned by the government, for unauthorized time travel. The fine was half a million dollars, almost twice what he made for the Giza mission. That's what pisses him off the most, that the government thinks stealing a time machine from a villain is bad enough to negate what he went through in Egypt. He was busted once before, during the war, for insubordination. Flash was always a good soldier, but he resents authority. Pasty podium jockeys shouldn't be telling real warriors how, who, why and when to fight. Politicians. He doesn't mind being subordinate to generals who've actually been warriors. He feels most at home in the Retaliators, because they are led by the ultimate warrior. Mighty Man, Mars, Captain Superhero, Tech War and Hotpoint are attacking high. Upsurge is wrestling with one in a pretty even match. Citizen Defender and Mêlée are buzzing around in a Hovermount. Mighty Man flies into one of the monsters' face and knocks him hard onto his butt.

Mêlée: Man! Look at Mighty Man go! I'd heard he was some kinda super-fanny. But, he sure doesn't look like it to me!

Captain Superhero: No he doesn't, does he? That's not the same guy we've been working with these past months. Must be his twin.

In the air;

Tech War: Hey, Casey! I've got an idea. My thrust is stronger than yours. How about if I grab onto you and use my rockets, in junction with your jets, to see what you can do to these guys with some leverage!

Mighty Man: Ha, ha! Alright! This is gonna be good!

Tech War grabs Mighty Man from behind. Together, they fly into the chest of one of the monsters. Mighty Man draws back and knocks the monster sailing backwards through the air. Mars draws his fist and punches one, knocking it hard on its back. The third monster has Upsurge in a sitting sleeper hold. Mars remains with the two beaten monsters, to keep knocking them dizzier

than they already are. Tech War and Mighty Man go to help Upsurge. Tech War blasts the monster, causing him to free Upsurge. Mighty Man lands on the monster's shoulder. He locks onto the collar of its metal space suit with one hand, and starts waling on him with the other.

Space Monster 1: Aaaaahh!

Upsurge: Thanks for the upper hand, Casey, but this one's mine. I can't let it be that my job was done for me.

Upsurge kicks the monster in the back of his left knee, causing his leg to buckle, but then Upsurge holds the monster upright by its armpits just long enough to knee him in the midsection, then he lets him fall. This causes a cloud of dirt up to around Upsurge's knees and makes a rumbling sound.

Space Monster 1: Oof!

Upsurge finishes putting the monster down by cold cocking him in the side of the head with his right fist. Sprawled out on his back, the monster grabs a handful of sandy dirt and throws it in Upsurge's eyes, distracting him long enough to point a giant sized ray gun at him. Captain Superhero flies over with his pistol drawn and shoots the giant monster in its gun hand. The monster drops the ray gun and starts holding his hand with the tiny smoking bullet hole in it.

Space Monster 1: Ow! Ow, ow! The tiny winged one fired a tiny missile into my hand! The detonator is hot! Oh no! My hand is going to explode!

Captain Superhero: It's not a bomb, you're not going to explode, you giant pussy. You might get lead poisoning, though.

Upsurge: You were going to shoot me while I couldn't see, you ugly fucking alien? I'll beat your damn skull in, you cheating son of a bitch!

Upsurge knocks the alien onto his back, straddles him, and pounds him with

rage, old style, left, right, left, right. Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow!

Space Monster 1: Aaaaahh! Stop! Enough! We concede! We will not invade your planet! Aaaaaaahhh! We concede! Someone help me! I don't want to die! Aaaaaaahhhh!

Mighty Man: Jackson, brother, he's trying to give up.

Upsurge comes to his senses and dismounts the space monster.

Mighty Man: Ha! Did you three overgrown fish heads seriously think you could invade our planet? Haven't you heard of the Faulks?

Space Monster 1: The Faulks...? You are the one who destroyed their flagship with a single blow?

Mighty Man: No, that was *him*.

Mighty Man points a thumb back at Mars, who looks like he appreciates the acknowledgment. Also, he looks like he's impressed that Mighty Man was just mistaken for him. There's a potential successor emerging from the inept.

Mighty Man: He's a real god, the rest of us are just a bunch of watered down hybrids. You wanna talk to him?

Space Monster 1: *No* ...

Space Monster 2: We will pay a tribute, if you allow us to leave.

Mars grows to their size, to address them, and they step back and cower like 90 pound wimps confronted by the local badass. Upsurge looks like he just tasted raw lemon, as he usually does when Mars grows.

Mars: We don't require tribute. This time. If you return here again with malicious intent, we will confiscate all you brought with you and incarcerate you, indefinitely. You are fortunate to have been stopped by us before you reached a populated area. If you had harmed just one of our citizens,

you would not be given this generous offer.

Space Monster 2: We may leave, then ?

Mars: Unless you want to give us all you have and be held indefinitely as hostiles.

Space Monster 3: We'll go. Thank you.

Upsurge, Tech War, and Mars each select a giant space monster and escort them back into their spaceship. Mighty Man is hovering in front of them, threatening them with a drawn fist.

Mars: Tell it in all your lands and ports that Terra and the Terrans are under the protection of The Retaliators. My namesakes, Mars and the Martians, as well. This entire Solar System and all who dwell in it. In the near future, you will see our citizens in deep space. It would be prudent for you to treat them as if I am nearby, even if I'm not. As a universe god, I command zero distance hyperspace with my will. Thus, unaided, I travel through space faster than any condensed distance hyperspace vessel. Mundane Terrans and Martians are comparatively weak, and may seem like easy targets. If I hear of any mistreatment of our citizens, I'll be there promptly, asking questions and exacting penance.

Space Monster 1: We will comply. We will tell of The Retaliators and that the Terrans and Martians must be respected.

Mighty Man: Don't forget to write, Snookums!

Later, in the space monsters' spaceship: They must be on automatic pilot, because we can see space moving through the cockpit windows, but all three of them are looking at video monitors, displaying the events of their encounter with the Retaliators, apparently shot from hidden cameras on their spacesuits. The stars aren't zipping by, that's old sci-fi. But we are

condensed-distance hyperspacing, so the nearer stars seem to be crossing the further stars. And the stars appear distorted because of the dimensional overlap. Imagine walking casually across a large dark room filled with tiny hanging lights, while wearing 3D glasses smeared with vegetable oil, and that's what we see out the windows.

Space Monster 1: The Faulks underpaid us. We never had a chance to escape. We'd be dead or captured, if not for the generosity of our "hosts".

Space Monster 2: What do they want with this data? Surely they wouldn't be foolish enough to plan another invasion.

Space Monster 3: Retribution, most likely. Redemption, from their universally known failure. Perhaps they plan to destroy Terra, secretly, and from a safe distance. A bio-weapon or super bomb, perhaps, planted by dupes, like us.

Space Monster 1: Whatever their plan, I've done all I'll do, for the Faulks. I prefer jobs where our size is an advantage. Some of them were even stronger than the Vorn. I'll never enter this system again, nor will I ever work for the Faulks again.

Vision 47

Matilda Martel's kitchen. She's clearing supper dishes off the table. On the front porch swing, Casey has his arm around Yvenia. Both in civvies, no makeup stripe on her. She's wearing his Ray-Bans and his glowing eyes are showing.

Casey: Come back with me! There's no need for you to live this life, anymore! When the Citizen Defender goes back to Kenya, there'll be an opening. I can get you into the Retaliators, I know I can!

Yvenia: You don't understand! I didn't meet Rascher, until I graduated boarding school. I told you that, and it is the truth. But what I didn't tell you is that he was paying my tuition the entire time. He's been the closest thing I've known to family, since my mother died, and my father left me and my brother. My brother lives on Mars, did I tell you that?

Casey: Yeah, with the Outcast colony. I want to go there, and meet him and his family. I'll ask Arthur to arrange it for me.

Yvenia: All of a sudden you want to fly to Mars? That's an awful lot of trouble, just to meet my brother. Why don't you just wait until his next visit?

Casey: Because I don't want to meet your brother at Doktor Rascher's place. You know, Captain Superhero used to be a teammate of your grandparents'.

Yvenia: The Line Breakers. Way before my time. I have some wrinkled old photos. I don't even know why I keep them.

Casey: Because it's a connection to your roots. Your grandparents were heroes, Yvenia. And their number one enemy was Doktor Rascher. Something about that just doesn't add up. Did you know he was a Nazi?

Yvenia: What's a Nazi, other than our former enemies? We're allies with Germany, now, aren't we?

Casey: "What's a Nazi"? Yvenia, there are volumes of books on the subject, "what's a Nazi"! They hate everyone who's not like them! Especially S.P.I.'s! People like them are why the Outcasts felt they had to live on Mars!

Yvenia: Hardly! Most of the Outcasts were American. Did Nazis drive them to leave the planet, hmm? It was their own people, right here, I think. The Line Breakers was a combined team of American and Russian S.P.I.'s. If Captain Superhero hadn't been missing, he and my grandparents would've had to fight against each other in what your country calls the "Soviet War",

some called the “Commie War”, we called it the “Fascist War”.

Casey: Fascism is Italian, actually.

Yvenia: I never heard that. No one thinks of Fascism as Italian, it’s American. Everyone in the world says it. Going around warring on foreigners, not over borders or trade, but for not running their own affairs the way America thinks they ought to. God! I say again, what’s a Nazi, other than something which doesn’t quite fit “The American Way”? Just because they’ve been declared xenophobic by the most xenophobic country on the planet doesn’t convince me. Rascher’s never shown me the slightest inclination for that sort of thing. He treats me like a daughter. And I... don’t really have a father, anymore.

Casey squeezes her tightly closer to him.

Casey: He’s probably experimenting on you.

She pulls away from him.

Yvenia: Don’t you be throwing unfounded accusations around, like that! I’ll have you know, I...

Casey: Shhh. I’m sorry. I just worry about you, since we haven’t been living together.

She sinks back into him and he wraps his other arm around her front, cocooning her.

Yvenia: I miss you so much. I wish you’d come back home.

Casey: I wish you’d come back to the Retaliators with me. Will you do me a favor?

Yvenia: What?

Casey: If anything ever happens to me... would you look into giving the Retaliators a try? I really think it’s much better for you, and all I want is what’s best for you.

Yvenia: You’re Mighty Man. What’s ever gonna happen to you? You make the Retaliators sound like the greatest thing. I guess if you’re never gonna give them up, I’ll have to join them, to be with you.

Casey: I'll set it up! As soon as Citizen Defender goes back to Kenya!
Yvenia: *Pressure ... !*

Matilda Martel puts her back to the screen door, and opens it, by backing up into it. Yvenia gives Casey back his Ray-Bans, and he puts them on. Matilda comes out onto the porch, carrying three steaming mugs. She hands one to each of the two lovebirds, and keeps the third.

Matilda: I thought you two lovebirds might like some cocoa!

Casey: You read my mind! Thanks, Momma.

Yvenia: Thanks, Mrs. Martel.

Matilda: Please, call me Matilda.

Yvenia: O.k., Matilda.

She takes a seat in the wicker chair, facing the view of the neighborhood foliage.

Matilda: You're important to Casey. That makes you important to me. We're friends. Maybe someday we'll be family.

The two lovebirds look at each other, with embarrassed but devious smiles.

Yvenia: I don't know. Maybe.

Yvenia lets her fingers do the walking up Casey's right arm. He looks at his mother and winks. (From behind the Ray-Bans. The cheek scrunch is the giveaway.) She smiles at her son, then returns to her view. Yvenia curls up into Casey and relaxes. He's smiling. He's the happiest man in the world. He's home, spending time with the two people he loves the most. He's finally fitting in as a Retaliator. Things couldn't be going better for him. Except for one thing. He's dying. He'd momentarily forgotten. The smile fades from his face. Casey's cocoa mug. Yvenia at the doctor's office, in a hospital gown. She's sitting on a table. The doctor comes in.

Doctor: I see by the calendar on the wall, it's time for your monthly physical, Ms. Orchev. First, I'm gonna need some blood.

The nurse ties off her arm and extracts some blood. The doctor takes the vial and hands it to another nurse.

Doctor: Here, take this to the lab for me, if you don't mind, nurse. Now, I'm gonna test your reflexes.

The vial is handed off to a thug, wearing a delivery uniform. He puts it in a tray, then puts the tray in the front seat of his truck. The vial is handed off to Rascher, at a lab we haven't seen. Rascher holds it up to his eye level.

Alchemist: Es sieht aus wie normale Blut, nicht wahr?

Rascher: Like the Russian parents she inherited it from, the Proteus Element in my young ward's blood is a mischling of Nordic, Latin, Hindu, Schwarzoid, Khazar and ... *Semite* derivatives. The pollution likely occurred in her Aryan ancestry. Arbeiterklasse Aryans breed with gods and schweine alike. Das is gut. Our genes and those of our enemies, in one sample. Their interactions can be manipulated, their reactions measured. If our race is to dominate the era of the man-gods, we must find a way to ensure that the legacy of our gods supersedes that of all the others. Nimm das. See what you can come up with, that will expedite that end.

Rascher hands the vial off to the Alchemist.



Vision 48: Helldragon: The Dargotha Prophecy

Outside the main entrance to Subterra Village, Borneo. The Retaliators; Mars, Captain Superhero, Tech War, Upsurge, Hotpoint, Citizen Defender, Mêlée and Mighty Man are fighting an army of Craglidites. Everyone is using their special talents to drive the Craglidites back into their hole, and of course Captain Superhero is using his great strength and expert fighting skill. This is a diplomatic beat down. Some human cave explorers got eaten, some more humans came and shot a fair amount of Craglidites, now the Craglidites want to go to war against the humans, with sharpened stones tied to sticks. The explorers were British, the Australians have had problems with the Craglidites for over a hundred years, both are one more provocation away from extinguishing the Craglidites altogether, and this feeble attempt at war would be that provocation. So, the beating is for their own good. Their crude weapons have already been vanished away, so there's none of that. Just superhuman fist vs Craglidite face. Craglidites are sort of an average height version of the Yeti, imposing to most humans, but even the non-powered Retaliator Mêlée is introducing them to the stars and tweety birds.

Mighty Man: Hey, Flash! Watch! I'm gonna show you the right way to do this!

Mighty Man does the Curly Shuffle, and defeats a large portion of the Craglidites, using Three Stooges techniques. He hands out a few eye gouges. Captain Superhero does a somersault, in which, when upside down he punches a Craglidite. On the lateral angle of the maneuver he elbows one in the head, lands straddle the shoulders of a third, and punches a fourth, then spin throws the one he was sitting on. Mighty Man gives four Craglidites in a row face-smacks that knock them out. Captain Superhero spins up some angular centrifugal force, then extends his fist to intersect with an unfortunate Craglidite. Mighty Man smacks his own fist to make it swing around and bop a Craglidite on the head. Captain Superhero jump kicks a Craglidite. Mighty Man belly bumps a Craglidite. As a Craglidite is lunging at Captain Superhero, Flash evades the lunge by rolling himself across the back of the Craglidite, and once on the other side, rolls off, grabs the creature's arm, shoulder throws it to the ground, then punches it out. Mighty Man does the mesmerizing upwardly fluttering hand/downward smack to a Craglidite. Captain Superhero lays on his back, kicks one up into the air, then stands, and punches the Craglidite, while it's airborne. Mighty Man gives one a punch in the stomach that doubles it over, then follows that with a subsequent bop in the forehead. Captain Superhero performs the most beautiful and graceful spinning round kick in the history of martial arts, which forces one Craglidite into three of his friends, knocking them all down. Mighty Man performs the ugliest, awkwardest, bouncy, uncoordinated spinning round kick in the history of martial arts, that lands not the sole of his boot, but more like the corner of the side of it, into a Craglidite. Mighty Man almost trips. The Craglidite is sent barreling backwards into about a dozen others, knocking them all down, like bowling a strike. Mighty Man bows to Captain Superhero.

Mighty Man: Now, that's how it's done!

Captain Superhero gives Mighty Man an amused look, and flips him off. Later, onboard the Hyperjet. It's already in flight and Mighty Man gets out of his seat, to go sit next to Mars. Mars' helmet is in his lap.

Mighty Man: Hey.

Mars: Hey.

Mighty Man: It's true what they say; victory is sweet. Now that I've had a taste, I never wanna wallow in my own bullshit ever again. How soon till the next time we get to go out and smack somebody around?

Mars: Something will come up, I'm sure.

Mighty Man: I've been reading about your destiny.

Mars: And you want the more detailed version, straight from the horse's mouth?

Mighty Man: Yeah, I guess. It says you're destined to die, after a grueling battle, in which you defeat and destroy the Helldragon.

Mars nods.

Mars: Dargotha; daughter of Vulcan. Born of his hate for me.

Mighty Man: Vulcan, your brother. ? Wouldn't that make Dargotha your niece?

Mars: I suppose it would. I have many enemies among my relatives.

Mighty Man: So, it's true? Your future's been written, and you already know how you're going to die?

Mars: I don't die after the battle, but at the end. The prophesy doesn't say if we've mortally wounded each other or if there's something about the way she dies that causes my own death, only that "As the great Helldragon is destroyed, her blood mingles with that of her destroyer, and the last thing her dying eyes see is the death of Mars." One sentence, which changed everything. The prophesy of my victory over Dargotha has existed since before Vulcan and I were enemies, it was part of the prophesy which foretold that we would be enemies. Prophesy is made possible by a seeing of the future, as it will happen, nothing more complex than that. As you learned from Epochalus, the future is as established as the past. Unless it's altered. In the original version, my victory over Dargotha was to be my ultimate triumph over Vulcan. A new ending was added 2000 years ago, that I would die with Dargotha. Three years ago, just before I returned to Terra, the god who had secretly been responsible for the new ending boasted of it to me. At the time, he was an oracle god with the power to create fate with his prophesies. That

is, instead of the future telling him what it will be, he could tell the future what to be. The Celestial Order, for some reason known only to them, chose to give a power requiring the most responsibility to the least responsible of us. A “Golden Child” of the realm, who, up until then, had gotten away with every evil thing that had crossed his wretched mind to do. Not long before the appearance of the new ending, I had put myself at risk to help save him, and it was by his words that I had been doomed. All I’ve done and all I’ve been, to be destroyed by his whim... I dragged him by his hair to face judgment before the throne of Jupiter. Jupiter stripped him of all his abilities and decreed that if I am to die with Dargotha, he who made the prophesy would die with me. Divine justice.

Mighty Man nods.

Mars: She lies beneath us, underground, at this very moment, the Helldragon does. Vulcan impregnated the very Terra, it’s not known exactly when. Terra’s molten core is the mother’s womb which nurtures Dargotha. When she awakens, it will be her intent to devour Terra, to build her strength enough to destroy me.

Mighty Man: But, you’ll save Terra, though the destruction of Dargotha kills you also.

Mars: The oracle could create new prophesies, but not erase or conflict with existing ones. The prophesy of Dargotha had been as far as my story had been told, at that time. He had to start there. But he ended it there, as abruptly as possible, sacrificing prose for clarity. It does give me the benefit of knowing I won’t die any other way. I shall never give up the ghost, till my prophesied destiny is completed. Then, my glory awaits me, in the Elysian Fields.

Mighty Man: If I could choose how to die, I’d want to die saving Terra, or something like that. You know, go out as a hero.

Mars: The oracle did give me a proud ending, I must say. You are not doomed. Some of the top medical experts and S.P.I. specialists in the world are working on your cure. One of them happens to live with us. Since I still know not the time of my end, it’s possible you may outlive me. Die of old age, if you can. However...

Mars gets a gleam in his eye and smiles like he's about to tell a secret.

Mars: A glorious, noble death is the surest way for a hero to live forever.

Mighty Man smiles and nods, like he agrees.

Mighty Man: I've been thinking about fear, and I don't think I ever had it. Not the kind that would hold me back from this. Just of death and failure. Maybe that's why I couldn't fight worth a damn, because I didn't have a healthy fear of getting my ass beat. Maybe I liked getting my ass beat. Gashes and bruises were proof that I'm alive. Now that that can't happen anymore, I might as well be a badass.

Mars: Interesting philosophy. I wouldn't embrace it as a complete revelation, but I can see the truth in it. That is, there are no simple answers. Big ones are comprised of many smaller ones, and they don't all agree. We have till our end to justify our existence. Death is going to sleep, nothing to fear. Failure is temporary, if you have tomorrow. Dying a failure is the thing most fearful. Hold to this new idea of yours, in your quest. It's as good a path as any, for the warrior within you to find his way out.

Mighty Man: I couldn't have made it this far without your help. Mars... ?

Mars looks at Mighty Man and Mighty Man looks him in the eye.

Mighty Man: I'll never disappoint you again.

Mars resumes his forward gaze and leans back in his chair.

Mars: Good.

Vision 49a: Followed

At this stage in his developing character, Casey Martel would never want to be seen in public without sunglasses. Not as Mighty Man, or especially as Casey Martel. But, everybody on the beach has sunglasses. Coney Island. Casey and Yvenia get off the Ferris wheel, laughing. As they pass by the boardwalk on their way to the beach, they don't notice the young lady with a chili covered Nathan's Famous Hotdog, buying a snow cone from the vendor there. But after buying it, she turns, and notices them holding hands, walking away. She decides to discreetly follow them. Later, the lovebirds are well settled in, on the beach. They are laying on beach chairs, with the usual surroundings; some towels, a cooler, a duffel bag, and a radio.

Casey: Yvenia, you know I love you, right?

Yvenia: Uh, huh. Me too, baby.

Casey: You are the only woman in the world for me. That's why...

He reaches in the duffel bag, produces a ring box, and opens it.

Casey: I'd like for you to marry me. ?

Yvenia sits up in the chair and takes the box from him. She looks at it and puts her hand over her mouth, with her other hand.

Yvenia: Casey, this is... this is...

Casey: Meant to be. ?

Yvenia: Yes! Oh, I love you so much! Yes, I'll marry you!

She hugs him and the hug turns into a kiss. When it's over, she puts the ring on. Then, she pops him on the knee with the back of her hand.

Yvenia: You're supposed to kneel, you dolt!

Casey: I didn't want to draw any attention. Someone might recognize us.

Yvenia: Oh, I wish we didn't have to sneak around like this.

Casey: If only you weren't still connected to Rascher, we wouldn't have to.

Yvenia: I know. I tell you what; when that opening becomes available, I'll

apply for The Retaliators.

Casey: You mean it?

Yvenia: Of course, silly! We can't have a husband and wife fighting on opposite sides, now can we?

Casey: Duh, no! Ha! Let's pack this stuff up, I want to take you out and celebrate.

They get out of their chairs and start to pack up. As they are standing, Yvenia notices a young lady peeking around a shed, near the boardwalk. Yvenia nods at Casey to look back there.

Casey: Shit! Go... powder your nose or something. I'll get rid of her.

Yvenia walks away, toward the restrooms. Casey approaches the young lady, and she comes out from behind there and approaches him. He's a foot and a half taller and about 200 pounds heavier. Casey and Yvenia's size difference is similar to Jackson and Candace's size difference. Casey makes Yvenia look small, Jackson makes Candace look small, so Casey makes Candace look miniature. Reminiscent of the famous confrontation between Darth Vader and Princess Leia. These two are actually the same approximate size as those two characters, respectively. Casey's body shape is actually somewhere in-between Ferrigno's and Prowse's. He could have competed professionally, before the enhancement. He entertained the thought a few times, but was too tied to Martel Manufacturing to try out. He took steroids, but so do all the top bodybuilding competitors. They say don't do it, but they turn their heads. Not for super powers, though. The enhancements have disqualified him for competitive bodybuilding forever now, even though neither of the enhancements altered his body shape. Rules are rules. He doesn't need to work out anymore, after the last enhancement, but he does it anyway, out of habit. He can't make it "burn", but he goes through the motions. Casey's 4 years older than Candace in the world, but Candace is 3 years older than him in the Retaliators, and she's a founder, which trumps any Johnny-come-latelys, teamwise. When she first met him last year, she could've made embarrassingly short work out of him, in a one on one fight. Quicker than one tenth the time it took Flash, and possibly with some crying and begging. She'd been, up until recently, thinking nothing had changed since then, and it

turned out to not be the case. But she's still hard to hit and hard hitting, and she always outranks him in the team, no matter what, so he'd better watch out.

Candice: Who's your friend, Casey? She looks familiar.

Casey: You don't know her.

Candice: I'd like to meet her.

Casey: You can't. She's shy.

Candice: Shy? That's about the lamest excuse I've ever heard!

Casey: What do you want from me? Why do you have to be so suspicious of me, all the time? Haven't I proven myself to you and the rest of The Retaliators, yet?

Candice: Maybe that's part of your ploy.

Casey: Candy, please, there's nothing going on like that. I swear to you, on my oath as a Retaliator.

Candice: Which means exactly what to you?

Casey: *Everything* ! Please, just leave me alone. This doesn't concern you or The Retaliators. It's private. Respect my privacy. And respect me as your teammate, to butt out of my business.

Candice: Fine. I guess it's none of my business, then.

Casey: Thank you.

She turns and walks away. Later, at an open air restaurant. Casey and Yvenia are trying to enjoy a good meal, to celebrate their engagement, when suddenly an unseen voice on the sidewalk says;

Unseen Voice: Hey, look! It's the Hotpoint! Can I take your picture, Ms. Newmeyer?

Casey and Yvenia look up at each other.

Casey: Waiter; check, please!

The parking lot. Casey and Yvenia get into his Jag. As the door is opened, we see Hotpoint, in costume, is already in the back seat, hiding under the beach blanket that was back there. Later, the car is pulling into Matilda Martel's

driveway. The garage door opens automatically. Once inside, Casey and Yvenia exit the car. The garage door is automatically closing, but it's a mechanical process, slow but sure. Hotpoint is peaking up from the blanket, spying on Casey and Yvenia entering the house through the garage entrance. Once they're in and out of sight, Hotpoint eases the door open, slides out and gently closes the door, careful not to make a sound that can be heard in the house. Great, the click blends in perfectly with the sound of the garage door machine. The garage door is almost down, and Hotpoint rolls through the narrowing gap as it closes, Indiana Jones style. Some time later. Hotpoint is sitting high up in a tree in front of the house, looking down at Mighty Man and Jhotica walk out onto the front porch. Matilda Martel opens the screen door, and Mighty Man kisses his mother goodbye. He picks up Jhotica, and she rests the duffel bag on her lap. They fly away. The flare of his belt jets are like two little red beacons in the night. Hotpoint waits for Matilda to get all the way back into the house, then she steps off the tree, held aloft by the bio energy emanating around her feet. She follows the little red beacons, toward the city. Sometime later. Mighty Man, carrying Jhotica, flies onto the terrace of Rascher's penthouse. He's hovering outside the barrier, letting her down inside the barrier. A brief kiss, and her left hand is in his right hand as he slowly pulls back. After he's pulled back enough that they are no longer touching hands, they are still outstretching their hands to one another. His jets increase a bit and he flies backward a couple hundred feet, still facing her with his hand outstretched toward her. Then he flips over and flies away, toward the East River.



Vision 49b: Rascher's Hideout

By the time Hotpoint lands on the balcony, half the lights are out in the penthouse. She enters the penthouse and opens the first door she comes to. It's Jhotica's room. Jhotica is not in it. The light is off. She'll leave it off. She lights up her left hand and walks around with it held up, like a lantern. She looks around the room. There's a picture of Casey on the bed table next to the bed. Hotpoint nods to herself like she's caught Casey red-handed in his web of lies, finally. She's seen enough in here, and decides to exit this room and check out the rest of the lair. Very nice. The penthouse suite of the Astor Plaza. The last place the authorities would look for fugitives. She moves cautiously into the corridor. There's no sign of anyone, which is good, she's free to explore. Always mindful of the direction back to the terrace. She may have to make a quick getaway. It's for certain, this must be Rascher's hideout. There's another door in the hallway. Before checking out the main areas, she'll look around in here to see what she can find. She quietly opens the door. The light is on. No one here but a 6' mouth-less, nostril-less android standing against the wall, with lighted eyes, a black and red super suit and a pulsating bulge in the briefs of its tights. Next to it, there's a dresser top which gives equal space to jewelry, perfume, makeup and dildos. One in particular stands out; it's a cartoonish figure of a jackass sitting straight up,

with a goofy grin, a goofy hat and an erection bigger than the rest of his entire body. There's a metal sculpture on the wall of the male and female emblems interlocked. In actuality, the emblems for Mars and Venus.

Hotpoint (whispering under her breath): Venus!

The open door swings shut, revealing that Venus was hiding behind it.

Venus: Mmmmm, I love the way you speak my name. Did you come here to proclaim your love for me?

Venus approaches her. Hotpoint edges along the far wall, and bumps into the robot. It humps at her.

Hotpoint: Ew, gross! Get away from me. I'm not like that.

Venus stands seductively in front of her. Hotpoint slides away from the robot. It doesn't move with her, but Venus does. There's a window on the other side of the bed, but there's something else keeping her here. Venus steps closer.

Venus: Oh? Then, why do you not fight me, or fly away?

Hotpoint (helpless, whimpering voice): I 'on't know. ?

Venus pins her hands against the wall and puts her face up close to Hotpoint's face.

Venus: I think you are like that, but you are just not yet privy to the knowing of it.

She kisses her.

Vision 50a: Someone's Missing

Next day. Retaliators Mansion living room. It's about 11:00 and everyone's up, even the late sleepers. Except for Jackson Race, who's usually an early

riser. And Hotpoint. Where could she be?

Mzalendo: Oh, man! I can't ever get used to the time difference! I've been here for weeks now, and my sleep is still screwed up!

Mighty Man: Yeah? When were you thinking of, you know, heading back home?

Mzalendo: Soon, Casey. In a hurry to see me leave, are ya?

Mighty Man: No, no. Of course not. It's just; I figure you must be getting homesick, that's all.

Mzalendo: Ah. It breaks my heart to see you so concerned for my welfare, Casey. Here. This is against card players' ethics, but here's the money back I won from you t'other day.

Mighty Man: No, no, put that back. It's against my card players' ethics, too. I'm not worried about the money. Just forget I mentioned it, O.k.? Sheesh!

Tech War can be seen through a window, approaching the mansion. She's heading obviously to the front porch, though we can't see the landing, it's obviously where she's headed. She enters through the front door. (Note: this isn't the first time in this story it's been her, not counting the one at the military contract demonstration, where it was obvious. But the other two times, there were no references to "he" or "she", only "Tech War". Happy guessing! Except for that first time, when Wally and Wendy both had their voice modulators turned off, there's no way to tell by the voice. The modulated voice is a mix of three or four synchronized robotic voices with different pitches. The human voice might be audible, but since it's whispered as low as possible for the synthesizer to still detect it, it blends in and is drowned out by the modulated voice)

Tech War: Sorry I'm late, guys. I had some pressing matters to attend to at R.I.

Captain Superhero: Arthur Reddingfield's lucky you're so tied up with The Retaliators. If you had more time to spend at Reddingfield Innovations, I bet you'd be running the place, before long.

Tech War: Ha, ha! Arthur's got no competition in me, that's for sure.

Mars: Don't sell yourself so short, Tech War. I believe you could fill in for Reddingfield, and have it go well, without a hitch. But, could he ever step

into your shoes, without having it go awry?

Tech War: Ha, ha! Probably not, it goes awry for me, half the time! Ha, ha, ha! If you guys don't mind, I wanna go down to the lab, to see if Jackson's made any progress on Casey's cure.

Mêlée: I think he hasn't gotten up, yet.

Tech War: That's unusual. He must've worked long into the night, and went to bed exhausted.

On that, Upsurge enters, from the main hall.

Mars: Ah, there he is. Did you have a good sleep, Jackson?

Upsurge: No! I waited up until all hours for Candice to come home. I fell asleep waiting. When I checked her room, she wasn't in it. Guys, please tell me she came home late, and got up early, and is, I don't know, in the kitchen, bothering the chef about the right way to make a plum pudding, or something. ?

Everyone shakes their head.

Captain Superhero: I haven't seen her, and I've been up since the crack of dawn.

Upsurge: Anyone else seen her?

Mighty Man stares at the empty air in front of him.

Mêlée: No.

Mzalendo: No, I just got up.

Tech War: And I just got here.

Mars: Do you think she may have befallen some manner of foul play?

Mighty Man: SHIT !!!

Upsurge: What?!

Mighty Man: I was on a date, yesterday, and she kept following us around.

Upsurge: Why would she do that?

Mighty Man: O.k., don't doubt me, now, that my loyalties are with the Retaliators, but... I've been seeing Jhotica.

All Retaliators: What?!

Upsurge: How long?

Mighty Man: Ever since. We were together before I came here, and I wouldn't break up with her just because we have conflicting jobs. But, I haven't seen Rascher since I've been a Retaliator. I haven't wanted to see him.

Upsurge: Since you've been a Retaliator, or since the arraignment? Which is it, huh?

Mighty Man: I've only been seeing Yvenia. And when... Citizen Defender goes back to Africa, she wants to apply for his spot on the Retaliators' roster.

Mzalendo: Ah, hah!

Tech War: Citizen Defender isn't on the full-time active duty roster. There's a *vacancy* on the roster. But even if there wasn't, your girlfriend could stay here, without being on the roster. Especially if it meant her leaving Rascher.

Mighty Man: What... ?

Mars: Have you left Rascher, Mighty Man?

Mighty Man: Yes! Why do people keep asking me that? Aaaaahh! I didn't know Yvenia could stay here!

Tech War: You should've asked.

Mighty Man: I should've asked!

Upsurge: Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when at first we practice to deceive.

Mighty Man: Astor Plaza, penthouse suite. That's Rascher's hideout. If you guys wanna kick me out, do it later. If Rascher has Candy, we can't waste any more time.

Mars: Tech War, Captain Superhero, Mighty Man and I will start there, now. The rest of you take the Hyperjet. Mêlée, you're the pilot. Upsurge is too distracted to fly.

Mighty Man: Jackson, I promise, I'll get her back for you. Even if I have to personally rip Rascher's lungs out, myself!

Upsurge snorts through his nose at Mighty Man, as if he wants to rip his lungs out. Then, he turns away, to make for the rear entrance of the mansion, where the Hyperjets are. Then, he turns back toward Mighty Man. Upsurge, 6'1" in skivvies, 6'2" in boots, Mighty Man, 6'7" in skivvies, a bit over 6'9"

in boots and a helmet. Upsurge doesn't like to look up at anyone, especially people he's pissed off at, so he grows to 10' tall and scowls down at Mighty Man.

Upsurge: She had better be alright. 'Cause, so help me God, I don't care if I have to grow to 200 feet tall, I will...

Upsurge claps his two massive hands together, grinds them together, gritting his teeth, then brushes away some imaginary dust from his hands. As Upsurge speaks, his eyes can be seen through the eyeholes of his mask, and they look a bit crazed. He speaks through a noticeable amount of spittle. He's trembling, slightly, from adrenaline.

Upsurge: Do NOT fuck around with me! D'you understand?

Mighty Man nods. Mars and Tech War, waiting for Mighty Man, also nod, denoting they support what Upsurge is saying, and if it comes down to a fight between Upsurge and Mighty Man, they'll make sure Upsurge wins. Upsurge normalizes his height, to better clear the doorway to the hall, and makes his way toward the rear of the mansion. Mighty Man, Mars, Captain Superhero and Tech War exit the front door, and fly away.



Vision 50b

Rascher's penthouse terrace. Mighty Man, Mars, Captain Superhero and Tech War land on it. As they walk through to the hallway, the Retaliator Hyperjet approaches, turns sideways, and hovers alongside the terrace. He could land on the terrace, if there wasn't a swimming pool in the middle. The right rear wing is over the barricade, but Mêleé is still trying to clear the fore nacelle, when Upsurge opens the door and jumps out, onto the terrace. The penthouse is empty. In the living room, Mighty Man finds a VHS tape on the coffee table, with a post-it note on it. It says "Play Me".

Mighty Man: Hey, guys! I found something!

Upsurge: What are the odds that you'd be the one to "find" something?

Mighty Man gets a frustrated look on his face. He holds up the video.

Mighty Man: It's a video tape. It's probably a clue.

Citizen Defender has entered the building. Mêlée's keeping the Hyperjet hovering.

Tech War: It's probably some form of deception, orchestrated by Doktor Rascher.

Upsurge: *Play it .*

Mars and Tech War nod at Mighty Man. He turns on the T.V., and sticks the tape in the VCR. Doktor Rascher is on the video. In costume, behind a prop desk, with prop books behind him, like he's making a presentation video.

Doktor Rascher: Casey, you betrayed me! After everything I've done for you, there you stand in my living room, with your fellow Retaliators, ready to put an end to my "evil-doings", once and for all. Oh, you Retaliators; don't go blaming Casey for this. He was as much a dupe to my master plan as the rest of you. But you're not interested in that, are you? Your only concern, right now is; what have I done with the effervescent Hotpoint? She is not harmed. But, as you can see; she is also not here. You didn't expect me to make it easy for you, did you? By the time you see this message, I will have taken her... out of country. Now, if only you can get Mighty Man to betray me further, you can move on to the next leg of your journey. And the next stage of my master plan. Auf Wiedersehen!

The video goes black. Then static. Mighty Man punches the screen out.

Mighty Man: Aaaaaaahh! I'll kill him!!

Upsurge: WHAT... was he talking about?!

Mighty Man: Colombia. His "out of country" facility is in Colombia.

Vision 50c

The Coldplay track “Speed Of Sound”, playing to a far away rear bird’s eye view of a Retaliators Hyperjet, hauling ass to South America, all jet engines, one on the end of each wing, one on each fore nacelle, are off, reduced distance hyperspace is activated. It’s similar to the concept of warp drive. Mars gave R.I. the secret to reduced distance hyperspace a couple years ago, he’s a couple years away from giving them condensed distance hyperspace, which is used by spacefaring races for intergalactic space travel. The Terrans will have to figure out zero distance hyperspace on their own. As evidenced by Skull Croat, they eventually will. Zero distance hyperspace is teleportation. Not to be confused with the transporter from that famous series. The method is entirely different, though the result is similar.

Coldplay: Look up, I look up at night, planets are moving at the speed of light. Climb up, up in the trees, every chance that you get is a chance you seize.

A level bird’s eye view of the Hyperjet approaching, whizzing past, then we turn and watch it haul ass away.

Coldplay: How long am I gonna stand with my head stuck under the sand? I’ll start before I can stop, uh before I see things the right way up.

The rear of the Hyperjet. Blurred from the wind and the warping of space/time. There’s a sparkly colored lightshow around the hyperspace engine in the center rear of the tailfin/wing assembly. It’s off when the jets are on and vice versa.

Coldplay: All that noise, and all that sound, all those spaces I’ve got found. Um, Birds come flying at the speed of sound, to show you how it all began. Birds came flying from the underground, if you could see it then you’d understand.

Inside the Hyperjet. Everyone is onboard, even the flyers. We’re going extremely fast, past the sound barrier, approaching light speed. Mighty Man

is seated one row above, and across the aisle from Upsurge. He looks over at him. Upsurge looks back at him, hard faced and dagger eyed. Mighty Man averts his gaze and looks straight ahead. Upsurge continues looking at him, and Mighty Man feels the daggers. Then, Upsurge averts his gaze and looks ahead. Mighty Man looks up at the ceiling, with desperation on what can be seen of his face.

Mighty Man (whispering to God): Please, let me get this right. ? For once in my life, just let me get something right. ?

He glances back at Upsurge, then looks back up at the ceiling.

Mighty Man: And if I should ever get anything right, please let it be this. ?

Mighty Man crosses himself. Despite the Retaliators' annoyance, they know he's torn up over this. They persist in believing in him, even to a fault.

Vision 51: The Betrayal

Colombia. The facility looks like a 3rd world drug cartel base. Forklifts, stacked crates, etc, like in a standard action hero flick. The Retaliators exit the Hyperjet.

Mighty Man: O.k., this is it. There's a lot of sheds and buildings and Candy could be in any one of them, or even out here in all this junk. We'll have to search for her.

Mars: Spread out. But don't get lost. Maintain eyesight with one another, at all times. There's no telling what manner of bedevilment Rascher has cooked up for us.

They all spread out in a circle on the outskirts of the airstrip, and begin looking around the junk and inside the sheds and buildings, to find a trace of Candace. Zoom in on Mighty Man's ear.

Voice In Mighty Man's Ear (Rascher): Psssst!

Mighty Man looks over to his left, and sees Rascher and the Consulate Of Despots, including Jhotica, all huddled up in a junk strewn covey hole, that is apparently the hidden entrance to the main building.

Voice In Mighty Man's Ear (Rascher): Shhh!

The Consulate Of Despots step aside, to reveal Hotpoint, chained to a wooden pole in front of the entrance. Venus is hanging all over her, as if they were "together". Rascher motions Mighty Man over. He looks back at the Retaliators.

Voice In Mighty Man's Ear (Rascher): Shhh!

Rascher motions him over again. Mighty Man runs over there.

Mighty Man (to Jhotica): Hey.

Jhotica: Hey.

Venus is licking on the side of Hotpoint's face. Hotpoint is mesmerized and smiling.

Mighty Man: This is the end for you, Rascher. You've gone too far, this... (to Venus) Ack! You're sick!

Venus: Yes. It is a fever I spread. If you come near me, you will feel the heat of my affliction, as well.

Jhotica (to Venus): Don't you dare!

Doktor Rascher: It's time to make our play, Mighty Man. Now, you must go in and devastate The Retaliators for me.

Mighty Man: I am a Retaliator. I'm Mighty Man! You nor Wyatt can lay a hand on me, now! Whether you like it or not, I'm out of the Consulate Of Despots! And I'm taking Jhotica with me. She doesn't belong with your band of thugs, either.

Doktor Rascher: Do you want to live, Mighty Man?

Mighty Man: What are you talking about?

Doktor Rascher: Haven't they given you a physical examination, yet? You're dying, Mr. Martel. I have the antidote to the radiation poisoning that is slowly killing you. Your choices are to either do as I say and live a long full life, with the woman you love, or defy me and die a horrible death, leaving her broken hearted and alone.

Mighty Man stares Rascher hard in the face, and breathes heavily through his teeth at him. Then he turns, takes flight, and tackles Tech War.

Tech War: Casey, what's gotten into you?

Mighty Man: I'm sorry. I don't have a choice.

Mighty Man grabs Tech War's legs, ascends, spins up some force, then hurls Tech War into Upsurge. The fight song is; "Is It Any Wonder?", by Keane.

Captain Superhero: Casey, what're you doing?

Mighty Man: I'm sorry. I don't have a choice.

Captain Superhero: I be damn! He is a double agent, working for Rascher!

Mighty Man lands in front of Captain Superhero, who assumes a fighting stance.

Mighty Man: I didn't know, either. I just got the news myself, friend.

Mighty Man readies to fight Captain Superhero. Suddenly, the ground shakes, and a fist the size of a van comes from up high and crashes down on top of Mighty Man, planting him into the ground. When the fist is lifted off, Mighty Man scampers out of the hole, unharmed. He apologizes, again.

Mighty Man: I'm sorry. I don't have a choice.

Upsurge: Damn you, Casey! I'm tired of your excuses. I've had it with you!

Further back, we can see Upsurge is nearly 80 feet tall, kneeling over Mighty Man. He starts beating Mighty Man back into the ground, with both fists.

Mighty Man keeps crawling out of the hole, unharmed. Upsurge scoops him up, into his massive fist, and starts beating him, with his other fist. Mighty Man squirms his way out of the giant fist, flies up and punches Upsurge, but the impact only makes him stumble backwards over some trucks. Still in the air, Mighty Man squares off with Tech War again, who's also hovering, but before he can clash with her, Mars' mace knocks him into the side of a 3 story warehouse. Mighty Man cautiously peers out of the hole he made in the wall. Mars ascends up high, and the sky turns dark behind him. Mighty Man exits the hole, hovering, and looks up, but he won't go up there.

Mars: Traitor! Malefactor! You have made a fool out of me, yet again! In his realm, the god of the forge laughs like a maniac, and cries out, "Fool Mars!" This for he who gives my brother cause for such glee!

Mars comes down fast like a black streak, with the toe of his boot impacting on Mighty Man's helmet. It flies off, and Mighty Man pinwheels in the air. When the jets are pointing up, Mighty Man starts thrusting downward, but he rights himself in the air. Captain Superhero flies over and kicks Mighty Man's face with an armored shin. This makes Mighty Man horizontal, facing up, and his own jets are adding to the momentum of Captain Superhero's kick. Tech War flies around and under, from the direction Mighty Man's head is pointed, flies up, grabs both of Mighty Man's ankles, and flings him head first into the ground. Mighty Man skids in the dirt, stops, and stands up, unphased by any of it. All The Retaliators gang up on Mighty Man. It's a six on one pileup. Upsurge is down to his 12 foot optimal fighting size. Mighty Man is always keeping another opponent between him and Mars, and Mars is limiting his activity, so as to not accidentally kill one of his comrades. Mêlée spins out of the mêlée with his feet up higher than his head, and he lands a good ten feet away on the back of his shoulders, the rest of his body jolting from the impact, before settling unceremoniously to the ground. Next; Tech War. It's a hard right hook to the left side of her helmet that spins her in the air like a pinwheel, before the centrifugal momentum is interrupted by the ground. The armor only weighs about 80 pounds, so even with it, she's way lighter than him. If she'd been more immoveable, that punch might've killed her. Citizen Defender launches a blunt cable at Mighty Man's face, knocking

the goggles off. Mighty Man grabs the cable and uses it to reel Citizen Defender in. Citizen Defender resists, but his strength is no match. From behind, Captain Superhero wraps his armored left arm around Mighty Man's throat, causing him to drop the cable. Citizen Defender conjures spirits from the soul gem in the forehead of his helmet, and they fly down Mighty Man's throat. Mighty Man jolts like there's a battle inside him, and he emits beams of white light from his mouth, nose, ears and eyes. The spirits flee, some return to the gem, some are dispersed in the air. Mighty Man grabs Captain Superhero's right knee, and back-kicks him hard enough to break the chokehold, with no effect on Mighty Man's impervious neck. Mighty Man wields Captain Superhero's shin like a baseball bat, and beats Citizen Defender down with Captain Superhero's armored form, "hit a motherfucker with another motherfucker" style. Mighty Man slams Captain Superhero hard into the ground a few times by his leg, then flings his semiconscious form at the face of a 50 foot Upsurge. Upsurge catches the armored legend before the impact, but the sudden stop puts Flash the rest of the way asleep. Upsurge lays Captain Superhero with the other heroes. Upsurge stands defiantly, but must force himself not to rage, because he might step on his sleeping teammates. Mighty Man flies up and punches Upsurge in the jaw. It's a localized sting and Mighty Man gets bitch slapped. Mighty Man circles around for another pass, and a giant fist knocks him back through the air like a shuttlecock. Mighty Man rights himself in the air and decides he needs a bigger fist. He flies over to the warehouse and digs his fingers into the brick wall. He maneuvers around so that he's perched with his feet planted against the wall, holding himself in place by his fingers, not his jets. He shoves off with a super leap that demolishes half the façade. In the air, he puts his shoulder forward, like he's going to break a door down. He impacts on Upsurge's left forehead, knocking the giant out. Upsurge falls, rumbling the ground and whipping up a dirt cloud. Mars takes to the sky above, and conjures his mystic scepter. It strikes Mighty Man with groping tendrils of mystic energy. Mighty Man is being intensely zapped.

Mighty Man: Aaaargh!!

Mighty Man falls to his hands and knees. Then he looks over at Jhotica, standing with the villains, screaming hysterically. Rascher looks like he's

trying to reassure her that all is well. A close-up view of Mars in the sky shows him putting a more determined look of fury on his face. He outstretches both arms, including the one with the scepter, and a steady bolt of lightning strikes him and is channeled through the scepter at Mighty Man. Back to Mighty Man. He looks over at Jhotica, and somehow finds the strength to stand. He picks up a forklift, even while being electrocuted, and hurls it at Mars. It totally misses. But it's still going.

Doktor Rascher (to Venus): Give him an enchantment, so he can't miss!

Venus throws a magic bolt at Mighty Man. He picks up a HUMV and hurls it at Mars. It comes right to him, and Mars busts it into fiery pieces, with his mace. The lightning stops. Mars flings his mace away and it vanishes, as he flies down to face Mighty Man. The space around Mars distorts and mingles with strange parallel dimensions, as he transforms into a golden man-wolf creature, still wearing the same costume, closing in on its cornered prey. He's now emanating the same sparkly energy he had when he rammed Croat's force field. That's scary enough, and strength to strength, fighting to fighting is one thing, but how could Mighty Man fight or overpower these hell dimensions that keep appearing and disappearing, randomly? Mighty Man's eye lights pulsate, and his full-toothed expression is the unmistakable smile/frown of anxiety. He starts stepping backward, glancing behind himself to his right to see where he's going. The sparkly golden man-wolf snarls and shakes its head, disapprovingly. The spatial distortion increases. The hells are expanding and staying longer. Mighty Man stops backing up, glances over at the covey hole, looks back at his very scary opponent, bounces on his heels a couple times, rolls his head around to loosen his neck, crosses himself one time with his left hand, then assumes the Aikido fighting stance, which looks good, but didn't help him against Pete Martel or Captain Superhero. Man-wolf Mars thrusts his arms up and flexes them, commanding the distortions to cease. Mars doesn't want to damn his progeny, he wants to beat the shit out of him, to completion this time, either redeeming or destroying him as the result. Though the knuckle gloves he's wearing don't include the spikes anyway, he shakes his hands in front of himself and they vanish, making him as bare fisted as Mighty Man. He smiles, nods and assumes an ordinary fist fight stance. The scar in Mars' right hand is still visible, even with the even

toned golden color. Vulcan's dagger. Croat's ray-gun. Mars is vulnerable. Mighty Man may not be. Magic tendrils emanate from all over Mars' body, like multicolored electricity, then the tendrils gather around his right arm, as if he's working up a super punch that could possibly knock Mighty Man into orbit. Before he has a chance to use it, Mighty Man has already given him a right cross, that actually turns his head to the right. Wolf-Mars turns his head back, slowly, to show that he's unaffected. Mighty Man answers that with two more right crosses, followed with a left. The super punch Mars had built up is delivered in the form of a short upward ascension, followed by a downward fist, enhanced by magic. It's reminiscent of one of Tigerlily's powered strikes, only with much more power. Mighty Man is driven so hard to the ground, he bounces back up, literally. Mighty Man lands on his feet, and lunges forward, with super speed, which we and he didn't know he had, until now. Mars' own super speed allows him to sidestep it, but just barely. However, because of Venus' magic spell, Mighty Man can't miss, so, even without his feet under him or his belt jets activated, Mighty Man's body swings around and rams Mars. It didn't really work in Mighty Man's favor, it threw off his own balance more than it affected Mars. While Mighty Man is stumbling and twirling around, tripping over his own feet, Mars side kicks him in the back. Mars' fighting style is freakish to watch, because he doesn't have to be firmly planted to have leverage. He's as solidly braced hovering as standing, and he can lunge without an equal opposite reaction. The kick would've knocked Mighty Man down, except he was already thinking about activating his jets and ascending, to straighten himself out. Mars flies up to meet him, with his eagle wings formed, so now he's in full eagle-wolf mode. They grapple and exchange punches, and they're both feeling it. It's not exactly an even fight, but Mighty Man's coming closer than Vulcan did, way back when. But, Mighty Man's jets are so comparatively weak, Mars only has to palm Mighty Man's cranium like a basketball and slam dunk him hard to the ground. Mighty Man quickly gets up, but soon as he does, Mars comes down on him with the sole of his right boot. The wings vanish, the wolf remains. The strength and resilience seems to be close, but Mars teleports, knocks the hell out of Mighty Man, then teleports to a different position and knocks the hell out of him again. Mighty Man just can't compete with that. He stoops over with his hands on his knees, like he's trying to get his bearings or think. Mighty Man does the "time out" gesture with his hands.

Mars answers that with another kick in the face, then they roll around, slugging each other, Mars dominating, 5 punches to one. Mars ends up on top, beating Mighty Man similarly to how he did before, but this time Mighty Man is fighting back. A strong left fist to the face/snout leans Mars back enough for Mighty Man to get a foot under Mars' chest and kick him off. Mars tumbles backwards in the dirt a few times, then rolls to his feet. Mighty Man is already back on his feet, as well. They walk casually but purposefully toward each other with their right fists drawn. They both throw a right punch, the fists meet in the middle, and "bust knuckles". It makes a visible shock wave.

Shock Wave: **KA-POW!**

Though they both were perfectly centered and braced, they both were pushed back a couple yards each, mounding up piles of dirt behind their heels, and they both hurt their hand. They look at each other like "What the fuck?". Suddenly, the forklift comes back down and lands right on top of Mars. It makes a small crater, shakes the ground and sends Mighty Man sailing backwards to land on his butt.

Crashing Forklift: **FA-BOOM !!**

Mighty Man: Noooo !!!

Mighty Man runs over, and with his right hand, flings the flattened forklift into the air behind himself, without looking at it. It tumbles and spins in the air for about 30 yards, then crashes into a mound of dirt, bounces and settles into a pile of junk. Inside the crater, Mars is unconscious and has returned to his natural state. Mighty Man pulls him out of the crater. In all his history, up to this point, Mars has never lost a fight, much less been knocked out. Though, it's closer to the truth that he was defeated by Venus, than by Mighty Man, and she's been a source of misfortune for him, for a very long time. Consistent with her own master plan, the credit as well as the blame for this will go elsewhere. Not to take anything away from Mighty Man, he did his share, surpassing anyone else's best against Mars, raising the status of Mighty Man's legend, from this point on. But, without Venus' part, this

might have had a more predictable outcome. Though Mighty Man's invulnerability is now well proven, there may be some truth to what Rascher said about his capacity. He'd either be completely unscathed or utterly destroyed. Mars is limp as a noodle while being dragged, and his helmet slides off his head. Mighty Man kneels on both knees, toward the fallen Retaliators, sitting on his calves. Rascher's master strategies are always formed from the factors around him, never realizing those factors are aligned by Venus in a way for Rascher to draw the conclusions she knows he will. Here's the plan; Whether Mighty Man starts or finishes with him, Mars will be the hardest to kill, requiring the separation of head and body or some manner of destruction of either or both. Mighty Man could wear himself out on that job, but before too much damage is done, Venus can vanish Mighty Man away to somewhere, thus saving Mars' life. She'd probably keep Mighty Man too, she's not worried about Jhotica. Whether the other Retaliators are dead or not, Mars being back under Venus' control should be enough to dissolve the Retaliators, thus making Rascher the hero of all villains. He won't get a holiday, but his status'll be raised. Mighty Man's an 11, the consummate superhero, the quintessential icon and selfless martyr. All-around a better quality of person than the rest of us. A prime example for everyone of the right way to be. But he still hasn't wrapped his head completely around Mighty Man, he still thinks of himself as Casey Martel, a 5, confused, inconsistent, impossible to predict. There really was a reality wherein he dove into Skull Croat and pounded his helmet in, as per Epochalus' prophesy that his life depends on it. And the one we saw, wherein he curled up and crawled away like a helpless feeb. That's how wide the margin is of what can be predicted of Casey Martel. He doesn't even know what he'll do, till it happens. Casey Martel in the Martel Manufacturing flight suit, minus the sleeves. His "Mighty Man" costume. Something he dresses up and pretends to be, for kicks.

Doktor Rascher: Finish them! What are you waiting for?

Mighty Man: Noble Mars, our fearless leader. You vouched for me, when some of the others were still unsure. Virtuous Captain Superhero, I read comic books about you, when I was just a little kid. I always dreamed that I'd grow up someday, and be just like you. Mêlée, friend of Jitara, who got killed when it was supposed to be me who died. I barely know you. Could it be that

you blame me, as I blame myself? It's okay if you do, my friend. I understand, if you do. Citizen Defender, Tech War, Upsurge. All my friends. All of you... are my friends. Probably the truest friends I ever had, besides my Momma and Poppa. You knew where I came from, and you accepted me, and took me in as one of your own. And I repaid your trust with treachery and betrayal. What kind of monster have I become? Can you ever forgive me?

No answer. They're still sleeping. Mighty Man puts his hands up to his face, and rubs his closed eyes. Beneath his eyes, there are two iridescent glow in the dark tears. One on each cheek. If it was night, they'd light his face. He starts raking at the dry dirt on either side of himself, with the fingers of both hands.

Mighty Man: The company... The Retaliators... All my life... My life... This is my life... It's my curse, I think, to be given everything I want, just to have it slip away.

Mighty Man raises both fists out to his sides and each has a clump of dirt, which he sifts away as his fists rise, creating a cloud of dust, which fades away. He rocks back to his feet, stands and faces Doktor Rascher.

Mighty Man: You!! You did this! You reduced me to this! I'm going to beat you to death, you Nazi scum!

Mighty Man runs at Rascher. Rascher steps back, and Adonais steps in front of Mighty Man. Adonais is the one being beaten, but Rascher is the one screaming. Mighty Man's eye view: As soon as Adonais falls, Doktor Rascher is standing behind him, pointing his ray-gun at us. He fires. A direct hit, the ray lights everything red. Back to regular view: Mighty Man is knocked back by the force of the blast, but the fact that his chest is on fire prevents him from regaining his balance. He's staggering clumsily backwards, and trips over the sleeping Tech War's legs. He lands on his back, and Jhotica runs over to him. She kneels beside his head and cradles it.

Jhotica: Casey, are you o.k.?

Mighty Man: Ohhhhhhh. Burning up all over.

Venus and Adonais disappear. Doktor Rascher is still there. There's a very large dump truck tire flying directly at him. He dashes for the door and narrowly escapes.

Jhotica: Yeah, you'd better run, you son of a bitch!

She telekinetically throws jeeps and other junk at him, but it only hits the outside of the building, and Rascher's already inside. He won't be pursued. This matter here is more pressing, and Alchemist is in there incanting an influence to assure that this is more urgent. Jhotica rocks Mighty Man's head back and forth. She's crying.

Jhotica: It's o.k., Casey, they're gone now. Rascher won't hurt you anymore. I won't let him.

Mighty Man: You won't forget me, will you Yvenia?

Jhotica: What are you talking about? I'm here, baby. Everything is going to be fine. HELP ME !!! Aaaaahhh!! Somebody help us!

Upsurge is awake, and runs past them toward Rascher's covey hole.

Jhotica: HELP US !!! Oh, God, somebody help us!!

Mars clambers to a half sitting position. Jhotica is frantically looking around for help. Upsurge can't get the chains off of Hotpoint, so he grows tall and pulls the pole out of the ground, and slides it up through the bonds, freeing her. He returns to normal size. She's still chained, but they're long, so she's able to step over them to free her hands enough to hug and kiss her true lover. Tech War is kneeling beside Jhotica, looking at Mighty Man.

Tech War: What happened?

Jhotica: He couldn't go through with it. He chose you guys, and Rascher k... shot him for it. Please, you've got to help him!

Mighty Man: Poppa... ? Is that you, Poppa?

Jhotica: Aaaaahh, hah, hah!

Tech War: No, I'm just a friend. You hurt my neck, you big clumsy oaf.

Mighty Man: I'm sorry.

Tech War: It's okay. I'll be alright and so will you. Jackson! We need some help over here! Ow, my neck.

Upsurge: Oh, my God! What happened?

Tech War: He couldn't go through with it. Rascher shot him.

Upsurge: Oh, my God.

Hotpoint: Oh, no! This is my fault! If I hadn't... If I hadn't...

Upsurge: You were doing your job, honey. Rascher did this. He probably orchestrated the whole thing, since the beginning. Everyone involved just played right into his hand. Except... obviously this was his plan b; in case it failed.

Hotpoint: This is just like Psion-Man. You said Casey was tougher than Flash, and no way Rascher's weapon could be more powerful than Croat's future gun. Rascher had to know Casey's Achilles' Heel. This couldn't happen otherwise.

Upsurge: Good point, honey. Shedowee created the machine that gave Psion-Man his power. Thus, he knew his vulnerability. That's the parallel. The difference is; Mighty Man's invulnerability isn't a conscious effort. His invulnerability is always "on", whether he's thinking about it or not, even in his sleep. The gun had to have been designed specifically for this purpose. To interact negatively with his power.

Jhotica: Aaaaah, hah, hah! RASCHER !!! Ah, hah, hah! You've got to help him, please! Take me, put me in jail! I'll answer to everything I've done, if you'll help him!

Upsurge: Don't worry. You're not going to jail. The way I see it, you're just another victim. I'll do what I can to help your boyfriend.

Jhotica: Fiancé.

Hotpoint: Oh, God.

Hotpoint throws herself into Upsurge's arms. Mars is there by now, and he scoops Mighty Man up in his arms and carries him to the Hyperjet.

Tech War: Mêlée's flying again, I gotta lay back. My neck hurts. Somebody grab my nacelles, I'm gonna pop 'em off.

Mêlée: I got it.

Mêlée grabs the nacelles as they pop off. He opens a small closet with a clothing rack in it, and hangs the inner angles of the rockets over the bar. Tech War sits in a chair and reclines all the way back in it. She winces and grabs her neck.

Tech War: Ooh, ooh!

The Hyperjet ascends and rocks back a bit. We're using jets for the ascension.

Tech War: Ow! Careful, willya?

Mêlée: That's as smooth an ascension as anybody's, give me a break. We'll be hyperzipping through the air straight as an arrow, soon enough.

Upsurge: You alright, you need me to take a look at ya?

Tech War: It's not so bad to give up my identity. Besides, Casey's your priority. Just, somebody call ahead and have Arthur or Wally bring a chopper to the jetport, so I can go get x-rayed soon as we get there.

Mêlée: Ah, this Wally person must be that second person besides Reddingfield who knows who ya are.

Upsurge: You really should let me check you. You may've loosened something besides a vertebra. You wouldn't ordinarily make a mistake like that.

Tech War: Oh, like you hadn't already figured Wally knew.

Upsurge: It's obvious to me Wally was the other person who knows who you are, I work there. The rest of these people don't even know Wally, but now they do.

Citizen Defender: I know Wally. Met him at R.I., years ago. Leave Wally alone, he's a cool cat.

Mêlée: I don't wanna corner the gouv, I'd just loike to talk to him, fiond out how he gets to know Tech War's name and the rest of us don't. We're all your friends, aren't we? Nobody 'ere wants to sell ya out, mate, I'd just loike to take ya out on the town without the duds. Just come outta the suit and we'll go f'ra beer, raise some hell.

Tech War: I'm Pierce Welch.

Mêlée: Oh yeah, I read that in a comic book. Don't piss in my pocket and tell me it's liquid sunshine. If it was real, everybody'd know it was him. Arthur and Pierce on a cruise ship, the pirates show up, all of a sudden there's Tech War, but Pierce is nowhere around! Shit! I grew out of fairy tails when I was a kid!

Upsurge: You revealed your identity in the comics before telling us?

Tech War: No. There's no such person. It's made up, to make the comic readers stop asking who I am. Arthur even had...

Mêlée: No, no, Jackson, hey, they put the armor in a brief case! Not even a big one, but a regular one! It folds up and goes flat in there!

Upsurge: It doesn't fold up and flatten out, that's nonsense.

Mêlée: I know! Pierce puts the armor on over his business suit. You gotta business suit on under there? How do you keep it from getting snagged in the machinery?

Tech War: Polyimide long johns. The same thing you see around my eyes is everywhere but my eyes, between me and this bear trap. They get chewed up so I don't. Usually. (To Upsurge) How's Casey?

Upsurge: Hanging in. He's had better days.

Tech War: Ow! Mêlée, are you playing bumper cars in the air?

Mêlée: Hyperspace jump. Sorry 'bout your neck, mate. I had church bells ringin' in my head from my wallop and I'm over it now. I reckoned you're a fanny in there.

Tech War: Asshole. Sorry, Candy. He called me a pussy in Australian. Shut up and fly the jet, Mêlée. Smoother, please. (to Candace) Don't zap me or him. I'm injured and he's piloting. Plus, the jet is extremely fragile at this speed.

Hotpoint: *I knowwwwah* . You don't get to pick on me today, buddy, you're the one letting it slip who knows your secret. I've always had this idea how to...

Mêlée: Got it on my bare chin too, mate. No metal helmet, no enhancement of any kind, except hard living and nature fed bones and muscles. Ain't nothing there whatcha see 'ere but a good ol' fashion Aussie shitkickah.

Hotpoint: Humph. I almost got mad just now but I guess I don't have the right. I appreciate all you guys for coming getting me. Some of you even got hurt over me, and I appreciate it. Sorry about your bells, Mêlée. Sorry about your neck, Tech War.

Tech War: Thanks. Hurts like a bitch. Sorry.

Tech War takes out a Swisher Sweet Little Cigar from the utility compartment of her chest plate and fires it up.

Hotpoint: Oh, yuck, that looks stinky. Don't you have one of your menthols?

Tech War: Relax, it's Cherry. Smells like a Yule log. Want one?

Hotpoint: No.

We won't see Wendy in the armor again until 1993, and then only once. She got hurt, and that's all the excuse Wally needs to put his foot down for her to give it up. Wally has loved Wendy since grade school. It would break his heart if he knew she gave up her virginity to Arthur in high school. Arthur's not in love with Wendy, Arthur's in love with himself. Actually, he may love Zoëy more than he realizes, he'll realize too late. Arthur will only have one child before Firewolf wrecks his body beyond that ability, and it will be with Wendy Stevenson. That causes problems all around. In addition to that, it makes Wendy the matriarchal ancestor of that legendary slaughterer of thousands in the future, Angus Reddingfield. A few thousand doesn't put him anywhere near Skull Croat's level, but it's still a hell of a lotta blood on the hands of one man. More than enough to make him a legend. Most of Skull Croat's victims died at the hands of soldiers such as Angus, and unraveled timelines. If you only count personal kills, Angus' Tech War is far ahead of any given Damon. Actually, Skull Croat's legend is known only to his bifurcates and a few others involved in the Gemini War, including the Retaliators, because, though Skull Croat has made history many times, it's been with made up, borrowed or stolen names. Everyone Angus Reddingfield killed was in the name of Tech War, which was legitimately his, by right of inheritance. Because of him, in the future, the name Tech War instills fear and hate. Show a child in that era a picture of the original Tech War, and if he doesn't know his history, he'll likely think it's a picture of an ancient villain. Tech War was the monster that King Abaddon could threaten to unleash, and a role model for young Prince Damon. Damon succeeded Angus as First Knight, at age 16.

Mêlée: Sir William Riley Crandall will be your pilot for this evening's flight, but you may call me Billy. BIIIIIIILLLLLLLLLLAAAAYYYY!!!

Muy name is Billy! Fuck people who don't say deir names!

Hotpoint: Oh my Peanut Butter Boobs, are you drunk?

Mêlée: No, I wish I was. I did get bashed in 'e 'ead earlier, but I'm a'roight, now.

Hotpoint: Well, it's okay, and you're doing a good job, but you shouldn't wish you were flying drunk. The Retaliators are made for better things than crashing into the side of a mountain. And try not to cuss around me, please, thank you.

Mêlée: Uh, Candy, deary, when are ya gonna be over it? The Retaliators free the world, but can't speak freely? How long you been repressin' these good people?

Hotpoint: The entire time. It does seem like a losing battle. Okay, I'll stop zapping and nagging, if you'll at least remember it bothers me. Please?

Mêlée: Um, okay. Ay, what're their codenames, so I can call in your medivac?

Tech War: R-1 and R-2.

Vision 52: Shakespearean Death Dream

Retaliators Mansion trauma room. Upsurge is in his Dr. Race persona, accompanied by Doctor Weston from New Hope Medical Center and Professor Ganesh from the Warburg Elite Academy, who taught both. Mighty Man is on a trauma table, in only his gray costume pants and socks. There's a glowing fluxing black/red scorch on his chest. The doctors are bombarding Casey with rays, beams and electricity.

Dr. Race: His body keeps shifting polarities. He's phasing in and out from positive matter to negative matter. In the median phase, he's pure ionic energy. If we could stabilize him in his ionic form, we could at least save him as an energy being.

Dr. Weston: Doctor Race, I'm seeing the negative phase as some sort of black hole phenomenon. Our patient is not the only one in danger, here. He could explode, or implode, taking the entire island with him. Or worse. It's a legitimate concern.

Dr. Race: Don't worry, I've seen my future self. Jeesh, he's flaking. And leaking. I wanna collect all of this, I never was able to take samples from him before.

Prof. Ganesh: That's your best chance to save him. I could recreate him.

Dr. Race: Sir, no. The DNA is fucked. I'm not mad scientist enough to intentionally create a Dark Matter superman, especially with this as the precedent. I just wanna study the samples and reverse engineer Rascher's process, to see how he did this.

Later in the crisis. Mighty Man is glowing bright white light, and groaning.

Mighty Man: Ooooooooooh! I'm not gonna make it, Doc! I can... Ungh! ...feel myself slipping away! Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Dr. Race: I'm sorry, Casey. I'm afraid you're right. We've slowed down your phase shifts, but the intensities are increased and your body is deteriorating.

Mighty Man: Is Yvenia here?

Dr. Race: Yeah. Do you want to see her?

Mighty Man: Yeah. Can't put it off... Aaaahhh! ...till tomorrow.

Dr. Race nods at Flash, who's standing outside the door. He goes out of the room, and comes back with Jhotica, who runs over to Mighty Man's bedside, and kisses his face.

Jhotica: Oh, Casey, please be o.k. For me, please? Won't you please be o.k.? You're so strong. You can beat this. You can beat anything.

Mighty Man: I... can't. I'm already beaten.

Jhotica: NO !! You've got to be o.k. I can't go on without you!

Mighty Man: Yvenia... don't wallow in this. It was meant to be. You...

>ungh< you are so beautiful. Inside and out. What man wouldn't love you? You will survive me. You were meant to go on without me. But.. please... don't ever forget me...

Jhotica: Oh, Casey, I could never forget you! You are the only man I could ever love. You won't die! You can't! I'll never accept it!

Mighty Man: Yvenia, I'm on a one way journey, here. I can tell. Promise me... you'll be o.k.?

Jhotica: No! I can't exist without you!

Mighty Man: I'll be with you, in a way. If you wanna keep our memory, please do. Don't mire yourself up in it, though. If you move on, that's okay... it's better, I guess. I'm just asking you, either way, to be okay. Promise me you'll be okay?

Pause.

Mighty Man: Aaaaaaaagh!

Mighty Man turns into a solarized negative image. Only his physical form, not his pants. The lights in the room dim, slightly. As if something was sucking all the energy out of the room.

Mighty Man (hollow eerie voice): Proooooomiiiiisssse Meeeeeeeeeeeeee ?!

Jhotica: Oh, God! Yes, Casey, I promise! Aaaaahh, hah, hah!

Mighty Man's eye view: We see Yvenia going hysterical, but the sound and image fades to black. Black screen. From screen right, a caterpillar walks into the center of the screen, on an unseen floor. It turns away from us, and climbs up an unseen wall. In a high speed time-elapse, the caterpillar is spinning itself into a cocoon. The cocoon morphs into a Shakespearean stage play. Cleopatra is played by Yvenia Orchev. Diomedes is played by Mars. Mardian is played by Doktor Rascher. Charmian is played by Matilda Martel. Iras is played by Candice Newmeyer. The Messenger is played by Jackson Race.

Cleopatra: And when good will is show'd, though't come too short, the actor may plead pardon. I'll none now: Give me mine angle; we'll to the river: there, My music playing far off, I will betray tawny-finn'd fishes; my bended

hook shall pierce their slimy jaws; and, as I draw them up, I'll think them every one an Antony, and say "Ah, ha! You're caught."

Charmian: 'Twas merry when you wager'd on your angling, when your driver did hang a salt-fish on his hook, which he with fervency drew up.

Cleopatra (overacting nostalgic): That time, - - O times! - - I laugh'd him out of patience; and next morn, ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed; Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst I wore his sword Philipian.

Enter the messenger. Cleopatra drops to her knees in front of him and assumes the pleading position.

Cleopatra: O, from Italy ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, that long time have been barren.

Messenger: Madam, madam, - -

She quickly rises and schizophrenically assumes an overbearing scorned monarch stance.

Cleopatra: Antonius dead! - - If thou say so, villain, thou kill'st thy mistress: but well and free, if thou so yield him, there is gold, and here my bluest veins to kiss; a hand that kings have lipp'd, and trembled kissing.

She offers the back of her hand. The messenger takes one knee, kisses it, then rises.

Messenger: First, madam, he is well.

Cleopatra takes some gold pieces from Diomedes' bag and gives them to the man.

Cleopatra: Why, there's more gold.

She turns away and puts the back of her hand dramatically against her forehead.

Cleopatra: But, sirrah, mark, we use to say the dead are well: ...

She swivels, points at him and takes a harsh tone.

Cleopatra: ...bring it to that, the gold I give thee will I melt and pour down thy ill- uttering throat.

Messenger: Good madam, hear me.

She withdraws her pointed finger and sits in her chair. The messenger takes one knee, and lowers his head.

Cleopatra: Well, go to, I will; but there's no goodness in thy face: if Antony be free and healthful, - - so tart a favour to trumpet such good tidings! If not well, thou shouldst come like a Fury crown'd with snakes, Not like a formal man.

The messenger remains kneeling, but raises his head to speak.

Messenger: Will't please you hear me?

She rises up, grabs her scepter and draws it back menacingly at him.

Cleopatra: I have a mind to strike thee ere thou speak'st: ...

The messenger cringes. She flings the scepter to the floor and assumes her previous kneeling pleading position. The messenger stands and takes a step back. She walks toward him on her knees.

Cleopatra: ...Yet if thou say Antony lives, is well, or friends with Caesar, or not captive to him, I'll set thee in a shower of gold, and hail rich pearls upon thee.

The messenger dips his head once, then raises it and tilts it. Upon speaking, he gradually postures by slowly extending his arms, bearing his chest out, and tilting his head back, until at last he is fully posed in a display of

grandeur. While this is happening, he slowly grows to 10 feet tall. Then, he shimmers bright light.

Messenger: Madam, he awaits the miracle dawn of the chrysalis. At journey's end; there lies his destiny. Upon burgeoning the sands of time, the phoenix shall Rise, rise rise!

She smiles, rises, and tilts her head. Before we see him again, the messenger has returned to normal size.

Cleopatra: Well said.

Suddenly the orchestra blares into a cascade of grandiose frivolity. The actors start dancing and prancing around the stage, like idiots. They curtsy to one another. They pretend to smack, fall back, and be caught by one another. Then, they all line up in a row, smile, and bow to us. Applause, as the curtain falls. Once it does, a fancy painted sign comes down from between the curtain and its valance, attached to two shiny golden ropes. It reads; INTERMISSION



Vision 53

The sifting sand of an hourglass. The Retaliators trauma room. Mighty Man is still laying on the table. His shirt, helmet and glasses are back on. He's black. Not like a black person. No, he's black, like black paint. Dr. Race is standing over his bedside, with a chart. He turns off some of the machines. Flash Anderson enters the room.

Flash Anderson: Hi, Jackson. So... nothing worked, huh?

Dr. Race: No. As much as I hate to, I'm about ready to throw in the towel.

Flash Anderson: What a shame. He was so screwed up. But, in a way that was like a mirror for all of us, you know?

Dr. Race nods.

Dr. Race: No matter how many times he'd disappoint ya, you just couldn't help but root for the guy.

Flash Anderson nods.

Flash Anderson: What's with all the lights?

Dr. Race: I can't keep it lit in here. I had to bring in more lights.

Flash Anderson: That's odd. Is it because of him, do you think?

Dr. Race: Yeah, watch this. Hit them lights over there for me, would ya?

Flash Anderson turns the main light switch off. Dr. Race turns off the standing auxiliary lights that had been brought in. It's dark, except for the light that's coming in through the door, but dark enough for the demonstration. Dr. Race takes out his doctor's penlight, and shines it across Mighty Man's chest. The light arcs, and angles itself downward toward Mighty Man.

Flash Anderson: That's weird.

Dr. Race: Between the Dark Matter and the xenon nuclear bi-product in his body, he's a natural absorber of neutrons, protons and photons. It especially craves light.

Dr. Race shines the light directly at Mighty Man. The flashlight stays on, and the bulb is bright, but the light coming from it dims, darkening the area. Dr. Race turns the big lights back on, and puts the flashlight away.

Flash Anderson: That would be an interesting power to have, if only...

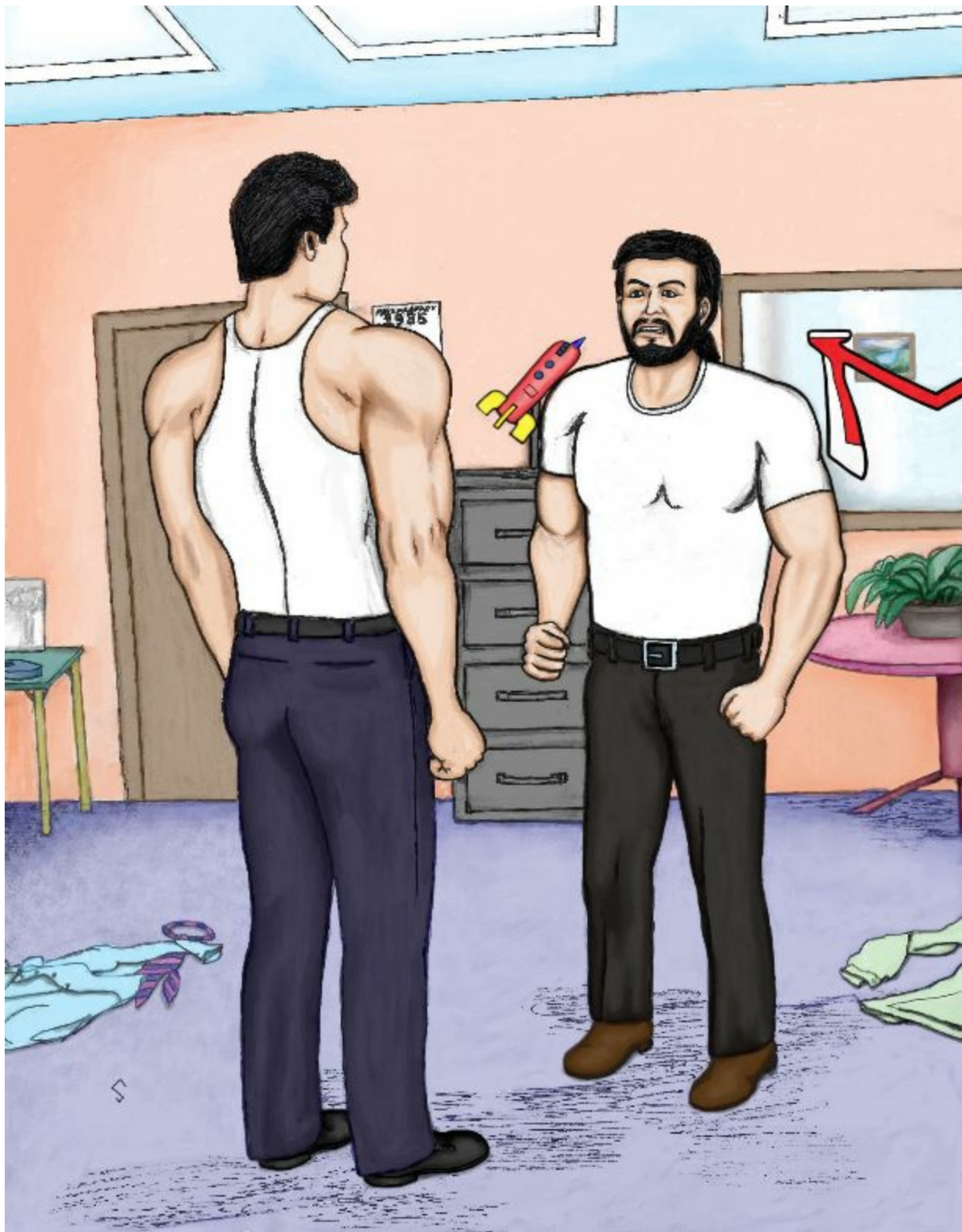
He takes Mighty Man's pulse. He doesn't indicate an unexpected result.

Flash Anderson: ...he wasn't dead.

Flash Anderson puts the arm back down. He makes a grimacing face.

Flash Anderson: >Whew!< Cold as ice.

Dr. Race: Yeah. It's been a week, now. He's not coming back. It's time to call it. Time of death; ... ah shit, he died last week. That's what I'm putting down.



Vision 54: Sea Of Time

The southwestern edge of Retaliators Island, near the seacliff. There're rows of family, friends and Retaliators seated in front of the gravesite. Mars is wearing regal attire, instead of his usual warrior garb. Pete Martel is not present. Matilda Martel is front row center, seated next to Jhotica, who is seated next to Hotpoint, who's seated next to a normal sized Upsurge. On the other side of Matilda Martel is Mars, Tech War, and Captain Superhero. Epochalus presides over the ceremony.

Epochalus: ...and so, we commit his body back to the Terra, from which it came. But take comfort in the promise of Eternity; that his soul has become a part of the vastness of the cosmos, and all the great energies that encompass all things. As we look out over the sea of time, we can't help but wonder; what does it all mean? A man's life is like but a vapor; here today, gone tomorrow. What purpose can one find in a life so brief? For the answer to that question, one needs but look at the faces of his loved ones. Those whose lives he touched so deeply. My friends, Mighty Man is not dead. His soul lives on, in the hearts and minds of those whose courses were forever altered by his presence in the sea of time. His presence here on this Terra, while brief, has forever altered the future of this planet that had issued him out for seemingly a day in the grand scheme of things. For as long as time continues to march forward, the future history of the Terra, itself, will attest that this man once lived. For the future itself will proclaim; things will never be how they would've been, had he not lived. Mrs. Martel, I believe you wanted to give some final words, before the interment?

Matilda Martel gets up, accompanied by Captain Superhero and Tech War, to make sure she doesn't fall. Up in the clouds, the eyes of Venus, watching. Watery, as before. No one notices, not even Epochalus.

Matilda Martel: Casey; my son. You're with your Poppa, now. I know you two were so close. He was so proud of you. And so am I. I couldn't have asked for a better son. You always seemed to brighten my day with that smile of yours. I remember, as a little boy, how you'd run around the yard, with a

towel tied around your neck, like Bellerophon. You'd jump off things, trying to fly, and hurt yourself. You'd come in the house, all sobbing and scraped up, and Momma'd make it all better. Then you'd go right back out there and do it again.

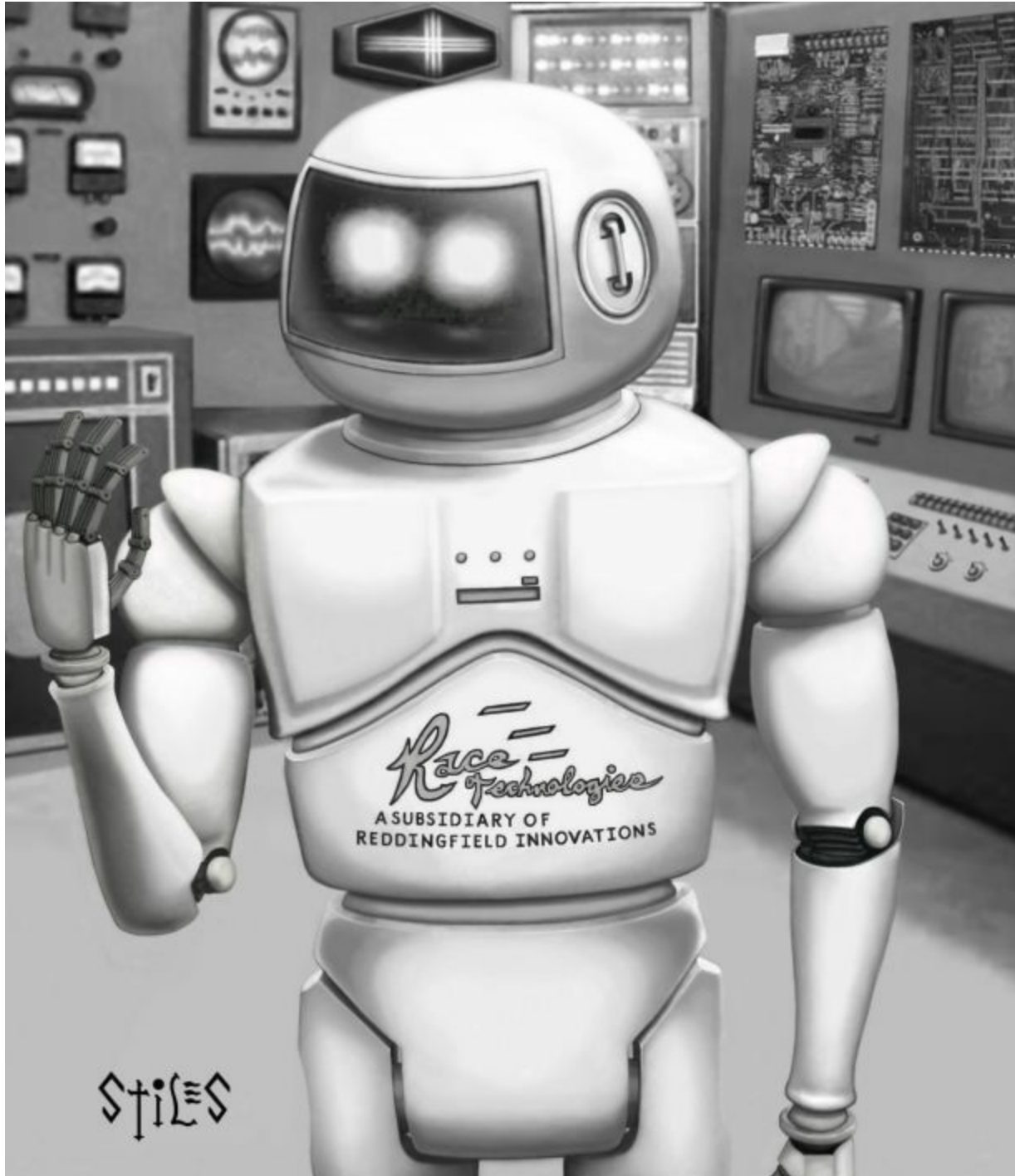
She smiles, and one of many tears runs down her face. Some of the Retaliators are also crying. Mars is somber but stoic. He's almost certain there's a deeper meaning to all this, but not certain enough to ignore the possibility that it's a huge waste.

Matilda Martel: And then you grew up, and got to be a real superhero. You were a Retaliator. I know how proud that made you. My dear sweet Casey; your dream finally came true.

Matilda Martel is not aware of the irony in that last statement, but the Retaliators are, and are taken aback by it. None so much as Jhotica, who is pushed to the edge by it, and has a nervous breakdown, right there on the spot.

Jhotica: Aaaaaaahh! Aaaaahh, hah, hah!

Jhotica tenses up and slides off the chair. She falls to her knees and rolls over on her back, before Hotpoint can grab on to her. Hotpoint and Upsurge kneel over her, trying to help.



Vision 55: Last Dance ? (Final Vision)

A cocoon, attached to the backside of a tombstone. Jhotica kneeling in front of Mighty Man's grave. The front of the tombstone reads; "Casey Martel a.k.a Mighty Man He died a Retaliator". Jhotica's makeup stripe across her

eyes is a gothic jagged pattern, in a batwing-like shape. Instead of the primary sky blue base with pink, purple, orange, yellow and green highlights, it's deep blue with red, brown, beige and white highlights, accented in metallic gold and silver with black outlines. Her stripe is usually never outlined, but it is now, heavily, in black. The ornamentation inside is just spider web designs. She has tears streaming down her face, making streaks in the **bizarre** design. She wipes her face, smearing the makeup even more bizarrely and stands up. She looks over the sea at the Manhattan skyline. Manhattan; that place where this all started. There are a couple ferry boats, a scow, and a yacht, sharing the water. All those people out there, going on with their daily lives. Don't they know the world has ended? Don't they know there's nothing left to look forward to? She approaches the edge. The boats haven't gone away or changed their courses at all. Waves are crashing on the rocks below. She steps closer to the edge. She is catching a breeze. She looks up at the clouds, and an image appears in front of her, suspended in the air, over the seashore. It's Mighty Man, costume 6, black and white "M" shirt, no glasses, no belt-jet, but there's an identical belt without jets, in its place. His skin is light blue, his eyes still shine bluish white, but brighter now.

E.L.O. : You're sailing softly through the sun, in a broken stone age dawn...

He reaches out his hand to her. She smiles and takes it. He smiles back. Without taking her eyes off his, she steps off the edge of the cliff. But, she doesn't fall. She is suspended in air, just like he is.

E.L.O. : ...you fly , so high, I get a Strange Magic. Oh what a Strange Magic. Oh, it's a Strange Magic.

He puts his left arm around her back, and flies out over the sea with her.

E.L.O. : Got a Strange Magic. Got a Strange Magic.

They end up over the clouds. He stands on one, and sets her down. She hugs up to him, and puts her head on his shoulder. Her smeared makeup reforms, in a similar but less jagged design as before. They're slow dancing.

E.L.O. : You're walking meadows in my mind. Making waves across my time. Oh, no. Oh, no.

She looks at him and smiles through her tears. The makeup stripe is straight across now, as it usually is, but the colors are still the dark ones from before. Blended though, to be softer. The design is of fireworks. The fireworks patterns morph into red hearts that appear to break, then morph into weeping clown faces. Her tears are smearing the weeping clowns' faces. He wipes her tears away, once they get below the makeup stripe, and continues the dance. With the boats below, the lovers dance up high.

E.L.O. : I get a Strange Magic. Oh what a Strange Magic. Oh, it's a Strange Magic.

The two lovers, dancing on a cloud. He dips her. She flourishes her left arm out and smiles, with her head upside down. The hearts have returned to the stripe. Joined by rainbows and little white birds. This design will remain for the duration.

E.L.O. : Got a Strange Magic. Got a Strange Magic.

She straightens up again. They continue the dance.

E.L.O. : Oh, I'm never gonna be the same again. Now I've seen the way it's got to end.

They kiss.

E.L.O. : Sweet Dream, Sweet Dream.

He spins her out. She flourishes both arms, and dips herself.

E.L.O. : Strange Magic. Oh, what a Strange Magic. Oh, it's a Strange Magic.

She spins back in, and he cradles her back with his right arm, while she

arches her back, flourishes both arms, and assumes the flamingo stance.

E.L.O. : Got a Strange Magic. Got a Strange Magic.

They continue the dance. He dips her again. She spins herself back up.

E.L.O. : It's Magic. It's Magic. It's Magic.

She tilts her head back and looks lovingly into his iridescent eyes. He tilts his head to the right, and looks lovingly into hers.

E.L.O. : Strange Magic. Oh, what a Strange Magic. Oh, it's a Strange Magic.

She puts her head back on his shoulder. They continue the dance.

E.L.O. : Got a Strange Magic. Strange Magic. Strange Magic. Oh, what a Strange Magic. Strange Magic. Oh, it's a Strange Magic.

As she has her arms wrapped around his shoulders, she's running her fingers through the hair in the back of his head. He caresses her back with his huge, but gentle hands.

E.L.O. : Got A Strange Magic. Strange Magic. Strange Magic. Oh, what a Strange Magic. Oh, what a Strange Magic.

They twirl off the cloud, still holding to each other, heading downward, back to the cliff. Once there, he sets her safely down on the ground, a couple feet away from the edge. He also stands on the ground. He kisses her again.

E.L.O. : Got a Strange Magic. Got a Strange Magic. You know I gotta Strange Magic. Yeah, I gotta Strange Magic.

The kiss breaks. He smiles at her, then leans in to whisper in her ear.

Mighty Man: I will return to you, my love.

With that, he pulls away and levitates toward the sky. They outstretch their arms to one another, as he drifts further away. He lowers his arm and looks over his left shoulder. He's saying something, but there's no sound. A lip reader might think he's saying, "I'll be right there, Jackson." But Jhotica is not a lip reader. He looks back at her, and outstretches his arm to her again, before he fades away. Jhotica's arm is still outstretched. She has a look of desperate hope on her face. From where Mighty Man had been, she looks small. She presses her two clenched fists tightly into her chest, in the "Hope" gesture.



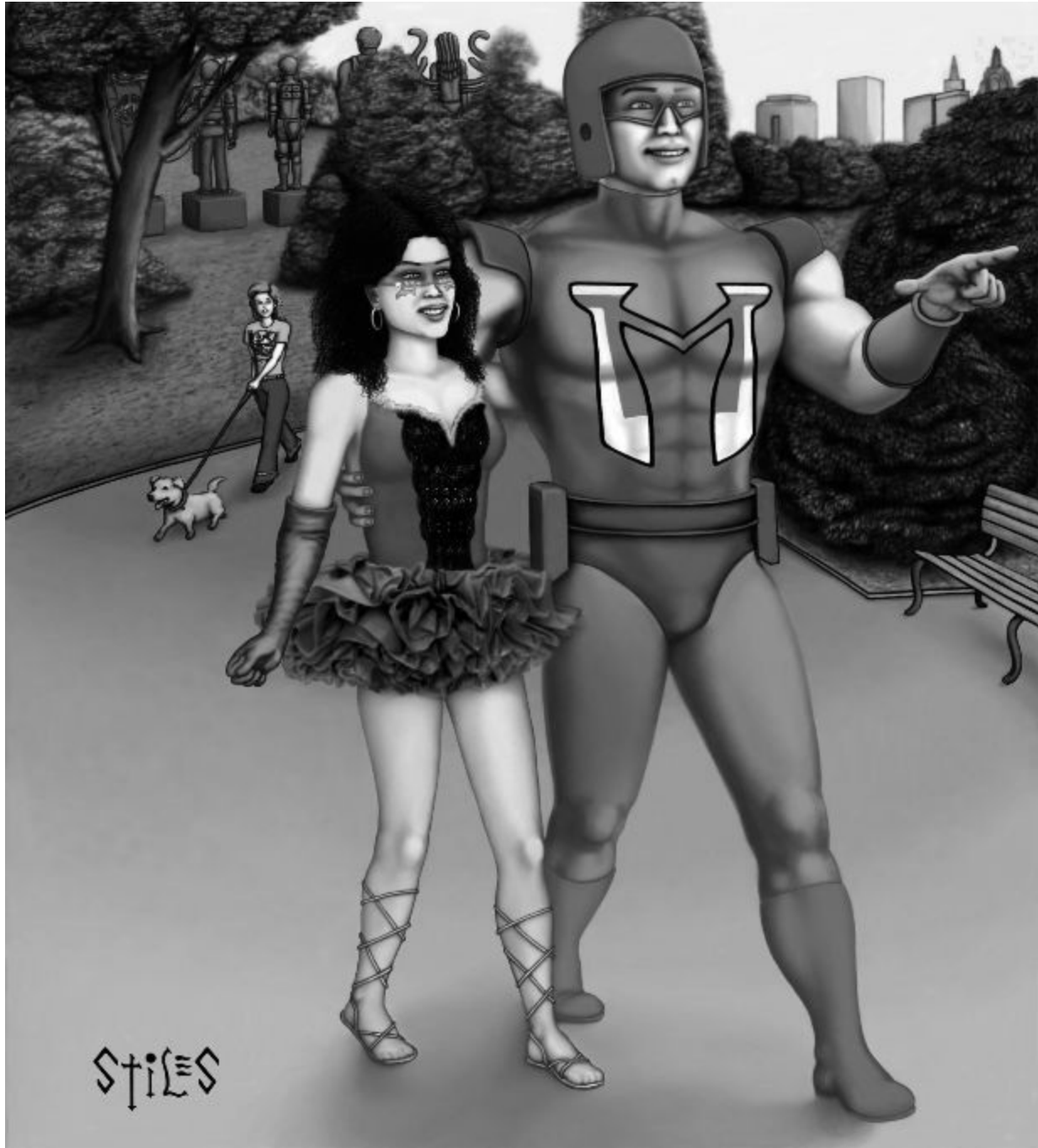
End Revelation: Flight Of The Butterfly

The sequence begins with a butterfly near the broken cocoon, on the back of Mighty Man's tombstone, stretching its wings for the very first time. Cue the Sheryl Crow track "Always On Your Side". The butterfly flits off the grave marker, and flies in front of Jhotica, who's still hanging around. We see her look up at it, but she's soon out of frame, as we follow the butterfly across the water, heading for the main island. On the main island of Manhattan, we see cars from the seventies lined up for gas, and signs that say "No Gas". The butterfly goes out of frame as we transition to a Red China War protest. Up front is a particular National Guardsman, with his M-16 pointed at an innocent looking hippie girl. She grabs the barrel of his weapon with superspeed and makes off with it, circling around to all the Guardsman, making off with all their weapons. In a flash, she's piled them up in the center of the lawn, and a male student proceeds to melt them down with flame from his hand. They both laugh and the male student beats at his chest with his eight fingers like "Shoot me now!" The butterfly comes back into frame and flies directly in front of his face. Follow the butterfly, as we transition to a place where some Black people are being fire-hosed. The butterfly flies in front of one of the cops holding a fire-hose. He spits tobacco at it, and it flits away from him. Cut to a brash young Black man, possibly a teenager, stooping down to pick up a brick. Just as his hand is on it, the butterfly hovers in front of his face, looking him in the eyes. He holds out the hand that would've picked up the brick, and the butterfly lights in his palm. The young man and the butterfly are about to be water blasted, when Top Dog, in his prime, no gray hair at this point in time, flies down and starts beating the hell out of the cops and trashing their equipment. The young Black superhero who will in later years become Louisiana Congressman Troy D. "Top Dog" Allen takes the time to turn around and smile and wink at the young man. The young Black man smiles and releases the butterfly, which flies up, out of frame. We transition to a place where some greaser is propped up on his souped up '50's car. His pony-tailed squeeze blows a bubble, then smiles, as she watches the butterfly come back into frame. We move down the street and we can see the usual malt shops, record stores etc. We follow the butterfly around the corner, where the cars are from the forties, and there are "Captain Superhero Wants YOU To Relax While He Fights The Damn

War For You. Or You Could Get Off Your Ass And See Your Local U.S. Army Recruiter” posters and War Bond signs hanging around. In front of the police station, some Japanese-American detainees are being led down from a paddy wagon and up onto an Army transport truck. One 40ish male detainee sees the butterfly, gives it a sour sarcastic look, and makes a fluttering gesture with his manacled hands. The butterfly moves out of frame as we transition to a place where the people are dressed thirties style. The butterfly flies into and out of the frame, briefly catching the attention of a monocle and top hat wearing “Dapper Dan”. We transition to a grassy field, where a man lifts the canvas cover off his spiffy new bi-plane, before a crowd of cheering spectators. The butterfly flies into frame, directly in front of the presenter, who smiles and uses the two-hands-out gesture, to also, jokingly, present the butterfly. The butterfly flies out of frame. We transition to another place, where some idiot wearing wings strapped to his arms jumps off a barn and busts his ass. His friends rush over to help him to his feet. The butterfly enters the frame and flits in front of him. The man looks at the butterfly, with a frustrated look on his face. He just shakes his head from the frustration, still looking at the butterfly as it flies out of frame. We transition to a pair of deer leather knee boots walking through a cotton field. The boots stop at a stooping cotton picker and a Tan hand taps the cotton picker on the shoulder. The cotton picker stands and he’s White. The smiling man handing him a glass of lemonade is Native. The cotton picker smiles gratefully and gulps the lemonade down, replacing the glass on the box tray with almost a dozen full ones. The worker wipes his brow, smiles and nods gratefully and the owner smiles and pats the cotton picker on the back for doing a good job, while he moves on to the next worker. Once he’s out of sight, the worker scowls like a White racist who can’t stand working for a “Red” man. A butterfly flies up and we follow it up and back for a wide shot. The wide shot of the field shows the rest of the cotton pickers are six Whites, three Blacks and two Latinos. The butterfly flies out of frame to our right, toward behind us. We turn to follow it, but instead of seeing the other side of the cotton field, we’re looking at a dirty “cowboy” town. A healthy but weary-looking Black man wearing shabby work clothes and holding a straw field hat in his hands is standing in front of a wagon full of apple bushels. We can’t hear the auctioneer for the music track, but we can tell he’s doing his running off bids shtick. The auctioneer points his gavel at the apparent winner, and his left

hand at the Black man. What appears to be a White businessman approaches the Black man, counts out a wad of cash and hands it to him. The businessman and a couple of his helpers start loading the apple bushels off the wagon. The beaming Black man puts his hat on and pitches in. As we zoom in closer to him, the butterfly flies into frame, near the side of his face. The Black man smiles and tugs on the brim of his hat, with his left hand, acknowledging the presence of God in this small wonder of nature. The butterfly leaves the frame, exactly as we zoom over and past the apple wagon. We transition to a Main Street sidewalk in Arizona City. It's important to get a view down street of the hills off in the distance, to see that there's nothing there but the horizon. On the wall next to the door of the Marshall's office, there's a poster of a really wicked looking minister with long bushy white hair and a nasty scar across his face. It's prefaced with the header: "Office of US Marshall Goyaaté Geronimo - Arizona City, AZ". The big text reads: "WANTED". Under that it says "\$500 reward for detainment or information leading to the arrest of FATHER MAYHEM". The description reads: "True identity unknown. Father Mayhem is a criminal who disguises himself as a minister and leads a band of outlaws who relentlessly rob and harass citizens and visitors of the town of Arizona City, Arizona." Inside the Marshall's office, there's a very glum looking middle aged Native American man, who's hair is not solid white, it's black with streaks of white. He's sitting behind the desk, wearing the Wanagi Akicita costume, but not the mask or cape. Also important to note, there is no pierced black heart emblem with the blood drop, thorny vines and R.I.P. initials on top. He's holding a badge in his hand, which is spattered with dried blood and a couple specks of gray goop, looking at it, thinking. The town printer enters the office, and places a stack of ten posters on the desk, with the same picture as the one outside, but the new one has the preface "By Order Of Federal Magistrate - Arizona City, AZ", and the main title "WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE! \$5000 reward for the capture or killing of FATHER MAYHEM". They nod at each other, and the printer exits. The Native man slams the badge down onto the image of the man with the disfigured face. His gloved hand is glowing. We cut back to the street, and a black and white haired Wanagi Akicita, mask and all, but still no cape or emblem, exits the Marshall's office and mounts his horse. He glows as he rides away, toward the end of the street, beyond which are those hills where nothing can be seen but the horizon. A shimmering

kaleidoscope effect envelopes everything, and when it's gone, Wanagi Akicita is gone, the people are changed around. Riders going one way down the street are gone, replaced by different riders going the other way. Pedestrians are changed, shuffled, similarly. The most noticeable change is that there is now a huge futuristic citadel, off in the distance, beyond those hills, obscuring the horizon. End the song. Dissolve to the Epilogue.



Epilogue: The Deceiver Revealed

A third floor hotel room. Close-up of a wanted poster on the wall, next to the door. It reads; "WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE! \$5000 reward for the capture or killing of FATHER MAYHEM". In smaller lettering on the bottom, it

reads; “True identity unknown. Father Mayhem disguises himself as a religious minister, but he is actually a crime boss who leads a ‘congregation’ of blood thirsty bandits. Some of his followers are human outlaws, some are clockwork men, which are indistinguishable from humans until injured. He is an olive complexioned man in his late 50’s to early 60’s, with shoulder length frizzy white hair, a full white beard and a very distinguishing disfigurement of a slash mark scar running diagonally across his face. Has three purple gemstone dental implants in his left upper pallet. Reports say they gleam even in the dark, so it appears as if there are three small stars in his mouth. Uses magic tricks or possibly super powers to make it appear that he can’t be killed. Possible background in circus, carnival or stage magic. Uses a modified Solstice Lightning-Gun uniquely calibrated to light its victims on fire. Wanted for five known murders, including that of U.S. Marshall Geronimo. Also wanted for multiple counts of grand larceny and rabbleroising.” The image on the poster is of an Epochalus aged Skull Croat, with long white hair, and that nasty scar he picked up in ancient Egypt. He’s wearing minister clothes, complete with the hat. Look around the room. To the right, the Potniški Time-Machine is dismantled into large and small parts. Next to it, the Croat and Caesar Skull armors are displayed standing. The goggles of the Croat helmet are painted burgundy from the inside, and can’t be seen through. The Caesar Skull armor isn’t a full body armor, like the Croat armor, the mannequin it dresses can be seen. What’s inside the Croat armor isn’t a mannequin. The Red Shadow’s red cape lays on the bed. There’s a door next to the bed, and a monitor room/control center is seen on the other side. Not only does the technology not belong, the space it takes up does not belong in the space it occupies. This is evidenced by the fact that the interior of the techno room should extend past the center of the street outside, but the window in the hotel part of the room shows that it doesn’t. The only logical conclusion is that it’s not a matter of part of his citadel being in the hotel room, or part of the hotel room being in the citadel, but rather, the doorway is a portal between the hotel room and the citadel. Through the hotel room window can only be seen the hustle bustle of a frontier shoot-em-up town. At the left side of the room, Wanagi Akicita is at a lavatory mirror, finishing up a beard trim. His pale blue cape is laying on a wooden chair, folded. He has the black heart emblem. He is not the same Wanagi Akicita we saw in the last sequence. With a beard trim and his white hair tied back in

a mid-head ponytail, he's virtually indistinguishable from Epochalus, except for the difference in hair color and the huge disfiguring slash mark scar running diagonally across his face. (In Act 3, when Wanagi Akicita reveals his face to a Ramadūm Croat, he'll have a full untrimmed beard, and wild wavy uncombed hair, like the Skull Croats, post-scar. He cares even less about his appearance after he got his front teeth knocked out by Cadet Shitbird, formerly known as Captain Superhero, in the Galaxie Games. Damon should be proud of his glowing purple teeth. No one else on Terra has alien quasar gem dental implants.) The aged and battle scarred prince is fixing up now, because he's about to go see somebody. She's not linearly out of sync with him, like the one in Egypt unfortunately was. She's four years younger than he seems to be, as his own princess was, before Fate robbed him of her. She hasn't seen her Damon in years, and he's counting on her not knowing the difference, or even that there are two kinds of him. She does know, and she knows he's the wrong one, but she loves him anyway, because she knows all he's been through to find her, when her own Damon just abandoned her, for his cause and his Destiny and all that, as far as she knows. He really abandoned her because of his fear the Skull Croat would track him and find her. Not that any of that will matter, since her Damon is now dead and thereby she's doomed. Plenty of tragedy to go around, in the Gemini War. (Rama Croats' hair is semi-long and wavy, like the Skull Croats', but at least they comb it. Ramadūm Croats maintain a well-trimmed goatee. Unscarred Skull Croats groom the same as Ramadūm Croats, but after the scar, Skull Croats don't groom so much, usually. Wild hair goes better with a mangled face. Epochalus shaves his cheeks and neck, his beard is just the strip of hair running along his jaw line. And it's dyed black, like his hair.) In the reflection, he sees a butterfly land on the window sill. He turns toward it, looks at it, and tilts his head. From a close-up angle to the butterfly's left, in line with the direction of the street, we can see Father Mayhem's citadel, looking like a fat man at the head of a banquet table, looming above a couple hills that are between the "settlement" and the tiny town. (The citizens aren't freaking out about the out of place, out of time citadel, it's been there long enough for the shock to've worn off. They know full well what it is and who is there. And he is there, as well as here. At any given time, the citadel is occupied by a dozen or more of him. They are not at odds, they are all the same incarnation of the same man, at different points in his finite life and

infinite non-life. Mostly the latter. In the Retaliators' world, there's nothing in the history books about the sudden appearance of a huge futuristic citadel in the Old West. This is not their past, we followed their past down to this point in time, then shifted by a slight variable. In time travel, the Butterfly Effect can work in reverse, especially in regards to points prior to 1988, the center of the strand. From 1988, Time's Arrow points both ways. No one ever knew that prior to 1988 time was going backwards, because so were they. They weren't doing, they were undoing. They weren't learning, they were unlearning. Like a VCR tape. Rewinding it doesn't change the order of events or the outcome. The Ordained members of the Western Furies, a subsidiary of the Retaliators formed just prior to the Apocalypse, will spend some post Apocalypse time here, diverted from their search for Captain Superhero, who they suspect is fucking with the timeline. What the Western Furies end up doing is taking part in the events that will tie the two realities together. For this Skull Croat, all that has already happened, it's part of how he became the Wanagi Akicita imposter. There really were two real Wanagi Akicitas in both realities, in many realities, in fact. The two Native heroes in this world were both murdered by this Skull Croat, under slightly different circumstances than the way the imposter told the story to the Retaliators. But in the Retaliators' world, the story the imposter told was exactly correct. And the Skull Croat who killed that world's Geronimo wasn't this one. The Skull Croat/Father Mayhem in the Retaliators' timeline was an idiot. He didn't bring his citadel, he opted for a compound more aesthetically appropriate to the 19th century, with a few futuristic gadgets, of course, but no real defense against the real Tatanka/Wanagi Akicita. He escaped by faking his death in a mine collapse, which killed all his followers, while he departed the era a huge failure. Likely to've later been unraveled in the Gemini War, since he's not the primary. Many Ramadūm Croats never survived to become Epochalus and no Skull Croat lived past the age of 45, and only a handful of those figured out how to survive their deaths. Before your death, the Timescape tells all your future yous to go away. But, if you are a Master Of Time whose mastery of time increases over time, and your 45 year old self dies, when the Timescape tells your 55 years old self to go away, he might already be advanced to a level where he's playing his own game, making up his own rules. It started with the game of shuffled artifacts. He has tracks all over the Timescape. Too many to be

found, much less erased, and that was only for starters. Everything ties to everything else, but the biggest part of it is that though they died at 45, they allowed themselves to be killed at age 55 by a man they killed when they were 40, which is a paradox the Timescape can't sort out without imploding. Additionally, they conned their way into Epochalus' own Time-Knot, by participating in the Retaliators' 2nd mission to ancient Egypt, the one that actually restored existence after it was unraveled, thereby they are indelibly tied to existence, even though they don't exist, frozen forever at an age they never actually lived to be. He didn't just jump from 45 to 55, he lived every one of those 10 years that never happened, and existed though nonexistent for many eons after. His latter self had achieved such godhood, that he was able to teleport himself to Galaxie's hidden inter-dimensional Gameworld, which had held even Mars and Venus captive for months, and reconstitute his disintegrated younger self, give him a new weapon that he had swiped right out of the holster of a Ramadūm Croat and replaced with his dead younger self's discarded, damaged one. The bad luck of the theft was transferred to the victim, not the thief. Then, the Wanagi Akicita imposter sent his younger existent/nonexistent self to the Crossworld, to be the most stealthy warrior in the Gemini War, single-handedly eliminating more Ramadūm Croats than any other Skull Croat. While the 55 year old Skull Croat remains on Terra for infinite time, as a phantom. Naturally, operating from the advantages that provides, rather than wasting time trying to overcome whatever disadvantages there might be. While conning his way into the time-knot, he also conned his way back onto the Crossworld, and became the invading force. It takes two sides to make a war, and the Gemini War was meant to happen. Not all phantom Skull Croats became Wanagi Akicita imposters. Some non-disfigured ones wear outfits very similar to Epochalus', and call themselves Father Time. Some Epochalus age Ramadūm Croats also wear that outfit and call themselves Father Time. A Father Time could be either, but one kind is a phantom, and much darker than the other kind. The overlap, where it's hard to distinguish between the two archetypal Prince Damons. But both kinds of Father Time are obscure, in the Timescape. Other Skull Croats became different phantom figures, some overtly related to time, some not so obvious. Any Skull Croat past age 45 is a phantom who can't be killed, only unraveled by his Forbidden Knowledge. But that fate is certain for all but the primary, and only the one who became Wanagi Akicita secures his 1

status, the primary, the king, or “chief”, as it were. Epochalus is now a 7, the wizard, prophet and philosopher. This war pits the Master Manipulator vs. the Master Sage. With the Retaliators and even all of existence caught in the middle. The winner will become the 8, the living embodiment of all that is, good and evil, heaven and hell, infinity itself. Since the Retaliators we’ve been following are of the Catalyst Universe, we’ll most often see the primaries of either of the two types of Croat The Gotovost. The primaries do change, but they will always be diverged from the two we followed in this story.) Skull Croat un-holsters his ray-gun and blasts the hell out of the butterfly. Before the delta-ray has even dissipated, he’s spun and holstered his weapon. The split second before the butterfly is incinerated, it diverges a replica of itself, which flutters safely out of harm’s way. When it’s over, the butterfly lands back on the window sill. The Latter-Life Skull Croat turns toward the armor and the time-machine, and steps forward. In his wake he leaves behind an afterimage of himself that dissolves into a rotten corpse, then dust, then nothing. The one that’s still here takes the Caesar Skull helmet in one hand and Pseudodeus’ cape in the other. He won’t use his Croat helmet anymore, because the inside of it got Geronimo’s puréed head gunk in the nooks and crannies, and he’d rather not clean that mess. The rest of the armor is equally useless, as it still contains the corpse of Geronimo, as well as Geronimo’s strong spirit. The spirit of Geronimo is a much sought after commodity among sorcerers all across the Timescape, but in this particular timeline of the Catalyst Universe, the sorcerer who possesses the spirit of Geronimo is Skull Croat. Also, standing over Geronimo’s body, the Morning Star power which the real Wanagi Akicita had used to help his people win the Indian War left Geronimo and entered the imposter. He rarely uses that power, he favors his own powers, that he has gained through gradual ascension over the years. He sometimes laments having caused the Marshal’s death inside his own armor, surely he could’ve captured the spirit in something else, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time. Destiny steering the course of Free Will, perhaps. The logic at the time was that since Skull Croat intends to assume the persona of Geronimo’s alter ego, it would even out the Karmic imbalance if Geronimo dies as Skull Croat. Oh well. It may be that, in which case the sacrifice of the armor is worth it. At this stage in his existence, everything the armor once did for him is no longer necessary. The Caesar Skull helmet is still good, the Red Shadow’s red cape matches it, and

the light blue costume makes an interesting contrast. Her prince has returned from his adventures abroad and this is what he now looks like. Good enough. Play the Moody Blues track “I’m Just A Singer (In A Rock ‘n’ Roll Band)”. If any Prince Damon Prophecy can be not a Doom’s Dawn Prophecy or a Gemini War Prophecy, then it is a Master Of Time Prophecy. Next, to thank Casey for bringing us this far, play “Stars”, by t.A.T.u. We may see Casey again, especially after the Apocalypse, but our guide through the rest of our journey to the Apocalypse will be a Strange Matter superman, whose birth name is Pseudodeus, persona name “The Red Shadow”. Born in a lab, man and machine entwined with the Beyond. He doesn’t exist yet, as of the last point in their strand where we last saw the Retaliators, but the shit he’s made of does. The stage is set, the players are in place, let the End Of The Beginning begin.

For Stacy; the Guardian Angel who
brought me back from the dead.

Master Of Time

Fight For Utopia - 1983-1984

The Gemini War, Act 1 - Master Of Time - 1985-1986

The Gemini War, Act 2 - Doom’s Dawn - 1987-1988

The Gemini War, Act 3 - The Gemini Wars - 1988 - 1989

The Fallen Galaxie - 1990

The Emergence Of Firewolf - 1991

The Galaxie Games - 1991-1992

Metal On Metal - 1992-1993

NUMEROLOGY

The numbers of the letters have more bearing than the number of letters. The universe has a pulse. The rhythm is the function, the program, the operating system. Echoes of the original magic spell “Let there be...” The modern Numerology chart. Each letter is given the number above it. Calculate the sum of all the numbers of your full name. The full name you most commonly go by, whether it’s one, two, three or four names. Calculate the numbers of that sum, repeat, until you end up with a single digit, or 11 or 22. If you’re a 33, you already know what you are.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

1: The Alpha. The center of their world and of all who are caught in its gravity.

2: The Lackey. Subordinate. Accommodating. Can be two-faced, malicious.

3: The Ace. Flashy. Gifted and lucky. Expects success, so it naturally comes.

4: The Earther. Industrious toilers. Keep the wheels of the machine turning.

5: The Butterfly. Attractive, impulsive, adventurous. Many-sided, unpredictable.

6: The Rock. Reliable “head of the house” figure. Aloof. Stern but supportive.

7: The Sage. Wizard, prophet and philosopher. Content hermit, lives internally.

8: The Extremer. Power & struggle. Success & failure. Good & evil. Infinity.

9: The Sentinel. Sanctimonious philanthropist. Cares for mankind over individuals.

11: The Martyr. Righteous, moral, selfless, consummate. A higher level of 9.

22: The Master. Made up of the best characteristics of all the other numbers.

For more Retaliators, go to:

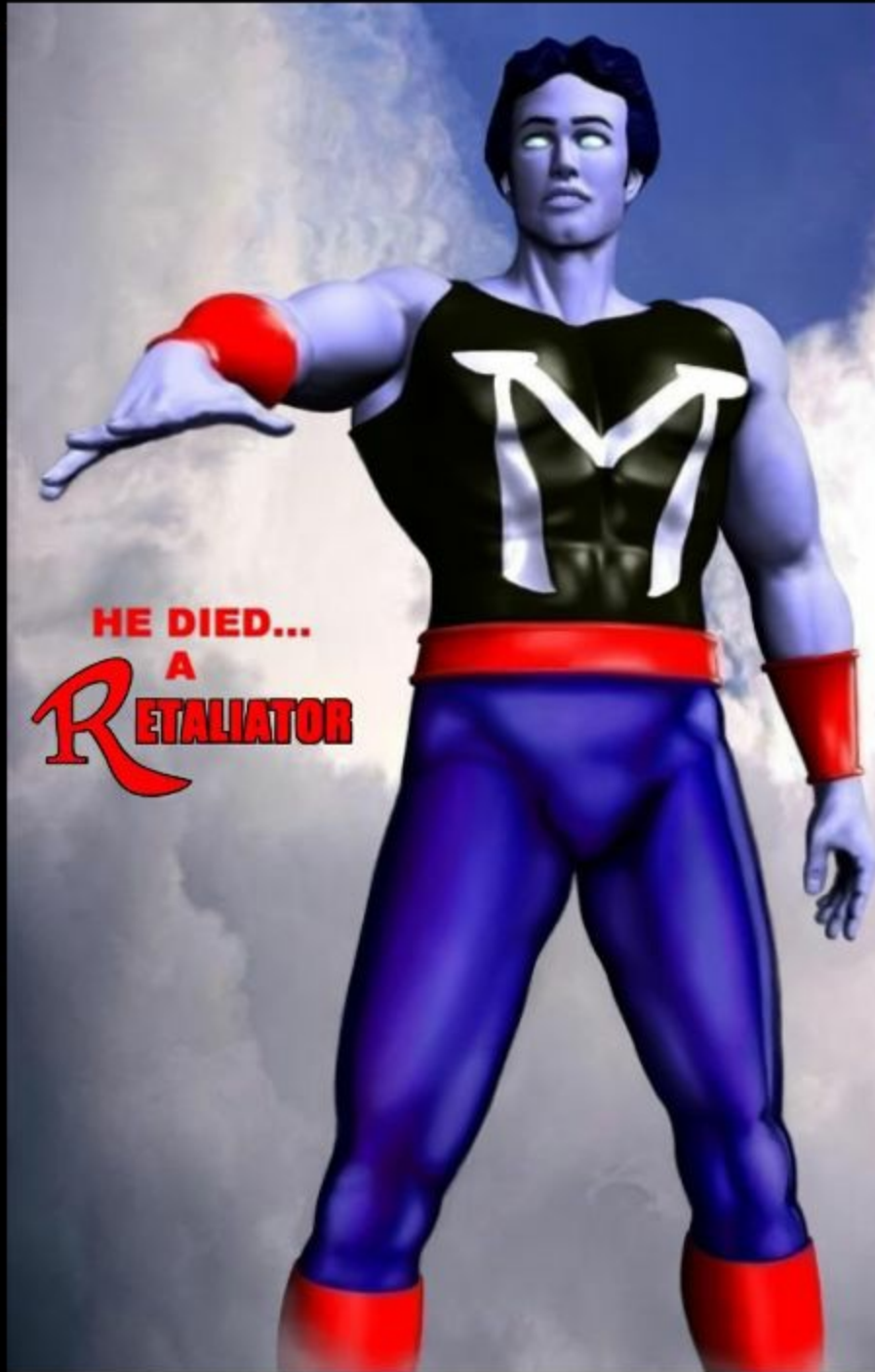
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