



CITY OF HEROES[®]

FANZINE

#0



Render by
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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Welcome to the preview issue of the City of Heroes Fanzine – this special #0 issue reproduces some of my favorite stories and art from the Top Cow City of Heroes Comic Book Community Pages – these works are all created by you or your colleagues, the players and fans of CoH!

And that's what we all are, aren't we? Fans of City of Heroes. Although I came to Paragon City a bit late, I had long heard of its reputation. I worked in the pen&paper/hobby game industry for a number of years and it seemed like everyone I knew was playing CoH. It swept through the industry like wildfire, and when I got the opportunity to both play and work for the company, I knew it was something special.

But it wasn't until I really got into the community – and that's the forums, but also emails, Private Messages, and most impressively convention gatherings and meet-ups – where I learned how awesome the game is. Not just because we get to play super-powered heroes and villains (though watching my 8' tall hulking brute of fire and darkness fly through the air still gives me a thrill!) but because I'm constantly amazed at how many good and cool people I've met who participate in this community.

The Top Cow CoH Comic had a good run of 20 issues, but my biggest disappointment was that the Community Pages were being lost. Fan Fiction (and to a lesser extent, Fan Art) can be a touchy subject across the science-fiction/fantasy industry, whether we're talking about movies or TV, comics, novels, or games. And while I've read a lot of arguments on both sides, I think games especially benefit from fan fiction. By their nature, games are more interactive and invite a more active engagement than other forms of media. Furthermore, there are some amazingly talented and creative people among our fans. As a professional writer and editor, as well as a community person, I take pleasure in finding the gems among the submissions and helping polish them to the best of my ability. By giving such works an official nod of recognition, I think it makes the creators feel good that their work has been seen, and with luck helps them show off their endeavors to a wider crowd. And that in turn strengthens both the community and the fictional world we like to visit.

This is all a very long-winded way of saying welcome to the new City of Heroes fanzine. While this is a "best of" issue, we're looking for new content. Lots of new content! And publishing this as a PDF-magazine lets us play with page counts a bit more freely, so we're encouraging you to push the boundaries a bit.

Our stories include, "Repent, Builder" a bittersweet tale from the villains side of things.

"Closure," by Bayani, one of the forum regulars, who tells a touching story of love and loss of his eponymous hero.

The epic "STRIKE-HAMMER" by my friend Lucien Soulban, and one of the biggest proponents of CoH that I know.

We also hope that the new Artist Showcase will let player-created art shine in full glory. Keep creating these amazing pieces!

Finally, we received so many great entries from this year's HyperComics contest that we're pleased to have a good vehicle to show off some of the runners-up. And we're happy to review new pieces, as well. This issue gives us "Quiver" by Ascendant, a coming-of-age story that twists and turns through the City.

Check 'em all out and tell us what you think in the forums!

Cheers,

Jesse "Arctic Sun" Scoble

REPENT, BUILDER

*By Matthew
J. Phillion*



"Today I gave you a heart," the Builder said to his creation. The robot, chest freshly soldered, a living human heart beating within, looked at the Builder with a gaze almost human. "Today I gave you a heart, my prince, my little tick-tock prince, and tomorrow I will give you a conscience."

And then the Builder went to bed and never woke up.

The robot waited for his Builder as the sun rose gently outside the laboratory, a place of concrete and cheap tin and the scattered remnants of a thousand clocks. Little robots, siblings to the complex and incomplete being sitting quietly by the window, chattered and clicked and squealed, a cacophony of toys. The heart beating in the robot's chest confused him. It had no bearing on his mechanics, none at all, and, in fact, the Builder had told his creation that it was not the heart that kept him "alive," but vice-versa.

The heart had belonged to the Builder's human son. The Builder had wept when the boy died in a car accident in Paragon City. He did not tell the robot how he came to own his son's heart, or how he convinced it to beat again. He only wept softly as he installed the pink ball of flesh in the robot's chest and told him to keep it safe.

"My prince. My little tick-tock prince. As long as you walk, my child still lives," the Builder said.

Two days passed before curiosity overcame the robot. He found the Builder, such a small and pleasant-faced old man, lying peacefully in his bed. The robot touched him, searching for the latch that would open him up and allow the robot to rewind his battery, but he found nothing of the sort.

Before his heart, the robot had been given a powerful computer for a brain, and this computer was graced with an artificial intelligence of the highest quality. This brain had been left, for the most part, blank, to be filled in later with the sort of information he would need to walk through this world safely. It had a tremendous capacity for learning, however, and already the Builder had shown the robot how to repair himself, and to repair the small brothers who prowled the old man's factory.

It was a brain that could have learned right and wrong, given the chance. That chance died with the Builder, peacefully in the dark.

The robot searched the factory for this thing the Builder called a conscience. He found lasers and gears, sprockets and tools, but nothing like a conscience. He asked the Builder's corpse for answers, but received nothing but silence in return.

Still, he searched. The Builder would never promise something he could not make, the robot knew.

On the third day, the robot opened up the Builder's chest and attempted to remove his heart. It was a procedure he was ill-equipped for, and messily done, and in the end, he could not understand how to fit two hearts inside his own chest, not without killing the beating muscle already contained within. So instead the robot began to build.

He needed parts, and these he took, often by force, from frightened strangers. He did not know there was another way. The robot, his

body unfinished and unpainted but for the blood of the Builder, made a ferocious visage to behold.

Witnesses would later say that the robot would ask, in a monotone but gentle voice, if they had "ever seen a conscience." He would ask what a conscience looked like.

Inevitably, a small band of heroes learned about the robot. They tracked him to the laboratory in short order. The robot was capable of great intelligence, yes, but his young mind had not yet absorbed all he would need to survive, and knew nothing of subtlety or stealth. He never expected reprisal for his actions, and, if robots can be surprised, he was quite shocked when the heroes burst into his world.

They found him standing over one of his own creations, the Builder's now dried and dead heart in his hands. The gruesome sight spurred on the heroes, who saw only a murderous and violent machine, covered in dried blood and motor oil.

He fought back, of course. After all, the heart was all he had left of his father.

The Builder had left little record of his actions, and no explanation for the robot at all. The Builder, his chest cavity torn open by robot's clumsy fingers, was presumed to be a victim of murder.

There was a trial. The robot observed the procedures with a learning eye, his artificial intelligence taking note of every nuance, every rule, every game that humans play in a court of law. In the court there was some confusion as to the robot's status. A simple machine could have been shut down, labeled an experiment gone wrong. But the robot – who had become known as the Ticktock Prince, a fragment scrawled in the Builder's notes – had a human heart beating in his chest. It left legal minds, even those used to dealing with superhuman cases, baffled. Was he a man, rebuilt with a robot body to preserve his life? Was he an android? What purpose could the heart serve?

The courts chose to err on the side of caution, and imprison the Ticktock Prince in the Ziggurat Penitentiary rather than shut him down. Perhaps, in retrospect, it would have been for the better to end his life, because prison provided his vast intellect an abundance of the worst sources for learning: the most dangerous criminal minds in the world.

From the inmates he saw violence and selfishness. He listened to stories of murder and villainy and greed. He learned, and his powerful brain recorded it all. Without a conscience to guide him, he was lost. Locked up in the Zig, however, the Prince could do no harm no matter what he now knew.

Until one day there was a prison break.

As alarms sounded and men died all around him, the Ticktock Prince simply walked away. He had brothers to bring to life, after all, brothers to build and many new games to play with them. He had learned so much about this world.

CLOSURE

By Bayani



The red blur leaped with calculated ease from the the electric high wires to the crumbling window ledges, never glancing back at the energy bolts that singed each of his jump points. The path Bayani wove through Warburg would have been challenging enough normally, but the winter ice and wind made each perch downright treacherous. Bayani never stopped to contemplate how risky his strategy was; the slightest hesitation would give his adversary a clean shot.

Bayani chose to confront his hunter in Warburg rather than Paragon City in order to avoid property damage and casualties. The papers described Bayani as “cold” and “aloof.” The last thing he needed was for them to add “careless” and “foolhardy” to the list. Bayani’s mentor had trained him to follow his instincts and focus on the present moment. Coupled with confidence and a dry wit, Bayani’s persona tended to alienate many of his peers, though he never truly cared much about impressing others to begin with. Bayani considered saving lives the only real priority. There were many things he could never outrun, no matter how fast or high he leaped. Failure was one. The Paragon Protector on his tail was another.

The blue and gold streak pursued Bayani across the industrial skyline, matching Bayani’s breakneck speeds and determination. Countess Crey was not one to be trifled with, but that had not stopped Bayani from investigating Crey Industries. While the general public believed Paragon Protectors were heroes for hire, Bayani had discovered the real truth: Crey Industries cloned the Protectors from stolen hero DNA and deployed them for a variety of unethical practices. And despite Bayani’s efforts to avoid conflict until he planned his next steps, the Countess had different holiday plans in mind.

“You know, a lump of coal would’ve been an easier gesture!” Bayani taunted as he somersaulted to the next rooftop. That last torrent of energy had missed him by mere inches.

The Protector may have been frustrated, but Bayani could not tell. She never spoke and wore a faceless helmet that masked her expression. Noticing that he was about to run out of cover, Bayani switched gears and dropped straight down onto the beach, using his agility to avoid the Protector raining death from above. As he danced through the onslaught of energy, the sand began to stir, giving Bayani the inspiration he needed.

Bayani somersaulted high into the sky and blasted the banks of sand with fire, obscuring his chosen battlefield with a makeshift sandstorm. He disappeared amidst the swirling clouds before springing like a leopard at his surprised opponent. Bayani staggered the Protector with a fiery uppercut in mid-air. As gravity took its course, Bayani pulled his stunned opponent down with him and continued to pummel her with a dizzying array of fire and energy until they were grounded. Gripping his assailant by her collar, Bayani blasted her helmet off then pulled her back up for a knockout strike. As the sandstorm dissipated, Bayani eyed his unmasked opponent and inhaled sharply.

“Bree?” he whispered. Bayani dropped the Protector as painful memories resurfaced. Struggling with guilt and remorse, Bayani turned to the easiest option available. He ran.

But the Protector was already rising and found her opportunity. The concussive energy numbed Bayani’s reflexes, causing him to buckle from the shock. As Bayani reeled, the Protector crushed him with

a thunderous blow and sent him crashing into the short cliffsides that bordered the sandy shores. The impact caused the wall of rock to shake violently. Before Bayani could struggle to his feet, the cliffs imploded, burying him in an avalanche of boulders and dust.

Seeking to confirm the death of her target, the Paragon Protector blasted through the rubble to retrieve Bayani. Upon finding her quarry, she yanked the unconscious Filipino by his collar from the landslide, tearing a strip of red cloth from his jacket in the process. Bayani’s breathing was shallow and blood flowed freely from an unsightly gash on his forehead. Still clutching a shred of Bayani’s costume in her fist, she charged her deadly energy and prepared the final blow.

And yet...

Despite her Crey programming, the clone paused. She was overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu. She glanced at the red cloth in her fist and then at Bayani. Her blue eyes fluttered with confusion as strange memories flooded her mind. The memory transference programs to complete the cloning process had been an all or nothing deal. To avoid potential issues, Crey locked the memories that would otherwise debase the clone’s servitude. Bayani’s barrage had loosened her memory locks, but it seemed that fate took care of the rest. As days rushed through her mind in mere seconds, the Paragon Protector broke her silence.

“Why does this seem so familiar?”

* * *

Five Years Ago...

The sun splashed the sky with a blaze of orange and red as two college students soaked in the beautiful view. Kris and Sabrina spent the entire afternoon on that beach, but exchanged few words that day. Their relationship had developed past the need for any. For over eight years, Kris and Bree grew up as rivals, friends, and soul mates. After a few more quiet moments, Bree fetched a red headband from her pack and tied it around Kris’s head.

“I made this from my old costume from that time I beat you in the tournament,” she grinned as she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and kissed his cheek. “It’ll bring you luck.”

Kris smiled softly, his new headband fluttered in the breeze a bit. He relaxed in her arms as he recalled that battle. They trained together for the tournament, but ended up meeting in the finals. While evenly matched, her experience had been the key.

“I didn’t lose on purpose.”

“I know. But remember what you said to the reporters afterwards? You said, ‘Yes, she was the only woman to compete. But don’t cheapen her success and say the men took her lightly. Sabrina fought challenging odds and beat everyone.’ “

“I remember. My shoulder still aches, you know.”

She giggled and punched his left shoulder gently, before settling into a more comfortable position. The chemotherapy left her weak and tired, but she was able to relax in Hawaii, far away from the hustle and bustle of New England. Sensing Sabrina's discomfort, Kris shifted positions and cradled her in his strong arms. Bree sighed contently and leaned into his chest as he kissed the top of her white bandana.

"That's when I really knew that I wanted share the rest of my life with you," she smiled, looking up into his eyes. "How do you say 'hero' in Tagalog?"

"Bayani."

"My bayani," she sighed melodramatically. A hint of mischief crept into her smile.

"Like you need a hero, lady," Kris smirked. Growing up, Bree had a chip on her shoulder but he always admired her strong will and candor. Bree was no damsel in distress, even in spite of her battle with leukemia. She was always quick to point out otherwise, with an energy blast or two.

Bree laughed with him, though her strength was fading. Feeling disoriented, she closed her eyes to ward off the sudden vertigo. She battled with everything she had against the fatigue that overwhelmed her, but despite how hard she fought, her end drew closer.

"Kris?" she whispered softly.

"Yes, Bree?"

"I'm ... sorry," she mumbled as her last breath escaped her lips.

"For what?" he asked quietly before he realized what was happening.

* * *

There were no memories for Bree to recall after that moment, save for the disjointed ones Crey developed for her since her creation. As for Bayani, his race had begun that fateful evening. The moments that followed have been a blur as he raced to distance himself from the pain.

The Bree clone discharged her energy harmlessly and knelt behind the fallen Bayani. She tore off a strip of gold cloth from her pants leg and tied it around Bayani's head to stem the bleeding. Time grew short for Bree again as the broken memory locks inadvertently activated the fail-safe device in her cerebral cortex. Crey's safeguards ensured the Protectors would never leak classified information should they be captured. As the device caused her nervous system to deteriorate rapidly, Bree managed to finish dressing Bayani's wounds.

Afterwards, Bree wrapped her arms around Bayani and rested her head on his shoulder. Her quiet sobbing caused Bayani to stir. His muscles ached horribly but Bayani summoned his chi to dull the pain and rebuild his strength. As he regained his senses, Bayani grew alarmed and struggled in Bree's arms.

"Shh ... it's ok. We ... you'll be ok," the Paragon Protector said as tears streamed down her cheek. Her body began to convulse and twitch violently as the deterioration continued. "Just hold me, please?"

Bayani touched the makeshift headband and looked up at copy of the woman who got away. Thrusting aside his misgivings, he tugged his gloves off and warmed his hands with soft, soothing energy. He slipped his arms around Bree gingerly, and comforted her as best he could.

"I'm sorry, Kris. I've let you down, haven't I?"

"Never," Bayani replied firmly, shaking his head. He brushed the sand and tears from her cheek. "I miss you, though."

"I know ... I'll miss you too," she choked, closing her hands over his. She squeezed gently as Bayani's energy slowed her seizure. She closed her eyes and drew tighter into Bayani's arms.

"You never let me down either, Kris," she whispered, struggling through the pain. "Just promise me you won't forget that I ..."

I love you too, Bayani mouthed, interrupting her. Her blue eyes sparkled brilliantly while she read his lips. With the last of her strength, she gave him a lingering kiss to remember her by. Bayani ran his fingers through her chestnut brown hair as she grew still in his arms. He closed her eyes, shedding tears of his own as he buried his face in her shoulder.

The race ended and this time, Bayani stopped.

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STRIKE-HAMMER

**By Lucien
Soulban**



Troy Blankenship breathed slowly -- his nerves chattered and his heart stomped against his chest. With rust-colored hair, Troy looked better suited for clubbing than a military action.

All around him, a sea of costumed reds and whites filled the streets and mini-parks around the Steel Canyon gate; row upon row of Longbows' finest agents organized into loose phalanxes beneath the grey skies and skyscrapers of Siren's Call.

The air buzzed with anxious whispers and hardware. Agents waited while supply officers furnished them with grenades and clips. Flame-thrower units checked the mix of the volatile cocktails in their tanks; minigun operators loaded ammo belts into their chain-guns and checked their riggings.

"Makes you wish you had more firepower, eh?" Michelle said, smiling.

Troy nodded to the black-haired woman, briefly admiring the way her costume stroked her waist and the row of red stars spilled down her legs. He checked the slide on his semi-automatic and holstered his weapon.

"Don't sweat it," she said. "You'll do fine." Michelle tugged on his rigging, ensuring he'd secured it properly. "If you're hurt, the mediport transponders will beam you back to the field hospital."

Troy nodded. Even though the medical transport beacons couldn't reach the Rogue Isles, Freedom Phalanx's Citadel had hacked Arachnos' mediport network.

"I know," Troy said. "With our system, we can redirect their signals... us to the hospital and injured villains into the Zig."

"How'd you know that?" Michelle asked, laughing. "They briefed me this morning and I sure as hell outrank you."

"Not exactly the best kept secret, Captain," Troy responded. "But I'm more worried about Arachnos uncovering the hack."

"It'll be too late by then," Michelle said. She quickly swallowed her own smile.

Troy followed her gaze; the Longbow Wardens moved through the ranks, patting operatives on the shoulders and stopping long enough to give their platoons a pep talk.

"Guess the briefing's over," Troy said.

"Guess so."

The various units gathered around their Longbow Wardens. Troy and Michelle headed for Warden Tyron, a Longbow commander with square features and a buzz-cut afro.

"Okay, listen up," Warden Tyron said. "Freedom Phalanx is leading the charge. All platoons under D Company will accompany Synapse to Charlie Point."

"How the hell are we supposed to accompany Synapse?" Michelle asked. "We're speed bumps to him."

"Don't try following him. Just secure the beachhead...like the simulations. The Freedom Phalanx and Agents will act as skirmish units, engaging the villains and pulling them off our backs until we're set." "How come I don't see other heroes around?" someone asked.

"This is strictly a police action," Warden Tyron said. "We start using private citizens in this fight and the UN will be on Paragon's back faster than Synapse can sneeze."

The whine of turbines filled the air.

"Heads up," someone shouted, "this is it."

Several dozen bullet-nosed Longbow Chasers rose skyward, propelled on turbofans; on their heels soared wings of Longbow Eagles with their gleaming jetpacks.

"Debarkation in ten minutes!" Warden Tyron shouted.

The calm sea of white and red uniforms broke into brisk action. Men and women returned to their units, checked their equipment and made final preparations for the assault. Longbow operatives yelled and jostled into position, Wardens barked orders and the hum of machines rose in pitch. Warden Tyron gave his squad a nod before moving through the crowd.

"Listen," Troy said to Michelle. "If I don't come back. It was a privilege--"

"Hey!" Michelle said. "None of that."

"It's just--" Troy hesitated, his footing precarious at this moment. A dozen things he wanted to say, but nothing he could say. Too much was at stake — far more than anyone here realized.

Thankfully, a cheer broke through the crowd, distracting Michelle. Fingers pointed skyward. The Freedom Phalanx jet had arrived with Statesman flying in the lead.

* * *

Twenty minutes ago, Statesman touched down alongside the heavy turbine whine of the Freedom Phalanx jet. The men and women who emerged proved a who's who of Paragon City's epic champions. A cheer rose as Manticore, Synapse, Sister Psyche, Back Alley Brawler, Positron, Ravenstorm and Ms. Liberty each stepped off the jet.

Fifteen minutes ago, Statesman finished his speech, sending a rush of excitement through the crowd.

Fourteen minutes ago, a half-naked man with alabaster skin appeared in the sky. He was a giant, measuring close to forty feet in height. He hovered above the ground, his skirt-robe billowing gently at the hand of some unseen wind. Statesman called him Faathim the Kind, an allied Rularuu from the Shadow Shard. Six other men and women accompanied him, each of them levitated and orbiting him.

Thirteen minutes ago, Faathim and his sibling sorcerers began their rituals to open iris-like portals leading to the Rogue Isles.

Ten minutes ago, the defense turrets along the Rogue Isles' coastlines pointed out, each one purring and moving as it tracked inbound objects. Longbow agents and crafts streamed through the portals, into Mercy Island...behind the automated defenses.

Ten minutes ago Troy activated a transponder switch hidden in his belt.

And ten minutes ago is exactly when all Hell broke loose.

* * *

Michelle stood on the lip of the crater, spraying the advancing villains with hydro-kinetic rounds — less-than-lethal bullets with liquid cores. The remaining agents took shelter in the crater itself.

"Bingo on ammo!" someone shouted.

Troy tossed a magazine to the operative before unloading his clip into a dog-like villain trying to advance on them. The dog lopped away, yelping. He fired at someone else, a shimmer in the air, and scored another hit.

The ruins of Darwin's Landing suited the entrenched Longbow forces perfectly, but their well-coordinated assault devolved into a free-for-all. The villains responded far more quickly than anticipated, swarming the invaders with sheer numbers. Chasers and Eagles soared skyward to establish air dominance, but the ground forces clashed with villains of all makes.

"These are the bottom-feeders!" Michelle yelled, oblivious to the hiss and whine of energy bolts and tracer rounds around her. "Where are the big-guns?"

"Protecting Lord Recluse!" Troy responded. He watched as Warden Tyron brought a spinning roundhouse into the gut of an armored undead brandishing a broadsword.

"Look out!" someone shouted.

A truck-sized section of wall seemed to hang in the air a moment before arcing toward the crater. The agents scattered from their cover seconds before the crushing mass slammed into their position. With a grunt, a tall, well-muscled woman in torn costume picked up another section of wall.

"Brute-class heavy!" Michelle cried.

"Mine!" Tyron responded, flying straight for his adversary. They collided, both careening into the crumbling ruins. Walls collapsed and a grey clot of dust choked the air.

The villains renewed their attack and swept in with a coordinated offensive. The mob of two dozen washed over the scattered and now isolated Longbow operatives.

Troy couldn't see anyone else past the hammering punishment directed at him. His gel-pack body armor protected him despite the rain of fists, bullet impacts and energy blows that buffeted him.

"Enough," Troy snarled, backhanding the zombie trying to bite his arm. He shouldered his way past opponents and headed, in his best estimation, away from the others. He dodged and wove, barely avoiding bolts of fire and frost that screamed past him. Suddenly, a blade struck him square in the back; it skipped off his armor as the Stalker-class assassin flitted in and out of the shadows. Troy tucked into a forward roll against the second blow and sprang to his feet.

Can't maintain this farce, he thought.

Troy dropped his pistol, a poor weapon at best, but a necessary part of the charade. The advancing villains smiled, believing they faced a coward. Instead, Troy reached into one of the invisible nil-pockets orbiting him, a tesseract niche only he could see and touch. His hand shimmered, a fact everyone noticed just before the pulse rifle materialized in his grip.

Troy smiled before unleashing streams of crimson blasts into the villains. A few backed away, frightened by the turn of the events. The more veteran among them avoided the shots and fired back with fire, ice and spore.

The blows struck Troy hard, sending him crashing into a pile of rubble. The rifle fell from his grip and seemed to evaporate; Troy could barely see through the haze of pain and soporifics. He waited for the killing strike to fall. In its stead, a helmet-filtered voice roared:

"Enough!"

It took Troy a moment to focus on the caped villain hovering between him and the mob. The other miscreants hesitated, obviously confused by the arrival of the white uniformed Arachnos Arbiter. A squad of five Wolf Spider soldiers, with their red-eyed helmets, pushed through the crowd.

"I sent the signal twenty minutes ago," Troy muttered, getting back to his feet. "What took you so long?"

"Been busy, little brother," the Arbiter replied. He turned to the crowd. "He's one of us. Now go on...there're other Longbow incursions to fight. Hail Lord Recluse."

Most villains moved away, their disappointment obvious. A few others, stubborn or powerful, continued watching.

"Why'd you break cover?" the Arbiter asked.

"Because you got a problem," Troy said, pulling off his mask.

"We can handle the invasion."

"Wrong," Troy said. "Citadel tapped into your emergency medical network. Your defeated 'chosen' are being sent to the Zig."

The Arbiter studied Troy a moment, both of them standing amid the ruins of Mercy Island.

"You're sure?" the Arbiter asked.

"Citadel hacked into your emergency mediport grid," Troy said. "They're sending villains with tagged genomes into the Zig and their own people to Siren's Call."

The Arbiter nodded. "All right, little brother. You did good enough. Get yourself out of that monkey suit before these wannabes jump you again, and help us push Longbow back."

Troy smiled. "Finally," he said. He concentrated a moment, using bio-stimulus to activate the universal assemblers hidden in his uniform. The Longbow costume reformed into red and white ceramic armor; the logo vanished in favor of new trim. A cyclopean sensor array covered his face; from invisible tesseract pockets orbiting his body, a pair of mechanical wings appeared and locked into his spinal hub. A wealth of data streamed across his HUD, his battlesuit's intelligence protocols instantly relaying all immediate data to him.

"Those are dad's designs," the Arbiter said, motioning to the suit. "I knew you stole the schematics." He turned to the Wolf Spider soldiers. "Inform the Registry that Siege Engineer is now active. Oh... and tell them no special favors on my account."

The Wolf Spider soldiers chuckled as the Arbiter walked away. They followed.

"Nice to see you too, bro," Troy muttered to himself.

The remaining villains drifted away as well, picking through the ruins or heading off to another skirmish.

"Sorry I tried killing you," a woman said.

Troy turned to find the same woman who threw a brick wall at him earlier addressing him. Despite the metal plate over one eye and square features, she possessed a rugged beauty.

"What happened to the Warden you were fighting?"

"He ran." She grinned. "No hard feelings?"

"Part of the job, right?"

"Right. Name's Brutallia."

Troy shook her outstretched hand. "Siege Engineer."

"So, you want to go hunting? Longbow's everywhere..."

A triumphant cry from the ruins drew their attention. A man, solid muscle and dressed in tight leather, held a Longbow woman by the neck. She struggled in his massive grip.

Michelle! Troy realized.

"Lookie what I caught," the man roared. "I fried her t-port beacon. We gonna have us some fun now!"

"No," Troy said, striding forward. "She's my kill."

"Says who, little boy?" the man said.

The air around Troy blurred and five robots materialized from the ether. Three small bots and two larger ones, their bodies plated and their arms strapped with blasters, pointed their weapons at the man.

"Ask me that again," Troy said. "Now drop her! She's mine."

"Better listen to him," Brutallia said. "His brother's an Arbiter."

After a moment, the man unclenched his fist. A battered Michelle fell to the ground with a grunt. The man backed away, his gaze a scowl that never wavered.

Troy grabbed Michelle by the collar.

"Bastard," she moaned through the pain.

"Name's Siege Engineer. I was never part of Longbow, in case you're wondering. My family's served Lord Recluse for generations."

Michelle struggled against his grip, but Troy held on tight. Ordinarily, she would have beaten him soundly, but badly injured, she couldn't put up much of a fight.

Troy dropped her to the ground and pointed his blaster at her head. "Nothing personal," he said.

Before Troy could pull the trigger, Michelle evaporated, vanishing in an explosion of light.

Troy spun and faced the man who'd captured her. "I thought you said her beacon was disabled!"

The man stammered, obviously shocked. Before he could articulate a proper retort, the five bots fired in unison. The blasts rocked the man off his feet.

"Welcome back to Rogue Isles," Brutallia said.

"This is what passes for a villain around here? Pathetic," Troy replied.

* * *

"Your friends are putting up one hell of a fight," Brutallia said, throwing a Longbow agent through a car's windshield.

"Not my friends," Troy replied. His HUD identified the next threat, a Longbow Eagle engaged in strafing runs.

Miguel, Troy realized; he recognized the Eagle as he passed overhead. Shell bursts ripped up the ground beneath Troy's feet, spraying him with biting concrete. The HUD slaved his robots to its targeting protocols, but Troy mentally overrode their parameters before they could target the Eagle and fire. He searched for another target...someone he didn't recognize. He located a Longbow minigun operator and targeted him instead; the robots followed suit, firing a barrage of crimson pulse beams. The minigun operator hit the ground hard and vanished.

"Nice shot," Brutallia said. "C'mon. We have more incursions at the Clock Tower."

"Right," Troy said. His gaze lingered on the spot where the Longbow agent fell.

* * *

"Out of my way!" Michelle yelled, trying to move past the Longbow medic.

"You're still hurt!" the medic protested, blocking her from leaving the field hospital pavilion. "The mediport system isn't a miracle worker. You still have micro-contusions!"

Michelle grabbed the man's rigging and pointed to the bank of mediport pods. The interiors of two flashed with bright lights, transporting in two agents. Longbow medics and combat nurses were on hand to catch and support the injured men as they arrived.

"Any minute now you're going to stop receiving patients," Michelle said. "The system's been compromised! Our personnel are in danger!"

The medic's eyes widened. He nodded and quickly escorted Michelle outside, to the command post where two Longbow Nullifiers, a man and a woman stood guard. A moment later, Michelle found herself inside the tent, explaining the situation to Longbow's Field Commander....

* * *

"We suspected we might have traitors," Field Commander Warrens said. He stood at a foot higher than Michelle, with brick-wall shoulders. "So he's Mastermind-class?" Warrens asked.

"Yes. But look, he compromised our hack," Michelle said, doing her best not to fidget. At least five Wardens surrounded her, all looming over her as they listened to her story.

"A red herring," Warrens said. "The hack's there, but we knew Arachnos would eventually find it. Lulls them into a false sense of security. We have other measures in place protecting our forces."

Michelle sighed. "Thank God," she said. "What about Troy?"

The Field Commander shook his head. "Traitors are another matter. We just dispatched someone to apprehend this 'Siege Engineer.'"

"Who?" Michelle asked.

Warrens merely smiled.

* * *

The fighting intensified, the surrounding buildings lost behind the thick haze of debris clouds and smoke. Power flares and energy bursts lit the miasma-choked air. Troy switched to low-light display, the surge filters barely staying ahead of the random flashes.

If the distractions bothered Brutallia, she didn't show it. She waded into one fight after another, feeding off the adrenaline and endorphins racing through her veins. Troy, however, let his bots handle his adversaries while he cycled through his secondary arsenal. The acid mortar had just fired its last round, according to his HUD read-out, and his forcefield was low on power. Warning lights flashed on the icon of two bots, the battle putting a severe strain on their chassis. The other three appeared fine for the moment. Troy could no longer see them through the haze, but he did see through their sensors-array.

Suddenly, one of the heavily damaged bots, Catapult, caught something on an incoming vector. Before it could react, however, an electric blast shorted out its systems and the sensor-grid blipped out. Warning bells filled Troy's ear-piece and the HUD blacked out Catapult's icons.

Warning, the HUD message announced. Automaton designation: 'Catapult' destroyed.

Troy snarled a small curse and ordered the four remaining bots into tighter formation. Before they could move, however, another electrical blast slammed into Battering Ram.

Warning, the HUD message announced. Automaton designation: 'Battering Ram' destroyed.

"Brutallia!" Troy cried. "We got serious trouble!"

In the moment it took Troy to speak, Trebuchet fell next, followed by Shield Wall.

"This is happening too fast!" Troy muttered.

Siege Tower fell last. Brutallia had only now turned around to face Troy.

A blur of blue motion — too fast to see — and a punch like a baseball bat in full swing caught Troy in the jaw. His faceplate and sensor array cracked from the high-velocity impact of steel-covered knuckles. The world slipped out from beneath his feet, and for an instant, Troy sailed through the air, his vision blotchy from white pain flares.

He struck the ground abruptly; the ceramic armor absorbed much of the impact, but Troy stuttered a moment, trying to draw his breath. In a sudden, painful rush, he caught a lungful of air and opened his eyes in time to watch Brutallia hit the ground hard.

Synapse stood above her, but he locked sights with Siege Engineer. Electricity crackled around his clenched fist and ran across his red and blue lightning-bolt patterned costume.

"Get up, traitor," Synapse said with a snarl. "I haven't even started hurting you yet!"

It might have been one blow or a dozen; but Troy felt like he was fighting an angry jackhammer. Synapse fought more like an artist, however, darting in to land a succession of blows before darting back

out to admire his handiwork. Troy tried to materialize a pulse rifle in his hands, but Synapse fired a crippling surge of electricity that left Troy twitching on the debris-strewn ground.

Troy's body ached, his muscles numb with fatigue and his joints screaming at every inconvenience. His muffled senses felt like he saw and heard everything as though underwater. The HUD flickered and sputtered, his armor fighting hard to discharge the residual electricity.

"Get up!" Synapse said.

Troy tried, but Synapse ran by, kicking out his legs from under him. His armor cushioned some of the blow, but not enough. Troy spun like a discus before crashing to the ground.

Can't go under, Troy thought. If the Arbiters hadn't disabled Citadel's hack yet, he'd be transported out and likely into a Zig sapper cell.

Can't fail this early! Troy's hands shimmered as he reached into one of his tesseracts.

"Hey!" Synapse said. In a streak, he rushed in and caught Troy's hand with lightning's grace.

"Too late," Troy said, his voice barely a whisper. The small mine he'd dropped on the ground burst with a muted thump and spread a noxious green cloud through the air. Troy switched to his portable rebreather.

Synapse dropped Troy and backed away. He surrendered a single cough and no more.

"You gotta be kidding me," Synapse said, shaking his head. He grabbed Troy under the arm and lifted him to his feet. "You seriously think that some second-hand smoke's going to stop me?"

"Wasn't trying to stop you," Troy said. "Just distract you."

A small spark discharged off Troy's chestplate. Synapse immediately unleashed an electric surge through him.

Troy's muscles clenched into a single knot, his teeth slamming together. He struck the ground with the elegance of a plank.

"What was that!?" Synapse demanded. "What did you do?"

It took Troy a moment to speak, his muscles relaxing instantly, but his capacity for speech still shorted out. "Fried-" Troy managed, finally. "Fried my mediport transponder. Emergency beacon won't transport me out and you won't kill me."

"You sure about that?" Synapse said before unleashing lightning from both fists. The wild bolts shattered the earth on either side of Troy's head.

"Calculated risk," Troy admitted, stalling. "Besides...you have other things to worry about."

Synapse heard Brutallia's heavy step; a split second later, her fist cratered the ground where he'd been standing. Behind her, more villains emerged from the mists, their bodies wreathed in the nimbus glow of their powers.

"You expecting these Rocky Horror rejects to save you?" Synapse asked, darting between the incoming blasts of frost and plasma, earth and radiation.

"No...just convince you that you're not taking me back alive."

Within seconds, the assembly of villains descended on Synapse, each one eager for their share of the trophy. To his credit, Synapse wove past most blasts, avoided most blows. It was the culmination of the smaller hits, however, that got to him; and it was through the attrition of Synapse's lightning charged blows that one villain after another fell.

Troy knew he had precious few seconds to act. From the tesseract, he pulled a jet injector with a drum barrel of liquid-filled vials, and rapidly pumped five pressure-driven shots into the med-patch slot in his leg armor. Quick clotting agents to stop the bleeding, adrenal cocktails to override the fatigue, calcium-ceramic micro-filaments to repair bones, hyperpeptide endorphins to numb the roar of pain and synaptic boosters to accelerate his hand-eye coordination.

In the span of seconds, Troy felt like a new man...or rather, an entirely different person. More villains fell to Synapse, their bodies contorted by electrical surges or by his machinegun blows and mach-one clothlines.

Brutallia struggled to stand, her costume further shredded, her plated eye bleeding so hard that blood coated her face. Troy ran to her, jet injector in hand. He pumped shots into her neck, bringing her back from the brink of collapse and mediport.

"I'm okay," she muttered.

"She can't help you, traitor!" Synapse said. He dodged blows from his two remaining opponents, and while his step wavered, he still fought. A demon-like creature fell next. "None of these losers can!" and with that, Synapse electrified a woman covered in quills.

"Probably not," Troy said, standing to face Synapse. "But it's still a stalemate."

Synapse moved too quickly for Troy to register. Troy felt the blow a second before he realized the speedster had budged.

Troy landed on his side hard -- but he was still conscious.

"It's a choice," Troy managed, struggling to his feet. "Carry me out. Or fight them."

Synapse paused long enough to glance at the circle of villains unconscious on the ground. Some rose on unsteady legs, ready for Round Two. More villains appeared through the mist, ready to join the fray.

"But I'm betting you can't do both," Troy concluded.

And for the first time in the fight, Synapse hesitated.

Nobody moved. The villains waited for someone else to land the first blow, and likely be the first to fall. Brutallia stood by Troy's side while Synapse considered his options. They all knew he could fight them one and all, but Synapse's advantage had evaporated; he appeared to

be skirting exhaustion, unable to fight multiple opponents while still bringing Siege Engineer to justice.

"You're right," Synapse finally admitted. "I can't do both and I won't kill you either. You won. But you know what? I'm a sore loser...worse than Manticore. Be seeing ya!" And with that, Synapse exploded into a dead run, straight for Troy.

Troy hit the ground unconscious from the mach-speed blow that propelled him a dozen yards back.

* * *

The vid-display hovering over the holograph table flickered before the image of the oil tanker vanished. Troy turned to Brutallia and nodded.

"Tell the War Crows to get ready. We attack in an hour."

Brutallia nodded before exiting the room. Troy sighed and sank into his chair, the drone of computers welcome company tonight; he let the noise wash over him.

"How's the jaw?" a woman asked.

Troy bolted from his chair, his rematerialized pulse pistol pointed at the shimmering form of a woman who stood before him. She wore white thigh-length boots, a tight one-piece bikini of a costume and a half-shawl of feathers.

"You can't shoot an astral projection," she said.

"Sure I could," Troy replied, his gaze darting to the sides of the room. "Just wouldn't do me any good, right?"

"You're alone," she said. "Your lieutenant is out of earshot."

Troy dropped the gun after a moment, allowing it to vanish as it slipped from his grip.

"I was getting worried, Swan," Troy said. "I hadn't heard from you in a while."

"I thought it best to let you get settled into your role. How's the jaw?"

"Fixed. Bastard broke it in five places."

"Synapse doesn't like to lose. Are you in Lord Recluse's hierarchy yet?"

"Not yet," Troy replied, sinking back into his chair. "They don't trust people that quickly and my brother's gone that extra mile to 'test' me. It'll take months...maybe years."

"Can you stay the course?"

"I have to," Troy said. "Recluse has to be stopped and you folks need all the inside help you can get."

Swan nodded. "Are you all right? In here, I mean," she said, touching her temple.

"Not really. I betrayed the people I care about on both sides of this conflict. If my family knows what I've done, I'm a dead man. And now, even the Freedom Phalanx thinks I'm a traitor."

Swan smiled kindly. "It's necessary. Not everyone is shielded against mind-readers."

"I know," Troy replied. "Just as long as you and Statesman know about Operation Strike-Hammer, that's enough."

A moment of silence passed between them.

"How's Michelle?" Troy whispered. "She wasn't hurt too badly?"

"Her pride's stung," Swan said. "But she doesn't know she owes you her life. Using your powers to repair her damaged mediport transponder was a good thing."

"Then why don't I feel that."

Swan smiled and reached down, her hand hovering above Troy's. "Nobody said being a hero would be easy."

"Haven't you heard," Troy said, laughing. "I'm not a hero."

"Just because someone doesn't know what you've done for them, doesn't make you any less the champion. Heroism is based on action, not any badge of merit or public accolade."

Troy nodded. "Thanks," he said.

Swan smiled. "They're coming back."

"I know," Troy said. "There's an oil tanker that Longbow's using as a secret base off the Pit. Better tell them we're coming."

"I will." Swan was about to fade away when Troy looked at her.

"You know that day Synapse attacked me," Troy said. "I was hoping he'd win."

"I'm glad he didn't," Swan replied. "Now...go out there and be the hero."

With that Swan vanished just as the room's double doors swung open.

"You ready, boss?" Brutallia said, striding in.

"Yeah," Troy responded, standing. "It's time to play the villains."

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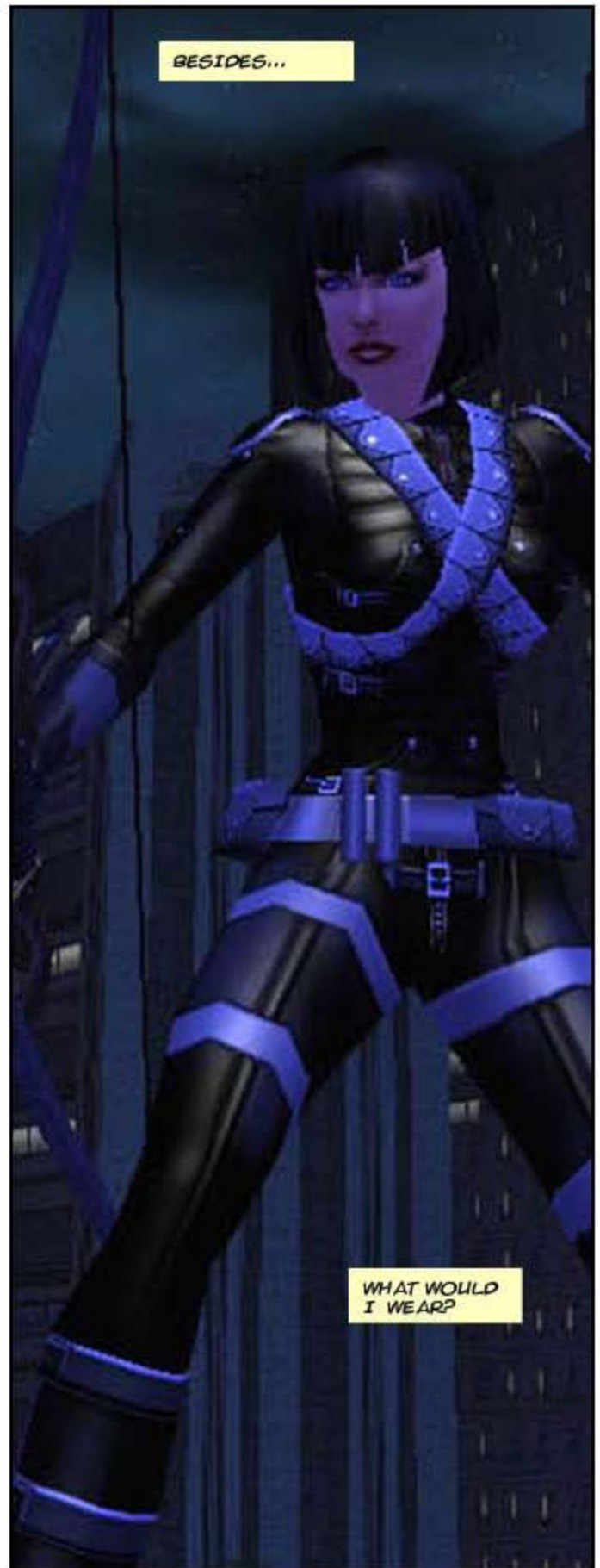
QUIVER



THE **LEGACY**
PART ONE



Creator







SIX YEARS AGO...



now



TWO YEARS AGO...




now



MAYBE THAT'S WHY I
DO THIS EVERY NIGHT.

MAYBE I'M TRYING
TO LIVE THE LIFE SHE
GAVE UP FOR ME.




STOPPING THE BAD
GUYS SHE NEVER HAD
A CHANCE TO STOP.

MAKING A
DIFFERENCE IN
A WORLD THAT
I DENIED TO
HER.



I KNOW THAT OTHER KIDS
MY AGE SPEND THEIR
NIGHTS DIFFERENTLY...

RIGHT NOW,
THEY'RE OUT ON
FIRST DATES...



OR LEARNING
HOW TO KISS...

KA-POW

OR AWKWARDLY FUMBLING
TOWARDS SECOND BASE.



I SUPPOSE I'M
MISSING OUT,
IN A WAY.

BUT I'LL
GET OVER
IT.

THE WAY I SPEND
MY NIGHTS HAS
ITS OWN REWARDS.



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