

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 1

"Day One, Again"

by David Ingram

United Nations, a non descript meeting room

John Walker, known better to the world at large as U.S Agent, leaned back in a plush leather chair and kicked his feet up on the ebony table that he and his teammates were sitting at. Hanging behind him on his chair was his old red, black and white indestructible shield. Following recent events, Walker had been asked to once again wear his old uniform to remind the world, and himself, that he was an agent of the United States in both fact and name. The only change to his old uniform was that he now wore a riot gear helmet over his face, covering everything except his mouth, "Boy, this seems like a familiar scene, huh?" He asked his friends and teammates.

An amused look came across Union Jack's face, even though it was concealed by a full mask, as he cleaned his pistol while Sabra and Darkstar just rolled their eyes. Hellios just looked at U.S Agent with a slightly bewildered look on his face.

"I'm not sure I understand, John." Hellios confessed.

"I guess we never got around to telling you all about our first meeting as a team, huh? We basically woke up to a call from our government telling us to get our butts down to the local U.N building to catch a transport to the Heli-Carrier." Walker explained.

"Not a lot of people were happy about that." Union Jack added wryly.

"Ah yes, I do remember hearing a little about that." Hellios replied, "I wonder where Savitar, Bridge and Honey Lemon are. I thought that all of Excalibur was brought under the United Nations' direct authority."

"Bridge is too loyal to SHIELD, Savitar has completed his sentence and asked to be reassigned to reserve status, and Japan requested the return of Honey Lemon." A new voice explained. Excalibur turned to see a Caucasian, brown haired man in a dark blue military uniform with a blue beret atop his head. The officer had a manila folder tucked his left arm while a young woman with silver hair stood next to him, dressed in a similar uniform indicating military service to the United Nations

"How'd you know that, smurf?" Walker asked casually.

The officer removed his beret and smirked, “Because my name’s Joey Chapman, and I’m your new commanding officer, Mr. Walker.”

Sabra and Union Jack jumped as if they’d been shocked by electricity, instantly garnering the attention of the others.

“Blimey...” Union Jack muttered

“What’s wrong?” Darkstar asked Union Jack, while keeping one eye focused on Chapman.

“This bloke used to run with the Hellfire Club, a nasty bunch of people. Ran up against X-Force and Black Air. Though last I heard, he was filleted by the Shadow King’s X-Men.” Rock explained. He’d holstered his pistol, but kept his hand loose in case he needed to use it suddenly. It was a good instinct.

“I’ll admit that I’ve had conflicts in the past with Mr. Wisdom and Black Air that I will not go into,” Chapman stated evenly, “but that’s in the past. And before you all feel a sudden need to defend Wisdom’s honor, perhaps you’d like to see an example of his handiwork?”

Chapman opened the folder he’d kept tucked under his arm and withdrew several photos. The members of Excalibur looked them over, and even Sabra, a veteran in regards to scenes of brutality and torture, visibly blanched. So disgusted by what they saw, no member of Excalibur even thought to ask what the crimes of the men and women were in the photos. Chapman noted their reactions with approval before continuing, though he intentionally neglected to reclaim the photographs.

“At any rate, I’m not here to discuss the past. Excalibur, as you are well aware, has been reorganized. I am now your C.O, and I’ll be introducing you to your new teammates.” Chapman turned to his assistant, “Delphi, could you bring in Mr. Faoul?”

The young woman nodded, and exited the room. She returned with an Arabian man dressed in a scarlet body suit with a scarab over his right breast pocket. His hair was slicked back and he had a barely visible goatee developing on his chin. The man regarded the members of Excalibur with respect, though Sabra glared daggers at him.

“Excalibur, this man’s name is the Scarlet Scarab, chosen by the Arab nations to serve in Excalibur. He possesses super strength, energy absorbion, the ability to project force fields and flight.”

“I feel like a contestant on a bad American game show, Mr. Chapman.” Scarab commented as he strode forward to shake hands, “However, I believe that it will be a pleasure to serve in Excalibur, and I am happy to be here.”

Scarab politely shook the hands of each member of Excalibur. His handshake was firm and businesslike, but hardly intimidating, nothing about it betraying the vast power that once held Thor

at bay. Scarab came to a stop at Sabra, who kept her arms folded across her chest the entire time. Scarab left his hand extended for a long moment before allowing it to fall to his side.

“Sabra. A pleasure as always.” Scarab commented respectfully.

“Shouldn’t you be straddling a fence at home?” Sabra hissed.

Scarab sighed in slight disappointment, “As my teammate, and especially as a Jew, you are entitled to a certain amount of respect from me, something I will always strive to give you.” Scarab’s eyes narrowed, though his tone remained exactly the same, “Now that said, I will not be lectured about fences, by an Israeli.”

The two glared at one another for a moment, and the rest of Excalibur tensed in case the two Middle Eastern heroes decided to go at it, but Chapman decided not to give them the opportunity, “Delphi, could you bring in Ms. Endo?”

Walker’s ears perked up when he heard that name, “Did you say...?”

“Suzi Endo, AKA Cybermancer now, and reluctant representative of the Chinese government.” U.S Agent looked and saw a twenty something Asian woman wearing a very familiar purple and silver armor. The visor normally used to cover the armor wearer’s eyes was in the woman’s left hand, revealing her face, “Hey John, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah.” John said as he walked up to Suzi and gave her a friendly hug, “Too long. Sorry I lost touch after that mess with Force Works and whatnot. Good to see ya girl.”

“Thanks, John. Don’t worry about losing touch, we all have lives to lead. As you might not have noticed, I finished my armor.” Suzi replied, “Just in time to get drafted into Excalibur.” She grumbled.

“Ms. Endo will be our team scientist and provide field analysis as needed, among other things.” Chapman explained. Out of the corner of his eye, Chapman observed Union Jack shift uncomfortably, however slightly. Union Jack was trained to hide his body language, but no one was 100% perfect.

“Delphi, could you please send in Eshu?” Chapman requested

“...Eshu?” Agent repeated

“Named after an African trickster God.” Excalibur watched passively as Eshu entered. His appearance was that of a young black male, no older than twenty years with a bald head and yellow and blue uniform, “Says a lot a lot about me, don’t it?”

“I don’t know, does Eshu also translate into back stabbing bastard?” Walker spat.

“John? Have you had dealings with this man in the past?” Hellios asked.

“Not directly,” John replied, not daring to take his eyes off Eshu, “I did a mission in Genosha once. They gave me a quick briefing of bastards to keep an eye out for, and this guy was on the top of the list. Traitor who served those magistrate bastards without a second thought. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised he turned tail and ran when Magneto took over.”

“Gee, I never knew you cared that much about what happened in Genosha, Mr. Walker.” Eshu said casually, “Are you a Rightwinger or Leftwinger on the matter, if I may ask?” Eshu stated, deliberately emphasizing Rightwinger and Leftwinger. Agent snarled and lunged forward, only to be quickly restrained by Sabra and Hellios.

“Let me go! I’ll rip that bastard apart!” Walker roared as he struggled against his teammates.

“For all the good it would do you.” Eshu said casually as he examined his nails, unimpressed by Walker’s rage. A shot then rang out, startling everyone.

“Praise the lord for blanks.” Chapman commented as he holstered his weapon. Once again the center of attention, he continued his briefing, “Eshu is a omni morph, made up completely of unstable molecules. Not very powerful, but fairly versatile. Hopefully that will make up for his... demeanor.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, boss man.” Eshu quipped.

“Eshu, you were forced on my team as an obscene political gesture by the African nations regarding the UN’s handling of Genosha.” Chapman explained unemotionally, “Let me state now, openly and for the record, I have no faith or confidence in you whatsoever. Delphi, could you bring in our last member?”

Delphi did as ordered, and returned with a short young woman dressed in what looked like a tribal leotard along with silver jewels and bracelets. The young woman kept her arms crossed in an annoyed manner.

“Hey, I’m Silverclaw, and I’m oh so happy to be doing my patriotic duty.” Silverclaw said with a roll of her eyes.

“Maria here is a animorph, meaning that she can assume certain aspects of animals while retaining, to a degree, her human form.” Chapman stated.

“Welcome to the madhouse, kid.” Agent commented.

“Hey, shape shifting is my bag!” Eshu protested flippantly while in the form of a circus clown, “What do we need little miss animal house here for?”

“Because if need be, Maria can track people via their scent. You can’t.” Chapman explained, “And I believe she has more potential in Excalibur than you will ever have. Now shut up. Does anyone have any questions?”

“Yes.” Hellios stated, “Who is leading Excalibur now that Bridge has returned to SHIELD?”

“I should think it’s obvious. The leader of Excalibur should...no...needs to have a back ground in intelligence work, quick-witted, creative and above all, intelligent.”

Sabra and U.S Agent both naturally perked up at hearing Chapman’s description of his ideal Excalibur leader.

“Therefore, I can think of no better leader than Union Jack for Excalibur.”

Percival Rock took a step back as he felt all eyes in the room fall upon him. Rock, however, was too smart to let gratitude override his caution and mistrust.

“Why me?” Rock asked suspiciously.

“I thought I was fairly clear the first time.” Chapman answered

“You were, and quite flattering too. But I also know you have...an issue with the man who gave me this uniform.”

Chapman shrugged, “Yes, that’s correct. With the man who gave you that uniform, not you. You stepped up to the plate when your country needed you. Hard to begrudge that, mate. And don’t act like I’m doing you any favors with this. As of now, the lives of your entire team now depend on you and your choices you make in the field.”

“Gee, no pressure there.” Silverclaw muttered under her breath.

“I know he’s up to it.” Chapman said without ever looking towards Silverclaw

“Congratulations, man.” Agent said as he slapped Rock on the back, “you’ll do a great job, man.”

“Agreed.” Sabra stated, “I can think of no better choice, other than myself, of course.”

“I’ve only known you for ten minutes, but you seem alright.” Cybermancer added.

“Why don’t all of you take the time to fix that?” Chapman suggested, “There are no missions as of yet lined up, so why don’t you get to know one another better right now?”

“I’m not sure I want to get to know some of these people better.” U.S Agent said while glaring at Eshu. Eshu morphed into a giant hand, and gave Agent the finger

“Too bloody bad. Stay here for the next two hours, and get to know one another. That’s an order.” Chapman commanded, before turning to leave.

England

There were times when Pete Wisdom wondered what he'd do without the HERMES teleporter that SHIELD so often employed. Not only was it strategic tool, but it also granted Wisdom access to just about every bar on the planet, a major plus as far as the former Black Air agent and unabashed alcoholic was concerned. That was a fringe benefit he'd enjoy during his all too few off periods, and today was no different. The reorganization of SHIELD was stressing beyond belief, and so it went without saying that Wisdom needed some type of relief.

So, naturally, Wisdom sought a drink every now and then to make it thru the day. He'd taken a seat on the far side of the bar so that he could see the door, and proceeded to order some whiskey. He had barely finished his first glass before a stunning, silver haired young woman (wearing a United Nations uniform, which Wisdom found a little odd) carrying two whiskeys approached him and purred, "Care to join me for a drink?"

"Whiskey and no ice? Sure thing, luv." Wisdom smiled as he took the glass. Normally, Wisdom never took drinks from a stranger, but something seemed to override his usual inhibitions. Something about the woman's perfume made Wisdom curious about her, even though Wisdom was faithful to his current ladylove, Lydia.

"So what brings you here, handsome?" the silver haired woman asked in a sultry voice.

"Just catching my breath. Long day at the office." Wisdom answered after a sip. So enraptured by the woman sitting across from him, he failed to notice the United Nations uniformed officer who was approaching him as quietly and stealthy as a morning shadow, "What's your name, by the way?"

"I'm called Delphi, Mr. Wisdom."

Wisdom's eyes widened in shock, but before he could divine how this beautiful woman knew his name, a hand shot out and grabbed his wrist and the back of his neck at the same time while a foot kicked the stool he was sitting on out from under him. Wisdom's head slammed painfully into the bar before he'd even realized he was under assault, and thus was easily pinned.

"The drug in the whiskey will kill you instantly if you attempt to use your powers. And yes, I am well aware of your recent upgrade, Mr. Wisdom." A voice whispered into the SHIELD agent's ear. Wisdom raged when recognition came a split second later, and he began to struggle like a madman. The pressure disappeared, and the man who'd pinned Wisdom stepped back.

"Chapman," Wisdom spat venomously thru gritted teeth, "how the bloody fuck are you here? Last time I saw you, I'd gutted your worthless arse."

"Did you say 'I'd'? Last time we met, you needed an entire team to back you up, including one of the most powerful mutants on the bloody planet. And you still couldn't do the job right." Chapman mocked, "And before that me and mine nearly had you. You remember our first encounter, Wisdom? I do. You took me out to a pub, under the guise of the whole 'protective

brother' act you put on for your sister, who I had the misfortune of dating at the time. You drugged my drink, ambushed me with over a dozen Black Air agents and that Scratch bastard. You may have taken me down, but I know I left you pissing blood for a month."

"And a half." Wisdom thought to himself, "So what's with the stroll down memory lane, and just how the hell did you survive what we did to you?"

"I have friends in very high places." Chapman smirked. He'd half considered telling Wisdom about The Lady of the Lake, but knew that Wisdom wouldn't believe him. And he wasn't about to make Wisdom's life one iota easier either, "As to why I'm here, well, turn about is fair play."

Wisdom spared a glance towards Delphi, whom he noted had already disabled several men to prevent them from involving themselves in this little fight. A mighty impressive feat considering three of the men had at least two hundred pounds on the petite, silver haired woman.

"Don't worry about Delphi, Wisdom. You're all mine." Chapman said with a wicked smile.

Wisdom took a moment to consider his situation. He had no doubt the drug given to him by Chapman would kill him if he used his powers, as he didn't feel quite right as it was, and knowing Chapman, he couldn't summon X-Force. So the only way out, if he was to be believed, was thru Chapman. And that was just fine with Wisdom.

"I've taken you out before, I'll do it again. And this time, I'll make sure I do it right." Wisdom growled.

"If you can. No sneak attacks, no backstabbing, no lies. You and me, face to face, like real men. Think you're man enough?" Chapman demanded as he pounded his fist in his open palm, "Your sister sure as hell didn't think so."

Wisdom didn't even acknowledge the comment as he rushed forward with murder in his eyes. He struck out with a right, a punch that Chapman easily caught in mid swing with his left hand. With his free hand, Chapman struck Wisdom across the face with a blow that rattled Wisdom's teeth, and brought his hand back with a loud slap! that drew blood. Chapman lashed out with a kick to Wisdom's kidney that sent the spy tumbling backwards and to the floor, gasping for air.

"I may have let my combat skills slip when I was with the Hellfire Club, Wisdom, but I won't make that mistake again." Chapman explained as he looked down at Wisdom. Wisdom charged forward in a rage, and found himself flung into a table before he'd even seen Chapman move.

"But even rusty, mate, I'm still a master. You're good Wisdom, very good in fact, but compared to me?" Chapman sneered, "Not good enough. England may not have the trouble spots that the States have, but Lambeth and Leeds would still chew you up and spit you out even with your powers, Wisdom. And Baron Blood and Grace? They'd have your garters for breakfast."

Wisdom forced himself up again, his body screaming in pain and attacked again. He didn't expect to be successful, he wasn't about to lie down and die. Unsurprisingly, Wisdom went head first into yet another wooden table, only this time he didn't get up.

"Had enough?" Chapman asked as strode towards the downed agent. Wisdom, though fully conscious (and in a good deal of pain), didn't reply. He knew when to swallow his pride and when to start fighting dirty. He was a spy, first and foremost, after all. Deception and underhanded acts were his weapons of choice. Wisdom lay as still as possible while clutching his service weapon that had been hidden in his coat up until now. Wisdom tensed as he heard Chapman getting closer and closer, like a snake waiting to strike at an unsuspecting prey. Wisdom waited until Chapman was almost right on top of him, and then as quickly as humanly possible, rolled, aimed his weapon right at Chapman's smug face...and then realized he was looking down the barrel of Chapman's own pistol.

"Was the man to man thing too much for you Wisdom?" Chapman asked contemptuously, "I'm not surprised, honestly."

"I should kill you right now." Wisdom spat.

"And I should kill you for what you did to my kids! I still may!" Chapman yelled with a fury that took even Wisdom back. Chapman, realizing that perhaps now certainly wasn't the time to lose his temper, took several deep breaths to calm himself, "Don't you even want to know why I'm here and dressed in this uniform?"

"I don't give a bloody fuck. You're a dead man." Pete warned as he kept his weapon trained on Chapman, "After we gutted your Hellfire Club, SHIELD tossed the place. We got enough to put you away for the rest of your natural life."

"Oh, that? I'm afraid that it was my evil clone who did all those nasty things, who imprisoned me in a stasis chamber. I recently freed myself," Chapman explained sarcastically while making a dismissive gesture with his free hand, "and oh so want to redeem my good name!"

"You've lost the plot." Wisdom observed matter of factly.

"Oh no, I haven't. Doctors have even examined me, and will testify that I have never once had cybernetic implants." Chapman then holstered his weapon, even though Wisdom kept his trained on the former Union Jack, "Care to know how I'm redeeming my good name?"

"Good name? That's a joke." Wisdom scoffed

"You're not one to talk, mate. You've killed more men than I'll ever know, and destroyed more lives than me too. Dallas Roirdan ring any bells? Just how hard did you fight the Shadow King, eh?"

Wisdom was silent

“As I was saying, I’m redeeming my good name. I’m the new director of the United Nations strikeforce Excalibur, officially announced tomorrow.” Chapman smiled wickedly at Wisdom, “I wanted it to be a surprise for you.”

Wisdom’s eyes went wide at that revelation. He’d heard about Excalibur’s botched mission into Latveria, based on faulty information and eventually leading to the strikeforce being reorganized. Wisdom had even looked into who could have fed SHIELD that misinformation. Wisdom instantly knew he didn’t have to look any farther now.

“Bloody hell...”

Chapman knelt down closer and whispered so that only Wisdom could hear him now, “Care to know how I pulled it off?”

“Like I could stop you?” Wisdom asked thru gritted teeth

“Probably not. It was thanks to Black Air, actually.” Chapman said with a sinister grin, “how soundly do you think our countrymen would sleep if they knew the full scope of Black Air’s dealings? That a former member of Excalibur and current leader of X-Force was responsible for the death of every man, woman and child in a quaint, defenseless little town? Ronsaphan, wasn’t it? Peace of mind carries a very, very heavy price in these trying times, mate.”

“You bast...” Wisdom didn’t get a chance to finish. In one fluid motion, Chapman snatched Wisdom’s weapon out of his grip with his left hand while Chapman’s right hand slammed down on the side of Wisdom’s head, smashing it into the hardwood floor, causing Wisdom’s vision to swim. Chapman twirled Wisdom’s weapon in his hand easily and then stopped, and slammed the side of the weapon into Wisdom’s face. Chapman twirled it again, stopped and leveled it at the former Black Air agent.

“This is only the start, Wisdom. So watch your arse.” Chapman threatened as he stepped back, the light gleaming off the barrel of Wisdom’s stolen weapon.

“You really thing you can turn those tossers against me?” Wisdom laughed as he painfully brought himself into a standing position and wiped away the blood on his mouth and nose, “I’ve worked with them, you stupid wanker. They’re not like you. They’re heroes.”

“They’re patriots, Wisdom.” Chapman corrected, “Like me. And who says I need them? I hope by now you’ve learned that I’m a very, very resourceful man.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll still kill you dead as horse shit.” Wisdom hissed

“Oh no you won’t. I’m protected from on high, Wisdom, while you’ve burned nearly every bridge you’ve come across. You cross my backers, and you’ll be lucky if they only put a bullet between your eyes.” Chapman emptied the magazine of Wisdom’s weapon and tossed it back to him. “Be seeing you around, you can be sure of that. Delphi? Get us out of here.”

The silver haired woman nodded in acknowledgement, “Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and Wisdom? That drug Delphi slipped you? It only thing it causes gas. I thought it was fitting.” Before Wisdom could fully absorb this information, Chapman and Delphi had disappeared, taken away by the familiar signature of the Excalibur HERMES system.

Wisdom stood in the wreckage of the bar, as patrons (those not disabled by Delphi’s fists and feet) stared at him in confusion and sympathy. Ignoring them, Wisdom limped over to the bar, set his former stool upright and sat down.

“I need a drink.”

“What...would you like to drink?” The barkeeper asked hesitatingly

“The entire... fucking... bar.” Wisdom said in all seriousness

Just past Mercury, heading towards Earth at faster than light speeds, inside a ship crafted much like a sword

A holographic image of the planet earth hovered in the center of an otherwise lightless room, its holographic image providing the only light for the two hulking figures, who regarded the image with obvious disdain. Light was a luxury to these alien warriors, who preferred the darkness. It complimented their nature nicely, and wasn’t a drain on their resources.

“It looks so weak, the planet earth, doesn’t it my friend?” The first figure asked. His voice was throaty and deep, like gravel speaking, not a man and rife with obvious impatience “almost like clay.”

“Perhaps that is because, to you, the planet is clay, a plaything for you to shape.” The second figure replied. His voice was as gruff as his companion’s, but it was laced with a certain patience that commanded the respect of his fellow.

“Perhaps. But the inhabitants of this accursed planet have long irritated me, and you. I would just as soon destroy it as pillage it.”

“Who’s to say we can’t do both?”

Malevolent laughter filled the chamber and hallways of the ship for sometime as both warriors reveled in the thought of destroying the planet that vexed the both of them for so long, without a single finger until it was all over.

Next Issue: An arms race unlike anything the world has ever seen.

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 2

"Intergalactica"

Part One

by David Ingram

New York, 15 miles out in the ocean.

If his friends were asked to describe Jonathon Exner with one word, they would all use 'solitary'. Exner was hardly an anti social as he had many a friends, but more often than not Exner just preferred to be alone. That's one reason why he took up fishing, and currently had his boat anchored so far off the coast of New York at the moment. Out here, he had little fear of running into someone else. Here, he could be alone to relax from the rigors of his life and career.

Every now and then, he would spare a glance skywards, ever since he'd caught a glimpse of the Avenger's quinjet streaking overhead several years ago. As he did so now, he was rewarded with the rare site of a shining shooting star streaking overhead. Exner, feeling oddly contemplative today, leaned back and wondered about what life was like on other planets. What heights did they achieve? No doubt they threw off the shackles of dictators and petty concepts like greed and hatred long ago, he mused.

Exner wondered about the universe for about half a minute before he observed that at the shooting star he'd seen, had altered its course. Another ten seconds later, he realized that the shooting star was now on a collision course with his boat. He leapt to his feet, but it was far too late. The 'shooting star', in actuality a human figure surrounded by the fires of reentry, slammed thru his boat and then into the ocean, incinerating both Exner and his medium sized boat to less than ash in a second.

Underneath the waves, a grim and rocky figure smiled as he sank deeper and deeper towards the ocean floor. First blood was his. A trivial matter, true, but the alien warrior nevertheless took the death of the innocent man as a good omen for his plans of conquest. Steadily sinking towards ocean floor, the faux rock warrior touched the pitch-black ocean bottom, kicking up a small particle cloud. Those animals with constitutions strong enough to survive on the ocean floor instantly fled at the arrival of the figure, their primitive animal instincts divining the creature's power and disposition.

With a combination of a sneer and smile, the creature stretched out its thick, muscle bound arms, like a maestro preparing an orchestra, and began issuing orders to the mass of earth around him. Unfazed by the total blackness of the ocean depths, he went about his work. As on a dozen worlds before, the planet complied with the obedience of a well-trained dog.

New York, New York

Joey Chapman, newly appointed director of Excalibur, awoke from his usual nightmares to the sound of his cell phone ringing. With a groan, he reached over and plucked it off the nightstand adjoining the bed. He flipped it open and pressed it against his ear, head still resting on the pillow.

“ello?”

“Sir, it’s Delphi.” The voice of his assistant said, “You need to turn on the T.V now, sir.”

“Why?” Chapman asked, slightly miffed. He was the one who issued orders after all, though he held a great deal of respect for Delphi’s opinion. He sat up, reached for the remote to the T.V that sat at the far wall of his bed, and clicked it on.

“You’ll see, sir.”

“What channel?”

“Any news channel, sir.”

Chapman clicked the T.V on and was greeted by the image of a warmly dressed, brunette woman holding a microphone. Behind her was a lush, green forest of trees and flora of an almost alien nature, an alien paradise from all appearances.

“...Is Trish Tilby reporting about fifteen miles off of the United States. As incredible as it sounds, an island about twice the size of Central Park was created overnight by the two aliens behind me.”

The camera swiveled to the right, and displayed two powerfully built yet obviously alien men. The first was seemingly a man made out of rock wielding a long, silver axe that Chapman recognized as Terrax. The second figure, physically as impressive as the Hulk, wore a silver body armor with wore a blood red beard. The camera shifted back to Tilby.

“...Thus far, they have made no threats or made any demands, though they have said they have a message for our entire world. Attempts to reach the Fantastic Four or Avengers have been unsuccessful, and they are believed to be away on missions. Battle ships have been stationed off the island, but have made no aggressive moves.”

“Alien invasion? What, is it Tuesday already?” Chapman asked flippantly

“Then you see it sir?” Delphi asked

“Yes, sadly enough. What are those bloody reporters doing out there?”

“They were teleported out after they received a telepathic invitation according to our intelligence, sir. Terrax and Overmind are extraterrestrials, according to our files; though our information is limited. I believe the reporters are de facto hostages...”

“To keep the yanks from blowing them to hell before they’ve said their piece. Creating their little rock off the coast in international waters also lets them snub the U.S too. Smart buggers. No doubt the reporters are under some degree of telepathic influence.” Chapman deduced

“Course of action, sir?”

“Lets see what they want first, then decide how we’re going to kick their arse back to their home planet.” Chapman stated, “Get Excalibur together, and have them on standby.”

Chapman endured roughly twenty minutes of the media finding new and interesting ways of saying the same damn thing (that of we have no bloody idea what’s really going on) before finally the reporters stopped speaking, as if of one mind, and turned their cameras towards the two alien warriors.

“Hear me, people of earth. I am called Overmind, and long have I known of your world’s plight...”

“Here we go, what’s your game, mate?” Chapman muttered to himself as he watched them make their pitch.

“This great and wondrous planet is riddled with inequality, and it pains me to see it so. This planet has defied the mighty Galactus, beaten back the Brood, defeated the mighty Kree...”

“And kick you back to whatever pit you crawled out of.” Chapman added

“But there are still places that do not have running water, adequate housing or those who are dependant upon the dictatorial United States for protection. That is because the more advanced nations of this world need someone to look down upon, to snub their noses at. Well, I say no longer!”

“Oh, bloody fucking hell.” Chapman already knew exactly where this was going now, and it sent chills down his spine. Luckily, he’d still had his cell phone on with Delphi waiting patiently, “Delphi, is Excalibur assembled yet?”

“Negative sir. Most are on leave in their home countries. I’ve recalled them, but only I only have Sabra, Hellios and Darkstar with me at the moment.”

“Scramble them right bloody now! If this wanker is thinking what I think he’s thinking, we’re only a stones throw away from the worse crisis since I don’t know how long! I’ll get dressed and HERMES down.” Chapman slapped his cell closed and leaped out of bed. It was already one of those days...

Overmind smiled as gently as his warrior nature would allow him as he looked out over his enthralled audience, “No longer will a select few nations lord over the rest! As of now, I freely offer assistance to those nations ridiculed by the designation ‘third world’! To the minorities of the world who find themselves oppressed, to the down trodden, I offer salvation. Military assistance is yours for the asking, as is any other form of technology you could need. No longer will you be exploited under the heel of mightier nations! If you doubt our power, look at this very island we have created on the borders of this planet’s mightiest nation. Power we will willingly share with you!”

Overmind looked towards New York, and observed Hellios, Sabra and Darkstar flying towards his position like guided missiles. Overmind grinned widely at the sight of the oncoming U.N sponsored heroes.

“As we can see, even now other nations will do whatever it takes to prevent you from raising yourselves up to their exalted position.” Overmind reached outwards with his telepathic powers, “But that won’t deter us and our offer of aid.”

Sabra furrowed her brow in frustration, “We’ve been made. Brace yourselves for an attack.”

“Brace how?” Darkstar asked, “according to our three shreds of intelligence, one of the aliens is a powerful telepath. We’d...best attack from the north side.”

“Hellios, keep on course, I’ll deal with Darkstar.” Sabra lashed out with a glancing blow that knocked Darkstar from the sky and hurtling towards the water below, “Go!”

Darkstar righted herself and flew at Sabra, unleashing a blast darkforce at the superstrong heroine.

“You’re a smart one. I didn’t fool you for a moment, did I?” Darkstar asked, though her voice was overlapped by that of a more powerful and deeper, masculine voice.

“Complaints and tactical suggestions do not go hand in hand.” Sabra explained as she flew above a darkforce blast. Sabra brought her wrist blasters, armed with sedative needles forward and released a wave of them at the Russian mutant. Darkstar/Overmind brought up an ebony shield to protect herself, but the needles passed thru the shield and stuck the mutant before she could counter attack. Darkstar then fell from the sky like a rag doll.

“My needles are now charged slightly with microwave energy.” Sabra explained as she swooped down and grabbed Darkstar by the wrist, “always be prepared.”

Sabra looked towards the island where Hellios was charging headlong into danger, and said a small prayer on his behalf. Though she longed to assist him, Sabra was now burdened with protecting the helpless Darkstar and would thus be a liability in combat, and though she had no way of proving it, she knew that was exactly why Overmind had taken over Darkstar’s mind.

In essence, he was toying with them. That was how much these aliens respected Excalibur.

Terrax grinned wolfishly as he watched Hellios sped towards his person, intent on dishing out bodily harm upon the former herald. Terrax pointed his battleaxe, and unleashed a blast of cosmic energy so powerful all the reporters present had to look away to avoid being permanently blinded. With a grunt, Hellios met the cosmic blast head on, the energy slamming into him unrelentingly like waves upon the shore, and sent searing pain thru his entire chest. Pushing past the pain, Hellios kept on his collision course for Terrax and smashed into the former herald, carving out a slight trench with their bodies in the newly conceived island.

“Is this the best you have to offer?” Terrax demanded as he lashed out with both his feet and struck Hellios directly in his solar plexus, wounding the solar powered hero. Terrax followed thru with a slash from his axe, raking it across Hellios’ chest. Though Hellios was strong enough to take the swing without being eviscerated, barely, it still hurt like hell as he had to grit his teeth to keep from crying out.

“Take your lies and your honeyed words elsewhere, earth doesn’t want your evil!” Hellios hissed as he blasted at Terrax with his solar vision. Terrax met the attack with his own energy and the two energy signatures struck one another in a dazzlingly display of light and power. For a moment, the two powerhouses were stalemated, but slowly, powered by righteous desire to defeat the alien arms dealer, Hellios’ power pressed closer and closer to the alien. Finally, only when his power was within several feet of the villain did Hellios feel something creeping up his leg. He spared a glance down, and couldn’t hide his astonishment. Both combatants ceased their power displays, Terrax desiring to savor the look on Hellios’ face as the solar powered hero was defeated.

“Diamonds!?” Hellios gasped as he watched in horror as his body subsumed in a thick layer of diamonds that moved up his body like water. Hellios tried to fly away, but suddenly found he just couldn’t remember the mental mechanism he used for flight.

“The infernal telepath we were warned about, no doubt.” Hellios thought bitterly as he struggled to get free. Terrax watched as Hellios’ chest, neck and finally head disappeared underneath the diamond growth he’d created.

“You were amusing, but hardly the best I’ve ever had. So much power yet so little skill. And for that, I sentence you to a horrible death for wasting my time.” Terrax reached out with an open palm, concentrated, and then closed it. The diamond prison he’d entrapped Hellios shrunk inwards accordingly. Even Overmind grimaced, just a little. Terrax then turned towards his ally.

“I’ve had my sport, and we’ve made our statement. Let us be away.” Terrax stated.

“Agreed.” And a second later, the two aliens disappeared, carried away by their own personal teleporter. Sabra touched down on the island a split second later, set Darkstar down as gently as possible and then rushed towards the diamond structure as fast as her flightpack would carry her. Sabra slammed the diamond prison full speed, and then lit into it with all her incredible strength, to no effect. Like flies swarming a dead body, the media circled Sabra as she attempted in vain to free her teammate.

“Sabra, John Parker, News Channel 5, how do you feel about Overmind’s offer of assistance to oppressed minorities?”

“Sabra, what’s the United Nation’s stance on Overmind’s offer?”

“Sabra, News Channel Nine, how does the death of Hellios make you feel?”

“Scum!” Sabra hissed as she waved outwards with the back of her hand, knocking the media aside like tenpins, “A man has just died and you are foaming at the mouth to get ratings while standing on his coffin!”

Sabra was distracted from her rage when she heard a sound, much like the breaking of glass but only harder and louder. She turned and saw large cracks and tears forming in the diamond structure she’d been trying to break only moments before.

“Get back, give him room!” Sabra ordered as she roughly pushed the reporters away from the diamond tomb. Only moments later, it exploded in a shower of diamond fragments and shower of particle sized diamond dust. Hellios stood in the center of his former death trap, brushing off small fragments from his person. His face bore an odd expression of both irritation and relief, but he was, as ever, physically perfect.

“Well, I have to admit, I’m impressed.” Sabra stated.

“Thank you. I would have been out sooner, but that metal devil paralyzed my body with his powers.” Hellios explained, “Are you well?”

Sabra looked out over the Atlantic, “Two powerful alien arms dealers have freely offered to arm the angry, the disenchanting and downtrodden. I know I won’t be well until this is finished, and we have brought those two down.”

Several days later, Chechnya

Andrei Gurov, proud a proud member of the Russian infantry assigned to retake the break away republic of Chechnya, fought the urge to look over his shoulder at the giant monstrosity that had forced three battalions of the Russian army into a full retreat thru the muddy, rain softened ground. Seasoned veteran of the horrors of Urban warfare, Gurov was no coward. But that was only in regards to something that he had a chance in hell of beating.

Behind him, a robot akin to a griffin tore into the Russian army with a bloodlust surpassing any madman. The monster looked like nothing found in a child’s fairy tale it itself escaped from a monster’s nightmare, with bat shaped wings and standing two stories tall with steel and patches of green, faux flesh. A huge paw slapped out and smashed one tank thru the air, only to have it land on several soldiers, violently ending their lives. The beast then unleashed a plume of flame and dragged it from left to right slowly and back again, butchering wave after wave of soldiers with napalm that burned more powerfully than anything on earth. After several minutes of

slaughter, the robotic monster stopped and surveyed the situation, and the operator inside the metal beast found he was quite satisfied with the destruction. He then commanded the beast to take flight. The operator knew full well he could never expect to get away with his actions, but he hoped to at least make it into Moscow, where his option of self-destruction would do his cause the most good.

The metal griffin lifted high into the air, and began rising higher and higher...

And in the span of several seconds, the giant robot was then sent careening back to the earth with a loud –tha-toom!- that shook the foundations of the nearby rubble that had once been a thriving town.

“Nice shot.” Eshu commented to Sabra as he hovered beside her, the lower half of his body formed into that of a rocket and impossibly keeping him aloft, “Was that a right or a left, sweet cheeks?”

“Left. I trained to be ambidextrous.” Sabra stated. She didn’t even deign to acknowledge the ‘sweet cheeks’ comment.

“Enough banter. This creature has slain innocent soldiers!” Darkstar barked at her teammates, “we need to end this threat now!”

“Yeah, so Russia can go back to pillaging this country and the United Nations can go back to not giving a damn! I mean, that is why we’re here as opposed to the Winter Guard.” Eshu said as he posed heroically with an American flag in one hand while his upper body transformed into an internationally recognized red, white and blue uniform. Eshu then saluted Darkstar, “And most of all, lets do it for those brave ashes who served their country as true rapists below.”

Darkstar, at least at first, was left completely breathless by Eshu’s sarcasm. Knowing it wouldn’t be wise to stick around and wait for the inevitable anger that was sure to come, Eshu immediately dropped down towards the beast.

“You two distract him, I’ll take a peak inside!” Eshu’s rear end suggested. He landed on the beast’s steel frame with a wet splat, and began forcing himself thru a tiny opening in the seams of the alien metal.

“That dog dropping is as likely to use that machine against us as stop it!” Darkstar shouted as she dodged a blast of flame.

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Sabra retorted

Eshu moved thru the mechanical beast at a casual pace, whistling to himself. He felt no great motivation to hurry, after all, he didn’t like his teammates, let alone what they represented. But still, regardless of his personal opinions, Eshu had a work ethic. You do a job, you do it right, that’s the way Eshu lived his life. Eshu traced what he suspected to be the power cables to the command module. Eshu shifted his molecules into the density of steel and shot straight up,

shredding the controls of the beast and finding a single man, sitting in a steel chair at the controls. The man jumped back as energy arced all over the control boards, destroying his dreams of revenge.

Eshu morphed his hand into a red Stop! sign and said, “Sorry buddy, you can’t take this to Moscow. It’s an Allah free zone, and boy howdy do we need those!”

The man, his face covered in soot and looking as though he’d just walked off a battlefield (meaning he looked like every other civilian in the area), spat at Eshu’s face, “I am no Muslim you piece of shit! I’m a Christian who wants to see an end to an occupation that killed my son, raped my wife and disappeared my daughter!”

Eshu struck the man unconscious with a single punch, “I only represent the United Nations. Go tell someone who cares.”

India

A military barracks exploded in a display of firepower as twenty Thugee cultists, abandoned their disguises as militiamen and armed with powerful laser weapons began indiscriminately firing once their stolen transport had reached the center of the base.

“Forward! Kali shines upon us!” One cultist yelled as his men cut a bloody swath thru the militiamen to where their intelligence indicated where the experimental nuclear was held. Given the suddenness and ferocity of their attack, the Indian military fell like ripe wheat before the scythe.

“Terrible Kali will favor us for our sacrifice!” The leader announced as the group was within eyeshot of the building leading to the underground bunker where their objective was stored. They fought with renewed fervor, but each and everyone of them stopped dead in their tracks where a circular shield shot out and struck their leader and ricochet away.

“Anyone else getting a bad sense of deja ve, again?” U.S Agent asked as he caught his weapon. To his right Union Jack brandished his energy dagger while at his left, Silverclaw shifted into her half human half cat form and growled. Scarlet Scarab hovered above the group, his arms crossed in a casual manner

“It was Pakistan last time, actually.” Union Jack replied, “and you weren’t even there.”

“Like it matters? Come on, I got homework!” Silverclaw snapped as she leaped forward at the group.

“Scarab, would you be so kind as to box these buggers off?” Union Jack asked as he snapped kicked a cultist into unconsciousness.

“Of course, Jack.” Scarab flew above the mob and set down in front of them. A few cultists, those not occupied by the fists of Union Jack or U.S Agent or claws of Silverclaw, managed to

fire off a lucky shot at Scarab. The Middle Eastern hero absorbed the blasts harmlessly, and stood vigilant, insuring that no Thugee escaped. Hopelessly outmatched, the worshippers of Kali folded within minutes.

“Okay, that was fun. Now can we get out of here?” Silverclaw asked, “I have trig homework!”

“Nutty aliens arming radical fundamentalists take precedence over book reports.” U.S Agent snorted.

“Maria is simply concerned about her education, Agent. There is nothing wrong with that.” Scarab opined

“Shut up, the lot of you.” A voice they all recognized as belonging to Joey Chapman ordered over the team’s comm. units, “Scarab, what is your report on the energy you absorbed from these men’s weapons?”

“It is the same energy as in all the other incidents.”

“I suspected as much. Assist the local authorities with cleanup, and get back here ASAP.” Chapman ordered.

United Nations Emergency Bunker

Delphi’s hands glided across her workstation, from activating Excalibur’s communication band to connecting to secret labs while Chapman stood over her shoulder. Delphi brought up a screen with Suzi Endo, dressed in her Cybermancer armor and surrounded by weapons of all kinds. Most obvious was the mechanical griffin Sabra, Darkstar and Eshu had defeated.

“What’s your report, Cybermancer?” Chapman asked

“You were right sir. It took some effort, but I discovered all the weapons Terrax and Overmind have given out and that Excalibur has confiscated, operate on the same frequency. What’s more, none of the weapons have anything that functions like a battery.”

“Which means Terrax and Overmind have the kill switches.”

“That’d be my guess, sir. Never let your weapons be turned against you, I’m sure that’s in ‘The Art of War’ somewhere.”

“No doubt. Good work, Cybermancer. Finish up there, and we’ll use the HERMES system to bring you back for mission planning.”

“So we’re finally going after these monsters?” Suzi asked.

“Oh yes. Finish up quickly so we can push the world back from the brink.”

“Will do, sir.”

Chapman terminated the communication, and allowed his thoughts to drift to another subject for a moment. Excalibur was operating out of the United Nations emergency bunker, underneath the main U.N building. While everything was functional, he had no quarters for his troops, possessed no training facilities, the bunker itself was doubtlessly bugged by every major intelligence agency in the world and simply wasn't designed for long term use. Chapman had placed official requests for a base for Excalibur, but the politicians were predictably taking their time on the matter. It was almost enough to make Chapman regret beating the crap out of Pete Wisdom. Almost.

Later, in the defacto Excalibur briefing room

“Alright everyone, listen closely,” Chapman began as he addressed his team, (and thanked God his meeting table had been delivered at least), “Overmind and Terrax have been arming terrorists the world over with powerful weapons. They have deliberately targeted military personnel and bases worldwide, I believe to demonstrate both the power of their weapons and to show our powerlessness against them. So believe me when I say that the crisis's we've squashed so far are nothing compared to what's in store if this goes any longer. It's time we took the fight to them. Cybermancer, you and Union Jack have reviewed all the data we've gathered so far. Have you developed a method to track them?”

“I'm afraid not.” Cybermancer confessed, “the energy they use shifts too quickly to lock onto and is nearly impossible to trace.”

“And lets me honest, whatever these blokes are using is light years ahead of us.” Rock added, “So our chances of find them that way were almost non existent to begin with. Why not shake down their buyers?”

Chapman rubbed his temples in frustration, “Scientists. Not a lick of common sense at times. Between their scanners and Overmind's telepathy, we'd never get the drop on them by following a potential buyer. But we can still trace them.”

“How's that?” U.S Agent asked, “I mean, Cybermancer and Rock are our big brains.”

“By following my orders. They're not our only brains, after all. Cybermancer, interface your armor into the bunker computers. They're tied into a satellite network that constantly scans the earth.” Chapman instructed, “Now, use your armor and create a holographic image of the earth using data from two days before our alien warriors came to earth, and let us see it.”

Cybermancer did as she was ordered, and a holographic display of the planet appeared in the center of the room.

“Now, add a blue tinge to represent all background energy. Microwave, gamma radiation, whatever.”

Cybermancer acknowledged the order, and the globe was then tinted with blue.

“Now, repeat everything you just did, only now using current data. Display any disruptions in normal background radiation in red.”

Cybermancer again did as she was ordered, and Excalibur gasped as they saw little red lines leading from Chechnya, Pakistan and other locations where they’d fought people armed by Overmind and Terrax, leading to a single location above the Atlantic Ocean.

“Got ‘em.” Chapman smiled.

“Umm, I got lost.” Silverclaw confessed, “What makes you so sure that’s where these guys are holed up?”

“Drop a stone in a pond, even an invisible one, and it creates ripples. We’ve just traced the ripples back to the source.” Chapman explained confidently.

“Chapman’s much smarter than we gave him credit for, it seems.” Sabra murmured to U.S Agent.

“Cap told me about him once. Said Chapman was a quick on his feet, cool under pressure. Makes sense he’s even cooler without the pressure.” Agent whispered back.

“So now that we know where they are, how do we reach them?” Hellios asked, “More importantly, how do we prevent Overmind from seizing control of our mind once we have reached them?”

Delphi, who stood behind Chapman picked up a white box and began handing out small gray, high tech armbands to the members of Excalibur.

“These armbands are miniature versions of the telepathic shields used all over the world, from the White House to the United Nations to Parliament in the UK. Personally designed by Tony Stark himself to block the strongest telepaths in the world.” Chapman explained, “These little toys would let you ignore Onslaught’s telepathy, that bugger who nearly killed the Avengers and FF a while back.”

“And how do we get to these men?” Scarab asked,

“I’ve that covered too. Relax, calm yourself, and don’t immediately start punching things when you see that you’re surrounded by heavily armed men, alright?” Chapman requested.

Immediately after Chapman had said that, Excalibur disappeared, sprinted away by the HERMES teleporter, and rematerialized in a room the size of a three football fields with a cement roof and what had to be spaceships as far as the eye could see. Some were obviously ancient; others laid in the open with their bowels strewn about on the floor and being dissected by scientists while others were in perfect condition.

And just as Chapman warned, heavily armed men surrounded the Excalibur team.

“Greetings. I’m Joey Chapman, director of Excalibur. You were told to expect me.” Chapman said with a cocky, disarming smile.

“Yeah, we know.” One soldier stated, “But with your record, trust but verify, Mr. Chapman.” The lead soldier lowered his weapon, though his men did not. He motioned for Excalibur to follow him.

Silverclaw looked on in awe as they passed the alien machines. Many had their guts and wires pulled out on display while scientists in stereotypical white lab coats examined them and took notes on clipboards, “These place looks like a prop room for Star Trek! What is this place?”

“This place, girl, is the end result of almost every half arsed attempted invasion or alien excursion into earth.” Chapman said without looking over his shoulder, “All alien crafts taken from the Shi’ar, Skrulls, Kree and any other alien who’s been forced to leave earth post haste thanks to a foot up the bum by some hero, comes here for analyst.”

“Quite an armada from the looks of it.” Hellios commented. He wondered for a moment if the alien craft responsible for his empowering formula made it’s way here.

“Not really.” Chapman corrected, “only about sixty percent are space worthy, and barely at that.”

“You’re not sending us into battle with an E.T version of a beat up old cab, are you?” Agent asked

“Oh, of course not, Walker.”

Excalibur turned a corner, and the sight they saw stopped them dead. In the center of a huge room sat an aircraft the size of a large charter plane and shaped like a missile with dozens upon dozens of weapons protruding from ports on every side.

“If anything, I’d give my team the space version of Blue Thunder.”

“Didn’t know you were into American action movies.” Agent said

“We all have our nasty little vices.” Chapman replied

U.S Agent looked the ship up and down like a jockey examining a horse before a race as Chapman led them to the ramp. Walker greedily rubbed his hands together and licked his lips like a dog just about to be given a big, juicy steak, “You know, I think I’m gonna like working with you, Chapman.”

The former Union Jack smiled slightly, “Sorry, mate, Suzi and Rock are driving.”

“Where’s the manual, then?” Rock asked

“Inside.” Chapman motioned for them to begin up the entry ramp, “I’ve some things to do back at the U.N. The boys here will see you out. Good luck.”

Chapman waited patiently as Excalibur entered the craft. He knew he should immediately HERMES back to the bunker as soon as possible, but there was just one thing he wanted to hear.

“Post its! The manual is post it notes!?” Rock shouted in disbelief

Chapman then teleported away

Much fussing and fretting later

“Okay, you can do this, you can do this.” Cybermancer told herself in a hushed tone as she sat in the co-pilots seat and took a few deep breaths while Union Jack carefully and meticulously went over the controls for the fifth time. Most of Excalibur were strapped into seats that had been imported and grafted onto the bridge, waiting for take off.

“Nervous Suzi Q?” A voice asked, startling the high-strung scientist.

“Gee, what makes you think that, John?” Suzi replied

“Guess. This is your first real mission, after all.” U.S Agent stated as he leaned up against the control panel in front her.

“Good guess. I am a little scared. I’ve only tested the armor, but not myself.” Suzi confided.

“You did pretty good when we first met, when Mandarin attacked Hong Cong, and that was before you had your spiffy armor. Level head, cool under fire.” U.S Agent said confidently, “You strike me as a sink or swim girl, and you haven’t sunk yet. If you don’t die on this mission, I can promise you that you’ll do fine as a hero.”

“You have an odd way of reassuring people, John, you know that?” Cybermancer said with a slight chuckle, “Just two things, for future reference.”

“What’s that?”

“One, don’t call me girl. I’m a woman.”

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

“I know, but regardless. And two, no, I won’t let you drive.”

U.S Agent threw his hands up in anger and issued a string of highly imaginative profanities as he went back to his seat.

“He’s incorrigible, isn’t he?” Union Jack asked from his seat.

“That’s a little more polite than what I was thinking, but yes. Are we finally ready for take off?”

“Yes. I’ve signaled the base to open the hatches. We’re taking off now.”

The spacecraft rose into the air and began steadily climbing. Excalibur was quite, anticipating the coming battle and preparing themselves for the coming battle. Well, most were.

“Tell me, Scarab, when we reach these terrorists, will you coddle and scold them lightly in hopes that they will surrender?” Sabra asked sarcastically.

“Worry about yourself and your own actions, Sabra, and I will worry about mine.” Scarab replied, not bothering to look at the mutant Israeli.

“So what’s the plan? Just shoot our way in?” Eshu asked in the form of a western gun slinger, cutting thru the silence like a knife.

“That’s correct.” Union Jack replied, “Not much of one I admit, but it’s own only option.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” A voice broadcasted in all their minds. Excalibur attempted to spring into action, but found that what they thought, and what they actually did, were two completely different things.

“The psi dampeners! They’re not working!” Hellios exclaimed as he found himself a prisoner of his own body.

“The directions said this thing had a cloak, how’d they find us?!” Cybermancer shouted as she fought a futile battle to regain control of her body’s motor functions.

“Oh, that was easy…” Overmind said in their minds.

Union Jack, marshaling every last bit of his will power, slammed his palm down on the button labeled ‘weapons systems’. Instead of a dazzling display of firepower on their port side, a holographic image of Joey Chapman appeared.

“If you are seeing this, then it means my deal with Overmind is now complete. Sorry mates, but the power they promised me pales anything you could offer. So we made a deal. I give them Excalibur, a powerful source of biological weapons, and they will give me all the political power I want in their new world order. Ta”

“Your leader hand delivered you to us, as promised.” Overmind said smugly “You are now ours, Excalibur, to do with as we wish.”

Next Issue: Betrayed and captured, Excalibur is trapped in the belly of the beast. More betrayal is in store as plans are revealed, a hero's strength is tested and Excalibur returns to earth the worst way possible

Sword Strokes

Issue 27 got me a letter from Jason E, master of the writing of the Widow and DD. Take it away, Jason!

"I am impressed."

Rock on!

"Excalibur #27, the first issue by new writer David Ingram, is a rip-roaring roller coaster ride. Chock full of action, this story was a blast to read. David gives a great ending to the old era of Excalibur and a very smooth transition toward his new one."

Had to put David's baby to rest to smother...err, I mean finish his plots and head off in my direction. Glad you liked it

"If any out there haven't read Excalibur lately, read this issue. It's a great jumping on point, with hardly any of the baggage from David's run (though that baggage was great, too!)"

Standalone issues are cool, glad that did it for you

"I'm giving this issue 4.5 out of 5 "insert witty trademark review symbol here"s. Looking really forward to future issues, David.

~Jason E."

I hope I don't disappoint, though the last two issues are action lacking. Rest assured, issue 3 will more than make up for that!

And last issue got me a letter from Gary Jones. Take it away, man!

"I liked the opening scene.

I liked the removal of Bridge from the team for the sole reason that it took Armory with him, the remote tele-presence unit did make the team seem a little like a low grade version of the Avengers, and Excalibur doesn't need that monkey on its back."

Bah! Who needs the Avengers? That's my motto :P

"I liked Eshu, it looks as if he is going to bring some real tension to a team that formally were all buddy buddy, and Sabra and the Scarab looks like a major internal battle to come."

Glad you liked the changes. Eshu will bring a lot of tension to the team, though don't look for Sabra and Scarab thing to be too big an issue. More like a constant, bitter cold war

“Putting Cybermancer into the team is an odd choice and I look forward to seeing Stark Enterprises response to having one of its main research scientists (She works for SE in China) press-ganged into a team, hey a possible future teamup right there.”

I thought she would work for Stark Fugiwwhatever now ? Suzi was drafted mainly for tech support, and because her armor looks damn cool ;)

“However The addition of Silverclaw left me scratching my head. She seems in her brief appearance to bear little relation to her Marvel counterpart and more like your standard cheerleader type, although that is probably a deliberate move to take her away from her Marvel counterpart.”

Silverclaw has some very American mannerisms, and was forcefully drafted into Excalibur. Hence the 'tude. We'll see more of that later

“I loved the fight between Chapman and Wisdom in the bar, which proved that mutants do seem to rely a little too much on their powers and are lost when they can't use them, but did think that as a former spy Wisdom was tricked a little too easily by Delphi, but that is a small grumble.”

That's not that fair to Wisdom, honestly. He knows how to fight well enough without his powers, but Chapman's always only had his wits, a silver dagger and a gun and HE survived. He's just a better fighter. As to how Delphi got so close, that'll be explained in Excalibur 4

“As for the end scene, please lord tell me this isn't going to become another alien invasion or world takeover storyline.

Between Rames Xavier, the Sons of Set and the Shadow King/Hydra, I've about had my fill of them at M2K.”

As you saw this issue, the aliens in question were hardly invading. As to what exactly Overmind and Terrax have planned, you'll see next issue

Also, the Champion of writers, Mike Exner gave me a review, which rules all.

“I only followed the 1st volume of Excalibur at M2K for a short while, so admittedly, I can't compare how this issue stands next to its predecessor. But I've enjoyed David Ingram's work on New Warriors and Force Works, so i decided to give it a shot.”

So you're the second person of three to read my Warriors!

“I'm pleased with the decision to start this title back at one. David has decided to re-work the roster a bit, so it makes sense. I remember when Excalibur first came out, the roster was huge, so a little trimming of the fat makes loads of sense. The team is run by the UN, and the concept is

still sound... take heroes from different nations, throw them together and make a team capable of meeting any international threat that might arise. Now that's what I call international relations.”

Heh, we'll see a lot of that down the line. As for keeping the basic idea, if it's not broken...

“Now, the roster leftover from before appears to be U.S. Agent (a fave), Union Jack (the billionth one), Darkstar, Sabra, and Heliios (a Greek 'Superman'). The former leader of the team Bridge (from SHIELD fame) has gone back to his old stomping grounds, and the UN has decided to appoint Joey Chapman as the new head honcho.”

I always thought an evil bastard should run a government team as the government is filled with evil bastards ? It's really simple when you think about it

“David instills tension right away. As if Chapman wasn't enough of a distraction for UJ, the first person he recruits is the Scarlet Scarab. All I know about this guy is that he's rumbled with Thor, so that's a good thing, but another character on the team - Sabra - who's gone toe to toe with the Hulk and the Scarab don't exactly see eye to eye. All that power at odds, and you're just asking for trouble.”

Oh yeah. Don't expect any hugs and kisses between Scarab and Sabra anytime soon. You'll see why Sabra's got a chip on her shoulder regarding Scarab in issue 4

“The rest of the characters file in, Cybermancer (China), Eshu, a mutant shapeshifter, and Silverclaw, who's been ignored up to this point in M2K which is great, because David can do with her basically whatever he'd like. The characters aren't the most popular, but they're diverse in culture and in power-level, which gives off a sense of a wealth of stories that could conceivably be told.”

With Excalibur, I've got more stories than I know what to do with! Eshu will be especially fun to play with.

“David also mixes things up by granting leadership of the group to Union Jack. This is troublesome for two reasons. One, UJ is a lesser-powered character, and two, UJ and Chapman have somewhat of a history. David plays both of these off rather quickly, but you have the feeling trouble will arise again before long.”

There are two main reasons why Chapman appointed Rock as leader. One reason we've already seen. The other, we'll see down the line

“The scene between Wisdom and Chapman in the bar was an entertaining fight, but a little confusing for someone not totally familiar with their history. That would be my only complaint there. A little more effort into explaining why things are happening when they do would aid Dave there.”

Yeah, seriously. That was a screw up I'll admit to, though hopefully I've now inspired people to research why Chapman and Wisdom hate one another.

“The final scene is a nice addition, and I'm looking forward to the next issue. I would have liked a little more action from this issue, but it was good for what it was, a set-up for things to come. Hopefully David can keep it up and continue to improve on what he's built so far. 6.5 out of 10.”

I hope so to, and I'll try with every issue. Thanks, Mike!

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 3

"Intergalactica"

Part Two

by David Ingram

The story thus far : Two alien warriors Overmind and Terrax, for reasons thus far unknown, have come to earth offering powerful weaponry to anyone seeing themselves as oppressed and or wishing to increase the power of their military. After squashing several emergencies arising from this offer, Excalibur decided to take the fight to Overmind and Terrax, who were secreted away above the atmosphere in their own spacecraft. The counter attack failed miserably as Excalibur was easily captured by the duo, where it was revealed Chapman had sold them out!

On the outer fringes of Earth's atmosphere, inside Overmind's ship

“Welcome Excalibur, to the place where true power on your pathetic planet is meted out to the masses .” Overmind, an alien warlord boating a body that looked physically powerful enough to battle the Hulk adorned with a sleek sliver armor and empowered with incredible telepathic might, boasted proudly as he led the entranced down the corridor of his ship. The interior of the craft was as black as night, with lines that pulsated with an emerald energy that illuminated the interior. The ebony walls seemed to almost beat with a life of their own as energy coursed thru them.

Overmind motioned to the walls as he led Excalibur down the hall, who followed like loyal worker drones “ When I escaped a cosmic monster known as The Stranger who unfairly imprisoned me for years, this craft was amongst his collection of oddities. I took it for my own. This craft is alive somehow, and can even grow weapons.”

The alien tyrant turned another corner with Excalibur still following like zombies, “In my travels, I came across Terrax the Tamer. A kindred spirit, with a similar vendetta against your planet.”

They turned one final corner, and came upon an expansive room that could only be the strange alien craft's bridge. Terrax stood in the center of the room with his arms crossed behind his back in a business like manner, addressing the holographic display of an Asian Businessman.

“We agree with your assessment. Your Island more than deserves its independence from both the mainland and the United States . We will be in contact about your weapons shipment.” Terrax terminated the signal and then slammed his large fist down on the consul leaving an heavy imprint of his stony fist, “You slaving, spineless worm!”

“Temper, Terrax, patience is key to this endeavor.” Overmind chided, “Let the humans think we care about their welfare. We’ll have reached our desired saturation point soon enough.”

“Yeah, shut your yap and spill the beans already.” Chapman sighed from his seat in the United Nations' emergency bunker. Thanks to a secret connection in Cybermancer's armor (so secret in fact, Ms. Endo had no idea it was there), Chapman was watching and recording everything the Chinese scientist, and by natural extension the rest of Excalibur, saw. Delphi sat at a command center in front of Chapman, always ready for any command.

“What makes you believe they will reveal their plans, sir?” Delphi asked, genuinely curious.

“Blokes like this Overmind love to hear their own voice. And besides, what's the point of crafting some brilliant plan if no one can appreciate it? They're like politicians, weak egos who need recognition of their 'genius'.”

“Why have you brought those humans here?” Terrax demanded, “You should lock them in the brig or killed them outright! Their ilk are nothing but trouble!”

“We have no uses for corpses, and I do not trust this ship to keep these humans imprisoned. My mental powers can hold them easily while we execute our plan.” Overmind calmly stated. Overmind then looked Excalibur with a raised eyebrow

“What's my plan, you wonder? I can hear that question bouncing around with your tiny little skulls. Well, it's really quite simple. While I was a prisoner of the Stranger, I pulled an incredible secret from his mind. I discovered that your species is among the most adaptive ever in creation. Few have your 'mutants' but no other race has beings like your Spiderman, your Fantastic Four, your Hulk. None. Just like no one else has beaten the might Galactus, or driven back so many advanced races so early in their history.

“If only a handful of individuals could accomplish so much, just imagine what an army can do! With this ship, our plan is simple. Arm people around the globe with our weapons, wait until we've armed enough of them, we will overload the weapons' power packs. Then, swoop down upon the devastated planet, conquer the severely weakened but powerfully mutated population with my vast mental powers and use them as cannon fodder as we pillage the universe.” Overmind explained in an off hand, casual manner

“Essentially, we're pirates in need of a crew.” Terrax offered, “And your fellow earthmen are perfect for what we need.” A sinister smile came across Terrax's lips, “After a few modifications, of course.”

“Pirates...?” Chapman asked aloud, “They've pushed our planet to the brink of war...for slaves for their oars?” Chapman slumped slightly in his chair, feeling a little numb. For the last several days, Chapman and Excalibur had been working double overtime to squash emergencies created by these monsters. That so many lives had been lost and even more, millions in fact, had been threatened simply because Overmind and Terrax wanted a pirate crew left Chapman utterly breathless.

“Sir? What's our next course of action?” Delphi asked.

Chapman steepled his hands in front of his chin and didn't immediately reply. After several moments of thought, “First, start making copies of Red Beard and Stone Arse and start circulating it around the major news agencies. BBC, CNN, etc. Then, detonate the bombs we hid on the ship we gave Excalibur, that should force these bastards down to earth where we can better deal with them if Excalibur fails.”

“Understood sir.

“Oh,” Chapman added, almost in an after thought, “Lets actually turn on those Stark made telepathic dampeners on, shall we?”

Chapman watched with satisfaction as Delphi quickly executed her orders, which would turn Overmind and Terrax's plans on their head. Chapman only regretted he was there to see their faces, for he had something he wished to say to them in person. But though they couldn't hear him, he went ahead and said it aloud anyways.

“Boom, you sons of bitches.”

On the outer fringes of Earth's atmosphere

Overmind, Excalibur and Terrax fell from side to side as the very floor they stood upon lurched back and forth like a small boat caught in a typhoon only seconds after a massive explosion was heard from deep inside the bowels of the alien craft.

“Terrax, what's happened!” Overmind demanded as he struggled for footing, the craft still bucking like a mad bronco.

“What do you think has happened? We've been tricked!” Terrax spat as he gripped a section of the wall to keep from slamming into the more important parts of the bridge, “Their craft was filled with explosives! These humans were nothing but a diversion!”

“How is that possible? Their minds are an open book to me!” Overmind snapped as he stoop up. The ship was no longer swaying as much as before, and seemed to have stabilized somewhat, enabling the two villains to stand properly, “They're my puppets!”

“Correction, asshole.”

An indestructible shield, colored red white and black slammed into Overmind's nose, breaking it with a – crunch -. The shield ricocheted back and the straps on the back slid seamlessly onto a wrist covered in black combat leather.

“We were your puppets,” U.S. Agent stated. Behind him, the rest of Excalibur glared at Terrax and Overmind with looks of pure malice.

“Sabra, Scarab, Helliios! Front and center!” Union Jack ordered, “everyone else, interference!”

“Lets kick their ass!” Silverclaw shouted as she shifted into her were cat form and leaped forward. She didn't make it six inches before she felt a hand grab her belt from behind and gently toss her backwards on her rear.

“These men are out of your league, Maria.” Sabra warned as she then flew towards Overmind like a guided missile, but collided with Scarlet Scarab before making contact with the villain.

“Scarab!”

“I am not to blame, he was mine!”

“You call yourselves a team?” Overmind laughed, not bothering to reveal his telekinetic powers were to blame. He then blasted the two Middle Eastern heroes away with a single telekinetic blast, “ Hah !”

A block of darkforce the size of a small truck slammed into Overmind, knocking him backwards off his feet.

“We are a team because should one fall, another is ready to take their place!” Darkstar snapped as she unleashed another darkforce blast at the mental juggernaut.

“Come forward and face your death!” Terrax shouted. Helliios, eager for a rematch, flew forward to meet Terrax's challenge. Terrax ducked to the side and slashed his axe against Helliios' back as the Greek hero missed him. Helliios cried out in pain as Terrax once again came within inches of tearing his superstrong flesh.

“Raw power is useless against a warrior's born as myself!” Terrax swung his axe again and unleashed as much power cosmic as his powerful body could channel. The bolt of energy slammed into Helliios and expelled him out the side of the ship like a runaway comet and towards the green earth far, far below. The alien craft instantly sealed the wound before decompression could threaten Excalibur.

“Bah! Easy prey.” Terrax sneered. Terrax then felt a wet, slimy substance fall over his face, blinding him. The former herald grabbed the substance with his powerful hands and began pulling it away, but it was like trying to grip Jell-O. Chunks came away, but it still remained around his head

“What? You lookin' for a whuppin' or somethin'?” Eshu asked as he covered Terrax's upper body in his malleable flesh, “Well block head, we're more than willing to help ya there!”

“He's a male, he needs to build his ego.” Cybermancer quipped as she blasted Terrax's hide with repulsar blasts. Terrax swung his axe blindly, and Cybermancer would have been half the woman she once was had Union Jack not tackled her to the ground.

“Sabra! Terrax!” Union Jack ordered. Sabra slammed into the rock creature from behind as Union Jack helped Suzi up.

“We need you to get set this ship down, luv. We'll deal with these tossers!”

“Don't delude yourself, human trash.” Overmind blasted Scarlet Scarab away and depressed a button on the nearest wall. A panel opened to reveal dozens of robots, none looking too advanced but all were bulky and the size of professional quarter backs, “without the advantage of superior numbers, you don't stand a chance against us!”

“Bugger...” Rock muttered, “Agent, ‘Claw! We need to deal with those robots so the others can do their work!”

U.S Agent ploughed into the lead robot and swung outwards with his shield, striking down another three.

“Hurry up Rock, or I won't leave any for you!”

Suzi Endo tried to do her best to ignore the battles going on behind her and analyze the alien machinery. She was standing at what looked like the control panel (a round outcropping with many bright buttons) as behind her Darkstar hovered over a downed Scarlet Scarab while she blasted away at Overmind, keeping the alien on the defensive while Sabra struggled to contain Terrax, as his superior power overwhelmed her despite her skill. Suzi struggled to block it all out as she examined the controls in an attempt to decipher them. Removing a nano tech interface node from her wrist gauntlet, Suzi plugged it into what looked like an input center. Within moments, her onboard computer was nearly overloaded with bits and pieces of alien information. Were it not for special firewalls created beforehand, her armor would have crashed from overload.

“Damn, too much information to scowl thru.” Suzi realized, “If only this thing was written in English or Chinese and looked halfway normal!”

As if responding to her command, the alien craft began shifting and changing texture in response to Suzi's request. The ebony black walls and green conduits changed into a sleeker, more science fiction look, changing from the appearance of the inside of the belly of a beast to something out of Star Wars. It went without saying that this change did not go unnoticed.

“Stalin's balls! What has happened?” Darkstar exclaimed dumbfounded

“My ship! What have you done to my ship!” Overmind swatted Darkstar aside and rushed towards Cybermancer. But before he could reach the distracted scientist, twin beams of energy struck his back.

“I believe we have some issues to discuss.” Scarab stated, his hands glowing with his trademark crimson energy. Overmind scoffed wordlessly, and counter attacked.

“Suzi? What did you do to the ship?” Darkstar asked as she flew to her friend's side. Cybermancer said nothing in reply, and Darkstar tapped her on the shoulder in concern; and was rewarded with a thousand volts of electricity. Darkstar instinctively pulled away, but it was too late and she passed from consciousness seconds later.

Union Jack slashed outwards with his energy dagger and disabled one robot that'd gotten too close for comfort while behind him, U.S Agent decapitated another two with his indestructible shield while watching Union Jack's back. Off to the side of the pair, Silverclaw made easy work of the robots that came her way in her powerful sloth form (how Silverclaw's most powerful form could be a slough baffled Union Jack, but he didn't dwell on it. As long as it worked). The three braced for another attack, but the ship bucked again and threw everyone from their feet. The heroes scrambled back up, but there wasn't a single one of them who didn't notice that they felt noticeably lighter.

“This is not good, mates.” Union Jack observed as his heart dropped into his stomach.

“What is it?” Agent asked as he threw his shield at the recovering robots.

“That light feeling? That means we're falling.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Exactly. Where the fecking hell is Hellios!” Union Jack demanded.

Sudan Desert

Niko Hrisalis, otherwise known as the Greek hero Hellios, grunted in pain as he stumbled out of the crater he formed when he came crashing back to earth via the Terrax express. Every inch of his body was sore and his head was pounding like an insane drummer, which was to be expected as he'd just survived reentry. But more annoying than the pain that wracked his entire body was the low buzzing in his ears. Hellios paused for a moment; that wasn't buzzing that he heard.

“...ellios? Are you there? This is Chapman, report!”

It was the micro thin communicator that was specially created to tap into the bio force field that gave Hellios his invulnerability, thus making it as durable as Hellios himself. With a snarl, he activated the two-way communicator circuit.

“Chapman!” Hellios hissed venomously, “When I get my hands upon you, you will wish you were never born!”

“Hellios, I sent you up against a mind reader with the wrong information in your head,” Chapman spat, “do the math.”

Hellios clenched his fists in anger and defeat, “What do you need, Chapman?”

“Terrax and Overmind's ship has begun to fall into the atmosphere. We need you to guide it down as gently as possible to minimize the damage.”

“Give me the coordinates.” Information instantly followed, and Hellios soared into the air towards where the alien spacecraft was projected to be.

“Word of warning, Hellios. The ship weighs over an estimated 1,000 tons.” Chapman stated.

“You'll have to forgive me, Chapman, my head is still pounding.” Hellios explained as he flew towards the coordinates he was being given, “What is that in the metric system?”

“You don't want to know, mate.”

Hellios finally came to a stop; high above the clouds where Chapman had said he could intercept the falling spacecraft. Hellios only had to wait three nano seconds before he saw the falling ship. He gasped as he saw the alien craft. It was coated in flames, but its outer hull was plain to see. Shaped like a sword larger than almost any skyscraper Hellios had ever seen and coated in sleek silver, Hellios thought it looked like the industrial sword of God. And it was speeding towards Hellios like the runaway comet it was. The tip ploughed into the solar powered hero's chest and just kept on its collision course. Stunned only for a second, Hellios marshaled every last bit of power at his command, embedded his fingers into the metal like it was clay, and pushed back with all his solar powered strength.

Veins made themselves visible, muscles bulged and tendons threatened to tear as Hellios' body begged him to stop as he pitted his incredible solar powered strength against the alien ship fall from the Heavens. But Hellios was not to be denied. As hard the ship pressed downwards, Hellios swore to press twice as hard against it, and he made steady progress. After several long seconds, Hellios felt the ship beginning to slow marginally. It was still going far too fast, but Hellios was beginning to feel more and more confident that he could safely bring the craft down. Chapman had suggested where he could direct the craft, but if he could just carry it away...

Suddenly, Hellios unwittingly tore thru the metal of the alien craft like a well-struck baseball going thru a kitchen window and flew into the upper atmosphere, hurtling straight up before bringing himself to a surprised stop. After a moment of confusion, he recognized the problem he currently faced.

“Too much pressure!” The Greek hero scowled. Though Hellios easily possessed enough strength to stop the falling craft, his comparatively small form meant that it was like pushing against a landslide with a pencil. Even with enough strength, the landslide, or metal in this case, would simply shift around the opposing force, negating it. Hellios streaked towards the front of the ship and readied himself again. All he had to do was use less pressure, he could still save Excalibur, and it was that simple. As Hellios once again went about breaking the fall of the alien craft, he ignored the nagging thought that he didn't know whether or not Excalibur was still alive.

“Okay, this is getting real old.” U.S Agent grumbled as he and everyone else picked themselves up off the floor for what had to be the millionth time.

“Just wish I knew what the hell was going on!” Union Jack swore as he fired a few explosive rounds from his pistol at the seemingly endless legion of robots Overmind had sent to occupy them.

“Heliios is using his strength to slow the ship's descent and guide it down.” A somewhat recognizable, albeit electronic, voice stated over what passed for the spaceship's intercom.

“Suzi, that you?” U.S Agent asked as he continued to fend off attacks.

“Gold star for you, John. I'm connected with this ship at the moment.” She explained.

“Can you shut down these bloody machines?” Union Jack asked as he ducked under a swipe intended to take his head off.

“No, I'm not strong enough, Overmind's telepathic powers are still running most of the ship. All I can do right now is use the inertia dampeners to keep us from being turned into pancakes.”

“So's all we have to do is take down Overmind and Terrax.” Silverclaw stated as she slammed two robots together, eavesdropping on the conversation, “No problem!”

Union Jack spared a glance to where the rest of his team was sparring with the two alien warriors responsible for this entire mess. Things were not exactly going well, as both Sabra and Scarab were barely holding their own against their respective foes.

“This is just one of those days...” Union Jack sighed.

“It is time for this foolishness to end.” Terrax growled as he felt Sabra's fist slammed into his face thru Eshu's putty like face. Terrax, though not as accomplished as other former heralds in manipulating his power cosmic, still possessed some small skill, that he used to superheat his body. Eshu screamed in pain and quickly slinked away like an abused animal. Terrax then turned his attention towards Sabra

“It's an honor to face a warrior born in combat, they are too rare on this planet.” Terrax commented as Sabra struck him across the jaw with a solid right hook. Terrax responded with a punch to Sabra's stomach, his first solid hit the entire fight. Sabra was sent hurtling backwards and embedded into the wall like a fly in plaster.

“Pity your courage and skill doesn't match your power.”

“I'm...not thru yet.” Sabra snarled thru clenched teeth. Not allowing herself a moment's rest, Sabra began to pull herself out of the human sized dent that'd been created with her superstrong body...

Wham!

Only to be sent back into the wall five feet deeper than before when Scarab's super strong body slammed into hers like a speeding comet.

“We...have to stop meeting like this, Sabra.” Scarlet Scarab groaned, “people will talk.”

Sabra didn't reply, she simply pushed him aside and began tearing her way out of the wall, ripping cords, circuit boards and conduits aside, with Scarab closely behind. The two heroes emerged from the wall at the same time, and saw Overmind and Terrax standing there waiting.

“Time for round two.” Scarab sighed wearily as the two Middle Eastern heroes stood back to back with their fists raised in preparation for action. Overmind had been wiping the floor with him before, while Scarab would never consider surrender, Scarab didn't expect the next round to be that different from the first.

“Perhaps, but not exactly as before.” Sabra grabbed Scarab's belt and threw him towards Terrax like a human spear. Scarab slammed into Terrax's midsection at over a hundred miles per hour while Sabra launched herself at Overmind.

“Think you'll do better than your friend? Doubtful.” Overmind drove home the point by blasting Sabra back with a telekinetic blast.

“One, Scarab is not my friend,” Sabra grabbed the armband that had been protecting her from Overmind's telepathy and crushed it into so much hi tech scrap, “And two, why don't you see what I think of you, you weak willed space dung!”

“Ha! You won't have time to regret that mistake!” Overmind taunted as he instantly reached out to Sabra's now unprotected mind with his powerful telepathy. His telepathic tentacles plunged into the deepest recesses of the Israeli secret agent's mind, her entire life laying bare before him. The discovery of her powers, her training at the Mossad, the birth of her son, everything. And then Overmind suddenly screamed as pain began lancing thru his skull like a blazing sword.

“What's...happening...what did you do...to me?” Overmind forced out, the pounding in his head getting stronger and more painful with every breath.

“A mental virus, created by specially trained Mossad telepaths. I'd have used it before, but I didn't know what effect it would have had on the rest of Excalibur.” Sabra explained as she punched Overmind across the face, “You know, if you'd attacked a few years sooner, you might have won.”

A roundhouse kick to the face.

“But with the likes of Shadow King and Onslaught, the world is no longer as vulnerable to telepaths as we were before.”

A foot sweep sent Overmind sprawling on his back.

“While still a deadly ability, it is one that can be guarded or planned against very effectively.”

Sabra leaped on Overmind's chest, and pulled her right fist back. Extending only her index and ring finger, Sabra then lashed out with a strike aimed just below Overmind's Adam's apple on his neck. Overmind gurgled sickly as the blow cut off his air supply and combined with the unbearable pain thundering in his brain, sent him spiraling into darkness.

“Tell me, what is your name, brightly garbed one?” Terrax asked Scarab as he slowly spun his as in preparation for glorious battle, “I would know as it will make it all the sweeter when I suck the marrow from your bones.”

“I am called the Scarlet Scarab, alien. Now will you fight, or talk me to death?” Scarab inquired. With a smirk, Terrax lumbered forward and swung his axe with the intent to behead Scarab. Scarab ducked under the swing and tackled Terrax. Wrapping his arms firmly around Terrax's waste, Scarab activated his ability to absorb energy and began siphoning the power cosmic from Terrax.

“What are you doing? You parasite, fight like a man!” Terrax ordered he his hands pounded on Scarab's back in an attempt to get free. Scarab, his strength and power boosted by his draining of the former herald, held firm, squeezing Terrax even tighter. Terrax fought like a madman to get free, but Scarab was just as determined to hold him place for as long as it took. Using one last burst of strength and creativity, Terrax slammed the sides of Scarab's head with the flat of his palms, forcing Scarab to release him.

“I'm not beaten yet.” Terrax warned, his voice raspy and dry.

“Easily rectified.” Scarab strode forward and unleashed a haymaker powered by Terrax's stolen cosmic energy that knocked the stone herald into the far wall. Terrax saw stars on the ends of his vision, and weakly tried to defend himself against another attack by holding his axe up in front of himself. Scarab chuckled, and unleashed the entirety of his stolen energy straight at Terrax. The alien warlord disappeared from view for a split second under the onslaught of energy, and when Terrax returned he was slumped forward, his stone skin chipped and cracked, his red and blue uniform charred in places and steam rising off his entire body.

“One problem solved.” Scarlet Scarab sighed as he brushed his hands off. He observed Overmind's defeated body with Sabra standing guard over him, and the deactivated robots that had been threatening Silverclaw, U.S Agent and Union Jack.

“Jack, should I go assist Hellios?”

“That won't be necessary.” Cybermancer said via the ship intercom. “Brace yourselves, everyone.”

Every member of Excalibur grabbed onto something, be it a part of the bridge, an entrance way or another teammate as the ship began slowly rumbling like a car preparing to stall. It was slow at first, then slowly began increasing in tempo. Within moments the team felt the vibrations in their teeth. Then, as quickly as it began, the rumbling subsided.

“This thing's about spoiled me on roller coasters.” U.S Agent commented, “What happened Suzi Q?”

“We've landed.”

“Please tell me not in or on a populated area.” Union Jack asked with baited breath.

“Course not! Give me some credit, Rock. Let me disconnect, and I'll explain.”

Excalibur looked towards where Cybermancer's form was standing like a statue, her armor still interfaced with the ship. Suddenly, she came to life, as if she'd suddenly awoken from a daydream. Suzi massaged her sore head, and on unsteady legs walked towards the rest of Excalibur.

“This ship, it's semi conscious, almost like a new born infant. Overmind was forcing it to do whatever he wanted. While he was distracted, Hellios and I safely brought us down.”

“Where did we land anyways?” Silverclaw inquired.

“Oh, you'll have to see it to believe it.” Suzi smiled

Hellios hovered above where Overmind's ship had embedded itself into the earth. The sun was setting on the sword shaped ship, which was embedded perfectly upright, pointing towards the heavens as it cast it's shadow on the island Terrax had created only days before. From his view, it was like what Hellios imagined King Arthur saw when he first laid his eyes upon the legendary sword from which Hellios' and his friends took their name.

Excalibur emerged from the craft, limping, battered and bleeding, but most importantly, victorious. Cybermancer had created some makeshift restraints for Overmind and Terrax, with Scarab was dragging their unconscious forms outside. Hellios dropped down from the sky and landed before his friends.

“It's so good to see you all alive!” Hellios exclaimed as he scooped Union Jack, U.S Agent and Sabra into his arms for a powerful group hug.

“Hellios, air!” Union Jack gasped. Hellios released them a moment later.

“I'm just fine, thank you.” Darkstar mumbled under her breath, off to the side. Before any other pleasantries could be exchanged, the team of international heroes saw the HERMES teleportation affect occur just off to the side

“Congratulations, Excalibur, you've saved the world.” Chapman observed, “And you survived to boot. I'm impressed.”

“Chapman!” Rock snapped

“You got a lot of nerve...” U.S Agent growled as he advanced towards the former hero. Delphi quickly stepped between Agent and Chapman, her hands raised in preparation for combat. Walker stopped, for as much as he wanted to rearrange Chapman's face, he didn't want to hit a woman to do it.

“Is there a problem?” Chapman asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, only the whole thing of... you selling us out!” Silverclaw snapped.

“Welcome to my Excalibur.” Chapman said evenly, “And to be accurate, I filled your hollow heads with false information because you were facing a bloke who could read your minds like an open book. I made you think what I needed you to think to get you close enough to complete your mission. You have a problem with that?”

“How am I supposed to lead this team if you're always plotting something behind my back!” Rock demanded.

“Simple, you let me worry about that. And Excalibur is my team, never forget that.”

“We're nothing but pawns to you, aren't we?” Darkstar asked

Chapman snorted, and took a moment to look each and every member of Excalibur in the eyes for two seconds before continuing, “I am charged with maintaining the stability of this entire world, and I will do so as I see fit. I will not throw your lives away needlessly, but I will sacrifice each and every one of you if that's what it takes to do my job and keep this world safe. You don't like it? That's too bleedin' bad. Welcome to the draft, as the yanks say. And before you get to high and mighty on me, may I remind you that not only are you still alive, but you completed your mission successfully because of steps I took. Does anyone have a problem with that?”

Excalibur let the silence answer for them.

“Good. Delphi, call SHIELD so they can pick up our trash, and then call the Security Council.”

Joey Chapman, both a hero and villain once upon a time, looked up and down the alien ship that was embedded in the newborn island with an approving smile

“I think Excalibur has found their new base. Avalon sound nice to anyone else?”

“Understood sir. We have a slight problem in the Balkans, however.”

“Oh, what's that?”

Delphi quickly explained the situation to Chapman. Chapman tapped his foot on the ground, contemplating what to do next and how to best react.

“Surgical strike. I'll use Scarab and Hellios only.” Chapman paused, “And I think I'll join them.”

Somewhere in the Balkans

Chairman Rugova finished brushing his teeth, and dressed in an old robe he'd been wearing to bed since long before the bombs and peacekeepers came, lumbered out of his bathroom and towards his bed. Today, dealing with the self-righteous Americans was made easier by secret knowledge contained inside the Chairman's head. Soon, they would no longer be needed. He pulled the sheets back, but before he could lie down for the night, he felt powerful hands grab him, and in the blink of an eye, literally, the Chairman found himself thrown face first into the soft ground of a hill country side. Standing several feet away with his hands crossed behind his back, looking down the mountain at the military base below and not even bothering to acknowledge the Chairman, was Joey Chapman.

“What is the meaning of this!” The Chairman shouted, “You have no right to kidnap a duly appointed leader like this!”

Chapman ignored the Chairman for a moment, choosing instead to look towards the sky. Finally, he spoke, “I know you, with the assistance of A.I.M, have been stockpiling alien weapons with the intent to make them again operational and use them to expel the United States and NATO forces from your country. That's unacceptable.”

The statement was then punctuated by several massive explosions from the base below. Hellios and Scarab could plainly be seen, even from the distance Chapman and the Chairman were at, making short work of the militiamen, not even deigning to use their fists. Rather, both men casually gutted the base with their respective energy blasts, barely noticing any resistance that they met. World War Two era tanks, second hand Soviet planes and anti-aircraft missile carriers were destroyed as easily as a child might destroy their old action figures.

“That's a lie! Those machines were mere terraformers that could have rebuilt our economy!”

“And use them in experiments to create superhumans and other weapons of mass destruction, among other things.” Chapman rolled his eyes, “I'm not an idiot sir, so don't treat me like one.”

“Those are lies! That technology can benefit my country in ways undreamed of!”

“Could. But I don't care. You can't have them. I happen to know of a few thousand ethnic Muslims who can only say one thing, that your government, people and military cannot be trusted with such technology.”

“By what right do you do this!” The Chairman demanded, flecks of spittle flying from his mouth, “By what right do countries like the United States , Russia , England and all the others keep hundreds of living weapons of mass destruction while the rest of the world is defenseless and completely dependant upon them! Why do you and yours get a monopoly on power!”

“Simple, really.” Chapman stopped looking up at the sky, and then turned towards the Chairman, “Because I said so.”

“Of all the arrogant, self righteous...”

“You and yours have been fighting and killing one another for hundreds of years over a simple land dispute,” Chapman hissed with such authority and venom it instantly silenced the Chairman, “I may be arrogant, but at least I'm not that petty. You've proven you can't be trusted, so like a good parent, I'm taking away your matches before you burn the house down, the house in this case being the planet in which we all live.”

The Chairman was beside himself, shaking with impotent fury, “How...dare you talk to me like that! I should have you killed!”

Joey Chapman smirked as he strode forward towards the Chairman. The fat man never saw the punch coming, and crumbled to the ground, unaccustomed to being struck with such force. Chapman placed his boot on the man's throat and pointed his pistol at the man's head and said in a low, menacing voice “Understand this, if word of your involvement in this pathetic not even little coup got out, you would be disappeared overnight. But I've pulled a few strings and kept you out of this. So as of now, you are my bitch. When I say bark, you will bark. When I say jump, you will ask how high, and you will be thankful for it.”

“Chapman, we are finished here.” Hellios and Scarab, their hands still smoldering with energy, dropped down from the sky several feet away from their commanding officer.

“I suppose we are.” Chapman removed his boot from the Chairman's throat, “Oh, one last thing, Mr. Chairman. If you ever, ever try something like this again, I will burn your country to the ground, salt the earth and defile each and every one of your dead. Are. We. Clear?”

“Yes...”

“Yes what?”

“Yes... master.”

Chapman smiled a cocky grin, “Good boy.”

The End

Next Issue: It's moving day as Excalibur claims their new base! Be here next issue as we learn Sabra's grudge against Scarlet Scarab, Silverclaw pouts, and a former Invader drops by to visit Chapman. All this, and Eshu gives himself boob job too! Honestly, what more could you want?

Sword Strokes

Issue 1 got me a letter from kick ass writer (I.E he kicks all our asses in terms of skill) Will Short!

EXCALIBUR Vol. 2, #1 @ Marvel 2000

by David Ingram

“This really doesn't feel that much like a first issue, which we say like, "Thank god!" But are first issues really that bad? They can be, I guess. I don't think this one is. Part of the reason it doesn't feel quite like a first issue is because it's the second volume of the series, carrying over some characters and stories from the last. I think David could've done a tiny bit more to catch us up on who some of these characters were and what the status quo of the team is, but overall, I didn't feel like I was totally behind because I didn't read any of volume one.”

No worries there, because ya don't ;) While David's run was incredible, anything I take from his series will be explained in context of mine. That said, everyone should go read David's series just because it's damn good.

“Dialogue and characterization are pretty solid here. I like the new additions to the team a lot. Scarlet Scarab is a thoughtful choice (although the way Chapman introduces him is sort of like a condensed Marvel Universe handbook entry; "Here's this guy, these are his powers.") and his interaction with Sabra is good because there's bile there, but not childish stuff. The exchange they have is smart and adult, and shows David's done his homework, although I hope these sorts of things aren't thrown in too much just because the author has done research.”

Glad you liked it. Funny you bring up the Marvel Handbook, as that was where I first learned about Scarab. I've always been drawn to Legacy heroes for some reason. And let me state for the record that Sabra's issues with Scarab are far from childish. I'll address that in issue 4

“I understand that it's a political title, that's not what I'm talking about; I just don't want this to be like ER, where there's constantly hospital talk that might as well be gibberish to you and me and is put in there for "realism", when it's really a justification for hours of research. David doesn't fall into that trap here at all, don't worry. Consider it just... A WARNING.

Duly noted, man ;) Excalibur, though it will be filled with political overtones, will be fairly straightforward

“Cybermancer and USAgent's reactions to each other is cool to me because it's short and sweet. It doesn't seem like heroes are reunited as old friends that often these days; everybody seems to have a sordid past with one another that makes them all bitter. And there are a few of those in this issue, too. But they're balance out by Cybermancer and Agent's nice little back-and-forth.”

Happy reunions are too few, aren't they? All things considered, it just seemed natural that these two would be happy to see one another

“Is Eshu a new character, or just one I haven't heard of (and therefore, in my world, obscure)? Either way, named yourself after an African trickster god is awesome. The powers seem to match (although I was a little confused at first by exactly what they were; he's basically an elastic guy, I believe).”

He's a new character (sorta) who's there to represent some of the odder things about politics in the MU (I.E Genosha)

“ What's also interesting about these new members is that most of them either don't want to be here or aren't wanted here. In Eshu's case, Chapman's treating him like crap, because the guy was forced on them by African government and is obviously not the most noble guy. In the case of, say, Silverclaw (the last new addition, and a good idea for one at that), she looks upon being forced to join as a chore. Point is, this makes the situation more tense and more realistic. Not everyone's gonna want to take part in this, but not everyone's going to bitch about it, either.”

Yeah, I figure most people know when to put up and shut up. If you can't fight City Hall, how can you fight the UN?

“Joey Chapman as the new head guy for the team is okay. It doesn't really bother me or anything, he does the job of "Not So Nice Guy as Head of Superteam" fine, but he doesn't really do anything in particular for me either. Although how he gets the team's attention and the way he handles Pete Wisdom are fun.

Chapman will shine in upcoming issues, promise.

“That scene, with Pete, is overall pretty good. It adds a little bit of a noir or espionage feel, with a bar, a pretty lady, and someone trying to kill you. Pete's introduced quickly and well enough to readers who aren't that familiar with him. You get a brawl, two men with guns at each other's heads, and then a funny bit about a drug Chapman slips Pete that I sort of saw coming, but was still entertaining, nonetheless.”

What's the point of writing a semi villainous guy if you don't have him go out and do something semi villainous? That's what I always say.

“My main problem with this scene is how much Chapman falls into the "And now I'll tell you how I did it, and what I plan to do after..." mold. It's exposition that's at least in dialogue, but it still feels like the character's words are just the author's summarizations for part.”

I agree to a certain degree, but Chapman has developed something of a mean streak in regards to Wisdom and so taunting him is a requirement.

One thing that threw me off right away with the issue (and I don't think this is something to blame David for, or really "blame" anyone, but...) was that there were only six headshots, which

were mostly for the characters new to the series. When the scene started off with a number of older Excalibur members, I was confused; Darkstar in particular is just pretty much there, not getting much of an intro or a part in anything.

Yeah, Darkstar was something of a 5th wheel, but with some many characters someone's gotta get left out. She'll play a larger role down the line, promise

“The issue suffers from a few awkward word choices and grammatical problems. The main one is how David uses periods with dialogue.

Example:

“Welcome to the madhouse, kid.’ Agent commented.”

There should be a comma at the end, not a period. David does this throughout the issue, and it stopped bugging me once I realized it wasn't just randomly occurring, but it's still something that could be fixed. Speaking of dialogue, David also uses "growled" in place of "said" a number of times in the issue. Rereading can catch repetition like this. Of course, if it's intentional, that's another thing, but they were spaced apart, used for different people, so I don't think that was the case.”

Problems with repetition and grammar seem to follow me everywhere. All I can say is that I'm still working on it ;)

“ I know I complained about not quite enough catching up this issue, but I also have to say that David spells a little bit *too* much for me out via narration. Character's feelings or histories will suddenly be covered in the middle of a scene. That sounds worse than I meant... I'm not talking ridiculous amounts here. Not entire biographies. But it doesn't come out very naturally and breaks story flow.

There were some things that I wanted and or needed to get out there for the sake of the current and future story. I'm not surprised I stumbled here and there

“The British characters in this story sound somewhat stiff when it comes to using their native slang. I think David should work on this some, or even just tone it down for the most part. It's not glaring or anything, but it's better not to include this stuff much if it doesn't really add anything.”

I've got two British characters I've gotta deal with. *cries*

“This is the sort of writing that makes for long, quality runs that aren't abandoned, overhyped, or plagued by any other fanfiction diseases. It's not the sort of thing where the writer put every last piece of his energy into the one issue, then won't come back for a second. It does feel like more could've happened in the issue, considering we're with the team then leave them just before they even get to know each other, but I think that's because David knows he's committed and can work these things at the pacing he wants and needs. The cliffhanger itself honestly doesn't have

that much interest for me, but I would be back to read some dependable writing and to see how the series develops, because David's got me to trust him on this one with just a single issue.

And I hope you enjoy yourself when you do, Will! I know I enjoyed writing it. And thanks loads for the review, man!

Plus, issue 2 got me a review from Champs writer, Mike Exner!

“Even though my cousin John died in the opening scene of Excalibur #2, I'm going to try reeeaaally hard to give it a fair and partial review.”

Think of it as a revenge killing for writing my characters better than me!

“Okay! The opening scene was actually pretty pimp, with a very mysterious air to it. Dave gets you involved with both characters - villain and victim - fairly quickly even without going in-depth into who they are or what their deal is.”

Gotta race towards that action!

“I thought the immediate switch from arrival of Terrax (villain mystery solved) to Chapman being summoned by his assistant because Terrax and Overmind had fashioned an island off the coast of the U.S. was a little jarring, but only because it was over the course of the first two scenes, so it seemed like it happened only seconds afterward, and we never really got an introduction to Overmind. But the dialogue between Chapman and Delphi was fun, as were Joey's comments overlapping Overmind's statements to the people of Earth.”

Glad you liked it. Chapman is always fun to write

“The plan of the two baddies is great. Apparently, Overmind and Terrax have come to Earth to offer technological might to the 'third world' countries, oppressed minorities, and terrorists kept 'in check' by the superpower nations. They mask their intention by telling the world it'll make everybody even, but what it would more than likely do is turn the planet into one big war, which would suit the warrior natures of Terrax and Overmind just fine.”

Not exactly the plan, though those two are hardly adverse to carnage

“In steps Hellios, Sabra and Darkstar, as the other members of the team are scattered about in their home countries. Overmind wastes, like, a second of time before controlling Darkstar. Sabra deals with the mind-controlled hottie in a pretty ingenious way, but this leaves Hellios alone to deal with the baddies, and it seems pretty apparent that the 'evil-doers' are only toying with the good guys.”

“Terrax puts a pretty good hurt on Hellios, but the big Greek puts up a decent fight. The impressive part of this scene is the easy way Dave describes the action. I've read battle-scenes from Dave before (Mr. Hyde vs. the New Warriors comes immediately to mind), but this scene is

a cut above any other fight I've read from him. High quality work. My only issue was with why Terrax and Overmind left when they were easily winning the fight.”

Well, Hellios was 'dead' and Sabra and Darkstar were non-factors. Glad you liked that little skirmish and hopefully you loved the full out action in this issue

“A few days go by, and the plan of Overmind and Terrax is in full swing. Eshu has joined Sabra and Darkstar to stop a giant griffin-machine from annihilating a Russian regiment. They're a little late, but they succeed in stopping the machine. Eshu's comments about what Overmind and Terrax are doing play well off of Darkstar's obvious loyalty to her country. The tension is palpable, and both heroines mistrust Eshu completely. Lovin' it. Especially since Eshu really just doesn't seem to care what anybody thinks or feels. He's just doing his thing.”

For a last minute addition, Eshu is sure fun to write!

“Across the globe things go down the same way. Extremists get mondo firepower from Terrax and Overmind, they cause some damage, Excalibur (neatly divided into strike teams)swoops in to clean up. As they do, Chapman gradually pieces together clues to help him figure out how to stop (or at least TRY to stop) the cosmic-juggernauts they're up against. The problem is they're also on a crappy U.N. budget. Excalibur needs a base, and more funding, but Chapman does the best with what he has, and this is where the issue really shines for me. See, Chapman isn't exactly the most powerful guy in the world, and he's running a team filled to the brim with powerhouses, scientists, malcontents, kids, you name it. Dave recognizes this, so when the rest of Excalibur is stumped on how to track the baddies, Chapman is there with a solution. It keeps the team in line, and respectful of Joey's leadership.”

Chapman's no dope. Someone's gotta point the heroes in the right direction!

“Chapman figures the best way to assault an alien stronghold is to hit it with an alien ship. The team teleports into a bunker filled with alien ships collected by the U.S. over the years, which is a great touch, and are ordered to fly it with nothing but 'post it' notes as a manual. As Cybermancer and Union Jack try to puzzle out the controls, the team waits impatiently and gets to bickering (as is their nature) until they're rudely interrupted by Overmind. Seems as though Chapman has betrayed the team, given their position to Overmind, and sabotaged the telepathic dampeners supplied to them. Raunchy. Dave supplies a great twist to a great ish, and I'm really looking forward to the next. Excalibur seems to really fit David's strengths, and I highly recommend this title to anyone. Hey, I read it, and David killed my cousin!”

As you can see, Chapman's plan was a little more subtle than it appeared, though his concern for the team's well being remained the same ;) Thanks for the review, man!

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 5

"Terror of the Rising Sun"

Part One: First Blood

by David Ingram

Asia, little before Now

Nyoko Anda surveyed the computer printouts lined out on the workbench before her with intense interest. They were sophisticated diagrams of a new computer processor, one she hoped to find a way to cheaply mass-produce, and, she hoped, eventually combat illiteracy in the poorer regions in Asia and perhaps worldwide.

Suddenly, as if she were in some B movie, she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. She quickly spun around and scanned her private lab, carefully looking for anything suspicious or out of place. Finding nothing amiss, the Japanese heroine known as Honey Lemon chalked it up to her returned humanity simply playing tricks on her mind. Being transformed into a snake woman and then back had left her feeling little uneasy with her own body at times. She returned to her work, never realizing the man she'd sensed was standing over her left shoulder. The man observed Honey Lemon's work for a few moments, and left peacefully.

The Prime Minister of Japan felt a cold breeze down his neck as the stranger who'd invaded Nyoko's lab observed his work on trade agreements. He simply ignored the feeling, knowing how important his work was to his nation.

Kun Hai shuddered involuntarily as he went about managing the finances of his father's bank. All of a sudden, he felt like someone had walked over his grave. Unknown to him, he was being observed and carefully studied by one of his more curious (and invisible) countrymen. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he went back to his work.

Unseen by all as they went about their daily lives, a peculiar man walked thru the region of Asia, observing all that he saw, yet never being seen in turn. Whenever he tired of one location, the landscape around him would ripple like water, displaying a change of scenery. All the while, he was little more than an observant ghost, coming and going all about Asia as he pleased with no one being the wiser.

While the man himself was a proud member of his Asian lineage, born into a Shinpan Dynasty in fact, at first glance he hardly looked like your typical Asian male. He stood six feet tall and his body was covered in a silver armor with ancient silk robes draped over them. His natural skin pigmentation was altered by chemicals, magic and super science combined, all used to extend his life well past its intended span.

And now, he was on perhaps the strangest warpath in the history of mankind. The man slightly scolded himself. His forces were assembled, ready to be led into battle by one of the deadliest killers in the world. His campaign was carefully considered and meditated on while his agents had finished all preparations. All was in readiness to unleash terror against the foul polluters of the culture he loved so much, who were gnawing at the edges of his great and beautiful society, but something held him back. It certainly wasn't his conscious. No, when he lost that the man could never remember, for all he ever knew of it was its absence.

But his more rational mind wondered briefly if the crime committed against him and his would be equal to the punishment he would in turn mete out. Thankfully for the overlord, the matter was easily resolved.

With the powerful magic at his fingertips, the old Shinpan willed himself to remember the paths of broken destiny that littered his beloved homeland. These lines represented tragedy and potential forever unseen. He had to remember WHY, why he intended to punish the West for their vile poison. Why they had to be made to pay. Why they must be made to suffer. Remembering these painful tales of woe, the ancient wizard sent out a silent command, and let slip the dogs of war.

Why Asia

The scene before him shifted to the home of Katsuo Minoru, a brilliant young man who would eventually unlock the secrets of cold fusion, a radical discovery that would change the world and bring his family great honor.

Sadly, the combined pressure of school and societies expectations was too much for him. His seven days a week, eight hour classes always left him physically and emotionally depleted. No matter how much was done, no matter how hard he worked, there was always so much more to be done.

And his parents? Their expectations were too much for the boy as well. He always felt no matter how much he tried, he could never live up to their ideals that they had set down and be the son they truly wanted and would be proud of.

So like so many other gifted youths thru out Asia , he committed suicide, hanging himself from the light in his room. The ancient mystic shook his head remorsefully, and summoned another path.

Then Almagordo , New Mexico Months Earlier

Yuriko Oyama, proud samurai and the powerful cyborg killer known as Lady Deathstrike, struggled to remain conscious, an incredible task in and of itself given the fact that seventy percent of her cyborg body had been stripped of its cybernetic components for nefarious use elsewhere. One hand grasping the amputated hand of Armin Zola, Yuriko almost wanted to laugh at the irony of her impending death.

Yuriko Oyama was born the daughter of the Japanese crime lord Dark Wind. Her father was a brilliant man who'd created a process to bond the indestructible metal known as adamantium to the human body. But, the process was stolen and Dark Wind's notes destroyed. He spent long years, decades recreating the process, and as she grew to be an adult, his daughter vowed to punish those who'd stolen her father's work and as a result, stolen her father from her.

Eventually, her crusade had led her into conflict against the mutant known as Wolverine. She became convinced Wolverine was allied with those who'd stolen the life work of her father and swore to destroy him. With each encounter and each battle, Yuriko found herself surrendering more and more of her humanity just to slay her hated foe. But in time, she'd discovered it was all for naught. Wolverine had never stolen her father's work, but rather was an innocent victim of those who did. She'd sacrificed her humanity and honor... in a fool's quest against a great and honorable man.

And so, in one last desperate attempt to regain her honor, she'd willingly joined Wolverine when he began assembling a team to rescue his infant son from the clutches of the evil telepathic being known as the Shadow King.

The mission was an utter disaster. The others Wolverine had gathered were all killed outright in the fighting, the powerful mutant known as X-Man had sided with The Shadow King and defeated Wolverine and Yuriko herself had been captured by Hydra, who needed certain cyborg parts from her body to, ironically, recreate her father's bonding process. To say that Lady Deathstrike suffered while they removed these parts was like saying the sun burned brightly.

But she vowed to endure until the tables could be turned, and eventually they were. Wolverine freed himself from Hydra control, and returned with a vengeance. He'd quickly killed Armin Zola (or at least seemed to. One could never be sure with him), Yuriko's tormenter and removed the monster's hand and given it to Yuriko to activate the base's self destruction option.

Lady Deathstrike had vowed to give Wolverine as much time as she could, to destroy the base with her last gasp, but was quickly discovering that time wouldn't be much at all. Her entire lower body was a mesh of wires that seemingly did nothing but radiate pain. Blackness was beginning to consume her vision and even worse, Lady Deathstrike found that her cybernetic limbs were slow and sluggish to respond to her commands. She began to fear that soon, not only would she die without vengeance, but that she wouldn't fulfill her final vow to the man she'd shamefully hounded.

"Your father would be ashamed." A voice, deep and ancient, snapped suddenly.

Lady Deathstrike found her attention almost unnaturally drawn to a spectral figure of a man who's just appeared before her. She found herself instinctively wanting to look away, sensing that he was a perversion of everything she held dear, but at the same time being helpless to do so. This man, if he could be called that, possessed such a piercing gaze that she simply couldn't look away.

"What...do you know of my father?" Lady Deathstrike stammered out.

"I know that he would never approve of you dying for the sake of wild westerners." The man spat.

Lady Deathstrike, remembering her father's abuse, lies and evil despite the love she felt for him, wanted to retort, but couldn't quite seem to find her voice. All she discovered she could say was, "I have given him my word."

"You have only sworn to destroy this facility. Not to give your life for a cause not your own. Still, no matter. I will ensure that you keep your vow, in return for your services as a warrior for the East."

It was more of a statement than a request. Within moments, the base was destroyed, the two long departed from the inferno. Soon, Lady Deathstrike would find herself wishing that she'd been destroyed alongside her enemies. For that would have far more honor.

Now Paris , France

Jonathon Peters had been saving for this trip to Paris for nearly three years now. He'd clipped every coupon, scrapped up every last dollar and pinched every penny to finally see the city of lights. Three years spent denying himself all the material pleasures he could think of to make this journey of a lifetime to one of the world's most famous cities.

But, as he and his fellow passengers on the tourist saw the peculiar man who'd just appeared out of no where in front of their tour bus, he realized his time couldn't have been worse.

The man was huge, to say the least. Standing eight feet tall and with a powerful frame suitable for a sumo wrestler, the man would have stood out in a crowd even if his skin weren't blazing gold, his eyes aflame while a small fire smoldered on his back. And the way he looked at them left no doubt as to his motives.

Peters and his fellow tourists were awash in flames before the idea of fleeing had barely begun to form within his mind. The sweet old lady two seats behind him, the squalling two year three seats to the left and the two young lovers behind him, all were consumed by a torrent of flame within seconds. The sound of their flesh burning was the only noise they made as they died.

The man now known as the Aviator Foundry turned away from the tour bus and examined the buildings that now surrounded him. Like most of the city, the architecture had an old world charm to it while housing modern conveniences such as shops, internet cafes, open air market places and small, family owned bakeries.

Logically, people began abandoning everything they were doing after Foundry had committed his wonton act of destruction. But no matter how fast or far they ran, Foundry knew there was no escape. As such, he turned his attention towards the buildings that surrounded him.

After all, he wasn't teleported into this quiet Paris side-street at random. No, those were only the perks of his mission.

A Pre-strike recon had indicated that the majority of the shops and buildings around Foundry used substantial amounts of gas, either for personal heating or business related matters.

Foundry released a tidal wave of pure fire and hatred from his eyes, and didn't stop until all the structures he saw were utterly consumed in flames. It took only moments later for the gas inside the buildings to ignite, and the explosions sounded like the most wonderful music to Foundry's ears. His only regret was that he hadn't brought something to record this glorious act of cleansing.

Why Asia

Akemi Amaya wept as she handed her infant daughter off, like she was a bundle of goods, not a human being, to men she barely knew and trusted even less. The baby bawled as babies are wont to do, and the men handed Ms. Amaya the equivalent of two hundred dollars for the totality of her second born's life.

The child would be then be stuffed into a suitcase like a cheap suit, smuggled into the nearby city and sold into slavery of some kind. Whether she would be working on her back in some brothel, slaving away as a servant in some rich man's house, or in sold to some childless couple who could afford a child her mother didn't know, nor would she ever.

That was provided the young infant even survived the harsh and unforgiving trip inside an unair-conditioned compartment for miles on end to wherever her destination was. The overlord watched this scene with a heavy heart. The thought to intervene never really occurred to him. After all, what good would it do? This scene was being played out all across China in the poorer regions.

Then Location secret

The ancient wizard found his patience sorely tested by the presences of his four allies. They were fools one and all, who welded a powerful weapon that he craved for himself. Like so many others, they did not understand his true goal.

His objective wasn't just power as they allowed themselves to believe, but sole control over a weapon that took their pooled resources to control. The wizard never would have otherwise deigned to ally with such idiots who unknown to them, were beating a blind path to the world's destruction.

Thankfully, the old mage knew the errors of their ways. He would stay in this foolish alliance, prevent the destruction they might unwillingly wrought and then...then he would have full control over a weapon that literally dwarfed almost any other. Soon, it would be all his. And the world would tremble.

Now Paris France

Over forty French police squad cars sped thru the streets of the old city followed closely by military humvee, filled with specially trained members of the French Foreign Legion. The police officers carried M-16s armed with special armor piercing bullets supplied by the African nation of Wakanda while the members of the Foreign Legion carried a myriad of advanced weaponry, from taser nets, plasma cannons and high grade explosives. Following the successful kidnapping of their Prime Minister by the mutant terrorists known as the Fallen Angels and rise of terrorism in general, the French government had decided to invest even more money into their emergency response teams. The firepower these men and women possessed was enough to stagger even the Avengers, according to even the most critical of assessments. Not only that, the weaponry was always kept in good repair, and ready at a moment's notice.

So what happened when the officers approached the heart of the city, on their way to intercept Foundry, should have been impossible. It should not have happened, but sadly it did.

The tires of the vehicles in the lead exploded, and the car jack knifed. It was like a domino effect as the cars behind that single car tried desperately to swerve around that single car only to hit another officer's car, and then another. It got even worse when the humvees slammed into the smaller and weaker police cars. Within the span of a single minute, the French superhuman emergency response team became one of the biggest pileups in the history of France .

Sadly, that was no where near the worst of it.

High powered energy weapons began malfunctioning and exploded with the force of a landmine. Explosives that were not armed and as such shouldn't explode even if exposed to the high intensity flames of the crash, detonated and threw shrapnel into the air. Not a single survivor of the crash managed to free themselves in time to escape the radical malfunctions of their arsenal.

The gray, beaked Aviator known as Quake turned looked towards his fellow Aviator, the Asian woman dressed in fine robes and floating in the air, known as Butterfly.

“Lovely work, it truly warms my heart. But you left none for me.” He complained.

“Oh, not at all, Quake. I've left plenty for you, if you'll just wait a moment.”

The flames of the crash burned like a great bonfire, and began to reach a height of three stories. Small sparks began jumping to the nearby buildings and within moments, they too were aflame. The civilians who'd sought shelter in them ran into the streets and most, upon seeing the two Aviators ran in the opposite direction.

They found no refuge there. Quake and Butterfly had the foresight to lead the French police into a trap, and had blocked every entry point into the block except the direction from which the police had come.

It quickly became apparent that the only way to escape would have to be making it past Quake. Fear and courage mixed, and the people, French, immigrants and tourists alike formed a human wave that rushed past the large Aviator to what they hoped would be freedom.

Quake threw his arms out wide and laughed. They actually thought they could escape!

“Seek the skies for a moment, Butterfly. I wouldn't want your delicate ears to hear what I am about to say.”

Butterfly quickly raised herself high in the sky, and once Quake was satisfied she was a safe enough distance away, slammed his hands together,

-Boom!-

The sonic boom his hands created as they slammed together shattered ear drums, ruptured spleens, livers and other important internal organs as the shockwave slammed outwards. Everyone fell limp to the ground, in too much pain for rational thought, let alone fleeing.

Quake, however, was never one to leave things half done. He hefted a smashed police car into his gravel hands, strode to where his first victim lay helpless, and slammed the car down upon the woman like it was an oversized fly swatter. One wet splat later, Quake spotted a family of three holding hands to pool their courage as they lay powerless on the ground, and he knew his next victims.

Why Asia

Fu Ai looked into the eyes of his beautiful wife of twenty three years, and wept. To supplement their meager earnings as farmers, both he and his wife has taken to selling their plasma, their blood, on the black market. Sadly, the man who extracted their life's fluid simply couldn't be bothered to so much as use a clean needle each time he drew blood.

And because of that callousness, Fu Ai and his wife were now infected with HIV. They had no money to purchase the anti viral drugs needed to prevent AIDS and if they revealed their condition to government health care workers, their entire family would be shunned, dishonored. They were trapped in a cultural prison that they could never break free of, and the walls seemed to get smaller every day.

Then Private Chambers

He'd spent hours meditating and he'd vowed to spend hours more if that's what it took while he sought out his final weapon. He was working largely on for lack of a better term, guess work. He'd learned about the weapon thru various sources, the files of his enemy who'd once wielded the weapon and lost it, and classified debriefing files from the first Force Works.

Finally, the fates rewarded the patient Asian warlord with what he sought. Visually, it was far from impressive. It was the size of a medicine ball and colored the deepest, darkest black that the

old mage had ever seen before in his long life. But as the object hovered before him, one thing regarding it was unmistakable.

Power. The object seemed to pulse with an energy quite unlike anything the old wizard had ever seen before in his long life and myriad travels. Better yet, while the object, known as the Heart of Darkness, was brimming with power, the old mage could sense that that power couldn't be easier to harness for his own ends. His contemporary had used this power against his own people, but he had a far better idea for it.

A smile came across the old man's aged and cracked lips as he thought of the events soon to come, now that he had his final weapon.

Now Paris , France

Peter Jackson and three of his fellow officers had just finished lunch when the call came in. Though they weren't an active part of the pre planned emergency response team, they knew when they were needed. They slapped some money down on their tables and rushed to their cars. Taking what they knew to be a slightly faster route to the scene than the normal route, they began steeling themselves for whatever horror they would find. The emergency call had said superhuman, and they had no illusions about how dangerous they could be.

But before they reached the site of the reported incident, the officers saw something that forced them to slam on the brakes. Tires squealed loudly and the smell of burning rubber was added to the fresh air of the city of Paris.

The block was like something out of a tourist guide to Paris . Well within eyesight of the Eiffel Tower was a block reserved solely for open air cafes and shops for tourists. While that itself still stood, relatively untouched, no one else did. Bodies littered the landscape. Blood was splattered upon the walls; some was even atop the umbrellas that protected the customers from the Sun's onslaught.

And standing in the middle of this street of the butchered, was an Asian woman with short, jet black cropped hair. Her body was covered in a pure black suit while her hands gleamed with silver. She stood with her head down as the policemen jumped out of their cars and aimed their service weapons at her.

Lady Deathstrike looked up, and mouthed the words 'I'm so sorry' silently before springing into action.

The officers had stood side to side, to present a unified front against and obviously more powerful enemy. But it would also mean that they would die that much quicker.

Lady Deathstrike landed on the far left of the officers. She drew her hand back, and slashed her hand into the stomach of the closest officer. She swooped out all the blood, viscera and internal organ matter she could like it was so much ice cream, and flung it at the remaining three officers.

Blinded as they were by their fellow's blood, the first instinct of all the officers was not to fire their guns for fear of hitting a bystander or a fellow officer. They didn't know all possible bystanders were already dead, or that Lady Deathstrike counted on them to react like that. Regardless, their small caliber bullets wouldn't have hurt her cyborg body.

Lady Deathstrike elongated her other arm, stuck out her index finger, and slashed towards the officers. Their throats were cut almost as one, and they fell dead seconds later, leaving Lady Deathstrike alone, or so she thought.

“How goes the assault?” Lady Deathstrike's body froze despite her best efforts to the contrary. She wanted to run, escape or even hide if that's what it took to free herself from her so called savior, but her internal processors wouldn't allow her that. She was his puppet now, body and soul.

“It...goes well. Many have already fallen, and we have been unopposed. Shall we retreat?” Lady Deathstrike proposed, though she knew it to be naively optimistic.

“Don't you know our plan? Need I remind you?” The voice of her master inquired.

“No.” Deathstrike answered, as close to the verge of tears as her programming would allow.

“Our current plan of attack is to undermine the societies' ability to police and regulate itself. As such, our targets are policemen, emergency workers and such. First responders, essentially. Tell me my dear, how do we kill as many of them as possible?” The ancient voice rasped.

Her chest heaving in sorrow as her programming forced a smile to come across her inhuman lips, Lady Deathstrike answered, “That is simplicity itself. We set two bombs, reasonably timed apart.”

“Excellent, my dear. Now, I think it's time for the second bomb.”

To be continued....

Next issue: The second bomb and Excalibur.

Sword Strokes

Issue four gots me a letter from our esteemed editor Chris Munn!

“Yet another update, so yet another Editor's Choice.”

“Excalibur # 4 by David Ingram”

Yeah, go me!

“Although I've never really been the biggest fan of the whole Excalibur concept (a United Nations sponsored super-team, for those of you not in the know), David's managed to keep my interest in the first few issues of his run. The cast is decent enough, but the real thing that keeps me reading (other than being the editor, 'natch), is Ingram's work on the character of Joey Chapman, the former Union Jack turned Excalibur bastard-in-charge. I like bastard characters, and Chapman definitely fits in that category. Lots of cool character interactions take place in this ish, capped off by the return of a forgotten character that really shouldn't be forgotten, Spitfire.”

You like bastards in charge, eh? Yeah, I can relate ;)

“So, yeah, if you like superheroes with a political slant, check this series out!”

Chris

Heed and obey the mighty Munn-thing!

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 5

"Terror of the Rising Sun"

Part One: First Blood

by David Ingram

Asia, little before Now

Nyoko Anda surveyed the computer printouts lined out on the workbench before her with intense interest. They were sophisticated diagrams of a new computer processor, one she hoped to find a way to cheaply mass-produce, and, she hoped, eventually combat illiteracy in the poorer regions in Asia and perhaps worldwide.

Suddenly, as if she were in some B movie, she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. She quickly spun around and scanned her private lab, carefully looking for anything suspicious or out of place. Finding nothing amiss, the Japanese heroine known as Honey Lemon chalked it up to her returned humanity simply playing tricks on her mind. Being transformed into a snake woman and then back had left her feeling little uneasy with her own body at times. She returned to her work, never realizing the man she'd sensed was standing over her left shoulder. The man observed Honey Lemon's work for a few moments, and left peacefully.

The Prime Minister of Japan felt a cold breeze down his neck as the stranger who'd invaded Nyoko's lab observed his work on trade agreements. He simply ignored the feeling, knowing how important his work was to his nation.

Kun Hai shuddered involuntarily as he went about managing the finances of his father's bank. All of a sudden, he felt like someone had walked over his grave. Unknown to him, he was being observed and carefully studied by one of his more curious (and invisible) countrymen. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he went back to his work.

Unseen by all as they went about their daily lives, a peculiar man walked thru the region of Asia, observing all that he saw, yet never being seen in turn. Whenever he tired of one location, the landscape around him would ripple like water, displaying a change of scenery. All the while, he was little more than an observant ghost, coming and going all about Asia as he pleased with no one being the wiser.

While the man himself was a proud member of his Asian lineage, born into a Shinpan Dynasty in fact, at first glance he hardly looked like your typical Asian male. He stood six feet tall and his body was covered in a silver armor with ancient silk robes draped over them. His natural skin

pigmentation was altered by chemicals, magic and super science combined, all used to extend his life well past its intended span.

And now, he was on perhaps the strangest warpath in the history of mankind. The man slightly scolded himself. His forces were assembled, ready to be led into battle by one of the deadliest killers in the world. His campaign was carefully considered and meditated on while his agents had finished all preparations. All was in readiness to unleash terror against the foul polluters of the culture he loved so much, who were gnawing at the edges of his great and beautiful society, but something held him back. It certainly wasn't his conscience. No, when he lost that the man could never remember, for all he ever knew of it was its absence.

But his more rational mind wondered briefly if the crime committed against him and his would be equal to the punishment he would in turn mete out. Thankfully for the overlord, the matter was easily resolved.

With the powerful magic at his fingertips, the old Shinpan willed himself to remember the paths of broken destiny that littered his beloved homeland. These lines represented tragedy and potential forever unseen. He had to remember WHY, why he intended to punish the West for their vile poison. Why they had to be made to pay. Why they must be made to suffer. Remembering these painful tales of woe, the ancient wizard sent out a silent command, and let slip the dogs of war.

Why Asia

The scene before him shifted to the home of Katsuo Minoru, a brilliant young man who would eventually unlock the secrets of cold fusion, a radical discovery that would change the world and bring his family great honor.

Sadly, the combined pressure of school and societies expectations was too much for him. His seven days a week, eight hour classes always left him physically and emotionally depleted. No matter how much was done, no matter how hard he worked, there was always so much more to be done.

And his parents? Their expectations were too much for the boy as well. He always felt no matter how much he tried, he could never live up to their ideals that they had set down and be the son they truly wanted and would be proud of.

So like so many other gifted youths thru out Asia , he committed suicide, hanging himself from the light in his room. The ancient mystic shook his head remorsefully, and summoned another path.

Then Almagordo , New Mexico Months Earlier

Yuriko Oyama, proud samurai and the powerful cyborg killer known as Lady Deathstrike, struggled to remain conscious, an incredible task in and of itself given the fact that seventy percent of her cyborg body had been stripped of its cybernetic components for nefarious use

elsewhere. One hand grasping the amputated hand of Armin Zola, Yuriko almost wanted to laugh at the irony of her impending death.

Yuriko Oyama was born the daughter of the Japanese crime lord Dark Wind. Her father was a brilliant man who'd created a process to bond the indestructible metal known as adamantium to the human body. But, the process was stolen and Dark Wind's notes destroyed. He spent long years, decades recreating the process, and as she grew to be an adult, his daughter vowed to punish those who'd stolen her father's work and as a result, stolen her father from her.

Eventually, her crusade had led her into conflict against the mutant known as Wolverine. She became convinced Wolverine was allied with those who'd stolen the life work of her father and swore to destroy him. With each encounter and each battle, Yuriko found herself surrendering more and more of her humanity just to slay her hated foe. But in time, she'd discovered it was all for naught. Wolverine had never stolen her father's work, but rather was an innocent victim of those who did. She'd sacrificed her humanity and honor... in a fool's quest against a great and honorable man.

And so, in one last desperate attempt to regain her honor, she'd willingly joined Wolverine when he began assembling a team to rescue his infant son from the clutches of the evil telepathic being known as the Shadow King.

The mission was an utter disaster. The others Wolverine had gathered were all killed outright in the fighting, the powerful mutant known as X-Man had sided with The Shadow King and defeated Wolverine and Yuriko herself had been captured by Hydra, who needed certain cyborg parts from her body to, ironically, recreate her father's bonding process. To say that Lady Deathstrike suffered while they removed these parts was like saying the sun burned brightly.

But she vowed to endure until the tables could be turned, and eventually they were. Wolverine freed himself from Hydra control, and returned with a vengeance. He'd quickly killed Armin Zola (or at least seemed to. One could never be sure with him), Yuriko's tormenter and removed the monster's hand and given it to Yuriko to activate the base's self destruction option.

Lady Deathstrike had vowed to give Wolverine as much time as she could, to destroy the base with her last gasp, but was quickly discovering that time wouldn't be much at all. Her entire lower body was a mesh of wires that seemingly did nothing but radiate pain. Blackness was beginning to consume her vision and even worse, Lady Deathstrike found that her cybernetic limbs were slow and sluggish to respond to her commands. She began to fear that soon, not only would she die without vengeance, but that she wouldn't fulfill her final vow to the man she'd shamefully hounded.

"Your father would be ashamed." A voice, deep and ancient, snapped suddenly.

Lady Deathstrike found her attention almost unnaturally drawn to a spectral figure of a man who's just appeared before her. She found herself instinctively wanting to look away, sensing that he was a perversion of everything she held dear, but at the same time being helpless to do so.

This man, if he could be called that, possessed such a piercing gaze that she simply couldn't look away.

"What...do you know of my father?" Lady Deathstrike stammered out.

"I know that he would never approve of you dying for the sake of wild westerners." The man spat.

Lady Deathstrike, remembering her father's abuse, lies and evil despite the love she felt for him, wanted to retort, but couldn't quite seem to find her voice. All she discovered she could say was, "I have given him my word."

"You have only sworn to destroy this facility. Not to give your life for a cause not your own. Still, no matter. I will ensure that you keep your vow, in return for your services as a warrior for the East."

It was more of a statement than a request. Within moments, the base was destroyed, the two long departed from the inferno. Soon, Lady Deathstrike would find herself wishing that she'd been destroyed alongside her enemies. For that would have far more honor.

Now Paris , France

Jonathon Peters had been saving for this trip to Paris for nearly three years now. He'd clipped every coupon, scrapped up every last dollar and pinched every penny to finally see the city of lights. Three years spent denying himself all the material pleasures he could think of to make this journey of a lifetime to one of the world's most famous cities.

But, as he and his fellow passengers on the tourist saw the peculiar man who'd just appeared out of no where in front of their tour bus, he realized his time couldn't have been worse.

The man was huge, to say the least. Standing eight feet tall and with a powerful frame suitable for a sumo wrestler, the man would have stood out in a crowd even if his skin weren't blazing gold, his eyes aflame while a small fire smoldered on his back. And the way he looked at them left no doubt as to his motives.

Peters and his fellow tourists were awash in flames before the idea of fleeing had barely begun to form within his mind. The sweet old lady two seats behind him, the squalling two year three seats to the left and the two young lovers behind him, all were consumed by a torrent of flame within seconds. The sound of their flesh burning was the only noise they made as they died.

The man now known as the Aviator Foundry turned away from the tour bus and examined the buildings that now surrounded him. Like most of the city, the architecture had an old world charm to it while housing modern conveniences such as shops, internet cafes, open air market places and small, family owned bakeries.

Logically, people began abandoning everything they were doing after Foundry had committed his wonton act of destruction. But no matter how fast or far they ran, Foundry knew there was no escape. As such, he turned his attention towards the buildings that surrounded him.

After all, he wasn't teleported into this quaint Paris side-street at random. No, those were only the perks of his mission.

A Pre-strike recon had indicated that the majority of the shops and buildings around Foundry used substantial amounts of gas, either for personal heating or business related matters.

Foundry released a tidal wave of pure fire and hatred from his eyes, and didn't stop until all the structures he saw were utterly consumed in flames. It took only moments later for the gas inside the buildings to ignite, and the explosions sounded like the most wonderful music to Foundry's ears. His only regret was that he hadn't brought something to record this glorious act of cleansing.

Why Asia

Akemi Amaya wept as she handed her infant daughter off, like she was a bundle of goods, not a human being, to men she barely knew and trusted even less. The baby bawled as babies are wont to do, and the men handed Ms. Amaya the equivalent of two hundred dollars for the totality of her second born's life.

The child would be then be stuffed into a suitcase like a cheap suit, smuggled into the nearby city and sold into slavery of some kind. Whether she would be working on her back in some brothel, slaving away as a servant in some rich man's house, or in sold to some childless couple who could afford a child her mother didn't know, nor would she ever.

That was provided the young infant even survived the harsh and unforgiving trip inside an unair-conditioned compartment for miles on end to wherever her destination was. The overlord watched this scene with a heavy heart. The thought to intervene never really occurred to him. After all, what good would it do? This scene was being played out all across China in the poorer regions.

Then Location secret

The ancient wizard found his patience sorely tested by the presences of his four allies. They were fools one and all, who welded a powerful weapon that he craved for himself. Like so many others, they did not understand his true goal.

His objective wasn't just power as they allowed themselves to believe, but sole control over a weapon that took their pooled resources to control. The wizard never would have otherwise deigned to ally with such idiots who unknown to them, were beating a blind path to the world's destruction.

Thankfully, the old mage knew the errors of their ways. He would stay in this foolish alliance, prevent the destruction they might unwillingly wrought and then...then he would have full control over a weapon that literally dwarfed almost any other. Soon, it would be all his. And the world would tremble.

Now Paris France

Over forty French police squad cars sped thru the streets of the old city followed closely by military humvee, filled with specially trained members of the French Foreign Legion. The police officers carried M-16s armed with special armor piercing bullets supplied by the African nation of Wakanda while the members of the Foreign Legion carried a myriad of advanced weaponry, from taser nets, plasma cannons and high grade explosives. Following the successful kidnapping of their Prime Minister by the mutant terrorists known as the Fallen Angels and rise of terrorism in general, the French government had decided to invest even more money into their emergency response teams. The firepower these men and women possessed was enough to stagger even the Avengers, according to even the most critical of assessments. Not only that, the weaponry was always kept in good repair, and ready at a moment's notice.

So what happened when the officers approached the heart of the city, on their way to intercept Foundry, should have been impossible. It should not have happened, but sadly it did.

The tires of the vehicles in the lead exploded, and the car jack knifed. It was like a domino effect as the cars behind that single car tried desperately to swerve around that single car only to hit another officer's car, and then another. It got even worse when the humvees slammed into the smaller and weaker police cars. Within the span of a single minute, the French superhuman emergency response team became one of the biggest pileups in the history of France .

Sadly, that was no where near the worst of it.

High powered energy weapons began malfunctioning and exploded with the force of a landmine. Explosives that were not armed and as such shouldn't explode even if exposed to the high intensity flames of the crash, detonated and threw shrapnel into the air. Not a single survivor of the crash managed to free themselves in time to escape the radical malfunctions of their arsenal.

The gray, beaked Aviator known as Quake turned looked towards his fellow Aviator, the Asian woman dressed in fine robes and floating in the air, known as Butterfly.

“Lovely work, it truly warms my heart. But you left none for me.” He complained.

“Oh, not at all, Quake. I've left plenty for you, if you'll just wait a moment.”

The flames of the crash burned like a great bonfire, and began to reach a height of three stories. Small sparks began jumping to the nearby buildings and within moments, they too were aflame. The civilians who'd sought shelter in them ran into the streets and most, upon seeing the two Aviators ran in the opposite direction.

They found no refuge there. Quake and Butterfly had the foresight to lead the French police into a trap, and had blocked every entry point into the block except the direction from which the police had come.

It quickly became apparent that the only way to escape would have to be making it past Quake. Fear and courage mixed, and the people, French, immigrants and tourists alike formed a human wave that rushed past the large Aviator to what they hoped would be freedom.

Quake threw his arms out wide and laughed. They actually thought they could escape!

“Seek the skies for a moment, Butterfly. I wouldn't want your delicate ears to hear what I am about to say.”

Butterfly quickly raised herself high in the sky, and once Quake was satisfied she was a safe enough distance away, slammed his hands together,

-Boom!-

The sonic boom his hands created as they slammed together shattered ear drums, ruptured spleens, livers and other important internal organs as the shockwave slammed outwards. Everyone fell limp to the ground, in too much pain for rational thought, let alone fleeing.

Quake, however, was never one to leave things half done. He hefted a smashed police car into his gravel hands, strode to where his first victim lay helpless, and slammed the car down upon the woman like it was an oversized fly swatter. One wet splat later, Quake spotted a family of three holding hands to pool their courage as they lay powerless on the ground, and he knew his next victims.

Why Asia

Fu Ai looked into the eyes of his beautiful wife of twenty three years, and wept. To supplement their meager earnings as farmers, both he and his wife has taken to selling their plasma, their blood, on the black market. Sadly, the man who extracted their life's fluid simply couldn't be bothered to so much as use a clean needle each time he drew blood.

And because of that callousness, Fu Ai and his wife were now infected with HIV. They had no money to purchase the anti viral drugs needed to prevent AIDS and if they revealed their condition to government health care workers, their entire family would be shunned, dishonored. They were trapped in a cultural prison that they could never break free of, and the walls seemed to get smaller every day.

Then Private Chambers

He'd spent hours meditating and he'd vowed to spend hours more if that's what it took while he sought out his final weapon. He was working largely on for lack of a better term, guess work.

He'd learned about the weapon thru various sources, the files of his enemy who'd once wielded the weapon and lost it, and classified debriefing files from the first Force Works.

Finally, the fates rewarded the patient Asian warlord with what he sought. Visually, it was far from impressive. It was the size of a medicine ball and colored the deepest, darkest black that the old mage had ever seen before in his long life. But as the object hovered before him, one thing regarding it was unmistakable.

Power. The object seemed to pulse with an energy quite unlike anything the old wizard had ever seen before in his long life and myriad travels. Better yet, while the object, known as the Heart of Darkness, was brimming with power, the old mage could sense that that power couldn't be easier to harness for his own ends. His contemporary had used this power against his own people, but he had a far better idea for it.

A smile came across the old man's aged and cracked lips as he thought of the events soon to come, now that he had his final weapon.

Now Paris , France

Peter Jackson and three of his fellow officers had just finished lunch when the call came in. Though they weren't an active part of the pre planned emergency response team, they knew when they were needed. They slapped some money down on their tables and rushed to their cars. Taking what they knew to be a slightly faster route to the scene than the normal route, they began steeling themselves for whatever horror they would find. The emergency call had said superhuman, and they had no illusions about how dangerous they could be.

But before they reached the site of the reported incident, the officers saw something that forced them to slam on the brakes. Tires squealed loudly and the smell of burning rubber was added to the fresh air of the city of Paris.

The block was like something out of a tourist guide to Paris . Well within eyesight of the Eiffel Tower was a block reserved solely for open air cafes and shops for tourists. While that itself still stood, relatively untouched, no one else did. Bodies littered the landscape. Blood was splattered upon the walls; some was even atop the umbrellas that protected the customers from the Sun's onslaught.

And standing in the middle of this street of the butchered, was an Asian woman with short, jet black cropped hair. Her body was covered in a pure black suit while her hands gleamed with silver. She stood with her head down as the policemen jumped out of their cars and aimed their service weapons at her.

Lady Deathstrike looked up, and mouthed the words 'I'm so sorry' silently before springing into action.

The officers had stood side to side, to present a unified front against and obviously more powerful enemy. But it would also mean that they would die that much quicker.

Lady Deathstrike landed on the far left of the officers. She drew her hand back, and slashed her hand into the stomach of the closest officer. She swooped out all the blood, viscera and internal organ matter she could like it was so much ice cream, and flung it at the remaining three officers.

Blinded as they were by their fellow's blood, the first instinct of all the officers was not to fire their guns for fear of hitting a bystander or a fellow officer. They didn't know all possible bystanders were already dead, or that Lady Deathstrike counted on them to react like that. Regardless, their small caliber bullets wouldn't have hurt her cyborg body.

Lady Deathstrike elongated her other arm, stuck out her index finger, and slashed towards the officers. Their throats were cut almost as one, and they fell dead seconds later, leaving Lady Deathstrike alone, or so she thought.

“How goes the assault?” Lady Deathstrike's body froze despite her best efforts to the contrary. She wanted to run, escape or even hide if that's what it took to free herself from her so called savior, but her internal processors wouldn't allow her that. She was his puppet now, body and soul.

“It...goes well. Many have already fallen, and we have been unopposed. Shall we retreat?” Lady Deathstrike proposed, though she knew it to be naively optimistic.

“Don't you know our plan? Need I remind you?” The voice of her master inquired.

“No.” Deathstrike answered, as close to the verge of tears as her programming would allow.

“Our current plan of attack is to undermine the societies' ability to police and regulate itself. As such, our targets are policemen, emergency workers and such. First responders, essentially. Tell me my dear, how do we kill as many of them as possible?” The ancient voice rasped.

Her chest heaving in sorrow as her programming forced a smile to come across her inhuman lips, Lady Deathstrike answered, “That is simplicity itself. We set two bombs, reasonably timed apart.”

“Excellent, my dear. Now, I think it's time for the second bomb.”

To be continued....

Next issue: The second bomb and Excalibur.

Sword Strokes

Issue four gets me a letter from our esteemed editor Chris Munn!

“Yet another update, so yet another Editor's Choice.”

“Excalibur # 4 by David Ingram”

Yeah, go me!

“Although I've never really been the biggest fan of the whole Excalibur concept (a United Nations sponsored super-team, for those of you not in the know), David's managed to keep my interest in the first few issues of his run. The cast is decent enough, but the real thing that keeps me reading (other than being the editor, 'natch), is Ingram's work on the character of Joey Chapman, the former Union Jack turned Excalibur bastard-in-charge. I like bastard characters, and Chapman definitely fits in that category. Lots of cool character interactions take place in this ish, capped off by the return of a forgotten character that really shouldn't be forgotten, Spitfire.”

You like bastards in charge, eh? Yeah, I can relate ;)

“So, yeah, if you like superheroes with a political slant, check this series out!”

Chris

Heed and obey the mighty Munn-thing!

Marvel 2000 Presents

Excalibur Vol.2 #6

By David Ingram

Terror of the Rising Sun

Part 2

The Second Bomb

The story thus far: Asian terrorist nationals have attacked Paris, France, killing hundreds in minutes for reasons unknown to anyone but themselves. Unknown to anyone, however, is the fact that they are fully prepared for any resistance that comes their way.

Within the heart of Avalon, Excalibur's Island base

Joey Chapman struggled to keep his face impassive as he studied the screens lined up on the wall before him. He was standing with his assistant Delphi in the inner most chamber of the alien base with some two dozen men and women who staffed the room at all times, monitoring the world for what were labeled as extra normal crisis's.

Right now, the entirety of the room was focused on Paris, France. Images taken from dozens of spy satellites were intersected local media reports and special CNN broadcast played across the screens. Though the pictures were taken from more than two dozen different sources, there was a single constant in each and everyone. Innocent men, women and children were being cut down like so much wheat by powerful superhumans that local forces couldn't hope to match.

"Excalibur's E.T.A is three minutes, sir." Delphi informed her superior. Chapman barely acknowledged the comment. He was simply thankful for the fact that he had the foresight to have the more unreliable Excalibur members followed by his agents at all times, in case of emergencies like this. Made it easy to gather the team

Chapman's mind raced as he sought to determine a motive for this attack. He knew once he discovered their motive, handling this entire situation would become just a little more manageable, easier to handle. As it stood, Chapman was in the dark, and that didn't help anyone.

"Sir, Excalibur is assembled and ready at the HERMES bay." Delphi stated

Chapman nodded and began to tear himself away from the scenes of death and carnage when something most peculiar happened. One screen, showing a CNN broadcast, died and became so much static. Then another one. And another. Like burned out Christmas Lights, each and every monitor died within seconds of each other.

“What the hell happened?!” Chapman demanded.

“It’s...gone.” A technician stammered.

“I know it’s gone you fecking idiot! Get those images back, now!” Chapman barked.

“No, you don’t understand sir. It’s gone.” The technician explained, “According to our scanners, Paris France is technologically dead. We can’t raise any radio communications, no satellite images or even a single active internet connection. As far as the twentieth first century is concerned, Paris France...no longer exists.”

Chapman didn’t know quite what to think when his technician explained the problem to him. Nothing positive came to mind from that revelation. So Joey Chapman, one time Union Jack and representative of the United Kingdom, did the only thing he could.

He ran.

Silverclaw fidgeted nervously as she stood barefoot on the Excalibur HERMES teleporter. The damn thing was always so cold, and Maria had yet to find some shoes that fit with her costume.

At least, that’s why Maria told herself she was fidgeting so much. She’d been at the base when the attack on Paris started. She’d seen the slaughter live on T.V, how blood was splattered upon a camera lens, and felt a little uncertain of her ability to make a difference. After all, what good could a bunch of jungle animal forms do against someone who could throw an inferno down her throat?

The casual readiness of her teammates only made Silverclaw feel even more unsure of herself. Hellios, Union Jack, Darkstar and everyone else looked more than ready, even though they all knew they had little idea what they would be facing. Only Cybermancer, who seemed to radiate anger, was any different from her fellow teammates.

Silverclaw felt a calming hand placed on her shoulder, and turned to see Sabra behind her who seemed to give her a look of complete understanding. Maria didn’t notice, but she stopped fidgeting.

“Alright, Excalibur, time for the briefing.” Chapman said as he suddenly entered the room, “Some bastards identified as the Aviators of the Mandarin have attacked Paris France. We believe they were teleported into the city by means unknown at this time. We lost all

communications with the city a few minutes ago, so we have no idea what's happening now. And that's the sit rep."

"So, these guys could have released a deadly bio weapon and fled by now." Eshu proposed in an off hand manner. He wasn't overly concerned as his shape shifting powers made him immune to most diseases.

"Correct. That's a risk you'll have to take." Chapman commented.

"It's one we're all willing to take." Cybermancer growled.

"Is that our briefing?" Union Jack asked incredulously.

"Yeah, that's it mate. I need you to hit the ground running and corral these bastards as quick as you can so we can get relief workers in." Chapman signaled for the HERMES teleporter operator to transport the team in. As they faded away, Chapman was already trying to figure out how to remove the anti technology field that hung over Paris like a death shroud.

When Excalibur first touched down on the old stone streets of Paris, the first thing that struck them was what they first heard. Cars were strewn about, gutted by fire and buildings were so much rubble. Explosions, fires crackling in the distance as smoke billowed into the air and painful far flung screams, the city of lights was more a city at war.

The second thing that struck them was the many bodies that now surrounded them. Some were burned, others had their insides torn out and with some though unmistakably dead, though how was impossible to determine at first glance. Even more terrifying than that was the random body parts that were littered here and there. An arm with no owner, a shoeless foot and a single staying eye spoke volumes of the carnage.

"Omigodomigoomigod..." Silverclaw muttered under her breath rapidly. She was almost lost in the horror when she felt another reassuring hand in her shoulder, bringing her back to reality. Sabra smiled confidently on the young girl, lending Maria her strength, of which she had aplenty.

"Agent, Cybermancer, what are we up against?" Union Jack asked.

"Shouldn't we be moving out? I mean, Chapman did say we should hit the ground a runnin'." Eshu pointed out.

"Chapman can go to hell. I'm not sending my team anywhere without proper Intel." Union Jack growled, "Agent, Suzi, out with it."

"I'll go." U.S Agent said, "Fought these guys with the real Force Works. Not much to say, really. What you see is what you get. Flame guy throws flame. Water guy controls water. One lady you

wanna watch out for is the Butterfly chick. Floats in the air and her shadow causes really bad luck, like heart attack bad. Though last I heard, all these bums were dead.”

“We can fix that.” Suzi Endo spat. In her mind’s eye, she was counting off the names of friends, family and co workers she’d known personally who’d been killed by the Avatars. Thankfully, Tony Stark had created a way to defeat the anti technology field that’d been used in that first attack and she’d integrated it into her armor almost as an after thought, meaning her armor was likely the one piece of technology that was still working in Paris, “Rock, give me your weapons real quick. I can fix them so they work here.”

“Could the Mandarin be behind these attacks?” Hellios asked as Union Jack handed off his energy dagger and gun.

“Doesn’t matter.” Union Jack snapped, “We need to split up into four groups and sweep the city.”

“Silverclaw is with me.” Sabra stated firmly.

“Fine.” Union Jack didn’t bother to argue, there wasn’t time, “Agent, you’re with me. Eshu, you and Suzi are together. Scarab, you, Hellios and Darkstar are together. Fan out, find the terrorists and stop them. If you can’t beat them then draw them away from the city, but for God’s sake don’t let them take any more lives. You’re on your own, all of you. Any final questions?”

“Yeah,” Eshu smirked in a sly fashion, “is this a killing mission?”

Union Jack looked the shape shifter right in the eyes and said, “If they wanted this handled nice and neat, they would have called the Avengers. They didn’t. Now move out!”

The three teams took off in opposite directions while U.S Agent and Union Jack began running thru the streets of Paris. Neither seemingly noticed the woman overhead who stalked the rooftops. The woman was so skilled that she kept to the shadows on the bright Paris day as she stalked her prey down below. With a single silent leap, she placed herself a good block ahead of Union Jack and U.S Agent with them being none the wiser.

Eshu and Cybermancer flew north east towards the banks of the Seine. Eshu said nothing to his teammate while they flew thru the air. Though he did enjoy being a jerk to the rest of his team, he suspected that of all of Excalibur, Cybermancer was the only one who understood his life up until now. Not that he’d ever confide that in her, no he’d just put her on his ‘do not annoy’ list of one.

Cybermancer, however, paid Eshu no mind whatsoever as they flew over the devastated city. There wasn’t any room left in her mind for anything other than hate. When she first encountered

the Aviators, Suzi Endo was just a regular woman working for Stark Enterprises, helpless to save her staff, her friends and her fellow countrymen as they were cut down like wheat. Revenge almost completely consumed her mind.

Thankfully, being the genius that she was, she still had the presence of mind to note the location possible locations of the Aviators judging from the new footage she'd seen earlier. She'd chosen the farthest target to insure none of these monsters would get away with this. Once her target was defeated, she fully intended to close the noose on the rest.

It took a quite flight of ten minutes down the Seine before they came upon their prey. Quite literally walking upon the water's surface was a man made completely of water watching intently as a mob of people on the bank were trying to tear the city apart with their bare hands. A man with bleached white skin, skull like face and Asian warrior dress watched it all with sick approval on the street.

Cybermancer recognized them as the Avatars Deluge and Lich. Though she knew consciously they couldn't be the same men who attacked Hong Kong so long ago, the hate still simmered enough so it really didn't matter.

"Eshu, Lich is yours! Deluge's is mine!" Suzi shouted. She rocketed towards the water villain so fast Eshu didn't even think to reply. Rather, he looked at the skeletal warrior known as Lich, and fell towards the inhuman creature in the form of a gooey, snot-like substance.

Lich slashed his claws at Eshu as the shapeshifter fell upon him, for all the good it did him. Eshu's transparent liquid like form fell across Lich's body like amber covering a fly. It took all of three seconds for Eshu to encase the mystic warrior completely with his malleable body. Lich clawed and hacked at Eshu's form madly to no avail. In his panicked frenzy, Lich hadn't yet realized he could still breathe.

"Hey buddy, do you know what a passive aggressive power is?" Eshu asked, still a formless blob draped over Lich. Lich shook his head left to right furiously, "didn't think so. Passive aggressive powers are powers that aren't physical per say, but still dangerous. Like, sonics, lights, telepathy and so forth."

Lich felt his blob prison suddenly become as hard as steel, not allowing him to move a muscle, "Metamorphs are considered passive aggressive too. That's me. No internal organs to damage, just a bunch of molecules I can mentally command, to a degree. See, that's how I fly. Tell my molecules to move thru the air, and they do. Well, to a degree. Anyways, how does this relate to you?"

Lich felt his forefinger bent backwards by his amber prison, slowly, painfully and deliberately and it didn't stop moving until a small –snap!- echoed thru the air.

Lich whimpered as Eshu voiced his thoughts, "See, I can do whatever I want to you, and you can't do a God damn thing to stop me. What bones are next?"

If he could have opened his mouth to scream, Lich would have been doing just that. So loudly in fact he might have run the risk of damaging his lungs. But he couldn't. He was forcibly silent as –snap!- after –snap!- after –snap- could be heard.

Cybermancer pumped her fists back and forth as she released blast after blast at Deluge, the water Avatar. The slippery creature bobbed and weaved in the water that was his natural element, avoiding everything Cybermancer threw his way.

In truth, even if Cybermancer had struck him with her energy blasts, it wouldn't have done much good, but Deluge wanted to taunt the heroine for standing with the enemy, as it were.

“I won't even soil my hands with you, I'll let my followers handle you!” the water creature mocked. With a wave of his hand, dozens of bystanders who'd been tearing the city apart while the superhumans battled turned and actually flew thru the air like arrows towards the stunned Cybermancer. Suzi raised her forcefields, but even that wasn't enough to turn back this onslaught.

The sight was odd, to say nothing else. Hovering the air was a sphere of Frenchmen, immigrants and tourists trying to reach one woman. Cybermancer projected her force field outwards, and swallowed her rage. Her anger only clouded her judgment, and thus wouldn't allow her to think of a way to free these people from Deluge's control. Ignoring the cold, dead eyes staring at her, Suzi commanded her armor to do a quick sensor scan. It took only seconds to finish and the results ran across her HUD. The information made her blood run cold and magnified her rage beyond anything she'd felt before in her life.

Deluge watched the sphere of men, women and children nonchalantly, wondering how long it would be before the woman made her discovery. His question was answered moments later as the sphere exploded with pure yellow energy, leaving one very pissed Cybermancer.

“You bastard dog!” she spat as she flew downwards at Deluge, “how dare you violate the dead like that! Use them as your puppets!”

Cybermancer's infuriated form passed harmlessly thru Deluge, amusing the creature all the more, “The human body is majority water! I'd be a fool not to take advantage of that!”

Cybermancer pointed her gauntlets at Deluge, three openings on each glowing yellow, “My armor prevents you from doing that to me, and I'll make you pay, dog!”

Brak!brakbrakbrakbrakbrak!

Cybermancer's face became illuminated as her gauntlets released thousands of energy bullets that would have cut down a normal man in nanoseconds. Deluge could only laugh as the bullets harmlessly passed thru his body, causing it to ripple but doing nothing more. The fool woman was easier to bait than he ever expected of any foe.

Suzi Endo gritted her teeth and just kept on pouring on the power as she sought to defeat...no...kill Deluge. She didn't care what she had to do, this piece of dung didn't deserve another moment in this world and if it took every last erg of power in her armor, she'd put him down like the dog he was.

Unfortunately, Suzi's rage blinded her to the mistake she was making. Here she was, battling a man who controlled water in the middle of the French river of Seine. Two giant fists of ice silently rose out of the river just behind Suzi and fell upon her. Cybermancer barely registered the impact before she struck the water's surface, which was now solid ice. Her lungs burning for air, she couldn't even scream as the ice become like quicksand and pulled her under and into an icy grave. Deluge could only smile in satisfaction.

"Hey, wetback!"

Deluge looked towards the shore, and his jaw dropped. Eshu was standing there, his lower body extended backwards much like a rubber band. And laying limp inside the metamorph, was Deluge's teammate Lich.

"I think this china doll is broken! Here, have him back!" Eshu's waist shot outwards like a slingshot, and Lich flew thru the air to crash into the other side of the bank. The collision sounded a lot like deadwood being thrown against the ground, and Lich was very still, to say nothing of the awkward positions of each one of his limbs. Deluge's face twisted into a rage.

"You'll pay for that!" swore Deluge. Eshu rushed forward to meet the challenge, and dove into the river like an Olympic diver. Deluge instantly froze the water around him, turning the section the metamorph had jumped into to ice before he could even surface. Deluge then flowed up by commanding the ice to form into spikes, and began to extend them into the man who'd killed his friend. Not too quickly, Deluge didn't want the man to die too fast, that would be too good for the dung dropping.

However, Deluge wasn't quite prepared when a giant, twenty foot tall squid burst thru the ice and entangled him with his many, many arms.

"That the best you got, wet willy?" Eshu asked in his squid form.

Deluge passed thru the dozen squid arms easily enough and formed both of his hands into giant blades of ice. He brought them down upon the giant squid's head with all his strength. The effect created a large slash in Eshu's squid body, but that wasn't enough to stop the shapeshifter.

Eshu reformed into his normal appearance of an African man in a skin tight yellow suit and tackled Deluge. Deluge found to his surprise that his water form wouldn't pass thru Eshu's form like it had before.

“That trick won’t work twice! I bet you don’t know jack about your powers!” taunted Eshu, and he was right. Deluge could do some creative things with his powers here and there, but he was still in the dark as to the full extent of his powers.

However, he still knew enough to try to slip away by other means. He stretched his entire body high into the air, but Eshu followed him, both their pliable bodies inter-tangled so that Deluge couldn’t quite escape Eshu’s grip. Their bodies reaching some thirty feet in the air, they grappled back and forth for several seconds before Deluge realized he and his foe were utterly ineffective against the other.

“It appears we have a stalemate, genetic trash,” Deluge sneered, “you cannot hurt me, and I cannot hurt you.”

Eshu chuckled good naturedly at the observation, as if they were discussing sports, “Oh, I’m not trying to hurt you,” he explained with a smirk, “I’m just lining you up for the kill shot, you dumb son of a bitch.”

Then, faster than his eyes could follow, Deluge watched as Eshu’s form shrank together to form a hummingbird and flutter away. Kill shot...? The woman!

Cybermancer savored the look in Deluge’s face as he spun around to where he’d entombed her in ice. He’d never considered the possibility that her armor was more than strong enough to break her out of the ice, or that she had a special devise that supplied her with air in her armor that activated automatically in the event of submersion.

And that would cost him everything. The area became bathed in a brilliant white light as electricity arced off her gauntlets, begging for discharge. Suzi aimed them at Deluge, and let loose two twin bolts of lightning that would make Thunder gods proud.

Deluge felt indescribable pain as the electricity tore him apart like fire destroying paper. The hydrogen and oxygen molecules that made up his body were forcefully separated, and the mystic energy field that gave him his consciousness was shredded beyond all hopes of repair.

The steam that was Deluge’s corpse had barely begun to rise before Cybermancer willed herself into the air, “Come on Eshu, we still have lives to save and bastards to kill.”

At the suggestion of Hellios, he, Darkstar and Scarlet Scarab had chosen to make their way towards the Eiffel Tower. As it was a tourist attraction, it was a natural place to attack if one wanted to inflict the maximum amount of fatalities.

They flew thru the air like birds of prey, Hellios in the lead and Scarab and Darkstar at the side, flying over the once beautiful city at break neck speeds. They came upon their targets in the shadow of the famous Eiffel Tower, their suspicions tragically sound. Standing in the middle of the devastated street were three Avatars, Foundry, Old Woman and Ancestor. The Avatars were

the epicenter of an overwhelming amount of destruction that shocked the members of Excalibur. From their vantage point in the sky, they could see the bloody path that these sadists had cut thru the city, the smoldering bodies and devastated buildings.

Strangely enough, it was almost as if the Avatars had been warned that the three heroes were coming, as all three looked up at once and spotted the triad of international heroes approaching. Not that it much mattered to the three. Element of surprise or not, no one intended to balk at their duty.

Hellios arced down first, slamming into the large golden Avatar known as Foundry so hard the two dug a deep furrow in the French street. Scarlet Scarab was next, as he swooped down and smashed the elderly Avatar known as Ancestor across the head, sending the man flying thru the air like a coke can caught in a tornado. Scarab gripped his hand painfully, and realized that blow had nearly broken his hand!

Darkstar had chosen Old Woman, a woman in Asian dress and an expressionless silver mask on her face, as her target. She unleashed a barrage of darkforce daggers at the woman to gauge her foes abilities. Old Woman struck the ground with her staff, and it rose up in the path of the daggers, effectively blocking them.

Old Woman, an elemental sculptress, didn't just stop there. She then commanded the molecules of her shield to explode outwards like a shrapnel bomb. Darkstar was caught completely unprepared and barely managed to raise a shield that deflected some of the assault, though not nearly all. Sharp, angled pieces of rock slashed across her shoulders and one bounced off her ribs, leaving a deep gash. Darkstar, her mind swimming and reeling in pain, fell to the earth with a harsh -thud!-

Darkstar clutched her sides, and knew for certain that she'd broken several ribs, in addition to the numerous cuts and bruises that peppered her body. But when she saw Old Man preparing to move again, all pain was forgotten. She was Russian after all, no stranger to pain.

Old Woman, in her eagerness for the kill, had dropped her defenses. Darkstar lashed out with a darkforce blast that hit Old Woman dead center of her chest. Old Woman was lifted into the air by the force of the blast, and slammed into a café wall. She fell to her knees instantly, her body without breath, and had to use her staff to support from falling all the way to the ground.

She had barely taken three short breaths before a fist of darkforce slammed into the wall beside her head. Old Woman slammed her staff on the ground and the soil beneath her feet began rippling like a wave towards Darkstar. The Russian mutant barely raised herself into the air before the wave crested where she'd been standing, and cursed the double vision that had ruined her shot before. Not one to cry over spilt milk, she attacked again before her foe could recover too much. Darkstar kept up her assault, with none of her attacks meant to disable. Maim or kill was all she strived for now. What she had to strive for.

Hellios gripped the dazed Foundry by his neck, and gave serious thought to crushing the throat in his hand. It was not something a hero would do, no, but Hellios had seen what this monster had done to this wondrous city of culture. These were not the actions of a man, but a monster. And heroes could kill monsters, he rationalized.

Suddenly, he felt a stinging sensation in his hand, and he recoiled instinctively. He examined his palm, and found to his surprise it was reddened, almost as if it was burned. But how was that possible? He'd survived reentry with barely a singe, and this creature couldn't generate heat compared to that, could he?

Hellios was denied the time to further consider the situation as four separate bolts of lightning lanced down from the sky and collided with one another with Hellios at the center. The mighty supersoldier screamed and fell to his powerful knees, his mind blazing with pain while the smell of his smoldering flesh filled his nostrils. While he took short and heavy breaths, the very air around him began swirling and coalescing into the form of a human female. The blood in Hellios' ears prevented him from hearing the air-woman identify herself as Tsunami, but nothing could block the pain another lightning bolt brought. Hellios staggered, but he did not fall. With his vision swimming, the Greek hero realized that he was quite vulnerable to whatever power these creatures were using to fuel their abilities, magic most likely. Gale force winds began hammering his body, and he feverishly sought to think of a way to defeat his opponent.

With nothing coming to mind, Hellios took off high into the air. A bolt of lightning lashed across his back, but he was thankful that if nothing else, he'd drawn this dangerous foe away from his less powerful teammates. Now if he survived himself, that still remained to be seen.

Scarlet Scarab, ever the hero, closed the distance between himself and the Avatar known as Ancestor as swiftly as his powers would allow. Scarab suspected that his foe tapped some outside energy source for power, and decided the best tactic was to overwhelm his foe before he could bring all that strength to bear.

If Scarab knew the source of Ancestor's might, that the elderly man drew upon the millions of dead spirits of his homeland for his strength, Scarab certainly would have reconsidered his strategy, at least somewhat. Scarab threw a haymaker that was easily caught by the ancient terrorist. Exerting a small fraction of his strength, Ancestor squeezed Scarlet Scarab's fist. The sounds of bones grinding together seeped into Scarab's ears, who refused to scream as he was forced down on one knee.

Ancestor looked down upon the pain wracked Middle Eastern hero, his lips curled in a smug smile. Ancestor was easily the strongest Avatar, breaking men with his bare hands with only the smallest of effort. Scarlet Scarab, he felt, wasn't even in his league. His power was limitless...then Ancestor became curious. Why was the Arab man smiling so?

Ancestor felt light headed for a moment, and suddenly understood why the brightly clad hero was smiling. Scarlet Scarab activated his ability to absorb energy, his might increasing tenfold in

less than a second. He easily broke free from Ancestor's mighty grip and sprang up. The Middle Eastern hero quickly locked Ancestor's arm underneath his elbow with one arm, and began pummeling Ancestor in the face with his other fist.

Ancestor tried to pull away, but with one arm firmly locked in place by Scarab, he wasn't going anywhere. Worse, he felt his strength shrink as Scarab's strength grew. Punch after punch after punch sent teeth flying and sent blood pouring out his mouth and nose. After a good three dozen punches that made Ancestor's face so swollen that he couldn't see, Scarab suddenly stopped his punishment.

Ancestor didn't know why, but he was thankful that the onslaught had finally stopped. He cursed his foe for his stupidity, for Ancestor could feel his powers renewing his body. He opened a barely healed eye, and saw Scarlet Scarab, his right fist pulled back, balancing on his back right foot, his clenched fist radiating power.

Scarlet Scarab then lurched forward and with a single blow, released all the energy he'd stolen. The entire block rumbled and lifted up, as if the hand of the Almighty himself swooped up the land and dropped it again. Darkstar and Old Woman, two blocks away, used their respective powers to protect themselves from the shockwave that Scarlet Scarab had unleashed. Cars flew thru the air and lamp posts were torn from their sockets by the torrent of energy the Egyptian had released. When all was said and done, the Muslim hero was standing in a steaming crater of street alone, the pavement below his feet was bubbling like overcooked soup, and if one looked hard enough they could see a comet streaking away from earth in the far distance. Scarab shook his hands distastefully. The magic he'd absorbed had been fully expelled, but it still left a bitter after taste.

Ironically, Scarlet Scarab's first thought was that a comet had landed when a fiery object slammed into Mother Earth a few blocks away from his position. Scarab's blood ran cold when he realized the truth. He signaled Darkstar and rocketed to the impact site. Hellios was sprawled out unconscious embedded in the street, his entire body covered with electrical burns. Scarab landed and quickly knelt down to check for a pulse.

He breathed an obvious sigh of relief when he finally found his friend's pulse. It was shallow and weak, but most certainly there. A moment later, Scarab felt a low rumbling, like tremors. Years as a hero had taught him better, and he looked up to see the large Avatar known Foundry approaching, licking his lips in anticipation as puffs of smoke climbed into the air off his back. Scarlet Scarab took a step back...and bumped into Darkstar. He spun around looked at her, then looked over her shoulder to see Old Woman approaching. As if that weren't bad enough, the sky above them began dark and ominous. The clouds swirled to form a female body, and the creature known as Tsunami floated to the ground, a confident smirk plastered upon her gaseous face.

The two heroes set their jaws. For all intents and purposes, with their strongest downed and quite possibly the entire city of Paris relying on them, mercy was akin to stupidity. If they didn't go for blood, they would be lost. Darkstar unleashed a wave of darkforce at Old Woman while Scarlet Scarab encased Tsunami in one of his crimson forcefields, and forced Foundry back with his energy blasts.

Both sides, sensing both victory and desperation in their foes, pressed forward with renewed vigor. There were no witty banter, almighty proclamations of power, or disparaging of another's parentage. Words had no place in this battle. Only power and action would carry the day.

"You know, I bet Captain America never charges into battle like this." Whined Silverclaw as she clutched her arms tightly around Sabra's neck. The two were careening over the French skyline, propelled by Sabra's powerful leg muscles. Silverclaw wasn't overly concerned about falling (she could fly, but not fast enough for Sabra's tastes), but it was kinda embarrassing going into a fight piggybacking on a teammate.

"You are not Captain America, child." Sabra stated. They were on the apex of her last leap, when Sabra said, "Silverclaw, assume your bird form and follow me down."

Though she was somewhat baffled by the order, Maria nevertheless obeyed. She released her grip on Sabra's neck, and commanded her body to assume the form of a humanoid cockatoo. The winds collected underneath her wrist wings, and Silverclaw slowly glided to the ground like a feather.

Sabra landed with surprising grace for a woman of her power, bending her knees as she touched the earth and barely leaving an impression of her feet in the ground despite her awesome strength.

"Why'd we stop?" Silverclaw asked as she landed at Sabra's side, "those Avatars guys aren't anywhere near here."

"They're forty five seconds away from us." Sabra stated matter of factly, "I observed their path of destruction from the air, and I wish to head them off."

"Oh." Silverclaw suddenly felt guilty for not making the same observations as Sabra, "Umm, Sabra? Why'd you insist on partnering up with me?"

"You are young, inexperienced and impulsive." Sabra stated in a tone that lacked both judgment and malice. The Mossad agent hadn't even looked at Silverclaw when she gave her answer, her attention drawn elsewhere, "you need to be partnered with someone who will take this into account and react accordingly."

"Oh, o...kay." Silverclaw stuttered, somewhat embarrassed, both by the harsh opinion and the knowledge that Sabra was one hundred percent correct in her assessment.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of." Sabra reassured her, "no one is perfect, and I'd be more than willing to train you, if you'd like."

"Yeah, I think that would be cool." Said Silverclaw, "providing we survive and all."

“We’ll soon find out. Five seconds.”

Four seconds later and five houses down at the end of the block, a building housing a bakery that spanned three generations came tumbling down in an avalanche of cement, brick and clay. A thick cloud of red dust billowed outwards to settle at the feet of the two heroines, and the Avatars known as Quake and Butterfly stepped forward to make their presence known.

“<<Look pretty butterfly, it appears we have finally found some sport.>>” Quake said in his native tongue to his teammate who hovered in the air beside him.

“<<I suppose a break from the slaughter would help me stay awake.>>” Answered Butterfly dryly.

Sabra, fluent in Chinese, among other languages, listened intently to the two for a moment. Just by listening to the dialect of Chinese the two used, Sabra was able to determine that the two terrorists were likely from poor, uneducated families, likely Rice farmers who were forced to irk out a living doing hard labor with little or no prospects for the future. Such poverty would make them ideal for terrorist recruiters, Sabra knew from bitter experience.

“So...what’s the plan?” Silverclaw asked apprehensively.

“You stay back, and leave them to me.” Sabra ordered, “you may wish to cover your eyes, though I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“That’s not much of a plan.” Observed Silverclaw.

“We’ll see.” Sabra stomped her foot on the ground, and a sewer lid right next to her foot sprang into the air. Sabra plucked the top out of the air with one hand and glared at Avatars. With no malice in her heart whatsoever, she stated in perfect Chinese, “I will teach you dogs a lesson the Arabs should have learned long ago, you pathetic low born bastards! You do not screw with Mossad agents!”

Butterfly, absolutely incensed by Sabra’s insults, flew forward to encompass the mutant heroine in her lethal shadow. Sabra remembered U.S Agent’s comments about this woman in particular, and had no intention of falling prey to whatever misfortune the woman’s shadow would bring. Sabra pulled her arm back, and let fly the sewer lid on her hand with all her strength and skill. Butterfly’s eyes snapped open in horror, and a moment later, she fell to the ground with two separate -splats!-

Quake stared in horror at his fallen friend, and then towards Sabra.

“Tell me something, dung heap,” Said Sabra. She unfastened her cape that housed the anti-gravity unit that typically allowed her to fly from around her shoulders. The device was rendered largely inert by the anti-technology field that permeated Paris, “do you still think I’m good sport?”

Quake answered by charging at Sabra like blood thirsty bull and screaming in a rage. Sabra simply stood her ground, almost oblivious to the enraged Avatar. She swung her anti gravity cape in one hand, the only real movement she made. Suddenly, when Quake was almost upon her, Sabra sprang to life. She stepped to the side as she swung her cape directly into Quake's face.

-Boom!-

Silverclaw covered her face with her hands as the explosion from Sabra's anti gravity generator sent a wave of air rushing past. Silverclaw looked to see where her teammate once stood, and saw nothing but a thick, black cloud of smoke.

"Sabra...? Are you alright?" Silverclaw called out, her heart in her throat. Sabra was one of the toughest, surely she wouldn't have done something that could have killed her...!

Silverclaw's heart nearly stopped when she saw Quake, his body covered in soot, costume torn but very much alive, strode smugly out of the smoke cloud.

"It appears your teammate suffered from terminal stupidity." Remarked Quake.

Trembling with anger, Silverclaw shifted her body into her puma form. It was far from her most powerful, but she reasoned its agility would allow her enough time to devise a plan to defeat Quake, whom she knew was vastly more powerful.

"It's called a distraction, not stupidity." War weathered hands reached out from the smoke behind Quake's head and grabbed him about the neck. Quake bucked from side to side, and shook his body like a dog might shake to dry off as he tried to dislodge Sabra from his back. The Mossad agent held on easily with her powerful strength, and all but ignored Quake's attempts at freedom as she maneuvered her hands into position.

Silverclaw saw this, and almost instantly recognized what Sabra was doing. Silverclaw squeezed her eyes shut just as she heard the almost unperceivable -krak!-

Maria opened her eyes again, and was quickly on her knees, vomiting. The rush of adrenaline had faded, and the entirety of the battle had hit the young woman all at once. Butterfly laying in two different locations and Sabra stepping off Quake's limp and unquestionably dead form, it was too for the young college woman to take.

Sabra watched patiently as Silverclaw voided her last three meals upon the Paris street.

"Is that...what you want to teach me?" the young heroine asked weakly, her stomach still rebelling against her.

Sabra scanned the battle field, observing the death and destruction that had been wrought by both her and the terrorists, “No, I want to teach you a better way. Allow you to take a path I never could.”

Sabra extended her hand to the slumped over Silverclaw, “I’d like to think that we could teach one another, if you’re willing.”

Union Jack, his pistol in his left hand, pressed his back up against a stone wall. U.S Agent was at his side likewise, the two preparing an ambush. Union Jack signaled silently, and U.S Agent, his shield at the ready, jumped out into the street.

“Alright you...son of a...” U.S Agent brought his shield up to deflect a rake aimed to take off his head. U.S Agent cursed under his breath. He’d thought Union Jack had found the terrorists they were after, not a mob of Frenchmen!

And it truly was a mob. Some sixteen men of varying ethnic backgrounds attacked U.S Agent with a desperate fury. Some looked like tourists, others Native Frenchmen and a few immigrants mixed in. They were almost tripping over one another trying to get at U.S Agent, which made it all the easier for John Walker to defend himself. However, more than anything he wanted to be tearing the bad guys a new asshole, not fighting the people he was supposed to be protecting.

“Hey, hold up! Peace, damn it!” U.S Agent shouted to no avail. Finally fed up, he swung his indestructible shield outwards. He barely put any of his impressive strength behind the swing, but he still managed to knock a wave of his attackers on their ass.

“<<That’s enough! We’re with Excalibur!>>” Union Jack shouted from behind the crowd in perfect French. The men instantly stopped attacking. Even though his usual stomping grounds were some distance away, Union Jack was a figure instantly recognizable all over Europe.

“<<Excalibur? Where are your teammates?>>” One of the more well informed members of the mob, a young doctor, asked.

“<<They’re handling the terrorists at separate locations. Where is everyone? My friend and I haven’t seen almost anyone.>>”

“<<Our government organized and implemented emergency plans for an extranormal terrorist attack after Magneto’s men kidnapped our Prime Minister. Most are huddled in the mosques, churches and basements. But we refuse to hide!>>”

“<<If you bastards stay out here, you’ll only hinder us.>>” Union Jack told the mob. He pointed back the way he came, “<<If you want to make yourself helpful, go that way. We saw some seriously injured men and women, but we couldn’t stop to help.>>”

The leader of the mob nodded in acknowledgement, and led his men away as U.S Agent stood there dumbfounded.

“Where are they going?” he asked.

“To help the injured we were forced to leave behind.” Union Jack explained.

“There wasn’t anyone left alive, man.”

Union Jack smiled underneath his mask, “I know. But there also aren’t any terrorists that way.”

“Ah, good. Funny stereotypes aside, they really do need to be hiding. Last thing these terrorist bastards need is more victims.” Said U.S Agent.

“Would you hide?”

Agent shrugged, “No, probably not. But I’d hope my family would.”

Union Jack fell silent, and began looking at something rather curious just past his friend. Without saying a word, Union Jack walked past John Walker to the stone wall of a gift shop. The wall had five deep but precise gouges in it, slashing downwards. Union Jack bent down and knelt closely to examine the scored stone, studying it intently.

“What is it?” Agent asked. Behind him a lithe figure landed as silently as a summer’s breeze. Her fingers were inhumanly long and shimmered silver.

“These gouges, it’s almost like someone actually took knife to this stone.” Union Jack’s hand crept towards his belt, “I can’t imagine the blade it would take to do something like this.”

“What, you think you can C.S.I out our killer? Come on Rock, we need to get a move on.” U.S Agent remained ignorant of the assassin now only a few feet from his exposed back.

“Agent,” Rock snapped, “down!”

U.S Agent squatted down just as Union Jack whirled around and unleashed a hail of explosive bullets at an assailant U.S Agent hadn’t even known was behind him. Eight explosive bullets hit their mark, but the killer stood their ground, virtually unfazed. U.S Agent heard the –klik- of Jack’s gun indicating the clip was empty, and sprang up while swinging his shield behind him. It collided so hard with the figure it sounded like a bell ringing and the black clad figure flew clear across the street into a stone wall. She crashed into it so hard she left an imprint of her back, but to the surprise of U.S Agent and Union Jack both, still managed to land on her feet.

“Lady Deathstrike.” Union Jack said thru clenched teeth, “I’d thought exposing our back our draw out whoever I felt stalking us, but I didn’t expect it to be you. Last I heard, you were dead.”

“Obviously not.” Lady Deathstrike hissed, “ready?”

“Bring it bitch.” John Walker snarled.

Lady Deathstrike targeted U.S Agent first. She sprang forward like a jack in the box, her long, razor sharp claws reaching outwards. Agent brought his shield up to defend himself, just as Deathstrike expected him to.

She hit the shield with her hands at the outer most edge, and her elongated fingers reached around the edges and firmly gripped the shield. Allowing her momentum to carry her up and over, Lady Deathstrike kept a firm grip on the shield when her feet touched the ground, and using her cyborg strength she flipped U.S Agent over on his back onto the cold hard street.

“Ugggh!” U.S Agent’s world blinked in and out after he was slammed to the pavement and the breath flew from his body. He didn’t see Lady Deathstrike slide his shield off his wrist, but his world came back into focus just as the renegade samurai raised the shield over her head, and brought it crashing down towards his neck.

“Shit!” U.S Agent caught the shield one foot from decapitation, though the indestructible shield sliced into his hands. He forced the shield back up and clipped Deathstrike in the jaw with its edge. Union Jack then tackled the woman aside.

“Thought you were better than this!” Union Jack cracked his bo staff against Deathstrike’s head, giving himself breathing room.

Lady Deathstrike stepped back, her claws raised, “You were right.”

Union Jack rushed forward as he imbedded his bo stall in the street, and used it to vault at the killer cyborg. With one leg pulled back, he readied a snap kick that would have taken off the head of a normal man. Union Jack snapped his foot out catching his foe in the head, but it hardly had the effect he desired.

Lady Deathstrike grabbed Union Jack’s calf and flipped him over onto the street so hard he kicked up a small cloud of dust. His back feeling as though on fire, he was at Lady Deathstrike’s mercy.

“Does this seem familiar, English? You are fighting a foe with superior physical power!” Lady Deathstrike warned as she loomed over Rock, “Fight smarter!”

Union Jack aimed his pistol at Deathstrike’s knee.

“Okay.”

Blam!blam!blam!blam!blam!

A clip of concentrated explosive bullets was all it took to turn Deathstrike's knee into so much hash. Cybernetic signals that translated into pure pain lanced thru the cyborg's mind and Union Jack, not wasting a moment, kicked the killer in the stomach, forcing her back.

"Agent, one two!" Jack ordered as he whipped his knife out. He charged at Deathstrike fearlessly, ducking underneath a deadly swing of her claws to rake his energy dagger across her stomach, to no visible effect. Union Jack cursed, skillfully ducked another slash, and gripped his energy dagger with both hands, and slammed it down.

This time, it took all of Lady Deathstrike's considerable willpower not to scream. She looked down to see her foot was pinned to the ground by the Englishman's energy dagger. Her breathing became short and shallow, anger and pain overriding her morality. Union Jack had already slipped away, but he wouldn't escape her wrath she swore.

"Hey tin can!"

Lady Deathstrike turned to see U.S Agent's fist cocked completely back.

-Wham!-

U.S Agent struck Lady Deathstrike with every last ounce of his superstrength and then some. The blow was so powerful it snapped Yuriko's head around some 180 degrees, so that she was staring down the barrel of Union Jack's gun.

Blam!blam!

Two explosive bullets pierced both of Deathstrike's eyes and exploded inside her skull cavity. All motion from the cyborg ceased.

"God damn!" John Walker clutched his aching hand to his chest as he stepped away from the still cyborg, "that woman's head is like punching a steel wall."

"You'll...live."

U.S Agent couldn't miss the suspicion in Jack's voice, "What's wrong?"

"If we killed Deathstrike, why's her leg still repairing itself?"

"Because my brain is no longer housed in my skull." Deathstrike answered. She snapped her head back into place, and glared at the two U.N heroes, "ready for round two?"

Lady Deathstrike tore her foot free from Union Jack's energy dagger and lunged at the two with lightning speed. A spin kick separated the two, and Deathstrike tackled U.S Agent as he was flung through the air. They slammed into a stone corner with a -crunch!-

“All strength and little skill.” She remarked as she smashed U.S Agent across the face with a jackhammer punch, sending bits and pieces of Agent’s helmet flying. Deathstrike spun around and unleashed a roundhouse kick, but kept her foot planted behind Walker’s head as she brought her foot down, slamming him face first into the pavement. John Walker did not get up.

“Hopefully one day you’ll learn better.”

“Care to try a master?” Union Jack asked, his staff held firmly in his hands.

Lady Deathstrike tried not to laugh. Her left arm telescoped outwards and sliced the staff in two while her right hand tried to stab Jack’s eyes out. Jack ducked to his right, and then realized that both of Deathstrike’s hands were now behind him. Lady Deathstrike then retracted her arms with incredible speed, all but throwing the British hero at herself. Lady Deathstrike pulled her head back and...

-Kraak!-

Union Jack slumped to the ground with a mild concussion. Lady Deathstrike looked down at his vulnerable form, her hands trembling. After an eternity of struggle, they stopped, and she simply walked away.

“...stop...”

Yuiko stopped, looked over her shoulder and felt her respect for the British grow by leaps and bounds. Union Jack was amazingly standing erect on unsteady legs. His arms weren’t even raised in preparation for battle, but there was fire in his eyes.

“You don’t want to do this.”

“...the bloody hell I don’t. I won’t let you take another life.” Rock hissed.

“Fine, I’ll take yours.”

Lady Deathstrike turned around and strolled towards Jack.

A telescopic right arm slashed him across the chest. Blood ran freely, but he didn’t fall. A cybernetic left cross cracked his jaw, and still he stood his ground. The adamantium laced ring and index finger pierced his shoulder and out his back like butter, and still Union Jack was silent. His legs felt like rubber, and it was his will alone that kept him conscious and fighting

“I’m impressed.” Said Lady Deathstrike as she approached, her fingers still in Union Jack’s shoulder, “by all rights, you should be screaming for mercy.” She twisted her fingers slightly, and she saw Union Jack’s body ripple. Still, he refused to fall.

“I’m actually smiling underneath this mask.” Union Jack informed Deathstrike. He then reached behind his back and pulled out a device about the size of a T.V remote. He flashed it at

Deathstrike before concealing it behind his back again, “see this, it’s my experiment with C4. I call it C16 for reasons that’ll be come apparent, and it has a deadman’s switch.”

“You’re lying.” Deathstrike stated, though in her mind she was running scenarios for escape. Strangely, she found she just couldn’t muster enough willpower to care about that, “Then what are you waiting for?”

“I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me why they deserved to die.”

Deathstrike spared no second in looking Union Jack in the eyes to explain, “They didn’t.”

He wanted to let go. He wanted to detonate his bomb that he was sure would destroy them both. But there was something in Deathstrike’s voice that made him hesitate, that made him realize that perhaps she too was a victim in all this. But he also realized that even if she was under mind control, she was a lethal fighter he had to bring down with this one chance.

So they stood there in a silent Mexican standoff, Deathstrike not caring overly much if she lived or died, and Union Jack’s instincts as a hero and soldier battling it out, until...

“Deathstrike, what’s your status?”

The cyborg, Jack realized, had decided against using her internal radio. The fact that she’d made such a tactical mistake only fueled the British hero’s suspicions.

“I’ve killed all resistance I’ve encountered. However, I’ve begun to feel quite sluggish, I feel the devises that protect me against the anti-technology field are beginning to fade.”

“Noted. The field itself is beginning to fade itself, is everything in readiness?” The voice on the other end inquired.

“Yes, our third strike is more than ready.” Lady Deathstrike never removed her eyes from Union Jack, “I doubt anyone will expect it, much less stop it.”

“Good. Then prepare for extraction.”

Lady Deathstrike disappeared slowly, and Union Jack felt the pain in his pierced shoulder lessen. He barely flipped the safety switch on his bomb before falling to his knees.

Union Jack’s chest and arm were covered in blood, his mind on the verge of shock and his body begged him for rest. But none of these things were given any heed. All he could think of was what a third strike would entail.

“Union Jack! Omigod!”

Silverclaw dropped down from the sky and assumed human form instantly, “Are you already?! Omigod theresomuchbloodwhathappened...”

“Maria, see to U.S Agent.” Sabra commanded. The young woman nodded and moved away. Sabra knelt down, placed Jack’s arm over her shoulder and gently helped him what, “What happened?”

“Deathstrike.” He answered flatly.

“I thought she was dead.”

“I... only... wish.”

Sabra observed Rock’s voice trail off and how his attention was focused down the block. She followed his eyes, and found herself somewhat baffled.

“Rock, what’s wrong?”

“It’s a mosque.” Union Jack explained, “Dear God in heaven, that’s the third strike!”

Union Jack pulled away from Sabra and began running towards the mosque with speed that belied his injuries. His teammates were in fast pursuit, but still far behind. Union Jack snatched the knob to throw it open, praying that he was wrong all the while.

Foom!

A wall of flame exploded outwards at Union Jack, his suit the only thing saving his life. The mosque was utterly engulfed in flames as people who’d taken refuge there screamed for help.

Union Jack felt his mind drift out of his body as he hit the pavement. He didn’t see Sabra, U.S Agent and Silverclaw all but jump into the flames in a desperate attempt to save lives. No, whether it was his mind playing tricks on him or something else, he heard the many explosions that came one by one by one all over France. Hospitals, churches, community centers and more burst into flames as incendiary bombs exploded exactly where one might expect civilians to take refuge. Excalibur, scattered all over the city, reacted exactly the same, plunging into the fires in an effort save lives. But they knew the same thing Union Jack did.

No matter how hard they tried, they wouldn’t be enough. Even if their powers and numbers were a hundred times greater. Union Jack had time for only one last thought before he spiraled into oblivion.

That this was only the beginning...

To be continued....

Next issue: The Avatars have barely begun their terror. Who is next...?

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 7

"Terror of the Rising Sun"

Part Three: London Bridge is Falling Down

by David Ingram

Avalon, New York

Joey Chapman sat in his command chair in the center of Avalon's international emergency monitoring womb, contemplating recent events. It had been little over a week since the terrorists known as the Avatars of the Mandarin had gutted Paris, France in a daringly ruthless attack. Thousands had been butchered and the death toll was still being tallied, hundreds of historical buildings were damaged beyond repair or outright destroyed and one member of Excalibur was even put in a coma.

Chapman tried not to think about that last detail of information too much, lest it demoralize him like it had the rest of his team. Even though no one said it aloud, seeing their most powerful member Hellios badly beaten to the point of near death shook even the most veteran members of Excalibur. Hellios had been the team's rock in many ways, and seeing him laying there in a hospital bed, the doctors surrounding him helpless to even so much as access his situation due to the superman's steel like skin. Hellios' fate was simply out of his hands.

And allowing himself to be demoralized now could prove dangerous. While it had been little over a week since their attack, the final estimates on the death total and damage inflicted upon Paris France had been reported and sunk in to the worldwide consciousness. Chapman knew in his blood that a follow-up attack would come soon, so as to take full psychological advantage of their first attack. To show the world that the Avatars were still free and active despite the best efforts of the United Nations personal superheroes. It was what Chapman would do after all, something that scared him in some ways but made him thankful in others.

It was only after a half hour of waiting before international monitoring stations sent the base's alarms blaring. Thanks to Chapman's foresight, the entirety of Excalibur were already stationed at Avalon, and they were summoned to the HERMES teleport station instantly. In fact, by the time Chapman was able to read the monitor screen, Excalibur was already in the field.

And when he saw their destination, Chapman was never more thankful for it. Because the Avatars had just launched a full scale attack on his home country of England.

"The Avatars are in London?" Silverclaw asked as she sped down the corridor with Eshu close behind, "oh God, of all the places...one of my best friend Jessica's in London! I hope she's not in the area..."

"Yeah, terrorists should stick to killing nameless orphans in third world countries," Eshu remarked blithely. Maria couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or sincere, and didn't know which would disturb her more quite honestly.

The team was at the HERMES teleporter platform in record time, and with no ceremony were teleported into the heart of the disturbance, or at least well within range.

Looking down the block, Excalibur saw the Avatars almost literally tearing the block apart. Foundry casually raked his flames across the store fronts, Quake had a lamp post resting in one hand while the others with less destructive abilities seemed to have been pacing around anxiously up until Excalibur had arrive. No one in Excalibur missed the fact that some of the Avatars that had been slain in their previous battle were now alive along with a few new faces, a man with a shimmering sheath, one with glowing hands and the final one made of solid gray stone, though they all agreed how and why was a matter for another time. Oddly enough however, Tsunami was nowhere to be seen.

If Union Jack was especially concerned about the fact that they were about to engage a group of powerful terrorists in his homeland, nothing betrayed that fact. He barked out orders almost instantly.

"Darkstar, Cybermancer, left right containment and double back!" Rock snapped.

Darkstar and Cybermancer shot forward fast and hard, dodging bursts of flame and water before they lashed out with their abilities. Darkstar created a wall of solid darkforce and powerfully drove it through the sidewalk adjacent to the Avatars like a plow parting dirt while Cybermancer opted to fire a continuous laser beam from her right gauntlet as she flanked her Russian teammate. Instinctively moving to avoid being struck, the Avatars were grouped together in the street where a wall of crimson energy slammed into them painfully, leveling most of the team.

"Good going Scarab," Union Jack complimented. His team had stopped their charge some ten feet from the disorientated Avatars, "Sabra, Scarab, Suzi, Darkstar Butterfly needs to go!"

Sabra knelt down and scooped up the pavement as if it were sand and threw the fragments of street towards her foe. Scarab raised his hands to fire as both Darkstar and Cybermancer took aim and unleashed their respective energies.

Not even Butterfly's much feared ability to alter probability was enough to save her. The fragments of road broke the sound barrier just seconds before they tore through Butterfly's petite body like knives through air, puncturing vital organs without so much as slowing down. Thankfully, crimson energy followed by superheated protons and steel strong darkforce blasts were enough to cauterize the wounds before transforming her into a smoldering pile of once bone and human flesh.

Union Jack didn't so much as flinch when he saw Butterfly cut down. But, with her abilities to alter probabilities removed from the field as Darkstar and Cybermancer returned to their team's side he was free to shout,

"Excalibur strike!"

Scarlet Scarab was first, rocketing forward like an arrow, his arms extended outwards and knocking down Lich, Lady Deathstrike and Foundry like ten pins before the newest Avatar, made of gray stone, cocked his fist back and swung forward like a Yankee pitcher. The Middle Eastern hero was instantly sent flying in the opposite direction just as his teammates had reached the Avatars.

U.S. Agent leapt forward shield first, his indestructible disc colliding into the blazing hands of Warfist, and to his surprise came to a complete stop. Barely ducking under a fiery chop of the man's hands, U.S. Agent connected with a powerful right hook to the man's jaw.

Silverclaw, shifted into her puma form, tackled the Avatar aptly named Scythe and began clawing like mad as the man struggled to defend himself. Cybermancer chased Deluge with powerful electrical blasts that the creature slithered and dodged through like the snake he was. Suzi wasn't aware of Foundry until her automated defense computers overrode her control over the armor and forced her over a jet of flame. The warrior scientist realized her mistake and locked her weapons systems on the avatar, but only one mini missile was in the air before a water spout made entirely of ice nearly took her head off, again only saved by her automated systems that made her bob under the attack. Pressing their advantage, Foundry and Deluge attacked kept up the assault, hoping to catch the Chinese representative in the crossfire.

To one side, Darkstar kept to the air as she rained down darkforce blasts that Old Woman was only barely able to protect herself from. Old Woman, though faster than her name implied, was constantly on the defensive. Every shield she erected was smashed and every counter attack parried.

Off to the other side Eshu again engaged Lich while Sabra tossed Quake's giant form over her shoulder in a judo toss. This Quake had at least some combat skills Sabra had observed, which combined with his superior strength made it considerably harder for the Mossad agent to just dispatch him like she had his predecessor. She hoped now that she had him on the ground she could end his threat. Unfortunately, the Israeli hero was so focused on completely defeating Quake, that she failed to notice the gray stoned Avatar approaching from behind.

"Foolish witch!" A gray arm extended like a snake from it's hole and the smashed across the back of Sara's head so hard it sounded like a mine exploding. Sabra fell to her hands and knees, her head ring like a bell on Sunday Morning. The only thing her mind could consciously register, barely, was that Quake, Ancestor and this latest Avatar were standing right over her.

"Ignore Fuji at your peril!" The gray stoned Avatar hissed as he molded his left hand into a giant spiked globe.

There was a whistling noise, and the Avatar Fuji exploded into a cloud of dust.

"Duly noted." Scarlet Scarab released a quick burst of energy and sent Quake stumbling backwards to his knees. Scarab instantly reached for Ancestor, hoping to add the elderly and homicidal man's power to his own to finally end this madness. But Ancestor was ready. As the famous Middle Eastern hero reached out, Ancestor chopped down with his right hand. His impressive power was more than enough to break both bones in Scarab's left forearm. With lightning speed, Ancestor gripped his hand around Scarab's shattered wrist and squeezed as he brought the hero up to eye level.

"Please, don't be insulting Arab dog!"

The ground underneath Ancestor shook unexpectedly, and the villain accidentally dropped Scarlet Scarab, whose world was swimming with pain to the cracked pavement below. Sabra then charged forward and flew towards Ancestor's head. With practiced skill she smashed the flat of her palms against Ancestor's head. It was akin to a bomb exploding inside the elderly man's head, and it took all his impressive strength to only stagger backwards.

"We need to be more careful. These Avatars have obviously learned from those who we killed in the last attack somehow," Sabra said in a quick, business like manner, "old tricks won't work as easily this time."

Scarlet Scarab saw the reformed Fuji lumbering towards their position. With barely a thought, he swept his hand outwards as he released a tightly focused burst of energy, creating an energy scythe that sliced the man in two, "Thus we must teach them new tricks."

The rumbling in the ground was a tell-tail sign of Quake's approach. Scarlet Scarab created a forcefield around his broken wrist, the pain a dull roar by now, and nodded to Sabra. Silently, she launched herself at Quake, wrist needles blazing. His body protected within an energy shell of pure mystical energy that made him appear four sizes bigger, Scarab flew like a bullet towards Ancestor. The impact rattled the teeth of everyone within a two-block radius.

At the head of the battle, almost detached from the chaos of Silverclaw ducking underneath the mystic weapon of Scythe or U.S. Agent being on the receiving end of a round house kick, were Union Jack and Lady Deathstrike.

The battle had lasted all of a minute now, but the two stood there immobile, their eyes locked one each other like the two deadly predators they were. As much as Union Jack wanted to help his team by coordinating them against the Avatars, he knew Lady Deathstrike would cut him down in an instant the second he took his eyes off her.

Lady Deathstrike herself cared little for her teammates, but there was little she could do to fight the insidious programming that corrupted her body and mind. It dictated that she fight Excalibur, though thankfully didn't completely control the how.

Union Jack moved first to break the stalemate, removing two ebony riot sticks from behind his back. They were barely in place before Lady Deathstrike slashed forward, his lethally sharp fingers ready to separate Rock's head from his shoulders.

Union Jack parried the lethal blade fingers with his night stick, and with a spark Lady Deathstrike screamed. Union Jack's sigh of relief was inaudible as he brought the night stick down across the cyborg's face with his left stick and then swung through with a swing that would impress any coach with the right. Deathstrike's head snapped back, and saw stars on the edges of her vision.

"What...on earth..."

Union Jack's smug smile was visible beneath his mask. It was a combination of pride in his handiwork and his own skill, "The nightsticks are specially made. Hollowed out with electromagnetics attuned to your neural net." Jack deliberately left out the fact he'd studied Lady Deathstrike's fighting styles for days. Combined with his specially created weapons, he held a definite edge.

"Preparation. That's a small step away from fear," Yuriko Oyama observed.

"Actually, it's a large step in the direction of kicking your arse!"

Union Jack ran forward and swung at the Samurai cyborg, who easily sprang over the attack. Union Jack was barely fast enough to cross his weapons in front of his face as she lashed out with both steel feet at his flesh and blood head. Of course, by touching the weapons Lady Deathstrike was overwhelmed by waves of agony. Dropping to the ground in a heap, Union Jack was on her in an instant. As much as his every instinct as a man and hero loathed the idea of pounding on a defenseless woman, his common sense never let him stop for a second. Fat blue sparks flew off his batons like a Fourth of July of electrical fireworks.

Deathstrike defended herself as best she could, her systems threatening to crash as each blow rained down. With desperate speed, she gripped the ground beneath her, her indestructible claws sinking into the street with ease. Then, using her superstrength to brace herself, she pivoted on her arm and lashed out with both feet, striking Jack's sternum. Union Jack's impressive and personally designed body armor prevented his chest from caving in, it couldn't stop him from being thrown back. Before he'd even struck the ground, Deathstrike shakily rose to her feet.

"Avatars, fall back!" With a single bound, Lady Deathstrike managed to clear the entire distance of the battle and landed further down the street, safely away from Union Jack, "Fall back now!"

As soon as Eshu heard that order, he knew it was time to stop screwing around. He'd been sparring with the second Lich (who was no smarter than the first) who was hacking and slashing at him like there was no tomorrow. But all good things had to come to an end, Eshu knew. Several cables of malleable, putty like flesh shot out and grabbed Lich in an inescapable hold.

"It's been fun, buddy, but this is where you get off," Eshu stated in friendly, conversational manner, "your claws are impressive, but I'm sure you Asian guys here this a lot," Eshu's left arm morphed into a steel, spiked pinchers. He pulled his fist back, and punched straight through Lich's chest out the other side like it was an overripe fruit. He popped the wet, sticky organ in between his pinchers like a grape while the body of the skeletal warrior Lich twitched as it hung limply on his massive limb, "...mine is bigger."

"Oh my God in heaven!"

Silverclaw's concentration snapped like a dry twig and she was in her knees, in human form and fought back dry heaves, wishing she'd never glanced in Eshu's direction. Scythe, his mystic sickle in hand and fully charged, couldn't complain. He raised his weapon high and took aim towards the animorph's exposed neck.

"Maria!"

Sabra turned away from Quake and fired her wrist needles towards Scythe as soon as she heard the young woman cry out. Almost instantly, Scythe was impersonating a pin cushion, his nerves and muscles utterly immobile if only for several minutes. But in doing so, Sabra had left her back exposed to Quake. The huge, gray skinned beak nosed Avatars raised his fists above his head, and slammed them down on Sabra's shoulders with a -thoom!-. Had the street not sagged underneath the sudden impact forming a crater underneath, Sabra's spine might have been shattered. As it was, her left collarbone had been broken.

"Be thankful my orders don't allow me the time to finish you!" Quake spat as he looked down at the fallen warrior before turning away to leave. Sabra dragged herself into a sitting position. She hurt like nothing else, but she'd fought the Hulk and survived, and if she had to she'd fight these monsters with nothing but her teeth! But before she could go that far, the Israel representative noticed a long shadow suddenly fall over the battle field.

"Excalibur, look out!" Cybermancer yelled from above.

U.S. Agent stopped fighting Warfist long enough to see a fifteen foot wall of water bearing down upon him. The water parted around his foe and washed John Walker, and then the rest of his teammates half way down the block like children's toys.

"Excalibur... *cough!* ...regroup!" Percival Rock ordered as he spit up water from his suddenly flooded lungs.

"Jack, I am sorry, Foundry and Old Woman distracted me," Darkstar explained as she and Cybermancer touched down.

"Don't worry about it luv, lets just get after them! Stay together and stay alert!"

Excalibur took after the fleeing Avatars at full speed, with Laynia creating a darkforce platform for the non flying members. The terrorists had already reached Westminster Bridge, and Union

Jack cursed their speed. The monsters would be half way across by the time they reached the bridge!

"Should we cut them off?" Sabra asked as she flew alongside, almost reading Rock's thoughts.

"No. They're terrorists. Their best tactic is divide and conquer," Rock answered. The second they reached the bridge, Rock knew something was wrong. The steel upon the bridge shimmered with a transparent gloss, the air held a chill while the windows of the abandoned cars were fogged up.

"Why'd they freeze the bridge?" U.S. Agent thought aloud.

"Incoming!" Eshu yelled. A fireball the size of an SUV was falling towards their position and falling fast. Union Jack, Eshu and U.S. Agent dived off the darkforce platform and rolled onto the street. The other members of Excalibur used their flight abilities to pull away while scarlet Scarab met the fireball head on. It exploded against his chest like a water balloon and doing as much damage as one to him, but the flame burned brightly enough to ignite several cars on the bridge.

"...help us...!"

"...my baby! My baby!..."

A cold shiver went down the British hero's spine the instant he heard the cries for help. Obviously, some people had chosen to hide inside their vehicles rather than flee unprotected and exposed.

"Scarab! Laynia! Get everyone off the bridge!" Union Jack roared, "Sabra, U.S. Agent! Front and center, lets get these bastards and teach them a lesson!"

Lady Deathstrike observed Excalibur racing across the bridge dispassionately. Her programming wouldn't allow anything else. Beside her stood Ancestor, Quake and Fuji, in readiness for their next attack.

"Deluge has done his part, are you three ready to do yours?" She asked in perfect English, the only insult the programming infecting her mind would allow.

"Very much so," Ancestor answered for the three.

"Foundry, continue to run interference while your teammates do their work."

The flaming Avatar smiled wickedly, "Of course."

U.S. Agent ran through a short wall of flame, his suit protecting his body from the worst of the heat. He could see the Avatars only a hundred yards off, and this short sprinting was building up his battle lust. He was certain by the time he reached the villains he'd be pumped enough to take them down by himself.

It was then that the bridge itself seemingly rolled up and pitched the once Captain America from his feet and onto the ground face first. Once down, his heart plummeted as he realized he could feel the bridge swinging. He didn't have to see Quake, Ancestor and Fuji acting in union at the end of the bridge, using their incredible strength to punish the bridge. The steel and concrete bed reacted like an oversized, thin water bed, flowing back and forth.

What followed was hardly unpredictable. The snapping of the giant steel cable sounded like the cracking of a whip only a thousand times louder while the bridge rumbled and cracked with a deafening sound. Union Jack was snatched into the air by Sabra while U.S. Agent caught a ride with Cybermancer.

"Oh man, Rock and Chapman are both gonna be pissed," muttered U.S. Agent as he watched Westminster bridge fall into the Thames River.

"I just hope Scarab and Darkstar got everyone off before they dropped the bridge!" Cybermancer countered.

"Heads up!" U.S. Agent barely brought his indestructible shield up in time to deflect a fireball that would have burned his chest like a match. The sky around Excalibur came alive with goutts of flame from Foundry, knives of ice propelled high into the air by Deluge while Scythe projected blades of energy towards the heroes and Quake clapped his hands at the heroes, producing bubbles of pressurized air that sliced through the air like an arrow.

Unprepared for such an onslaught so high in the air, Excalibur found themselves forced back. And vulnerable to even more attacks.

And all around Excalibur, media helicopters from CNN, the BBC and even Fox News watched the battle with their cameras, transmitting the heroic struggle into homes all across the United Kingdom.

Chapman watched the battle on several monitors, the feed provided by several different stations. He rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He knew something was wrong. Somehow, Excalibur and all local news media had been alerted to the Avatars long before local law enforcement. In fact, according to reports he'd just received, the local police hadn't even known the Avatars were rampaging in London until they saw it on the telly, indicating the phones had been jammed.

This meant that whoever was behind the Avatars wanted Excalibur and the media to be there. And Chapman knew that if he could figure out why, he'd be able to save as many lives as Excalibur in the field.

"Whoa!" U.S. Agent, hanging from Suzi Endo's armored hands, barely managed to raise himself over a ball of fire that was on a crash course with his little John Walker. Excalibur had been subjected to this barrage for a total of thirty seconds, and things weren't looking up.

"Okay, screw this. Throw me at those bastards!" Jack shouted.

"What, are you crazy?!"

"What, you think is sane?" Agent blocked a chunk of ice that made him swing in Suzi's grip like a child on the monkey bars, "You got some superstrength in that armor, right? Use it or drop me already!"

"Fine!" Letting her anger and frustration get the better of her for a second, Cybermancer pitched U.S. Agent at the terrorists in a strong, under hand manner.

Marine training took over instantly as a directed free fall took over. U.S. Agent tucked his arms, included the one with a shield strapped to it, to his side in an effort to decrease wind resistance, the air whistling in his ears as he fell like a bird of prey towards his enemies. By shifting his weight to the left with a shrug, he avoided a stream of flame. Nodding to the left, he avoided most of a burst of razor-sharp ice. Large and long painful cuts sliced into his arm, but he gritted his teeth, his eyes locked on his target.

John Walker fell for almost six seconds before he reached his target, the oversized smoke stack known as Foundry. During the last two seconds, he brought his shield up and held it firm with both hands and braced himself for the impact.

The crash was sharp and sudden, like getting rear ended only a dozen times worse. The crash was worthy of the best of NASCAR as Foundry was slammed backwards onto his back, his steel form screeching as it was forced back and sparks not produced naturally by his body were produced. Both U.S. Agent and Foundry were knocked senseless, though U.S. Agent had sense enough to roll off the super-hot Avatar before he was burned.

Of course, there was little he could do about the fact that he was surrounded by enemies who bored holes into head with their looks of hared.

"Eh," Agent shrugged, "at least my boots are on."

"Not today, Walker you insane bastard!"

The area exploded, energy bursts, grenades and explosive bullets turning the area into pure, confused chaos. The attack was too sudden and unpredictable for the Avatars to mount a proper defense, and they followed Deathstrike as she retreated. U.S. Agent smiled as he saw Union Jack, Cybermancer, Sabra and Eshu running towards him. The pure energy of their anger and hate was enough to drive the terrorists away from their easy prey.

"Come on Walker, we got these tossers on the run!" Jack shouted as he ran past his U.S. teammate. The former wrestler didn't waste a second.

The Avatars made it just past the world famous Big Ben before Darkstar, Scarlet Scarab and Silverclaw dropped down like avenging angels directly in their path.

Deathstrike's computer like mind evaluated her team's predicament. To one side Scarlet Scarab's hands glowed with power while Silverclaw had assumed her puma form, a bestial growl in her throat while Darkstar hovered towards the back, her hands crossed disapprovingly.

To the other, Union Jack was loading another clip into his gun, Sabra and U.S. Agent had assumed fighting stances, Eshu had spikes formed all over his body and Cybermancer's body language screamed hate.

Things did not look good at all. And Yuriko couldn't have been more relieved.

"Let's squeeze these guys like the pimple on the ass of humanity they are!" U.S. Agent snarled as he ran forward.

The two sides of Excalibur charged towards their foe with such speed and power that victory was assured. Only Darkstar held back, with orders to contain the battle and the subsequent damage. So it was quite the surprise when the Avatars faded from sight only seconds before Excalibur would have slammed down on them like the hand of God.

And so, for a moment, Excalibur stood there bewildered and enraged in the shadow of Europe's most famous clock, Big Ben. Finally, Silverclaw broke the silence.

"Is it just me, or is it too dark for this time of day?"

Scarlet Scarab, Union Jack and U.S. Agent all crooked their head upwards to observe the thick, gray skies that congealed over the city. The clouds were literally as thick as pea soup and flashes of lighting and booms of thunder could be heard in their massive belly, producing a storm cloud quite unlike anything even the most well traveled Excalibur member had ever seen.

Twin lighting bolts stabbed down from the sky and struck the base of Big Ben, only a few dozen yards away from the international superteam, who threw themselves to the ground to avoid being struck. Subsequent explosions followed almost instantly, bombs placed well beforehand now triggered by the lightning strike. The centuries old clock tower lurched forward with the loudest - crack!- most the team had ever heard, just like the saboteurs knew it would. Union Jack looked up just in time to see the face of his people's most famous monument crashing down towards him.

"Nooo!" Darkstar shot towards her team like a bullet, but even from down the block she was too far away. The debris and stone of the clock tower fell like gravel out of a dump truck onto her comrades, who were buried underneath the rubble in an instant. Instincts of self preservation kicked in automatically as smaller pieces of debris and dust rushed towards her like an avalanche.

High above in the clouds, the once human woman now known as Tsunami congratulated herself on a job well done. She'd been gathering her strength since long before the Avatars made themselves known, consuming the wind, the ambient energy, the very air around London for power. It took considerable effort, but she possessed the power of two and a half hurricanes

inside her gaseous body. And with one great mental push, she released it all towards the exposed power lines below.

Chapman's jaw hit the floor when he saw Big Ben, a landmark first introduced to him by his grandfather, fall like a house of cards upon the team he commanded. But when the screens that had been following the battle went blank, for reasons he couldn't explain to himself, Chapman dove to the ground like a soldier into a foxhole. It likely saved his life as the monitors exploded with horrendous force, turning the glass into ultra sharp projectiles traveling at unheard of speeds, killing a quarter of the staff present and maiming the rest.

And it was the same all throughout London. Tsunami had converted all her power into magical lightning that surged through the power lines like a tornado might through a sewer. A computer serving the porn needs of a middle aged man, a T.V. that conveyed information to a lovely blond haired mother of two, the laptop of a casual internet surfer, all exploded like cluster bombs, maiming their owners, and this scene repeated itself a thousand times over, both in London and whomever was unfortunate enough to be watching the battle itself. Those maimed and killed were random and indiscriminate. Most were innocent. Some were deserving, others old, most young. All random victims of cruel fate.

"No, it won't end like this, it can't end like this!" Darkstar created giant shovel after giant shovel with her power as she tore into the rubble that had fallen atop her friends and teammates were last seen. The dust hadn't even settled yet and she had already displaced several tons.

Suddenly, Darkstar noticed that the rubble was beginning to move itself. She stepped back, and a scarlet sphere of energy rose up from the corpse of the clock tower, her teammates safely inside.

Darkstar let out a sigh of relief as Scarab set his sphere down and dissipated the bubble.

"Sometimes I forget I am not the only one who can create forcefields," Commented Laynia.

The members of Excalibur broke apart somewhat to survey the damage. Already emergency vehicles had arrived alongside policemen and military personal. Excalibur slowly drifted apart to see what they could do to help, although Union Jack could feel their eyes upon him as he stood there with quacking fists.

Only U.S. Agent with his famous (lack of) tact was willing to approach.

"Rock..."

"I don't want to hear it," Union Jack said sharply, "they are going to pay, John. If I have to fight the devil himself...I will make them pay."

Silverclaw and Sabra waded through the lines of emergency workers aimlessly. Triage centers had been set up in the middle of the street as the wounded poured onto the street. Both women knew their powers were of little use, but could do little else. Tsunami had unwittingly destroyed their communication lines to Avalon, leaving them stranded in London for the moment. Maria

kept her eyes and ears open however in the off chance that someone might need them. It was all she could do to prevent herself from breaking down in the face such tragedy.

"Maria?"

Maria de Guadalupe Santiago's skipped a beat when she heard that voice. Her head and eyes darted around frantically until she realized the person she was looking for was five feet directly behind her.

"Jessica!"

Maria threw her arms around the five foot eight, blond, middle class born twenty something college student that easily held the title of 'best friend'. Jessica was dressed accordingly for the weather, but Sabra noted several cuts and tears in the clothes as well as slight burns.

"Man, I leave New York and the craziness...Maria, you're crying, chill out!" Jessica said, looking at her friend in an odd manner, "I'm fine! Besides, I think we should be more worried about you! I saw on the TV how you and Excalibur were in the thick of it! I mean, wow!"

"Did something happen to the television while you were watching it?" Sabra asked carefully. Up until now, Maria had completely forgotten she was standing there.

"Yeah. I was watching the footage of the battle at a local when a T.V. literally blew up in my face!" Jessica answered, "I feel fine, but I was lucky the thing didn't kill me!"

"Indeed," Sabra answered in a remorseful tone, "Silverclaw, come with me. We need to search for additional victims from the sky."

Maria looked at Sabra curiously. After all, if all the victims were injured while inside their homes, what good would looking for them from the sky do? Then Maria heard a thump, followed by Sabra cursing under her breath.

"Jessica?"

Jessica was lying face down in the street, utterly still.

"Jessica!"

Maria checked her friend's neck for a pulse.

"Oh God, Jessica! Medic!" shrieked Silverclaw so loud her throat hurt. Two emergency workers began to sprint to the young women's side, but were stopped short by Sabra's raised arms.

"She is beyond help. See to someone else."

"Sabra, what are you doing!?" Maria demanded, "Jessica needs help!"

"You're not a bloody doctor, let us help!" One of the emergency workers protested.

"According to information she gave me only moments before, it's the Butterfly Effect."

The emergency workers understood instantly, and turned and left.

"Where re you going, come back!" Maria begged, still standing over her friend's body.

"Maria, there's nothing they can do..."

"You don't know that you cold hearted bitch!" Silverclaw was in her puma form instantaneously. Silverclaw leapt towards Sabra with dangerous intent, but Sabra easily grabbed the younger woman by her wrists and held her firm. Using instead the claws on her feet, Silverclaw scratched at Sabra like a wildcat, but to no effect, "Let me go! Let them help her, please!"

"It's called the Butterfly Effect," Sabra began, "it's where the force of an explosion travels through a person's body. It causes no visible, but ruptures internal organs. Lungs, heart, kidneys...there is no way to save her."

"No...no..." Maria only stopped struggling for the briefest second, "...no... you're lying! You have to be...!"

"You know I would never lie to you, Maria. I know it when I see it because..." Sabra swallowed hard, "it's exactly what happened to my son."

The makeshift walls Maria erected around her grief came tumbling down. Her strength lost, she returned to human form and cry into the chest of the only person who could understand her pain.

"It's not fair, it's just not fair..." Was all she could say.

And high in the air hovered Scarlet Scarab like a guardian Angel over the two women. His eyes scanned the historical city, taking note of the many columns of smoke wafting into the air. Each one likely indicating another innocent person harmed. While Scarab held no special love for the British people, but this was something he would never wish upon them. And it chilled his heart to think what these beats planned to do next.

Next Issue: Once again, the Avatars lay siege to a famous city. Only this time, they attack the very foundations of the Free World! Why does this bring a smile to Joey Chapman's face?

Central Park, New York

Franklin Keep ushered his family into the small little alcove he'd discovered some during his morning constitution. It was as secluded as you could find in Central Park, allowing in enough sun while providing the right amount of shade and a perfect view of the Empire State Building.

This was what it was all about, Keep thought to himself as he ushered his family towards the perfect spot for a picnic. Keep had served in the United States army for three years, both in Afghanistan and Iraq. He'd served his country with pride and distinction and was now ready to settle into his reward of raising his family in a country made just a little bit safer by his efforts in the battle field.

His Beautiful Joan, High School sweetheart all four years, laid out the blanket while his twin children, Ann and Michael, unfurled their kite. Franklin was looking forward to settling into the perfect mundanely of every day life.

However, instincts learned on the battle field raged as he felt a cool breeze on the back of his neck. The warm spring day was close to eighty five degrees, yet the sudden wind chilled him to the marrow. Matters weren't helped any when he looked over his shoulder, and not four yards away saw the international terrorists known as the Avatars of the Mandarin.

Franklin was yelling orders back at his family even as he was rushing towards the terrorists. His soldier mind recognized he was gifted with something so many victims of terrorism wanted the world over, but rarely received. A chance to fight back. His family was of course a military family, and they followed his orders without hesitation.

Franklin leapt towards the madmen and fell among them. Men of such power were more surprised than anything else, but that didn't last long. The former soldier kicked and flailed, his only desire to obscure these monsters for as long as possible. Within seconds, however, blood, entrails and limbs were flying, all belonging to one person. But he didn't care. The last thought that went through Franklin's Keep mind was one of happiness amid the carnage. If he couldn't be a father to his children and a doting grandfather to theirs, at least he could be a hero and example instead.

Delayed only by moments, the Avatars continued their march into New York, wearing the blood and entrails of their first victim. But most certainly not their last.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 8

"Terror of the Rising Sun"

Part Four: The Gold of New York

by David Ingram

"Lets go, lets go, lets go!" Union Jack, Silverclaw, Sabra and Cybermancer tore down the hall the instant they received the summons. There wasn't anyone in Excalibur who wasn't shocked to learn that the Avatars had actually chosen to attack New York, despite the well known fact that it was swarming with heroes, from the Avengers, to New Warriors to Spider-Man. However, no one could fault their timing. Chapman kept a constant eye on all major superhuman teams on the East Coast, and currently all were either on a mission or occupied. Everyone knew that was no coincidence.

The three turned a finally corner and were outside, where the remainder of their teammates plus Chapman were waiting. Given that the attack was so close, using the HERMES teleporter would have wasted more time than it saved. Darkstar had already created an ebony platform for the non-flyers.

"Orders?" Rock asked, knowing Chapman had to be there for a reason.

"Contain but under no bloody conditions are you to disable, cripple or defeat these blighters," Chapman ordered, "longer we hold them in one place, better the chance we have of using all that tech in the air to trace them back to their base."

"Understood."

As Excalibur shot away towards Central Park, Joey Chapman was already on the phone with the United States United Nations Security Council member. Through him, Chapman hoped to be able to realign at least one spy satellite over America, though he was under no illusions how difficult moving even only one would be.

So thank God he had a few back-up plans cooking.

Quake, every bit as sadistic as his predecessor, loomed over his latest victim like a death shroud, drinking in the young woman's terror. Raising his fists above his head, he was about to turn the jogger into just another statistic when he heard a loud roaring noise.

Quake looked up just in time for three missiles the size of pencils to explode across his chest. It was painful, but Quake possessed quite a bit of power, and only staggered backwards a few feet.

That was more than enough for the red and gold armored hero known as Rocket Racer. Riding his jet powered skate board; Robert Farrell scooped up the young woman and blasted away. It only took a handful of seconds before he was a safe enough distance away to put the young woman down.

"Run!" He barked, to which he received no argument. The gold and red armored hero only wished he could do the same. But somehow, somehow, he was raised better than that. Rocket Racer spun his board around and charged back into the fray, gets blasting.

The skeletal Avatar titled Lich was about to eviscerate an elderly when he felt a wet, sticky substance splatter across his back.

"Ah-ah!" the amazing Spider-Man yanked the villain backwards away from his prey and into a nearby scrub, "that isn't how tourists are supposed to act. Not until after your first cab ride!"

Lich said nothing as he sliced through the thick webbing like it was wet damp tissue paper. On his feet in seconds, Lich lunged at the wall crawler, weapons first.

Union Jack felt a mixture of relief and frustration as Excalibur reached the combat zone. New York was renowned for its collection of heroes on any given day, and today was no exception. Not only had Spider-Man and Rocket Racer engaged the Avatars, but so had Power Man and Iron Fist, the master thief Black Cat, along with a speeding young man in a yellow and blue lightning bolt uniform.

"You have your orders Excalibur," Union Jack said evenly, "Suzi, hang back a moment, eh?"

"What do you want?" Suzi snapped sharply, reminding Rock of just how much the team scientist loathed these monsters.

"I don't want you in the battle. Get high and start scanning. Every attack thus far has been a part of a larger plan, and I don't intend to wait until the bodies start hitting the ground to find out what it is!"

Cybermancer let out an inarticulate huff of anger before shooting into the sky and began hovering there. Setting her defenses to automatic, she began to scan as far and wide as her armor allowed. As much as she wanted her pound of flesh, she wouldn't allow these monsters one more victim if she could help it.

Luis Thompson, the super-speed hero to be called Thunderbolt, swallowed hard as he ran circles around the Avatar aptly named Scythe. He should be figuring out how to pay for college, not fighting some terrorist attack in Central Park! Having little idea what to do and even less confidence, the only tactic that Thunderbolt thought he could successfully do was to contain this monster. If he got too close, the man might slice him in half with a lucky swing. But thankfully, Scythe held back as well, respectful of the fact that his foe's speed gave him an advantage, even if the young man didn't have the confidence to use it.

Both hero and villain were locked in an odd stalemate...until an elongated foot stretched out of nowhere, tripping up Thunderbolt and sent him tumbling head over heels some thirty feet away.

"Oops," said Eshu with an uncaring shrug, "shoulda watched where I was goin', kid!"

Luke Cage unleashed an uppercut that would have done the Thing proud. The Avatar known as Quake was thrown a good twelve feet before returning to Mother Earth. His knuckles stung with pain and felt half broken, but that was nothing new. Most boxers broke their hands in the ring, after all. But all Luke felt was nature telling him he'd just scored a perfect shot.

There was a sound not unlike several punches landing all at once, and then the Avatar with the blazing fists known as Warfist followed his own flight path towards Quake.

"Ain't nothin' like bein' the real thing, is it, Danny?"

"Not at all," Daniel Rand, better known as the martial artist superhero Iron Fist answered simply.

The dynamic duo moved in to finish off their foes but were startled when Silverclaw, a once time ally, landed directly in their path.

"Danny! Luke! Umm...how have you guys been?"

Both heroes looked at Silverclaw like she'd grown another head. For a short time, the three of them had worked together in a loosely formed Heroes for Hire business. That had broken apart in record speed, but not so quickly that the two didn't get a good feel for Lupe's personality. And landing directly between them and their foes was terribly out of character for the bright college freshman.

"Maria, explain," Iron Fist said sharply, his eyes locked on the Avatars who were recovering as they spoke. This was no time for pleasantries.

"Look, this sounds crazy..." Lupe lowered her voice so that only Iron Fist and Cage could hear her, "...but my team needs to you guys not to beat Avatars. It's just complicated, so trust me, kay?"

"You guys want time try to get a lock on them wit' all the sensors flyin' in the sky," Cage summarized, "got it."

Only Maria looked surprised at Cage's deduction.

"I only act like a thug," Cage winked, "okay girl, we'll play it your way. Hope you guys know what you're doin'."

Maria assumed her bird form, silver feathers adorning her arms, "Yeah, me too!"

Federal Reserve Bank, Wall Street

Simon Bradley lounged back in his leather recliner, enjoying a day as restful as one could be while still away. Simon worked the reception desk for five years, and despite the fact that the building was perhaps one of the most important buildings in the world, things were always slow. It took some effort to get past the first ring of security around the building, and those who made it past them always knew where they were going. Simon shared the shift with five other men, all armed with M-16s they all hoped to never use, so Simon felt justified in kicking back just a little.

He shot up like a bullet when he saw a tall, slender woman rush into the lobby. She was wearing a high priced business suit, like she worked in a well-heeled office somewhere, only it was torn

and ripped, with blood splattered over some parts of it. The woman was rambling in some foreign language (they all sounded the same to Simon) as she hobbled in.

Surprisingly, Simon was the first to act. He always considered himself a gentleman at heart.

"Chris! Call the cops!" He shouted as he rushed to the woman's side.

"Ma'am, are you alright? Were you attacked?" Simon placed his hands on the mystery woman's shoulders as gently as possible, hoping to determine what had occurred. The Asian woman shrunk to the ground like a cowed dog accepting its fate, "Ma'am, I can't understand you. Can't you speak English, what are you saying?"

"I'm begging all who are Holy, to please forgive me," she whispered.

Simon never heard Chris yell to him that the phones weren't working. A silver blade of indestructible composition sundered his heart. He felt nothing. The only reward Lady Deathstrike could give him for his selflessness.

Within the span of fifty seconds, there were five blood splatters scattered across the marble floor of the lobby, and the cyborg known as Lady Deathstrike was left unopposed.

A shudder went through her body as she began to realize that the greatest weapon in the United State's vast arsenal would soon lay exposed for her master to take.

Union Jack never felt more useless as anxiety pooled in his gut. This was too easy by far. In fact, Excalibur and the various other heroes of New York were having such an easy holding the Avatars at bay that Union Jack was left with little more to do than stand around uselessly.

But as for the Avatars themselves, as hard as they fought, the buggers weren't fighting with any real degree of urgency, and that was disturbing to Union Jack's tactical mind. Just as he knew the earth rotated around the sun, he knew these bastards were waiting for something. And he had to find out what. What could be so important as to attack New York...?

It dawned on him almost instantly.

"Suzi!" He yelled over the communicator, "I need you down here now!"

"What now, Rock?" the armored heroine demanded as she set down in front of her team leader, "my scanners haven't found anything, anymore bright ideas?"

Rock told her his 'bright idea'.

"You're crazy, that's...that's impossible!" She said disbelievingly.

"Which is part and parcel with magic, no?"

Cybermancer silently nodded, and put her arm underneath Rock's. Activating her boot-jets, the two soared into the air. Cybermancer quietly asked her onboard computer, with a real time link to several different databases, for some very specific information.

"Are you sure about this, Rock?"

"As much as I can be, luv." he answered as they soared through the air towards New York's financial district, "Think about it, what gives the United States' it's most influence and power in the world? It's not just their military, it's..."

"Their economy." Suzi finished.

"Economics can be a gun," Union Jack explained, "Soviet Union found that out."

The rest of the trip through New York's skyline was quite. Once the duo reached the Federal Reserve Building, they saw dead bodies strewn about and several cop cars smashed together in a law enforcement pileup.

"Landlines are dead," Cybermancer stated as they landed, "And I just scanned police frequencies. Three different terrorist threats were called twenty minutes ago. I think we're on our own."

The two began trekking towards the entrance. Rock upholstered his pistol, holding it in front of him as he scanned the area with his eyes, "Could have told you that, luv."

"You don't even seem surprised that these monsters are always one step ahead of us."

Union Jack snorted, "Of course they are. They're the ones acting first. No matter how well trained, smart or powerful, you can't beat a basic law of physics. Action is faster than reaction."

Cybermancer felt a shudder as they entered the lobby, and not just because of the dead bodies. Union Jack took note, but otherwise gave them no mind. Once they reached the elevator, Suzi asked,

"Up or down?"

"Up." Rock answered.

"Up?"

"There's over two hundred billion dollars worth of gold beneath us," Jack explained, "in a vault the size of an American football field. The thing's so bleedin' heavy its set on New York's bedrock. Even the Hulk would have a tough time pressing all that weight."

"So?"

"So, unless you have a bloody army to move it, you have to teleport it somehow." Union Jack stated, "and to do that, you have to be able to get a single into the building. And the extra normal defense systems are on the fourth floor."

Suzi gripped the elevator doors and pushed them apart with ease. Grabbing Jack's hand, they shot up towards the fourth floor.

"How many people know the exact security layout of the building?" Cybermancer asked, "can't imagine it's something the U.S. wants to be too well known."

"Being a U.S. ally has its advantages," Rock smiled.

Suzi forced the door open to the fourth floor, and as they opened the two heroes could see smoke billowing down the hall and the crackles of a distant fire. It didn't take a genius (which they both were) to realize what had happened.

"Back down?"

"Down. You first."

"You're such a gentlemen, Rock."

Central Park

Scarlet Scarab motioned towards the smoldering fire Avatar known as Foundry with his hands, and crimson energy flooded outwards to be met with a magical inferno that spewed from the Golden Terrorist's eyes.

"Arab Dog! I'll burn the flesh from your skin!" Foundry snarled.

"You can try," Was all Scarab could get past his clenched teeth. These maniacs offended him as an educated, religious and worldly man. Scarlet Scarab always found battling ignorance to be the most infuriating. It wasn't a force that he could touch or stop in the field of battle, and whenever it got this far he found, it was self-sustaining. Stalemated for a second, Scarab slowly willed his talisman to release more energy.

The two mystic energies met in the middle, and swirled together like pea-soup. A sphere of energy appeared, and the more energy the Middle Eastern hero released, the closer that sphere of congealed magics came to his foe. Foundry began pouring more and more energy out through his eyes desperately, but for every ounce of energy he released, Scarab countered with twice as much. For all his boasting, the golden inferno couldn't hope to match. His power faltered for a second, and the sphere of mixed magics exploded in his face with a blinding flash of light and power. The behemoth was thrown through the air where he crashed at the edge of Central Park's pond. Surprisingly, his landing created virtually no steam, his internal furnace almost spent.

"Where are your boasts now, Golden One?"

Foundry noticed his hand becoming transparent and felt the pride of victory swell in his chest, "I have no need of them, dog, for we have already won!"

The elevator doors to the Vault level exploded outwards, the heavy metal doors now crooked and warped as they fell away.

"She's been here," Cybermancer breathed, "my sensors are picking up the body heat of a cyborg."

"Lovely." Muttered Rock. He kept his sidearm up at attention, but he knew it was useless.

The two members of Excalibur carefully made their way down the corridor leading to the main vault entrance, finding only death. Guards, limbs and internal organs were scattered about carelessly. When Union Jack saw the open vault door, he already knew what lay ahead.

The area was as large as a football field. The ceiling was sixteen feet tall. It should have been filled with billions and billions of dollars worth of gold bars. All of which propped up the world's economy, ensuring that the trains ran on time, banks had money to distribute in the morning and when all was said and done, acted as the glue of the global economy. An invisible yet ever present force that held society together on many levels.

Instead, it was virtually empty. Where there should have been hundreds of bars of gold, there was nothing but air. Only two massive piles of gold remained, and when Union Jack read who they belonged to, he felt a lump form in his throat.

"Suzi, I need a secure line to Chapman, now," Rock spoke so softly Cybermancer almost couldn't hear him, but she already anticipated his request. With a few adjustments of her communications systems routed through several pre arranged stations, and Union Jack's communicator was linked to Chapman's cell phone.

"Chapman here."

"Chapman, Rock. We have a problem..."

"All the gold in the Federal Reserve except the United States and Israel's was stolen." Chapman stated matter of factly.

"...how could you know that?"

"Because it just went out over CNN, the BBC and every other major new outlet just reported it," answered Chapman. He slapped his phone closed, and began listening to the reporter who looked pathetically flustered by the turn of events. He doubted she ever expected to be reporting on the collapse of the global economy, and in such an odd fashion.

"...repeating our top story, we have just received this video tape that reports to be from the terrorists who attacked Paris, London and just minutes ago New York in what they call 'a defense of Eastern Values'. We cannot at this time verify the truthfulness of the statements contained within the videotape, but if it's indeed true, the implications could be devastating. Here is the tape again."

The screen cut away to a darkened image of a man speaking into a camera. It was impossible to make out anything else beside the figure's gender.

"To all those who see this, Greetings," the man began calmly, "my name is unimportant. For too long, the rich culture that birthed me has been chipped away, little by little. For too long our majesty has been polluted, diluted and destroyed by outsiders without so much as a second thought about the consequences of their actions as disease, human trafficking and drugs have run rampant. I can tolerate this no longer. My attacks upon Paris, London and New York are merely delayed acts of cultural self defense, and I will not stop there until I have brought low the arrogant nations that have scarred my countrymen. To this end, I have removed all the gold that lay in deposit in New York, the gold that sustains the monstrosity known as the global economy. However, I am not a monster. I will return every last bar of gold if the president of the United States pays me ten million dollars in a bank account I will provide when he is ready. If he is unwilling...I will give every last bar of gold to those who's ideas of nonconformity mirror my own. That is all, thank you for your time."

Chapman muted the television rather than listen to the commentary that would doubtlessly be repeated a million times over before the hour was done. His assistant, Delphi, looked more than a little confused.

"Ten million dollars for over two hundred billion? That's insanity," she remarked.

"The yanks have a stupid and smart policy," Chapman sighed, "Zero tolerance. No negotiation with terrorists no matter what and it looks ready to bite them in the arse. You have anything to report?"

"No, sir. The Americans weren't willing to move their satellites in time," Delphi stated, "we weren't able to trace them that way, sir."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Sir, didn't you hear me?"

"Aye?"

"Then why are you still smiling like that?"

Next issue: Why indeed! What does Chapman have up his sleeve? Excalibur is placed under lockdown as they ready for their final battle against the Avatars as political tensions mount! Reserves are brought in, and a hero returns for the final showdown as another is laid low. But do

the Avatars have one final weapon that will make all of Excalibur's preparation for naught? Find out next issue!

United Nations General Assembly

"How dare you refuse us! You cowardly hypocritical xenophobia war mongering fools didn't hesitate to arm terrorists when a handful of hostages were at stake!"

If that was the polite translation, the American representative to the United Nations wondered, if only for a moment, what the Indonesian Representative had really said. Not less than four hours ago, all the gold within the Federal Reserve had been stolen by Asian national terrorists with the exception of the United States and Israel. The head of the terrorists had obscenely offered to sell the gold back at the price of a few million dollars, but the majority of the administration saw that was utterly unacceptable. To bow before a terrorist on the world stage would be unthinkable from their perspective.

Of course, the hardliners in the administration weren't the ones who faced their local economies falling part and fearful citizens whose fear quickly changed to anger. Already there were riots in every corner of the world. Tensions in the Middle East skyrocketed and any and all attempts to broker any type of temporary agreement to broke down into petty posturing. The banking institutions were looking towards the local governments for answers. The local government was looking towards the national government for guidance and the national government was looking towards the United Nations for a solution that didn't exist. It was gridlock of international proportions.

Joey Chapman watched the American Representative defend himself to his fellow delegates for the hundredth time, literally. He'd given his assessment of the terrorist and events leading up to the gold being stolen. Luckily, no one dwelled on his orders to Excalibur to hold back when engaging the Avatars. No, that would have wasted precious time bickering and blaming the United States.

Still, Chapman wished he could have told the truth. He knew exactly where the terrorists were. Plans were already in motion to ensure they wouldn't slip away like they had every time before. But if he revealed this information too soon, it'd tip his hands and the Avatars would be gone. Chapman knew this for a fact.

Chapman signaled for Avalon Headquarters to teleport him back to base. The director of Excalibur had the perfect plan to save the day.

The United Nations just had to survive long enough to implement it.

EXCALIBUR

Vol. 2, # 9

"Terror of the Rising Sun"

Part Five: The Raging Calm Before The Storm

by David Ingram

"Alright gits, pay attention," Chapman took a drag of his cigarette and slowly exhaled. He couldn't remember exactly when he started the habit, but he was thankful for it now, "Excalibur is officially on lockdown. From here on out all communications are strictly dog and pony crap."

"Does this mean no prank calls?" asked Eshu. He and the rest of Excalibur, in addition to reservists of Le Peregrine and Spitfire, sat impatiently around the main conference table. With the rise in tensions following the theft at the Federal Reserve, each and every one of them felt a large amount of pressure from their respective governments to do something, anything to resolve the situation. Some, like Le Peregrine and Union Jack, wanted vengeance against the Avatars. And since they didn't know where these monsters were based, no one had the patience to just sit around and be lectured by some asshole like Chapman. No one expected his next line, though perhaps they should have by now.

"Because I know exactly where the Avatars are."

Chapman was met with silent expressions of shock and awe.

"I recognized the pattern of their attacks," Chapman explained, "In each of their attacks; they took something that was highly valued by that society. In France, they took the people. In England, they struck out at our history..."

"Killed," Le Peregrine growled. The French hero was trembling with outrage, "they killed. They 'took' no one."

"Right, sorry mate," Chapman said apathetically, "and in America I thought they'd strike out at the finical institutions. I created and implemented several secret contingencies, one of which was placing specially designed global tracking devises."

"So what the hell are we waiting for?" Demanded Silverclaw, "Let's go kick their asses!"

"No one's going anywhere for at least eight hours," Chapman stated firmly, "I'm not going to chance these blighters slipping through our hands. As we speak Excalibur agents are littering the local area with teleporter scramblers while others gather information. We're doing this slow, careful," Chapman blew out a ring of smoke, "and final."

"Which I suppose means find some busy work until go time, right?" stated U.S. Agent.

"Correct. I'll summon you when we're ready. It'll be at least eight hours though, so get some rest, train, whatever," Chapman ordered, "Dismissed."

Excalibur filed out of the conference room, satisfied but anxious. They all wanted a piece of the Avatars, but at least for now were content to know that they had an edge over their slippery foes.

Union Jack walked a little slower than the rest, for there was someone he wanted...no, needed to talk to.

Jacqueline Falsworth, otherwise known as the Legendary World War 2 hero called Spitfire, who dabbled behind the rest, looking at Chapman with a painful longing before leaving. Once the rest of Excalibur was down the hall, Rock moved to the former Invader's side

"Ms. Falsworth, I need to, I mean, I've been meaning to..." Union Jack fumbled for the right words that said 'I want to let you know I'm doing everything I can to honor your family' without the screaming unspoken implication of 'I'm a whiney git looking for your approval'.

"I've been meaning to ask you a question, young man," Spitfire interrupted.

"Yes?"

Spitfire spun on her heel so that she was face to face with Rock, "Just who do you think you are, dressing up in that costume?"

"Excuse me? I'm Union Jack!" the leader of Excalibur answered, sounding angrier and more defensive than he was. He'd heard plenty about how he was unfit to uphold the legacy of Union Jack, a legacy he'd felt he'd honored a hundred times over.

"I think not," Spitfire snapped, "To wit, I grew up with a Union Jack. I knew a Union Jack. A Union Jack was a friend of mine. You sir, are no Union Jack."

Spitfire snorted, turned her nose upwards, and was gone in a blur before Rock could even finish digesting what she'd said.

Rock stood motionless in shock, digesting what he'd just been told by one of the most legendary heroes of his country. The flaring of a match snapped him out of his ruminations.

"Now, you can either believe a woman who's donated quarter of her family's wealth to charity is being a snobby bitch," Chapman pressed his match to the cigarette and took a drag, "or that she sees something you don't. Care for a hint?"

"Piss off."

Medical Bay

"...and it seems that Chapman's done it again," Darkstar explained, "with any luck, we'll be able to find the Avatars and finish them once and for all."

There was no response to her statements, which was hardly surprising. Darkstar sat with her legs crossed next to the metal slab that doubled as a medical bed as it pumped solar energy into the body of Excalibur's most powerful member, Heliios. Heliios was beaten into a coma during Excalibur's first battle with the Avatars, learning first hand just how vulnerable he was to magic. It was a blow to Excalibur's confidence that they'd yet to recover from, even now.

But Darkstar felt it more sharply than the others. She was there when Hellios went down and felt guilty that even considering her status as one of the team's powerhouses. She was there, and she could have helped, but didn't. But Laynia was Russian. If she couldn't save Hellios now, she'd avenge him unto her dying breath. She promised that to her friend, and left to rest.

The medical bay was all but deserted when she left. With no casualties outside Hellios, whom they really couldn't help, the doctors were in a conference room down the hall, reviewing emergency procedures for the coming battle. As such, no one saw Hellios' mighty fists clench, and then release.

"Violent riots have engulfed several Asian countries as fears worsen about the long term effects of..."

click

"Communist parties and Maoist rebels all over the world have stepped up attacks, viewing the theft as proof of..."

click

"...And then I said to him..."

Eshu tossed the remote control aside and sighed, "Finally!"

The problems of the world weren't his, as he saw it. His only concern rested inside the numerous refugee camps created when the United Nations handed Magneto blanket control of Genosha. His world in many ways couldn't get smaller, so what did he care if the larger one burned? They made this bed, after all. Win lose or draw, so long as he got what he wanted, the mutant shape shifter was happy.

Le Peregrine accessed the situation. He was outnumbered with at least a dozen semi-automatic aimed at his person. The gunmen were supported by an equal number of heavy set thugs with heavy jagged blades that were too big to be called knives but too crude to be called machetes.

The French hero wasted no time in going to work. With practiced ease, he flew over a hail of gunfire and landed in the center of the mob with no hesitation. The armed criminals hesitated for a split second, afraid of hitting their teammates. That split second was like an hour to a man of Le Peregrine's skill.

Three feather like blades embedded themselves in one man's throat, another's eye and deep into the brainpan of the final man. The superhero and part time writer was a blur of motion, landing precise blows that fractured ribs, snapped wrists and crushed throats. As he smashed the throat of one man, Le Peregrine removed a grenade from his belt and threw it over his shoulder thoughtlessly. The following explosion engulfed two gunmen who'd just drawn a bead on the flying hero.

Watching from the safety of the monitoring room, Suzi Endo watched with awe as Le Peregrine made hash of a program that Union Jack had just customized for himself. The rage that burned within him made Le Peregrine more effective Suzi observed, and crueler than he was known to be. He crippled where he could disable. Killed carelessly.

Watching the French hero, Suzi felt like she was watching herself at times. She'd let the Avatars drag her down to their level, becoming every bit as blood thirsty as they were. Was that any way to honor her countrymen, just becoming a mirror opposite of their enemy?

"You need to think about this carefully," Sabra flicked several switches from her seat in the secondary training room. Chapman's maniacal preparations mandated a second room for training, and so while Le Peregrine occupied one room, Sabra could use the second to train one of the least experienced members of Excalibur, "...because I will not go easy on you, young lady. No one learns that way."

"I got it the first three times," Silverclaw sighed.

"Good."

A row of hoops sixteen feet high shot out from the floor in a long, winding row.

"This is a joke, right?"

"Do I look like a woman who jokes?"

Silverclaw knew better than to answer that question. With a thought, she assumed her Puma form, her legs morphing like that of the hind legs of a cat and her hands became razor sharp claws. Lupe crouched, and sprang into the air with all the power her hind legs could give her. At the apex of her leap, the South American heroine commanded her body to assume that of a human/cockatoo hybrid form. Her mouth elongated into a beak, and her bones became hollow as feathers shot out from underneath her arms. Within the blink of an eye, Silverclaw was airborne, flying through the hoops with ease. Some of the hoops dipped and rose unexpectedly, but that was no challenge for the young demi-goddess.

"Good," Sabra remarked over the inter-comm. The Israeli depressed a big red button, "but let's see how you deal with a real challenge."

Silverclaw nearly had a heart attack when the hoop eight feet behind her caught fire. With an unladylike remark in her native tongue, the jungle heroine beat her wings faster and faster to outdistance the hoops as they became engulfed in flames. Maria's heart was impersonating a jackhammer, but she'd be damned if broke under the pressure. The flames were just another obstacle to overcome, something she could do with ease if she applied herself.

And for a minute or two, Lupe was successful. Up until a wall seemed to descend from nowhere, directly in her flight path and absolutely nowhere to dodge.

"Ugh! No!" Silverclaw hit the 'wall' at full speed, but thankfully, it was in fact as soft as a pillow. Her concentration broken, Maria fell to the floor where a large cushion was awaiting her.

"Not bad," Sabra congratulated as she strode into the training room, towel in hand, "not bad at all. However, you should have changed into your anaconda form when confronted with the wall. Snakes haven't bones to break. You'll need to instinctively learn the abilities of your animal forms better."

"You make it sound so easy," Silverclaw moaned as she took the towel and wiped the sweat from her face.

"Nothing about combat is easy. Still, you should take pride in your performance," Sabra motioned for Silverclaw to follow her, "when I first received my flight cloak, my superiors came me the exact same test. They explained that, despite my great strength, I needed exercises in precise application of force."

"How'd you do?"

Sabra smirked, "I tore the hoops from the floor and told my superiors it was an exercise in lateral thinking. They didn't try it again."

Silverclaw snickered softly. Sabra was a lot cooler than Maria had first figured. Tough but not butch, smart but not brainy and more than willing to make the young woman the hero she wanted to be without making her feel like some brain dead idiot.

The two women had just passed Silverclaw's room when the intercom blared, "Attention Excalibur agents. Report to Briefing Room 8 for mission planning."

"Finally!" Maria shouted, "we're going to get those Avatar bastards in their own home for a change! Be a relief to get all that pressure off Israel too, right?"

Sabra said nothing for a moment, and Silverclaw worried for a second if she erred. When the Avatars stole virtually all the gold in the Federal Reserve, they left only two nations with their deposits. The United States...and Israel. The Arab media had a field day with that, as did more than a few European nations that were fond criticizing the Jewish nation.

"My country withstands worldwide pressure every day," Sabra smiled, "I'll make sure to give the Avatars some broken bones on your behalf."

"Wha..." Maria's words trailed off as her legs became like rubber and her body refused to answer her commands. She fell backwards into Sabra's waiting arms.

"You are a young woman with an enormous amount of potential," Sabra lifted her younger heroine into her arms and opened the door to her room, "and I won't see that potential cut down before you have had a chance to reach it. You're not ready, not yet."

Sabra gently set Silverclaw down in her bed and pulled the covers over her, "The effects should wear off in several hours, but you won't be combat ready for several hours afterwards."

"You...suck..."Lupe managed to slur, which only made Sabra smile.

"That's how I know what I'm doing is right."

"Our information places the Avatars in a large estate on the edges of Mandipoor, which as we all know is under SHIELD control," Chapman explained to the gathered heroes. He noted Sabra entering the briefing alone (and late, odd for her) and paused long enough for her to pick up a manila folder marked with her name, which basically was a printed version of the briefing.

"There's no indication that the Mandarin is involved, but as of yet we don't know who the mastermind behind the Avatars is," Chapman continued, "the estate itself isn't booby trapped on the outside, but heavy albeit un-activated defenses were noted. I'd recommend against assaulting the main house until you've subdued the Avatars. Lastly, some type of secret weapon has been detected with directional mikes. We don't know what it is and can't wait to find out either, so tread carefully. Any final questions?"

Sabra raised her hand respectfully.

"Yes?"

"The level of detail of this report indicates expert infiltration, but no one on Excalibur nor the soldier support division that we were given possess the necessary skills to collect this information in such a short amount of time," Sabra explained, "so where did we get it? X-Force?"

There were a few hushed chuckles, Chapman's rivalry (at least that's what the members of Excalibur preferred to think of it as) with X-Force was well known, as was the stick up Chapman's ass. As such, no one paid much attention to his answer of 'I just did', save Union Jack and Sabra. Both knew the second they read the report that there was more to it than Chapman was telling. Spooks were naturally hard to fool.

"Where's Silverclaw?" Chapman demanded sharply, "as I understand it, she was training with you."

Sabra mentally noted the swift change of subject but said nothing. Instead, she smoothly answered, "One of my needles misfired. I'm afraid that she won't be able to join us."

"Scarab, go find Silverclaw and make sure she isn't hiding in a broom closet," Chapman snapped, "then join us in the HERMES teleporter room."

The Egyptian hero glared at Chapman, glanced towards Sabra, and left without a word.

Scarlet Scarab didn't bother knocking as he heard a long string of Spanish profanities coming from Silverclaw's room. He entered to see the young woman changing from animal form to animal form.

"Scarab, you wouldn't believe what Sabra did to me!" Silverclaw huffed as she alternated forms, "she hit me with one of her freakin' darts! I am so gonna kill her...or just yell at her."

"Are you alright?" Scarab asked with obvious concern.

"Yeah, I think I can work the stuff out of my system if I keep 'shifting," Maria answered.

"Israelis," Scarab sighed as he took Maria's hand. Maria braced herself mentally for some anti-Israel monologue and was already in the process of rolling her eyes when she felt the familiar feeling of strength fleeing her limbs. By the time she realized the Arabian hero was draining her energy, she was already unconscious, "it used to be when they did something under handed, they did it right."

Hermes Teleporter Room

Chapman gritted his teeth as he saw Scarlet Scarab return alone. One less warm body tipped the odds in their foe's favor, no matter how small.

Chapman tried to think of some inspirational words, but came up with "I presume everyone's ready to kick some arse?"

"Oh yes..." A voice boomed, brimming with confidence and strength, "...some of us have some catching up to do."

Hellios stood in the doorway, his thick, sinewy arms crossed across his broad chest. The solar powered hero almost glowed with strength and power as his cape fluttered behind him. His aura of strength was instantly infectious.

"Well, hell yeah!" U.S. Agent cheered as he pumped his fist in the air.

The members of Excalibur greeted Hellios like a star linebacker, slapping his back and shaking his hand even though they knew this man so well. The might super soldier's return was taken as a good omen by all, even the cynical Eshu.

The celebration quickly died down in action, but not spirit and the HERMES teleporter went to work moments later.

Yuriko Oyama bowed in prayer as the Avatar known as Quake read pathetic love poems to her. The programming that had assumed control of her cybernetic like a vise demanded nothing but respect for her master's lapdogs. As much as she wanted to scoop out their vital organs, she couldn't as much as look at them with a disapproving gesture.

Thankfully, her torture quickly ended. She felt a mental summons in her mind, and the entirety of the terrorist estate poured into the courtyard where they saw the assembled Excalibur lined up one by one, filled with righteous anger and impressive power. They formed a line that could only be broken with their deaths.

Union Jack sized up their opponents. Most obvious was Lady Deathstrike, the Avatars of the Mandarin alongside scores of heavily armed ninjas, most likely yet another break away faction of The Hand, judging from their uniforms.

The two sides stood still with baited breath. Neither was willing to make the first move just yet. Then, silently, the army of terrorists parted like the Red Sea as a withered old man, clad in silver armor over most of his flesh and wearing a blue silk robe hobbled forward. The respect and reverence the Avatars gave him clearly marked this man as their master, this man known as...

"Yellow Claw."

Union Jack almost felt disappointed. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd hoped that somehow the mastermind behind the Avatars was...someone who made sense. As much as the idea of mass murder appalled him, a small part of him somehow wished it was justified. If it was justified, than it made 'sense'. And it making sense wasn't nearly as terrifying as thinking a madman had ordered the death of thousands for no reason whatsoever.

The ancient oriental villain pointed a weathered old finger at Excalibur, "I see the decadent guardians of the West aligned before me. How polite, to display yourselves like pigs for the slaughter."

"Oh, there's gonna be a massacre here," U.S. Agent grunted, "but it ain't gonna be us."

"Is that so American?" The voice was like that of a powerful avalanche, echoing into the very bones of the collected heroes. Finding the source of a voice like that wasn't overly hard. A thin, nude man stood tall atop the main house of Yellow Claw's estate, "I must disagree."

"And what's your name scumbag?" the one time Captain America demanded.

The man chuckled as if he'd just heard a private joke, "My name? Funny you should ask that, little flea. Where I come from, we name ourselves. I chose a name that was ordinary, a name that I personally would win respect for. What is my name?"

The short and physically unimpressive man leapt to high into the air some of Excalibur thought the man had instead flown into the clouds. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash of green energy that exploded outwards, growing exponentially like an atomic blast.

"My name is Fin..."

A giant green clawed foot smashed into the ground one hundred feet away from where Excalibur was standing, dumbstruck.

"Fang!"

Another clawed foot slammed into the ground some two hundred feet from the first one.

"Foom!"

Mighty wings stretched out and swallowed Excalibur's sun as they watched with limp jaws. The mighty alien dragon was standing directly over Yellow Claw and his minions, his very shadow seeming to be all the protection in the world that they could ever need. The great beast roared towards the sky as if he was challenging the Gods themselves.

"We're gonna need a bigger boat," Eshu deadpanned, "or a whole damn fleet..."

Fin Fang Foom snorted, sending a slight puff of acidic flame into the air, "Tell me flea, do you have anything to say before I end this?"

Union Jack could feel the eyes of his team upon his back and the weight of the world upon his shoulders. But what he said next, he said with no fear, no intimidation and absolutely no hesitation.

"Lady Deathstrike, Yellow Claw, Avatars and assorted others," Union Jack nodded to indicate Yellow Claw's ninjas and personal dragon.

"You are all hereby under arrest for acts of international terrorism by the power vested in me by the United Nations of the World," Rock's eyes met each and every one of theirs. He then craned his neck up longer and farther than he ever had before to meet those of the powerful dragon, Fin Fang Foom. Union Jack pulled the hammer of his gun back as he finished, "but you most certainly are more than welcome...to resist."

Next issue: Resisting Arrest. 'Nuff said

Sword Strokes

Here's our esteemed editor's comment on the slam bam issue 7. Take it away David!

"The series continues with the avatars arc, with the villains striking at London and making short work of the UK capital. It's very well written, with Excalibur facing overwhelming odds and being beaten back, unable to prevent the destruction that's going on. The emotional impact, the action scenes and such all work well and fits together to have an exceptional chapter to the story but there are problems, the biggest of which is where are the other heroes of the UK? Surely there would have been someone - anyone - helping the team defend the city. It seemed a missed opportunity there, which is a shame because it could have been such a good showcase of other heroes, potentially for Excalibur and it would have been nice to see Brian Braddock again, especially after his last appearance in the title involved Hellios giving him a blood transfusion. I know it's a slight thing, but it would have given the premise of the series is international heroes

(working for the UN true), it would have been nice, even if the heroes had been in the background."

Glad you liked the issue, David. It occurred to me to include some other heroes, but the issue was already full, and England isn't New York ;) (that was next issue *cough*).

"It's a good read and people will enjoy it. 4 out of 6."

Kick ass!

Yuriko Oyama bowed in prayer as the Avatar known as Quake read pathetic love poems to her. The programming that had assumed control of her cybernetic like a vise demanded nothing but respect for her master's lapdogs. As much as she wanted to scoop out their vital organs, she couldn't as much as look at them with a disapproving gesture.

Thankfully, her torture quickly ended. She felt a mental summons in her mind, and the entirety of the terrorist estate poured into the courtyard where they saw the assembled Excalibur lined up one by one, filled with righteous anger and impressive power. They formed a line that could only be broken with their deaths.

Union Jack sized up their opponents. Most obvious was Lady Deathstrike, the Avatars of the Mandarin alongside scores of heavily armed ninjas, most likely a break away faction of The Hand, judging from their uniforms.

The two sides stood still with baited breath. Neither was willing to make the first move just yet. Then, silently, the army of terrorists parted like the Red Sea as a withered old man, clad in silver armor over most of his flesh and wearing a blue silk robe hobbled forward. The respect and reverence the Avatars gave him clearly marked this man as their master, this man known as...

"Yellow Claw."

The ancient oriental villain pointed a weathered old finger at Excalibur, "I see the decadent guardians of the West aligned before me. How polite, to display yourselves like pigs for the slaughter."

"Oh, there's gonna be a massacre here," U.S. Agent grunted, "but it ain't gonna be us."

"Is that so American?" The voice was like that of a powerful avalanche, echoing into the very bones of the collected heroes. Finding the source of a voice like that wasn't overly hard. A thin, nude man stood tall atop the main house of Yellow Claw's estate, "I must disagree."

"And what's your name scumbag?" the former Super Patriot demanded.

The man chuckled as if he'd just heard a private joke, "My name? Funny you should ask that, little flea. Where I come from, we name ourselves. I chose a name that was ordinary, a name that I personally would win respect for. What is my name?"

The short and physically unimpressive man leapt to high into the air some of Excalibur thought the man had instead flown into the clouds. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash of green energy that exploded outwards, growing exponentially like an atomic blast.

"My name is Fin..."

A giant green clawed foot smashed into the ground one hundred feet away from where Excalibur was standing, dumbstruck.

“Fang!”

Another clawed foot slammed into the ground some two hundred feet from the first one.

“Foom!”

Mighty wings stretched out and swallowed Excalibur’s sun as they watched with limp jaws. The mighty alien dragon was standing directly over Yellow Claw and his minions, his very shadow seeming to be all the protection in the world that they could ever need.

Fin Fang Foom snorted, sending a slight puff of acidic flame into the air, “Tell me flea, do you have anything to say before I end this?”

Union Jack could feel the eyes of his team upon his back and the weight of the world upon his shoulders. But what he said next, he said with no fear, no intimidation and absolutely no hesitation.

“Lady Deathstrike, Yellow Claw, Avatars and assorted others,” Union Jack nodded to indicate Yellow Claw’s ninjas and personal dragon.

“You are all hereby under arrest for acts of international terrorism by the power vested in me by the United Nations of the World,” Rock’s eyes met each and every one of theirs. He then craned his neck up longer and farther than he ever had before to meet those of the powerful dragon, Fin Fang Foom. Union Jack pulled the hammer of his gun back as he finished, “but you most certainly are more than welcome...to resist.”

Excalibur

#53

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

Terror of the Rising Sun

Conclusion: Major Terror in Asia Minor

by Daniel Ingram

“Scatter!”

A green scaled foot larger than most yachts came crashing down upon Excalibur’s position, as the mammoth alien dragon feared through out all of Asia, Fin Fang Foom, dismissed the heroes as the insects that he saw them as. The ten person super hero team leapt or flew to one side to avoid being crushed to death, with one sole exception.

“Hellios!”

The massive weight of Fin Fang Foom's clawed foot sent a pressure wave that pushed a thick cloud of dust into the air. It settled several seconds later, and what the combined forces saw amazed them both equally.

The solar powered superhero's arms were held above his head, keeping the giant clawed foot at bay. His muscles rippled and eyes were ablaze with solar power.

"You won't get rid of me that easy," at the speed of sound, Hellios flew out from underfoot and smashed into the mighty dragon's chin with both fists. The blow sounded like a clap of thunder and threw the alien dragon's head back, "I intend to make up for time lost."

"Sabra, Scarab, back him up!" yelled Union Jack.

Fin Fang Foom flapped his giant wings, attempting to get into a better position so that he could napalm the fleas that plagued his master, but that proved his undoing. Scarab, Hellios and Sabra slammed into him at once, and between their strength and the legendary dragon's lack of leverage, the alien dragon was blasted through the air to land clear across the tiny Asian nation, in Madripoor 'High Town' section.

"You just had to egg them on, didn't you!" screamed Eshu as he morphed his body around a searing blast of flame, "and we've lost our strongest! What do we do now?"

Union Jack sighted the probability manipulator known as Butterfly with his sidearm. With a single shot, she joined her predecessors. Luck was to much of an advantage to allow the Avatars.

"We fight and we win!"

Le Peregrine soared into the air and lobbed several grenades at Foundry. Cybermancer blasted Quake with a thousand decibels of sound while Darkstar created an ebony wall and ploughed through the legion of foes.

"Keep moving! Don't let them pin you down!" Rock decked one of Yellow Claw's ninjas, "Spitfire...!"

Union Jack spared a second to look over the battlefield, and saw that the famous English Invader known as Spitfire was nowhere to be seen.

"The fecking hell..."

A sword swung for Jack's neck, and by the time it struck his energy dagger, all thoughts of Spitfire were gone. She wasn't here, he was and it was that simple to Union Jack's tactical mind. Answers could wait, but the man trying to kill him wouldn't, nor would the approaching Lich who thought Union Jack's turned back was an invitation.

Yellow Claw smiled in obscene satisfaction. The magics that bent the mighty dragon Fin Fang Foom to his will were far superior to those used by the secret power cabal he'd joined months

earlier who sought and failed to fully tame the beast. Unlike those savages, the Yellow Claw always thought two steps ahead, his formulas acting like a virus, slowly and invisibly bending the creature's mind to his will to where the dragon was his most loyal servant.

With the battle raging at his very doorstep, Yellow Claw turned on his heel and strolled away towards his inner sanctum. More drastic measures might be required soon if his soldiers didn't claim victory soon, and Claw wanted to be ready.

Le Peregrine saw the man who'd ordered the death of thousands of his country men just walking away unobstructed as if the entire battle was just something he couldn't be bothered with.

And it pissed the flying hero off.

“CLAW!”

The French hero dove after the villain only seconds after he'd entered his estate. Le Peregrine was half way through mentally counting the tortures he'd inflict upon the man when he collided with a solid but invisible wall that he bounced like a tennis ball off a racket while sending a jolt of energy through his body.

“Kill the infidel!”

His head still swimming and body still tingling, Le Peregrine was targeted by three of Claw's regular soldiers. One man hauled the Frenchman to his feet and gripping the sometimes writer in a headlock while the other two drew their knives. They intended to take their time with the hero, to savor his screams.

Le Peregrine would have none of it. He snapped his head backwards, breaking the nose of the man that held him. Reaching over his head and grabbing the man's neck for support, he lashed out with both legs, striking the other two men in their delicates. As they kneeled over, the savate trained fighter dropped his legs on their far shoulder and brought the two thug's head together. The snap he heard behind his head meant nothing to him.

Grabbing one opponent at random, he slammed the man up against the force field that first obstructed him. The screams were ear piercing, and the smell of burning flesh mixed with feces and urine, but Le Peregrine pushed the man against the barrier with all his strength regardless.

“That's enough!” U.S. Agent grabbed the French soldier by his shoulder and threw him of the man.

“Agent! What are you doing, I was trying to get to Claw!”

“You were torturing that bastard!”

Quake stomped towards them alongside the reluctant Lady Deathstrike, “Yes, fight amongst yourselves. It will only make you that much easier to slay!”

Le Peregrine soared into the air as U.S. Agent threw himself backwards with his shield raised, barely fending off her attack. In the back of his mind, he wondered how long he had before she got her head in the game and spread his guts all across the ground. He only hoped the others were doing better

Bo Heng Lim Ming and Wen Bao, two tourists who just happened to be walking down the street screamed as Fin Fang Foom towards like the Hindi berg, his massive wing span tearing through buildings like a knife through butter in an out of control crash. They squeezed their eyes together, felt a strange breeze, and two blocks away realized they were in fact still alive.

“Run!” Spitfire shouted to the crowd she’d gathered as superspeed. The giant dragon battling three super heroes only a block away and perhaps only an inch away from danger scattered any translation problems.

A single tear rolled down her cheek as the once Invader raced back into the battle, remembering those she wasn’t fast enough to save the first time. She knew she couldn’t save everyone. Even at the height of her power, she was no Quicksilver. But in the face of a clash of titans, Spitfire resolved to do everything she could do to save anyone forgotten in this battle of giants.

Sabra watched in astonishment as Hellios let loose a left hook that snapped back Foom’s head like the beast was a ‘Rock ‘em Sock ‘em’ child’s toy.

Fin Fang Foom’s head was reeling, but he’d sooner mate with a human than admit surrender to these specks of flesh. As he brought his head back, he opened fanged mouth and expelled a blast of atomic fire that was powerful enough to melt a battleship in seconds. Both Scarlet Scarab and Sabra flew above the blast, but even with their invulnerable skin and distance they felt their mouths run dry.

Hellios took the superheated plasma straight on, hands on his hips with his cape flapping in the wind in a sign of casual defiance. Fin Fang Foom smirked loudly, the foolishness of the bright little flea who was now less than dust, less than...

“As the Americans say, your bark is less than your bite, dragon.”

Hellios hovered before his enemy, his custom completely immaculate, even his teeth shined in the sun light.

“Clearly, I have to beat some more sense into you, beast,” Hellios drew his fist back and smiled, “thank you.”

It was then Hellios felt as if his very skin was aflame and his blood replaced with acid. The attack lasted only a split second, but felt as though it were an eternity. The pain dulled for a moment, then returned with twice as much force. This time, however, Hellios heard the thunder, and with his blurring, double vision swirling body of air that formed his enemy.

“Tsunami...” the word was filled with equal parts venom and worry. A hero, Hellios had no concern for his own life, but he did worry what might happen should the woman who casually threw him into a coma the first time they fought manage to kill him in round two.

“Hellios, now where have you been hiding?” she taunted, “to think, you just removed your tail from between your legs and now...”

Scarlet Scarab saw the lighting coming, and only barely managed to block it with his own body before it struck his teammate. Thankfully, due to the fact his own powers were fueled by magic Scarab weathered the attack easily.

“Let me handle her,” he suggested, “my powers well allow me to combat her more effectively.”

“She is made of pure air,” Hellios warned, “you cannot hurt her.”

“And I think she’s proven she can hurt you.”

“I have an idea,” answered Hellios, “I simply ask you trust me.”

Scarab gritted his teeth, “Very well.”

“Tsunami! You slanted eye slut!” Hellios taunted, “if you want me, come and get me!”

Hellios sped away with Tsunami hot on his tail. Wordlessly, Sabra and Scarlet Scarab looked at each other, and then towards their giant foe. Fin Fang Foom smiled broadly, revealing teeth larger than the average football player as smoke trickled out his jaw.

“Now, little fleas, where were we?”

Yellow Claw stared into the mystical artifact known as ‘The Heart of Darkness’ and watched his minions battle Excalibur. Even in this, his inner most sanctum, he could hear and feel the blows of the battle. Yellow Claw knew his minions would fail him. If they hadn’t won by now, they never would. And even if they killed the entire of Excalibur, more heroes would come. X-Force, the mighty Avengers and countless others would be charged with his capture. The Celestial One was not one who cared to be hounded.

One last stand was called for then. An act of magnificence non conformity was required before he departed this world for his ancestors. Plunging his hand deep into the Heart of Darkness, Yellow Claw drank deep into it’s strength and felt his strength multiply a thousand fold, again and again.

Within seconds he felt as though he had enough power to eradicate the Western World with a simple shrug.

He wasn’t too far off.

Cybermancer blasted Foundry with every last bit of power her gauntlets had while he answered back with waves of flame that could melt a tank.

“We’re at a stalemate, whore, not for long. Surrender, I would hate to damage such beauty.”

“Worry about yourself. Now, John!”

An indestructible shield whirled through the air and embedded itself in Foundry’s golden metal belly. The Avatar screamed in pain and surprise, faltering in his onslaught long enough for Cybermancer to let loose two mini missiles from her wrists that split the fiery terrorist in two.

“Suzi! Look out!” screamed Agent.

Lady Deathstrike fell upon Cybermancer no louder than the fall of a snow flake and began hacking and slashing at the armored heroine. Indestructible blades propelled by servo motors raked across Cybermancer’s body as she fell to the earth. Lady Deathstrike jumped off a moment before impact, and looked at her victim to see that the damage that had be wrought.

“What!?”

Cybermancer’s armor was virtually unscathed, and there wasn’t a mark on the young woman’s exposed face.

“How...?”

An EMP blast crashed Deathstrike’s neural net, “Force fields turn away edged weapons, especially mine.”

U.S. Agent collected his shield and helped his friend to her feet, “Man, I was worried for a sec there...”

“Me too, but...”

Just then, Eshu’s elongated body slammed into the old friends.

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting something? ‘Cause me and Quake have a problem with each other.”

“If I kill him, will that shut you up?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll take that bet!”

U.S. Agent picked himself up as Quake rushed towards their position. Jumping into the air, he flung his shield towards his enemy. It bounced off harmlessly, slammed into Lich’s head where

it ricocheted off the wall and back into U.S. Agent's out stretched hand where he swung it in front of his chest just in time to prevent Quake's fist from collapsing his ribcage.

Darkstar flew back and forth above the battle, blasting the cannon fodder with repeat bursts of darkforce energy. Already she'd downed Old Woman and Warfist with this strategy, and best of all kept her foes looking over their shoulders in hesitation. One bullet had found its way to her heel and another in her shoulder, but two energy bandages later, she was still battle worthy.

Union Jack battled Lich while Le Peregrine watched his flank from the air. Cybermancer dogged Deluge as Ancestor found his incredible strength useless as he sought to remove Eshu's slime like body from around his head, suffocating him. U.S. Agent used every last ounce of skill he had to hold off Quake, knowing the second his teammates defeated their foes they'd help him.

Their enemies were many and powerful, but slowly Excalibur began turning the tide in their favor. They became increasingly confident of their victory, of finally ending the Avatars threat. There was a massive explosion from the estate, and in the settling dust the gathered Excalibur looked up to see their hopes slip through their hands like sand through an hour glass.

Scarlet Scarab darted above an avalanche of flame that ignited several city blocks behind him. The Arabic hero knew he couldn't let himself be concerned with the lives in danger, but it was still like a knife to his heart to just callously turn away from those who might be in danger to battle some monster.

Fin Fang Foom had the two on the ropes, but Scarab was smart enough to know size wasn't always an advantage. Flying over the monster's head, Scarab landed upon it's back, and plunged his hands into the scaly green flesh with all his strength. Almost instantly, the second generation hero activated his ability to siphon energy and drank deep into Foom's power.

"Arrggh! What treachery is this?" Foom bellowed, loud enough to break every window on the island nation, "you won't steal my holy power, human trash!"

Sabra watched in horror as Fin Fang Foom threw himself backwards, demolishing buildings like sand castles. The entire island shook from the impact, and when Foom picked himself back up, Scarlet Scarab was laying in the center of the (vaguely) dragon shaped crater.

"Scarab!"

Sabra darted towards her teammate, but was plucked from the air like a paper airplane by Foom's claws. Impossibly powerful claws tightened around her waist as Foom sought to burn a hole through her body with just his glare.

"Your friend sought to sup upon me. Perhaps I should sup upon you to return the favor?"

"He is not my friend," with speed and skill, Sabra reached for the claw on Foom's thumb, braced herself and marshalling every last ounce of strength, pulled.

Foom screamed in pain, but it still wasn't enough for the Israel super agent to get free. Luckily, the finger nail she'd just relieved her foe possessed a pointed edge. Sabra thought it only fair to return the nail to the thumb from which it'd come from.

Another roar of pain and spurt of blood, and she was free. Sabra landed next to Scarab's limp form, still in the new crater.

"Scarab, wake up! We have to move!"

"You pathetic, insignificant cow!"

Sabra looked up, and to her horror saw Fin Fang Foom less than fifteen meters away. The savage beast was breathing deeply, and even an idiot knew what that meant. Her anti-gravity cloak was damaged, no guarantee of escape.

"Scarab...!"

Atomic flame rumbled forward like a wall of pure death. Sabra raised her hands in a vain, futile attempt to protect herself.

To her amazement, the flame slammed into a wall of crimson energy.

"I've no love of close calls, Scarab."

"I need your strength," Scarab stated as he stood up.

"What?"

"I wasn't strong enough to hold on," Scarab explained hastily. Foom had stopped his onslaught, but the smoke would conceal them for a few more precious seconds, "With your strength combined with mine, I can drain that beast of his power."

"What on earth makes you think that will work?" snapped Sabra, "if it fails, you'll be dead and I'll be defenseless!"

Scarab reached out his hand, "You'll just have to trust me."

Fin Fang Foom flapped his leathery wings, scattering the blanket of smoke his flames had created. No sooner had the ebony clouds parted than Scarlet Scarab rocketed forward. The hero flew through the monster's shoulder like a bullet, painfully tearing and severing alien muscles and ligaments. When he swung back around, Scarlet Scarab landed upon the back of Foom's neck. He wouldn't be dislodged so easily again.

U.S. Agent, Le Peregrine, and the rest of Excalibur stared with slack jaws as a ninety foot Yellow Claw loomed over them, regarding them like the ants they now were to him.

“Two giants in one day, this bloody gig doesn’t pay enough...”muttered Union Jack.

“Hey Frenchy, you called first dibs, right?” Eshu asked.

Yellow Claw scowled at the collected heroes, and a powerful laser beam lanced down, barely missing Cybermancer and scoring the island bedrock.

“You’ve finally managed to be somewhat effective, Excalibur. You’ve actually earned my full attention,” observed Yellow Claw, “and that’s why you’ll die.”

Another powerful blast reigned down, this time almost slicing down towards the planet’s molten core as the villain tried to eradicate Union Jack and Darkstar.

“Talk about a performance review,” Eshu quipped.

“Grab the Avatars, we can use them as hostages!” Le Peregrine shouted.

“I think not.”

With a casual wave of his giant hand, Yellow Claw teleported his minions away.

“Now, where were we?”

“I was about to end your evil for all time.”

Yellow Claw turned around, and was met with an equally giant fist to the face that sent him staggering back.

Scarlet Scarab, standing equally tall and bubbling with energy, stared back at him.

“Come, let us end this.”

“End this?” Tsunami laughed. With a mental shrug, she lashed Hellios with another bolt of lightning that threatened to fry every nerve in the hero’s body. If they were on solid ground, the solar powered hero would almost certainly be on his knees, “but we’ve barely even started!”

But they were not on solid ground, far from it. They were on the very outer edge of the tiny Asian nation of Madripoor. A distance of twenty miles was the farthest Tsunami had allowed him to flee before bringing him to a grinding halt.

Now was the moment of truth for the Greek hero. Marshalling every last ounce of power his body could give him, Hellios rocketed forward at twice the speed of sound.

Tsunami was at first unimpressed. Physical power meant nothing to her body of solid air. But Hellios changed course, missing her by a wide margin before turning back around in a full circle.

Within seconds the hero was nothing more than a swirling blur that surrounded her on all sides. It was then she realized her foe's tactics, he was creating a vacuum!

Hellios flew above, below around and under his foe as she lashed out desperately with lightning to free herself. But she couldn't match his speed, nor cunning. Though she was a creature of pure air, Hellios observed that his foe preferred to unleash her lightning from her hands and he made sure to keep out of the line of fire.

Tsunami screamed, and it sent a chill down Hellios' spine. The first Hellios and Tsunami were founding members of Excalibur and died on their second mission. A small part of him feared history repeating itself here.

The hero created vacuum grew larger and larger, and Tsunami grew more desperate. Her body felt as though every inch was being torn apart, and each thought became harder and harder. As a last ditch effort, she released her power entire, mystic energy blasting outwards in every direction. Even the superfast Hellios wasn't swift enough to avoid it, the blast knocking him towards the mainland, but it didn't matter. By releasing all her power, Tsunami lost the only thing that held her together, and she died only moments before the vacuum would have taken her.

Unfortunately, the ad-hoc weather system created by Hellios didn't magically die like its victim. It was too powerful and created too quickly. The swirling mass of air morphed into a powerful cyclone as it thundered towards the mainland.

"You shouldn't have embarrassed yourself, Arab," Yellow Claw and Scarlet Scarab were grappling hand to hand as titans, but the ancient terrorist had the hero on his knees, struggling to rise, "your gem can barely contain the power you wield. I can already hear your mind breaking at the strain!"

"Then it's a good thing he doesn't stand alone!"

Darkstar and Cybermancer blasted one of Yellow Claw's eyes with their energies while Le Peregrine threw his last two grenades at the monster's hands, hoping to somehow free Scarab. With a wave of his hand, Yellow Claw dismissed all three. With a smirk he watched as the remainder of Excalibur stood by helplessly. They would die soon enough.

Yellow Claw gripped Scarab by the neck and poured the power of The Heart of Darkness into the Egyptian hero's form.

"Now would be the time to say something memorable for your tombstone, Arab."

Scarlet Scarab's vision blurred and for one brief moment, thought he saw his long dead father. He could feel himself shrinking, the power he stole from Fin Fang Foom escaping the gem or being expended in the battle. He felt as though his brain were on fire, and knew he couldn't keep this up much longer. The power and his own sanity were slipping from his control like grains of sand in an hour glass. One last gamble for the sake of the world.

“In the words of a great Muslim, float like a butterfly...”

The Egyptian hero flew into Yellow Claw, slamming into him and carrying their titanic form high into the air, until the island nation they were fighting upon was just no greater than a dinner plate in the distance.

“...and sting like a bee!”

With that, Scarlet Scarab released every last ounce of energy his mystic gem contained. Yellow Claw screamed as his flesh was peeled back and body torn apart. So close he was to Scarab’s power, it was almost as if he was standing next to a bomb. The astronauts on the International Space Station saw the explosion from half a world away.

Scarlet Scarab smiled as he saw nothing left of his foe. Gravity reclaimed him, and Scarlet Scarab was glad to know that he would die with his mission finished. His world faded to black, his mind needing rest after controlling such incredible energies. He knew none of his flying teammates would save him, as none had the constitution to follow him up this high.

He never saw the white gloved hand that saved him.

Epilogue 1

The Avatars felt Yellow Claw’s termination with the power of the Heart of Darkness as one. They were gathered together on a barge that was slowly making its way out of the territorial waters of Madripoor, concealed by several devices both technological and mystic in origin.

“Our master is dead,” Lich said plainly, “what are we to do now?”

“Be thankful that we have our freedom,” Lady Deathstrike hissed.

“No, we must honor our master!” Quake rumbled, “Yuriko, you must lead us now!”

“Yes!” Ancestor seconded, “You have more experience than any of us combined! Who better to lead us?”

Lady Deathstrike snorted in disgust, “Very well. But I must warn you, Avatars...”

The female cyborg ran her finger across Quake’s chest suggestively. The monster felt his heart pound in his chest, and then heard something wet and sloppy strike the deck. He looked down to see his own internal organs at his feet.

Her adamantium claws slick with Quake’s blood, Deathstrike glared at the stunned terrorists, “You know nothing of honor, of merit. But I will teach you.”

Within minutes, the Avatars learned, and knew no more.

Epilogue 2

“...half of Low Town was destroyed, the cyclone created by Hellios devastated the docks and nearly one thousand innocent lives were lost in the crossfire,” the Chinese representative finished. For the last hour, the United Nations Security Council had been grilling Joey Chapman on Excalibur’s performance. He wasn’t too surprised. But deep down he knew they were more pissed with him for concealing the fact that he had discovered Yellow Claw’s base and not divulging that fact to them. The lives and destruction wrought meant less to them than the sting their collective egos suffered realizing that Chapman was playing his own game while they argued. The destruction and lives lost was to be expected. Lies from someone they saw as an underling, were not.

“Tell me, have you anything to add?”

“Only that we recovered the gold and defeated Yellow Claw, preventing him from launching any more terrorist attacks as per my orders.”

“And the Avatars?”

“We...found their chunks.”

“Still, it is hardly a job well done,” the Russian Representative began, “there were riots in Low Town. Local leaders have demanded SHIELD and other U.N. forces leave the island immediately and are demanding compensation. We have little choice but to acquiesce.”

“Now wait just one bloody minute!” snapped Chapman, “some of those blighters had to know Claw was there, and didn’t do a damned thing! Why should we be responsible for their harboring such a monster?!”

“Because that’s the way things are run,” answered the American Representative, “that aside, your team has endured its first real test, and survived. While your performance has been overall excellent, the record will show that it was your actions that cost us control of Madripoor, something that could have been prevented had we received proper warning.”

Chapman bit his tongue, wanting so much to wipe that smug look off his superior’s face. But he couldn’t. They were talking down to him for one reason and one reason only, to remind him he was on their leash. The droning continued until he finally heard that magic word, ‘dismissed’.

Later

Union Jack knocked politely on Chapman’s door before he entered.

“You wanted to see me?”

Chapman had a glass of scotch in one hand, “I just wanted to commend you on a fine job. I got fucked up the arse for what went down, but I know the front lines better than those twits.”

“And you wanted someone to have a drink with. Misery and company an’ all that.”

“The thought crossed my mind. Any reason why?”

“Just thinking,” Chapman peered into his own reflection in the scotch, “Yellow Claw represented less than one percent of one percent of one billion people. But because he got his hands on some extra normal weaponry and a barely fifty other fools like him, he was able to kill thousands. That’s who we protect the world from, that simple dozen among billions.”

“Damnation,” Union Jack scowled, “now I need a drink...”

Next issue: Did someone notice a Presence in the room?

United Nations Security Council, now

Chapman sat passively in his chair, as he had for nearly the last hour. He had a terrible itch on his nose, his rear positively ached and the silence was beginning to get to him, but Chapman refused to be the first one to break.

The United Nations Security Council had summoned him regarding Excalibur's latest mission. When Chapman arrived at the closed meeting, he'd been ordered into the room and told to sit in the chair provided. The five permanent members of the Council were already inside, waiting.

Chapman had taken his seat without saying a word. He knew this game. They wanted him to speak first, as if they were some admission of fault. Chapman knew he was going to be raked over the coals already, he'd be damned if he gave them what they wanted so easily.

“Director Chapman...” began the representative of China,

Finally, Chapman mentally sighed.

“...I trust you know why we called you here today?”

“I do, sir.” Chapman answered curtly.

“Would you care to elaborate?” the Russian representative asked.

“We were understaffed and unprepared for the mission given to us,” Chapman answered, “simple as that. All things considered, I'd consider the mission a success.”

“A success?” asked the French representative, “Your team is currently a disaster. You have members who are dead, missing in action if we're lucky, or clinging to life!”

“Some of my people are still alive, if only barely. I consider that a success, all things considered.” Chapman said bluntly.

“You would be in the minority there, Director Chapman.”

“I understand that, sir.”

“Then perhaps you can help us understand how this...this absolute disaster happened, director!” spat the American Representative, “we gave you a team at least equal to the Avengers and you allow this to happen?”

“Power has never automatically translate into effectiveness, sir,” answered Chapman, “I expressed misgivings about the mission from the beginning because of that.”

Excalibur
#11
July 2007
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"MEETING RUIN"
Part One: Abysmal Beginnings

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Avalon, then

Joey Chapman looked over the list of suspected criminals in the mission profile given to him, looked up at the United Nations Liaison, and said simply, "I think I may faint. So many bastards, all in one place!"

"I wouldn't be so eager, if I were you," warned the man. Chapman didn't even know his name, nor did he care to. Excalibur liaisons changed every other week, literally. The people were vetted, shipped in, and shipped out as a precaution against infiltration.

"Abyss, Black Tarantula, A.I.M scientists and more are planning a clan destine meet on a small uninhabited island off of Mandipoor," Chapman tapped on the printouts he'd been given eagerly, "that's one hell of a haul, mate. We'll be making law enforcement history with this break for sure. How'd we come by this intelligence, anyways?"

"A Shield agent stationed in the area got a tip from a local contact," the Liaison explained, "in return for protection and relocation, of course."

Chapman shook his head, "I suppose that's as close as the scumbag will ever come to winning the lottery. But I think this is more than worth the cost."

"Look at the timestamp, director."

Chapman picked up the file, and within seconds felt his blood run cold, "You're puttin' me on."

"I only wish." replied the man sympathetically.

"We only have seven hours until launch?" Chapman almost couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth, "seven bleedin' hours!? That's not nearly enough damn time to work up a mission profile!"

“And that's what makes me glad not to be you. I've already taken the liberty of summoning your team. They should arrive shortly.”

“Balls to this,” Chapman spat, “I need more than just my team for something like this! X-Force...”

“Is on a mission. The heli-carrier is half way around the world. Abyss' people would rabbit before it got within a hundred miles of them.”

“What about the Avengers? Fantastic Four? Bloody hell, I'd even take those Force Works prats!”

“There are certain members of the Security Council who doesn't want such an operation...overly tainted by American heroes,” explained the Liaison carefully, “they already resent their high profile nature compared to their local heroes. They see this as Excalibur's chance to prove themselves.”

"You're puttin' my people's lives on the line for the sake of politics!"

"And you're surprised, Director Chapman? Excalibur is an arm of the United Nations. As such, you're expected to represent a certain level of independence and effectiveness."

“Or die in the effort,” Chapman sighed, an overwhelming sense of dread and defeat washing over him. As much as he wanted to, there was no way to appeal the orders. Like any other soldier, his was not to reason why. A stab of guilt reminded Chapman that he wouldn't be the one in the field facing the threat, rather it would be the people he hand picked from dozen of other possible heroes who'd be facing this impossible challenge.

“Fine. Leave the files and get the hell out of my face. I have a suicide mission to plan.” snarled the director of Excalibur. The man shook his head, and left without another word. He knew rudeness was the best thing he could expect from a man in Joey Chapman's position right now.

God only knew how well his team would take it.

“This is an obscene joke. End it now before I tear off your arms and feed them to dogs,” Sabra hissed.

“Sorry sweetheart, this isn't a gag,” Chapman reassured her, “I've already expressed my concerns, and they brushed me off. So the more time we spend complaining, the less time we have to form an actual, solid plan. As it stands, this thing is all set to go tits' up.”

“What about our reserves?” asked Union Jack. Of all of Excalibur, only Sabra, Chapman, Union Jack and U.S. Agent were currently meeting. Not only had most of the others still hadn't been recalled yet, but Chapman preferred dealing with just these three rather than the entire team because they were the only ones who had real military or counter intelligence experience.

“Both are on other assignments,” Chapman sighed with a trace of both regret and relief. Not that he especially wanted to have Spitfire, a long time family friend predating all this spandex craziness involved but in an emergency like this he needed every last warm body.

“What about the soldiers that are attached to Excalibur? Any special forces in there?”

“Some, but not enough. The rest are a mixed bag. Some have seen action, a few are fresh out of boot camp, hell, who knows?” Chapman shook his head, “Walker? I’ll need you to organize some units. Talk to the soldiers, see if you can give me some balanced units. And I need you to do that now, John.”

U.S. Agent nodded, and sprinted out of the room.

“I’ll take what special forces we have,” Union Jack offered, “me, Cybermancer, Eshu and our unit will secure whatever weapons they intend to be selling or demonstrating at this conference. That’ll keep them from being turned against us, and give us something solid to hold onto.”

“What do we tell the others?” asked Sabra, “we know how dangerous this mission will be, but Scarab? Maria? None of them are prepared for something like this.”

Union Jack rubbed the back of his neck, guilt creeping up into his guilt.

“We tell them nothing,” Chapman said quickly, “our chances for success will only get smaller if the entire team thinks we’re doomed to failure.”

“As opposed to just us three,” Sabra deadpanned.

“The better we plan, the better chances we have of all coming out of this alive,” reassured Union Jack, “all of us here have faced worse odds and prevailed. This thing isn’t bugged yet, and lets stop acting like it, eh?”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself, mate,” answered Chapman, “none of us are here by chance. We do this right, and every other agency out there will be green with envy, and we’ll be laughing about how worried we were.”

Sabra and Union Jack nodded, and went back to planning. They tried their best to have hope.

Mike Rucker was an unabashed opportunist. He joined the military and quickly found ways to worm around the authority he was supposed to respect. Whether it was via blackmail, bribes or just outright lies, he steadfastly avoided the majority of hard work that went along with serving one’s country.

That wasn’t to say he never worked hard, as roughly three million in a half dozen Swiss bank accounts would attest. He ran a lucrative contraband ring, using the various contacts he’d cultivated while serving. Acting as a middle man, he helped sneak all kinds of things past military inspectors and the like for a reasonable fee. As a matter of fact, that’s why he had

weaseled himself into Excalibur's military attachment, in the hopes that he would find something valuable to steal. After all, heroes didn't fight super criminals without picking up a few trophies along the way.

To date though, all he'd managed to get was some unmentionables sought after by the freaks that always lurk on the Internet. Hardly what anyone would call a good haul, and a perfect example of the drought he felt he was suffering.

That's why when he saw the latest liaison arrive, he immediately rushed to a supply closet and activated the listening device he'd planted earlier in Chapman's office. The bug was short range, and required a coded signal to even activate. Powered by background radiation and hidden in the dirt of a plant inside Chapman's, it had survived countless security sweeps but still hadn't yet paid off, in Rucker's opinion.

But when he heard the words 'Abyss', 'Black Tarantula' and other high profile super criminals, Rucker felt as though his ship at finally come in. Criminals of their stature would be immensely grateful if they were warned that Excalibur were about to come down on them like a ton of bricks. Having an 'I owe you' from a villain equal to the likes of Red Skull or Doom was like being given a blank check...there just wasn't anything better than that in the smuggler's opinion.

The only question was if he could warn them in time. Without a moment to lose, he left his little hidey hole and dashed to his quarters. He had some calls to make...

Several Hours later, Devil's Island

The international terrorist known as Abyss smiled inwardly as he greeted another representative, this one representing a European Maggia family. Like so many other things in the world, his organization was like a business. He was forced to evolve, to change, if he was to survive against organizations like the Avengers, Interpol and Shield, and one of the most important requirements for survival was networking.

There were representatives from Hydra, A.I.M, ULIMATIUM, and other competitors. However, the conference wasn't just limited to fellow non conformists. Spaced among the gathered organizations were dozens of independent contractors, either leaders of their own small criminal empires like the Black Tarantula or superhuman mercenaries like Shockwave and Crossfire simply looking for work.

That was why, of all the impressive forces at his command, he'd only brought a strikeforce of unnamed mercenaries along with his bodyguard Fatale and his personal representative, the Indian necromancer Charon to this summit. While most of those who served him were loyal, a show of force would only put those who he hoped to sway to his cause on edge. Besides the usual swapping of intelligence, he also hoped to make more allies, sway them to his cause. Intimidating his enemies could wait for another day.

So far, the day was going swimmingly. He'd already scheduled a half dozen meetings, anyone of which would fortify his position in the criminal underworld. When his communications officer

rushed over to him with a concerned expression on his face and a 'for your ears only' information, Abyss' first thought was that he had arranged another meeting. The young man was terribly eager to please, after all.

Abyss excused himself, and entered his makeshift command center, a hover craft about the size of a regular city bus. He grew concerned when one of his men sealed and locked the entrance behind them.

"Wynn, what is the issue?" Abyss asked as he narrowed his eyes. He could feel the hum of the engines, and knew that the pilots were running a preflight check. He was canny enough to know that boded ill for his plans.

"We just received reliable intelligence that Excalibur is planning a raid within the next several hours, sir," To his credit, Wynn Renfre never hesitated when he delivered the bad news, "obviously, we feel it's best that we leave as soon as possible."

To his minions, Abyss was the picture of calm, of utter and total control. Inwardly, in the silence of his own mind, Abyss let loose an amazingly complex string of profanities.

Charon simply shrugged casually as he processed the new information, "Good, the food here is terrible, and please, do not get me started on the atmosphere! Hired killers are the worst with casual conversation. All I once got stabbed here, I killed that, etc'."

Abyss grabbed Charon by his pudgy neck and lifted him into the air. Through clenched teeth, he spat "How a narcissistic fool like you ever mastered the mystic arts, I will never know. Suppose I leave now, and Excalibur comes. Can you imagine how much face I would lose? Can you imagine how many enemies that would earn me?"

"A...few?" Charon gasped.

With a sneer of disgust, Abyss dropped his henchman on his oversized rear, "If I just left now, my work could be set back by years, and have a dozen criminals, not a one caring a wit for due process, looking for my blood. No, leaving simply isn't an option."

"Couldn't we simply warn everyone?" suggested Fatal.

"That would be almost as bad," Abyss explained, his temper in check for the moment, "I would be acknowledging weakness in front of too many. No, the only real way to save face would be to actually be here when Excalibur comes. No one will be too angry if I was in the same boat as them."

"You can't be serious!" Charon rubbed his aching throat, "we can't stay here simply for the sake of your reputation! What if we're caught?"

Abyss shook his head in disbelief, "You of all people should know that the first rule of magic...is simple slight of hand. I'm always prepared for a raid by any authorities, it's the least

of what we can expect in our profession. But I don't intend for Excalibur to cut us down so easy. Fatal?"

"Yes sir?"

"We're going to prepare. Here's what I need from you..."

Chapman looked over the teams one final time. For once, it wasn't the members of Excalibur he was concerned about, but the regular soldiers that would be accompanying them on this incursion.

It didn't take much to be in Excalibur's support force. Service in a military, any military in the world, and fluency in English. The vast majority were volunteers, most sought the three week long assignment as a way to get out of their usual duties at home. Chapman could only imagine how those soldiers were now soiling themselves at the prospect of facing an entire mob of superhuman criminals.

"Looking good, looking good," Chapman said unconvincingly as he inspected the squads. Union Jack, Cybermancer and Eshu were leading one team of ten, all former members of different special forces. They were the best they had at the moment, and Chapman hoped Union Jack could pull them through to accomplish their end of the mission. They were armed lightly, mostly small arms and a few sniper rifles. Stealth was what they would need to rely on, not firepower.

Team two, consisting of Sabra, U.S. Agent and Silverclaw consisted of a larger team of twenty five men, all armed with Stark made plasma casters. All of the men of this team had at least some combat experience under their belt and Chapman hoped that being led by two career military heroes would hold together well enough to do what needed to be done.

The final squad, team three was led by Scarlet Scarab alongside Darkstar and Hellios, consisted of forty men, all with infantry experience. The idea was that with them complimenting the heavy hitters, any resistance would quickly crumble.

No one really believed that, but it was better to cling to that delusion than bend over as if they were screwed already. There wasn't a man on base who didn't expect fatalities from this raid, but damn near everyone believed it wouldn't be them.

"Squad one to the HERMES platform," Chapman ordered, "secure the landing zone and then signal back. If there are any issues, we'll pull you out and scrap the mission."

Union Jack nodded, and led his soldiers onto the platform. Chapman knew Rock was smart enough to bullshit a reason to scrap the mission, but doubted that he would. The current Union Jack was a law enforcement man through and through, he'd see this mission finished or die trying.

Chapman couldn't believe his poor luck, to be handled a shit mission like this dealing with Abyss, of all people. Chapman had a history with the terrorist leader, and though he harbored no

sympathy for stopping him (Abyss made his bed, let him burn in it), it did complicate matters terribly.

The two had been a part of the London Hellfire Club together, when Abyss still went by Vortigen Walker. They'd been, if not friends, than trustworthy allies. Chapman felt secure in turning his back to the man, then at least. Though they had both since disavowed their links to the Hellfire Club, there wasn't a single person in the higher echelons of the intelligence community who didn't know of their mutual association. Chapman had escaped major suspicion because of his complete submission to the United Nation's authority, but if there was even a whiff of doubt Chapman knew he would be dead in a ditch in some third world nation before the day was out.

And that would only be if he was lucky.

“Maybe all this negative attitude is a good thing,” Eshu commented as they lined up on the HERMES platform.

“What on earth makes you think that?” Cybermancer asked incredulously.

“Damn near everyone expects this thing to go south. What happens when that meets Murphy's Law?”

Suzi actually laughed despite herself, “I don't know, maybe an incredible mess that dwarfs all messes before it?”

Eshu shrugged, “Well, yeah, that.”

Abyss' summit, Devil's Island

Fatal looked up from the scanners she'd been watching almost religiously and shouted to her leader, “We've picked up a HERMES teleporter signal! Excalibur's here, sir.”

“Thank you Dallas,” Abyss closed his eyes to concentrate, focusing upon the unseen mystical energy that surrounded everyone, and cast his senses out towards the intruders. Without leaving the safety of his craft, he was able to listen in to Union Jack briefing his team as if he were standing right in front of him.

“We have a little bit of luck on our side,” Union Jack began, “this island used to be a Japanese listening station, and the bad guys thought they'd use some of it to store their wares. The base is stationed on the beach, meaning that if they want to get away without a fight, they better be damn good swimmers. The closest land is five miles on the opposite end of the island.”

“I can think of a dozen super criminals capable of that feat,” Sabra interrupted.

“Well, we'll make do with the small fish then,” Union Jack answered smoothly. He already accepted that, even if the mission went perfectly, they wouldn't be able to catch everyone, “I'm

going to take my team in. When I'm in position, I'll radio you to begin the assault. Any questions? No? Good."

Union Jack took a deep breath as he waved for his team to follow. The distance to the shore was equivalent to three city blocks, but thankfully the tree line helped conceal the team's location. Cybermancer activated her armor's cloak and hovered silently while the rest of Rock's team crawled on their bellies, careful to make as little noise as possible.

Having such experienced and highly trained men at his back helped ease Jack's anxiety, somewhat. He vowed that when he finished this mission, he'd join Chapman in demanding a dedicated support unit for Excalibur. These were some fine men he was leading, but they'd barely done any drills as a unit. It was as much raw nerves as experience that kept them from falling apart right now.

Sensing the first sentry before he saw saw them, Union Jack silently signaled his men to stop. A moment later, a man in a yellow uniform that resembled a stylized bee-keeper's uniform.

"A.I.M agent. I'll take him."

Union Jack looked down to where he heard the whispered voice, and saw a silver puddle. Eshu, obviously.

"Wait until he reports in," Jack whispered.

Several tense moments passed as the watchman stood there, unaware of danger lurking less than a dozen feet away, coiled and ready to strike.

It seemed to take forever for the man to tap his earpiece and report an erroneous 'all clear'. Less than ten seconds later, a silver spike shot from the ground and into the man's heart, and emerging out his back.

Eshu assumed his human form, still slick with the man's blood, and looked towards his fellow soldiers, "Clear, Jacky Boy. Hide the body?"

"Don't bother. In a few more minutes it won't matter if they come across it," Union Jack waved his men forward. Within three minutes, his troops had pushed through the brush and were within eye shot of the camp.

"Look at them all," Cybermancer breathed. Union Jack removed his binoculars and scanned the gathering, slowly counting off the numbers. He counted the organizations present as one, and then began counting the super human or other extra normal criminals. He stopped at thirty, his heart just not into it anymore.

"Ours is not to reason why," Jack mumbled under his breath.

From the comfort and safety of her personal hover craft, Abyss began weaving ancient mystical energy in a complex pattern that laymen would call a 'spell'. It was an extraordinarily simple one, far older than any remembered civilization. When cast, it instantly alerted those who were subjected to it to the exact location of the enemy. With but a gesture, Abyss cast the spell into the air, and then sat back and smiled as it did it's work.

Cybermancer wanted to wet herself when she saw every single man, woman and thing stop what they were doing, and turn their eyes and attention to exactly she and her team were concealed. She didn't see who fired the first shot, but she instinctive jumped back along with Union Jack and Eshu.

The force of the explosion threw the team on their back, and while Union Jack had the presence of mind to call the rest of the team, Eshu could only laugh to himself.

Because only a smart ass like himself could appreciate the irony that the only thing that had gone right with the mission was how it had gone so wrong, so fast.

Next issue: Excalibur's outnumbered three to one, and that's the good news! Can they contain the chaos without losing their lives?

United Nations Security Council, now

“I’m trying to think of a failure that compares to Excalibur’s,” began the American Official, “would you care to explain to me how over thirty high profile targets managed to slid through your grasp?”

“I think that question answers itself, don’t you?” replied Chapman, “I was afforded only nine superhumans to apprehend those said thirty extra normal criminals.”

“The support forces we gave you...”

“Were worth shite,” snapped Chapman, “they were the bottom percentage of several different militaries whose only qualification was that they barely spoke bloody English!”

“I hope you are not blaming us for what happened,” warned the Russian Representative, his tone carrying obvious malice, “that would have...consequences.”

“I’m blaming everyone here,” Chapman hissed, “including myself. Maybe if we were better funded and properly equipped, instead of being treated like a poor man’s version of the Avengers and Shield mashed together, I’d still have three of my men!”

Excalibur
#12
August 2007
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"MEETING RUIN"
Part Two: Meeting the Fan

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Mandipoor, Devil’s Island, then

It'd all gone to hell in the blink of an eye, reflected Union Jack. Somehow, everyone had been alerted to Excalibur's presence. Jack knew this, because somehow the information had been thrust into his skull as well. Magic was his first guess (he'd been around Captain Britain and others who used it often enough), though it didn't much matter now. A mercenary Union Jack recognized as Bombshell threw one of her patented explosive, and he had to move now. Throwing himself backwards, he gambled that his suit's armor would save his life.

The force of the explosion threw the patriotic hero Union Jack through the air, but even as he was crashing back towards Mother Earth, his battle trained reflexes activated his earpiece, and he shouted for reinforcements.

Hitting the ground hard, Rock rolled to the side as he upholstered his weapon. He fired several wild shots, hoping to ward off potential attackers than actually hitting anyone.

“I need some support, damn it!”

Union Jack rolled to a stop, so that he could assess the situation. That would prove to be possibly fatal, for when he came to a stop, Union Jack looked up and saw several Hydra soldiers had their weapons trained upon him.

“Hail Hydra!” the four soldiers seemed to shout as one, before the closest one took aim with his automatic.

Union Jack lashed out with his leg immediately, kicking the barrel of the gun into the air, where it fired off harmlessly. Pushing himself up by his hands, Jack swung his feet to underneath his body, and sprang forward, tackling three of them to the ground at once. He dispatched the first one with a headbutt, dispatched the one on his right by slamming the palm of his hand into the unfortunate bugger's face, and defeated the one on his left with a powerful chop to the neck.

Unfortunately, that left the fourth and final member of Hydra, who managed to scramble to his feet, and had his side arm drawn and pointed at the British Hero's eye.

“We are Hydra, cut off one limb and another will take its place!” he bellowed.

“Well, get ready for the cut mate.”

Jack ducked his head, and a whirling, indestructible metal shield slammed into his assailant. The metal disc ricocheted perfectly into the hands of U.S. Agent. Silverclaw and Sabra were close behind, along with Hellios, Darkstar, Scarlet Scarab and the soldiers they were leading

“Thanks, Agent,” Union Jack stood up, and took a split second to appraise the situation.

FUBAR was all he could come up with.

“Sabra, take your team and flank left, Scarab, flank right!” Rock ordered, “hard and fast, and don't give them time to group together!”

Though he was pleased to see his orders were being followed, Union Jack knew in both his head and heart that the only thing he could really do in this situation was ride herd until the end. There were too many criminals, too many soldiers, simply too damn many factors.

But he fought on despite knowing that. He was Union Jack, after all. It was almost tradition.

When Josiah Holt, AKA Night Strike in law enforcement and Human Rights circles, saw and sensed that Excalibur was on the same island as too damn many criminals to count, his first thoughts weren't of panic.

No, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief bordering on elation.

Holt was a professional saboteur, assassin and general jack of all trades mercenary, these days at least. He had decided to attend this clan-destine meeting for two reasons. The first had been to network, to integrate himself even deeper with others in his field. It never hurt to establish a professional relationship with others in the same field before a job came along.

But the second reason he'd chosen to attend is because he really, really had his heart set on either stealing, purchasing or bargaining for nasty extra normal weapon. Maybe a gamma bomb, legacy virus laced intercontinental, or perhaps something as simple as admantium laced sword. This summit was as much for displaying, high lighting and demonstrating highly illegal weapons as it was for networking with one's fellow criminal, after all.

As a matter of fact, he'd already found something that caught his eye, even as he knew it was (way) out of his price range. Holt had been mentally contemplating ways to make it his (up to, but not limited to stealing, begging or selling his soul, both figuratively and literally) when those idiots came barging in.

"There is no chance I'm going to pass this up," he swore to himself, even as laser fire flew overhead. Ducking behind a covered jeep, he took a glance out to note the positions of the Excalibur team and their support troops before he made a dash for his objective. Excalibur was having a hard enough time keeping people from running; he doubted they would target anyone running into the chaos.

That was their mistake, and Night Strike was willing to gamble it would cost an entire country their existence.

A dozen yards away from where the fire fight, appeared a single man, carried to the beach by his personal teleporter signal.

He wore a black, skin tight suit with small, silver circuits laced across it almost like webbing. Draped across the suit was a dark, sleeveless trench coat. The man himself sported brown hair, and wore a pair of round glasses across his face that seemed more suited for a High School book worm than a man of action. On his hips he wore two seemingly empty sword sheaths.

No longer going by his birth name, he was recognized by his few peers by the name of Ninjato. It was a sword he'd used while traveling Asia, and while it wasn't his preferred weapon of choice, the man thought it best described his nature, and yet wasn't revealing enough to give his foes any real knowledge about his abilities. Why some superhumans advertised their powers in their code names, Ninjato had no idea.

Casually placing his arms behind his back, he observed the battle for a moment, taking in the utter chaos as if it were simply an article in the morning's paper.

Finally, he found himself motivated to action when three mercenaries, armed to the teeth with automatic weapons.

Without a second thought, the young man approached them with the greatest stealth possible until he was within several yards of the men. The soldiers, though possessed of battle trained instincts, foolishly focused their attention on the battle they had just escaped, and not in front of them.

Removing three thin needles, no larger than regular pencils, from his pouch, Ninjato threw them with surgical precision, where each one embedded themselves into the left eye of the men's skull.

“Arrgh!” Only one of the men managed to scream out before the needles released their payload of nano-technology directly into their brains. The microscopic robots began their work on their brain tissue and basic DNA, re-knitting synapses, overriding the existing genetic code into something stronger, something deadlier. The men would have screamed, if they could, as their muscles tore themselves and reformed at three times their original strength. But their vocal cords were the first thing Ninjato's nano-bot's shut down, leaving them unable to even whimper as their entire bodies were changed down to an atomic level.

Watching with sick scientific detachment, Ninjato waited a full minute before his designer weapon had completed its work. Then, as one, the three men rose. Their skin was bright red, from increased cellular oxygen intake, and their eyes seemed dislodged from their skulls, though one would never guess that their vision had just been greatly enhanced, so much so that they could read a newspaper from fifty yards away. Their minds and bodies held the muscle memory of a dozen new and hard fought battles, in addition to their already impressive skill.

“Unit Trinity read for your orders,” they droned together.

Ninjato nodded impassively. Though others might have been impressed with it, the scientific supervillain knew that his ‘soldier juice’ was hardly anything a true scientist should be proud of. The strain it caused on the men's body would kill them in twenty hour hours, and they'd only be operable for half that time. That wasn't too much of a concern, though, it wasn't as if he needed them that long, after all.

Striding into the carnage with his newly drafted troops, Ninjato silently smirked at the irony of a pawn using even more pawns for his own ends. Oh, how the master would laugh.

“Silverclaw, stay close!” Sabra barked as a large Alpha Class Hydra Man-droid battle armor began stomping towards them, kicking up the beach sand as it went.

The Israeli super agent went through the armor's history in her minds eye as it bore down on her. Designed as the terrorist's answer to the walking battle tanks known as Man-droids, the things stood some nine feet tall, five feet across with gleaming green armor and that damned Hydra

symbol at the center of it's chest, it was faster and more maneuverable than the average Man-Droid, though lacking in firepower in comparison.

“Uh, you want to take this one?” asked U.S Agent

“Gladly. Cease fire!” Sabra ordered to the soldiers flanking her, moments before the battle armor was almost upon her. The last thing she needed right now was the distraction.

The battle armor was nearly on top of her when Sabra leapt into the air, and drove her powerful fists into the metal chest of her armored attacker. The punch was so powerful that the pilot inside the armor found himself thrown for a loop, falling backwards on his ass like a sucker punched drunk. In the several seconds it took him to recover his wits, Sabra was standing over him, her powerful fists clenched together.

The Hydra soldier shrieked as Sabra brought her fists down with enough force to split steel. In his panic, the man had forgotten that six inches of armored glass. When Sabra’s fist struck the glass, it cracked like an egg. Wedging her fingernails inside the glass, Sabra strained her muscles before the armored glass popped off like a beer cap.

“Don’t kill me, please!” begged the soldier, who’d suddenly realized he’d been ordered into battle as a delaying tactic, chum thrown into the water to keep the sharks from the bigger fish.

“Shut up,” Sabra activated her wrist needles, a single dart piercing the man’s flesh and rendering him unconscious. Not for the first time, Sabra was thankful that her superiors insisted she carry some non lethal weapons into battle. The use of lethal force always managed to escalate battles, and that was the last thing they needed right now.

But with the immediate threat dealt with, Sabra found herself at a loss for what to do next. All over, there was chaos. The gathered terrorists had turned against each other as well as Excalibur, and began exchanging fire.

“Look out!”

Given the pandemonium, Sabra could be forgiven for not seeing the feet that collided into her mid section before it was too late. The Israel super agent was tossed backwards, striking a hum-vee so hard the bullet proof steel was dented.

“Sabra!” Silverclaw shifted into the form of a humanoid cat, and snarled at the man who'd struck her mentor. The man was tall, easily six feet and while not broad shouldered, was far skinny. Dressed in all black, with a white spider-symbol between the eyes of the mask, Silverclaw had little trouble recognizing the man as the infamous Black Tarantula, a drug lord from her native South America.

“As tempting as it might be flee this confrontation, I'm afraid I must make an example of the United Nations law enforcement,” Black Tarantula's tone was cold and impersonal, though his

words were anything but, “first X-Force, now this. If I'm to maintain my reputation, I simply cannot allow this to go unpunished.”

“I'll tear you to shreds!” hissed Silverclaw.

“Claw, no!” U.S Agent grabbed for the youngest member of Excalibur, but missed by inches.

Almost casually, Black Tarantula knocked the young heroine aside. Silverclaw landed on her feet (in no small part thanks to the cat form she'd assumed), but when she looked up to face the enemy, she saw his eyes glowing with power.

“I will make your death swift.”

Energy lanced outwards from the crimelord's eyes, and all Silverclaw panicked, raising her arms in front of her face to protect herself (as opposed to dodging or something more useful, lectured a small voice), but was shocked when she heard a -clang!- and felt someone fall on top of her.

“Agent!”

“Don't respect your elders in the field, you get killed,” grouched Walker as he stood up, his shield between him, his teammate, and the super powered drug lord.

“Sorry, what he did to Sabra...”

“Ought to have been a clear sign not to underestimate him,” finished U.S Agent, “this bastard is a class three superhuman, at least. I doubt you know what that means, so let me make it simple. Not only is he dangerously strong and powerful, but he's trained to use said power to its fullest potential. Think Jackie Chan with super strength.”

Silverclaw gulped audibly.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly.”

“You flatter me, U.S Agent,” Black Tarantula fell into a fighting stance, “but I've read your file too. If I may say so, my training and strength greatly surpass your own. I warn you now, I will kill one of you for today's trouble. Decide amongst yourself, now!”

Black Tarantula was a second away from leaping into action when Sabra's fist slammed into his kidney. Survival instincts flaring, Tarantula swung his fist behind him as he spun around to face his opponent, but the super agent fluidly ducked under the blow and delivered another two strong punches to the villain's kidneys.

“I've already decided who will die here,” Sabra snorted as she leapt back. Pointing her wrists, she unleashed a barrage of her specially designed needles. Laced with energy, they didn't need to pierce the flesh to paralyze whoever they struck, though made from surgical steel; they had little trouble doing both, as Black Tarantula discovered.

“Arrgh!” Though blessed with superior healing, Black Tarantula was hardly immune to pain. He tried to brush some of the needles off his chest, but he made the mistake of again ignoring Sabra. He'd barely removed a quarter of the needles before Sabra lunged at him, furiously battering his body all over.

One well placed snap kick caught Sabra in the chin and drove her back, but Black Tarantula realized the damage was already done. The heroine had driven the needles further into his skin as his body healed. With his skin healed over the needles, they now stabbed painfully at his nerves, little blades constantly slicing underneath his flesh. The villain knew that nothing short of surgery would get them out now, damn his healing factor!

“According to Mossad files, you are in fact a talented fighter,” Sabra cracked her knuckles, “care to test your skills against a seasoned Krav Maga fighter?”

“Love to,” snarled the drug lord.

Cybermancer bobbed and weaved through the night sky, her scanners working furiously to work out a flight pattern that wouldn't get her killed. She was in the middle of returning fire with a horde of private mercenaries, when she realized that just to the north of her scanners were blank, literally. An entire section of the beach was a perfect blank slate, according to all casual scans.

Suzi didn't become a scientist by being an idiot. With a simple radar scan (ironically, most advanced cloaking devices still had trouble with basic radar simply because the people who built them assumed no one would use such a primitive method), she pierced the cloaking field. What it revealed made her stop dead.

“Eshu, I need you here, now!” shouted the armored heroine.

Eshu, a shapeshifter, had just polished off several AIM agents when he heard his teammate call for him.

Stretching his legs forward, he was at her side in three lengthy steps.

“What's the deal, Cybermancer?”

Cybermancer began adjusted a knob on her gauntlet, and pointed it towards the seemingly empty corner of the beach, “You'll see in just a second.”

A flash of energy was released, and Eshu knew his heart would have stopped if he still had one. Standing revealed before them was an AIM modified, intercontinental ballistic stinger missile, nick named the 'country killer'. Twenty feet long and built like a dump truck, it carried a missile half that size, armed with several metric tons of radiological and biological weapons. It had been used only once as a weapon of black mail, before a Shield team shut it down, that was one time too many. The weapon's very existence scared the living hell entire intelligence community, and

looking at it, her scanners detailing each and every deadly toxin and radioactive element inside the payload, while knowing that it could strike anywhere on the planet, Suzi could see why.

The thing was a marvel of extranormal technology, with Pym particles shrinking down literal tons of chemical weapons mixed with radioactive elements that would ground the poisons for thousands of years, and a payload system that could circle the earth twice before coming down within inches of its designated target. It was a work of genius. Twisted and evil certainly, but genius all the same.

Eshu whistled softly, never expecting to actually be in the presence of such a feared weapon. In its own way, it was like seeing a perverted version of the Enola Gay.

“We have to secure this thing,” snapped Cybermancer, “there is no way in hell we can let anyone take this thing with them as a keepsake. I'm going to start disabling the rocket, you cover me.”

“You better work fast,” Eshu pointed towards a figure running away from the weapon, “because there's no way that's a good thing.”

“Damn it, stop him!” Cybermancer barked, “we have to know what he did!”

Cybermancer shot towards the man, but unfortunately she'd already been spotted. The man removed a gun from his side holster and fired. Cybermancer, confident of her armor's abilities, never thought to dodge, and it was a mistake she paid for when the specially designed missile struck her chest plate. The size of a pencil, it was a specially made localized electro-magnetic pulse weapon. While it didn't crash all her systems, her boot-jets and flight computers were instantly compromised, and she crashed to ground in a heap.

“No sleeping on the job,” teased Eshu, his malleable body reaching out with tentacles, ensnaring their mystery foe.

“Damn it, Kevin, let me go!”

Eshu did a double take when he heard his birth name. No one, not even his fellow members on Excalibur, knew his real name. Keeping his body firmly wrapped around the man, Eshu squinted his eyes, and was stunned to find that he recognized the man.

“Holt?! What in God's name are you doing here?”

“What do you think I'm doin'? Man's gotta eat,” he spat, trying to struggle his way out of Eshu's grip, “ever since the U.N., your employers gave Magneto our homeland, us Magistrates have had to resort to merc work just to feed our family!”

“Do you know this man?”

“Yeah, we...worked the same detail in Genosha,” Eshu explained carefully, “his name is Josiah Holt, call sign Night Stalker. He and I...sorta dealt with dissenters back in the ol' mother land.”

“What he means to say is that we kept our fellow mutants down,” Holt grinned. Eshu tightened his grip around his once fellow officer, but he kept on talking, “we were some of the best capture/kill units.”

“Shut up!” snarled Eshu, this time constricting his body so hard his captive howled in pain, “we were never that close in Genosha, Holt. Want me to fix that?”

“Forget your grudge,” Suzi insisted, “we need to know what he was doing with that missile.”

“You're pretty dumb for someone so smart,” snickered Night Stalker, “the United Nation gave Magneto Genosha. Where do you think I aimed that damn thing at?”

The entire beach seemed to shudder, and the two heroes watched in horror as the missile began its pre-flight. The rockets began flaring, covering the area in exhaust.

“Ha! I wouldn't want to be on the other end of that thing!” smirked Night Stalker.

“Hellios! We need you here!” Cybermancer shouted into her radio. Once glanced at her HUD told her that her armor wouldn't fully reboot for another full minute, but the rocket would be ready to launch in half that time “Hellios, answer me, this is an emergency!”

A roar of pain was her response, and for a second Cybermancer realized just how out of control this entire situation was. All around her people were embroiled in their own battles while a missile with a payload powerful enough to kill a nation was readying to launch less than twenty feet away.

“Damn, damn damn!” Suzi ripped open a panel on her gauntlet, determined to rewire her armor by hand if need be. But by the time she got to the first wire, the missile's rockets began firing, and lifting off it's launch platform.

“No!”

Eshu took a moment to look at his teammate, Holt, and then the rocket. With great reluctance but amazing speed none the less, he shot out his hand like a fishing reel and grabbed the side of the missile, his shape shifting body holding on like gum to a sidewalk.

“Eshu, don't!” Suzi saw it happen almost in slow motion, but it was already too late. The shapeshifter had released Night Stalker, and was clinging to the side, dangling like a fish on a reel.

The lenses on Suzi's armor picked up Eshu worming his way inside the missile, his pliable form slipping through cracks in the missile's designs. But the fact that her friend was now inside a deadly missile capable of wiping out an entire country naturally did nothing to ease her anxiety.

“That kid was always stupid,” remarked Holt.

“Shut! Up!” Suzi spun around and smashed her steel gloved fist into Night Stalker's face, loosening her fair share of teeth and breaking his jaw.

Ten seconds later her armor fully rebooted, and the armored heroine didn't hesitate to activate her boot jets.

“Jack, this is Cybermancer!” she called out over the comm., “I'm pursuing a ballistic missile armed with radioactive bio-weapons! Eshu is already on board!”

“Bloody hell! You two picked a wonderful time for a vacation!” Suzi grimaced, realizing she could hear the sounds of battle clearly over Rock's voice.

“We don't have much of a choice here, 'Jack!” Cybermancer hated the thought of deserting her teammates when they needed her most, but the lives of millions would always have more weight measured against her life, and that of her teammates.

Not all of Excalibur struggled against overwhelming power, though. Darkstar, Scarlet Scarab and Hellios, easily the three most powerful members of the team, actually managed to hold their own fairly well.

Darkstar created ebony walls to barrel roll soldiers, while Scarlet Scarab's powerful blasts cut down several thugs armored in outdated Crimson Dynamo armors, while Hellios simply waded through a mob of soldiers who actually choose courage instead of flight (likely knowing they sure as hell wouldn't get far. They were on an island, after all).

But all the same, it was like trying to catch roaches after someone flipped the light on. Both Scarlet Scarab and Darkstar were terrified out of their minds, fighting on pure emotional instinct.

“That the best you can do? Come on, then!”

Hellios, however, wasn't quite as worried.

Plasma bursts, nano-tech bombs, gamma bursts and even the occasional knife or arrow bounced harmlessly off his super powered form. Nothing that they threw at him even gave the solar powered hero pause, and he was confident nothing would.

Even hip deep in AIM Dreadnaughts, he was already envisioning, in his mind's eye, how he would save the entire team from this disaster.

Sadly, reality had other plans.

“Die for Set!” Hellios saw a man, dressed in a green, snake like uniform, aim a rocket launcher and fire. Thinking the payload was nothing, Hellios plucked the missile out of the air like it was a paper plane, and crushed it in his hand.

Almost immediately, he realized his mistake, as his hand began to feel numb, while glowing brighter and brighter.

“That bomb was designed to tear the energy from your power soaked cells!” raved the madman as he marched forward, ignoring the scorching heat that was already radiating from Hellios' body, “I've turned you into a living, solar powered bomb! Kill for Set! The glory of the death god...”

A surge of pure energy reduced the man to ash, but Hellios hadn't noticed, nor did he hear Cybermancer's cry for help over his own scream of pain.

“Hellios!” Darkstar saw her teammate in agony, and reached out with her darkforce powers, hoping to contain his rampaging power. Unfortunately, the raw solar power dissolved it instantly.

“Laynia! Don't get too close!” Scarlet Scarab warned.

“We have to do something!” By now, Hellios was radiating so much power the sand beneath him was molten glass, “you heard that madman! He could destroy the entire island!”

“I'll try to siphon off his heat, maybe get it under control!” Scarlet Scarab proposed, trying not to let the doubt he felt slip through his voice. Even with his own great strength and endurance, he was beginning to sweat. Already Darkstar had flown back some ten feet to avoid being baked, and it was barely enough.

“Can you handle that much power?”

“I don't know. But if I can't, will it really matter?”

U.S. Agent watched Sabra and Black Tarantula fight back and forth for what seemed like an eternity. While he wanted to help her with every bone in his body, he also knew that he'd just be getting in the way at this point.

But like a good teammate, he kept his eye on the fight while he dealt with the riff raff. And it was because of that, that U.S. Agent saw a most curious sight.

“What in hell's name...?”

To his astonishment, U.S. Agent saw the mysterious Ninjato, flanked by his enslaved helpers, actually walking into the chaos. The fact that they were heading into the firefight, and not away from it, was suspicious, but from the look of him, he knew exactly where he was going and what he wanted.

Something tugged at the back of Walker's mind, an inkling of a theory. A man of action, John Walker lived by his instincts, and his instincts were telling him to investigate.

“Silverclaw! Watch your back, I need to check something out!” Agent hollered to his teammate as he dashed off.

U.S. Agent tried his best to keep an eye on the men, but there was a burst of light and wave of heat from somewhere that blinded him for a split second, but that was enough to lose the mystery guest.

U.S Agent cursed, but recovered quickly enough. He scanned the ground, looking for foot prints, “Where’d that little bastard disappear to...?”

It didn’t take him long to find their trail, and he followed it for several feet before it literally disappeared into a well lit tent, that appeared to be almost completely empty, with the exception of a few crates, though a glance at the two dead AIM soldiers told the former Avenger that this was no mere tent.

“This is a bad idea,” U.S. Agent took a few steps back, then charged forward, “this is a really bad idea!”

As he plunged into the tent, the background changed from empty tent to sleek, metal room filled with all kinds of equipment and weapons. Besides enough technology to keep the average mad scientist busy for a year, there was of course Ninjato, and his three zombie soldiers.

“I don’t recall inviting you,” Ninjato said simply. He glanced at his soldiers, “Kill him.”

U.S. Agent brought up his shield as he unholstered his weapon, diving to the side as he returned fire. And though he wasn’t Clint Barton, he still managed to do fatal damage to the three by the time he landed.

Observing the three corpses on the floor, Ninjato could only sigh, “And I brought them along so that I wouldn’t have to get my hands dirty. Did you really have to kill them, John? You really did limit their usefulness.”

U.S. Agent tried to react to hearing his real name. He knew that, within certain intelligence circles, both good and bad, his entire history was an open file, literally, “Sorry buddy, I can’t stand henchmen. I’m impatient that way.”

“Very well then,” U.S Agent saw his foe reach into his coat and slash his hand towards him. Though his first thought was that it was merely a feint, his instincts took over regardless, raising his shield in front of his body and a split second later, he heard something shatter. Looking down, he could see some type of glass or crystal on the floor.

Didn’t even see the damned things, thought U.S. Agent. As he watched Ninjato grab his seemingly empty sheathes that were around his waist, Walker prepared himself for one nasty fight. An opponent who’s abilities he didn’t know but was obviously both intelligent and skilled, in a high tech warehouse filled with God knows what while smelling like a chemical factory.

He could already feel the head ache building.

“Ugh!”

Sabra stumbled back, having taken a direct punch to the head from Black Tarantula’s fist. When Black Tarantula stepped forward to follow up with a left hook, Sabra stepped back and brought her foot up and smashed it into the villain’s knee. The damage wasn’t enough to prevent him from ramming his shoulder into her stomach, but Sabra didn’t mind the pain too much.

Not when it gave her the chance to slam both fists down upon the Drug Lord’s back with enough power to kill a herd of rhinos. Grabbing underneath the man’s armpits, Sabra then pitched him bodily into a nearby hover tank.

They’d been fighting back and forth for a full ten minutes now, neither gaining an advantage.

Unfortunately for the two, they were too evenly matched. Strength, combat experience and just plain toughness, neither seemed to be able to gain an advantage, at least at first.

When Sabra saw Black Tarantula’s eyes flair with power, she knew what was going to happen next. With a burst of energy, Sabra found herself pitched backwards, slamming into a parked hummer, her powerful body bending the steel door.

“Surrender...and I promise to end this quickly,” gasped Black Tarantula, his chest heaving with exertion.

“If the son of a whore killed me here...I’d never live it down,” Sabra hissed. She tried to stand, but then clutched her hands to her side and hissed in pain.

Incensed, and seeing such an obvious weakness, Black Tarantula marshaled his strength, rushing forward like a drunkard with the hopes of finishing this fight and then escaping.

Sabra saw then, and began limping towards the front of the hummer, as if to get away. But when Black Tarantula was only a mere five feet away, Sabra stood straight as if she’d never been hurt, grabbed the hummer’s bumper and swung it towards her foe with all her mighty strength.

Black Tarantula never had a chance.

The hummer slammed into him bodily and threw him into the air, and far, far away from the battle.

“Idiots are always too willing to see weakness in woman,” muttered the Israeli agent as she discarded the hummer.

“Sabra...!”

Sabra turned to see Silverclaw rushing towards her, along with a giant piece of shrapnel that was hurtling towards them both.

“Down!”

Sabra grabbed the younger heroine and placed Silverclaw in front of her while she braced herself for the impact. The flaming Man-Droid battery slammed into her back, but thankfully wasn't enough to hurt the Israeli agent.

“Oh man...” Silverclaw looked at the wreckage that might have taken her life, were it not for Sabra.

“Maria, we don't have time to stare,” snapped Sabra, “we need to get this situation under control. So report, or start fighting!”

“Something's wrong with Agent!” Silverclaw explained hastily.

Sabra scoffed. Despite the man's brash attitude, he was one of the most capable members of Excalibur.

“U.S. Agent can handle himself just fine. We've enough to do here without stumbling over him.”

“No, you don't understand!” insisted Silverclaw, “I can smell his blood! He's being cut to pieces!”

Just how did this happen? Agent asked himself as he clutched his chest, his hand draped over a deep cut that ran across his entire chest. That wasn't even the worst of it. In his short battle with Ninjato, John had picked up a dozen similar cuts, a raging headache and burning eyes that struggled to see his foe, as the room itself seemed to spin.

“Come now, John, I know you can do better than this,” stated Ninjato, his tone only slightly sarcastic. U.S. Agent replied with a hail of gunfire, all of which was easily dodged.

“Feeling a tad sluggish? Trouble breathing, perhaps?” Ninjato swung his swords almost casual, slicing into Agent's shoulder, “you've no one to blame but yourself.”

U.S. Agent caught a look at the men he'd shot, and saw their rapidly decomposing bodies. They almost looked as though they were evaporating. Even through the poison haze that enveloped his mind, Walker knew what had happened.

“Even in death, my cannon fodder has it's uses,” Ninjato explained, “though they're less effective in an open environment.”

A well placed kick sent U.S Agent stumbling backwards, but he remained standing by strength of will alone.

“This has been amusing, John Walker,” Ninjato stood in front of the bloodied hero and leveled his sword over his shoulder, “but my master desires the contents of this tesseract, and that requires your removal.”

“Agent, report!” Sabra snapped as she stepped into the room. She took a single whiff, and stopped dead.

“Silverclaw, stay back!” she barked, “there's poison gas in the air. I can handle it, you can't!”

Sabra stepped quickly though. She knew her limits, and knew today wasn't the day to test them.

“Walker, are you alright?”

Sabra had just stepped past a metal column when she saw it. John Walker, U.S. Agent, sliding off the glass sword of an unknown enemy, a pool of crimson gathering around him.

“If I had to venture a guess,” answered Ninjato, “I would have to say no.”

Next issue: Excalibur is pushed to their limits as they try to contain the situation and restore control! But is that even possible as they lose members left and right? Plus, two explosions and at least one death as Meeting Ruin comes to it's explosive finale!

New York, Little UN Restaurant Now

The Little UN was a restaurant established back in the sixties by, of all organizations, the CIA and KGB. Both organizations agreed that their agents, the attaches' who acted as go betweens for the diplomats and their respective agencies.

And so, six blocks, The Little UN Bar was created. Financed by the CIA, it was declared a 'safe zone' by all major agencies (so long as it wasn't abused, and amazingly, it never was) for their operatives who weren't undercover to stop looking over their shoulders, stop worrying about how their every word was being recorded and dissected by faceless spies in the backroom of a safe house or embassy, and just unwind.

In short, it was a blue collar bar for those that did the grunt work that went along with running the world. A working man's bar, albeit a few levels above blue collar.

And so when Ruth Bat-Seraph, otherwise known as Sabra, needed to find her teammate, she knew exactly where to look. As soon as she entered the bar, one look around the room told her exactly where the man she wanted to find was sitting. Nursing a glass, Union Jack sat in the corner in quiet contemplation.

"You are set to testify in front of the Security Council in a few hours Rock," Sara stated in a neutral tone, "are certain you wish to have alcohol on your breath?"

"It's customary to drink to lost friends," countered Union Jack, "after our dust up on Devil's Island..."

"But not before giving an official after action report," Sabra shot back, "it is my understanding the Security Council is torn between two extremes. One camp is of the mind that Excalibur is a waste and the program should be discontinued, and the other side feels that not enough resources were invested."

"How do you feel?"

"That Excalibur's mandate is a good one," Sabra answered, "but that my service on the team takes away time I could instead use to serve my country."

"Plus, there's Chapman," observed Union Jack.

"I realized that. Depending on how we give our report, it might make the difference between him continuing as director of Excalibur..."

"Or him being kicked to the curb," finished Union Jack. The British hero examined his reflection in his drink, "I think I'm going to need something stronger."

Excalibur

#13

October 2007

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"MEETING RUIN"

Conclusion: Fallout

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Devil's Island, then

Cybermancer diverted every last ounce of energy into her boot-jets as she trailed after a enormous missile with a payload powerful enough to exterminate an entire country. But no matter how hard she pushed her armor, Suzi found it impossible to close the distance. The only reason she could even see the missile was because of the magnifying capabilities on her visor, allowing her to see the missile that was a mile away as if it were right in front of her face.

If that missile struck, with its pay load ...Suzi shuddered. She literally did not want to think how the mutant population of the world would react if 'their' nation was suddenly wiped off the face of the earth one morning. Riots and killings on a global scale for certain and if that's all that happened, they were lucky.

But not all hope was lost, Cybermancer knew. When the missile launched, the team's shapeshifter Eshu had managed to get aboard, and worm his way inside. The only problem was, Eshu happened to be an ex-patriot of Genosha, and that was exactly where the missile she was chasing was aimed at.

And God help them all if Magneto or some other omega mutant on Genosha actually managed to stop the thing without blowing it up. The amount of bio-weapons and radioactive material on the missile could have paid off the national debt of a small country if sold on the black market.

The question now was, would Eshu help her disarm it, or stand idly by as it devastated his former homeland? Some could easily see it as dying for their country.

Only one way to find out...

"Eshu, this is Cybermancer, come in!"

Silence.

"Come on, this isn't funny!"

Nothing.

“I will so jam that missile so far up your ass if you don’t answer!”

“Had you going, didn’t I?” replied Eshu. Though Cybermancer doubted the shapeshifter even had a mouth, she knew somehow that jerk was grinning.

“Yeah, ha ha,” Cybermancer growled, “have you found any way to disable that thing?”

“What, like a big red button that says 'off',?” Eshu shot back, “sorry babe, you’re the big brain, not me. You gotta tell me what to do, not the other way around. What are our options?”

“Premature detonation is the ideal choice,” Suzi explained, “if the bomb detonates before it's properly armed, the blast should destroy the bio weapons instead of simply scattering it.”

“And it'd also kill me,” Eshu observed.

“Like I said,” Suzi chuckled, “it is the ideal solution.”

“Ha! Gallow humor, I think I like you even more now!”

“We'll go with option two for right now. See if you can't worm your way towards the front of the missile. If we can hack its navigation computer, we might have some leverage with this damned thing.”

“Oh god, oh god, heroes, why did there have to be heroes here?” Professor Ethan Mortious asked no one in particular as he verged on a nervous breakdown. He was a man of short height, brown hair with an average face. The only thing that made him stand out in a crowd was how his left eye was covered in a replaced with metal and circuitry, a specially crafted microscope enhancement designed to give him a better view for some of the micro-surgery he had to perform on certain pieces of technology. 'The Mort', as he was known in most underworld circles, was unlike most 'mad scientists' that heroes encountered. The Mort recreated existing weapons and sold cheap knock offs to the crime agencies that could afford them while paying a percentage to the original inventor. Where someone like the Tinkerer might help a villain build and maintain his weaponry, it was people like Mort who helped the same villains turn a profit elsewhere. After all, they needed money to stay operational after the authorities shut down their accounts and confiscated all their equipment.

The Mort was hardly the only scientist to devote his time to selling imitation weaponry, but he was by far the most successful. He'd worked with the Trapster, Klaw, Doc Ock and on the rare occasion, The Wizard among others. He'd secretly helped them either turn their current inventions into money, or secretly patent a new one under an assumed identity.

But the six digit income that brought him just wasn't enough for 'The Mort', not with the risks involved, so he thought that he might branch out and cultivate some new contacts. He especially hoped to make inroads with Abyss, the latest up and comer on the international crime scene.

But now, with Excalibur only yards away, those dreams were like ash in the wind. Gathering up the more powerful (and thus more expensive) weapons into one silver container, he tapped his wrist watch to activate an emergency teleporter kept on standby for just such an emergency.

Nothing.

He tapped it again, a little more urgently this time.

Again, he remained rooted.

“This multi-level phase interference devise you have over here? Top notch work, mate,” complimented a new voice, “designed to keep unwanted guests from teleporting in unexpected. Or out, as the case may be.”

The Mort spun around to see Union Jack standing next to one of his prize inventions (the very same one that kept him on the accused island. Who knew the patriotic idiot was so damn smart?), his gun leveled at the quivering scientist's head.

“I need some equipment. And according to Interpol, you're the go to man for that.”

The Mort wiped a thick sheen of sweat off his face, “What...what do you need exactly?”

“Hydra grade weapons, probably some MGH and if you have a certain Dutchman's weapons, I'll definitely need that,” explained Union Jack.

“MGH? Why...why do you need a drug like that? Can't cut it with your team?” sneered Mort.

“I've never had a problem standing equal to titans,” Union Jack countered, “it's a failsafe.”

“Is that how you justify it?” Mort asked, his voice containing a little too courage for a man at the wrong end of a gun barrel.

Union Jack barely heard the soft crunch behind him before it was too late. He swung his left arm up and behind to block a skilled karate chop aimed at his head, and instinctively fired the pistol in his right hand, hitting The Mort's kneecaps like it was a bullseye. The scientist went down screaming.

Union Jack faired little better. The shot had cost him, as his mysterious foe landed a solid kick across the stomach, followed up by a blinding (literally!) right hook that sent Rock sprawling into the nearby equipment.

“I'm in a bit of a pickle, old friend,” explained the attacker, “and I think your life would be just the thing to get me off this island before even more idiots crash the party.”

Union Jack shook his head to clear the stars, and when he saw the man that had attacked him, he gritted his teeth in anger.

“Shockwave, you prat...”

Shockwave, clad in a yellow body suit with wires running all across it and a glass plate plate that the man's entire face, was a name well known by everyone in MI5. Lancaster Sneed had been trained in explosives, but botched his first mission so badly he was almost killed. While most people that idiotic would have had the good sense to fade into the shadows on an agency pension, this bastard got himself enhancements and went mercenary, with an eye towards sticking it to the agency that had trained him. Armed with an armor that gave him electric punches (and kicks) and comprehensive training in martial arts, he was a man to be reckoned with.

At least, for most people.

“I don't have time for this,” Union Jack growled as he stood up, “leave now, and we can call it square.”

“You're my ticket out, you little poof,” Shockwave countered. He assumed a fighting stance, “that's the only reason why I won't kill you. But lets see how much you can take, eh?”

Union Jack strode forward unafraid. Shockwave assumed it was simple arrogance and opened with a punch towards Union Jack's ribcage. The hero didn't even budge when the blow landed, and that's when Shockwave realized his mistake.

“It's called insulation,” Union Jack grabbed Shockwave's wrist and bent it backwards, “only been around for over fifty years.”

With his right hand, Union Jack's knife flashed, and almost instantly Shockwave found his suit losing power. Union Jack then closed the distance between them in a simple step. Though he had released Shockwave's wrist, it really didn't make that much of a difference.

With his left fist, Union Jack punished Shockwave's kidneys, where the armor plates were looser to allow greater flexibility. At the same time, he repeatedly swung his right elbow into Shockwave's face and neck. The mercenary tried his best to fight back, but the sand underneath his feet made it impossible to dig in and counter.

The Mort didn't intend to stick around to see who'd win the fight, though. He began crawling towards the entrance of his tent with his leg ruined, and hopefully out of the scrambler's range.

He didn't get five feet before Union Jack grabbed him by the collar, and swung the pitiful scientist over his head and face first into one of his many storage create and pressed the barrel of his gun on the terrified man's forehead.

“I asked you a question. I want an answer now, or so help me I’ll literally pick your brain and find what I want that way!”

Mehemet Faoul, the Scarlet Scarab, felt as though his eyes were being pitched in acid as he looked towards his teammate, but he couldn't look away.

Not when his teammate needed his help.

Hellios' body was releasing enough light to be mistaken for a small star, but the mighty hero wasn't in control of an ounce of it. A suicidal cultist had blasted the Greek champion with a missile that tore control of his stores solar energy from him. Scarlet Scarab knew it was only a matter of time before his teammate lost all control, destroying the island, killing everyone and if the damage was limited to that, then they could be counted as lucky.

“Hellios! Hellios, can you hear me?!” Scarab shouted as he edged closer to his teammate, all the while soaking in the rampant solar energy with his magical scarab. But even with his incredible power, Scarlet Scarab found the light and energy just too much to bear. His skin starting to sizzle and his eyes searing with pain, he stepped back and looked away, trying to blink the dots from his eyes.

“Did you manage to reach him?” asked Darkstar. She'd erected a full shield around herself to keep from being scorched, Scarab saw. All around them, Hydra, AIM and even their own soldiers had stopped fighting, watching the scene unfold with pure terror.

“No, his body is expelling energy too fast, even for me!” Scarab exclaimed, “if there were some way to slow the process, I might be able to help him resume control, but...”

“I can help there,” Darkstar interrupted, “the solar energy his body is putting out is disrupting my powers, but it may be just enough to let you get close enough to Hellios, and maybe stop his meltdown!”

Scarab nodded, “Then we haven't a moment to lose.”

Darkstar nodded, pointed her hands, and expelled a mass of darkforce. The ebony energy blanketed the Egyptian hero from head to toe, and he immediately dove into torrent of energy. He could feel the darkforce sheath around his body chipping, energy cutting chipped and ate away at the shell, but it slowed the onslaught of energy to an acceptable rate, and made it almost bearable to cast his eyes at Hellios without losing his vision.

“Hellios! You have to get out of here!” Scarab yelled as he willed himself to absorb even more power from his teammate. It both amazed and terrified him, the sheer amount of power his teammate possessed.

“I...I can't!”

“You have to!” snapped Scarab, “you’re a hero, Hellios! Reach into yourself and find the strength! I know you don’t want to die, but I also know you don’t want to be a killer!”

“I..I am a hero,” Hellios snarled through gritted teeth, more for his own benefit than anyone else’s.

“And for what it’s worth, your death will be that of a hero’s.”

“I won’t die, Scarab. Trust in Allah.”

Pushing aside the pain, Hellios rose to his feet. Uttering a half remembered prayer from his youth, Hellios mustered his willpower and rocketed into the sky, like a falling star in reverse.

Almost instantly, Scarab aimed his hands towards the sky, and released the pent up energy, enough to destroy an entire city, into the night’s sky. For a moment, the entire island was awash in pure light, before the night sky reclaimed the island.

Spent, Scarlet Scarab fell to one knee and glanced towards his teammate. From the look of her, Darkstar was equally exhausted, having strained her abilities to the limit just giving him the chance to get close to their teammate.

Having succeeded, the two wanted to do nothing more than pass out into blissful unconsciousness.

That’s when the first mortar fell from the sky, hissing like an insane firecracker. Darkstar threw up a force field while Scarab crossed his arms over his face, and hoped that he still had enough energy in his mystic jewel to protect him, because it was obvious these terrorists weren’t about to show them the least bit of gratitude.

I only hope the others are faring better, Darkstar thought to herself as she willed herself into the air. In the past, Laynia had found flying to be an effortless matter. But right now, she felt as though her body were made of lead and returning fire with blasts of darkforce was easily three times as hard now, because it’s hard to be doing any worse than us!

Silverclaw wanted to throw up as she saw U.S. Agent’s body slide off the sword of Ninjato. Sabra stood there impassively, her body taunt with power waiting to explode. Though she was concerned for her teammate’s welfare, she also knew that their mystery foe could still end his life with a flick of his wrist.

“I’m going to make this simple,” he began, “the Agent’s life for this room. Give me your word that you’ll allow me to leave in piece, and you can take your man.

“No,” Sabra retorted simply. She slammed her palms together so loudly it sounded as if a cannon had just been fired. A wave of pressurized air traveled through the air like a cannonball, and

Ninjato just barely leapt over the attack before it crippled him. When he came back down again, he found Sabra standing between him and U.S. Agent, and clearly unwilling to budge.

“Silverclaw, get U.S. Agent out of here, and call for a teleport. And do it quickly, this room is filled with a fast acting poison. My body is strong enough to take it, but it may start affecting you.”

“Actually, I’d suggest that the both of you leave,” Ninjato suggested politely, “just before U.S. Agent interrupted me, I had placed several dimensional anchors around this tesseract. Within several moments, this room will be released from the portal at Devil’s Island and will reconnect at a location of my choosing.”

“You’re bluffing. The technology you would need ...”

“Was thoughtfully provided by my master,” Ninjato bowed respectfully, “I fear you already have enough to deal with this day. I suggest you leave, immediately.”

“You are the cause of all this, aren’t you?” hissed Sabra, fists clenched, “you’re stealing a damned tesseract...you don’t get the hardware to do that from just anyone, especially when you’re ripping AIM, or all people.”

“You’re every bit as intelligent as your file indicates,” complimented Ninjato, “however, as I explained, your questions will have to be answered at another time.”

The room began rumbling, as if a stampede of elephants were tearing through the room.

“Unless of course you’d like to make the journey with me? Because I assure you, the people I work with are more than prepared for that possibility.”

Sabra spun on her heels, and though she hated herself for it, flew out of the room and back towards the island at amazing speed. The moment she emerged from the tent, she looked back and saw the room she’d just occupied slowly shrink into a dark horizon.

“I got Agent back to base, what the hell just happened?” asked Silverclaw.

“A tesseract is basically a larger dimensional space transposed over a smaller one,” explained Sabra, “remove the anchors and it becomes unhinged from reality. Our mystery foe said he replaced the anchors, meaning he can bring it back anywhere he wants! He likely got away with an untold amount of advanced technology!”

“That sucks, but we’re still here! What do we do now?!”

“We leave,” Abyss ordered. He was watching the carnage from his personal craft, removed from the chaos caused by the raid on a summit that he had convened.

“As we should have done the moment we heard this raid was coming!” Charon, one of Abyss' top aides, whined, “our little magic isn't enough to keep them from looking our way forever!”

“Noted.” Abyss barely seemed to shrug as he took his seat in the center of the craft.

Fatale, another close operative of Abyss, elbowed her associate in the ribs and gave him a look that translated into a perfectly reasonable plea to 'Shut the hell up or he'll kill us!'.

“Someone did this to me,” Abyss said aloud, to no one in particular, “I know Chapman. It cannot be a coincidence that this fell into his lap, or that his forces were so ill prepared. Or that we were forewarned.”

The craft lifted off unnoticed, and soon Devil's Island was little more than a fiery speck of unfortunate chaos in the distance.

“Someone did this to me. Why, who, I don't know. But I will find out, and I will make them pay a hundred times over!”

It's so...small from up here, Hellios looked down at his home planet, in awe of the blue and green globe beneath him. He'd seen earth like this before, in fact the solar powered champion made it a point to see earth from space at least once a week but something about it seemed different now.

It was probably because he was dying, allowing him to truly realize that despite everything, despite how people and nations tried to divide themselves, that humanity was just one race, one people.

Death brought the most romantic thoughts, Hellios concluded.

He had only made it to the upper atmosphere before he hadn't the power to keep flying any farther. Thankfully, all the radiation that the ozone layer was designed to keep out was absorbed by Hellios' body like a sponge, even as he lost more and more control over his body's energy stores.

Caught between the pain of life, and the prospect of death's release, Hellios honestly didn't know what to do. He was fairly certain that if he just...let go of his enormous power, that it would purge the energy infection.

But what the Greek hero didn't know, was if his body could recharge the energy fast enough to prevent him from either suffocating at the edge of earth's atmosphere or burning up on reentry, whichever happened first.

But in the end, it was the prospect of being trapped exactly where he was for all eternity that prompted Hellios to at least try.

In the end, all he had to do was let go. It was easy. Two lives flashed before his eyes, and then the world faded to a cold black as he tumbled backwards.

“Lay down suppressing fire! Keep them back!”

Trapped behind several AIM rapid assault vehicles and over a half dozen metal crates, were about twenty disparate men, the military attache that had accompanied Excalibur on the raid. But in the first few minutes of the raid, either half their number had been separated from their commanding officers, or killed by superior fighting power.

That was until Lieutenant Commander Frank Armin began shouting orders, pulling his men into a defensible position, and just held on. Laser beams, particle blasts and energy daggers seemed to fly every which way, having killed at least three of his men now, but Armin was determined to hold. Even if retreat were possible (too damn many devices were screwing up the radios), he'd be damned if he let these scumbags off without a fight.

But when he felt someone drop down from above, Frank felt that in his gut, it was the end. He spun around...and found never found himself more relieved, and then angry, to see another nation's flag.

“Union Jack! Sir, I nearly took your head off!”

“Sorry,” Union Jack said unconvincingly. The two of them crouched down while the other soldiers tried to keep the legions at bay, “I just had to liberate some party favors.”

Union Jack unslung a heavy sack from his pack onto the sand. When the British hero unzipped it to expose the contents, a smile washed across the soldier's face.

He didn't know the model names, and some of them looked amazingly outlandish, but he knew high powered firearms when he saw them.

“What can they do?” Armin picked a small, silver handgun at random. In truth, it reminded him more of a steel water pistol than it did of a deadly weapon.

“Why don't you find out?”

Aiming at a cluster of Hydra agents, the soldier pulled the trigger and was gratified to see a purple lance of energy shoot out the barrel effortlessly, literally slicing through five Hydra agents.

“Holy...”

“Did you see that?” asked soldiers on both sides.

“Well, what do you know? Cut one down, another two really do take their place,” Union Jack remarked blithely .

Within seconds, the soldiers had discarded their standard, military issue weapons for the sleek and vastly more powerful weapons that Union Jack had procured for them.

The effect was obvious. Hydra agents ducked for cover, free lance mercenaries began looking for an escape as they came under a hail of fire. The support soldiers, who'd seen so many of their comrades cut down, some not less than ten minutes ago, unleashed an unholy hell against their attackers.

The tide had clearly turned, and for the first it was in Excalibur's favor.

Union Jack, though, knew that it wouldn't last forever. His troops were outnumbered, poorly coordinated and despite the weapons they now had, were still not powerful enough.

But they didn't just allow anyone to assume the mantle of Union Jack. Percival Rock had gone into this mission knowing that his chances of victory were slim, and planned accordingly, creating several contingencies in his mind. Although he was no Tony Stark, Union Jack was still a former career spy, respected inventor and leader of Excalibur.

He always had a plan, though most sane people wouldn't call what he had in mind a real 'plan'. Stupid, and fool hardy might better describe his course of action, but at this point, it really didn't matter.

The math was painfully simple. Insufficient intelligence. Under equipped troops. Numerically enemies with vastly superior firepower. If something about this equitation wasn't changed, they'd all die. And soon. Retreat simply wasn't an option. All it would do would be to embolden their enemies later.

But then, a good spy knew how to, if not beat, than circumvent a superior enemy, and that's just what Union Jack had in mind.

“...shielded by some kind of force field, best I can tell. I can't get in.”

Cybermancer cursed imaginatively in Cantonese while she rolled another plan over in her head. It was the absolute last one she wanted to use, but now, having exhausted all other options she was simply left with no other choice.

“Alright Eshu, I need you to break an exterior panel and see if you can extend your form so that you can reach me. I'm positive that if I get aboard, I can disarm this thing.”

“So your genius plan is to make myself into a rope and haul your nice ass aboard? Stark hired you with ideas like that?”

“Can you think of any other options?”

“You’re too far away,” Eshu insisted, his heart heavy, “there’s no way I’d be able to reach you and be able to pull you back in.”

“You’ll just have to find a way. It’s the only way to stop this thing!”

“Suzi, we know that isn’t true.”

“Eshu...!”

“...I always liked you, Cybermancer,” Eshu’s field of vision was like looking at a dozen mirrors at once. His liquid like form allowed him a unique vision of the world, one that certainly came in handy for what he was planning next, “I figured if anyone knows what it’s like to have to serve a less than perfect government, it’s someone with China Syndrome.”

“Eshu, please...!”

“Kevin,” replied her teammate, “my name is Kevin. Eshu’s just a name a smart ass spook who spent too much time in the bush came up with.”

“Kevin, you can’t think that you can sabotage that thing and still escape.”

The shape shifting mutant willed himself to wrap several tentacles around a variety of wires. The only one of which he knew was important was the one line that carried the rocket’s coolant system, but if you’re going to make a mess, might as well go all the way!

“Yeah, escape wasn’t part of my master plan, sorry.”

“Kevin, we have other options, you don’t have to...”

“No, no we don’t,” Eshu interrupted, “for what it’s worth, I really did like you, Suzi. You never judged me too harshly, and I think you could have understood where I was coming from. See you around, babe.”

Eshue terminated his comm. link and with a wistful sigh, yanked loose each cable he had wrapped his form around. Red lights went off instantly, as did the typical screeching 'warning! warning!'. Eshu silently chuckled about the thought of them placing alarms inside the damn thing. Just who exactly was going to hear them and be able to do something about it?

Of course, one didn't take chances with a missile that had enough chemical weapons to wipe out an eastern seaboard without breaking a sweat.

Feeling the missile plummet, Eshu felt strangely at peace. He recognized the irony of a former Genoshian mutant magistrate, the definition of a race traitor by some, saving what the world

called 'Magneto's Genosha'. All the shapeshifter saw Magneto and his cronies as, were occupiers, invaders.

All the same though, with his death so obviously approaching, Eshu wanted to check out knowing he'd done just one unselfish deed of his own free will. He knew he'd never reach those pearly gates, but ever since he walked into the genetic screening room, Eshu wanted to do something good, something pure for his country. Like everyone else, he had grown up knowing Genosha's dirty little 'secret', and he had a boyhood dream of some great heroic act that would redeem the country he loved so much.

But there were always excuses, something else that needed to be done or orders that prevented it. When it was discovered his powers prevented the mutate bonding process, the government of Genosha decided that he'd make a good spy, doing dirty deeds to maintain the secrecy of his nation's power. His sins ran the length of a baseball field, but that desire, that childhood dream to do one great thing, was never fully extinguished.

Here, now, with no one to tell him what to do, there were no more excuses. As a searing heat washed over him, Eshu felt a tinge of honest, untarnished pride for the first, and last, time of his fourteen year career.

Cybermancer watched in silent horror as the missile she was chasing careened into the ocean, and kept going. Perhaps guided by some divine hand, the guidance computer had been the first thing to give out on the lethal weapon, and now it was plunging into the crushing depths of the ocean, where it would do the least harm.

Not a minute later, her sensors detected a massive explosion beneath the waves, and then...nothing. The missile had plunged so deep, the water above barely bubbled in acknowledgment.

Suzi didn't even bother with her sensors. As a scientist, she knew that hopes of survival, even for someone like Eshu, was impossible. She simply hovered there, and cried silent tears for the man she had never really knew at all.

Darkstar crashed to the beach, completely spent. She barely had the strength to keep her eyes open, which at the moment was no mercy. Several Hydra soldiers had watched her crash, and like true vultures rushed in for the kill. Barely able to move, Darkstar simply apologized to her husband in her mind for dying, and accepted that this was the end.

“Don't remove your comms.!” Union Jack ordered over the radios, before they squealed with static.

Darkstar put her hand over her ear, and was about to tear the radio from her ear when she saw the Hydra soldiers were beginning to fall themselves. Like drunken fools who didn't know their limits, they staggered about before falling flat on their face.

As Darkstar swept her vision over the island, she saw the exact same thing happening all across the battle field. So relieved by what she saw, Darkstar had all but forgotten about the loud, scratchy noise in her ear.

Some fifteen meters away, Union Jack was running through the battle field, aiming his makeshift sonic pulse rifle indiscriminately. With its blanket effect, it wasn't like he actually needed to aim the damned thing, after all. And with only four minutes of battery time maximum, he couldn't waste a second.

As luck would have it, The Mort had a prototype of the sonic converter invented by the villainous master of sound known as Klaw. All Union Jack had to do was jury rig a power supply (thank you very much, Shockwave), remember what sonic frequency induced nausea and dizziness and create a counter frequency over his team's comm. links and do it all before his team was killed.

They weren't out of the woods yet, but Union Jack did feel a small amount of pride for what he'd accomplished this far. He savored that fleeting taste of satisfaction, knowing what he planned next would be a blight on his entire career that would dwarf any of today's accomplishments.

Union Jack sprinted to Darkstar's side, and held out a vial labeled MGH for her to see.

Darkstar couldn't hear a word her leader might have been saying because of the static piped over her communicator, but she didn't need to be a rocket scientist to recognize that it was a drug and likely dangerous one at that.

It came down to a matter of trust, and desperate need. The Laynia knew that Union Jack would never ask such a thing of her unless he was positive there was a chance of her survival, and there'd be no chance of their survival the way things were going. Hadn't she just been saying her good byes to her husband only moments before?

Darkstar looked at the vial, then to Union Jack, and simply nodded okay.

She didn't feel the needle when it pierced her skin, but the mutant heroine definitely felt its effects. MGH, or Mutant Growth Hormone, created with a mish-mash of chemicals and biological material from a real superhuman, anything from some pieces of hair to actual flesh, gave ordinary people incredible super powers often with little control. But for those that already possessed superpowers, MGH acted exactly like a steroid, enhancing the existing powers to amazing levels as Darkstar was beginning to learn.

Her strength returned while a tingling sensation spread across her body, like ants crawling underneath her skin. Within seconds she could feel her connection to the dark force dimension rip open, flooding her body with power unlike anything she'd ever felt before. Glancing as her hands, she saw dark force energy literally bleeding off her body almost like water from a faucet. Channeling so much power, it almost seemed like a chore to pay attention to the world around her.

Rocked activated his comm. and yelled,

“Excalibur! This is Union Jack! Everyone who's still standing, form on me! Form on me!”

Within seconds, the order was acknowledged. Sabra and Silverclaw flew side by side, Scarlet Scarab rushed to join them on foot while roughly a dozen men from the regular attachment who'd survived rejoined them.

But opposite the heroes, the villains were rallying as well. The Red Ghost, Crossfire and Black Brigade, among others, stood at the forefront of a mix of Hydra, AIM and assorted other mercenaries, all of whom were left behind to cover their superiors' retreat, but none of them willing to stand and just be taken into custody and well aware of their superior numbers.

For several seconds, it was a text book Mexican stand off. Neither side wanted to be the one to start what was most definitely going to be the night's final battle and both needed a second wind.

Finally, Rock had had enough. Win, lose or draw, he wanted this battle to be over with.

“Laynia, luv, would you mind clearing a path?”

Darkstar nodded. Her eyes were glazed over and her reactions were slow, but she still understood what Rock was asking and the danger they were facing, at least on some level. She pointed her hands forward, and what could only be described as a flood of dark force energy crashed forward.

On the opposing side, those that saw the attack coming wisely dove to the side to avoid the black death. Those behind them weren't nearly as lucky, and screamed as black death washed over them.

The onslaught only lasted several seconds, but effect was terrifying to behold. All that remained of the men were bones bleached white without a single trace of flesh, while their clothes entirely and black steam drifted up off their corpses. The sight was baffling and terrifying to behold.

At least for the bad guys.

“Let them have it!” screamed Union Jack.

The heroes surged forward, and only after a moment's hesitation, the villains rose to meet them. Like a tidal wave crashing against the shore, the two sides unleashed terrible power as they met, but neither side seemed ready to give an inch.

Silverclaw swooped down from the sky, shifting her animal form from bird to anaconda and wrapped herself around the feral, orange mutant known as Smiling Tiger, and squeezed hard.

“Those claws don't help when they're trapped at your sides, do they?” Silverclaw asked rhetorically. Smiling Tiger said nothing witty as he struggled to escape the young heroine's grasp before the lack of oxygen did him in.

“But that snake form's gonna make it that much easier to tear you apart,” hissed Bloodstrike, Smiling Tiger's super strong teammate.

“You'll need to deal with me first,” Sabra stepped between Silverclaw and Bloodstrike, and unleashed an amazing right hook. While Bloodstrike was still trying to clear the stars from his vision, Sabra leapt into the air and smashed down hard on the mutant's shoulders, driving into the sand like a nail in wood.

“Oh no...” Bloodstrike felt his heart seize when he realized his head was level with Sabra's waist, meaning that she held the height advantage now.

A sleek, silver plated fist flew through the air and collided with Mehemet Faoul's cheek. Scarlet Scarab's face snapped to the side, spitting teeth and blood as his body soared some ten feet back through the air. His free flying body collided hard with a downed Man-Droid armor, creating a large human sized dent in the three inch titanium steel hull.

“You are weak, muslim trash!” hissed Black Brigade. The cyborg stood some nine feet tall with muscles that dwarfed the greatest football player, stood with shoulders as wide as the Hulk and possessed a pronounced hunchback that made him look that much more sinister. His entire body was covered with silver plates with a plasma cannon on each shoulder.

And though the two had never met before today, Scarlet Scarab knew all about Black Brigade. How the man terrorized ethnic Muslims in the Balkans, and assisted in purges until a team of loose cannon American heroes (with tacit approval of the international community) brought him down. As he was a government agent as well as superhero, Scarab was forbidden to do something so foolhardy, but he did fantasize about what he'd do to the villain if their paths ever met.

Right now, reality was hardly living up to his expectations. He was exhausted and the crimson jewel that gave him his awesome power was virtually exhausted. As Black Brigade stomped forward, Scarab hatched a desperate plan.

“Have you nothing to say before death?” Black Brigade activated his boot jets and streaked forward, “good! Death should be silent!”

Channeling the last dregs of his power into his fist, Scarlet Scarab waited until Black Brigade was almost on top of him before he rammed his fist into, and then through, the man's chest. The two stumbled backwards, but Scarab kept his arm firmly implanted in his enemy's chest, siphoning more and more power from the steel monster.

Finally, the two ground to a halt. With barely a shrug, Scarlet Scarab brushed the 1000 pounds of high tech mercenary off of him, and flew back towards the conflict refreshed.

At almost a leisurely pace, Darkstar unleashed her vast power against Excalibur's enemies. With a brush of her fingers, she unleashed a blast of darkforce that erased another five Hydra agents off the face of the earth.

“Move your asses, do you want her to notice us?” demanded Adam Perkins, the defacto leader of the remaining AIM agents. There were only four of them left now, but if things went according to plan, it wouldn't matter. They'd salvaged a photon missile launcher, and with some jury rigging, had actually gotten it working.

The only problem they were left with was four former college nerds struggling to move it's eight hundred pound weight into position. Hidden behind the scrapped remains of several jeeps, they hoped that they wouldn't be noticed before they were able to actually use the thing.

Unfortunately for them, Darkstar wasn't the heroine they needed to worry about.

“You've already been noticed, losers.”

Standing atop the wreckage, her form shimmering in the moon light, Silverclaw allowed her prey to stare in fear for only a split second before she fell atop of them in her cat form, slashing and tearing.

Union Jack pistol whipped Midnight's Fire across the face, and turned around just in time to see the villain known as Crossfire level a rifle right at his head.

“Goodbye 'Jack arrgh!”

Crossfire held face first into the sand, needles sticking out of his back.

“Strength in numbers, Union Jack,” Sabra said as way of apology, “I ordered Silverclaw to cover Darkstar. There's only a handful left now, all we need is one last push!”

A blast of signature crimson energy flew past several, taking down a terribly large man.

“I must concur with that logic,” Scarlet Scarab touched down beside his leader, looking more refreshed than he had any right to.

“Well, lets do it then.”

Side by side with Sabra and Scarlet Scarab, Union Jack pushed once more into battle, and vowed not to take a single step back.

Now

“...and we didn't,” finished Union Jack. He sat in front of the United Nations Security Council, calm and collected even though the memories of the mission still burned. So much that went wrong, so much that could have been done better... “by then, most of the heavy hitters had fled. We got a few choice catches, though.”

“At high cost,” remarked one council member, “Hellios is MIA, your African attachment...”

“Eshu,” interrupted Union Jack, “not 'African attachment', his code-name was Eshu and his name was Kevin.”

“Right...Eshu killed. And both Darkstar and U.S Agent in comas.”

“...Darkstar is expected to fully recover,” Union Jack pointed out, more for his own benefit than that of the official record. He also noted how the Council members didn't mention the support forces that had been slaughtered.

“She is, but U.S. Agent is still in critical condition. Your team has been diminished to only five active agents, all of whom it'd be fair to say suffer from poor morale. I feel it's worth noting that this could have been avoided...” The Council member left the statement hanging, though it wasn't hard to tell what he wanted to hear next.

“Agreed,” Union Jack replied, “but if what you're about to suggest next is that we should have retreated, I'd urge you to reconsider. One of the most basic tenants of law enforcement is to never back down, even in the face of superior force. Especially then.”

“The losses sustained...”

“Happened because we were under funded and under equipped,” snapped Union Jack, “our budget is a pathetic fifty million, three quarters of which are spent on equipment upkeep, communications and basic security. We've no dedicated staff, our equipment is second hand...”

With a heavy sigh, Union Jack stood up and said simply, "I suppose this is where I should deliver some great, uplifting speech. But that's never been my strong suit. So I'll stick to the facts. By now, both sides of the street have heard about what happened on Devil's Island. And it's up to you five people to decide if what they see is Excalibur returning to the field stronger than ever, or dying with a whimper. Just remember that whatever happens, they'll still be out there... and if they see us go down, they'll think they can win. That if they fight hard enough, if they kill enough people, that they can get away with their crimes when faced with law enforcement. If that's what you want to tell criminals the world over, well...that's your business. Let me know what you decide, eh?"

Union Jack walked away before the Security Council could get a word in edgewise. Rock knew, not suspected, but knew, that they expected him to turn on Chapman, to undermine the director and given them an excuse to shuttle the team.

Obviously, that hadn't happened. But without a scapegoat, what would they do?

Later

This is it, Chapman reflected, the end of his short tenor as director of Excalibur. It seemed so easy, so obvious to assume control of the floundering organization when his Hellfire Club had fallen apart. Now the same thing had happened all over again and Chapman found himself at the mercies of the fates, the one thing he vowed to never let happen again!

Standing in front of the Security Council, he braced himself for their decision. The representative of the United States cleared his throat, and began.

“Your organization should consider itself lucky that it is about the sole thing this body agrees on unanimously. Given the extra normal events that seem to happen weekly and assorted superhumans who are not confined to any one nation, we consider it foolhardy not to have our own strikeforce. But we now realize that Excalibur is not something we can do halfway. Since the beginning, Excalibur has been underfunded and understaffed. We now recognize that, and pursuant to we've agreed to fund your original proposal that you gave us when we appointed director.”

Chapman had to prevent himself from visibly reacting, or else he might have been jumping up and down, giddy with this unexpected turn of events. His original proposal for the Excalibur organization was solid, but little more than a pipe dream at the time. He asked for the stars and the sky in the hopes of getting a few simple scraps of dirt.

“However, you remaining as director, at the moment, remains in doubt,” stated the representative, “consider this next order an assignment. Fail, and we find someone else.”

In the back of his head, Chapman all but knew what was to come next.

“As you know, according to the debriefings, the Excalibur member Hellios took off into space and released his body's store of bio energy.”

“He didn't perish, did he?”

“No, Shield's global security net traced an object with Hellios' mass to an impact crater outside a small South American village. But by the time a team got there, there was nothing to find.”

Chapman silently processed the information. Hellios was still alive, and he hadn't checked in. Hadn't made contact. Whatever the reason for that, it couldn't be good.

“We have reason to believe he might know the truth now. I don’t think we have to explain the damage he could do if he decides to switches alliances. If you want to keep your job, find him. Find him, and bring him back to Excalibur, dead or alive!”

Next issue: The two part ‘Hunt for Hellios’ begins! But Excalibur isn’t the only team out there looking for this wayward hero! And just why hasn’t he returned home? Find out next issue!

Avalon

When Laynia Petrovna awoke, her head pounding like the bells of St. Petersburg themselves. Her eyes fluttered open, trying to adjust to the lights of the room.

“Take it easy there, sweetheart,” suggested a familiar voice, “you’ve unconsciousness for a while. Take it slowly.”

Recognition flared as she opened her eyes to see a man in a dark blue mask, wearing the flag of the United Kingdom, “Rock...?”

Union Jack offered his teammate a glass of water, and she took it greedily.

“Dimitri...?” she asked, after another glass.

“Takin’ a quick catnap, as luck would have it. He’s been by your side non stop these last few days,” Union Jack explained, “but even Russians need sleep. I’ll send for him in a second, and after I leave,” Union Jack added.

Darkstar nodded, the events of their last battle still vivid in her memory, “I suppose my husband has issues with masked men who inject me with designer drugs,” Laynia said wryly, “imagine that.”

“Laynia...I...”

“It was simply a joke, Rock,” Darkstar waved her hand dismissively, “Had you not injected me, that island would have been all our graves. And I suspect that I will be fine, as I’m recovering on Avalon and not a specially design medical facility.”

“Still...”

“You did the only thing you could,” Darkstar gave Union Jack a hard look, “understood?”

“Aye,” Union Jack rubbed the back of his neck, “if you say so, luv.”

“I do. Now tell me, what happened exactly?” Darkstar asked, “Obviously, I haven’t been properly debriefed and my memory is...fuzzy, at best.”

“We routed the blighters,” Union Jack said simply, “but we had some casualties. Eshu was killed preventing a missile from hitting Genosha and causing a world war, Walker was nearly killed trying to prevent a mystery assailant from lifting advanced technology. He’s still in a coma from the attack. As for Hellios, he disappeared into the upper atmosphere when he was struck by an energy missile that disrupted his control over his powers.”

“...no!” Darkstar could barely breath. Part of her suspected that the battle had taken a heavy toll on her team given how the orderlies had been dodging her questions, but never once did she

think that the cost was so heavy. After all, how many times had they faced worse odds and prevailed?

“I wish I could say otherwise,” Union Jack sighed, “the good news is that our next mission is to find Hellios and bring him in.”

“Bring him back, Rock. Whatever you do, bring him back.”

Union Jack couldn't tell his teammate was giving him an order, or making a heart felt request. In the end, though, it didn't matter. Because what he hadn't told his teammate was that their orders were to bring in Hellios, by any means necessary, no matter the cost.

Dead or alive.

Excalibur
#14
December 2007
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"THE HUNT FOR HELLIOS"
Part One: The Search For the Sun

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Venice Italy, the past...?

Andrea Russo gave his old, blind mother a peck on the cheek and smiled as she cried what could be seen as both tears of joy and worry.

“Andrea, please, reconsider! What if your body can't take the serum? They say it's dangerous!”

“I know mother, I know. But our country needs a hero, and they say that there's a chance that I could be that hero! Don't you think that is worth the risk?”

Reluctantly, his mother nodded her approval, “It is. I know now, that I have never been more proud of you.”

Hellios played the memory of his conversation with his mother in his head over and over, as he hovered some sixty stories over where he remembered his dear old mother's house to have been.

Only his mother didn't live there, at least not today. A simple check of the records revealed that a Mrs. Russo had never, in fact, lived in the flats directly below. How was that possible, Hellios wondered, when he expressly remembered visiting her just two weeks ago?

To make things even more maddening for the solar powered hero, the memories felt...wrong. He couldn't place the feeling, but something about them felt off, like a splinter just beneath the skin.

So he tried to remember other, littler things about the neighborhood, like who lived next door, or where his family would go out to dinner.

Nothing. Save for a few scattered memories, none of which felt 'right', Hellios found could not remember a damn thing about living in the area.

But somehow, at the same time, Hellios knew that Italy was his home. His favorite foods, styles, T.V shows, they all felt real, tangible. But how could that be when so much else was so obviously fake...?

Hellios shook his head, and then, faster than a speeding bullet, flew towards another city that stuck out in his memory.

On the outer edges of the planet

Space is considered a vast, empty place by the average man. Most know that there are satellites orbiting our planet for both commercial and government purposes. Some people think that there are only a hundred. Few know that the space above planet earth, there are tens of thousands man-made objects in orbit around earth.

And only a few hundred people, with the highest security clearance on the planet, know about twelve specially designed satellites that scan the earth continuously for Omega level superhuman energy signatures at the request of high ranking officials.

At the moment, one such satellite was tracking a bio-solar powered omega superhuman, who was flying erratically across the Middle East at Mach-four.

Strangely though, this information wasn't transmitted to Avalon, base of the United Nation's strikeforce as preprogrammed commands demanded, but instead sent the information to a secret base along the Iran/Afghanistan border.

While there were less than twenty people occupying this particular base, but thankfully for them, there was always a man at the monitors. When the sentry saw the information flashing across his screen, he bolted up from his chair and raced to find his superiors.

After all, it wasn't every day that a demi-God came within their grasp.

Avalon, HERMES Teleporter

"Remember, under no conditions are you to fail," Chapman stalked back in forth in front of the teleporter. Chapman vaguely reminded Union Jack of the generals in old war movies, giving his soldiers some rousing speech.

The difference here was, no one held half as much respect for Chapman as those soldiers held for their general. In fact, this entire mission smelled to Rock. His contacts in British Intelligence had told him that the higher ups were wetting themselves about Hellios' disappearance but no one really knew why. At least, none of Rock's contacts knew, though he was reasonably certain he knew why they were getting their knickers in a twist.

Even odder was the fact that every member of Excalibur had been contacted by their respective United Nations ambassador personally, and told in no uncertain terms to give the mission their all, without offering an explanation why. Union Jack supposed he should be annoyed with the secrecy and politics surrounding this mission, but to his horror he found that he was getting used to it.

Rock barely noticed when the teleporter was activated. With a blink, he was taken from the teleport room, to a cold, sterile room that looked as if it had just been 'scrubbed'. It was obvious, even to the untrained eye, that computers and other heavy equipment that had been here was obviously removed.

"...where did they teleport us?" asked Silverclaw, "an abandoned movie set?"

"The lab where Hellios became the man he is today," answered Union Jack, "though obviously, they wanted to keep the exact secrets about that to themselves. I doubt we'll find another soul here."

"What makes them so certain that he'll turn up here?" asked Cybermancer.

Union Jack considered his words carefully before he answered, "There might be some concerns for Hellios' mental state. It's only logical that he would think that the lab that gifted him with his powers would also hold the answers to his questions."

"I'm going to scout the base," Sabra stated.

"Trying to pry some more secrets for the Mossad?" proposed Scarlet Scarab.

"You act as though I don't already know everything about this base," Sabra countered smugly, "I simply want some tactical knowledge of the lab should things become...complicated."

"If you know so much, then perhaps you could inform us why this subject has made all of our respective governments uncomfortable," Scarab asked, "all of us want to find our teammate, but there's something more than they're not telling us, that much is obvious."

Sabra glanced towards Rock, who answered no with his eyes, "I do, but I feel it's best that that information remain relatively secret for the time being, until we can use it to its best tactical advantage. But don't worry yourself, Scarab, when this mission is over, we'll all know Hellios' secret."

"Who am I?" Hellios muttered to himself, lost in thought, "and why am I here?"

'Here' was a scarcely populated, at least originally, neighborhood of Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Unlike most of the country, Kurdistan had been a self governing for years before the invasion. With their own police force and army, they easily kept the pace, making Hellios, hovering some twelve feet in the air, quite a spectacle. A large crowd gathered to watch as policemen formed a barricade around the area while tanks were pulled in from border patrol.

Hellios remained oblivious to the commotion he was causing, his mind wracked with two separate sets of memory. For some reason, Kurdistan stuck out in his mind like a spike in his brain, unwilling to let go. Something about this place, these people, just seemed real to him.

The solar powerhouse was struggling with the mystery for a good half hour, lost in the mystery of his own mind when, out of the clear blue sky, a tornado slammed into his chest dead center and blasted him to the earth.

Hellios shook his head, more startled than stunned. Almost instantly, several more tornados, spawned from nothing, formed in front of the gaping crowd. Mothers grabbed their children and ran, curious teenagers scrambled to get away and the police struggled to contain it all.

"I apologize about my sudden assault, but I think it best we speak in relative private, and it's rather hard for me to maintain flight."

Hellios looked up to see a man, dressed in red, light weight body armor, flaps under his arms like that of a flying squirrel and a helmet with a glass panel over his face.

"My name is Aminedi, Hellios," the man offered his hand in friendship, "and I believe that I can help you with your identity issues."

"Do you think me a fool?" In a blur, Hellios grabbed the man by the neck, his thick fingers easily wrapping around the man's slender neck, "a stranger comes out of nowhere to solve all my problems. How stupid do you think I am?"

"I...don't think you stupid...at all," choked out Aminedi, "...I actually... respect you...Goran."

Hellios released the man as the name 'Goran' cut through his mind like a knife. With all the conflicting image and mist like memories, the name 'Goran' somehow felt real, tangible.

Against his better judgment, Hellios released the man.

"Thank you," Aminedi rubbed his sore throat, "I come bearing gifts because of who you are, and who you could be, to us and all our brothers!"

Hellios eyed the man with suspicion, "And I don't suppose you'd be willing to simply tell me the secrets that you obviously know about me?"

"There would be little point. Your mind is clouded with memories you believe...know, to be false, yes?"

With some consideration, Hellios nodded.

"What's the point in me revealing the truth, when your mind won't even recognize it?"

As much as he hated to admit it, Hellios knew the man had a point.

"My team and I will assist you. Once we have done that, I hope that you will use to remain with us."

"Your team?"

Aminedi smiled a little too politely, "We call ourselves Desert Sword. Al-Fasaud! Please bring me my soldiers!"

Hellios watched a familiar teleport signature open to reveal four men. Well, at least the first two looked like men. The second two looked nothing like anything Hellios had seen in his life.

"Desert Sword, introduce yourselves for our brother!"

The first member to step forward was a young man, barely sixteen from the looks of him. His uniform was simply a green body suit with a sword emblem on his right breast pocket. With eyes hungry for approval, he looked towards Hellios and boldly declared, "I am called Atar! My fire burns hotter than any sun!"

The next man stepped forward. He couldn't have been more different from his young comrade. He had a long beard, middle aged face with gut that was just beginning to take shape. He didn't appear to be pleased, "I am Djinn, and I control all non organic matter."

The next man stepped forward, though describing him as a man would be considered generous. He possessed gray skin, bat like wings on his back and what looked like external ribs around his chest, "You may call me Dahak."

Finally, the last man stepped forward. Standing eight feet tall, steel armor that was far from seamless and two trash can sized cannons resting casually on his shoulders as if they were made of paper, not high grade steel, "They call me Haoma."

"With our help brother, we can help you recover your memories," smiled the leader of Desert Sword, "and I hope that, after that, you see fit to join us."

"Jack, we have a problem," Cybermancer tapped her ear, listening to the report, "According to CNN, Hellios was just spotted in Northern Iraq."

"What could he be doing there?" asked Scarab, "besides proving that we're wasting our time merely standing here!"

"That's not the only issue," Sabra stated as she rejoined the group.

"What's the issue," asked Union Jack.

"All equipment from this base has been removed," Sabra explained, "except for a single room, the one room that likely should have been destroyed."

"What are you..."

"Jack," Cybermancer interrupted, "is Chapman supposed to be sending us any reinforcements?"

"No, why?"

"Because my scanners are detecting the HERMES teleporting signature, just outside this room!"

Union Jack barely had a moment to react before the far wall exploded outward, knocking Excalibur to their feet.

"See, brother! See! They knew the truth all along!" Aminedi snarled, "they are only here to stop you from learning the truth!"

"So I see," Excalibur felt a collective shiver of fear slide down their backs as Hellios, alongside Desert Sword, turned his gaze towards them and spat, "They won't stand in my way for long."

Next issue: It's a depleted Excalibur vs. Desert Sword, plus a pissed off Hellios! What is the solar powered hero's secret and what will happen when he learns the truth?

Avalon

To his surprise, Joey Chapman found that one of the better ways to avoid the stress related to sending his team into the field, was to actually work on the massive amounts of paper work that haunted his office. After all, some low level clerk might be pissed if he filed out the wrong form, but no one would die because of it and there certainly wasn't any danger in typos, and a misspelled word that might sneak past spell check wasn't about to destroy the world.

Given that he'd just assigned his team to bring in an errant teammate (undermanned, no less!), and the fact that his remaining director of Excalibur hinged on their success, Chapman certainly needed the relaxation (comparatively speaking, of course), now more than ever.

Chapman had just started to reach his stride, when the senior technician, Anderson, burst into his office.

“Sir, we have a situation with the teleporters!”

Chapman was out from behind his desk in an instant, “What do you mean by ‘situation’?”

“We no longer have control over the teleporters, sir. Something’s managed to hack into the controls, and we can’t get whatever it is out!”

“...hell,” Chapman felt his blood run cold, and he found himself fearing for his entire team, “get every technician we have to the teleporter! If we don’t get control of it stat, they could teleport Excalibur to the center of the earth!”

Excalibur

#15

March 2008

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"THE HUNT FOR HELLIOS"

Conclusion: 'Identity Super-Nova'

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Location, Secret

“Traitors!” roared Helliios with such force, Excalibur as a whole literally took a step back, “you knew of this base this entire time and yet you did nothing to help me!”

“Hellios, wait one bloody second!” Union Jack felt his heart pounding in his chest, but he still hoped to defuse Hellios’ anger (without a doubt though, his new friends wouldn’t leave without a fight).

“I don’t want to hear you lies, Rock! You kept the truth from me!”

“Hellios, it’s not that simple...!”

“Liar!”

Hellios, enraged, flew forward, and Scarlet Scarab just barely intercepted him in time to prevent his leader from becoming a blue and red stain.

The impact of the two super-powerful bodies was enough to knock both Desert Sword and Excalibur from their feet.

“Desert Sword! Cut them down!”

The youngest of Desert Sword, Atar, released a burst of flame towards Silverclaw. But before it could turn the young demi-goddess, Cybermancer in front of the blast and stopped it with a force field.

“I’ll take flame boy, you take the one with wings!” Cybermancer suggested.

“Deal!” Silverclaw shifted her form to that of her puma form, “good luck!”

Cybermancer aimed her free hand at Atar and let loose a proton blast that knocked the young man back, but not out, thanks to the flames around the boy’s body.

To the side, Silverclaw crouched low to the ground and sprinted for the grey skinned member of Desert Sword. With a dismissive sneer, the member of Desert Sword flapped his leathery wings and was airborne in seconds.

“Care to meet me in the air, kitten?” Dahak asked in perfect, unaccented English. He growled, and suddenly his ribs seemed to grow and tear away from his body and grow in length. When it was done, his bloody ribs had grown to the length of pincers and dripped blood, “I haven’t had a good challenge in a while.”

Silverclaw felt a bead of sweat pass down her forehead.

“Hey, Cybermancer...?”

“No take backs!” yelled the armored heroine.

Union Jack watched in surprise as a section of the floor came up like water in a fountain, and crashed back down. Flipping backwards, Union Jack removed his pistol and fired several shots, reluctantly, at the middle aged, pot-bellied man he knew to be responsible.

Djinn waved his hand, and the bullets stopped in mid air.

“I have no love for British,” Djinn said emotionlessly, “but I have not enough hate in my heart to kill you, or even the Jew. If you let us complete our mission, we will leave peacefully.”

In one fluid motion, Union Jack released the magazine on his pistol and replaced it with a new, different one, “Thanks for the offer, but somehow I doubt a reasonable fellow like you is in charge of this rabble.”

Union Jack pulled the trigger and instinctively tried to stop it with his powers...and felt white hot something slice his upper shoulder as a result. Djinn, a far better scholar than he was a warrior (and he was a fine scholar) shouted out in pain

“I’m something of a tinkerer, mate,” Union Jack explained, “my gun shoots pure energy, something I don’t think you can control. Now surrender, or the next one goes between your eyes and right into your brainpan.”

“I give up, and my family suffers!” Djinn stamped his foot on the ground, causing a tidal wave of matter to rise up from the floor, “there is nothing you can threaten worse than that!”

“That’s what I get for being nice to the bloke,” Union Jack muttered as the wave came falling down upon him. At the last second, he jumped backwards and quickly began considering his options.

When Desert Sword attacked, Sabra didn’t hesitate to run towards their largest member, Haoma. Named after a god of strength, according to Mossad files the lumbering brute had been a mutant born with incredible strength, size and endurance. Apparently his handlers didn’t think that was enough, so they paid black market cyber surgeons to graft on stronger bio-armor and two rickety plasma cannons that rested squarely on his shoulders.

Thankfully, the neural interface required to grant Haoma control over the cannons, plus whatever they used to keep the goliath under their thumb, meant that the brute had a less than average mental speed.

By the time the brute had even registered that he was under attack, Sabra had already leapt upon his shoulders. With an almost disturbing amount of calm, she reached down and pulled at the oversized weapon. Haoma screamed in agony as the weapon was wrenched free from its moorings.

The metal enhanced mutant tried to reach up and grab Sabra, bucking like a rodeo bull. The super agent tried to keep her balance, but there was too little room and her foe was just too

angry. Haoma grabbed her ankle just seconds before Sabra dove, and just barely managed to grab a cord connecting the second plasma cannon to Haoma's shoulder.

With a roar, he slammed the mutant heroine to the floor like a sack of potatoes, and aimed his still (barely) functioning plasma cannon at her.

Sabra brought her hands up in front of her face, and braced herself. Haoma's plasma cannon managed to squeeze out a single shot before it sputtered and died.

The shot slammed into Sabra hard, and sent her skidding across the floor like soap on a wet floor, and her super strong body struck the walls so hard she left a dent.

"You should have run when you had the chance," Haoma said contemptuously, "you won't survive my power!"

The giant metal mutant aimed both cannons...only to gape as nothing happened.

"It takes very little to break such powerful and precise machines," Sabra stood up and brushed herself off, "now that I've dealt with your strongest advantage, allow me to teach you a story my people are fond of. I think even your simple brain knows it. It's David vs. Goliath, and I will be reenacting the part of David."

"Damn it Hellios! Stop this at once!" Scarlet Scarab was pounding his teammate across the face with all his might, but the solar powered hero had his hands firmly gripped around the Egyptian hero's neck and nothing Scarab did seem to lessen the pressure.

"I won't stop until I know the truth!" Hellios roared.

"I told you, I don't know what it is!"

Aminedi, mutant master of the wind and leader of Desert Sword, watched the battle with undisguised glee. His champion was battling...no, dominating the hero many in his home region saw their champion, and he was doing it with ease. He didn't doubt that, when this was over, that Hellios would eclipse the Scarlet Scarab as the Arab hero of the Middle East.

When his Iranian handlers had proposed this mission, citing spotty intelligence and forming a half baked plan with soldiers too eager to serve, too stupid to breathe or press-ganged into service, the mutant windmaster thought that they were out of their mind.

But now, watching his 'brother' grapple with Islam's greatest modern hero, and winning, he honestly thought this whole scheme could actually work.

"I'm sorry my friend," Scarlet Scarab was convinced that his friend was beyond words, and began to leech the power from his solar charged body, "I assure you that when this is over, we will find the truth out together."

“No! You will not take my power, parasite!” Hellios threw Scarlet Scarab to the ground with such force, his impact created a miniature earthquake, interrupting everyone’s battles, and involuntarily drew their attention from their battles to his.

Scarab, mustering his will, tried to rise, knowing he was the only person on the battlefield who could remotely match Hellios in terms of raw power.

He had only gotten to his knees when Hellios came crashing down on him like a runaway comet.

“Scarab!” Silverclaw cried out. Her foe, the demonic Dahak, crept towards her, ready to take advantage of her distraction, when the metal floor groaned in protest from Hellios’ rash action, buckled and finally, died.

Excalibur and Desert Sword both cried out as the floor beneath them slid and they fell into darkness.

Avalon

Joey Chapman rubbed his temples, trying to alleviate the headache he felt building.

“Explain to me, in plain English, what’s wrong with our teleporters.”

“Someone’s taken control of them,” explained one technician.

“And how the hell did that happen? I thought we took precautions to prevent any blighter from being able to bloody do that!”

“Those safeguards only work against telepathic manipulation of the machines,” explained another technician, “they don’t work against energy beings who...”

“Can do the exact same thing,” Chapman finished. He rubbed his temples, “Damn superhumans...”

“The good news is that we sent a special radio pulse through Excalibur’s communicators,” the technician explained, “that way, whoever’s got control over the teleporters simply can’t transport them into the center of the earth, the bottom of the ocean or anywhere else.”

“But they can still teleport out!” Chapman snapped.

“...yes sir, they can. And we won’t be able track them either.”

“Is there anyway we can stop them?” Chapman sighed, fearing he knew the answer.

“It depends how crude you want to get,” answered the technician, “if we physically cut power while they were in the middle of a teleport, that would certainly stop them. It’d be risky, it might leave them as energy forever, or make them miss and rematerialize in solid matter, or...”

The technician's voice trailed off, and he felt a cold chill travel down his back as he looked to Chapman, and saw a trickster's grin.

The forty year old man codenamed Djinn by his native government, grabbed his tailbone and groaned loudly.

"This is a young man game," he muttered to himself, wistfully wishing he was anywhere else.

A gloved hand reached out in assistance, "Here, let me help you."

"Thank..."

-Krak!-

Union Jack was surprised how little guilt he felt about sucker-punching a middle aged man, but didn't dwell on it too long. The man was clearly a civilian in this little collection and anything that removed him from the field was for his own good.

"Excalibur, form on me! Regroup!"

Some ten feet away, Aminedi stood alongside Hellios, one of the smuggest grins in history painted across his face.

"Desert Sword, do not let them pass!"

Hellios and Amined then turned their back on the collected heroes, and simply walked away.

In the back of his mind, Union Jack could feel a silent countdown beginning.

Several long, painful seconds passed, and Cybermancer, Sabra and Silverclaw limped to Union Jack's side. Scarlet Scarab was nowhere to be found.

Union Jack imagined that this was the only time that he'd ever be disappointed to only be surrounded by beautiful, powerful women.

Standing in their way, the battered Desert Sword, who knew that they had to do very little to achieve their goals.

Union Jack knew what he had to do next, but he sure as hell wasn't looking forward to it.

"Cybermancer, you have to stop Hellios," Union Jack's voice was barely a whisper, but he knew that with the sensors on his teammate's armor, his whisper might as well be a scream, "if he gets to that chamber..."

Cybermancer swallowed hard, "...I know."

“Now!”

Cybermancer flew forward, releasing nearly half the arsenal from her gauntlets. Mini missiles, pulse bolts, high pitched sonics and flares were more than enough to part Desert Sword like the Red Sea.

“She’s got!” Atar yelled the obvious to his teammates, and was about to give chase when a grenade exploded behind his head. Even though the flames acted as a buffer, it still made his head ring.

“We’re still here,” Union Jack leveled his weapon, “and I’ve just about had it with you pieces of crap that think you matter to the world.”

Once she was safely past Desert Sword, Suzi stopped and sent a secure transmission to Avalon.

“Communications compromised,” came an automatic response, “prepare for data dump.”

Within a split second, an encrypted file was downloaded onto her systems. Using the encryption key, she scanned the information quickly (luckly, Chapman was one of the few commanders who understood the importance of brevity) and scowled.

“Hellios...you shallow idiot!”

“...can’t change this, once it’s over...”

“...same again...”

“...hero for everyone...”

The moment Hellios saw the room, so much equipment focused around one metal platform, he knew.

This room held the secrets. His mind was swirling, and he felt his mind drift towards the past, but still he knew the truth was finally, finally! with his grasp.

But it wasn’t that realization that brought an abrupt end to his swirling memories and firmly planted him back in the here and now, but instead it was a tearing pain in his right shoulder.

“Hellios!” Amined watched in horror as the solar powerhouse staggered to one knee, clutching his shoulder that impossibly had a bullet hole in it.

Amined saw Cybermancer standing at the doorway’s threshold, and immediately summoned gale for winds powerful enough to throw a tank.

Luckily, Suzi saw it coming a mile away. A breathing mask slipped over her face and magnetized boots kept her from blowing away. With a dismissive energy blast, the leader of Desert Sword was no longer an issue.

“I know you’re confused Hellios, but I need you to trust me for just a second,” Suzi felt beads of cold sweat speed down her face. The energy absorbing bullet she hit Hellios with would only last another minute at best. Hopefully, that’d be enough time.

“They brain washed me here! I know that in my bones!”

“They did. And they were about to do it again,” Cybermancer fired a specially designed missile at the table. Once it struck, the table sparked and for a second, the two could see a distinct face.

“That was Farouk Al-Fasaud,” Cybermancer explained, “he’s an energy being who hijacked our teleporters and probably would have brain washed you while trying help you.”

“She lies!” Amined yelled, his voice seeped in desperation, “they won’t tell you the truth!”

“The hell I won’t,” Cybermancer growled, “I just won’t ask for anything. Hellios release code, omega eight reveal.”

When Hellios heard those words, it was like a dam had been opened in his mind.

“I remember,” Hellios whispered sadly, “I remember everything...”

“No...no!” Amined shot out of the room like a bullet, his heart jack hammering with fear.

“That’s all well and good, Hellios, really, but there’s still a battle going on...”

Hellios nodded...then smiled.

“Not for much longer.”

To his credit, the searing hot flames were the only reason why Union Jack was sweating. The flame caster, Atar, was a little cleverer than he looked, and Rock realized that too late. He created a wall of flame first, boxing the British hero in, and seemed to dare him to jump it.

Union Jack knew that the second his feet left the ground, he’d be toast. But unfortunately, if he stayed where he was much longer, he’d be toast anyways. The only saving grace, and it was a small one at that, was that Atar had something of a sadistic streak. Having cornered Union Jack, and with his teammates busy with their own battles, he felt confident enough to twist the knife.

Union Jack was about to execute a daring escape and counter attack...when the flames died and Atar was rude yanked out of the air.

In a split second, the entirety of Desert Sword was piled one on top of the other without regard for comfort. All they would remember was the blink of an eye, sudden pain and a blinding light.

When Amined moved, he could feel his ribs swimming in his chest, but he pushed past the pain, past the agony to activate his communicator.

“Farouk, get us out of here!”

“Why should I?” the voice was filled with static, but the anger was unmistakable, “I was promised revenge against the Fantastic Four, but if your men can’t even kill Excalibur, what good are you to me?”

“Just do it!” Amined roared, “you think anyone else would help you?!”

“Just remember, you owe me!”

Farouk Al-Fasaud reached out with his thoughts and energy to Avalon, and seized control of the HERMES teleporter. Once he wormed his way inside the CPU, he issued a series of commands, and the teleporter began a complex series of calculations designed to both convert matter to energy, and reassemble safely at another location.

Union Jack watched in anger as the HERMES teleport signature enveloped Desert Sword. As much as he wanted to let loose with his energy pistol, the variables were and unknowns were simply too much. For all he knew, the interactions between the two energies could cause a chain reaction that could destroy the entire base.

Half a world away, the former Union Jack wasn’t nearly so worried. Wearing insulated gloves and carrying a heavy axe, he waited until he received a signal from the technician.

“Now!”

Joey Chapman swung the axe with all his strength, severing the main power coupling. The HERMES teleporter had already taken in enough power to begin the teleport, but not enough to finish it completely. And one of the safety features designed into the system was that once started...it didn’t stop.

So Excalibur was treated to the sight of Desert Sword screaming in pain and then fading into oblivion.

Under normal circumstances, the members of Excalibur might have been moved to any emotion from sympathy to satisfaction, but they were on edge. They had just finally grown accustomed to the idea that Hellios was on the other side and now here he stood, back on their side again, at least that’s the way it seemed.

“Hellios...” Sabra eyed her teammate carefully, “or you answer to Behnam now?”

Hellios nodded towards his teammate with a resigned sigh, “Both, actually. I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that you knew the truth already.”

“I’m not about to join a work alongside someone I know nothing about,” Sabra scoffed, “and unfortunately, there are many people in your government open to bribes.”

“Why didn’t you tell him that before he beat the crap out of Scarab?” Silverclaw demanded.

“He wouldn’t have believed me,” Sabra shrugged, half convincingly, half not.

“You could have tried,” Scarlet Scarab groaned as he stood up. He’d been conscious long enough to see Hellios round up Desert Sword, and certainly wasn’t spoiling for another fight. He limped towards his friends, and gingerly sat down on a medium sized piece of rubble, “am I to assume that you’re on our side again, Hellios?”

“Yes. Please, forgive me. I wasn’t in my right mind, by any means.”

“Why don’t you explain, Hellios,” Union Jack ordered. He already knew the truth, but he thought it best that Hellios bare his soul to the team, if only to repair the rift his rampage had caused.

“My name...my name is Behnam Goran. I was born in Italy after my family immigrated from Iran,” Hellios began, “much to my parent’s displeasure...I fully embraced my birth nation’s many pleasures, to put it politely. Had the matter remains private, I think they might have been more tolerant. But I was a good football player, excellent in fact. Ascoli Calcio were ecstatic when I agreed to sign.

“Wait,” Silverclaw interrupted, both in confusion and awe, “you’re the Behnam Goran? You sure you’re not still brainwashed? Behnam was killed in a car crash, and was middle-eastern!”

“Whatever made you think that the serum that gave me my powers only gave me amazing super strength?” Hellios smiled coyly, “as it was explained to me, with a few tweaks, I could become a whole new person, both physically and mentally.”

“Why did they brainwash you? Why did they fake your death and change your appearance?” Scarab asked in an accusing tone.

“...because I asked them to,” Hellios said quietly. He let that fact sink in for a moment, “I didn’t think that I could handle the responsibility that came with my powers, and that if I became a national hero I would only embarrass them further. So they created a false life for me, an ideal one that I wouldn’t feel compelled to question. But my power is tied to my mind, and when I was struck with that energy missile...I guess something came loose.”

“Understatement of the century,” Silverclaw muttered, “I guess that’s why Desert Sword thought they could recruit you, ‘cause you were Muslim and from Iran. Pretty thin string to hang their hopes on.”

“Well, they were likely going to brainwash me,” Hellios stated with a shrug.

“Desert Sword is a collection of idiots and innocents pressganged into service,” Scarlet Scarab spat, “those fools tried to recruit me some time back. Their greatest flaw is thinking that every Muslim agrees with them.”

“We should get back to Avalon,” Hellios suggested, “I’m certain the powers that be were terrified by my breakdown, and would like me debriefed. Then...maybe a party. After all this destruction, I need something uplifting to make it through the week.”

“Do you even know anyone throwing a party?” asked Silverclaw.

“There’s always a party somewhere,” Hellios answered with a bright smile, “and I can go anywhere. Why, I doubt I’ll be able to stop with just one!”

Union Jack was tired, sore and scorched. But just listening to Hellios’ voice, he sensed that he’d be grappling with another problem, very soon. Unlike Silverclaw, who only knew Hellios’ real identity by reputation and Sabra who bribed his file out of corrupt officials, Union Jack was briefed in full when he was appointed leader. Hellios was a hedonist of the first degree, and the only reason he was even considered for the Hellios serum was because his body could accept it on a genetic level and he agreed to a false personality implant.

Union Jack was already finding himself wistful for the past, if only for a second, “...Desert Sword might consider themselves lucky they’re not saddled with Hellios instead of us. They got off lucky.”

Elsewhere

Amined gasped at his teammates in horror. Though he wasn’t close friends with the people under him, he still cared. Their welfare was entrusted to him, and to see them in this state...

The teleportation went wrong, the mutant terrorist didn’t need anyone to tell him that. But the horror it inflicted on his team was beyond description. His mind red with rage and horror, Amined screamed vengeance to the Heavens, and vowed to spend every last breath avenging this defeat...

Next issue: What? You want more? We'll see...

Avalon

Chapman picked up huge stack of thick, manila folders from his desk and walked down the hall towards the briefing room. Unlike most occasions, only two members of Excalibur were waiting for him. That was because, of all of Excalibur, they were the only two current members, Sabra and Union Jack, who's expertise, professionalism and intelligence background actually enabled them to contribute to what had to be done now.

"Are those the dossiers? About bleedin' time," observed Union Jack.

"And what weight is given to our opinions?" Sabra asked bluntly.

"Depends on the opinions offered," Chapman answered as just bluntly.

Union Jack picked several files at random and began flipping through them, "Mind telling me what criteria we're using for members?"

"Skilled, capable people who can do the job and who their home countries would be willing to part with."

"Our countries had no problem loaning us out," Union Jack observed.

"That was before we lost the first Hellios, Tsunami and the rest," Sabra countered with a heavy sigh. She was no stranger to loss, but she mourned their absence in her own way

"With everyone itchy about terrorists, they're not eager to loan out their most effective, well known agents to work overseas," Chapman explained, "I've had to fight like hell just to retain you two."

"I'm touched," Union Jack said dryly.

"So no Captain America, Vindicator, Black Panther or Captain Britain," translated Sabra.

"I see," Union Jack nodded sagely, "we're looking for the best of the rest."

Excalibur

#16

June 2008

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"FOREIGN LEGIONS"

Part One: 'The Gathering Heroes'

Written by Daniel Ingram

Washington DC

Manuel Diego Armand Vicente, or Danny Vincent to associates (friends weren't worth the investment and liability), watched as one Simon Lyles and Katherine Banks let themselves into a cheesy, one level hourly motel, hand in hand as if they were two kids in High School.

"Finally," he sighed aloud. Danny pulled out a digital camcorder, and snapped a few shots of the happy duo. Once he'd done that, he emailed the photos to a waiting account.

When that was completed, he flipped open a pre-paid phone and dialed, "Mrs. Lyles? This is Brent. Your 'loving husband' just checked into the hotel with someone who's not you. Are you at the website? Good...good. You see that? When you transfer the two hundred k to my account, you'll own not only the pictures but the camera it came with and the PI who took them. Yes, yes I know it's expensive, but look at it as the only down payment you'll ever have to make on your mansion. Thank you."

Danny flipped the phone shut and got out of his car, "Rich people, they swear everyone's out to rip them off."

As he crossed the street, Danny looked down the block and signaled to a man he had waiting there.

Danny knocked on the door twice, "Mr. Lyles? I need to speak with you for a moment. It's about your credit card."

The Middle aged importer came to the door, his shirt disheveled and belt undone, "I didn't pay by credit card!"

"Why, afraid the wife might find out?" asked Danny, knowing the answer full well.

The man paled, obviously aware of the implications, and Danny Vincent continued, "My name's David Golightly. The wife hired me to find out if you were in fact cheating on her. The reason why I'm here sir, is that I'm a fair man. I'm offering you the opportunity to match the three hundred thousand dollars she's already paid me. That money will not only buy you the evidence I've collected thus far, but an iron clad alibi and access to the computer worm that's already on her personal computer." Danny held up another pre-paid phone, "just dial 2. The speed dial's just for you."

In ordinary conditions, a seasoned businessman like Mr. Lyles would have told anyone else to go hell. But Danny Vincent projected an eerily, professional calm that seemed dangerous on not just a business level, but physical one as well. In less time than it took to tell, Mr. Lyles had transferred twice the requested amount of money.

"It's done," Lyles handed the phone back to Danny, "I hesitate to ask, but...you said you'd give me an alibi?"

“Right,” Danny turned his head and whistled, “Hey, Igor!”

Mr. Lyles nearly wet himself as a six foot seven Russian man walked up to the door. Almost mechanically, the man extended his hand. Lyles, shaking like a leaf, took the man’s hand but didn’t have the courage to meet his eyes.

“What...what is this?” The Importer demanded, his voice teetering between terrified and outraged.

“This is Igor. Igor works with Russian mob. He’s a Godless Russian with no fear of testifying under oath. You’ve been looking to break into new markets. He’s got muscle to help with the breaking,” Danny smiled like the cat that’d eaten the canary, “what is this? A match made in heaven, is what.”

“I can’t work with organized crime! I’m an honest business man!”

“Not according to Wilson Fisk. He says that you’ve done him a solid, here and there, under the table,” Danny countered smoothly, “as a matter of fact, I may be doing you a favor. See, people like Fisk? They don’t like guys like you, who’ve barely committed a serious crime, on their payroll. Any rookie DA can flip you like a hamburger to get to him. You’d look a lot better than some corner drug store dealer, testifying against the fatman. Honestly? If it weren’t for me, you’d be in a gutter someone, a loose end tied up by some up and coming thug.”

“Oh God, oh God,” Mr. Lyles clutched his chest and wiped his brow, damp with sweat. His heart was pounding a mile a minute as he felt his life spiral out of control before his eyes.

“Hey, hey!” Danny snapped his fingers twice, “I just saved your life man, be more grateful!”

“I...I just looked the other way once or twice, and never for drugs!”

“Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. Now Igor and me are going to go finish up our business. Why don’t you impress upon the lovely Ms. Banks how upset her orthodox father would be to find she was carrying on an affair with a married man, okay?”

The Russian at Danny’s side chuckled as they walk away, “Good thing we in open air. Smell of bullshit, David. It might just kill me.”

“There are worse ways to die,” Danny shrugged, “but time is money. I assume you wired mine?”

“Of course. You are good American. Few people can make four hundred thousand with just a few weeks work.”

“What can I say? I’m a genius.”

Danny gave a polite goodbye, and strolled towards his car. He dialed one last number.

“Barry? Josh here. I’ve got a hot tip about the Russian mob. Interested...good, good. Get the money to my usual account and I’ll get that information to you. Good doing business with you again.”

Maryland

It wasn’t until he pulled into his garage and shut the door that Danny Vincent felt comfortable removing the blond haired face mask and tossing it aside in a waiting bucket with a dozen others.

Danny hummed a merry tune to himself as he let himself into his house, his castle, his sanctuary.

The tune died in his throat when he saw Joey Chapman lounging on his couch, casually reading a newspaper.

“What, you don’t knock in the U.K.?”

“I get the impression you might not answer, Danny.”

“Lets keep this professional. Call me Junta,” Danny went into his kitchen and grabbed a coke out of the fridge, “course, the problem here is that you never called me, after I did you a solid. At great personal risk, I might add.”

“I haven’t forgotten how you infiltrated Yellow Claw’s base for us,” Chapman defended, “but that case went south for us. I could hardly justify bringing you on given the collateral of that mission.”

“Hey!” Danny snapped defensively, “That’s hardly my fault. If I had a team backing me, I might have been able to give you better intel, but don’t asked me to infiltrate another villain strong hold with the promise of more work! I did it and I got jack all to show for it. Now...unless you plan to make up for that...”

“Well, that depends on how you define making up for it...”

Jack Hudlin considered himself smarter than most people, even though he never graduated High School, flunking out in the eleventh grade and despite the fact that he would never qualified anything above a minimum wage job.

The reason he thought himself smarter than most people was because when luck finally came his way in the form of super powers (an industrial accident that he was actually responsible for), Jack neither rushed out to save the day or rob a bank. He never even bothered to think up a ‘code name’, like everyone else seemed to do.

Instead, he moved out into the middle of nowhere, and lived life as he pleased. When he went grocery shopping, he simply grabbed the stuff he wanted and left, without bothering to stop at the register. The landlord could never muster the courage to cut the utilities on a man who could

(and would) tear his piece of crap car apart with his bare hands. And the local cops didn't have the muscle to put him down and he really doubted any hero would leave New York, just to deal with him.

It was a simple life, true, but that was how Jack wanted it and no one could take that away from him. Jack didn't even think twice when he heard a knock on his door, even though he hadn't been expecting a soul.

So imagine his surprise when he opened the door to see a Native American man, wearing a leather jacket, weathered but not torn blue jeans and a helmet whose glass faceplate was shaped like the beak of an eagle and armed with a mini cross bow strapped to his hip.

"Who the hell are you?" was the only thing Jack could think to say.

The man's hands shot out and grabbed Jack by his thick neck with strength the lazy superhuman never thought he'd feel, and with contemptuous ease, was tossed outside on his front lawn.

"The name's American Eagle," the man stated, "I guess as far as you're concerned, I'm just a civil servant taking out the trash."

"You ain't so tough," Jack sneered, "I ain't never heard of you before and you sure don't scare me now!"

Jack swung his oversized fist at American Eagle's head, curious to see what damage he might do now that he could actually cut loose...only to watch in horror as his foe reached up and caught his fist in mid swing with dismissive effort.

"You'd be surprised how many things you never heard of can still kill you. Or, as I'm about to demonstrate, wipe the floor with you."

An hour later, American Eagle finally managed to extract himself from the throngs of everyday people grateful that he had finally done what no one else could, remove a superhuman bully from their midst. Guardsmen had finally arrived to haul the man away to the Vault, and with that accomplished, Jason Strongbow felt no particular desire to remain. Basking in praise for longer than ten minutes just seemed selfish to him, and he had other assignments waiting, at least not today.

Strolling towards where he parked his motorcycle, American Eagle was thinking about where he would find a cheap local motel when he heard the gravel behind him crunching underfoot, just loud and long enough to indicate someone was declaring their presence.

In one fluid motion, American Eagle unhooked his crossbow, spun around and leveled it at the mystery person's chest.

"Good reflexes," Sabra complimented.

“Never a bad thing to have,” American Eagle holstered his crossbow, “you should be more careful. I use...”

“Vibranium arrows,” Sabra finished, “I know. So, have you given our invitation any thought?”

“I have, but I’d like to know why you’re interested in me.”

“Most heroes in America have an established territory that they keep to almost religiously,” Sabra explained, “it’s our understanding that you approached your government and offered to act as a trouble shooter. That takes initiative, something we would like in a member of Excalibur.”

“I did it because not every place has the heroes it needs,” explained Jason, “I can’t say me joining Excalibur would improve that.”

“There are places all over the world that lack for heroes,” Sabra countered, “and when there is an emergency, all they have is us. I think you could accomplish far more against the likes of Moses Magnum, Dr. Doom and others, than against...what was that man’s name?”

American Eagle chuckled slightly, “Good point. But there’s also the matter of my contract. I’m being paid to wrangle three other superhumans by the end of next week and two of them are on separate coasts. I don’t know if I can afford a detour to try out for a super team.”

“At present, four members of Excalibur will be inactive until we’ve chosen our final members,” Sabra stated, “if it’s alright with you, I can assign them to apprehend your targets.”

“Hard to turn down an offer like that,” American Eagle nodded, “Alright, I’ll play.”

Paris, France

Union Jack drummed his fingers on the leather chair with one hand while he flipped through a two month old magazine while the office secretary gave him quizzing looks in between doing...whatever she was supposed to be doing.

Union Jack supposed it should have been annoying, the way the woman was looking at him as if he was a madman, but figured it was only natural. He was in full costume and in the office of a well renowned and respected therapist. The math on that wasn’t especially hard.

Just as the time for his appointment had arrived, the twin oak doors to the private office swung open, and two people emerged.

One was a woman dressed in a dark, conservative business suit. The second person was a heavy set man, dressed in business casual with a white shirt and brown pants and smiling as if he’d just inherited half of England.

“...can’t thank you enough, Dr. Pear. I simply can’t believe that I never looked at it that way!” the man glanced towards Union Jack, and his eyes went wide.

“...I think he’ll need your help more than me,” the man said in accented English.

“More than you will ever know,” Dr. Pear smiled in good humor, “Janice, why don’t you take the rest of the day off? This may be a while. ‘Jack, would you join me in my office?’”

“So, Persona Gratis is now a therapist for the insecure rich and powerful,” Union Jack glanced around the office, noting the expensive furniture, elegant rugs and first editions that lined the book cases. The far wall was lined with photos of politicians, captains of industry, models and a few unmistakably lower class men and women. It was, without a doubt, a truly menagerie of Paris, “among others. I have to say, this isn’t where I expected you to be, five years ago.”

“I like to think that I did. I’ve always liked to listen to people talk and I like to solve problems,” Dr. Pear took her seat, and with a curt smile, gestured to the couch, “shall we go through the motions?”

Union Jack laid down on the couch and steepled his hands together, “I don’t do this as often as I should. Do I start?”

“That would be ideal.”

“Alright...I come on behalf of Excalibur. We’re seeking highly skilled recruits who wouldn’t be terribly missed by their governments. What’s more, we’ve been under pressure from the French representative on the Security Council to add a French agent, while at the same time denying us access to their top agents.”

“Politicians are fond of their contradictions.”

“Very much so. However, that is where I would like you to come it. You have French citizenship...”

“Naturalized, of course...”

“...and you have a background in counter intelligence work. Your skills would be invaluable addition to our cause.”

“Team,” Persona Gratis corrected, “not cause. I know it sounds less romantic, but that doesn’t make you any less a hero. And you were dispatched here in the hopes that my gratitude for your services all those years ago will sway me into joining.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t say I’m impressed by the complexity of your plan, Rock. Somehow, I doubt your team can match either my salary or job satisfaction.

“Actually, we can,” said Union Jack, “most of Excalibur is already paid handsomely by our own governments. That allows us to exceed by ten percent whatever it is you’re making already and stay within our yearly budget nicely.”

“A ten percent increase is hardly reason enough to risk my life. In the interests of time Rock, play your trump card please. Beating around the bush simply isn’t in your nature.”

“Well, I was just thinking,” Union Jack said casually, “how proud your father might be if you were an elite member of the United Nations security force, saving countless lives on every continent. I think he would look at you in a whole new way.”

“...”

Still staring at the ceiling, Union Jack smiled just a little bit underneath his mask and said, “I’ve been taking some lessons in fluent bastard since I last saw you.”

“What makes you think I care about that?”

“Because you write a letter to him every week,” Union Jack answered.

“I wasn’t aware that Shield felt the need to spy on my habits.”

“Now who said anything about anyone spying?” Union Jack smirked.

Saudi Arabia

Guy Smith, known in the local intelligence networks as The Orphan, a proud member of Magneto’s Fallen Angels, meditated and wondered if he was making a wise decision.

When the Director of Excalibur announced, via various diplomatic channels, that they were looking for recruits to replace Eshu and U.S. Agent, Magneto was intrigued. Discussing it with several of his advisors, they came to see it as an opportunity to raise Genosha’s international profile (and with any luck, at the cost of Americans on the United Nations team). After what seemed like countless hours of discussion, it was decided that Guy would be the best applicant. He was skilled, diplomatic and while not the most experienced, his enhanced senses would be advantageous in observing the other members of Excalibur and reporting back to his government, should he be selected for membership.

But now, sitting in the officer’s lounge of a Saudi military base waiting for pickup, Guy was beginning to realize the stiff competition that he was going to be face.

Two potential recruits were members of the Janissaries, a team that Guy had clashed with in the past. One was known as Firearm, reputed master of any weapon (and lord knew, she carried enough of them) and the second was the electronics master known as Malak. From what Orphan understood, the two of them had been trained since birth and though that hardly made them perfect warriors (experience can’t be taught) it still made them dangerous in their own right.

As if those two weren't enough, the Saudis had insisted on including the latest Arabian Knight. The man wore a simple flak vest, black suit and army pants with a huge sword strapped to his side. The man was actually very pleasant, making light, sincere conversation with Guy before excusing himself to talk with the other gathered heroes.

Finally, there was Batal, the Syrian representative. Standing six feet tall with broad shoulders, with a black suit highlighted by bright red boots and pouches, an oversized gun strapped to his chest and the Syrian flag on his chest, Batal looked impressive. But his face held a constant sneer aimed at everyone in the room, which to Guy indicated ignorance, a weakness of the mind he was all too familiar with.

Guy could sense the power, the strength of each hero, and it made him question if he could in fact rise above them all.

"Everyone is here?" Sabra strolled into the room casually. Almost instantly, Batal took his eyes away from the other heroes and almost growled at the new entry.

"Good. If you'd just follow me..."

"Do you really expect me to trust you after what you've done?" shouted Batal, "I learned my lesson about turning my back on you."

Sabra allowed the accusation to wash off of her like water from a duck. She remembered the incident with Batal clearly. She'd been mind-controlled during a peace conference and the first thing she'd done was strike Batal down from behind. That alone had put the talks back months, as no one had really believed that Sabra was acting under outside influence, no matter how true it was.

"Batal, I don't need your back turned to deal with you," Sabra said blithely, "but if you want to stay here with your tail between your legs, that's your choice. The rest of you who call yourselves heroes, please follow me."

Guy smiled as he sensed Batal picking up the rear. He may have had his doubts about what was to come, but seeing a bigot get dressed down always raised his spirits.

Fort Bragg

Joseph Green tried to ignore the odd glances and incredulous looks he was receiving from his fellow soldiers as he made his way across the base. He couldn't really blame his fellow soldiers for staring, he'd do the same in their place. After all, his right arm was encased in a giant alien weapon that resembled a creation of Japanese animation that looked big enough to arm wrestle the Hulk.

Code named 'Gauntlet' (the military had better things to spend it's time on than creativity), Green was one of a handful of superhuman recruits in the United States military and considered

by the top brass one of the most powerful in their arsenal, though his general lack of combat against superhumans worried them. Even the dumbest rookie knew that real men got stronger when facing equals or superiors and as proud as he was of his record, Gauntlet was honest enough to admit to himself that he hadn't yet faced a threat equal to the power he had. That was why his superiors were open to the idea of him joining Excalibur for an extended tour.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Green? We need to have a word with you."

Suits. This should be interesting, Gauntlet grumbled silently to himself. He'd been briefed already, so anything these two men would almost certainly be off the record and a complete pain in the rear.

The two men flashed their ID badges, indicating they worked for the Commission on Superhuman Activity. And just as expected, what they said next was both off the record and, in Gauntlet's opinion, not only a pain in the ass but completely immoral.

Hangar

Joey Chapman paced back and forth in the hangar as his flight crew ran a routine check, waiting for the final arrive.

The first candidate, code named Commando, had arrived a few minutes early. Chapman had actually arranged it that way, in the hopes that the man would be...talkative, perhaps revealing something about himself to help the selection process along.

That wasn't proving to be the case.

The man, code named Commando, looked every bit like the soldier described in his dossier. Six foot four, broad shoulders and muscles that would impress any bodybuilder. Unlike most National superheroes, Commando didn't have a costume that doubled as a uniform.

Rather, his uniform doubled as his costume. He wore the same vest, helmet and bullet proof vest as any other enlisted man. Naturally though, the man's equipment was anything but standard issue. The knife sheathed in Commando's boot was clearly secondary adamantium, and the two silver plated Berettas 92Fs in his shoulder holsters were by no means standard issue. The M4 Carbine hanging over his shoulder was clearly a custom job, with a circular magazine like those on a Tommy gun, a barrel that was a half inch longer than regulation and an attached, modified M203 grenade launcher that barely looked like it's parent weapon. His body armor wasn't made up of ceramic plates and hidden under his uniform like most soldiers. Rather, Commando wore his armor on the outside, black as night and wrapped around his waist like a girdle. And Chapman didn't want to think about the grenades.

As if the equipment wasn't enough, the super human soldier differed from his fellow enlisted men in another way. Where they wore light green and brown camouflage, every inch of Commando that wasn't covered in weapons or armor was covered in bright red. Others might

have found that odd to borderline suicidal, Chapman wasn't the least bit concerned or surprised, given the man's father.

Joey Chapman, former Union Jack, knew instinctively the power of legacy.

At long last, the final recruit arrived, entering the room with no ceremony, simply quiet reflection. Chapman walked forward to greet the man.

"Code name Gauntlet reporting for duty, sir!"

"At ease," Chapman nodded, "welcome aboard, Gauntlet. As you know, I'm the director of Excalibur, but I don't much give a damn how you address me, so long as it's with due respect. This here is Commando, and he'll be your competition, among others."

Commando glanced at Gauntlet, and smirked, "And here I thought it just caused blindness."

Mentally, Chapman rolled his eyes. Commando's comment was certainly revealing, but that hardly meant he liked what he saw.

China

Sabra stood silently as she watched the leader of the newly created Chinese superhuman response team, the Republican Guard, went through several katas. The man, code named Er Lang, was given the ability to create energy weapons that matched his sleeveless, electric blue uniform and he seemed to be fairly proficient with them, if his fighting style was any indication.

Sabra supposed this showcase of combat ability was supposed to influence her, but being honest with herself, Sabra couldn't care less. Going through the motions of battle was one thing, the real thing was another creature entirely.

Involuntarily, Sabra found her attention drawn to the man sitting in the corner of the courtyard, as if he were meditating. The Israeli agent could tell that the man wasn't actually meditating. His eyes were closed, but his eyes still followed his fellow soldier perfectly and his body was coiled, tense, ready for action at a moment's notice.

Guishen was the operative's name and unlike most of the candidates, Sabra knew very little about him. Virtually nothing was offered by the Chinese government even as they insisted that he be included in the try outs. They only listed his powers. Tactical telepathy, empathy and some combat ability.

The man's uniform consisted of a sleeveless, black uniform that ran the length of his body. The skin that Sabra would see was pale, as if the man hadn't seen the sun in years and his arms (even now, sitting in this open-aired courtyard) and his arms were thin, and didn't look as if they belonged to a man who exercised with any regularity. He wore a belt with no latches, no way to easily open that Sabra could see and two Russian GSh-18 in twin holsters attached to his hip while strapped to his back were twin short swords.

As Sabra watched Er Lang finish his demonstration, she made sure to keep one eye on Guishen. He was a mystery to her, which made as both interesting and dangerous.

Tartarus

Chapman breathed in deep, enjoying the tingle of sea air on his lungs. He took a look around at the ocean that surrounded this metal fortress. Tartarus was just another prison in the tradition of Devil's Island, Alcatraz and even Australia in its beginning, islands relying the sheer strength of the surrounding oceans to keep their prisoners inside the prison walls.

Some considered it inhumane to keep even criminals separated from the rest of society with an ocean. When it came to superhumans, Chapman thought of it as the bare minimum to keep them incarcerated.

“Director Chapman? I'm chief of security, Ganya Volker. Welcome to Tartarus, sir.”

The man was medium height, strong build with dark skin. According to his jacket, he run one of the most efficient prisons in South Africa, with one of the lowest corruption rate, guard deaths and prisoner complaints combined.

Secret internal documents expressed doubt at his ability to do the same here, but that wasn't Chapman's concern at the moment.

“Thank you for having me,” Chapman shook the man's hand, and the two of them made their way inside the building, “I imagine you don't get requests like this too often.”

“No sir. Most people sent to this hell hole, their countries don't want back. I'm surprised anyone would want to take any of these scum bags off our hands, especially the two you're interested in. They're among the most dangerous people imprisoned here long term, top ten easily.”

“I'm well aware of that,” Chapman smiled, “Hell, I wouldn't even consider using criminals unless they were good. Hard to argue with results.”

“That's certainly a universal truth,” Ganya replied, “so which one would you like to meet first?”

“I think I'll start with the bloke who came here willingly,” answered Chapman.

The cell was on one of the lower sub basements. Iron bars was all the kept the young man inside, which was itself unusual for superhumans.

“This is Kamau,” Ganya said as the two stood outside the cell, “that's Kenyan for quiet warrior. He...”

“I've read his jacket,” Chapman interrupted, “given how powers, is it wise to keep him this deep?”

Volker shrugged with a guilty smile, “If you’ve read his jacket, then you know that we have no legal justification to lock him up. He’s only in jail because he wants to be. Snuck in about three months ago and insisted on staying.”

“I’m surprised you let him.”

“You read the same files as I did. He’s never been a problem, even saved a guard from another prisoners. Besides, someone like him...”

“Gets to stay wherever he wants,” Chapman finished, “alright, open the cell and give me a moment alone, please.”

The door swung open, and Chapman casually strolled inside. Sitting in the center of the room was a young African man, sitting lotus style with his eyes closed. He wore a simple pair of brown pants and no shirt, his powerfully built body. His head was shaved bald except a single spot at the back of his head which sported thinly braided pony tail. The young man’s face, though handsome, was fairly unremarkable except for four vertical scars on his mouth, which reminded Chapman eerily of a flesh stripped skull.

“Meditating, eh?”

Silence.

“You want to talk to me, son. Because I have authority over superhumans who can kick your arse out of here and drop you back in Africa without breaking a sweat. Authority I’m not afraid to use.”

“Yes, I am trying to meditate,” answered Kamau, “I’m not having a great deal of success.”

“I have that effect on people.”

“I didn’t say you were the cause.”

“Hard to forget their faces, isn’t he?” Chapman asked softly.

“What would you know of it?” Kamau snapped defensively.

“I’ve done things I’m not proud of,” Chapman confided, “I’m trying to make them right, with Excalibur. I think you could do the same, son.”

“I am paying my penance here, now,” Kamau growled, “I deserve to be in this cesspool.”

“This isn’t penance,” Chapman said, “if anything, this place is limbo for you. In between Heaven and Hell, the blood on your hands neither dragging you down nor washing off. You can leave at

any time, you have room and board, more than a lot of people can say. You help nothing and no one. But you can change that.”

“I left violence behind for a reason.”

“I know Udo...can I call you Udo?”

“You can call me whatever you prefer. I have no interest in joining your team whatsoever.”

“I didn’t think so,” Chapman shook his head, “but lets see how much interest you really have in redemption. When I leave here today, I’m going to order my team to expel anyone that is illegally residing in this prison. It’s not a long list. No more free room and board. You’ll be sent home, free and I promise you you’ll remain that way for the rest of your life.

“Or, you can join me in one hour as I depart and try out for membership on my team. If you fail, I give you my word that I’ll make it so you can stay here forever. So starting now, you sixty minutes to decide just how far you’re willing to go to redeem yourself.”

In comparison to Kamau’s simple, iron cell, the one prison cell that Chapman stood in front of now looked more like the door of a bank vault than a prison cell. There were three separate locks and a thin glass panel allowing him to look inside.

As if that weren’t enough, security insisted that Chapman wear a bio-hazard suit before they even considered allowing him inside to see the prisoner.

“This all seems like a bit much,” Chapman remarked casually as the men zipped him up.

“With her powers, it’s just enough,” Volker replied, “the convict can turn herself into mustard gas if it suits her mood.”

“Wouldn’t be hard to kill someone with your bare hands in this spacesuit,” Chapman muttered. The suit was bulky, clumsy. Not the image that he wanted to present at all to the superhuman locked up side that cell.

“The suit doesn’t conduct electricity,” Ganya stated, “we’ll be watching the entire time along with sensors on automatic. If she tries anything, we’ll light her up.”

“Good to know,” Chapman commented as his helmet was secured. One of the technicians handed Chapman a silver cylinder that Chapman had asked him to hold. With a nod, one of the men keyed in the door’s code, and with a hiss of pressurized air the first door swung open.

Chapman stepped through the door, and listened as it slammed shut behind him. In a way, this whole thing, the sealed suit and the sealed airlock reminded Chapman of a medical quarantine, where one person was completely isolated from the rest of the world in every sense for the safety of everyone. The person locked inside wasn’t sick in any physical way, but the principle remained.

The door at the far end opened, and Chapman waited a moment before stepping in. He wasn't scared in the slightest, but he also didn't want to appear eager to the person imprisoned inside.

When he stepped into the room, Chapman mentally noted the metal floor and sprinklers on the ceiling. In some regards, it was like many other prison cells. A bed attached to the wall, toilet in the corner and a small, empty desk.

Where it differed was the fact that the bed was covered in plastic, the walls were covered in a white, seamless bullet proof glass. The glass on the windows was an inch thick, barely allowing in any light. Anything and everything that might retain even the smallest amount of liquid was removed, with the exception of the prisoner's orange jumpsuit.

As for the prisoner herself, Chapman guessed that she was a young woman in her late twenties or early thirties. Information on her true identity was hard to come by. He suspected that was because of whatever event that gave the woman her powers. Most people didn't forget a woman with light blue skin, and white hair with streaks of red.

"So...what does the director of Excalibur want with a lowly criminal like myself?" Her English was perfect, with barely a hint of her Indian accent. She hadn't bothered to stand up to meet Chapman, but instead chose to lie back on her bed apathetically

"That depends on you," Chapman answered, "and what impression you make on me. To start, what do I call you?"

"Shiva will do," answered the woman.

"Not an especially creative choice, that."

"What makes you think I was trying to be creative?" She sat up and looked at Chapman, "my record speaks for itself. Don't pretend that you will be leaving here without me. You wouldn't have insisted on seeing me otherwise. Terms of my release is all we should bother with, not witty repartee."

"Smart bird," Chapman smiled, "lets talk about that record, shall we? You have a long, impressive list of kills. Including five separate superhumans that targeted you before your capture. Do you know why they came after you?"

"I likely killed the wrong person," Shiva replied, as if the answer was the most obvious thing in the world, "and they were sent as retaliation. That is basic math."

"Actually, that's not the case," Chapman corrected, "see, when you killed your first handler, turned on your employer..."

"He got what was coming to him!" Shiva snapped, "and there's no way his people put out a contract on me! They are too scared of me to even think it!"

“Be that as it may, they weren’t the ones who called out a contract on you. In fact, no one did. The five assassins that came after you didn’t do it for a contract.”

Shiva looked at Chapman, examining him for anything that might hint at a deception, “Why else would they come after me, if not for profit?”

“Well, profit was involved in a round about way. You’ve been red listed,” Chapman answered.

“Red listed?”

“That’s an underground slang term, you might say,” Chapman stated, “understandable that someone from a high caste like yourself wouldn’t know that, I suppose.”

Chapman smiled inwardly as Shiva scowled the second she heard the term ‘caste’. He had no idea who she was, but he was forming an idea.

“At any rate, ‘Red Listed’ is when an assassin has demonstrated that they’re too uncontrollable or dangerous. Blokes Sabretooth, Deadpool and the like. Turns out, the other side of the street is as tired of them as law enforcement,” Chapman explained, “so a bunch of criminals put their heads together and came up with the ‘Red List’.”

“Anyone who takes someone down on the Red List gets an instant rep boost and some gratitude from local criminal heads. And anyone who survives being on it for longer than a year demonstrates how good they are. Provided, they have an employer willing to stick their neck out.”

“You’re lying,” Shiva snarled, “there are plenty of killers more dangerous than myself out there. Like you said, Sabretooth, Bullseye...”

“Are professionals,” Chapman retorted, “they know who to approach, are expert killers and can disappear at a moments notice. They’re wired and worth the risk. You? Three Shield agents followed you back to your loft and wired your bed with a neural charge. You can fight and your powers give you easy access to a target. But that’s only the tip of the iceberg to being a real professional, luv.”

“Noted,” Shiva scowled.

“But don’t worry, you were right. I am here to release you. I just want you to know how much you need me,” Chapman’s grin was entirely too cocky for Shiva, but she tolerated it without complaint, “you think of rabbiting, and I’ll be the least of your worries. To me, you’d just be an embarrassment. But to an up and coming mercenary, you’re a stepping stone to a bigger paycheck and without connections, you can’t go to ground.”

“And your solution is to work for you? I’m no fool, there is no way that could help my reputation.”

“You’d be surprised. A lot of professionals have done work for their governments. And it’s not as if you have any other way out of this cell.”

“That’s not...”

“Your ‘secret’ bank accounts were seized, you killed your last employer and this cell was created with you in mind. I doubt you can even see the guard shifts to time them. Now, I’m a busy man. You have the next ten seconds to accept my offer. I’m a busy man, and this suit chafes. One...two...ten.”

“I’m in,” Shiva said quietly, staring at the floor, “so where is my leash? I don’t expect you to trust me.”

“Right here,” Chapman tossed the silver cylinder he carried in. Shiva caught it in one hand.

“What’s this supposed to be?”

“It’s a container for nano-bots,” Chapman explained, “ones created with you in mind. In several seconds, I’ll be able to activate the pain receptors in your body at will if you step out of line.”

“You’re an idiot if you think I’d let you inject me with something like that!” spat Shiva, “I changed my mind, I want out!”

“Too late,” Shiva saw the cylinder break apart in her hand as if it were made of ash, “Nano-bots, remember? They entered in through your pores. I’ll have your uniform brought in. Hurry up and change, I have a schedule to keep.”

Half hour later

Chapman leaned back against the jail wall, waiting his for latest recruit to finish dressing.

Knew it was a mistake to tell her to hurry, he thought to himself. Chapman was seriously considering activating the nanites when he heard a knock on the door window. The guards accompanying him seemed to jump back in surprise, but Chapman was more relieved than anything else.

“Walk out, or there’ll be trouble,” Chapman warned as he signaled for a man to unlock the door.

The heavy door swung open, and Shiva stepped out gingerly. Like every hero or villain ever, Shiva wore a tight, form fitting uniform. She wore a red top, and red pants with dozens of pockets that to Chapman seemed ‘loud’ for her type of work. Bright colors were hardly conducive towards stealth, but he also knew that her skill and powers helped off set that.

“This is a nice change,” Shiva looked around, pleased with how the guards not only gave her a wide berth, but had their weapons leveled at her, “you boys better hope that Chapman here ca...argh!”

Shiva fell to one knee as pain unlike anything else she had felt before coursed through her body. It was only for a split second, but it was still worse than anything she had felt before.

“Save the childish threats for later. We still have to pick up your toys from storage,” Chapman said curtly.

Storage

Tartarus, like any other prison, was charged with holding the personal effects of all their prisoners. As a rule though, all weapons were held in a secret storage facility on the mainland. Chapman, however, didn't feel like making an additional stop and so used his pull to have Shiva's weapons delivered to the prison itself.

Chapman knew there were a lot, but even he was surprised by the number of crates hauled out and opened.

“My little darlings...”

Shiva felt positively her heart giddy as she saw her old arsenal of edged weapons that she used in her profession. Two hook swords, two specially designed katars eight inches long, two sais and a belt with upside down pouches, two wrist protectors with a space for three throwing blades underneath them and four different daggers for concealment within her boots.

“I missed you all,” Shiva cooed as she strapped her belt on. She flicked one pocket open, and four throwing stars fell into her waiting hand, “we have so much work ahead of us.”

Shiva activated the electro-magnet she wore underneath her top and slapped her hook swords on her back. It was the only way she could carry them, and she considered them her favorite weapons.

“We had them all cleaned before they were put in storage,” Chapman said, more than a little disturbed by the affection he saw being lavished upon the weapons.

“Easily fixed,” Shiva replied as she ran her finger over one of her blades, “is handsome there joining us?”

Chapman didn't have to turn around.

“Decided to join us, Kamau?”

“Don't pretend this is my choice,” The African warrior stepped past Chapman and towards guards, “may I have my personal effects?”

Kamau looked down at the box that contained the tools of his old life. He had surrendered them readily when he first insisted upon his imprisonment. And here he was now, reclaiming them with only moderate reluctance. He wondered, had he truly changed?

Shiva watched Kamau out of the corner of her eye as she went through the process of strapping on all her weapons. She could see what was inside, and wondered ideally which of his weapons he would reclaim first.

To her surprise, Kamau reached into the crate, and removed a silver necklace first. The necklace was, to the confusion of Chapman and Shiva both, adorned with a cross, Star of David, an ankh, Tao symbol and a few others neither recognized. Once that was secured, Kamau picked up two trench knives, the blades only seven inches long but made of pure diamond. He placed these weapons in their sheaths without ceremony. His last weapon was a sword that looked as if it were made of glass. The pommel of the sword was connected to a steel chain. Kamau wrapped the chain around his wrist, and Chapman watched in surprise as the steel sank into Kamau's arm like a snake entering its burrow.

"I like a man who likes big long toys," Shiva said with a crooked grin.

"I am ready."

Joey Chapman stood before the two greatest superhuman killers of two continents with a confident, self assured grin, "Don't say that before you see your competition."

Hurry up and wait. In Gauntlet's mind, that saying was the best way to describe the last two days. All the possible candidates for Excalibur membership came from different time zones. So they were all teleported to a United Nations compound on some island and told to take the next two days to adjust.

Given that everyone knew that they'd be competing against each other, everyone kept to themselves. Chapman predicted that, and graciously provided DVD players, books and Cable television from their home countries.

At the beginning of the third day, when everyone had adjusted, he summoned them together in a hangar and without warning, teleported them all to beach God only knew here.

"Everyone ready for Hell?" asked Chapman, "because that's what I intend to put you through."

Next issue: The gathered heroes ready themselves for the greatest challenge of their career as they fight it out for a place on Excalibur! And unfortunately for the gathered heroes, they didn't leave behind the petty politics of their homeland...

The Story thus far:

Excalibur is down two men, but has had an increase in funding as well as wide discretion on choosing new members. As a result, Chapman, with the assistance of Union Jack and Sabra, has gathered various government sponsored superheroes, with the intention of organizing a competition between them to decide who would join the roster.

Excalibur
#17
July 2008
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"FOREIGN LEGIONS"
Part Two: 'Gauntlets'

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Mordillo Island, East China Sea
Commando yawned as he saw Chapman beginning his best Patton impersonation. His father had met the real deal, even had dinner with him and somehow, Commando suspected that Chapman just didn't measure up. Regardless, he still paid attention, knowing that any information about what was to come was good information.

"Membership in Excalibur is not a right," Chapman told the heroes gathered before him. Fourteen heroes stood before him in an uneven line. Their expressions couldn't have been more different if they tried, but there were a few constants mixed in. Some regarded him with amusement, others with disgust while others were just plain dismissive. Chapman didn't care too much, that just made the job he had to do easier, "it is a burden. We are constantly asked to get involved in messy, dangerous situations. If we're lucky, the odds against us are just overwhelming. But if we're really unlucky, we have more than just the odds against us. That's something I intend to demonstrate today. But first, in the interests of giving you a shot in hell, I'll allow you see who else will be involved in this little exercise."

A HERMES teleport signature appeared about four yards away, and Commando went about committing the faces to memory. More than a few concerned him, though he'd never admit that aloud.

Silver Sable and her legendary Wildpack. The Chinese Agent known as The Cat. The feral Puma, Bullet and others that Commando regarded as well trained professionals in the field of violence.

“These are the highly trained agents I would prefer to have on Excalibur instead of you lot, but simply can’t afford,” Chapman stated, “Union Jack, if you would?”

Union Jack came forward with a box. He presented it to American Eagle first, who reached in and pulled out a silver bracelet (which Commando could see were already worn by the opposing mercenaries). When everyone had a bracelet, Chapman started again.

“This exercise is going to be a variant of ‘capture the flag’”, Chapman began, “the objective is to capture another bracelet while retaining your own. As you can see, the fine mercenaries behind me have one as well.”

“What’s the catch?” asked American Eagle.

“It’s fairly straight forward,” Chapman stated, “you cannot remove your bracelet for any reason. You can claim a bracelet from a fellow candidate or from one of the fine hired guns here. If you lose your bracelet and cannot reclaim it within ten minutes, you will be removed from the field by the HERMES teleporter and from consideration from membership. Also, those who capture an additional bracelet will be teleported out within five minutes of their victory. Beyond that, the rules are fairly open, and no killing allowed whatsoever. Those who violate that rule will be instantly deported to the home country of their victim to face justice.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Batal remarked.

“I’m not done,” snapped Chapman, “the bracelets on your wrists also act as homing devices. In addition, I took the liberty of giving my mercenary friends here full dossiers on the lot of you. Ponder that for a spell, if you will.”

That garnered Chapman more than a few looks of shock and outrage.

“For those of you a little slower on the uptake, that means not only will your opposition know where you are at all times, but they’ll know full well what to expect from you. And should you manage to take a bracelet from them, they can still fight past the ten minute limit that applies to all of you. Oh, and this island? Used to be a villain hideout. While all the lethal traps have been downgraded, they’re still active and reasonable dangerous. So watch yourself, eh?”

“That...that’s not fair!” Firearm sputtered.

“What, having your enemies knowing everything about you, not knowing who’s your ally, having the terrain against you and rules specifically designed to hinder your effectiveness?” Chapman smiled in a manner that clearly indicated just how little sympathy he felt, “that’s what being on a team like Excalibur is all about. Anyone who can’t handle that, walk away now.”

No one took Chapman up on his offer, so he finished explaining.

“Also, one last thing. This exercise isn’t over until about half of you have been eliminated. You can work together all you want, but until there are only eight candidates left, the exercise will continue.”

“He’s going through a lot of trouble just to find two new members,” Er Lang muttered to himself in his native tongue. Junta, who overheard, just smirked knowingly.

A moment later, the heroes were teleported to the interior of the island, and the games began.

The Indian killer known as Shiva looked around the forest for a moment, still adjusting to the sudden displacement of teleportation.

This jungle wasn’t much different from that of her native India, where she had performed a mission or two. With a hook sword in each hand, Shiva leapt at the nearest tree, sank one sword into the trunk and began climbing.

There were easier ways to reach the top, but more than anyone else, Shiva needed to work up a good sweat before she started a fight.

The second Danny Vincent’s feet hit the ground, his mind was running like a formula one stockcar, but not in panic. No, he already had a plan and what he saw as a perfect strategy for an ambush. Not a single thing Chapman had warned them about really concerned the young spook known as Junta.

First, he removed a heavy hunting knife he carried and quickly cut off several branches from nearby trees. Holding them in one hand, he looked around until he saw where one tree had collapsed upon another. Adjusting his gravity belt, he walked up the ninety degree angled surface like it was a sidewalk until he was where the trees met. He carefully laid his branches down, mindful of their appearance from the outside. Junta made several more quick trips for branches before he was finally done.

From the ground, his hidey hole looked like a suspicious bunch of branches possibly concealing a handsome young spy. And that’s why Junta took up residence in another tree, much higher up less than ten feet away.

The plan was pretty simple, and in Danny’s experience, those worked best. Most homing devices were two dimensional. And anyone tracking the homing device in his bracelet likely wouldn’t think to look up and those who did would see his nest long before they saw him. If Puma was the one to stumble across it, Danny knew he might be in some trouble. The man was a tracker and wilderness expert after all, but Junta had little fear there. Without a scent, Junta was confident he’d see Puma first.

Treating it like a stakeout, Junta waited patiently for fifteen straight minutes without complaint. He was ready to go for hours more when his instincts began blaring. He had just begun turning around when a foot slammed into his chest. Junta went limp, rolling with the hit and leapt backwards.

To Danny Vincent, Junta, gravity was often little more than an afterthought. He all but flew out of the tree, twisting in midair. He grabbed a loose branch, swung towards a tree and when his feet met the trunk, he pushed off towards the ground. He spun again and came to a skidding halt, his eyes locked upon his former hiding place and whoever might have attacked him.

Junta watched as the man leapt down from the tree with such grace it was as if he, and not Junta, possessed the ability to casually defy gravity. Danny checked the surrounding area for any additional enemies as best he could without removing his eyes from his foe. The young spy's heart was pounding, if this man was who he thought he was, a fight was a sure one way ticket to the hospital.

"I would have thought someone of your national background would do better in the jungle."

Oh crap.

Junta's instincts were right. His foe was none other than Shen Kuei, a Hong Kong intelligence agent known as The Cat. He was regarded as one of the best spies in the field, his name mentioned in the same breath as 'Nick Fury' and 'Black Widow', and as if that weren't enough, he was also internationally recognized by intelligence agencies as one of the greatest hand to hand combatants in the world (that same list that didn't even mention Junta). His threat assessment amounted to a single sentence. If encountered, run like hell.

"What can I say, camping was never my thing. I'm a city boy, Cat." Junta removed his collapsible bo-staff behind his back and extended it to full length. Flight wasn't an option, not from someone this good, which only left fight.

"Jungle survival training is a lost art," Cat observed as he strolled forward. Junta tensed, his mind racing. Running wasn't an option. Even with his gravity powers, Junta knew that the moment his feet left the earth, he'd be at an even greater disadvantage than he was now. He observed how The Cat wore gloves, meaning that his foe knew that touching Danny's skin to his would induce extreme nausea, which meant Chapman wasn't bluffing when he said that his mercenaries were fully briefed.

Realizing the full implications of that, a light went off in Junta's head and though his face betrayed no emotion, Danny began to feel better about this fight, began to feel like he had a chance.

The Cat moved with all the speed and grace of his namesake. Junta had barely registered the first blow by the time another three punishing hits connected. He fought back with his staff as best he could, but The Cat stepped between his counter attacks with practiced ease.

Junta endured another four punishing blows before he finally saw his opening. The Cat had aimed a punch at his left rib, but instead of trying to dodge it, Junta brought his arm down at the last second, redirecting the blow to his waist, where it connected with something metal.

Junta waited several seconds before reacting, acting as though he was still swept up in the fight. After several seconds though, his eyes went wide and he shouted, “My gravity belt, I think it’s broken!”

The Cat stopped instantly, recalling the implications. According to files, Junta lived in ‘gravity well’ and his ability to interact normally depended on the belt secured around his waist. If it malfunctioned or was tampered with, a miniature black hole would consume everything within a six block radius.

Junta sank to one knee, one hand pressed against the belt.

“What can I do to help?” Shen asked quickly.

“I..I don’t think we can fix this,” Junta’s voice was filled with such raw emotion, The Cat didn’t notice Danny’s free hand until it landed upon his unprotected face.

The effect was immediate. Shen found himself so overwhelmed with vertigo that he literally had no idea which way was up. When the bo staff cracked against The Cat’s temple and knocked him unconscious, it was almost a mercy.

“That boy was playing with fire,” Union Jack commented. He sat in one of the island’s many command bunkers, watching a large monitor screen that were connected to the hidden cameras that allowed him to observe Danny Vincent’s fight from any angle. He was on a raised platform, watching the action alongside Chapman and Sabra, while below a host of specially trained agents were keeping an eye on their monitors, observing the other heroes on the field.

“That’s what any hero does,” Chapman countered.

“He cries wolf too many times and we may all regret it,” stated Sabra, “still, this Junta seems skilled and reliable in his own slimy way. Much like yourself, Chapman.”

“People used to respect their superiors,” Chapman sighed. He signaled to one of the agents below, “be prepared teleport Junta to the barracks. We have our first winner.”

Gauntlet moved through the thick forest slow and deliberately. He knew that with the oversized weapon connected to his arm, there was little hope of him moving with any stealth. So instead, he chose to move like a convoy, moving briskly while trying to keep an eye out for anything that might be a threat.

“Yo Joe!”

Gauntlet swung his weapon up towards where he heard the voice, and saw American Eagle sitting in a tree, a piece of long grass in the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t start man, I hear that enough from my brothers,” Gauntlet snapped, “so...we going to throw down or what, Jason? I like you okay, but stand-offs aren’t my thing.”

“Mine either,” American Eagle leapt down off the tree, “I like you okay too, and there are plenty of other people to beat up.”

Gauntlet smiled and lowered his weapon, “Yeah, true dat.”

The two heroes had met while waiting for this exercise to begin. With little else to do, they struck a conversation and before long were well on their way to becoming fast friends. Neither wanted to jeopardize a new friendship when they were both luke warm to the idea of actually joining Excalibur.

“So this is a team-up, huh?” Gauntlet smirked, “this is a first for me. I don’t need to learn no secret hand shake, now do I?”

“We’re good there,” American Eagle’s face went somber, and in a low tone said, “actually, I wanted to ask you something now that we’re away from prying ears. After Excalibur approached me, I got a call from a friend in the DOD. Said he was passing along some under the table orders.”

Gauntlet nodded serious, “Let me guess. He said to eliminate that Commando guy from the competition.”

“Yeah. Any idea why? He didn’t seem that bad.”

“None, man,” Gauntlet shrugged, “but orders are orders. For me anyways.”

“I just can’t see any reason for it,” American Eagle shook his head, “still, whatever. This is a big island, chances are we won’t even see him.”

Some thirty yards away, the man of discussion sat in excellent concealment, with a directional microphone that conveyed the conversation perfectly. As the pair walked away, Commando stalked after them, a sinister grin on his face.

The superhuman labeled to as Guishen was literally taking time to stop and smell the flowers when he sensed two men of hostile intent and company, approaching.

“Please stand down, surrender your bracelets and you will not be harmed,” Guishen said in a calm, conversational tone that carried complete and utter self conviction.

“It is you who should be worried about being harmed,” Er Lang said in his native tongue. Beside him stood Malak, technological member of the Saudi team called the Janissaries. Behind him stood a contingent of twelve robot toy soldiers that looked like they were plucked from the play ‘The Nutcracker’, that Guishen guessed were under the Arab’s control.

Why they were clearly working together so naturally was a mystery, one Guishen intended to solve.

“Lethal force is prohibited by the rules,” Guishen reminded them as he stood up. The two took a step back on reflex.

“We have no intention of killing you,” Er Lang’s smile was forced, “but alliances are allowed and Malak thinks we would do better together. Don’t be jealous that you didn’t use your spare time to network. A good soldier knows when to look for allies.”

“I see,” Guishen’s face remained impassive, “however, I already have two allies.”

In one fluid motion, Guishen’s Russian GSh-18 were in his hand and he was running towards Er Lanf and Malek before they could properly react. He pumped the triggers of his gun as he approached their toy soldiers. He came straight down the middle, rolled on his back while still in between them and came up to a standing position.

The toy soldiers turned around as ordered by Malak...and then fell apart thanks to Guishen’s explosive bullets and expertly placed shots.

Er Lang instantly created an energy shield while Malak just stood there, absolutely stunned.

“You should be thankful lethal force is prohibited,” Guishen hit the release on his guns, and the empty magazines slid out and fell to the ground. He slapped the guns to his belt and the mechanisms within instantly loaded in another full clip. But instead of raining hot lead down upon them, Guishen returned his weapons to their holsters.

“Give up!” Er Lang snapped, “you know what this is about!”

“I will in a moment,” Guishen replied. Er Lang and Malak watched as Guishen took a step to the side...and disappeared completely.

The two government declared heroes looked around frantically, but could find no sign of their prey. Er Lang gripped the energy sword in his hands tighter than he was ever trained to as he scanned the area. He saw nothing, but out of nowhere he felt a warm breath on the back of his neck and felt cold steel against his throat and a hand gripping his hair.

“Why are you doing this?” Guishen said, “what is your intention?”

“I will never answer!” Er Lang spat defiantly.

“You were improperly briefed,” Guishen stated, “because you already have.”

Guishen dispatched Er Lang with a swift blow to the back of the head, and turned to his co-conspirator.

“My government wishes me dead, and bargained with yours for assistance. That is why, I presume, the monitors on this island haven’t picked up this fight?”

Malak nodded, "As far as they're concerned, we're on opposite sides of the island. Technology is in my blood, you might say. Just like your blood will be on the ground in a moment"

"I think not," Guishen said evenly, "you see, you and Er Lang were not fully briefed, likely because your superiors thought that full knowledge of my abilities would do more to intimidate you than help you defeat me."

Malak assumed a fighting stance, "I'm no slouch myself! Technology isn't my only advantage!"

"Yes, I know," Guishen was calm, polite, "but you're having trouble focusing right now, aren't you? You see an idea in your head, but you can't quite grasp it."

Malak swallowed hard.

"You see, not only am I built for combat, my powers also inhibit the mental abilities of my opponents. While you struggle to put string a thought together, my mind is working perfectly. I understand that the American cliché is 'Do the math', but at the moment, you can't even do that."

Two minutes later, Guishen was teleported to the barracks with two bracelets as signs of his victory.

The warrior known as Kamau strolled into a vast field of low lying grass, all the while contemplating his role in this mockery of a battle.

Despite how the Englishman might protest, this petty little conflict was nothing compared to what Kamau had seen and done in his life. A life he now sought to make amends for every waking moment of his life.

But because of Chapman, Kamou now found himself torn. He wanted to dive head first into the battles around this island, to meet them weapon in hand and conquer them without fear or hesitation.

But was that desire merely blood lust, or had his unconscious mind seen the path to redemption that his waking mind refused?

His heart torn by conflict, Kamau decided to that the best thing to do was to leave the matter up to fate. So instead of searching out any prey, he sat down lotus style and waited.

"Look at that black cur," Batal sneered. He and Arabian Knight were less than thirty yards away, though the shade of the trees above them and gentle downward slope of the clearing allowed them a better view of Kamau than he had of them, "he thinks this is a time for meditation."

"Perhaps he simply does not wish to fight," Arabian Knight countered, wincing inwardly at his comrade's racism. The heroes of Saudi Arabia and Syria had fought side by side in the past, but

each time Arabian Knight was a little more grateful than usual when the threat passed. Batal was a strong and powerful ally, but he was anything but enlightened. Arabian Knight supposed that was because his handlers didn't want someone with had both superpowers and the intelligence to question their orders.

"He would not be here, if that were the case," said Batal, "if he is going to lower his guard, I see no reason not to take advantage of that."

"You do what you want," Arabian Knight turned and began walking away, disgusted, "I think I will find more willing participants."

Arabian Knight left his sometimes comrade and began wandering into the jungle's interior. He had no particular destination in mind, but was confident someone would find him sooner or later.

Sure enough, his special training alerted him in just enough time to bring his scimitar up to block several throwing stars aimed at his head.

"Five minutes?" he asked his foe.

"Little over seven, actually," Silver Sable stepped out of the foliage, knife in one hand and a gun in the other.

"Let me guess, you were herding me away from any help and away from whatever traps may be lying about."

"Correct."

Arabian Knight willed a small amount of mystic energy through his sword, causing it glow brightly, and making his opponent away of the power this ancient weapon held. It was both for intimidation and misdirection. Navid found that his opponents often focused too much on the weapon and not where the man holding it would be attacking with it.

Silver Sable watched her foe carefully, observing the powerful sword and how the sash tied around Arabian Knight's belt seemed to twitch against the wind. She ran through several scenarios in her head

Confident that his foe wouldn't attempt to put a bullet in his head, Arabian Knight surged forward and swung the flat of his blade at Silver Sable's head. Sable knew better than to try to block the mystical weapon with her knife. According to the briefings, the sword could literally cut through anything.

Arabian Knight switched tactics with his second strike, slashing his sword like a seeming madman, the cutting edge coming closer and closer to Silver Sable.

Silver Sable was so focused on avoiding the deadly blade, that she forgot all about Arabian Knight's sash until lashed out as if it had a mind of it's own and grabbed her by the ankle. Silver Sable, already dodging backwards, had no way to stop her momentum and spilled to the ground.

Arabian Knight smiled and twisted his sword in his hand, ready to smack Silver Sable upside the head with the flat of his blade (which he knew from experience was non-fatal). He felt neither hesitation nor perverse satisfaction in beating a woman. While Arabian Knight didn't approve of female warriors, he knew they were just as capable and deserving of respect as men, making them every bit as dangerous.

Ironically, Arabian Knight would later realize he failed to give Silver Sable the full respect he knew she deserved. When Arabian Knight raised his sword above his head to disable the professional mercenary, Silver Sable took aim with her gun and shot the Knight six times in the chest.

The Saudi hero went down like a sack of bricks. He felt like a horse had kicked him in the chest, and realized his mistake. Long ago, Arabian Knight had woven the magic carpet of his predecessor into his uniform. So while it looked like all that remained of the magic carpet was the red sash he wore around his belt, in reality Arabian Knight's seemingly normal uniform had threads of the carpet woven into it. Given that the magic carpet itself was indestructible, it acted as excellent body armor and had saved Navid's life several times already.

Unfortunately, the armor was much like Kevlar. It would stop the bullets and save his life, but did nothing to stop the kinetic energy of the bullets themselves.

Silver Sable flipped up, and approached the Knight. Arabian Knight realized that he failed to fully take into account his opponent's knowledge before he began the fight. He cursed himself for acting like an American as the butt of Silver Sable's handgun met his forehead.

"Arabian Knight has been eliminated," said Silver Sable into her radio, "Team three, what's the status of Batal and Kamau?"

"Batal is preparing to engage Kamau. He hasn't made us yet."

"And Kamau?"

"Who knows? He's just sitting there. Were Chapman's files a bluff?"

Silver Sable shook her head, "Not in the least, I helped compile them myself. Keep an eye on them and be prepared to intervene. Remember, part of our contract is preventing fatalities."

"Understood. So are we to just observe?"

"Correct. Let those two fight it out. Then, pick off the winner. No reason we need to make this any harder than it needs to be."

Guy Smith, The Orphan of Fallen Angels, moved along the island in a pattern only he could see, only he could sense.

Unlike some of the others, Smith was actually relieved when Chapman said that the island contained traps. In the days leading up to this exercise, Guy was anything but ideal. He walked the grounds, encountering his fellow competitors and allowing his super senses to wash over them. And though the information he gleaned was hardly comprehensive, it was enough to make him painfully aware of how outclassed he was. Orphan was keenly aware of how he didn't possess the raw power of Gauntlet, the sheer strength of Batal or the weapon skills of Firearm.

But with a battlefield like this, Smith was confident he could offset that disadvantage. Even the greatest survival expert would have been hard pressed to make it through these downgraded death traps, but to the Orphan, the traps might have well come with hazard signs, warning lights and detailed instructions written with neon signs.

He could smell the gun oil, taste the metal and feel the electrical power lines that fed the traps, every one of which stood out like a sore thumb in this thick jungle. It was as if Guy had a detailed, X-ray picture of his immediate surroundings. In this jungle filled with traps, Orphan found that his powers put him perfectly at ease.

But like all good things, Smith knew that it wouldn't last. He heard a pounding heart approach, and with a calming breath, purged his anxiety and looked towards his approaching foe.

The trees of this jungle were unnaturally tall (according to Orphan's nose), but Guy was still a little surprised when he saw a woman swinging through them like Spider-Man through New York.

Like all his senses, Guy's eye sight was enhanced to epic levels, and he identified the approaching woman as Shiva.

Just my luck, thought Guy Smith. Unlike the other competitors, Shiva was kept isolated until they were ready to begin. As a result, Orphan had no idea what her powers were. He could smell the poison on her blades though, and that was enough for him. One nick and he'd be in serious trouble.

Shiva saw Orphan looking right at her, and grinned like a shark in return. She swung herself towards another tree face first. She hit the tree trunk hard and drove the blades on her pommel into the wood. Her body weight was enough carry her back to mother earth.

Guy decided instantly that it would be better if he could hit her before she reached the ground, and ran towards where Shiva was descending.

"Eager for death, are we?" Shiva sensed the Fallen Angel approaching, and when she decided she was close enough to the ground, pushed off from the tree and landed in a crouch, one sword aimed at Orphan.

“You care to lose your limbs in any particular order?” asked Shiva.

“Why do all sociopaths think they sound clever?” Orphan asked aloud. He did a cart wheel to the side, activating a trap he detected there.

Shiva barely saw the net coming in time. She sliced it in two, but Orphan had closed the distance between them. Shiva swung her other sword, but Orphan rolled between the attack and his foot came up to nail Shiva in the stomach. Orphan rolled to his side and came up again, a smirk on his face.

“Hook swords are good weapons, but not the easiest to stab with, are they?”

“You are correct,” Shiva dropped her weapons to the ground, and grabbed her two katars, V shaped weapons with five inch blades, “you’re better than I gave you credit for. Up close and personal it is, then.”

Orphan eyed the swords on the ground for a moment, wondering if he should grab one. He’d practiced with swords in the past and knew his way around them better than most. But at the same time, he couldn’t imagine someone as well trained as Shiva leaving a weapon that could be turned against her just laying on the battlefield like that, if it could be turned against her.

Shiva came at him like a wild animal, and Orphan used every last bit of his enhanced senses to predict her attacks. Orphan ducked and weaved as he avoided the blades. He could sense her pounding heart, and suspected that she couldn’t keep this effort up much longer. Nothing about Shiva’s physical body was enhanced, Orphan could tell that much easily.

Shiva swung her katars in a tight arc, aimed at Orphan’s neck. Guy blocked her wrists with his own and head-butted Shiva, who stumbled backwards.

“You’re good, but I’m afraid you don’t stand a chance against me,” Orphan stated evenly, “I can sense every attack you make and counter it. And unlike you, I didn’t waste any energy swinging through the jungle like a monkey.”

Shiva’s response was to spit upon Orphan’s chest and smirk, “I was just working up a sweat. You’re the one outclassed here, little boy. I will enjoy carving my name into your skull.”

Guy looked at Shiva with a raised eye brow, “Okay little girl, time for a time-out.”

Orphan slammed his foot down upon the switch for a trap door that he had maneuvered Shiva atop of. When the sociopath disappeared beneath the ground, Orphan breathed a little easier. His lungs were starting to burn for air and he felt a little light headed.

Took more out of me than I thought, Orphan commented to himself. He wiped away a brow of sweat, and then realized something.

He couldn’t sense Shiva anywhere.

He couldn't detect her body mass in the trap below, he couldn't hear her heartbeat anywhere while her scent...seemed to oddly linger.

Guy concentrated, trying to detect any energy signatures, in case she'd teleported away somehow.

"You're more clever than I gave you credit for," Shiva appeared out of thin air behind Guy. In one fluid motion, she removed three throwing stars and sent them flying towards Orphan's chest. Orphan leaned back to avoid them...and then fell on his ass, his head and vision swimming.

"Having a little trouble standing boy?" asked Shiva, "I think that may be because my body can produce any poison I wish. My sweat...my spit...all as lethal as my blades. I can even produce poisons that are completely scentless. Of course, that doesn't prevent your enhanced senses from detecting them, does it?"

Orphan felt a chill run down his spine and cursed his luck. He realized too late that Shiva was the absolute last foe he should have picked a fight with.

"You have enhanced senses, right?" Shiva removed a crooked dagger from behind her back, "logic would suggest then that you have a higher pain threshold. Lets test that, shall we?"

Next issue: The non-stop action continues as secret agendas and personal grudges pollute an otherwise completely civilized battle royal.

The Story thus far:

Excalibur is down two men, but has had an increase in funding as well as wide discretion on choosing new members. As a result, Chapman, with the assistance of Union Jack and Sabra, has gathered various government sponsored superheroes, with the intention of organizing a competition between them to decide who would join the roster.

Unfortunately, some members have hidden agenda and personal grudges that have infected an otherwise perfectly civilized brawl.

Excalibur

#18

September 2008

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"FOREIGN LEGIONS"

Part Three: 'Waging Warriors'

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Mordillo Island, East China Sea

The Syrian superhuman known as Batal looked down on the meditating Kamau with a sneer, wondering just what could have possessed this young man to calmly sit down on the battlefield like he were on some school trip.

“What do you think you’re doing, praying?”

“After a fashion, I suppose.”

Batal observed the number of religious icons on Kamau’s necklace, and the iron chain wrapped around Kamau’s right wrist, “You might have better luck if you made a choice in your God and set down your weapons.”

“Maybe.”

“Are you going to hand over your bracelet?”

Kamau looked at it, then to Batal, “No, no I think that would defeat the point of the exercise. You may try to remove it from me by force, or find another target. The choice is yours. That is more than was given to me.”

“What do you hope to accomplish by sitting here then, boy?”

Kamau looked up at Syrian hero, “Simply hoping that fate will put me on a path of absolution.”

“The battle field the wrong place to look for redemption,” Batal pulled his fist back, “there are no clerics to be found here, boy, only warriors!”

Batal’s fist missed Kamau’s head by inches as the other man sunk into the ground like a drop of water into the ocean.

“Idiots as well...”

Batal scanned the area frantically, looking for where Kamau might have escaped to. The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

“...because you should have first learned why I need absolution...before you attacked. But since you insisted on this battle...”

Kamau arose from the ground behind Batal like a vampire rising from his crypt, as silent as the night. He held a diamond trench knife in each hand. Lunging forward but silent as the wind itself, Kamau slashed an ‘X’ across Batal’s back.

“I will simply demonstrate for you.”

Guy Smith tried to force his unresponsive muscles into action as Shiva drew closer and closer. Shiva moved with deliberate slowness, enjoying the look of fear in her prey’s eyes as she advanced. She savored looks like that almost as much as she savored the kill itself.

But before Shiva could get too close to gut her victim, she felt something connect with her stomach hard. Pitched backwards, Shiva rolled with the hit and rolled to her feet in a smooth motion.

“Would you tell me why you’re so interested in returning to prison?”

She looked up to see a woman, six feet tall, dressed in a tight, black uniform that while form fitting, wasn’t skin tight either. Her raven hair was made up in a bun, with two braids on each side of her face.

“What’s it matter to you?”

“Professional curiosity,” she answered calmly.

“You should have learned the lesson cats teach,” Shiva gripped her katars, “as in ‘curiosity killed the...!’”

Shiva lunged forward, but her foe moved with impossible speed and before Shiva's battle hardened reflexes even registered the slap, Shiva was sent sprawling backwards on her rear.

"People often forget the end of that saying, as in 'satisfaction brought it back'."

"What do you want?" Shiva wiped some blood from her cheek.

"My chosen codename is Persona Grata," answered Shiva's foe, "and I'm simply here to prevent you from making a mistake."

Shiva scowled, and disappeared. Persona Grata didn't waste her time looking around for where her quarry might appear. Instead, she calmly waited until she felt Shiva's hands on her face. Persona Grata casually grabbed Shiva's wrists and flipped her over her head and towards the ground. Like before, Shiva corrected herself in midair, but the look on her face was one of pure murder.

"I swear I will strangle you with your own intestines!"

"Unlikely for several reasons," Persona Grata bent down and removed Orphan's bracelet from his wrist.

"First, I don't fear your poison touch. That gives me an advantage you're not used to dealing with. Second, I can activate the nanites in your bloodstream at will. For the third reason..." Persona pointed over Shiva's shoulder. Against her better judgment, the Indian killer looked over her shoulder, and saw a mountain of a man, dressed in all black with a stock of red hair and large mustache.

"Hey, how's it goin'?" asked the man calmly. Shiva took one look into the man's eyes, and saw someone whose lack of apprehension for life matched her own.

"His name is Bullet, and he's been a black ops killer before you ever held your first knife. Even if you did manage to beat me, he would pick you off without breaking a sweat," Persona Grata tossed Shiva Orphan's bracelet, "but if you leave now, you may get an opportunity to kill me in the future."

Shiva snatched the bracelet out of the air and smirked, "I do prefer my kills to be more intimate. Consider it a date."

Bullet sighed as he watched both Shiva and Orphan teleported away, leaving only him and Persona Grata remaining on the battlefield.

"I was aiming for the psycho bitch, not you," Bullet's tone carried hints of guilt, though his body was coiled for action.

"I know, Agent Bullet, and I don't take offense. Now then, shall we?"

“Medical bay reports that they have Orphan stabilized,” Union Jack reported to Chapman.

“Good. Hate to give that bastard Magneto reason to get up in our business,” said Chapman.

“Terribly convenient that Orphan ran into a foe whose powers exploited his,” Sabra observed calmly, “who then in turn ran into someone immune to her powers.”

Chapman just shrugged, with a jackal’s grin across his face, “If Magneto wants to send me a spy, he should be more subtle about it. We had one bastard from Genosha already, that was enough for me.”

“...damn it,” Gauntlet wasn’t the most experienced hero in America, but he liked to think that his military training helped offset the lack of experience he had working the WMD attached to his left arm. Basic training helped him keep his cool under fire, and the special training he received when this alien gauntlet fused itself onto his arm was something he would have given his right eye for. Right now though, every instinct that the army and his life had cultivated was telling him one thing.

They screwed up. Big time.

One of the most important things about any combat situation was to know the terrain. If you happened to be at the bottom of a hill when your enemy was at the top, you were dog food.

Gauntlet, along with his impromptu partner, American Eagle, had realized that they were being shadowed about five minutes ago. Rather than fight their enemy in the thick jungle, the two of them went looking for the first clearing they could find, and found one easily.

Unfortunately, it was in actuality a cliff face, with a large pond below it. The clearing was only about thirty feet wide, not nearly enough open area to draw their pursuers out. Jumping down was out of the question, not only was Gauntlet unable to swim with the weapon on his arm, the water would slow them down enough to make them even easier pickings.

“Here they come,” American Eagle warned his friend, “one flier, followed by men on the ground. You take the flier and I’ll take ground.”

“That plan sounds as good as any,” Gauntlet began to will energy through his alien weapon.

The two didn’t have to wait long for the attack. A woman in blue and white flew overhead while a large behemoth with a fin on his back stomped through the brush.

American Eagle scowled. He was positive these two hadn’t been tracking them several minutes ago, and he hated being suckered. But he put those thoughts aside to deal with the immediate threat.

Jason took one look at his foe, eight feet tall wearing a shark skin patterned uniform with a large fin on his back, and braced himself for a fight. Even if he was stronger than this guy, his foe had a good three feet on him in height plus considerable bulk.

“You look stressed,” commented his foe, “a good fight will calm you down.”

“Yeah, somehow I can’t see that helping,” American Eagle stepped forward and landed a good, solid punch on his foe’s solar plexus. Though he placed a good portion of his muscle behind the blow, his enemy barely budged.

“Good one! This’ll make a great fight.”

Several yards away, Amy Chen, Douglas Powell and Crippler, elite members of Silver Sable’s world respected Wild Pack, chuckled under their breath a little as they watched Gauntlet and American Eagle’s plight.

“Bet them two thought they had someone else tailin’ them!” Powell slapped his knee, howling in laughter, “the looks on their faces...!”

“Glad you found my plan amusing,” Amy Chen said evenly, “but this isn’t over. We need to insure that Lightbright and Fin bring the two down. Our bonuses depend upon it.”

“We got the gas grenades prepped and some extra firepower,” Crippler held up a small bag that carried a half dozen exotic weapons, “we’re good to go, if our muscle cops out.”

Suddenly, Chen felt a tingle down her spine, battle honed instincts telling her that something was amiss.

Crippler felt it too, ironically only seconds before steel toed boots crashed into his backside and sent him sprawling to the ground.

“That Chapman fella ain’t say a thing about blocking the signal,” Commando stood before the three highly paid mercenaries, a cigar clenched between his teeth. Though the man had entered the jungle with more firepower, he didn’t have a weapon drawn on any of them. Whether that was because he didn’t see guns as non lethal weapons or because he wanted to get his hands dirty was anyone’s guess.

All they knew, was that Commando, who had a file filled with dozens of compelling reasons why he shouldn’t be engaged in close combat, was less than eight feet away and grinning like a madman.

“Ah hell,” Powell’s hand went to his customized .44 magnum. Commando was only three yards away, but by the time Powell had his gun out Commando had crossed the distance between them. The brightly colored soldier grabbed Powell’s gun out of his hand and smacked him across the face with it twice, more than enough to knock him senseless, but not unconscious.

Commando grabbed the man in a head lock, just as Crippler recovered and lunged at him. Commando lashed out with a kick that connected with just below Crippler's ribs, while at the same he pummeled Powell's face with his free hand.

Dropping his unconscious foe, Commando then swung his right fist backwards. His fist connected with Amy Chen's crossed arms, as she tried to deflect the blow, but Commando's haymaker was still more than enough to stun her even through the block.

Chen staggered just enough for Commando to grab her collar. He swung her one hundred and eight degrees into Crippler, the back of her skull colliding with his face and knocked out like a light.

"This barely qualifies as foreplay," Crippler wiped the blood from his face and pushed his unconscious teammate aside, "that all you got?"

"Come find out, cupcake."

Crippler stomped forward, ducked under an elbow...only for his jaw to collide into a devastating uppercut that fractured his jaw and was more than enough to surpass even his pain threshold.

American Eagle connected with another solid hit to his foe's stomach, but to his dismay saw Fin barely grunt in discomfort. It seemed that no matter how many blows Eagle landed, Fin could take them and more. His massive, incredible bulk wasn't just for show.

American Eagle scuffled back, just out of arms length and desperate for a plan. Though he was hardly a small man, his foe The Fin was only one size smaller than the Hulk and felt only two sizes weaker.

"You're a good fighter," Fin remarked casually. The large man was a brawler by nature, and didn't even seem offended by Eagle's hits. Jason really didn't know what to make of that.

American Eagle accessed his foe again. The lack of malice in Fin meant it would be hard, if not impossible to goad him into making mistakes, and the man's size and muscles...

A light suddenly went off in American Eagle's head. With a cocky grin on his face, the hero charged forward right at his enemy, and at the last moment slid to the ground and slipped between Fin's giant legs.

Fin barely had any time to register that American Eagle was behind him before the hero leapt up and wrapped his arms around Fin's neck, and then began to squeeze.

The Fin was easily bigger and stronger than American Eagle. But unlike American Eagle, the Fin's giant body lacked the range of motion most people took for granted. With arms as thick as tree trunks, literally, The Fin simply couldn't reach his back to pluck American Eagle off. The giant was lucky if he could even touch his own elbows!

Fin slammed his back into the nearest tree, but American Eagle's skin was as tough as steel. He weathered the crash of wood against his body without complaint, his grip around Fin's throat never wavering. Eagle began to smile as Fin fell to one knee, his powerful body obviously unable to sustain itself long without oxygen.

Gauntlet, however, didn't share his partner's luck. His enemy, Lightbright, besides being gifted with flight (and the dumbest name Gauntlet could think of) could shoot energy beams out of both her hands and eyes. Combined, Joe couldn't think of better powers for strafing an enemy while keeping out of reach.

Gauntlet's weapon hardly lacked for range, but compared to Lightbright's speed, Gauntlet's energy hand was next to useless.

Lightbright flew through the air with more grace than a bird, releasing bursts of energy that came within several feet. The earth near Joe's feet exploded, throwing up grass and dirt and making it even harder for the army hero to fight back.

"Yo, hand job!"

Gauntlet squinted through the debris, and saw Commando, only several yards brandishing his modified M4 carbine. Gauntlet swallowed hard, knowing that he didn't have anywhere near the experience needed to take out both his foes.

Well, I tried my damndest, he shrugged to himself.

"Catch her! Gonna graze her skull!"

Commando took aim at Lightbright, and Gauntlet found himself too stunned to move for a split second. This entire exercise was supposed to be non lethal, and no matter how good this Commando thought he was, simply grazing the skull of someone who was a hundred feet in the air and in constant motion was next to impossible. The variables were just too many, from Lightbright's momentum, to wind resistance and experienced snipers only knew what else.

But in the time it took Gauntlet to form a verbal objection to Commando's plan of action, the man had already taken his shot.

Gauntlet watched in horror as Lightbright's head jerked back, and she fell from the sky like a stone. A trained soldier, his instincts took over immediately, creating a giant energy hand that caught the mercenary before she fell too far.

Gauntlet gently lowered her to the ground and, to his relief, only saw a gash on the woman's head. To Gauntlet's complete shock, Commando's shot had been perfectly, merely grazing the African mutant enough to knock her without killing her.

"...crazy bastard," muttered Gauntlet.

“Hey, cue ball! How about you return the favor?”

Gauntlet turned his head to see Commando taking fire, pinned behind a fallen tree that was being chewed by a duel laser guns, wielded by the Arab heroine, Firearm.

“Get involved and I put you down next!” Firearm yelled at Gauntlet.

Commando popped up and squeezed off several shots at his enemy. They were perfectly aimed at her mid section (survivable with medical care), but seemed to bounce off an invisible barrier.

Firearm did nothing but smirk. Unlike American superhumans who seemed to love declaring their abilities to their enemies, she felt no need to inform the man that she possessed an additional power of slowing time. And by using that power on the air surrounding her, she could create an impregnable force field.

Gauntlet observed the bullets bouncing off Firearm’s shield, and rather than waste time testing its strength, he had another idea. Gauntlet sent his hard energy into the earth, and in his mind’s eye, began to direct it through the dirt. When he estimated that it was directly below Firearm, Gauntlet winked at her, and willed his energy skyward.

A column of light seemed to consume Firearm for a moment, but the energy dissipated to reveal a smoking, but still alive, unconscious Janissary.

“Nice shootin’,” Commando stood up and strolled over to his fellow soldier, “guess that makes us about even.”

Gauntlet examined Commando for a second, looking for something, anything, that might justify acting on his clan destine orders to eliminate the other man from competition. Unfortunately, nothing was forth coming.

“Everything alright?” asked American Eagle as he stepped through the brush, stealing a glance at Commando and then looking back to Gauntlet.

Gauntlet paused for a second, and then said, “Yeah, we cool here. We all got bracelets, now all that’s left to do is wait.”

Sabra watched as Kamau slashed Batal across the chest for the second time, and smiled to herself. The cut wasn’t deep, but it was more than enough to draw blood.

“Hmm, I think I may have to request a copy of this for myself,” Sabra commented as she watched the two superhumans duke it out.

“Don’t get too blood thirty,” Union Jack warned.

“If you knew the operations Batal has been a part of, you would be cheering alongside me,” retorted Sabra, “I am curious though. The records state that Kamau is a geomorph. Why doesn’t he simply change shape, like Sandman or Quicksand?”

“He can’t,” Chapman answered, “our boy here can’t change his shape. He’s like Iceman used to be, is the closest example I can think of. He absorb rock and silica into his body to make his skin rock hard, control it, but can’t change his shape with it.”

“Then how’d he dodge that punch?”

“Apparently, he can move through rock like water,” Chapman replied, “now, do you mind? We’re supposed to be evaluating this bloke.”

“Had we been given the same files as the mercenaries, we wouldn’t need to ask these questions,” Sabra countered.

“I wanted an objective analysis. Now be quiet and analyze!”

Batal, gifted with steel hard skin and super strength, gritted his teeth as a diamond blade slashed his skin, drawing a thin line of blood. Ever since the Syrian government had enhanced him and made him their national hero, Batal had rarely known fear or pain. But now as he fought Kamau, Batal was relearning them both, with interest.

His foe moved with speed, strength and precision. Kamau cartwheeled at his enemy, the heel of his left heel smashing across the Syrian’s mouth. As he landed, the African Warrior used his momentum and swung his right hand, armed with a diamond blade, slashing across Batal’s chest.

Batal gritted his teeth, as his mind attempted to tell his panicking heart that the cut wasn’t nearly as bad as it felt. The slice was by no means a paper cut, but at the same time, Kamau didn’t have enough strength to drive his blades in deep enough.

Batal shunted the pain to the back of his mind and lunged forward to tackle his enemy, but as he came forward, Kamau swung his right below into Batal’s jaw. The Syrian stumbled backwards until his back was lined against a stone boulder...that definitely hadn’t been there ten minutes before.

Batal looked over his shoulder as a matter of reflex and when he turned his head back around, he just barely saw Kamau’s foot before it slammed into his face and sent his head bouncing back against the rock. His vision swimming, Batal never had a chance to block the follow up blow to his stomach.

Batal pitched forward, barely able to keep the contents of his stomach secured. Kamau grabbed him by the shoulder and hair, and swung him around, face first into the wall of stone. Batal’s head went neck deep into the stone...and his body went limp.

Kamau took a step back, his heart pounding and a blanket of sweat dripped off his body, but barely any of it was from exhaustion.

“Come out!” Kamau roared, “I know you’re out there!”

Battlestar, former partner of U.S. Agent and the cyborg Coldblood 7 stepped into the clearing, both with weapons in hand and bodies primed for battle.

Kamau looked from one to the other, held his hands up, and concentrated. Coldblood 7 sank six inches into the ground and then sped backwards as if he were on an escalator.

With one combatant dealt with, at least for the moment, Kamau turned his attention towards Battlestar.

Kamau focused his mind, and began to slide towards Battlestar as if the ground were made of ice. He lashed out with his right, and willed the chain around it to unravel and shoot towards the Patriotic hero like a bullet.

Battlestar brought his shield up to block the chain, which ricocheted off the shield and fell to the ground. Battlestar rushed forward to meet Kamau’s charge, stepping over the chain with his shield and fists at the ready.

Battlestar was only seconds away from his foe when the chain came alive and swept towards him from the back. Battlestar stumbled backwards as the chain struck the back of his knees like a log. Battlestar fell backwards just as Kamau’s foot collided with his chin. Propelled by Kamau’s foot, the back of Battlestar’s skull collided with the ground hard and he instantly blacked out.

Kamau spun around just in time to take a left cross across the jaw from Coldblood 7. The cyborg, to his credit, moved faster than any man and had more than enough strength to make Kamau see stars.

But unfortunately for the cyborg, the African Warrior’s instincts were forged in the fires of a hundred battles. Even as his brain was still registering the pain in his jaw, his right arm, with chain connected, was swinging down upon Coldblood. The chain fell across Coldblood’s shoulders, and Kamau snatched the other side with his free hand.

Kamau pulled down on the chain while leaping forward, both of his knees crashing into Coldblood’s steel chest with enough force to demolish a car. As soon as his feet touched the earth again, Kamau swung his entire weight forward and elbowed Coldblood in the face, denting the high density steel that protected his skull and knocked the cyborg off line.

Kamau took a moment to catch his breath, and then asked, “Are you looking for the honor of single combat, or a coward?”

Thomas Fireheart, known and feared by the name Puma, crooked his head to the side.

“Neither, actually. Unlike my associates, I rely upon speed and agility, and something that’s hampered in a group,” Puma held his claws out for Kamau to see, “I should warn you, my claws are stronger than they look. And I promise you that you are not quick enough to catch me with your knives.”

“That may be,” Puma watched as a sword made of glass seemed to grow in Kamau’s right hand, connected to the chain that covered his wrist. He pointed the sword at Puma with an air of calm confidence, “luckily, this sword is stronger than it appears and has far greater distance than your claws. Lets finish this business.”

Kamau used his powers to give the ground beneath him the texture of ice, and sped forward. Puma, not to be outdone, ran towards his enemy. Seconds away from collision, Kamau swung his swords at his foe’s stomach, hoping to drive him backwards.

Unfortunately, Puma effortlessly cart-wheeled over the glass blade and the claws on his foot slashed across Kamau’s, his concentration broken, snapped to a sudden stop.

Puma landed in a crouch, and lunged at Kamau again, this time raking his claws against Kamau’s back. The African Warrior cried out in pain, swung his sword at Puma, who ducked and slashed him again for his troubles.

Pain wracking his entire body and unable to hit his target, Kamau leapt forward to the ground, and sank as if it were water.

Puma froze where he stood. He’d seen this trick once already, when his opponent had dealt with Batal. So rather than waste time looking for someone he’d never find, Puma instead listened to all his enhanced senses.

Kamau breached the earth with the force of a rocket, his sword aimed at Puma’s chest. Thomas Fireheart flipped backwards only seconds before his foe breached the earth. Landing on his feet, Puma held his claws out defensively and looked towards Kamau with worry.

“We need to get you to a doctor immediately! The dirt in your wounds...”

“Means nothing to me,” Kamau concentrated, and grunted in pain. Puma watched in amazement as the warrior absorbed the thick cover of dirt that covered him. Slowly, the wounds Puma had inflicted closed as the dirt that covered Kamau slowly disappeared. After several seconds, the wounds were closed, and Kamau was breathing hard, sweat dripping off his chin, “but everything to you.”

“Impressive,” Puma commented, “but hard work, from what I hear. And now I know how to defeat you without worrying about scarring you for life.”

Kamau said nothing. He simply held his arms at his side, and willed the rocks to him. They came to him like metal to a magnet and before Puma realized what had happened, Kamau’s arms were

covered in rocks of all different shapes and sizes, rocks that seemed to meld into one another like wax in a lava lamp.

Puma watched in a mixture of fear and awe before he realized that he needed to attack, regain the initiative, if he wanted to win this thing. And The Puma was no quitter.

Kamau, however, had no intention of being on the defensive any longer. He raised his left hand, and willed blades of rock and stone to shoot forward with the force of bullets. Puma dodged to the left...and ran into a fist of rock that hit his chest with the force of a cannonball. Puma barely had time to gasp before darkness took him.

Kamau breathed a sigh of relief...and then took a single step to his left, just barely avoiding Batal's angry lunge.

"I won't be defeated by trash again!" Batal snarled as he spun around, fists clenched.

Batal charged at Kamau like a bloodthirsty bull and once again Kamau side stepped easily. But before Batal could spin around again, Kamau flung his chain over Batal's shoulders and began twisting.

"You should have stayed down!" Kamau hissed as he stightened the chain around Batal's throat. To his horror, the Syrian found that the earth beneath his feet had turned into quicksand, "this was only meant as a mock battle, but since you wanted real combat, have a taste!"

Batal gagged and clawed at the chain, struggling for breath. But the metal was stronger than it appeared, as was Kamau. Batal felt a chill run down his spine, as he realized that the first time they fought, Kamau held back.

"That is enough," Kamau heard the click of a hammer, and saw Silver Sable standing ten feet away, pistol raised and aimed directly at his head, "you've already won. Let him go and leave."

"And if I don't?"

"Don't think I'm fool enough to aim a weapon that wouldn't be effective against you," Silver Sable warned, "stand down now. Or stay and fight, if you were lying about desiring absolution."

Kamau could barely hear Silver Sable over the pounding of his heart, but he could still hear enough. He released Batal, and without a word gathered up the bracelets of his foes.

Silver Sable watched him the entire time, and breathed a sigh of relief when the mutant melted into the ground.

Silver Sable holster her weapon, and surveyed the battle field littered with superhumans. The power and skill it took to accomplish this impressed her on a professional level, but concerned her as well. Skill and sanity didn't always go hand in hand and God help anyone who had to reign that man in if he went too far.

“I hope Chapman knows what he’s doing.”

“You do know what you’re doing, right Chapman?” Sabra asked, having just finished watching Kamau’s battle.

“The bloke won, didn’t he?”

“An’ he nearly killed Batal,” Union Jack retorted, “he had a mad look on his face too. I’ve seen that look before, and never on someone I’d turn my back on.”

“I don’t think you’re…”

“That entire fight, only once did he use his powers instead of his fists,” snapped Union Jack, “he wanted to take them down with his fists. No other thought ever occurred to him.”

“Kamau had a rough upbringing,” Chapman defended, “but he’s not a lost cause. Silver Sable brought him back from the edge with just a few choice words. Does that say Sabretooth to you?”

“I’ll concede the point for now,” said Sabra, “still, I have to wonder why your criteria for possible members was limited to two different spectrums, heroes or sociopaths. Heroes I naturally understand, and I know our options were limited. But shouldn’t we have considered perhaps mercenaries or vigilantes? On an operational level, people like Kamau, Guishen and Shiva make me nervous.”

“We hire mercenaries, we’re just waiting for the day until they get a higher bid,” Chapman explained, “as for vigilantes…well, I just don’t care for their tendency to defy authority combined with their willingness to sacrifice themselves. I know I’m playing with fire here, but at least we know where we stand with the wackjobs.”

“On the edge of a cliff?” offered Union Jack.

“Perhaps,” Chapman conceded, “but you know it, they know it and the situation can only improve from there. Now, who’s left?”

“Nearly everyone else has been eliminated or finished the exercise. I think Persona Grata is the only one left.”

Union Jack rubbed the back of his neck, concerned about the safety of his friend. She had only been on a few field operations before and he honestly didn’t know if she was built for an exercise like this.

Persona Grata tilted her head slightly, just narrowly dodging the cinder block sized fist that was aimed at her head. With a step to her right, she avoided the second punch and then effortlessly leaped over Bullet as he tried to bum rush her.

“So tell me Bullet, how is Lance?” asked Persona.

“So-so,” Bullet sighed as he turned around, “that specialist you referred me to did some good work, but he couldn’t fix ‘em.”

“I’m sorry,” Persona said sincerely, “I’m curious, do the other nations participating in this know that a black ops United States agent is evaluating their heroes?”

“Well honestly, they actually don’t care,” Bullet hefted a fallen tree trunk with both hands, “I ain’t the only one here, see? Not a soul here’s got a secret that everyone don’t already know about. Well, except maybe that Shiva wackjob.”

Bullet swung the tree trunk at Persona Grata, who leaned back to avoid it easily.

“And could you at least insult me some, or push my buttons? I feel bad enough about this as is,” Bullet remarked, “feel like I’m beating up on a school teacher.”

Persona Grata smiled...and then seemed to disappear.

“Oh damn, I did ask for it, didn’t I?” Bullet grouched, a second or two before he felt the first punch across the face. Bullet, unable to see his target, brought his wrists up and defended his face against the onslaught. The blows came from everywhere, and the best Bullet could do in a situation like this was protect his head and try to pick up on the patterns of blows.

To his surprise though, Bullet felt the barrage suddenly stop. Persona Grata reappeared, balanced on a tree branch about ten feet up and three yards away.

For a moment, Bullet wondered what made her stop. She might have addressed him respectfully, but he knew she didn’t regard his profession with too much respect. Then he looked at his wrist.

“Oh yeah.”

His bracelet, the one he was supposed to keep away from the ‘enemy’ was gone, and he saw it dangling from Persona’s wrist.

“Not my color, but given the circumstances, I think it looks good on me. I’ll see you later, Agent Bullet. Give my best to your son, please.”

Persona Grata then disappeared. Bullet shrugged and began to stroll to the extraction point. He wasn’t a man who liked losing, but losing to Persona Grata was an easy pill to swallow, considering both her polite demeanor and abilities. It felt more like losing a hand of poker than losing an actual fight.

American Eagle paced the temporary compound, trying process the day’s events. Up until now, Jason hadn’t really thought about really joining Excalibur. But up until now, that possibility seemed a distance away, not worth reflecting on.

But now that he was one of the final candidates, Jason Strongbow found he couldn't ignore the idea anymore. On the one hand, the idea of saving people the world over had a very nice, romantic appeal to it. American Eagle wasn't in this business for the glory, what little there was, but that was just a nice bonus as far as he was concerned.

But he wasn't sure if he liked his would be teammates. Gauntlet and Persona Grata were fine people, but the remaining super humans (he refused to call any of them heroes) made him edgy.

American Eagle had barely decided to sleep on the matter, when he heard a slight –hum-.

In addition to steel hard skin and super strength, American Eagle was gifted with enhanced senses. Though they were by no means as powerful enough to say, track someone by scent, they were enough to let him see, smell and hear what most never could.

American Eagle turned his head in the direction he'd heard the noise...and saw a man in a yellow uniform that vaguely resembled that of a Bee-keeper and carrying a pistol that looked as if it were stolen from the set of Start Trek.

“A.I.M!” American Eagle instinctively reached for the crossbow he used. Armed with vibranium arrows, it was a deadly weapon.

And unfortunately, he'd left it in the barracks. His split second confusion and hesitation gave his enemy enough to fire his weapon. American Eagle flew backwards, and roared in pain as energy seemed to lance through every cell in his body.

“We're not A.I.M!” The man declared angrily, “We are RAID! Radical Advanced Ideas in Destruction! And you and your friends, are ours now!”

To be concluded...

Next Issue: Our heroes and sociopaths are captured by RAID! It's a battle for survival, but not everything is as it appears...

This arc's been pretty popular with Anthony Crute, writer of our excellent Dr. Samson series. I forgot to add his letter in the last issue, so I got two of them ready to go!

>This title made me smile :) (see)

pulls out mission accomplished banner

>What a great issue of this mostly new, all exciting Excalibur team.

Revamps are always fun, I think

>I'll admit when I first came to the site before I even read any issues I thought about putting in a pitch to be the next writer on this title and you did here what I had in mind.

I steal dreams. It's a skill

>I love issues where were introduced to so many interesting and new characters and then watching them grow (so looking forward to the training).

As you can see from this issue, no all of them stuck around, but the ones who do...oh boy!

>The new characters all seem really interesting and it's great to see American Eagle and you taking Ellis characterization and running with it.

Hey, if it's not broken...

>There are a lot of Antiheroes on the title yes? Interesting is this a shape of things to come? Less Spandex and more Authority like?

We're heading somewhere between Ultimates and spandex, a nice middle road.

>You know the one thing which would have made this even better? The thing I had in my head should I pitch when the team is suprised by the newest member forced on them from the member state (and one of the big six thus having special powers) Greece: Everyone's favorite (definitely mine) Avenger HERCULES!

Herc would be cool, but we have one Greek powerhouse already ;)

>Looking forward to the next issue.

Here's Crute again!

>Hi

>I'm here to give you some more feedback.

Sweet!

>I think in the last two issues you've taken Excalibur to one of my favourite series.

Go me!

>Once I get to know the characters a little more so I know what the hell is going on with each of them then I'm sure I'm going to like it even more.

Hope so!

>This is an 'inventive' way to get a team together, try outs in such a way, I wonder how legal it is?

It's as legal as Chapman says it is ;). The heroes had their permission slips signed and everything!

>Junta's fight was great.

It was fun to write. Brains vs. more brains!

>The thing I'm liking is that already there are other things going on. Most (probably me too) would just have a straight forward recruitment and then launch into missions and build the stories but already out of nowhere with almost nothing known about them we've got assassination attempts and the like.

Thanks. I wanted to do a traditional recruitment arc, but with a swerve I think it worked!

>All you need now is some vampires for Joey to kill :)

In due time, trust me ;)

The Story thus far:

Over a dozen heroes and heroines have competed fiercely for membership on the United Nations strikeforce.

After several grueling battles, only eight remained. The native American bounty hunter American Eagle, the powerfully armed Gauntlet, the aptly named Commando, the secretive Guishen, the beautiful Persona Grata, Shiva women of pure poison, Junta the young spy and quick and powerful Kamau, all defeated the hurdles thrown in their path.

Unfortunately, the collection of heroes had just begun to wind down from the day's conflict when they were captured by RAID, a splinter cell of AIM, for reasons currently unknown.

Excalibur

#19

September 2008

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"FOREIGN LEGIONS"

Part Four

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Location Unknown

American Eagle awoke as he felt ice cold water splash against his face. He blinked his eyes furiously, trying clear the fog of his mind. He tried to wipe the water from his face, but his arm refused to respond. Within a few seconds, he realized why.

American Eagle saw that he was bound spread eagle. His arms were encased in thick metal manacles that ran the length of his wrist. He glanced towards his feet, and saw they were likewise restrained.

"American Eagle."

Jason looked forward, and felt a sinking feeling in his gut. Commando and Gauntlet were standing just across the room, surrounded by a dozen men in yellow uniforms that resembled those used by Bee Keepers. The men might have looked completely ridiculous, were it not for the advanced weaponry in their hands.

To no surprise, both Gauntlet and Commando were restrained. Commando's arms were bound behind his back, while Gauntlet's weapon was encased in almost seamless metal. A keypad on the wrist was the only thing that indicated that the metal functioned as an advanced restraint device.

American Eagle looked into the reflection of his immaculately polished restraints, and saw a man sitting at a computer console several feet away. His stomach clenched when he saw a dial directly next to the console, his imagination didn't have to go

"Commando, Gauntlet, your attention please?"

American Eagle turned his head to the speaker. The man wasn't like the other agents. Instead of the yellow uniforms the other agents wore, this man wore a simple white lab coat, white pants and blue shirt. He looked every bit a lab technician and not a mad scientist, except for his pale skin that looked as if it might burn in true sunlight.

"My name is Doctor Theo Adam. I'm the founder of RAID," he began, "AIM, we feel, has been too complacent in the world, and that's something we intend to fix that."

"Hey, if it ain't broke..." offered Commando.

Dr. Adam ignored him, "To that end, we need information. We weren't able to claim much when we left our AIM brothers. But luck has blessed us with both you and a powerful ally. But that's not enough."

"Still need a prom date?"

Gauntlet gritted his teeth and bore a hole in the floor with his eyes. Provoking captors with hostages was one of the dumbest moves in the book.

Dr. Adam nodded to a man behind American Eagle, and almost instantly thousands of volts of electricity washed over his skin, and he screamed like a wounded animal.

"The two of you have, combined, over forty years experience in the United States military. What I want from each of you is your knowledge on your fellow superhumans in the service. What their powers are, their codenames, every last detail that you know or remember. Otherwise..."

American Eagle roared as even more energy washed over his body.

Gauntlet gritted his teeth and looked away. He considered American Eagle a friend, and even if he wasn't, torture of any kind churned his stomach. Worse was the fact that he knew that there was nothing he could do to help. Even if it was his own mother up there instead of Eagle, Gauntlet knew he could never give these bastards the information they wanted. It was too dangerous for the country and too dangerous to the servicemen and their families.

"Have you two anything to say?"

Commando took one look at American Eagle, watching as the hero screaming convulsed as energy ran across his skin, and then looked to Dr. Adam.

“Your interrogation technique really needs work,” observed Commando.

“Oh, give it time,” Dr. Adam smiled as he left the cell, the screams of a hero trailing him out.

Waiting for him outside were three identical faces. It was often said that, if you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself. So Dr. Adam took to cloning, and created three copies that, which a little invasive brain surgery, followed his every command with the same intelligence and attention to detail that he would apply to any situation. They each wore a different number around their neck, the only way to tell them apart.

“Adam One, status report on the prisoners.”

The first clone nodded, “All seven have been dealt with. Besides the U.S. operatives, Junta is in a private cell. Guishen is locked in a room with a projecting empath as we speak while Kamau is in a special stasis cell. The room has been specially treated to avoid any dust build up.”

“That’s only three,” said Dr. Adam, “what about the seventh?”

“He...he’s dead,” replied the clone, “according to our scanners, the Frenchman, Comte Du Nuit, had a sudden heart attack after we gassed him.”

“Damn it,” muttered Dr. Adam, angry that he now had one less hostage and one less potential soldier, “I assume the body’s in a cooler? We should autopsy it later, see how far along they are with their version of the super soldier serum. Adam Two, how are the engines?”

“There are some unanticipated drag issues,” answered the clone. He then coughed, hacking as if a swarm of insects were swirling in his lungs.

“Do you need to go to medical?” Dr. Adam could never stand to see himself suffer.

“No sir, it’s just a bug,” for better or worse, the clone possessed the original’s work ethic, “seems like someone’s sitting on my lungs at times, though.”

“Then if you’re not going to medical, get down to the engine room. It doesn’t take our IQ to know how important it is to keep this place afloat. Make sure we keep moving, to minimize our chances of discovery.”

Adam Two saluted, and walked off, all the while coughing and hacking, trying to clear his lungs.

“Adam Three, what about our benefactor slash partner? Did he say when he’d be by for an inspection?”

“He said he intends to make an inspection in about an hour, sir.”

“Good, good. Make sure we have a beacon for his teleporter and find me in about half an hour. In the interim, head down to medical and have scrub team ready,” Scrub team was AIM’s euphemism for brain washing specialists, “in the mean time, I’m going to have a little word with Kamau. I think he could be turned to our side with the right words. One, see to the prisoner’s security. Two, prep the Frenchman’s body for autopsy. Dismissed!”

Both clones nodded in acknowledgement and marched off. But only one went to their assigned station.

As Danny Vincent, AKA Junta, awoke, he began evaluating his situation before he was even fully conscious of the fact that he’d been kidnapped and restrained.

By the time he could form a coherent thought, Junta had already identified a flaw in their restraint system.

Sure, he was bound to a metal chair loaded with high tech features that negated his gravity powers and restrained both his arms and legs. And they had definitely taken all his concealed weapons. But his captors had unknowingly left Danny with his most powerful weapon.

Danny opened his eyes and smiled as he saw two guards standing watch.

“Uhhh...what the...?” Danny sounded both genuinely surprised and annoyed as he ‘awoke’, and then glanced towards his two guards, “oh, this is real cute. So no one got the memo, huh?”

The pair of security guards looked at one another, and then back to Junta.

“Umm...what?”

“Oh, sorry, my bad,” Junta took a deep breath, “Omega, alpha thirty sigma. That’s the code.”

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Junta threw his head back and laughed. The laughter was good natured but dry, something he’d had plenty of time perfecting in his career as a spy, “This is just great, really...great. Look guys, I’m on your side. That code I gave you just now was supposed to verify it.”

“They...they didn’t inform us of that,” said one guard.

Junta shook his head, “I swear, they never think to tell the guys on the ground. ‘Need to know’ applies to the people carrying out the mission too, damn idiots.”

“We’re not stupid,” snapped one guard, “how do we know you’re not lying?”

Junta shook his head, “Look, all I have is the code. Would you give me your name if you ran this thing? Look, just go grab your superior and we’ll get this settled, okay?”

“Oh, you’d just love it if we left the room, wouldn’t you?”

“Just one of you go, idiot,” Junta sighed, “I won’t go anywhere, I promise.”

“Give me one good reason!”

“Fine,” Junta narrowed his eyes as he glared at the two guards and spoke in a growl just barely louder than a whisper, forcing the two to strain to hear him, “because I’m a God damn superhuman killer and infiltration expert. Gravity is my bitch and even a brain dead slug like you can realize what an advantage that is. So when, not if... but when, I’m freed, I’ll add the two of you to my contract. I’ll kill you because you forced me to stay locked in this chair, and your superiors will let me because you were incompetent and I’m a bigger asset.”

“Now!” Junta shouted, startling the two low ranked RAID agents, “get your superior down here, this instant, and I won’t kill you. Sound fair?”

“Of course!” One guard scrambled out, and Danny smiled inwardly. Bound and shackled, and he still had them right where he wanted them.

Paul Jackson took pride in his position within RAID. To date, he was their first superhuman recruit, and his powers ensured that regardless of how many more were joined their ranks, he would be the most important. He would be their leader, their rock.

Jackson believed that, because he was gifted with the ability to project any emotion he wanted. In the past, he had used his powers to whip entire neighborhoods that had simply been enjoying a summer’s day into a bloody frenzy just to see if he could. He joined AIM, and later defected with RAID, because he knew that they needed someone like him far more than he needed them. He was, without a doubt, an asset, who could increase their power ten fold, if used correctly.

Like right now. He currently had the entirety of his power focused on one man, the Chinese agent known as Guishen. Paul was projecting enough emotion to drive a dozen men to suicide.

Guishen, stripped of his weapons, was on his hands and knees, his face buried in his hands. Paul could only imagine the pain his victim was feeling. But he put that aside and remembered the lines he’d been given, lines designed to cement his victim’s emotional destruction.

“They left you. After all your service, they sent you here to die,” Paul said calmly, “and why? Because you did what they asked!”

Guishen didn’t respond, though his tormentor wasn’t surprised. Though Guishen wasn’t restrained in the typical way, he was still physically helpless. High tech metal bands on his wrists and legs prevented the superhuman from performing any physical violence and a band around his

head sealed off his telepathic powers. If Guishen made any attempt at violence, he'd be stopped before he moved an half an inch.

The theory (and hope) was, that Guishen would look kindly upon this minor freedom and might tip his opinion of RAID in their favor. But it was an illusion of freedom, nothing more.

“Is that fair? Is that right?”

“...no,” whispered Guishen.

“Join us, Guishen. We will never turn on you simply because of who you are, because you did we asked of you!”

Guishen took a deep breath and sighed, “No, you won't.”

Paul Jackson paled as he saw that Guishen hadn't shed so much as a single tear. He projected wave after wave of crippling depression, enough to kill the population of a small island, as the Chinese agent calmly stepped forward undaunted.

“Don't...you can't hurt me!” Jackson snapped finally. He tried desperately to reassert control, unwilling to call for help and lose face in front of his superiors, “your restraints won't let you hurt a fly!”

“...but you're not a fly.”

“Arrgh!”

Commando winced as he heard American Eagle's screams, the sound echoing in his skull.

“Okay, this is a waste of time,” he muttered, “Eagle, enough already. This is getting old.”

“I don't think he can hear you,” snickered one of the guards.

“Damn it, shut up,” Gauntlet growled under his breath, “we don't need you makin' things worse here!”

“Seriously, this ain't funny no more!” Commando popped his neck, “I'm hungry, I ain't had my beauty sleep and he sounds like a little girl when he screams! So lets can the act and get out of here already!”

“Commando...” Gauntlet crooked his head to the guards, who were beginning to grip their weapons and stand up straighter.

“Oh fine,” Commando sighed. He slumped a little bit...and leapt up as he swung outwards with his foot, catching three RAID soldiers in the chest.

“Shoot him, Shoot...!” The guard’s orders were cut off as Gauntlet swung his steel encased arm into the man’s chest and crushed his rib cage. Though the dampener that RAID had fitted over his weapon negated both its strength and energy projection, the thing still weighed several hundred pounds, and Gauntlet had no trouble moving it.

“Hell,” American Eagle saw the scene unfolding, and without hesitation tore himself free of the restraints.

“...how?” whispered the man who’d been ‘torturing’ American Eagle for the past half hour.

“I’m stronger than I look.”

Between the three heroes, the RAID guards were dispatched within only a minute and a half, with only one still conscious.

“You’ll never get out of here! The second you broke free, a tactical alert team was dispatched! You step out you’ll be turned into free floating atoms!”

“Good to know,” Commando smashed his boot into the man’s face, and then spun around so that his back (and bound arms) were to American Eagle, “you’re going to have to be my skeleton key, buddy.”

“How’d you know I was faking?” American Eagle reached out and tore the metal restraints in two.

“You scream like a little girl,” Commando answered. He rubbed his sore wrists, “I’ve heard people scream ‘cause of torture. Done it once or twice myself. You...you ain’t sound nothin’ like them.”

“I was hoping they might give up something. Stupid interrogators sometimes give up more than they get without realizing it,” American Eagle ripped asunder the device constraining Gauntlet’s arm, “plus, I really didn’t want them figuring out they weren’t using enough juice. They might have amped it before I could get out.”

“Boy said there people waitin’ for us outside the door,” warned Commando, “we gonna keep them waiting?”

In fact, there were two, four man assault teams waiting for the heroes. One team was carrying nothing of energy casting weapons. The heroes would get from them super-heated plasma, high intensity lasers, searing light and absolute zero temperatures. The second team had projectile weapons loaded with diamond or adamantium tipped bullets that would rend the flesh from the Hulk himself.

The two teams stood twelve feet from the door, their muscles taut and fingers inches from the trigger. Each and everyone of them was ready to unleash enough firepower to destroy a battalion the second the metal doors slid open to unveil their targets.

The assault squads were focused so intently on the door, they were caught completely flat footed when the wall five feet down exploded outwards. Gauntlet stepped through with a smirk, and swept his armored hand outwards. With a single extended blast, the heavily armed teams were left sprawled on the floor in defeat, moaning in agony.

“We should head to the command center,” said American Eagle, “shut this place down and maybe call for help while we’re at it.”

“I need to get topside,” Gauntlet stated, “my weapon has a unique energy signature that can be picked up half way around the world, whether they’re scanning for it or not. A little Morse code to give them a sit rep and we’ll have cavalry in no time!”

“Good idea,” Eagle nodded, “you focus on that. Me and Commando will focus on keeping these guys busy. Maybe free whoever else these bastards have.”

“Understood,” Gauntlet paused to salute, and then took off.

“Commando...” American Eagle looked over his shoulder to see Commando searching the defeated security team, “...just grab a weapon already and lets go!”

“Hold on, I need a sec!” answered Commando. He looked over the weapons, laser pistols, modified M-16s to shoot adamantium bullets and countless others. Weighing the threat the enemy posed, versus his weapons preference, Commando reached down and made his choice.

“Okay, ready. This’ll be a fair fight now.”

American Eagle looked at his comrade who, of all the weapons present, had simply chosen two jagged pieces of metal. He thought about

“Well, your funeral macho man.”

The two raced down the hall, but hadn’t made it for before American Eagle signaled them to stop. Silently, he motioned to a door several feet away.

“What?” whispered Commando, barely loud enough to be heard.

“One of the guys from the island is in there,” answered Eagle, “he’s alone and bleeding though.”

American Eagle grabbed the door by the handle and door the thing from it’s hinges. American Eagle took one look inside, and then had to look away as he struggled for control of his stomach.

Inside was the Chinese agent Guishen. His mouth was covered in blood that dripped down his chin, like a vampire who had just feasted. At his feet was his interrogator, the man’s throat

“Thank you for opening the door,” Guishen said evenly, and held up his restraints, “would you kindly remove these?”

Commando took a moment to examine the scene, glanced at American Eagle and shrugged, “Well, at least he won’t have to stop for lunch”

Junta smiled as he saw Adam One stomp into the cell, a look of irritation plastered on his face.

“My subordinates tell me you claim to be a double agent,” the man scowled at Junta, “but if you are, I’m afraid that you’re out of luck. We only have one man inside Excalibur’s organization, and it isn’t you.”

Figured as much, Junta thought to himself. RAID moved with too much skill and precision, while still managing to be complete idiots. A mole was the only logical explanation, “If you think I’m lying, then why’d you come?”

“To reassure the men guarding you, to be honest. The last thing I need is them freeing you under the delusion that they’re helping RAID. “

“Good thinking,” complimented Junta, “but you still screwed up. Code omega eight!”

Adam One looked down at Junta with a raised eye brow, “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“To be honest, it means more to me,” Danny stated, “see, I just activated a self destruct mechanism in my gravity belt. Alpha Ten! You know the one that prevents everything around me from getting sucked into a miniature black hole and consuming a six block radius?”

“You’re bluffing!” Adam One smirked confidently, “we examined your belt before we restrained you. There is no self destruct mechanism!”

“That you found. Omega Five!” Danny continued, “see, the mistake you made is assuming that you know the devise that’s keeping me alive better than I do.”

“My I.Q....”

“Is pretty damn impressive, I’m sure,” Danny interrupted, “I’m sure you know gamma bombs, death rays and neural nets...delta eight!...but here’s what you forgot. I need to know the ends and out of my gravity belt because my life depends on it. To you, it’s just an interesting trinket. To me, it’s the only thing keeping me alive for well over a decade now. So ask yourself...Mr. One is it? Who do you really think knows the devise strapped around my waist better?”

Adam One felt his heart pounding, but still put on his best poker face, “Am I really to believe that you’d kill yourself like that?”

Junta looked at the man, a deadly serious expression etched on his face, “The only difference between death by black hole and slavery is how many of you I take with me. But then, that’s up to you. Who knows? I might survive...delta six!...we are talking about my powers, after all. So it’s less suicide than a calculated gamble.”

Adam One loosened his collar, trying to think what to do. Being a clone didn’t mean he didn’t have a sense of self preservation.

“Call or fold, buddy? Because I think I’m beginning to forget the codes ...”

Several minutes earlier

The doors slid open and Dr. Theo Adam admired the sight before him. Six men, three on each side sat before monitors. The African Warrior known as Kamau hovered inside of a force field that wouldn’t allow his feet to touch the ground and was strong enough to hold a battalion of men.

“Good morning, Kamau,” Dr. Adam said with a genuine smile, “forgive the cliché, but please believe me when I say I really do apologize for the accommodations. Given your impressive reputation, I have to take certain measures to project both myself and my organization, even if I am confident that we can come to an understanding.”

“And what understanding would that be?” Kamau’s eyes bore down on Dr. Adam with an intensity that the scientist had never encountered before. The warrior smiled a fake, disinterested smile. The four scars that slashed down over his lips stretched ever so subtly, and for a moment Dr. Adam thought he was speaking to an avatar of death itself.

Dr. Adam recovered quickly enough, though and remembered his sales pitch.

“I would like you to act as RAID’s principle agent. As we saw with Hydra and their use of the mutant Wolverine, an organization like ours can flourish with a strong, powerful agent holding our banner.”

“And why would I ever join you?”

Dr. Adam stiffened, “Because we’re willing to pay you twice what you made as a member of the Leopard’s Claw. We’re not asking you to do anything you haven’t done before. In fact, under us, your work load will be far lighter and work...easier on the stomach. And because...a man like you doesn’t change.”

“You may be right,” Kamau conceded, his tone even.

“Plus, I honestly do respect you. Too few superhumans know how best to use their powers, even with a western education. Your chain, for instance, may look like steel, but is filled with rocks, diamond and silica. That’s how you control it, isn’t it?”

Kamau nodded.

“Know that I speak from my heart when I say I respect you and would be honored our organization. It is within our means to force you, but I’d rather not.”

Kamau shook his head, “To be blunt, I cannot return the respect. And even if I weren’t trying to change my ways, I could never join an organization as sloppy as yours. However, I will match your respect with mercy. Free me now, and I will kill no one.”

“My respect may have been a little premature,” Dr. Adam scoffed, “you’re a deadly mutant, Kamau. But we took precautions. We took your weapons, that cell can easily withstand your strength and there isn’t a single mote of dust in this room you could use against us.”

“You are correct about only one thing. This cell is indeed too strong for me,” Kamau narrowed his eyes at the scientist, “however, I am not unarmed. You missed my diamond blades. A natural mistake, I suppose,” Kamau held his hands out and Dr. Adam felt his heart race as he watched Kamau’s infamous blades literally slide into the warrior’s hands, “because I keep them within me.”

“Even...even with your weapons, you’re no threat to me!” Dr. Adam just barely managed to stammer out, “that force field was designed to hold someone with twice your strength!”

“I don’t need to step outside this cell to kill you,” Kamau stated evenly, “you left me alone for hours. So I focused my powers and seized control of all the silica in the room.”

“Now I know you’re bluffing,” Dr. Adam stood up straight and smiled, “this room uses nanites to remain completely dust free. Every grain of sand is removed from the room and flushed down the waste system.”

“That is true...Kamau nodded, “but you were too clever for your own good. You overlooked one simple thing.”

Kamau pointed to the ceiling, and Dr. Adam looked up, confident that the man was merely bluffing. All he saw was were the florescent lights that illuminated the room, and for a moment the felt confident he was right.

Then he remembered something.

“Oh God, the lights...the lights are made out of glass...” Dr. Adam felt his blood run cold.

“Which is nothing more than slow moving sand, Doctor. Now, please remember...”

The lights exploded, but glass did not rain down on Dr. Adam and his men. Instead the glass fell from the ceiling and drifted like feathers caught in a gentle wind to the front of Kamau’s cell, now the only source of light in the room. The self defined ‘Radical scientists’ watched in horror

the glass began to merge together in mid air, as if it were made of water, and formed two perfectly round discs that seemed to almost shine.

“You brought this on yourself.”

The discs shot towards the scientists like bullets, men screamed as glass cut through them like wet paper. Blood and limbs flew through the air like confetti and Kamau, the author of the carnage, never once blinked.

Gauntlet didn't hesitate to blast open the door labeled 'authorized persons only'. His reasoning was simple. The door had been at the top of long and winding stairs, and because he had no idea what might be waiting for him on the other side. Freedom, an army of cloned soldiers and maniac robots were high on the list of possibilities.

What Gauntlet honestly never expected was to be assaulted with freezing, gale force winds. Forcing himself forward, the army trained hero stepped outside, and his eyes became as wide as saucers when he realized both his predicament and his mistake.

The entire time, Gauntlet had assumed that he and the others were being held captive in some secret base, concealed in some hellhole armpit of the world, or perhaps cleverly disguised in the middle of some metropolis.

He never thought that they were actually on a highly advanced aircraft, that ran the length of three city blocks and possessed God only knew how much firepower. He could hear the anti-gravity engines and almost feel the raw power that flowed through the vessel required just to keep it aloft.

Gauntlet slammed his fist down on the ground, and began willing small bursts of energy through his arm. It was bad enough that RAID had captured so many superhumans, but that they had a mobile base, armed to the teeth? That was a Def-Con Three situation in his mind, at the very least

“Adam Two sir, we've got security breaches all across the board,” The RAID flunky looked to his superior, in desperate need of command, “Junta, Kamau and the rest are free while the engine room's gone dark! What do we do?”

Adam Two looked around, and saw the panic in the eyes of the lower ranked RAID members. Only two possessed any sort of military training. The rest of the bridge crew had only the training needed to fly this flying fortress and little else. Any additional stress was enough to break what little nerve they had.

“We need reinforcements,” Adam Two said evenly, “I've already alerted our 'silent partner'. Drop the scramblers so that he can get through, and put an end to this madness! Give him the bridge coordinates, now!”

“Done!”

The gathered members of RAID actually sighed in relief as the HERMES teleport effect appeared in the center of the bridge, dropping Joey Chapman, Union Jack and Sabra in their midst.

“I see that these pathetic fools require the aid of the Shadow King,” Chapman’s eyes glowed blood red, and his voice sounded like two rocks grinding together, “I cannot say that I’m surprised.”

Adam Two shook his head ruefully, “It really worked. I’m torn between admiring your genius and disbelief at RAID’s stupidity.”

“Some people will believe anything that it gets them to the top,” Chapman replied, “give me a sec, eh love?”

Chapman jerked his head forward and a pair of blood red contracts fell into his hand. Reaching up to his throat, he then torn free a small microphone and casually tossed it aside, and cleared his throat with a loud cough.

“Plus, when the Shadow King fell, Shield found a few computer files with his old confirm codes and communication protocols,” Chapman explained, “everyone knows how villains like him come back to life all the time, so I thought I might use it to my advantage. Now, situation report.”

“Everyone has basically managed to free themselves,” answered Adam Two, “there are a few loose ends we need to settle before this illusion of competition, but otherwise everything is in hand just as you predicted.”

“Sir, what are you doing?” demanded one of the RAID technician, deeply disturbed how casually his superior officer was carrying on with Chapman, who (ironically) to his horror revealed that he wasn’t possessed by the Shadow King at all.

“Adam Two is unconscious in the morgue,” Adam Two’s form melted away, into that of Persona Grata, “if you surrender now, they may be lenient on you. And energy weapons are forbidden on the bridge,” Persona added, “there’s no reason why we can’t be mature about this.”

“The hell with you!” One of the braver RAID agents dove for the bridge’s panic button, that would have activated a security system that would automatically attack anyone in the room that didn’t have a RAID loyalty microchip implanted in their spine.

His fist slammed down on the button and...nothing happened. Concerned, he hit it again with the same result. Persona Grata casually strolled over to the RAID flunky while he pounded on the button in the mad hope that it might finally work.

“I shape-shifted into a French hero,” Persona Grata grabbed the man’s wrist and led him away from the consul, “when you ran my finger prints against the government files, a virus was

uploaded into your system. The big picture is that your people no longer have any control over this war machine that I don't allow."

"Union Jack, take the wheel," Chapman ordered, "Sabra, keep an eye on the cannon fodder. Persona, would you be so kind as to direct our wayward chums to the bridge? Preferably, before they break something."

"Understood," all three answered as one, like the professionals they were.

Sabra turned towards the men on the bridge, little over a dozen in all. She said nothing, but clenched her fist tightly. The sound of her muscles tightening, her knuckles popping sounded very much like a broken cement mixer. When Sabra pointed to the far wall, no one resisted.

"Jack, begin teleporting in support troops," Chapman added, "we need to round up all these bastards before they realize that the wool's been pulled over their eyes. Last thing we need is them damaging my new ship."

Persona Grata made her way to the engine room first, moving as quickly as her legs would carry her. After all, the last thing they needed was for all these thousands of tons of steel to come crashing back down to earth. Even if by some miracle they avoided crashing on some populated area, the ship's power supply would certainly contaminate the area and spew all kinds of radioactivity into the air.

The doors slid open, and Persona Grata was witness to an impressive scene of carnage. Men hung from the rafters, blood was splattered across the controls and the lights were scattered. Only a shallow emergency light was left to illuminate the room. Bodies were scattered all across the room, their yellow masks torn to reveal faces frozen in horror. The entire place was a charnel house.

"Hiding now, Shiva?" Persona Grata never flinched, but moved through the engine room slowly, her senses in high alert, "thought you were better than that."

Persona Grata listened for any response, any reaction. She had expected to be attacked the moment she finished her sentence, but nothing happened. There was no clever retort, no angered lunge. Persona sighed in relief, and then felt two stabs slide into her back.

"One in the liver, one in the kidney," Shiva whispered gently into Persona's ear. Shiva rested her chin on her victim's shoulder, smiling, "both poisoned, that's why you can't feel it. I move, you die. Only I can give you the antidote in time. Now, you'll going to contract Chapman for me..."

"I don't think so," Persona threw her head back, and the back of her skull smacked Shiva in the side of her face. Shiva cursed loudly as she stumbled back, while Persona Grata casually pulled herself off the blades stuck in her back.

“Your blades aren’t anymore effective than your poison,” Persona explained, “anything else? And before you answer, remember that I can activate the nano-bots in your blood stream. You are still leashed, young lady.”

Shiva pulled a small, cylinder detonator from her belt, “We’re in the engine room. With the press of a button, I can bring this entire thing crashing down. Now, you get Chapman down here, deactivate the nanites and just maybe I won’t kill you later.”

“We’re over a particularly poor section of Yemen,” stated Persona, “you crash this thing on all those people, and you’re more likely to get a medal than anything else, putting all those undesirables out of their misery.”

Shiva opened her mouth to speak, but could think of nothing to say. So Persona Grata lunged forward, grabbed the hand with the detonator and pressed the button herself.

“No!” Shiva squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see the massive fireball that would turn her to ash. A second or two ticked by, and Shiva opened her eyes again and glanced around, baffled as to why she hadn’t yet been incinerated.

“All of RAID’s explosives require special codes from the central computer,” Persona Grata crushed the detonator in her hand, “I changed them. Weapons security is about the only thing RAID managed to do right.”

“What are you..!” Shiva spat, “there’s no way you could have known for certain that the codes were changed! No one, even with healing factors, shrugs off poison like you do! What kind of monster are you?”

“You’re calling me a monster?” Persona motioned to the corpses that littered the room, “and you didn’t do all this just to convince me or anyone who came after you that you’re a monster yourself? Though in an odd way, this is reassuring. Real monsters don’t try, they do.”

“Answer me!” Shiva had two katars in both hands, ready for another attack that not so deep down, she knew wouldn’t work.

“Very well. Hopefully, you’ll see just why fighting...” Persona Grata smiled to herself, reveling in a private joke, “...why fighting me is futile.”

Shiva gasped as the skin peeled back to reveal a massive plastic and wires that vaguely resembled muscle.

“I’m a Shield LMD, experimental infiltration unit to be precise,” Persona Grata explained, “that’s why your poisons have no effect on me. That’s how I knew your bombs didn’t work and how I can activate the nanites inside you at will. Now, are you going to continue acting like a spoiled child and force me to spank you, or can you still act like an adult?”

In took a good two nerve wracking hours, but eventually, Excalibur and their associates had RAID safely secured, and stood in uncontested control of their flying headquarters. Lacking a podium and detesting ceremony, Chapman had instead chosen to gather the heroes and sociopaths in one hangar to inform them of his final decision.

“So, who’re the lucky two who get to go home with you?” Gauntlet grumbled. He was still fuming from the fact that this had all been an elaborate hoax. That in and of itself hadn’t angered him, Gauntlet knew of similar tactics used by intelligence agencies to test new recruits. What bothered him was that Chapman was so confident in their and his abilities that his precautions were bare minimum. Cowboy crap like that got people killed more often than not, and this time, it was his fat in the fire, not Chapman’s.

“Funny you should ask,” answered Chapman, “because only two people are leaving, and that’s yourself and Eagle.”

“I’m heart broken,” stated American Eagle, who after narrowly avoiding torture because of Chapman, could barely shrug indifferently. Having seen first hand how Excalibur was run, he no longer had the slightest desire to serve them. But he was slightly curious, “not that I care, but why’d we get cut?”

“The both of ye were asked to remove one pain in the ass Commando from competition...”

“Yo.”

“...but failed to do so when given the opportunity. An opportunity I made sure was presented to you,” Chapman explained, “Excalibur sometimes gets into a grey area. If you can’t stab a jackass in the back, then you’re no good to me.”

“More like, we’re too good for you,” American Eagle corrected, “Come on, Gauntlet, lets get out of here. The smell of this scum bag is making me sick.”

“These excuse this interruption,” Guishen said politely, “but is it wise to have six members to a strike force? I do not believe our powers would complement the other existing members of your team, given their strength.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Chapman nodded, “that’s why only Commando and Kamau will be on the main team. The rest of you lot are going to be on a separate team, working in conjunction with Excalibur.”

“What, we’re your secret black ops group?” asked Shiva.

Chapman looked to the ceiling and sighed, “For all your skill, you might as well where a sign that says rookie. I just placed everyone here in battle with a combination of mercenaries and government agents. By this time tomorrow, at the latest, the direct of the CIA, Nick Fury and everyone else who matters will have complete dossiers on every last one of you. I don’t have the time or pull you make you secret.

“No, you four are Excalibur’s advance team,” Chapman explained, “I need some precision as much as I need power. Someone who can slip into the castle and lower the drawbridge when the situation requires it. Persona Grata for infiltration. Guishen, interrogation. Junta, technologies expert and you...well, we all know how you get your giggles.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Persona Grata remarked, “though it probably should have been implemented a long time ago.”

Chapman shrugged, “I agree there, but that’s politics for you. At least we’re no longer a poor man’s Avengers, but that doesn’t mean our funding is the best. Hell, I had to steal an airship from these blighters when SHIELD has a half dozen already in service!”

A panel slid loose from the ceiling, landing only a foot away from Chapman with a loud –clang!-

“I think you got your money’s worth out of this thing,” Commando commented.

“Well, we are still UN funded,” Chapman sighed.

Brent Hunter honestly had no idea the exact reason why he and his wife had decided on Mongolia for a vacation. They wanted something off the beaten path, yet still rich in history. Having spent three decades prior teaching history, they now wanted to actually see some of that history in their retirement. Somewhere along the line, they had decided on Asia and from there, at the toss of a dart literally, Mongolia.

Their first stop was a nice, quiet little village at the end of the Gobi Desert. The idea was to take in both the local culture and to observe, from place of comfort, the Gobi Desert.

As luck would have it, their timing was perfect. Brent watched contently from his window as snow fell in the desert. The pure white blanket that lay over the snow was just the thing he needed for self reflection. With a cigar in one hand and local brandy in the other, of course.

Brent was minutes from turning in, when he saw what could only be described as a silver tear appear in the sky. He watched in awe as it grew and grew, until it took up the totality of his view of the night’s sky. The light was searing, but the college professor couldn’t bring himself to look away.

Because in the center of the breach, he saw a city that looked as if it were made of crystal fast approaching. Though he couldn’t see it, there was a flicker of light from the approaching city that grew in size, and by the time Brent’s mind realized the approaching threat, it was too late.

Next issue: Excalibur faces their greatest challenge ever in the form of a new foe who has an entire society behind him! It’s their first mission with their new teammates and it’s sink or swim time already!

Excalibur
#20
January 2009
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SIEGE OF MAGIC"
Part One - Battlefield Diplomacy

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Avalon, United States
"What's the situation?"

Two rows of soldiers poured past Joey Chapman, out of Excalibur's based and into their recent acquisition, the multi-ton flying warship dubbed 'The Resolute'. Chapman followed them inside at a brisk pace while his LMD assistant Delphi briefed him on the threat he and his team faced.

"Two weeks ago, the government of Mongolia lost communications with a small town on the border of the Gobi Desert. It took them about a week to notice. When they sent several teams of people to investigate, no one reported back. Finally, they asked China to send in a team," Delphi removed several photos from the file and handed them to Chapman, "they weren't anymore successful. Finally, China resorted to satellite. As you can see, the result was... unexpected."

Chapman looked at the photos and then back to his assistant, "They programmed you for understatement. Is Excalibur assembled?"

"Everyone but Hellios, sir," Delphi answered, "he was...active last night. I have our Italian contingent searching for him as we speak."

"He's been nothing but an irresponsible ass since he got his memories back," groused Chapman. By now the two had reached the bridge.

"That may be sir, but he's also the most powerful member of Excalibur. His presence on the team is responsible for ten percent of our funding."

"Please, don't remind me," Chapman took his chair on the bridge and sighed heavily. The first test for his new team was now underway and if he had to be honest, he wasn't looking forward to it. Chapman remaining director of the Excalibur program would hinge on their performance, and he wasn't certain that they would perform to expectations.

Plus, of course, the fate of the world might depend on them.

But life was what happened when you had other things planned, as Chapman's dad might say. He motioned for the crew to begin take off, took his seat and girded himself for the conflict to come.

&&&

Silverclaw fidgeted in her seat. Her nerves were always a little jangly before a battle, and riding in a virtually untested, multi-ton flying battleship did nothing to sooth her.

So instead of dwelling on the possibly dangerous flight and likely upcoming battle, Silverclaw turned her attention to one of the newer members of Excalibur, the African Warrior known as Kamau. He was sitting across from her, his eyes closed though his body was like coiled steel, ready to move at a moment's notice. Unlike other members of Excalibur, Kamau wasn't sporting a costume per say.

He wore brown and green camouflage pants, a chain around his left hand, a necklace of various religious icons, including both a cross and Star of David, and little else. He was barefoot, no vest, but his body was painted with white chalk. His head was painted so that it resembled a skull, while he had the picture of a lion painted over his heart while his right arm was painted so that it looked as if an anaconda had encircled it.

Silverclaw marveled at the intricate designs, the attention to detail. But she did a double take when she saw the designs suddenly move.

"It is a custom of my people to paint themselves before engaging in ritual combat," Kamau explained, his eyes still closed, "I use my powers to apply the chalk. I have also found it intimidates my enemies."

"Oh, that's cool," answered Silverclaw, trying to play off the fact that she'd been caught staring at a teammate. A teammate build like a brick house and half naked, but still..., "my dad gave me my costume, said my mom, a goddess created it."

"Interesting," Kamau said dispassionately.

"Yeah..." Silverclaw cleared her throat, and then looked around. Union Jack was examining his gun, Cybermancer was running a system's check, while Sabra, Darkstar and Scarlet Scarab just milled about.

"Hey, where's that Commando guy?"

"He's...prepping something for the mission," answered Union Jack. Silverclaw blinked, and wondered if she'd imagined the disbelief in Jack's voice.

&&&

Gobi Desert, Mongolia

“We’re descending now, sir,” reported the helmsman of The Resolute, “scanners indicate hostiles on site. Bringing up on the monitor now.”

A screen flickered to life in front of Chapman, displaying a scene that might have stumped lesser men. But Joey Chapman had seen a lot in his time as Union Jack. Werewolves that carried automatic weapons, vampires that walked in the sun and foul mouthed pixies. So what he saw on the monitor didn’t phase him.

Much.

Laid out on the desert before The Resolute was the oddest collection of creatures Chapman had ever seen. In tight, disciplined groups were centaurs, giant cyclops, elves and mythological creatures of every shape and size. Not a single one carried a modern weapon, but none of them were any less threatening because of it.

“It’s like someone militarized a damn Harry Potter book,” observed Chapman.

“Orders sir?”

“Send out a drone. Imprint a hologram of myself, interface it with the main screen, and lets see what that gets us.”

Chapman waited patiently as his men followed his orders, and watched expectantly as the drone was launched. Costing some three mission dollars, the devise was the size of a soccer ball. With an anti-gravity devise and holographic projector, it made a passable diplomat when the situation demanded more an exceptional amount of caution. Its outward appearance was that of a silver orb, giving it a sleek, peaceful appearance. With the touch of a button, it was released from a missile chamber and flew towards the gathered horde slowly, peacefully.

One minute later, Chapman was using his hand to shield his eyes from the light produced by the probe’s sudden and violent destruction.

“Seems like they’re spoiling for a fight,” sighed Chapman, “fair be it from us to be rude to these new comers. Patch me through to Excalibur’s ready room. We need a better plan than just rushing them like a bunch of football hooligans.”

&&&

Three minutes and one hastily explained plan later

“...understand?” Chapman asked.

“Understood, Director,” Union Jack affirmed with an air of annoyance, “I’ve prepared actual landing zones, not just read about them in books.”

“Good,” A panel on the far end of the room slid open, and Excalibur found themselves blasted in the face with fresh air, “now get to it.”

Kamau didn’t bother to wait for his teammates as he ran towards the open hatch and leapt into gravity’s embrace. The African Warrior hit the desert floor at terminal velocity with all the grace of a meteor. He was on his feet in seconds, and reached out with his powers.

To both his left and right, six mounds of earth rose from the ground. Twelve feet high, a vertical face on the front and an easy slope on the rear, they were excellent gunnery positions for Excalibur’s regular forces.

With that accomplished, Kamau looked towards the enemy. Dwarves, centaurs and giants were the least of the army. Behind them lay giant Cyclops, winged gargoyles and demons with snarling, gnashing teeth and a hunger for blood that radiated so strongly it was almost physical.

Kamau willed his diamond blades into his hands in a reverse grip, and crouched down as he prepared to strike. He took one cleansing breath, and then willed a column of stone to shoot up from under his feet, catapulting him high into the air.

The enemy army saw him coming, and some of the quicker soldiers raised their spears in anticipation of Kamau’s return to earth. More than a dozen elves let fly their arrows with laser accuracy at the young mutant.

Spears and arrows shattered against his rock hard skin, and as soon as Kamau touched earth again, he swept outwards with his diamond blades. With edges barely twelve molecules wide and powered by muscles reinforced with solid rock, they tore through six elves with glistening chainmail armor as if they weren’t even there.

Kamau summoned a cloud of dust and glass around his body and then willed it outwards with the force of a hurricane. Dwarves, elves and other soldiers screamed as tiny particles of sand and glass tore at their flesh and eyes, rendering them blind, helpless.

His foes now blind, Kamau unraveled the chain on his left wrist and began to spin it with the speed of a helicopter blade. He curved his swing downwards, and sent it tearing through three centaur archer without stopping.

The battle field was beginning to cloud with dust, but with his connection to the earth, that barely impaired Kamau’s ability to sense the battlefield. The footfalls of his enemies sent ripples of vibrations that his powers carried to him instinctively, like sonar. As long as they stood on solid ground, no one could surprise him.

So when he felt the earth beginning to rumble beneath his feet, Kamau didn’t need to see the size of the shadow that fell across him to know exactly what was approaching.

The captain of the 31st division was a three stories tall Cyclops by the name of Alek Win'ters of Clan Win'ters. He earned his commission through a combination of strength of mind, body and character. His height gave him an unparalleled view of the battlefield, his strength enabled him to fight for his men and his willingness to die for them made them willing to fight for him. And what he saw in Kamau was a dangerous killing machine that his men couldn't hope to stop. With war club in hand, the Captain moved to save his people.

Kamau sensed the giant coming but gave no sign of it, and continued his rampage as the behemoth stomped closer and closer. Within seconds, the giant was within range.

Kamau willed his chain to stop instantly, where it hovered in midair for a second before it was sent flying towards his giant enemy's singular eye. It plowed through the organ, killing the captain instantly, and didn't stop until it reached grey matter. The end of the chain then morphed into a hook and latched onto the outlining of the eye socket.

Pulling with all his impressive strength, Kamau brought the captain tumbling down on seven of his own men.

The ground ran red around Kamau now, but the mutant warrior barely paused to notice. He was in his element now, and would not, could not stop until all who stood against him were dead.

&&&

"That's a man who knows his business," stated Union Jack as he hopped off Darkstar's platform, "alright team, here's the plan. Darkstar, Cybermancer, I want you two cutting a path through those blighters. Hit and run across the front lines. We need to buy Excalibur's regular forces time to set up."

"Understood," replied the two.

"Sabra, would you be a dear and start us off?"

Sabra turned towards and clapped her hands together with all her impressive strength. The rush of air pushed the first wave back. Scarlet Scarab brought up his hands and unleashed a tsunami of crimson energy that pushed back the second wave.

Union Jack pulled out his pistol, activated his energy dagger and charged into the breach, followed quickly by his teammates.

Cybermancer looked over her shoulder and saw a half dozen hover-platforms descending with over a dozen men on each, all armed to the teeth. She then primed her gauntlets and began blasting away any threat that dared approach alongside Darkstar. Excalibur's regular forces might be the key to containing this invasion, but only if they were given a chance to set up a perimeter. And the only way to do that was to hold back an entire army.

&&&

Aboard The Resolute

Chapman watched the action unfold, and tapped his foot impatiently as a team of technicians scurried about.

“Well?” demanded Chapman for the fifth time, “What in the hell is taking so long? We need to get them out there, now!”

“We’re trying sir,” answered one of the technicians, “but the HERMES system requires an enormous amount of power, and we haven’t been able to install another generator for it yet without disrupting our anti-gravity engines. Just another...there!”

“Finally,” Chapman sighed. He activated the ship’s comms. system, “attention stealth squad, our teleporter problems have been fixed. Prepare for a quick trip, and bring up back something nice!”

&&&

Ten Minutes later

Major Lien Bre’ak stepped into General Mc’lean tent. The aged Elven General at the center of the make shift war-room like a statue stood at the head of the table. Maps and troop deployments were scattered across the table in a semi organized fashion, each one watched by a division commander. General Mc’lean simply nodded in acknowledgement, and the Major gave his battlefield report.

“Things on the battlefield are odd, to say the least,” began the Major, “Preliminary reports state that our forces have met resistance from a small militia supported by several augmented soldiers. At the moment, we can only confirm that two of them were using magic, though have received reports that the first soldier fielded was a skeletal avatar of death. I’ve dispatched a special agent to deal with it.”

“Good. Do we have any intelligent on that floating steel structure they came out of? What are its abilities, anything of the like?”

“No sir. We have people scrying the craft now. We’ve managed to penetrate it with no difficulty, but haven’t been able to make sense of what we’ve seen. They appear to be using magic solely through channels.”

“Interesting,” General Mc’lean rubbed his chin, processing the information, “send an order through the ranks. Capture the enemy at all costs, no fatalities, no matter what. We engineered this skirmish to take their measure. But we can’t do that if we don’t understand how their magic works. We need captives to interrogate, hard information!”

“I understa...” Major Lien stiffened in mid sentence, and had just enough time to glance down at the blade that was stick out of his chest, just next to his second heart. By then though, his blood was swimming with poison that attacked all his vital organs at once.

“Amazing coincidence,” Shiva removed her blade from her victim, allowing him to fall, “that’s just what we’re here for too.”

General Mc’lean cursed the fates as he saw four oddly attired individuals step into his tent. It wasn’t just that they’d found his command post, it was that they were able to approach it so casually. He had no doubt that the guards posted outside were dead, but despite his keen elven senses, he hadn’t sensed a thing.

“I’m afraid I have to ask everyone to surrender immediately, I’m going to have to insist you come with us,” stated Junta. He didn’t expect his offer to be accepted, but it never hurt to open a deal strong, “I can promise that you will not be harmed and be accorded all respect due men of your stations.”

Everyone gathered in the tent looked to their General for guidance and when Junta saw that, he smiled. He thumbed a switch on his belt, and almost instantly dozens of explosions could be heard.

“Persona, get going. Guishen, Shiva, do your thing.”

Persona Grata shifted her form into a perfect replica of the General and then stepped outside, immediately barking orders. They were vaguely worded orders that might have confused the soldiers that knew the General well, but Persona Grata carried herself with authority and in an emergency like this, no one would dare question a superior.

Meanwhile, inside the tent, Guishen went left while Shiva went right. Guishen’s foes looked to be human, but were armed with medieval weapons, chainmail and everything else one might expect from a society that hadn’t moved past the Dark Ages. Guishen grabbed the man by the wrist before he could remove his sword from its sheath with one hand and with the other, grabbed the man by his hair and slammed him face first into the table. The second and third man on his path to General Mc’lean were dispatched with mechanical efficiency and rendered unconscious without any unnecessary pain.

In contrast, when Shiva was done, the side of the tent closest to her battle was covered in blood. The poison mistress stood atop the corpses proud as she turned her gaze to the General.

“Peacefully, or in pieces?”

General Mc’lean simply growled as he unleashed a bolt of emerald energy that would have taken Shiva’s head off if she hadn’t instantly transformed into mist.

“Oh hell!” Junta kicked the table into the General, and began madly thinking of a plan that would allow them to capture the General (they needed the information in his brain like a plant needed water) when he saw Guishen leveling his pistol out of the corner of his eye.

“Guishen, wait!” Junta called out, ten seconds too late. Guishen pulled the trigger and Junta felt his stomach drop as the General went down.

“Damn it Guishen, we needed him alive!” Danny snapped, “We’re being attacked by the cast of Dungeons and Dragons and we need to know why!”

“He is not dead, I merely grazed him,” Guishen reported as he holstered his weapon, “I took the liberty of scanning the men that I downed. I am afraid that the General won’t be able to give us too much information. He is not popular with the ruling class.”

“He can broaden our horizons if nothing else,” Junta replied as he took a silent breath of relief. He reminded himself that Guishen was once an internal security agent of China and they tolerated little less than perfection.

“We need to leave immediately,” Guishen removed some plastic ties from his belt and went about binding the General’s arms behind his back, “Persona Grata will not be able to keep them away from this tent much longer.”

“Should we care?” Shiva materialized atop the table, sitting lotus style, “it’s not as if she can keep her charade up forever.”

“I’m surprised you care,” said Junta.

“Of course I do. She’s my kill.”

“Hmm. Chapman,” Danny spoke into his communicator, “we’re ready for extraction. Make like Scotty.”

&&&

The Resolute

Chapman gritted his teeth, and wished to God that he was standing next to Junta at the moment instead of simply relaying orders, “I’m afraid that isn’t possible, Junta. The HERMES teleporter needs additional time to recharge. Can you go to ground for fifteen minutes?”

“Sure. Would you like me to deliver the moon while you’re at it?”

“A simple no would have been enough,” Chapman sighed, “You have flares, correct? Wait three minutes and then signal. I’ll send in Darkstar for pickup and we’ll go from there. Good luck.”

&&&

“Good God, three minutes in hot enemy territory?” Junta gritted his teeth, “that man has been out of the field way too long.”

Naturally, that’s when another soldier walked into the command tent, eager to receive his orders, “Commander Krosp of the Elite 4th Division report...”

The man/cat hybrid barely had time to gasp as he saw Shiva dive for him, a bundi dagger in each hand.

Shiva hit the man with all her weight, wrapped her legs around his waist and held tight. She moved quickly, and before her foe realized he was under attack, Shiva had furiously driven each bundi dagger into his neck half a dozen times.

Commander Krosp stumbled and then fell backwards, dead. Shiva stood up, covered in the man’s blood and then with a glance found that she was surrounded by four of his compatriots. One man had a pair of flaming swords, the second man was a cross between a bull and a human with a total of three fingers on each hand, a green skinned woman who held tight to a metal staff with a jeweled top and lastly, an armored dwarf who carried two mean looking axes.

“Well?” asked Shiva, well aware of how she was covered in the blood of their friend.

The man armed with the flaming swords moved first. Shiva sidestepped the first slash and slashed the man’s wrist lengthwise with a backwards slice barely deeper than a paper-cut.

She pushed herself to the side and spun. Leaping up at the last second, she shoved one dagger into the mouth of the man-ox. The warrior bull moved with a surprising swiftness as he lunged for Shiva, but only grabbed air.

Shiva rematerialized in front of the green skinned woman and the dwarf with a throwing star in each hand. She swept her hand outwards, letting them fly. One nicked the thigh of the jade woman and the second just scratched the cheek of the war dwarf.

“Goodbye,” smiled Shiva.

“If you think such meager wounds will stop elite warriors as ourselves...”

Shiva licked her blades as she grinned, “Some people need to disembowel to kill, or the perfect shot. Me, I just need a little cut, a scratch.”

The man with the flaming swords passed out first, followed by the dwarf. Shiva watched intently, always fascinated by the death throes of her victims. To her surprise, the man-bull creature reached out to the jade skinned woman and called out her name before they expired. Shiva felt a shudder run down her spine as she realized that they might have been lovers.

“Lets go!” Danny ordered, the General slung over his back.

The three of them ran parallel to the invader's camp. Stealth wasn't possible and running further away decreased the chances of the HERMES teleporter being able to pick them up. The best they could hope for now was that everyone no one noticed them long enough to score an evac.

"They have the General!" someone yelled.

Junta sighed, and stopped in his tracks. A running battle wasn't a battle that he wanted to fight.

Guishen saw horsemen approaching, and unholstered his dual pistols. With inhuman accuracy, he let loose a dozen shots only inches from the horse's hooves. The animals stopped as quickly as nature would allow, and began to buck wildly as they began to understand the danger of their master's actions.

At his back, Shiva was slicing arrows out of the air with her hook swords with so much ease they might have well been paper airplanes.

Junta glanced over his shoulder, and saw a half dozen soldiers, eight feet in height, green skinned with pointy teeth and nasty looking clubs running towards them.

He didn't bother to warn his two teammates, they were already busy. Concentrating, he focused a small bundle of the anti-gravity particles that saturated his body into his bo-staff and swung it towards the ground. The wave of anti-gravity particles caused a cloud of dust to shoot towards the soldiers, who grabbed their face as sand particles became wedged in their eyes.

"Damn it, Chapman, hurry up with that extraction!"

&&&

Sabra, hero of Israel and trained Mossad agent, learned a long time ago to never meet a situation with disbelief no matter how outrageous it appeared. Her training and instincts told her to both fight and observe, and that's exactly what she did.

So when she knocked aside a humanoid bull, she didn't blink. When three troll like creatures ran towards her, Sabra treated them like any other foe, raising her wrist launchers and sending a dozen paralyzing needles careening at their face.

When a warrior broke his sword over Sabra's shoulder, she caught the offending blade in midair, swung the broken blade backwards and rammed it through her attacker's throat without a second thought.

Sabra set her needle launchers to automatic, noted the position of her allies and began firing. The needle launchers on her wrist were charged with a special energy that paralyzed the human nervous system and though the army that surrounded her was far from human, Sabra hoped that it would still have some effect.

And to her relief, it did. The legions of warriors that had been close to smothering her scrambled backwards, desperate to either escape the effects of the needles, or what they feared they might be.

Sabra glanced at her teammates, and assessed the situation. The ground was littered with dozens of fallen warriors, creatures of all shapes and sizes laying unconscious or worse on the ground. Union Jack, Silverclaw, Scarlet Scarab formed a small circle with air support from Cybermancer and Darkstar.

Though they looked winded, Sabra could see that they were still battle worthy. Unfortunately, from what she could see, so were the legions surrounding them.

“We can’t keep this up forever,” stated Sabra.

“We won’t have to,” answered Union Jack, who then yelled, “Excalibur, airborne!”

Sabra heard a rumbling, and instinctively grabbed Union Jack, carrying him into the air with her.

Sabra and Union Jack watched as a modified M1 Abrams tank barreled through the enemy ranks like a bull through fine china.

Hell, modified didn’t begin to describe the vehicle in Union Jack’s mind. Each end carried its own rocket launcher. The front was adorned with six blades of no ordinary steel that sliced through anyone who had the misfortune not to move out of the way. And riding a lot of the thing was Excalibur’s newest American addition to the team, Commando.

“Our American friend is certainly well equipped for a frontal assault,” remarked Sabra.

Union Jack rolled his eyes, “Set me down on the tank and then backup Scarab. We need them occupied as long as possible. But call for an extraction if you get pinned down or can’t keep fighting. Our regular forces should have them contained by then.”

“Understood,” Sabra matched speed with the tank, set the British hero down and then set off to find Scarlet Scarab.

Out of the corner of his eye, Union Jack saw Darkstar peel away from the battle and head deeper into the enemy camp. Rock fought the urge to radio her and demand to know what she thought she was doing, but he reminded himself that she was an experienced hero and wouldn’t have broken formation without just cause.

“Aim for the head,” remarked Commando, “they don’t seem to like it.”

“Imagine that,” remarked Union Jack.

A man in gleaming silver armor leapt over the blades of the tank of if they were a simple bump and landed on the front. With a sword on one hand, he stalked towards Commando.

“Surrender, I am enchanted with invincibility against all blades!”

“Thanks for the warning,” Commando leveled his customized Desert Eagle at the man and put a single bullet between his enemy’s eyes, “I almost feel guilty when it’s this easy.”

“Well, it appears that we have some volunteers to deal with your issues,” stated Union Jack, “we have big incoming at three, five and eight o clock.”

Commando looked around, and saw the enemies ‘Jack was referring to. Three giant Cyclops, twelve feet tall, four feet across, built of solid muscle and necks so thick that it was almost impossible to see where the neck began and the shoulders ended.

“Pay attention, Rock. You’re about to see my slingshot.”

Commando turned his head towards each enemy, tapped the side of his helmet and then smiled. Union Jack didn’t need an owner’s manual to know that Commando kept a small, high powered aiming laser in his helmet, similar to how Special Forces soldiers aimed airstrikes.

The rear rocket launchers let fly three missiles and completely obliterated the three monsters. Rock was both surprised and disturbed to learn that the missiles carried a dual payload of napalm and explosives.

“Hang on,” Commando said in a tone that meant it wasn’t a mere idle suggestion. Union Jack hooked his arm around a handlebar on the top of the tank and then nodded to Commando.

“Maneuver strafe F one. No friendlies,” Commando spoke into his collar.

Two powerful chain guns emerged from the front of the tank, and let loose a hail of bullets that literally cut anyone standing in front of them in two.

“Laser guided missiles, anti-gravity units to increase speed, depleted uranium bullets,” Union Jack listed off the technical observations as a way to settle his nerves, “what don’t you have on this thing?”

“You’d be surprised,” Commando answered. The tank stopped spinning, and then rolled forward with speed impossible for any other rolling weapon of mass destruction. Dozens of enemy soldiers were crushed underneath or smashed aside. While the tank weighed less than it had any right to, its mass was easily double that of a normal tank, “remove the room needed for a crew and you can add almost anything.”

“...good to know.”

&&&

“Darkstar, this is Chapman. I need you to pick up Junta’s squad. They have a prisoner we need.”

“Understood,” answered the Russian mutant. Almost immediately, Darkstar darted over the battlefield like a bullet, trying to pay attention to both the homing device installed in the wrist of her costume, and to the battle raging both below and in front of her. Despite all the carnage that was being unleashed, Laynia was fascinated by how many different creatures of myth just seem so casually laid out before her.

“Surrender, or be destroyed!”

Like, say, the four dragons arrayed before her.

As creatures of myth went, the dragons didn’t exactly live up to expectation. They were large things true, were only twice as thick as the average house, the length of their bodies was at least a dozen yards long and their wings stretched out some eighteen year in both directions.

They were nothing to scoff at, but Darkstar suspected that she’d prefer these things to the epic sized dragons of myth. And their riders...

Darkstar did a double take as she realized that these beasts had no riders. They were the ones who’d threatened her!

“I will not,” Darkstar recovered quickly, “but I extend the same offer. You are trespassing in this reality. Stand down, or I will be forced to kill you.”

A gout of flame aimed at Darkstar’s stomach was their answer. The Russian mutant climbed above the flame, and retaliated immediately.

Lashing out with her powers, she encased the head of the farthest most dragon in darkforce. Within the span of a blink, the creature was overwhelmed by darkness. He could see, smell, and hear nothing. To everyone of his razor sharp senses, it was as if the world had disappeared, fell away in the blink of an eye.

Primal instincts kicked, the snake-like dragon began flailing without concern to who was around and slammed into his pod mate next to him. The two dragons became entangled and within a split second, gravity took over.

“You’ll pay for that!” hissed the third dragon.

Darkstar created a wall of darkforce. The second the flame died, Laynia shaped the wall into a blade and then it flying towards the dragon. The creature ducked it’s head, assuming Darkstar’s intent was to cleave his skull in two. The ebony blade then curved and sliced through the bone of his left wing, and sent the beast plummeting to the ground.

“Primate monster!” screeched the last dragon. He came in hard and fast, and Darkstar barely reacted quickly enough to save her life. She blasted the dragon back with a stream of pure darkforce with no style or finesse, but it wasn’t enough.

She watched the beast rear its head back, ready to let loose a wide gout of flame when inspiration struck. She reached out with her powers, and just before the creature was about to expel the flame from its lungs, she created a clamp around its beak-like mouth.

A split second later, there was a flash of heat and light, then ash and bone that fell to the ground.

“Chapman, I’m in position,” Darkstar reported.

“Understood. Stand by...”

Several tense seconds ticked by. Darkstar was starting to get just a little nervous before she heard Chapman’s voice over the radio again.

“Flares deployed. Maneuver alpha. Is this understood?”

“It is,” Darkstar shot towards the green smoke like a bullet.

Junta, Guishen and Shiva were fighting back to back with their prisoner in the center. Unlike her other teammates, Darkstar saw that they were simply trying to hold back their enemies, not fighting to kill or win.

Well, except for Shiva.

“Finally!” spat Junta when he saw the Russian mutant, “teleport us out of here already!”

“I’m sorry Junta,” Darkstar landed in between the members of the Stealth Squad and created a dome of darkforce, “teleporting anyone besides myself has a...disturbing effect on the individual lately.”

“How then do you plan on extracting us?” asked Guishen.

“Though I cannot teleport groups anymore, the strength of my darkforce has increased dramatically,” Darkstar answered. “Chapman, I’m ready.”

There was a brief pause, and suddenly it sounded as if they were in the middle of a firing range. The earth shook, there were a dozen explosions that rattled their teeth, and then finally, silence.

Darkstar dropped the shield, and the members of Excalibur took in the scene before there. There were dozens of fresh, smoldering craters all around them, body parts and weapons scattered like twigs.

“I cannot believe it,” hissed Shiva, “The Resolute fired on our position! They fired on us!”

“We were safe,” Darkstar reassured her, “but if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather debate the tactic back at base, and not on the battlefield.”

“Agreed. Sooner we get back, the sooner we can get back to picking this guy’s brain,” said Junta.

Darkstar encased them in a bubble of darkforce, and then sped towards Excalibur’s airship. Despite the general loathing she felt for the man, Darkstar was thankful that they had him to direct their counter attack in situations like this. Union Jack was an excellent leader, but the necessity of him being in the field also hampered his view of the bigger picture. Only by taking care of both could Excalibur hope to be effective.

&&&

“Sir, Darkstar and the Stealth Squad are aboard. Darkstar and Shiva have both redeployed to the main battle.”

Chapman nodded, “Good. What about the battalion commanders?”

“They report that they have just about secured a perimeter around the enemy army.”

“Understood,” Chapman steeped his hands and began to organize his thoughts. When the perimeter was established, he’d call back Excalibur and try to reopen negotiations. Armies, even magical ones, didn’t just appear out of thin air. They had leaders, objectives and everything else an army required to function and keep discipline.

Chapman knew, not suspected, but knew as a certainty that the battle raging on the desert before him was a distraction, nothing more.

But waiting for the other shoe to drop was becoming maddening. If the enemy had an army that they could casually field, what else could they do? What were they?

“Sir, we have incoming!” reported a sensor operator.

“What is it?” Chapman demanded.

“I...I don’t know. Long range scanners just picked it up. It looks like a jet...no, a missile...no! Si, it’s...!”

&&&

Hellios landed on the desert floor with the force of a low yield ballistic missile and all the grace of a cannonball. The impact sent mythic logical soldiers flying in every which direction.

Hellios dragged himself out of the hole, and rubbed his head gingerly. His head was ringing, and it wasn’t because of his less than graceful return to earth.

“...never should have drunk a tub of Russian vodka,” muttered Hellios. He rubbed his drowsy eyes as he looked around, “...did I arrive at the right place...?”

The war club of a giant crashed down on the head of the solar powered hero.

“Flying gnat,” grumbled Battletooth, leader of his mighty war clan, “with pests like this, I’m amazed they kept us in reserve so long.”

Battletooth tried to lift his ancient war-club, a family heirloom that had been used to smite tens of thousands of enemies, but to his surprise, it wouldn’t budge. He gripped it tighter and began to put his back into it, but still the weapon remained entrenched on the ground, where it had smacked the flying human.

Battletooth did a double take when he felt the weapon torn from his grip, and before he could reclaim it, the club was sent hurtling through the air, where it smashed into his jaw with twice the force required to render him unconscious.

With an angry growl, Helligos took to the air, bobbing and weaving (though not intentionally) as he rocketed towards the remaining giants, his eyes smoldering with solar energy.

&&&

Kamau, trench knife in hand, swung his at the goblin enemy who had the misfortune to be standing in front of him. The razor sharp edges of the diamond blade punched through his skull starting at the mouth, splitting his head in twain. Swinging upwards with his other hand, the blade sliced through the shoulder of an elf who thought that his chainmail armor would guard against any blade.

Stomping his feet for effect, Kamau unleashed 5.6 earthquake for thirty feet in every direction. It was as if someone had suddenly picked up the ground, thrown it into the air and let it fall back down again. Soldiers were thrown from their horses, archer’s dropped their arrows and heavily armored knights were pitched backwards on their ass.

Kamau stood tall, his chest heaving in equal parts exhilaration and exhaustion. He concentrated for a moment, drawing the earth into his body, healing the minor wounds and the easing the strain he felt on his muscles.

“The first person to stand dies,” roared Kamau. He punctuated his statement by casually strolling over to a defiant dwarf, his diamond trench knife cutting through the soldier’s metal axe effortlessly.

“And those already standing?”

Kamau turned his head towards the voice, surprised (though his face didn’t reveal it) that he hadn’t sensed the man. But when he saw the speaker, Kamau realized that ‘man’ was a generous description.

The flesh of his enemy was chalk white, with blue veins visible on both his neck and face. He stood six feet tall, wore nothing but torn black pants and carried an axe engraved with symbols that pulsated with energy.

“When I’m finished, they won’t be.”

Kamau charged at his foe, who swung his axe in a lazy swing that might have taken his head off if the African warrior hadn’t smoothly ducked under the swing. Kamau lashed out with his knives, slicing through his enemy’s side as if it weren’t even there.

Kamau spun as he came around and willed a small section of earth to shoot upwards underneath his feet, slinging him into the air. Kamau swung his foot up, and then brought it crashing down on his enemy’s skull. Bone snapped, flesh tore as the skull was smashed down his shoulder and the man slumped to the ground.

“Not impressed.” Spat Kamau.

“The feeling is mutual.”

Kamau took a step back without and felt a shiver of horror, a feeling that he thought he’d never feel again, as he watched his enemy climb to his feet, the man’s skull still pressed down his shoulders.

“I am a Death Knight,” hissed the unholy creature, “and it will take far more than that to end me.”

Kamau held his knife in a reverse grip and snarled like an angry beast, “Whatever it takes, I promise you, I have it!”

&&&

“Finally...” muttered Chapman as the battalion commanders gave their report. His troops had secured a parameter, cutting the army of ghouls, trolls and other creatures of myth off from civilization (such as it was).

“Alright, tell Excalibur to stand by. I want to wait a few minutes, then recall Excalibur and begin bombarding the army with low yield mortars. When that’s done, they should be softened up enough to listen to reason,” Chapman paused to reflect on his orders, “or to finish off completely. Maybe by then I’ll be in the mood to be diplomatic...”

“Sir, we’re getting new readings...!”

“...it just appeared, sensors can’t get a single thing!”

“Director Chapman, look!”

Chapman gazed forward and a split second later, his jaw dropped to the floor. Where there had been nothing but empty sky and desert, was now a massive, floating island that literally shined like the perfect diamond. Walls of flawless crystal served to protect gleaming, golden towers. Impossibly bright buildings with architecture lifted from the Middle Ages towered above the walls while dragons, pixies and all other kinds of impossible beasts littered the skyline.

And standing in front of this immaculate was a blond haired man over twenty stories tall. He wore golden armor that looked as if it could belong to King Arthur and spoke with a voice that somehow cut through everything.

“That...is...enough...!”

One the battlefield below, Kamau stopped his knife only inches away from the neck of the Death Knight and listened.

“I, Lord Darkstorm, lord and rule of the society of E’u’atha, have sent my people below to take the measure of this world!”

Silverclaw clasped her hands over her ears and tried to will the invasive voice away. As she listened, it felt as if every cell had been invaded by the man’s voice.

“Now that I have, I demand to know, why have you so brutally assaulted my homeland!”

Sabra observed the man with dispassion.

“I await your answer!”

Chapman watched both the image and army disappear in the blink of an eye. The giant floating island remained, containing God only knew how many more soldiers and weapons. Chapman knew from the beginning that his foes used magic as a weapon but up until now never imagined to what extent.

The fact that their enemy apparently relied upon magic, a discipline known not only for its power, but subtlety made Chapman feel very, very nervous.

“I think I’m in the mood to be diplomatic now.”

Next Issue: Unicorns, dragons and pixies, oh my! Excalibur find themselves up against an enemy unlike any other and pissed off! Good thing a special guest star is there to help!

Excalibur
#21
June 2009
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"Siege of Magic"
Part II: The Magic of First Contact

Written by Daniel Ingram

THE STORY THUS FAR: A city of magical beings of unknown origins and unknown intent has emerged on the fringes of the Gobi Desert and deployed their magical army. After an initial skirmish, they have accused earth of attacking their homeland.

Gobi Desert, aboard Excalibur's support craft The Resolute

Joey Chapman watched the giant image of a man bellow out fire and brimstone, and swallowed hard.

"Our magic stolen, and our lands run dry of life itself! Our greatest diviners have traced the blight to this realm, this land! And I, on behalf of my people, will have satisfaction!"

As a rule, magic never much disturbed Joey Chapman. His first adventure as Union Jack was against a dangerous and very real vampire, after all. Since his passion was art, tactics and abstract thought, magic actually appealed to the romantic part of his soul, even when that magic amounted to a werewolf trying to rip his throat out. Something that small, relatively, didn't bother him one bit. There was room enough in this world for armored scientists and unseen masters of the mystic arts.

But to see someone who could casually throw around magic without appearing to break a sweat, those people terrified Chapman. It wasn't just that they were extremely powerful; it was that they were powerful with few, if any, practical limits. Powerhouses like Magneto could only manipulate magnetism, Graviton was limited to gravity, but blokes like Loki and Dr. Strange could do damn near anything they wanted, from turning a man into ash with their pinky to turning him into a three headed goat to unleashing a plague that science couldn't hope to scratch.

Even worse, in Chapman's opinion, was their seeming ability to go anywhere. The Director of Excalibur had actually used magic in the past for eavesdropping, as a member of the Hellfire Club. It had been expensive as hell, but worth every penny. The applications of magic seemed damn near limitless and while Chapman did have a plan, it wasn't nearly as reliable as he liked.

“Delphi,” Chapman turned to his LMD assistant, “recall all of Excalibur and enact protocol Mag DS, now.”

The android nodded silently.

“Alright, we need to speak face to face now,” Chapman all but shouted. The personal on the bridge gave Chapman some odd looks, but he just ignored them, “otherwise, we’ll be here all day, nothing will be accomplished and none of us want that.”

There was a burst of light, and suddenly Chapman found a man in gleaming golden armor standing before him. The Resolute had at least three different anti-teleportation mechanisms in it, and five different subsystems designed to prevent outside observation and yet this man likely hadn’t even noticed them.

There were times, Chapman decided, that being right wasn’t at all comforting.

“I see that you are not unfamiliar with magic. Might I know your name?”

Chapman appraised the man carefully. He was a large, broad shouldered man with a light skinned face and long blond hair that reached down to touch his shoulders. His armor shined unnaturally, and was virtually seamless. His chest bore a stylized depiction of a man battling a wizard, and Chapman guessed that it was the man’s family crest.

“I am Director Chapman of Excalibur,” replied Chapman, mindful to not reveal his first name. With magic, names had power, “and I take it that you, Lord Darkstorm, are the leader of that island nation I see floating outside my window?”

“I would have thought my declaration obvious,” Lord Darkstorm regarded Chapman with thinly disguised curiosity, “yes, I am the proper lord of Faylin. Gather your vassals and fellow lords, we need immediate satisfaction.”

“Well, that’s just not how things are done in this reality,” Chapman rested his hand on the gun that he kept attached to his hip. Darkstorm didn’t even flinch or even take notice, Chapman observed, “would it be possible to arrange a truce? You have to understand that I’m not the ruler of this realm.”

Lord Darkstorm raised a curious eye brow, “I suppose that is acceptable. Consult with your fellow rulers then. I promise a cease of hostilities for at least three days, but cannot promise any greater time. Our concerns are most dire, Director Chapman.”

“I understand, and I assure you that I won’t need half the time. But until we agree on formal talks, I’m afraid that I must leave some of my men here. While no aggression will be taken without my order, be aware that any attempts to breach the truce will be dealt with swiftly.”

“I understand fully. Thank you, I do so hope we can handle this like civilized creatures,” Lord Darkstorm bowed politely, and then disappeared.

“Delphi, get the Security Council on the line, I’ll need to brief them immediately. Have Excalibur teleported back to Avalon,” Chapman removed his eyes from where Darkstorm had just been moments before, as if to assure himself that the man wasn’t still there. Magic was, almost by definition, deceptive, “I’m going to leave you in command here. Take no aggressive action without my permission and establish a strong parameter. They likely already have hostages, we don’t need to give them anymore. I want an update sent to Avalon every ten minutes. If I don’t get it, I’ll assume something happened.”

“Understood. I have already alerted the Security Council and they are insisting on an update before we take any further action.”

“Of course they would,” Chapman sighed, “I don’t even know what I’m going to tell them yet. All I know is what I can’t tell them...”

Faylin, Darkstorm’s Tower.

“...feel very strongly about this man. His title is odd, I’ll grant you, but we shouldn’t judge just on that. We can only begin to guess how the culture on his world developed...”

Lord Darkstorm watched his personal scrying glass, forged hundreds of years ago by his clansmen and watched Chapman’s briefing with a smug grin a smug grin. He really had no idea that Chapman would be so easily fooled. How had such a weak and naïve little man assumed control of such a powerful army?

“My Lord?”

Lord Darkstorm turned his head and saw his personal vassal, known simply as the Red Knight, standing in the doorway. He had earned his name with no humor after slaying his hundredth wyldedragon, their collective blood forever staining the family armor. The family crest, chain mail forged in the hottest mystical flame, his ceremonial cape, everything he wore into battle was the color of blood.

But the vassal now known as Red Knight adopted the name with polite humor and stoic resolve. If he was ever troubled by the fact that his birth name had been subsumed by a title drenched in blood, Lord Darkstorm honestly couldn’t say.

“The Council of Warlocks have reported that they are no closer to finding the sorcerer supreme of this world than when we first arrived, sire. Though none would say it, some are beginning to suspect that this plane may not even have one.”

“They use magic,” Lord Darkstorm insisted, “we saw it with our own eyes! The gem that dark one carried, and the shapeshifter!”

“No one disputes that, but it may be that they do not know the sources of their own abilities,” countered Red Knight, “of hundreds of soldiers they sent against us, only two used arcane

against against us, and then only barely. Our generals suspect that the inhabitants may be entirely ignorant of its existence.”

Lord Darkstorm rubbed his chin and thought for a moment, trying to hide a smile from his personal enforcer, “That may well be.”

“But that raises a deeper question. If they cannot use magic, how could they have ever stolen ours?”

“That is what we must find out,” Lord Darkstorm noticed how the image on his scrying mirror began to waiver, “keep me abreast of any new developments.”

“Understood, my Lord.”

Red Knight marched off, never taking notice of Darkstorm’s scrying mirror. When his vassal left the chambers, Lord Darkstorm turned to it and smiled. Things were moving along just as expected.

“... they were just testing us. I spoke to their leader personally, and though I’d like more time with him, this Lord Darkstorm does strike me as a man who can be reasoned with, fancy name aside.”

The members of the Security Council nodded politely, and asked a few follow up questions. Though all were concerned about a new city that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, they all saw it as someone else’s problem. Even China, the closest nation was confident that they faced no risk. Chapman ideally wondered how the sudden appearance of a magical city had become so...mundane to world leaders.

Though at the moment, it worked in Chapman’s favor. Because they didn’t truly appreciate the enormity of what was happening, it gave him the wide operational latitude he needed to deal with this emergency. No one was standing over his shoulder second guessing him, or sending in their own forces ‘just in case’. For once, political ignorance worked in his favor. The last thing the Director of Excalibur wanted was to explain his war plans to people with no experience in magic and all kinds of experience in nit picking.

Chapman made his way into the briefing room, where everyone minus Shiva was waiting patiently for him.

“How did the Security Council react?” asked Scarab.

“Exactly how I expected,” answered Chapman, “completely indifferent, and by default confident that we can handle this new threat. I suppose earth can only be invaded so many times before it starts to lose its charm. Has our specialist arrived yet?”

“I’ve actually been here since this morning. From the moment your people engaged Darkstorm’s people.”

Chapman looked across the room to his empty chair, and saw one Dr. Strange, master of the mystic arts and sorcerer supreme of this reality, sitting comfortably. He noted, with some annoyance, that he was the only one surprised to see Dr. Strange sitting there.

“Please forgive this intrusion,” Dr. Strange stood up and began to stroll towards Chapman, “I needed to ward this island against magical intrusion, and it’s most easily done when the people you are trying to protect are in the room as well.”

“Actually, that would have been the first thing I asked you to do,” Chapman nodded to the Doctor, and took his seat, “So tell me, Dr. Strange, what can you tell me about these gits?”

“Actually, I’d like to hear your impression first.”

Chapman nodded his head, “This Lord Darkstorm is ninety percent politician and ten percent madman. He fielded piss poor soldiers against us, and didn’t even bother to ask for his general back. We’ve done him no wrong and he’s either scape-goating us or making another play that we don’t know about.”

Dr. Strange raised an eyebrow, “That’s not at all what you told the Security Council.”

“You weren’t the only one listening to my report with a magical mirror,” Chapman smiled, “your turn, Doc. Am I right, did anyone from our world attack or damage theirs?”

“Most certainly not,” Dr. Strange answered, “as a matter of fact, in the small amount of time they have been here, they have already done considerable damage to this reality.”

“How so?”

“By crudely tearing a hole in the fabric of our reality,” Dr. Strange explained, “the magic they used to enter our reality was wielded with all the grace of a surgeon using a rusty chainsaw as a scalpel. And they used said chainsaw on the fabric of reality itself.”

“That...that sounds deeply disturbing,” observed Scarlet Scarab.

“It was meant to be,” Dr. Strange said, “especially when you take into account the fact that there are ancient path ways and imperfections in reality, flaws that can be effortlessly opened that allow easy passage between realms. They are easy to find and with the right time and preparation, can be used without great risk.”

“In other words, they took the hard road even though it was more dangerous,” Union Jack summarized, “could it have been intentional?”

“I would very much doubt it, given the risks involved,” Dr. Strange replied, “they could have easily been invaded by an army of demons, or be trapped in a subrealm for generations. Honestly, they were lucky to reach our reality unscathed. Elder demon gods enter our reality with more grace.”

“They had to move an entire island, plus God only knows how many people and weapons,” Sabra stated, “might the greater mass be why they were so clumsy with their transportation?”

“Highly unlikely. With the amount of sorcerers and sheer power at their disposal, the greater mass wouldn’t matter, it would simply require greater effort and coordination on their part. And patience and ceremony are the hallmarks of perfected magic,” Dr. Strange explained evenly, “I’ll be honest, what I’ve seen thus far is baffling. They obviously have magic at their disposal, their entire society is based upon it yet they have little to no grasp of the nuance, the depth required of magic. I find it all deeply disturbing.”

“Disturbing in what way?” Guishen asked.

“Dangerous in the ‘children playing with gamma bombs’,” Dr. Strange replied in all seriousness, “if that pathway into our reality is any indication of their real skill with magic, our entire reality may be at risk.”

“So why haven’t you dealt with them?” Union Jack asked.

“Because they have too much power and at least seem to wield it too carelessly,” Dr. Strange answered, “if I confronted them, even with other magical allies, it would be impossible to predict the damage that would follow. When you fight fire with fire, everyone gets burned. I prefer water in situations like this.”

“Which means you can help, but we have to do the heavy lifting,” Chapman stated.

Dr. Strange rolled his eyes and sighed, “Despite what you may want to believe, I simply cannot solve every problem with a mere wave of my hand. And unless we want our reality to unravel, I need your help as much as you need mine.”

“Of course, my apologies Doctor,” Chapman rubbed his chin and reflected on the situation for a moment.

“Unless we have proper intelligence, we’re just feeling around in the dark,” Chapman began, “but I also want to be ready for an assault. So here’s how it’s going to be. Dr. Strange? Can you trace these people back to their home?”

“Effortlessly. To be honest, given two years I could teach anyone here to do the same.”

“Good, that means you can take some escorts. Union Jack, Cybermancer, Commando, Darkstar, you’ll accompany Strange back to these bloke’s home reality,” Chapman ordered, “I’m not

expecting a complete history, but a general overview would be nice. Try to be low profile if possible and for God's sake don't get captured."

"I think I should accompany them," Sabra offered, "I have some experience in intelligence gathering that may be useful."

"That's actually why I need you with me," Chapman answered, "You, Scarab, Silverclaw and Kamau are going to join me when we attempt to parlay with Darkstorm. I don't expect to be successful, but I have to try."

"Are you sure you want me along as you parlay?" Kamau asked. He frowned, and the scars that adorned his mouth made him look like an ominous skull, "I haven't much experience with being...diplomatic. Just direct."

"Then just be quiet and look menacing," Chapman ordered, "I want to see how these blokes deal with a wolf in their midst. According to footage, you have the highest amount of personal kills..."

"This time," Commando interrupted.

"...and your powers might strike them as magic while being anything but. Just look dangerous, leave the talking to me and we'll be fine."

"I should join you," Hellios said quickly, "I'm the most powerful member of Excalibur, I think they'll be a little more agreeable when they see me!"

"You're also amazingly vulnerable to magic," Chapman countered, "last thing I need is my biggest cannon benched before the whistle blows. No, you're my back-up plan if we actually need to send them packing. So you're going to get some special equipment, and then play janitor."

"Janitor?!" Hellios' shout literally rocked the room, "I'm the strongest one here, I..."

"Was piss drunk when I needed you for action!" Chapman's shout wasn't as loud by half, but it carried twice the weight, "and even better, you showed in the middle of a fight wasted! So you shut up and do what I tell you, or I'll make you an actual janitor just for the sake of irony!"

Hellios seethed inwardly, but he just looked aside, not meeting Chapman's eyes.

"And my squad?" asked Junta, "what will we be doing?"

"What you do best, what I brought you on board for," Chapman answered, "with a little help from an asset we were kind enough to leave them."

In the streets of Faylin...

Young Vaarsuvius Starshine considered herself especially gifted for an elf child. When her parents were...removed and their estate taken by the state while she was just left, ignored and forgotten on a street corner.

Vaarsuvius took to her new life with equal parts pain and skill. She plucked money from loose pockets easily, and food venders never suspected a high born elf like herself to be a shoplifter (the young child congratulated herself on mastering the art of illusion at such a young age. It took her peers ten years to do what she could in five).

Unfortunately, even the finest mind couldn't predict everything. Like the fact that she wasn't the only orphan child in this district, or that some had formed mutual protection pacts, or gangs if one wanted to be crass. And that these gangs would take issue with her thefts in their declared territory.

One gang, after a terrible chase, had her cornered in a back alley. A gang of two human boys, one Tauren and three Halflings.

"This street is ours, pointy ears!" growled the Tauren boy.

"I do believe only Nobles own streets," Vaarsuvius answered matter of factly. She had a habit of spouting mildly relevant facts when nervous. Surprisingly, this didn't help her situation at all.

"Think you're smart, huh?" The lead boy, the Tauren, stepped forward and cracked his knuckles. While still a boy by his own racial definition, the combination of man and bull still equaled an ungodly amount of muscle mass, "see how smart you are when your brains are outside of your head!"

Young Vaarsuvius gulped, and deep down, readied herself to meet her forbearers.

"Children, that is quiet enough."

The group of youngsters turned, and saw an older woman, dressed in rags and cast offs, standing at the mouth of the alley, hands on her hip and looking at them all with unquestionable authority.

"It would be wise for all of you to step away from that child and head home now," advised the old woman.

"This doesn't involve you," growled the lead boy. Even at five years old, the Tauren stood at nearly six feet, "leave, before I decide it does."

Without saying a word, the old woman leapt forward, and brought her leg straight up. When it came down again, it landed squarely on the boy's head with a -krunch!-. The boy fell over unconscious, and the others instantly cowed.

The gang, with equal parts fear and awe, dragged their leader away while averting their eyes from the older woman. Though she hardly seemed excessively violent, none of them wanted to risk her wraith.

Choosing to ignore them as well, the old woman stepped forward and offered her hand to the young elf.

“Why don’t we take a walk?”

Vaarsuvius took the woman’s hand, and she lead her out of the alley and into the (relative) safety of the street.

“So why is a smart young elf like yourself doing out here?” asked the older woman.

“Surviving,” the young elf said curtly.

“Without one’s elders, this can be a dangerous world,” remarked the older woman, “where are yours?”

“Where everyone else is who speaks the truth,” the child pointed at an immaculate crystal spire in the distance.

“Surely they wouldn’t be in jail unless they were criminals,” said the older woman, deliberately unconvincing.

“Foolish old hag!” spat the young elf, the rage of having watched her parents dragged from their simple sanctum boiling over, “surely age has given you enough wisdom to see through the lies of the high lord!”

“I don’t understand what you mean...”

“Typically ignorant peasant,” spat the young elf, “when his noble house asked the fates for a name and were answered with Darkstorm, they should have had the common sense to smother him in his sleep. But his family pretended as though he would merely lead us through a terrible storm, and not cause it. The fates themselves decreed him a destroy, but because he’s noble born, they act as if he’s a savor!”

“The fates do love a sense of irony.”

“Were he a true savor, he would not lock away everyone who speaks out against him!” Vaarsuvius shouted, tears running down her cheeks.

She looked at the older woman, but in the blink of an eye saw that she’d vanished. She felt something atop her head, and reached up, plunking it from her head. It was an apple, and inscribed in it’s red skin, in a language Vaarsuvius didn’t understand, said ‘thank you.’

Avalon.

Union Jack, Commando, Darkstar and Cybermancer sat in a pentagram locus style, while Dr. Strange hovered above them, his eyes closed in concentration and chanted in a language none of them knew. An unnatural wind blew through the empty room and the candles that provided illumination seemed to dim of their own free will.

“Are we supposed to hum in Latin or somethin’?” Commando asked.

“If the Doctor required something of us, I am certain he would inform us,” Sabra said bluntly.

“Just askin’...” shrugged Commando.

“Ready yourselves,” Dr. Strange said softly.

“How...” Cybermancer’s voice drifted off as she began herself beginning float, all the while still being able to feel herself still sitting. There was a sudden jerk, like a rollercoaster suddenly starting that Suzi felt only in her mind, a flash of colors Suzi never knew existed and then Cybermancer felt the steel floor underneath her replaced with rock.

“That certainly wasn’t like the HERMES system,” Union Jack remarked as he shook his head.

He glanced around, and saw that Dr. Strange had teleported them high atop a mountain. He glanced east, and saw a vast collection of tents, mud huts and other dwelling constructed from anything else the residents could get their hands on. People were gathered around giant bonfires, while he could see a long line of hungry, downtrodden people waiting in line in front of one of the few wooden structures, dented and banged up bowls in hand.

They might have stepped across a reality or two, but Union Jack recognized a refugee camp when he saw one.

“So what’s our first move, Doctor?” Union Jack looked towards the master of the mystic arts, and took an involuntary step back by what he saw.

Dr. Strange, master of the mystic, champion of magic that fought beings of unimaginable horror and wielded more power in two fingers than Union Jack, looked completely, utterly terrified. His face was pale, drained of blood and his mouth gaped like a fish.

Union Jack followed the doctor’s eyes, and saw, in the distance, a giant indigo cloud. Red and orange lightning cracked on the edges. There were random flashes of light and it seemed to repel the very air around it.

“What is that?” asked Sabra.

“That,” Dr. Strange regained his composure instantly, “is an abomination. Something that if handled improperly, will cause a terrible, terrible bang.”

“What, just a bang?” shrugged Commando.

“Excuse me, I misspoke. I meant it could cause a creation event. Or in laymen’s terms, a big bang.”

NEXT ISSUE: Chapman enters Darkstorm’s crystal city with a diplomatic mission, but plans are afoot. Who's playing who?

Excalibur
#22
Sept 2009
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"Siege of Magic"
Part III: Into the Dragon's Din

Written by Daniel Ingram

Gobi Desert, Mongolia.
On the deck of the Excalibur Hellicarrier

Joey Chapman, Kamau, Silverclaw, Scarlet Scarab and Sabra stood atop Excalibur's attack helicarrier. Surprisingly, the anti-gravity generators that allowed the massive warship to literally float in the air were fairly quiet. The roar they generated was no greater than the noise created average crowd at an American mall.

Of course, Silverclaw was the only one who really seemed to notice. Everyone else was too busy standing around looking serious, staring seriously at the magical, floating island of crystal that hovered in the distance. Try as she might though, Silverclaw couldn't take seriously something that looked like it stepped out of a Disney movie.

"So what do you think their society is like, Scarab?" Maria asked. Idle conversation seemed better than listening to anti-gravity engines and the wind, "Don't you study this kind of stuff?"

"As an archeologist, I study the past, not the present," Scarab corrected.

"Yeah, I know that, but studying the development of a society is something you've been doing for like, decades. Don't you have any ideas what they might be like?"

Scarlet Scarab smiled. In his experience teaching, a curious student was a gift, "If I had to guess, these people have come to completely rely on magic. Their understanding of our world therefore is likely to be limited and framed in the context. So I would tread carefully and leave the talking to our Director."

"Sound advice, mate," Chapman observed a singular cloud emerge from a wall of solid crystal. He rubbed a spot of dirt off his cufflinks, "look sharp, our ride's here. Let me do the talking and say nothing that isn't the vaguest compliment you can think of. Understood?"

The members of Excalibur nodded in agreement.

The cloud came to a stop some thirty yards away. Lord Darkstorm brought an entourage, as expected, and Chapman took a moment to study them. The first was a knight wearing an ancient, blood stained armor, next to him was a short, green skinned goblin-like creature with a red cloak and golden necklace while the last one was simply an animated skeleton that wore a blue robe, red cape and golden crown atop his head. All men of power, and Chapman could see from their body language that they all deferred to Darkstorm.

“Director Chapman, I would be honored if you joined us.” With a simple gesture, the solid cloud beneath Darkstorm stood on extended outwards, forming a bridge for Excalibur.

The bridge was barely a meter and a half wide, with an excellent view of the ground but Chapman didn’t blink. He put one foot down to test. It felt like stepping in mud, his sinking too far for him to be entirely comfortable with. Someone with lesser nerves might have feared it giving way, but Chapman was actually expecting this.

Chpaman knew that Darkstorm was, however subtly, testing him. Whether Darkstorm wanted him to hesitate to test his nerve, or wanted him to stumble as a sort of joke, Chapman neither knew nor cared. He strode forward easily, ignoring the nature of the ground (cloud?) beneath his feet. His team joined him in short order.

“Thank you for joining us, Director Chapman,” Darkstorm’s smile was as genuine as it was unnerving, “though I cannot stress how much I wish the circumstances were different, I look forward to learning more of your world.”

I’ll bet, Chapman thought to himself, “Of course. Even in the most serious crisis’s, we should take the time to learn about new cultures. I think it will be amazing to learn how a society based entirely on magic.”

“As interesting as it will be to see how it developed without it,” Darkstorm countered, “as a matter of fact, there was a small matter regarding your world a must ask you about.”

“Oh? What might that be, Lord Darkstorm?”

Darkstorm pointed towards the edge of his crystal city, and Chapman found his vision impossibly enhanced as he saw three military predator drones circling the city. Chapman recognized the design immediately.

“Those are illegal spy drones, sent by China,” Chapman explained casually, “you don’t need my permission to remove them from the sky. In fact, I strongly recommend that you do so right now.”

“Chapman, are you out of your mind?” Scarlet Scarab whispered, “China is on the Security Council...!”

“And I will make sure that they answer for sticking their nose in my business,” Chapman said casually, as if he didn’t care who heard him.

Lord Darkstorm made a vague gesture with his right hand, and three plumes of flame shot out from the city walls, striking the drones and sending them plummeting to the ground below.

“Thank you. I felt they were violating the terms of our cease-fire, but did not wish to create a pointless diplomatic incident,” Darkstorm explained, “now, in my culture, before diplomacy truly begins, we enjoy a customary feast. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not, Lord Darkstorm. Too many bad decisions can be made on an empty stomach, after all,” In the opinions of his subordinates, Chapman’s smile was too bright and too easy.

“Agreed! Now, prepare yourself. The splendor of the ancient city of Faylin always takes my breath away, and I have lived within her nearly all my life!”

The cloud they flew on climbed into the air like a feather caught in an updraft.

All at once a city built on the foundations of twenty generations of magic came into sight, and Darkstorm wasn’t kidding when he said it was breath taking.

There were a million odd sights to be seen, among them a sky scraper made entirely of smooth, seamless crystal, a mansion that hovered in the air, and a tree larger than any building Chapman had ever seen that seemed to house thousands.

On the street below, unicorns pulled cars full of fruits that Chapman never knew existed, while cyclops, pixies and humans casually walked side by side. Signs advertised for magical services of every kind, from new custom fit clothing, to healing to even dentistry.

More interesting to Chapman though, was the lack of technology that he saw. As far as the eye could see, the wheel, cart and lever seemed to be the most advanced technology these people possessed that wasn’t dependant upon magic.

At least the scales are balanced, Chapman thought silently, we know as little about them as they know about us.

Down below in Faylin, one agent of Chapman was working to tip the scales in their favor.

She had the appearance of an old beggar woman, but she moved with the strength and grace of someone a quarter her age couldn’t manage. Secreted in an empty alley, she listened with ears better than most animals, and looking for prying eyes with a half dozen senses that no human naturally possessed. Satisfied the area was secured, she activated a small, handheld devise designed to send out a short wave homing signal.

After a minute’s pause, there was a flash of light, and Guishen, Shiva and Junta of Excalibur’s stealth squad were delivered to the alley via the HERMES teleporter.

“Sit. rep, Persona?”

“I’ve mapped most of the city,” Persona Grata assumed her natural, feminine cat suit wearing form, “nothing detailed, but I can direct us to the general area of where we will need to be, depending on our assignments.”

“Good,” Junta reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device no larger than a cell-phone. He pressed a single button, and the device grew to twice the size of a tackle box. He set it down on the ground, and began typing several commands into the now visible keypad, “because I’ve got enough toys for this whole city.”

“Weaponized Pym particles?” Persona Grata took a step back, “do you have any idea how many weapons treaties that thing violates just by existing?”

“I am, and so is Chapman. It’s something that was confiscated during the Devil’s Island debacle,” Junta explained, “Chapman didn’t want to keep it, but couldn’t trust anyone to get rid of it either. So we’re gonna tap it out and destroy it. Two birds, one surprisingly small stone.”

“I don’t even see what the big deal is,” Shiva muttered.

Danny tapped the box, “I’ve got enough C-4 in here to blow up half of New York without even trying. With Pym Particles, I can carry enough weapons to arm a battalion under one arm. Hell, the treaties that outlaw Pym particles as weapons are secret, because they don’t want to give anyone the idea to use them.”

“And what do I get for keeping the secret?” asked Shiva.

“Crazy wacko on a nano-chain says ‘aarg!’”

Shiva screamed as the nano-bots in her system were activated. It felt as if someone had grabbed a handful of her nerves and gave a harsh yank.

Junta ignored her, and Persona Grata’s withering glare, and handed Guishen a modified dart-gun, “Your assignment is to target as many high ranking members as you can find with this thing.”

Guishen examined the gun carefully, “This appeared to be modified from a Desert Eagle, but the chamber is too small for standard bullets. And cannot I kill enough people to counter the risk of exposure with a clip of this size.”

“The clip is modified with Pym Particles, and shoots liquid bullets composed of nano-chains,” Junta explained, “they’ll just feel a splash of water, and it will enable us to kill anyone targeted at will. You should be able to infect two hundred targets, if you do it right.”

“I understand. I have used weapons like this before in my homeland,” Guishen said. Persona Grata and Shiva gave him a curious look.

“Don’t focus on just the generals,” Junta said, “colonels, captains, anyone that might screw up troop deployment and response. We want total chaos, not just a head shot.”

“Persona, I want you and killjoy to hit the prison. Scope it out, but don’t make contact until we get the go ahead. If you do see the need to make contact, don’t promise anything we can’t keep, okay?”

“And what exactly can we promise?” Persona asked.

“Nothing. Use your best poker face,” Junta pressed several buttons, and the device shrank again, “in the meantime, I’m going to distribute some fireworks. Remember, if you’re caught, lie, lie, lie.”

“Not likely,” Shiva muttered.

“Well, with your nano-chains, you’ll just ‘die, die, die’,” Junta said dismissively, “so don’t get any bright ideas. Stick with your killing, ‘kay?”

“And what happens if we can actually solve this with real diplomacy?” Persona Grata asked, half sarcastically.

“Then we’ll come in later to disable all the weapons planted by Hydra,” Junta said smoothly, “now let’s get this done.”

Guishen waited patiently for his teammates to disperse. Then, he walked several feet until he was almost at the mouth of the alley, and then lashed out with his foot at open air.

Guishen felt it connect with someone solid, just where his telepathy indicated someone would be. The figure looked young, no taller than five feet, immature features but when Guishen had heard his prey’s surface thoughts, they were complex, fully recognizing the implications of the Stealth Squad’s presence in this dark alley, and to who needed to be made aware.

He or she could be twenty, five or even twelve years old, it was impossible for the Chinese Operative to tell. But all Guishen and his sword really cared about was operational security.

A moment later the street was stained red. The Chinese Security Agent took two minutes to ensure the body wouldn’t be found, and then went about his business.

Elsewhere

The members of Excalibur stared long and hard at the ominous cloud that hung in the far sky. The longer they looked at it, the more it reminded them

“Big bang? Are you serious?” Cybermancer took an involuntary step backwards, as did Union Jack. Both scientists at heart, they absorbed Dr. Strange’s comment a little more thoroughly than Commando or Darkstar.

“Perfectly serious,” Dr. Strange answered, “I don’t believe that we’re in any direct danger just yet, but I certainly don’t wish to remain here any longer than is absolutely necessary.”

“You ain’t the only one,” Commando muttered.

“Before we go any further, there’s something I need to do,” Dr. Strange took a steadying breath and began moving his hands to form ancient signs while he whispered secret words of power, “just incantation to access the situation. In a world of magic, there can be any number of traps designed only to attack outsiders. It stands to reason that Darkstorm would have left several of them before leaving.”

“So you’re doing a magic mine sweep,” Commando summarized.

“Good explanation as any. One moment...” Dr. Strange concentrated for a moment, and released the slight energy he had gathered up with his will. The spell was fairly intricate, but compared Dr. Strange’s usual repertoire, it was a weak spell, something nearly any novice could safely accomplish.

So naturally, everyone was surprised when the moment the spell was released, the earth began to move, the wind howled and Excalibur was attacked by everything.

The solid rock beneath their feet became like mud, trees began bending towards them while the wind howled like a wounded animal. Nature itself warped, and lunged for Dr. Strange.

Darkstar reacted first, covering the Sorcerer Supreme in a bubble of indestructible darkforce. Rock, wind and branches lashed against the barrier to no avail. Cybermancer was next, releasing quick bursts of energy that destroyed the tree limbs reaching for Dr. Strange and blew apart the earth.

After several seconds, the sound and fury died with a slight whine. Darkstar lowered the shield around Dr. Strange, who looked absolutely furious.

“Thank you, Darkstar,” Dr. Strange said politely. There was a clear undertone of anger in the good Doctor’s voice, but it was clear that none of it was directed at anyone present.

“Has something like that ever happened before?” asked Union Jack. He certainly didn’t need to be told that wasn’t the intended effect of the spell.

“No, never,” answered Dr. Strange, “I have walked across a hundred different realities and never once did a reality react like that.”

“Jack,” Darkstar called, “look at this!”

Darkstar projected her trademark energy from her hand, the pitch black energy that obeyed her every whim. But as it flowed from her fingers, the color shifted, no longer darker than space itself, but from blue to green to yellow.

Cybermancer gave Union Jack a startled look and then pointed, “Rock, your knife!”

Union Jack grabbed his energy knife from its sheath and hurled it to the ground. He knew instinctively to trust his teammates.

To his utter shock, his energy dagger, capable of slicing through steel or just disrupting a man’s nervous system depending on the setting, was activated despite needing contact with special microchips embedded in his glove to even activate. Hell, it wasn’t just active, the damn thing was glowing white hot. Union Jack could see that the damned thing was eating through a battery with a twenty four hour charge and would likely die in the next ten minutes. It began to melt into the ground itself without making a single noise.

He looked at his side where he usually kept the dagger, half expecting third degree burns that he didn’t feel yet because he was in shock. But there was nothing to see. He touched his sheath, and it was cool to the touch.

“Something is very wrong here,” Union Jack muttered.

“Hey, you!”

The small team of heroes turned around and saw four men, carrying blood stained axes and wearing white cloaks stomping towards them.

“You know the penalty for unauthorized magic!”

“We are warders! Surrender now, and your sentence will be swift and painless!”

“I got this,” Commando shrugged. He moved into motion with the speed of a cat, and all the grace of a quarterback. He crossed the distance between them and the self declared Warders in seconds.

Lined up almost side by side, the Warders were in the worst position to defend themselves against someone like Commando. He slugged the first one on the outer right, and kicked the one on the outer left in the face before they even had time to register he was near. The last two received unceremonious fists straight to the face.

“Now we have prisoners to interrogate,” Commando said over his shoulder, “dibs!”

“All yours, Commando. Darkstar, Strange and I will follow their path back to civilization,” said Union Jack, “Cybermancer, you stay with Commando. You two are going to be our reinforcements if something goes wrong.”

“Understood. Do we need to strip these guys for disguises?” asked Cybermancer.

“Kinky,” Commando observed.

“Shut up.”

“No need, I brought image inducers,” Union Jack answered, “and Commando? No torture. That’s an order.”

Commando rolled his eyes, “Please, torture is for idiots. Breaking a body and breaking a mind are two completely different things, Percy.”

“Just get the basics, Francis. We don’t need much.”

Growing up in Israel as a child, Sabra secretly wanted to grow up. There wasn’t a single child who didn’t see the violence surrounding them, but unlike other little girls her age, Sabra never tried to ignore or forget the violence. Even at the age of five, she wanted to do something about it. Sometimes she wanted to single handily bring peace all by herself, on her moodier days she wanted to vanquish all of Israel’s enemies as a feared and wise general.

Now, as an adult, for the first time in her life, Sabra actually wished that she were younger. The mystical mythic city of Faylin possessed enough sites to overwhelm the imagination of anyone, and Sabra wished that she could only appreciate it better. Glancing at Silverclaw, Sabra saw a glimmer of what she wished she had.

Surrounded by nothing but creatures of pure imagination, Sabra wondered what their home world was like.

When traveling to new places, Union Jack always hoped to see something new. Sadly, that wasn’t the case here. In fact, he was looking at a very familiar scene, if one didn’t count real fairies, goblins and various other magical creatures.

The makeshift tents, the stench of unwashed flesh and untreated wounds, the air of depression. Apparently, Dr. Strange had teleported them to the outskirts of a refugee camp. In the distance, Union Jack could see the ruins of a floating city much like the one back home, only it was toppled, resting on its side and it’s many towers crumbling from age and disrepair.

Union Jack watched grimly as dozens of people huddled around a bonfire some two stories tall, struggling for warmth. Earlier he’d seen a family of five fighting tooth and nail over a single thing of corn, and before that witnessed a half dozen people frozen perfectly still, the only sign that they were even alive being their flickering eyes. Even more disturbing to the former spy was how so few reacted to the scene, resigned to their inability to help their fellows.

Union Jack couldn't help but feel that he should know what was wrong with this reality, despite its foundations in magic. Something seemed to nag at the edges of his awareness, something about this entire situation he felt he should just automatically know.

In his mind, Union Jack kept track of the time that passed and after several hours, made his way towards the agreed upon rendezvous point. He moved slowly, careful not to draw suspicion. Arriving early, Union Jack scanned the area with a critical eye, wary of anyone who looked suspicious. Their mission was too important and they were too far from home not to take every precaution.

Union Jack saw nothing of concern, and breathed a little easier when he saw Darkstar approaching.

"There is something deeply wrong with this world," Darkstar muttered to Union Jack, "I can't describe it, but can't help but think that I should know. Russia at its worst has never made me feel what I feel now."

"I feel it too," Union Jack replied, "hopefully, Dr. Strange will have some insight into what's wrong. If even we can sense it, I'll bet that he'll know the cause."

"Where is the good doctor?" asked Darkstar.

"He'll be along in a minute or two," Union Jack replied, "the image inducer I supplied has a built in clock."

Several minutes past uneventfully, but Union Jack grew more anxious as each minute ticked by. The longer they staid, the longer they risked being discovered, the longer Chapman went without the proper intelligence and the greater the threat to their world grew.

"...do you think they caught him?" Darkstar asked, knowing she was only giving voice to Union Jack's fears.

"I don't think so," Union Jack replied, "there's usually more of an uproar when a spy of any kind is suddenly caught, trust me."

"So what could be keeping him?"

Union Jack didn't have to think long, "Follow me."

In truth, Union Jack only had the vaguest idea of where to go. But in his career as a government agent, he'd learned to observe certain patterns, how to make note of seemingly useless information, analyze it and apply it to his goals.

For instance, this world had never advanced past the Middle Ages technologically, and whatever affliction the world suffered, it had crippled the very forces that they'd come to rely on for basic

day to day living. Add that with the fact that Dr. Strange possessed an actual doctorate in medicine, and Union Jack had a pretty good idea where he'd find the Sorcerer Supreme.

"No, are you insane? Leeches only take blood! You need to clean out the wound and drain the

They found him in the third triage tent. Union Jack peaked inside, and all the normally composed and stoic Dr. Stranger all but raving at several people in blue gowns. Union Jack guessed that they were what passed for medical staff in this world, from both their uniforms and looks of complete disbelief they gave Dr. Strange.

"Follow my lead," Union Jack whispered to Darkstar, "Stephen, we've been worried sick!"

Dr. Strange spun around, and gave Union Jack a look of pure disgust.

The former spy crossed the room quickly, and wrapped his arm around the Doctor's neck. Placing his index and thumb on key muscles, Union Jack literally took away Dr. Strange's ability to protest.

"I'm so sorry!" Darkstar said to the attendants, "he just gets these mad ideas and thinks that he's...well, I'm sorry. We'll just be leaving, again, I'm so sorry!"

Dr. Strange managed to wrest himself free from Union Jack's grip, but by then the three of them were a good distance away from the triage tent.

"I should turn you into a toad," Dr. Strange hissed, rubbing his sore throat, "you don't deserve any creative punishment for what you just did!"

"I know you thought you were just treating patients Doctor, but you were drawing needless attention to yourself," Union Jack replied, "we have people, and lives, relying on us for information. I'm sorry, Strange, but that's how it is."

Dr. Strange rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed, "No, I'm sorry, Union Jack. You're right. It's just that when I saw those appalling conditions..."

Dr. Strange just shook his head, and began walking. The three moved in silence, back up the hill where they'd left Commando and Cybermancer. Union Jack honestly didn't know what to expect, coming back.

But he certainly didn't expect the four of them, plus Commando, sitting in a circle, playing cards with their four captives.

"About time you got here," Commando grunted, never looking away from his cards, "just let me finish this hand."

"No no, we fold," said first man. He pushed a pile of daggers, gold coins and even a battle axe forward, "we've been here too long, and like you we have to see to our duty."

Union Jack looked at the self declared Warders oddly, but said nothing.

“Commando convinced them that we’re here to fix their reality,” Cybermancer said through their comm. links, “he had me show off my armor some, convince them that we were investigating what was happening.”

Union Jack nodded to Cybermancer, but remained silent as Commando collected his winnings and said goodbye to the four former captives.

“I’m impressed,” Union Jack said finally.

“What, thought I’d grab a knife and start hacking away for information?”

“Something like that,” Union Jack shrugged, “United States army interrogation has been seriously lacking, lately.”

“Fair enough. But it’s just easier to lie,” Commando pulled out a small body bag that he kept on his belt. He unzipped it, and began to fill it with his winnings, “less messy, smarter and you really do get more out of it.”

“Dr. Strange, can we still get home,” Cybermancer asked, “after what those four said...”

“You needn’t worry,” Dr. Strange answered, “I prepared a series of intricate spells in laden with certain...precautions. I’m not terribly surprised about what we found, I just didn’t want to admit that to myself.”

With a heavy sigh, Dr. Strange teleported the four heroes back to their own reality.

The food was easily the finest Chapman had ever tasted, and as a former leader of England’s Hellfire Club, that meant a lot. Chapman was mildly concerned when he realized that he couldn’t recognize the animal that they were cutting the meat from, but when he saw Darkstorm eat from the same animal, Chapman relaxed.

Sure, the guy was a scumbag, but he looked human. So hopefully, anything that was safe for him to eat, was safe for Chapman and his subordinates to eat.

The meal lasted a good half hour, and reminded Chapman of damn near every medieval movie that he’d ever see, mixed with a little Harry Potter. They were dining in a stone wall, warmed by a fire, entertained by dancers, the whole nine yards. Chapman was, still in mild disbelief.

Eventually, the meal began to wind down. Chapman felt himself beginning to tense. Though things had been peaceful up until now, Chapman suspected that Lord Darkstorm was preparing to spring a trap. The man’s demeanor was too smug, too confident for Chapman’s liking.

“Hear me, my most honored court,” Lord Darkstorm suddenly stood and everyone, including members of Excalibur, turned to pay attention, “now that we have established relations with this fine dimension, we will have our traditional ceremony of arms!”

“Here it comes...” Chapman muttered under his breath.

“A battle of champions, to the death!”

NEXT ISSUE: Chapman finds himself in a bind, and we learn the terrible secret of Lord Darkstorm’s home reality! Plus, we catch a glimpse of what Hellios has been up to this entire time.

Earth 616, The Enchanted City of Faylin

Chapman felt his heart stop before it began racing like a jackhammer. A battle to the death? The idea was patently absurd, but Chapman reminded himself that these people came from a different world, a different culture. Who knew what standards of diplomacy they held to?

Chapman could feel the eyes of his people on him as he stood up, and tried to figure out how he might meet the challenge without causing a diplomatic incident. At least, not before he was ready to create one on his timetable.

“Lord Darkstorm...!” Chapman rose to his feet, still uncertain of how to weasel his way out.

“We accept.”

Chapman, Scarlet Scarab, Sabra and Silverclaw all looked at Kamau as if he’d grown another head.

“Excellent!” Lord Darkstorm rubbed his hands together and a good natured smile that seemed out of place for the life or death matter they were discussing, came across his face, “in our culture, we need to judge the seriousness by which one is willing to commit to negotiations. A contest of life and death, to emphasize the matters of life and death of which we heads of state sometimes take too lightly!”

Chapman grabbed Kamau by the arm, and half whispered, half growled, “Just what do you think you’re doing, mate?!”

“Exactly what you took me from jail to do,” Kamau answered coldly. He pulled his arm free, “it’s a little late to be concerned about it now.”

Excalibur

#23

October 2009

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"THE CHALLENGE"

'SIEGE OF MAGIC' (Part four)

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Elsewhere in the same city

Bolker Bittershield, a halfling described by his own family as ‘born wrong’, was a man who hated his life at the moment. While he had long since established himself as an excellent warrior along with the rest of his phalanx, he and all his fellow soldiers had been sidelined upon reaching this plain, and given menial guard assignments. What kind of society goes to war with their worst soldiers at the front and their best in reserve?

Outrage stewed in Bolker’s mind, and he didn’t even notice the current of air that brushed by, or see his superior officer casually stroll by without demanding a salute.

Persona Grata rounded a corner, glanced around and then asked, “Shiva, have you found the hostages?”

The air swirled in front of Persona Grata, and formed into the shape of a well armed, blue skinned woman.

“Yeah, they’re down the hall. The guards keeping watch didn’t seem too impressive, but I didn’t get close. It could be a trap.”

“You mean you were unwilling to sacrifice those innocent people for the sake of your death wish?”

Shiva gave Persona Grata a look that said more than words ever could about how much she appreciated the other woman’s attempts to psycho-analyze.

“The lower level looks like it has political prisoners. They were going on and on about Darkstorm’s unlawful oppression, and how he couldn’t silence their voice forever,” Shiva stated evenly. “Might be worth investigating.”

“It would be,” Persona Grata reflected, “I need to do something regarding the hostages they took. Head down there and, without killing anyone, see if you can’t herd the guards away.”

“I make poisons,” Shiva scowled, “I either kill or I don’t.”

“No, you make chemical reactions,” Persona sighed, “give them hay fever, an itchy throat, something so that they will not be inclined to watch the cells too hard. Stop acting stupid, please. I don’t have the patience for it here.”

Several minutes later

Persona Grata glanced at the two unconscious guards, sleeping contently, and then to Shiva.

“Good job,” Persona complimented, “lead the way, please.”

The two women calmly walked down the stone hall. It wasn’t long until they reached a single cell that while possessing no bars, seemed to contain hundred of prisoners. Persona Grata knew instantly that it was because of magic, but it was somewhat disconcerting for the android to see such an obvious affront to logic and physics.

One woman stepped forward until she was within a inch of smoldering runes etched into the floor. The woman had scarlet red skin, pitch black hair and was dressed in rags, but still carried herself with a sense of dignity and purpose. Just a glance at how the other prisoners looked at her was enough to tell Persona Grata that this woman was their leader.

“Off-worlders,” the woman said plainly, “I am Noblewoman Cessilia. I can only assume that you have come here seeking allies against the scum Darkstorm.”

“Actually, to us you’re the off-worlders,” Persona Grata corrected, “and if you are a noblewoman, may I ask why you are in rags?”

“A simple question with an easy answer,” Cessilia replied with a world-weary sigh, “before he sought to abandon our world, Lord Darkstorm had all his critics and enemies taken from their home, swept up and taken to the dungeons. His excuse changed depending on whom he ordered taken, some were deemed spies, others zealots and even some for their own protection! His lies changed, but we all ended up here just the same.”

While Cessilia spoke, Persona Grata observed the prisoners around her. Judging on body language, no one disagreed with her assessment, and some even recoiled at the mention of Darkstorm’s name.

“And no one objected?”

“Whoever did was shouted down as anti-magic,” Cessilia growled, “there is no more vile insult in our world.”

“So am I to understand that you do not believe Lord Darkstorm’s accusations that we are the cause of your world’s ruin?”

“We all know your world is blameless, just a scapegoat for our so called lord,” Cessilia spat.

“So tell me then, just what are you and yours willing to do about it?”

Hellios hummed to himself, and reflected on his current isolation. Part of him knew that he’d have gotten this assignment whether or not he’d mouthed off to Chapman, but he also wondered if Chapman might have found a way to somehow make it more pleasant had he kept a civil tongue.

The solar powered hero reached up with his hand and caught a piece of metal. With a thought, he activated his vision powered, and melted the metal into liquid hot steel.

Then, while it was still malleable, he pressed it against a giant ball of steel and waited several seconds for it to cool.

Hellios looked at the sheer size of the crude weapon he was making. It was solid steel three times the size of the average house, and felt a chill run down his spine that had absolutely nothing to do with the freezing temperatures that surrounded him.

Leave it to Chapman to create his own nuclear weapons, Hellios reflected.

Faylin

The VIP seating for Kamau's battle reminded Chapman of old movies set in the age of King Arthur. Colorful flags surrounded their simple seating, Chapman's people were on one side, Darkstorm's on the other. They were seated like nobility of old in preparation for a joust, not the deadly battle that was to come.

Chapman mulled over his options in his mind again and again, but kept coming up empty. He could feel the accusing glances of his subordinates, but did his best to ignore them and think about the situation objectively.

Did he really have the option of refusing? How would Darkstorm respond to such a snub? By now, Chapman was positive that the Stealth Squad had infiltrated the city, but had no idea how far long they were into their sabotage efforts. In his pocket, he had a specially made signal device that could reach anywhere within a split second, but at the same time Chapman had a timetable. He knew as surely as the sun rose that he could send these people packing from his world, but only if he kept to the plan!

Without regard for Chapman's plan, a horn was blown and the battle was officially started.

Kamau sized up his enemy, a heavy-set knight dressed in red armor and helmet with a T-slit. Kamau cringed, however slightly, when he realized the man's armor gained its color from the sheer amount of bloodshed it was involved in, but decided it was of little importance. If nothing else, he respected the man's honest nature.

"Have you any words before we begin?" asked Red Knight.

Kamau looked down at his necklace of religious icons, and then to Red Knight, "No. Actions are all that define life, and death, here."

Kamau sprang into action, crossing the fifteen feet between him and his enemy within seconds. He swung his right fist towards the Knight's throat, only to have it slam into his enemy's claymore.

"You're quick," Kamau remarked off-hand. He swung his free hand, diamond knife aimed at Red Knight's stomach, but the Knight caught him by the wrist seconds before the knife threatened to disembowel him.

"Dragons are my area of expertise, but are not the only foe I have encountered," the Knight boasted, "You have to be a little quicker than that, to catch me."

"Understood."

A column of solid earth, the size and width of an average trash can, shot out of the ground and slammed into Red Knight's mid-section, and knocked him through the air like a kick ball.

Kamau concentrated, and the moment his foe hit the earth, he willed the column of earth to shoot from the ground like a cannonball.

Red Knight was too swift though. He was on his feet in seconds, and batted the chunk of earth away with his sword as if it was a tennis ball. He then pointed his sword at Kamau, and a gout of flame lunged forth from the blade.

Kamau brought up a wall of solid earth, and began to sweat as the heat washed over him. He could feel the earth he summoned beginning to turn to molten rock, and no small amount of willpower to hold it in place.

For a second, the heat stopped and Kamau breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the wall of earth he'd summoned exploded as the Red Knight tore through it like a missile. Kamau was thrown back by the sheer force, went limp, and rolling with the impact. He tucked himself into a ball and rolled to his feet, knives in each hand.

“So your magic allows you to control the earth. Very impressive,” Red Knight remarked honestly, “however, I have fought and beaten mages with the same ability.”

Kamau said nothing, as he absorbed his diamond knives back into his body and summoned his glass sword to his right hand. Kamau grinned savagely as Red Knight took a step back. It wasn't because he could make glass was stronger than diamonds, no. It was because one had to stare, to catch it at the right angle just to see it, let alone defend against it.

A better weapon, Kamau couldn't imagine.

Kamau moved in slowly this time, then broke into a run and leapt into the air. As he came down again, Kamau aimed his sword for Red Knight's neck, and the Magical Champion just barely brought his sword up in time to block the strike.

Kamau's glass sword was cleaved instantly, but the second it passed Red Knight's enchanted sword, it lengthened, tearing a jagged cut across Red Knight's armor.

“Arrgh!” Red Knight screamed in pain, but that's not how he reached. He brought his sword arm down, slamming his elbow into Kamau's shoulder and dislocating the arm. He then swung his right hand, and connected with a haymaker that sent the African Warrior skidding back some twenty feet like a puck across ice.

“First blood to me,” Kamau observed. Almost as an afterthought, he took his still working arm, grabbed his upper bicep and popped his shoulder back into place.

“It is last blood, not first, that determines victory,” Red Knight didn't even seem to notice as his blood was added to his crimson armor.

“Oh, rest assured, I will to get the rest of it.”

Without another word, Kamau and Red Knight threw themselves at each other.

Silverclaw squirmed in her seat as she saw Red Knight and Kamau clash. She literally winced when one of Red Knight's haymakers connected with Kamau's ribs.

"Why doesn't he turn the earth into quicksand or something?"

"Kamau's control over the earth is limited by the amount of exposure he has to it," Sabra explained, "if not given time to prepare, he one of the weakest known geo-morphs known."

"Oh crap..."

"You needn't worry," Sabra said reassuringly, "he's deadlier than the most powerful geo-morph. He will be fine."

Silverclaw nodded and tried to relax. But even though she wanted to trust Sabra's information resources, she found it hard to ignore what she saw with her own eyes and became increasingly worried.

Avalon

There was a brief flash of a rarely seen color of green, and what had once been an empty room now contained Dr. Strange, Union Jack, Commando, Darkstar and Cybermancer.

"Nice to be in our own reality," Commando observed.

"You will never know how true that is," Dr. Strange replied.

"Do you suppose that Chapman is back from his diplomatic mission?" asked Darkstar.

"I certainly hope so," Dr. Strange said, "I need to report our findings immediately. Time is of the essence."

"Give me a moment to get connected to our systems," Cybermancer checked her HUD, and to her relief saw nothing of concern, "the truce still seems to be in effect. Chapman's still in the city, but according to the monitoring devices he strapped on before he left, he's fine but tense."

Darkstar shrugged, "Well, at least things didn't get out of control while we were gone."

Kamau saw stars as Red Knight's fist slammed into his jaw, and another slammed into his ribs. Kamau could barely feel his body when Red Knight grabbed his face in his giant hands, lifted him into the air and then slammed the back of his skull into the ground.

Red Knight stood over the bruised and battered Kamau, his sword poised for the final killing stroke. Kamau struggled to stay conscious, unwilling to die in darkness. Every inch of his body ached, and he couldn't even muster the concentration to melt into the earth.

"It was a fine battle," Red Knight said with complete honesty, "but it could only end one way!"

The sword came slicing down, and seconds stretched into hours for Kamau. Knowing that death was fleeting seconds away, struggled to find peace but his heart rebelled. Even with certain death rushing towards him, Kamau remained defiant.

-Thunk!-

To the surprise of everyone, Red Knight's sword sliced into the earth just beside Kamau's head. The blood stained knight then took a step back, and offered his hand to Kamau. Still baffled by what had just happened, took the hand and was hoisted to his feet. Red Knight then knelt down, and bowed on one knee.

"You humble me with your respect," said the dragon slayer.

It was all a bloody game, Chapman snarled to himself. But he was surprised when he looked at Lord Darkstorm, and saw the man's upper lip curled in disgust. Chapman began to wonder, were things supposed to end differently?

"I am deeply sorry for our deception, but we are unfamiliar with your culture," explained Red Knight, "so it was necessary to know just how far your people would go."

"And if I'd won?" Kamau asked.

"We would not have held it against you because you simply did what you had to," Red Knight said plainly, "though I would have been a little inconvenienced."

Later

The challenge now finished, Chapman and his people were making their way back towards the magical carriages that had ferried them out to this private battle field. Excalibur and Lord Darkstorm's retainers walked lock step behind their leaders, who were having a private chat.

"Your world has an interesting way of displaying diplomacy," Chapman remarked to Lord Darkstorm, "but I hope now that we have found a middle ground, we can truly begin."

Lord Darkstorm, disappointment still etched in his forehead, nodded, "I hope you understand, there is much to discuss. The distribution of ethereal energy, the means by which it was allowed to occur and other matters. We had to be certain of your commitment."

“And there is the matter of the people you’ve taken for interrogation,” Chapman added, “it’s too easy to forget things like that, I suppose.”

Chapman noted how Lord Darkstorm looked at him, as if Chapman had just confessed he thought the world was flat.

“Yes, there is that as well,” Lord Darkstorm said dismissively, “I trust there are people you need to speak to before we begin?”

“Of course. And after such a fine meal, we need a good night’s rest,” Chapman said, “so matters of state, I’m afraid will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“A pity. If you’ll give me a moment, I will summon the chariot for you and your people...”

“No need,” Chapman reached into his pocket and activated a signal device. Three breaths later, Excalibur’s HERMES teleporter system had locked onto them inside the walls of the city, and teleported them over a thousand miles away to Avalon, in the span of a blink.

Chapman wished he could have seen Darkstorm’s face when he realized how effortlessly Excalibur had removed themselves from his center of power. Chapman hoped that Lord Darkstorm was canny enough to realize the implications. After an entire evening flaunting his own power, Lord Darkstorm was upstaged in one single act that screamed vulnerability, in front of all his people. A better diplomatic smack to the face, he couldn’t imagine.

Avalon, later

“So we’re clean?” Chapman asked.

“Yes. They cast a number of intrusive spells on you and the other members of Excalibur...”

“Jerks ought to respect diplomatic immunity!” Silverclaw spat.

“...but removing them was child’s play,” Dr. Strange stated.

The entirety of Excalibur’s main strike-force, including Helliios (who had just finished his mission), and guest Dr. Strange, were sitting about the briefing room. Chapman, thanks to jet (teleporter?) lag had no idea what time it was, but his body voted night. Subsequently, he was in a hurry to start (and finish) this briefing, and then retire for the day.

“So, Dr. Strange, what can you tell me about their homeworld?”

Dr. Strange steepled his hands together and for a moment, didn’t speak. Finally, he said...

“They broke their universe.”

Excalibur exchanged confused looks with one another.

“Come again?”

“Let me start from the beginning. At first glance, I know magic may seem all powerful to you,” Dr. Strange began, “but I assure you, it is not. On the grand scheme of things, while I wield tremendous power, I do so only because the practitioners of magic are so few and far between, in this reality, comparatively speaking.”

“So what you’re saying is that if there were a hundred more magic users, your power would decrease,” Union Jack summarized.

“There would need to be far, far more than a hundred. But yes. While there is an impressive amount of magical energy out there with which to work, there are very few who can access it and fewer still who understand the real implications of magic. Compared to the totality of reality, there are only a handful of magic users in this dimension.”

“What do you mean?” Sabra asked, as she did everything she could to commit this conversation to memory flawlessly. Magic was one of the few areas that the Mossad had a little trouble with.

“Magic does not ignore physicals,” Dr. Strange said, “we bend them, manipulate them as needed and when done, reality returns itself to its original form. The more skilled practitioner can actually tie a knot with reality itself. That’s how curses and prophecies come about, bundles of mystical energy woven into reality like a thread.”

“I’m beginning to see where this is going,” Cybermancer observed.

“It appears to me that Darkstorm’s people have, for thousands upon thousands of generations, relied upon magic for societal progress, instead of technology. When I was in a medical tent, they were still using leeches. We saw nothing more advanced than the wheel, and what I felt...” Dr. Strange’s voice trailed off for a moment, “what I felt when I stopped denying it, was a vast open, bleeding wound. They took, exploited or stole every iota of magical energy they could get their hands on, as a society, and did so without understanding the full implications of their actions. But abuse anything too much, and it will fail.”

That’s why Darkstar’s black energy changed colors. That’s why Union Jack’s energy daggers activated and burned through solid rock without leaving a mark on him. In their world, the laws of physicals themselves are like wounded animals, limping along.”

“How is that possible?” asked Scarlet Scarab, “I’ve heard of worlds that are nothing but magic!”

“In some worlds, magic flows as easily water,” Dr. Strange replied, “but in that world, it was as rare as it is here. And the whole of humanity used it, relied upon it, for thousands of years to sustain their stagnate society. For instance, rather than create a common language they wove a translator spell into the spirit of their planet.”

“...why did I think they just naturally spoke Russian?” Darkstar mused aloud.

“Because they wove it into nature,” explained Dr. Strange, “magic is about working with the natural world, complimenting it. But to change nature like that...they essentially forced a square object into a round hole, and have been doing so for far too long. They tried to bend the rules of magic and eventually they broke. When that happened, rather than correct their errors, they compounded them by continuing to do the same things. They made the same mistake again and again, until reality itself protested.”

“That’s why my poker buddies kill unauthorized magic,” Commando volunteered, “they know magic is the problem, but not how to fix it. They damn near cried when I said we were workin’ on it.”

“But how could they let that happen?” Silverclaw asked, “I thought magic was, I don’t know, kind of spiritual? They had to know they were doing something wrong, feel something, didn’t they?”

“We’ve all done something we knew was wrong at one time or another,” Dr. Strange replied, “and our political leaders have raised self-deception to an art form. If I had to guess, that’s what happened here. Those that used magic ignored the implications, simply believing that they would either fix it in time or something that the next generation would correct.”

“So basically, they exhausted their own natural resources, came looking for a scapegoat, and found us,” Chapman summarized, “is that the gist of it, Doctor?”

“That comparison is...adequate, I suppose.”

“Wouldn’t be the first country to blame someone else for their own screw-ups,” Cybermancer observed, “but we have to look at the worst case scenario. Not every one of Darkstorm’s people is a screw-up at magic. Someone has to know that we’re not responsible.”

“And any appeasement would be construed as guilt,” Chapman concluded.

“There’s also the matter of the portal they used to enter our world,” Dr. Strange warned, “on their world, it could cause a creation even. A part of it is tethered to their city and if the spells around it were not properly dismantled, well, the effect wouldn’t be as destructive. It would just destroy this solar system.”

Chapman rubbed his forehead in irritation, “This just gets better and better. Can you sever the connection?”

“By myself, no. But give me eight hours, and I can gather the people with the right expertise.”

“So what’s the plan, Chapman?” Commando asked, “we can’t keep dickin’ around with these guys much longer. They want what we can’t give and whether or not they know it, they got a bomb just primed to explode.”

“I’m well aware of all those things,” Chapman said, “as luck would have it, the Stealth team is still safely inside Darkstorm’s city. So my orders are simple. All of you are going to get some rest, and in ten hours, when Strange has his people together...we’re going to put our collective foot up Darkstorm’s arse and keep it there until he and his people gotten the hell out of our world.”

NEXT ISSUE: The all new Excalibur goes to war, and it is not pretty...

Excalibur

#24

February 2010

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SIEGE OF MAGIC"

Island Stomping

(Conclusion)

Writtenby Daniel Ingram

Bridge of Excalibur's support hellicarrier, The Resolute

"Would ya look at that scene?" Chapman muttered, "such a beautiful work of art. Just not right what we're gonna do to it..."

Chapman stared longingly at the giant crystal city of Faylin. As an artist, Chapman knew magnificent works of art when he saw them, and from the outside, the giant floating island hovering over the edge of the Mongolian desert was a priceless treasure. It almost pained him to do what he was planning.

But Chapman wasn't one to let his sentimentality get the better of him. That city was a threat to his entire world and came into this reality intent on making war rather than accept their mistakes. Such people could not be reasoned with, not without a high cost paid in blood. So Chapman was going to do his damndest to make sure it was the enemy that paid that butcher's bill.

"Is everything ready?" Chapman asked his Captain.

"All teams reporting go status," he replied.

Chapman nodded, "Then open with a light barrage. Give these blighters a love tap, and see how they respond."

The Captain motioned towards the weapons master, and within half a minute, three dozen stinger missiles cut through the air and towards Faylin. The Captain held his breath, but Chapman didn't even blink when they slammed into an invisible wall and exploded without leaving a scratch.

"Deflector shields," Chapman sighed, "and they use magic. That's not even fair."

"Orders, sir?" The Captain was nervous, but his voice didn't betray that. He was a professional, and remain one even while fighting the unknowable.

“Ready our interceptors, tell the Stealth team inside the island to get to cover,” Chapman ordered, “and then, tell Hellios...”

Space, unknown to most people, was littered with hundreds of tons of debris. Parts that fell off of shuttles, satellites that no longer functioned and all other kinds of junk that came with exploring the final frontier. And that didn't begin to include the occasional destroyed alien warship, or no longer functioning orbital death-ray. The space around earth's orbit was as polluted as any open landfill, something Chapman was well aware of.

So for the past forty eight hours, Hellios had been gathering up all that trash, all that waste, and using his solar vision, melting them into long metal columns that stretched the length of a block, and were thicker than three elephants tied together. The solar powered hero was amazed to see how much material was left over after he'd constructed six of the missiles. He honestly didn't know if he could look at the night's sky the same way after this.

“Bring the thunder.”

Hellios smiled as he heard the order. Ever since he'd gained his powers, he had a hard time imagining himself as anything other than what he was now. As a young boy, he wanted to be Hercules, as a Football player he wanted to be better, but as Hellios?

Up until now, he couldn't think of anything greater than being his country's solar powered champion.

Hellios felt on top of the world, literally. In addition to his hand crafted weapons, Hellios had another vital tool. Resting atop his head was a thick metal visor, specially made for what was to happen next. When he grabbed the first giant metal column, it automatically showed Hellios where and how hard he'd have to throw it to hit his target. It was a modern miracle of targeting technology, something Hellios was eternally grateful for. Remaining in space and hurling down fiery justice beat reentry with a giant metal phallic symbol any day of the week.

The mighty Hellios sank his hands into the steel of the first missile, and let it sail. Within moments, Chapman ordered another missile and Hellios gleefully complied.

All the while, the former Football player imagined himself as Zeus, hurling his mighty thunderbolts to smite his enemies as he unleashed a terrible vengeance down upon them.

And as far as the citizens of Faylin were concerned, he wasn't far from the truth.

Faylin

Lord Darkstorm stood in his command center with his hands folded behind his back. The room was a massive crystal structure, twice the length of a football field. Jagged columns of tree like crystals, and mystic pools dotted the floor. Some two hundred specially trained mages monitored a half dozen scrying window. Some conveyed his orders to the army, other mages worked to direct his intelligence services while others connected directly to his research teams.

This was the heart of Darkstorm's military apparatus, where he coordinated his people of thousands. There was nowhere else that Lord Darkstorm felt more powerful, more secure.

And since Chapman's abrupt and seemingly effortless departure earlier in the day, it was something he needed more now than ever. He wouldn't allow himself a moment's sleep until it was discovered exactly how it was accomplished and if it was an isolated incident. The idea that a potential enemy could travel to and fro from his territory at will was terrifying to any leader at a time of war.

Unfortunately, his three best researchers were hitting a wall, only all they saw was inspiration.

"We think he might have used a family summons contract," said the first one, "perhaps he had an empathic link to a familiar that enabled him to signal for them to leave. All he would need is a blood contract."

"But those contracts take decades to establish, and we'd recognize the remaining blood! And how did the others disappear?" asked the second man, "I tell you, this was a magic we've never seen before!" quarter

"They might not have used magic at all," Lord Darkstorm suggested casually.

"They might be using mana fueled spells, or possibly chakra like they used in the East," said the second researcher, as if Darkstorm hadn't said a thing.

"Or they didn't use magic," Darkstorm growled again, this time making sure he was heard, "we only found three with any touch of magic that we could feel. Perhaps the source of their power is something we haven't considered or even discovered."

"It's possible, my Lord, that their magic is so advanced that it doesn't appear to be magic at all! A sort of super magic, if you will."

"They must use magic, however else could they have stolen ours?"

Lord Darkstorm winced inwardly, and was about to refute the idea when he saw the glimmer in his researchers eyes. They grabbed the idea like a starving dog attacking a piece of meat, and weren't about to let go anytime soon.

Darkstorm excused himself and made his way to a nearby balcony, his hands folded behind his back. For the first time since he'd started this gambit, he was beginning to doubt its outcome. He had at first assumed that once they were free from their rotting home-world, his people would return to their natural superiority. But never did he imagine he'd find a realm where people were as powerful as his combat mages without even the hint of magic.

"Lord Darkstorm! They've begun their attack! Their war-craft just released a barrage of giant flaming metal arrows, but our defenses held fast!"

Darkstorm turned towards his most trusted seer, Oliver Deegan. He was gifted with far sight, often able to see the connection between the present and future to be.

“Can they get through our defenses?”

“They haven’t yet, but ultimately I cannot say. The future is far too uncertain, the coming storm too great!”

“I thought as much,” Darkstorm nodded, “go assist the Generals. Help them deploy and keep me appraised. It will be some time before they get through our defenses, but we need to be prepared as soon as possible regardless.”

Deegan teleported away, and the leader of Faylin strolled towards the nearby balcony. Like he did as he did as a young boy, Lord Darkstorm looked to the sky in quiet, serene contemplation. More than one epiphany was inspiring by peering at its ebony depths.

Only now, his heart nearly jumped out of his throat when he saw a giant, molten fireball emerge from those inky depths, careening directly towards his precious city.

He tried to shout a warning, unleash some meager means of mystical defense, anything, but by the time the command reached his brain, it was already too late.

Three hundred tons of solid steel slammed into the shields around Faylin with such force, just over seven thousand miles per hour, that the giant, Manhattan-sized floating city actually bobbed up and down for several brief seconds. The fireball struck the city with so much power that Darkstorm would actually feel it in his teeth.

When it was all over, he looked up and saw glowing orange molten steel resting atop his city’s final defense, and could sense how the field strained to keep the superheated metal that was spread across it like an ominous cloud from falling any further.

“What...was that?” Lord Darkstorm growled, incensed that they’d dare hit his city with such a devastating weapon.

“That?” Chapman smirked at his Captain, “that’s just physics, lad. Energy equals mass times the speed o’ light. The longer and farther those metal missiles fell, the harder they hit. And our boy Hellios can lob them pretty hard.”

The Captain watched as another missile hit the island. The impact was visible to the naked eye, and The Resolute rattled despite its two mile distance from the floating city.

“According to the experts I talked to, those things are releasing more energy than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima. Only without any of that nasty radiation and weapons treaty bans.”

“A green nuke. Very progressive of you, sir.”

“We all have to do our part for the environment.”

Faylin

Lord Darkstorm felt six successive strikes on his precious city, six acts of mass destruction and chaos, before they finally stopped.

“...how?” Lord Darkstorm gaped, as he looked at his ruined city. Hundreds of tons worth of molten slag hung above the city, like an ominous storm cloud, blotting out the sun. The city’s defenses, to their credit, held for the most part but there were still giant cracks and seams in its once fabled defenses, and small droplets of scorching steel managed to slip through, falling like deadly dew drops.

And that was only the beginning. Darkstorm could see hundreds of buildings that had collapsed just from the shockwaves, and even the sturdier buildings that somehow survived had large cracks running up the faces that would worry even the most optimistic man.

Worse yet, the people he’d sworn to save ran through the streets like headless chickens, no doubt believing the sky was falling here, just as it had at home. The few people with their wits about them cried out for their family or dug into the ruins with bare bloody hands, trying to save their loved ones. Some wandered through the street, dumbstruck, almost as if they resigned themselves to death.

Lord Darkstorm looked out his balcony, high atop his station of power, and saw nothing but ruin.

“What have I...what have they done!?”

“My lord! What are your orders?!”

Lord Darkstorm spun on his heel, “I want a death curse leveled at the man who sent those missiles on our city! I will not let them get away with this! You are my greatest seer, Dominic, find him!”

Darkstorm’s minion pointed towards a circle of mages, “We have already begun, my Lord. Whoever is responsible will die a terrible, painful death and there’s nowhere they will be able to hide!”

Six mages, trained almost since birth chanted ancient words of power, and concentrated. Small, almost immaterial strips of emerald energy began to form in midair, and began to wrap around one another, forming a small sphere. While three of the mages concentrated on keeping that energy together, the other three formed a karmic locator spell, taking remnants off the molten metal that hung over the city. If anyone came within several miles of those weapons, the spell would seek them out and destroy them no matter where they hid!

With a final blessing and curse, the small bundle of mystical energy known to Darkstorm's people as 'World's End' was born. Since its discovery, not a single soul had ever survived the curse. From demi-gods to death Knights and dragons born before creation, not a single one had ever survived it.

The mages released the curse, and watched as it flew through the air like a divine avenger, and barrel into the air. The curse was connected to each mage, as they wanted to feel the death of the man who's rained such destruction on their last remaining safe haven.

The globe of energy passed through the ceiling, and into the air. But as the death curse cut through the clouds, they felt something they'd never felt before. Once their death curse hit the upper atmosphere, into the void of space, it began to unravel like a ball of twine.

Several seconds later, the death curse that had lain low hundreds of living legends and unholy engines of destruction for thousands of years before the written word on their home world struck Hellios.

The solar powered hero, genetically enhanced by xeno-biological samples that rendered him especially vulnerable to magic...sneezed.

On the ground below, Lord Darkstorm looked at each other in disbelief.

"It failed..." Darkstorm couldn't believe the words that slid past his lips.

"They can survive in the outer reaches," gasped one mage.

"No," Lord Darkstorm snarled. His temper was reaching boiling point as the size of his misstep became more and more obvious, "it's not possible!"

"Sire, they must have...!"

"You speak blasphemy!" Lord Darkstorm roared, spittle flying from his mouth, "nothing can live beyond the sky, no magic can survive that far from the source! It! Cannot! Happen!"

"Sire," said the bravest one, "it clearly has."

Darkstorm felt his entire world beginning to spin, as if he'd suddenly learned that somehow, cold was hot, two plus two was six or the human soul didn't actually exist. Emotionally, he just couldn't grasp the idea that anything other than lifeless rocks that fell from the sky could possibly survive that murky blackness above the clouds.

These people had accomplished the impossible. What other hells could they unleash on his beloved city?

Chapman casually examined his nails, "I think we've given them enough shock, Captain. Please signal the stealth team that it's time for the 'awe'."

The Captain signaled to his communications officer, "It's done, sir. But I think we actually started with awe."

"You're probably right, but 'awe and shock' doesn't have the same ring, I'm afraid."

"Sir, are we going to deploy Excalibur soon?" asked his personal assistant Delphi.

"Not just yet. We've got to face down a whole city, and no one's setting foot in that damn city until I've finished stacking the odds in our favor."

"Odds, or bodies sir?"

"Yes."

Junta sat perched five stories up, situated in between a row of gargoyles that decorated what he guessed to be the private home. He was high enough not to be seen, but still able to view the city's skyline with a simple pair of binoculars. He'd spent the last ten of the twelve hours trying to find the important parts of the city and determining how he could do the most damage. He'd napped one hour before choking down some emergency rations and drinking vitamin pills dissolved in warm orange Gatorade.

As far as infiltration missions went, Junta had done worse. He wasn't even homesick when he received the order to find cover came in. He found the tallest building and started climbing because when gravity is optional, heights give you the most time to think of a way out of a jam.

When Hellios finally finished, Junta didn't need a signal to know that it was his turn to bat. He turned to the lunch-box sized integrated weapons system he nick named 'Little Boy'. He pressed a button and a holographic keyboard came up. Junta typed a few commands, and then took a deep breath.

It wasn't hard to see why the use of this thing was considered a war crime anywhere on earth. Junta had been countless hours planting bombs and a few other surprises, yet the inventory indicated that it was still sixty percent full. Though Junta knew he could get a few billion just for what was left, he still intended to destroy the thing when this operation was over. Some things were just too dangerous to mess with.

"Alright Little Boy, lets smash the charts with your swan song..."

"We are not beaten yet," Lord Darkstorm growled, "we have hostages, we have weapons they have never seen before! We will not fall to these backwards savages!"

"My lord..." Messenger Mage Nodwick, Lord Darkstorm's most trusted envoy, stumbled into the room. He was a short man, unremarkable in many ways save for his dedication and common sense. Only now, his usually health white flesh tone was replaced with a sickly purple, "I regret to report that I...am unfit for duty."

“No!” Darkstorm rushed to the man’s side, and though he wasn’t too experienced with healing magics, cast the strongest rejuvenation spell he knew upon his trusted friend. For a moment Nodwick almost returned to full health. But then, just as quickly, he passed from the mortal coil.

Darkstorm was ready to call back the soul of his friend, to attempt resurrection, when he felt a chill travel down his spine. Educated as he was in the ways of magic, he knew immediately that whatever befell his friend was striking down citizens all across his city.

Skull the Blue Skinned collapsed in front of his elite warriors...

Miko, second in command of the Jade Paladins, fell to her knees in agony. She was in the middle of an impassioned speech about how the Gods smiled on their mission when she suddenly felt as though she was being ripped in two...

In the Pern Palace, the storied Dragon Riders ran from their barracks and into the stables, where their steeds were running amok. The might beasts, the smallest weighing over three tons, were clawing at the walls like beasts possessed. The older Dragon Riders, though with empathic bonds with their flying partners, could feel a ringing in their yet heard nothing.

Captain Redtopped, known throughout the city police-force as a steadfast man of honor and integrity, fell over seconds after removing a giant boulder off a small child. His men rushed to his side, but had no idea what was wrong, let alone how to help him.

Stormmaster Tarvek was in the middle of brewing his potions for the quickly approaching battle, when he realized he couldn’t breathe. He looked towards his family members who were helping him in the lab, but he was blue in the face by the time they realized it wasn’t some sad ploy for attention.

And it was only worse from there...

Persona Grata and Shiva, along with their new ally Cessilia glanced out the window. Their new ally choked back a sob when she saw all the devastation Hellios had inflicted on the city she so loved.

“I’m afraid it’s decision time,” Persona Grata said, “Noblewoman Cessilia, you said that your people would be willing to join us. Do you still stand by that? Because I fear that the damage to your people is just starting.”

“The damage will never end so long as Darkstorm remains in power,” Cessilia hissed. She brandished two swords from the armory Shiva and Persona Grata had liberated, “I won’t degrudge a people for defending themselves. But we must move now, before Darkstorm recovers from your attack!”

Durklon Thunderbolt, a dwarf as powerful as he was short, lead his elite party towards the jails. Orders had been passed down from on high that the hostages were to be secured, and a dwarf never failed his duty so long as there was breath in his body.

He pushed past the front gates, too wound up from the destruction all around him to stop and wonder where the guards who were supposed to be at the front were. But as he stomped across the moat, his highly tuned Dwarven senses could feel a curious rumble, approaching fast.

Durklon watched in horror as the giant steel doors responsible for keeping the prison population captive fell like some dead tree.

An onslaught of elves, unicorns, centaurs, kobolds and every citizen of the realm poured out, with the disgraced Cessilia at the lead.

“For the true, for justice!” Cessilia roared, “do not stop until Darkstorm’s blood has washed our blades!”

“That’s an attitude I can get behind!” Shiva swept her swords outwards, and caught three of Durklon’s men with slight scratches. Within seconds, a goblin, troll and dwarf fell over dead, their systems unable to handle the combination of poisons.

Shiva smiled, taking comfort in the fact that the Poison Dart Frog toxins were universally lethal, especially when mixed with a touch of arsenic.

“Persona Grata reports that they’ve freed the city’s prison population,” Delphi reported, “in addition to that, we managed to use the HERMES teleporter to extract the hostages.”

“And the nano-trackers I left with Darkstorm?”

“Fully functioning, sir.”

“Then send in Excalibur. Tell them I want Darkstorm. A piece of him or whole, I really don’t care. We either need a bargaining chip or the head of their government gone. And the second they’re inserted, notify Strange’s team.”

Lord Darkstorm felt a tremor down his spine, and found himself drawn to the window.

Looking down in the courtyard, he watched in horror as diamond blades sliced through loyal soldiers, columns of pure ebony swatted aside mighty knights and blasts of pure crimson tore through members of the Daywatch protecting his citadel while bursts of energy cast forth from silver gauntlets that tore through goblin and elven soldiers like arrows through parchment.

Excalibur stood back to back in his courtyard, tearing through his men as if they were reeds of overgrown grass, and the Master Mystic knew could be no coincidence that they somehow arrived so close to his own location. For Lord Darkstorm, it was the final straw.

“Forces of Faylin, pull back!” Darkstorm leapt out the window, and flexing an ounce of the magic that flowed through his blood, he came slamming down on the ground like a meteor, throwing Excalibur from their feet.

“Minions of Chapman!” Darkstorm roared, “I will use your bleached bones as a message to your master for this craven attack!”

“We’re called Excalibur,” Union Jack leveled his pistol at Darkstorm. His teammates stood behind him, tense and ready for action, “and we know the truth about what you’re doing here, mate. Don’t be getting high and mighty with us. Everything that’s happened here today is all on your head, mate.”

The look on Darkstorm’s face said it all, even if it lasted for only a second.

Then, his face a mask of rage, Darkstorm gathered a terrifying amount of mystical energy into his hands and let it fly towards the United Nations team.

“Everyone move!” Scarlet Scarab threw himself forward and took the torrent of sheer power chest first. The scarab that gave him his power drank in the mystic energy like a desert swallowing a glass of water.

Scarlet Scarab could scarcely believe the sheer power that was flowing through his veins, inundating each cell. Almost reflexively, he pointed his hands towards Darkstorm, and simply let go of the power.

The leader of the Mystic city teleported out of the way instinctively, and a wave of sheer power exploded forth from Scarlet Scarab’s hands. It tore out of the courtyard, through the stone structures it slammed into on the street and eventually out of the city itself. Chapman swore as he saw the blast of mystic energy lancing out of the north face of the city.

“Damn, I hope that’s one for our side,” Chapman remarked.

Inside the island itself, Scarlet Scarab was like a statue, barely able to move after seeing the devastation he’d just unleashed.

“What have I done...?” Scarlet Scarab could scarcely believe the sight before him. It was as if an entire section of the city had been ripped asunder by God himself. Buildings were torn in two, and wounded men, women and other assorted creatures were scattered across the ground as if there’d been an airstrike. Even the ground itself was scorched and cracked.

“Monster!” Red Knight swung his sword and slashed Scarab’s side. The pain and shock drove him to his knees, and as he clutched the wound, Darkstorm’s most loyal servant stood over him with his sword ready to remove his head, “you dare to attack civilians?”

“I didn’t mean...”

A tentacle of darkforce energy wrapped itself around Red Knight's wrist, and when he tried to pull himself free, Commando's feet slammed into his chest and sent him flying backwards.

"I see honor of single combat escapes you as well," Red Knight hissed as he picked himself up.

"Yup!" Commando released a burst of fire from his customized M-16, shooting Red Knight's sword out of his hands, "all yours, kid!"

Silverclaw shifted into the shape of a snake, and coiled her body around Red Knight's throat, "You're going to pay for every drop of blood your sword took!"

"Brother!" Darkstorm was about to unleash a spell that would have torn Silverclaw away from his most loyal follower, a searing hot white light sliced the ground in front of him.

"Damn magic is screwing up my targeting computers," Cybermancer grumbled. She raised her gauntlets a little higher, and Darkstorm barely summoned the Emerald Shield of Ancestors before it was hit with an onslaught of mini-missiles, lasers and bullets. Darkstorm found himself both terrified and fascinated by the weapons.

But while he was focused on Cybermancer's attack, Sabra and Kamau tackled him from behind and began to pummel him.

"It's not working!" Kamau shouted as he felt his trench knives fail to get any traction.

"Keep trying!" Sabra shouted, "we have to keep him off balance!"

"Then you have failed!"

With a single gesture, Darkstorm threw both of them off. He climbed to his feet, heartened that his protection spells were still working.

"You have no idea my power!" Darkstorm pointed his hand towards Silverclaw, and a thin line of purple lightning blasted her off Red Knight, "no idea how foolish it was to attack me here!"

Union Jack fired off two quick shots from his pistol that hit Darkstorm right in his eyes. Whatever magic that protected him from mortal harm did nothing about the light and shock that accompanied the shots.

"We know, and we're not scared," Union Jack stated calmly, "surrender now, or we start to get real nasty. We all know the truth, so don't you dare expect any mercy."

Darkstorm looked at Excalibur with genuine moral outrage and spat, "Bring it on!"

The Temple of Crossing

Henry Porter fidgeted as he stood at his post. Just inside the chamber he and his fellow rival from the Unseen Academy Dracon were charged with watching the Eternal Portal. It was their only link to the homeland they were so desperately trying to save, one small part of a greater hole that would enable them to hide their way home again.

How that responsibility fell onto two new graduates, albeit the most skilled of their year, Henry had no idea. But it was a duty he swore he'd be willing to lay down his life for.

And when he sensed the approach of Dr. Strange, Henry thought that not even his life would be enough to stop the man.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Dr. Strange said politely, “I would like your permission to enter the chamber behind you. As I hope you can sense, I am a man of extraordinary power. Furthermore, I am the sorcerer supreme of this reality. I assure you, I am only here to help.”

“Help us to our grave perhaps!” spat Dracon. Henry wasn't as sure, but with his entire society at stake couldn't risk it. Both youths summoned an impressive amount of mystical energy, and pointed their wands at Dr. Strange.

“Release!”

Dr. Strange stood there nonchalant as the energy harmlessly bounced off him and slammed into both boys, throwing them against the gate they were charged with defending.

“They sure were trigger happy,” commented a young woman behind Strange.

“Indeed they were,” Dr. Strange sighed, “please drop your concealment spell, Wanda. There's no more need.”

“Heh, I wonder how those boys would have reacted to me,” mused Illyana Rasputina, otherwise known as the teleporting mutant Magik. She held her soul sword lazily in one hand.

“It's probably best that we remain in ignorance,” remarked Michael Twoyoungmen, better known as Shaman of Alpha Flight.

“I can't believe this society,” said Elizabeth Twoyoungman, AKA Talisman of Alpha Flight and Shaman's daughter, “there's almost as much power here as there is stupidity!”

“Magic doesn't automatically equal skill,” observed Wanda Maximoff, world renowned Avenger known as the Scarlet Witch, “that concealment spell was a thousand times harder than my regular hexes. I can throw those around like candy, but a spell that actually does what it was intended to...”

“And you did fairly well,” Dr. Strange said, “there were some flaws, but I was curious if the guards would have detected something amiss. Like you and others, it appears that their ability to use magic is far greater than their ability to listen and understand it.”

“So what’s the plan, Doc?” Magik rested her soul sword on her shoulder, “kick ass and take names?”

“No, that is Excalibur’s responsibility,” Dr. Strange replied evenly, “you and Talisman are going to assist me. The rulers of this city are using a dangerous dimensional anchor that if improperly defused could destroy our entire world on several levels.”

“So how come the defenses suck so much?” Ilyana asked as she motioned outwards to the empty courtyard, “those two chumps were going to protect something that important?”

“They might not realize its significance,” Shaman offered.

“Or it’s a trap,” Scarlet Witch proposed.

“I sense no one inside, but we will be cautious,” Dr. Strange said, “Shaman, Wanda, I need you two to prevent anyone from interfering, or Ancient One forbid, take over for us if we’re killed.”

It went unsaid that the good Doctor was just being polite. If they made a mistake in dealing with the dimensional anchor, everyone would be dead before they even realized there was an issue.

“I’m beginning to think this team isn’t so bad!”

Shiva laughed as her knife slit the throat of an orange-skinned goblin dressed in the robes of a monk. A target rich environment was a rare gift, and she was intent on squeezing every last drop of blood possible.

“Try to show some level of restraint, please,” Persona Grata remarked as she slapped away one foe, “there’s no need to litter the ground with corpses.”

“I must agree with your golem friend,” Cessilia said sharply, “my people are being oppressed, even if they are not aware of it. It’s not their fault, it’s the society they were born into.”

Persona Grata noticed Shiva hesitating for a moment, before finally silently agreeing. The Indian assassin sheathed her blades, and to Persona Grata’s surprise, started fighting with just her hands, feet and elbows.

Persona took note of that as she fought. Shiva was without a doubt a loose cannon, but it was increasingly obvious that there were some things she still cared about, some lines she wouldn’t willingly cross.

“Treasonous curs, all of you!” Persona Grata turned her attention to a Centaur who was barreling towards them. Persona Grata aimed her personal pistol, and fired two rapid shots, taking out his knees.

“God, I hope they get better medical treatment than regular horses,” Persona Grata muttered. The sentient Life Model Decoy knew better than to dwell on it, but she still loathed the harm she was doing to these people. But then, how could anyone with a heart feel otherwise?

Guishen didn't blink as he put two bullets through the brain pans of four elves.

He moved through the panic filled streets calmly, killing anyone that was part of Faylin's police or militia that was unlucky enough to pass him in this chaos.

The streets were filled with the dirt of crumbled buildings, debris covering everything like a light snow, while fathers dug through rubble to find their children and orphaned children screamed for aid. Block after block of the magical city was devastated, and people ran every which way trying to figure out what to do. The air stunk of smoke and burned flesh.

Yet Guishen barely took notice of any of that. Two guardsmen rushed towards him, and Guishen didn't even bother to see if they were coming at his direction, or looking for him.

He put a bullet through five eyes total, and casually strolled past the corpses without a second glance. The only emotion that Guishen felt was the hope that the main strikeforce was enjoying his luck.

“Oh freakin' hell, ain't this a classic,” Commando muttered, as Excalibur found themselves surrounded by sixteen separate illusions of Darkstorm.

“Cybermancer?” Union Jack asked without missing a beat.

The Chinese heroine took a moment to scan the spectrums, and within seconds she saw through Darkstorm's illusions and sent a barrage of lasers that sent the man stumbling back, his defense and healing spells struggling to repair the damage done.

“Hit him!” Union Jack ordered.

Darkstorm barely had enough time to create a mystic shield before beams of crimson energy and darkforce slammed into it, pushing him back. He began to sweat, but a small smile managed to pass his lips as he saw the 32nd Groundpounders brigade charging towards his position.

Then he heard thunder that sounded wrong.

He looked up, and saw a fireball shoot down from the sky, and land behind the elite troops. There was an explosion of light and sound that even Excalibur had to take notice of.

When the smoke and dust finally settled, Darkstorm saw a glowing man hovering over the crater, hands on his hip in a smug ‘Yes, I did that’ manner.

“Don't worry, your reinforcements are still around,” Hellios said smugly, and gestured to the smoke, “there's some there, a little here and I think some right under your foot.”

Lord Darkstorm's face went livid as he channeled more power than any leader of Faylin had ever taken from the land before. But Scarlet Scarab slammed into him from behind, and the blast missed Hellios by a dozen feet.

"Your power is no great mystery to us," Darkstorm watched in horror as Scarlet Scarab tore free a golden gauntlet from his enemy's ancestral armor, a feat that was thought impossible before now, "thousands of your people are dead, their city devastated. I beg you, surrender! And we can begin to help them. Fighting will only prolong their suffering!"

The idea of just accepting defeat, accepting responsibility for all the death and suffering of his people filled Darkstorm with such a white hot rage, that he barely needed to speak a single incantation to throw Scarlet Scarab off.

Darkstorm rose with such rage that it could be literally felt, and silently screamed as he unleashed every ounce of magic he could muster.

Darkstar reacted just a second quicker, and created a wall of darkforce between her team and Darkstorm. The wave of magic met the wall of darkforce, and the subsequent explosion threw most of Excalibur backwards through the air.

"Think we made him mad," Commando observed drily.

Less than a city block away, Sabra and Kamau clashed with Red Knight with such intensity that they barely noticed the nearby battle.

There was no banter, no scathing remarks. Between the three of them, the years of battle and experience had hardened them into engines of destruction that moved with the purpose of ballet dancers.

Red Knight swept his sword in an arc, and created a wall of flame that Sabra hesitated to test. But before he could launch an attack, Kamau slammed into him from the side. The African Warrior ground his forearm against Red Knight's throat, but his foe slammed his fist into Kamau's kidneys and threw him off as if he were a morning blanket.

Kamau went flying, and Red Knight just barely rolled to the side before Sabra's leg came crashing down where his chest once was.

For a man in heavy armor, he's amazingly agile, Sabra noted as Red Knight leapt to his feet.

Red Knight's sword swung for her throat, and Sabra stepped under it easily, and delivered two rapid punches to his stomach before Red Knight brought his elbow crashing down on her shoulder. Red Knight flipped his sword in his hand, but before he could ram it through Sabra's neck, Kamau wrapped his chain around throat and pulled him backwards.

Red Knight swung his sword backwards, where it pierced Kamau's side like a mystical sword through a stone. The former Child Soldier grunted, but his grip remained firm, until Red Knight threw his head backwards and his helmet smashed into his enemy's face.

Kamau had a pain tolerance stronger than ninety percent of the population, but even he had limits. His grip on the chain went slack for just long enough, and Red Knight tore himself free.

The noble Knight of Faylin spun on his heels, pointed his sword at Kamau and unleashed a gout of searing, white hot flame. Kamau only barely saw it coming, and only just moved out of the way. With the exception of his right hand, he was fine.

But his right hand, caught in just the edge of the blast, was seared to the bone, just five inches past the wrist.

Red Knight hesitated, never before having (intentionally) inflicted such a terrible wound, and certainly never seeing anyone endure such a thing without a cry of pain.

"Yield," Red Knight pointed his sword at Kamau's head. His instincts took over, demanding he offer either the mercy of surrender or a quick death, "and I promise to have you healed."

"Yield...?" The edges of his vision were blurry, but Kamau saw his enemy with unparalleled intensity. He saw a small chink in the Knight's armor, just below where his bellybutton would be, and still held one diamond blade in his remaining hand, "if I knew how, I swear I would."

Kamau smashed his boneless hand into the ground, where it shattered in an explosion of white and marrow, leaving only a rugged jagged point where there had once a joint. He shot forward, and jammed the bone deep into small opening, where it neatly sliced through muscle and tissue. With his remaining hand, Kamau stabbed his foe in the side. For the most part, Red Knight's armor held, but it was painful as hell.

Red Knight saw and felt all this happen, of course, but he was so stunned by what he saw that for several seconds he simply couldn't move as his mind struggled to process the events. But pain was a great motivator

"Animal!" Red Knight grabbed Kamau by the throat and hurled him backwards.

"Kamau!" Sabra tackled Red Knight from behind, and wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck, and squeezed. The mystic armor provided some defense, but not nearly enough, "regenerate! I'll hold him off!"

The African Warrior sank the bone into the ground, and began concentrating. His powers pulled the earth from the ground, and began to transform it into muscle, bone and nerves. The process was agonizing, but Kamau had endured it a hundred times in the past.

Dr. Strange better be having more luck, Kamau thought darkly as he watched Red Knight dislodge Sabra. He sprang forward.

“Excalibur better be having more luck,” Dr. Strange muttered as sweat trickled down his brow. He wished that he was back in an OR, where someone with a free hand would wipe from his brow and keep the sweat from stinging his eyes, but Dr. Strange had long since learned to just ignore the distraction.

Especially now, with everything that was on the line. Even for his usual line of work, what he had to do was nothing less than monumental. He was mystically channeling not only the power he held as Sorcerer Supreme, but the mystical diffusing abilities of Talisman in conjunction with the mutant mystic Magik, and her powers of inter-dimensional travel. The two young women sat Indian style while his hands rested on their shoulders. They chanted a minor incantation that mixed their power with Dr. Strange’s own strength, while Strange controlled it all with just the power of his mind.

While he was channeling their mystical might, Dr. Strange was more powerful than any mystic on earth. Yet he still wasn’t certain that it was enough.

Manipulating magical energy always depended on the energy being employed. Some power was granted by mystic entities in return for a show of respect or even a prearranged agreement. Other energy was just always there, generated by living people with each breath, waiting to be employed and others was power created by mystic focuses, like his own Eye of Agamotto.

And to facilitate their travel to this reality, Strange quickly realized that these people had mixed every mystical energy they could think of, without regard to how the energies would mix and change. The floating orb of power floating all too close to Dr. Strange was like a quilt made out of landmines and hand grenades.

Only, instead of triggering an explosion, would wrong move would trigger a big bang.

As if that weren’t bad enough, Dr. Strange was operating on theory and instinct. His mentor, the Ancient One, never even hinted to him on how to deal with a situation quite like this. Strange suspected that was because his Master never would have believed that anyone could be so foolish as to try to bend the universe using the mystical equivalent of bail and duct tape. Even the lowest demon wouldn’t do something so foolhardy, for fear of erasing themselves and anywhere they might try to reach.

Dr. Strange carefully moved one string of mystical energy over the other, negated the very existence of a second and strengthened a third. Slowly, gradually, he was untangling the web of magic that was literally bending an aspect of reality the wrong way.

Dr. Strange didn’t know what it was, but when he began working on an innocuous thread, that he felt beginning to turn wrong. He felt a cold chill run down his back just moments before he felt a wave of hostile magic wash over him.

“A trap,” Dr. Strange hissed.

“Oh crap,” the sudden malevolent energy snapped both Talisman and Magik out of the group-mind they’d formed with Dr. Strange, “that’s not good.”

“What do we do now?” Talisman asked, as the orb of mystic energy and pure reality began to glow and change color like a maniac disco ball, “if the spells around that thing release improperly...!”

“Our planet will be erased,” Dr. Strange said, eerily calm. Up until now, every bit of spell craft he’d encountered were sloppy, poorly crafted things that would shame first year apprentices. Yet the spell inadvertently triggered, that was ingenious, something he might not have seen even if he was on guard for it.

And as he watched, the mystical trap was unraveling every spell that allowed Faylin to travel to this world, that helped the warped bit of reality in check.

Dr. Strange cleared his throat as the two mystics looked at him worriedly, “We should leave.”

Scarlet Scarab’s fist slammed into Darkstorm’s jaw, and sent the man tumbling backwards.

The Egyptian hero watched the Mystic Master of Faylin wiped the blood from his chin. Darkstorm prepared to return the blow, but for a moment hesitated.

“Something wrong?” Scarlet Scarab knew that look, that hesitation. He’d fought villains before who were fond of diversions, of open attacks to mask covert goals.

“No,” Darkstorm looked over the horizon, “Something’s just been made right.”

Despite his better judgment, Scarlet Scarab followed Darkstorm’s gaze, and saw a building radiating the purest white he’d ever seen. The city began to shake, and he could feel a vibration so powerful his teeth ached.

“Something’s wrong!” Silverclaw screamed as she covered her ears, trying to force out the piercing sounds that overwhelmed her animal senses, while her gut churned in response to the wild magic that was churning about, “this shouldn’t be happening!”

Cybermancer rocketed into the air, and poured every ounce of juice her armor could spare into her sensors. Suzi barely understood half of the information she got back, but she understood enough to know that the mega-tons of power that were leaking from the city was anything but good news.

“Finally!” Darkstorm laughed in soulful, blissful relief, but to Excalibur he sounded like a manic, “This is just the beginning, Excalibur! You will look back on this day, and weep for what you have wrought!”

Before Darkstorm or Excalibur could even move, white light washed over them.

The Resolute

“...science division can't make heads of tails of the energy!”

“...it's creasing, oh God the power is increasing! It's over nine thousand!”

“...power is off the charts!”

Delphi turned to Chapman, who wasn't even making an effort to reign in the chaos of the bridge. The blinding light show that was produced by the floating island had thrown them into a panic, “Sir, what do we do?”

Chapman just sighed and slumped in his chair, “Recall Excalibur. We can't leave them there, no matter what. I'll be damned if we leave our men behind as our last act!”

“And then?”

“The only thing we can do. We die.”

And before there could be any further discussion, the white light swept over and through the Helicarrier, and kept on going.

NEXT ISSUE: To be concluded...?

Excalibur

#25

March 2010

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SIEGE OF MAGIC"

After Shocks

(Epilogue)

Written by Daniel Ingram

The Story Thus Far: Earth has been invaded by the mystical city of Faylin, and accused of stealing their magic. When this was discovered to be false, Chapman launched a two-pronged attack, one to seize of kill Faylin's leader and the second to disarm the dangerous magical construct that allowed them access to earth. The mission was ongoing when the construct began to self destruct, and threatens to take the entire planet with it!

The Resolute

Joseph Chapman had just barely made his peace with God as a white light crashed through the bridge of his ship, washed over him...and simply kept on going. Chapman blinked several times, and scanned the bridge. His people were fine, and equally baffled.

"Sir, the city... it's gone!"

The Bridge crew gaped at the monitors, seeing that where there had once been a majestic floating city, was nothing but empty air and sand.

"Sit-rep, now!" Chapman barked, quickly recovering from his near death experience, "is there any debris? Any clue where they went? And what's Excalibur's status?"

"No remains that we can detect or see, sir. However, the HERMES team reports that Excalibur was safely extracted."

"What about Dr. Strange's team?"

"We're fine," Dr. Strange said from behind Chapman. To his credit, the Director of Excalibur managed not to jump out of his skin, but just barely, "the other members of my impromptu coven are resting at home as we speak."

Chapman breathed a sigh of relief, "What can you tell me about what happened?"

Dr. Strange hesitated, then said, "Amid all their poor spells, there was one well crafted trap. I do not think it was a coincidence."

Chapman slumped in his chair, “God, how do I even begin to explain this to the Security Council?”

United Nations Security Council

“The operation against Darkstorm and his people was executed almost flawlessly,” Chapman said with an even smile, “we had a spot of luck here and there, but I would chalk our victory up to our reorganization that enabled Excalibur’s main force to focus on the assault while the Stealth team enabled us slip behind their lines, and prevent their army from organizing.”

“Are you certain there was no negotiating with this...Darkstorm?” asked the French Council member, “your efforts in that regard seem wanting.”

“I am and I was,” Chapman replied, “Darkstorm’s society held us responsible for something our world had no part in, for something that was actually the fault of his own culture. Since I knew I would be unable to change their minds, I thought it best to strike first.”

“You say the operation was a complete success, then can you explain what that flash of light was following the end of operations?” inquired the British Security Council member, “that thing was seen for hundreds of miles around! God only knows how many accidents it caused!”

“According to our paranormal, that was simply reality sealing up the hole created by Darkstorm’s people when they traveled to our reality,” Chapman explained, “luckily, the energy was directed at a minor sub-plane that happens to exist parallel to our reality. He thinks it was because of a slipstream residual effect, but says that it was ultimately harmless.”

Chapman did his best to look sincere as the Security Council mulled over his techno-babble (or was it magic babble?) explanation. While it was nothing more than hog wash, Chapman sounded far better than ‘It’s magic, we can’t/don’t have to explain it’.

“This entire mission seems to have been executed in a very sloppy manner,” observed the Chinese representative, “you used remote control drones to sell a position you did not have, you used weapons of mass destruction unprovoked and...”

“The emergencies Excalibur was created for, are rarely clean,” Chapman countered, “I’m thankful for China allowing us to destroy several outdated drones, and let me assure the Council that I have no intention of using improvised nuclear weapons in the future. But I would also remind you that we launched this operation from a seized airship and my combat roster has been degraded by...unwanted superhumans from several member nations. So unless the permanent members of the Security Council are willing to invest more money and technology in Excalibur’s operation, our ability to perform will always lack a certain finesse.”

Chapman observed how the Security members squirmed in their chairs. Funding was always going to be an issue for Excalibur, but Chapman knew when to pick his battles. Egotism in the afterglow of victory often bred contempt and if one wasn't careful, secret enemies.

“However, our accomplishments speak for themselves. We rescued all the hostages, we repelled an invading army and took virtually no collateral damage. Superhuman operations are by their nature messy, but this operation went as close to perfect as we had any right to hope.”

“One last question before we finish,” stated the American Representative, “Darkstorm and his people, are they dead?”

Chapman mulled over his response carefully. He wanted to remind these people that, without a body, all the evidence in the world didn't mean a damn thing. Unless you confirmed the kill, all the science in the world was useless. But he knew what they wanted to hear.

“I'm confident that Darkstorm is dead,” Chapman replied, but he knew enough to leave himself a loophole, “but we'll remain on alert regardless. Until we have any manner of confirmation, it would be unwise to count Darkstorm out.”

Avalon

Scarlet Scarab stared at the sunrise as it peaked out over the horizon. The day's cold air didn't much affect him, but the Egyptian hero shivered anyway.

“Umm, penny for your thoughts?”

Scarlet Scarab turned his head to acknowledge Silverclaw.

“Aren't you cold?” Scarab asked instinctively, before he realized just how judgmental it sounded.

“Actually, I rarely get cold for whatever reason,” Silverclaw shrugged. Given that she was wearing a one piece ceremonial outfit that had no legs or sleeves, she was accustomed to the question, “I'm just a little concerned. You've been walking around the base in a haze for a while now. Do you want to talk about it?”

Truth be told, the Egyptian hero really didn't want to. In his home country, he was constantly pressured to express his opinion in one form or another for the advantage of the political leaders, and it got to the point that Scarlet Scarab cherished any shred of privacy he could find.

But at the same time, he didn't want to refuse honest, heartfelt concern.

“I'm just thinking about our battle in Faylin. During the fight, I absorbed too much power. When I unleashed it at Darkstorm, I missed and...” Scarlet Scarab drew in a heavy breath.

Silverclaw remembered that fairly well. It was pretty hard to miss a teammate single handily paving a smoldering highway, even in a pitched battle.

“...and I don’t know how many I killed,” Scarab finished.

“You didn’t mean for that to happen!” Silverclaw defended, “we didn’t start the fight!”

“Actually...”

“Okay, we hit them first because we knew they wouldn’t listen to reason,” Silverclaw amended, “and it wasn’t like we were trying to hit innocent people. What happened was just...”

“Collateral damage?” Scarlet Scarab finished.

“I was trying to think of a kinder expression, but yeah,” Silverclaw shifted uncomfortably.

“I understand, and I actually agree,” Scarlet Scarab sighed, “but I know far too many people who’ve been on the other side of ‘collateral damage’ to ever be comfortable on this side of it.”

Francis Bohannon, known to the United States military simply as Commando, stepped into his specially prepared firing range. In many ways, it was simple and straight forward, yet at the same time impressively advanced and challenging.

The room was ninety by fifty feet wide, and littered with bulls-eyes. On the ceiling was a glorified laser projector, and just below it was a round anti-gravity platform. Commando strapped himself in, and activated the firing range.

The platform raised six feet into the air, and then lurched ninety degrees to the side while the laser projector on the ceiling dotted a bulls-eye on the far wall.

Commando aimed his custom modified Desert Eagles (because five pounds of gun wasn’t enough for him) and picked the target off with ease. The platform underneath his feet spun him around again, and now he was upside down with three more bulls-eyes to hit. Commando picked them off with ease.

Commando went about his target practice for ten minutes, and enjoyed every second of it when he suddenly sensed something appear as if out of nowhere.

Battle tested instincts took over, and Commando fired a shot in the direction of the disturbance.

Guishen, an experienced Chinese Internal Security agent, slapped the bullet aside with his short sword and scored his own bulls-eye.

“Next time you walk into a firing range like that, I’ll put a bullet through your eyes on principle,” Commando huffed.

“My apologies, Francis-Chan,” Guishen said with a polite smile.

“I know the difference between Japanese prefixes too, Chinaman,” Commando added, “if you got a reason for being here, out with it. Otherwise, get lost or become a target.”

“I...was wondering if you could provide some career advice, actually” Guishen replied.

Commando chuckled, “Two jokes in a row. Who said the Chinese don’t have a sense of humor?”

“I’m very serious,” Guishen stated, “as much as I respect Excalibur, I would prefer to be in my homeland, performing my duty. Yet I have been assigned here, for being too effective at home, I fear.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“According to my sources, you have managed to influence your assignments within your government,” Guishen stated, “I would, respectfully, like to know how.”

“What, you think that Excalibur is a choice assignment?” Commando smirked.

“No, it isn’t,” Guishen replied, “but I also know that you are not seeking a ‘choice’ assignment. The only time I’ve seen you put forth any actual effort is in combat. I also know that you are only serving because you want to, not because you’re currently enlisted.”

“One of the perks of serving the army for over two decades,” Commando observed, “don’t think it’d help you much.”

“Still...”

“Look kid,” Commando stood up a little straighter, “I don’t think you fully understand. I choose my assignments for a combination of reasons. We’re both in the dog house as far as our respective institutions are concerned. Only I got twenty years of results behind me, more than a few friends and my father’s name to back me up. And I still get the crap black ops jobs. You’re in the same boat as I am, but with a lot less holding you up.”

“I...see.”

“Sorry kid,” Commando activated the anti-gravity platform again, “you want a career like mine? Screw up, let people down. They’ll revoke your seat at the Big Kids table and let you play in the mud all you want. Think you can do that?”

Silence was the only response.

“That’s what I thought.”

Persona Grata sat across from her poisonous teammate, Shiva, notepad in hand. As a condition of serving on Excalibur's Stealth Team, Persona Grata insisted on being continue to offer psychiatric treatment to members of Excalibur who needed it.

And Shiva, inches away from being a full blown sociopath in Persona's opinion, needed it like a fish needed water.

The blue skinned woman was sitting on the edge of her chair, sharpening a dagger while she laced it with a deadly nerve toxin. She'd been doing this for nearly five minutes, and if Persona Grata were made of flesh and blood, she'd a little intimidated.

But as a person of metal and plastic, poison was just another liquid to her and knives weren't that scary when you had no arteries.

"Something you'd like to talk about?"

"No, just another sociopath working with her weapons," Shiva replied.

Persona Grata rolled her eyes. There wasn't much in the way of papers written on dealing with meta-human assassins (usually because those few who were caught and forced to attend sessions then killed the therapist), but the Sentient LMD held out hope that her patient could be rehabilitated.

"So, you're not upset that we left behind Cessilia and her people?" Persona Grata asked.

Shiva stopped her sharpening for a second, before she shrugged indifferently, "Not my problem, is it?"

"I'll take that as a yes. Might I ask why?"

"It's just not right, to leave people like, people whose only crime was speaking out," Shiva growled, "besides, I know how dangerous it is to stab those sort of people in the back."

Chapman leaned back in his chair, drumming his fingers on his desk. Almost as an afterthought, he reached to the side and activated a small alien devise he'd picked up in his Hellfire Club days. It created a null field around his office that made it impossible for any data to get in or out. Though the improvised battery lasted only ten minutes, it created a zone of silence so effective that not even an atomic blast could be heard just one office over.

"Alright Dr. Strange, give it to me straight. What happened?"

"Apparently, in all of Faylin, there is actually someone who understands magic and its consequences," Dr. Strange started, "when I was disassembling the dimensional anchor that

allowed them to reach our reality, I stumbled over a hat would best be described as a tripwire. It literally changed every other spell it came into contact with, and unmoored the anchor.”

“A domino effect.”

“Exactly. It is my belief that it created a series of events and released the anchor. The light we saw was a dimensional equivalent of a sonic boom. Every rushed to fill the void it left, and...”

“And no boom, Doctor,” Chapman finished, “why was that?”

“I would like to believe luck, but...”

“You don’t believe in it.”

“Actually, I know for a fact luck exists and have spoken to several deities that can influence it,” Dr. Strange corrected, “but no, in this instance, I do not believe in luck. They tell me you are well read Chapman. Tell me, do you know the story of Hernán Cortés?”

“I do indeed,” Chapman replied, “he came to the ‘New World’ with only an army of hundreds and conquered a nation of thousands. And one of the first things he did...”

“Was set fire to his boats so that his army could not flee hope to Spain,” Dr. Strange finished.

“Misdirection. Isn’t that the first rule of magic?”

Dr. Strange snorted derisively, “For stage magicians, yes. I fear we’ve not heard the last of Darkstorm.”

“As it so happens, that’s not what worries me, Doctor.”

“Oh?”

“Tell me, what was that bright light we saw, when the anchor gave way? It covered several countries before fluttering out.”

“Oh, that,” Dr. Strange nodded, “from what I can tell, Darkstorm’s people tore a hole in reality itself to reach our dimension, one that directly connected their reality to ours. When the connection was severed, reality returning to its natural state created...ripples, for lack of a better term. The release of energy was enormous, frighteningly staggering even. It should have destroyed our world, and I’m certain it destroyed theirs.”

“I see.”

“I share your sympathy for the lives lost,” Dr. Strange said, “but I wouldn’t worry. Our world is now safe.”

“Not hardly,” Chapman snorted, “figures you’d miss it. No offense, Doctor.”

“Miss what?” Strange asked with a raised eye brow.

“So reality snapped back into shape on both sides of their little portal, released a tsunami of energy and all we got was a light show?” Chapman stated, “just where the bloody hell did all that power go?”

Elsewhere

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Lord Darkstorm stood side by side with his brother, Red Knight, stood in the bowels of Faylin.

They were standing in a cavern filled with crystal structures, glowing an emerald green.

“This cave was created for storing our lost magic, and in our hour of greatest need, saved our city from destruction!”

“Forgive me if I am unimpressed,” Red Knight replied in a somber tone, “our city has been devastated, our world lost...”

“But we will rebuild,” Darkstorm pressed his hand against a crystal, the feeling of power was almost intoxicating, “we are twenty million strong, our magic is replenished and we are united. We will punish those who destroyed our world and make a new, stronger one!”

“...and it will still not replace the one we lost,” Red Knight countered.

“We will remember our lost world as he forge a new one,” Darkstorm assured him, “we have survived, and grown stronger than we have been for a hundred generations. In time, we will take a new world, and avenge ourselves on all who have wronged us!”

Later

Danny Vincent sat in front of Chapman’s desk, one leg over the other. Most of the time, the young spy made it a point to keep a smirk off his face, no matter how justified its presence upon his handsome features.

But today, he thought nothing of it. His team had effectively sabotaged an entire people and crippled their ability to fight back. If that didn’t entitle someone to appear a little cocky, what did?

“Do you know why I’ve asked you here?”

Danny knew better than to say ‘To offer congratulations’. No matter how well deserved, superiors were always conservative with praise. Short of accomplishing a miracle, the best anyone could really hope for was a ‘Good job, now here’s the next mission’. Looking cocky was one thing, acting was another.

“To prep Excalibur’s next mission, I assumed,” Junta replied in a neutral voice.

“After a fashion,” replied Chapman, “I trust you’re aware of the Devil’s Island Incident?”

Junta nodded. The disastrous mission was one of the reasons why his team existed.

“We’ve rounded up most of the criminals involved,” Chapman stated, “but some have eluded us. Blighter goes by the name of Night Strike. He killed a member of Excalibur. I cannot...will not... tolerate that.”

Junta said nothing. An experienced operative, he knew that sometimes losing a man in the field was unavoidable. But in his opinion, too many law enforcement agencies saw it as an unforgivable sin as opposed to an occupational hazard. From there, it all too often escalated into a pointless war.

But wanting to keep his job, Danny kept his own counsel.

“But at the same time, the United Nations has begun to express concern about excessive force...”

Danny rubbed his temple, “I know where this is going...”

“It gets better,” Chapman smiled, “Night Strike is the leader of a Genoshian black-ops team that’s refused to disarm and accept amnesty.”

“And the last thing we need is a terrorist team from a previous administration causing problems for the one the United Nations installed,” Junta was well versed in the way of avoiding scandal. When you installed a new government, the last thing you want was to be reminded of the old one. Unless you were stringing them along, of course.

“Exactly. The powers that be want this handled quickly, quietly and effectively,” Chapman stated, “so you and your team are going to bring them in. Consider it your trial by fire.”

NEXT ISSUE: Junta leads his team, plus a few borrowed Excalibur members, to hunt down a Genoshian black ops team! What could go wrong?

Excalibur
#26
October 2010
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SHADOW OPERATIONS"
Part One

Written by Daniel Ingram

South Africa

Malcolm Fillion took a sip of his water, trying to steady his nerves. In a few minutes, ff everything went according to plan, his contact would arrive and he'd trade what was in his suitcase for a retirement fund on a beach far, far from here.

The operative word being if. The contents of the suitcase were worth millions, and even with the hired help, the one-time Interpol Agent was certain he wouldn't feel close to comfortable until the contents were sold, and the money was deposited in his Swiss account.

"Mr. Fillion, can we talk?"

The middle aged man felt a shiver shoot down his spine, and his eyes darted around desperately, looking for the source of the voice.

"Down here."

Fillion glanced down at the ground, and saw shadow in the form of a smiley face. He did a double take, and nearly wet himself as he realized what it meant.

"Don't worry, I don't want to hurt you," a man rose up from the shadow. He wore a blue bodysuit with a grey line down the middle. His chest was criss-crossed with straps, and he had two pistols on each hip, "I just want what's in that suitcase there, and for you to tell me your source."

Fillion grabbed the suitcase and held it to his chest as if it were a life-preserver, "You work for Rulke, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so," the man replied. He pulled out a chair across from Fillion and sat down, crossing one leg over the other, "name's Night Strike and let me be honest sir, I'm just the tip of a very pointy stick. You give me what I want, however, and no one has to get hurt. I'll even tell Rulke you're dead so he won't come after you."

“I’d still be broke and on the run!” Mal hissed, “you must be insane!”

“I prefer to think of myself as quirky, actually. Non conformist, if we have to apply a label.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” Mal hissed. He slapped his hand over his watch, “this suitcase is worth millions! Do you really think that I wouldn’t bring insurance?”

Night Strike rolled his eyes behind his mask, and barely shrugged as three Dreadnoughts smashed through the front window of the restaurant.

“And I told you I was just the tip of the spear,” Night Strike replied, “when this settles, and I put a bullet through your skull, don’t say I didn’t try to be square.”

The store patrons screamed, and scrambled out of the way as the silver robots stomped towards him.

Night Strike turned towards Mr. Fillion, and casually said, “You’re about to find out what happens when you hire cut rate mercenaries for a multi-million dollar deal. Val!”

Malcolm watched in horror as Night Strike vanished into the shadows of the floor seconds before the Dreadnoughts would have grabbed him. He leapt up on his chair, keenly aware that someone who could melt could choose to reappear anywhere he wanted.

Mr. Fillion was watching the shadows so intently that he didn’t notice the Asian woman sitting by the door, who hadn’t so much as even blinked when three automated weapons burst into the store.

She cut an unusual figure, female Asian, but standing six foot six with well toned muscles and wearing a far from inconspicuous trench-coat. In fact, had she been in the store longer than five minutes, she suspected she would have drawn as much attention as the robots now rampaging through it.

That didn’t matter much now, and when she heard her name, Val threw off the trench-coat to reveal a grey suit and body armor reminiscent of police riot gear. With an act of will, she summoned a five foot blue staff into her hand, and pointed it at the Dreadnoughts.

With little more than a mental shrug, she blasted two of the three into so much scrap metal. The third one spun around, and rocketed towards her with the assistance of rocket boots.

Val casually tossed her staff aside, and demolished it with a single punch.

“Heavy opposition has been eliminated,” Val said as she activated her radio, “does anyone have eyes on the prize?”

“I have eyes on his van,” reported her teammate, Airborne. She was a skinny young woman, wearing a combination of cover-alls, flight vest and goggles. Her real name was Bethany Rhodes, and with her red hair and freckles, looked as if she belonged in a 1950s Pulp novel, were it not for her metal arms and the brown backpack she wore. The young mutant hovered three stories up in the air, and would have drawn more attention than the Dreadnoughts if she didn’t happen to have a camouflage devise, “should I intercept?”

“Run it down,” Night Strike ordered, “but be careful.”

“Yes daddy,” Airborne teased. She reached around and grabbed a feed belt from the backpack and attached it to a slide on her wrist. Automatically, a digital display came up, displayed in her head via a cybernetic link that gave her the local temperature, wind-speed and automated targeting.

She deactivated the camouflage (not that it worked when she was actually moving), and shot down like a bird of prey.

Airborne followed the car as it raced through traffic, hoping that it would turn down a street that wasn’t packed with midday travelers. But after three blocks, Airborne was quick to realize her target wasn’t about to make things easy for her.

So she flew down until she was only fifteen feet above them, pointed her wrist, and fired three shots into the engine block.

The car sputtered to a halt, and Airborne landed in front, wrist pistols raised.

“I’m sorry Mr. Fillion, but I’m going to have to ask you to step outta the car,” Airborne said evenly. She then looked at the car closer, and swore.

“They’re freakin’ robots!” Airborne spat, “I lost them!”

“But I didn’t,” Night Strike radioed, “sorry kiddo; I needed them to think that they’d gotten away.”

“Happy to waste my time,” Airborne muttered.

Elsewhere

If Malcolm Fillion was nervous before, he was downright terrified now. His clients, the people who were so interested in the contents of his suitcase, were also his saviors and now, at their insistence, they had relocated to one of their safe-houses.

Needless to say, it greatly enhanced their negotiating position.

“That’s not even half of what I was promised!” Mr. Fillion protested as he clutched the suit case to his chest, “I asked you to provide security, and all you did was have us run away!”

“RAID does not fight petty battles,” replied his buyer. Wearing the traditional yellow Bee-keeper suit that AIM made so infamous, the leader of the breakaway faction (Radical Advanced Ideas in Destruction) wore it in an attempt to hijack the fear and power that AIM had cultivated, and in the bowels of RAID’s secret labs/safe-house, it was a very effective lever.

“We saved your life,” replied the Faction Leader, “that should be worth a considerable discount.”

“I’d agree, if that’s what you actually did,” replied a voice from the shadows.

Mr. Fillion and the gathered agents of RAID turned towards the corner, and saw Night Strike casually leaning against the wall.

“I’m going to ask for the suitcase nicely,” Night Strike said in a low, even tone that left no question about his seriousness, “and if I don’t get it, then everyone in here is going to die.”

“You and what army?” spat the RAID leader as he pulled a laser pistol from his hip.

“Thanks for the set-up, actually,” Night Strike smiled. With a cocky grin, he snapped his fingers and said, “This army!”

Several tense seconds passed as nothing happened and Night Strike’s grin went from goofy cockiness to an annoyed frown.

“Can you give me just a second?” Night Strike asked. Both Malcolm and the RAID leader nodded, dumbstruck by the casual, but sheer audacity of the man.

“Hey, where’s my army?” Night Strike shorted into his radio, “a raise? Oh hell no. With you and Val, you already get twice as much as everyone else! No, no! I don’t want to hear it. You get your army ass down here now, or you’ll lose the use of another set of limbs!”

Night Strike turned to both Malcolm Fillion, and the leader of RAID, now flanked by dozens of robots and men in Beekeeper uniforms wielding advanced weapons.

“Sorry about that. Little management problem.”

Suddenly, the room began to tremble, and from every door poured in hundreds of men. They were all perfectly identical, brown haired men in worn jeans and a South Park T-shirt.

“Self multiplication, useful for an ad-hoc army,” commented the RAID leader, trying not to sound indifferent, and not as terrified as he actually was, “but my robots happen to use lasers, so they have ammunition for every last one.”

“Well, see, that might cause me worry if he was the one going to end you,” Night Strike said, “no, ol’ Multiable here...”

“I hate that name,” they muttered as one.

“Well, if you hadn’t picked it, maybe irony wouldn’t have bit ya,” Night Strike replied.

“Anyways, he’s not the one going to take you out. No see, I’ve got a little girl to take care of that.”

The ceiling above them exploded, and a lithe figure shot out of the smoke and landed in between Night Strike and the RAID leader.

“Puppies.”

The leader of RAID did a double take as he saw a short woman, no taller than five foot five, standing in the newly created crater. She was covered in a black, leather like substance, with red slits where he eyes should be, bio-hazard signs on her knees and elbows and a respirator in front of her mouth.

She turned her head to regard Malcolm Fillion and his RAID allies, but they felt as though she was looking past them, not at them.

“Bad puppies need to be punished,” she said, as if reciting a nursery rhyme for children.

“Paradigm,” Night Strike’s voice carried an unquestionable military authority, “these are hostiles. I want a clean sweep.”

There was a -click! - heard from the suit, and the young woman just nodded once.

“Understood.”

Though she was responsible for all of what happened next, Paradigm in truth barely saw much of it. She remembered her own hands tearing through reinforced steel as if it was wax; she caught glimpses of bone tearing through flesh and the sight of both man and machine being impaled with thrown shrapnel.

At the end, Paradigm ‘woke up’ atop a pile of broken flesh and steel, her arms covered in blood and small, smoldering fires all around. She was on her hands and knees, the eye of a hurricane of violence.

As this fact began to sink in, she held her arms close to her chest, and rocked back and forth.

“Alex!” Paradigm cried out, like a child, “Alex! Where are you?! Something’s wrong! Alex!”

“I’m here, Winter, I’m here.”

Paradigm, real name Winter Childs, turned her head and saw her brother, Alex, AKA Union. Tall, dark haired, he was hardly dressed for combat in his brown pants and yellow shirt. But in many ways, he was just as dangerous as his sister.

“I think I did it again,” Paradigm whispered between sobs, “I didn’t mean to, I swear…”

“It’s okay,” Alex wrapped his arms around his sister and comforted her as best he could, “I know it was an accident. I’m here, I’ll make everything better.”

“Promise?”

Alex looked around at the wreckage, blood and other fluids staining the walls, strewn bodies everywhere.

“...promise.”

Later

Alex ushered his sister through the dark-force portal created by Night Strike. As they were leaving, he picked up Fillion’s suitcase, stained with blood and oil.

They came out into the cargo hold of a boat, not much bigger than the average living room. With the exception of Val and Night Strike, the other members of the team were nowhere to be seen.

“You forgot something,” Alex held out the suitcase for his leader. Night Strike sheepishly reached for it without a second thought, but the moment his fingers touched the handle, Union swung his fist into his commander’s stomach, making him double over.

“If we didn’t need you, I would kill you inch by inch,” Alex spat. He led his sister away gently, and left the room without so much as looking at Val.

“I don’t think Alex approves of you deploying his little sister,” Val observed neutrally.

“Figured that out all by yourself, did you?” Night Strike coughed, hands still on his knees, “we didn’t have a choice. We just finished laying low, and got to finish what little work we get quickly.”

“We were supposed to bring back Mr. Fillion too,” Val noted.

“Well, no mission runs smooth,” Night Strike shrugged, “important thing is, we got what we wanted. We lucked out that there’s no heat on us because of Devil’s Island…”

“And whose fault was that, sir?”

“...but now that we’re in the clear, we need to get back to work,” he sighed, “keep on keeping on.”

“Understood sir. So long as you’re sure the heat is off.”

Half a world away, Avalon, Private office of Excalibur’s Advance Team leader

Manuel Deigo Armand Vincente, or Danny Vincent to his associates (friends weren’t worth the investment to the young spy) looked at the files scattered across his desk. They came from a half dozen different sources and were of varying worth, heavily redacted files from the CIA, a file full of speculation from Interpol, a detailed in depth file from Russian Intelligence and other morally questionable yet still reliable sources.

The files all concerned a black-ops Genoshian mutant team, labeled ‘Strikeforce: Shadow’ by their government. Officially, the team was disbanded after the X-Men overthrew the Magistrate government, but even someone who’d only spent a year in covert ops. would know that was a bold faced lie.

The team was one of several that specialized in covert insertion into foreign countries, and elimination of anyone with evidence of Genosha’s use of mutant slavery. There were easily two dozen high profile deaths linked to the team, from reporters to highly placed members of law enforcement. And Genosha’s dirty little secret was exposed, Strikeforce: Shadow was seen as so ‘radioactive’ that even when Magneto was given Genosha, the magistrates didn’t dare use them. It would be like fighting Vietnam with nuclear weapons. Even if they won, they’d still lose.

Ironically, it was Magneto that allowed the team to operate more freely. No one wanted to arrest criminals who’d make Magneto look better by comparison, so Strikeforce: Shadow’s Interpol arrest warrant was silently pushed to the bottom of the heap, and forgotten.

Up until their team leader crashed a black market weapons expo and launch a bio-weapon at Genosha, killing a member of Excalibur in the effort to disable it.

So as a test of his newest attachment to Excalibur, Joey Chapman ordered Junta to bring the team in with minimal assistance (translated: none) from the main team. But looking at the files, Danny wasn’t convinced that his team had the edge he preferred in a fight.

So Danny pushed back his chair, and decided to do what he always did, exploit the rules. Chapman said that he couldn’t ask for help unless there was an emergency. But that didn’t mean someone couldn’t ask to be on his team, and he had the perfect idea who might be willing to exactly that.

Suzi Endo loved getting her hands dirty, but only in the intellectual sense. Give her a scientific mystery, and she would pick it apart with the finest sensors money could buy, or if she had the time, finest she could design. Suzi took a special pride in the quiet dignity that being both a

scientist and engineer allowed her to enjoy. Getting dirty to her was just some insecure engineer's way of confirming to themselves they actually did work.

Which was why she was mentally going through every profanity she'd ever learned as she was crawling through a maintenance tube, replacing several sensors that had burned out in the last week.

Unlike some of her teammates, Suzi Endo never forgot that their base Avalon was actually a living spaceship, created by some unknown alien with abilities yet to be discovered. When it was manned by Overmind and Terrax, it created weapons of mass destruction effortlessly, and when Excalibur adopted the base as their own, it responded by mimicking a standard hi-tech facility.

The exterior walls, living rooms, everything looked just like any other superhero base or advanced installation, but all one had to do was peel back the walls to see a murky, black panels that appeared to be perfectly plain never performed better than any technology Suzi had ever seen. Their base was a puzzle, one that would easily require a hundred hours of research to even begin to understand, and one Suzi was determined to solve.

“Hey, Cybermancer, you got a sec?”

“Yeah, hold on,” Suzi sighed. She recognized the voice instantly. Chapman's new hire, or as Union Jack called him, Chapman Jr., Junta. Suzi had only really dealt with him a little bit, but honestly didn't know what to make of him. He was smart, that much was obvious but he carried himself with the practiced ease of a consummate liar. Suzi knew the type, they made up half the Party officials she had to deal with back home, and the ability to recognize them was almost second nature by now.

Suzi shimmied out of the maintenance duct, and brushed the dust from her cover-alls. Junta offered her a hand up, and she took it.

“Thanks. What seems to be the problem?”

“I'm having problems hooking up my laptop to the network. I've got the password down just fine, but I keep getting disconnecting,” Junta explained as he showed Suzi his laptop. The young engineer flipped it open, and when she did her jaw dropped.

On the laptop's screen was the image of a man in a full body suit, blue stripe in the middle, grey running down the side and several belts containing custom weapons. Cybermancer recognized the man instantly, and hated him with a passion.

“Oh, sorry,” Junta reached over and removed the image from the screen, “that was a file I was reviewing for an upcoming mission.”

“Rock never mentioned anything about that to me,” Suzi said, still stunned, “when did this come in?”

“It’s not a mission for your team, just mine,” Junta explained, “Chapman wants to know if the team I assembled for our advance team can handle ourselves by ourselves.”

“Clever,” Cybermancer remarked with a dry chuckle.

“Well, we’ll have to agree to disagree there.”

“No, I mean you,” Suzi corrected, “you come in here, on an innocent errand and ‘accidentally’ show me the mug shot of the man who killed a teammate. And of course, you’re kind enough to use ‘we’ in describing your position in Excalibur, rookie. According to Rock, your mission is supposed to operate without support from us.”

“So you’re saying you’re not interested?” Junta smiled, “you happen to be the base’s default technician, and keep everything running smoothly. I’d be willing to bet Chapman would bend a few personal rules for you.”

“I’m sure I could twist his arm,” Cybermancer replied, “but don’t give yourself too much credit kid. I was there when Eshu was killed. He was a friend, and if I can bring his killer to justice, then it’s my responsibility to do so.”

“Fair enough,” Junta shrugged, “I wanted to see how cagey you are, to be honest. Running down Night Strike’s crew isn’t going to be a fist fight, they’re good at staying under the radar. I don’t need a naïve idiot slowing me down.”

“Duly noted. I’ll make sure to ensure my lie to Chapman is especially convincing.”

Junta closed his laptop, “That’d be much appreciated. See you at the briefings.”

Later

“Alright people, listen up. We happen to have the good fortune of having intelligence on our targets, and that’s something we are going to take advantage of,” Danny said.

Cybermancer took a moment to glance at her teammates. The room was a marked contrast to Excalibur’s usual briefs. Hellios, barely paying attention, Silverclaw struggling to stay awake, Commando paying rapt attention even while he was sitting slack in his chair, Scarlet Scarab’s detached demeanor, as a whole how the team treated briefings reflected who they were.

That was hardly the case with the Advance team. All four paid rapt attention, even the sociopathic Shiva, to Junta. He was standing in front of a white blackboard, manila folder in hand, almost like a college professor teaching a class.

“We’re targeting a team of enhanced mutants,” Danny began, “they’re skilled, but we’re lucky in that this team seems to have little in the way of major combat experience. They specialize in

quick insertions and wet works. That said, I'm sure their time as mercenaries has improved their resume, so take nothing for granted."

Junta turned on the projector, and an image of Night Strike was displayed on the screen.

"This is their leader, who goes by the name Night Strike. His powers are focused through the suit he wears, which enables him to create weapons out of darkforce or merge with shadows. He has limited teleportation abilities, but defines slippery."

Next came an image of Val.

"This is Night Strike's second in command. No moniker, just Val for whatever reason. She's their combat expert, and has several fight enhancements powered by the energy her mutant powers generate. Enhanced speed, strength, the usual plus the ability to focus energy through a staff she always carries. She's also married to another member of the squad, an angle we might have to exploit if we want to keep her under control."

Junta called up an image of Multi-Able.

"This man is their main source of cannon fodder. Multi-Able, as he calls himself, is capable of energy based self duplication. The number of duplicates is unknown, but what we do know is that one mortal wound is all it takes to make the things harmlessly dissipate. He's dangerous, but a poor fighter with little initiative. He could be the key to controlling Val, and vice versa."

Next image was that of Airborne.

"This little lady goes by Airborne. Her mutant powers are to produce some sort of anti-gravity agent and internal propellant. Which basically means she can fly very fast while carrying a great deal of weight. She's believed to have single handedly extracted her team on several occasions. While normally that would be annoying, there's the fact that her arms are cybernetic with automatic weapons. She usually wears a backpack that allows her to carry a decent amount of ammunition."

"How'd she lose her arms?" Suzi interrupted. She could see right away from the face Danny made, that it wasn't a question he wanted to answer.

That only made her want to know the answer more.

"They were amputated shortly after she was assigned to the team," Danny explained quickly.

"...you must be joking!" Suzi gasped.

"Flight's a pretty mundane ability in our world," Junta explained, "a human fighter jet, a little less so. Also, don't feel too sorry for her. The only reason why she was spared the mutate process is because of her family connections, and because of her, dozens of people who might

have exposed Genosha's secret before the X-Men did, are dead. Five reporters, eight human rights activists and three would-be defectors, and that's just who we know of."

Cybermancer wanted to reply with something snarky (especially considering what she knew of Junta's record), but realized there wouldn't be much point, and though it went against her nature, she knew he was right. It was dangerous to be sympathetic to an enemy, especially one with a history of black-ops. It was a good way to end up dead.

"Next up is a gentleman that's deceptively dangerous," Junta brought up an image of Union, "this gent has the ability to merge and disconnect any molecules that he touches. Basically, he can disintegrate anything as well as superglue anything to anything else. Dangerous, but as luck would have it he serves primarily as their medic. Oh, and he helps keep the final member of this merry band in line, who happens to be his sister."

Finally, Junta brought up an image of Paradigm.

"This one is going to be tricky. Powers unknown, but has never been seen outside her suit. From what we can observe, she has super strength and the ability to deflect or absorb energy. Without a doubt the most powerful member of the team, she's demonstrated an assortment of powers. We definitely need something special to put her down."

"We need more muscle to put them all down!" Shiva snapped, "they've got strength, a teleporter and air support!"

"And we've got precision, ruthlessness and genius on our side," Junta replied, "plus, we're no pushovers in regards to muscle. Now, here's what we do first..."

South Africa

John Mace sighed as he closed the door. He'd spent the last six hours in negotiations for greater humanitarian aid for the Genosha refugees, six hours trying to remind the South African government how much they owed Genosha, how basic human kindness demanded that the ex-patriot citizens now rotting in the shanty town just outside of Johannesburg, mockingly referred to as District M.

Six straight hours, and all he was able to walk away with was a strong 'maybe'. Mace thanked God that his combat training instilled within him patience a hundred times that of the common man. Otherwise he might have used that very same combat training to kill each and every member of the board with the pen his daughter gave him for his birthday.

That very same combat training alerted him to the fact that his house was breached by the time he closed his front door. It was a subtle thing, he didn't hear the sound of his twins playing video games, the sounds of his wife cleaning up after a long day, the lack of sound yet a feeling that the house was still occupied.

John reached into the umbrella stand by the door, pulled up the false bottom, and withdrew a revolver loaded with adamantium bullets. He wasn't much surprised that the first weapon, a taped Desert Eagle, was missing.

He could literally smell them in his living room, the tang of steel, taint of gun powder found their way to his nose, and the weight of their bodies on his hardwood floor. John weighed his options carefully. If they were here to kill him, they sure as hell wouldn't hang out in his living room like it was it was a coffee shop.

So, swallowing a lump in his throat, he stepped into the living room, gun at the ready but finger off the trigger.

"Damn," he growled under his breath, when he saw Junta's team lounging on his couch. Like anyone else worth their salt in the Intelligence Community, he knew each member of the team much like members of the KGB knew of the CIA. They had some information, some reliable, some not, and hoped to meet the other on their own terms.

Junta was slouching in John's, a cocky grin on his face. Guishen was on the couch, cleaning several guns on top of a cloth. It took John a moment to realize that Guishen was cleaning several of the weapons he'd kept concealed around the house, and not his own personal weapons. Opposite him casually sat Persona Grata, while Cybermancer stood behind her. John wondered for a moment where the sociopath called Shiva was, before he felt a slight presence just behind him.

"Hey Mr. Mace, why don't you join us?" Junta offered with a friendly smile.

"Where is my family?" John demanded as he stepped into the room.

"We convinced your wife that she should have a friend pick her and them up for a spell," Persona Grata explained, "she thought she warned you, but we hacked her cell phone."

"I see," John placed his gun on the mantle, "so what is this little visit about?"

"We're interested in Strikeforce: Shadow," Junta began, "we've got intelligence that they were in contact with members of Genosha's exile government."

"So why aren't you talking to them?" Mace asked, "I've been a naturalized citizen of South Africa for a decade and a half. And before you answer, 'Because you run a security firm', you damn well better remember all the friends that firm has brought me."

"We're not here to accuse you of anything," Junta replied evenly, "just a warning. One of the main reasons your former countrymen get as much aid as they do, is because they agreed to disarm."

"I'm well aware," Mace said through gritted teeth.

“Good, because what, a million exile Genoshians rely on that aid?”

“Two and a half,” Mace grunted.

“Oh, that many? Man, that’d be impossible for a private industry to feed,” Junta said flippantly, “no international sympathy points, easy target for terrorists if they show up on CNN, those bastards just getting buy on the good graces of the United Nations...”

“Is there a point to this?” Mace snapped.

“Actually, yes,” Junta flicked a small coin towards Mace, who caught it in one hand. It promptly crumbled in his hand like a dry leaf, “then that’s not going to tell us anything, is it?”

Mace brushed his hands off, “And what the hell was that supposed to be?”

“The latest CIA spy trick,” Junta explained, “a coin filled with time release nanites. They drop a few around a target’s house, lie dormant until activated, then consume the coin’s matter to reproduce, spread out and eavesdrop. Say what you want about the Americans, but they have some impressive toys.”

Junta’s explanation was little more than techno-babble lies, but Mace had no way of knowing that. He stiffened, which in the spy business was the same as was the same as going pale with fear. Junta knew the man was probably as paranoid Mace took precautions on a daily basis (the arsenal Guishen was still cleaning was evidence of that), but there were always ways to sneak things under the radar.

“Assuming this was even true, why would the Americans even care one way or the other?”

“You know the United States,” Junta stood up, “always looking for good, expendable muscle. I have a friend in The Company, and he tipped me off. Me, personally? I just want to bring Strikeforce Shadow in, alive. So I thought I might give you a heads up, before I start my operation.”

“Consider me duly warned. Now get the hell out!” Mace spat.

Silently, the members of Excalibur stood up and walked out, like party guests who realized they overstayed their welcome. Guishen was the last, he stopped at the front for a moment, and turned his head.

“You should change the plastic bags you store your weapons in at least twice a year. Otherwise, they cease to be airtight,” Guishen said helpfully. John Mace, experienced veteran of over a hundred battles, couldn’t help but to be unnerved by the man’s genuine smile.

“So was there a point to that besides threatening refugees?” Cybermancer demanded as they walked away, “I know you’ve read the same reports as me. Even if it was a bluff, it was still a damn low blow!”

“Two reasons,” Junta replied calmly, “first, John Mace serves as Strikeforce Shadow’s main intermediary. Without him, they have little in the way of contacts, money or any other resources should they try to rabbit. Mace is going to probably spend half his personal budget just to establish a pointless alibi for all the times he’s contacted our targets. Even better is the fact that when he sweeps his house tonight, he’s only going to find one bug. All pros use at least two, and it’s going to freak him the hell out.”

“You’re a little too proud of violating someone’s peace of mind,” Cybermancer observed, “And the second?”

“Psychological warfare,” Junta smiled, “when we find our targets, they’re going to try to reach out to old friends. When that fails, they’re going to be forced to rely on their current employers. And there’s no one for law enforcement to squeeze than a criminal.”

“So now we hunt?” Shiva smiled.

“Hunt? Junta scoffed, as his team trailed behind, “no, now we take them apart. By the time they realize we’re after them, we’ll have already won.”

NEXT ISSUE: The Advance Team moves against Strikeforce: Shadow, but in a way you’d never expect!

Excalibur

#27

February 2011

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SHADOW OPERATIONS"

Part Two

Written by Daniel Ingram

THE STORY THUS FAR: Excalibur's shiny new Advance Team has been given a special assignment by Director Chapman, leader of Excalibur. Bring down the former Genoshian black-ops group Strikeforce:Shadow, and do it without the assistance of the larger team. Junta, however, still managed to secure the assistance of Cybermancer, who is eager to avenge the teammate Strikeforce: Shadow killed. But she's not exactly sold on her teammates and their methods...

Somalia, Gobolka Bay

Ina Cabdille Dalmar breathed heavily as he sat across from the man who'd once been one of his most reliable go-betweens. Three years ago the man infiltrated his home effortlessly, and instead of killing him as one might expect, the mystery man explained that he had a business proposition. Allow certain ships to pass his country unmolested, and he would be rewarded a million a year payout, and possible tips about vulnerable and valuable targets.

Despite the man's obviously lethal nature, at no time did he make the usual addition threat, 'take this offer or die', though that threat obviously lurked beneath his polite smile. When he learned the operative's codename later, it came as no surprise that it translated as 'demon'.

So when the man returned, bypassing his upgraded security as effortlessly as before, Dalmar felt no more comfortable with the man's presence than he did the first time. The honest smile clashed too much with the weapons on his waist, and short swords on his back.

"You need to relax," Guishen smiled warmly, "I know I am not here on behalf of my government, but that shouldn't prevent us from having a conversation."

"A...conversation?" Dalmar was keenly aware of the gun in his desk, though he knew it wouldn't be much help. Guishen would sense the attack before Dalmar even fully committed, and wouldn't hesitate to end him. Like too many weapons, it provided a false sense of security, "what about, exactly?"

Garrison Katar, with his sandy blond hair and five foot eleven build, wasn't much to look at, at least not at first glance. But that was exactly what the mercenary slash assassin wanted. Katar

was a man who liked to think of himself as practical in a business that was nothing but deceit and danger. He didn't hold grudges, never explained his powers and always looked before he leaped. Yes, he was resigned to the fact that he'd die a sudden and violent death, but the road didn't have to be paved by stupid decisions.

But that wasn't to say that he hadn't hit a few pot holes along the way. Two years ago, he tried to raise his status by eliminating a fellow assassin who'd been 'Red Listed', which meant their deaths would buy credibility whoever took them down. Like a Letter of Recommendation inked in blood, written on the dead flesh of a dead sociopath.

Katar tried that once, and barely escaped with his life. Rather than risking a rematch, he relocated to Africa, a continent that always needed men of violence, and easier to reach from India than any other moderately profitable area of conflict.

Katar thought he'd put the entire incident behind him, so no one was more shocked than him when the Indian psychopath known as Shiva strolled through the front door, smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

Garrison's usual watering hole didn't cater to the average law-biding citizen, not by any stretch of the imagination. But everyone in the bar took one glance at Shiva, and instinctively decided to turn their attention from her to their drinks.

"Well, well, well," Katar kicked out a chair for Shiva, and unclipped the holster for his revolver opposite of the poisoned killer. He relaxed as best he could, half because he didn't want to die tense, and half because he thought his powers might be able to save his life again, "judging from the fact you didn't try ambushing me outside, I'm guessing this is a personal call."

"You tried to kill me," Shiva said with a hint of amusement. She spun the chair around, and sat down facing Garrison, "does anything get more personal than that?"

"Sex?"

"Not by much," Shiva shrugged, "you can lay off the hand cannon, by the way. Both you and I know it wouldn't do any good, and I'm not here to kill you."

"Be still my heart," Katar's hand remained on the 'cannon', "so if this isn't revenge, then it's business."

"That's right," Shiva nodded, "I have some...things I need to perform here in Africa. Powerful employer, lots of money but very hands off. Has something he wants done, and wants me to do it for him."

"But you don't know the lay of the land."

“Correct,” Shiva lied, “and my needs are rather specific. I need a team capable of quick insertion and extraction, with experience working together. My mission can’t afford rookie mistakes, not at the price he’s offering.”

Katar rubbed his unshaved chin, “And if I do this for you, we’re square?”

“No, not even close,” Shiva’s smile uncomfortably reminded Garrison of too many wild animals, “but I promise not to kill you next time I see you. Give me information, or give me a fight to the death.”

Katar sighed. It wasn’t the best deal, but he wasn’t in the mood for hospital food.

“There are a couple of guys you might be interested in. Your best bet, though, would be these guys by the name of Strikeforce: Shadow...”

Langley, Virginia

Danny Vincent drummed his fingers on the glass table, comforted by the knowledge that annoying as it was to do, it was even more annoying for the secretary that was keeping him from meeting his contact.

As far as the CIA was concerned, Danny Vincent was persona non grata, a lightning rod for uncomfortable scrutiny. Some time back, he was a small but important part of a botched operation to overthrow the ruler of Wakanda, the Black Panther, and to install a sympathetic leader that would have given them access to Wakanda’s advanced technology.

That operation went so impossibly wrong that the CIA had to spend half a billion dollars burning bridges, creating cut-outs and discrediting anyone who was a part of the op., just to stave off a United Nations investigation. The closest comparison Danny could think of was an animal knowing off its own leg to get out of a trap, and Junta saw his career vanish in the span of a week.

But now, things were different. As a member of Chapman’s Excalibur, Danny Vincent enjoyed official status as a member of international law enforcement. Due to dozens of complicated treaties, Danny could walk into any law enforcement agency as free as he pleased, and request certain otherwise confidential information.

Oh, he couldn’t get the plans for the invasion of Latveria, but he was certainly entitled to the annual superhuman assessment of Africa, an internal report about everyone and anyone who happened to possess powers worth mentioning on the continent. Information was the lifeblood of any intelligence agency, and superpowers could screw-up an operation faster than any reporter.

“Come on, Marvin, I know you’re not on the phone,” Junta shouted past the aged secretary. She gave him a withering look, but otherwise said nothing.

Marvin Philips was the CIA's regional director for Africa. The son of diplomats, there wasn't a single African country he wasn't familiar with. Junta knew this because Marvin was the man who recommended him for the Wakanda op that made Junta radioactive to the CIA and other intelligence agencies. As far as Danny was concerned, if he could get a little pay back, along with needed Intel, it was worth the wait.

"Your daughter's play starts in an hour and a half," Junta said loudly, "according to her Facebook page, she's really excited about you being there. Something about you usually being too busy?"

Junta smiled as the door opened.

Danny stood up and nodded to the secretary, "Thanks for keeping me company."

Without any hint of ceremony, Marvin dropped the Pan-African report on all superhumans on the glass coffee table, and gave Danny a look of pure contempt.

"You know, when they said I was radioactive, Marv, they didn't mean literally," Danny began going through the files, making sure it wasn't filled with too many redactions, "no reason we can't be friends."

"I like my career just the way it is," Marvin shot back, "look, I'm sorry you got left out in the cold, but that's the way the game is played. Don't come here acting like nothing happened."

"Officially, nothing did happen," satisfied with the file, Junta picked it up and placed it under his arm, "and in our business, the rules only apply if you're not smart enough to make them work for you."

Avalon, Advance Team Briefing Room

Cybermancer motioned towards the huge stack of papers on the main table of the briefing room. In the back of her head, Suzi thought there had to be at least half a tree's worth of paper and a gallon of ink, all told.

"That was all I could get from various mercenary groups operating in Africa before they cut me off," Cybermancer explained.

"Thanks, good work," Junta, in one fell swoop, pushed all the papers off the table and onto the floor.

"Hey, what the hell did you do that for?!" For a brief second, Suzi seriously considered targeting Danny with every weapon in her armor and just letting the chips fall where they may.

"Because between Guishen, Shiva and me, know everything we need to find them," Junta explained.

“So why the hell did you have me do all that hacking?!” Suzi demanded.

“To keep you out of the way,” Junta said with no shred of remorse, “I need your firepower, not explaining to you every step we make while we do real work.”

“You don’t need to give me busy work, you son of a…”

“Suzi, that’s enough,” Persona Grata gently placed a hand on Cybermancer’s shoulder, “what’s done is done. Better we focus on the future, yes?”

Cybermancer sighed, “Yeah, fine. Do it again, Junta, and you’ll see just how fast I can make your life hell.”

“He will not disrespect you like that again,” Guishen said in a neutral tone, “that is a promise.”

There was an awkward pause as everyone turned and gave Guishen a curious look.

“Alright,” Shiva cleared her throat, “I love the tense atmosphere as much as anyone, but the more time we spend talking, the less time I get to spend actually cutting. So what do we know?”

“Strikeforce:Shadow is currently under a retainer for a Nigerian crimelord that goes by the name of Adama Rulke, a new face on the African crime scene” Junta began, “while we weren’t able to find out where they’re housed, but we were able to find out that Rulke is moving some valuable merchandise soon. Given his usual concern about security, I think it’s safe to say he’ll use the Strikeforce to secure it.”

“Do we know what it is that’s being transported?” Suzi asked.

“Nope.”

“Do we know where it’s going?”

“Nope.”

“Do we even know why whatever it is they’re transporting, is important?”

“Nope.”

“A lot of work for just a thin strand of information,” Suzi observed contemptuously.

“Yes, yes it is,” Danny smirked, “Intelligence gathering is a lot of work for a few glimmers of hope. It requires experience, training and patience. Now do you understand why I gave you busy work?”

Later

Cybermancer looked at the giant locker of equipment with a grimace.

“All this for one team of mutants?” Cybermancer mused aloud, “overkill doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“Amongst law enforcement, there is the belief that a greater use of force will ultimately result in less loss of life,” Cybermancer turned her head, and saw Guishen standing in the doorway of her lab.

Cybermancer knew it was wrong, but she couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable in the man’s presence. He was a vivid reminder of her country’s more unsavory practices. As if that weren’t enough, she still didn’t know what to think of the fact that he wasn’t removed from his position for incompetence, but for being overzealous.

“I understand your trepidation,” Guishen replied passively, as he picked up the giant locker and slung it over his shoulder. Brimming with equipment, the thing must have weighed at least two tons, but he held it steady without complaint, “my past work for The Party was unpleasant. I suppose that was why I was so quick to defend you. I really do envy you.”

“There’s not much to envy,” Cybermancer countered, “I’m a third string hero on a UN team that’s deliberately underfunded by the same people who expects us to solve their problems.”

“You’re also one of the most revered heroes in modern China,” Guishen explained, “you have a series of action figures, a focus every weekend in the news cycles. You’re a public hero, the kind I can never be.”

Cybermancer felt a wave of guilt wash over her as she listened to Guishen. She only vaguely knew of how she was promoted to the country back home, and it never occurred to her, though it logically should have, that Guishen might have wanted to same level of respect and admiration, something top reflect his commitment to the state.

Then Suzi remembered how he expressed that commitment to his country, and the guilt became an uncomfortable feeling she couldn’t exactly describe. Needless to say, the two of them walked to the hangar in silence, where they found the other members of the Advance team waiting for them.

“You double check the equipment?” Junta asked in a surprisingly business-like fashion.

“Of course,” Cybermancer replied quickly, surprised by the lack of condensation, “I designed some of the weapons myself.”

“Then lets get moving. Our window of opportunity is a small one and it’s a long flight,” Junta commented, “plus, I want to play with this cloaked VTOL as much as possible.”

“You do know that, unless you found a new one in the last twelve hours, the only VTOL craft Excalibur has is easily defeated by sensors designed five years ago,” Cybermancer said, “we got that thing from the French government who didn’t want to pay the maintenance costs anymore.”

“Trust me, it really won’t matter.”

High above a lonely road in Nairobi

Cybermancer held the controls steady, keeping the craft above their target, a heavily armored truck some three stories below. A red light flashed on her consul, and Cybermancer opened the rear bay door, and prayed.

Guishen stepped out first with blithe indifference about the ground so far below. He fell gracefully, twisting casually as he unsheathed his short swords, and positioned them for his landing.

He came down on the truck’s front, landing in a crouch with his swords pointed straight down, the momentum allowing them to slice through both armor plating and the engine block like wet clay.

Guishen didn’t so much as bother to look at the two men in the cab of the truck behind him. Sitting behind one and a half inches of reinforced glass, the two were still struggling with the fact that a man had dropped out of nowhere and disabled their truck, which they knew could take grenades without slowing down, with just two swords.

Guishen tightened his grip on the swords now imbedded in the truck, and using them as braces, kicked backwards. The reinforced glass tore free from the screws and glue that had been holding it in place and slammed into the guards, rendering them unconscious as the armored truck slid to a stop.

Junta and Persona Grata landed on the back of the truck next. Persona Grata held a devise that, from afar, might be mistaken for a simple spear, but in truth, was actually a very advanced spear.

The Sentient LMD jammed it down on the ceiling of the armored truck, where it managed to punch through some three inches of solid steel. Once it was in, Persona Grata flipped a switch on the end of the spear, and nodded to Junta.

At the opposite end of the spear, the tip opened up to reveal three globes that released a strobe light at a very specific frequency, blinding everyone and disrupting the abilities of anyone who used the mysterious energy known as the dark force. A fourth globe spewed out a large amount of knock out gas, which in the small confines of the truck would be all but impossible to avoid.

With that done, both Persona Grata and Junta hurried to wrap a tick white cord into a circle on the roof of the truck. Persona manipulated the cord personally while Junta laid small amounts of adhesive putty on top to hold it in place. It took less than twenty seconds total, and when it was

done, both took several conscious steps back before Junta reached into his pocket, flipped the cover on the switch and pressed the activator.

The cord was a pyromaniac's wet dream of incendiaries. Though it held only small amounts of white phosphorus, micro-particles of titanium and Momma's blend of napalm gel, it was still strong enough to singe the hair on Thor's head. It burned itself out in a split second literally, but cut through the reinforced steel like a chainsaw through tissue.

Junta silently signaled Guishen and Shiva, and the two dove in through the hole. Less than ten seconds later, the rear of the armored truck was thrown open.

"We have a problem," Shiva dragged two unconscious bodies to the rear, and Junta rubbed his head in irritation.

The armored truck held four people in the rear, and given what they were protecting, Junta had assumed that the four would be superhumans. Not the entirety of Strikeforce: Shadow, but a damn good start.

Instead the truck was filled with four African men. Junta recognized them immediately from Interpol files. They were Rulke's bodyguards, capable of manipulating darkforce into weapons and using it to teleport. And as luck would have it, the strobe grenade meant for Night Strike was just as effective against them.

"Alright, Guishen, Shiva, secure them. We're moving on to plan B," Junta stated.

"We have a plan B?" Persona Grata asked.

"We do now," Junta activated his radio, "change of plans, Cybermancer. Bring the plane back to Avalon, we'll brief you when we get there."

"How are you..." Cybermancer watched in annoyance as the armored truck disappeared within the HERMES teleport effect. Scientifically, Suzi knew Junta had just strained the system to breaking point, and was personally annoyed that she would have to make the two hour trip back to base alone.

"You're going to what?!"

Junta had his hands folded behind his back as he stood in front of Chapman's desk. The Englishman's face was livid, but Danny wasn't too terribly worried. After all, he'd expected this.

"Ransom Rulke's bodyguards back to him in exchange for him giving up Strikeforce: Shadow," Junta repeated, "if we keep digging, they'll go to ground and we'll never find them. But Rulke can have them delivered to us at a time and place of our choosing, before they ever catch wind that a sexy spy and his sidekicks are gunning for them."

Chapman ran his hand through his hair, “And the money? He had his men protecting some twenty million dollars.”

“Oh, I’ll give that back, to sweeten the deal.”

Chapman looked at Junta as if he’d grown a second head.

“Oh, don’t worry. I intend to spray it with some radioactive dyes that’ll let us track them.”

“He’ll see that coming.”

Junta smiled, “Of course. So he’ll be forced to sit on a pile of money but he’ll at least have to bite at the opportunity. We have his top men, and his money. All he has to do to get both back is hand over a mercenary crew that he’s hired time from time. Hardly Sophie’s Choice.”

“Seems like we’re handing over some diamonds for chump change,” Chapman observed, “why don’t we just go with the Bird in the hand, and not in the bush?”

“Because Rulke is part of something bigger,” Junta answered, “he’s part of a much larger organization and if we go after them, we will need to be ready for war. He has considerable influence in the United Nations delegation, and can cut us off at the knees before we could bring him down. But! If we offered him a sweet deal, then I think he’d take it without much offense.”

Chapman rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “And if we don’t get Strikeforce: Shadow, we’ll have let millions and four major criminals slipped through our fingers. A screw-up like that...would deep six anyone’s career.”

“That it would,” Junta said without missing a beat.

“Already, go ahead,” Chapman said, “but if this fails, you might as well change your name from Junta to scapegoat.”

Secret location in Africa

Adama Rulke felt absolutely no guilt as he entered a heavily encrypted website that served as a point of contact for the Genosha mercenary team Strikeforce Shadow, and prepared to betray them to law enforcement. The Genoshian mercenary had done good work for him in the years past, but the deal Danny Vincent was offering up was too good to pass up.

“I want you to hire Strikeforce Shadow,” the smug little spy said over the video feed, “I don’t care how you do it. We’ll give you a location, and if you deliver them, we’ll return all of your property, no questions asked.”

As a crime lord, Rulke knew that loyalty for those outside the organization was a luxury that he simply couldn’t afford. His bodyguards knew too many secrets, and while he could afford to lose

the money Excalibur confiscated, he also couldn't pass up an opportunity to get it back if it was at all possible.

Rulke put on his best game when Night Strike picked up.

"Rulke, good buddy, how's tricks?" Night Strike asked casually, "hope you're calling for work, because we're getting a little itchy here."

Rulke smiled. Perhaps he was disloyal, but he still felt that there should at least be some honor amongst thieves.

"I do, actually. Some people have crossed me recently, and I want you to kill them for me..."

TO BE CONTINUED...

NEXT ISSUE: The trap is set, as Strikeforce: Shadow is set on a collision course for Excalibur's Advance Team, but who's trapping who?

Excalibur
#28
May 2011
MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"SHADOW OPERATIONS"
Finale

Written by Daniel Ingram

Avalon, Excalibur's Headquarters

"You have got to be insane."

Danny Vincent, Junta, leader of Excalibur's small advance team, just smiled at Cybermancer as he went through the files on his desk.

"What, trusting that Rulke will produce Strikeforce: Shadow?" Junta asked, "or giving him back his bodyguards if he does?"

"Yes," Cybermancer deadpanned.

The two were in one of the main lab, both working on separate projects. Suzi was making a few modifications to her armor in anticipation of their upcoming mission, while Junta was going over and checking surplus equipment 'donated' by SHIELD.

"Look," Junta flipped open a laptop, and opened up program labeled 'LM-Personalities', "Rulke will produce them, I'm confident of that. We have his best men and the longer they're in our custody the more he has to fear."

"And you don't think an African crime-lord can't think of a way to still screw us?" Suzi grabbed a welding torch, and began applying it to her armor, "he didn't become a millionaire crime-lord by being stupid."

"Oh, I know he'll try," Junta answered, "we just have to be smarter, is all. But we're going to treat this thing like a law enforcement operation, but some bad comic book action scene. Why are you so worried?"

"Because we're dealing with a highly trained black-ops team," Suzi snapped, "how can you be so sure your plan will even work?"

"Because I've been in the exact same position," Junta explained, "look, they may do mercenary work, but their training is as infiltration and extraction specialists. And people like them always

fall back on their training. So they'll go with a quick, surgical strike, and that's when we'll hit them. Cake walk, trust me."

Three blocks away from a deserted warehouse in Freetown, Sierra Leone

"I say we blow it up."

Strikeforce: Shadow looked at their leader like he'd grown a new head. Airborne put her face in her hands, Val let out a tired sigh, while her husband Multi-Able gave her a look that all but said 'Is he insane?' while Union simply gritted his teeth. Only Paradigm ignored the statement, focusing her attention on a fascinating anthill some three feet away from her.

"Honey, please tell our leader he's a madman," Multi-Able deadpanned, "because blowing up a warehouse with people inside, even bad people, is not how we keep a low profile."

"He's got a point, sir," Val said flatly.

"And I don't wanna blow anyone up!" Airborne protested, "I hate havin' to shoot anyone as is!"

"In addition, 'oh leader'," Union all but sneered, "an explosion would make leaving undetected that much harder."

"Listen, these guys are terrorists, scum of scum according to our boss," Night Strike insisted, "we plan some bombs around the building, and we make it look like they screwed up. The headlines won't be 'mutant bombers' but 'idiot would be bombers'. Who's to look too hard into that?"

For a moment, the mutant ex-patriots paused, and looked at one another.

"That might be crazy enough to work," Multi-Able conceded, "but Rulke will still want us to confirm the kills."

"Well, at least we know why you insisted on buying all that C-4," Val shrugged.

"What, do you guys think I'm crazy or somethin'?" Night Strike did his best to look offended.

"We've never had any illusions about your mental state," Val replied calmly.

"Thank you," Night Strike walked towards their rental van, while Airborne and Union hung back.

"At least he's smart enough not to ask us what we think of his mental state," Union remarked.

Night Strike and Airborne took point in placing the charges. Airborne placed a pound of explosive on each corner of the warehouse's roof before rejoining her teammates, while Night Strike used his shadow abilities to slip into the warehouse itself. Like a snake made of ink, he

slithered from shadow to shadow, of which there was no shortage in the warehouse. In his wake he left little saucers of C-4, five total, before he stopped to look at the people he was going to kill.

It was like a scene out of a bad action movie. There were four men, with bad clothes and worse hygiene, playing poker surrounded by weapons. Night Strike didn't know why Rulke wanted these people dead, but from the looks of things, it would be no great loss to the world.

“Okay, I got the camera ready.”

Night Strike gave Multi-Able an ‘Are you serious?’ look, mixed with a side of ‘are you really that stupid?’.

“Hey, Rulke won't put us on payroll!” Multi-Able defended.

“What, are you going to put it up on Youtube?” Night Strike asked, “call it ‘Secret striketeam greatest hits’?”

“Well...an employer might just ask for our resume one day, and I thought...”

“Clearly you didn't,” Union remarked.

“C-4, while a powerful explosive, is also one of the most stable explosives used in combat,” Paradigm added as she looked up at the night's sky, “soldiers in Vietnam used it as firewood.”

“...right,” Night Strike tried to avoid eye-contact with his less than all-there subordinate.

“My man likes big explosions,” Val defended with a tone that made it clear that was there the discussion would end.

“I'm in charge of a crazy house,” Night Strike muttered.

“Vanilla puppies,” Paradigm added.

“Right. Just hold that thought...” Night Strike pressed the detonator, and moments later the entire dock shook, as a plume of flame the size of a house rose into the air, and the warehouse was reduced to little more than wood fragments. Even from three blocks away, the entire team felt the shockwave in their teeth

“Jesus!” Airborne shouted, “how much C-4 did you use?!”

“Not that much!”

“Sir, when you use enough explosives to destroy a city block, please remember that we're still on it,” Val said flatly.

“Hey, it wasn’t me!” Night Strike defended, “those idiots must have had a few barrels of explosives!”

“And you didn’t think to look?” Union demanded, “what if they had poison gas, or radioactive material?”

“I’m getting damn tired of you questioning me,” Night Strike took a step towards his Medic, “you don’t like how I run things, you and your sister can take your leave any damn time you want, but out here...!”

“Enough,” Val stepped between the two, “we should confirm the kill as best we can, and then scatter. The locals can’t ignore an explosion like that, and we need to be gone before they can arrive.”

“Agreed,” Night Strike nodded, “alright everyone, double time it!”

The Genoshian Black ops team sprinted to the still burning wreckage, and began to examine the area for anything recognizable, anything that would lend credence to the fact that they’d just accomplished their objective. To most, it was like finding a needle in a hay stack, but Strikeforce: Shadow had experience in this sort of thing.

“Commander!” Airborne shouted, before she dove into the still smoldering wreckage. Night Strike felt his blood run cold. Airborne only referred to him by his rank when she was nervous, and she had nerves of steel.

So focused on the now destroyed warehouse, no one noticed the water rippling just off the end of the dock, or how the wind around them was beginning to pick up.

Airborne was in and out of the fire, and next to her commanding officer in seconds, the decapitated head of one of their targets in her hands.

“Eww, I don’t need to see that!” Night Strike protested.

“Look closer, dummy!” Airborne snapped, holding the head upside down by the wires in its neck.

A light bulb went off in Night Strike’s head.

“An LMD, a fake person...” he muttered, “ambush!”

“Attention Strikeforce: Shadow!” Flood lights brighter than the sun washed over the group, blinding them and severing Night Strike’s connection to the dark-force all at once, “this is Junta of Excalibur. I have a warrant for your arrest. Lay down on the ground, hands atop your head!”

Night Strike felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He saw black helicopters armed to the teeth (with noise deduction technology), there was the hover craft with the spotlight and, in all likely

hood, members of Excalibur, an Avengers level team, ready to come down on his team like the hand of God himself.

Really, there was only one thing, to give his people even a chance.

“Scatter!”

“And there they go,” Junta said flatly. He was in the co-pilot’s seat of the main craft, with Cybermancer standing right behind him.

“Like roaches when the lights come on,” Cybermancer remarked. She turned towards the side hatch, “I’ll get Airborne, keep on Night Strike and don’t you dare let him get away!”

“Yes ma’am!” Junta replied. He pressed his ear radio, “they’re rabbiting, team! Get to your targets and keep them contained, go!”

Bethany Rhodes, aka Airborne, had tears in her eyes as she rocketed away from the scene. It wasn’t that she was afraid she couldn’t get away, it was the fact that she left her teammates, her family for the last six years, behind. Val, who was like a big sister, Multi-Able, who was like a funny uncle, even Union, the man she loved.

But Night Strike trained them, and trained them well. When he said scatter, Airborne had no intention of stopping until she passed at least two borders.

“Airborne, pull over!”

The mutant cyborg looked over her shoulder, and to her shock saw Cybermancer tearing towards her like a purple and silver guided missile.

“Did I really say pull over?” Cybermancer asked herself. She hadn’t realized how little attention she was paying attention to the chase, and how much she was focusing on the experimental engine installed on her back. Of all of Strikeforce: Shadow, it was obvious that Airborne had the best chance of escaping their ambush, thus Suzi was assigned to keep that from happening. Up until now, it seemed more like a scientific problem than a practical one.

That ended when Airborne stopped on a dime, and then shot up into the air faster than Cybermancer could follow with her eyes.

“Oh lovely,” Cybermancer brought her arms up instinctively as a rain of bullets smashed into her. The attack on her head wasn’t too surprising, given that most people assumed that because her long hair and mouth weren’t encased in steel, that they were vulnerable. No one ever thought that Cybermancer, having studied under Tony Stark, wasn’t an idiot. Her entire suit was protected by invisible force-fields that could take a tank shell without straining. The bullets from Airborne’s bionic guns fell well short of that, about as effective as rubber-bands against Kevlar.

Cybermancer tried to counter attack with her gauntlets, firing off small, controlled bursts, but Airborne was just too fast. She sped past like a formula one racecar, and peppered Cybermancer with automatic fire as she darted by.

“Damn she’s good at this,” Cybermancer muttered as she tried to fight back, “Bethany, you need to surrender! I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m not going to let you get away!”

“I’m doing just fine, thanks!” More bullets slammed into Cybermancer’s back, and it was then that she realized what Airborne was doing.

Airborne wasn’t fighting to win, she was fighting to escape. If she damaged the rocket on Cybermancer’s back, then the scientist would have no means of chasing her, no possibility of running her down.

“Airborne, give up!” Cybermancer scrolled through a few automatic targeting programs, and let loose an onslaught of energy blasts in every direction, trying to hit the mutant cyborg, “you are not getting away from me, but I don’t want to hurt you!”

“This is about Eshu, isn’t it?” Airborne dipped, bobbed and weaved through each and every blast of energy with such skill and grace it was like she was performing a school dance. She then pointed her arms at Cybermancer again, and the automatic rifles install on her wrist spat out another round of bullets, “he knew what he was signing up for! There ain’t no reason to make this personal!”

“He was a friend,” despite herself, Cybermancer flinched as the high caliber rounds struck her armor, “that’s reason enough for me. I know you didn’t want this life, and if you surrender I’ll put in a good word.”

“Ha!” Airborne laughed with a combination of contempt and disbelief, “lady, I may not know you well, but I know enough. You work in a lab, but I’ve served in the trenches! You don’t scare me!”

“I should,” Cybermancer activated a program she’d created specially to deal with Airborne, “because, you’re right. I do work in a lab, with nothing but cybernetic and imagination. Meanwhile, you’re a cyborg who relies on an unencrypted GPS signal to get around.”

Airborne had barely processed what Cybermancer had said when her vision began to notice that she was seeing static. Not blurred vision like she’d had one too many, but actual black and white television static inside her head.

“What are you doing?” Airborne gripped her head as she felt a surge of agony overtake her, “stop it, please!”

“I’ve rewritten the operating code on your cybernetic arms,” Cybermancer explained, “the wires in your head that control your arms now have too much power in them, thus the migraine you

feel. The interface between your eyes and targeting and positioning computer? Corrupted. Oh, and your superiors seemed to have installed some sort of remote failsafe..."

"OhGodohGodohGod," Airborne watched in horror as her arms hung limp at her side, refusing to respond to her commands.

Cybermancer wasn't certain what to expect after she'd hijacked Airborne's cybernetics. But she certainly didn't expect the young woman to pass how, and dropped like a stone.

"Oh hell," Cybermancer swooped in, and grabbed her enemy before she could fall more than ten feet. A quick scan which revealed, much to Suzi's relief, that Airborne had simply passed out in a panic, but was otherwise fine.

"I tried to do this peacefully," Cybermancer muttered weakly as she turned around, and headed back to the site of the ambush.

When Night Strike ordered his team to scatter, only two people remained where they were.

Well, technically six people remained in the same position, but in reality there was only Val, her husband the self-multiplier and four of his duplicate.

"You have to run," Val did everything she could not to look at her husband. She summoned her energy staff, and assumed a fighting stance, "I'm the only one who can even hope to hold them off besides Paradigm, and we know how that could turn out."

"I can't just leave you!" Multi-Able protested, "how can you expect to get out of here!"

"And do you really think they'll let us stay together in jail?" Val countered, "news flash, it's either they take us both down, or they take just me and your force multiplying ass rescues me!"

Multi-Able recognized that tone of voice, the tone that told him that this was where she stood in her opinion, and nothing short of God himself would make her budge.

"If you find someone prettier than me, I'll never forgive you," Multi-Able sighed.

"Never happen honey," Val countered, "might find someone wittier, though."

"Always gotta have the last word," husband and wife shared a passionate embrace, but only for a moment. Then, Multi-Able and his duplicates took off in separate directions.

This wasn't the first time law enforcement had come down on them, Multi-Able reflected. But it was the first time the law enforcement response included superheroes...

"Bring it on!" Val shouted, as she lashed with her energy staff. She shot as close as she dared to the surrounding helicopters, but took care to only drive them back. She knew from experience

that law enforcement took it personally when you killed their coworkers, and the last thing they needed was for this to get personal.

“For what’s it worth, I’m very sorry about this.”

Val turned towards the source of the voice, but only saw the outline of a woman before she felt a fist smash across her jaw.

“This isn’t an ideal situation for anyone,” Persona Grata sighed, while barely visible. The sentient LMD had her camouflage activated so that Val could barely see her, “but if you surrender, I can promise you visitation rights with your husband.”

“I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself,” Val pointed her energy staff at the ground, and let out a powerful burst. Rock and debris went flying everywhere, and Val instantly spotted the small section of dust that stopped well short of where it should. Val then blitzed forward and punched at the center mass, sending her foe flying backwards, “I’m not beaten yet.”

Persona Grata dropped her camouflage and rubbed her sore belly.

“You want to take me down, you have to earn it,” Val said confidently.

Persona Grata sprang to her feet, “Duly noted.”

Val braced herself, as she saw Persona Grata race towards her with the speed of a wild animal.

Fortunately, Val’s training kicked in the second she felt the first punch, and swung her staff towards the LMD’s head. When Persona Grata dodged, Val lashed out with a snap kick that Persona Grata sidestepped. The Android then swung her right fist hard into Val’s side.

“Son of a...!” Val stumbled back. Though she could bench-press several tons and had extensive combat training, her experience fighting someone on par with her was somewhat limited.

“Surrender is still on the table,” Persona Grata observed.

“You don’t think you can take me?” Val smiled.

“I don’t think it matters,” Persona Grata said truthfully, “as much as I wouldn’t mind the challenge of fighting you, my ego doesn’t require it.”

“You’re not going to stop me any other way,” Val warned.

“I know,” Persona Grata conceded, “my blows were mainly to determine just how strong you actually are. Once I’d determined that, I radioed the helicopters surrounding the area, and launched a moderate barrage of missiles right at you.”

“Ah. I see,” Val heard a low whistling, but couldn’t even turned around before a clutch of missiles landed all around her, and the immediate area was consumed in a bright, orange fireball. When the dust finally settled, Persona Grata saw Val on her knees, in the middle of the crater, covered in soot and smoke.

Persona Grata felt her stomach grip, concerned that she’d have to put Val down, that the missiles hadn’t done the job, when Val simply fell forward, limp.

“You should have just surrendered,” Persona Grata sighed.

Alex Childs, aka Union, and his sister Winter, aka Paradigm ran for some five blocks, before they turned down a dead end alley.

“We left the children!” Paradigm protested.

“They’ll be fine,” Union replied without so much as a second thought. By now, he was used to his sister’s verbal nonsense. The full body suit she wore to control her powers had slowly but surely eroded her mind over the years. While she still remembered who her brother was, and that she should listen to her commanding officer, she would always be hazy on the why. One day it was because they were a band of adventurers, then the following day because they were protecting a society that hates and fears them. Every day, it was something new, “this is just a game, Winter, remember? We’ll see them soon enough, promise.”

“Liar liar,” Union and Paradigm looked up, and saw Shiva standing on the edge of a roof at the top of the alley, “but don’t worry, I’m willing to help you keep a promise.”

“You should leave,” Union hissed, “I don’t know who you are, but I know you drew the short end of the assignment when you were assigned to my sister and I.”

“But I know who you are, Union,” Shiva replied, “team medic, weakest link, all that nonsense.”

Union placed his hand against the wall Shiva was standing atop of, “Is that so?”

An electrical effect raced out of Union’s hand, and within seconds crisscrossed the entire wall, and within seconds it crumbled, as if it were made of sand all along. A small cloud of dust particles settled around the length of the alley.

“You should have paid closer attention.”

“Nope,” Shiva shot out of the smoke like a shark out of the water, dagger in hand. Union had some combat training, but even he wasn’t fast enough to avoid being nicked, “I just know what I need to get close.”

“Alex!” Paradigm caught her brother before he began to fall, and gently laid him on the ground, “Alex? Wake up, sleeping time is eight point three hours away. Alex...?”

“Don’t bother, kid,” Shiva remarked as she replaced the dagger on her belt, and removed one of her bundhi daggers, “he won’t be waking up until I produce an antidote. Give up now, and I just may. Otherwise, big brother won’t be getting up from his nap.”

“Give me the cure,” Paradigm growled, her tone clipped and concise, “give me the cure now or I rip it out of your body.”

“Not likely,” Shiva smirked.

Paradigm lunged for the assassin, but to Shiva the move was one of the most telegraphed attacks she’d ever seen in her life. She stepped sideways while holding her dagger outwards, and Paradigm impaled herself as she tried to punch Shiva’s head off.

“And to think, you were the biggest x factor in this whole plan, I’m just supposed to keep you occupied,” Shiva twisted the dagger, “and you all but jumped onto my blade.”

“Your blade?” Paradigm grabbed the dagger that was impaled in her lung by the handle, Shiva just barely withdrawing her hand in time, and crushed it. Shiva stepped backwards, and watched in amazement as Paradigm flexed her chest, pushing the edged weapon out of her body without even touching it, simply by flexing her muscles “I’m going to feed you this blade, when I’m done.”

“Well finally,” Shiva turned to mist seconds before Paradigm’s fist would have turned her head into pulp, “something interesting...”

“Ohcrapohcrapohcrapohcrap,” Multi-Able hadn’t been this panicked since of one Magneto’s bounty hunters managed to find him, and put a bullet through his spine. He later joked that he knew the bullet was coming and chose his codename in anticipation of it, but at the time he was scared witless. The numbness of his legs, the blood pooling in his stomach...

But the terror of that attack was dwarfed by what he felt now, having been forced to leave his wife behind on the battlefield.

Ironically, he was probably the safest member of his entire team. Given that he required massive amounts of energy to create his duplicates, it was decided that he should be stationed a few miles away from the staging area, and they’d just bring a few clones with them. Since his clones could create clones as long as he was hooked up, it was never much of an issue.

But now, he didn’t want to be safe, he wanted to be at his wife’s side, he wanted a plan to save his teammates. And sitting on his ass in a van that also contained a powerful beta-generator was not a means of doing that.

“Think, think, think!” Multi-Able slapped his head, trying to think of a way out of this, of a way to at least get his way out of harm’s way.

And then he heard a –thump- on the roof of the van.

“Oh, damn it,” Multi-Able muttered as he concentrated. Within seconds, he’d created a dozen almost exact duplicates of himself (after all, what god were a mob of people who couldn’t walk?), and they spilled out of the van and onto the street.

Standing atop the van, Guishen watched as the men poured out impassively.

“My name is Guishen,” he said flatly, “and by the authority Excalibur’s United Nations charter, I hereby order you to stand down.”

Multi-Able tried to think of a witty reply, but the best he could come up with was “Screw you!”

Guishen dove into the crowd, short swords in each hand. The mob of duplicates watched them spin with the speed of a helicopter, and then Guishen swept outwards with them, a good dozen and a half duplicates were instantly destroyed.

“Don’t be fooled into thinking your numerical advantage is of any assistance,” Guishen sheathed his swords, and unholstered his sidearm. He aimed at the van, and pulled the trigger three times.

Inside the van, Multi-Able felt his heart jump out of his chest, before he realized there weren’t any new bullet holes in him. But a quick glance around, and he saw that there were a few holes where they shouldn’t be.

Attached to his chair had been an experimental Stark Beta-particle generator, about the size of a small footlocker. And it sported three holes in very important places. And without that to power his ability to create duplicates, Multi-Able realized that the three dozen or so outside were all he had left, and his enemy didn’t even look interested.

“Damn you, inverse ninja law!”

Danny Vincent, aka Junta, stalked through the warehouse back alleys carefully, trying to look like he was on the hunt, trying to look like he was actually searching for someone, while helicopters flew overhead and UN soldiers went about securing a parameter.

But in reality, Junta was really just sticking his neck out as bait. He was under no illusions that he was little more than bloody meat on a hook, bobbing in the water, waiting for a shark to catch the scent. The leader of Strikeforce: Shadow clearly had something of an ego, naming the entire team after himself, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a skilled operative in his own right.

Junta just had to hope he was juicy enough bait, tempting enough to lure Night Strike back despite the fact that he could make a quick and clean getaway.

And when he saw a shadow moved against the light out of the corner of his eye, Junta knew he had an answer.

“Thought you’d grab the head cheese?” Junta leapt forward some eight feet, as easily as some might step over a puddle, and spun around.

“Something like that,” Night Strike shrugged, “you wanted to blow us up, didn’t you? That’s why that warehouse went up like that.”

“Only a little bit,” Junta shrugged, “guys like us just brush that kind of stuff off like a bad cold, am I right?”

“Yeah, but we like it just as much as a bullet to the gut.”

Junta did his best to look calm, collected. He’d seen a lot of strange things in his time as a spy, but looking at a shadow that stood and talked like a man beat all of those things hands down. He’d read the file of course, but often no piece of paper could really capture the mundane insanity of such a thing.

Always did prefer to be the only one with powers in the caper, Junta thought to himself, “We’ve all but put a bow on your crew, Night Strike. There’s nothing left for you to do but surrender.”

“I don’t know, you’d make a pretty good bargaining chip,” Night Strike lashed outwards, and Junta watched as the man’s arm extended like a black, oily whip. Junta leapt upwards, and with a thought attached himself to the wall like a spider.

“You walked into an ambush,” Junta pulled out his collapsible staff, and swung it to full length with his left hand, and with his right pulled out a small, hockey-puck sized disc, “do you really think we weren’t prepared?”

Junta hurled the disc and leapt. It exploded in a powerful white light, and if Danny weren’t wearing special goggles, he’d have been blinded for weeks. As it was, the light was so overpowering that he lost sight of his target, though that wasn’t much cause for concern. Danny swung his staff where Night Strike’s head had been, confident that the former magistrate couldn’t access the darkforce.

So Junta was very surprised, to say the least, to see Night Strike still standing as a human shadow when Danny’s feet touched the pavement again.

“And here I thought you’d read our files,” Night Strike’s arm lashed out again, striking Danny in the chest, and passed through him like a ghost in the night, “this suit? Helps me focus my powers and keep a good lock on the dark force even when someone shines a flashlight in my face.”

“Ahhh!” Junta felt cold unlike anything he’d ever felt before, grip him. This cold didn’t feel physical, yet somehow the pain it caused seemed to seep down to his cells and every inch of his body.

“Okay, this is just sad,” Night Strike resumed his human form, and created a sword in his left hand, “figure the least I could do is make this somewhat fair when I beat the crap out of you.”

“How kind,” Danny muttered. He spun his staff in one hand, and awaited the first attack.

Night Strike didn't keep him waiting long, swinging his sword in a deadly arc towards Danny's shoulder. Danny blocked it with his staff, and then brought it swinging towards Night Strike's head, only to have it harmlessly pass through.

“Oh come on!” Danny snapped, “thought you were fighting fair!”

“Somewhat fair,” Night Strike countered, “you brought a few hundred soldiers and special equipment to roll us up, and you're bitching that I'm using my powers?”

“Fair point,” Junta shrugged, “and in that vein, I'm going to have to bow out. This isn't as nearly lopsided as I prefer my fights, and for her, this is personal.”

“Her? Personal?” Night Strike heard an electrical hum behind him, “oh crap...”

Night Strike turned around, and saw Cybermancer hovering over him, both gauntlets pointed at him.

“This is about that missile and Eshu, isn't it?”

“Got it in one,” Cybermancer observed, “I'm torn on what cliché to use, to be honest. ‘Easy way or the hard way’ is a classic, but ‘make my day’ actually sounds excellent in Chinese.”

“All this because I killed a guy like Eshu?” Night Strike shook his head, “do you know what kind of man he was, what he did? I'm sorry he died, but that's just the way the game is played.”

“So is this,” Cybermancer blasted Night Strike in the rest, sprawling him on his ass, “you threatened an entire island of people with your stunt, and killed a member of Excalibur. You should have crawled under the deepest rock you could find and never come out!”

“Yeah, then I wouldn't have to listen to a Chinese agent lecture me about morality!” Night Strike created a sword in one hand, and grabbed his pistol with the second, “we're just two sides of the same coin, lady. People getting caught doing the dirty work, getting dragged down by...!”

“Enough,” Cybermancer snarled.

“What, strike a nerve?”

“No, what I meant was that I'm different enough,” Cybermancer replied, “I'm not going to compromise my conscience simply because my superiors tell me to. I'm not going to launch a missile in the hopes of killing millions, and if I break the law, I won't start bitching about the ‘game’, when the rules include break the law, go to jail!”

To Cybermancer's surprise, Night Strike actually seemed a little taken back.

“Yeah, I guess I really don’t have much room to talk, do I?” Night Strike holstered his gun, and saluted, “round one goes to you guys. Don’t think this is over yet.”

A pause.

“What the hell...?” Night Strike looked at his suit in disbelief.

“Oh, it’s over,” Cybermancer smirked, “I’m a scientist, soldier boy. I know how to shut down all your equipment as easily as flipping a switch, and I have a teammate who uses the darkforce as well. You should be more fearful of geniuses who get paid to think.”

Cybermancer blasted Night Strike in the chest, and watched with a savage grin as he was blown backwards into a pile of garbage.

“You enjoyed that a little too much,” Junta rubbed his chest, still numb from when Night Strike phased his hand through it, “would have been nice if your other equipment worked half as well!”

“I thought it would,” Cybermancer shrugged, “I ran it through several simulations, and...”

“Persona Grata calling Cybermancer and Junta!” Their radios crackled, “Need assistance with Paradigm!”

Junta and Cybermancer exchanged an anxious look, before the Chinese scientist grabbed the spy by the wrist, and the two of them rocketed towards their teammate’s position.

They weren’t far, maybe three blocks with a right turn, but when Cybermancer and Junta arrived, it was like they’d entered another world.

UN soldiers were scattered around like ten pins, armored carriers were on their sides, and in the center of it all was Paradigm. Still in her ebony suit, surrounded by Guishen, Shiva and Persona Grata, was Paradigm. They circled the mutant like lion tamers, each with body language that promised pain, but no one dared to be the first one forward.

“Nothing ever goes smooth,” Junta sighed, as Cybermancer set him down, “one away from the best ambush of the year and this happens...”

“We knew that Paradigm was going to be a difficult one from the beginning,” Cybermancer replied, “this has been a cakewalk up until now, Junta. Time for you and your people to step up.”

“Your inspirational speeches need work,” Junta grunted.

“Let the kittens free!”

“Cybermancer?” Junta’s smile was way too cocky for her liking, “you’re our biggest gun here, so go take your shot.”

“On it,” Cybermancer said in a neutral voice. She didn’t much care for the order, since she knew it came from Junta being annoyed by her attitude, but recognized that in the tactical sense, he was right.

The Chinese scientist mentally everything she knew about Paradigm. The files on her were limited to about three or four public battles, but each time she displayed something new or different. Healing factor, superspeed. Healing factor, enhanced strength, energy absorption. Healing factor, massive super strength, and a few others, the healing factor being the only constant.

“Well, at least she’ll survive this,” Cybermancer scrolled through her targeting computer, and made a few careful selections, “...I hope.”

A pair of mini-missiles, a burst of ultra-sonics and microwave energy slammed into Paradigm, but the mutant girl didn’t so much as flinch. Cybermancer felt her heart begin to pound as the sensors in her armor began telling her the effect of barrage had on Paradigm.

“Bad puppy!” Paradigm launched herself at Cybermancer, and grabbed her by the throat, “unleash, unleash the warriors and rain!”

“Back off!” Cybermancer pressed her gauntlet underneath Paradigm’s chin, and unleashed a blast containing half her armor’s power supply. Though her suit wasn’t nearly as advanced as say, Iron Man’s, it still contained enough power to light the average neighborhood for four weeks.

When the blast hit Paradigm, she didn’t ignore it like she did the first time. This time, she absorbed it, as easily and effortlessly as a cup held water. She then scowled at Cybermancer, while her eyes began to glow.

“Oh damn...”

“Excuse me,” Guishen kicked Paradigm in the back of the knees, just as she unleashed the energy Cybermancer had all but given her. The energy went hurtling in the sky, but to her credit, Paradigm remained on her feet.

“Bad bug needs to be squished.” Paradigm flipped into the air, twisting in an impossible way, and kicked Guishen in the stomach before he could even move to defend himself. The Chinese secret agent was thrown down the street, and Paradigm chased after like like a cat after a mouse.

“...Guishen!” Cybermancer cried as Paradigm nearly smashed her foot into his head.

“Stay back!” Guishen shouted, with a rare show of emotion. He stabbed his short sword into Paradigm’s ankle, and pulled it upwards, tripping her, “she’s too powerful!”

“But I...” Cybermancer’s voice trailed off, and the scientist inside her took over. She glanced towards Shiva, Persona Grata and then Guishen.

All three were radically different, in terms of power and physical ability. Shiva was physically a baseline human, Persona Grata three steps above that by being a life model decoy, and Guishen’s enhancements were at least three degrees above human. And then there were their powers. Shiva was a poison factory, and Guishen possessed powerful mental abilities and neither so much as slowed Paradigm down.

“What’s the constant? How do her powers keep changing...?” Cybermancer asked herself, just before a light went off in her head.

Cybermancer did a quick modification to her gauntlet, radioed Persona Grata, and then took aim at both Paradigm and Guishen. Without a single word of warning, she opened fire.

Avalon, Chapman’s office.

Joey Chapman shuffled the files on his desk, gathering his thoughts. Junta sat across from him, one leg over the other, slouching, like this meeting was a casual get together, and not a debriefing.

“I have to say, I’m impressed and disappointed,” Chapman began, “when I handed you the assignment, I never expected your team to complete it. I had hoped that you’d insist on using several more powerful members of Excalibur. A good leader knows when to object to stupid missions.”

“We had additional help,” Junta defended.

“That you manipulated into joining the mission,” Chapman said, “so instead of objecting to a stupid order, you went around them. And while carrying out my orders, you allowed the bodyguards of an up and coming African drug lord to walk away scott-free.”

“That was the deal we made to get Strikeforce: Shadow delivered,” Junta replied, “deal’s a deal.”

“Hmm,” Chapman murmured, “still, you passed the test. Your team functions well in the field, I’ve seen how you operate and we brought in the people who killed a member of Excalibur. Congratulations, you’ve accomplished everything I hoped for.”

“I barely know what we accomplished.”

Cybermancer stood in front of Eshu’s memorial. It was little more than an empty hall where someone had placed a statue and plaque of the Genoshian mutant, alongside the memorials for the other fallen members of Excalibur, Tsunami, the original Hellios, G.W. Bridge and Hauptman.

“You’ll be happy to know that we at least avenged you,” Cybermancer began, “though in truth, I can’t say we even did that with honor. I spent so much time riding Junta that I wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing. When we were bringing the last one down, I worked out that her suit was directing her adapting mutation, I didn’t realize that it was all that kept her alive. I barely cobbled something together, before...”

Cybermancer’s voice trailed off.

“It’s funny, I joined the mission to avenge you, and I barely knew you, Eshu,” Suzi said, “I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry about what you had to do for your country, and I’m sorry that the man who killed you knew you better than your own teammates. And for what it’s worth, I’ll remember you as a good man, who stood up when he had to. Who wasn’t defined by the evil deeds he did for his country, but by the duty he felt towards them. And that you and I are not the only ones

“I hope you can hear me, when I say thank you.”

Guishen placed his belt carefully on his work bench, before he went to a shelf and grabbed his specialized tools. The belt he wore was designed to automatically insert magazines into his guns, and was high maintenance. There was a possibility, however remote, that Cybermancer’s pulse damaged it. And while Guishen had three others, he wasn’t about to let any of his equipment fall into disrepair.

“God, that looks tedious.”

“I prefer to think of it as soothing,” Guishen didn’t look up from his equipment.

“Why don’t you let me take care of that later?” Suzi offered, “I owe you dinner for saving my life.”

“It was my duty.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t owe you one,” Suzi insisted. She walked across the room, and placed herself between the belt and Guishen, “besides, I’d like to get to know you better. We answer to the same people, we’re on the same team, surely you can spare time for a few drinks?”

To Guishen’s surprise, it took him a moment to notice that Suzi was dressed casually, and not in her silver and purple armor. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he only knew her from afar, even though they were from the same country, with the same superiors.

Guishen set his tools down.

“I think I could find some time.”

END

NEXT ISSUE: Excalibur faces their most vicious villain yet, in “From Russia with Hate!”

&&&
Marvel 2000 Presents
Excalibur Vol.2 #29
“From Russia with Hate.”
Part 1
&&&

Russia

“Do you know what I hear, when someone says ‘I have a family to feed’, comrade? I hear that I have to kill a family, just to get what’s rightfully mine.”

Petr Vlasov wiped his forehead, and wondered why this was happening to him. He was just a superintendant, charged with keeping the pipes warm and the power flowing.

But now he was forced to deal with one of Russia’s worse Mafia bosses. Sitting in his favorite chair at his dinner table, was a man known as KGBastard, and three of his ‘body guards’, not that the man couldn’t provide his own protection.

KGBastard hardly did the man justice, Petr thought. KGBastard didn’t look overly remarkable, blond haired with a pony tail, six feet tall and average build. He wore a black turtle neck with gray pants and jacket, not the single hint of a ‘costume’ to be seen. The only thing odd about him were the black glasses he wore over what looked to be empty sockets.

But despite the fact the man had no eyes, Petr could feel KGBastard look right through him.

“Please, you don’t understand,” Petr pleaded, “I’ve raised the rent as much as I can! I’ve given you every last dollar we have! We simply don’t have any more to give!”

“But you do have more to lose,” KGBastard stood up, “you would do well to remember that. I’ll be back in a week. Have my money, or kill your family with a spoon and save me the time.”

Petr sighed in relief as the villain walked out. And then went to his room to pack. He knew that if he didn’t leave tonight, they just might make it far enough to survive.

oooOOooo

KGBastard and his entourage stopped outside on the street, as the crime boss felt a sudden need to examine his nails.

“He thinks he can run away. They always think that.”

“Well,” KGBastard reached into his pocket and removed a remote detonator, “maybe if he’s in hell, he might be safe from me.”

The villain’s bodyguards nearly jumped out of their skin as the entire block shook from the explosion. The heat from the fireball washed over them, raising the hair on the back of their necks.

“The safety of the grave, vastly underrated,” KGBastard remarked, as his own bodyguards stared at him in horror.

“Sir, we should be going,” remarked Jacob Edward, the bravest of KGBastard’s men present. He nodded towards the mob of people who were gathering, watching in horror as the tenement began to crumble.

“I suppose,” KGBastard sighed, “oh, Jacob?”

The bodyguard froze. His boss was as unpredictable as the weather, and human life and dignity meant nothing to him.

“Down the street,” KGBastard pointed towards a woman who had her camera aimed not at the burning apartment building, but at them. The crime-lord reached into his jacket, and handed Jacob a serrated knife, “someone seems to think that they are allowed to take pictures of me. Kindly teach her what Russia does to rats.”

“...understood sir.”

“Wonderful weather, don’t you think?” KGBastard asked his remaining men casually. Still reeling from two casual acts of brutality, his men nodded numbly, and fought back the bile rising in their throats.

oooOOooo

Avalon, Excalibur headquarters

“I’m not going to lie to you,” Chapman began, “our next mission is going to be...distasteful. But it should be easier than the last few ones we’ve had tossed in our lap.”

“If the job stinks, buy breath mints,” Commando said with a shrug, “we ain’t your average spandex idiots, Chapman. Just spit it out already.”

“Fine. We’re going to be protecting an ‘honest businessman’, by the name of Colonel-General Valentin Shatalov”, Chapman didn’t even bother with finger quotes, “from a crime-lord calling himself KGBastard.”

He clicked the remote in his hand, and an image of KGBastard, dressed in a military uniform standing in front of a blue background came up on the screen behind him.

“Okay, I take it back. No amount of breath mints is going to save this mission,” Commando replied.

“Why are we handling this?” Silverclaw asked, “I mean, Russia’s got its own superheroes, right? And no way are all of them corrupt...uh, right Darkstar? No offense...”

Darkstar winced as she felt her teammates glance towards her, “There are some as noble and dedicated as Captain America, but KGBastard has been planning his coup for some time. When he started, he went after a high level file clerk inside the Kremlin, and...”

“Went after a file clerk?” Hellios asked, “how does that matter?”

“This is how,” Chapman clicked his remote, and the image of an average kitchen came up. The room was splattered with crimson, and three heads and maybe enough organs to equal one whole person.

Excalibur was staffed by experienced heroes had seen their fair share of blood and horror. And yet still, their stomachs rebelled.

“Those bodies belong to a friend of the file clerk responsible for maintaining the files that contained the identities of Russian super heroes and powered operatives,” Chapman explained, “KGBastard has said that he’ll go after anyone remotely connected to any Russian hero that stands in his way. Not just friends, but friends of friends, second cousins...the man is beyond ruthless.”

“I do not feel comfortable removing one criminal for the sake of another,” Scarlet Scarab scowled.

“Good news there then, mate,” Chapman replied, “because you won’t be joining the team on this. The UN’s gotten a little concerned about excessive force, and is concerned about escalating conflicts. You and Hellios will be sitting this one out, I’m afraid.”

“...good,” Scarlet Scarab crossed his arms indignantly, but spared a glance at Silverclaw. He wasn’t entirely keen on the idea of her being on the battlefield without him there to lend assistance.

“What about the advance team?” Union Jack asked. He wasn’t fond of most of them, but he wasn’t about to turn down any possible help on a mission. To a former spy, the idea of a fair fight ranked right up there with a root canal.

“Junta and Shiva are on a different assignment,” Chapman replied, “as are Persona Grata and Guishen.”

“So I have to leave my most powerful at home and have no advance team,” Union Jack sighed, “why are pencil pushers dictating my combat terms?”

“Because escalating with superhumans means a burned husk of a planet,” Chapman countered, “now get a move on. The sooner we get this mission finished, the sooner we can move into actually doing some good in the world.”

“I heard that,” Commando grunted as he stood up.

All of Excalibur filed out, save for Darkstar. She couldn't bear to look at her teammates, knowing they were heading to her homeland to deal with a menace, without her at their side. It cut the Russian mutant to her core, and she couldn't bring herself to even look in her teammates direction.

Darkstar thought she might die of shame, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“I know what it's like to have loved ones targeted,” Chapman said reassuringly, “go be with your husband. We'll have this bastard sorted out, no problem.”

oooOOooo

Burma

Danny Vincent, AKA Junta of Excalibur's forward team, whistled a tune as he waited atop a Burmese hotel. Early on in his training, his trainers explained that at least ninety percent of espionage was simply waiting. Whether you were waiting on an informant to arrive, readying an ambush or waiting for an opportunity to plant a bug, long stretches of nothing were unavoidable.

“It's done.”

Danny turned his head and saw his teammate, the Indian killer known as Shiva, just appear out of a cloud of smoke. With blue skin, white hair and more blades than any sane person should carry, along with the ability to secrete poison and turn into any gas of her choosing, she was easily one of the most dangerous killers on the planet.

Danny was already planning contingencies for when she slipped her nano-chain restraints and went after those she thought wronged her. That, he knew, would be a bloody day.

But that wouldn't be today.

“What room?” Danny asked

“Third floor, towards the alley. Name on the passport reads Danny Trejo.”

“Everyone's a comedian,” Danny sighed, “alright, through the door, back me up and remember the plan.”

“Hey, accidents happen,” Shiva examined her reflection in one of her throwing blades.

“For amateurs, maybe,” Junta countered, “do this right, and maybe you won’t have an accident.”

oooOOooo

Mariano Lopez, known better in law enforcement circles as Machete, examined his weapons as he placed them inside a sealed crate, to be mailed to a friend of a friend who had an interest in bladed weapons.

While most people in his profession preferred to keep their tools of the trade elsewhere, Machete operated on level well above ‘average’. Any law enforcement that thought about approaching him would assume that he was armed and would shoot first and never even bother with questions. It was one of the perils of being a costumed mercenary. The average pay was better, but the reaction from law enforcement was often akin to swatting a fly with a rocket launcher.

Better to carry weapons to fight your way out, than to be shot down in a hail of nervous gunfire, Zartan once said and Machete took his friend’s advice to heart.

“Machete!”

The door exploded inward, and Junta and Shiva walked in, chests puffed out righteously.

“Case in point,” Machete muttered, as he drew two of his signature weapons, “Never saw you as the law enforcement type, Danny!”

Machete leapt forward, sweeping one blade towards Danny’s neck, and another at Shiva’s. Danny blocked the blade with his staff, while Shiva vanished in a puff of smoke.

“What can I say?” Danny smirked, “I like the steady pay and easy work.”

Machete head-butted the spy, knocking him on his rear. Junta saw double as Machete raised his weapons over his head, ready to cleave Danny’s throbbing skull in two.

“You were always weak in the field,” Machete chided.

“And you always had tunnel vision in a fight,” Junta countered.

Shiva came up from behind Machete, and slammed her foot into his knee. The villain screamed in pain, and Shiva grabbed him around the collar, spun him around and threw him through a nearby window.

“Oops,” Shiva smiled.

“After him!” Junta shouted at the top of his lungs, though he remained seated on the floor.

“Poor man, limping away on a popped joint for no reason,” Shiva chuckled, “oh my, this reminds me of this one contract. The guy twisted his ankle, and...”

“And he lived happily ever after,” Junta interrupted, “I don’t give a damn about your fetishes. We need to confirm that the trackers are working. He’s only a stalking house, after all.”

oooOOooo

Sheremetyevo International Airport, Moscow.

“...it just feels wrong, Darkstar not being here.”

Silverclaw could almost feel a weight fall on her shoulders as she finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

“What?” Silverclaw defended, “this is her country! Feels like we’re in someone else’s house and they’re not even there. It’s just weird!”

“It’s just as well,” Union Jack replied, “I’ve seen the files on KGBastard. He’s a brutal one. I doubt Darkstar would have been very effective if she had to worry about her husband, her family. This way, we have everyone focused on the mission. We’ll crush this little tick, and...”

Union Jack’s last words were overshadowed by the rear of the plane exploding.

“What the hell?”

“Holy crap!”

“Ladies, out!” Union Jack snapped, “intercept, but hold back!”

Cybermancer and Sabra tore through the straps keeping them in their chairs and were outside in seconds. Silverclaw was a little more skillful, shifting into snake form, slipping through her straps and to the floor. From there, she slithered out the hatch and into the open air, where she assumed her bird form, catching the air in her wings effortlessly.

“Jesus our savior...”

When she assumed the abilities of an animal, Silverclaw acquired more than just their superficial abilities. The form of a bird didn’t give her just wings and talons, but eyesight a hundred times better than any human could imagine.

So she could literally see in perfect detail the two dozen RPGs blasting towards them like a wall of death.

“Sabra, pull back!” Cybermancer shouted as energy lanced from her gauntlet. Bright blue bursts lanced outwards, exploding missile after missile harmlessly.

“Silverclaw, eyes on the attackers!” Sabra shouted as she darted towards Excalibur’s falling aircraft.

The young heroine stumbled for only a second, and then turned her attention towards the mob of armed men on the tarmac. The sheer number of armed men was staggering, two dozen men had been holding rocket launchers, and they were intermingled with men of colorful costumes and what looked like walking corpses with spikes on their shoulders and a cannon grafted onto their left arm. There were at least fifty men, some even in costumes (which always meant some combination of powers, training or insanity).

Silverclaw felt sick to her stomach, knowing that KGBastard had the ability and sheer audacity to assemble a small army at an airport for an attack like this. If his attention wasn’t focused on them, he could have easily slaughtered hundreds before anyone could stop him. Any doubts about this mission, about removing one criminal for the sake of another, vanished.

The young South American heroine felt bullets begin to pass by, and realized that she was spotted. Her blood pumped, but she remained calm as she arced backwards, towards the wreckage of Excalibur’s plane, where Kamau, Commando and Union Jack were just climbing out of.

“Glad I always use the backroom before riding these things,” Union Jack muttered as he brushed himself off. The –pak-pak-pak!- of automatic gunfire on metal could be heard in the background, but the Englishman paid it no mind as Sabra, Cybermancer and Silverclaw touched down.

“What are we looking at?” asked Union Jack.

“Video play back indicates a group of fifty armed men plus superhumans,” Cybermancer’s summary was punctuated by a massive explosion that rocked the wreckage they were hunkered behind.

“We need to make our move quickly,” Kamau hissed, “I can sense them beginning to surround us.”

“They got some heavy muscle too,” Commando peaked around the edge of the craft, “those zombie things out there are called warborgs. ‘Bout as strong as Sabra here, and armed with lasers and poison barbs. Dumb as logs, though.”

“Alright, here’s how we play it…” Union Jack said calmly.

oooOOooo

Vladimir Orekhov, AKA Doctor Volkh and leader of the small hard-line breakaway team known as Bogatyri (Valiant Champions), ordered the men forward, convinced that they had Excalibur right where they wanted them. With fifty heavily armed men, six warborgs and his two other teammates, he simply didn’t see failure as a possibility.

And that was why he was so slow to react when Commando lobbed two grenades in the midst of his soldiers.

Uncertain of what to do, as a man of science and not action, Dr. Volkh froze. The grenades exploded in a plume of smoke, enveloping them in smoke and confusion. Only the cyborg corpses, the Warborgs, were indifferent to the smoke.

“Stay calm!” Dr. Volkh shouted, reassuring absolutely no one, “we still have them outnumbered!”

Cybermancer, Sabra and Kamou then slammed through their superior numbers like bowling bowls through glass. Men flew every which way, and Dr. Volkh gulped when he saw Sabra turn in midair.

“Come on, then!” Dr. Volkh growled defiantly, limbs outstretched, “your strength means nothing to my elastic powers!”

Sabra said nothing as she careened into the boastful scientist, noting only that slamming into him felt little different than landing in mud. Without preamble, Sabra clapped the man’s head between her palms, not even wincing at the sonic boom that was created.

Dr. Volkh slid through her hands like water. Even though his brain was like rubber, it still wasn’t capable of being flattened like a pancake, or being at the epicenter of a small but powerful sonic boom.

“I always wondered if that would work on you elastic types,” Sabra mused.

“Enjoy that victory, for it will be your last!”

Sabra turned to the remaining members of Bogatyri. The first was a medium sized man, dark haired with a metal brace around his neck, with antennas protruding from the front. The second was a blond man, large as a Humvee with a cybernetic right arm.

“Golubev, hold her!” shouted the large man.

“Understood, Svyator!”

The telekinetic reached out with his powers, and Sabra found herself struggling to move. Simply moving her arms was like moving through sand. All Sabra could do was tuck her head when Svyator landed his first blow.

“Surrender! We only need one of you alive!” Svyator hissed.

Sabra filed that information away for later examination as she pointed her wrist blaster towards Golubev and pressed the trigger. Almost instantly a special needles laced with sedatives were sent flying towards the telekinetic.

With a smirk, Golubev raised his hand and stopped the needles in midair.

“You’ll need to do better than that!”

“Agreed,” said Sabra as her fist smashed into Svyator’s jaw. The mountain of a man staggered, and Sabra raised both arms and unleashed another wave of needles.

Golubev caught them as easily as the first, though he was baffled why an Israeli agent would try the same tactic that had failed moments before. The confusion ended when Sabra swung her foot, and punted a chunk of dirt like it was a football. The Russian telekinetic saw the earth missile careening towards him, but in the time it took the drop the needles and focus his concentration on the dirt clod, it had smashed into his stomach and knocked him out.

All the same, Sabra hit him with a sedative needle, better safe than sorry, and turned her attention to his recovering, and final, teammate.

Sabra wiped a small speck of blood from her mouth, and then, in perfect Russian, said, “You rely on your powers too much. I don’t. That’s why this fight is already over.”

oooOOooo

Main Airport

After they broke up the first wave, Kamau turned towards the warborgs. According to Commando, they were the most dangerous weapons in their enemy’s arsenal.

They were every bit the monsters the super soldier said they were. Grey rotted flesh, exposed muscles, spikes on their shoulder, flesh pulled back from their mouth and a cannon that ran the length of their right arm.

There was no mistaking these creatures purpose as anything other than terror, death and destruction. Shambling mockeries of life who spread only death and misery.

Kamau almost felt a kinship with them.

But that wasn’t about to stop the African warrior.

He weaved between bursts of energy, and leapt through the air at the nearest creature, trench knives. He slammed into its midsection, and tore through rotted flesh mixed with plastic and metal like a cannon ball through wood.

The Warborg was bisected, and Kamau rolled to his feet, now only surrounded by five lethal soldiers over twenty years dead.

Kamau stomped his foot, and the ground came up underneath the two behind him, pitching them through the air like footballs.

His back now clear, Kamau was able to turn his full attention to the three in front of him.

The Mutant Warrior leaped into the air, and swung his elbow into the monster's face, sending rotted flesh and bone flying.

“Arrgh!”

Kamau fell to one knee as energy slammed into his back. As pain burned through his skull, Kamau felt like he finally understood Commando's fear of these creatures. Every nerve felt as if it was dipped in molten steel.

The Warborg took aim again, but Kamau rolled out of the way on instinct. As he came up, he pulled his arm back and launched it through the air like an arrow at the moving corpse. The diamond trench knife sank in up to the hilt, and Kamau began to concentrate.

Having used the diamond knife for years now, Kamau had perfect control over every aspect. Whereas his ability to control the earth was crude and lacking finesse, his power over his own blades was like that of a surgeon with a scalpel.

With the same mental effort one associated with closing their hand, Kamau reached out to the blade diamond and had it form two hooks on each side, and willed it back to his hand. Grey and purple blood exploded out of the warborg's head as Kamau reclaimed his weapon.

“Even the dead can die again,” Kamau muttered as he turned towards the remaining two warborgs. He had just formed a strategy when he felt a searing pain in his leg.

Kamau glanced down, and saw the first Warborg that he'd attacked, the one he'd sliced in half, with its single hand wrapped around his thigh, nails sunk into his flesh.

The Soldier Mutant reacted instinctively, pulling free as he leapt high into the air. He then flipped head over heels, and tucked his legs in, and came down on the Warborg's back knees first and then brought his trench knife down on the warborg's neck and removed it with a clean slice.

Kamau didn't have a second to enjoy the victory, as his vision began to swim. Though he'd destroyed the machine, he still had to purge the toxins from his body before they stopped his heart.

Slamming his fist into the ground, Kamau reached out with his powers and began to draw minerals and energy from the ground. As he saw the two remaining Warborgs beginning to stalk towards him, Kamau began to envy those with automatic healing factors, as he found himself rooted in place, trying to draw enough power from the ground to clean his body of the toxins before the warborgs got within striking distance.

“This is a little harder than Union Jack implied...” Kamau mused.

oooOOooo

This is too easy, Union Jack thought to himself as he swept his energy dagger outwards, disabling the half dozen men who'd thought they could box him in. But even as over combined eight hundred pounds of muscle went down, five more men, armed with knives and brass knuckles, stepped forward to fill the void.

Union Jack held them off easily enough, but he couldn't help but feel he was missing something. KGBastard had military training and experience, and the first thing any officer learned was that no plan survived contact with the enemy.

So the British hero was certain that there was a back-up plan just lurking somewhere. And he was right, because the 'back-up plan' had Union Jack's head cited in his rifle.

oooOOooo

Viktor Rezun, a disgraced Spetsnaz veteran of the first Afganistan War, sighted Union Jack through his scope, and sighed. Though he loved his country, he had long since realized that loving your own country did not mean hating all others.

But Viktor knew that so long as he worked for KGBastard, his life was no longer his own. He didn't make the decisions anymore, and the orders were clear. They only needed one alive, and in any battle the best strategy was always to kill those in command.

Viktor resigned himself to a place in infamy as the murderer of Britain's patriotic hero, when he heard someone clear their throat.

"Don't shoot..." Viktor held his hands up and away from his rifle. This was the first time he'd ever been spotted in his sniper's nest, but the procedure was common sense. Move slowly and do nothing that might be construed as threatening.

Viktor slowly rolled on his back, and was a little surprised to see that the person who'd managed to effortlessly sneak up on him was a brunette of average height, pretty face wearing a business suit with a black tie that...had a red dot on it.

The Sharpshooter's instincts took over, and for some reason he found himself drawn to the red dot more than the silenced pistol in her hand, which under closer inspection he saw was shaped like an hour glass.

Red hourglass symbol, surrounded by black.

"The Red Room..." Viktor stammered, his mind now consumed with fear.

"Not quite," she pulled the trigger once, and a dart lodged itself in Viktor's neck, "but my employer does not believe in wasted talent. Consider yourself lucky."

oooOOooo

“Alright, who wants to be another notch in my belt?”

Commando stood atop a pile of a dozen men (that he personally stacked up for intimidation value), surrounded by tattooed thugs. All of them were outcasts from their own organizations, deemed too brutal for the Russian mob, and as such, simply weren't impressed by the fact that Commando had already beaten so many of their number with just his bare hands.

“Not gonna have a belt when this is all over,” Commando grunted. He was seconds away from throwing himself at them, when he heard a whistling sound. He looked up just in time to see an energy blast strike the ground between him and his assailants.

Commando looked up, and saw five different sets of the same armor, the infamous Crimson Dynamo armor, swooping down from the sky like angels of vengeance. They unleashed fire every which way that didn't include a member of Excalibur and if they showed any restraint, Commando couldn't see it.

“Russian Calvary. Dad would spit nails...”

oooOOooo

Sabra rubbed her sore fists, and watched as men in Kevlar and carrying automatics calmly marched down the tarmac. Their aim was excellent, hesitation non-existent and calm was absolutely perfect.

“Who are these guys?” Cybermancer landed next to Sabra, and scanned the battlefield. Men in suits too nice to be worn on the battlefield were mowing down the thugs who'd ambushed Excalibur like they were cardboard cut outs.

“I suspect they're with the man we're supposed to be protecting,” Sabra mused.

“If he's got all this, why's he need our help?”

Sabra said nothing.

oooOOooo

Minutes later

KGBastard's men broke into a full run, and no one bothered to chase them.

Excalibur gathered together on the tarmac, while their 'reinforcements' started to patrol the area, making sure the area was secure.

“Where are the police?” asked Silverclaw.

“Probably the same place Darkstar is,” Kamau remarked.

Sabra and Union Jack glared daggers.

“We got incomin’,” Commando called over his shoulder.

A well polished limo drove down the tarmac, and stopped several feet away from the UN heroes.

“Not quite the welcome I wanted to extend,” A man in a well tailored business suit, with countless Russian medals stepped out of the limo, “but I hope you can see why you were asked to protect me.”

“Colonel-General Valentin Shatalov, I presume?” Union Jack stated.

“At your service. Tell me, besides the murder attempt, how was your flight?”

Next Issue: Excalibur’s in Russia to take down KGBastard, and protect their current crime lord!
But their target isn’t about to roll over and die, and one member of Excalibur may pay the ultimate price!

&&&
Marvel 2000 Presents
Excalibur Vol.2 #30
“From Russia with Hate.”
Part 2
&&&

Russia

Laynia Petrovna Gryzlov, Darkstar of at one time or another The Champions, Winter Guard and Excalibur, glanced out the window of her ‘new apartment’. She watched as more and more buses pulled into the complex, unloading hordes of people.

In order to protect Russia’s heroes, the government reopened an old asylum that had, in the days of the Soviet Union, had served to house political prisoners. Darkstar wondered what the world was coming to when the safest place for the friends and family of heroes was not a military base, but insane asylum.

All things considered, however, it was the ideal place to house innocent civilians from the depraved madman, KGBastard. The man had only been in the game for nine months, but his record for brutality was already legend.

“You need to stop worrying,” said Dimitri. Darkstar’s husband gently placed his hands on his wife’s shoulders, and gave her a reassuring squeeze, “your teammates will be fine. They’re just as experienced as you, and...”

“And I should be with them,” Darkstar finished, “they’re good people, I owe them my lives. But...”

“But not your family’s,” Dimitri nodded, “but that’s over now. Every Russian hero and their loved ones have been moved to safe locations. And I bet they are quickly becoming restless...”

Darkstar’s frown disappeared in an instant, “You always know what to say to cheer me up.”

The two shared a passionate kiss, that Darkstar broke with some regret.

“I have a feeling I shouldn’t wait up.”

“I’m afraid so, my love,” Darkstar reached into the darkforce, and teleported herself from her flat, to that of Red Guardian’s. He’d been the first hero to arrive, along with his divorced parents and younger sister. Darkstar was more than a little disconcerted to see the man who’d led the

Winter Guard against armies, the man who'd never once shown an ounce of fear, fretting over his family like an overprotective parent. But she thought that by now surely he'd regained his balance.

What Darkstar hadn't expected, when she teleported into his flat, was for it to be filled with chalk boards plastered with news articles and official reports regarding KGBastard, or for the room to already be occupied with dozens of other heroes, like Volstok, Perun and Power Surge. Darkstar was grateful her powers prevented her from teleporting into solid matter, otherwise she might have killed a few heroes herself.

"Ah, Laynia, good of you to join us," Red Guardian set down a file he'd been discussing with other members of the Winter Guard, "we'd have come to get you sooner, but we're still discussing tactics."

Darkstar looked at Red Guardian's board, at the surveillance photos and other hi-lighted information. Darkstar almost felt a pang of sympathy for KGBastard, as she could see clear as day that the full force of Russia's heroes were about to fall on his head.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Darkstar said, "we Russians may retreat, but we never surrender."

"Truer words were never spoken," Red Guardian observed, "while Excalibur hits him from the front, we plan to strike...everywhere else.

"We are going to make KGBastard nothing more than a bad memory."

oooOOooo

Russia

"I understand your security concerns," Colonel-General Valentin Shatalov strode confidently through the top floor of his company's building, followed closely by investors from all over the world, from the United States, to Genosha and China. To the Colonel, they were like wolves, instinctively seeking out an Alpha to protect them in dangerous territory, and he intended to be that big bad wolf, "but I can promise you, my security is the best in the country. Russia has always been a country in upheaval, but if you join with me I can navigate you through our troubled waters."

"I was made to understand that you hire former Red Guardians and Black Widow candidates," said one man. Valentin smiled graciously at the man, whom he just happened to be blackmailing to act as his mouthpiece.

"That's correct," Valentin smiled with a white, toothy grin, "my former contacts in the military have allowed me to recruit some of the best private security officers in the world. My employees may not have made the cut, but I assure you, a just to be a candidate for Black Widow makes them worth two dozen men. My Red Widows are a force to be reckoned with."

“I was made to understand that there was another...issue,” said a second man, gently. Openly discussing warfare between two criminal empires simply wasn’t polite conversation, even in Russia.

“There was,” by now the group had reached Valentin’s board room. He wanted, no needed, to make a show of the fact that he’d managed to have Excalibur assigned to protect him while he worked on crushing the upstart worm that had the gall to call himself KGBastard. It cost Valentin a dozen favors and put him into ‘debt’ for at least a year, but it was about to pay off, “but as you can see, I’ve recruited an even more powerful ally to deal with the law breakers that are trying to drag me down.”

Valentin flung open the hand carved oak doors to his personal conference room, where inside was waiting...were six uniform Russian police officers. Union Jack, wearing an image inducer that made him look like an ordinary officers, waved at the assembly in a deliberately awkward manner.

“...who?”

Later

Valentin drummed his fingers on the table, as he watched as his investors leave. He’d managed to recover his presentation, but being unable to present Excalibur, and the power and influence such a thing implied, all but crippled what was to be his boldest move yet.

“...just what the hell was that?” Valentin asked, venom in every word.

Union Jack motioned to his team, and they deactivated their image inducers.

“What was what?” asked Union Jack.

“You were using image inducers,” Valentin shook with rage for a moment, before calming himself, “why?”

“I thought it best to be low profile,” answered Union Jack with a shrug.

“One of the worst killers in this country is targeting me for death. And you think a low profile will somehow protect me?”

“You may be right,” Union Jack around the table, until he was standing in front of Valentin, “but it was my decision to make. So deal with it.”

“One call to your superior, and...”

Union Jack grabbed Valentin by the throat, picked him up and then slammed him against the table. All three of his female assistants unholstered their weapons and had Union Jack’s head in their crosshairs in seconds.

“You call Chapman and he’ll tell you the same thing I will,” Union Jack growled, “you might be able to yank us around, but if you think you can parade us around like some like some dog show, you are sadly mistaken. Try this again, and you will regret it.”

Union Jack released the former KGB colonel. Valentin stood up, and straightened his collar

“You British, always so damn serious,” he sighed, “fine. Can I trust you won’t object to a walk before my next meeting?”

oooOOooo

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

Danny Vincent stared at his laptop as he sat in the Officer’s Briefing of the destroyer USS Fury. Every fifteen minutes, the laptop would receive a signal bounced off of several satellites, giving them a rough location of the mercenary known as Machete.

“So are we sure he’s even heading in the direction we want?” Shiva was sprawled out across several chairs she’d put together. While she was utterly ruthless in the field, the Indian Assassin had little patience for related field work when it came to a mission. Action, and planning for action, were the only two interests she really had.

“We did some good damage,” Junta replied, “torn ligaments, plus the landing. Besides that, I called in a few favors. Machete has at least three job offers in his inbox, so he needs to get fixed up fast. He can’t wait for six weeks rehab, that means super science and there’s only one guy within a hundred miles who can do that.”

“If the guy we’re after is so important, how is it I’ve never heard of him?”

“Because you just strapped some knives on and pretended that made you a professional,” Junta replied without missing a beat.

“And it’s professional to critique and antagonize a sloppy professional killer?”

“Depends on the killer,” Junta typed a few commands into the laptop, “even pros have to work with riff raff. Maybe if you tighten up, you won’t get us all killed.”

Shiva pressed a dagger against her finger, “Maybe if I tighten up, I’ll kill you all.”

Junta paused, then nodded.

“That is certainly a possibility.”

oooOOooo

Russia, Losiny Ostrov National Park

“I’m in Russia and it’s summer,” Silverclaw said to no one in particular, “I didn’t even know they had summer here.”

“You shouldn’t complain, not with your outfit,” Sabra observed.

“Actually, I never really feel cold,” Silverclaw replied, “I can walk bare-foot in snow. I think maybe its part of the animal mind I shift into, but who knows?”

“Just don’t eat an elk, please,” Union Jack asked, “hate to see that on the telly back home.”

Excalibur, image inducers in full effect, had taken a leisurely walk through Moscow’s “Elk Island” national forest. 166 kilometers and standing in Russia’s history as its first national park, Union Jack supposed he should be observing the beauty, but all he could see were hundreds of trees that would make an ambush distressingly easy.

For his part, Kamau didn’t much care about the natural splendor. Having been as a child soldier in Africa, all nature was to him was just cover and a means to escape and obstruct pursuit, “Colonel, could I ask you a personal question?”

“Certainly, young man.”

“What’s the difference between killing for your nation, and killing for yourself?”

While the rest of Excalibur tried to pretend they hadn’t heard the question, Colonel Valentin rubbed his chin in honest contemplation.

“It’s better, I have found, to kill for a nation,” Valentin finally said, “because you can tell yourself that it’s for a greater cause. Because it may actually help people. Because the death is not your decision alone. Killing for yourself can never be the same as killing for your country, because even if you can lie to yourself, you cannot.”

“In theory, of course,” Union Jack offered.

“Of course,” Valentin reached into his jacket, and withdrew what looked like the unholy lovechild of a Desert Eagle and Buck Rogers gun, “now, since we’re about to have guests, could you have your men fan out and greet them?”

Union Jack glanced around, and where there had been absolutely no one before, there were now angry men and supervillains wanted on three continents. Omega Red, Titanium Man were bad were bad enough on their own, capable of fighting legends to a standstill, but they were flanked by the underrated Hammer and Sickle, plus at least two dozen professional mobsters, judging by the impressive tattoos slash resumes on their arms.

“Bloody hell!” Union Jack’s hand flew to his sidearm. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Valentin’s female bodyguards disappearing into the woods, “how did they get so close, and where the hell are they going?!”

“Snipers,” Valentin grabbed Union Jack by the collar, and pulled him aside, moments before a 50. Caliber bullet tore a path of destruction through the woods behind him. Rock heard a second shot, followed by a scream.

“They’re good,” Union Jack observed picked off three men with his pistol, “Sabra, Cybermancer, take care of Titanium Man! Kamau, Omega Red! Commando, Silverclaw, get the other two! Valentin and I will handle the foot soldiers!”

“Valentin!” Titanium Man swatted Sabra aside and stomped towards the former KGB Colonel, “I am going to have your head for what you did to me!”

“I did nothing you did not deserve,” Valentin aimed his pistol at Titanium Man’s head, and pulled the trigger. A bolt of lightning as wide as a trash can spat out, slamming into the steel Russian and pitching him backwards like a leaf in a hurricane, “and you are not my old friend. Just a mechanical ghost.”

Valentin caught Union Jack gaping at his pistol.

“Early prototype based on the Crimson Dynamo armor,” Valentin explained, “that shot cost me half the power-cells.”

“Damn I want one...” Rock muttered.

oooOOooo

Kamau dove into the ground as if it were made of water, moving through dirt as easily as a bird moved through air. He erupted out of Mother Earth in front of Omega Red, diamond trench knives ready for blood, but the Russian super soldier was faster.

Nearly indestructible tentacles wrapped around Kamau’s chest like a trap snapping shut, and he found himself flung aside, snapping several trees like twigs.

“You can be a little predictable,” Omega Red tightened the tentacles around Kamau, and the African Warrior felt his ribs crack, “you killed at least a dozen men that way. You think someone wouldn’t notice?”

“You think that’s all I can do?” Kamau stomped his foot into the ground, and a pillar of solid stone rocketed out of the ground, slamming into Omega’s left knee. Omega Red grunted in pain, and did his best not to reveal the agony that was coursing through his body, but it didn’t matter.

His grip on Kamau loosened just enough, and the African warrior pulled them off effortlessly. Rather than risk his enemy recovering, Kamau charged, slamming into Omega Red like a freight train.

“Fool!” Omega Red was coughing up blood, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle. His body was already healing and with his enemy this close, Omega Red was certain that victory was only a matter of time, “I had to restrain my death spores because of my allies, but with you this close...”

Omega Red watched in satisfaction as he could literally see the veins in Kamau’s face bulge and warp, but it was a fleeting emotion when the warrior punched him across the face with his trench knife, tearing free flesh and muscle. Even as it healed, Omega Red could see Kamau doing exactly the same.

“Does everyone have a healing factor?!” Omega Red willed the sharp end of his tentacles to impale Kamau through the shoulder, and lifted him into the air. But before he could pitch him away like before, Kamau slammed both feet into Omega Red’s face, and the mutant dropped him.

Within seconds, the two were entangled in a grisly, bloody duel. Kamau was stronger than Omega Red, but the mutant’s healing factor bought him enough time to release his death spores. Kamau’s healing factor could overcome them, but he required concentration to heal, and every time he backed off enough to kill the spores in his system, Omega Red siphoned off energy from him that allowed him to keep fighting just a little longer.

Diamond blades ripped flesh. Kamau swung his elbow into Omega’s Red’s face, flinging teeth, blood and spit through the air. Carbonadium tentacles whipped down to crush bone. Omega Red wrapped one tentacle around Kamau’s leg and twisted. Bone ripped through flesh as strong as steel. Blood and viscera mixed as the two augmented enemies sought to tear the other to pieces, bit by bloody bit.

oooOOooo

“Which one you want?” Silverclaw smiled as Hammer and Sickle approached her and Commando. Their name-sake weapons radiated power, but Silverclaw had long since stopped being impressed by that.

“Dibs on the big one,” Commando stated, “the skinny albino’s yours.”

“Remember the plan,” Hammer said to his partner, before he lifted his hammer above his head, and then slammed it into the ground. A wedge of energy crashed outwards, separating the two members of Excalibur. Before Silverclaw could even think of rejoining her teammate, Sickle came at her, blade slashing and driving her back.

Commando spared his teammate a glance, before remembering that she'd been trained by Sabra, and he had his own issues to deal with at the moment.

"She's already dead," Hammer growled, "just like you will be!"

Hammer swung his weapon again, but Commando ducked under the attack easily.

"Heavy weapon, isn't it?" Commando smiled, "I bet your partner's the quick one, right? He boxes them in, you finish 'em off."

"I can fight my own battles!" Hammer spat, though he held his weapon steady for the moment, "and I am quick enough to handle you!"

"Maybe," Commando removed a grenade from its pouch in his belt, pulled the pin and then tossed it at Hammer's feet, "lets see your 100 meter dash."

"No!" Hammer brought his weapon down upon the grenade, smothering the explosion. Hammer, his attention focused on the grenade, locked up, and realized he didn't see Commando anywhere.

"Show yourself!" Hammer raised his weapon, and his head shot side to side, searching for where his enemy might have fled, "coward! Come out and fight!"

"Why?" Hammer sought everywhere for the voice, but found nothing, "this is more fun. I thought you were a pro, but it turns out you're just dumb muscle. I'm worse than offended, I'm bored!"

"Then face me!" Hammer shouted, sweat beading down his face. He was no coward, but he valued his life and knew there was no deadlier enemy than the one you couldn't see.

Above him, his legs pointed almost straight out, wedged between two oak trees, was Commando. He'd learned in Vietnam that trees offered a great tactical advantage, and wanted to see if that was true in Russia as well.

It was all he could do to make this fight interesting. He was almost ready to nod off as it was.

"Then find me first!" Commando taunted.

"Coward!"

"You used that already," Commando observed, "also, if you were the professional that you thought you were, you might have thought to look up."

"Look...up?"

Hammer did just that, as a pair of extra large boots followed by several hundred pounds of muscle came crashing down. The mercenary crumbled like a soda can.

“Better check up on the kid,” Commando mused, before a bullet whizzed past his chin. In one fluid motion, he unholstered his sidearm and returned fire. One thug went down, but there were still an even dozen, all armed with automatics, remaining.

Seconds before they fired as one, creating a wall of bullets, and Commando just barely dove behind a outcropping rock in time.

“This might take a minute,” Commando grunted.

oooOOooo

“Fall down you stubborn, green relic!”

Cybermancer had her gauntlets unleashing their full power upon Titanium Man’s head, and the villain barely seemed to notice. Suzi’s sensors detected an energy build up, and her armor automatically lifted her up and out of the path of the blast. Her sensor scans of Titanium Man were baffling, but the young scientist could make sense of some of what she was seeing. The metal behemoth was using technology that was two years old, and in this business, that was like bringing a pocket knife to a gun fight.

Cybermancer was able to blind all his sensors, able to predict when and where he would use his repulsars and keep out of his reach almost indefinitely. But actually putting him down?

That was proving much harder.

“Any ideas Cybermancer?” Sabra crashed into the back of Titanium Man’s knees, and sent him crashing to the ground.

“I’m working on it!” Cybermancer replied. She remembered how Stark once described the Titanium Man as a juggernaut of technology, a force of nature and Suzi now fully understood what that meant. As much as she could damage some of his subsystems, he would and could just keep coming, “hell, didn’t you might the Hulk to a standstill?”

“Different tactical situation!” Sabra swung a fist into where Titanium Man’s kidneys would be, if he were human. The steel almost dented, but otherwise there was no mark was left, “Hulk had pressure points, no long distance attacks and savagery that made him easy to avoid.”

“Nothing but excuses,” Cybermancer wanted to roll her eyes, but her response wasn’t surprising. They simply didn’t have the sheer power to get through his reinforced steel shell, not without Scarlet Scarab or Hellios. Her armor was at least three generations more advanced, but then, that only mattered up to a point. A sledge hammer still beat an Ipod any day of the week.

“Okay, we need precision,” Cybermancer began reviewing her sensor scans, and though she was able to penetrate every inch of her enemy’s armor, she saw nothing she could turn to her advantage, “Sabra, can you hold on?”

“Indefinitely,” The Israeli Super agent ducked underneath Titanium Man’s giant fist almost effortlessly.

“Good,” Cybermancer diverted twenty percent of her power into a single laser, and blasted Titanium Man. Seven micro-bursts that did little more than scorch her enemy’s steel shell.

“Focus on those spots,” Cybermancer stated, “I’ll be back with help in a second!”

Cybermancer darted into the air, and scanned the battlefield. She saw Kamau and Omega Red entangled, battling like wild animals. She positioned herself above them, and released a quick burst of energy that separated the two.

“Kamau, help Sabra!” Cybermancer shouted, “I’ll deal with ‘Red!’”

A bestial growl escaped Kamau’s lips, and he stepped forward without regard for Cybermancer’s order.

“Kamau! Sabra needs you now!”

Kamau muttered something under his breath, and then turned towards Titanium Man.

“So, you think you can succeed where your most brutal man failed?” Cybermancer felt her stomach rebel as she watched Omega Red’s eye regrow.

“Because I’m not about to get within arms’ length,” she replied.

Omega Red’s eyes went wide as three mini missiles shot out of Cybermancer’s gauntlet. They exploded with terrible force, and before he could recover he was hit with a burst of electrical energy that seemed to ignite every nerve ending in his body. Omega Red could recall the agony he felt when he first battled Wolverine, of punctured lungs and shredded nerve bundles, but that didn’t compare to this.

“The thirty year old bio-implants that let you control your tentacles?” Cybermancer commented, “to me, they’re like a giant red button that says ‘push me for pain’.”

oooOOooo

Silverclaw fell backwards as Sickle’s weapon slashed through the air. On instinct, she transformed her body into that of a human/jungle-cat hybrid, and leapt into the trees.

By the time her claws had sunk into the wood of the closest tree, Sickle had reared his weapon back in an effort to bring it down. Silverclaw leapt into the air, and shifted into her bird form. She took a moment to catch an updraft, and then tucked her wings back and dove for Sickle like a hawk diving at a mouse.

The Russian Mercenary thought he was prepared, weapon at the ready, but he was caught flat footed when Silverclaw went from bird form to snake, and slammed into him like a runaway bull.

Her head ringing a little, but lacking any bones to break, the young heroine recovered quickly, and wrapped her snake body around Sickle, and squeezed.

One...two...three...Silverclaw counted the seconds in her head as Sickle struggled to get free. He was strong for someone so wiry, but he had neither the strength nor leverage to get free. It wasn't long before he passed out from lack of air, though Silverclaw kept a firm grip on him for a minute afterwards, just to be sure.

"Man, Sabra is going to be so impressed!" Silverclaw glanced sideways, and saw three men hauling away an unconscious Colonel Valentin. On instinct, Silverclaw shifted into her cat form, and racing on all fours, caught the men before they even realized they were in her sights.

Silverclaw fell upon them in a flurry of claws, fists and growls. They never stood a chance.

"Are you okay?" Silverclaw, without thinking, offered Valentin a hand up while still in her cat-form, but stopped suddenly. Valentin's scent had a metallic tinge, and she heard an odd hum that she'd never heard before.

Silverclaw hadn't the time to act on the information before 'Valentin' pointed his wrist at her, and a dart from nowhere shot out and struck her in the chest.

Silverclaw blinked only once, before she passed out.

"This is Skulljacket," the false 'Valentin' reported over his radio, "I have the secondary objective. Have my payment ready."

oooOOooo

Kamau slammed into Titanium Man at the knees, and brought the metal giant tumbling down.

"Plan?" He asked his teammate simply.

"Scorch marks, focus on them," Sabra replied.

Kamau nodded. He didn't need to know the logic or rationale, he respected his teammates as professionals. In the heat of battle, that was all he needed.

"You go left," Kamau replied.

Titanium Man brought his fists slamming down in anger, but missed both. It was like fighting wolves, whenever he went for one the other lunged for an artery.

Sabra's fists shook his flight processors, while Kamau's knives dug towards the coolants for his repulsars. The assault was precise, powerful and relentless.

"Stand still!" Titanium Man shouted in frustration, though he knew exactly how stupid it sounded. He activated his repulsars and swept them outwards, but Sabra flew over them effortlessly, while Kamau melted into the ground. The iron giant pointed both hands at the Israeli agent, judging her to be the bigger threat, and ordered his systems to unleash a wave of energy powerful enough to cripple a warship.

Titanium Man's repulsars flared, then faded with a soft electric hum.

"Oh no," Titanium Man looked at his hands in horror, but before he could do anything Kamau shot out of the earth like a bullet, and slashed his diamond blades across the back of the Russian's knees, just as Sabra flew at him like an arrow, and drove both of her fists into his steel face.

"Damn you all," Titanium Man growled under his breath, as his HUD display began listing countless errors. Titanium Man was no engineer, but he knew that even if he won this battle he'd be in no shape to take his revenge on Valentin before the man escaped.

Titanium Man activated his boot jets, and tore into the sky.

"Tell that snake I will be back for him!" Titanium Man pointed at the members of Excalibur, "and when I have done that, I will end you both!"

Sabra wiped the sweat from her brow, and then half sat, half fell down.

"I think we won," Kamau nodded as he saw his teammates approach. Union Jack, Valentin, Cybermancer and Commando limped towards them. They had cuts and scratches, but there was no denying that they were victorious.

Sabra looked towards her teammates, and saw something different.

"Where's Silverclaw?"

oooOOooo

Silverclaw blinked her eyes, and felt like she wanted to throw up. And when the world came into focus around her, that feeling only grew when she realized the situation she was in.

She was alone with KGBastard, surrounded by at least two dozen of his men, and the special telepathic blocker she'd been issued to protect her mind from his powers?

It was in the monster's left hand.

“You just made a big mistake,” growled Silverclaw, as she shifted into her were-cat form. The odds were not in her favor, but she wasn’t about to surrender.

“I disagree,” KGBastard dropped the telepathic dampener, and crushed it underneath his heel.

Silverclaw had just begun to lunge for the monster, when his powers flooded her mind, and she stopped instantly.

“Heel,” KGBastard smiled, as Silverclaw once again assumed her human form.

Inside her own mind, Maria kicked, screamed and raged, but nothing she did raised a single response with her own body. She couldn’t twitch a finger, or blink an eye. She was a prisoner in her own body, able to see and hear everything, but control nothing.

“Alright, everyone leave,” KGBastard ordered.

“Sir, I really don’t think that...”

“Jacob,” KGBastard didn’t even spare the man a glance, “if I repeat myself, I will have you tear out your own intestines.”

There was no further protest, and as the men filed out Silverclaw noticed a camera tripod that she hadn’t seen before.

“Now, we need to send your teammates a message they won’t ignore.”

oooOOooo

“We need to call in Hellios and Scarlet Scarab,” Sabra said through gritted teeth, “it’s not escalation if we end this tomorrow.”

The small contingent of Excalibur were in one of Valentin many conference rooms, and the tension was thick. Sabra was ready to do damn near anything, Commando was silent but wouldn’t stop handling his combat knife, while Kamau sat with his arms crossed, staring out the window with cold eyes.

Cybermancer and Union Jack, more out of necessity than lack of concern, were the only ones reigning in their emotions.

“That’s not an option,” Union Jack said firmly, “if we push this guy into a corner, there’s no telling what he’ll do, not just to Silverclaw, but just to stay alive.”

“I must agree with my British friend,” Valentin said, “I’ve been warring with KGBastard for nearly a year. Every time I boxed him in...it got bloody.”

“You don’t get a voice in this, secret agent man,” Commando said coldly.

“Do we even have a plan for finding her?” asked Kamau.

The question hung in the air, and before anyone could provide an adequate answer, there was a knock at the door. One of Valentin’s ‘Red Widows’ stepped in.

“We received a message from KGBastard,” she said simply, and handed a CD to Valentin. Union Jack plucked it from the Russian’s hand, and put it into the room’s media center.

The video began, and within seconds it was possible to hear a pin drop. No one dared breathe.

“Hello Excalibur,” KGBastard began, “you are in possession of someone I want. I expect him delivered to me at a location of my choosing. Please.”

His words barely registered. As threats went, the words lacked teeth. They’d heard better threats from Hydra goons.

But that was simply because KGBastard’s actions spoke volumes. He stood next to Silverclaw, her leotard draped over one arm like a butler with a towel. Silverclaw was on her knees next to him, protecting her modesty as best she could with her hands, shaking with equal parts rage and fear.

Next Issue: Excalibur find themselves in a deadly hostage situation with an utter madman. Torn between loyalty to their teammate and a mission they loath, the decision they make could change them forever!

&&&
Marvel 2000 Presents
Excalibur Vol.2 #31
“From Russia with Hate.”
Part 3
&&&

Russia

“Otherwise, you’ll wish I only killed your teammate. See you soon.”

The video ended, and for an eternity that lasted a moment, silence reigned.

“He’s bluffing,” Valentin said, “not even he is insane enough to do something like that.”

“Are we really willing to bet Maria’s life on the sanity of a sociopath?” Cybermancer demanded.

“Now hold on, we’re not betting anyone’s life here!” Union Jack said.

“Lets just give the bastard to the Bastard,” Commando suggested, “call it a draw.”

“Even if we handed him over, we have no way to know he’ll return Silverclaw,” Kamau said, “I’ve seen this situation many times. Even if he has no tactical reason to kill her, he might do it for pride, to look strong. Then we’d fail for nothing.”

“I’m more than willing to help you reclaim your teammate,” Valentin said, “but don’t think I’ll allow you to hand me over...!”

The room exploded, or that’s what it sounded like when Sabra clapped her hands. The Israeli agent waited patiently for the occupants to regain their hearing.

“We are rescuing Maria, we are not surrendering Valentin no matter how foul a man he is, and we are killing KGBastard,” Sabra said, “anyone who feels otherwise, we will have words.”

“Sound good to me,” Commando said, “so how are we going to do it?”

“With reinforcements,” said a new, familiar voice.

oooOOooo

Elsewhere

“Well, I think we caught their attention,” KGBastard smiled to Silverclaw.

“They’ll kill you,” Silverclaw spat, “they won’t even hesitate.”

“They’ll try,” KGBastard handed Silverclaw back her costume, “dress, now. We have places to be, and friends to call.”

oooOOooo

Pacific Ocean

Danny Vincent looked through his AIM-bought binoculars, and smiled as the mercenary known as Machete, some two miles away on a different boat, pulled into a dock.

The seasoned mercenary was met by three women in skimpy outfits, and placed on a stretcher.

“Looks like our boy ran right where we wanted him too,” Danny said. He picked up a small remote, and pressed a button. A signal was instantly sent, frying the homing device that they’d managed to conceal on the man’s weapons.

“So this where that guy, Dr. Jaeger is holed up?” Shiva looked past Machete, and at the island he was being taken to. To the untrained eye, it was like any other cheap resort. Overweight men being served drinks by beautiful women, people lounging by the pool.

But it didn’t take Shiva long to notice how this wasn’t like any other beach resort. Several of the men sported bionic implants, some had skin colors that were completely unnatural, and Shiva found that she actually recognized a man or three from past jobs.

“So this guy runs a clinic for bad guys,” Shiva said, “healthcare for assholes. Why do we care, exactly?”

“Because he’s not just providing healthcare,” Junta replied, “though that’s bad enough. His medicines allow cyborgs all over Asia to operate at low cost. He puts hired killers back in the field in days instead of months, and if you can afford it, he’ll give you reliable superpowers. According to the CIA, he’s responsible for arming ten percent of the C-list villains in South America, and fifteen percent in Asia minor. If we get him, we make it harder for dozens of organizations to operate at the levels they do.”

“Still not caring.”

“He operates a slave trade on the side.”

“Okay, I think I can kill him now,” said Shiva.

“Oh, you need a reason now?”

“Never hurts.”

“That’s not what your victims say.”

oooOOooo

Elsewhere

“Thank you,” KGBastard smiled into the monitor, “when this is all settled, I can confident that RAID will find far more comfort in the bosom of Mother Russia than they have in the past, and I’d even be willing to assist with your other troubles.”

“Sir?”

KGBastard killed the connection, and turned to his man. It took him a minute to remember the man’s name. He didn’t much care to remember their names when he could read their minds effortlessly.

“Jacob,” the man offered.

“Yes, Jacob? Could you tell me why I shouldn’t order you to strangle yourself with your own intestines?”

Jacob wiped a thin trail of sweat from his brow, “We’re just a little concerned, sir. This thing with Silverclaw, and now calling into loose cannons like RAID...things are escalating sir. And we have enough trouble as is.”

KGBastard smirked, “Oh, haven’t you heard? It’s always darkest before the dawn.”

“But sir....”

“Enough,” KGBastard growled, “I am my father’s son. I will not be beaten by some third rate Iron Man. I don’t care the allies he has, or how powerful he thinks his new friends are. I am more ruthless, and far more evolved than Valentin. And because of that, I will win!”

oooOOooo

Avalon

Joey Chapman looked at the files scattered across his desk, all pertaining to KGBastard and his organization.

The team had reported in half an hour ago, while after they’d come up with a plan, Chapman came away disturbed.

Why had KGBastard resorted to such desperate measure? Kidnapping Silverclaw and using her as a hostage was not the actions of a man in control, far from it. They were the actions of a man struggling just to survive.

“Then why would they call us in...?” Chapman wondered aloud.

He was under no illusions that Excalibur’s mission was anything other than propping up an important member of the UN Security Council. And he was fine with choosing the lesser of two evils, especially when one of those evils was a man like KGBastard.

But KGBastard’s actions were not the actions of a man vying for control of the Russian underworld. They were an escalation, a violation of unspoken rules going back decades.

Like a cornered rat trying to stay alive.

And while cornered rats were dangerous, they usually required nothing more than an exterminator. Excalibur was nothing short of a nuclear weapon in comparison.

Slowly, after looking over intelligence reports that came from non Russian sources, Chapman saw the complete, unvarnished truth.

“Son. Of. A. Bitch.”

oooOOooo

Siberia

Union Jack wasn’t certain of what to expect when KGBastard gave him the coordinates for the meet. When he received the coordinates, the English hero ran them through an old SHIELD database, but the file hardly did the place credit.

It was an old, abandoned penal colony that was abandoned even before the Berlin Wall fell. The entire place was covered in a layer of snow, but all the cold and snow did nothing to preserve the installation. There wasn’t a window unbroken, walls had given away to age and everything about the complex looked as if it belonged to a past, dying era.

Excalibur made their way through what had once been the town square, and though they could feel dozens of eyes on them, they saw nothing.

“Excellent place for an ambush,” Sabra observed, “isolated, easy to prep in advance...”

“I don’t imagine they chose this spot for the warmth,” Cybermancer replied, “I’m running full scans of the area, but nothing’s showing up.”

“They chose this place,” said Valentin, “I would be more worried if we could detect something.”

“Chapman said we had back-up,” Cybermancer said, “does that mean that Scarlet Scarab and Hellios are getting off the damn bench? What about the stealth team?”

“Scarab and Hellios were called to a situation in Brazil,” Union Jack replied, “and the entire stealth team is on assignment.”

“Great,” Cybermancer muttered, “so it’s us against this bastard’s hired guns.”

“Not just them,” Sabra said, “my sources in the Mossad said that KGBastard was looking for assistance from anyone who may hold a grudge against us.”

“So what’s that list include?” Cybermancer asked.

“Hydra, Yellow Claw, Overmind, Hydra, could be anyone,” Union Jack said.

“Great,” Cybermancer said dryly.

“Don’t worry,” KGBastard said, “I was only able to make contact with one of your enemies. Radical Advanced Ideas in Destruction.”

KGBastard snapped his fingers, and suddenly the entire block became covered in soldiers in yellow beesuits, and none of them held conventional weapons. In alleys stood yellow mechs, while KGBastard was flanked by his men, Omega Red, Titanium Man and Hammer and Sickle. By any measure, the madman had a small army at his command.

And standing in front of him was Silverclaw, in full costume, thankfully.

“Hey guys,” Silverclaw said weakly, “sorry about this?”

“Has he hurt you?” Sabra demanded, unable to hold herself back.

“Nothing more than a cheap show,” Silverclaw growled.

KGBastard just smirked.

“She’s unharmed, just as I promised. And my allies have scanned miles in every direction,” KGBastard grinned like the cat that had eaten the canary, “now, hand Valentin over, and...”

KGBastard glanced over Excalibur.

“Where’s the one known as Commando?”

“He showed up an hour ago.”

Fate answered KGBastard’s question in the form of a dozen of explosions all around the compound. Silverclaw’s surprise lasted only a second before she assumed her bird form, and with one flap of her wings.

“Surprising how someone so big can be so stealthy, eh mate?” said Union Jack.

“Clever,” KGBastard growled, “but it’s not enough to save you!”

“No,” Sabra pointed to the sky, “but a mile and a half, is.”

KGBastard looked up, and he saw an odd black globe in the sky, that seemed to be growing larger, like...

“Is that a star...?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes,” said a new voice, “a very, very dark star.”

KGBastard felt as if water was poured down his spine, as an ebony globe opened up, and Russian heroes poured out.

Red Guardian, Vanguard, Crimson Dynamo, Ulsa Major and a dozen others. KGBastard recognized each and every one of them, because he’d read their files and threatened their families.

“No...,” KGBastard could barely breath, but when he got his wits to, he pointed at Excalibur and the Russian heroes like, and screamed, “kill them! Kill them all!”

KGBastard’s men went for their guns, but before even one managed to reach their holster, three women appeared out of thin air, a gun in each hand. With several pulls of the trigger, KGBastard’s men were cut in half.

Crimson Dynamo and Kamau fell on Titanium Man, Cybermancer and Red Guardian fell on Omega Red, as Excalibur and Russian heroes fell on KGBastard and RAID’s forces like a tidal wave.

The Russian telepath ran for his life, fear increasing his pace with every step.

oooOOooo

Union Jack leveled his pistol at several approaching RAID attack drones, but before he could pull the trigger Sibercat tackled them like a wild animal.

Union Jack turned from them, and eyed a man-droid that was charging it’s main cannon. His genius mind had already worked out a way to overload the devise, when Powersurge swooped down and unleashed a torrent of energy, melting steel like it was butter.

Union Jack turned to find another target, only to find a Russian hero already there time and again.

“Bloody hell,” Union Jack sighed, as he holstered his weapon.

“Russian rage is a terrible thing to behold, is it not?” Darkstar asked as she landed next to Union Jack.

“Not hard to see how your grandfathers sent the Nazis packing,” said Union Jack. He watched as Crimson Dynamo and Kamau brought Titanium Man down like a lumberjacks bringing down a tree, as Sabra and Silverclaw savaged Hammer and Sickle and Cybermancer and Volstok brought Omega Red to his knees.

Battle raged all around him, but Union Jack felt like little more than a bystander. Between Excalibur and the Russian heroes, there wasn’t much of anything for him to really do.

“Once we made sure our families were safe, we would have given our lives to be here,” Darkstar said. Something behind the heroine exploded into an orange ball of fire, but Darkstar hadn’t even flinched.

“Don’t think we need to go that far,” Union Jack said, “anyone will think twice before ever threatening your families.”

“Not if we let that scumbag get away,” Darkstar hissed, “he’s slipped away in the chaos!”

Union Jack smirked, “Oh no, he hasn’t.”

oooOOooo

KGBastard ran as if the hounds of hell were baying at his feet, and in terms of outrage and fury, it was a vast understatement.

His men had fallen, his allies were worse than useless, and the combined forces of Excalibur and every Russian hero were a force of nature he had no chance of standing against, even if he was as powerful as his father.

But where his father relied only on his power, KGBastard relied on his brain. He’d secretly had his men place a small aircraft nearby, and all he had to do was...

“That’s far enough,” Jacob Edward, one of his most trusted (and therefore cowed) men stepped right in front of KGBastard, “you have too much to answer for.”

“Step aside and I may let you live,” KGBastard growled.

“I don’t think so,” Edward said confidently.

“Grab your throat and tear it out,” KGBastard reached out towards Edwards with his powers, and to his horror, found nothing, “...how?”

“When you sent your man to kill that reporter,” Jacob Edward’s image melted from that of a stocky, Russian man to a slender woman known as Persona Grata, “or rather, meant to kill me.”

KGBastard took a step back in fear, “How could you deceive me...?”

“Your arrogance, mostly,” Persona Grata said, “you were too confident in your abilities to ensure the loyalty of your men. Hardly surprising, as they were anything but when removed from your influence. In addition, I had some specialized help.”

KGBastard felt a blade pressed against his back.

“Your telepathy is crude,” Guishen observed, “it is as if you use a sword as a club.”

“He rode his father’s legacy to power,” Valentin said as he strolled down the street as if he owned it. He strolled up to KGBastard with a smirk on his face, “unwise, young man, unwise. A true man forges his own path.”

“Says the man hiding behind two nations of heroes,” KGBastard growled.

“Do you see me hiding now?” Valentin adjusted his collar, “I’ll make you a deal, boy. Excalibur is under orders to bring you in. Dead or alive won’t matter.”

“Valentin, this wasn’t the deal,” Persona Grata said.

Valentin made a small motion with his hands, and a bullet landed an inch from the Android’s foot.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Valentin said, “you know of Russian prisons. The only way this pathetic thing could hope to survive is if he gave his fellow inmates a reason to fear him. What I intend...is simply an act of charity.”

“Your first and last,” KGBastard growled.

“We shall see,” Valentin cracked his knuckles, “we shall see...”

oooOOooo

Titanium Man crashed through the wall, and when Cybermancer saw the LEDs on his helmet dim, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Russian tech,” Suzi sighed, “they always overbuild.”

“You should respect it more,” Darkstar brought two mandoids down, “I’ve brought a dozen of these pathetic imitations of armor down in the time it took you to bring down one Russian built madman.”

“Fair point,” Cybermancer said, “though I didn’t exactly beat him. I just burned out his batteries.”

“A win is a win,” Union Jack observed, “where’s Persona Grata?”

“Persona?” Sabra stopped in her tracks, “she’s here...? Wait, she infiltrated KGBastard’s inner circle, didn’t she?!”

Before Union Jack could even think to offer an explanation, Sabra had her hands around his throat like an iron vise.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Sabra demanded, blinking back tears.

“Ruth, stop!” Silverclaw begged, “it’s okay, I’m fine!”

“I said why!” Sabra snapped.

Union Jack could barely breathe, but he met Sabra’s eyes, and simply said, “Operational security.”

Sabra grimaced, but she released her leader all the same. But she gave him a cold look, and simply said,

“You are becoming dangerously like Chapman. It’s not a change I care for.”

“I...”

“Well now, what’s all this?” Valentin sauntered towards Excalibur with a block eye, torn clothes, bloody fists but a predator’s smile, “we’ve won! We should be celebrating! Not arguing!”

Union Jack looked at Valentin, and then to Persona Grata and Guishen. Guishen seemed normal, but Union Jack could easily read the disgust on Persona Grata’s face.

“...where’s KGBastard?”

oooOOooo

Later, Red Square

Chapman stood outside of the Kremlin, casually mingling with the tourists. He wasn’t wearing his United Nations uniform. He wanted to blend in with the crowd, with all the thousands of other tourists that mingled about, taking in the history.

“You English are so punctual, aren’t you?”

Chapman nodded his head towards Valentin. With but a glance, Chapman spotted a dozen of Valentin’s bodyguards that hadn’t been there moments before.

Despite himself Chapman couldn’t help but smile.

“It’s a sign of strong character,” Chapman replied, “but I suppose I shouldn’t brag. I’m late myself.”

Valentin raised an eyebrow, “Oh? Is that so?”

“Figuratively, at any rate,” Chapman said, “I really should have seen it sooner. KGBastard did an excellent job at putting the country’s countries in checkmate, but how did he put you on your ass? I’ve seen your bank accounts. You could have hired any number of specialists, from Bullseye, to Crossfire to Black Swan, to remove him from the board. Hell, you could have done it yourself over the weekend, given the protection you have against his powers. But you didn’t. Why?”

“Well...”

Chapman waved his hand dismissively, “Rhetorically. I already know the answer. Because just putting a bullet in his brain wasn’t enough. You had to show everyone how powerful you were, you had to make a show of it. To demonstrate to the entire country the amount of influence and power you can bring to bear.”

“Chapman, you underestimate me,” Valentin smiled.

“Lets find out.”

Valentin didn’t see the first punch, but he recovered well. He swung towards Chapman’s jaw in response, but the Englishman was faster. He caught Valentin’s fist in his palm, and twisted it backwards.

“You need a few more lessons in hand to hand,” Chapman observed, “you broke the bones in your hand, but you did it wrong.”

Valentin tried to pull his hand free, but Chapman mule kicked him in the stomach.

“You should have spent more time in the field,” Chapman said.

Valentin felt at least a dozen blows land with expert blows, before he fell to the ground, his eyes swelling and blood pouring from his mouth.

“You...have just made...” Valentin glanced at his bodyguards, and saw that only a foot in front of each, there was a small, pinpoint smoldering hole in the ground.

Some ten thousand feet above the ground, Hellios growled.

“If you think you can get away with this...”

Chapman placed his foot on Valentin’s chest, “I know I can. You played me, good job. And the best I can repay you for putting my people in danger is this little beating. But know this...”

Chapman pressed his boot harder into Valentin’s chest.

“...if you ever think of doing anything like this again, I will crush you like the Hand of God. I don't have the influence and power you do, but I have a really, really big gun.”

Valentin wiped the blood from his mouth, “When I come for you, you will never see me coming. Count on that, Englishman.”

“You get one shot,” Chapman said. He took his foot off the former KGB agent's chest, “don't miss. Now, I'll let you go. You have a meeting with a council of Russian capos, don't you?”

Chapman looked at Valentin's bloody face and gave him a sarcastic smile.

“Don't want to be late, do you?”

Next Issue: A routine mission becomes anything but as the team finds themselves divided at the worst possible time!

I'd like to dedicate this issue to Jason Eberly, who passed away recently. As a matter of fact, he helped me develop the idea to use Valentin as a villain, and suggested the idea of wash-out Black Widows as bodyguards and such. He was a great writer, great guy and he will be missed.

&&&
Marvel 2000 Presents
Excalibur Vol.2 #32
“Siege of Law.”
Part 1
&&&

Avalon

“The plan here is fairly straight forward,” Chapman began. He was in the conference room, surrounded by the entirety of Excalibur. Behind him on a large screen was the image of a middle aged man, blond with a receding hairline. The only thing that made him look any different from any other doctor was a cybernetic left eye.

“Dr. Jaeger operates a very advanced clinic for superhuman criminals. We’re bringing him in.”

“So what, we’re anti healthcare now?” Silverclaw said.

“His methods are illegal and untested, to say nothing of the recreational drugs he manufactures,” Sabra said, and glared at Silverclaw, “and he operates exclusively with, or for, criminals.”

The young heroine shrunk under the gaze.

“And, pardon the pun, he’s tapped into the pulse of the criminal underworld,” Chapman said, “Dr. Jaeger is potentially a fountain of information, and his arrest would throw a monkey wrench in all kinds of criminal operations. This won’t be the arrest of the year, but it’ll be up there. Rock?”

Union Jack stood up.

“Alright team, Chapman expects that there’ll be a few cameras in this clinic, so we’ll have to use kid gloves. Last thing the bosses want is Excalibur splashed across the telly for excessive force,” Union Jack said, “so the team’ll be me, Sabra, Commando, Kamau, and Suzi. Junta, since you and Shiva started this, I’d like you along too, let you finish what you started.”

“I don’t really care about that,” Junta said.

“Seconded there, unless I can kill someone,” Shiva said.

“Duly noted,” Union Jack said, “but I don’t care. You’re joining us. I need the two of you to escort Cybermancer inside before the attack. The three of you are to secure the servers. I don’t want Dr. Jaeger wiping them before we can get to them.”

“I could use Persona along,” Junta said.

“Not happening,” Union Jack said, “we want to keep our numbers low, and I won’t risk Dr. Jaeger compromising her, not given his knowledge of robotics. No offense, luv.”

“None taken,” Persona Grata said, “I’m actually touched you don’t consider me expendable. Unlike most AIs, I’ve only the one body.”

“While they’re sneaking in the back door, alpha team will hit the front,” said Union Jack, “everyone else will remain in the helicarrier a few miles out. If this goes south, you’ll be there to bail us out. Scarab’s in charge, if it comes to that.”

“Any questions?”

“Do we have any idea who he might be treating?” Sabra asked, “who could be in residence?”

“We don’t have any eyes in, so Machete is the only confirmed patient,” Union Jack said, “for this mission, Dr. Jaeger is the prize. We’ll let any other scumbags slink away, if we have to choose between them or mission success. That said, we’ll take anyone who stays. The island defenses a concern, but we’ve cooked up something to get around that.”

“So this is just a simple smash and grab?” Commando said.

“If that’s how you Americans describe an arrest, sure,” Union Jack said, “unless there are any more questions, everyone gear up. We’ll head out in an hour.”

oooOOoo

Vulcan Domuyo, Red Nation Sanctum

“Every day! Every day they get closer!”

“We have so little land! How can they demand more?!”

“Brothers, brothers please!” Minister Blood, leader of the Red Nation Sanctum, tried to calm his fellow vampires, “I’ve been talking with the government, we have to give it time!”

The vampires that stood before him seemed to growl as one. As immortals, they could be patient, they could be disciplined

.But they could also sense when that patience was being used against them.

“How long have we talked! How long have they continued to inch closer and closer!” demanded another of his flock, “this land is holy! If we’re driven from here, where would we go?”

“They have no intention of destroying us,” Minister Blood said, “please, just have patience. We can still work through this!”

Minister Blood could tell that his flock was less than convinced, but they were quieted for the moment.

As they filed out, his assistant James lingered.

“And if they do not listen to reason, do we have options?” he said softly.

“We’re vampires,” Minister Blood said bluntly.

“And as vampires, outside of this land we’re vulnerable to any number of weapons that the humans can mass produce, to say nothing of the sun,” said James, “and they have an army. So I ask again, do we have options?”

“Only one,” Minister Blood said, “but I shudder to think what might happen were we forced to use it.”

oooOOoo

“A sewer, why is it always a sewer?”

Junta rolled his eyes at Cybermancer’s question. He, Shiva and Cybermancer were slogging through the island’s main refuge pipe, which was every bit as pleasant as it sounded. Griping did little to help the matter.

“Can you think of a better exit in a hurry? Not a lot of people are going to be in a rush to follow you.”

“Besides,” Shiva said, “what are you complaining about? Your armor is sealed. We’re the one wearing fabric.”

“Doesn’t he have cameras?” Cybermancer said.

“Barely,” Junta said, “Dr. Jaeger installed this backdoor intending to use it if someone compromised his clinic. So instead of installing cameras, he installed some passive scanners.”

“How do you know that?”

Junta smiled, “Because I know the guy who installed them. He’s great with physical security, not so much when it comes to computers.”

“Which is Junta’s way of saying we already did the hard work, princess,” Shiva sneered.

“Don’t worry,” Cybermancer said, “when this is over, I’ll have done my fair share.”

About thirty yards in, Junta motioned for them to stop, and pointed to the wall on their left.

“This is where you start,” he said.

Cybermancer brought her scanners to bear, and where her eyes saw stone, her scanners detected solid steel, electrical current and an electromagnetic field.

“Solid hologram,” Cybermancer said, “he must have taken a cue from Shield.”

“It’s a Sternako,” Junta said, “I’ve gotten through them before, but I’d need at least an hour on it. Any chance you could get us through faster?”

Cybermancer pointed her gauntlet at the door, and released a short burst of energy. The hologram fell instantly, but otherwise nothing changed.

“Done,” Suzi said, “you or Shiva might want to go first. I’m not what you would call stealthy.”

“I’ll go,” Shiva held a bundi dagger in each hand, “been too long since I stretched my legs.”

Shiva’s body transformed into a white mist, and drifted through the cracks in the door, and out of sight.

“Should we really be allowing her out of our sight like that?” asked Cybermancer.

“I nixed the cameras on this level, and I’m not too keen to get between her and her targets,” Junta said, “she’s doing what she was paroled to do, and knows what’ll happen if she steps out of line. What about your systems? Ready to signal Rock once we’ve secured the servers?”

“I’ve got a steady micro-burst signal,” Cybermancer said, “I cloned a phone of one of his patients and piggy backing off it right now.”

“Deadman’s switch?” Junta said, “clever.”

The door swung open, and Shiva stood in the threshold, daggers dripping blood.

“Path is clear,” Shiva said.

The two superheroes stepped inside. There were two guards on the floor, but beyond that there were no signs of alarm, nothing to indicate that their presence wasn’t still a secret.

“I saw the servers down there,” Shiva thumbed over her shoulder, “not lock on the door, lucky us.”

“Makes sense,” said Junta, as the three made their way down the hall, “you’d want to keep them in a place that you can keep them cool, and wipe them on your way out if you’re in a hurry.”

“Good plan,” Cybermancer gave the servers a once over, and found Dr. Jaeger’s failsafe almost immediately. An intelligent man, he wasn’t about to punch a command into a computer and hope that it was enough to delete all the information. Instead he had a dedicated generator, off in the

corner, designed to blow out the servers and turn them into slag. Clever and practical, until Cybermancer cut the connections with a simple laser, “but not today. Luck’s on our side.”

“Yeah,” Junta said, “but she’s a fickle bitch. Signal Rock and the others. Sooner Dr. Jaeger’s in the bag, the sooner we’re home.”

oooOOoo

“Alright,” Union Jack turned to his team. They were stuffed in an old Shield drop ship, used mainly because it held an anti-gravity devise that allowed quick deployment, “we’re good to go. Any last questions?”

“Can we shoot anyone in hospital beds?” Commando asked.

“...use your best judgment,” said Union Jack.

“I’ll take point,” Sabra said.

“I’ll come with!” said, Silverclaw but she stopped in her tracks when Sabra turned her head and glared.

“I’ll take point alone,” Sabra said.

Silverclaw saw how the rest of the team looked away. No one cared to defy the Mossad agent, regardless of her official rank on the team.

“I’ll secure a landing zone,” Sabra said. She stepped out the hatch, and flew to the head of the craft.

“She’s simply worried,” Kamau placed a reassuring hand on Silverclaw’s shoulder, “you should be honored she cares enough to be.”

oooOOoo

Dr. Jaeger looked at his monitors in horror. His alarms started blaring the moment the drop craft entered his airspace, and at first he feared that it was Hydra or AIM, come to take the drugs and experiments that he’d worked so hard to create.

Seeing that it was Excalibur was actually a little reassuring, but not by much. The team of heroes could easily overpower his defenses, and he had several fail-safes designed in case of law enforcement, but they’d never been tested. Not like this.

“Oh well, it will work or it won’t,” Dr. Jaeger said to himself. He went to his private quarters, and removed a twenty year old bottle of scotch. He poured himself a shot, hands shaking, “no sense in worrying about something you can’t control.”

oooOOoo

Outside

“For someone who makes millions, he should have spent more on his defenses.”

Sabra flew through three Dreadnaughts, punching through their steel exteriors as if they were paper.

“I’ve had a more difficult time filing my nails.”

“Perhaps he thought his reputation might be enough,” Kamau said.

He lunged at a Dreadnaught, diamond trench knives in each hand. With a single slash, he tore it in two.

Off to the side, Commando found he was in heaven.

Commando grabbed one security guard, dressed in a tailored, off the rack suit. He backhanded the man across the jaw, snapping his head back 180 degrees. Another man came at Commando from behind, but he caught the man by the wrist, and his grip still firm, kicked the man in the kidneys and in effect tearing his arm from his socket.

“Bloody hell!” Union Jack said, “just because they’re LMDs doesn’t mean you have to go Jack the Ripper, mate!”

“Wait, they’re LMDs?” Commando smiled, “alright, now I can stop holding back!”

Union Jack paused. He honestly couldn’t tell if the man was kidding or not, and he wondered what that said about them both.

He scanned the battlefield, as his team dispatched the last of Dr. Jaeger’s security force. The few guests that had been here had run off, to where Union Jack neither knew nor cared. They weren’t the priority here, and once Dr. Jaeger was secured his team would be free to sweep up any stragglers later.

“Least this island mission’s going better than the first two,” Union Jack said, “Excalibur, on me!”

“Thought this guy was important,” Silverclaw said, as she landed next to her leader, “how’s come he’s only got generic defenses?”

“He was arrogant,” Kamau said, “most who deal in death from afar think it will never be returned to them.”

“What Kamau said,” Union Jack took a step forward, but he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and instinctively leapt back.

It was all that saved his life, when an orange dome erupted out of the ground, severing the odd robot and patient who happened to be standing at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The dome reached some two stories in the sky, and filled the air around with it with the odd smell of both oil and copper.

“Force field, always a classic,” Union Jack said.

“I recognize this type,” Sabra said, “it’s rated to stand up to the likes of Ben Grimm. We should call in Hellios, before anyone inside has time to rally.”

“No, not yet,” Union Jack said, “we’re trying to soft sell this, remember. And we still have an ace in the hole.”

Union Jack pressed his earpiece.

“Cybermancer?”

oooOOoo

“Here, Rock,” Cybermancer replied over the radio, “what’s up?”

“Got a force field out here. Anything you can do to help?”

“Give me a moment,” Cybermancer already had her armor plugged into the base’s servers. Within a few commands, she found the security controls, “alright Rock, just remember to wipe your feet when you come in the front door.”

oooOOoo

It took Dr. Jaeger a considerable amount of self control not to spit out the scotch he’d been drinking.

He never expected his force field to stop Excalibur. He held no illusions there. But he at least expected it to hold them back for at least a few minutes!

“They have someone inside, the tricky little bastards,” Dr. Jaeger muttered. But despite the danger, Dr. Jaeger smiled.

Because the security in this room was disconnected from his main servers for a reason.

oooOOoo

Excalibur's entry into the clinic was not subtle. The entire complex shook as if it were in the middle of a war zone, and a few automated defenses still worked, loudly spewing energy.

One man, an experienced killer, heard the violence. A patient of Dr. Jaeger, he was on a two day bed rest, though the man hardly saw the need. A torn Achilles tendon wasn't something he could physically ignore, but the killer found that Dr. Jaeger was an excellent doctor, who erred on the side of caution when it came to dealing with serial killers and the like.

So the man swung his feet off his bed, picked up his sunglasses, and hunted for the shadows. His lust for a kill was balanced by the knowledge that he could never hope to take down the entire team of Excalibur by himself.

But if one should stray from the pack...

oooOOoo

Dr. Jaeger watched in sadness as the oak doors to his private study exploded inward as Excalibur stormed inside.

"Honestly, why does no one ever knock?" Dr. Jaeger sighed.

"Because smashing is more fun," Union Jack said, "Dr. Jaeger, you're under arrest for...well, I don't have all bloody day. Just being an evil doctor in general."

"I simply provide medical care to those in extreme need," Dr. Jaeger said, "not some super villain."

"You'll be able to explain that to the judge," Union Jack said. He leveled his pistol at Dr. Jaeger, "hands, raise 'em."

"Your people were pretty thorough," Dr. Jaeger raised his hands, "but tell me, did they get the isolated holographic guards?"

"Umm, yes?"

"Picard Six," Dr. Jaeger said.

"...hell."

Six men, dressed like mobsters from the 20s carrying Tommy guns, appeared in a burst of light. Union Jack barely had time to curse before they began spraying bullets everywhere.

"Get back!" Sabra lunged at the closest gunman, and grabbed him by the collar. She threw him into another gunman, and winced as the 'bullets' struck her. They looked like antiquated weapons, but Sabra knew they were anything but. They were constructs of hard light, and were twice as deadly as they appeared.

Kamau sliced three of the gunmen in half with one stroke, but that didn't so much as knock them down, let alone keep them from firing. The bisected gunman hovered in midair, still firing his Tommy-gun.

"Commando, get down!" Silverclaw shifted into her snake form, both to present a smaller target and for the speed, and sped out the door.

Commando simply stepped aside, a hail of bullets missing him by inches, and drew his sidearm. He aimed, pulled the trigger twice, and the holographic mobsters vanished.

"Those lightbulbs in the corner didn't look like energy savers," Commando observed.

Dr. Jaeger shrugged, "Well, I had to try."

"No you didn't," Union Jack groaned.

Sabra detected the distress in her leader's voice, and her eyes fell upon him immediately.

"Rock!"

Union Jack, to his credit, was still standing, even as he held a hand over his stomach, blood trickling past. Sabra was at his side in an instant, supporting him and helping the British hero stand.

"You need to lie down," Sabra said.

"Just a flesh wound," Union Jack smiled underneath his mask, "s'not bad."

"You're a sober Englishman who's slurring," Sabra said, "it's bad."

"This stopped being fun," Commando stomped over to Dr. Jaeger, and grabbed the man by his neck. He then tapped his ear, "Chapman, we have the doc, and we got wounded. Send a team to our position, now!"

oooOOoo

Chapman felt his blood run cold.

"Commando, I need you to hold on for a minute," Chapman said.

A string of profanities in three different languages came through the radio, ending in "And the hell is that, you worthless rat bastard?"

Chapman looked at the gentlemen in the three thousand dollar suit standing across from him, with a smug grin on his face.

“Because Dr. Jaeger’s lawyer is contesting the arrest warrant. If you take him now, everything will be thrown out.”

oooOOooo

“Lawyers,” Kamau growled, “I’ve still not met I wouldn’t kill.”

“This guy, I may just help you do it,” Commando said. He pulled out a zip-tie, and bound Dr. Jaeger’s hands in front of him, “but we got other shit to do. Sabra, get ‘Jack on that bed! I’ll be there in a sec to look at the wound.”

“You have medical training?” Sabra picked Union Jack up, and then gently placed him on the bed.

“Some, mostly field,” Commando said.

“Please, those are silk goose down sheets!” Dr. Jaeger pleaded.

Commando backhanded the Doctor in the jaw without ever looking at him.

“We need to get the others here,” Sabra said.

“Guys...?”

“Kamau, I need you to go to the labs we passed and get me some gauze, scalpels and sutures,” Commando said.

“Guys...?”

“The wound is clean, but nothing’s stopping the bleeding,” Sabra reported, “the longer we stay, the greater the risk.”

“Everyone’s already rabbitted,” Commando said, as he approached to Union Jack’s side, “we can’t arrest this asshole yet, but operational law allows rescue in damn near any circumstances. Give Chapman a few minutes, and we’ll be good.”

“Guys!”

Everyone turned their attention to Silverclaw, and then looked past her at the monitor that was against the wall.

It showed the beach, and a half dozen villains, and more literally appearing out of thin air by the second.

Some of those who appeared were simple mercenaries, with cyborg implants. Not a one was recognized.

But others...others were infamous. Lady Deathstrike, Tiger Shark, Klaw, the Griffin and more.

“Oh crap...” Commando muttered.

“Good doctors are hard to find,” Dr. Jaeger said with a shark like grin, “now you see why I give a discount to teleporters, hmm?”

Silverclaw looked to her teammates.

“What do we do...?”

Next Issue: