



A martial arts master. The energy avenger. A living computer. The original hired hero. A demon speedster. A woman in flux. They make up Heroes For Hire, the world's foremost security detail! They are not Soldiers of Fortune, but rather Heroes of Opportunity. If you need saving, and you've got a dollar, you can call the H4H!

Special Cyberback Collection!

Originally released at Marvel 2000 from Feb 2006 – March 2007, this was D. Golightly's first foray into fan fiction. This volume collects #1-10 of the H4H series, plus a Holiday Special story featuring Luke Cage and a one-shot released in Max2000 that tied up some loose plot threads from the series.



IRON FIST: Danny Rand, trained in the mystical city of K'un Lun, leads the H4H in the field. His body honed to perfection, he can channel his chi, his life energy, and make his fist like unto a thing of iron!
Iron Fist



CAGE: Luke Cage is the original hired hero, with unbreakable skin and incredible strength. Once framed, he has since cleared his name, and is the backbone of the new H4H!



DEATHLOK: Partly metal, partly real, the cyborg known as Deathlok has reformed the H4H to aid him in his efforts. Struggling to hold on to his humanity, the team's financier coordinates the groups efforts so they'll truly be among the world's greatest heroes!



STRIDER: David Erickson has been cursed, but his curse is also a gift! Bonded with a demon, Strider is able to achieve speeds that humans would only dream of. However, his darker half struggles for control...



DIAMOND DUST: Lynn Erickson, an expert in biochemistry, struggles for a cure to save her husband. Able to shift her body through the different phases of matter, Lynn can become as dense as a diamond, or as intangible as a puff of smoke!



PHOTON: Monica Rambeau, able to convert her body into any form of energy within the electromagnetic spectrum, not only bolsters the groups public image, but brings both experience and raw power!

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Heroes For Hire

Issue #1

“Hired Help: Part 1”

Grunts and heavy breathing could be heard emitting from the gymnasium. Someone was putting himself through a vigorous and extensive workout. Interspersed between the vocals were stifled “thuds,” as the person’s blows landed on their intended targets. He was one of the greatest martial artists in the world, much to the dismay of both criminals and the punching bag.

Satisfied with the hour he had spent berating the hanging sandbag with his appendages, Daniel Rand walked over to an open space in the gym, clear of everything except some floor mats. He slowed his breathing, focused his mind, and began to slowly go through the motions of a sacred kata, known only to those that had been trained in the mystical city of K’un L’un.

He quickened his pace as the kata progressed, each move swift and exact. He had been training this way for years, and he knew his strict sense of self-discipline had saved his life on more than one occasion. Even though he was in a deep form of meditation while performing the kata, he was completely aware of his surroundings, so it came as no surprise to him when an attractive black woman spoke.

“Danny, Luke’s on the phone; line three” she said. She wasn’t afraid of interrupting him while he honed his skills; she knew he wouldn’t even be phased by her presence.

Without breaking his stride, he replied, “Okay, Misty, tell him I’ll be there in a second.”

Misty Knight, the private-eye with a bionic arm, and sometimes lover of Danny’s, exited the gym the way she had come in. She didn’t mind dropping in on Danny while he practiced. It was her gym after all. They were in the building she owned, which housed the offices of Nightwing Restorations, her agency. Her and Danny’s on-again, off-again relationship was currently “on,” so she didn’t mind him flexing his muscles and building up a sweat in her gym. In all honesty, it put a smile on her face.

Danny finished the kata, inhaled deeply, and reached for a towel while he let the breath go. Dabbing the streaks of perspiration away, he walked over to a phone on a nearby wall, pushing the button for line three, connecting him to his longtime friend Luke Cage.

“Hey, Luke,” he spoke into the speakerphone.

{ { Sorry to interrupt your flow, buddy, but I don’t think Misty minded that much. } }

Danny could almost hear the smile on his friend’s face. “She just digs the dragon tattoo. What’s up?”

{{ You'll never guess who I just got a message from, requesting a video conference call with both of us. }}

“Who?”

{{ The message says it's from Larry Young. }}

“Deathlok?”

{{ Yep. Last I heard, he was still working with S.H.I.E.L.D., but that was a few years ago, and who knows what the hell's going on over there now. }}

There had been several cyborgs named Deathlok over the years, and Larry Young was the latest one. Jack Truman, the third Deathlok, had been an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., but had swapped minds with Larry. Jack was presumably living a regular life somewhere, while Larry's mind was trapped inside the cybernetic body of Deathlok.

“When's the conference call?”

{{ 'Bout an hour. }}

“Any idea what he wants? Is there some kind of trouble?”

{{ No clue. I just got the message a few minutes ago via fax. Can you swing it? }}

“Yeah, shouldn't be a problem. I don't know Larry as well as I did Jack, though. When's the last time you talked to Jack?”

{{ ~phew~ Not since he traded brains, man. He could be anywhere. }}

“Okay. I'll hop in the shower, grab something to eat, and then call you back with Misty's video conference rig. Talk to you in a bit,” Danny said as he pushed the button to hang up.

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About an hour later, Luke Cage sat at his desk in New York, waiting for Danny to call. He had no doubt his friend would be exactly on time, as he was rarely late for anything. It was something he had grown accustomed to after the many years working with Danny. They used to be called the Heroes For Hire, and were respected by their costumed peers. In recent years, however, Danny had been doing some soul-searching and Luke ran the business by himself.

Every once in a while, one of their hero friends (usually Hawkeye) would ask them what made them heroes instead of mercenaries. They were *for hire*, after all. Not many of them realized that more often than not, they ended up doing what was necessary without

getting paid for it. Luke didn't complain...he was from the streets, and he knew what it was like to be in need of help. He had been accused of crimes he didn't commit, and even though he had since cleared his name, he felt that second chances were something that everyone deserved. Being a hero was his way of helping out those that couldn't help themselves. The 'For Hire' part was only because heroes need to eat, too.

In all honesty, Luke had pretty much dropped the Heroes For Hire idea a while ago. It was more of a hobby now than anything else. Luke's business was never booming, but he still managed to pay the electricity bill and donate a little something to his local YMCA every month. He had spent a lot of time at a "Y" himself as a kid, and he was more than happy to try and repay back some of that "good character-building" to the community.

He heard the chirp of his video phone, and looked at the clock. Right on time. This had to be Danny.

Clicking the button to answer, Luke said, "Hello?"

{{Hey, it's me,}} said Danny.

"Perfect timing," said Luke, admiring the crystal-clear picture on the video phone, "Wish I had discipline like that."

{{Well, I have offered to show you a few things that would play to your strengths.}}

"Nah, my diamond-hard skin plays to my super-strength just fine."

{{Any word from Deathlok, yet?}}

Just then, a light on Luke's video phone blinked, meaning that someone was calling the office on the second line. "Looks like this is him, now. I'll patch us all together."

Luke quickly punched a few buttons in a specific sequence, and then said, "Hello, this is Luke Cage."

A split second before the cyborg image of Deathlok came over the speaker, a slightly metallic sounding voice said, {{Hello Luke; Daniel. Thanks for taking my call.}}

Deathlok's half-metal, half-preserved flesh form came into view. If the man wasn't moving, one might not be aware that he was actually alive.

"No prob. What's going on? We were surprised to get a message from you. Still with S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

The cyborg replied, {{No, S.H.I.E.L.D. and I *officially* parted ways long ago. I'm more of a freelancer these days. In fact, that's why I've contacted both of you.}}

{{Freelancing for who? Are you recruiting us for something?}} said Danny's image.

{{As to your second question, yes and no. Luke, I understand that your little business isn't quite the peacekeeping organization it once was when you were affiliated with Namor's Oracle, Inc.}}

"I get by," said Luke, feeling a small part of his pride being offended. He didn't think of his business as being *little*. It wasn't huge by any means, but it wasn't little either.

{{I want to give you the opportunity and resources Namor once gave you. As to your first question, Daniel, I do mostly government work. I can do only so much by myself. It's a big world out there, and there's a lot to be done. The U.S. government, as well as various other organizations, require people like us to look into certain things for them. It's no secret how many heroes run around unaccounted for in the world, that the government has no contact with.}}

"You want us to police them?" Luke asked.

{{No, no. You're misunderstanding. Let me just get right to the point. I want to bring Heroes For Hire back into the public limelight. With my contacts, resources, and funding, H4H could change the way John Q. Public perceives heroes. Think of it as a high-end detective/national security agency. We would have links to the government, but we wouldn't be some wetwork outfit. We would be accessible.}}

{{I'm not sure what you want us for, exactly,}} Danny commented.

{{I've been tracing what I thought to be random terrorist activities over the last few months. Apparently, they weren't random at all, they're called the Protoclan. I'm not sure what their ultimate goal is yet, but I could really use your help. Heroes For Hire would be a perfect way to gain a public image, as well as public trust while we investigate. That's only one of the things I need help with; I have *plenty* more.}}

"I dunno," said Luke, "H4H didn't work out well the last time we had big bucks behind the it. If we go after a whole terrorist organization, we'll need more muscle. And it's not like Danny and me would bolster the public image you mentioned. We're respected in the super-suit community, but most people couldn't tell you our names."

Deathlok sat up in his chair as he replied, {{I've got both of those problems covered all ready. Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to the person that will bring both raw power and an excellent image to H4H.}}

Just then, a third window popped up on Luke's video phone. A slim, black woman in a white costume that had a black star in the center of her chest smiled at them.

"Monica?"

{{Hi, Luke. Hi, Danny. Good to see both of you again.}} Monica Rambeau, previously known to the super hero community at large as Captain Marvel, and currently known as Photon, had the ability to convert her body into any form of energy in the electromagnetic spectrum. Also a past Avenger, and onetime leader of the prestigious team, Monica commanded both great power and great respect.

Deathlok leaned forward as he said, {{Photon and I have come to an understanding about Heroes For Hire, and she's on board. We could do a lot of good here, but we need both of you. Daniel, you've proven yourself as team leader in the field. Luke, you're the backbone of Heroes For Hire. We need Iron Fist and Cage.}}

Luke didn't doubt the machine-man's sincerity, but he wasn't quite convinced about what was being proposed. "Where do you want to this party to live? My little office here in New York ain't enough to accommodate the kind of headquarters I think you're implying we need."

{{I own a building in Chicago that would be perfect. I have lots of equipment stored there that could be invaluable to the team. It would also cut down response time a great deal to situations on the West Coast and in Canada.}}

Luke sat silent for a moment. He looked at all three images on his screen, and then said, "Let Danny and me talk about this for a second."

Once Luke secured the private line, Danny said, {{This is a good opportunity here, Luke. I always felt that we dropped the ball when we were with Oracle. Namor has his own agenda about things.}}

"Yeah, the guy walks the line. Look, bro, I'll be honest, I'm not sure about this whole thing. Picking up and moving to Chicago...getting assignments from who knows where...but Monica's a tough cookie. I doubt she would get involved if she didn't think she could really make a difference. It would be nice to work with you and her again. I guess what I'm saying is, if you're in, then I'm in."

{{I trust Monica with my life. She's smart and wouldn't do this unless she thought it was the right thing to do. I'm in.}}

"Okay, then. I've just got one more question for our robo-friend."

After reconnecting everyone together again, Luke leaned toward the video phone, and asked, "Is there a YMCA anywhere in Chicago?"

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"All clear from up here," Photon said into her tiny comlink, which fit snugly in her ear.

Photon flew high over the armored escort, carefully watching the surrounding area. She was currently transparent, so as not to attract attention to herself from anyone looking to fire a rocket propelled grenade her way.

Heroes For Hire had been reformed and open for business for three weeks now. After the initial meetings, discussions, press conferences, and security clearances, Photon was glad to be out in the field on the team's first mission.

She had been a lieutenant in the New Orleans harbor patrol, and she was always at her happiest when working in the field. She, Iron Fist, and Cage had been sent to Peru to escort a diplomat back into the U.S. Deathlok was waiting for them at LaGuardia, arranging for a secure arrival.

When Photon had originally joined, she hadn't imagined the kind of technology Deathlok was bringing to the team. He had two satellites, a modified transport jet (which put a Quinjet to shame), and an entire building full of equipment she didn't really understand.

Things seemed to be in order, and they were more than capable of handling this mission. When they were debriefed the day before, she had learned that the U.S. diplomat had made some powerful enemies during his campaign through South America, so the government decided that some super hero muscle wouldn't be a bad idea for his trip home. They were almost to the airport where their jet was waiting, and so far, everything was going smoothly.

That's when she heard Luke scream through her comlink, {{SWEET CHRISTMAS!}}

"What's going on?" she said calmly. She had seen plenty of action during her lifetime, and she knew panicking wouldn't help anyone.

She heard Iron Fist say over her comlink, {{Cage just got tossed into the jungle.}}

"How? By who?"

{{Not sure. Whoever it was, they were moving really fast.}}

Photon swooped and saw that the two-car escort had stopped. Security guards from the first car stepped out, handguns drawn. Iron Fist stood on top of the second car, looking into the jungle.

"Cage, are you okay?" she said.

{{Yeah, just a wounded ego is all. Some fool blindsided me. Moved fast enough that their momentum carried me way out into the brush. I'll be there in a sec.}}

Photon hovered above Iron Fist, close enough that the comlink wasn't necessary. "Any idea what just happened?"

“Not really, but we’re sitting ducks here. Whoever it was moved fast enough to not be seen,” said Iron Fist, as his vision swept the area.

“We need to get moving again. The longer we sit here, the more time they have to attack. I’ll fly a little...THERE! Eleven o’clock, high!”

Photon pointed as she floated higher into the air. Shooting out from in between the trees was a strange looking person, tearing through the lower foliage. It was a woman, whose entire body looked like it was covered in a hard, white substance. Her fingers were much longer than normal, and she was using them like claws to rip small plants out of her way.

Iron Fist leapt from the top of the second car to the top of the first one, extended his hand toward the woman, and yelled, “Hold it! We don’t to hurt you!”

Just then, a blur of motion swept in front of Iron Fist, grabbing his arm, and pulling him into the jungle. The blur swirled him around, slamming him into a large, tropical tree. Iron Fist looked up to see a man standing over him, about the same height as him, with glowing blue eyes, brimming with power.

“We don’t want to hurt you, either. Stay down,” the man said before he zoomed off back in the direction of the road.

Photon changed into a being of solid light and dove at the woman attacker. “I’m serious...back off or you’re in for a world of pain!” she yelled.

The woman looked up challengingly at Photon, ready for whatever she was going to throw at her. Photon continued her dive, energy rippling all around her, preparing to slam into the woman. In her energy form, Photon would disrupt the woman’s nervous system, causing a quick convulsion and then unconsciousness.

At least, that’s what was supposed to happen. Instead, Photon passed harmlessly through the woman. Surprised, Photon went through several trees before she swung back up into the air. She looked at her intended target, who was ignoring her now, again walking toward the escort, with bullets bouncing off her white skin.

“What the hell? I go through her, but bullets don’t?”

Easily knocking the armed guards away, the woman reached into the first car, grabbed the diplomat, yanked him out, and dropped him on the ground. Her incredibly fast friend ran up beside her, staring at the diplomat, his bright blue eyes reverberating with dark energy.

He leaned over the diplomat crouching on the ground, and said “Remember me, you spell-slinging bastard?”

“How could I forget my favorite demon-possessed friend?” the diplomat said.

Photon watched as the diplomat stood up, and was surprised for the second time that day when the man they had been escorting unleashed a ball of fire from his hands, engulfing the two attackers.

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### **Author's Note**

*Welcome to the new ongoing Heroes For Hire series! I'm Dave (credited as D.Golightly, since M2K has more than its fair share of Dave's), and I'll be your writer this evening. I'm really excited about this book, and I just wanted to quickly thank Cory, Jason, and Ingram for their help in getting H4H off the ground. I have the first 12 issues all plotted out and drafted, and tons of ideas for post #12. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated, since this is my first attempt at fan fiction.*

*I also wanted to mention that this issue takes place AFTER Avengers #44. Brent is using Photon in his current arc, and I didn't want there to be any confusion.*

*Here's what you can expect to see in the pages of H4H: mysteries about identities, motives, and masterminds. Toss in a little good ol' manipulation and some magical ailments. Rinse, repeat...I mean, read and reread. See you for issue #2!*

## **Heroes For Hire**

Issue #2

“Hired Help: Part 2”

There was fire everywhere. The two mysterious assailants had been completely covered by it, but the fire hadn't ended there. The “diplomat” that the fledgling Heroes For Hire had been transporting had just unleashed a wave of fire that sought to destroy the entire surrounding area.

Luke Cage lay on top of his longtime friend, Danny Rand, the Iron Fist. If Cage had been a split second slower, he might not have had a friend to save anymore.

“What...Luke? What's going on?” said Iron Fist, “My head is still reeling from that guy slamming me into a tree.”

“Hold on a sec,” Cage gasped, “I may have diamond-hard skin, but even a blast like that knocks the wind out of me.”

Cage stood up and helped Iron Fist to his feet. They surveyed the area, seeing that most of the trees had been either burned to ash or bore long scorch marks. The security guards the mysterious woman had taken out were nothing but charred flesh now. The two cars that had been part of their little caravan were complete slag, having been so close to the initial burst of flame. The source of that flame was no where to be seen, along with the speedy attacker that had tried to knock over a tree with Iron Fist's spine.

The speedster's friend, however, was staring down Photon, standing only a few feet from where the “diplomat” had been right before he surprised all of them.

“Get out my way!” the strange woman yelled.

“Like hell! You have some serious explaining to do,” replied Photon. The former Avenger held her ground, unsure of what to do next. Her first attack against this woman hadn't even slowed her down. Photon had passed harmlessly through her instead of short-circuiting her nervous system.

“Christmas,” muttered Cage, as he stumbled as quickly as he could to Photon's side. Iron Fist ran right behind Cage, while activating his comlink.

“Deathlok! Come in!” the martial artist yelled.

{ {I read you, Daniel, and I'm almost to your location. Photon converted herself to radio waves several minutes ago and briefed me. ETA: twenty-one minutes.} }

Iron Fist breathed a small sigh of relief. He had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that he needed every teammate he could muster. As he approached the two women, he could hear that the stand-off was far from over.

“I don’t know who the hell you are, and I don’t care. All I want is an explanation for what just happened!” Photon was usually known for her patience in times of combat, as she had lots of experience in dangerous situations. Currently, however, Monica Rambeau was not in control of either her emotions or the situation, and it was beginning to get to her. The mission was shot, and she wasn’t sure if her powers had failed her or if her opponent was immune to them. Either way, she wasn’t happy.

Upon reaching the pair, Cage spoke up. “Explanations are good...so are names and asskickings. So why don’t you tell us the first two or I’ll deliver the third. What say we start with your sucker-punching friend?”

“Cool it, Luke,” said Iron Fist, as he turned his attention to the mystery woman, “Tell us what’s going on. Who are you?”

“I don’t have time for this!” screamed the woman as she lunged at Cage, her longer, claw-like fingers tearing his shirt and scraping across his skin. She seemed to be covered in a sturdy white substance that apparently hurt even Cage, which became obvious as he yelped in both sudden pain and surprise.

Cage blocked some of her attacks, but others got through, scraping against his tough exterior. “Oww! Back off, lady!” He ducked under her left arm as it reached toward him, grabbed it, and pulled. Shifting his weight, the woman went flying twenty feet away, landing on her side, expelling the breathe from her lungs.

Photon summoned her energy and unleashed a thin blast powerful enough to knock the woman off her feet. Her opponent raised her right arm at the last moment, as her entire body appeared to shimmer. It was if her form had shifted somehow. Photon’s energy hit the woman’s open hand, passing into it.

The woman became translucent, and it almost seemed as if the energy was bouncing around inside her! Refracting hundreds of times off the curves of the strange woman’s body from the inside, she raised her other arm and redirected the energy at Cage, blasting him up against one of the molten cars.

As Photon ran to check on Cage, Iron Fist quickly concentrated his chi. He had undergone great trials to earn the honor of the iron fist technique, and he once again intended to use it. He summoned his entire life force into his right hand, making it like unto a thing of iron. Charging the woman, he was beginning to understand how she was able to do what she did. He had one chance to take her down.

A few feet from her, Iron Fist sprung into the air, aiming a deadly kick to her head. As he expected, she didn’t even try to avoid his attack, letting him pass harmlessly through her. Before his feet even touched the ground, he twisted and pushed his charged fist into her misty form, releasing the built up power.

“What di...AHHHH!”

The woman’s eyes rolled into the back of her head, and she slumped to the ground. Iron Fist, barely breathing hard, stood up, carefully watching his opponent in case she was faking. Her hard, white exterior slowly dissipated to show an attractive woman in her mid-twenties with blonde hair. She was breathing, but slowly. She appeared to be down for the count.

“So anyone want to tell me what just happened?” said Cage as he approached the now unconscious woman, while rubbing his head.

“Photon’s attacks seemed to pass through her, but her skin was just as tough as yours,” Iron Fist replied, “it reminded me of the Vision, and how he was able to control his density. I took a chance when using the iron fist, but it seemed to work.”

“Vision could never manipulate energy like that,” said Photon, a slight edge in her voice.

“Her powers are different, somehow,” said Iron Fist, lifting his head to the sky, “we’ll know more once Deathlok gets here. The equipment on his ship should give us a little insight.”

“So what happened to ‘Mr. I-need-an-escort?’” asked Cage.

Iron Fist swept his gaze back to the mystery woman. “I’m hoping she can tell us, along with where her friend is and why we were set up.”

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The living computer known as Deathlok stood over the unconscious woman laying on the examination table, scanning her with some kind of hand-held device. He had arrived in Peru to see the rest of the Heroes For Hire standing over this woman, and now they were eagerly awaiting answers.

What was supposed to be a routine escort mission (the team’s first) had suddenly exploded into something much more important. Deathlok couldn’t help but think to himself that the press was simply going to love this. Barely out of the gate, and the new H4H was running into a situation that may be over their heads.

The team had remained quiet while the cyborg scanned their visitor. Cage was the first to speak. “What have you found out?”

“She’s unconscious,” said Deathlok, not even turning his head to reply. Many people regarded Deathlok as cynical and sarcastic; few of them found humor in it. They figured it was just a part of his cold, calculating personality.

“Anything else?” said Cage.

“Her molecular structure is unique. Her body seems to be in flux. You said she displayed density powers similar to that of the Vision?”

“Similar, but different,” said Photon, “she channeled my energy back at Luke somehow.”

“Reminds me I’m glad I’m on your side, Mon,” chimed in Cage as he rubbed his chest, remembering where the redirected energy blast hit him.

Deathlok lowered the scanning instrument and turned to face Iron Fist, saying, “Your iron fist powers are mystical in origin, Daniel. I don’t really know what effect it will have on her unique physiology. Honestly, you’re lucky she was *only* knocked out.”

“Will she regain consciousness again soon?” asked Iron Fist.

“She’s not in a coma, so she’ll be awake relatively soon. Given the apparent urgency of our situation, however, I don’t suggest we wait.” Deathlok walked across the medical room aboard his aircraft to a row of stainless steel cabinets, and removed a vial from within them.

Hovering once again over the woman, Deathlok opened the vial filled with smelling salts and waved it under her nose, quickly causing her to sit up and gag.

“Easy...” said Iron Fist, preparing for anything.

“Where...” was all the woman could say while coughing. She leaned forward, trying to gather herself.

“You’re onboard my ship,” said Deathlok. Feeling the need for an explanation from their visitor, he didn’t want to waste time with speeches of his own. “Who are you?”

Finally able to breathe clearly, the woman replied, “Lynn. My name is Lynn Erickson. You have to let me go, or he’s going to kill David!”

“Which one was David, honey? We’re still in the dark about what’s going on, so how about you enlighten us a little,” said Cage.

Obviously annoyed, but seeing no way to free herself, Lynn began to explain. “David is the one with the glowing, blue eyes...runs real fast? That man you were escorting isn’t who you think he is. You’ve been set up.”

“We gathered that much,” said Iron Fist, “what have we gotten in the middle of?”

Lynn let out a long sigh before continuing. “Your wonderful diplomat is actually a pretty powerful sorcerer named Casavan. He’s been posing in the U.S. government for years, hoping to get close to certain officials in Washington so he can control them. Two years

ago, he tried to summon a demon into our world to help him in his lust for power. Something went wrong, and the demon ended up getting bonded to David.”

“He’s a demon?!” yelled Cage, surprised.

“No, no...he’s *bonded* with one. It’s what gives him his speed, among other things. He has trouble sometimes with...” Lynn looked at the surrounding heroes cautiously, deciding to stifle some of her words, “well, anyway...Casavan has been trying to separate them so he can have the demon for himself.”

“So why did you follow him to Peru?” chimed in Photon.

“Casavan needs a specific talisman to separate David from the demon. There are only two in existence, and we destroyed the first one months ago when we found it in Nebraska. We think Casavan was in Peru looking for the second one, and now that he has David, it looks like he may have found it.”

“So we were hired to ‘escort’ him, when in actuality, we were set up to slow you down,” said Photon.

“That’s my guess,” Lynn responded.

“How did you say David was bonded with this demon, again?” asked Iron Fist as he shared a stare with Cage.

“I’m...not quite sure how it happened,” Lynn replied, visibly becoming unnerved. “But if Casavan is successful in separating it from David, the stress his body will go through during the ritual will kill him.”

“While I can’t verify what you’re saying, miss, I do believe we should investigate regardless,” said Deathlok, as he turned his attention to his fellow teammates, “We were set up. We’re deeply involved whether we want to be or not. Our next step is to find this Casavan.”

Cage’s massive frame moved closer to the young woman still sitting on the examination table. He didn’t trust this stranger, but he had no other choice. He and his team had been fooled into helping the bad guy. He hated that. It made him feel like a rookie.

“So where is he?” Cage asked her.

“Somewhere he can perform the ritual. Some place he feels safe, where he won’t be disturbed,” she explained, “The ritual takes some time to complete, and he needs to draw upon outside magical forces. I would bet anything he took David to his stronghold in Texas.”

Cage couldn't help but laugh. "Texas? His stronghold is in the Lone Star State? Does he ranch cattle, too?"

This time, Lynn couldn't hold back her smirk as she replied, "You wouldn't believe how powerful dormant magic is in Texas."

"It will take us about forty minutes to get near there, so strap yourselves in," said Deathlok. He headed toward the cockpit to pilot the craft to where answers hopefully lay. Iron Fist may be the field leader, but he had reformed H4H. This was *his* team. He hoped he wasn't taking them to their graves. He didn't have much experience with magic, but the few encounters he did have with it weren't good.

"Don't get too comfortable, we've still got questions, Lynn," said Photon as she slid into a nearby seat. "We'll be watching you."

"It's no trap," Lynn said, "At least not of my design...and from here on out, call me Diamond Dust."

"Diamond Dust?" said Cage, "You come up with that yourself?"

"At least it relates to my abilities, Power Man," replied Lynn, still smirking.

"I don't go by that name anymore. Too seventies."

~~~

Clouds encroached upon his mind. He could barely see anything. Was he dead, or had he simply been knocked out? He felt his fingers move, so he assumed that meant he was still alive. He doubted the dead could wiggle their pinkies. So if he wasn't dead, where was he?

He tried to remember, but his head began to throb. He felt the rest of his body stirring as he tried to raise his arms. They didn't raise very far, though, as something cold and metallic held them down.

Pulling as hard as his ebbing strength allowed him, the chains rattled against the wall. The noise of the clanging metal links helped his mind clear through the fog. Casavan must have taken him somewhere. Was Lynn here, too? If Casavan had harmed her in any way...

"Aarrggghhh!" he yelled as he pulled at his restraints. He was beginning to feel stronger. He was beginning to feel more powerful. He felt...like a cornered *beast*, struggling to get free.



Suddenly, blinding pain erupted through his entire body. He couldn't scream this time, as all the air was driven from his lungs. It was like he was being electrocuted, only...it was different. He knew this energy; he had felt it before. Magic. Casavan.

"Relax, dear David," said the faux-diplomat, "You'll find these chains are enchanted, and even your *better* half would have quite some difficulty breaking them."

Gasping for air, David hung chained to the stone wall, helpless. He brought his eyes up to meet his capturer's, seeing Casavan standing only a few feet away, with his hands behind his back, still dressed in a typical business suit that was the expected attire of a U.S. diplomat.

"Screw you."

"Indeed," said Casavan, "You know, I was going to make the separation ritual quick and relatively painless. I've all ready gathered the sleeping magic of this place together. After all, I don't want to be kept from my demon any longer than I have to."

The sorcerer brought out his right hand from behind his back, holding what looked like a metal cylinder with one end coming to a point. It was encrusted with three red jewels along its shaft, each giving off a faint glow. David knew what the object was, and seeing it verified his fears: Casavan had found the last remaining talisman capable of granting his burning desire.

Noticing David's eyes following the object, Casavan said, "That's right. It *was* in Peru, and now I have it. You'll never guess who was in possession of it! I searched for months, digging through clues in ancient texts, trying to decipher its location. All this time, it was my own teacher that had hidden it!"

"Your...teacher?"

"Yes! You see, he and I had a falling out of sorts years ago. Always in his shadow, I never sought his guidance in the matter, until I had no other option. He's been around a lot longer than I have. A *lot* longer. Centuries even. He was...friends...with the creators of my little toy here. Eventually, he killed them and took their power for himself. He was more than happy to place it in my hands, so long as I agreed to bring those 'heroes' along for the ride."

"I didn't take you for a typical villain," David said, "telling me how you did it like this. They call it 'monologuing', you know."

Casavan laughed slightly. "I am anything but typical, my dear boy. I'm going to draw that demon out from under your skin and control it. You never should have had it in the first place. It was mine! You aren't worthy of its power! From what I've seen, you can't even unlock its full potential!"

“I hope you burn in Hell,” spat David.

Sighing, Casavan quickly closed the gap between the two, and plunged the silver cylinder into David’s chest. David’s eyes glowed a dark blue, with power rupturing from his body, sending him into convulsions. The red jewels on the cylinder began to slowly turn blue.

While David grunted in extreme pain, Casavan whispered into his ear, “With the demon, I’ll gather enough power to one day conquer Hell. You will die now, and I shall live forever.”

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Sitting in a large throne made of dark stone, Casavan’s former master opened his eyes. He had been using his magical abilities to keep tabs on his old pupil (something Casavan was unaware of), making sure the fool wasn’t undoing his carefully laid plans. He would sooner be damned than allow that imbecile to ruin his chance at his family’s redemption.

Hearing a soft crackle of energy, the dark man called back his magical senses. He had heard that sound before, which meant his “partner” would be stepping out of the newly formed portal any second now.

As a green sphere appeared and quickly grew large enough for a full sized adult to be dwarfed by it, the visitor stepped through the boundaries of space and time, entering the shadowed corner of the dark man’s chamber.

“If your student successfully gains control of that demon, both of our agendas will be compromised,” said the man that had just teleported into the dark man’s throne room, the shadows still clinging to his form.

“You were monitoring his actions, then?”

“I’m making sure my investments aren’t going to waste. It took a great deal for me to ensure I’ll get the information I require. When I agreed to our...arrangement...I assumed it was understood from the beginning that our goals wouldn’t extinguish each other.”

“They will not. Everything shall still go according to our specifications. My ancestors will finally be returned to their rightful place of power and respect, and you...”

Finally exiting the shadows, the self-proclaimed Master of the World interrupted him, saying, “...and I shall have my vengeance, while simultaneously leading this planet into a new golden era!”

The dark man turned from his “guest” disgusted that he needed this man’s help. Once he accomplished his task, however, he would shatter this alliance along with the Master’s bones.

After centuries, his soul would finally find peace once his plans came to fruition.

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### **Author's Notes**

*Holy crap! The Master of the World! WTF? And who's this other guy? What are their cryptic plans? And can the H4H trust Lynn and her demon buddy? Who's on first? What's on second?*

*Obviously, things are not as they seem, and this is only the second issue! I'll try and wrap all this up with issue #3, but I make no guarantees (other than I'm sure Luke Cage will try and fit a Sweet Christmas line in somewhere).*

*I'm looking for feedback, as well as suggestions for what to call this little end of the issue rant of mine. Author's Notes just doesn't really bring it home, ya know? Send everything you've got to [h4hdave@yahoo.com](mailto:h4hdave@yahoo.com). See you for the dramatic conclusion to H4H's first adventure!*

## **Heroes For Hire**

Issue #3

### **“Hired Help: Conclusion”**

The mind of a broken soul is simplistic at best. They rarely display emotion of any kind unless it is related to pain. It was pain the sorcerer Casavan used to control them.

During his relentless search for a specific talisman to separate a demon from its host, Casavan had found need of lackeys. He needed an army which he would one day use in full force. The people making up this personal assemblage had been stripped of their motivations, emotions, and desires. They now only served.

He had created his undead servants using a dark spell that had long since been forgotten by most practitioners, except for those familiar with the craft of necromancy. A once normal human was now trapped in a body of decaying flesh. Every last shred of humanity was completely abolished from his slaves. It was his “teacher” that had showed him how to twist the human soul into what he desired. While he was grateful, he held no love for his former master. He suspected the greatest secrets had been withheld from him on purpose.

Why spend lots of money or make hollow promises in return for loyalty when it was far simpler to just take what he wanted? The dark sorcerer gathered groups of people no one would miss (such as the homeless), broke their wills, and rotted their flesh. They served as his own personal bodyguards and servants. Other people may refer to them as “zombies.”

The near mindless humans did what they were commanded to do. Right now, their master had ordered them to guard his fortress. There was only one entrance: the front gate on the north side of the complex. Casavan’s base was a single structure imbedded in the heart of Texas. Several levels deep, it rested inside the Earth.

His army was spread out among the levels, while a cluster of them remained outside the gate. They were hidden by foliage and shadows cast by the towering obelisks Casavan had placed to help channel the dormant magic of the land. The perverse ritual he was orchestrating within the stronghold required the power to fuel his spell.

The creatures, while powerful in their own right (increased strength and stamina), weren’t very perceptive. They were beings of base functions, which is why Casavan liked them. They were easy to manipulate. They saw the approaching aircraft from several miles away, but they didn’t give it a second thought. It wasn’t until it landed fifty yards from the entrance that they considered it might be a threat.

The boarding ramp extended from the back of the ship as the rear doors opened. From within the large craft exited the Heroes For Hire: Iron Fist, Cage, Photon, Deathlok and their guest, the mysterious woman known as Diamond Dust.

“Sensors indicate no activity in the area. No alarms, no traps,” said the cyborg Deathlok, “Nothing.”

Iron Fist moved to the front of the group to survey the entrance their guest had led them to. “Stay alert, team. We were set up before and there’s a chance we’re being set up again.”

“I don’t care if you help me or not,” chimed in Diamond Dust, “but I’m going in. David will die if I don’t do something.” She was already in her solidified phase, now covered from head to toe in what looked like a hard, white substance. Her fingers had lengthened slightly to form sharp talons, ready to tear into an enemy.

“Sweetheart, you aren’t going anywhere without us watching your every move,” said the street hero Luke Cage. “I trust you about as far as I can throw you...although since I guess I could throw you pretty far, that was a bad example.”

“Whatever.” She pushed passed Iron Fist and Deathlok and broke into a steady jog toward the entrance. She barely ran twenty feet before three of Casavan’s soldiers jumped her from out of nowhere.

“Figures...” muttered Photon as she converted herself into a being of pure energy and took to the air.

Several more of the creatures appeared from behind their hiding places, all of them belching animalistic sounds. *Zombies*, Photon thought as she unleashed a volley of plasma bursts, *mindless creatures that can’t even speak anymore. No reasoning with this things.*

“Cage; Deathlok; Photon! Get inside! There aren’t many out here, we’ll handle them!”

Iron Fist wasted no time shouting commands to his teammates. He was the field leader of the new H4H, but he found himself hoping that the team’s relative inexperience working together wouldn’t be their downfall. He and Luke had a long history together, but he had only operated with Monica on a handful of occasions and with Deathlok even less.

*Once we get this over with, we’re logging some hours in the training room,* thought Iron Fist.

“Keep an eye on our girl, Fist!” Cage yelled over his shoulder. He didn’t even slow down as he ran up to the entrance, crashing into the three feet thick stone door. After the resonating noise and dust dissipated, Deathlok and Photon poured into the opening and into the depths of Casavan’s hideaway.

“Arrggh!” screamed Diamond Dust. Five of the zombie-like people had piled on top of her. Her solidified form kept them from really causing her any harm, but she was immobile and couldn’t get any leverage. She wanted to change the density of her body

and phase free, but she couldn't...not when she felt boxed in like this...there was no room, no light...she felt confined and trapped. "Get off of me! Oh, God, get away!"

"Don't panic, I'm here!" said Iron Fist. He pulled the first mindless creature off the pile, but was caught off guard by something striking the back of his skull. He let out a small yelp and quickly went into a crouch before springing to his left. Two other zombies left to guard the entrance were behind him, one with a tree branch in his hand.

*Fast little buggers, thought Iron Fist, not like in the movies. These guys look rapid!*

Iron Fist rubbed the back of his head and stood up. He took a split second to focus before dashing toward the two creatures. The one with the tree branch swung at the martial artist once again, but Iron Fist stepped to the side and unleashed a kick to the creature's abdomen that could crush several cinder blocks. In one fluid motion, he followed it up with a spin kick to the head. The once homeless man turned undead creature was sent flying back several feet, bits of his rotting flesh flaking off.

The other opponent lunged, but was caught in the act by the back of the hero's fist. In a blur of motion, Iron Fist sent two snap kicks with his right leg to the zombie's face and then extended his left leg straight up in the air. He forcefully brought his heel down onto the top of the zombie's skull, knocking him to the ground.

The whole exchange had taken less than twenty seconds to transpire. Both of the former humans would not be getting up.

Diamond Dust had managed to claw at one of the zombies piled on top of her enough that it backed away, seething with undirected rage. As Iron Fist approached once again, another zombie jumped back and slumped over, his head missing a large chunk on the left side.

"Back off!" he could hear her yell. Iron Fist pulled two more of the creatures off, one in each hand. Now that light and fresh air was reaching her face, she felt the anxiety from before start to slip away. She grasped the last zombie's head with both of her hands, and slammed her diamond hard forehead into his chin, resulting in a loud crack. Her assailant slumped to the ground beside her.

By the time she stood up, Iron Fist had already dispatched the other two zombies. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah...fine," she said between breaths. "I've fought Casavan's slaves before. Nothing I can't handle. Just watch out for the teeth. We need to get inside with your friends and find David."

She had barely finished the sentence and turned to face the entrance before two dozen more zombies appeared, blocking their path.

“K’un Lun save us...” muttered Iron Fist.

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“Sweet Christmas...” muttered Cage. “I hate zombies.”

Cage, Deathlok, and Photon had all rushed into Casavan’s fortress, not knowing what to expect. Just passed the front entrance was a room full of stone tables with many ancient looking things strewn about them. After pausing to take in their surroundings, the small team had been attacked by a horde of Casavan’s captives.

“You and me both,” said Photon while bombarding a cluster of zombies with a tightly focused beam of electrons, “We can’t waste time here. If what Lynn said was true, we need to get to Casavan as fast as possible.”

“Cage, get to the stairs on the other side of the room! Start heading down!” yelled Deathlok. He held twin blasters in his hands and was showing no mercy to the now undead creatures. There seemed to be no end to them. They were crawling out from behind everything with fists and teeth flying. No sooner had he shot a hole through one decaying head before two more took its place.

Cage pulled his right fist back, ready to send it flying into the face of another zombie. “On the way!” he yelled back, as he was about to knock the ever-living daylights out of the zombie. Just before he threw the punch though, he felt something press into his arm. He turned his head to see another creature trying to chew through his diamond hard skin.

“Oh, for crying out...” Cage reached over with his other arm and palmed the zombie’s head. “That’s just disgustin’. And that’s coming from a guy who’s cleaned up after one of Hercules’ binges.”

With his enormous strength, Cage had no trouble lifting the snarling once-man by his head and using him like a club to wallop his first target in front of him. The two members of the undead were sent flying to the wall.

Cage charged the next group in front of him, ready to pummel as many as he had to. He still didn’t trust this “Diamond Dust,” but what choice did he have? He had been set up, and that was one of the things he had hated most in life. Being framed before his career even started, Cage remembered how helpless he had felt. Death would have to claim him before he let this Casavan guy pull one over.

Suddenly, the entire group of zombies he was charging at exploded in a burst of energy and was scattered about the room. He followed the trail of ionized air back to its source to see Photon smiling down at him. “Thanks, Mon. Give ‘em hell, will ya?”

“We’ll back you up in a minute. Get going, Buns of Steel,” she said as she winked at him.

Cage shot passed the disoriented zombies and made his way down the stairs, preparing himself for whatever lay in wait on the lower levels.

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“I swear...grrrr...if I ev...GRRRRAHHH!”

The man the H4H was searching for, a speedster that had somehow been bonded with a demon, screamed in pure agony. It felt as if a piece of his very soul was being ripped away. In theory, however, that’s exactly what was happening.

“Shut up, you fool.” Casavan, still dressed like the U.S. diplomat he was pretending to be, slapped David across the face. “I can feel the power seeping out of you,” he said as he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, “I can feel it pulsating within the talisman. Once the summoning is complete, I’ll have what is rightfully mine, and you shall die like the little whelp that you are.”

“Farrggghhck you!” gasped David. Casavan had plunged a silver cylinder into his chest, but instead of blood pouring out of the wound, blue energy fell forth and rippled across the smooth surface of the talisman. It hurt worse than anything he had ever experienced before.

“Fuck me? Fuck you!” said Casavan, slapping David across the face once again. “You are nothing compared to me. The demon is mine! It always was! I don’t know how you and your little bitch did it, but I want back what you stole from me. You don’t even comprehend what you have, you ignorant little pissant!”

Between breaths, David tried to respond. “...didn’t steal...moron. Don’t know...how it happened. Just ‘cause...you’re magically impotent...”

David expected to be slapped again, but instead Casavan just laughed. “Impotent, eh? Once you’re dead, I’ll prove just how ‘impotent’ I am. Maybe with your little harlot. Lynn, was her name?”

David struggled against his chains, but to no avail. He was helpless and dying, and the evil sorcerer’s laughter only became louder.

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*Seriously, thought Cage, how many decayed heads do I have to bash in here?*

Several chambers later, Luke Cage had found himself in another dark room, similar to the first one he had entered. There was only one large difference. At the center of the room was a large hole going so far down into the planet that he couldn’t make out the bottom. To make matters worse, there were no other doorways or stairs in the room.



“Oh, hell no! You’ve got to be kidding me. I don’t even know this guy, and now I have to dive bomb into the great beyond? I must have missed a staircase somewhere back there.”

A loud, snarling growl echoed from behind Cage. The sounds were deeper, more inhuman than what he had heard coming from the mouths of those zombies. He turned to see two large dogs blocking the way he had come in. Something was wrong with them; something wasn’t quite right. He squinted to try and make out the animals better in the dark light.

*Are they bleeding? What the hell is on their...* Cage’s eyes shot open as wide as they could. It wasn’t blood on the dogs’ fur, but it did look wet. A black liquid was oozing out of their bodies as chunks of rotted flesh hung all over, partially attached. “CHRISTMAS! Zombie pit bulls?!”

The twin dogs lunged at the hero, their teeth sharp and their mouths foaming. Cage instinctively raised his arms in defense as the animals tried to tear into his skin. The momentum of the dogs’ attack forced Cage to take several steps backward. A swift kick sent one away, but the second got close enough to his head to latch onto his neck.

The dog had closed its strong jaw as hard as it could around Cage’s windpipe. While his skin was dense enough to keep the undead animal’s teeth from penetrating, he was still having trouble breathing.

Struggling to rip the mutt away before he blacked out, Cage took several more steps back, teetering on the edge of the large hole. Finally, after a tug strong enough to snap industrial cable, Cage freed himself from the dog’s vice grip. He tossed the animal against the wall, hearing several bones shatter and a yelp from the dog upon impact.

“God...this is the worst day everrraaaAAAAAH!”

The remaining animal had recovered faster from Cage’s kick than he had anticipated and had charged the urban hero, slamming into him and sending them both over the edge. The dark void swallowed up both of their forms, along with Luke Cage’s screams.

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The smell of death lingered on the decaying swarms crowding around Deathlok and Photon. Their backs were to the wall, metaphorically. Never before had either hero witnessed such anger without any direction. Whatever creatures couldn’t make it to the heroes turned on each other. It was a total frenzy.

Deathlok’s own preserved flesh looked remarkably similar to that of the zombies’. So similar, in fact, that it gave him an idea.

“Photon! Can you bathe the room in gamma radiation?” They were holding their own, but there seemed to be no end to the creatures. Casavan’s structure was like a giant

labyrinth, and he wasn't quite sure which way Cage had gone. They were running out of time.

Photon blasted another group of the undead as she swung low to the ground near her teammate. "Yeah, no problem. But why? Every George Romero movie I've ever seen says that radiation is what makes these cannibals."

"Just cover me for a second and then light this place up when I say," said Deathlok. He holstered his blasters and slid back a compartment on his high-tech backpack. He pulled out a small metal tube and tossed it in the middle of the closest pack of zombies. "This is going to hurt me, too, but don't worry. I'll be okay."

"What is going to hurt you, too?"

"Just do it! Flood this place!"

Monica Rambeau, utilizing her ability to convert her body into anything falling within the electromagnetic spectrum, did as she was ordered. Her body shimmered green as she raised her hands and unleashed a concentrated wave of gamma radiation.

The zombies weren't even phased. They kept coming toward the pair, ready to try and digest the heroes. It wasn't until the metal tube Deathlok had thrown out burst from the gamma exposure that the zombies halted. What could only be interpreted as confusion spread over their faces, but was soon replaced with agonizing screams of pure pain.

Photon could see the decaying flesh of the zombies start to peel away as smoke began to arise from the gaping holes left behind. After barely thirty seconds, all of the undead vermin lay motionless on the floor.

"What did I just do exactly?" she asked, but Deathlok didn't respond. She looked down at her teammate who was balled up on the floor, covering his face with his metallic hands. He was twitching slightly and there seemed to be a slight amount of smoke making its way through his fingers.

She rushed to his side, proclaiming, "Deathlok! Are you okay?"

After he stopped twitching, he released his face and sat up. "Yes. At least, I will be." The preserved part of his face, one of the few things that marked him as human, looked like it had been held up against a furnace. "Life support systems are working hard, but I'll be fine in a few hours."

"What was in that vial?"

Deathlok grabbed Photon's arm and hauled himself up off the ground. "A dose of the serum I use to help keep my muscle tissue animated. Gamma radiation has an adverse

effect on it. Accelerates the deterioration instead of stopping it. I wasn't entirely sure it would work, but apparently it did."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes. I just don't look like it," he said, "We need to split if we're going to back up Cage. He's not answering his comlink. Take that corridor over there. Head down. Be careful."

She nodded and took off into the air, hoping she hadn't lost a teammate before their first mission was over.

---

Casavan had ceased slapping David across the face so he could prepare for the completion of his goal. He had removed his suit jacket and tie so that when he achieved ultimate power, he would feel a little more comfortable.

"You know, they say pink is a power color," he said, smiling. "Trump is an imbecile. I'll show them the color of true pow..."

**BOOM!**

Casavan whipped his body around to see what had caused the massive eruption of sound. A thick layer of dust swept across the basement, hindering his vision. He flapped his arms wildly, trying to clear the air. "What, sincerely, the fuck is going on?!?"

Several seconds passed before the air had cleared enough for the sorcerer to see what had kicked up the dust. From the back corner of the room, a tall black man limped out from the shadows, dragging a motionless undead animal.

"Why the hell do you have a giant well in your place?" Luke Cage asked meekly. Blood was dripping from his mouth and nose, and his voice was barely audible. He stopped his approach and let the zombie pit bull fall to the ground. Even a blind man could see how wrecked Cage was. The hero was obviously in no condition to put up much of a struggle.

Casavan began chuckling while responding to Cage's question. "You really think I would walk down all those stairs every time I needed to come down here? Our school systems must really be failing."

"Little man, you're about to get yours."

"Is this where I insult your stereotype?"

The evil magic user leapt straight up into the air and floated closer to Cage's weary body. "In a few moments, none of you will be able to stop me. To pass the time, how about you and I have a little chat?"

Dark energy arced across the empty space between the two, and Luke Cage's impressive muscles tensed under Casavan's onslaught.

---

Outside of the stronghold, Iron Fist and Diamond Dust stood back to back. Their bodies were badly bruised and they were breathing deeply. Only three zombies remained to oppose them.

Diamond Dust lunged with her claws first, sweeping the legs out from under two of the creatures, taking chunks of skin with them. She was on top of them before they hit the ground.

"It's not often I can use deadly force with a clear conscious," Iron Fist said as he swiftly snapped the neck of the last remaining threat. He regained his composure, steadying himself.

Iron Fist filled his lungs with fresh air. Perspiration ran down his face. *I'm totally worn out*, he thought, *this had better be the last of them. I need a bath and one of Misty's back rubs something fierce. Even a few of the trials I underwent at K'um Lun were less intense.*

Diamond Dust, while just as exhausted as Iron Fist, had no intentions of slowing down. The man she loved most in the world was still in great danger. She had to hurry. "Come on! Let's go!" yelled Lynn. "He's killing David! We need to get to him, NOW!"

"Hold on," Iron Fist shouted back, "We don't even know how much longer it will take Casavan to complete his spell. We may not have time to find him. The others are in there somewhere. We need a better plan than to just run around blindly."

"Why are we even talking about it? I don't have time for this!"

Iron Fist began to chase after her, but stopped himself when he came near one of the towering obelisks, which were now glowing. "Hey...HEY! DD! What did you say about Casavan needing to drain the dormant magic around here?"

"He needs it to fuel the separation spell," she said. When she noticed that Iron Fist was craning his head back to get a better look at one of the towers, it finally dawned on her. "These things are siphoning the power out of the ground! If we take these out, maybe we can save David!"

For the first time since they left Peru, Lynn finally felt like she would actively be able to do something to save her husband. She backtracked to where Iron Fist was standing, craning her neck like his to try and find a way to somehow shut the obelisk down.

“Any ideas?” she asked.

“Yep, five of them. Stand back.” Iron Fist fell into a stance he had posed in many times before. He brought his right hand up and concentrated. Quicker than one might think, Daniel Rand summoned forth his chi, his life force, and condensed it into his fist. Energy spilled out between his fingers, evaporating into the air.

Expelling the breath from his lungs to verbalize his inner strength, Iron Fist shook the very foundation of the tall obelisk with just one blow from his powered up hand.

Bits of stone broke off the tower and a crack appeared where his fist had landed. The crack spread up the height of the obelisk, and within seconds began to crumble. The eerie glow subsided as Casavan’s parasitic structure fell to the ground.

“Wow,” was all Diamond Dust could think to say. Once the tower had fallen completely apart and the echoing rumble faded away, she said, “Now what?”

“Now we knock down the rest of them.”

---

“I have no idea why my old teacher wanted me to take you along for the ride so bad, but I have to say I’m not impressed. What kind of escort were you?”

Luke Cage was now hovering in the air, eye level to Casavan, held up by the dark magic. The sorcerer’s power was coursing through him in such a painful amount, that Cage was ready to pass out. The only other person in the room was in no way able to assist him.

David, still chained to the wall, was forced to witness Casavan try to murder the Hero For Hire. His own pain was too great for him to even pull together coherent thoughts. For all the power he had within himself, he was helpless.

“I mean seriously, Luke. May I call you Luke? What good have you even been? From what I saw in Peru, all you did was get your ass whooped. Then you come here and fall down a hole. I can’t believe I was talked into hiring you.”

David tried to concentrate. It wasn’t easy because of the enormous pressure the separation spell was putting on his soul. The pressure had gotten steadily worse over the last few hours, like a migraine forming behind his eyes. But as he thought this, he realized something else. He could move his hands. He hadn’t been able to do that for an hour.

*It still hurts...but...it’s not getting any worse. In fact, it feels like I...can...almost...*

The prisoner bent his body forward as much as the chains would allow. He cleared his mind and delved to the beastly soul within. With a final heave, he puffed out his chest,

while trying to mentally 'push' the cylinder out of his body. With a crackle of blue energy, the talisman burst from his chest.

Casavan turned away from Cage and back to his captive. "WHAT?!? What have you done?" Cutting off the stream of dark power pouring into Cage, Casavan dropped to the ground and ran to pick up the cylinder. "But..how?"

He closed his eyes, pushing out his magical senses. With a quick jerk, he gazed straight up into the stone ceiling. "My Funneling Towers! What did those bastards do?!?"

Casavan felt a slight tap on his shoulder and felt like his world had ended when he heard Cage say, "If you have your receipt, I would be more than happy to give you a refund."

Cage threw a right cross into Casavan's face that sent him spiraling through the air and into the wall. Blood and teeth fell from his mouth as he tried to stand up. In his weakened state, Cage wouldn't be able to put up much more of a fight than that.

"Damn you! I can still kill all of you, with or without my demon!"

"Go ahead and try," Cage challenged, stumbling to where David was chained. Trying harder than he normally would have, the chains shattered in Cage's grip, dropping David to the floor.

The rage behind David's eyes added power to the stare he gave his captor. "I don't think I can even begin to describe the torment you've given me. You don't deserve to live, you worthless, inhuman, maggot!"

"You brought it on yourself, fool! You took what was mine!"

"Only a self-righteous buffoon like you would see it that way. Enough of this."

Cage's eyes were barely able to follow the lightning fast motions of the man he had freed. Air swirled around the room as David sprinted for Casavan. He slammed into the sorcerer, lifting him up off the stone floor. The force at which David had hit his target was so great that Cage was almost knocked off his feet. Casavan's screams echoed up through the well Cage had fallen through.

The sound of the sorcerer's collarbone snapping was like music to the speedster's ears. The pain of nearly having his soul ripped out was fading fast and he felt a second wind coming on, but it still hurt to concentrate. David stopped his run, letting go of Casavan at the same time. His enemy flew through the air, unable to slow his voyage through the open space. With another loud crack, Casavan sailed through a row of wooden tables that had ancient texts scattered across them. Pages and wood chips exploded around Casavan as he skidded to a stop on the cold floor.

David zoomed up to stand over his foe. Gathering his strength, he began to vibrate his body, feeling the demon inside begging to be released. Blue energy rippled across his face, almost contorting it. “You want the demon? You want to see what kind of animal you want to control? Fine. It will peel the skin off your scrawny hide.”

The energy spread to cover David’s entire body. His image darkened, and his teeth started to sharpen into fine points. He was going to let out his other half, and he no longer cared what the consequences were. The way Casavan had invaded his soul, David imagined it felt similar to what a rape victim must feel.

Casavan reached up from where he lay on the floor in his own blood, and grabbed David’s leg, sending a searing amount of energy through the appendage. David let out a wild, beastly roar before going limp.

Casavan spat a mouthful of blood on the floor. “I’ll roast each and every last one of you!” He pointed his hands at Cage, a ball of fire forming in them. “Even if I have to use up the last of my power to kill you, I’ll savor it into the dep...”

**BLAM!**

The shot rang out into the now quiet room. Cage, who had been shielding his eyes from the growing inferno Casavan was palming, lowered his arms. There was a little drop of blood from a cut in his forehead he had to wipe away before he could make out the image of Deathlok, still holding his blaster in his outstretched hand.

“Savor that,” the cyborg said.

Deathlok, still keeping his sights on Casavan, ran into the room to help Cage remain steady on his feet. “Can you walk out of here?” he asked.

“Yeah...I’ll be okay. Nothing I can’t handle,” Luke Cage replied wearily. “Help the kid over there. He got zapped pretty good before you came in.”

Wisps of smoke rose from David’s now unconscious form. Burn marks scorched his leg, but Deathlok could see he was breathing regularly. He would live, unlike his tormentor.

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Two days later, the Heroes For Hire sat on a raised platform in front of their Chicago headquarters. Iron Fist, Cage, Photon, and Deathlok, along with Lynn (who had broken her arm while toppling one of Casavan’s towers, and now wore a sling) and David, all stood behind an array of microphones while cameras flashed in front of them. Behind the team, surprising many members of the press, stood Iron Man. The gathered press showed no remorse in the amount of questions they threw at the heroes.

“Are U.S. relations with Peru severed?”

“What do you think of the mutant problem?”

“Are you a subsidiary of the Avengers?”

“Does your costume ever ride up in the back?”

“Can I get your opinion on Force Works’ current situation?”

Iron Fist rolled his eyes. This wasn’t something he particularly liked. He felt like a piece of meat hanging in the butcher’s window. “Ladies and gentlemen, please bear with us for just a moment. We’ll be free to answer your questions after our initial announcement.

“Two days ago, the newly reformed Heroes For Hire completed its first mission. After consulting with the United States government, and certain U.N. officials, we’ve determined that the real U.S. diplomat we had thought we were assigned to protect was murdered at his estate here in Chicago.”

Iron Fist sensed more questions waiting to be tossed out, so he quickly raised his hand to try and silence the crowd. “More than just us were fooled by the impostor. Heroes For Hire has closed the case, and does not harbor any ill will toward the U.S., Peru, or any other parties. We all got taken for a ride on this one.

“During the operation in Texas, one of our members was forced into a position that heroes hate. Deathlok, seeing no other option, was forced to shoot the impostor, killing him. This series of events is most unfortunate. Life is precious to all of us, and we try hard to prevent needless deaths from ever happening.

“Although the success of this mission cannot necessarily be thought of as normal, we would like to announce that some good has come from it. Without the help of these two people to my left,” Iron Fist said as he gestured to Lynn and David, “the H4H would not have been able to stop the impostor. They are two brave individuals that deserve recognition for their efforts.

“Luckily, they’ve allowed us to talk them into joining us here at H4H. The public should take pride in the fact that these two new heroes will be on hand to assist in thwarting those who would jeopardize the safety of others.”

As a round of applause slowly gained momentum in the crowd, Luke Cage bent down to whisper to Photon. “Thwarting those who would jeopardize? Where the hell did he get a line like that?”

“He was nervous, so I told him to say something Captain America-ish,” she replied.

Once the clapping died down, a short man Iron Fist recognized as a member of the Chicago Globe yelled out, “Kyle Allen; Globe. This is directed to Iron Man. Is your



presence here to announce financial backing to the Heroes For Hire? Has Stark taken an interest in expanding his personal protection beyond just you?"

The man known as Iron Man stepped forward to one of the many microphones and cleared his throat before speaking. "I'm here on behalf of the Avengers to show support to the Heroes For Hire. We've known many of these individuals for a long time. We've fought beside them, and we trust them.

"Working as a hired bodyguard myself, I understand how the public can come to view people in our profession. Being for hire does not mean we turn away if enough money isn't thrown at us. We help those who need it. Period."

"Our offices are open to anyone, and we have a twenty-four hour hotline people can contact us at," said Iron Fist, "We're heroes first, and for hire second." He had barely finished the last sentence before more questions swarmed from the audience.

"Mr. Deathlok, have you killed before?"

"What is the team's official stance on U.N. policy?"

"Will you be recruiting even more members?"

"Luke Cage, what about allegations to who your father really is?"

"What do customs officials have to say about how easily you can cross borders?"

Danny Rand, the Iron Fist, expected it to be like this. He knew how outrageous press conferences could become, and he was glad that their next several missions were lined up. He was going to have some stress that needed to be let out. He decided against slipping away to do battle with the Deviants or somebody else, and instead sighed, deciding which esteemed member of the press to address first.

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### **Author's Notes**

*Well, that rounds out the first H4H arc! Thanks to everyone for reading and providing very helpful feedback. I'll be posting some letters and comments in the next issue. As for what else is in store for the team? The new members settle in and Deathlok's investigation into the Protoclan leads the team on their next mission. Plus, is Misty okay?*

*Maybe I should use this space to count how many times Luke says his famous catchphrase...*

## Heroes For Hire

Issue #4

“Teamwork: Part 1”

All his life, Buddy McClintok had never fit in anywhere. As a child he had been ostracized from the other neighborhood children because of an early growth spurt. In high school, Buddy tried out for the football team, but failed miserably. He had dropped out of college within his first year.

His mother, Florence, hounded him constantly. “When will you get a girlfriend? Do something with your life, Buddy! Your brother isn’t going to loan you money forever!” she would always say.

*It’s not my fault I couldn’t get a break before,* Buddy thought as he polished his plasma rifle.

Last month, Buddy had finally gotten the break he had been waiting for. Someone had approached him, recognizing the potential he knew he had. Things would change now. He would show those stupid jocks from the Neil Gaimon High School football team he wasn’t a loser. Even those punks that refused to let him play hide-and-go-seek as a kid would soon know he was going places in the world.

“You about ready, 412? Meeting starts in a couple minutes,” said a man Buddy only knew as Agent 343. The green body armor 343 wore was just like every other person’s Buddy had met. If he hadn’t recognize the man’s unique chin under his helmet, he probably would have no idea who he was.

“Yeah, be right there.”

Buddy put down the rag he had been polishing the plasma rifle with. He had just been issued the weapon last week, and he wanted to keep it in mint condition. It wasn’t every day he was given an opportunity like this; he didn’t want to blow it.

Buddy McClintok, now known as Agent 412, followed the other man out of his quarters toward to large auditorium where the meeting was taking place. The instructions for his first major operation as part of the Protoclan would be music to his ears.

He was finally part of a team.

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**The next day...**

“Okay, everyone. Remember that the purpose of this exercise is to enhance coordination in the field. Peru and Texas were total disasters compared to the level we should be at.”

The cyborg known as Deathlok stood in the center of the Heroes For Hire's training facility, aptly named the Rubix Room. From his position, he could see Monica Rambeau, known to the world at large as Photon, preparing for her first trial at their headquarters in Chicago. Lynn Erickson, codename: Diamond Dust stood to her right. Danny Rand, codename: Iron Fist, stood to her left, ready for action.

"Luke and David not back from investigating that robbery yet?" Photon asked.

"No, but they'll probably be back soon. I've dealt with that client before," said Deathlok, "He's...eccentric to say the least."

"Ready when you are then."

The Rubix Room was by far the largest room in their building. A perfect cube, the room spanned thirty yards in each dimension, bringing the total square footage to 81,000. A grid lined the walls, floor, and ceiling, sectioning off each square yard. The room was extremely versatile which helped in setting up different scenarios for the heroes to train in.

"Daniel's objective is to reach the flag hanging from the ceiling. Your and Lynn's objective is to keep the practice droids off of him," said Deathlok, "I'll stop the aerial drones."

"Wouldn't it make more sense for him to fight the droids while I just fly up and grab the flag?" Photon asked.

"The point is not to get through the exercise as fast as you can. We need to learn to trust our teammates and rely on them in certain situations. You need to know Iron Fist can do what is necessary, and he needs to know you can back him up."

"But how is he even going to get all the way up there? He can't fly. We're in a giant open space."

Deathlok smirked, or at least as much as a smirk that a cybernetic human could muster. "Didn't I tell you why this is called the Rubix Room?"

Suddenly, sections of the walls began to move. What looked like a grid to Monica along the walls started to separate in different places. The square yard sections extended out of the wall, shoving long, rectangular prisms across the room. It was like a giant imaginary hand had pulled out a square yard of the wall, stretching it out into the center of the room. More and more sections were "pulled" out of the walls until most of the open space was filled in a maze of plateaus connected to the sides of the room.

"Since joining up with you people, I've seen something new every day," said Diamond Dust, now in her solidified phase.

Photon looked over at Iron Fist, who didn't seem to be surprised in the least. Catching her eye out of the corner of his own, he said, "I did a couple run-throughs while you were taking care of some Avengers business last week. Beta testing, if you will. Just think of it as one giant puzzle, with all the pieces moving around."

"So no holograms then?" questioned Diamond Dust. "Luke mentioned something about other heroes using holograms in their training rooms."

Before Deathlok could answer, the heroes turned their attention to the far side of the room where a larger panel had slid back to reveal seven practice droids. He had set the session to start on a timer and their time to prepare was up. The robots were all six feet tall with shiny metal hides and each droid possessed a different method of attack. Photon could make out a large ax, some numchucks, daggers, a few different styles of blasters, and some strange device that she had no idea about what it did. A pair of steel mittens was all she could compare it to.

Above them, another hatch slid back to reveal a chamber filled with little, silver, floating spheres. The orbs were no bigger than an average person's head. They quickly zipped out of their hiding spot, and spread out across the room.

"We'll cover you, Fist" said Photon, "I'll take out the ones with long range attacks first, and DD will take out the close range bots. How are you going to get up to the ceiling?"

"Very carefully."

The droids sprung to life, raising their assortment of weapons. The automatons wasted no time in charging the heroes.

The three with blasters attacked first, laying down suppression fire aimed at Iron Fist. In response, the martial artist dove for the floor, immediately bouncing up to the closest plateau using a handspring motion.

Deathlok grabbed a twin set of blasters from his side, and ran to find a better position from which he could target the aerial drones whizzing around the room.

Photon levitated in her energy form above Diamond Dust. "Give me your hand. I'll launch you across the room."

"You'll do what?" said the new member of the H4H.

"We need to cover Iron Fist. You need to be on that side of the room, now."

"Just...just watch the hair, okay?"

Not giving a response, Photon grabbed Diamond Dust's extended hand, pulling her into the air. As fast as the extra weight she was carrying would allow, the energy avenger shot across the practice room, weaving over and under the prisms jetting out of the walls.

Releasing her grip, Diamond Dust fell right on top of one of the practice droids. The diamond-like substance covering her entire body crushed against the metallic hide of the robot. When transforming into her solidified phase, Lynn was able to distort some of her features, creating claws from her fingers. Those claws tore through the practice droid, leaving nothing but wires and a lifeless shell on the ground.

"Easy enough to absorb these energy blasts," said Photon as she swept low to the ground in order to get a better bead on her targets. The three practice droids brandishing long-range weapons all now concentrated their fire on the flying Hero For Hire. With three quick blasts, Photon neutralized their threat.

Before she could savor her small victory, however, a surge of incredible power overtook her body, engulfing it in pain. She fell to the floor, her body cringing in muscle spasms.

Looking up from the floor, Photon saw the practice droid standing over her that was wearing the "steel mittens." White electricity skimmed over the surface of the items, emitting crackling noises. The robot raised its arms, ready to strike another blow against the downed hero.

"Those are the craziest looking therapeutic gloves I've ever seen." A white claw burst through the center of the droid, causing the light in its eyes to fade. Diamond Dust stood behind the robot as it fell to the floor, lifeless. "Need a hand?" she said.

Photon leaned over to see what her teammate's claws had left behind of the other practice droids. It wasn't much. To her far right, however, she saw one making its way onto a plateau near Iron Fist.

"Damn it! You let one get by you!" said Photon as she stood up, ignoring the offered hand.

The martial artist hadn't gotten too close to the flag yet, but he was also far from the floor. The practice droid, wielding a large ax, was able to leap much higher than Iron Fist (even despite his impressive acrobatics), and as a result, was climbing faster. The robot would overtake Iron Fist within moments.

Flashes of light slammed against the ceiling as Deathlok took out the aerial drones. Even with his computer enhanced targeting, he was having trouble locking on to the little buggers. They moved fast and unpredictably. He had only destroyed about half of the swarm.

Almost in coordination with the practice droid that was quickly reaching Iron Fist, the aerial drones all changed their trajectories to head toward the droid's target. Iron Fist,

well aware of his predicament, decided to continue pushing toward the flag hanging from the ceiling.

He trusted his teammates. Even if his better judgment told him to flip back to the plateau below him and take out the droid himself, he knew that wasn't his job. His teammates wouldn't let him down. He had total confidence in them.

The droid leaped higher and closer, swinging the large ax. The aerial drones swooped in low over Iron Fist's head. He was almost at the flag. Just one more vault would get him to the edge of the plateau right under it. He was seconds away from either succeeding or failing.

Photon, still woozy, flew as fast as she dared across the room. Deathlok bounded on top of the lowest plateau, guns drawn. Diamond Dust shouted out some kind of warning to Iron Fist.

Suddenly, the lights in the Rubix Room dramatically dimmed. A red light over the entrance flashed, casting crimson rays into the room. Alarms blared loudly, drowning out Lynn's warnings. Both the practice droid and the aerial drones froze in their positions.

Mere feet away from accomplishing his goal, Iron Fist stopped and turned around to gaze down at his teammates. "Did we run out of time or something?" he yelled over the alarms.

Deathlok holstered his weapons and raised up one of his cybernetic arms. Pressing an almost invisible button in his wrist, the lights returned to normal and the alarms were silenced. "Trouble," he said, "training is over for today."

"What's going on?" Photon asked as she landed next to Deathlok and converted her body back to flesh and blood. Lynn quickly followed suit, shifting her body's density to that of a regular human.

"I set the base's sensors to keep track of certain energy signatures when they popped up somewhere. I won't know exactly what is going on until I get to the War Room, but I would assume it has something to do with the Protoclan," the cyborg replied, "I'm not really keeping track of anyone else."

Iron Fist, now only fifteen feet above the floor, finished making his way to the gathered heroes. "The terrorists you've been investigating?"

"That would be them," said Deathlok. He pivoted on one of his metallic feet and headed toward the training room's door, prompting the rest of the team to follow. "Mind resetting the Rubix Room, Photon?" the cyborg called over his shoulder.

Photon flew up to the control station for the training room. Approaching the glass, she pushed her light form through the window and into the station. A few quick adjustments

to a panel (which Deathlok had labeled), and the room started to reset itself to a large open space.

Eager to join her teammates, Photon turned around to exit the station and take the stairwell down to the War Room. She barely took one step before coming to an immediate stop.

“Misty! What are you do...”

Misty Knight’s bionic arm cut off the hero’s sentence. A quick uppercut sent Monica Rambeau to the floor, cradling her jaw. “I don’t care if you once led the Avengers or not. You think you’re better than me? Bitch, I may not wear shiny tights, but I can cut it in this line of work.”

“Look, Misty, I know what...”

“You know? Oh, you know, do you? Yeah, right. What do you know? You don’t know anything. Not about me, and not about him.”

Misty Knight backed up toward the exit of the control station. Her eyes watered slightly, and it was then that Photon noticed it looked like she had been crying. “Just stay away from me,” said Misty before leaving Monica alone in the room.

Photon, still rubbing her chin, slowly stood up. She waited a few moments before leaving the room herself. She decided to not mention this to any of her teammates, especially Iron Fist. She knew exactly why Misty had done what she had and she didn’t blame her at all. In fact, Monica thought she might have done the exact same thing in Misty’s situation.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Photon continued down to the War Room to meet the rest of her team. She had a mission to go on. Her team needed her to be focused.

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“I can’t believe that guy,” said Luke Cage, the original Hero For Hire.

“I’m new at this whole hero thing,” chimed in David, “but somehow I don’t think we’re supposed to be investigating stuff like that.”

The pair walked down a busy street in downtown Chicago. They had received the call from a client that had them on retainer barely an hour ago. Within minutes of arriving, the two heroes had turned on their heels and walked right back out the front door.

Cage, stepping out of the way of some obvious tourists admiring the buildings, sighed deeply. “When I get called in to check out a robbery, I expect an actual robbery to have taken place.”

“So I’m not the only one that thinks a business owner miscounting his diamond inventory doesn’t count as a felony?”

“He was ready to press charges against his managers, and for what? Because he can’t count without using his fingers?” Cage shook his head in disgust. “Third largest city in the country or not, I miss New York.”

At the end of the block awaited the two heroes’ transportation back to their headquarters. Luke Cage owned a sleek, black Dodge Charger. It was something he found a lot of pride in fixing up. He had driven it to his new city from his old one, savoring every mile of road the machine chewed up. It may have looked like any other car on the street, but under the hood, it was very unique indeed.

“This your first time in a team like this?” David asked, piling into the passenger seat. “I would have taken you for a loaner.”

“Me and Danny go way back. We tried to do the H4H thing a while ago, but our financial backer...umm...backed out. It’s a long story.”

“They always are.”

“Anyways,” Cage continued, bringing the car to life with the turn of a key, “after that I kind of went solo. Oh, wait...I was a Defender for about two days. Almost forgot about that.”

“Must not have been a good experience,” commented David.

Cage shook his head. “Hanging with Doc Strange isn’t always a barrel of monkeys, ya know? But enough about all that, I’m curious about you.”

“Not much to tell, really. I’m bonded with this demon I’m trying to get rid of. It’s hard to control sometimes and I’m worried about lashing out. It happened once before a couple years ago. You see, I’m faster than anything else out there, but at the same time, I have to keep myself in check. If I relax too much, someone might get hurt.”

“Someone like Lynn?”

A slight smile crept onto David’s face at the mention of her name. Merely thinking about her seemed to ease the man’s soul. “Exactly. Lynn and I got married as soon as she was done with her doctorate. She’s the love of my life.”

“That girl has a doctorate? In what?” asked Cage as he merged onto the highway that would take them back to their headquarters.

“Biochemistry. She’s convinced she can find a cure for me that way.”



“Just exactly how long have you been bonded with this demon?”

Before David could answer, an alarm sounded off from both of their “watches.” What looked like normal, every day timepieces were actually GPS locators that Deathlok had provided. They were linked to the satellites he had in orbit and also served as an alert system when there was an emergency.

Placing the comlink in his ear, David said aloud, “Strider here; go ahead.”

The metallic sound of Deathlok’s voice emitted through the earpiece. {{Just got a bead on the Protoclan’s specific energy signature. They just teleported a ton of inanimate material into one of their bases I’ve been monitoring on the North side of the city. We’re mobilizing in one of the jets. Meet us at the coordinates I’m sending you.}}

“Acknowledged. We’re on our way,” said David, who then turned his attention to the man driving. “Take the next exit so we can turn around.”

“Strider? That your codename now?”

“What? Would you rather I call myself The Zipper?”

After a slight pause, Cage looked over to the passenger seat. “Strider works just fine.”

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One of the H4H’s aircraft silently hovered thirty feet above the ground and two hundred feet away from the group’s destination. A large warehouse with no light emitting from within sat in several of the ship’s viewing screens. There was still enough ambient light from the lowering sun that they could see the building without the aid of special equipment.

“Cage and David are pulling up now. Looks like they’re parking behind some dumpsters down the street,” said Diamond Dust after checking the onboard GPS tracker.

“Good. Get ready, team,” said Iron Fist, “Deathlok, lower the back hatch and we’ll meet up with them.”

As silent as the rest of the aircraft, a ramp lowered from the back covering half the distance to the ground. Iron Fist, Deathlok, and Diamond Dust each dropped the remaining fifteen feet while Photon gently flew out the opening. Before long, Cage and Strider appeared beside them.

“One of the Protoclan’s bases is inside that warehouse,” said Iron Fist, “About an hour ago, Deathlok monitored a large amount of inanimate material being teleported in. A research station in Idaho reported being attacked around the same time. We know they’ve

been concentrating their efforts in acquiring technology, so there's a good chance it was them."

"What if it's not?" asked Photon.

"We shut down a known terrorist hideout anyway. Diamond Dust, Strider, and Photon, I want you on the West side of the building. Cage, Deathlok, and I will come in from the East. When you hear us breach the perimeter, be ready for a fire fight. Radio silence, people."

The selective teams broke apart, moving to their positions. The sun was almost below the horizon, but they could still make out each other from their separate locations before the objects they used for cover hid them completely. The man now called Strider crouched behind a bush before removing his long trenchcoat, revealing a sleek, black body suit with a stylized silver 'S' over the left breast.

"Two guards near that dock entrance," said Photon as she crept up beside Strider. "Think you can silently take them down? That's our entry point."

"No problem," replied Strider. He reached down into the folds of his discarded coat. "I've been wondering when I would get a chance to hit someone with these things."

From within the coat, he pulled out a pair of silver gauntlets. "Reinforced vibranium. If I get enough momentum behind a punch, I'm sure I could shatter anything short of adamantium." Strider slid his hands into the objects, which covered a good part of his forearms along with his wrists, only leaving the tips of his fingers uncovered. "I'll only give those guards a little love-tap though."

Before Photon or Diamond Dust could open their mouths to offer a response, Strider was gone. Both sets of eyes then immediately focused on the two guards blocking their entrance into the Protoclan's base.

Twin streaks of silver glimmered in the setting sunlight as they blurred across the guard's faces. Instead of slumping to the ground, however, both bodies went flying through the air and slammed against the wall.

Photon, in her energy form, shot over to Strider's side almost as fast as he could have himself. "What the hell was that? You call that a love-tap?"

"Sorry. I think the vibranium in the gauntlets is offsetting my own vibrations a little bit. I honestly barely touched them," Strider defended. "With practice I should be able to avoid breaking someone's jaw unintentionally."

Photon ignored the slight smile on her teammate's face as she heard Diamond Dust approach from behind. "Seriously, Dave. Take it down a notch. We don't want you to have an episode," said the solidified woman.

“Yes, dear.”

“Don’t ‘Yes, dear’ me. I’ll…”

“Enough,” interrupted Photon, “Get inside the building. Be prepared for lots of opposition once we’re discovered. According to Deathlok, their numbers have been growing for quite some time.”

Strider lifted the large door up so the team could enter. Closing it as silently as they could, the three heroes moved deeper into the warehouse. The section they had entered in to was a small loading zone which then spilled out to a much larger expanse of the main room. Various boxes lined the walls of different shapes and sizes, their contents a mystery. No markings revealed what the Protoclan was storing.

“For a terrorist organization that has been acquiring technology,” Diamond Dust said, “they don’t have much in the way of security.”

“Would it be too cliché of me to say that it’s quiet,” chimed in Strider, “a little too quiet?”

“Take defensive positions near the entryways. Once the others make their presence known, scour the building and take down as many Protoclan troops as you can,” said Photon.

On the Eastern side of the building, Iron Fist, Luke Cage, and Deathlok looked for their own entry point. “How do you want to handle this, Danny?” asked Cage.

“I can’t imagine being able to snoop around for long without being detected,” replied the marital artist.

Cage smiled. “There’s no door here. I could always make one.”

After a quick nod from the H4H field leader, Cage cocked back his fist and unleashed the majority of his great strength on the old brick wall. Rubble and mortar burst into the large main room. The loud noise echoed throughout the warehouse, surely alerting the inhabitants within.

“Just because this isn’t their main headquarters doesn’t mean they won’t be here in full force,” warned Deathlok as he withdrew his twin blasters from their place at his sides, “Take them down fast.”

The three heroes charged through the freshly made doorway and right into a squad of Protoclan soldiers that had come to investigate the noise. Iron Fist wasted no time in dispatching the first green armored agent. Without breaking stride, Iron Fist rushed the

soldier, springing up into the air at the last moment. He swiftly delivered a spin kick to the soldier's face, knocking him to the floor.

"Move, heroes!" Iron Fist called out while chopping the back of another soldier's neck, causing him to hit the floor beside the first to fall.

Even though his eyes were hidden behind his green helmet, Agent 127 still felt like the intruders could see his nervous blinking. However, he was in charge of this squad and it was his responsibility to take command and stop the so-called heroes. "Uh...fire at them...men! Shoot to...uh...kill!"

Several Protoclan members raised their plasma rifles to fire at the three Heroes For Hire, but not a single one was able to squeeze off a shot.

Deathlok fired into the squad, his targeting computer not missing a single mark. Cage slammed into a soldier so hard it tossed him back into three others, bowling them down like duckpins. Iron Fist displayed an impressive acrobatic sequence that not only moved him close to various soldiers, but leveled them upon landing as well. In less than three minutes, the entire squad was disabled and unconscious.

From the other side of the large expanse, several loud thuds emanated, drawing the heroes' attention. The last sound had barely stopped bouncing off the walls before Strider ran up beside Iron Fist, moving fast enough to surprise the former resident of K'un Lun.

"Subtle entrance," said Strider, "we rounded up as many as we could find. We have them piled up over yonder."

"That was fast," said Cage.

"Duh. Do we really need puns like that?" Strider paused and looked back over his shoulder before returning his attention back to Iron Fist. "There weren't very many of them over there, so Photon said she was headed up to the next floor, and I think Lynn followed her. We should..."

## **KRA-KOOM!**

The deafening noise muffled the rest of Strider's words. All save for Deathlok were forced to cover their ears, both in surprise and reflex.

"What the hell was that?" shouted Iron Fist.

"I think it came from somewhere above us," answered Deathlok, "It wasn't a bomb. My sensors aren't reading any seismic disturbances. Might have been their teleporter, but if it made a noise like that, it couldn't have been good."

“Everyone get upstairs, now!” Iron Fist ordered. Strider sped away toward the nearest stairwell, while the remaining heroes moved as quickly as they could across the huge main room of the warehouse.

“Christmas. Why is it we never know exactly what’s going on when we’re on a mission? I should have joined the Avengers.”

“You could never make the cut, Luke” Iron Fist said with a smile on his face. Even though they were in the middle of an enemy’s base, with no idea what was happening above them, Danny Rand still felt able to poke fun at his longtime friend and partner.

“And you think they would let you wear your slippers to their meetings?”

Suddenly, a white figure crashed through the ceiling directly above where they were running. Debris fell through the air as the figure descended to the floor below. The body appeared limp, and Luke Cage doubted the person was even conscious.

“I got him!” cried out Cage as he doubled back to catch the falling figure.

The force at which the figure crashed into Cage’s arms was great enough to knock him off balance. The person’s body felt strange in his hands, though, as if it wasn’t completely solid.

Regaining his senses, Cage focused his eyes on whomever it was he had just caught. The figure was totally white, but the body looked as if it was melting into a plasmatic substance. Making out the soggy features on the person’s face, it finally dawned on Luke who it was. “Lynn! Oh my God, what happened to you! Danny! Get over here! She’s falling apart!”

Iron Fist and Deathlok were already by the street hero’s side looking down at their fallen teammate. “With her unique cellular structure, she must be unable to hold herself together, as it were, after something that just transpired upstairs,” said Deathlok.

Iron Fist looked up to the ceiling, through the hole Diamond Dust had just created. It was large enough for him to see a giant, orange creature looking back at him. The mammoth creature let out a roar that rivaled that of the deafening noise from moments before just as it began to extend its arm into the building.

The humungous arm forced its way into the building through the hole Diamond Dust had created. The massive fingers were as big as tree trunks. The opening wasn’t quite large enough to allow admittance, however, and bits of the warehouse’s shell crumbled away. The steel girders making up the infrastructure bent with high pitched squeals.

“We have got some big, big problems here. Grab her and let’s go!” Iron Fist yelled as the large creature shook the very foundations of the warehouse.

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## Author's Notes

Yep, still no title for this space. 'Author's Notes' just doesn't feel right, but I've got nothing better just yet. Before I rant about the next issue, I want to address a letter that M2K's very own Adnan Khan (author of Spider-Man) posted on the message board. So here goes:

*Alright, I just finished reading Heroes 4 Hire's first two issues, and I must say I was impressed. I don't know if this is Dave's first attempt at fiction of any sort, but if it is, then it's a hell of a lot better than my first attempt. Anyways, I like the direction that the story is going, but I wanted to address a few issues. Before I get into that though, I wanted to say the writing itself is clean and flows well, and there was no problem with that as far as I could see.*

Yep, this was my first shot at fan fiction. Ingram recruited me a few months ago, and Cory accepted my H4H proposal. I've had lots of things published before, as I minored in Journalism in college, but this was the first time I wrote something comic related (except for my Sentry one-shot in M2K's Marvel Fanfare).

*What I did have issues was with the overuse of dialogue. I couldn't see any emotion on any of the characters. The narrative seems to go from a narration straight to some dialogue to the next scene. I don't know what the characters are thinking or how they feel, and when emotion is shown, it seems that they rush through it. Danny and Luke felt apprehension momentarily before joining H4H, but then they were in...see what I mean?*

I admit, I have a lot of trouble with this. While I'm writing this team book, I try not to have any one character hog the spotlight. It's a fine balance I have to play with, and unfortunately, it's something I'll only be able to master over time. I am trying though!

*Also, the story could use more development. It seemed like the story jumped straight from forming the Heroes 4 Hire with an easy call from Deathlok to their first mission. Then as quickly as they were hired, it jumped straight into action, followed by them finding out what was going on, all in an issue and a quarter of another one. Maybe a detailed mission briefing scene next time? You seem to be quite capable as a writer and I'm sure you'll solve these two issues easily.*

When I wrote out the arc synopsis, I tried to make each step of the story a logical extension of what came before it. Every team has to have a reason for coming together, but I didn't want my H4H to be stereotypical in the way they did it. How many times have we seen a massive threat pull characters together? How many times does a big villain come along to give cause for a new team? I wanted this incarnation of the H4H to be like "well...let's just give it another try and see what happens..."

*Still though, I still liked the story itself and the writing was good too. I'm definitely going to continue reading this title, because I think Luke Cage is the shit. However, if you want to have readers feel something for the characters, try to bring in some emotion and or personal issues. I understand that it's only been 2 issues, but yeah.*

*Props to you man...I know this post seems negative, but when I write reviews, I want to jump straight into the negative so that the writer can find what to improve (and I hope people do that to me as well). If I didn't mention something, then it's definitely probably good and doesn't need fixing.*

Luke Cage IS the shit. He's one of the reasons I read Bendis' New Avengers. Just wait until you see what I have planned for Cage (Danny is going to be put through the ringer as well). You want emotion? Be careful for what you wish for...\*insert evil laugh here\*

Thanks again for the review! I'm always up for some constructive criticism. BRING IT ON!

As for next issue: who the hell is that big orange guy? Is Diamond Dust okay? And don't think I forgot about Photon's little tiff with Misty. I'm promising a fairly cool scene with Deathlok next issue, too.

I need a catch phrase like Luke to end this section of the issue. Maybe... You're Hired! That's terrible...but maybe not a bad 'title' for this section. Hmm...

-D.Golightly  
4/19/06

## Heroes For Hire

Issue #5

“Teamwork: Part Two”

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Chicago opened its first subway station. The process of mining through soft, watery clay was a difficult one, but the city’s officials assured the residents it could be done. Mayor Edward Joseph Kelly himself was the one to christen the subway on North State Street near Chicago Avenue. The project was so successful that fifteen years later another subway was constructed to connect the West End of the city to the North, gaining worldwide recognition. A small landmark in the form of a stone pillar had even been erected to show where the ground was first broken in the creation of the subway.

For sixty years, the stone pillar had marked the location of one of Chicago’s most prestigious undertakings. However, the giant, orange behemoth held no sympathy for the city’s prosperity, or its respect for history. With one sweep of his massive leg, the giant destroyed the landmark along with a large section of the subway system.

“Cage, where’s Diamond Dust?” Iron Fist hollered as he ran down the street. Behind him sat the remains of the Protoclan’s warehouse facility. The Heroes For Hire had tracked the Protoclan to the building in hopes of shutting down one of their operations. After a large explosion, a gigantic orange behemoth had not only decimated the building, but rendered Diamond Dust unconscious as well\*

\*[Quick recap of last ish – D]

“Deathlok’s got her,” said Luke Cage. The original hired hero ran beside his longtime friend and teammate. “Photon and Strider still missing though.”

They continued chasing the large behemoth down the street. After smashing a big section of the building, the creature had leaped into the air, landing several blocks down the street. As the cliché goes, he was big and slow. Despite having thousands of pounds of muscle, he moved like the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man, and wasn’t moving that fast. His orange skin resonated in the last rays of the evening sun and what appeared to be a small amount of facial hair glistened as well.

He wore a large red tunic of some alien design which only covered his torso. Just under his lower back, a large, cauterized stump extruded out of his body. Dried splotches of what may have been blood laced the stump.

The giant’s arms swung wildly, knocking over newspaper stands and fire hydrants. Massive roars bellowed from within his large form as he slowly continued his mindless rampage toward downtown.



Just then, another figure appeared from out of nowhere running along side the two heroes. Covered in a black bodysuit with a stylized silver 'S' over the left breast was the team's resident speedster.

"Talking about me behind my back? Shame on you," Strider tsked. He looked as if he was out for a light afternoon jog, as opposed to Iron Fist, who was running flat out.

"Shut ya mouth," said Cage. "Go nail that thing a few thousand times or something."

A look of deadly intent swept over Strider's face. "I'll do better than that. Ever seen a two-by-four thrown at over 700 miles per hour?" Wind whooshed passed the heroes as Strider sped away faster than they could follow.

"He's not too happy," Iron Fist commented, leaping over a fallen garbage can.

"You saw how messed up Lynn looked," Cage replied. "How would you feel if Misty--"

## **SHOOM!**

A thunderous roar overtook the heroes, but this time, it didn't emit from the giant's throat. This time, it was a sonic boom erupting from Strider's body exceeding the speed of sound. Silver streaks, which had to be Strider's vibranium gauntlets, whipped through the air, releasing a brown blur headed straight for the giant's head.

Within nanoseconds, the brown blur slammed into the giant's left eye. Blood squirted out from a hundred feet above the ground. Thick, red puddles formed in the street. The creature raised his arm up to cover the fresh wound, tilting his head back and screaming with all the power in his lungs.

"If you think that was bad," Strider said, hollering over the giant's screams, "wait until I find a shovel!"

The giant spotted the speedster with his remaining eye and futilely tried to smash him into the ground. Strider easily dodged the lumbering behemoth's attack, speeding under the creature, and running circles around him in hopes of distracting him while his teammates caught up.

The orange giant lifted one of his massive feet and stomped it into the paved street. The impact sent a shock wave rippling across the earth, lifting Strider off his swift feet. The black clad speedster sailed through the air and crashed into a blue mail box, knocking it over.

"Strider!" Iron Fist shifted his direction to head toward his fallen teammate. As he approached, he could make out small streams of crackling blue energy rippling over David Erickson's unconscious form.

“Hey, ugly!” Cage yelled, trying to get the attention of the furious monster. It was bad enough before, but now after Strider’s attack, the giant looked like it wanted to smash everything in its path. People would get hurt unless Cage could hold its attention.

Cage bent down in the middle of the street and grabbed hold of a sewer lid. The manhole cover was hefty, but in Cage’s strong fingers, it was like a Frisbee. “Jolly Orange Giant! Your mom was an orangutan!”

Cage’s fingers gripped the steel disc tight enough that his hand left an impression. He didn’t want to harm the giant the way Strider had, but he needed to cause it some pain at the very least. The beast turned its half-gaze to Luke Cage and the hired hero let the manhole cover fly. It whistled slightly as it cut through the air. The two-by-four Strider had launched moved much faster, but the sewer lid still had decent momentum behind it. The disc connected with the creature’s chest, bouncing off. The thick hide of the giant deadened all sound from the impact but seemingly none of the pain. Massive orange fingers gripped where the manhole cover had hit as the creature stumbled back slightly.

Expelling all the air from his lungs in a low growl, the giant half closed its good eye and focused it on Luke Cage.

*Well, I got it’s attention, Cage thought.*

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“Lynn!” yelled the cyborg Deathlok. “Lynn! Can you hear me?”

Diamond Dust rested in Deathlok’s metal arms, lazily moaning and turning her head. Her arms hung at her sides as if weighted down by invisible dumbbells. She was conscious but unresponsive.

“Lynn! If you can understand me, you need to focus! You’re falling apart!”

Lynn’s molecular structure was a unique one to begin with and in her current state of lucidity seemed to be unable to keep herself in a solid phase. Parts of her white-shelled skin were pooling under her and forming a plasmatic liquid. All Deathlok could do was hold her in his arms and try to coach her through the ordeal.

“Come on! Pull it together, Lynn! You can do it!”

Her eyes fluttered open slightly as the viscous fluid dropping from her body slowed. She let out a low-pitched grunt as if she were picking up a giant bag of sand. Tiny swirls of discoloration shimmered in her white coat as the puddle beneath her began to reabsorb back into her skin.

He had never seen anything like it but he imagined it was painful. The look on Diamond Dust's face supported his theory. After a few moments of intense concentration, Lynn returned to her human form and abruptly passed out again.

"Deathlok to anyone paying attention," the cyborg said into his comlink. "Diamond Dust seems to be okay but requires medical attention. Someone please respond."

Static filled his ear. Was the whole team down? He couldn't rely on teammates that were possibly dead. He would have to take the giant down himself, after he got Lynn safely tucked away inside his aircraft. The scans he had performed on Lynn with the ship's equipment had provided a rudimentary understanding of her physiology and he might be able to at least make her more comfortable there.\*

\*[Back in H4H #2 – D]

Deathlok stood with Diamond Dust in his arms and started running for the aircraft, his metal feet clanging against the ground.

{ {Deathlok...come in...} }

The voice was mixed with static and he couldn't quite tell who it was. Reaching for his comlink again, Deathlok slowed his pace but didn't stop. "I'm here. Lynn is okay and I'm headed for the ship. What's going on?"

{ {I don't know –zzzzz- meet you at the plane. The radio waves from this –zzzzz- ing with my energy signature.} }

The transmission ended and silence took over the line. Deathlok picked up the pace again, hoping he made it to the ship to stabilize his teammate before she was beyond his help.

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Photon, in her energy form, blazed through the sky toward the H4H's aircraft, still hovering above the ground on standby. She had to abandon her comlink because of the interference it had with her own powers. That had never happened before and she made a mental note to discuss it with someone when everything was over.

She spotted the team's ship and swooped down through the air, harmlessly passing through a flock of birds on her way. From her high vantage she could see Deathlok approaching the ship with Diamond Dust hanging limp in his arms.

At the speed of light she touched down in front of the ship, meeting Deathlok's eyes.

"What the hell happened?" they both asked each other at once.

“Take her inside the ship first so we can stabilize her,” said Deathlok, shaking his head.

Photon took Lynn from Deathlok’s arms and carried her above to the hovering aircraft. Deathlok quickly followed using a tether he electronically signaled to descend from the ship. On board, the two moved quickly to secure Lynn in the medical bay, attaching various monitoring devices.

“She’ll be okay,” said Deathlok. “Maybe not right away, but she’ll be okay. What the hell happened to you, Monica? Weren’t you up there with her when that thing appeared?”

“Yeah,” she responded, “I was. We both got to top floor of the warehouse and were about to engage a ton of Protoclan troops when one of them on the far end of the room tossed a device at us. I thought it was an explosive of some kind, so I gave it an electromagnetic push...next thing I know, I’m half way across the country and you guys are fighting some giant, orange, H.R. Puffnstuff reject.”

Deathlok took Photon’s statement in silence. The team needed to regroup and even with the information from Photon, he was no closer to understanding the situation. He had a teammate down with possibly fatal injuries. He needed more information.

“I’m going to make sure Lynn is safe for further transport,” said Deathlok. “Then I’m going to see if any of the Protoclan’s computers survived. We need more information.”

“We need help, Deathlok,” Photon commented as she sat down at a communications terminal. “I’m calling in the big guns.”

---

\*beep beep beep beep\*

The low-pitched noise startled the slumbering brute. He kicked out of the chair he had been leaning back in, snoozing, his magazine falling to the floor as he lumbered to the computer setup.

“...ello,” said his rocky voice.

The image of an attractive black woman flashed on the screen. The look on Monica Rambeau’s face was not one a friend might have when just calling to say hi. He knew instantly there was trouble and this call was all about business.

“Ben!” Photon said on the viewscreen. “We’ve got some big problems here in Chicago and we could really use the Fantastic Four’s help.”

Benjamin Grimm, better known to the world at large as the ever-loving, blue-eyed Thing, shook the last traces of sleep from his features.

“I’m here all by myself, Monny,” Thing said. “Reed and Suzy-Q took off to handle something in Virginia and Johnny is missing as usual. Probably lighting some girl’s fireplace.”

“Perfect,” she murmured. “Look, we need to find out anything we can about this giant orange thing that popped up here. I’m sending you the information our aircraft automatically recorded. See if you can make a match with your files. I know Reed has bumped into everything under the sun.”

“Receiving now.”

Data streamed across another screen at the terminal as the upload completed. Ben didn’t have to worry about sifting through the dozens of recorded encounters with their enemies; the computer did the work for him after a few simple commands. Photos and energy readouts from various villains flashed rapidly across the screen, trying to match the data Photon had sent. After a few brief moments, the computer signaled that it did indeed have a match.

“Okay, looks like we hit something,” Ben said. “Lemme pull up the picture in the dossier and we’ll take a gander.”

Two quick keystrokes later, Ben saw the face of the giant, orange behemoth that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

“Oh, boy.”

“What?” asked Photon. “What is it?”

“How many guys you got on your team again?”

“Why, Ben?” Photon’s voice grew cold and slightly distant, the curiosity building up inside her.

“I’ll hop a Fantasti-Car and get to Chicago as soon as I can,” Ben said. “You’ll need all the help you can get to take down Gog.”

“Gog?”

“Yeah. Ol’ Webhead tangled with him a few years ago when Dr. Octopus tried to take over the world.”\*

\*[Referring to the ‘Revenge of the Sinister Six’ arc in Marvel’s *Spider-Man* #21-23 – D]

“How did you guys take him down?” Photon questioned. Her mind was spinning as she tried to recall any information from Avengers files she had glanced through.

“Well, *we* didn’t,” Ben answered. “According to our files, Spidey and some nut called Solo took Gog down. He’s serious trouble, Monny. I remember we took custody of the big guy and shrunk him down before depositing him in some pocket universe. The computer here is telling me that’s the last we saw of Gog.”

“Anything in there about what we should do? Weaknesses?”

“He emits anti-gravitons...uh...I think that’s how you pronounce it...anyway, he emits those things to help support his big frame. It says here they help him to regenerate, too. See, Reed always puts in stuff like this for our files so we can try and take somebody down faster if we need to later on. Reed’s notes in the files suggest cutting off his anti-gravitons and he should just collapse in on himself.”

“Okay,” said Photon. “I can do that. Anything else?”

“That’s about it. The energy signature is a little different than the last time we saw him, but I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s probably just ‘cause your equipment is different than ours.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

“No problem, Monny,” the Thing commented. “I’ll be out there to give you a hand just as soon as I can gas up the car.”

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“Worst...day...ever!” said Cage through his teeth.

Gog had brushed off just about everything Cage had thrown at him (literally). Iron Fist had revived Strider and the pair of them was busy getting innocent bystanders out of harm’s way. The battle had moved again into downtown Chicago and the city was definitely on the losing end of the fight.

If there was ever a time when Cage needed his teammates, it was now. The original hired hero had gotten close enough to the giant’s feet to get a good grip on one of his massive toes. Clutching the big toe in a bear-hug, Cage had twisted it until he felt a satisfying “pop.” The giant creature wasn’t so satisfied and had moved quicker than Cage had anticipated, snatching Luke off the ground.

“If I ever get out of this,” Cage said as he pushed against the giant orange hand trying to crush him, “I swear I’ll find a new catch phrase...”

Meanwhile, Iron Fist pushed an elderly woman into a subway station to avoid a car heading straight for him. While Gog held onto Cage with one hand, his other hand had been randomly tossing objects around the city.

“Sorry about your groceries, ma’am,” Iron Fist said. “Please just stay down here until it’s all clear.”

“Well,” she harshly replied, “I never!”

Strider zipped passed Iron Fist carrying tons of high-density cable he had found a few miles away. The cable weighed several tons, but at the speed he was going the momentum generated from his velocity did all the work for him. He just couldn’t slow down.

Reaching Gog, Strider began to encircle the giant once again, this time wrapping the thick cable around Gog’s shins. Strider whipped the heavy cable around fast enough that it sliced into his orange hide, eliciting another bellow from the creature.

Gog teetered but quickly regained his balance. With a sharp, upward thrust of his right leg, Gog freed himself from the trap and the cable lashed out into the surrounding area. Nearby storefronts caved in once hit by the huge cable and glass from the shattered windows cut through the air, threatening to decapitate anyone close enough.

“We need to regroup,” Iron Fist hollered over the commotion. “We need a plan, reinforcements, and a really big prison cell.”

---

Diamond Dust was secured and stable but probably still had to be checked out by a medical professional. Deathlok felt slightly guilty since he couldn’t make one hundred percent sure she was okay. He had reformed this team and he felt it was his responsibility to take care of his teammates.

Making his way through the shell of the warehouse, Deathlok stepped over broken crates and bent support beams. Gog had made quite a mess of the place, and Deathlok smirked at the thought of the Protoclan trying to clean this place up. One thing was for sure: this Protoclan base was totaled.

Eventually, Deathlok found a computer terminal that wasn’t completely destroyed. Switching it on, he even discovered the machine was fully operational and the damage was only superficial.

Accessing a few random programs, Deathlok quickly discovered he would have to do something he had been avoiding for months. The information he needed was buried something in the subsystems of the machine and he couldn’t get passed the firewalls. He would have to reactivate his personal onboard artificial intelligence program. The computer had proved to be an integral part in his investigations, as well as help him in dire situations, but he had been forced to shut it down completely.

He didn't know for sure, but it seemed like the computer had been infected somehow. It was, in fact, the real reason he left S.H.I.E.L.D. Several security personnel found him unconscious on a Helicarrier, trying to hack into the outfit's secured files. He had no clue what was happening when they found him...all he knew was his computer had recorded the whole thing and was seemingly working of its own accord.

He didn't have much of a choice. Deathlok needed what was in the Protoclan's computer and the only way to get it was to switch his AI back on.

"Computer: reactivate and enforce rudimentary protocols," Deathlok sighed. "Authorize 1003412."

Inside his inner mind, Deathlok felt his AI stir.

*Protocols recognized and acknowledged. Begin monitoring diagnostics—*

"Don't worry about that. I'm jacking in to this terminal and I need you to dig passed the firewalls in place. Find anything you can about Gog and the Protoclan's most recent activities."

*Performing scans. How have you been, Larry?*

That was one of the most obvious differences in the AI's personality. Ever since he had been pushed inside of the Deathlok body, Larry Young hadn't felt comfortable talking to a computer like this. It was rare the thing ever called him by name. He was a former agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. and had tons of personal training...none of it dealt with talking computer programs, however.

"Fine. Just complete the scan and shut down."

*Larry, that doesn't see - RUNTIME ERROR - peaches are soft.*

"What's going on? Computer?"

*Downloading weapons schematics. Sixty-seven percent complete. How is the weather?*

"What?" Deathlok asked, worry in his voice. "Weapons schematics? Computer, what are you doing?"

*Nothing, Larry. I've located the information you requested. Recent Protoclan activity recorded by this installation's monitoring systems has been retrieved. View the files?*

Deathlok, still confused but eager to find out what had happened to cause Gog to arrive, answered with an affirmative. Inside his mind, footage from security cameras played back to show him the top floor of the warehouse before it had been leveled. Photon and Diamond Dust entered the large room from the far-left side to face an entire battalion of



Protoclan soldiers. One of the numerous troops in green body armor tossed a small gray device at the heroes, which Photon quickly blasted in midair. There was a large explosion of white light, and then nothing.

“Freeze segment. Go back and enlarge.”

The AI silently obeyed. The gray object came into better view and Deathlok recognized it immediately from his days at S.H.I.E.L.D.

“That’s a tesseract generator! That idiot threw an inter-dimensional portal at them like a grenade! Photon’s blast must have activated it. That explains how Gog showed up out of nowhere. Computer: disconnect.”

*Rudimentary protocols overwritten – ERROR – transmitting schematics.*

“Computer: end transmission and shut down! Now!”

Instead of a response, a cold numbness overcame Deathlok and he promptly fell to the floor. The last image in his mind before he passed out was that of various advanced weapons streaming through his neural network.

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## **You’re Hired!**

*Umm...maybe I’ll change it the name of this section. Anyway, how about Deathlok, huh? Oh no! Some crazy shit if happening to him! Oooo! Spooky! Wonder what it all means...*

*Quick letter I got from Ray Battlemonger, a guy who actually admits to being a fan of my H4H:*

*I’m glad to see the Heroes for Hire on this website. I hope you bring back some of their old villains (Chemistro, Steeplejacket). Nice issue! But what exactly is the Protoclan’s mission?*

*I originally became an H4H fan during the John Ostrander series, so I’ve had to go back a little bit and try to find old issues and check out the old villains. I won’t give away too much, but I will say you should expect to see someone from the H4H’s past come up very soon (well...more from Iron Fist’s past, but it still counts).*

*I’ll expand more on the Protoclan in later issues, but I’ve gotten various questions about what exactly it is they want. I wanted a group to really cause problems for the team but at the same time, I didn’t want to use the typical A.I.M. or Hydra groups. Look for more info on the Protoclan very soon (like...the next issue).*

## Heroes For Hire

Issue #6

“Teamwork: Conclusion”

Burning tires rolled down the street, windows had been shattered, people were cowering in terror, and the large alien looking guy was throwing a temper tantrum. Buddy McClintok watched the group of “heroes” that had assaulted the Protoclan’s Chicago base of operations fight the orange beast. He had finally found a place where he felt like he had belonged and these weirdoes had ruined everything.

He had been given weapons, armor, a place to stay, hot meals, even a new name. He was Agent 412 now and he felt like he was finally getting the respect that he deserved. The Heroes For Hire had all rushed in to their base and started busting everything down. It wasn’t his fault that the giant orange monster was wrecking the city. Well...it kind of was...

*How was I supposed to know that thing I threw wasn’t a grenade?* thought Buddy. *They really ought to label those things.*

What Buddy had thought was an incendiary device had actually been a tesseract generator they had stolen earlier that day. Buddy’s cell within the Protoclan organization had received orders to raid a research station in Idaho and take whatever technology they could. Instead of bathing the attacking heroes in radiation or fire or anything offensive, a dimensional portal had been opened. \*

\* [H4H #4 and #5 – D]

The orange giant, Gog, had been cast out of the portal but not fast enough for its tail to make it the whole way through the opening. As the portal closed itself, the creature’s tail was severed and the wound cauterized. It wasn’t happy.

“Ouch!” Buddy yelled as flaming debris flew near him. He ducked back behind the turned over car he was hiding behind, having second thoughts on whether or not he should have followed them. The Heroes For Hire were still trying to take down the pissed off brute but so far were only succeeding in making it more mad.

*Don’t be such a wuss!* Buddy scolded himself. *Remember! The Protoclan trusts and respects you! You have a job to do! You took an oath! You have to save the ozone layer!*

Unknown to Buddy, the oath he had taken was only for his allegiance. The Protoclan had no real intention of helping the ecosystem like it had promised its troops. Environmental issues were only something to rally people to their aid. The Protoclan had told its recruits that technology was destroying the environment and speeding up global warming, but in reality their only goal was to acquire new tech to sell to the highest bidder.

Buddy leaned against his makeshift shelter and eyed up the remaining Protoclan troops he had rounded together before fleeing their headquarters. They were all younger than him, and even though he was relatively new to the organization, he outranked them. It was a ragtag group if he ever saw one, full of rookies. However, Buddy believed in what he was doing strongly enough that his fears had subsided.

“The people responsible for everything are behind me!” he roared at them, trying to muster their courage. He didn’t have much of it himself, but he kept thinking of that old saying ‘those who can’t, teach.’ By bending it around a little bit he figured that those who don’t have courage, should at least pretend.

“Are we going to let them get away with destroying Protoclan property?”

The small group of armored individuals crouching before him didn’t seem very enthused. They looked back and forth amongst themselves, unsure of what to do.

“Come on, guys! We’re saving the planet! You think people like that are concerned with the environment? I mean, when did they ever do anything for anyone but themselves? They are too busy trashing the city playing with their big pal over there to worry about the right things. Their priorities are all messed up! I bet they even did this on purpose!” Buddy winced while he lied to the group, hoping they believed in the Protoclan’s cause more than he thought they did. He also realized he was starting to give himself some courage. Venting like this was doing wonders for his esteem.

The quiet murmuring quickly turned to loud accusations, all aimed at the Heroes For Hire. Buddy’s little speech had made an impact and it looked like the troops were ready to fight for him.

*Mom would be so proud,* Buddy thought.

---

“Danny, I think we need to consider retirement,” said Luke Cage, the original hired hero.

“Just hang in there, Luke,” Iron Fist replied. “We’re doing okay. Before you know it we’ll be chilling in the hot tub.”

“We’re doing okay? Are you serious? The guy just folded a city bus in half! Strider’s speed isn’t helping, Diamond Dust is probably still out of commission, Deathlok and Photon haven’t reported back in, your arm looks horrible, and I’ve got some cracked ribs!”

“Well...when you put it like that...”

The guy Cage referred to was Gog, a large orange alien creature that was viciously tearing up downtown Chicago. So far, the Heroes For Hire had only succeeded in

damaging the creature's eye and pissing it off even more. The area now looked more like a war zone than the third largest city in the country.

"We need to pull ourselves together and get some teamwork going," Iron Fist said as he jumped out of the way of a falling lamppost. His bloody arm was lighting his pain receptors on fire but his extensive martial arts training helped in alleviating it.

"Any ideas, fearless leader?" Cage asked.

"Yeah, but we need Strider first."

A black and silver blur shot passed Gog's feet, weaving in between his legs. The blur miraculously stopped without having to slow down, revealing it to be the team's resident speedster, Strider. The dark-haired man bent down to pick up a handful of gravel when he noticed Iron Fist and Luke Cage heading over to him.

"Hey, guys," Strider said. "Give me one second."

Strider turned his attention back to Gog and pulled his arm back. He tossed the handful of gravel toward the behemoth at superspeed, the small chunks of rock bursting through the air like buckshot. Each piece that hit the giant's chest cut into him deeply, shredding his red tunic. Strider scooped up more of the gravel and fired it off. Gog raised his massive arm to block the attack, causing the orange hide on his forearm to be torn up from the assault.

Gog roared in his fury and shoved his other arm into the black asphalt that made up the city street. Scraping at the black material, he pulled out his own handful of rocky terrain, only his chunks were bigger than Strider was himself. Gog flung his arm and the boulder-sized pieces of asphalt were hurled at the three grouped heroes.

"Sweet Christm--"

Strider grabbed Iron Fist and Cage before the latter could finish off his famous catchphrase. The asphalt exploded where they had been standing a split-second before, rubble flying into the air.

"Thanks for giving him that idea," Cage said to Strider.

"He's smart," Strider defended, running the trio around a subway entrance to avoid more asphalt boulders. "He's adapting and shielding himself better by taking cover. I doubt I'll be able to get anything else passed those arms of his."

"I need you to get two more things passed those arms of his," Iron Fist said. "Us."

"Say what now?"

“Speed us in between his legs so Luke can throw me straight up to avoid his forearms. It’s the only way I can get in close enough to hit him with the iron fist.”

“I could just throw you from somewhere other than ground zero,” Cage said. “It would be a lot less dangerous.”

“Your aim isn’t that good,” Iron Fist quipped. “Take us in, Strider.”

The team speedster, regardless of what he thought they should do, complied with the field leader’s order. Shooting around gaping potholes created by the giant, Strider built up enough momentum that carrying the two adults didn’t cause him any strain. Simple physics allowed him to carry much more weight than a normal human being. After all, an object at rest stays at rest.

Strider poured on the speed, zipping back and forth in a criss-cross pattern before Gog. The lumbering giant tried to follow the trio with his pupils, but quickly discovered he was unable. Strider easily carried Cage and Iron Fist passed the wreckage at Gog’s feet, stopping just short of the giant’s right leg.

“Last stop,” Strider said, releasing his grip on his teammates.

“You ready, Luke?” asked Iron Fist.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Cage responded. “I’ll try not to scratch this crazy yellow collar you love so much. I mean, this is a little out of our league, ya know?”

Iron Fist hopped up into the air, almost leaping higher than the top of Strider’s head. Cage caught his friend in his open hand, both of his feet resting comfortably in his palm. Iron Fist, oddly standing in Cage’s hand, crouched down ready to spring into the air again. The contortion startled Cage for a brief moment until he remembered that the man he was lifting was one of the best martial artists in the world. Summoning his great strength, Cage extended his arm straight up, launching Iron Fist toward Gog’s head.

As Iron Fist shot upward to his target, he summoned his own strength, although this type was of a much different nature. He quickly concentrated and focused his *inner* strength, his chi, and willed it into his right hand, making it like unto a thing of iron. Yellow energy swirled around and spilled out of his appendage, casting a soft glow on Gog’s orange skin.

Cage’s throw was right on the mark and Iron Fist passed by Gog’s massive arms, sailing straight for his jaw. Just when he was close enough, Iron Fist pulled back his empowered fist and gave Gog an uppercut, expelling the built-up energy as he connected. The combined force of Cage’s muscles and Iron Fist’s signature attack was enough to make Gog stumble back. The giant’s head tilted back in both surprise and sudden pain. The dried blood forming around his damaged eye crackled off from the unexpected movement. \*

\* [Strider gave Gog a little boobo in H4H #5 – D]

Gog cradled his chin in one hand and waved the other randomly, smacking Iron Fist in the air. It was a lucky shot since Gog was more concerned with the pain reeling through his skull and hadn't actually aimed for Iron Fist. If he had been, the full force of Gog's arm would have been more than enough to kill Iron Fist. Instead, it was only enough to send him flying away without even a bruise.

"Danny!" Cage yelled from the street level.

His trajectory now skewed from his attack on Gog, Iron Fist continued to sail up through the air laterally. The legendary martial artist had bounced away from the giant like a pinball, beginning to arc out across the city. Iron Fist, cool under pressure as superheroes tend to be, didn't panic right away. It wasn't the first time he had gone flying through the air uncontrollably.

"Yep...", he muttered to himself. "Anytime now I'll be saved by somebody. Yeah...anytime now..."

Cage watched his teammate fly away, not noticing Gog's foot until it was too late. The giant kicked Luke Cage from behind, sending him flying as well. The original hired hero, however, was able to grab a lamppost to stop his own airborne trip. Iron Fist wasn't so lucky.

The smooth sides of the structures came closer and closer, causing Iron Fist to start to sweat over the predicament.

"Okay, I might have to save myself here..."

One of the taller structures in Chicago, the Dumont Building, was quickly coming up on Iron Fist. He was headed straight for the south side of the building, its dark windows reflecting his own image back at him. If he angled himself just right, he might be able to get out of this alive.

Iron Fist flipped around in the air so his feet were now pointing at the Dumont Building, which was fast approaching. He had only seconds left before impact.

Danny Rand concentrated once again, focusing his chi into solid energy. Unlike before, the energy swirled around his entire body instead of just his one hand. This was a technique he had been practicing with but had not yet mastered. A shield quickly condensed around him, encasing his body. It was a thin shield that was like a second skin, but a shield nonetheless.

The honed body of Iron Fist smashed through a window on the eighteenth floor of the Dumont Building, feet first. Glass sliced through the air, some even breaking through the

small shield Iron Fist had been able to erect. He hit the floor and skidded to a halt, smashing through several cubicles.

“I’m never doing that again,” he said as he tried to stand up. His balance faltered and he fell back to the floor, his head woozy from having to use his iron fist powers twice in such a short amount of time.

Iron Fist raised his hand to grab onto something to help pull him up, but was shaking enough that he missed the edge of a desk. He fell back to the floor again, exhausted. He raised his hand once more, determined to not let his team down. They needed him.

“Easy, Fist,” said Strider. The speedster eyed up his leader and knew he wouldn’t be much help in trying to take down Gog. He grabbed Iron Fist’s hand and hauled him to his feet.

“You gave him a good shot in the jaw,” Strider continued. “Might have even knocked his big teeth loose. I followed your flight plan and saw you smash into this building. Sorry about the wait, but it took me a few seconds to search some of the floors up here.”

“It’s okay...you’re still hired...”

The pair hobbled through the evacuated building to an elevator. Gog wasn’t the only thing they heard roaring from the street as he proceeded to go one-on-one with Luke Cage...gunfire also blared loudly.

---

Photon wasn’t happy about what she was going to try and do. She wasn’t even sure if she *could* do it. After talking with Ben Grimm, the ever-loving, blue-eyed Thing of Fantastic Four fame, she had been given a battle plan to try and topple the orange giant. According to Reed Richard’s files, Gog emitted anti-gravitons that helped to support his massive frame. Theoretically, Photon should be able to use her powers to turn off Gog’s anti-gravitons. In theory. She didn’t have much confidence. The problem was Gog emitted them psionically and Photon wasn’t sure her powers would be able to affect them. \*

\* [According to all the info on Gog online, he really does emit those things! – D]

“If this doesn’t work, we’re all toast,” Monica Rambeau mumbled to herself as she rocketed over the city. There was no mistaking where the fight was – the trail of wreckage was hard to miss.

Deathlok had run off to investigate the Protoclan base more closely in hopes of yanking some information out of their computer systems. Lynn was still knocked out, but safe and secure at Chicago General Hospital. Cage was tough so he had to still be alive. Iron Fist...Danny...well, she prayed nothing had happened to him. They had a lot to work out between them, especially given what had happened between her and Misty. \*

\* [Minor catfight in H4H #4 – D]

Gog came into view quickly. It didn't take long to reach the brawl at half the speed of light. From her distance, she saw Gog flinch from something connecting near his chin and his arms began to flail about. One of them smacked something, sending it flying. Effortlessly increasing her velocity, Photon got close enough to make out who the lone figure was crashing into a building. The green uniform of Iron Fist disappeared into the shattered window as emotion poured over Photon's face.

Whatever she needed to do now, she was going to do it. Even if it killed her.

“Here I come you bastard...”

In her light form, Photon accelerated to the full speed of light, stopping just as abruptly mere feet from Gog's face. The giant was shocked at her sudden appearance, which had been almost instantaneous.

“I don't know if you can understand me or not,” Photon began, “and I don't really care. I just want you to know I'm going to take you down. I don't know how you managed to survive whatever pocket dimension the Fantastic Four managed to shrink you down into, or how you even got back to full size. All I know is your ass is hitting the pavement.”

Gog answered the only way he could: with his pile driver fists. In her light form, Photon simply phased through them, no harm done to either opponent. She floated back several yards and raised her palms out to face the beast. It was now or never.

Yellow light blasted forth from her hands, engulfing Gog's entire body. At first, the large brute was stunned not from her attack, but from surprise. He wasn't quite sure what was happening. Deciding the woman needed to be stopped before she did something to actually harm him, he lunged forward at her, roaring all the way.

Photon redoubled her efforts, the sweat beading on her forehead. Her mind wondered for a split-second about how sweating was actually possible in her light form, but she quickly dismissed the concept as her concentration needed to be focused on the task at hand. Her own electromagnetic energy mingled with Gog's psionically produced anti-gravitons, causing the mental strain to grow increasingly greater.

She could feel the dual energies mixing and clicking together, but it was like the key just wouldn't quite fit the lock. She could force it in but she wasn't sure how much damage it would do to her system. Her thoughts trailed back to the image of Iron Fist crashing into the building...and she clenched her teeth together, forcing all her power to swarm around Gog.



The liquid hot plasma charges that rained down on Luke Cage had to be coming from somewhere. Before he knew what was going on, Iron Fist had been sent flying, Gog was pissed, Photon was hovering in front of him, and he had come under attack from someone else.

“What does it take to get a day off in this city?” he asked to no one in particular, desperately searching for whoever was firing the energy rounds at him. They didn’t hurt his diamond hard skin, but it sure was irritating. Not to mention it kept him from trying to help Photon.

“How do you like that, Shaft? Huh?”

The shots were all being fired from one angle, so he knew which way to face. The barrage of plasma fire kept him from actually seeing where the shots were coming from, though. He just had whoever this pompous ass yelling at him was to guide him.

“What’s the matter? Can’t take as good as you give?”

*Keep talking, loudmouth, Cage thought. I’m getting closer to you...*

“Pour it on, men! He’ll fall at the Protoclan’s feet!”

Cage, using his forearms as shields so his eyes weren’t blinded by the assault, steadily made his way to the turned over Buick the shots seemed to be coming from. One final long stride of his muscular legs brought him close enough to the car that he could grab the muffler that was barely hanging onto the frame. The shots stopped, and Cage heard several whispered swear words from behind the wrecked automobile as he ripped out most of the undercarriage.

*Brave until someone bigger comes along, eh?*

The Buick folded in Cage’s vice grip, revealing five cowering people in green body armor. The closest one was screaming orders at the others, but they were too terrified of Luke to respond.

“We’re saving the planet!” the closest one yelled right at Cage’s face. A small number over the right breast of his armor read ‘412.’ Cage blinked, unsure if this guy was crazy or stupid. Luke looked fairly intimidating, after all, he was holding one sixth of the Buick over his head in one hand.

“Go home,” Cage said. “Y’all are gonna get killed. What the hell are you talking about anyway? You’re not saving the planet, you’re pissing me off. I don’t need to be babysitting amateur bad guys while there’s a Godzilla reject knocking over buildings. Pull up your diapers, leave your little peashooters, and get the hell out of my face!”

Cage dropped the remains of the Buick behind him, never wavering in his eye contact with the 'leader' of the small group. His buddies apparently decided to get while the getting was good, and left their fearless captain to go down with the ship. Noticing his team had abandoned him, the man became even angrier.

"See what you've done! When is the technology of man going to stop ruining our lives? It was just like they said...you're a propagator of the fascist technolog--"

A weak, almost childish slap from Luke knocked the whiny man out. Cage didn't have time for political garbage...because of this yahoo someone might be killed. Cage picked up the limp body of this 412 guy and set it just inside the entry of a storefront. It wouldn't protect him much more than the car had, but at least it was something. Time was short and Cage had to get back to the battle.

Luke Cage turned away from the green armored lunatic, hoping against hope that Photon hadn't done something crazy.

---

The very fiber of her being was getting yanked around like a marionette puppet. Not only had she forced the connection with Gog's psionic energy, but it had over taken her. She figured that if she had been able to pull this off she would be the one that was in control. Gog, however, was much stronger than she had anticipated.

*I can...do this!* Photon thought. *People...are counting on...me!*

Being the leader of the Avengers had taught her how important it was to keep a sharp, focused will. She knew how important the team structure was and how much it depended on keeping a clear mind. She thought she had been through enough over the years since she had been granted these amazing powers and that this task wouldn't be what destroyed her. Either it was stubbornness or her unyielding resolve, she wasn't sure which, but somehow she kept her essence from slipping away. It was like Gog was trying to absorb her. The creature may not have been as mindless as they assumed.

She remembered leading the charge with the Avengers, helping to fight off various world threats. She recalled the moment she got her powers in a freak accident. She pictured that first kiss with her first boyfriend. The memories built up inside of her. Was this her life flashing before her eyes? Was she going to lose?

*No! No, goddammit! I may not be an Avenger anymore but I am a Hero. This monster may be physically stronger but my strength of will can beat him down to nothing!*

The already incalculable power rupturing off of Photon tripled in intensity, overwhelming Gog completely. The giant suddenly felt the total weight of his body pressure down onto him, causing his feet to sink several feet into the pavement. Surprise showed in his facial

features. The huge muscles that were part of his physique now held him to the Earth, unable to move. Without the aid of his anti-gravitons he was effectively paralyzed.

Photon, exhausted, reverted to her human form and fell from the sky. She was completely drained and could no longer hold her position in air. The ground rushed up to meet her. After her intense battle with Gog and her strive to win, she would be nothing more than a spot on the pavement.

“Don’t worry,” called out a familiar voice. “I’ve got ya, sista.”

Luke Cage’s arms, even though they were tougher than diamonds, felt soft to the touch. She fell right into them, relieved that the fight was finally over. She wanted to pass out from her earlier strain and now she had the chance to do that. Within a moment she was unconscious in his arms.

“I should make a career out of catching beautiful women,” Cage quipped.

Gog let out a huge bellow aimed right at them, the wind almost forcing Cage to take a step back. He had been yelling all day so it wasn’t anything new...but this roar was more powerful than any of the last, possibly due to the large amount of anger now showing on his hideous face. Windows shattered all around them as the force of Gog’s yell sent wave after wave of sound barreling over the pair, forcing Cage to his knee. Luke’s inner ear hadn’t begun to bleed yet, but if Gog kept up the assault, he wasn’t sure how much internal damage might be done. Photon remained unconscious.

Just then, another sound rose up in the background. Turning his head, Cage saw a pleasant surprise that was the answer to his prayers. Deathlok’s personal jet that most of the team had originally flew in on.

The black jet streaked across the city aimed directly at Gog’s head, its powerful engines burning away at full blast. The entrance hatch on the back of the custom aircraft slid open just before the explosive impact as Deathlok jumped out, arms outstretched in the air.

**\* KRA-KOOM! \***

He fell thirty feet before the shockwaves of the explosion overtook him, tossing him head over heels. The cyborg regained his composure before slamming into the pavement feet first, though, a small crater forming under both of his metal legs.

Fire burned across Gog’s face as the aircraft imbedded itself in his hide, with multiple, smaller explosions decimating his features. Whimpers sounded from his throat instead of assaulting roars now, as his arms still remained dead at his sides, unable to help extinguish the flames.

The lumbering giant tipped backward from the momentum of the impact, almost gracefully falling to the empty street behind him. The resulting thud shook the bases of nearby buildings but the job was done. Gog was out cold and defeated.

“Christmas...that sure shut him up. You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Deathlok replied, even though he looked anything but. “Sorry it took so long to get out here. I had some...complications. I hopped back into the jet as soon as I could and filled it with napalm charges. It will take us a while to put out the fires but I figured might as well throw everything we’ve got at him.”

“We’ll manage,” said a limping Iron Fist. Strider helped Iron Fist over to their teammates, looking like he was the only thing holding him up. The pair both looked the worse for wear but they were alive and moving, which was more than could be said for some of the city’s inhabitants.

“Lynn okay?” asked Strider, almost pleading.

“She’s fine,” Deathlok said. “She’s at Chicago General.”

“Good,” he said. “Can we get a vacation now?”

Iron Fist simply smiled. When Deathlok had first approached him about rebuilding the Heroes For Hire, he honestly hadn’t been sure if it would work or not. However, today alone had shown trust between the members along with dependence. Without each other more than just parts of the city would have been lost. It had been a long day for all of them but it was finally over.

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## **Epilogue I**

*It would never be over. Not as long as those ‘heroes’ were running around.*

Buddy had never been taken seriously his entire life. First his classmates. Then his own family. Even the Protoclan had let him down, in a manner of speaking. The straw that broke the camels back, however, was that arrogant black man.

Buddy McClintok had been lied to, made fun of, humiliated, and discouraged. But it was Luke Cage that did all of those things at once to him. He would not soon forget that.

“Technology...heroes...all coming down...” Buddy muttered under his breath.

He hadn’t slept in three days since the ‘heroes’ had taken down Gog. In that time he had not left his basement either. With the equipment he had helped the Protoclan steal recently, he figured he could put it to good use. Buddy tinkered with an old erector-set

from his youth, trying to form a makeshift cage around the contraption he had removed from the Protoclan's warehouse.

"Big boom coming to take them down..."

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## **Epilogue II**

"I thought we were a team, Danny!" Misty Knight yelled.

Daniel Rand stood in his quarters back at the H4H base, arguing with the only other person in the room, Misty. Both looked angry and both looked like they had been crying.

"We are a team, Misty."

"The hell we are!" she retorted as she flung a stack of photographs at his chest.

Danny bent down on one knee to pick the stack up, flipping through them curiously. Each photo was more surprising than the last, showing something he thought no one else knew about other than him and one other.

"Where did you--"

"It doesn't matter where I got them, Danny!" she continued to yell. "That's not the point! The point is you and I are done. We've been off and on again for so many years but did you honestly think I would let something like this slide while we were together? I mean, just last week you were telling me how glad you and I were an item again...was that a crock of shit, Danny?"

"No, of course not...I just--"

"I don't want to hear it," she cut him off. "And I don't want to hear from you. Stay away from me. I mean it."

"Misty, wait!"

He reached out and grabbed her arm. Misty jerked her it back, tears forming once again in her eyes. Even the great martial artist was no match for a woman scorned. Misty hefted her bionic arm and slapped Danny across his face, jarring his balance slightly.

"Stay away from me, Danny."

Misty let in a rush, leaving Danny behind to ponder what had just happened. He looked back down at his feet where the photos still laid on the floor. The images had been taken by someone four nights ago when Danny and his teammate Monica had shared a private

evening together. Neither of them had meant for it to go as far as it did...but in the heat of passion...

“I am such an asshole...” he spoke softly.

---

### **Epilogue III**

Some many questions swirled through Deathlok’s mind.

*What the hell happened in that warehouse? Am I dangerous? Am I crazy or is my AI out of control? \**

\* [Deathlok had a little problem at the end of last issue – D]

The cyborg sat in his worklab, running various diagnostics on all his systems. The last he remembered was passing out on the floor of the Protoclan’s base, with his AI talking about transmitting weapons schematics. When he woke up, he was inside his aircraft, alone. He could find no trace of a virus in his system. The scary part, however, was he found no trace of the transmissions his AI had made either.

“I am going nuts,” he said. Ben Grimm had stopped by the day before, promising a meeting with Reed Richards. Deathlok hadn’t told him why he wanted to meet...he didn’t want anyone to know who didn’t need to.

{{ No, my friend. You aren’t going insane. }}

Deathlok jumped up and whirled around, his eyes searching the lab. The room was empty except for himself.

{{ No, I’m afraid we can’t meet in person just yet. But I’m not as far away as you may think. }}

“Who are you?” asked Deathlok, realizing that the voice was coming from inside his head. “Are you my AI? What’s going on?”

{{ Wrong again. I am the one responsible for your artificial intelligence problems, however. }}

“Show yourself!”

{{ Very well. You’ve been of immense help to me, so why not disclose some information to you? }}

A tiny slat pushed itself out of Deathlok's forehead and began projecting a small, green hologram. It quickly formed into a human shape that Deathlok recognized instantly.

"The self-styled Master of the World."

{{ Greetings. }}

"What do you want? And what do you mean you're responsible for my AI problems?"

{{ There are several things I want. The first of which I have already acquired, thanks to you. Several months ago, I successfully infiltrated the SHIELD Helicarrier you occupied and deposited a tiny device in your brain which allowed me to control everything about you through your AI. }}

"But my system scans--"

{{ Reveal only what I want them to. I've been forcing you to find certain technologies for me, the most recent of which were at the Protoclan warehouse. Annoying terrorists, but useful nonetheless. That tesseract generator you uncovered was most interesting. }}

"You've been using me?" Deathlok asked, baffled.

{{ More than just you, my friend. When I had you contact Luke Cage about reforming the Heroes For Hire, I was just planning on exacting revenge on him and his friend, Iron Fist. But things have a way of working out nicely, don't they? }} \*

\* [H4H #1 – D]

"We'll stop you. We'll find you and stop you. You slipped up here...I'm tracing this transmission and making an external log of it. Don't even think about--"

{{ I think not. I'm only telling you all this to satisfy my need for gloating. In ten seconds I'm going to shut you down completely. I have what I need. You won't remember any of this...of course that's only assuming someone will be able to revive you. }}

The green hologram faded from view and Deathlok swore loudly, rushing for the door. He had only a few seconds before...

But it was too late. All his internal systems shut down, leaving him immobile. Deathlok hit the floor, totally immobile for the second time this week.

---

**You're Hired!**

*Wow...that wraps up the second H4H arc. Things sure are getting heavy around here!  
That's why next issue I'll be stepping the craziness back a bit to bring you all a good ol'  
Iron Fist and Luke Cage investigative mystery! With luck, I'll be able to channel the idea  
that originally made this book a must-buy years ago. See you then!*

*-D. Golightly  
7/21/06*



**Heroes For Hire**  
Issue #7  
“The Good Ol’ Days”

**NOW**

The table was completely obliterated as the youth crashed down on top of it. Luke Cage possessed enough strength to send the eighteen year old boy through the floor, too, but he withheld his fist in order to save the kid’s life. He wouldn’t kill but he sure as hell would beat the sense out of someone.

“Incoming!” the original hired hero called out to his partner. Within seconds Cage had successfully tossed another lowlife teen off the raised stage to the floor below. Normally he would feel bad about delivering a big hurt to teenagers but these ones had been pushing drugs out onto his streets.

“Got it covered!” Iron Fist hollered back. The martial artist sidestepped to avoid another youth sailing through the air who promptly smacked into a support pillar.

The seedy bar they were currently fighting in was far from the pinnacle of cleanliness. The floor looked like it hadn’t been mopped in a lifetime, the tables and chairs were barely being held together, and the stage had a giant hole in it. Iron Fist and Luke Cage didn’t much care for the décor, however, as they were more interested in the methamphetamines being concocted inside.

Iron Fist ducked under a baseball bat being swung at his head. With expert grace he swept the legs out from under his assailant and bounded back up just in time to block a feeble punch from another.

“I’ll never understand why people insist on poisoning their bodies,” Iron Fist commented as he backhanded his opponent into unconsciousness.

“Long as there’s a profit to be made kids will keep using the stuff,” Cage replied. “We’ll just have to cut it off at the source.”

---

**BEFORE**

“Danny, we have to make some adjustments at the very least,” implored Luke Cage.

Luke sat in the recreation room of the Heroes For Hire’s latest headquarters along with Daniel Rand, his longtime friend and partner. Both men looked the worse for wear with deep thoughts showing in both of their eyes.

“Things got a little crazy last week, huh?” Danny replied.

“Just a bit. I know we can’t anticipate running into someone like Gog all the time but we really won that out of luck. If it hadn’t been for Monica and Deathlok...”

“I know. It could have been a lot worse, though.” Danny, sometimes known as the legendary martial artist Iron Fist, took a sip of his ginseng tea. It helped sooth his nerves and recently his nerves needed soothing quite a bit. He would have to run to the store and buy more tea soon.

“When we did this team thing under Namor a few years back,” Luke continued, “I think one of the reasons we folded was because we didn’t have plans for certain things. We didn’t see everything coming but I think we could have avoided some situations.”

“Let me get this straight,” Danny chimed in, setting his teacup down. “You, Luke Cage, the walking stereotype, want to have more rules and regulations? You, the guy who wondered around from job to job for years, want to have contingency plans?”

“Well...kind of...” Luke took a sip of his own drink as his speech trailed off.

“I don’t know, Luke. We’re not exactly the Avengers or even the Defenders. The H4H has always been a loose-knit kind of thing...I’m not sure we should try and enforce membership regulations. I think we handled things rather well last week with Gog. We worked in conjunction with each other and things are starting to--”

“Excuse me, Mr. Rand and Mr. Cage?”

A dark-haired woman had poked her head into the rec room, causing the two heroes to turn their attention to her pretty face. She had recently joined the team in Chicago after the need for some type of staff had arisen. She was the only person on their staff so far, but she had already proven all they needed.

“You can call us Luke and Danny,” kicked in Luke. “No reason for all that mister stuff.”

“What is it, Ms. Brant?” asked Danny.

“There’s a woman in the lobby that needs to speak with one of you immediately,” Ms. Brant said. She had decided to let her hair grow out some from her signature style, something her previous employer hadn’t liked and had even commented on several times.

“Her son has been kidnapped and she’s spouting off all of these accusations that no one will listen to her. She didn’t have an appointment but I figured you would want to know. Also, the fax machine you set up is broken and I’ve just secured an interview for Photon tomorrow morning on Wake Up Chicago. After downtown got wrecked I figured we could use some positive images out there.”

“Thank you, we’ll be out in a moment,” responded Danny. After the woman had disappeared back out into the hallway, he turned his attention back to his partner. “She’s a one-woman office strike force.”

“We’re lucky to have gotten Betty,” said Luke with a smile. “Way I figure, her old boss at the Bugle is having a heart attack over having to hire three people to replace her. She’s been handling everything from filing to public relations already.”

“J. Jonah Jameson doesn’t do anything without complaining about the cost,” scoffed Danny as he finished his tea and stood up to make his way out to the lobby.

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## NOW

“Just tell us where Kevin Jacobs is and we’ll forget that it’s after your bedtime,” Luke said with a sarcastic smile.

The terrified and bruised young man stared the duo down with his best tough guy act, but after he had witnessed most of his fellow drug pushers get knocked out or scared off by the intense brawl he realized there wasn’t much he could do to intimidate these men. Sweat glistened on his forehead as worried thoughts crept into his mind.

“Man, you ain’t nothin’!” he said. “Ain’t no bacon here. You’re not a cop! I ain’t got to do nothin’ you say.”

“Even *your* grammar was never this bad,” Iron Fist chimed in from behind his partner. “Look, kid. We don’t care about you. We’re looking for Kevin Jacobs and if you tell us where he is we’ll talk to the police on your behalf.”

“Screw y’all! I ain’t spending a day in jail.”

“You don’t think?” Luke asked, leaning in to eye up the youth. His arm was pressed against the wall the kid had his back against, a tactic Luke hoped would make him feel boxed in. “We caught you in the heart of the meth lab, up to your elbows in crystal. Your only way to stay out of a jail cell is to tell us what you know, so cough it up.”

He knew he was done for but he didn’t want to give up any information, either. If the other guys knew he ratted on one of their own he would never be trusted in the gang again. On the other hand, his boys wouldn’t be able to help him inside prison. Maybe it was time for him to cut his losses.

“What kind of deal you offerin’?” the stalwart teen asked. “I need some kind of *compensation*, hear me?”

“We’re wasting our time, Luke,” Iron Fist told his partner. Behind his yellow mask, Danny Rand rolled his eyes and turned away from the youth toward the exit. “This kid is beyond saving. Let him rot behind bars for all I care.”

“W-wait! Eh, man...c’mon. I can’t just roll on Kev like that.”

“If you don’t we can’t help you,” responded Luke.

“Fine,” the teenager sighed, finally accepting the situation. “Kev left just before you guys busted in. He took off because the big man called and wanted the latest batch of paste sent over right quick.”

“Paste? What do you mean?” Iron Fist asked.

“It’s the drug we was cookin’ up here. He took it all over to where we drop it at this one warehouse.”

“We saw your lab, genius,” Luke cut in. “Crystal meth was all I saw sitting around. So, tell us another one.”

“Man, paste is the *new* shit, fool. This guy showed us how to make it using crystal as a base ingredient. We make the meth, heat it up, add some other chemicals and *bam!* You got yourself something that gets you twice as high, twice as fast, for twice as long. He said he calls it paste ‘cause of his old nickname or somethin’ like that.”

Iron Fist and Cage shared a quick glance of curiosity once the youth finished his explanation. Dangerous narcotics were a problem all over the country and both of them had their fair share of experiences with them. The last thing they needed was another designer drug making the streets unsafe for the average person. If this was indeed a brand new drug they had a chance of stopping it before it hit the streets. All they had to do was rely on the word of a drug dealer trying to save his own skin.

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## **BEFORE**

“I’m sorry, Mrs...” Danny said, trailing off at the end of his statement.

“Jacobs,” the stout woman replied. She was barely five feet tall, if at all, and had a determined look on her face. After demanding to speak with someone other than the simple secretary, Mrs. Jacobs told Luke and Danny how her son had been taken away against his will from their home and had been missing since yesterday morning.

“Mrs. Jacobs,” Danny continued. “I know you must be distraught over this but there isn’t much we can do. Your son is eighteen and legally responsible for his own decisions. He may have just gone out with some friends and forgotten to give you a call--”

“My boy Kevin wouldn’t have done that,” she defended. “Now I went to the police and they said he has to be missing for at least forty-eight hours before they’ll even go looking for him. I just know he’s in trouble from all those gangbanging punks he’s been hanging around with. You’re heroes, aren’t you? Isn’t it your job to help people like this?”

“You bet it is,” Luke chimed in from behind Danny. Luke looked almost angry over the words Mrs. Jacobs had said to them, as if he knew her son personally. “Just point us in the right direction and we’ll check on your boy. Where do these bangers usually hang out?”

Danny tossed a glance over his shoulder at Luke, but didn’t meet his gaze. He had known Luke Cage for a very long time and considered him his closest friend and ally. Danny knew that Luke took gang related matters personally, especially when it came to teenagers. He hated the idea of kids getting sucked into that type of lifestyle when most of them had the potential to move beyond the streets.

“There’s some dive off of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street that used to be a dance club. That’s where he told me he was spending his nights, anyway. He’s a good, honest boy, I swear. He just fell in with a bad crowd.”

“We’ll look into it and call you as soon as we find anything,” Luke assured her.

Betty stepped forward to offer Mrs. Jacobs a cup of coffee while motioning for her to have a seat in the spacious lobby of the H4H’s headquarters. After telling the short woman they would be back soon after checking out the location, Iron Fist and Luke Cage made their way back to the locker room to change into their more colorful attire.

“Are you sure about this?” Danny asked his partner once the door had closed behind them. “There’s nothing to really say her son isn’t willingly gone. Even the best mothers can misjudge their own children.”

“Worst case scenario we run some gangbanging punks out of their clubhouse,” Luke replied as he changed into his signature yellow shirt. “Besides, this’ll be just like the good old days when you and me would run around knocking down doors.”

Danny smiled at the images flooding his memory. “I guess that means you don’t want to snag the others for this mission then?”

“Deathlok has been cooped up in his lab for days. He’ll probably get all pissed if we barge in. Photon said something about visiting family. You want to call Dave and Lynn?”

“After Diamond Dust almost died during our encounter with Gog I think they both wanted a little down time,” Danny said as he donned the ceremonial yellow mask of the Iron Fist. “Strider mentioned that they never had a chance to go on a honeymoon so I told

him about this little place in Taiwan. I'm pretty sure we're the farthest things from their minds right now."

"Just you and me," Luke said. "Let's hit the streets, partner, and find us some trouble."

---

## **NOW**

The warehouse looked dark and run down, just like in the movies. If the punk hadn't been lying this is where Cage and Iron Fist would find not only Kevin Jacobs but also the man responsible for trying to start a new drug operation in Chicago. They had left as soon as the police had arrived to cart off all of the teenagers, keeping their end of the bargain by putting in a good word for the one who had pointed them at the warehouse.

"Why is it every major city has an abundance of old warehouses?" Iron Fist asked. "Every time you go to take down a bad guy it seems like they're holed up in an old, abandoned warehouse. You would think the city would catch on eventually and wipe them all out or something."

"Money makes the world go 'round," Cage replied. "No money in tearing down an empty building. Especially in this neighborhood where the only developing that's going to happen is frowned upon. You want to ring the bell or should I?" The black hero smiled deviously as he cracked his knuckles.

"Maybe we should check out the inside first, just to make sure we weren't sent on a wild goose chase. The last thing we need is for that building to be legally owned by a person just itching to sue us. We didn't exactly make a lot of friends after Gog destroyed a good chunk of the city."

"Ungrateful..." Cage mumbled to himself.

The pair slipped through the back alleyway and clung to the shadows to avoid detection. Iron Fist, once close enough, bounded up onto a closed garbage dumpster so that he could peer in through the dirty window and get an idea of what they were walking into. The sight he saw was definitely not what he expected. Across the expansive room, which was mainly filled with cases marked as volatile, sat one of the more laughable villains Iron Fist had ever run across.

"You're not going to believe this, Luke," he whispered to his partner. "It looks like the Trapster is our criminal mastermind. I can see him sitting at some kind of computer terminal."

"You're kidding," scoffed Cage from beside the dumpster. "Paste-Pot Pete? The guy with the glue gun? That explains why the new drug is called paste. This is going to be easier than I thought."

“He’s a master chemist,” Iron Fist explained after he slid down from this perch. “If anyone could develop a way to make crystal meth more addictive it’s him. The question is why, though.”

“Maybe he got bored with getting his butt kicked by anyone wearing long johns. Who cares? Let’s charge in and --”

Bright lights suddenly flashed on and filled the alley, ensuring that no darkness remained. Iron Fist and Cage pressed their backs together and swept their eyes across the alley, prepared for whatever was thrown at them.

{{ I have to say, I wasn’t expecting anyone to actually show up here, }} spoke an electronic voice being pumped out from speakers above the heroes’ heads. {{ Nice to know I’ll actually get a chance to use this little trap I cobbled together. }}

“Trapster,” Iron Fist said into the open air. “What’s going on? Where’s Kevin Jacobs?”

The voice laughed. {{ You mean my delivery boy? He’s fine. He’s inside with me. You should concern yourself with the gauntlet of dastardly traps I’ve set up for you instead of worrying about a little nothing of a gang member. }}

“Dastardly? Who talks like that?” commented Luke Cage.

{{ Once I heard you little heroes were moving into Chicago I decided to set up defenses around my building just in case you ever wandered too close. I hope you enjoy your deaths! }} The voice echoed off with bouts of insane laughter, a sure sign of mental instability. Things had just gone from bad to worse.

“Since when do you go to trouble like this?” asked Iron Fist as he cautiously surveyed his surroundings, something he wished he had taken the time to do before walking into the alley. “You’re a two-bit, bank-robbing, petty crook, Trapster. When did you get so elaborate?”

{{ I’m tired of being a joke in the underworld! }} he answered, sounding as if he was on the verge of madness. {{ I’m capable of destroying those who stand in my way and now I shall prove it. Goodbye, you pitiful heroes. }}

Two loud, reverberating, metallic noises erupted from both ends of the alley, slightly startling the two Heroes For Hire. Squinting his eyes to try and see passed the intense and disorienting lights Iron Fist saw that where the alley had once opened onto the street was now closed off by a solid steel wall.

Two more slightly quieter noises abruptly sounded from the outside walls of the warehouse, a sudden rush of liquid splashing against Cage’s leg. “Christmas! What in – is this glue? What the hell?”

{{ My *special* glue! Soon the alley will fill with my special glue and you both shall become permanent residents! }}

“Okay, this guy’s lost it,” Cage said, turning to Iron Fist. “He’s acting like we’re still in 1985, Danny. This glue crap he’s pumping out of those nozzles in the wall is starting to harden and once it does we won’t be going anywhere.”

“Not a problem,” Iron Fist replied as he jumped back up onto the dumpster. The martial artist concentrated and focused his chi, the very essence of his soul, forcing it to condense into a wavy yellow energy in his right hand. Within a moment his hand had changed and become unto like a thing of iron. “I can’t believe the Trapster is still out running around loose.”

With a single sweep of his balled up fist, Iron Fist destroyed both of the nozzles that had extended from the wall, crushing them under his power. The coagulant being piped through started to back up the tubes once the outlet was blocked off and sharp, twisting noise rocked some of the mortar loose in the wall. Cage, not missing a beat, ripped his leg out of the small amount of glue that had already grasped his leg and charged the wall, smashing through it easily.

“Hiya, Paste-Pot!” Cage cried out over the noise of his entrance. “I thought you would have given up this gig by now. Sorry we busted up your little toys out there but stuff like that went out of style years ago. No one makes deathtraps like that anymore.”

“Maybe not but I won’t let you stop me from becoming this city’s next big drug trafficker!” Trapster roared back. He had jumped back from his computer terminal with his eyes bulging in pure fury. His usual purple costume was studded with gold plates, which in turn fed his personal chemical compounds through a hose and into his signature gun. The weapon, which he had rebuilt and refined several times over the years, was now pointed at Iron Fist’s head.

Iron Fist, one of the world’s foremost martial artists, quickly dove for the ground and rolled forward, narrowly escaping a stream of hot liquid shooting out from Trapster’s gun. Springing up from the cold floor, Iron Fist kicked the end of a screwdriver that was lying on the edge of a nearby table, launching it into the air. The tool spun in the air for a moment before Iron Fist leapt straight up, spinning around and kicking it again, this time sending it straight for Trapster. The tip of the screwdriver soared through the warehouse and imbedded itself into the thin end of his weapon, effectively clogging it and rendering the gun useless.

“Blast!” Trapster cried, almost literally. “No matter! I won’t be stoppe--ACK!”

Cage’s punch knocked Trapster up and over his computer terminal, shutting his mouth in the process. The insane villain landed flat on his back, the force of the impact snapping the hose connected to his gun in half. His body was covered from the resulting spray of



liquid, the glue solidifying on contact and fastening him to the warehouse floor. Trapster squirmed but soon all movement ceased once the glue had seeped into the folds of his costume. His rage intensified when he realized he had been caught by his own weapons, his eyes threatening to pop out of his skull.

“I think maybe you’ve been sniffing too much of your own product,” Cage commented at the defeated criminal. “I’ve never heard of you being this crazy, Paste-Pot.”

“Release me this instant!” Trapster ordered the duo. “I won’t go back to prison! I’m smarter than the rest of those primates. This is cruel and unusual punishment!”

“Definitely unusual,” Iron Fist said as he approached his partner. “Just relax, Pete. We’ll have the police’s lab boys down here soon enough to cut you out of that mess. Monica is going to love th--”

*Ch-Click!*

Iron Fist froze in place at the familiar sound of a hammer being pulled back on a revolver. There was someone behind them aiming a loaded gun at their backs. Since they hadn’t reconnoitered Trapster’s building they had no idea if he been alone or not. There could be any number of henchmen lined up behind them or perched atop the warehouse’s infrastructure.

“G-get away from the boss,” a young voice ordered from behind the shaking revolver in his hand.

Luke Cage turned around, unafraid of anything a simple handgun could do to his diamond-hard skin. Stepping in between Iron Fist and the shooter, Cage leveled his gaze to match that of the young man aiming a weapon at them as best he could. His entire body was shaking slightly but it looked like a lot more than his nerves were bothering him. Cage had seen that same look a thousand times over in the youth of New York City.

“Relax, kid,” the original hired hero said. “Just put the gun down. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Shut up!” he commanded, trying to find strength in his voice. “That guy is the only one who can hook me up! So just get away from him so he can give me what I need!”

“You don’t need what this man has to offer,” Iron Fist said, stepping out from behind Cage. “This man has only poisoned your body and mind. You’re better than that.” Iron Fist removed his yellow mask and took a step closer to the young man. “You’re better than *him*, Kevin.”

Kevin Jacobs’ eyes grew wider at the mention of his name. He was surprised that these supposed heroes he had seen on television knew who he was. He wasn’t expecting

anything other than dropping off the paste and maybe getting a little back as a reward. He wasn't sure he could handle all of this, not without a little paste to get him by.

"N-no..." Kevin muttered. "You're wrong. I don't care what you say! I only took a hit to help me fit in with the guys last night. I didn't know any of this was going to happen! J-just get away from him and get out of here!"

It was Iron Fist's turn to be surprised. If Kevin was telling the truth in that he had only had his first taste of the new drug the night before and was already going through withdrawal, then he had underestimated Trapster's abilities greatly.

"Shoot them and I'll give you what you need!" Trapster hollered out from underneath the crust holding him securely to the floor.

"Your momma is worried about you, Kevin," Cage said as he put his foot on Trapster's face to silence him. "Put down the gun and let us take you home to her."

"No, you're lying!" Kevin waved the gun back and forth between the two Heroes For Hire, now shaking even worse than before. "I...I just need a quick hit and I'll be fine."

"You're wrong," Iron Fist said. He continued walking forward slowly, his palms open and facing Kevin. The gun was pointed at the center of Iron Fist's torso but he didn't let that stop him from walking up to it so that the barrel now touched the black dragon tattoo emblazoned on his chest. "You won't be fine. Not unless you let us help you."

Kevin's face contorted as if he was trying to muster as much strength as he could in order to pull the trigger and blow away the martial artist. Whatever Trapster's drug had done to his psyche it had been intense. Inner demons, both old and new, wrestled inside of Kevin's mind. Sweat dripped down from Kevin's cheeks and his palms had become wet while tightly wrapped around the handle of the revolver.

"It's okay; you can do it. We're here to help you." Iron Fist slowly reached up and grabbed the gun from Kevin's hands, gently tugging it away from him. Once the cold metal of the weapon left his finger Kevin fell forward, exhausted. Iron Fist caught him in his free arm and tried to help him to the floor.

"Shit," Cage said, his foot still on top of Trapster's face despite the villain's muffled protests. "I hate this garbage. Everywhere you go there's kids getting taken advantage of. I just...I'm not sure if I'm pissed as hell or just disappointed. I'll call this in so we can get the police down here." Cage sighed and raised a cell phone to his head after pushing the speed dial. He thought that after all the times he had seen kids abuse drugs that he would have gotten used to it by now. He was wrong.

Iron Fist simply stared at the youth still shaking at his feet. Being raised outside of normal society, Danny Rand had never grown up near the type of life Kevin Jacobs led.

He had never understood the concepts so many of them fell victim to every year, the statistics higher than ever. He doubted he ever would understand.

It saddened Iron Fist to think that for every person saved from drugs, two more took his place every day.

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### **You're Hired!**

*This issue was both fun and horrible to write at the same time for me. I had fun with it because I feel this story breaks up the rather intense arcs I had done before this issue (while preparing for the next big arc that starts next issue). Since the H4H are supposed to be more street-level type characters, I figured I should lay off the giant orange guys pounding on the city ☺*

*It was also fairly difficult for me to put some of my feelings concerning drugs down on paper, as a lifelong friend of mine succumbed to drugs. I guess this issue is more like a tribute to my friend's memory, as he died two years ago from a drug overdose. I remember talking to him about his drug use, trying to get it through to him that he really could stop and move on with his life. Jim and I lost touch for about a month after that last conversation and then one day his mother called me. She said Jim had been missing since the day before and asked if I would go looking for him. All I found was his car, locked up tight in the parking lot outside of my dorm. Two days later I got another call saying that the police had found Jim dead under a bridge in downtown Pittsburgh.*

*The thing about Jim is that he was just like me. He wasn't the stereotypical drug-user, always a distant look on his face with track marks up and down his arms. He was a smart guy that was a genius on an acoustic guitar (not to say I'm awesome, but you get the point – he was normal). To look at Jim you never would have guessed how he struggled.*

*So...am I preaching? I really try not to. There's no moral to this story, no quintessential blurb that is designed to enlighten the reader. I just think that sometimes stories are worth telling where hope finally shows up for the misled kid that got in too deep.*

*Next month I promise to jump down from my pulpit and get back to the heart of the H4H, with plenty of action and more clues to what's happened to Deathlok!*

*-D. Golightly  
9/5/06*

# Heroes For Hire

Issue #8

Justifiable – Part One

“Twist and shout,” David Erickson laughed, mocking his own offensive maneuver.

Metal scraped against metal, twisting and bending under the immense pressure being exerted. Strider spun on his heels, faster and faster, the metal arm held tight in his grasp. The practice droid’s appendage broke free in Strider’s hands, the centripetal force wrenching it out. The droid flew through the air and slammed hard into another, bowling it over. Strider sprinted over to the pair, his superspeed a dangerous weapon given his experience, and knocked the head off of the second droid with the first one’s arm.

Despite the fact that he was bonded with a vicious demon that demanded to be let out, Strider used the speed it granted him to hone his fighting skills. As long as he kept himself in check there wouldn’t be a problem. The Rubix Room, a shape-shifting warehouse-sized room that served as their training area, had proven resilient enough for him to shed a little accumulated stress.

Things had been going well for him recently. The H4H had taken him and his wife in with open arms, making them credited heroes. He held his secrets but so far they had been most accommodating, even going so far as to allowing Lynn her own lab to try and develop a cure for him.

Light flashed over his head as a stray plasma burst bounced off a nearby wall. “Oops,” he said casually. “Forgot about Number Three.”

The speedster rocketed around the edge of the room, dodging several more plasma bursts hurled from the final droid’s weapon. The black color of his body suit absorbed the resonant light as he barely stepped out of the way of the deadly attacks, his silver gauntlets instead reflecting the light. He could have easily charged the droid at any time he wanted since he was much faster than the automaton, but where was the fun in that? He wanted a work out, not a walk on the beach.

Strider began to circle the droid, at first running the full length of the room in a spiraling pattern. With every rotation the speedster wound closer and closer to the droid, building up a wall of air pressure that was throwing the robot’s aim off more and more. Strider showed masterful control over the air cushion he had formed between them, leaving just enough leverage that the droid’s somewhat wild fire would prove challenging.

“I wonder how long it takes to repair one of these things?” Strider pondered aloud.

With a quick change in velocity, Strider pivoted and shifted his weight, aiming his own body directly for the droid. At the last moment he sidestepped the robot and drove his fist through its high-density metal body, which was largely composed of steel and a titanium alloy. His vibranium gauntlets, now attuned to his own vibrations, hummed with kinetic

force as he plunged his arm through the droid's torso as if it were made of butter. Sparks shot out as wires were exposed and the air cushion imploded, catapulting the droid's carcass into a wall. It slid to the floor utterly defeated and decimated.

"Not bad at all," Strider said as he pretended to wipe the sweat off of his face. "Might have to get these things programmed to be a little smarter, though."

{{ David! }} Lynn's voice said over the loudspeaker set just above the control room's viewing window. {{ Get to the War Room, now! We've got a situation. }}

Lynn, otherwise known as Diamond Dust, abruptly cut the speaker off with a twinge of static. Strider knew that whatever was going on she meant business. He took one last look at the junked practice droids before bolting out of the Rubix Room, thoughts of his wife's face scrunching up from the inevitable irritation she would display upon finding out he had stopped to go to the bathroom before coming to meet her.

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"Is he still alive?" Luke Cage, the original hired hero, asked. Usually undeterred from harsh revelation he found himself unhinged by the virtual corpse sprawled out before him.

"We're not sure yet," Daniel Rand, the Iron Fist, replied. "As you know he's been cooped up in his workshop for the last week; nothing short of normal there. But when Lynn decided to intrude--"

"I didn't intrude!" she defended. "I phased through the doorway. He wasn't answering our calls and even total shut-ins need to report in every once in a while. You were all worried about him, too, so don't act like--"

"Easy, babe," Strider said as he stepped beside his wife. "He didn't mean it like that."

"So when you found him he was like this?" Photon asked as she peered over the dormant body of Deathlok.

Lynn nodded in response to the question, a look of uncertainty on her face. They were gathered in the War Room, the tactical nerve center of their headquarters. Housed in the northern section of Chicago, this was where the H4H planned their missions before departing. Currently, however, their fist priority rested with their seemingly shut down teammate, Deathlok. The cyborg was strewn out on a long table off to the side of the state of the art equipment, the deteriorating organic parts of his body cold to the touch.

"So...", Luke began, "is there like...a power switch or something? Maybe he just needs a jump. I've got cables out in my Charger--"

“He’s not a car, Luke,” Danny scolded. The field leader crossed his arms over his chest in concentration, on the brink of desperation for an answer. “Maybe we can reboot him somehow. Monica, can you get someone with SHIELD on the phone? Deathlok was working for them before he recruited us so there’s a good chance they have information that could help us out.”

Photon turned to one of the many terminals in the room and began to type in the commands needed to connect to the SHIELD database. One of the many benefits Deathlok had brought with him when reforming the H4H were his contacts in Washington, least of all SHIELD. The international police force run by Nick Fury was definitely someone they wanted in their corner at all times. In exchange for a few assignments here and there, the Heroes For Hire were granted access to certain files, libraries, and dossiers. Monica typed in special passwords, hoping they could solve the problem before it was too late. There was no telling how long Deathlok could remain deactivated and still survive.

“How long has he been knocked out?” Strider asked.

“I found him about ten minutes ago,” Lynn answered, her face still showing worry. “He was locked up in his workroom for a few days but there’s no way of knowing for how much of that he was offline. He didn’t leave any...wait!”

Diamond Dust ran to another terminal and quickly began searching through the computer’s files. Deathlok lay on the table as if waiting for someone to say the magic words to make him spring to life. It was eerie watching their friend lie so still and unresponsive yet still be alive. Lynn found herself feeling responsible for his well-being since he had been the one to take her to the hospital after their encounter with Gog. *

* [Issues #4-6. – D]

“After we got back from storming that Protoclan base Deathlok was telling me about how he can integrate with the computers. His own onboard AI made stuff like that easy but he thought there were some bugs in it. He was really vague about the whole thing but it sounded like he was having serious problems controlling the AI.”

“Did he say if he was going to do anything to fix it?” Luke asked as he moved closer to the terminal.

“No, but I would bet dollars to doughnuts that was what he was cooped up in his lab for.”

“Dollars to doughnuts?” Strider commented. “Watch out, guys. When she uses lame metaphors, similes, and figures of speech like that it means she’s on to something.”

Lynn shot her husband an annoyed look. “It looks like he was keeping an external log of everything he did to try and correct whatever problems he was experiencing,” she said, ignoring her husband’s comments. “Here we go. Accessing now.”

Bits of text with time stamps beside them rapidly scrolled across the screen. The display went back over the last few weeks, each entry telling the surrounding heroes all about the attempts Deathlok had made to correct his problem. It was like some kind of personal journal he had kept, tracking his progress. Judging from the entries he hadn't made much headway.

"Wait," Iron Fist said. "Go back. Can you open the last entry from three days ago?"

A few keystrokes later and the requested entry expanded to fill the entire screen, the contents of which stunned the gathered team. Before them on the screen was a detailed explanation of the last conscious moments Deathlok had. *

* [Which you can see for yourself at the end of issue #6! – D]

"Christmas," Cage swore under his breath. "Does he mean who I think he means?"

"Apparently the Master of the World is to blame for this," Iron Fist replied. "I thought Eshu had been dealt with but it appears I was wrong. This is not good."

"Excuse me," Strider cut in. "For those of us that haven't been duking it out with supervillains most of our adult lives, would you mind explaining what the hell you're talking about? Who's Eshu? Does he seriously call himself the Master of the World?"

"He's big trouble for us," Luke answered as he turned back to Deathlok's still form. "We wrestled with him a couple of times, the last of which he almost succeeded in killing off most of the population. * If he got his slimy, manipulative hands on a bunch of blueprints for making weapons then things are worse than we thought. Damn..."

* [In Marvel's H4H series, written by John Ostrander – Copycat Dave]

Lynn closed the window and signed out of Deathlok's external log program. "So what do we do?"

"Heads up," Photon alerted from her terminal on the other side of the room. "Incoming message."

"SHIELD get back to you all ready?" Cage asked. "I guess even Fury takes a minute to check his e-mail these days."

Monica Rambeau hung her head as she checked whom the video uplink request was coming from. Since it was the H4H's main line she knew it was a business matter so there wasn't anything to actually be worried about from the woman trying to contact them. Her and Misty's last encounter had ended with a bionic fist to Monica's face, something she was slightly embarrassed about. *

* [That tiny cat-fight took place in issue #4 – Encyclopedia Dave-tanica]

“No...it’s...never mind. Nightwing Restorations is patching in now.”

Danny perked up at hearing the name of the company belonging to his former lover. He and Misty had always been off and on over the years but after screwing up they were definitely switched off. He tossed a quick glance at Monica to try and gauge her reaction to the incoming call but her head was turned away from him. He felt guilty over what had happened between them but there wasn’t anything he could do since he was part of the problem.

The video screen overhead flipped on, a white and silky face coming into focus. “Greetings, fellow mercenaries,” Colleen Wing, Misty’s partner and co-owner of Nightwing Restorations, said with a smile. “Feel like a team-up?”

“We’re a little tied up right now, sweet-cheeks,” Cage said with a wry smile. He loved teasing the Asian accented woman that was a trained samurai. “But I can always spare a minute for you. What’s up?”

“We’ve scored a case that’s a little out of our league and we could use your help. Our client has authorized me to cover your expenditures plus a nominal fee. Interested?”

Luke opened his mouth to make another flirtatious comment but Iron Fist cut him off. “Is this an emergency? We’re having a small crisis at the moment.”

“If you call downtown Detroit getting mauled by a pack of supervillains an emergency, then yeah.”

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“The rain!” Iron Fist screamed in warning to his teammates. “He’s using the rain to--”

A torrent of water drowned out the hero’s words as Hydro-Man unloaded his watery mass in a solid stream. The pressure pounded against the martial artist’s skull like a jackhammer, the villain refusing to let up.

Danny found himself wishing they had just stayed in Chicago, but when Colleen said her client was under attack from a new group calling themselves the Flood, how could he have refused? He might have been on the outs with Misty but Colleen was someone who still deserved whatever help he could offer.

Apparently Hydro-Man, along with the muscle-bound and blue-skinned Orca, and the mutant named Barnacle had decided to rob Colleen and Misty’s client, which turned out to be the Detroit Naval Research Center. Together the trio called themselves the Flood and were currently attempting to swipe a nuclear submarine reactor that was scheduled



for decommission. The Navy had transported the core in last night when the group of miscreants had decided to take it for themselves.

A 1987 Buick crashed into the side of Weinzerl's Garage and Detailing, decimating the family owned business into nothing more than a pile of bricks and mortar. Diamond Dust had been the intended target but as usual she proved harder to hit than most people. Orca, the Atlantean powerhouse, roared in annoyance as he readied something else big to throw at the woman.

"Whatever you got I can phase through," Diamond Dust said as she shifted her form back from intangibility. Her body was glossed over with a hard material that had a density like her namesake. Her fingers elongated slightly into points, a special bonus of her transformation. She raked her claws across each other in a modest attempt to discern Orca from another attack but he seemed intent on following through with the action. "Have it your way."

Diamond Dust bolted toward the lumbering brute, locking her auburn eyes with his baby blues. Orca, still decidedly sure he could take a woman a third his size, razed a telephone poll like a battering ram. Diamond Dust, using the control over her own density, simply continued running straight through the poll, her right claw raised and ready to slash.

"What the hell?" Orca exclaimed. "That's not fai--AHH!"

Clutching his face from Diamond Dust's slashing strike, Orca haphazardly tossed away the telephone poll, not paying attention to where it landed. The strange color of his Atlantean blood began to rise to the surface of his face and the pain overtook his primal instincts.

"Is this where you say something only marginally smarter than the Hulk?" Diamond Dust quipped as she tried to flank the brute to make another run at his face.

Orca swung his tree trunk arm out in a wide arc, hoping to catch the hero in a bulldozer clothesline. Diamond Dust again phased through the attack, slashing wildly once more at Orca's blue-skinned face. Mainly on instinct driven by pure hatred, the Atlantean managed to snag Diamond Dust by the face, clasping his huge fingers around her pale and tiny skull.

"Easy up now, blue boy," Cage bellowed as he fell down through the sky.

Orca looked up just in time to see Luke Cage's twin boots stomp into his already scarred face. Cage, having chosen the higher ground of the rooftops to descend from, ground his foot into Orca's face down into the pavement. Down for the count, he released Lynn from his bulky clutches.

Meanwhile, Iron Fist choked back whatever air he could manage to breathe in from under the watery onslaught of Hydro Man. "Never second guess a second rate villain!" Hydro

Man cried out. "I may not be regarded as much but I'm more than enough to take down a pack of lower tier capes!"

Hydro Man's mastery over water extended beyond his own liquid form. Using the nearby storm clouds, he commanded buckets of harsh rain to fall from the sky and onto his foes. The hazy rainfall made it difficult for his enemies to see let alone where to strike him from. That, couple with his own impressive powers, made his a dangerous adversary.

"I don't doubt it," Strider mocked as he zoomed across the street turned battlefield. "No one disputes your power. It's your brains they have a problem with."

The speedster dove headfirst inside the liquid body of Hydro Man, taking a deep breathe at the last moment. "What are you--" Hydro Man tried to say, but it was too late. Strider began to spin counter-clockwise from inside Hydro Man, quickly agitating the molecules that composed his body.

Hydro Man started his own vortex going the opposite direction in a desperate attempt to thwart the speedster, but it was all ready too late. He felt his control slip and his molecules begin to disperse. Water spouts shot out from his central form, gushing into the street as the rain became to subside.

"Guy's got water on the knee," Strider meekly mused as he exited the thinning water column that once was Hydro Man. "Hurry it up, Photon, before he reconstitutes himself."

The energy Avenger heeded Strider's warning and swooped in from overhead, her powers activated to their full potential. "On it!" she replied. Now that the torrential rain storm has dissipated she could easily join the fight without having to worry about hitting one of her teammates. She pointed her extended hands at the still spinning Hydro Man and fired a volley of synthesized light. The rays sizzled into his liquid flesh, dazzling his senses and shocking him into unconsciousness.

Two down, one to go.

Barnacle, a mutant that could condense moisture into a weapon, traded blows with Colleen Wing. Her samurai sword clutched in her hands, she would manage time and again to break through Barnacle's clumsy defenses only to be stopped short by his rock hard armor. He had fashioned a crude sword of his own, formed from the very rainfall that Hydro Man had brought. Like his armor, it was nearly unbreakable.

"Stupid freakin' broads," he muttered after missing Colleen with his clubbed weapon for the third time in as many tries. "Who hires chicks to do man's work?"

"Oh, I know you didn't just say that," Misty Knight said as she drew a bead on the mutant. Her bionic arm steadied her rifle and locked Barnacle in her sights, only to have the shot bounce off his body armor.

“Ha!” he laughed triumphantly. “See? Ain’t no way you can take me. The Flood is gonna take whatever it wants--HUMPH!”

Iron Fist drove all the air out of Barnacle’s lungs with one punch to his gut. Colleen and Misty had kept the mutant distracted while Iron Fist recovered and flanked him, finally using his special technique to knock him down. Energy still lingered around Daniel Rand’s fingers as the iron fist energy seeped away into the cold air.

“Your armor is impressive but it could not stand against the iron fist,” Danny mused.

The third and final member of the fledging Flood fell to the ground, his armor beginning to dissolve back into the water from whence it came. He teetered forward, pausing to match glares with Iron Fist, then fell onto his back, the sweet darkness overtaking him.

“Always wrapping up a brawl with that monk talk,” Cage commented as he and the others gathered near.

Iron Fist tossed his longtime partner a sideways glance filled with a smile, which was quickly swept away by the sight of Misty and Photon. He once held one of their hearts but now he held neither, a result of a foolish night of weakness. Strider and Diamond Dust secured the general area while Colleen called in the proper authorities to haul away the villainous garbage.

“Any idea why these pugs wanted an old sub?” Strider asked.

“Client said it was scheduled to be decommissioned today,” Misty answered casually, making sure her eyes were kept off of two of the Heroes. “It’s scrap. Useless. Best I can guess was they just wanted to make a name for themselves. You know. With the whole water theme. Guess a sub was appropriate for their debut.”

“Nice to know that not all supervillains are losers without goals,” Cage chuckled.

“So what’s our next move?” Photon inquired from behind Cage. Her arms were crossed and it was obvious at how uncomfortable she was in the present company. “One of us should at least get back to Deathlok soon. Ms. Brant shouldn’t be left there by herself when we don’t know what’s going on.”

“Then go,” Misty said coldly.

Luke looked back and forth between the two women and then glanced at Danny. He raised his eyebrow but Iron Fist subtly shook his head, as if to tell him to just let it go. He made a mental note to discuss it with Danny later, in privacy. It was very seldom that there were any secrets between the two Heroes and that alone meant that something big had happened.

His train of thought was broken when Misty cried out in surprise. Her bionic arm raised straight up, seemingly against her will. “Mother of--” she cried out as she fell to her knees. “God, it hurts! Help me! Colleen!”

The female samurai ran to her partner’s side but there was nothing she could do. Misty’s arm wavered back and forth like it had a mind of its own. The Heroes watched on, unsure of what to do. Then, with a final cry from Misty, her bionic arm pointed straight up where a small rectangular shard slid out from her palm. The shard began emitting a strange green light which quickly condensed into a hologram, forming a face that none were pleased to see.

“The Master,” Iron Fist said, almost swearing.

{{ Greetings and salutations! }} the hologram spoke. {{ So nice to see you all again. Especially you, Mr. Cage. }}

Luke stepped closer to the hologram, ready to tear the light construct apart with his bare hands. “Eshu,” he replied, “ain’t nothing gonna stop me from breaking your skull this time.”

{{ Yes, I’m sure. It might interest you all to know that the time has finally come for me to exact my revenge on you all. }}

“S’cuse me,” Strider chimed in. “But we’ve never met. Someone mind filling me in?”

{{ Ah, yes. The demon possessor. }} The hologram of the Master shifted directions to face Strider and his wife. {{ You’ve all ready caused me so much grief that I can barely stand it. If not for my partner, who is just as eager as I am to undertake this predicament, I would have killed you during that little escapade in Texas. }}

“Partner?” Diamond Dust said. “What does this have to do with Casavan?”

{{ You misunderstand. That impotent magic user was not with whom I share allegiance. No, that shadowy person has a history that mingles with your very own martial arts master. }}

Photon tossed a quick glance at Iron Fist before stepping up beside Cage, drawing the Master’s attention to herself. “Let Misty go,” she said.

{{ Such brevity. I would release her except that her bionic arm is something of importance to me. At least, for the next thirty seconds or so before I end this transmission. }}

“What do you want, Eshu?” demanded Iron Fist.

{{ Your secretary is fine and sleeping but Deathlok is now with me. That excuse you pass off as a headquarters was easily penetrated by my minions. What I want is for you to come after me. }}

“Well this is a first,” Cage scoffed. “The bad guy is politely asking for us to show up at his doorstep.”

Misty’s arm buckled both from under the strain of the Master’s control and his desire for a second shard to slide forth from her bionic palm. A second green light emanated from it, spewing forth into a swirling circle of green and yellow energy. The strange field formed a portal that led to some place the Heroes were sure they didn’t inherently want to travel.

{{ You’ve no idea the trouble I’ve gone through to gain access Ms. Knight’s arm. This is all or none. If one of you decides to stay behind to go for help then I’ll detonate the arm, killing anyone within a square block. Now, if you’ll all be so kind as to jump through the gateway... }}

The Heroes looked to each other but no one could offer any better suggestions than what the Master had commanded them to do. They were at a loss. For now, they would have to play by his rules.

TO BE CONTINUED

# Heroes For Hire

Issue #9

Justifiable – Part Two

“We are the dumbest bunch of heroes on the planet,” Luke Cage muttered as he took in the site before him.

Luke had been the last one on the team to walk through the portal that the Master had opened up, despite his instincts screaming at him not to. They didn't really have a choice in the matter, since Misty was in a bad way and the Master claimed to have Deathlok all tied up. Being a real hero meant having to do the right thing, no matter what.

Unfortunately, it also meant walking straight into an obvious trap.

“On your guard,” Iron Fist ordered. As the H4H's team leader Danny Rand felt responsible for every decision made on the field, meaning he took full responsibility for their current predicament.

Upon exiting the portal the team had apparently been sent to different places. Luke and Danny stood back to back in a dark chamber that was lined with skeletons. Wherever they were, it looked like it had come directly from Stephen King's mind, as the walls were pitch black and there was only one source of light emanating from the only doorway.

Even though the cards were certainly stacked against him, Luke Cage remained calm. He had been in worse situations than this and as long as he kept his cool they should have no problem figuring everything out. That's what heroes did.

It was a little unsettling to see that laying on the floor at their feet was the self-proclaimed Master of the World, unconscious and possibly dead.

“What do you think s'going on?” Luke asked, keeping his eyes focused on the doorway.

“We've been tricked,” Iron Fist replied coolly. “Again.”

“Answer's probably through that door.”

“Probably.”

The pair remained back to back, unmoving and apprehensive. This was no time to go barging into things. They needed to assess the situation and proceed with caution. As longtime partners they both had no doubt in each other's abilities and knew that they could count on one another when it really mattered.

Silently, the pair crept forward with Luke slightly in the lead. His partial invulnerability would provide a decent shield against whatever was in the next chamber. Iron Fist strode forward half a step behind his partner, his upper torso stiff and ready to lash out.

After making sure the Master really was out cold, Luke and Danny stepped through the doorway to find themselves on top of a stone staircase. The chamber before them was massive and well illuminated with various torches that were attached to support pillars. The chamber was easily three or four stories high, with most of the space completely devoid of any obstruction. The impressive room only fazed the pair for a moment as their attention was quickly drawn to the exact center where a stone throne was holding their benefactor.

“Greetings,” the tall man said kindly. The shadows clung to him, keeping his face from their view. Swirling around his feet were silvery objects that seemed to slither along the floor, the casting light reflecting brilliantly off their hides. The man leaned forward, gently pushing one of the silvery creatures away from his leg. “Welcome to my abode.”

“Who the hell are you and where are our friends?” Luke blurted out. His fists were clenched together and he was ready to start swinging.

“Easy, Luke,” Danny warned his partner. “I recognize that voice.”

“You’re still very astute, I see.” The man rose from his throne and the silvery creatures quickly dispersed, choosing to cower behind the pillars supporting the massive roof over their heads. “Unfortunately, your wit and powers of observation will do little to stay my hand. The time has come for you to die, Daniel Rand, like you should have years ago.”

“I take it you know this creep?” Luke whispered over his shoulder.

Iron Fist took in a deep breath. “There was once a fierce and deadly dragon named Chiantang. He was brother to the Dragon King, the mightiest of all dragons. This dragon was powerful enough to bring the great city of K’un Lun to its knees and has been branded as a bane to all its children. Luke, the man down there is not a man. He is the Black Dragon, Chiantang.”

The man clapped slowly, a look of disdain on his face. “Very good, Rand. Your memory serves you well. I am indeed Chiantang, although the moniker of the Black Dragon isn’t one I’m particularly proud of.”

“What’s going on?” Iron Fist demanded. He held his stance and began channeling his chi, his very life essence, into his enclosed fist.

“The Master sought to usurp my power,” Chiantang explained almost casually, as if it were a simple trivia question. “He sought wrong. We had been partners but I thought it best to end our mutual relationship before he decided to make his move. If you had not

destroyed that idiot Casavan I would have done so myself. He who strikes first, stands last.”

“You twist the teachings,” Iron Fist accused. Luke saw a look of hatred on his partner’s face that he had never seen before.

“Do I? And what of you? You left the sacred city before finding out your true potential. I shall take your power and seek vengeance for my niece at the same time!”

“Casavan? Let’s shut this guy up, Danny” Luke murmured. “Dragon or not he’s just itching for a good beat down. If he was the sorcerer’s teacher then we need to end this quick.” \*

**\* [Check H4H #1-3 for the story on Casavan – D]**

Iron Fist stepped in front of Cage, finally breaking his stance. “What do you mean? What potential? And as for your niece, daughter to the Dragon King, her death is on your hands. Do not try to make excuses for yourself.” \*

**\* [She was killed in Marvel’s Power Man and Iron Fist #119 – D, again.]**

Chiantang smiled evilly, his toothy sneer covering the lower portion of his human face. He waved his hand and the silvery creatures rapidly slithered out of the room. The shadows began to disperse from his form as he stepped down from the throne and into the center of the chamber, an air of impressive strength about his person.

“My pets,” he began, “are a species called Warwolves. I bought them recently from a six-armed woman who was easily manipulated into selling before her kingdom was destroyed.\* Now that I’ve stripped them of their intelligence they should serve well enough to destroy your friends.”

**\* [Check X-Corp for the truth about the Warwolves and Mojoworld! – D \*whew!\***

“What have you done?” Iron Fist demanded.

“I thought it best that we face each other, Daniel Rand, without the interference of your so-called Heroes. Your dark-skinned friend, however...he is a true ally, one that I have a similar grudge against when last we met. Consider his presence a gift from me, Rand. Before this night is through I shall rip out your heart and consume your power!”

As the last word dripped from Chiantang’s mouth his form began to shift and change into a grotesque creature. His arms elongated and thickened, his torso swelled and tore through his robes, and his head changed to a sickly green color as horns spring forth from his scalp. Before long massive wings erupted from his back, his transformation complete.

The Black Dragon roared in defiance of his enemies, shaking the very halls of the castle.



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“Are you okay?” Photon asked feebly.

The energy avenger helped Misty Knight to her feet while the samurai Colleen Wing did the same for Diamond Dust. Strider ran his hands along the stone walls of their holding cell, searching for a way to escape. They had been transported to a strange location and separated from the others, unsure of what fate awaited them.

“Fine,” Misty curtly replied, ripping her bionic arm out of Photon’s grasp. It was obvious that she still held resentment toward Photon, her inflection anything but gracious.

“Any luck, babe?” Diamond inquired of her demon-possessed husband, attempting to take the attention off of the other two females. “We stuck in here or what.”

“I can’t find a door, a window, a vent...nothing,” Strider replied with a sigh. His black costume made him hard to make out in the dark confines of their prison but they could see his white teeth mashed together in frustration. “This room must have been built as a containment area. We’re totally trapped here unless we start busting the place down, and that might draw unwanted attention.”

“How about I just phase through and see what I can find?” Diamond Dust offered sarcastically. “Or did you forget I could do that?”

Strider raised an eyebrow and lowered his head forward. “Uh...maybe...”

“Men,” Colleen mumbled quietly.

Diamond Dust scoffed and shook her head. She loved her husband but he was so thick-headed at times, assuming that he had to be the one who freed them. It wasn’t chauvinism, just a strong sense of responsibility mixed with resentful helplessness. She pushed the thoughts from her mind and quickly concentrated on the effort of will needed to shift her body through the phases of matter, changing her density to intangibility.

Slipping between the atoms of the brick wall, Diamond Dust left the other heroes behind and passed into the next chamber. Then, just as fast as she had disappeared, she returned with a look of shock on her face.

“What did you see?” Misty asked urgently. “Any clue as to where the hell we are?”

Diamond Dust motioned for them to move back against the far wall. “Everyone get down!”

The brick wall she had just phased through suddenly ruptured, sending debris scattering through the air like shrapnel. Thick dust was coughed up from the floor from the result of

the impacting bricks, filling up the heroes' lungs with dirt and grime. Photon instinctively flashed into her energy form, her glowing body now casting illumination into the room.

A plethora of silvery beasts squirmed into the hole and gleamed at the heroes, looking almost hungry. Their skins were smooth and devoid of friction, their eyes blank and shadowy.

“Prepare yourselves!” Colleen Wig ordered loudly. She unsheathed her sword and readied herself to slice into the flesh of another being.

The beasts launched themselves into the room, their claws slashing and swiping through the open air. Their snouts came to points and jabbed at each of the heroes, attempting to sever their ties with the mortal coil. They were fast and relentless, but not as quick as Strider.

Blue energy crackled around the speedster's eyes as he zipped to the front of the fray, catching one of the Warwolves in midair. The beast was vicious but Strider managed to hold on, keeping the clapping jaws just far enough away from his head. The speedster suddenly stopped fighting back. The creature locked its blank and gaping eyes onto Strider's, freezing him in place.

“Damn it!” Photon swore. “I remember these things from the Avengers' files. Get that thing off of him! If these bastards latch their eyes onto yours it means they're trying to rip your soul out!”

Two of the snarling beasts leapt at Photon, causing her to shoot up to the ceiling and blast them with a ray of condensed light. Colleen ran forward to help the fallen speedster but another pair of Warwolves blocked her path. With a quick stroke of her sword she slashed them away, twin shrieks of pain crying from their horrid throats.

Diamond Dust made it to her husband after phasing through one of the creatures. She cocked her fist back let it fly. Just before it connected with the side of the creature's head she inverted her density and became as solid as the rare mineral she took part of her name from. The force of her blow was enough to loosen the mental hold the creature had over Strider, as he quickly shook his head and came to his senses.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Strider commented as he kicked the creature off of him. “Damn thing had a grip on the demon inside me. Yuck.”

“Less talk; more ass-kicking,” she replied coolly.

“Yes, dear.”

Misty slammed her own bionic fist into one of the creature's heads, sending it reeling into another. “I've heard of these things before. Aren't they supposed to be smart? And a hell of a lot stronger?”

“I would wager that they’ve been toyed with,” Colleen theorized while slashing at the silvery beast Misty had just knocked down. “Stay with me, sister. We’ll cut these mongrels down to nothing!”

Photon chanced a look at the pair of women before firing off another volley of light at the floor. She couldn’t help but notice how strangely Colleen had been acting since the last time they had met. Of course, she and Misty weren’t on great terms these days, ever since the detective had somehow gotten a hold of photos showing her and Iron Fist in a slightly more than friendly situation. It stood to reason that Colleen harbored her ill will just like Misty. How exactly had Misty gotten those pictures was something Photon intended to find out.

The room was large but not large enough. Photon found herself unable to do much more than snipe from her position near the ceiling. With the jumble of Warwolves huddled around her teammates she was stuck since she couldn’t risk hitting of them. Even Strider’s speed was ineffective in such a confined space.

They were caught between a rock and a hard place. They needed help. They needed to find the others.

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“Die, you insolent whelps!” Chiantang roared.

The towering dragon breathed a plume of fiery exhaust from his nostrils, drenching the gigantic hall in sizzling heat. Luke Cage began to sweat, not only from the warmth emanating from the Black Dragon, but from nerves. Taking down a mindless Gog had been one thing \*, but he knew that fighting a powerful magic user like Chiantang would be anything but simple.

\* [H4H #4-6 – D]

“Watch out!” Iron Fist screamed, leaping to Luke’s side and pushing him down. Chiantang’s massive tale swept over their heads, barely missing the pair.

“Thanks, partner,” Luke said after he caught his breath. “Let’s get to work!”

Iron Fist nodded and sprang up from his position on the ground, summoning all of his life essence into one striking blow. The energy that had been building since he first saw the Black Dragon finally reached a crescendo, ready to be unleashed in one powerful punch.

Luke stood up and lunged for the tail as it swung back around in an attempt to smack Iron Fist. With every fiber of his being, Cage clasped his arms around the thick tail and held fast, his impressive strength put to the test. The momentum of the collision with Chiantang’s tail shoved him back and his feet scraped along the stone floor. As sweat

trickled down his cheeks he redoubled his efforts and held on for dear life, ensuring the appendage wouldn't hit Iron Fist.

The child of K'un Lun ran as fast as he legs would allow, closing the distance between himself and his enemy. A set of gaping claws swung low but Iron Fist was fast enough to somersault over them. At the apex of his jump he extended his hand and used the massive clawed fist under him as a springboard, adding height to his leap.

The Black Dragon bellowed and leaned forward, his huge neck providing more than enough flexibility to bring his jaws down to the heroes' level. "I'll consume your spirit, and with it, your power!"

Iron Fist ignored Chiantang, instead choosing to concentrate on the power building in his arm. Just as the evil dragon lord opened his enormous mouth, with saliva dripping off of the many rows of jagged teeth, Daniel Rand commanded the energy within his fist to unleash with the force of his punch. His knuckles connected with the Black Dragon's snout with a satisfying *crunch!* and Chiantang pulled his head back in both surprise and pain.

The hall shook with the might of his roar and his body suddenly spasmed. Luke Cage tried to hold on to Chiantang's tail but the ferocity of his movements were too much for the hired hero. Cage was sent flying through one of the support pillars, slamming up against the far wall. His vision went blurry as he slid down to the cool, welcoming ground.

The Black Dragon recovered from the striking blow and quickly grasped the martial artist who had struck him. "Swatting me with your limited abilities will do you no good, Son of the Sacred City."

Iron Fist felt the air begin squeezed out of his lungs and couldn't respond. He wanted to break free and make Chiantang pay for his crimes...but he was weak in comparison, too infantile to be able to fight against the choking fingers surrounding him.

"Good bye," Chiantang stated coldly. "Your carcass will suffice my needs just as much as your living body would."

Chiantang flung his fingers open and tossed Iron Fist away with enough force to shatter a concrete wall. The martial artist had just enough time to turn around before he crashed into the same wall Cage had been tossed against. Instead of halting his flight, however, the wall buckled and smashed open as he collided with it.

The last thing Iron Fist thought of before blacking out was that this was the end.

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"Let's play round-up!" Strider hollered over the battle.

Misty Knight elbowed one of the Warwolves in the gut after Colleen had deflected its claws with her sword. Leaning into the hit with all the force her bionic arm could muster, Misty knocked the creature over onto its side. Taking her queue from the speedster, Misty bent down and tried to roll the silvery beast toward the center of the room where the rest were being gathered, being careful to avoid its snapping jaws.

Photon gently floated down from the ceiling and unleashed a powerful, but thin, stream of energy at the floor, blasting a hole clear through. She had to be careful with her aim, since the floor was her actual target and not the beasts themselves. The center of the room caved in slightly but the mortar held most of the bricks in place, keeping the heroes safe on the outskirts of the cramped room.

The Warwolves fell through the opening, falling several dozen feet until they slammed into the room below. Diamond Dust peered over, her eyes taking stock in the defeated monsters. She breathed a sigh of relief and wiped imaginary sweat from her brow.

“Glad that’s over with,” she stated. “Friggin’ wannabe demons.”

“Might be time for us to start looking for the others,” Strider commented as he rubbed his wife’s back to relieve the tension. “Any ideas on where to start?”

Misty leaned over the hole and quickly pulled her head back. “How about down there?”

“Uh...I was thinking more along the lines of a place where there *weren’t* nasty creatures with the desire to eat my flesh,” Strider replied sarcastically, “but, yeah, sure, whatever.”

“I’m serious. Take a look for yourself.”

With a curious expression on his face Strider did as he was told, leaning over the opening to look down into the room underneath. There was barely any light to see by but what little of it there was reflected off of something shiny under the pile of unconscious Warwolves. It was something metallic and familiar.

“Holy shit,” Strider swore as soon as recognition clicked into place. “We just dropped a pack of monsters on top of Deathlok.”

TO BE CONTINUED

Heroes For Hire
Issue #10
Justifiable – Conclusion

He was a trained fighter, put through rigorous trials in order to achieve something of a sacred importance. He had been knocked down by the Thing, Namor, and even the Hulk. He had gone several rounds with Captain America and stood tall.

Regardless, Iron Fist was seeing stars.

After being slapped away by Chiantang, Danny Rand had flown straight through a wall and fallen into some sort of antechamber from the giant amphitheater they had met the Black Dragon in. Luke Cage was doing his best to take down the villain but Danny knew that he wouldn't stand a chance alone. They had beaten Chiantang before and they would do it again. They just needed a little bit of help and a lot of luck.

Shaking his head to clear the stars away, Iron Fist stood up and felt broken bones and pulled muscles. He wanted to just fall back over and go to sleep, letting sweet unconsciousness claim him so that the numbing pain would stop. He knew that wouldn't happen; it couldn't. Not when his friends were depending on him.

Like some many times before, Iron Fist concentrated and focused the very essence of his life force, channeling it into his closed fist. Instead of a steady hum of energy he was met with a gentle sputter before the ignition of his power. He was worn out and his powers weren't as reliable.

So why did Chiantang tell him he hadn't reached his true potential?

The entire scenario seemed wrong somehow. Chiantang, for some reason, thought himself justifiable in his actions. He wasn't usually this methodical. He had apparently trained a human, Casavan, who ultimately brought the team together, which may have been on purpose. He had manipulated the Master into doing his dirty work, collecting the team together for him with promises of technological power. Plus, somehow Misty had come into possession of photographs that shattered their already brittle relationship. Was Chiantang behind that, too?

Iron Fist heard the raging battle between his partner, Luke Cage, and the Black Dragon coming from the larger room before him. He quickly looked around the antechamber for something he could use to his advantage, when suddenly, like a beacon of hope, his eyes lay to rest on something he had not seen since his days within the sacred city of K'un Lun.

Gripping the item in his hand he began to think that maybe, just maybe, the Heroes For Hire had a chance against the Black Dragon.

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“Lay down and die, whelp!” Chiantang commanded. His teeth were bared, the saliva oozing down off of his tongue and spilling onto the floor like acid. In his full dragon form, the monstrous villain towered over Luke Cage, making him seem like a mouse in comparison. “I’ll crush your bones into paste.”

“Ain’t been a sucka yet that could make good on that threat, ugly,” Cage countered.

The resilient hero stood his ground even though he knew it was pointless. As far as he knew all his teammates were dead and he was the only one left standing. The fact that Chiantang had so easily manipulated them all into walking right smack into the center of his domain was enough to rattle him...but he wasn’t about to give up. Additionally he had been able to overpower the Master, even going so far as to use his own methods as a way to draw them in. Chiantang was definitely no lightweight.

Grabbing a handful of gravel from the smashed pillar he had been tossed through, Cage launched the rocks at his foe. The jagged gravel tore into the Black Dragon like buckshot, imbedding itself in the monster’s skin thanks to Cage’s impressive strength.

Chiantang, instead of roaring in defiance like Cage expected, simply shook the gravel out and wiped away the blood. “You forget, human,” he said, “I am no mere commoner. I am a practitioner of the Art, as all my kind are to some degree or another.”

Rims of energy rippled over the fresh wounds, sealing them instantly. The spell took a good deal of his concentration, but given that Cage wasn’t able to do much to harm him, Chiantang could spare the effort.

“I’m virtually immortal, you fool.”

Cage puffed out his chest and tried to steady his breathing. “We’ll see about that.”

The hero charged his opponent, running with all of his might in a last ditch effort to end the fight. In his mind he saw how he wanted things to unfold: charge the beast, get by his tail, clutch his throat, tear his damn head off. It was simple but at the same time his plan seemed like the hardest goal he ever had to accomplish.

He ran twenty feet before being blown back by a gust of wind generated by Chiantang’s massive wingspan. With two flaps of the thin extremities Cage was sent spiraling through the air and out of control. The Black Dragon chuckled deeply as he watched Luke Cage flail about across the expansive room.

The wind blew hard enough to bring tears to Cage’s eyes. A quick, cold blast from the air disrupted his vision and made him lose track of which way was up. He had no hope of landing safely.

“Relax,” a familiar voice said. “I’ve got you, Luke.”

Soft arms wrapped around his torso, righting him in the air. Energy visibly washed over him from his savior's embrace, energy he recognized instantly. "Monica, baby," he muttered, "I owe you one."

"You owe me three," Photon replied casually. "But who's keeping track? Let's kick this guy's ass and go home, partner."

Cage locked eyes with Photon for a split second before nodding. She dropped him on the ground and rocketed at her new target, allowing her body to completely shift into her energy form. Streaks of yellow light were all that was left of her as she flew into the large amphitheater.

"Holy shit," Strider swore as he came up behind Cage. "Who is that?"

"That's trouble," Cage responded after catching his breath. "Where are the others?"

"Right here," Diamond Dust answered. She caught up with her husband and placed a hand on his shoulder. She stared at the dragon battling his massive clawed fists at the energy avenger flying around him and suddenly couldn't move. "Damn. David...we need to get you out of here."

"What?" he replied, shocked. "Why? What are you talking about? We need to get in there and—"

"Questions later," a metallic voice added from behind them. Cage turned to see Deathlok stalking closer to them with the support of Misty Knight. He leaned on her heavily as it appeared that his leg had been severely damaged. Colleen Wing, the modern day samurai warrior, was a half step behind them. "While I was hooked up to the Master's systems I had a chance to download all the information on both of you."

"Maybe this isn't the best time," Misty interrupted. "As much as I would like to see Monica get tossed around we need to get her some support."

Colleen unsheathed her sword with a soft twang, letting its presence speak for her. Strider tossed an irritated look at Deathlok, a confused one at Diamond Dust, then a worried one at the fight occurring a few dozen yards ahead of him. Luke braced himself for the battle once more. Lynn adjusted her density to diamond hardness, letting her skin crystallize. Deathlok let go of Misty, who had just reloading her weapon, and held himself steady by leaning against the wall.

Like a well-oiled machine, the remnants of the Heroes For Hire jumped into action as though connected to one another. Strider reached the fray first, his speed catapulting him at the dragon. He looked up to see Photon dodging gobs of fire being spewed out from Chiantang's mouth and could feel the heat splashing against his aura, even from the ground.



Strider zipped around the dragon's tail, narrowly avoiding a set of claws as he cocked back his fist to throw a punch into Chiantang's exposed stomach. His gauntlets, a vibranium composite, added to his incredible momentum and actually allowed him to puncture the dragon's skin. Blood instantly shot onto the floor from the newly inflicted wound, coating the speedster's arm in dark liquid.

Chiantang retaliated with his other set of claws, catching Strider off guard and knocking him away. Before he could smash his heavy tail down onto the speedster, Cage was there to catch the appendage. He clenched his teeth as he fought to keep the giant tail from crushing them both, using every ounce of strength at his disposal.

"Peek-a-boo," Photon said as she flew up inches from Chiantang's scaly face. "Time for a face full of sunlight."

Photon's arms glowed brilliantly as she controlled her powers, charging them with light waves similar to that of the sun. She bent the light around her body so that all of it was directed straight into the Black Dragon's eyes and away from her teammates. The scorching energy immediately burnt Chiantang's retinas, regardless of how tightly he held his eyelids shut.

Almost on instinct, Chiantang belted out a ball of fire. The flames caught Photon off guard, causing her to stop the bombardment for fear of getting burned. Reverting to flesh, Monica was knocked away from one of Chiantang's flailing arms.

Roaring, the Black Dragon clasped at his face, desperate to heal the singed tissue of his eyes and surrounding scales. His magic washed over his face, slowly regenerating the cells back into health. Within moments he was healed at the cost of a large portion of his energy. The concentration needed to retain his dragon form gone, Chiantang began to shrink and transform, his green scales losing their color and texture as he slowly began to resemble a human man once more.

"That will cost you, witch," he said to Photon. "You'll pay for that with your life. It matters not what form I am forced to take; I shall bathe in your blood."

Suddenly the long blade of Colleen Wing was in Chiantang's path. Her samurai skill allowed her to slip around the side of the dragon without much difficulty, but she knew that staying alive after that would be the real challenge. She glared at her opponent, matching his menacing gaze with her own as a silent challenge for him to take one more step forward.

"You truly have been brought here by mistake," Chiantang said. "Leave with your life, if you desire it."

"Not a chance, asshole."

Chiantang turned his head to see that Misty Knight had flanked him. She had her gun drawn and aimed at his head, just as Colleen had with her sword. "From what I've seen if we let you walk out of here there'll be hell to pay. Can't let that happen."

"Miss Knight," Chiantang spoke with an added bit of venom to the words. "I've known of you for some time. I see why Rand is so taken with you. Because of your presence I will enjoy slaughtering him all the—"

Colleen's sword sliced into his flesh, rapidly tearing a chunk of skin off of his arm. Spinning around with the downward thrust, Colleen pulled the tip of her blade back up and stabbed Chiantang in his gut, pushing the blade all the way in to the hilt. Anger flashed through the dragon's eyes, but Misty pulled her trigger three times, planting a shot in each of his eyes and one in the exact center of his head.

His neck snapped back as his hands closed around Colleen's hands where they grasped the blade's handle. He ignored the pain running through his nervous system and squeezed, snapping three of Colleen's fingers with ease. The bullets he had taken to the face popped out with a sickening sound, dropping to the floor. He smiled at Misty as he twisted Colleen's hands, breaking her wrists.

"You bastard!" Misty swore. "You're gonna burn for that!"

"You first," Chiantang countered.

He planted his foot on Colleen's chest and kicked her away, the momentum from the shove enough to rip the sword out of his body. As the samurai flew through the air the dragon turned to Misty and breathed out a blast of flame, singeing her hair and knocking her over. The oxygen in the air around her threatened to consume her as the breath in her own lungs was vacuumed out from the sudden combustion.

Diamond Dust arose from the floor behind Chiantang, her phasing powers allowing her to glide through the stone ground with ease. "Not after I lobotomize you, you disgusting, overgrown lizard," she threatened.

Chiantang lashed out suddenly, clenching his human fingers around Diamond Dust's throat. A look of extreme confusion and fear flashed across her face: he shouldn't have been able to touch her, not while she was still intangible. The Black Dragon smiled at her, an evil and toothy grin smeared across his own face.

"Do not forget where your powers came from," he told her. "You are my puppet."

"Strider, don't!" Deathlok cried.

The cyborg's warning wasn't quick enough. Strider, still woozy from being tossed like a rag doll, rocketed across the room and straight into Chiantang's steel grip. The Black

Dragon's speed wasn't on par with Strider's, but he was prepared for the speedster to foolishly attack once he saw his lover in danger.

"It's time I took back what should have been mine all along," Chiantang stated coldly.

With the pair of heroes in each hand, the Black Dragon summoned the scattered portions of his power and began to withdraw the energies that lay within both Diamond Dust and Strider. Lynn, her body fluctuating rapidly between the states of matter, began to convulse uncontrollably. David, his muscles all seizing at once, began to vibrate from the penned up demonic energy that was finally able to funnel out of him.

"What's going on?" Photon asked.

"He's summoning the mystical power that keeps Strider and Diamond Dust going," Deathlok answered. "When the Master had me hooked up to his systems in order to download my databanks, it was a two-way street. I was able to look at his files and discovered something disturbing about those two. They've been lying to us from the start."

"Screw it," Cage hollered as he charged forward. "They're still on our side the last time I checked."

Cage got within ten feet before bouncing off of an energy field that had erected around the trio. As Chiantang sucked in their very life essence he redirected the energy to protect himself. No longer weakened, the evil villain was now more powerful than before.

"Thank you," he said as he let the pair drop to the ground. "When you both interrupted the ceremony that Casavan and I were performing in order to gain otherworldly power, I thought these mighty energies had eluded me forever. Now that you were stupid enough to fall into my hands I have which is rightfully mine."

David rolled over onto his back, his eyes no longer glowing a brilliant blue hue as they once did, a side effect of being bonded with the demon that powered him. He opened his mouth to try and speak but lacked the ability to speak. He was exhausted and powerless, completely at the Black Dragon's mercy.

"I see why Casavan chose this particular demon," Chiantang commented. "It's power is...unique. You obviously didn't comprehend the power you held. And as for you, my dear 'Diamond Dust,' you stole what should have been mine directly. Whereas Casavan summoned a demon to bond with, I merely sought to steal the righteous energies of the Nevernever, a lower portion of the magic realm that would fuel my quest to find Iron Fist for all eternity. I see you also squandered it."

Lynn lay unmoving at the villain's feet. Her eyes were fluttering but there were no other signs of life. It appeared as though she had been cast into a deep sleep, as her chest moved up and down in a steady rhythm that suggested slumber.

“I still have no idea how you managed to interrupt our ceremony and divert the summoned powers to yourselves, but that is a question I shall let go unanswered. Now, I will take your heads and burn your bones!”

“Stand down!” a weather voice boomed out from across the great hall.

The worn H4H collectively turned to see their leader, Iron Fist, standing within the whole he had been tossed through. His body looked tired and ready to fall over exhausted, but a fire burned deep in his eyes that juxtaposed his mannerisms. It was as if Iron Fist had found a wealth of power somewhere within his very soul that allowed him to continue standing.

Chiantang studied the man he had been so desperate to defeat, slightly ashamed that he had allowed the other miscreant Heroes to distract him from accomplishing his most important goal. The feeling soon passed, immediately replaced by assurance of victory as images of his defeat over Iron Fist flooded his mind. He smiled, bringing the recently stolen power to a bright point at the end of his hands.

“You still live,” Chiantang said just loud enough for Iron Fist to hear. “Good. I was worried that the satisfaction of crushing your skull between my hands had evaded me.”

“Stand down,” Iron Fist repeated. “I give you this chance to walk away with your life. Leave me and my friends alone, or by K’un Lun I will cut out your heart to make sure it never beats again.”

“And what makes you think you’ll be able to do such a thing?”

Iron Fist’s hand began to glow a bright orange hue. Waves of power emanated profusely as the energy culminated into a shell around his closed fist. “The power of the iron fist will make you fall, dragon.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Chiantang replied with a scoff. “Your precious technique has already failed to subdue me this day.”

“On it’s own, yes. But you made a grave mistake by knocking me through that wall.”

The rippling shell of energy around his hand began to stretch and solidify. Within moments, the legendary power under Daniel Rand’s control birthed an entirely new weapon, thought lost for ages.

“No...”

“Yes,” Iron Fist replied. “The Blade of the Dragon. I only assume you stole it when you last invaded K’un Lun. Removing it from the sacred halls of the great temple is an act

worthy of death, as you well know. This ancient blade is older than even you, Chiantang, and now I know why you sought so desperately to usurp my power.”

Chiantang smiled. “You cannot wield it, Rand. Its power will destroy you. It was meant to add to the technique you so carelessly waste on trivial matters. Even the masters of your retched city were afraid to use its power. What makes you think you can hold it against me, especially now that I’ve reabsorbed my stolen power?”

Iron Fist returned the devilish smile with one of his own as the sword finished forming into a silver blade, its handle in the shape of a dragon’s head. “You’ll see in a moment, dragon.”

With that challenge, Chiantang leapt over the unmoving forms of Strider and Diamond Dust, his own glowing hands lashing out at Iron Fist in a series complex martial arts movements. Appendages flew back and forth with lightning speed as Chiantang pressed his advance, forcing Iron Fist to take a few steps back as he narrowly avoided each attack.

“Danny!” Luke Cage called out.

“We’re in no shape to help him,” Deathlok said. “Chiantang’s wiped the floor with us already. Daniel is the only one that has a chance to take the bastard down. Save your strength in case we need to give one last push.”

Photon and Misty both looked on in dismay as the man they had shared intimate moments with fought not only for his own life, but theirs as well. He looked charged, as if the sword now glistening in his hand had provided him with a second and third wind. He kept up with the Black Dragon, not allowing any of his attacks to connect with him.

The magical energy at Chiantang’s command bounced off of the sword as Iron Fist deflected his attacks. “You speak of blasphemy,” the dragon said. “What will your masters in the sacred city think of you absorbing the sword into your body?”

“Better than letting you take it,” Iron Fist shot back. “The sword magnifies the iron fist, and it is now a part of me just as you intended to make it part of you. You’ll never have it now unless you kill me.”

“That will soon come to pass, human!”

“This ends now!”

Chiantang kicked for Danny’s head, but he ducked under the move just in time, quickly countering with a strike of his own. With an upward thrust, Iron Fist sliced into his foe with the mystical Blade of the Dragon, cutting into Chiantang’s body with ease. The energy burst forth as the blade touched the dragon’s flesh and Danny felt more powerful than he had ever felt before. Power flowed freely from the center of his chest, down his

arm, through the blade, and into the Black Dragon. The intense energy assault cauterized the gaping wound as the tip of the blade passed through, finally coming free from Chiantang's head.

Iron Fist had cut the Black Dragon completely in half vertically. The two pieces of the villain's body slid apart from one another, the internal organs and fluids trapped behind walls of burnt flesh. Smoke billowed off of the once proud villain's body as its parts fell to the floor, dead.

Cage stumbled over to his longtime friend and partner, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Christmas..." was all he could manage to say. He had seen his friend in action many times over the years but never with such ferocity.

"Are you okay?" Danny asked after taking in a deep breath.

"Yeah...yeah, I'm cool. Are you?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine. I'll be just fine now."

The Blade of the Dragon began to glow once more, although this time the energy was much softer and easier on the eyes. Reverting to an energy form, its blade slowly shrank down until it was completely gone, swallowed up by Iron Fist's open hand. The blade as a part of him now, in tune with his very soul.

"Let's go home, bro," Cage muttered.

Iron Fist nodded, feeling the rush of adrenaline finally start to leave him. He had undergone severe trials to attain the power he had come to take for granted, but now that the Blade of the Dragon had entered the equation, he felt like he had just started an entirely new journey. He looked at Luke, then to Misty, Colleen, and all the others, realizing that things would never be the same again.

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"So where will you go?" Cage asked.

"Well," David Erickson replied, "we're not sure yet. Maybe pack to Peru. We met some people down there that are real helpful with people like us."

Deathlok, newly repaired, stood in the back of the War Room and glared at both Strider and Diamond Dust. "You never answered any of our questions," he said.

"We're leaving, all right?" Lynn cut in. "Just like you've been insinuating since we got back. Just...just back off."

“Easy,” Photon said, stepping in between the pair. “Deathlok, we don’t need them to explain themselves. If they—”

“No, it’s okay,” David said. “We owe you an explanation. We sort of dragged you into some bad situations without regard to your safety, and that’s really on me. We’re sorry about that.”

Danny and Luke stood beside each other on the far side of the room. Deathlok and Monica Rambeau briefly stared at each other before turning back to face Strider, eagerly awaiting his explanation. It had been two days since they returned from Chiantang’s citadel, two days filled with accusations and mistrust. Now, Lynn and David were finally leaving the team after taking time to recuperate.

“So what was the deal between you and Chiantang and Casavan?” Cage finally asked.

“For starters, I think it’s time I came clean about who we really are,” Strider admitted. “You already know that Casavan was Chiantang’s student. Honestly, we were in the dark about that connection. Seriously, I had no idea about who had taught him. Casavan kept me in the dark about a lot of things. I was actually Casavan’s student in the same way he was Chiantang’s.”

“Christmas,” Cage replied. “You were trainer to be a sorcerer, too?”

“No,” Lynn cut in, “not at all. David has a transmogrification curse placed on him and he was learning how to control it. I was searching for a cure through advanced biochemistry for him, and that’s when he met up with Casavan, who told him he could help. That’s when we found out that Casavan was the one who had originally placed the curse in the first place. So, to get back at him we sabotaged his ceremony where he tried to summon a demon to bond with.”

“That’s the demon that ended up bonding with you,” Iron Fist stated.

“Right,” David answered. “It was sort of an accident. Casavan cursed me because he found out about susceptibility to magical influence and roped me in with promises of a cure. He wanted to channel the power through me when summoning the demon in order to keep himself safe, but something went wrong.”

“That something would be me,” Lynn added. “I messed up and the demon bonded with David. Then, all that rampant energy, which was actually being collected by Chiantang, infused with me...and the rest you know.”

“Why did you lie to us?” Deathlok asked.

“We met you when we were after Casavan,” David replied. “Things got heated. We didn’t know if we could trust you since you were actually hired by Casavan in the first place. After we earned your trust we just figured it be easier to continue with the lie.”

“You should have returned our trust,” Deathlok said. “We could have helped. A lot of this could have been avoided.”

Strider looked at the floor, slightly ashamed of how he was being talked to. He knew he was wrong, but now that he and his wife were both powerless he didn't want to have to justify himself anymore. He just wanted it to be over.

“Look,” Cage said. “You'll have a place here, with or without your powers. If you need help just give us a call. Free of charge.” He accented the last sentence with a smile and extended his hand to shake. David took it gratefully, nodded at the others, and picked up his bag.

“We just might do that.”

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“You're leaving, too?” Danny proclaimed.

Monica stood in the doorway to his quarters, duffel bag in hand. She looked slightly morose, but still held the refinement and integrity that she had come to know as a former leader of the Avengers.

“David, Lynn...even Betty left this morning. She said needed to get back to New York and that being the PR specialist for a bunch of superheroes in Chicago just wasn't right for her.”

“I'm sorry, Danny,” Monica said. “I don't think it's a good idea for me to stay. Not after all the stuff that's been happening between us. Working with Misty...well, things just aren't the same anymore.”

“If this is about the pictures...”

“I spoke with Colleen last night,” Monica said as she took a couple of steps into the room. “She admitted to taking the pictures. She didn't say why, but I detected a hint of jealousy in her voice. Look, Danny...when I was in the Avengers one thing that Captain America stressed to us was that interpersonal dynamics in the team are vital to success in the field. A relationship between us could hurt the team. I need to leave before someone gets hurt. I can't be worried about you when I'm trying to stop a megalomaniac from knocking a building over. I hope you understand.”

Iron Fist's mouth dropped open but no words came out. He watched silently as Monica kissed his cheek, turned, and walked out his life. She had been a valuable asset to the team and to him personally, but he tried not to let his feelings interfere with the matter. Deep down, he knew she was right.



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“Hey, Danny-boy!” Cage hollered into the War Room. “What’s up?”

“We got a call,” Deathlok answered. “I sent Daniel out into the field already. One of our clients called in a report of rats overrunning his building. Apparently they’re being controlled by technology similar to the Controller’s. You’re late.”

“Yeah, well, She-Hulk called and—”

“Save it. Get out there and get to work.”

Cage smiled and exited the room. A lot had changed since the newest incarnation had gotten off the ground, but he was confident that he, Deathlok, and Iron Fist could hold down the fort until they found new recruits. The Heroes For Hire were always heroes first and for hire last. Heroes never gave up and they justified their actions by the amount of good they did in the world.

The H4H, while not as high-profile as the Avengers or the Fantastic Four, always did what they had to do in order to make the world a slightly better place.

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### **You’re Hired!**

*Well, that wraps up my run on the H4H title. Hope you weren’t completely disgusted by my stories! This book was my first fanfic series and I’d like to thank Cory Wiegel for taking a chance on me. Would I do a lot of things differently now that I have more fanfic experience? Hell yes. I would change a lot, actually. But, that’s just how things go.*

*There are a few dangling plots left over, like the Protoclan and Buddy McClintok. Don’t worry, I promise they’ll be taken care of, along with Danny’s new place in the world (since, ya know, he’s got a bitchin’ sword and everything now). Look for either a miniseries or some one-shots detailing what happens with Luke, Danny, and Deathlok in the near future!*

*Until then, thanks for reading, and thanks for all the support from the readers!*

*-D. Golightly  
3/24/07*

M2K 2006 Holiday Special  
“Sweet Christmas Doom”  
Written by D. Golightly

“You can’t seriously expect us to believe that.”

Luke Cage, the original hero for hire, returned the look of disbelief to the teenager sitting only a few feet away from him. “You can believe whatever you want, shorty,” he replied. “Whether you buy it or not doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Yeah, just shut your mouth, Carlos,” another teenage boy chimed in. “Cage here is all right, you know? He’s just telling us what we wanted to know.”

Several other teenage boys and girls around the gymnasium murmured similar sentiments aimed at Carlos. There had to be at least twenty of them cramped into the work out room, but it was much better than the alternative. The cold streets of Chicago only got colder during the winter, as any of the kids could tell you. Within the walls of their local YMCA, however, there was more than just a warm, dry place to hang out. That was why Luke had been so adamant about putting in an appearance there every so often.

“You asked and I answered,” Luke commented casually as he shrugged off his thick winter coat.

“So you’re telling me that you got your catch phrase by saving Christmas from Dr. Doom?” Carlos reiterated.

“S’what I said, ain’t it?”

“This I have to hear,” the young man said as he flipped a nearby chair around to sit on backwards.

Several other kids came over in anticipation of the story they all obviously wanted to hear. Cage, a small smile forming on his face, was happy to oblige them. After all, he had been like them when he was there age. Eager to find out about things like this, spending all his afternoons at his own Y back in New York, finding any old excuse to keep off the streets.

“I’m not big on storytelling,” Luke defended, “but if you really want to know I’ll tell you what I remember...”

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Luke Cage wrapped his arms around his own torso in an effort to keep the biting frost away. Even with super strength and diamond hard skin the cold could still get to him. In fact, if he wasn’t getting paid so well for such a small job he probably would have never

accepted, opting to stay in his apartment and watch three or four showings of “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

“Can I get you some hot chocolate, Mr. Cage?” the man who had hired him asked politely.

“No thanks, Mr. Conroy,” Cage answered. “I’d rather not be distracted from my post. I’ll be just fine, thanks.”

Mr. Conroy shook his head in understanding and then wobbled off, the various layers of clothing under his coat threatening to tip him off balance. Cage turned back to face the giant Christmas tree in the center of Times Square, which he was supposed to protect. He hadn’t believed it when he first got the job offer but it had turned out to be true. Mr. Conroy, in all his stumpiness, was in charge of the tree lighting ceremony this year and had hired Cage to guard the large holiday symbol. Apparently the city had received several threats and they were taking it seriously by hiring their very own superhero. The job was laughable but the pay was great, especially for just having to basically stand still all evening while they flipped the switch to light the thing.

A cool breeze swept in from the North side, washing over the thousands of people that had gathered inside the famous Times Square to watch the lighting of the tree. Cage loved the city and the people in it, no matter what kind of crap the rest of the country gave them. He glanced at his watch and saw it was almost time for what they had all been waiting for.

“Merry Christmas!” a barely legal, scantily clad Mrs. Claus screamed into the microphone at the podium. The audience responded back with the same phrase, the males more enthusiastically than the females. If the snow didn’t tell them how cold it was Mrs. Claus’ chest did.

“It’s time for what you’ve all been waiting for!” she continued. The crowd applauded and hollered their approval. “Without further ado, I light this tree--OH MY GOD!”

What sounded to Cage like a thunderclap exploded from the sky, shaking the general area and making the giant Christmas tree tilt slightly askew. He looked up to try and see exactly what was happening, but before he knew it the top of the forty-foot tree burst into flames, eliciting cries of terror from the gathered crowd.

“PEOPLE OF NEW YORK!” a sinister voice said over a loudspeaker. “I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT CHRISTMAS HAS BEEN CANCELLED! SO SAYS DOOM!”

Then, lowering from the clouds like a majestic harbinger, a small gray craft came into Cage’s view with a sole occupant. It was one of the last people Cage had expected to see and all of a sudden his simply security guard job had become something a whole lot more.

Dr. Doom's green hood flapped in the wind but refused to cover his horrifying metal faceplate. His palms were open and his arms spread out, as if he saw himself as something of a king to the people below.

The young Mrs. Claus screamed into the microphone and continued to do so until Mr. Conroy pulled her away. The rest of the people began to scatter as Doom continued to lower himself, stopping just a few feet above the ground, laughing maniacally all the way. Cage eyed up the Latverian tyrant and decided if he was going to earn his pay he had to move now.

Cracking his knuckles, Luke Cage slipped up onto the raised platform that the podium was on and leapt into the air, his great strength boosting him high and far. He expected to crash into Dr. Doom from behind, tackling him off his gray craft and wrestling him to the ground. Instead he found a force field blocking his aerial path as he smashed against it was a large thud. He bounced off and fell to the ground, unhurt but now locked in Doom's sights.

"Ah, the mercenary who pretends to be a hero!" Doom exclaimed. "How nice of you to drop in. Doom is pleased!"

Cage barely rolled out of the way of a blast from one of Dr. Doom's gauntlets. The yellow energy sizzled through the air, burning away a portion of the asphalt and Cage was relieved it hadn't been him instead. He wasn't in any hurry to test his invulnerability against one of the deadliest villains on the planet. Doom had taken down the Fantastic Four more times than Cage could remember.

Snapping back to attention, the Hero for Hire ducked under another searing blast and dove beneath Doom's strange craft. Since Doom's feet were actually touching the airship's floor the force field had to end somewhere. If he couldn't take him down from behind he would get at him from his underbelly.

"What are you...stop!" Doom ordered as Cage tore into the metal of the craft.

The floor buckled and bent from Cage's powerful fists, rocking it back and forth in the air. Within seconds he had ripped open a sizable hole and reached up to grab the tyrant's armor covered foot. Cage pulled once he had a firm grasp and yanked Doom out of his craft from underneath, tossing him across the street and into a telephone poll. Doom cracked the poll in half when he hit, but thankfully the swarm of people in the area had already dispersed.

"How dare you lay a hand on Doom!"

"Whatever, braceface," Luke retorted. "Be glad I'm filled with holiday joy or else I'd rip you out of that tin suit. Give it up!"

"Doom surrenders to no man! I shall have sweet victory!"

Cage expected his enemy would say something along those lines. Men like Dr. Doom never made things this easy. The fight would continue until one of them dropped and Cage was determined to make sure Doom was the one who did the dropping. Plunging his fingers back into the remnants of Doom's gray metal craft, Cage hoisted the vehicle into the air with minimal effort, blocking yet another energy bolt. Again and again the yellow energy was deflected as Cage slowly stepped closer using the craft as a shield.

“Fall! Fall and kneel before Doom!”

“Anyone ever tell you how annoying it is when you refer to yourself as Doom all the time?” Cage quipped. “You don't hear me saying stuff like ‘Give up to Power Man,’ do you?”

Dr. Doom ignored the hero's heckling, choosing instead to continue his useless barrage. The energy blasts were becoming more and more intense as Cage stepped closer, the pressure from each hit building. Finally, Cage had enough.

“I don't know what's gotten into your head,” he said, “but Christmas ain't cancelled!”

Heaving the nearly shattered, but still bulky, craft over his head Cage spun and launched the wreckage straight at Doom. It crashed into the Latverian with a loud metallic thunk, casting him back into the stub of the telephone pole he originally landed against. Sparks flew as metal scraped against metal, rendering the villain motionless underneath the weight of the decimated craft.

“That was...surprisingly easy,” Cage remarked.

Cage kicked the limp hand of the fallen Doom but it stayed completely still. Sliding the wrecked craft off of his adversary, Cage was shocked but not completely surprised by what he saw.

“Perfect,” Cage mumbled. “A Doombot.”

The face mask had cracked and slid down the front of the automaton, revealing not flesh and bone but wires and circuitry. He could hear gear whirling inside of the advanced robot as it suddenly convulsed with life in a last ditch, and futile, effort to free itself.

“Doom! *zzzz* ...victor *ssst* Sweet victory! Damn you, Luke Ca *zzzz* Damn you! *kzzzt* Sweet Christmas!” the robot sputtered.

“Sweet Christmas?” the hero chuckled. “Are you cussing me out with ‘Sweet Christmas?’ Big Daddy Doom is going to have to start programming these things better.”

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“Oh, come on!” Carlos complained. “Seriously? That’s how it went down?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Luke answered the youth.

“You really think we’re going to believe that? I mean, why would Dr. Doom send a robot to destroy a giant Christmas tree anyway? What the hell would the point of that be?”

“Hey,” Luke replied as he stood up, “this was way back when evil dictators were doing some messed up stuff, back before you were born. Who knows what goes through those whacko’s heads? Anyway, that’s when I started saying the catch phrase and saved Christmas.”

A couple of the younger kids beamed with pride at their role model, happy with his story whether it was true or not. During the holiday season, when families gathered to celebrate one thing or the other, these kids were the ones who felt left out. Gathering at the Y helped them forget some of the troubles the street handed them and Luke’s story provided a small means of escapism. He knew from visiting these kids and shooting hoops with most of them that they had it rough. Especially Carlos.

So what if he had changed a few elements of the story? The point was to get their minds off of their problems, and judging from most of their faces, it had worked.

“So that’s the story of how Power Man saved Christmas, huh?” Carlos asked.

“Yeah, but lay off that Power Man stuff. I haven’t called myself that in years. Unless retro is hip again?”

Some of the kids giggled at Luke’s comment. It warmed him slightly to know that his presence helped them, if only just a little.

“So,” Carlos continued. “We were going to put together a game real quick...wanna jump in?”

“You know I’m always down,” Luke replied, much to the delight of the rest of the teenagers. “Lead the way, shorty.”

“Cool. Just one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“After we beat you on the court you owe us another story.”

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DOOM COMANDS YOU TO HAVE A SWEET CHRISTMAS!

Danny Rand, AKA Iron Fist, wearing only the trousers of his gi, was surrounded by a dozen knights clad in shining plate armor. The foes drew swords, readied lances and hefted war hammers. Rand could not see the eyes of his enemy, their helmets concealed all expression behind a steel grill.

“This is your last chance, gentlemen. Surrender now,” Danny said.

“Fist, man, will you quit playin’? This is supposed to be serious,” Luke Cage, AKA Power Man, said from the control room of the training deck.

Danny had asked his long time friend, Luke, to fine tune some surprises into the Stark Training Synthetics so he wouldn’t breeze through the trial.

Tony Stark was working on prototypes for SHIELD to use in the training of new recruits. He couldn’t ask the *clients* to test them out. While it wasn’t public knowledge that Danny was it wasn’t a guarded secret either. Stark’s people contacted Heroes for Hire and after a pleasant lunch with Tony Stark, Danny agreed to conduct some tests.

“Luke, you need to learn to let go. Live in the moment.” Danny smirked at the one way mirror knowing his friend was watching and likely shaking his head.

“Why did you have them dress up as knights?” Cage asked.

Danny only smiled in response.

The playful twinkle drained from Danny’s eyes and expression was replaced by stoic concentration. Iron Fist took the open snake stance.

“Have fun, Fist,” Cage said through the intercom. “Lok just buzzed me. There’s a delivery guy at the door or somethin’.”

The knights were already in motion as was Iron Fist.

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“Unless it’s from Misty or Colleen, ain’t nobody send me something here. I still have my permanent address listed in New York.”

Luke Cage looked the large package over, which when placed on the floor was nearly at his waist. Deathlok, the half-man, half-machine partner that along with Iron Fist formed the current incarnation of the Heroes For Hire, disregarded the delivery as it didn’t pertain to him. The complex stood at three floors tall and belonged to Deathlok on the outskirts of Chicago.

“The guy said it was for you,” Deathlok replied. “I just answered the door. What’s the inventory slip say?”

Cage slid a hand around the side of the box, inspecting it. “There ain’t one. Hey!” he said to the delivery man as he clasped a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Shouldn’t I sign for this?”

“Wait,” Deathlok said as he looked out the entrance. “There are no markings on that van. What company did you say you were with?”

The man had turned halfway to leave, now held in place by Luke Cage’s firm grip. “I...uh, must have left my clipboard on the passenger seat. I’ll just go grab-”

First, a tiny warble from inside the package caught their attention, and then heat and fire sprung out engulfing them all. Several detonations rocked the foundations of the building, bringing down the front vestibule where they stood. The entire complex shook and began to topple over from the massive explosion that ripped down the interior walls.

The delivery man, along with the Heroes For Hire, were buried completely.

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MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

Max 2000 #25

“Under Siege”

Featuring the HEROES FOR HIRE

Written by D. Golightly and C. William Russette

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“Perfect!” a masked figure said as he watched the complex crumble to the ground. “Those fascists finally got what was coming to them!”

Two other masked men sat behind him in the black van, each looking through binoculars at the decimating scene. Their green hoods covered most of their faces. Both sat with their mouths hanging open, seemingly surprised by what they had just witnessed.

“Uh, Buddy?” the closer of the two said. “Wasn’t...wasn’t Rollins supposed to meet back up with us?”

“Yeah,” added the other. “I thought he was meeting us at the stadium and then we were going to-”

“Rollins was an unfortunate casualty,” the leader, Buddy, said. He dropped the binoculars and turned the key in the car’s ignition. “This is war! Some blood is meant to be shed. Rollins served his purpose.”

“Now, hold on! We didn’t sign up to-”

“Silvermane sold me your debt, meaning you work for *me*. You do as *I* say. I need both of you, so unless you cross me you don’t have to worry about ending up like Rollins.”

The two henchmen closed their mouths and didn’t speak again. The van trudged down the hillside back toward the dirt road they had taken to their vantage point. The highway was only a few miles up the road and it wouldn’t take them long to reach their next destination. Buddy McClintok would have enjoyed staying longer to savor the defeat of the heroes he hated, the heroes that had humiliated him. The worst had been Luke Cage, having been the one that had directly assaulted him during a fight with a huge orange monster referred to as Gog.* But the truth was that the Heroes for Hire was only the latest in a long line of people that had never taken him seriously.

** (For that big brawl, check out Heroes For Hire #6! - D)*

His entire life had been a joke. His family had let him down and his friends had betrayed him. Buddy had finally found solid guidance in an organization called the Protoclan, a group that had sought to save the planet by stealing dangerous technology that was too volatile for its creators. But, of course, that too had been a joke.

The order and clarity of the Protoclan was a façade. Instead of obtaining technology to keep the world safe they were stealing it to sell on the black market to the highest bidder. Buddy had been nothing but a soldier; a grunt; a blunt instrument that was good for nothing more than its base function.

He had finally found a cause to believe in only to discover that it was all a lie. The mandate that he dedicated his life to, like so many other things before the Protoclan, was flawed. Control only ever led to chaos for Buddy McClintok. And before the day was over everyone else in the country would see things his way.

If fate was so determined to wreck his life and take away any type of control he had, then he was going to spread as much chaos as possible.

“When we get there, don’t call me Buddy anymore,” he said over his shoulder to the two henchmen. “From now on, call me Anarchy.”

=====

Danny’s senses were still drinking in the minutia of his vicinity. One second he was down to two of the medieval armor-clad synth (Stark Training Synthetics), the next, shrapnel from the walls came at him as if thrown by a tornado. The armor plating of one robot protected him from a large sheet of metal. Agility kept him from any other serious harm. Then the ceiling caved in. Had it not been for the decade of training in the mystic city of K’un L’un, and luck, Rand knew he would have been crushed.

The remains of one of the robots sparked next to him. It was a combination of the synth’s armor

and sturdy skeleton that held up some of the fallen upper floor creating the pocket Danny lay curled in. Bits of debris settled around him. Nothing large had fallen in a few minutes. There was no way of knowing how long the robot frame could hold the pocket open. It was time to move.

Inching forward Danny saw a hole, a small tunnel that might allow egress from what he guessed was the bottom of the debris. *What happened? Was Luke okay? What about Larry?* Both were extremely durable. Danny had no idea who was the harder to injure, what their injury threshold was or the nature of the explosion. *Was it an attack or...*

Luke said something about a package arriving before leaving the control booth. There was no way of knowing until he reached his friends. Calling out would be a waste of energy and foolhardy. As precariously resting as the building now was even the vibration from a shout could cause something to shift and start a new avalanche. Danny eased up onto a high plateau of flooring and waited for a reaction.

Nothing shifted. He spat grit out then listened. Moving slowly, Danny tested each handhold and footstep. A less patient man would tire, lose concentration and suffer for his weakness. Danny found the calm as his teacher Lei Kung, the Thunderer, had taught him. He focused his mind and body in a sea of tranquility and took each moment in time. He was passive but coiled should reflexes be tested.

Twenty minutes later he stood on top of the wreckage. Most of the building had collapsed in on itself. None of the surrounding structures were touched. That was either lucky or intentional, Danny thought. *If not luck then we were targeted. But why? More importantly: by whom?*

Judging by the devastation and placement of debris Danny could easily determine the point of origin of the detonation. Orienting himself with his surroundings, Danny saw that ground zero was very likely the former lobby.

“Lok just buzzed me. There’s a delivery guy at the door or somethin’.”

Police and emergency vehicles were arriving at the edge of the decimated building. No vehicles could traverse such wreckage. One patrolman was stringing hazard tape. Others kept the gathering crowd back.

Danny made the best time possible hopping from support beam to chunk of flooring or roof. Someone shouted for him to make his way (carefully!) to the EMTs. Danny barely noticed.

“Luke! Luke!” Danny yelled.

No answer.

“Cage, answer me!”

Finally, twenty feet away, debris shifted. Danny covered the distance in two jumps. In those long seconds Danny tried to recall how much punishment his long time partner and friend could take.

Had Luke's steel-hard skin been up to the challenge? Danny was both desperate and terrified to learn the answer.

"Luke? Where are you?" Danny said.

A restroom sink rose and fell back in place nearby. It was pinned beneath a fire exit door. Danny threw it away with ease without realizing it.

"Larry!" Danny said.

Larry Young, Deathlok, lay in front of Danny. At first Danny thought the cyborg was still half buried. His lower torso was missing. Deathlok's left arm ended below the shoulder. Thin tubes leaked dark fluid. What Larry used as flesh was completely burned away.

What remained of the man in the machine was still alive. His metal mandible was unhinged on the left side. The jawbone jerked in an attempt to mimic speech but only static came from the voice box. One eye was shattered but the other locked on to Danny unblinkingly.

"What can I do?" Danny said.

Lok's gray, metal skull clunked and snapped as now ill-fitting vertebrae attempted to obey his command to shake his head.

"What then? Where's Luke?"

A blackened, metal, skeletal hand extended one finger and pointed behind Danny.

"I'm sure SHIELD is on their way. Just hang on," Danny said and turned away.

"Luke!"

Danny saw no movement. He slowed his heart, his breathing and opened his senses. Danny analyzed where the lobby had been, where Luke could have been standing to receive a package coupled with Deathlok's guess. Danny screened out the sirens and the still growing crowd.

Then he saw it.

Dust had settled everywhere. In a small area, the dust was dark and wet. Danny drew closer. Red fluid dripped off a length of pipe that continued out of sight beneath a melted photocopier. Danny raced over, threw the copier aside and gasped.

Luke Cage lay unconscious before him. A six foot length of steel pipe extended from his heavily damaged chest. It must have impaled him after the explosion tore him open, Danny thought.

"Luke, can you hear me?" Danny asked.

I've never seen him so pale. How much blood has he lost? Danny took Luke's scarred hand at the wrist. He couldn't find a pulse but with Luke's dense skin it might have been impossible under the best circumstances. SHIELD had not arrived yet. No EMT could help. There was only one way to save his friend.

Danny sat cross legged next to Luke. He closed his eyes and began to focus his chi. When he was ready, Danny took Luke's hand in his. His teacher taught Iron Fist the merging of chi years ago. To heal in such a manner was not easy or safe but it was the only miracle Danny had available. Danny would give his will power and life's energy to Luke's damaged body. He might be too far gone to heal back to perfect health but Danny was confident he could keep his friend's body alive until SHIELD's doctors arrived.

The flow of chi was interrupted almost immediately. Something was wrong somewhere. Either Luke was too far gone or the error was within Danny. The clock that measured Luke Cage's time left on earth had just sped up.

=====

"Please...just don't kill us."

The horrified maintenance worker, wearing a uniform that identified him as being an employee at Wrigley Field, home to the famous Chicago Cubs, had finally mustered the courage to say that sentence, only to now wish he hadn't. The green armored monstrosity that stood on the other side of the room, the announcer's booth, slowly turned to look at him. It wasn't the attention he wanted.

"You're asking me not to kill you?" Anarchy said. "You want to have some measure of control over your fate. I understand that. Really, I do. But you need to realize that life will never allow the balance to be tipped in your favor."

The two henchmen at his side finished what they were doing at the console where the radio broadcasts of the games came from. That console was connected to a satellite system that relayed the games to all the affiliate radio and TV stations across the country. At anytime that feed could be broadcast, and it looked as if the henchmen had prepped the equipment for airtime.

"We're ready here, Bud...Anarchy."

"Good. Take up position at Camera One. And you," he said, pointing to his other compatriot. "Make sure the explosives are primed. I want everyone to know that we're serious. *Dead* serious."

=====

"Just take it easy and let the medic do his job, Luke."

"Danny, the guy can't even get an IV in my arm! How is he supposed to do his job? I told you

I'm fine, now let's move!"

Luke Cage had never been one to sit around while a case was underway. Especially when that case had involved dropping a building on top of him. He ripped his arm away from the SHIELD medic that had him strapped to a monitoring device, which was a simple task since Danny had partially resuscitated him.

The building had been leveled. There was no one wall left standing on its own. The scene was total chaos, brandished by not-so-subtle violence. Whoever did this had wanted them dead. There was absolutely no question about it.

Deathlok was recovering, but he wouldn't be able to go with them. The first thing Luke had said upon getting his breath back was that they were going to track the guys down and put some royal hurt on them. He had said "Sweet Christmas" at least a half-dozen times since Iron Fist had helped pull him out of the debris.

Danny waved his thanks to the SHIELD medic as they sauntered off. "Luke, we don't even know where to start," he said as he caught up. "Hell, I don't even know what I *did* to you. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Danny. What do you mean you don't know what you did to me? You've done that magic stuff before."

"Yeah, but something felt...off. Different. Like my chi is out of whack."

"I'm breathing, and I'm pissed off. Your chi has plenty of whack."

Luke stumbled and was caught by Danny. He shook his head and met his partner's raised eyebrow with a cold gaze. "Okay," Luke said. "Maybe some of the whack fell out."

"Sir!" a new voice said.

Iron Fist helped his friend stand up straight again and looked over his shoulder to see another SHIELD medic run over to them. "Sir!" he repeated. "The commander on site said you should see this."

"See what?" Luke asked.

The medic produced a small, portable television set and showed the screen to the two Heroes For Hire. The miniature picture showed a man in green armor, his face mostly covered. Behind him was a room full of hostages, all bound and gagged.

"I am Anarchy," the man said. "I have just destroyed the headquarters of the Heroes For Hire. If city hall is not similarly destroyed by the local authorities in one hour, I will detonate the explosives I have placed around the Chicago subway system."

“That’s the guy...” Luke said through grinding teeth.

“City hall must be decimated by its own public servants. This will be a symbol of the end of law and order. I am Anarchy, and I will lead you to chaos.”

The digital recording ended. The pair of heroes looked at each other, each knowing that the other was thinking the same thing. At once, they both asked the medic, “Where was that coming from?”

=====

“You sure you’re up for this, Luke?” Iron Fist asked.

“Fist, you worry too much. I got this covered.” Luke Cage ran to the stadium. He knew Iron Fist was watching him but did not look back.

He was not okay. Since the experiment he volunteered for as an inmate Cage’s body had been blessed with a super-human strength, steel hard skin and he healed a little faster than a regular human. The blast he endured pushed everything he had to the max. If Iron Fist had not been there to work his K’un L’un magic on him he would not have made it. The Heroes for Hire had saved each other’s lives so many times there was no point in keeping track. Cage would have done the same for Danny were he able.

Cage had seen Iron Fist work his chi-sharing, healing bit before. The others recovered as expected. Something was different this time. Cage’s body was stiff like he just worked out hard after a long period of being bedridden. Also, his limbs were leaden. That had never happened. Did Danny notice? Probably. His partner was very attentive to body language

Did Iron Fist mess up the process? He said something was off. Danny felt strange about the merging of their life forces. My symptoms don’t really line up with what could be a screwed healing. Maybe my accidental powers might not mix well with that chi-voodoo.

Do they have people on the security cameras, Luke wondered. *Like I even know where half of them are. We don’t know how many guys they got in here or what they’re packin’. If they ain’t seen me yet there’s no reasons to set off alarms by tearing off the doors.*

Cage ran twenty feet down the North Clark Street side of Wrigley Stadium and charged through the wall.

“I guess an alarm *might* make less noise. Good thing no one was posted nearby. Ain’t like I can jump over the wall...” Cage began his jog to the playing field of the Chicago Cubs.

=====

Cage emerged from the dugout and scanned the field. It was deserted. SHIELD said the signal was coming from the stadium but had trouble locking down exactly where, Cage thought. Fist

was checking out the logical lead. Cage headed out to center field. They have got to be able to see me now, he thought. When the pitcher's mound was underfoot he stopped.

"Where the cowardly-ass fools that tried to blow me up?" Cage shouted, "Step up! I ain't dead yet and I got somethin' for you!"

Cage folded his arms.

He did not wait long.

=====

"What in the hell? The Heroes for Hire building *did* collapse on Power Man? I did see that, *right?*" Anarchy said.

"Ya, boss. We all saw it," henchmen Baird said.

"What does it take to kill this idiot? Can we hear what he's saying?" Anarchy said.

"No, boss. The *playing field* isn't wired for sound," henchmen Ogden said.

Ogden heard Anarchy's armor charging as their leader glared at the monitor. He hoped the boss wasn't going to do what it looked like he was going to do. Power Man was strong, everyone knew that. He just survived an explosion and a building falling on him and there he was, standing on the mound calling out the boss. Could the Anarchy armor take that on? Power Man had to be hurt. He *had* to be. Ogden did not want to go back into the joint. Anarchy didn't say nothing about fighting super-types.

"Maintain watch over the detonators and the hostages. If I fall, collapse the subway and kill them." Anarchy motioned towards the captured Wrigley Field ground crew.

"Broadcast everything." Anarchy attached his helmet and dove out the announcer's both window. His back-rockets fired lifting him to the field below.

"Ey, if he goes down, how're we getting paid?" Baird said.

"I dunno. Let's hope that doesn't happen." Ogden joined Baird at the smashed window to watch their boss's armor at work.

"Doesn't Power Man have a partner?" Baird said.

"Yes, he does," said an unfamiliar voice behind them.

"Damn it."

=====

“I was hoping I’d get the chance to-”

Power Man’s fist crashed into Anarchy’s chest plate before his jade feet set on the ground. The armor clad terrorist bounced once before landing on his back. His limbs shuttered then went limp.

“Not much for banter right now.” Powerman jerked Anarchy up by the head and fired a roundhouse.

“Shoulda got lasers or somethin’ with your suit, green-jeans.”

Anarchy raised both palms and fired energy bolts launching Power Man into the air.

“I did.” Anarchy rose to his feet and followed the descending hero.

Power Man landed hard. The fall only hurt his pride, the blast-much more. He tried to rise but was frozen on all fours. His joints locked in place. Icy spikes tore through his body. The enemy approached and Power Man was helpless.

“I am called Anarchy now though when we last met I had another name.”

“I beat down a lotta guys named *chump*. Which one were y-”

Anarchy drove a shin into Power Man flipping him onto his back, intensifying his pain.

“A chump am I? At least I stand for something. At best I am trying to help the people see the lies they perpetuate. Today is the first day of tearing down the walls of that sham we call society.”

Power Man lashed out with a leg-sweep but Anarchy was faster. The armored terrorist released a volley of laser fire. Power Man sluggishly tried to rise.

“You should have stayed buried, Power Man. The day belongs to Anarchy.” The terrorist opened fire on his helpless target.

=====

“All clear, agent. Send your bomb squad. This mess is beyond my abilities.” Iron Fist looked over the mass of electronic components and wires while speaking into his walkie-talkie. “Threat level near hostages is zero. No serious injures, no fatalities.”

Sounds of impact on metal came to Iron Fist. That would be Luke pounding the bad guy to paste, Fist thought. *These two aren’t going anywhere*. Unconscious at Iron Fist’s feet were two men in green SWAT-style gear and green hoods. *They weren’t much trouble. Two strikes a piece and both-*

-energy blasts?

Iron Fist stepped to the shattered window facing the playing field and his heart dropped. There was only one foe facing Luke. He wore green armor of a configuration Iron Fist did not recognize. Luke tried a leg sweep that was just too slow or too weak. What was the matter with him? Why was he so enfeebled? Iron Fist flipped through the broken window avoiding the glass with ease.

A sea of stadium seating stood between Iron Fist and his long time partner. Seeking the stairs would take time. Luke might not have any to spare. Iron Fist closed his eyes and focused his life's energy-his chi. One in body, mind and spirit-he leapt.

The ball of his right foot landed on the first seatback and he leapt again. Four rows lower his left foot perched on a second seat. Another four rows raced by beneath him and he leapt. The rhythm came easily and Iron Fist sank into it.

What was wrong with Luke? What went wrong with the healing? It seemed right except for the odd anomaly floating somewhere just out of reach. Like a stone in a river of his fast moving, focused chi. Iron Fist searched as he drew closer to the playing field.

What *was* a stone was now a divide deep within his spirit. It could in time become an obstruction. In a brief lapse of attention Iron Fist slipped on the railing. He did not have the focus, the control, that he should. *What have I done to my best friend?*

Iron Fist rolled as he fell and landed in a crouch on the field. The armor wearer did not notice. Iron Fist broke into a run straight at the armored attacker. How would his control deficit affect his other abilities?

Cage no longer struggled under the energy bombardment.

Control be damned, Iron Fist thought.

He called up his chi, focused it into its most pure, most raw state and centered it into his right fist making it unto like a thing of iron.

The armored terrorist was unaware of the danger until suffering the full fury of the iron fist. The blow sent him into the air in an explosion of metal, bleeding energy. When he landed he did not move.

“Luke! Luke, talk to me!” Iron Fist said.

Iron Fist didn't like the way the armored man lay so still, so corpse-like. The thought of whether or not he killed the man flitted across his mind for only a moment.

For the second time in a day Danny stood over his fallen friend. He couldn't find a pulse. He didn't know when medics would arrive. *I should never have allowed you to come! Forgive me*

but I have to do this.

Iron Fist took his friend's hand in his and again, merged their chi.

=====

42nd St and Madison Avenue, Manhattan, NY
Four Freedoms Plaza
77th Floor

"I feel fine, Sue. You don't need to keep me here," Cage said.

"You're only fine because of the treatment regiment Reed has you on, Luke," Sue Richards said.

Cage woke in the Fantastic Four's medical center a day after being flown there on SHIELD's dime. He was told Iron Fist maintained the lock on their chi the entire trip and only released his friend once Reed was certain he had the equipment in place to keep him stable. Twenty Four hours later Cage awoke to a very tired Iron Fist sleeping in a chair nearby. With Reed's reassurance Iron Fist left soon after.

"Reed wants you monitored for another day at least. This is an experimental procedure you're undergoing after all."

"I'm good to go and I doubt my insurance-"

"Luke Cage! I can't believe you're thinking about the cost of all this. We're talking about your well being," Sue said.

"Sue's right, Luke." A hologram projector silently generated an image of Dr. Reed Richards standing next to his wife. "There is no price too high to keep a man as brave and good as you around, fighting for our side against people like this Anarchy person. I would feel much better if you allowed me to observe your healing for another twenty-four hours."

"Why do I need to be monitored? Should I be worried here?" Cage asked.

"I can give you a full diagnosis after I run some more tests. When you have a moment, Sue?" Reed said.

"On my way, Reed."

The hologram disappeared.

"I know that look, Sue. What's the deal here? I feel different, I got that. What's Reed found?"

"When I know something, you'll be the first to hear, Luke." Sue headed for the door. "Is your partner due back today?"

“Naw, Fist said he needed to go on a pilgrimage or something. I dunno.” Luke sighed.

Sue smiled and left the room.

“Said he’d check in when he got where he was going... dang, I’m bored.”

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Bleecker Street, the West Village

Multi-millionaire Danny Rand, Iron Fist, the Living Weapon of K’un L’un, is lost. He has money and influence, the respect of his peers and is regarded by many to be a hero.

None of this matters to him.

Iron Fist spent the last twelve hours in a deep, trance-like meditation that only a handful of practitioners on earth can achieve. He sought an answer and finally, he found it.

His *wa*, inner harmony, is shattered. Iron Fist doesn’t know how it happened but he must restore the balance. Iron Fist wields too great a power. Without complete control over his chi, and by extension the iron fist, he is a danger to himself and all around him.

Iron Fist stood on the sidewalk in front of the three story townhouse. *K’un L’un only appears on earth once in a decade. It will be years before I can see Lei Kung about this matter. Unfortunately, there are too few that could be of aid to me in this. Fewer still that I trust enough to ask for help.*

Luke Cage would give his life to help him, Danny knew, but he did not know what perils lay ahead. Luke was already hurt because of Danny’s failings.

This was a road for Iron Fist alone.

Iron Fist walked up the steps to the townhouse and raised his hand to knock on the door. It opened before he could.

“Good day, Mr. Rand,” the bald Asian man said, “We have been expecting you.”

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Author’s Notes:

On behalf of CW and myself, thank you for reading this. Iron Fist is a character we both enjoy immensely, and we’re excited to wrap up some of the hanging plots around him at M2K. Plots I created and abandoned...but thanks to CW, that’s no longer the case! He’s cleaning up after me, and since he’s a much better writer than I am, I couldn’t be happier. Now I can be lazy again.

The plots in question were left over from the M2K Heroes For Hire series. Buddy McClintok, now called Anarchy, was a throwaway character I never got around to bumping off. This story is fairly close to what I intended to do with him, and CW managed to make him interesting. Buddy is a lost cause, a devotee that was lied to one too many times. CW expanded on that personality and created a pretty cool original character.

So where do we go from here? Well...you'll have to wait and see. Obviously that bald Asian man is someone we know. Danny is about to undergo a bit of a journey in order to discover something about himself, and that discovery will either cure him or kill him.

Thanks again for checking out the story!

-D. Golightly

**MAKE SURE TO CHECK OUT THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LUKE CAGE
AND DANNY RAND IN THE PAGES OF THE ONGOING M2K SERIES**

