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"VICTORIA, YOU ALWAYS SAID 'THAT SUPERHERO STUFF WILL BE THE END OF YOU, CYRUS THOMPSON.' AND I GUESS YOU WERE RIGHT."

"THING IS, YOU KNOW I HAVEN'T SO MUCH AS PUT ON A COSTUME IN A GOOD TWENTY YEARS."

"BUT SOMEHOW I GOT MESSED UP IN IT ANYHOW. SEEKS THAT THE CIRCLE OF THORNS ARE PLANNIN' TO BRING A DEMON OR SOME SUCH THING INTO OUR WORLD."

"AND ME AND TWO OTHER FOLKS ARE THE KEY TO IT. MAN, DON'T I FEEL SPECIAL."

"LOOKS LIKE THE FREEDOM PHALANX WERE TRYING TO KEEP ALL THAT FROM HAPPENING...TRYING TO GET TO THE THREE OF US FIRST."

"THE FACT THAT I'M TRUSSLED UP HERE LIKE A BUTTERBALL TURKEY OUGHT TO TELL YOU HOW THAT WENT, AT LEAST IN MY CASE."

"I JUST HOPE THEY HAVE BETTER LUCK WITH THE OTHER TWO...OTHERWISE, WELL..."

"I DON'T MIND TELLIN' YA... I'M SCARED, HONEY..."

## SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Part 2 of 3

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MILES AWAY, IN A SITUATION NO LESS DIRE...

OKAY, BIG GUY,  
THERE YOU GO...  
TELEPORTATION  
HAS GOTTEN US  
HERE FAST...

...THOUGH  
I'M NOT QUITE  
SURE WHAT WE'VE  
TELEPORTED  
INTO.

WHAT  
DO YOU MEAN,  
MANTICORE?

I MEAN, LOOK AT THE POVERTY...  
GOOD LORD... NO MATTER HOW MANY  
TIMES I SEE IT, I NEVER GET USED TO  
IT... I GUESS THAT'S A GOOD THING...

IF YOU EVER GET USED  
TO HUMAN SUFFERING, I  
GUESS YOU'VE LOST  
THE BATTLE, THE  
REAL ONE.

THIS WAY,  
MY FRIEND, I'VE  
LOCKED INTO A  
GRID OF THE CITY.  
THE DOMICILE  
WE SEEK IS  
157 YARDS  
SOUTHWEST.

I MUST  
SAY, I HAVE  
A HARD TIME  
UNDERSTANDING  
WHY AN AREA LIKE  
THIS IS ANY MORE  
IMPOVERISHED  
THAN OTHERS.  
THE RESIDENCES  
SEEM TO PROVIDE  
SHELTER  
FROM THE  
ELEMENTS.

LIFE SHOULD NEVER BE MERE  
SURVIVAL, CITADEL, AND EVEN  
THAT'S DOUBTFUL HERE.

WHEN YOUR WHOLE  
LIFE BECOMES WORRY  
OVER HOW YOU'RE GOING  
TO FEED YOUR FAMILY...  
OVER WHAT WILL HAPPEN  
IF YOUR KIDS  
GET SICK...

...WELL,  
IT'S EXISTENCE,  
BUT IT'S NO WAY  
TO LIVE.



I THINK I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU  
MEAN. IN MY OWN CASE, I HAVE  
SO FEW NEEDS, I DON'T HAVE TO  
EAT... I CAN'T BECOME ILL...

I THINK THE LAST TIME I  
USED CURRENCY WAS WHEN  
I BOUGHT A TOOTHBRUSH  
A FEW YEARS AGO... IN AN  
ATTEMPT TO FEEL MORE  
"HUMAN"...

I ACTUALLY NEVER  
USED IT. IT'S STILL  
IN ITS PACKAGE,  
UNOPENED.



I'LL BET IT'D GO FOR A  
BUNDLE NOW ON EBAY.  
HEH.

I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN,  
THOUGH. IN MY OWN CASE,  
BECAUSE I WAS BORN INTO  
WEALTH, BECAUSE I'VE NEVER  
WANTED FOR ANYTHING, I TEND  
TO PLACE LITTLE VALUE ON  
"STUFF," YOU KNOW?

SURE, I LIKE  
AN ARMANI SUIT AS MUCH  
AS THE NEXT GUY, BUT I'M  
JUST AS HAPPY GIVING  
AWAY WHAT I HAVE AS  
KEEPING IT.



IN FACT, I END UP FEELING SOOOO GUILTY IF I USE IT FRIVOLOUSLY.

LIKE WITH MY ARROWS. IF I MISS A SHOT WITH ONE OF MY GUMMICK ARROWS, THERE'S SEVERAL THOUSAND BUCKS THAT COULD HAVE FED AND CLOTHED A WHOLE VILLAGE IN ETHIOPIA.

MAN, WHEN I THINK OF SOME OF THE THINGS I'VE INVESTED A FORTUNE IN, SAY, DID I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT MY RAGE ARROW?

NO, I HAVE NO SUCH MEMORY.

"WELL, THE IDEA WAS THAT IT WOULD DRIVE A GROUP OF FOES INTO A RAGE, AND IT DID."

A COUPLE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS WORTH OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT WENT INTO THAT ARROW.

THINK WHAT THAT MONEY COULD HAVE ACCOMPLISHED IN A NEIGHBORHOOD LIKE THIS.

THIS SHOULD BE THE APARTMENT ON THE RIGHT.

"THE FIRST, AND ONLY, TIME I USED IT WAS ON A GROUP OF IGNEOUS. THEY THEN PROCEEDED TO BEAT ME INTO SOMETHING RESEMBLING SPAGHETTI-O'S."

GOD, IT STINKS IN THIS HALLWAY. AS AN ANDROID, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU NOTICE IT?

ON THE CONTRARY, MY OLFACTORY SENSES ARE APPROXIMATELY 14 TIMES MORE SENSITIVE THAN YOURS. THEY ALSO ENABLE ME TO ANALYZE THE PARTICULARS OF THE SCENT.

AND IT IS MY BELIEF YOU WOULD RATHER NOT KNOW WHAT'S CAUSING THIS ODOR.

THANKS.

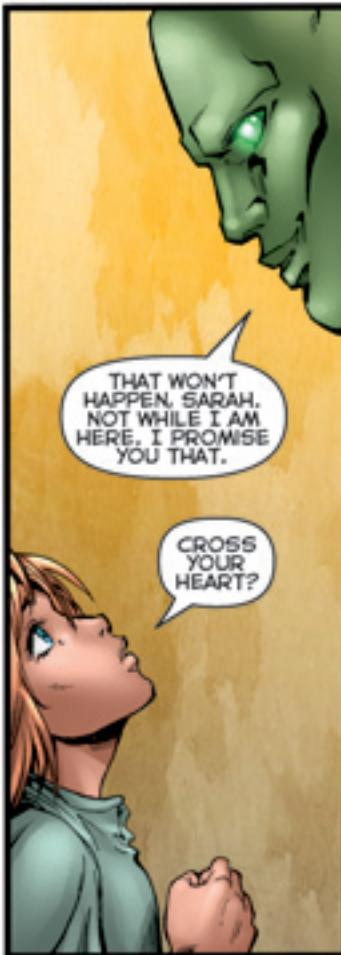
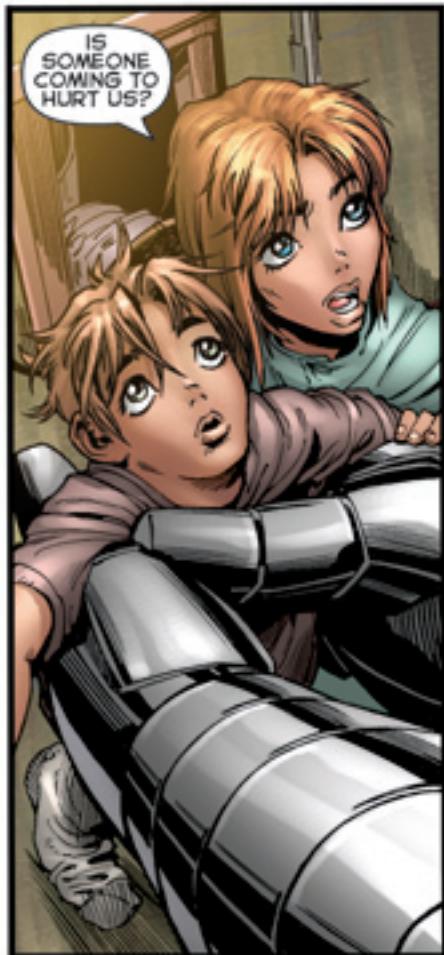
WHO ARE YOU?

HI, HONEY.  
MY NAME IS  
MANTICORE,  
AND THIS IS  
CITADEL.

I CAN'T LET  
YOU IN OR TALK  
TO YOU. YOU'RE  
STRANGERS.

WE ARE LOOKING FOR  
SOMEONE NAMED JIMMY  
PRESTON. DOES HE LIVE  
HERE?





GOD, IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN I THOUGHT. MOTHER STRUNG OUT ON DOPE, FATHER NOWHERE TO BE SEEN. LITTLE GIRL LEFT TO TAKE CARE OF AN INFANT...

ISN'T THERE ANYTHING THAT CAN BE DONE? YOU SAID YOURSELF THAT YOU HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF WEALTH, MANTICORE. CAN'T YOU--

WHAT? GIVE THEM A WAD OF CASH? I WISH IT WAS THAT SIMPLE, PAL. I WISH IT WAS.

IT GOES DEEPER THAN JUST BEING POOR. PROBLEMS LIKE THIS CAN'T BE EASILY SOLVED WITH SUPERPOWERS OR MONEY.

YOU CAN'T BUY AWAY GENERATIONS OF DESPAIR. YOU HAVE TO--



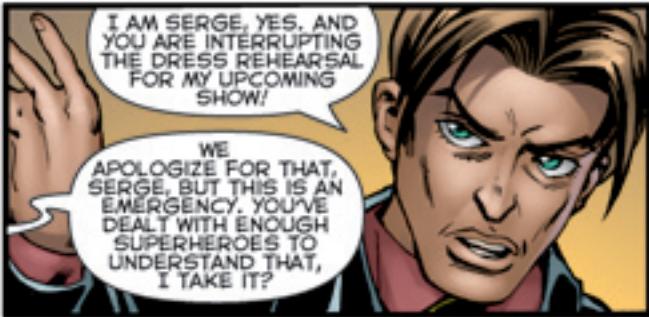


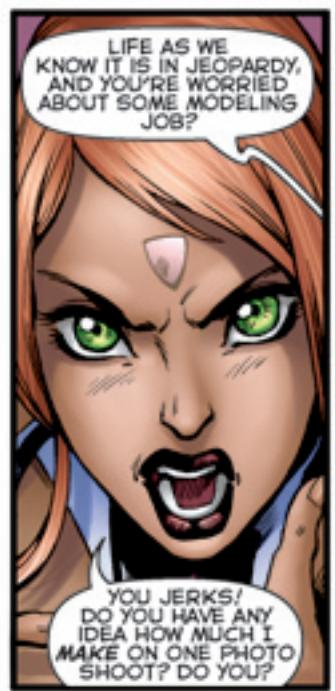
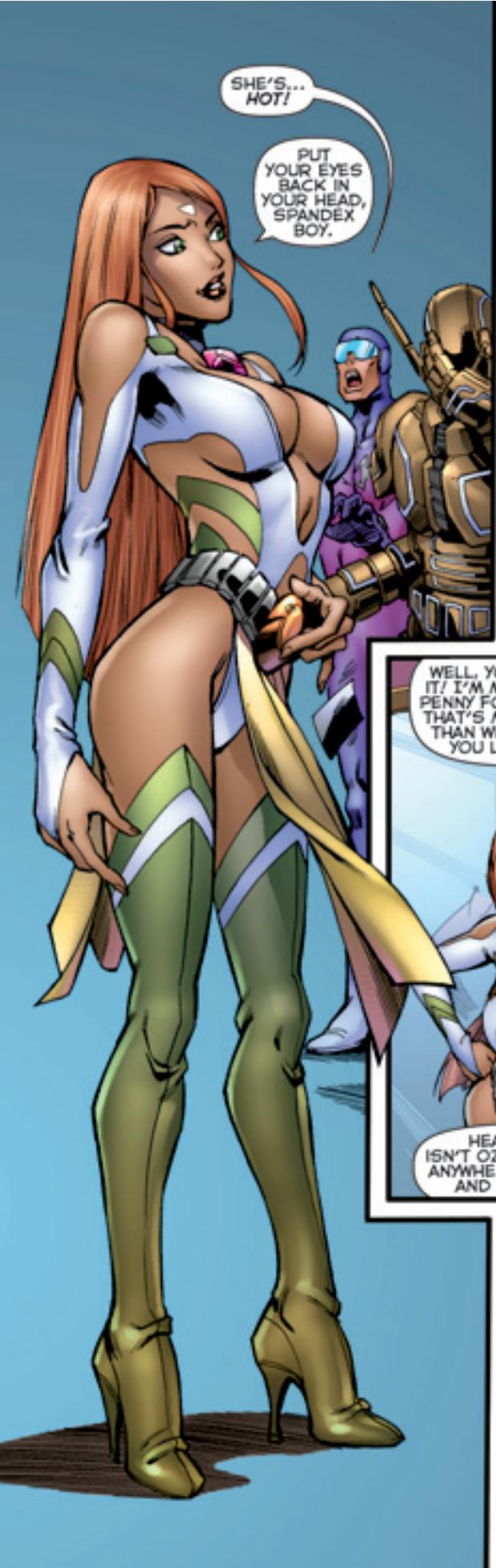


SARAH...  
SARAH...  
I'M...

...SORRY...









SERGE?  
WHAT IS IT...  
WHAT'S--



GIVE IT  
EVERYTHING YOU'VE  
GOT, SYNAPSE! I HATE  
TO SAY IT, BUT WE MAY  
BE THE LAST HOPE  
HERE!



...THEN  
THE REAL FUN  
BEGINS!

COME  
AND GET ME,  
YOU SAD CASPER  
WANNABES...

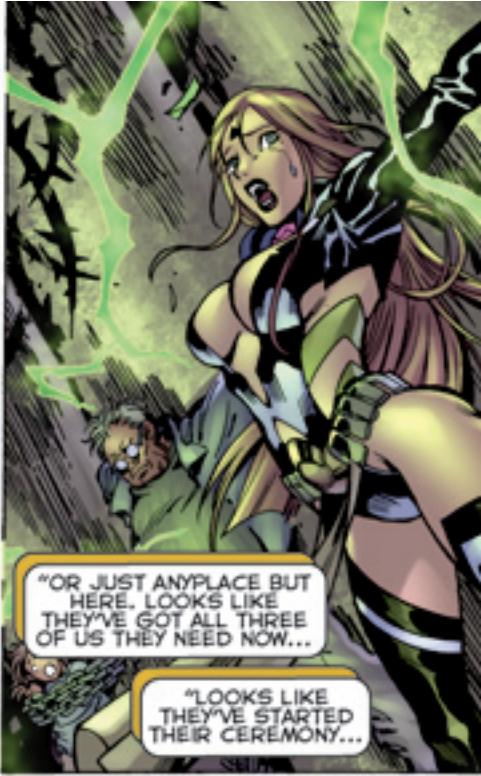
OH,  
FISHED  
IN!

WE HAVE NO  
TIME FOR THIS  
GAMEPLAYING!  
SLEEP!

NOW, A  
SIMPLE MATTER  
TO PUT THESE  
FOOLS OUT OF  
THEIR MISERY  
WITH--







T  
TO BE CONTINUED...

"A SHORT STORY"

WRITERS: MATT HAWKINS & TROY HICKMAN  
PENCILS: DAVID NAKAYAMA  
INKS: ROLAND PARIS  
COLORS: SONIA OBREZ  
LETTERING: TROY PITTMAR

"MY NAME IS MORGAN LE FEY, AND THEY TELL ME I'M A HERO."

"THEY MAKE SUCH A FUSS ABOUT ME THAT THE TINIEST CHANGE IN MY LIFE BECOMES BREAKING NEWS."

"TODAY THEY'VE ASKED ME TO UNVEIL MY NEW COSTUME ON CABLE TV, LIKE I'M A SUPERMARKET OPENING OR THE FIRST BABY BORN IN THE NEW YEAR."

"I TOLD THEM I'D DO IT IF THEY MADE A DONATION TO THE LOCAL BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB."

"HEY, FORCED PHILANTHROPY DOES JUST AS MUCH GOOD AS THE VOLUNTEER KIND."

"THE PUBLICITY CAN'T HURT ME EITHER. I FIND THAT IN THIS 'CAREER,' SOMETIMES HAVING YOUR NAME OUT THERE CAN HELP GET THE JOB DONE. THERE'S A LOT TO BE SAID FOR MAKING THE RIGHT CONTACTS."

"AS I TELEPORT IN, I NOTICE THE STUNNED LOOK ON THE ANCHORWOMAN'S FACE..."

"THOUGH, TRUTH BE TOLD, I'VE SEEN HER ON THE EVENING NEWS, THAT 'DEER IN THE HEADLIGHTS' EXPRESSION IS PRETTY MUCH PERMANENT."

"SHE'S GOING TO WANT TO INTERVIEW ME AS I UNVEIL MY NEW LOOK."

"I JUST HOPE I GET SOME NEW QUESTIONS FOR A CHANGE."

"GUESS NOT. THE FIRST TWO THINGS OUT OF HER MOUTH WERE 'CAN WE SEE THE NEW COSTUME' AND 'HOW DID YOU GET TO BE A SUPERHERO?'"

"REAL CUTTING-EDGE STUFF."

"AS I CAST A SMALL SPELL TO REVEAL THE COSTUME, I FIND MYSELF THINKING ABOUT HER OTHER QUESTION, ABOUT HOW I GOT HERE..."

"I GIVE HER SOME STOCK ANSWER, BUT WHAT I'D REALLY LIKE TO DO IS OPEN UP FOR A CHANGE, TELL THEM THE ROAD I REALLY TRAVELED..."



"...TELL THEM I WAS BORN MAGGIE DRAKE, A LITTLE GIRL FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS.

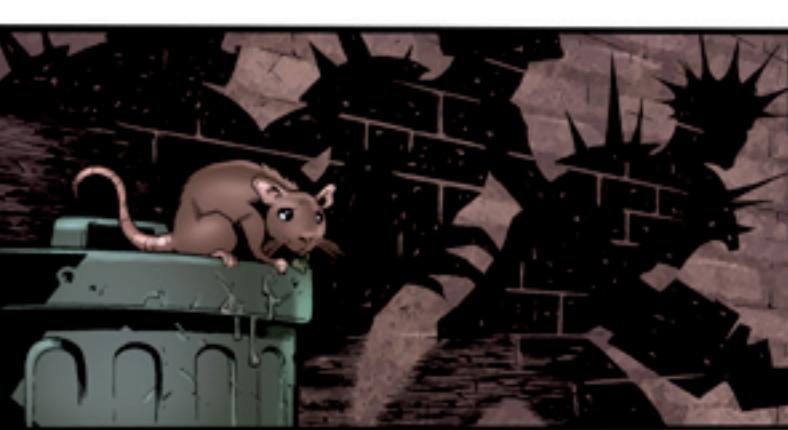
"HOW WOULD THEY FEEL IF THEY KNEW THEIR BIG-TIME SUPERHEROINE STARTED OUT LIFE WATCHING HER MOM AND DAD BOOZE AND DRUG THEMSELVES INTO OBLIVION?

"HOW WOULD THEY FEEL KNOWING THE IDOL OF MILLIONS STAYED HOME FROM SCHOOL COUNTLESS DAYS, TRYING TO HIDE BLACK EYES AND BRUISED LIMBS?

"IF THEY REALLY WANTED TO KNOW HOW I GOT FROM THAT HELL TO WHERE I AM NOW, I'D TELL THEM ABOUT THE THOMPSONS.

"THEY WERE OLD ENOUGH TO BE MY GRANDPARENTS, BUT THEY ALWAYS MADE ME CALL THEM CY AND VICKIE.

"AND THEY WERE THE ONLY LIGHT IN THE VERY DARK LIFE OF A LITTLE GIRL."



"THEY LIVED JUST UP THE BLOCK, AND I SPENT AS MUCH TIME THERE AS I COULD.



"MOM AND DAD TOLD ME TO STAY AWAY FROM THEM. THEY DIDN'T WANT ME TO ASSOCIATE WITH 'THOSE PEOPLE.' BUT I NEVER LISTENED.



"VICKIE WOULD FEED ME... GOD, DO I WISH I COULD HAVE SOME OF HER CORNBREAD RIGHT NOW.



"AND CY TAUGHT ME TO TYPE ON HIS OLD SMITH-CORONA. HE'S ONE OF THE REASONS I EVENTUALLY BECAME A WRITER, I THINK...



"...AND BOY, COULD HE TYPE FAST.



"MORE THAN ANYTHING, WHAT THEY TAUGHT ME WAS THAT LIFE WAS WORTH LIVING...



"...THAT NO MATTER HOW BAD SITUATIONS MIGHT GET, NO MATTER WHAT AWFUL THINGS GOT IN YOUR WAY... YOU COULD MAKE IT...



"...AS LONG AS YOU HAD A HEART AND A MIND AND THE WILL TO GO ON."

"YEARS LATER, A STRANGE MAN IN A CLOAK WOULD COME TO ME."

"HE'D TELL ME THAT I WAS THE DIRECT DESCENDANT OF AN INFAMOUS SORCERESS FROM HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO..."

"...AND THAT BECAUSE OF IT I HAD 'SPECIAL GIFTS.'"

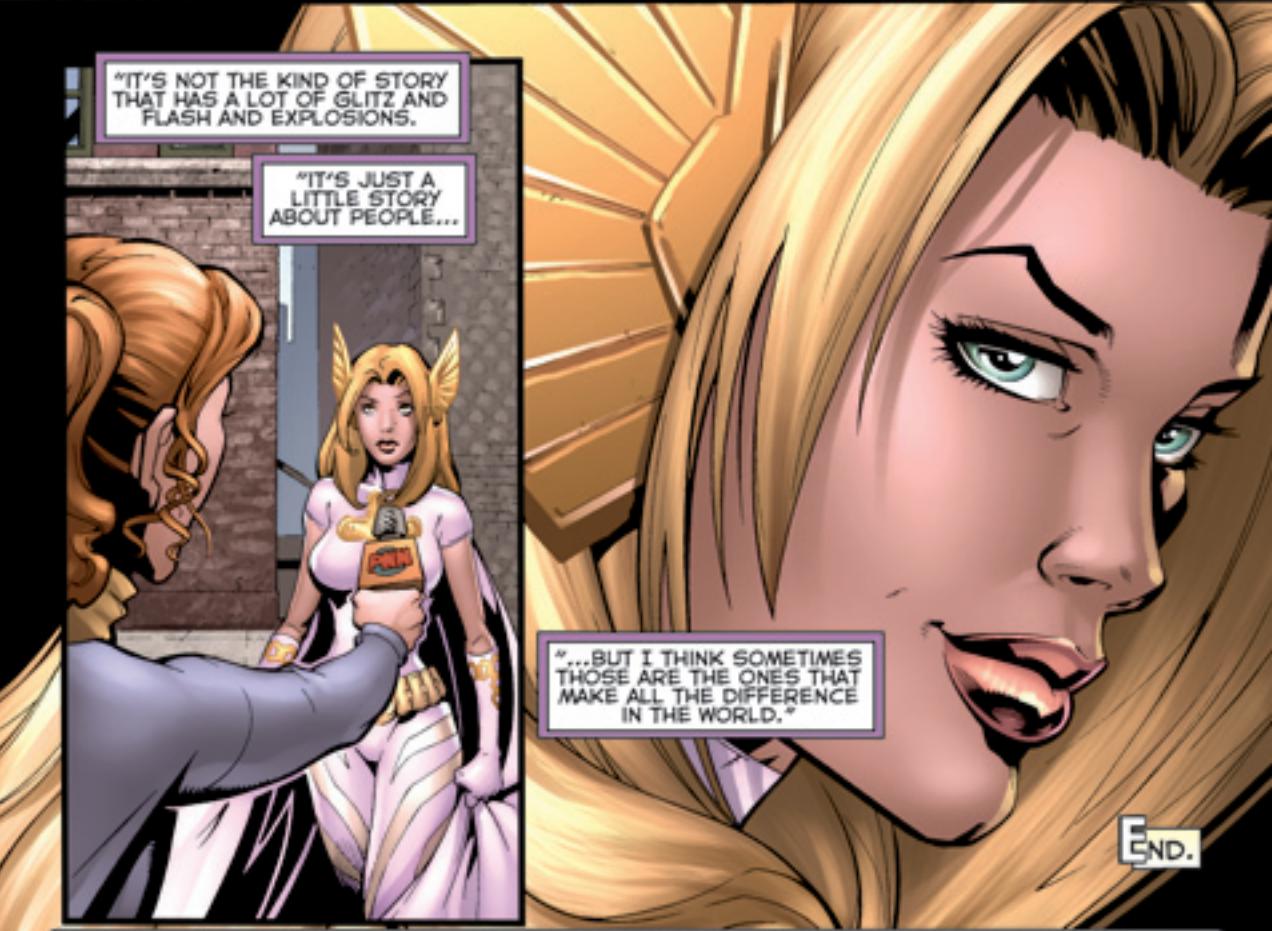
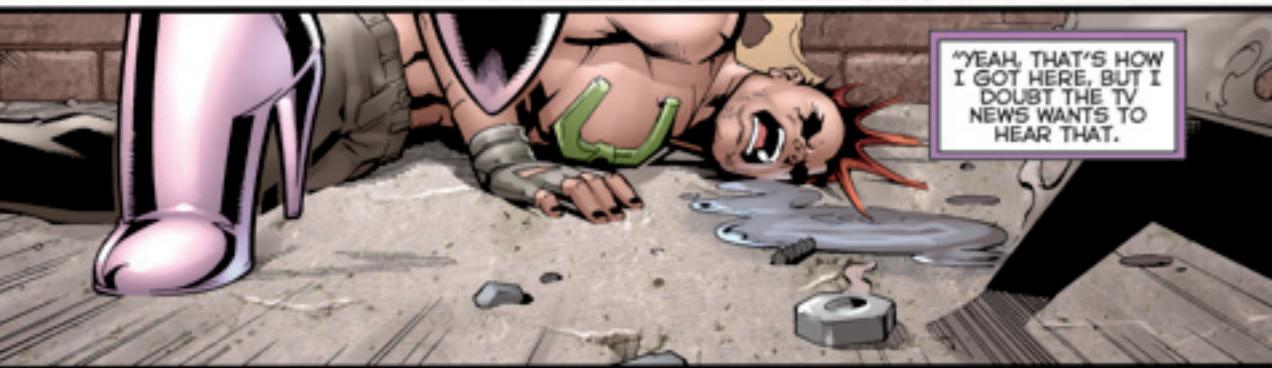
"BUT I DIDN'T NEED HIM TO TELL ME THAT."

"I'D FOUND THAT OUT YEARS BEFORE..."

"...ALL BECAUSE TWO VERY DECENT HUMAN BEINGS HAD SHOWN ME HOW GREAT I WAS..."

"...AND THEY DIDN'T NEED TO TEACH ME HOW TO TELEPORT, OR SHOOT ENERGY OUT OF MY HANDS TO DO IT."

"NO, THEY MADE ME SEE MY WORTH..."



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