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After the blinding light, there were only tears left for Chris Bradley. From the street in New York City, surrounded by ordinary people, the mutant known as Bolt disappeared in a flash of light. Where he reappeared, Bolt did not know. All he could remember were the plastic hands, immune to his mutant ability of generating electricity.

Somebody wanted Bolt for that ability. The small box and the wires told him as much. The constant rumbling around Bolt was fed by his energy, by everything he had. Even if Bolt knew where he was, who had taken him, he lacked the strength to do anything about it.

All Chris Bradley had strength for were tears, and the faint hope that the team he'd turned his back on wouldn't return the favor. Super-heroes took care of their own, but Bolt was no longer one of...



#14

“WHERE DID ALL THE BOYS GO?”

Written by Steve Crosby

“Flee, pitiful humans! Cower before the might of Blastaar, the Living Bomburst!”

Bolts of power ripped up the pavement in the streets of San Diego. Cars were flipped end-over-end by Blastaar's inhuman strength. As ruler of a mighty empire in the Negative Zone, Blastaar's power was absolute. On Earth, in San Diego, four young heroes on a rooftop were prepared to challenge him.

“Oh no, it's the Living Bomburst,” gasped one of the heroes sarcastically. A silver and white bodysuit covered everything but the top of his head, while a blue jacket with golden discs on the sleeves served to further protect him from the elements. The colors of his bodysuit were arranged to form a stylized 'R', appropriate for a man who called himself Ricochet. “I swear, some of these villains use the corniest language.”

“Along with that language, his rampage shall end here!” declared the strongest of the heroes, clad entirely in gold and silver armor with a massive red cape at his shoulders. Prodigy leapt from the rooftop, seeming almost to fly. “Slingers away.”

Behind his mask, Ricochet rolled his eyes. “Okay, not *just* the villains.”

Still on the rooftop with Ricochet were the final two heroes of their quartet. Dusk was easily identified by her costume, an entirely black bodysuit that concealed her feminine features. The features identifying Hornet were many and included rapidly humming wings on the back of his armor, antennae on the sides of his helmet, and the giant yellow hornet painted on the front of his armor's chestplate.

Together, three-fourths of the reassembled Slingers leapt off the rooftop to follow Prodigy's lead.

A golden fist slammed into Blastaar's face. Unfazed, the Living Bomburst sent Prodigy hurtling with a devastating backhand. Electric stinger blasts from Hornet peppered Blastaar, preventing him from advancing on and potentially tearing Prodigy limb from limb. Unafraid by what had just happened to his teammate, Ricochet landed directly in front of Blastaar.

"Wow, up close you're even uglier."

"Rraarhh!" Bursts of other-dimensional energy erupted from Blastaar's hands. Ricochet avoided these by back-flipping over an impossible distance. As he flipped, Ricochet tossed a pair of golden discs. Their impact actually drove Blastaar back a step.

One of Blastaar's energy bursts went straight towards Prodigy. At the last second, Dusk grabbed her teammate and they both disappeared only to reappear several feet away. Faster than the eye could follow, Hornet circled around Blastaar's head, still firing away with his electric stingers.

"I think all we're doing is making him mad," Ricochet commented to Prodigy. "Dusk, doesn't your suit have some kind of a connection to the Negative Zone? Maybe it's got something that can mess with this chia pet."

"Absolutely not," objected Prodigy. "We can't put Cassie's life at risk on a hunch. She's already died once."

"But it's my life to risk," argued Dusk. The female Slinger rushed forward, straight at Blastaar. "My powers helped save us from Mephisto. If they can make a difference here, I have to try!"

A stray burst impacted on a building as Hornet flew past, and the debris sent him spiraling out of control. Blastaar was taking aim at the helpless flyer when Dusk jumped onto his back. Darkness enveloped the two of them.

"No!" Prodigy rushed forward, prepared to enter the darkness. Ricochet took Prodigy by the arms and held him back.

"A bulletproof suit isn't any protection against a bruiser like that," Ricochet exclaimed as he struggled to hold onto his larger teammate. "There isn't anything we can do but trust in what Dusk is doing."

Angry and desperate, Prodigy tossed Ricochet aside. "Don't go spouting orders like you're the leader. The only leader around here is *me!*" He turned around to rush again at the darkness when Hornet slammed into his mid-section at high velocity. Prodigy was thrown off his feet and bounced down the street.

Hornet landed near where Ricochet was. The humming from his wings lessened considerably as they slowed down. "That should keep him away for another minute," he remarked to Ricochet. "You have any ideas for after that?"

Imaginary dust was wiped from Ricochet's jacket as he tried to stand gracefully to his feet. A slight wobble made this a failed attempt. "I could say I nailed his mom. Pummeling me to death would take *at least* another five minutes. Beyond that..." Ricochet shrugged. "If Dusk

isn't done with whatever she's doing by then, maybe somebody should walk into that darkness and get beaten to a pulp by *the Living Bomburst!*"

Hornet smirked in spite of himself. "You really like that name, don't you?"

"Thinking of using it for my LiveJournal. That or 'Home of the World's Biggest Spider-Man Wannabe'. Which do you think?"

"Yeah, I'd go with the former." Hornet pointed towards the field of darkness. It was beginning to dissipate. "It looks like Dusk did her thing."

Ricochet leaped forward towards the fading darkness, prepared to fight on if Blastaar appeared. Sure, Ricochet knew he didn't have much of a chance against *the Living Bomburst!* But just thinking that name lifted his spirits.

However, the darkness did not fade entirely. A humanoid shape that was Dusk remained, shaky but still on her feet. Of Blastaar there was no sign. It did turn out that Ricochet had something to do though, as he took a collapsed Dusk into his arms.

"Hey," Ricochet said as he looked into the expressionless black mask. "You did it girl. High-five?"

"Uh, you'd have to let go of me first." Dusk stepped out of Ricochet's grasp and took several steps on her own feet. Hornet was walking towards them, while Prodigy stalked angrily forward.

"Do that again, and I'll cripple your other arm," he snarled at Hornet. Dusk approached Prodigy cautiously. "That was a stupid thing to do," he told her.

Ricochet stepped forward, confrontational and yet light-hearted. "Hey, man. Lay off, okay? She saved the day."

"No, I didn't," Dusk said, talking to everybody. "We did, as a team." Her smile was tentative, and the hand she raised was shaking. "The Slingers, back together again."

Ricochet returned the grin. "Group high-five?"

In New York City, warehouses were the preferred hangouts of masked criminals and the occasional super-hero. One renovated warehouse, nicknamed "The Crash Pad," was home to a team of young super-heroes known as the New Warriors.

Among the many renovations the Crash Pad had gone through over the years, its most recent was a series of frilly pink curtains that hung over the many windows. This was an improvement that New Warriors leader Night Thrasher was less than enthusiastic about.

"The windows are covered in black paint," he pointed out to Ultra Girl, the young woman that had done the decorating. "Its not like anybody can admire those from the outside," he added while gesturing at the curtains.

Ultra Girl popped her bubble gum loudly in response, and chewed loudly as she spoke. "Well, excuse me for trying to add some of my personality to the place. This place isn't just a headquarters to me, 'Thrash. I have to live here."

From her position on the couch, Crux glanced up from her magazine. "Uh, hello? I live here too, *mallgirl*. But for some reason, my opinion doesn't count for squat."

"Grow some taste, then we'll talk," Ultra Girl shot back. To Night Thrasher she said, "Have you met my roommate, the girl who likes to turn this place into her own personal skating rink?"

"That was once!" Crux yelled, throwing her magazine to the floor. "And what do you care if the floor is covered in ice? Newsflash, blondie, you can fly!" Crux was on her feet now, in the face of the incredibly powerful human/Kree hybrid. "Unlike you, I actually have some talent, a skill that needs to be maintained through practice. Now, keep in mind that by talent I'm talking about something useful. So you're finely honed talent of being a bitch doesn't count."

"Oh, but masturbating to Playboy is?" Ultra Girl pointed to her eye. "X-Ray vision, dyke."

That was Night Thrasher's cue. "I need to get out of here," he muttered to himself. Behind him, fire blazed and furniture was being thrown about. Night Thrasher didn't pay any attention to that, however, except to the extent of occasionally moving his head to avoid getting hit as he walked away. As he neared the exit of the Crash Pad, Night Thrasher put a hand up to his helmet radio. "Hindsight, the faster you find Ricochet and Hornet, the better."

"Hey, Mickey! Wait up!"

Michiko "Mickey" Musashi turned at the voice calling for her. At the other end of the lobby in the Daily Bugle building, Mattie Franklin was jogging to catch up with her teammate in the New Warriors.

"Mattie, what are you doing here?" Mickey asked the other young woman when she stopped.

"Well..." Mattie rubbed a hand against the back of her head. "I had it in my head to try and get an internship here, but rather than bring it up with Jonah at home I figured it'd be better to approach the guy who actually did the hiring. Somebody who doesn't know I'm the Publisher's foster kid."

"Yeah, avoid any hint at nepotism." Mickey nodded her head. "So, how'd it go?"

"Not so well." Mattie's face got all scrunched up with embarrassment. "She was in the middle of kicking out the annoying little girl when Jonah stormed into the office yelling about... Uh, I'll probably never know, because once he saw me he had a whole 'nother thing to yell about."

"Ahh." Mickey nodded her head further, this time with a smile. "So you were responsible for that loud incoherent tirade I heard as I was leaving."

"And as you can see I slinked away as quickly as I could. What about you? Off to cover an exciting story on the streets?"

"Uh, no. My workday is over, so I'm going home."

"Oh." There was a slight hesitation before Mattie continued. "Mind if I tag along? Going home wouldn't be a very good idea for me at the moment."

"No, I don't think it'd be a good idea at all." Mickey started to turn, but indicated that Mattie should follow. "I'm kidding. Yeah, come on. Not to my place because, well your place is probably a lot nicer. But I was going to stop for a bagel and coffee. You can join me for that."

Nearly half an hour later saw the two women at a Starbucks five blocks away from the Daily Bugle. None could be built any closer because of numerous columns written by J. Jonah Jameson and petitions placed before the City Council.

"My dad was rich too," Mattie said before she bit into her bagel. A quick sip of coffee to clear the palette and she continued. "Huge mansion. As a kid I would get lost."

"Is this where you throw in the whole lonely kid routine?" Mickey asked between sips of her own coffee.

"Nah, more like a rebellious kid. I used to spy on my dad, learn about his business dealings. I heard about this Gathering of the Five ritual and decided to poach it from him." Mattie shrugged. "Granted I might not have if the words death and madness had ever come up. All I heard was 'power' and I saw an opportunity to soar alongside my idol Spider-Man."

"Oh, I think I see where this is going," Mickey said with a smile. "Jameson was good friends with your father, so you immediately disliked him and everything he stood for. Hence his grand crusade against Spider-Man in fact drew you to the wall-crawler."

That was how it had been for Mattie. "Does he realize how much those rants undermine his paper?"

"I don't think he cares. Journalistic responsibility and all that."

"Well, I could certainly be used to make a case for that." Mattie took another bite of her bagel. "Playing super-hero, it didn't work too well for me out of the gate. Only team-ups I had with Spider-Man were when he swooped in to save my life. Here I was with all this power and..."

Mattie suddenly went very quiet. This got Micky interested, but also a little subdued. In their community, sad stories were common. "What happened?"

"Drugs." Shame dripped in Mattie's voice. "In our world, being what we are, it brings on a rush. Sometimes though, the action slumps, and you find yourself wanting something,

anything to get that feeling again. Danger, excitement, just a joy of life. For me, that something turned out to be too much."

Mickey understood, or at least thought she did. Her hand reached over the table to press over Mattie's. "Hey, we've all been in that situation. A villain gets something on you, exploits a weakness, next thing you fear there's no way out. Anything you did, it was under duress."

Emphatically, Mattie began shaking her head. "No, no it wasn't anything I did. I mean, I wasn't forced into robbing banks or anything, wasn't really forced into anything at all. The guy, he wasn't a villain, just a drug dealer. And me...while I was drugged out pieces of my flesh would be cut out, used to manufacture a drug that--"

"Oh my god, it was you." Hearing this had stunned Mickey. Her eyes were down. Suddenly she couldn't look at Mattie. "There was an article Urich did, but nobody was named." Slight effort brought Mickey's eyes back up. "Who knows?"

"As far as I know, Urich, the Jamesons, and a private investigator that got me out. I'd rather not give her name."

The cell phone in Mickey's bag rang. She fished it out and looked at the caller ID. "Dammit." The phone went to her ear. "We agreed you don't call me. Be quiet. No names. He and I have an understanding. My life does not get intruded upon. Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can. We'll discuss this later."

Mickey put her phone away. "That was the lad. Our token boy has left to chase some strays. We need to get to the clubhouse where a catfight is in progress."

For several seconds, Mattie just looked at her. "Was that some kind of code?"

Mickey rolled her eyes. "Yes. We *are* in Starbucks you know."

"Just wondering. That token thing, it sounded a little racist."

"I said it because he's the only man in our group." Shaking her head in disbelief, Mickey picked up her bag and got up from the table.

"There's also the term lad. And you referred to him as a boy, which traditionally--"

"Okay so I should use better codewords. I get it."

From the outside, the warehouse that was the New Warriors' Crash Pad appeared to be intact. Inside, however, the place was a shambles. Clad in her Turbo armor, Michiko Musashi surveyed the damage while circling a forlorn Ultra Girl. Broken furniture lay everywhere, and millions of dollars in equipment had been drastically reduced in value.

"Nice curtains," Turbo eventually said. Tatters of pink fabric still hung at several of the windows. "How much did you pay for them?"

"Not really sure. Maybe five hundred." Ultra Girl shrugged. "Used my daddy's credit card. Didn't look at the price."

"As it turns out, they cost a bit more." Turbo focused her eyes on her teammate. "You will be paying Night Thrasher back for this. He may accept credit cards, but I doubt it."

"That's not fair!" Ultra Girl protested. "Crux is every bit as responsible for this as I am!"

"Which is why she'll be paying half the costs."

The whining didn't stop. "But Night Thrasher was here when it happened. He just walked away."

Beneath her mask, Turbo raised an eyebrow. "A regular guy didn't get in the middle of a brawl between two super-powered teenage girls? Yeah, I would have rather walked away and billed you later myself."

"You would," muttered Ultra Girl.

Turbo heard that, and immediately got into the other woman's face. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"First, I'm not a girl." She went up into Turbo's face. "Second, who the hell are you to order me around? What suddenly puts you in charge when Night Thrasher isn't around? For that matter why should I even listen to him? Neither of you have powers!"

Turbo raised a hand, balled into a fist with knuckles pointed at Ultra Girl. The turbine at her wrist whirred, brushing at her hair as well as Ultra Girl's. She raised her index finger. "First, if you want to change your perception, then stop calling yourself Ultra Girl." Her middle finger lifted. "Second, I'm acting like an adult around a bunch of children who like to bicker and fight with each other." Her ring finger joined the others. "Third, you are more than welcome to try tearing this suit off me and try using it yourself. The latter is extremely unlikely. The former has no chance of happening at all."

As fast and sudden as the punch was, Turbo was ready for it. The spinning turbine at her wrist moved faster, hardened the air in front of her and stopped that fist mere inches from her face. The other turbine on the wrist at Turbo's side also whirred, smashing solid air high against Ultra Girl's chest. As the super-strong heroine flew back through a sudden pocket of empty air, Turbo refocused the air manipulated by her first turbine and halted Ultra Girl in place. Struggle as she might, the super-strong girl who could usually fly was trapped in the air.

"If it means anything," Turbo mocked. "Night Thrasher would have had you down in even less time. We like to call it *experience*."

Even late at night there were ice-skaters out at Rockefeller Center. One lone skater in particular was moving fast, so fast that it wouldn't have been safe during the day, on a crowded rink. The rink's edge was coming up fast, and at the last minute the skater

jumped. Easily he made it over the barrier, while at the same time snatching an older woman's purse right off her arms.

"Aah!" Hard against the ground she fell, her arm almost dislocated from the force.

Screams of pain and outrage followed the thief as he continued to skate fast down the pavement. In his wake, sharp grooves marred the hard cement. Anybody who could get a good look at those skates would have seen that they weren't ice-skates at all.

It was near one of the paths out of Rockefeller Center that he was stopped. An almost invisible net of webbing had materialized between two buildings, and the skater was caught in it. So strong was his momentum that, impossibly, the webbing broke, and he crashed painfully to the ground.

"Ouch, that looked like it hurt." Two long legs belonging to a lifelong ice-skater came to a stop in front of the thief. One leg appeared to be made of solid ice, while the other was awash in flames. "Hey! You still awake?"

No movement registered from the thief. Two more legs appeared, these clad in red with black lines in a web-like pattern.

"He looks seriously hurt. Maybe we should have done it your way?"

"No, seeing him like this, you were right. At his speed, freezing those skates of his to the ground would have probably snapped his ankles." A thin hand of ice pointed at the mentioned skates. "That or he would have gone faster. Check it out."

The skate bottoms more resembled roller blades than ice-skates. Metal wheels were still spinning, and the two girls could see sparks crackling from one wheel to the next.

"Electromagnets." Spider-Woman walked into the light. "The cold would have just made them more powerful."

Crux nodded. "Now heat, that wouldn't have weakened them. Same problem though, he'd have died."

Sirens could be heard in the distance. Spider-Woman jerked her head at the sound. "They should take care of this guy. He's still alive, and there's nothing we can do."

Resigned, Crux shrugged. "Yeah, I guess we'd better get going. Turbo has probably finished with Ultra Girl, and she'll want to start on me. Hey, hey are you all right?"

Spider-Woman was feeling light-headed, dizzy. In a dazed panic she was off the ground, flying aimlessly higher and higher into the air. Crux was off after her, flames trailing behind. At several feet up in the air, Spider-Woman's flight grew more erratic. Semi-conscious and groaning, she crashed onto a nearby rooftop, with Crux landing soon after.

"Spi-- Spider-Woman?" Crux asked hesitantly. She knelt down next to her convulsing teammate. "What's wrong? I... I don't know what to do!"

"Aaahhh! Let me out!" Electricity burst out from Spider-Woman's mouth, illuminating the whole sky. "So dark, so cold," Mattie sobbed softly. Her breathing began to slow. The attack had passed. "They're hurting him."

"Who?" Crux asked. "What just happened?"

"It's Bolt," Spider-Woman explained. "I know where he is, and he needs our help."

Next Issue: The missing teammates have been found, and the New Warriors are out to bring them back. While Night Thrasher goes cross-country to face the Slingers, the ladies set out to rescue Bolt from the clutches of... naw, it ain't that easy. Find out next issue!

It was almost half an hour before landing that the hijackers had made their move. Scattered throughout the plane, they made their presence known with guns and explosives. Swiftly they took control, disabled the Air Marshall and situated themselves at key points within the plane. Two went for the cockpit, and probably would have made it.

Unfortunately, that particular flight had a passenger in fight class who reacted as quickly as the hijackers had. Dwayne Taylor had also been aching for something to hit since before he'd left New York, and getting stuck with an aisle seat hadn't improved his mood. As the hijackers passed by he moved, disabling the explosives on their vests and knocking them out with their own guns.

"Everybody stay in your seats," the man who often called himself Night Thrasher growled. The guns felt uncomfortable in his hands, so Dwayne dropped them. Even with his equipment traveling cross-country by train, he wasn't defenseless. There was a better way to save the plane than with death.

"I need this," said Dwayne as he picked up lipstick from a female passenger's tray. Still heavy, meaning it was almost brand new. Under the curtain separating first-class from coach, a shadow stirred.

Hands gripped the seats on either side of the aisle. Dwayne was in the air, feet out, when a figure emerged from behind the curtain. His toe caught the armed hijacker in the throat, while the other foot's heel slammed into the man's temple. As the man fell unconscious and silent, Dwayne twisted to grab the gun before he fell. Swiftly he laid it on the floor and disabled the explosives on this third hijacker's chest.

"Nobody touch those," Dwayne warned about the guns. Next thing Night Thrasher was through the curtain, with no intelligence on his opponents and only a tube of lipstick in his hand.

In operations like that, Night Thrasher knew that one person, not necessarily the leader, would have a remote detonator for all the explosives. That was his target as eyes scanned the rows. At the same time he was running, with the lipstick in his hand held back and ready to throw. Two other men were standing, and Night Thrasher suspected that at least one more was seated, a sleeper in case anything went wrong. This man Night Thrasher spotted instantly, and the lipstick flew.

The open laptop was struck near the top, fell in over the man's hands and gave Night Thrasher the few seconds he needed to leap at that seat and

punch the man out. In the man's lap was a gun, and at this point Night Thrasher didn't have any choice, with two hijackers drawing beads on him. A click of the release dropped the clip from the gun, and Night Thrasher threw both in opposite directions.

The last of the hijackers dropped, and with them the immediate threat. All that remained was for Night Thrasher to secure his fallen opponents and disable all their equipment. Then, when the plane landed, Dwayne Taylor would have some explaining to do.



#15
"GIRLS' NIGHT OUT"
Written by Steve Crosby

Turbo hung up her cell phone and stuck it into the pouch concealed on her costume. "That was Hindsight. Apparently 'Thrash was involved in a little incident on his way to California and will be detained for a few hours. We can't even get in touch with him."

"By then it will be too late," declared Spider-Woman. With her and Turbo in the New Warriors' Crash Pad were Ultra Girl and Crux. At the moment those four young women *were* the New Warriors. Their headquarters was trashed and they've fought amongst themselves twice that day already. "I could feel the pain Bolt was in. If we don't get to him soon he could die."

"No offense, Spider-Woman, but we've been looking for Bolt ever since he disappeared. The only difference now," Turbo swept a hand out. "Is that we lost a lot of our resources with which to search." She then shot a look at both Ultra Girl and Crux. One of the fights had been between the two of them, and the Crash Pad's current condition had been the result.

At the comment, Ultra Girl rolled her eyes. "'With which to search.' Who talks like that, really?"

Before either Turbo or Crux could respond, Spider-Woman spoke up. "This isn't the time for any of that. One of us is in trouble and we need to help him. By whatever means we can. The vision I had wasn't all pain and darkness." Unconsciously, Spider-Woman was rubbing her arms. "Wherever I was...wherever Bolt is, it's cold and it's wet and it's...there was shaking. Everywhere, shaking."

"That narrows it down some," retorted Ultra Girl. "We're only on an island."

"That's assuming Bolt is even in the city," Crux added. "We don't know what kind of range your...visions have."

"Somehow, I think I'd have known if he was farther away than New York." Something on Spider-Woman's person was ringing. She hurried to answer it. "Hello?"

"One of our teammates is in mortal danger, she's on the phone," remarked Ultra Girl to the others. Crux just glared at her. Turbo wasn't paying any attention. She was on her feet, lost in thought while slowly pacing.

"Okay, thanks Jessica," Spider-Woman said into the phone. "How much do I owe you? Oh, come on, it's your job. All right. 'Bye." She put away the phone and looked up at the others. "After the vision, I called a friend of mine, a private investigator. Asked her what she could find." To Turbo, she asked, "Is that okay?"

Turbo nodded, still in thought. Spider-Woman continued.

"I told her everything I could remember, asked her to find anyplace that might fit. That was her giving me a place."

Ultra Girl threw her head back and sighed deeply. "All that time you spent explaining, you could have just--"

"Hydrobase."

Spider-Woman and Crux stared at Turbo, aghast. Ultra Girl gestured at her. "Like that, thank you."

"How...?"

"My suit was listening in on your signal," Turbo revealed. "Yell at me for invasion of privacy later. Smart lady, that detective. I was all set to go check the Daily Bugle archives for strange power fluxes too." Everybody was still speechless. "Bolt was also in the vision, remember? Trapped, in pain, and with the power to generate electricity, somebody must be tapping him as an energy source."

"So what are we waiting for?" Crux asked. "Let's go get him out."

Something wet and slimy dripped from an overhand fell close to Ultra Girl's foot. She gave a little shriek, backed off and rested her hand against the pipe wall. A quick glance at the slime on the wall, and Ultra Girl snatched her hand back.

"Ew! This place is gross. Why can't any of our villains have class?"

"You should have seen this place back when the Avengers used it as their headquarters," Turbo remarked. The two women walked in the massive pipes that had connected Hydrobase to New York City. "Doctor Doom did this, if I remember right. Bombed the Quinjet fuel tanks, dropped hundreds of Doombots, just leveled the whole island. The Avengers ran a salvage operation, but as you can see a lot was left intact at the bottom of the ocean. Enough so that somebody decided to make use of it."

A fork in the pipeline appeared. Turbo indicated the pipe that slanted up. "That's where we want to go. You'll have to carry me. Pushing around air in this cramped space would draw attention, and climbing would take too long."

"You trust me not to drop you?" Ultra Girl asked.

"You might be a bitch, Ultra Girl, but you're also a hero. You wouldn't drop me. Especially since you might need me to save your life later."

"I probably will." Ultra Girl hooked her arms under Turbo's shoulders and lifted into the air. "Pairing up with me is almost as bad an idea as pairing Crux with Spider-Woman."

"They get along fine."

"Maybe a little too fine." The pitch in Ultra Girl's voice went up about two octaves on that last word.

"Aren't you from California?"

"Southern California."

"Well, I don't think they're..."

"Crux definitely is, and with Spider-Woman she's definitely interested. If she makes a move now, two things could happen. A fight or a make-out session, we'll be on our own."

The pipe soon leveled off, and Ultra Girl set Turbo down. The armored New Warrior shook her head. "That is probably your biggest problem. You don't have faith in your teammates."

While two of the New Warriors were taking the sneaky approach into the Hydrobase ruins, Spider Woman and Crux were to go in loud and fancy. Both were able to fly, and with Crux's flame powers it was a sight to behold. The two young woman soared over the New York skyline, soon reaching the bay and about to reach the island of artificial debris that had been Hydrobase.

"It's funny you volunteered for this," Spider-Woman yelled at Crux to carry over the rush of wind. "Your ice powers would have been of use underwater. Turbo, on the other hand, doesn't seem that suited to close quarters fighting."

"I hate sewers," Crux yelled back. "If you were ever under Paris, you'd understand."

"Does a summer fling in Greece count?"

Rather than answer, Crux releases gouts of fire and cold from her hands. They struck the debris together, the cold first creating a coating of ice that the fire evaporated as soon as it hit. Thick plumes of steam rose into the air while the metal and plastic underneath melted against the extreme heat.

"It's chilled," yelled Crux. "Get on in there!"

Spider-Woman did. She dropped through the steam, guided by extra-sensory abilities she didn't entirely understand. By instinct she slowed and put her hands up against cooled metal. Even through her costume she could feel it, the intense cold that had come on after extreme heat after deep chill. That material had gone beyond weak and brittle, and Spider-Woman tore through a reinforced hull like it was tissue paper. On the other side of darkness.

A light sting on Spider-Woman's back was the most pain she felt when six long appendages erupted out of her back. Suddenly she could feel everything they touched, as sensitive as fingertips, and could manipulate them as finely as her own two hands. The spindly appendages felt their way along the dark space, guiding Spider-Woman to a faint separation in the metal. Illumination behind her alerted Spider-Woman to Crux.

"Is that our way in?" the flaming ice princess asked.

"Most likely," answered Spider-Woman. "Let me get into position, then as soon as I open it feel free to burn a path if we needed."

Two of Spider-Woman's appendages reached up higher at the wall, dug into the wall and braced her. With the other four appendages, Spider-Woman wedged into the separation and forced open a massive door that would have led into a hanger.

In front of Spider-Woman's face over a dozen high-powered firearms were primed and ready to fire. She gave the armored soldiers a wry smile. "Hi! Is this the Delta Chi Omega pledge drive?" Behind Spider-Woman, it suddenly got very hot.

Pushing her appendages off the wall, Spider-Woman flipped back and over the gout of flame Crux unleashed. As fires consumed them, the armored soldiers opened fire. After generating the fire, Crux had formed a wall of ice that held against the barrage of energy shots. Overhead, Spider-Woman more utilized her flight rather than agility to twist around the bursts.

"Crux, there are people in those suits! Don't fry them alive!"

The bi-powered mutant raised an icy eyebrow. "Oh I think they're safe. If anything, those suits are just about at their limits."

Flames ceased. Pure cold emanated out from the wall of ice. The soldiers were engulfed in extreme cold following their exposure to extreme heat. Spider-Woman could see the results, saw the faint cracks in armor with her sharp eyes.

"Nice set-up," she remarked to Crux. Spinnerets of psionic webbing erupted from her hands. "Now I'll knock them down!"

The webs of energy swept over the soldiers and their brittle armor, breaking off whole chunks of armor and knocking the men unconscious to the ground. Perched on top of the ice wall, Spider-Woman glanced down at Crux, tipped her head to her, the back-flipped off the wall and through the open doorway.

Light footsteps walked over the unconscious henchmen, all of whom happened to be naked under the armor. "Eww," Spider-Woman commented. Quickly she averted her eyes from the floor.

"Yeah, that's gotta chaff," added Crux as she followed Spider-Woman. "Heh, and you know they're gonna blame the cold."

Spider-Woman wasn't looking down, but the remark made her laugh as she was about to turn the corner. "Oh, it's not just the cold. I knew this guy heavy into drugs, it made him look--"

Waves of force swept over Spider-Woman, sent her hurtling in the other direction. Crux actually saw the molecules in the air vibrating against the energy used. Rapidly she moved for the corner, raised her arms and attempted to generate cold.

Cold is the absence of heat, the lack of activity in molecules and thus no friction. Those waves of energy kept the air moving, negated Crux's ability no matter how hard she tried. Forget shattering an ice wall. Crux wasn't even able to make it cold enough to generate ice. The vibrations rolled over her, threw her back farther than Spider-Woman to land hard well past the other woman.

Spider-Woman struggled to her knees, looked up at the force that had attacked them. At the sight of a large black man with a short mohawk, dressed in a white a gold jumpsuit with an open chest, she had to contain her laughter.

"Who...? Oh my god, what are you...? Urk!"

Large white gloved hand gripped Spider-Woman by the neck. Just contact with the man sent vibrations throughout her body, sparking a violent convulsion. She was lifted off her feet, shaking uncontrollably, her face inches from the man that had overpowered her.

"Yes, little girl, I am Moses Magnum, Arms Dealer to the World and Master of the Magnum Force! Once again, an intrusive little arachnid has come to disrupt the testing of my weapons, but this time I have the power to fight back! With its power source ready at last, nothing is going to stand in the way of my new Seismic Amplifier! Once the whole of New York City is sunk beneath the sea, the leaders of the world will have no choice but to grant me unlimited wealth and power!"

Still weak and shaky, Spider-Woman kicked Moses Magnum ineffectively in the groin. "You talk too much."

Laughing, Moses Magnum hurled the young super-heroine against the wall. Over their heads, lights were starting to flicker. "I can afford to, against such

an insignificant threat. This time, none have the power to stop...Moses Magnum!"

"What do you see?"

"Shh."

"Come on, let me see. I have the vision powers."

"Since when?"

"Okay, I don't, but I want to see what's going on."

"Fine, if it'll shut you up."

Turbo moved from the vent, allowing Ultra Girl to scoot forward and into the large room outside. "What are we looking at?"

The self-proclaimed interim leader of the New Warriors rolled her eyes. "Those guys in white lab coats are scientists. The guys in armor, carrying guns and standing around doing nothing, they're guards."

"Oh. What are they doing?"

"I just told you," whispered Turbo loudly. "They're standing around doing nothing."

"Not them. The scientists."

"I was trying to figure that out when you interrupted me. Now if you'll just shh-"

"It looks like they're standing around doing nothing. The scientists," Ultra Girl added quickly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought at first. But see how they're standing around that big machine taking notes? Whatever is going on here, it has to do with that."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Ultra Girl asked without waiting for an answer. Her strong hands pressed against the vent, pushed it out. She flew

out, vent in her hands, threw it into a guards mid-section as she slammed feet-first into another guard.

"Oh dammit!" With no other choice, Turbo threw herself into the fray. Riding on currents of hard air, she blasted mini-whirlwinds at two other guards. Panicked, the guards attempted to scatter, but Turbo corralled them with a wide sweeping of strong breezes. "Nuh-uh, you folks aren't going anywhere until you tell me exactly what it is you're working on."

"Oh my god."

Turbo looked in Ultra Girl's direction. The super-strong heroine had finished tossing the remaining guards around, and was facing the large battery-like machine the scientists had been studying. A small window allowed one to see into the machine, and Ultra Girl could very clearly see the pained, unconscious face of Bolt. And now that she was looking in that direction, so could Turbo. Angry, she turned back to face the scientists.

"Why is he in there!" she yelled. Winds swept more fiercely around the panicking scientists. "What have you been doing to him!"

"The power we needed, it was too much to risk drawing on the city's electrical grid. Even he couldn't fill the demands of the--"

"Be quiet," another scientist hissed. "He'll kill us for exposing his plans!"

"Us! He's the one that won't shut up about it every ten minutes!"

"Be quiet!" Ultra Girl roared. She'd closed on the machine. "Whatever you're doing, it stops now. I'm getting Bolt out of this thing!" she said to Turbo.

"No, wait!" One of the scientists tried to rush forward, but Turbo had them all well in place. "We're drawing power on him right now! Any attempt to disrupt the machine as it's active will--"

It was too late. Ultra Girl gripped her hands on the machine, dug her fingers in, and tried to forcibly remove a section. Sparks erupted from the machine. A bolt of energy washed over Ultra Girl and sent her hurtling through the air. Turbo threw a hand over her visored eyes, but was still dazzled by the show of power.

With Turbo distracted, her cage of moving air dissipated, and the scientists quickly fled out through an open door into the corridor.

Shaken but still consciously, Ultra Girl rose to her feet and looked at what'd done. "Oh wow, I probably should have thought that through."

The disruption in his base's power didn't go unnoticed by Moses Magnum. Turning from the unconscious Crux and semi-conscious Spider-Woman, he started back towards the main control room.

"Ah, of course you wouldn't have come alone to face my might. Others have infiltrated by base and overpowered the rest of my inept guards. But no matter. The power of my Magnum Force will also bring them to heel!"

In the corridor, Moses Magnum saw his scientists fleeing. At the side of their employer, the scientists froze in their tracks. One tried to offer words of explanation, but these would fall on deaf ears.

"Cowards!" Moses Magnum roared. His hand was raised, and waves of seismic power emanated forth. "You've served your purpose, and your failure to safeguard my power has proved you have no other use. Therefore your lives are forfeit!"

The steel ground buckled beneath the scientists' feet even as powerful vibrations ripped through their bodies. Moses Magnum had also not slowed in his approach. Effortlessly he physically knocked aside the weak men with their fragile bodies. Nothing but pulp was left in his wake as Moses Magnum crossed the threshold into the nerve center of his base.

"Who dares attempt to thwart the plans of I, Moses Magnum!"

"Ultra Girl, grab one of those cables!" Turbo yelled, apparently not hearing the villain's proclamation. "They said something about still needing more power. It's how we found them."

"Yeah, if they don't have enough juice, maybe the machine will-Ahh!"

Ultra Girl also hadn't noticed Moses Magnum, in spite of his rather loud entrance. His backhand took her by surprise, knocking the young heroine across the room.

"Fools, you ignore Moses Magnum at your peril!"

Turbo whipped her head around at hearing this second proclamation. At seeing the villain, she allowed herself a small smile. "Oh, so you're the one responsible for all this?"

"Yes, and despite your efforts the Seismic Amplifier will enable me to destroy this city! Once that has occurred--"

Suddenly, the words were ripped from Moses Magnum's throat, along with all his air.

"Yeah, I've figured out the plan," said Turbo in a cold voice. "You tried the same thing in Japan a few years ago. How's your power against somebody who's not even on the ground?"

Moses Magnum sank to his knees, gasping for breath. Desperate, he raised his hand, focused the Magnum force on the turbine around Turbo's right wrist.

"Aah!" Turbo screamed when the machine at her wrist shattered. She fell to the ground in great pain, her arm covered with blood. Triumphant, Moses Magnum rose back to his feet and approached the young woman that had almost beaten him.

"A valiant effort, girl, but my power is absolute! Now, once I draw on the power of my Seismic Amplifier--"

"Do you ever, like, shut up!" yelled Ultra Girl as she slammed her body into the white-jumpsuit-clad villain. "And that get-up is so back it blows right past good and back to bad again!" She managed to stagger him with a powerful blow. "And hey, you just got punch in the face by a girl!"

"Gnat! I will crush you!" Moses Magnum tried to make good on his promise, threw a seismic-enhanced punch towards Ultra Girl. However, the athletic young woman who can also fly easily evading the blow and landed another of her own.

"Uhh." Groggy, close to shock, Turbo raised her head, saw that Ultra Girl was locked in combat with Moses Magnum. "Guess...his power works...pretty well. Unh, gotta do something," said Turbo to herself. A short distance away she could see one of the massive cables connected to the still sparking machine. Slowly and with great effort, Turbo raised her sole arm with a turbine and concentrated. A strong burst of air struck the cable pushed it stretched to its limit, but Turbo didn't stop.

Finally, Moses Magnum smashed a fist into Ultra Girl's mid-section. She doubled-up in pain, struggled to remain on her feet as Moses Magnum laughed.

"I've fought the X-Men themselves to a standstill. Did you really think that a team of little girls would ever stand a chance against me!"

"Okay, maybe if we'd known it was you we'd have called back-up." Threads of psionic webbing wrapped around Moses Magnum, temporarily holding him tight. "But what the hey, as long as we're here we may as well give it a shot."

Electricity bit through Moses Magnum's body, the paralyzing Venom Sting that Spider-Woman considered her ace in the hole. As the villain stood frozen, the female arachne-powered human flew down the corridor to take the fight up close.

"Come on, Ultra Girl! Double team!"

"Oh, totally!" agreed Ultra Girl. At the same time, both super-strong New Warriors slammed their fists Moses Magnum's head. The defenseless villain was sent hurtling, directly into the path of Turbo's air blast. This pushed Moses Magnum into the cable, which had started to wear under the assault and several exposed wires had started to spark.

"Aaarrgghhh!" Screamed Moses Magnum in agony as hundreds of thousands of volts of electricity coarsed through his body.

"It better get that before he dies," groaned Spider-Woman. Psionic webs sprang from her hands to wrap around the thick cable. She pulled hard, disconnecting the cable from the wall. Not only did Moses Magnum stop cooking and fell to the ground unconscious, but the large machine in the center of the room stopped sparking.

"Bolt's in there," Ultra Girl said to Spider-Woman. She flew to the section she had tried to remove earlier, and this time did it safely.

As this happened, Spider-Woman flew back in the direction she had come from. Turbo suddenly wondered what had happened to Crux. But then Bolt was clearly visible inside the machine, hooked up to numerous wires.

"Wait!" Turbo warned to Ultra Girl, who had been about to yank Bolt free. "We have no idea how connected he is to the machine. Just pulling him out could kill him!"

"Then give me a hand here," complained Ultra Girl as she turned to Turbo exasperated. "Use that suit's sensors to...oh my god."

"What?"

"Turbo...Mickey, your hand."

"What about my-" Turbo looked down, finally noticed what had happened when Moses Magnum had destroyed one of her turbines. Her arm ended in a bloody stump at the wrist. For several seconds, Turbo was frozen, breathing heavily and in shock at the sight of where her hand had once been.

Unsure of what to do, Ultra Girl slowly approached Turbo, her arms extended out. "Hey, Turbo? It...it's okay, girl. We...Night Thrasher can maybe help...I-I don't know. God, I, I'm sorry. But this, it's not over yet. We need you Turbo, please."

Eyes blinked. Breathing slowed. It seemed to take forever, but Turbo was pulling herself together. She looked up from the injury at Ultra Girl. "Okay, I'm going to take a look at the wires Bolt is connected to. If...if I can with any certainty, I'll tell how we can best get him out."

"Okay. Hey, maybe we better..." Ultra Girl looked down, saw a white lab coat. She bent down, started to remove a strip of cloth.

"That's not necessary," Turbo said. "Looks like it was cauterized by the explosion. Come on. We need to get Bolt out fast."

By the time Spider-Woman had returned, the unconscious Crux in her arms, Turbo and Ultra Girl had managed to get Bolt out of the machine.

"How is he?" Spider-Woman asked.

"He's breathing, and his heart is beating," said Turbo. "Beyond that, I don't have any idea. "What we need to do is get him to a hospital."

"You too," Ultra Girl said to Turbo.

That was when Spider-Woman noticed the missing hand. "Oh, oh Mickey, I'm so sorry."

"Forget it," she said with a forced strength. "The only we can do about it now is stop any infection. How's Crux?" she asked, noticing the unconscious teammate in Spider-Woman's arms.

"Alive, I think. But that blast she got hit with could have caused some internal damage." Spider-Woman glanced down. "More than half of us need a hospital. Some heroes we make."

"Eh, we did okay," remarked Ultra Girl. "We're still alive, and we did beat the bad guy." Her gaze then fell on the unconscious Moses Magnum. "Speaking of which, what are we doing with him?"

"All we can do is leave him," Turbo answered.

"What? But-"

"You two are carrying wounded, and I'm not equipped for passengers." Nobody laughed at the attempt at humor. "The best we can do is call the authorities. Hopefully the Avengers or somebody can get here before he and his men wake up."

"Well, okay." Spider-Woman didn't like it, but Turbo was right. There wasn't anything else they could do at the moment.

"We destroyed his equipment," Ultra Girl added. "The worst he can do is get away."

"Yeah," agreed Turbo. "That's all we can tell ourselves. Let's go."

With their wounded, the three remaining New Warriors left the base, down the corridors Spider-Woman and Crux had arrived from. In the main chamber, amongst the unconscious bodies and wrecked machinery, something came to life. Turbo's radio communicator had been hooked into her suit at the right wrist, near the turbine that Moses Magnum had destroyed. Miraculously, it still functioned.

"Turbo, can you read me?" The voice of Night Thrasher asked from the other side of the country. "I've run into a situation. You need to get here as soon as you can. Hello?"

To Be Continued!

Next Issue: As most of the New Warriors recover from grievous wounds, Night Thrasher manages to track down the Slingers! Will he accept the decision of Ricochet and Hornet to remain with their original team? Maybe he would, but Night Thrasher has a bad feeling about Dusk.

Each room was different, a representation of the distinct personalities of their occupants. Weights littered the floor of Prodigy's room, and posters of the heroes he idolized covered the walls. For Hornet's room, there was a workbench, pieces of machinery he'd tinker with all over it. One block of equipment was still held in place by the worn vise at one end of the bench. Of the three, Ricochet's room was the tidiest, comic books and DVDs all neatly stacked away, yoga mat folded in the corner. And then there was Dusk's, unused, perhaps not a room at all.

Covered feet made their way through heavy weights towards the bed. Prodigy stirred as a new shape came under his covers. "Cassie..." Solid black pressed against his lips, silencing Prodigy as the rest pressed up against him as well.

Metal crashed to the floor, pushed away to make room for Hornet. Darkness shaped like a female had him in control, overwhelming him with its desires.

Shadows gasped in Ricochet's room. Beneath him, darkness made an impression on the bed.

Not one of the three men knew that when Dusk wasn't with him that she was with one of the others, that she never spent a night in her own room. Every night she stayed in a room other than her own, but in a sense it wasn't empty. Every night, a husk that was Cassie slept, content.



#16
"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS"
Written by Steve Crosby

He was waiting in a car when Night Thrasher strode out of the airport. Neither man was in their armor, but they knew each other, and the greeting was respectful.

"Chris," said Night Thrasher curtly as he opened the passenger-side door and entered the vehicle.

"Dwayne," responded Darkhawk as he shifted gears and drove the car onto the road. During the brief drive, the conversation went much the same way.

"My armor?"

"In the trunk. It didn't arrive until after your flight. Were you planning to be delayed?"

"I was planning to pick it up as I left. Does your team have any information?"

"Only that four individuals in their uniforms are operating in Los Angeles, and doing a pretty good job of it. Iron Man has talked about recruiting them, but Hawkeye objects."

"After Vagabond he should."

"How do you know about that?"

"Moon Knight figured that everybody should know when one of us can't be trusted."

"Iron Man won't like that."

"He wouldn't. It was his mistake to recruit her."

"But anyway, that's not the reason. Hawkeye keeps his ear to the ground, knows that two of them were last associated with your team. I wouldn't be here if he hadn't given me the go-ahead."

"I realize your team is short-staffed. Tell him I appreciate the loan, but it won't be necessary. Aside from the info, I can handle things myself."

"Why didn't anybody else come?"

The leader of the New Warriors didn't have an answer, and least not one that satisfied him. When the lead had come about Ricochet and Hornet, he'd just left with only a message to the others about where he was going. At the time, Ultra Girl and Turbo had been tearing the place apart, and he couldn't help but think that he'd simply taken an excuse to get away from his team. Not that it was much of a team, Night Thrasher thought to himself.

"This isn't like the old team. Everybody's had trouble meshing together, and I may have something to do with that. Without me around, maybe the others will connect in some way, get closer to being an actual team. That or I'll find an empty Crash Pad when I return."

"Things are that bad?"

Night Thrasher gave a nod. "I can't blame Ricochet or Hornet for leaving. The only reason I'm here is to make sure it wasn't under duress. This is their old team, what they're familiar with. This new team doesn't have any of that, for anybody. Maybe I should move on, like the others did."

"What move on? Everybody's still fighting, and doing a better job of it because you turned them from loners to team-players. Nova, Namorita and Speedball are on a mixed team of mutants and contemporary heroes put together by a rich guy. Sound familiar?"

"And maybe this is what you're supposed to be doing," continued Darkhawk. "Young heroes need to be trained, not just in the use of their powers but also in how to use them responsibly. There's not telling how I would have ended up if Spider-Man hadn't taught me what being a hero is really about, and something tells me he learned it the hard way."

"Well, that's something to think about," Night Thrasher admitted. "But later. Right now I'd rather just worry about these Slingers."

"And if they need help, all the better."

"Let go of me!"

Prodigy struggled to keep hold of man, to prevent him from running out into traffic. Though much smaller, the man had passion for what he was after.

"Jessica! Jessica!" He waved frantically at somebody across the street who couldn't be seen. "I'm here sweetheart! We can be together!"

"She can't hear you." With some effort, Prodigy lifted the man off the ground and half-dragged, half-carried him away from the street. "She doesn't even know you exist, loser. Now stop your delusional ranting before I throw you to the moon."

"Now who's being delusional?" Ricochet hopped from speeding car to speeding car and landed in front of Prodigy and the crazed stalker. "Hey man, nice catsuit. Prodigy should take some fashion tips from you."

"I've got this," Prodigy told Ricochet. "Go handle your part."

"Oh, that." Ricochet turned his head towards the street and gave a brief shrug. "It's done. She had no idea her biggest fan was about to get paved along the road. Plus I got this." Ricochet held up a signed photograph. "Cool, huh? How much you think I can get off C-Bay?"

"Don't you dare!" Screamed the obsessed fan in the catsuit. "She gave you that to pass on to me!"

"Nah, I don't think so. Hey, Prodigy, let's dump this guy off at the nearest loony bin and meet up with the others."

"I'll be glad to," snarled the garishly dressed hero.

Several blocks away, Dusk observed a bank from across the street, hidden in shadows. A dozen stories up, Hornet was perched on a ledge, watching the same bank. Something tapped him on the shoulder, causing Hornet to jump and nearly fall before that same hand steadied him.

"Whoa, sorry there," apologized Ricochet. "You were so intent, you didn't hear me say hi."

"You did not say hi," corrected Prodigy, who was crawling out the same window Ricochet had used.

"Well, no, but I was thinking it really hard," he explained. "Just checking to see which of us becomes a telepath first. Every team has one."

"What took you," Hornet asked the two latecomers.

"We spied a celebrity stalker about to kill himself so the celebrity would notice him," Ricochet explained. "This city's bursting with crazies. Good news is I got an autograph. You wanna see?"

"Later," Prodigy said. To Hornet he asked, "Anything happened?"

Hornet shook his head, covered in that large, clunky helmet. "Nothing that I've noticed. Shots haven't been fired, and I haven't picked up the silent alarm."

"This bank *is* getting robbed today, right?" inquired Ricochet. "Because I think it's much more likely that snitch just doesn't Prodigy. I know I wouldn't, guy roughs me up every few nights for information."

"It is if that dirtbag knows what's good for him," answered Prodigy. Suddenly he pointed down at the street. "Look! A police car with sirens!"

Ricochet squinted. "Really? I thought that was a Cadillac."

"It means something's happened inside, and we missed it!" explained Prodigy, with a glare at Hornet. "Fix that helmet as soon as you're back home." In closing, Prodigy yelled as he leapt from the ledge, "Slingers away!"

"You better catch him," Ricochet said to Hornet as he also leapt from the ledge. "Otherwise he'll return from the dead all pissed off."

"I think something's happening, Dusk," said Hornet into his helmet transmitter as he flew off the ledge and towards Prodigy. "We're rushing in, but maybe you can teleport in unseen and not risk lives."

Three stories down Hornet's arms hooked under Prodigy's shoulders and the two men went in a controlled descent towards the bank. At the last second Prodigy pushed away from Hornet.

"Hey!"

Armor the color of silver and gold protected Prodigy in his crash through the bank's glass window. Hornet was similarly protected when he flew through a second window. Having no real armor to speak of, Ricochet landed nimbly onto the sidewalk and simply pulled open the door into the bank. Immediately he fell into a roll that ended into a fantastic somersault that would have evaded any greeting bullets, all the while withdrawing stun discs and holding them ready in his fingers.

The fourth Slinger, Dusk, stood in the center of the bank's lobby, next to three unconscious men that had been tied up. Against one wall of the bank were the employees and customers, all unharmed but scared.

Standing there after a spectacular and somewhat wasted entrance, Ricochet scratched his head, momentarily forgetting about the stun discs. "Ow!" Looking at the hand, Ricochet noticed the discs, went flush with embarrassment, and quickly put them away. "I mean, hmmm."

"What happened here?!" asked Prodigy incredulously.

At the same time, Hornet approached Dusk with a touch of awe on his face. "Wow. You managed to beat them all by yourself." Turning to face Ricochet and Prodigy, he added, "she must have noticed something while you guys took my attention."

"Not really," stated Dusk in a low, almost whisper of a voice. "I mean, well, yeah I did notice something. But it wasn't me that did this." She gestured at the trussed up robbers. With her other hand she held up a piece of paper. "I found this attached."

Ricochet reached for the paper, but Prodigy snatched it out of Dusk's hand before she could give it to anybody. His eyes scanned over it then glanced back-and-forth between Ricochet and Hornet. Without a word, he pushed the paper at Ricochet.

"It's from 'Thrash," said Ricochet for Hornet's benefit. "Gives a time and place. Huh, could've stuck around and talked to us right here."

"I told you we should have said goodbye in person," admonished Hornet. "Deserters get shot you know."

"I'm sure he just wants to make sure you're okay," stated Dusk hopefully. "But I suppose we'll know for certain tonight."

Train cars sat silent on rails that were no longer active. Among these shells of once mighty beasts stood the dark figure of Night Thrasher. High up behind him a figure of gold and silver was briefly illuminated by the full moon. Prodigy leaped from the train car and tackled the shape of Night Thrasher high about the neck. Both crashed to the ground, but Prodigy kept moving, raining blows against the head of the prone figure.

Others came out of the shadows. Hornet moved slow in his heavy armor that only allowed him to move quickly in the air. Ricochet seemed only to touch the ground briefly in between lengthy bounds. Of Dusk there was no sign, as she remained hidden in the shadows of which she seemed so much a part.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Hornet in a shocked tone.

Punches continued to land as Prodigy gave his answer. "Teaching this scum a lesson about not trying to break up the Slingers. We're a team, and we're going to stay that way!"

"Okay Prodigy, whatever you say," soothed out Ricochet. "But last I heard we heroes didn't go around beating up people until they actually did something."

"I couldn't agree more."

Prodigy turned away from the figure he'd been hammering at, right into a punch thrown by Night Thrasher! The self-proclaimed powerhouse of the Slingers fell dazed to the ground. His teammates Hornet and Ricochet watched as Night Thrasher stepped over the dummy and his decoy towards them. In his hand was one of the two truncheons Night Thrasher kept in his armor.

Stun discs appeared in Ricochet's hand, raised to throw. Hornet had likewise raised his arm, leveled it fist out towards Night Thrasher. The slightest spasm and his electric "stinger" blast would be activated.

"So," greeted Ricochet, "here we are. 'Thrash, good to see you again."

"I wanted to talk to you about us leaving," Hornet said hurriedly. You know how spur of the moment Ricochet can be though."

"Prodigy's message led us to believe he was in trouble," Ricochet explained. "We thought it best to get here as soon as possible, give you a call if it was something we couldn't handle."

"A good idea," Night Thrasher agreed. "Whatever happened to it?"

"I...I'm not r-really sure," Hornet stammered. He struggled to think about what has been going on these past few weeks, about the trouble that had brought him and Ricochet out west. Nothing came to mind.

"We aren't children 'Thrash," answered Ricochet with acid. "Your permission isn't required for every move we make." The words were coming out of his mouth, but Ricochet couldn't believe he was saying them.

"No, not permission," again, Night Thrasher agreed. "Courtesy would have been nice, though. Bolt disappeared the same night. You aren't the only ones I've been looking for."

Movement was registered behind Night Thrasher. He whipped around, caught Prodigy's fist in his hand. Cold, steely eyes met a surprised gaze. "You just don't stop being stupid, do you?"

Ozone fouled the air. Electricity crackled in Night Thrasher's direction. Knee bent, Night Thrasher dove to the side while pulling Prodigy forward. Hands broke apart the instant before Hornet's electric sting jabbed into Prodigy's chest. In the same motion, Night Thrasher hurled his truncheon.

"Hornet don't!" Ricochet yelled too late.

Night Thrasher had thrown his truncheon at the ground before Hornet's feet, where it bounced up between his legs and into the armor's jetpack. Having failed to notice this in time, when Hornet fired up his jetpack to go airborne the entire back of his armor exploded into flame.

"Eeeaaughh!"

One of the only friends he had in the world was on fire. Ricochet had no idea what he could do about that, but he could deal with the person responsible. Stun discs went flying from his hands. Night Thrasher was still moving, had turned around in the preceding seconds to see the discs coming. At first it appeared he only leaned back, and one of the discs did pass directly over him. But then Night Thrasher's feet left the ground. He back-flipped through the air, over the remaining stun discs. At the height of his jump, the second truncheon fired from Night Thrasher's second launcher.

Ricochet was only able move fast enough so that the truncheon didn't hit him square in the jaw. He took a glancing blow, stumbled to the ground pained but was still conscious. The brief distraction was all Night Thrasher need, however. He crossed the distance, kicked Ricochet so hard in the mid-section he landed on the pavement several feet away. It wasn't enough to knock Ricochet unconscious though, and he saw Night Thrasher spray Hornet with a flame-retardant.

"You know I didn't want a fight," Night Thrasher said to everybody and no one in particular. "But prepared, you would know that too. Something isn't right here. Where is the fourth one?"

Dusk didn't respond, or reveal herself from the shadows. But Night Thrasher didn't need for her too. The armor he wore had a number of functions and gadgets, including flash grenades that he'd previously found useful against an old girlfriend. Filters lowered over his eyes, and then Night Thrasher lit up the area.

"Aaahh!" Black became white. Shape became illuminated as though they were negatives, including the Slingers and most especially Dusk. She was no more than a few feet from Night Thrasher, and he was quick to grab hold of her before the light faded.

"Everybody here seems more than willing to fight except for you," observed the leader of the New Warriors. "Now what is going on here!"

"You're ruining it!" Dusk yelled in response. For some unexplainable reason, the black void of her covered face seemed to be shimmering. "This is my family! We're the heroes and you're ruining it so just stay away!"

The explosive force and deafening blast of sound were unexpected. Night Thrasher was thrown clear of Dusk, bounced off the side of a train car where the impact left a large dent. He struggled to his feet, and reached them at about the same time as Prodigy, Ricochet and Hornet. All four men saw the same thing, but only Ricochet had the words for it.

"Whoa."

Energies in shades of black and deeper black swirled in around the space filled by Dusk. The shape of her body was still visible within the maelstrom, suspended in mid-air with arms and legs hanging limp. Prodigy took a few steps towards her, but Night Thrasher grabbed him by the shoulder, a gesture that was met violently.

"Let go of me!" Prodigy screamed as he pulled away from Night Thrasher and threw a punch which the other man easily avoided. "This is all your fault! Somehow you're doing this to her!"

"Shut up Prodigy!" yelled Ricochet.

At that moment only Hornet was staring at Dusk and the growing swirl of energies around her. From his mouth came two words: "Negative Zone."

Ricochet, Night Thrasher and Prodigy all stopped and looked at him. Hornet turned his head and kept talking. "We know that Dusk's costume is connected to the Negative Zone in some way. She opened a portal the other day when we fought Blastaar."

It took considerable effort for Ricochet to not add, "The Living Bomburst!"

"Maybe that portal never closed," Hornet continued. "Or at least it stayed inside her, festering all this time. Could even explain our short tempers."

"Negative vibes from the Negative Zone?" suggested Ricochet. "Sounds farfetched to me."

"No, but microscopic particles of anti-matter coming through an unstable portal could affect the brain," theorized Night Thrasher. "Erratic neuron activity or unusual chemical reactions would be the least of it. Pieces of us could be disintegrating molecule by molecule. That portal needs to be closed." To Hornet he directed, "Radio the Avengers. Iron Man must have some technology that can--"

"My entire suit has been shorted out," Hornet explained. "Right now I can't move my arm and this suit is starting to get heavy."

"I've got a feeling the Avengers will hear about this anyway." Ricochet pointed. The portal was expanding upwards into the sky, and Dusk with it. Bolts of energy were crackling among dark clouds. "The way that's going, we might not have time to wait them. Not to mention the hell Dusk must be going through."

Decisions had to be made. None of the three Slingers seemed willing to make any, so Night Thrasher stepped in and acted. "Hornet, get that suit off. I'll help you about seeing what systems would be most useful and can be repaired quickly. Ricochet, is there any danger yet?"

"Look up in the sky." Quickly he added, "But I'm not sensing anything, so right now that portal's not a threat to me yet."

"Well, pay attention and if there's anything then let me know. Uh, Prodigy." Night Thrasher wracked his brain to think of something for Prodigy to do.

"Right, I'll get Dusk out of there," finished Prodigy.

Ricochet rolled his eyes at the remark. "Right. One problem though. She's up there, we're down here, and thanks to 'Thrash here trashing Hornet's armor none of us can fly."

"I still can." To the amazement of everybody, Prodigy slowly rose into the air.

"Wait, how can you...?" began Ricochet, but the wheels began turning in his mind.

Hornet finished the thought however. "The uniforms Black Marvel gave us; the ones that turned out to be from Mephisto. You kept yours?"

"Of course I did," answered Prodigy.

"Mephisto?" asked Night Thrasher.

"Yeah, bad scheme we stopped it," Ricochet told him dismissively. To Prodigy he asked, "That armor is bulletproof, allows you to fly and makes you super-strong. How come you were getting your ass kicked a minute ago?"

Prodigy shrugged as he continued to rise through the air. "Maybe I had to concentrate and this effect Dusk was having on us interfered with that."

"Wait," Night Thrasher tried to cut in. "If Mephisto provided your costumes, that changes everything. We're dealing with a portal to Hell."

Ricochet was shaking his head. "No, those were our original costumes. After we found out and ditched those, we got new ones. At least most of us did." He glanced up at Prodigy.

"I built this armor myself based on the old one's design," Hornet explained. "A friend of mine online helped, Wwprowl78."

"This costume was pretty much just homemade, except for the jacket which I found in a second-hand store. The discs too. Apparently they used to belong to belong to Nomad. Not Captain America, the loser."

"That doesn't look homemade or second hand!" Night Thrasher gestured up at the growing portal with Dusk at the center. "How'd Dusk get a costume like that if it wasn't from Mephisto?"

Ricochet shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she found it in a trash can after Spider-Man dumped it. He had these identities before us, you know. None of us are original."

Prodigy crashed to the ground, almost hitting Night Thrasher. As he climbed to his feet and wiped himself off, Prodigy said, "If that was a costume from Hell, you would think it'd react with mine somehow. But I have no affect against it at all." He peered up at the portal, and shook his head. "My helmet's thermal scanner isn't working at all. Everything up there is stone cold."

"What?" Night Thrasher reached to his own visor and adjusted the filters to thermal scanning. "Oh my god, your helmet is working. I'm not seeing any heat either."

"Are you saying Dusk is dead?" asked Ricochet.

"It's possible. She's not moving."

"Impossible. Maybe...maybe the portal is sucking in heat," suggested Hornet.

"There's heat around the portal," said Prodigy. "And no sign that it's being sucked in. Plus...I'm seeing heat in the portal itself. Just...not around Dusk. I only see her because she's absent of heat."

"No," insisted Hornet. "There's no way that she's dead. It could be her costume that's masking the heat. She was alive a few minutes until," He's head turned to look at Night Thrasher. "You! Her suit opened this portal because you attacked her! If she's dead because of you I'll--"

Hornet had lunged forward at Night Thrasher. It was a slow, brief little jump that Ricochet intercepted. He grabbed Hornet by the palsied arm and pushed him to the ground. Still encumbered in the heavy armor, Hornet struggled to rise but failed. Now it was Ricochet who faced Night Thrasher, with Prodigy next to both of them.

"Okay," Night Thrasher said, "Hornet's falling to pieces and we need to deal with this now. Dusk isn't moving and as far as we can tell she's not giving off heat. Are either of you willing to work under the assumption that she's been dead since that portal ripped out of her?"

Prodigy opened his mouth to respond, with an angry expression on his face. But it was Ricochet who spoke first, with one word. "No."

He continued before either of the other men could give a response. "As I understand it, bodies don't lose heat this fast. If Dusk is dead, then she died before tonight."

Behind them, Hornet was softly weeping. Beneath his helmet, Prodigy furrowed his brow. He had an idea of what Ricochet was getting at, and he didn't like it. "Are you talking about the night on the rooftop?"

"Yes."

Next thing Night Thrasher knew, he was between Prodigy and Ricochet, fighting to keep the former's hands from the latter's throat. This was significantly more difficult than when he previously overcame Prodigy

"You son of a bitch!" screamed Prodigy. "That wasn't my fault!"

"That's funny, because I remember some self-righteous prick that Dusk was out if she didn't jump that gap!" Ricochet screamed back. "But when she couldn't make it, you ran just as fast as the rest of us!"

"Both of you calm down!" yelled Night Thrasher. A final push managed to separate the two. "Now, when was this?"

"Over a year ago," answered Ricochet, stilling glaring daggers at Prodigy. "In New York, back when we first started out."

"When your suits had been provided by Mephisto?"

Prodigy nodded. "Even Dusk didn't know how she survived. When we found out about...the deal, that Black Marvel had made, we figured that was the reason. An effect that lasted even after she lost the suit."

"But apparently she's been dead this entire time," Ricochet thought out loud. "Or at least undead. And somehow her new suit's connection to the Negative Zone reacted with that. Okay, so how do we - Danger!"

In one motion, Ricochet pushed both Night Thrasher and Prodigy away, while at the same time he dove in the opposite direction. A winged creature of some kind flew over them. A golden disc from Ricochet struck the creature, and it exploded in the air.

"Anti-matter is starting to get through," realized Night Thrasher. "We need to close that portal now!" He turned and addressed Prodigy. "You're the only one that can get to it."

Prodigy nodded. "Only if nothing gets in my way."

Ricochet was on his feet, stun discs in both his hands. "I got you covered."

"You know what you have to do," said Night Thrasher.

Again, Prodigy nodded, more slowly, after a second of hesitation. Then he was in the air, soaring towards the by-now gargantuan vortex of negative energy that seemed to fill the entire sky. Also in the sky were more winged beasts, bat-like and insectoid in appearance. Golden stun discs and black truncheons whizzed past Prodigy and he weaved only to avoid explosions.

"What exactly does he have to do?" Ricochet asked as he threw another series of stun discs.

"I think you know the answer to that question."

The silence between Ricochet responded was deafening. "Yeah. I suppose I was just hoping you and Prodigy had thought up a brilliant alternative at the same time."

Before long Prodigy was only a speck in the sky, barely perceivable against the gaping maw of darkness towards which he flew. From that distance only he could see Dusk, her form spread-eagle in the center of a tear between dimensions. The closer Prodigy got, the more he felt those energies from a whole other universe tearing through his body. But, perhaps shielded by the unholy power behind his costume, Prodigy flew on.

Soon Prodigy was there, floating level with the unmoving, cold body of Dusk. Behind that faceless mask, Prodigy imagined he could see her eyes. Terrified, pleading for another way. Rips were forming on his uniform, and pieces of the armor had begun to fall off. Prodigy did not have much time. With tears running down his own eyes, Prodigy placed his hands on Dusk's head.

"I'm sorry."

Long minutes ago, a loud explosion of force had signaled the opening of that other-dimensional tear. What Night Thrasher, Ricochet and Hornet witnessed in the Los Angeles sky on that night so late it was almost dawn was an implosion so powerful they actually felt a faint tug pulling them towards it. Light filled the sky so bright, Night Thrasher's flash grenades paled in comparison. It was not soon until the light faded, and the three men were momentarily blinded.

Perhaps because of his helmet and eye filters, Night Thrasher was the first to recover. He saw a shape close to a hundred feet away. "Prodigy's on the ground," he said.

"A fall like that could have killed him." Ricochet took off at a run. He was soon standing over Prodigy, Night Thrasher not far behind him. On the ground was a man, Prodigy, his uniform reduced to tatters. "I think he's breathing." Ricochet knelt down, placed a hand on bare skin that felt unusually warm. "Are you okay, pal? What happened?"

The shape moved under Ricochet's touch. Prodigy looked up, his face red and covered with small cuts. Tears were mixed with the blood. "Dusk. Wh-where is she...?"

Night Thrasher gazed around the area. "Gone," he replied. His gaze turned to Prodigy. "She's not here. Prodigy, what happened?"

Like Hornet was still doing a hundred feet away, Prodigy began to weep. "I...I took her head in my h...my hands. Oh god...I tw-twisted it around. She...she's d-dead, because of...because of me."

"You broke the connection," stated Night Thrasher. "The portal closed, and Dusk went with it. You saved the world, Prodigy."

Those words did little to stop the tears.

Three men stood in the airport lobby. Two had carry-on bags, while the last was there only to see them off. A flight was announced as boarding, and one of the men with a bag extended his hand to the man with only one working arm.

"Goodbye pal," Ricochet said to his friend Hornet. "You're sure about staying? We still have your ticket right here."

"Yeah, I'm sure," replied Hornet as he accepted Ricochet's hand. "I'm sure there's a standby passenger who could use that more than I could."

Ricochet grinned. "If it's a supermodel, I'll send you a thank you card."

"The offer is always open," Night Thrasher said.

"Thank you, but somebody should stay and watch after Prodigy. The hospital you got him into will help a lot, I'm sure, but somebody should be here."

"Let me know how he's doing." With their final parting words, the two men broke away from Hornet and turned to board their plane. "So, you made much progress on Chris?" Ricochet asked Night Thrasher, referring to missing New Warriors member Bolt.

"Not much, no," he responded. "It's possible the others found a lead while I was away."

"Here's hoping they have a happy ending," quipped Ricochet.

Half a day later, the two men stood in the middle of the Crash Pad, still a wreck since the last time Night Thrasher had seen it. None of the four women who were also members of the New Warriors were present.

Ricochet glanced around, kicked at a piece of broken metal, and sighed. "Oh yeah, this'll take some work."

"But it's not beyond repair." Night Thrasher and Ricochet turned to see Turbo walk into the Crash Pad and towards them. One of her arms ended at the wrist. "I see you were half successful," she said to Night Thrasher. "Hornet?"

"He opted to stay there," Night Thrasher replied. "The man can make his own decisions." His eyes were fixed on Turbo's missing hand. "Are you...?"

"Fine," she answered. "Just a mishap when we rescued Bolt. Yeah," she added at seeing Night Thrasher's expression. "Spider-Woman had a premonition. He's still in the hospital, with the other girls keeping him company. Team's still together, 'Thrash."

That was exactly the kind of thing the leader of the New Warriors wanted to hear. "So then, let's get you a new hand and move on to the next adventure."

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'm not entirely sure if I was approached to write New Warriors or not. I know Cory Wiegel, Editor-in-Chief of M2K at the time, had made it known on the mailing list that he wanted to see the titles dangling plots resolved, so it may be that I just took him up on the offer. At any rate I saw an opportunity to be more involved in the fanfic group and I took it

All I had was the knowledge that Bolt disappeared in a flash of light, and Ricochet and Hornet left to apparently reform the Slingers, two events that had apparently been intended to be followed up in separate titles but never were. So I came up with some ideas, got approval, and the result is the last three issues you have all just read. I was told that another writer had ideas for Hornet, so I opted to leave him and just bring Ricochet back to the team. Hopefully you'll see him elsewhere soon.

As for the rest of the New Warriors, I'm not sure. To be honest my mind is at something of a blank as to further adventures, so whomever carries on the title from now on it won't be me. Maybe Bolt will go back with the team or he'll get snatched for an X-title. It's possible that Amazing Spider-Man will get picked up by a brilliant new writer who will decide to use Spider-Woman. Who really knows what the future has in store for the New Warriors?

All I know is this: I'll be right there with the rest of the readers the moment a new issue hits the web.

- Stephen Crosby
