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HERE COMES JUSTICE!



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FREE COMIC BOOK DAY

2017

*Welcome to the first Operative Network Free Comic Book Day sampler, **HERE COMES JUSTICE.***

Let's begin, shall we?

PROJECT WILDFIRE: ENTER PROJECT TORRENT (Part 1 of 2)
Page 3

Words/Production by Hannibal Tabu
Art/Lettering by Quinn McGowan
Cover by James C. Washington the Third
(PROJECT WILDFIRE created by QUINN MCGOWAN)



MENTHU: THE ANGER OF ANGELS (Part 1 of 3)
Page 27

Words/Production by Hannibal Tabu
Art/Lettering by Robert Roach
Cover by Quinn McGowan
Preview image by Todd Harris
(MENTHU created by ROBERT ROACH)



MIDNIGHT TIGER (A Preview of Issue #1)
Page 52

Words by DeWayne Feenstra
Art by Ray-Anthony Height
Colors/Letters by Paul John Little
(MIDNIGHT TIGER created by RAY-ANTHONY HEIGHT)



DJANGO UNPLUGGED (A T.A.S.K. STORY)
Page 57

Words by Hannibal Tabu
Images by Sean Isaakze
(T.A.S.K. created by DAMION GONZALES)



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PROJECT:

WILDFIRE

#4

HANNIBAL
TABU
QUINN
McGOWAN

Enter ...
**PROJECT:
TORRENT**

Part 1 of 2



TWO OF SHELBY CITY'S
YOUTH DEBATE THE REALITY
OF A SUPER-POWERED MAN
IN THE SKY...

...GETTIN'
FOOLED BY THAT
STUFF ON T.V.!

LISTEN...

ACTING
LIKE THIS
SOME KIND OF
COMIC BOOK!
\$#!+ IS TOO
REAL ON THE
MOUND.

LOOK UP,
THERE HE IS!

WHAAAAAAA?

A COLLEGE EXPERIMENT PROMISED
A FEW EXTRA DOLLARS BUT
TURNED A GENETIC PREDISPOSITION
INTO AMAZING SUPERPOWERS. HE
GREW UP IN THE STREETS OF
SHELBY AS WILL WATSON THE
THIRD BUT TAKES TO THE SKIES
AS...

PROJECT:

WILDFIRE

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN

WILL WATSON THE 3RD, A.K.A.
AGENT WILDFIRE. POWERFUL.
NEW AT THE HERO THING.
ADJUSTING WELL.

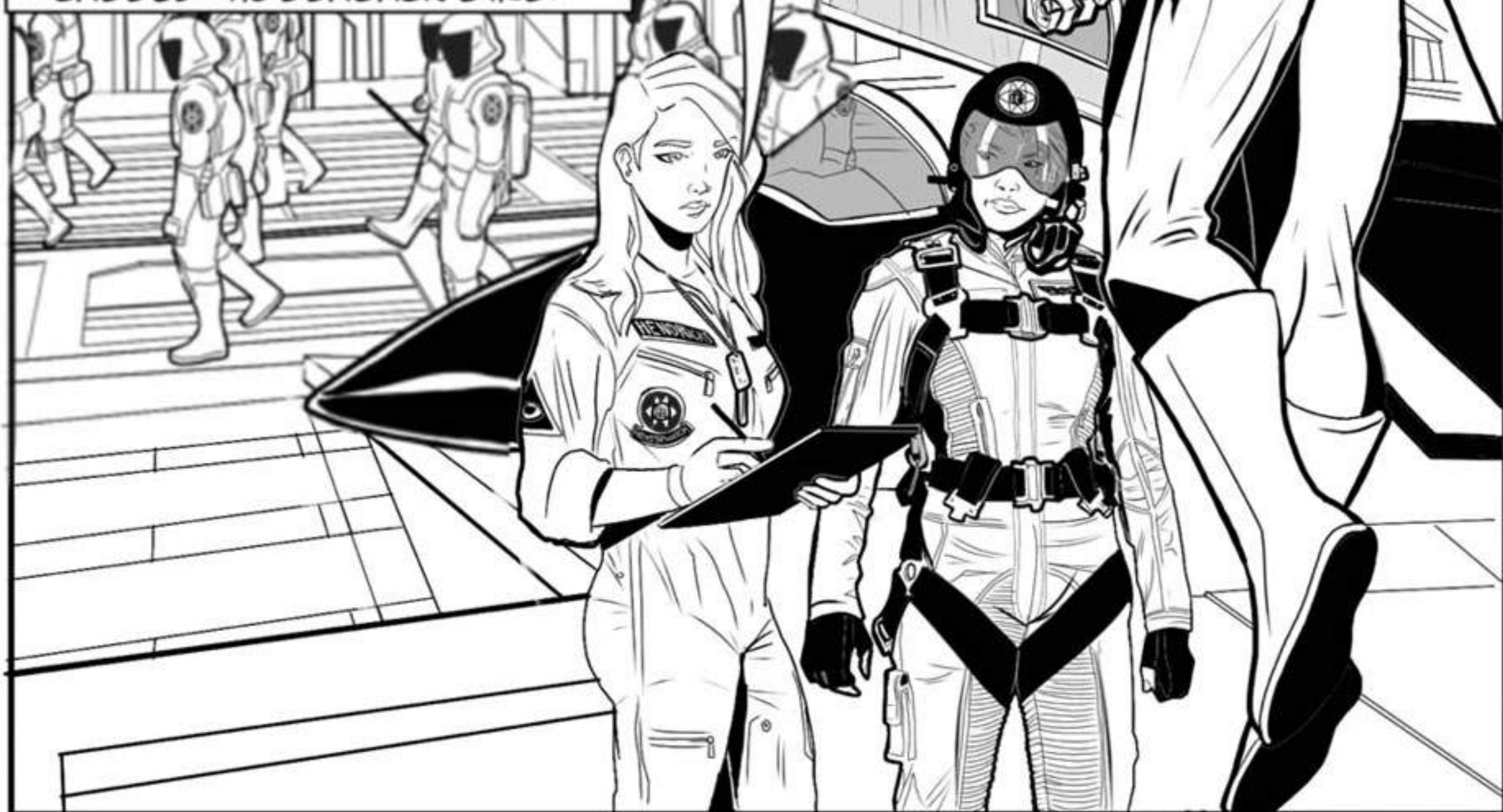
1 SEC
MONITORING SECRET ENTRANCE

HEY
HOLLABACK
GIRL! WHAT'S
EVERYBODY SO
HYPED
ABOUT?

GOT ME USING
ONE OF THE
DOWNTOWN SECRET
TUNNELS, THAT'S
WEIRD...

IT'S
CHERYL, NOT...
NEVERMIND, SORRY,
I'LL EMAIL YOU,
CAPTAIN
DANVERS...

NSA LIAISON CHERYL HENDRIX.
KNOWS MORE THAN SHE TELLS.
NEVER DISARMED. HATES BEING
CALLED "HOLLABACK GIRL."



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

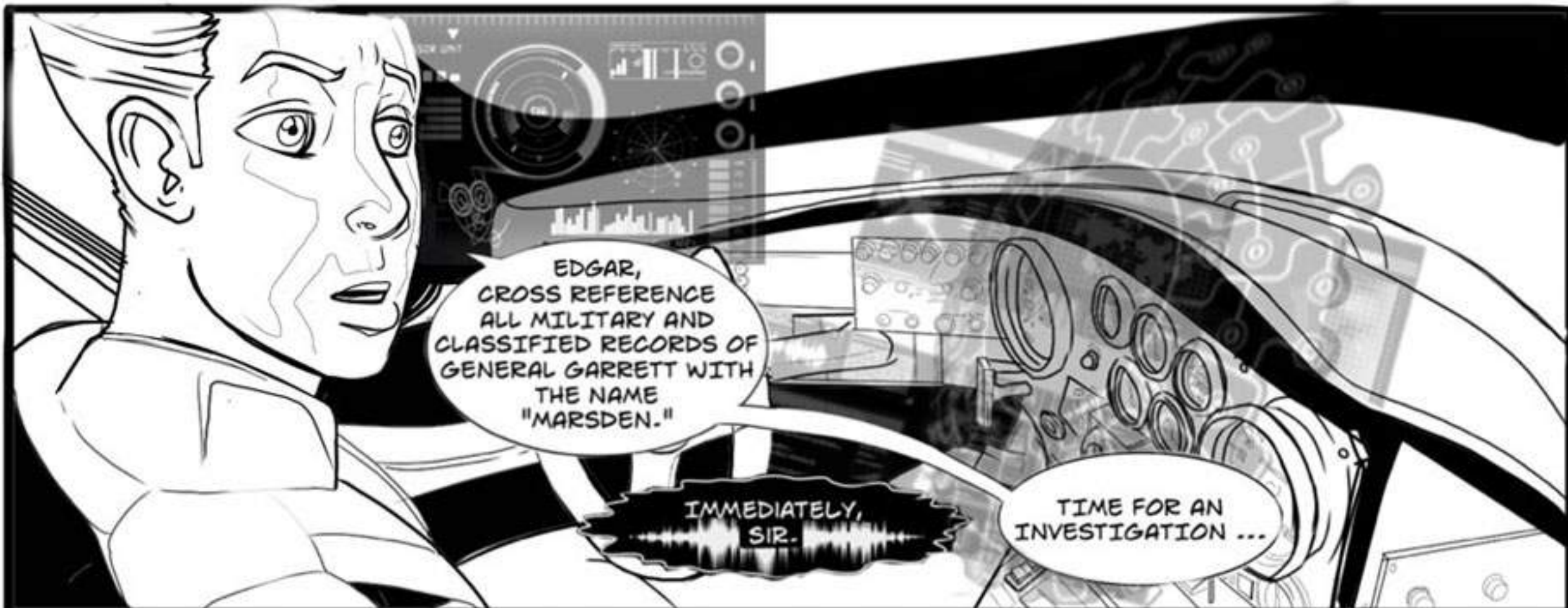
QUINN
McGOWAN



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN

THE SHELBY PYRAMID
HASN'T BEEN USED
FOR SPORTS SINCE
2004. NOW A
RAMSHACKLE RETAIL
ESTABLISHMENT
FREQUENTED BY GUN
ENTHUSIASTS AND
CONFEDERATE FLAG
WAVERS.

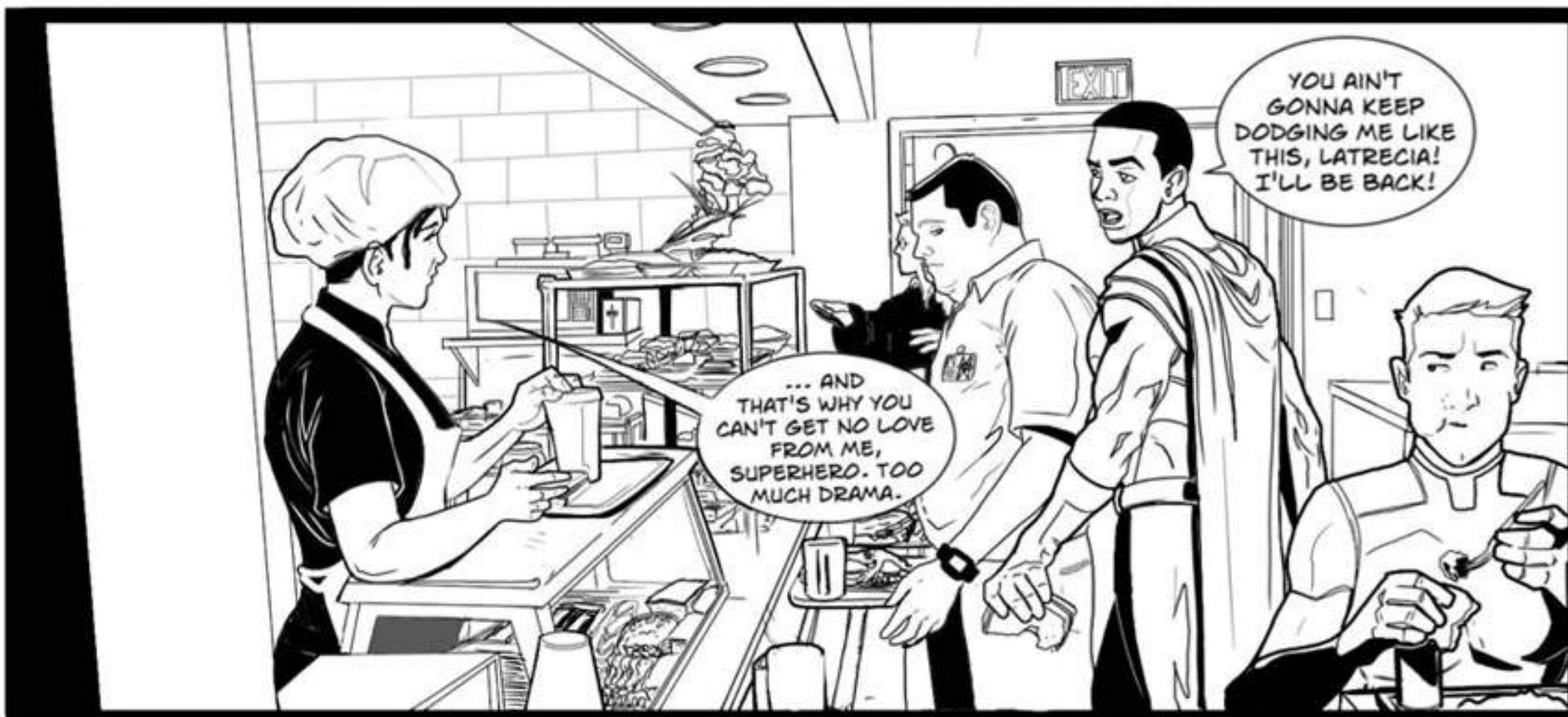


HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN

MEANWHILE, IN THE
MONSTERWATCH
CAFETERIA...



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

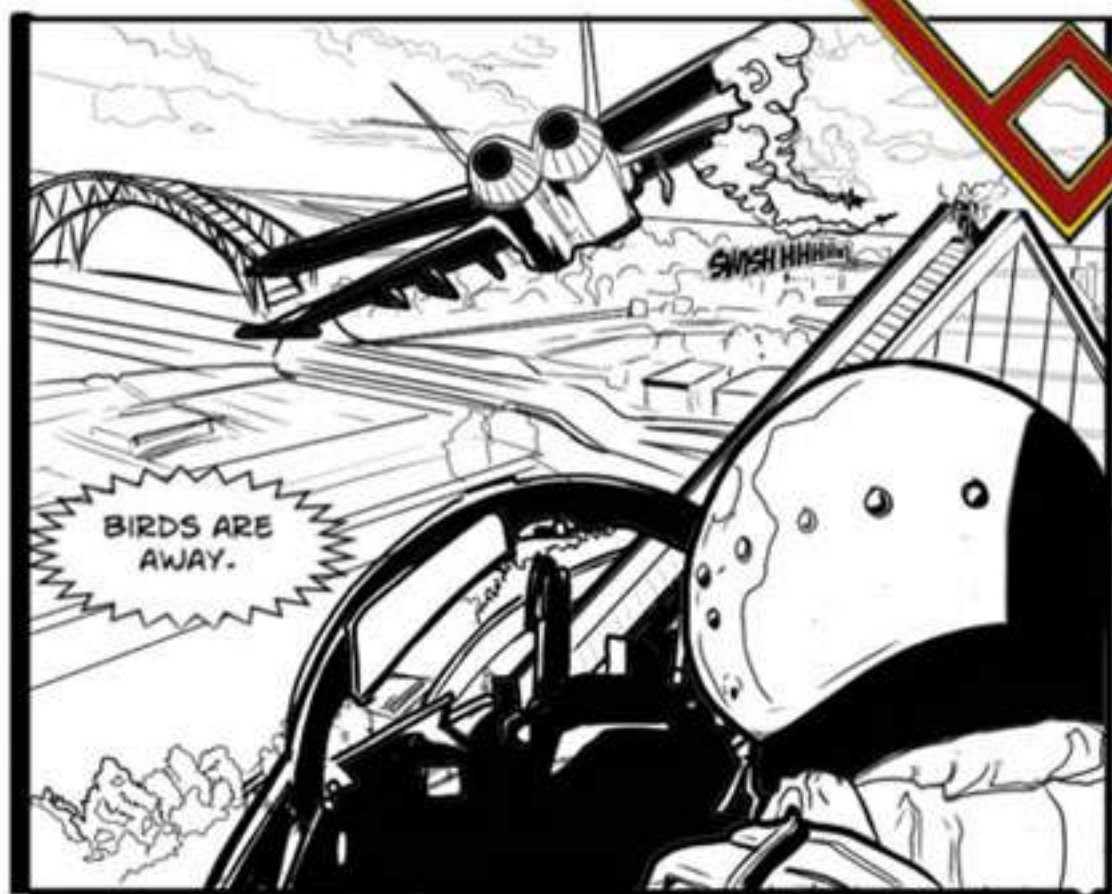
QUINN
McGOWAN



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN



HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN

INSIDE THE INTERNAL
REVENUE SERVICE
OFFICE ON FRONT
STREET...

«SIR,
YOUR FLYING
COUNTERPART IS HEADING
TOWARDS THE
PYRAMID.»

GOOD FOR
HIM...

WHY, EXACTLY
ARE YOU VIOLATING
THE PRIVACY OF THE
«CITIZENS, SIR?»

I KNOW
YOU'RE ASKING
BECAUSE I PROGRAMMED
YOU TO HELP ME THINK
THINGS OUT WHILE TALKING,
BUT IT'S STILL
ANNOYING.

WARDOS
SIGNED THE
PAPERWORK ON A DEAD
SOLDIER NAMED MARSDEN,
BUT THE PAYROLL RECORDS
ARE ALL WEIRD, LIKE
SOMEBODY ALTERED
THEM.

LUCKILY, SOME
OF IT WAS
PROCESSED THROUGH
THIS SCARILY OLD
FASHIONED IRS OFFICE...
AAAND HERE'S PAYROLL
ISSUED TO MARSDEN
AFTER HE DIED.

THIS
TEDIOUS
EXPOSITION MEANS
«WHAT, SIR?»

THAT IT'S TIME
TO USE BEING RICH TO
UN-REDACT SOME
CLASSIFIED
RECORDS!

HANNIBAL
TABU

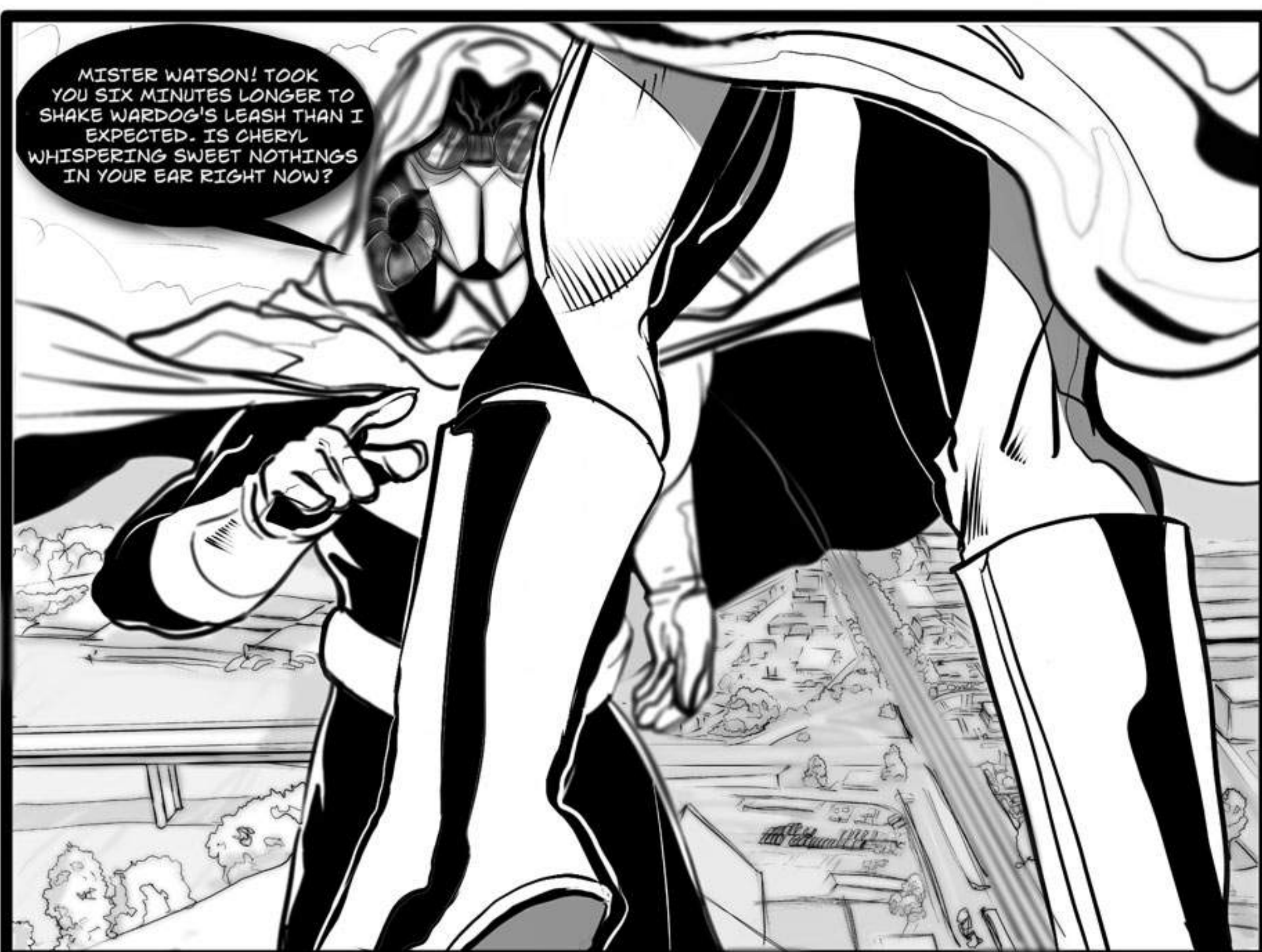
WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN



QUINN
McGOWAN
HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE



PROJECT:

WILDFIRE

QUINN
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HANNIBAL
TABU



PROJECT:

WILDFIRE

QUINN
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TABU



PROJECT:

QUINN
MCGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

I'M
MONSTERWATCH'S
DIRTY LITTLE SECRET.
I'M PROJECT: TORRENT.
I'M YOUR
PREDECESSOR.

YOU
REALLY
THOUGHT YOU
WERE THE
ONLY ONE?

WILL! WILL, SAY
SOMETHING! WILL!

PROJECT:

QUINN
McGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

WOW, THAT *DID*
FEEL GOOD! I WISH YOU
COULD SEE YOUR FACE. I
WISH I WAS ON
INSTAGRAM, SO I COULD
POST THIS.

HOW MANY IN
THE AIR?

THREE
ENTIRE
SQUADRONS,
SIR.

CALL FOR
SEVEN MORE.
WEAPONS HOT,
EVERYBODY.
TARGET GOES
DOWN.

WHAT?!??

OKAY, LET'S SAY I
BUY WHAT YOU'RE
SELLING. WHAT'S
SUPPOSED TO
HAPPEN NEXT?

THAT'S EASY. WE
GO BACK TO
MONSTERWATCH
TOGETHER AND
TEAR IT APART.

PROJECT:

WILDFIRE

QUINN
McGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WHY IN THE NAME
OF NAME OF ISAAC
HAYES WOULD I DO
THAT?

BECAUSE
THEY'RE USING
YOU, THEY...
ONE
MOMENT...

HAHAHAHA
HAHA!!!!

MONSTERWATCH, WE
HAVE A PROBLEM...

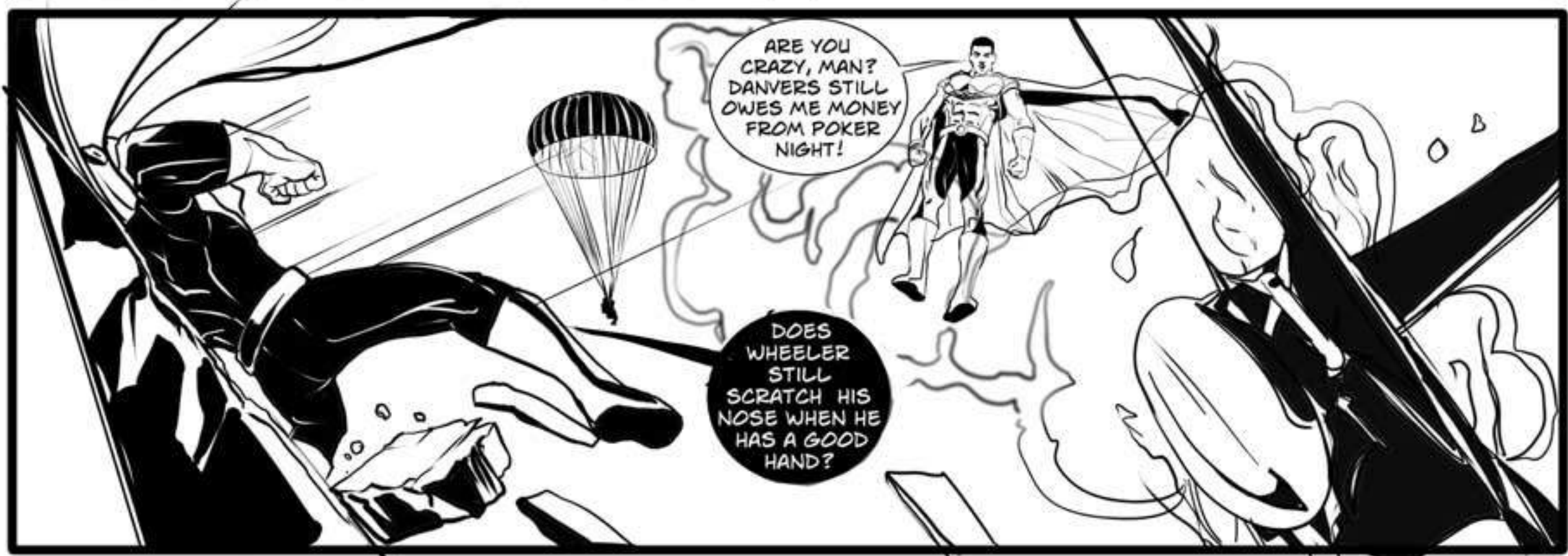
NOOOO!

PROJECT:

QUINN
MCGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE



PROJECT:

QUINN
McGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE



HOLLABACK,
THIS AIN'T GOOD
...HELP ME OUT
HERE...



I KNOW
THEM, MISTER
WATSON. I KNOW
THEY'LL USE YOU AND
THROW YOU AWAY, LIKE
THEY DID WITH
ME...



...JOINING ME
IS YOUR BEST
CHANCE!

I KNOW
WILL, GENERAL.
IF WE DON'T TELL
HIM PRETTY MUCH
EVERYTHING, WE
COULD BE IN
DANGER...



DON'T TELL ME
YOU'VE NEVER
DOUBTED GARRETT,
THAT HE WASN'T ON
YOUR SIDE...



DO WHAT YOU
HAVE TO DO,
HENDRIX! I HAVE TO
CALL WASHINGTON AND
FIND OUT HOW
MARSDEN GOT
LOOSE.

PROJECT:

QUINN
McGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE



PROJECT:

QUINN
McGOWAN

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WILDFIRE



PROJECT:

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TABU

WILDFIRE



PROJECT:

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McGOWAN

HANNIBAL
TABU

WILDFIRE

...THAT'S
PRETTY MUCH
MY THING.

...AH, THE
BILLIONAIRE.
YOU'RE FOUR MINUTES
LATER THAN I
ANTICIPATED,
MISTER SHELBY.

I CAN
JUST TELL
I'M GONNA
LIKE YOU,
SERGEANT!
LET'S
DANCE!

NEXT:

THE **BIG DANCE**
NUMBER!

WAR DOG'S SECRET!

BREAKING STUFF!

NEXT . . .

...LITTLE
TECHNOLOGY
CAN'T SAVE YOU,
MISTER SHELBY!

YOU'LL HAVE TO
PARDON ME FOR
DOING MY BEST BEN
AFFLECK THEN,
SERGEANT!

OF COURSE
YOU WOULD
HAVE LIKED THAT
MOVIE...

WHAT'S
THAT
SUPPOSED TO
MEAN?!?

WILL!
WILL!! IT'S
CHEYRL. CAN YOU
HEAR ME?

THIS IS
NOT HOW
MY DAY IS
GONNA
GO...

MENHU

The Anger of Angels

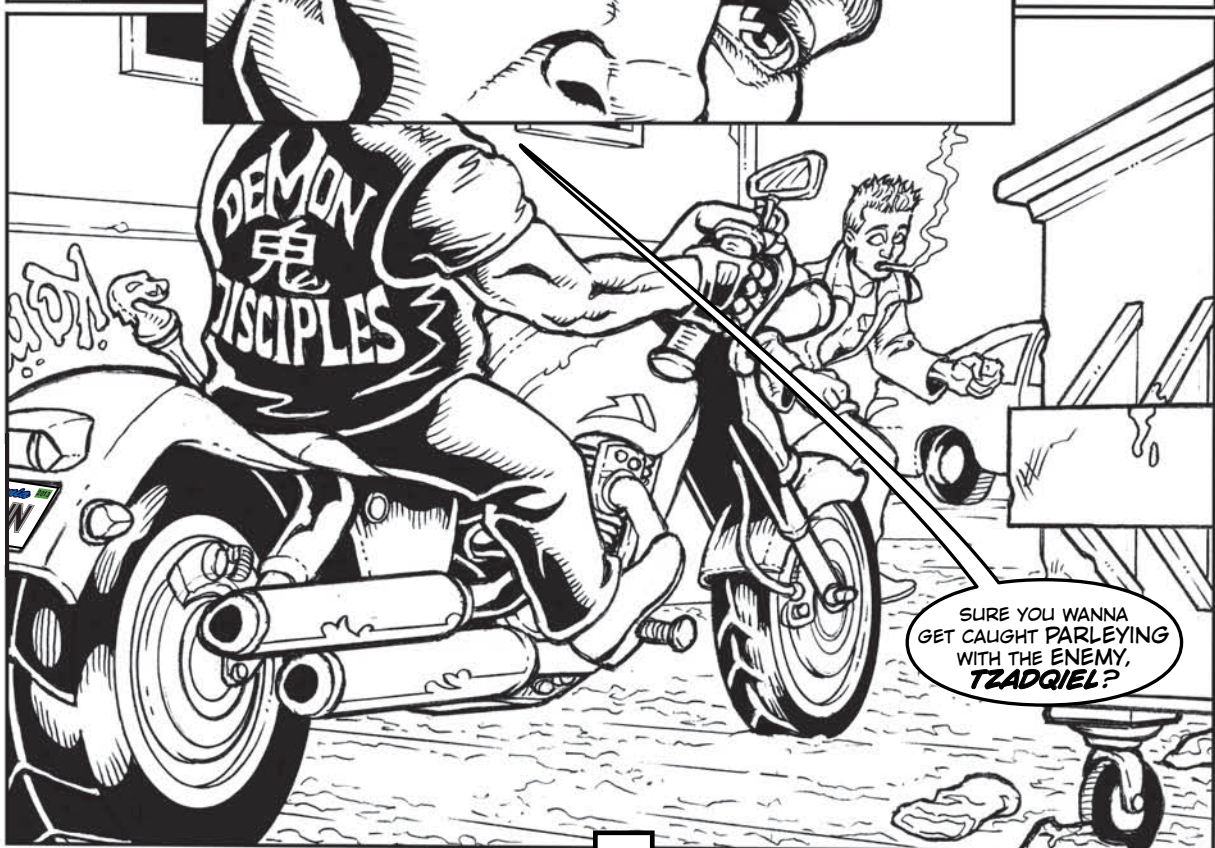
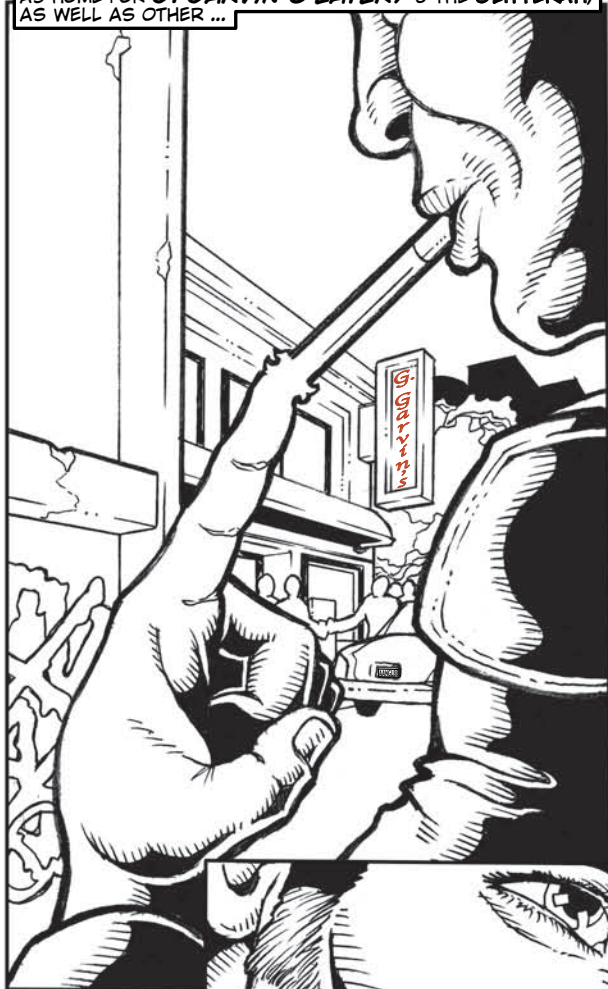
A Weekly Web Comic



McGowan

**TABU
ROACH**

LOS ANGELES' TRENDY MELROSE BOULEVARD SERVES AS HOME FOR *G. GARVIN'S EATERY* & THE GLITTERATI, AS WELL AS OTHER ...







EXACTLY. THE LAST THING ANY OF US NEED IS A VIABLE SPIRITUAL FIGURE FROM AN ALMOST FORGOTTEN PANTHEON ON EVERY TV SCREEN.

IT COULD MEAN ANOTHER GREAT WAR OF SPIRIT REALMS.

THAT'D BE ...

... NOTHING COULD SURVIVE THAT.



DO THIS FOR ME & HEAVEN LOOKS THE OTHER WAY ON SOMETHING YOU WANT.

YOU **REALLY** WANT THIS GUY DEAD!



THE NETER **CANNOT REGAIN** THEIR INFLUENCE. THEY'RE STILL PLAYING BY OLD RULES, MANIFESTING LIKE **HELLENICS**, FREAKING OUT CIVILIANS ...

REMEMBER WHEN WE FOUGHT JUST **ONE SEBAU**? I'D NEVER WANT A FIGHT THAT TOUGH AGAIN.



I REMEMBER HOW LONG IT TOOK YOUR **WINGS** TO GROW BACK ...

LAUGH IT UP, **ALTAR BOY**. REMEMBER WHO CALLED WHOM THIS TIME.



THIS **HAS** TO BE **CERTAIN**. THIS **MORTAL** HAS TO BE STOPPED FOR GOOD.

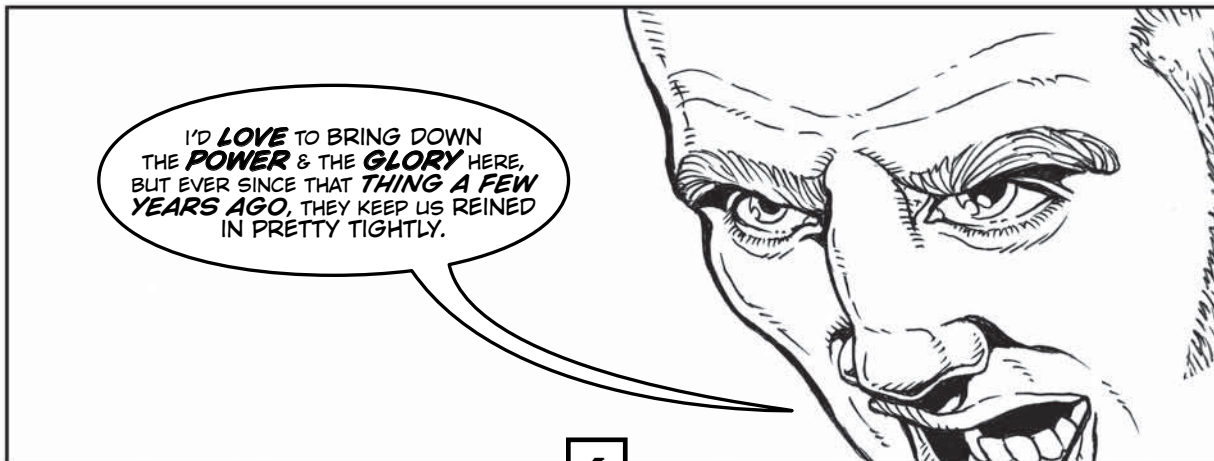
WAIT, HE'S NOT EVEN **IMMORTAL**? THAT SETTLES IT. NO ONE MAN SHOULD HAVE ALL THAT **POWER**.



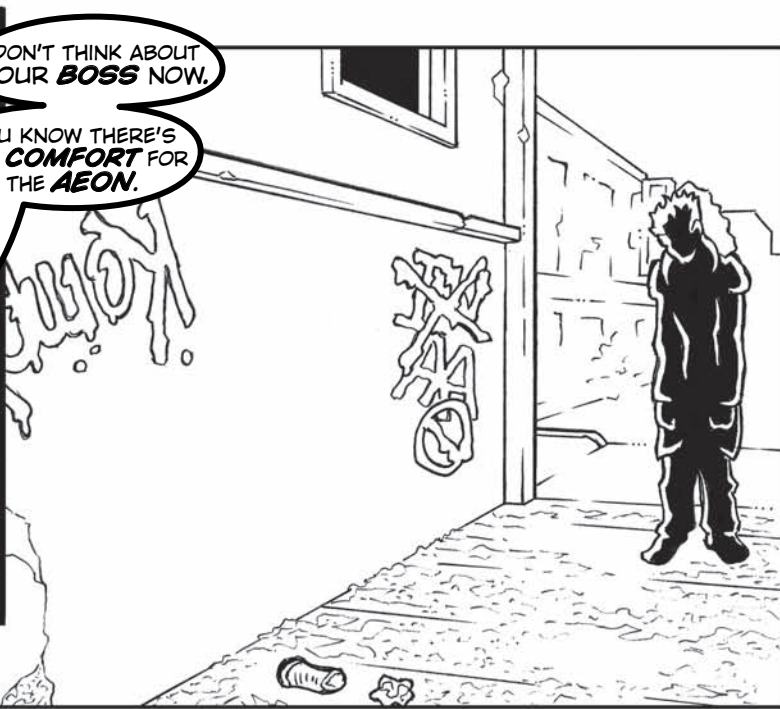
WE HAVE TO KEEP THIS QUIET. I'M NOT EXACTLY ... AUTHORIZED TO RUN THIS OP. THE **AEON** DOESN'T KNOW I'M OFF THE RESERVATION.



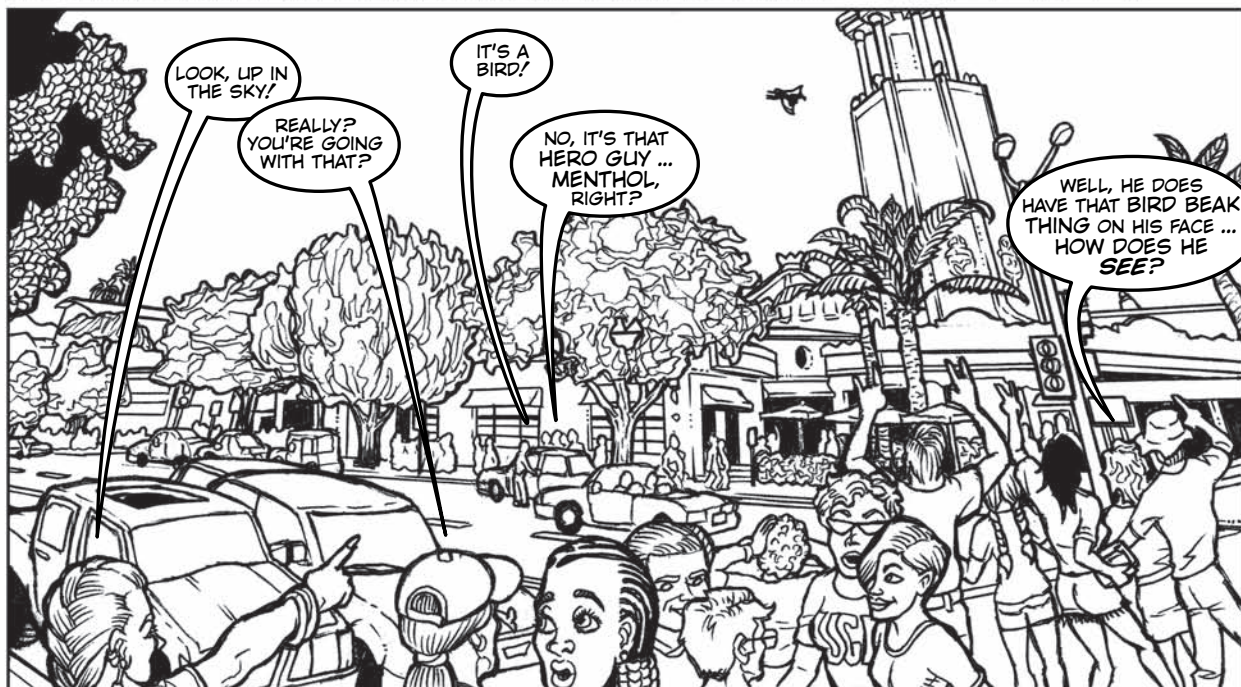
YOU'RE TALKING TO ME, I FIGURED AS MUCH. YOU ALWAYS WERE **ZEALOUS**, I WAS SURPRISED YOU DIDN'T **REBEL** ...



I'D **LOVE** TO BRING DOWN THE **POWER** & THE **GLORY** HERE, BUT EVER SINCE THAT **THING A FEW YEARS AGO**, THEY KEEP US REINED IN PRETTY TIGHTLY.



MEANWHILE, LOS ANGELES' NEWEST HERO, THE **ANCIENT EGYPTIAN** THEMED **MENTHU**, FLIES OVER WESTWOOD, DELIGHTING ONLOOKERS.



LOOK, UP IN THE SKY!

REALLY? YOU'RE GOING WITH THAT?

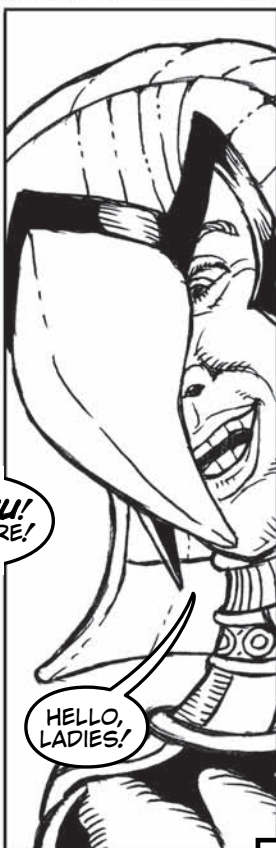
IT'S A BIRD!

NO, IT'S THAT HERO GUY ... MENTHOL, RIGHT?

WELL, HE DOES HAVE THAT BIRD BEAK THING ON HIS FACE ... HOW DOES HE SEE?



MENTHU!
OVER HERE!

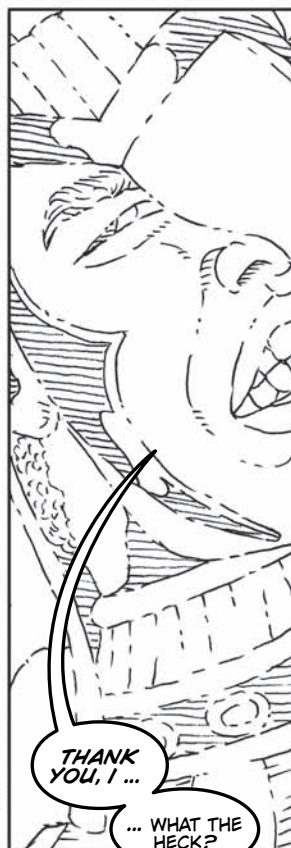


HELLO, LADIES!



mwah!

WE LOVE YOU, **MENTHU!**



THANK YOU, I ...

... WHAT THE HECK?



THAT LIGHT ...
WHAT IS IT?



TOO BRIGHT ...



... AND IN A
RHYTHM ...



... LIKE A
SIGNAL ...

... LEMME
CHECK THIS
OUT ...

SWOOPING DOWN, MENTHU
NEVER COULD HAVE EXPECTED ...



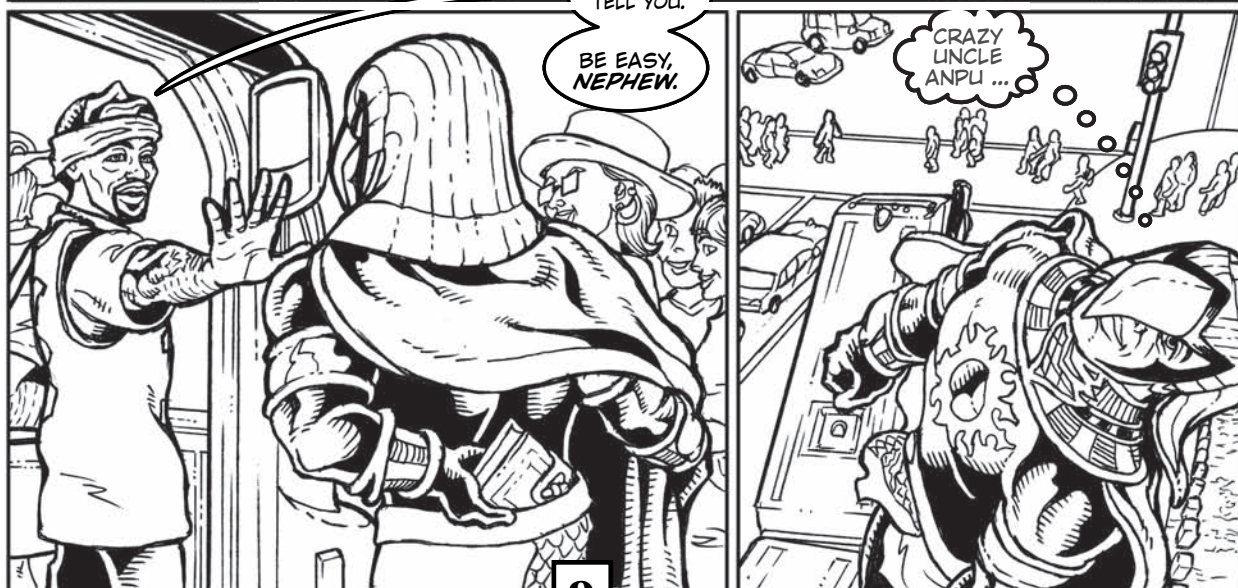
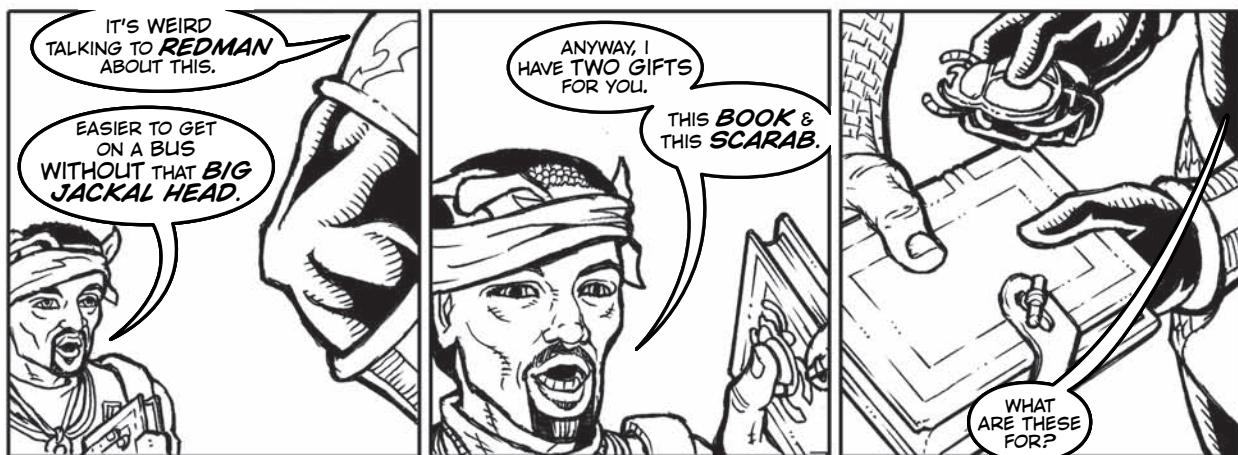
REDMAN?

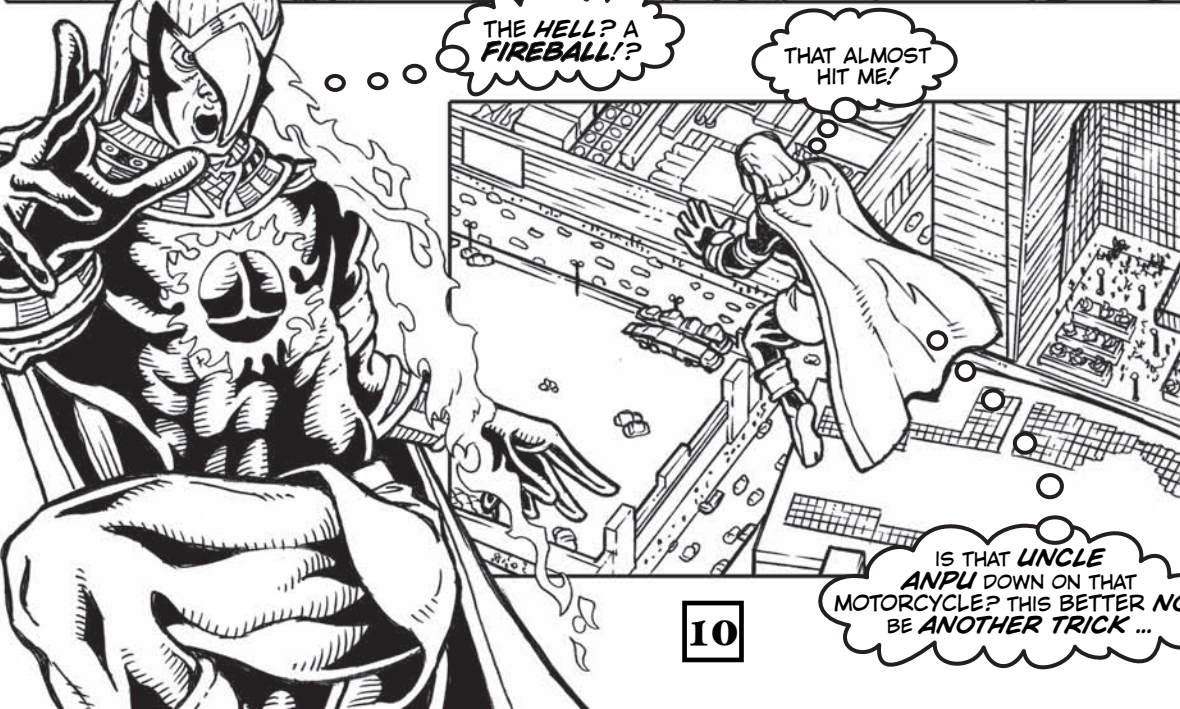
TRY AGAIN,
NEPHEW.

ANPU?
WHY DO YOU LOOK LIKE
REDMAN?

OR WHY DOES
REDMAN LOOK LIKE
ME, RIGHT?









TIME FOR YOU
TO GET A **WHUPPIN',
GODLING!**



WHAT ARE
YOU TALKING
ABOUT?



TIME TO
PAY THE PIPER,
BOY!



BETTER WATCH
WHO YOU'RE CALLIN'
"BOY" OUT HERE,
EASY RIDER!

YOU'RE ... YOU
DON'T EVEN RECOGNIZE
WHAT I AM, DO YOU?

THIS MIGHT
BE EVEN EASIER THAN
I THOUGHT!

YOU DO
KNOW I CAN FLY,
RIGHT?

YOU'LL NEVER
HIT ME WITH ...
WHATEVER THAT
IS ...

SURE I WILL.
YOU'RE A "HERO," WHICH
MAKES YOU **PREDICTABLY**
ALTRUISTIC.

BLAM!!
BLAM!!
BLAM!!
BLAM!!
BLAM!!

LIKE THIS,
FOR EXAMPLE! THIS
WILL PUT YOU RIGHT IN
MY SIGHTS!

BOOM!

OH NO ...

GOTTA
SAVE THOSE
PEOPLE!

EVERYBODY
GET DOWN!

I NEVER
FINISHED
THE HUNGER
GAMES!

NOOOOOOOO!!!!

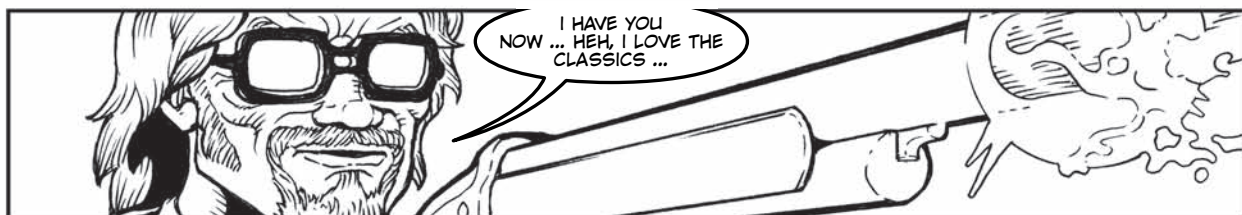
THERE'S
NOT A MOMENT
TO SPARE ...

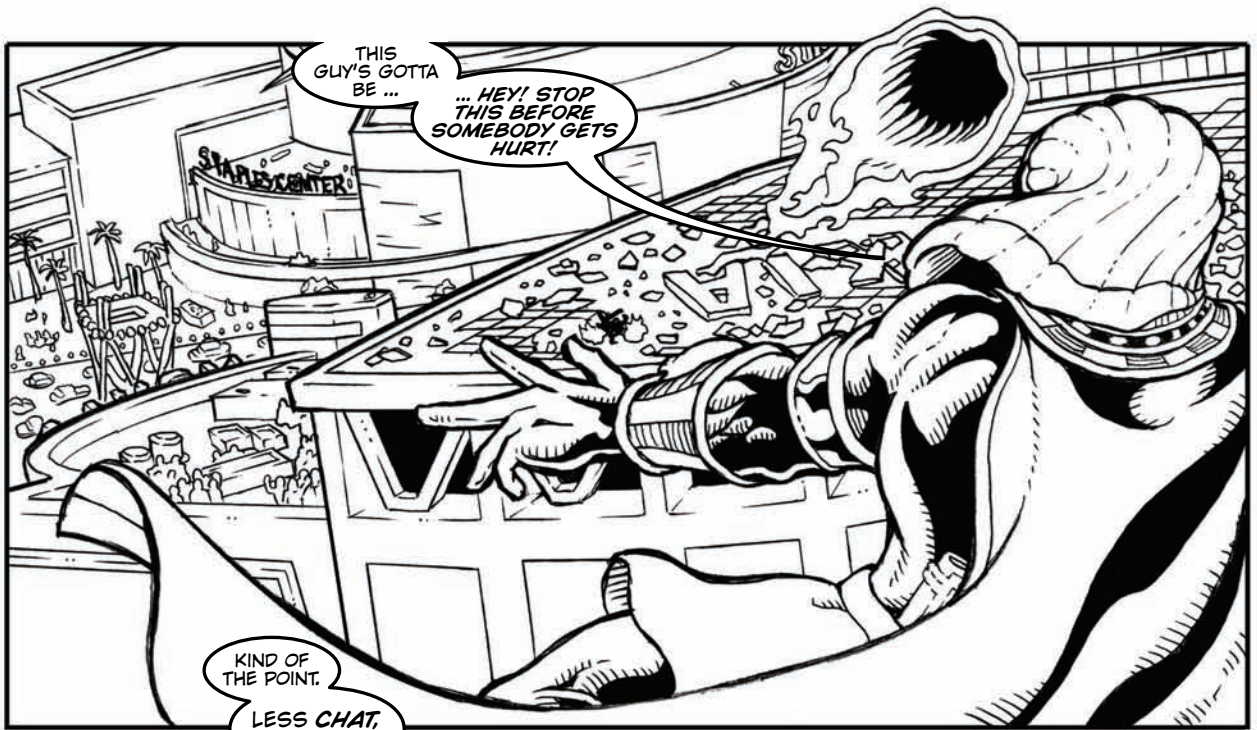
WHUH ...
WHAHA ...
AAAAAGH!

HELP
MEEEE!

13





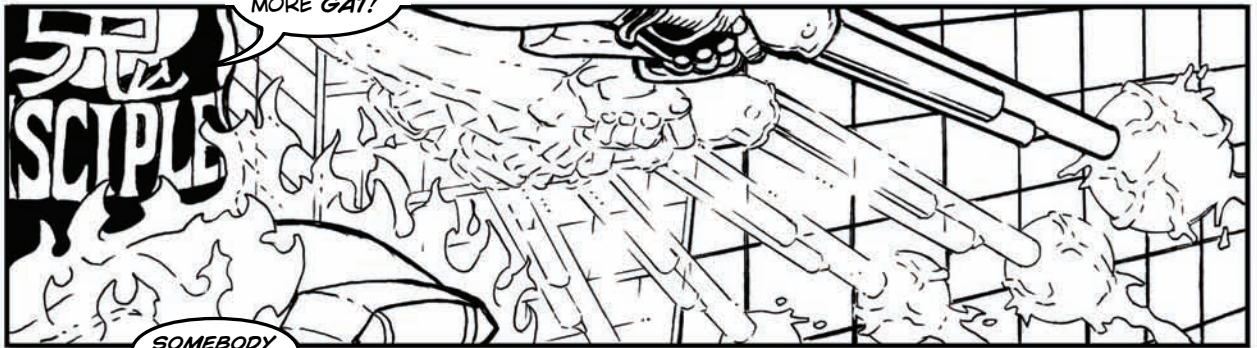


THIS GUY'S GOTTA BE ...

... HEY! STOP THIS BEFORE SOMEBODY GETS HURT!

KIND OF THE POINT.

LESS CHAT, MORE GAT!

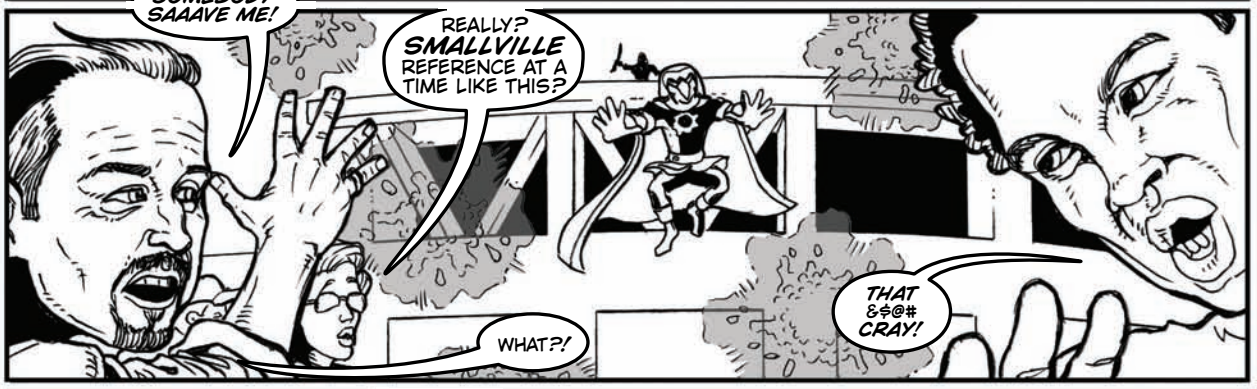


SOMEBODY SAAAVE ME!

REALLY? SMALLVILLE REFERENCE AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

WHAT?!

THAT S#@# CRAY!

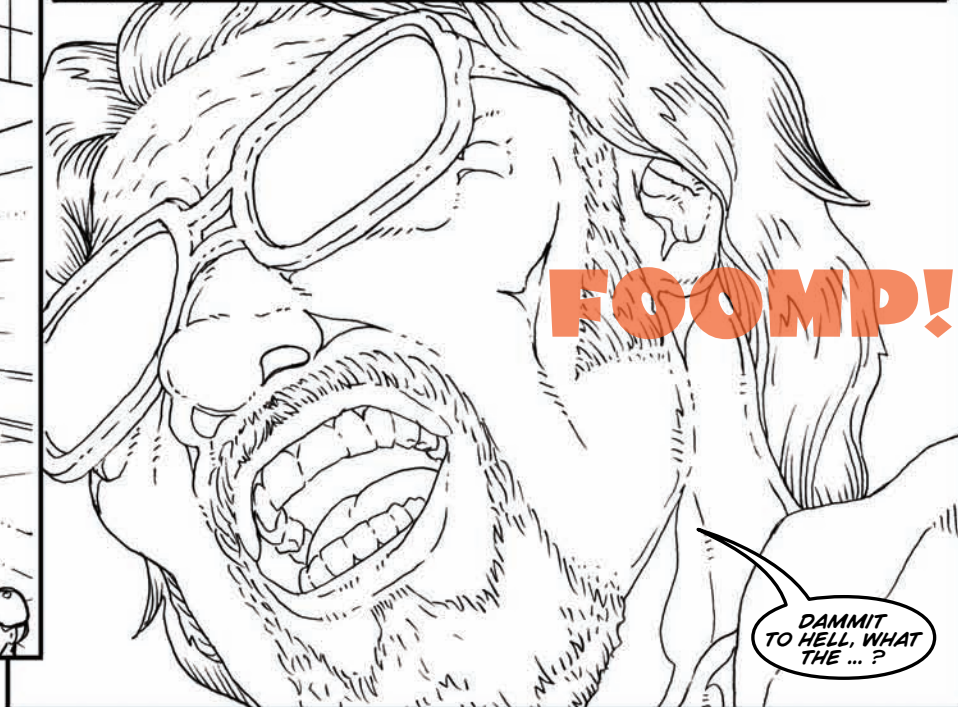
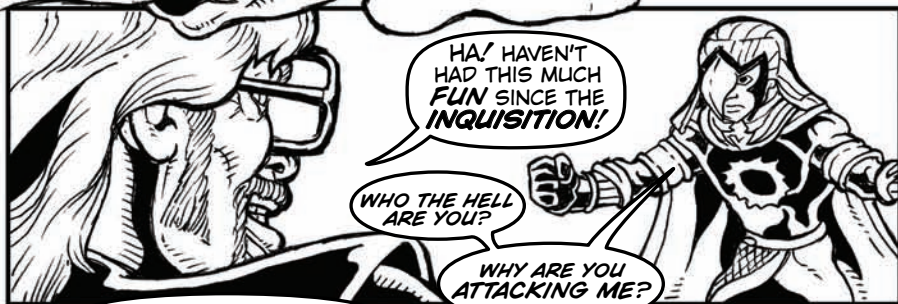
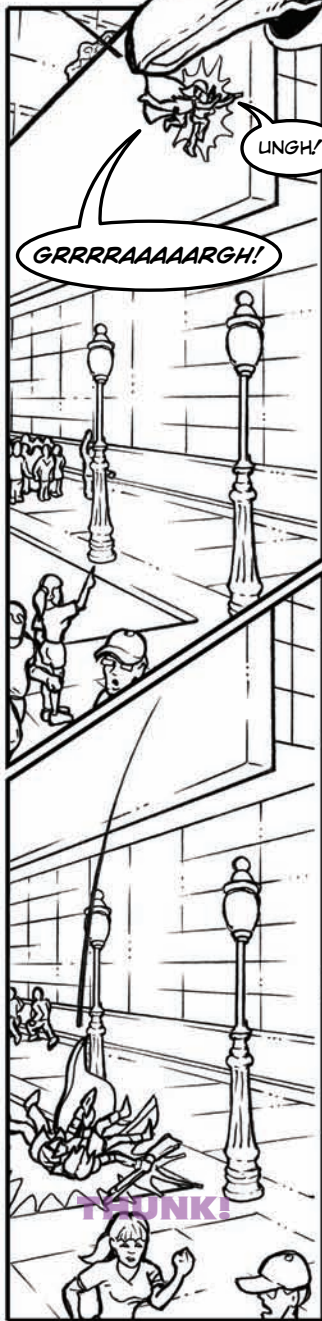


TOO GOOD FOR THE EASY WAY, HUH?

TIME FOR THE HARD ROAD, JUNIOR!

GRRRRRR ...

EVERYBODY, GET TO SAFETY, PL-

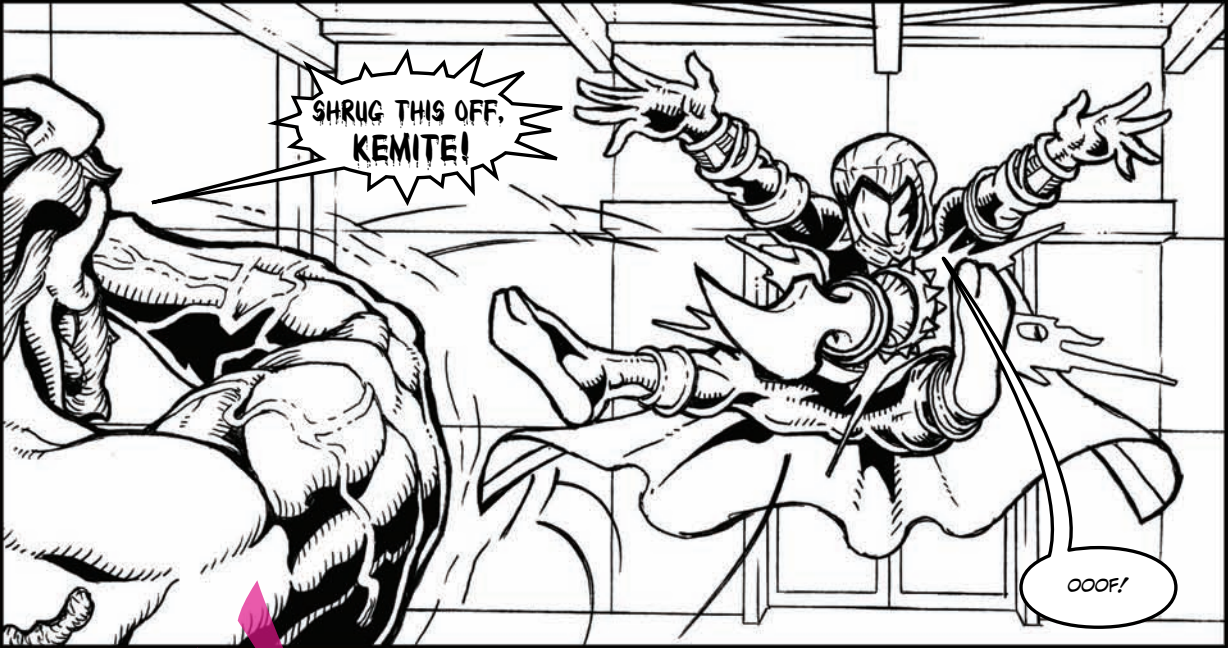


DAMMIT TO HELL, WHAT THE ... ?



THE GUN WIELDING BIKER UNDERGOES A FEARSOME TRANSFORMATION, REVEALING THE DEMON WITHIN!







... GOTTA ... DO SOMETHING ...

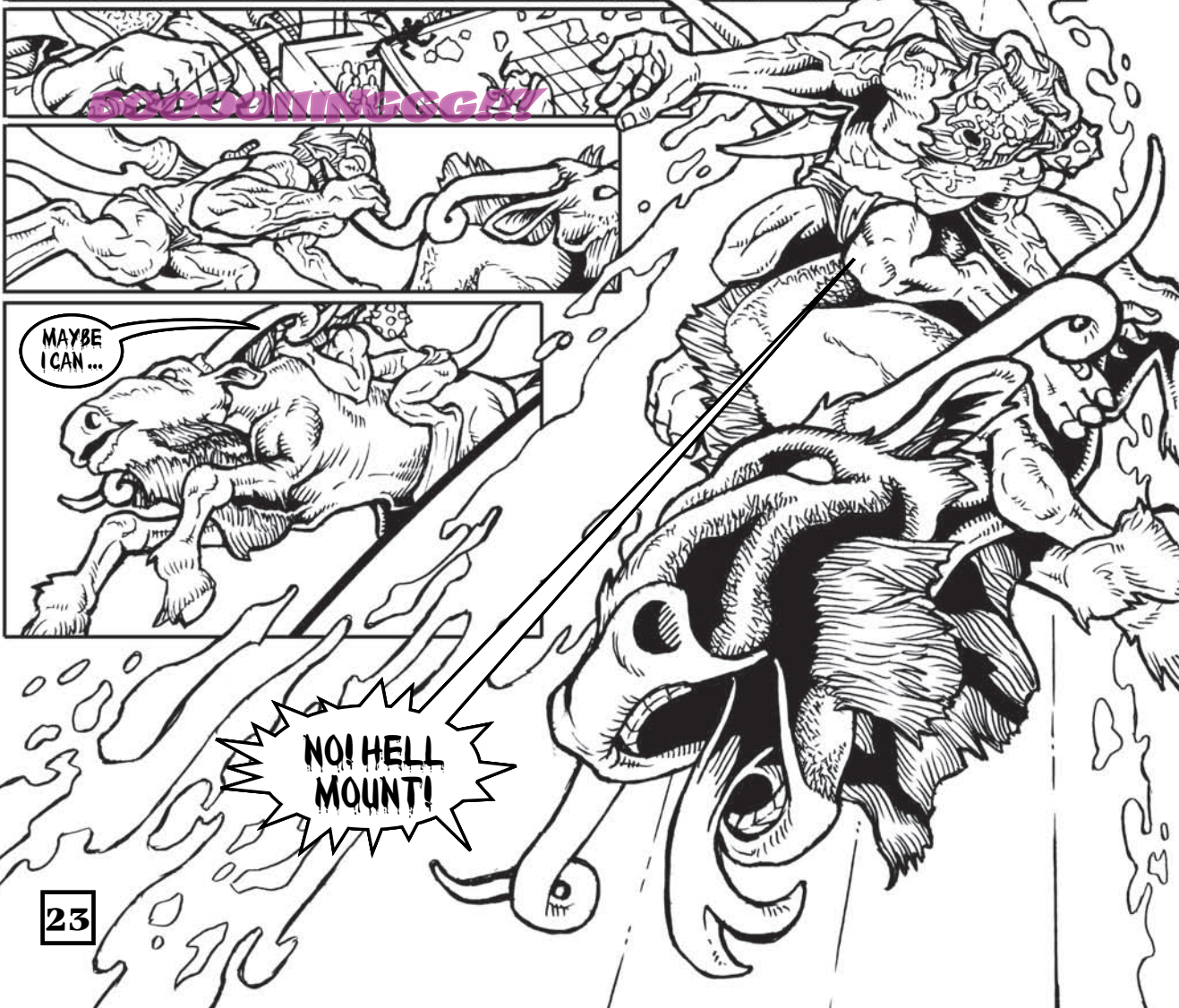
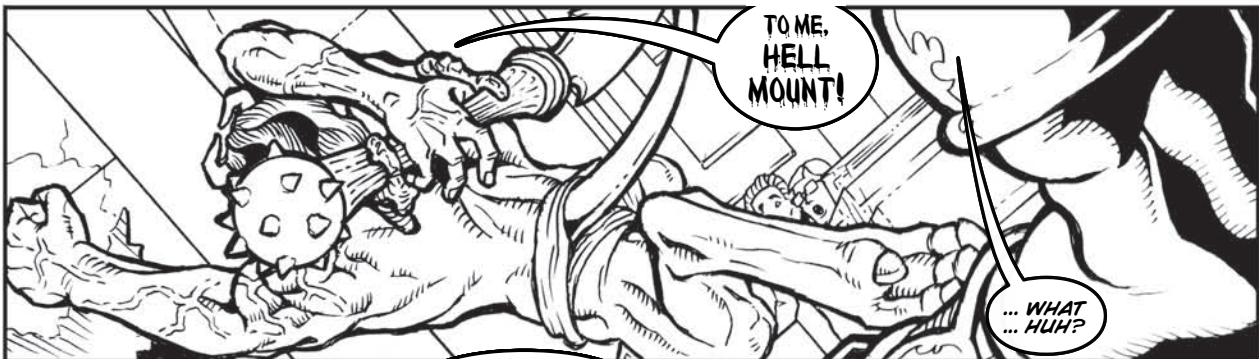
... OH NO ... NOT ALREADY ...

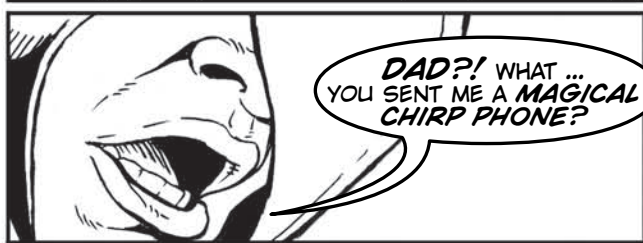
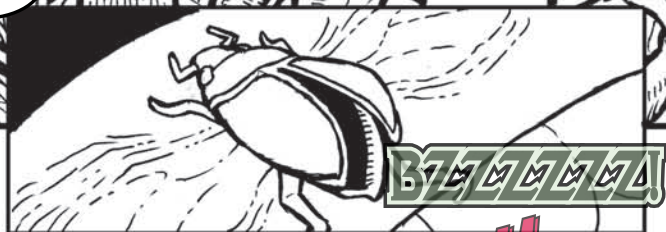
IS THAT SHIVA?!?

...SHOULDA GONE T' CONFESSION....

BOY!! HE'S A BIG'N!!

LOOK!







MANIGER



RAY-ANTHONY HEIGHT

DEWAYNE FEENSTRA

PAUL JOHN LITTLE



THE NEWS SAID THAT WHEN THEY FOUND THE BARTENDER, HE WAS ALIVE, BUT SMELLED LIKE BACON AND BURNT SO BADLY...

...HE ALMOST LOOKED LIKE IT.

WELL, THAT WAS MY INTERPRETATION OF IT, ANYWAY.

THE RIDICULE AND CONSTANT ABUSE I ENDURED FROM THE LIKES OF YOU...

...N-NO... WAIT...

...NO! WHEN YOU THOUGHT I WAS A POOR DRUNKEN DERELICT YOU BELIEVED ME TO BE BENEATH YOU. SOMEONE LOWLY AND DISGUSTING, ONLY DESERVING OF YOUR CONTEMPT.

H-HEY... HEY, MAN! WE'RE COOL, ALRIGHT? I DI-DIDN'T KNOW! I'M SORRY!

VERMIN! YOU STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO... DO YOU?! AND YET YOU BEG FOR A REPRIEVE!

ALL THOSE YEARS...GONE!

DON'T KILL ME... DON'T KILL ME...DON'T KILL ME...

SHUT UP, FOOL!

AS SURELY AS I LAY WASTE TO THIS DISMAL PLACE...I WILL KNOW SATISFACTION! FOR ONCE MY POWER IS FULLY RESTORED AND I'VE REGAINED THE LIFE STOLEN FROM ME BY THAT ARROGANT BASTARD THE OMEGAN AND HIS... STOOGES...

BURNOUT BUM... PLUS BAR STOCKED FULL OF ALCOHOL EQUALS MAD PROPERTY DAMAGE.

...THEY WILL KNOW THE HELLFIRE RAINED UPON THEM WILL BE FROM THE UNYIELDING WRATH OF INFERNUS!

WITH THE REVELATION THAT ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST BADASS SUPER VILLAINS DECIDED TO RETIRE IN A CITY WHERE THEY SEE SUPERHEROES AS OFTEN AS STEVE WONDER SEES... WELL... ANYTHING...

...IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE THE FOLKS IN RED CIRCLE GOT SPOOKED ENOUGH TO TAKE THEIR CONCERNS RIGHT TO THE COPS. AT LEAST THE ONES WHO ARE SUPPOSED TO HANDLE THE SUPER HUMAN ASPECTS OF THINGS

AND THAT'S A BIGGIE BECAUSE RED CIRCLE PEEPS DO NOT LIKE COPS OF ANY KIND.

APOLLO BAY POLICE DEPT.

I KNOW YOU ARE ALL CONCERNED FOR YOUR SAFETY IN LIGHT OF THE RECENT SITUATION. BUT AS OUR REPORTS HAVE STATED, THE INDIVIDUAL IN QUESTION HAS FLED THE SCENE AND IS NO LONGER IN RED CIRCLE OR APOLLO BAY COUNTY.

DESPITE WHAT YOU MAY HAVE HEARD, IT HAS NOT BEEN CONFIRMED THAT THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INCIDENT AT THE RED CIRCLE PROMENADE WAS INDEED THE TERRORIST KNOWN AS INFERNUS. WITH THAT SAID, REST ASSURED THAT THE SUPER-HUMAN ENFORCEMENT, RECONNAISSANCE, AND INCARCERATION OF FUGITIVES FORCE HERE ON THE WEST COAST ARE TAKING MEASURES AND WILL BE DOING EVERYTHING WE CAN TO BRING THE ASSAILANT TO JUSTICE.

I THOUGHT INFERNUS WAS DEAD!

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO IF HE COMES BACK?

MY SISTER WAS KILLED IN THAT FIRE!

WHERE THE HELL IS THE OMEGAN?

SO, THE PROMENADE IS COMPLETELY BURNED TO THE GROUND. BIG WHOOP. ONE LESS PLACE FOR PEOPLE TO GET STUPID DRUNK, DO DRUGS, AND COMMIT A LAUNDRY LIST OF ANY NUMBER OF ATROCITIES.

THE REAL STORY IS WHY THE COPS ARE TRYING TO DOWNPLAY THE FACT THAT IT REALLY WAS INFERNUS WHO DID IT AND NOT SOME MYSTERY SUPER POWERED ARSONIST.

I SAW THAT PRESS CONFERENCE ON TV AND GOODRICH LOOKED PLENTY SHOOK. DUDE COULDN'T WAIT TO VACATE THE PREMISES.

WHO'S GONNA PAY FOR THE DAMAGES?

COPS ARE COWARDS!

I WILL NOT BE ANSWERING ANY QUESTIONS AT THIS TIME.

THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING.

DAMN. I ALWAYS KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN.



SO, YEAH. IT'S BEEN A FEW WEEKS SINCE THEN AND THE CIRCLE IS STILL ON HIGH ALERT. EVEN A FEW OF THE THUGS FROM THE 17th STREET KINGS I KNOW FROM SCHOOL ARE SCARED INFERNUS WILL COME BACK.

AND HERE'S WHERE THINGS GOT **REALLY** CRAZY.

WHILE THE CIRCLE WAS HAVING THEIR REENACTMENT OF MISSISSIPPI BURNING...

...I WAS GETTING SUPERPOWERS.

IT ONLY TOOK GETTING MY GUTS RIPPED OPEN AND BEING IN A COMA FOR THREE DAYS. NO BIG, RIGHT? JUST TRYING TO BE A GOOD SAMARITAN.

I DON'T REALLY REMEMBER MUCH, BUT WHEN I FINALLY WOKE UP I WAS COMPLETELY HEALED. DOCTORS SAID IT WAS MIRACLE.

HA! IF THEY THOUGHT *THAT* WAS A MIRACLE THEN WHAT WOULD THEY SAY NOW!



DJANGO UNPLUGGED

A T.A.S.K. Story

For what felt like the thousandth time, Django's bare feet sloshed through cold, viscous sewage and he shuddered at what lie hidden. The dim illumination from shattered streets above and maintenance lights along the walls followed him, reluctantly, as if wanting no part of St. Louis' municipal underbelly. In a distance, he heard the pounding of ham-sized fists on unforgiving stone and the crash of load-bearing walls. Grimly, Django gritted his teeth and trudged forward, the fate of the world in his hands.

* * *

Hours earlier, thunderous applause followed the brightly clad hero Django as he walked off stage after giving a well-crafted keynote speech at Casa Central's Anniversary Annual Awards Dinner. He walked down the steps, his bare feet padding softly as he went, shaking hands with the mayor of Chicago and other well wishers and carrying a trophy honoring his status as an "icon of racial harmony and ideals."

Django -- well accustomed to the fawning and adulation of masses -- smiled graciously as he shook hands, waved and accepted random hugs from adherents. His jovial mood switched when he saw the stoic form of John Henry near the green room door, arms crossed and wearing an expression like a summer storm, sudden and unforgiving.

Django extricated himself from the crowds and followed Henry into the green room. Even after six months as T.A.S.K.'s representative from two "divine" houses, alien powers revered as gods by many human populations, Django still felt nervous around the organization's leader, a mortal in name only, with powers imbued by the planet itself matching his peerless valor and reputation.

"Did you see any of the speech?" Django opened conversationally, sitting down to grab a bottled water.



"I caught a lot of it, yes," Henry replied, still standing. "Meridian told me you'd asked him for help with it, but I barely even noticed any of his work there. Your flourishes and style, however, were very effective. You had the crowd eating out of your hand."

Django looked down smiling -- he appreciated Henry's praise more than any of the <i>hoi polloi</i> outside the door. "That's kind, thank you. The good doctor gave me the idea to use what he called a 'framing device,' but yes, most of it was the rhythm and cadence of my grandfather's voice."



Getting serious, Henry said, "I wish I was here to enjoy the expensive eats. T.A.S.K. needs your help, Django."

Django furrowed his brows -- for Henry to be delivering this message must imply great severity. "What can I do?" he asked earnestly, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"Our old friend Legacy has discovered that a very important piece of technology has been hidden under the city of St. Louis for thousands of years," Henry began. "We need you to retrieve it before Legacy's people do, but there are ... let's just say this won't be an easy mission. There's a Tempest waiting for you on the roof, can you come now?"

Django stood and nodded. "I can text my people from the air, yessir."

Django followed Henry's steadfast steps to a nearby elevator, which was waiting. As they ascended the entirety of the skyscraper, passing through the residential areas after clearing the hotel section, Henry said, "This will require you

to work with people, maybe even put your ego in check. I believe you aren't the hothead the media makes you out to be. Can you prove me right?"

Django hid his nervousness and nodded solemnly as the elevator came to a stop.

Henry walked confidently out, unflappable, up the ramp into the waiting transport -- a sleek slice of the future on nearly silent compressed air jets, hovering above the building with a ramp placidly ready to receive.

Django wondered as the JSOC pilot ignored John Henry, seated opposite, while checking straps on Django for security. *I know he's durable, but so am I ...* Django wondered.

Once the ramp was up and they began moving above the clouds, John Henry continued. "We are stretched thin with active duty response teams addressing crises in multiple locations. A nuclear threat in Sri Lanka, disaster relief in North Carolina, volcanic fallout in Iceland, mutant monsters in Tasmania and an ecological catastrophe off the coast of Somalia. You're the least committed person closest to this new challenge, because it's your day off."

Django chuckled. "Where I'm from, we don't get days off. What's the mission?"

Henry smirked and replied, "I'd love to give you more detail but ..." and then Henry's face dissolved in a cloud of static before continuing, "... into Jaffna now. Glitch will fill you in and ..."

Suddenly, Henry was gone, as though he had never been there. Django frowned, glancing around the suddenly empty cabin, made to carry up to 10 people and any attendant equipment. Django sighed and slid one of the digital workbenches from the wall -- a fold out desk with a holographic keyboard and display -- so he could email his assistant Gabriela about the change in his itinerary.

He'd been watching a "page loading" indicator for perhaps thirty seconds when the lithe young figure of the team's techno-savant Glitch appeared on the seat across from him. He glanced at her, seeing her gaze focused on something to Django's right, tapping away at a space she treated like a keyboard, but he could see nothing there. *Another hologram ...* he surmised.

After a moment, Django asked, "Glitch?"

She briefly glanced his way and replied, "Oh, hi! Django, why would I have you on my ... oh, I contacted you because the big guy is in the middle of the Pacific and didn't finish telling you how to save the world. Right, I remember what you need now, just one ... sec ..."

Django fumed, sucking in a sudden breath. "Look, I got pulled out of a favor for my grandfather and if John Henry can't deal with me himself ..."

"Hold that thought, El DeBarge ..." Glitch interrupted distractedly. "Just ... gotta ... there! Okay, I just stopped Bosnian hackers from bankrupting the EU and throwing the world economy into chaos. Now, what's your whiny holdup?"

With a frown, Django gritted his teeth and



focused on business. "What is the mission?" he managed.

Glitch seemed to ignore his expression, still distracted by things he couldn't see. "Hang on, an anarchist data collective is trying to black out Manhattan for the third time today ... gotta retask satellites to get eyes on Tasmania, now ... oh, you, St. Louis, right. Can I assume you know something about your family history and understand the term 'Liume?'"

Reining in his rising anger at this annoying child, Django simply said, "Yes."

"Sweet," she continued, barely pausing to register his reply. "The Liume genius Kao designed something hundreds of thousands of years ago to hide Earth from a transdimensional threat even he feared ..."

"The Burning Tide," Django interrupted. "The boogeymen haunting children of my kind."

"Sure, whatever," Glitch went on, typing furiously. "Anyway, Kao put it in the most boring place he could find at the time, made a note in case he ever had to fix it, then forgot about it. Now, his wackjob former apprentice Legacy found the note and figured he could take a shortcut to his nihilist wet dream and invite some dinner guests who have zero manners, you feel me?"

Django sat silently.

"I'll take that as tacit assent," Glitch continued, unabated. "That dull spot now has the city of St. Louis on top of it, and Legacy sent that stooge Royce ..."

Django chortled. "Barely a test for my powers ..."

"If you'll let me finish, Early 90s Bishop," Glitch said testily, "... and somehow figured out how to duplicate that psycho two dozen times. Now there's a platoon of him, destroying the sewers, caving in streets, waking babies from their naps and generally making stuff awful. You have to get the Liume cloaking device back to T.A.S.K. HQ before the Royces destroy it and doom us all."

"What does the device look like?" Django asked thoughtfully.

"Nobody knows," Glitch fired off, her attention wandering again. "Next question!"

"How can I find this thing?"

"No idea, but if the Royces have a way, you have to be smarter than them." After a pause she looked directly at him and asked, "Right?"

Django's hands crunched the edges of the workbench and closed his eyes, saying nothing. "When do I get there?"

Glitch pulled an apple from seemingly nowhere and took a bite. "You've been hovering over the first responder triage center for thirty seconds," she said through munching. "I'm surprised we're still talking about this ..."

He rolled his eyes and stood up. "Please contact my assistant and tell her I have to miss the fundraiser in LA." Without another word, Django disappeared in a flash of lightning.

Appearing in a flash of lightning below, Django began, "Could anyone please direct me to ..."

"Are you out of your ever loving mind?" a bellowing voice from behind Django yelled.

He turned to see a blustery overweight police lieutenant in an incongruous white and orange hard hat barrelling towards him to waggle an index finger angrily. "We have gas leaks everywhere, you're likely to blow up the whole damned thing!"

Django took a deep breath, ignoring the hundreds of ways he could murder this small man and remembered John Henry's admonition. "I'm sorry," Django said slowly, getting past how he'd let that teenaged technophile get under his skin again. "I didn't get a lot of information before I got here. Can we start fresh? I'm Django from T.A.S.K. and I'm here to help."

The cop, hands on his hips, narrowed his eyes at Django before softening. Sticking out a hand he said, "Lieutenant Jack Callahan, St. Louis PD. Thanks for rushing out here. Follow me? I can show you what we know ..."

Django nodded and followed Callahan into a hastily constructed mobile headquarters -- a bank of communications equipment and computers on folding tables under an impromptu canopy tent. "We've got IR on 25 moving targets," Callahan explained. "The file said this guy was just strong and healed fast, this duplicate thing is new."

"That's why they sent me," Django said, leaning in to look at the screens. "You said something about a gas leak?"

Callahan nodded. "One of the first things they smashed. The whole sewer system is flooded with natural gas. We're trying to evacuate the area, but it's slow going."

Django frowned. "I can't teleport, then. That takes lightning. Hm."

"Sorry," Callahan shrugged. "Why is he down there tearing up everything?"

Django considered this and decided to be straight with the man. "Underneath your city is an ancient artifact that's protected the world from alien invasion. If Royce down there finds it, we're all in danger."

Callahan blanched, gulping audibly. "Wow."

Django spared Callahan a considerate glance before asking, "Can you guide me if I go down there? I can't see carrying a tablet ..."

The lieutenant straightened up, saying, "Ah! That I know about, one sec ..."

Callahan reached under a table and pulled out a large black case. Unlatching it, he rummaged around until he pulled out a transparent bead the size of a pea. "We use these in hostage situations, new military issue stuff. Mic is inside of it, and it's lightly adhesive to stay in your ear. Give 'er a shot ..."

Regarding the device oddly, Django took the small transceiver and placed it in his left ear. Callahan pulled a small microphone from the case and whispered into it, which Django heard clearly as, "Do you read me?"

"Will wonders never cease?" Django pondered, fidgeting with the tight fit.

"Not with people like you on hand to help," Callahan admitted. "Okay, lemme walk you out ..."

As they walked out, a short uniformed female police sergeant with her cap pulled over her short dreadlocks approached carrying a disposable cell phone. "Lou, I ... I think this call is for him," she said.

"Thanks, Mary," Callahan said, taking the phone from her. He looked at it oddly as she walked off.

"I'll take it, go on ahead," Django said, taking the small piece of plastic in his large hands.

"Can you hear me, grandson?" a kindly old voice came through the phone.

Django was startled to hear the serpentine voice of his grandsire Quetzacoatl coming through a modern device. "Yes, my lord," Django said, his voice suddenly humble. "This is a surprise, I was just about to ..."

"You were just about to head under the ground, to the realm of dirt and serpents," Quetzacoatl chuckled. "I know much about what your day will be like. Just know this will be a test of your resilience, son of my daughter. Take your time, use all your powers smartly, and know I believe in you."

Django pulled the phone away and wondered at it, appreciating the gesture of having a god believe in you. "Wow," he managed. "Thank you, grandfather, I ..."

"I would love to have a good long chat with you," Quetzacoatl interrupted, "but you have a lot to do and Jim Richards will be walking up behind you. Good luck, and please turn to your right to hand him the phone."

Django turned and noted a fireman in full safety gear walking up, the name RICHARDS emblazoned across his hat. "Excuse me," Django said, unsure, "Are you Jim Richards?"

The man -- two days of salt and pepper stubble on his face, eyes sunken and body covered in soot -- raised an eyebrow at Django before saying, "Yeeessss ..."

Django handed him the phone and said, "I don't know what is happening or why, but this is for you ..."

Richards wondered at the phone -- a simple purplish plastic candybar -- and took it from Django. "... thank you, then," Richards said simply, put the phone to his ear and continued on his way.

Django caught up to Callahan a few feet away, looking down into a massive sinkhole with frayed pipes and rebar extending from shattered asphalt. "This section collapsed when one of these guys smashed through a load bearing section of the sewer," Callahan explained. "Spots like this all over town. There's one about 40 yards north of here, but it ain't pretty down there." He looked at Django -- dressed in a tight red leotard with white lightning bolts across its surface, golden bracers around ankles and wrists and bare feet -- and said, "I could, uh, get you a hazmat suit, maybe some boots ..."

Django waived Callahan off. "Just slow me down. Thank you, lieutenant. Pray to whatever god you honor for good fortune!"

Without another word, Django jumped down into the brackish water and started walking north, under the city streets.

* * *



Hundreds of feet away, the hulking figure of Royce plodded along through trash and human waste, glancing occasionally at the bracelet on his arm, pulsing with an otherworldly glow. He almost had to stoop to fit through the gray-green moss-bedecked walls of the claustrophobic sewer tunnels, grunting to himself as he went.

Taking a right at a corner, he glanced up to see an exact replica of himself, down to the bracelet, staring back at him.

"Oi!" the first Royce cried out.

"Oi!" his doppelganger replied.

"This is my bleedin' search pattern!" the first one growled.

"It bloody well is not!" the second returned. "You're ... hell, which one are you?"

The first pondered this a moment and said, "16! Legacy said I was 'Royce 16' when we went through 'is funny machine.'"

"Oi, then," the second said, pulling a grubby and battered piece of paper from a back pocket. "Says right 'ere, 'Royse 16 covers Junction 243, marker 9 to Junction 256, marker 12!"

"All right, wot?" Royse 16 asked.

The second Royce pointed at a grimy bronzed plaque, barely visible in the dim illumination of emergency lights. The plaque read, "Junction 237, Marker 19."

"... oh ..." Royce 16 said, hanging his head low.

Cursing and stuffing the paper back in his pocket, the second Royce said, "Legacy tells me, 'I can make two dozen of you, but only once and only for a day,' I figger, 'This'll be an orgy of mayhem the likes of which the world's never bloody seen! Is this a feckin' orgy of mayhem, 16?"

Before the hapless clone could answer, the second Royce continued. "No it's not! Everybody else from the Factory gets to blow stuff up and fight 'eroes, and I'm under this stupid city lookin' for a bloody magic rock with two dozen morons too stupid to follow a search pattern!"

16 furrowed his brow. "If we're all you, then doesn't that mean ..."

"I know what it bloody well means!" the second Royce bellowed. "I'm down 'ere talking to myself! Turn around and get back to your grid, you poncy tosser!"

Grumbling, the second Royce turned around and trudged into the darkness.

Nonplussed, 16 pulled a candy bar from a pocket and started eating as he returned the way he came, heading back towards Django.

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