CHAPTER ONE

When Jester and he had decided on this plan, Joey had no idea that when Jester said, “We’ll need to get some outside help”, he would be talking about the likes of Marshal Law. Yet here they were, weaving their way down dark alleyways of Darian.

As they came around one turn, they came upon a figure silhouetted by the light behind him. He leaned against the brick wall of the alley, light flared around his face from the Zippo he was using to ignite his cigar. Mirrored lenses covered his face, his hair back to its original sandy blonde.

“Right on time. Ever the F%$&ing apple polishers, eh?” came the voice of Marshal Law from between teeth clamping down on a cigar. He blew smoke into Jester’s approaching face. Joey knew Jester could have easily avoided it, but apparently chose not to. Joey didn’t want to be here, he had no love for Marshal Law, but Jester had felt he was exactly the kind of person they needed.

“Can it Law. We came here because we need people who will do what it takes to get him back, but you can check your attitude at the door,” Jester spat back at him.

“I don’t need you spandex wearing bozos. Just make with the whammy to get me to Apokaquerque…”

“Apokolips,” corrected Joey automatically.

“AND I’ll get him back,” growled Marshal Law.

“Listen you arrogant hick, I don’t like you either, or the way you do things, but in this case we need to work together!” Jester replied, his voice rising.

“I trusted you goodie goodies once already and left my only friend in your care, and you got him blown up!” yelled Marshal Law, his body visibly trembling.

“Disintegrated actually,’ explained Joey. “A process we believe can be…”

Marshal Law reached out and grabbed Joey by the shirt, “If you correct me one more time, Bill Nye the science guy, you’re gonna study the physics of ballistics first hand!”

He held Joey against the wall. Jester simply watched, a slight smile on his lips. A faint sound, like bits of metal sliding together, echoed in the alley. Joey grabbed Marshal Law’s shirt, and pushed, tossing him to the opposite wall as though he weighed nothing, a metal helmet sliding into place with a ‘shiiink’.

“HE WAS MY FRIEND TOO!!” boomed Joey’s voice so loud it rattled Marshal Law’s teeth, yet the sound would not travel far enough to even startle the rats in the alley. Marshal Law picked himself up, making dusting motions despite the lack of dust. Jester just grinned.

“Weeeeellll,” drawled Law, “maybe you boys got the stones after all….” At the same time, Marshal Law and Amp turned their heads. Standing at the end of the Alley was a large man, his head covered by a hardhat, a huge wrench clutched tightly in his hand. Marshal Law began to reach for a gun under his jacket that wasn’t there, but soon would be. Jester stepped towards the large man.

“Edward,” he said calmly. “You need to keep quiet about this, do you understand? We don’t want the others involved.”
Edward Dean, the Foreman, stared down at Jester; a hero he normally looked up to. But here he was, skulking in dark alleys with the likes of Marshal Law. He saw the intensity in Jester’s eyes. Whatever it was he was up to, he was VERY serious about it. By this time, Marshal Law had stepped up as well.

“You guys need me to take care of Lenny here?”

For the second time that night, Marshal Law was thrown against the alley wall. “If you touch a HAIR on this man’s head, you’ll spend your days eating through a straw!” yelled Jester, who turned his head towards Foreman. “You have to keep this to yourself, I have to be able to trust you on this. It’s for the Challengers, and maybe all of Darian’s protection.”

Foreman couldn’t help but trust Jester. He had been nothing but good to him. He nodded his head slowly, and Jester pushed Marshal Law to the opposite end of the alley. They walked to Amp and Jester touched them both on the shoulder.

“You shoulda let me take care of him, we can’t trust the retard,” mumbled Law.

“Law, when this is over, I am putting you away myself.”

In a green flash, the three were gone and Foreman was alone.
CHAPTER TWO

Joey Orca continued to mumble to himself. Things like dimensional mechanics, adequate power conduits, fault tolerances, and many other things the other three occupants of the dank room couldn’t understand. Those occupants stayed as far apart as they could in the crowded room. Badger’s eyes remained focused on Marshal Law, who was cleaning his nails with a dagger, his eyes shifting from Jester to Badger behind his mirrored shades.

Occasionally, Joey would call to Jester, asking about quantum foam, or reintegration, to which Jester would do some calculations in the air in glowing green before giving an answer, and then return to watch the visible tension between Law and Badger. In his head, he imagined the air blurring and eventually catching fire from the pressure they were causing.

Obviously bored, Marshal Law spoke “So, how’s it going mister spam in a can?” obviously referring to Joey.

“Well, I am pretty sure I can safely transfer three of the four us, with the fourth dying horribly. I wonder which one of us that will be.” He answered calmly, he focus never turning from the vast array of circuit and wires.

Marshal Law didn’t much care for the new Joey, not at all. Science geeks were supposed to be easy to push around. It was the natural order. If they were going to start to be tough, that meant guys like him were going to have to start studying, and that didn’t sit well at ALL.

An hour later, Law and Badger were sloshing through the sewers, carrying stacks of equipment, Badger carrying vastly more. They eventually emerged through the hole they had made that led to the spot where Scion had been slain. There were already small piles from the trips Jester was making, and Joey was reassembling his device. Badger set down his huge load (Joey said it was the reactor), as did Law with his smaller load. Joey had wisely made the entire thing modular for easy transport, and the re-assembly took only a few minutes.

The machine hummed loudly, and caused the whole chamber to vibrate slightly. Joey was looking at a screen. It showed a blurry image of a barren fiery landscape. Jester had explained what little he knew of where they were going, but finally seeing it, made them all uneasy. With a shaking hand, Joey flipped the activation switch, and the room was flooded with bright green. A vortex of swirling green and purple appeared with a thunderous ‘BOOM’.

The four men stepped up, each silhouetted against the green light. Badger’s muscles bulged as he flexed his claws, his skin crawled with electricity; Marshal Law gripped a pair of gleaming pistols, his cigar clenched between his smiling teeth; Jester with a huge hammer slung over his shoulder; and Amp encased in armor a wavy field of sound surrounding him. And they stepped forward.
CHAPTER THREE

The voyage hadn’t been as bad as they expected. Having traveled through dimensions so many times, there’s a certain amount of disorientation they’d become accustomed to. Unfortunately, the lack of discomfort on the journey was made up for upon arrival. The four men stepped from the easily traversed “Thunder Cylinder” straight into the face of hell. They emerged onto a precipice, mere feet from a sheer drop into a raging inferno. A fiery-red tendril of energy meters wide was pouring skyward directly in front of them. Its place of origin was a pond-sized pool of fire at the base of the sheer drop. The conflagration below gave off a bright-red hue illuminating the men’s horror stricken faces.

As the men exited the “Thunder Cylinder”, they were each in danger of sliding down the cliff into the blazing abyss. Jester was the first to react by teleporting himself several yards directly behind the group, avoiding a slippery fall. Right after him came Badger doing a number of dexterous flips to avoid the danger himself. Amp immediately levitated himself and calmly floated backward to join Jester and Badger. Marshal Law unfortunately wasn’t prepared for such a shocking arrival. Eyes wide behind his mirror sunglasses, his mouth aghast, cigar dangling from his lip by the barest of moisture, Marshal Law began stumbling backwards. Tripping over the craggy terrain, Marshal Law continued his retreat scrambling on his hands and feet until he joined the others. Law stood up straight, dusted himself off, and uttered a volley of expletives that would make a sailor blush. Somewhere embedded in the curses was the message of, “… point me at something I can shoot … f*@% this alien lava s#!+ …” A moment later, the glowing “Thunder Cylinder” flashed a bright green and winked from existence. There was no backing out now; the way home was gone.

On safer ground, the four men spent a moment to take in their surroundings. Most notable was the fire pit in front of them belching the fiery-red energy tendril skyward. The rest of the sky was thick with smoke, the clouds an eerie orange color. The air was so heavy, it felt like they were forced to choke it down just to continue breathing. In the distance, more fiery-red energy tendrils pushing towards the sky broke up the clouds. All around them stood enormous buildings, most likely factories from the look of them. Gigantic smoke stacks rose from the buildings breathing more filth into the already polluted sky. Each factory must have been fifteen stories, and as vast as a NFL football stadium. The dingy and menacing visage of these factories sent chills up the spines of the four men. All the buildings around them were colored in brown, gray, or black. The brightly-clad heroes were a sharp contrast to this backdrop.

The ground was almost completely covered by concrete and steel, however, a few spots of uncovered ground could be found. The soil there looked craggy and acidic, certainly incapable of supporting any life. In fact, how anything could survive here was unfathomable to Jester. Amp thought to himself, “Science has proven that life always finds a way.” And sure enough, they spotted a few of the denizens of this hellacious landscape. A group of huddled people could be seen a short distance away. These folks were garbed in dirty brown and gray robes (or some other color that eventually appeared to be brown and gray from all the grime clinging to it). They were hunched over, peering at our heroes through bloodshot zombie-like eyes. Their faces were covered in soot and scars, their skin ruined by years of destitute living. Badger was thinking about how these people looked far worse than the filthiest transients he’d dealt with in Crescent City. In fact, they looked like something from Europe during the height of the Black Plague.

The group of filthy people had stopped what they were doing to stare at our heroes. Before stopping, they had apparently been carrying dangerous looking materials into the factory. They had been walking in formation, perhaps part of some assembly line. Amp found
himself thinking that the conditions here resembled some twisted version of a munitions sweatshop in Central America back on Earth. The twenty or so grimy workers whispered amongst themselves. Meanwhile, Jester, Amp, Badger, and Marshal Law were still taking in their surroundings. Without warning, the twenty workers surged towards our heroes. They were shouting curses and brandishing clubs, metal bars, and wooden boards. Not expecting this, the Challengers took a moment to react to this turn of events. The ghastly workers were upon them.

Four minutes later, our heroes were “borrowing” dingy robes from the unconscious laborers. They hoped to blend in and not draw attention to themselves. They quickly hid the downed workers in an alley and left the scene. Now incognito, they traveled down a large road-like path that was lined with additional massive factories. They saw many more people in the same dead-eyed, destitute condition. They all appeared to be working as hard as possible in the factories. In fact, the image was the same for miles around – filthy, dirty buildings that exuded a feeling of dread.

They had come to this god-forsaken place to save their friend, Scion. Jester was not going to let anyone else die that he was responsible for, not after Siliaquonis. Amp was the brain; without him, they never would have been able to reach Apokolips. Marshal Law wanted to bring his only friend home safe. And Badger … well, Amp and Law weren’t sure why he was here, but Jester had his reasons for inviting him along.

They had crossed a universe to get here. But now with an entire nightmare planet in front of them … where do they start?

Marshal Law turned to Jester and Amp, “All right, Mr. Green-Genes and Tin Man. We’re here. What do we do next?”
CHAPTER FOUR

Jester spoke up, "Well guys, I don't know how long this is going to take. Maybe we should find us a hideout, to give us a central location to work from. Also, Badger, you think you scout around for us? Joey, think we can scrounge some junk to build sensor or communication devices, or something to tap into their communications network? And let's try our best not to make a ruckus...yet. The less attention we can draw until we are ready, the better."

"Well first of all I borrowed these from the Challengers", said Amp as he handed out the radio neck collars. "Second of all I was wondering if you could pick up any sign of a scent trail", as he turns his attention to Badger. "If the air is too polluted for you to sense anything Badger, I can try and lay down a low resonance field to clear out some of the large particles and hopefully clear the air a bit. If nothing else it might let you guys breathe a bit easier."

Amp was able to set up a resonance field around his armor that extended about 10 feet. Even though the resonance field was a comfort, Amp knew they would have to use it sparingly. They could only use it while completely alone, otherwise they were likely to attract attention as the field created a small visible warble in the air around them. As it was activated, both Badger and Marshal Law drew deep gasping breaths. Badger’s enhanced senses had been under assault since the moment of arrival. The thick choking air, along with floating minute particles had been excruciatingly painful for him. He had been doing his best to ignore the pain by focusing on finding his lost friend. Marshal Law had also been suffering in his own way. Marshal Law’s environment awareness power had been screaming at him since arrival. Even though Marshal Law could still sense the environment in agony outside the resonance field, there was relief to be found for him within Amp’s protective aura.

Not wishing to leave the resonance field, but following orders, Badger left to begin his scout of the area. As he was dashing off, Jester could hear Badger’s low voice trailing away, “Stealth of the Panther. Senses of the Bat...". When Badger got some distance away, they tested the radio neck collars. The collars didn’t work as designed, but they received enough signal that Amp believed he could make the necessary adjustments given some time.

Badger returned soon with lots of news. First he insisted they relocate for privacy to a burnt-out building he found. They left the primary “road” and followed Badger through a maze of buildings and paths. The endless buildings created a geography that was towering and confusing; they could have easily gotten eternally lost amongst this chaotic maze. As they traveled, they saw a horrifying site several hundred feet above them in the sky. High above, the sky seemed to be teeming with green and yellow garbed figures flying in formation – there must have been dozens of them. Each of them had large bulbous red eyes, and their mouths seemed to be perpetually frozen in a snarl that exposed ferocious-looking jagged teeth. Each held a brutal looking weapon; some held large firearms, while others wielded vicious bladed weapons. From the briefing Jester gave them prior to leaving Earth, they knew these must be Parademons, Darkseid’s flying army. They seemed to be patrolling the skies and observing activity on the ground. With Amp’s control over sound, he was able to hear a constant scream-like noise emanating from the fleet of Parademons. A stray thought occurred to Jester that the Parademons appearance bore an interesting resemblance to the uniform worn by the Coronisian holy man, A-Pok Para.

After the legion of Parademons had passed and the sky was free of watching eyes, Badger took them to a decrepit abandoned building. Apparently this once served as some sort
of apartment complex for the factory workers. The building was half demolished, giant gaping holes exposed in the walls, and the portion still standing had obviously suffered a damaging fire. Badger had found small, but stable portion of the building for the heroes to hide out. It was obvious from the interior of the building that the former residents lived in utter poverty and nightmarish conditions, even before the damage to the building. The term “shanty” would have been an extreme compliment for these cramped hovels.

Badger shared his discoveries with the group. Disappointment clearing showing, Badger informed them that his enhanced senses were unable to find any trace of Scion (or as Badger called him, “Abe”). Badger explained that it was possible that Abe was simply too far away, or that being inside a building with poor ventilation could make the trail almost impossible to pick up. Finally, he fearfully admitted it might also mean that Abe really did die in that Russian church on Earth and that he was never on Apokolips.

Badger continued to describe his findings to the group. He told them of the denizens of Apokolips he’d encountered. Most people look exactly like those that attacked them; garbed in dirty robes, hunched over, skin covered in soot and scars, and peering through bloodshot zombie-like eyes. As expected, he observed these people working in the factories. He encountered another group of people that must function as slave masters. These were massive beings armed with clubs, whips, guns, and other weapons. There were not many of them, but their job was obviously to enforce the others into slave labor. These vicious slave masters can be found in each factory.

Badger also found a couple more large road-like paths. After traveling the paths a few miles, he noticed that all the paths seem to be heading in an almost parallel direction. Almost parallel … there was a slight angle to each road. It was as if all the roads were heading to one centralized point, like spokes on a wheel. Based upon the angle, this centralized point the roads seem to be heading towards must be many miles away – several days travel by foot.

Badger also commented on the numerous statues that lined the major roads. It seemed like every block had a gigantic statue of Darkseid; most statues reaching to 20 feet tall. It seemed obvious to the heroes that Darkseid must be an egomaniacal dictator.

After a while, the heroes decided to explore their immediate area in more detail. As they ventured out, they noticed many denizens heading to a large auditorium-like building. These wretched people stood quietly in line outside the building with a zombie-like gaze. After watching the building, they understood that this was a place to eat. The best Earth analogy would be a soup kitchen of the 1940’s, or a food line at a mission. The heroes joined the end of the line of people, seeing this as a good opportunity to better understand the indigenous population and possibly get leads on where to find Scion. They were the last to enter the building, were served some slop, and joined the others on the rough wooden benches. The miserable people didn’t speak, however, more slave masters were visible whipping people that didn’t eat fast enough. By listening to the slave masters, they learned the pitiful factory workers were referred to as “Lowlies” and “Hunger Dogs”. The heroes gave the appearance of eating their meal (not really swallowing any) and eventually meandered out with the last of the Lowlies.

Because the street seemed deserted, the heroes guessed it must be nighttime. It wasn’t any darker than earlier, but they wouldn’t have been able to tell anyway. They hadn’t seen a sun since their arrival; the energy from the fire pits illuminated the sky at all times. They began the long walk back to their burnt-out apartment building. The trip seemed to take an incredibly long time. Twice on the journey they were forced to hide in the shadows to avoid Parademon patrols flying far overhead. As they rounded the final block on their trip, there were caught by surprise when their path was obstructed. Sitting high on saddles were two
massive armored men, each brandishing large axes. Their green and black armor was covered in spikes and looked very durable. The two men seemed positively normal when compared to their mounts. Each man was riding a gargantuan sized animal that greatly resembled an Earth Rottweiler dog. These dogs stood the height of a horse, but almost twice the length. They were adorned with metal saddles, which covered the length of the animals back, as well as the tail and snout. Like the riders armor, large spikes protruded in every angle from the saddle. The beast’s snouts were drawn back in a growl, revealing ferocious rows of teeth. Drool dripped from their fangs as they hungrily eyed Jester, Amp, Badger, and Marshal Law.

The armored men sneered smugly at the heroes, who were still in disguise wearing their filthy robes. The first man said, “Well ... look at this. A pack of lowlies out after curfew. You really should have known better. Without proper rest, you won’t have the strength to serve our lord Darkseid in the factories. Oh well, lucky for us. You’re saving us the trouble of having to find dinner for our War Hounds.” As the soldiers smiled conceitedly, the War Hounds began to march towards our heroes.
Jester, Amp, Badger, and Marshal Law found themselves in grave danger as the voracious War Hounds marched steadily closer. While still several yards away, Jester muttered under his breath, "This has to be quick and quiet … Badger, Amp, up high … Law and me, low … Go!" Like a well-oiled machine, the heroes simultaneously leapt into the fray.

In a blur of motion, the dingy robes that swallowed Jester's dainty form vanished in a brilliant burst of green light. Now rushing towards the War Hound was Jester in full costume, a glowing green light surrounding him, and a large green medieval lance carried in his hands. Jester hoisted the lance as he sped forward. He thrust the lance deep into the War Hounds cheek, released the weapon, and dropped into a roll. Deftly dodging the snapping jaws of the beast, Jester's roll carried him under the exposed belly of the dog. While lying under the dog he raised his hands, which were suddenly holding a large green sword that had just materialized.

At the same moment, Badger performed an uncanny leap aiming straight for the rider of the War Hound that Jester was attacking. Badger could be heard muttering, "Shock of the Eel" as he flew through the air. Badger's leap slammed him into the soldier and they both tumbled to the ground out of site behind the War Hound.

Meanwhile, Marshal Law had reacted the moment Jester ran into action. From under his robes, Marshal Law pulled back a powerful looking sawed-off shotgun. Marshal Law ducked and wove around the chomping fangs of the ferocious dog, obviously maneuvering for a better shot.

Upon Jester's signal, Joey had rushed forward. Under his cloak the Amp armor clinked into place, spreading from the chest piece to cover all of Joey's body. As the helmet locked into place, he immediately took flight charging towards the rider of the beast that Marshal Law was moving towards. Preparing to blast the rider, Amp was distracted as he noticed the weapon Marshal Law carried. Realizing the potential ramifications of Marshal Law's shotgun, Amp quickly changed his tactic and dampened the sound in the area – a milli-second before Marshal Law fired the shotgun into the War Hounds face. Leaving the sound dampening field in place, Amp swiveled in mid-air and let loose a sonic attack at the rider with the intent of manipulating his inner ear to incapacitate him. The rider's eyes rolled into his head as he slumped to the ground unconscious. Meanwhile, the beast also collapsed as Marshal Law unloaded his third shot into the creatures face. All of this occurring with out a single audible noise.

Simultaneously, Jester skillfully spun out of the way as the War Hound he was stabbing underneath collapsed. The creature had been screaming in pain, but its cries went unheard thanks to Amp. Unfortunately, the creature had managed earlier to stomp on Jester a couple of times, which was visible by the blood soaking through onto Jester's right leg. Badger could be seen casually standing up and dusting himself off, his hands sparking as he brushed his robes; the man lying at his feet was silently convulsing, small arcs of electricity seen flickering about him. Upon Badgers face and arms, several deep scratches were visible.

Upon Jester's instruction, Badger carried and hid the dead creatures in the abandoned apartment complex they had used earlier as a hideout. As Marshal Law was rummaging through the armor of the fallen riders, Amp roughly spun him around. Amp shouted (though the sound only carried a couple feet), "What the hell were you doing?!?!!? Jester specifically said to be quiet. Why the shotgun?!?!!?" Marshal Law looked slightly taken aback. Composing himself and taking a moment to answer, Law shook his shoulders to free himself of Amp's casual grip and then straightened his mirrored shades. Marshal Law stood to his full
height and poked a finger into Amp’s chest, “Green genes said take ‘em down quick. My way
was quickest.” Then Law added unconvincingly as he turned to walk away, “Sides, I knew
you’d take care of the rumble anyway.” Amp grabbed Law and slammed him up against a
wall. In a very calm but forceful tone Amp said, “Look you stupid hick, Jester’s in charge of this
operation. He gives an order, it’s probably going to save our lives, or at the very least Abe’s.
You have a problem with taking orders, we can leave you right here. For all I care, you can be
Kibbles and Bits for the next War Hound to come through here. Follow orders and stay with
us, or be a lone wolf and get lost. Your choice.” Without waiting for an answer, Amp roughly
dropped Marshal Law and stomped over to help Badger. Law clumsily stood up and dusted off
while thinking to himself, “Yeah, this is pretty f-ed up. This science geek just doesn’t get the
whole stereotype process. I’m gonna have to school him if he lays another hand on me.”

Deciding it wasn’t safe near the scene of the brawl, the heroes quickly found another
abandoned building to hide in for a few hours. They removed the armor from the Apokolips
guards and tied them up with plastic handcuffs from Badger’s utility belt. When asked
questions, the guards would only answer, “Live for Darkseid. Die for Darkseid.” After
exhausting all interrogation techniques, Badger kept the soldiers quiet by using a mild
chemical he managed to excrete from his skin. While Amp worked on the radio neck collars,
the others took turns resting. With his suit retracted as he worked, Joey was bothered by how
uncomfortable he felt. He realized he was having difficulty breathing and he was running a
fever; it felt like he was battling a bad cold or the flu. Oddly enough, none of these symptoms
were present while he was encased in his armor; also no one else seemed to be experiencing
this discomfort. Joey shook his head, decided to focus on more important matters, and
returned to working on the radio neck collars. He also spent some time checking the remote
recall device. Joey had built this gadget to remotely activate the Thunder Cylinder generator.
In theory, he could activate the generator back on Earth, which would open a portal here on
Apokolips in the exact same spot they arrived. This would allow the heroes to return home
whenever necessary. This technology hadn’t been tested in the field yet, but Joey was hopeful
it would work. He’d have to wait until the right moment, because the recall device was
unfortunately only good for one try.

It was obvious when the curfew ended because the streets were suddenly teeming with
lowlies; each of them en route to the wretched factories. Jester had formulated a plan and
shared it with the group. Amp and Badger were to scout ahead, trying to find the centralized
point all the roads were leading to. Also, Jester wanted them to identify places for retreat if it
should prove necessary. Amp was definitely in agreement with this plan, as he’d been anxious
to explore the planet further. Meanwhile, Jester and Marshal Law would dress in the Apokolips
soldier armor and try to infiltrate some of the local buildings.

An hour later, Jester and Law confidently strode into several factories donning the green
and black spiked armor. Apparently the status associated with this armor allowed the wearers
to come and go as they pleased. They spent a great deal of time surveying and conversing
with slave masters and lowlies. They found it difficult to start conversations, as most people
were not friendly and seemed only concerned with their own survival. Luckily, they were able
to discern that the men they were posing as were called “Dog Soldiers” and were apparently
trained by a feared woman called “Granny”. Go figure. Additionally, they discovered this area
of the planet was referred to as the “Armaghetto”. The most unexpected discovery was the
dedication the lowlies (or Hunger Dogs) displayed towards Darkseid. Even though their living
conditions were beyond the worst imaginable, they still revered him as their God. Jester and
Marshal Law were not able to uncover even the slightest glimmer of resistance. The slave masters were most likely there to keep the Hunger Dogs from destroying each other.

Amp and Badger continued down the large path-like road. Amp was bundled up under several robes, tying to hide his fully expanded armor. They traveled several miles, stopping to find additional abandoned buildings that could easily be used by the group as temporary hideouts. Amp and Badger were careful to avoid Dog Soldier and Parademon patrols. At one point during their voyage, it began to rain. As droplets fell, smoke rose from their robes and ground. Badger quickly pulled his hand inside his robes while cursing. The acid rain continued to flood down; apparently the robes were fairly insulated from the downpour, as the lowlies only reaction to the rain was to pull their hoods up. Badger murmured, “Shell of the Turtle” and seemed to relax some, while Amp’s armor seemed to resist the acid rain without problem.

Amp and Badger considered just how truly uninhabitable this planet was: the choking air, blazing fire pits, acid rain, dead soil, wretched factories, decrepit housing, brute squads, and confusing geography. It surprising that even this diseased and miserable populace has survived here.

They continued to follow the road, noticing the angle increasing; they were obviously approaching the centralized point. As the path rounded a small hill, they could see it in the distance. It was enormous – it had to be at least 200 feet high and all the roads could be seen dead-ending into the structure. Towering in the sky was the same visage they had seen on numerous statues since their arrival. A building sculpted into the horrific image of Darkseid’s head filled the sky. The same face they saw as he callously killed their friend Scion. This had to be the castle or headquarters of the bastard himself.

Now knowing where the roads were leading, Amp and Badger quickly turned around and headed back to meet Jester and Marshal Law. Within minutes, Badger’s senses detected they were being followed. Unfortunately, he was unable to identify who exactly was trailing them. The heroes immediately left the main path and vanished amongst the small crowded side alleys. After a few minutes, Badger seemed confident they had lost their tail. Both heroes watched carefully the rest of the voyage back.

Jester, Marshal Law, Amp, and Badger met up at their new hideout. They exchanged information and discussed the challenges ahead of them. Jester suggested creating some kind of massive distraction, like an explosion, or a chain of them. That may make it easier to check into the giant Darkseid-head building for prisoners. Jester believes the distraction is necessary because he doesn’t think the heroes will be allowed to just waltz into Darkseid’s bedroom. The other heroes consider Jester’s suggestion.
CHAPTER SIX

Jester and Joey spent most of the day brainstorming the details of their plan. They started with Jester’s basic idea of infiltrating Darkseid’s fortress, possibly using explosives to create a distraction. They extrapolated from that basic idea and a full-blown battle plan was developed.

Unfortunately, the first part of their plan seemed to thwart them. They attempted to locate an underground tunnel system that might lead to Darkseid’s fortress. They hoped to sneak into the fortress underground and attack from the inside. Once they discovered how to enter the underground sewers, they realized why this access point was rarely guarded. The caverns were absolutely mind-boggling. The confusing geography of buildings on the surface seemed simple when compared to the confusing tunnel system below ground. Joey commented that the perplexing caverns reminded him of an Escher drawing. Marshal Law, obviously not understanding the reference, mumbled that they should keep moving. Unfortunately, they quickly discovered that they were not alone underground. The sewers were teeming with various ferocious creatures. After the four heroes battled and slaughtered a few creatures, they became overrun with monsters. Due to the uncertain path to follow (if one existed at all) and the overpowering beasts, the Challengers decided to forgo the sewer route.

Refusing to be discouraged, Jester and Joey had already developed an alternative plan. Since entering Darkseid’s fortress from underground didn’t seem possible, they decided they would just have to sneak in the back door. The plan was for Amp and Marshal Law to don the black and green spiked “Dog Soldier” armor, while Jester and Badger would disguise themselves as slave prisoners. Using these disguises, they planned to sneak into the fortress through a service entrance. Once inside, they would quickly need to establish where the dungeons were. If luck was with them, they hoped to find Abe in the dungeons. The logic of Amp and Marshal Law posing as soldiers was because of their ability to stand up to punishment. Since the soldiers would be in front of the slaves, Amp’s armor and Marshal Law’s ability to absorb Kinetic damage would hopefully protect Jester and Badger if the disguises failed. Even though the Dog Soldier armor was fairly big, Joey would fit perfectly once his Amp armor was fully expanded.

Before traveling to Darkseid’s fortress, they gathered the necessary pieces for the explosives to be used to create diversions. It took a few days to gather enough, but with all the sulfur and burning around, they were able to find enough combustibles to create explosives. Joey slapped together a few remote detonators to work with the explosives. They planted the explosives within the underground tunnels in less inhabited areas of the Armaghetto. Joey warned the heroes that the remote control might not work. He was concerned about the reliability of components used in the remote, and quite frankly the theories behind them. He reminded the heroes that they were currently in another dimension. There was no guarantee that the physics of a normal remote control would work in this dimension. Joey performed a couple quick tests that seemed successful, but he remained apprehensive about their reliability. The heroes planned to use the explosions to create a diversion as they escaped from Darkseid’s fortress with Abe.

Once the explosives were placed, they prepared for their incursion into Darkseid’s fortress. The heroes were in agreement with Jester and Joey’s plan, with the exception of Badger arguing against one of the details. He suggested that Marshal Law should be disguised as a slave, not himself. Badger was obviously uncomfortable with the idea of being shackled as a prisoner, but he also raised a few good points. Badger suggested that if they were stopped and the “slaves” were closely scrutinized, he would not be able to pass for a human (or Apokolipian) – but Marshal Law could. Joey found himself agreeing with Badger -
with his fine fur coat, savage facial features, and pupil-less eyes, Badger just couldn’t pass as a “Lowly”. Believing that he successfully argued his way out of pretending to be a shackled slave, Badger was disappointed by Jester’s next comments. Jester pointed out that Marshal Law’s kinetic field could take a lot more punishment than Badger’s thick skin, regardless of how many turtle shell’s he was mimicking. Jester reiterated that they needed their most defensible people leading the way disguised as soldiers. As Badger began to utter an argument, Jester cut him off, “That’s it, Badger. The decision is made. Marshal Law wears the armor, and you’re going to pose as the slave. Your animal looks shouldn’t be a problem. After all, you and I both know that when you want to … you can look a lot more human.” Jester gave Badger a determined stare. Badger held his gaze for a moment, and suddenly an appalled expression crossed his face as understanding sunk in. Then, a mask of defeated acceptance slowly spread across Badger’s face. He sighed in frustration and stomped off, apparently going to gather robes for his “Lowly” disguise. Joey and Law exchanged confused looks, both unsure of what just transpired between Jester and Badger. They wondered what Jester meant by saying that Badger could look more human, and why that bothered Badger so much.

The four of them dressed in their disguises preparing for the stealth mission into Darkseid’s palace. As they readied to go, Marshal Law (clad in his black and green spiked armor) surveyed Badger (dressed in his bulky “Lowly” robes). “What the hell?” said Law with a more pronounced southern drawl than usual. “I thought this critter here was gonna try to look normal”, Law said taking obvious pleasure in ridiculing Badger. Badger wore the filthy peasant robes with the hood pulled up, but otherwise his feral appearance was unchanged. Joey, now wearing loose-fitting black and green spiked armor, gave Badger the once over and said, “Given the right equipment, I could probably jury-rig a holographic emitter to mask your animalistic appearance. However, with the brief amount of time and resources available, I really don’t think…” A disguised Jester interrupted Joey, “All right Joey, armor up. Law, shut your trap and try to remember you’re supposed to be a Dog Soldier. Badger, that’s enough wasted time. You’re going to have to look like a human slave. Whatever you do … get to it.” Badger huffed and gave Jester a hard glare. Badger’s pupil-less eyes darted back and forth across his three disguised teammates, his bestial facial features twitching with nervousness. “All right, I’m only doing this for Abe”, Badger uttered harshly while bearing his long fangs. He took a deep breath, obviously preparing himself for something dramatic. Then, Badger spoke in his usual gravelly voice, “Power of the Badger … be gone.” The transformation was nearly instantaneous. By simply saying that phrase, Badger had shrunk several inches in height and lost a considerable amount of mass. As he shrunk, the hood of the robes drooped to cover his face. Joey and Marshal Law stood stock-still, mouths slightly agape, both stunned into silence. There was a shuffling from within the now-overwhelming robes Badger wore. A voice quite different from Badgers came from within the voluminous robes, “Okay, just let me smear some grime on my face and I’ll be ready to go. And I don’t want to hear a word about this from you, Law!” Human looking hands appeared from the sleeves of Badger’s robes, reaching up to pull the vast hood back. With a flip, the hood fell back onto his shoulders, revealing the recognizable face of Hunter Trask.
“Damn,” thought Jester, “the whole plan had gone to hell.” It was pitch black and Jester was leaning against the wall exhausted. The sound of each of his teammates gasping for breath could be heard echoing through the dank cramped room. The stench of mildew, sweat, and blood was overpowering. They’d been running. Running hard and a long way. Raker promised that they wouldn’t be found here; Jester was hoping he was right. They sat in the dark for a long while, making no noise other than the wheezing of tired men trying to catch their breath. Each of them was silent, praying they wouldn’t be found in this hiding place, hoping to survive the next few hours.

We got cocky and sloppy, it’s that simple. Things had been going smooth for us. We imagined ourselves as the cavalry; that we were just going to ride in, sneak past the bad guys, and escape home with our friend. Surely we’d win; we’re the good guys, right? … We were idiots. Darkseid isn’t some typical egomaniac super villain. On Apokolips, Darkseid is a god. He rules this entire planet and everyone on it. He commands a worldwide army that is completely loyal to him. They live for him and they die for him. Could four aliens land on Earth and easily sneak into the White House? Probably not. I guess we thought it would be different for us because it wasn’t our planet. The four of us against the world. What a joke. We’re just lucky none of us have died … yet.

We thought the plan was pretty solid. Marshal Law and Amp were disguised as Dog Soldiers (clad in green and black spiked armor), while Badger and I were garbed in the filthy robes of the “Lowlies”. We marched to Darkseid’s palace, an enormous and imposing structure carved from stone to resemble the dictator’s head. Marshal Law grumbled most of the way about Badger’s secret identity, but Amp finally shut him up with some comment about Law betraying the Challengers by spying on the team for the government. Once at the fortress we luckily found a side entrance used by soldiers, tradesmen, and slaves who worked in the fortress. We quickly slipped inside the building, having to pass a small group of checkpoints. Badger and I were checked several times as prisoners, to ensure we weren’t carrying any weapons. I was thankful that Badger had agreed to transform into his Hunter Trask persona, as the bestial Badger body would never been able to pass as a “Lowly”. Amp was struggling to keep up the appearance of a Dog Soldier. Physically he matched just fine, it was the gruff attitude and caustic responses he had difficulty mimicking. Marshal Law recognized this and covered for both of them, snapping at anyone that asked too many questions, causing them to back off. Once inside the fortress, we immediately started looking for the dungeon. Unfortunately, we found something else altogether.

The size of the room defied comprehension. Gigantic stone walls sloped up to a 40-foot high ceiling and the width of the room was enough that it held thousands of men. Torches along the walls illuminated the legions of Dog Soldiers and Parademons that were standing at attention; perfect rows and columns of brutal warriors seemed to go on endlessly. Accidentally stumbling into this room, our minds reeled as we tried to take it all in. We noticed several things at once. These inhuman thugs all seemed to be facing a raised podium. At the podium, a mustached brute clad in red and brown ranted like a lunatic, punctuating each statement by flailing a deadly looking ax in the air. He was shouting statements like, “Know your enemy! Hate! These sniveling creatures oppose Darkseid! Kill these wretches!” Behind him, colossal screens displayed images like some sick twisted version of a football game jumbo-tron. Obviously not where we wanted to be, we began to slowly backtrack out of the room hoping not to attract attention. The images on the screens unexpectedly caught our eye and we found ourselves stunned. A series of grainy static pictures were shown, some obviously taken on
Apokolips, while other images were taken in more pleasant surroundings. Visions flashed across the screen of Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, Green Lantern (the kid, not the black guy in the JLA), Martian Manhunter, Red Tornado, Firestorm, Robin, Superboy (wearing some weird looking costume), and Kid Flash (back when he went by Impulse). The images continued showing more Earth heroes. The nut-job with the ax continued ranting, “Know your enemy! Take the Anti-Life Equation from Earth for Darkseid! Hate! Let no Earthman stand in your way! Live for Darkseid! Die for Darkseid! Kill Darkseid’s enemies!”

High above everyone, a small balcony overlooked the room. On the balcony, upon a giant throne, sat the stony-faced bastard that these monsters worshipped. Even this far away, you could see how massive he was. His horrible face carried a presence that you just can’t describe. You can feel your spine freeze and your stomach lurk just by looking at him. He seemed to be observing the crowd, taking in the thousands of mindless soldiers on display for him. Whispering by his side was a hunched purple-cloaked man. I immediately recognized him as DeSaad. I’d seen him on Earth through the Intergang communication devices, moments before Darkseid arrived and murdered Abraxis. DeSaad continued murmuring to Darkseid on the balcony. I didn’t know this at the time, but Amp was able to fine-tune his suit enough to eavesdrop on DeSaad’s whispers. Apparently, he was informing Darkseid that his four horsemen of Apokolips would soon be ready to lead the initial assault force to the Earth. An invasion of Earth?!?! We didn’t bargain for this, we just came to Apokolips to save our friend.

So shocked to have stumbled across Darkseid himself, we weren’t paying enough attention to our immediate surroundings. I’m not really sure exactly what we did wrong, but before we knew it, a group of twelve Parademons were screeching and zooming towards us. Our cover blown, we raced for the door. Amp took flight, Trask sprinted as he transformed into Badger, Law scrambled as fast as he could, and I ‘ported ahead. We made it out the door, but were pursued by the Parademons and several Dog Soldiers that joined them. We sped through corridors, blasting our pursuers with sound, green energy, needle-like quills, and shotgun bursts. We did our best to stay ahead of them and we almost … well, let’s face it, we got our asses handed to us. It was simply a matter of sheer numbers. Individually we could probably beat them, but together they put a major hurting on us. As we originally planned, Amp and Marshal Law took the brunt of the damage, but tons still got through to Badger and me. Amp used the remote control to set off the explosives hidden throughout the Armaghetto. This distraction should have provided us with the opportunity to escape – unfortunately the remote didn’t work. Whether it was the thickness of the walls or something else, we don’t know. Either way, we were trapped inside the damn fortress with no options left. It was about this time, the unexpected occurred.

We had managed to put some distance between our pursuers and us. We knew we hadn’t lost them, we’d just been able to pull ahead. We took a series of quick turns and stairwells, leading deeper into the fortress. As we rounded a corner, someone suddenly stepped from the shadows blocking our path. He was garbed in brown robes similar to the Lowlies, his legs and hands wrapped in cloth (much like a mummy). His robes and hood covered him almost completely, with only his blue face and blue fingertips exposed. The skin around each eye featured a bold vertical line that started above the eyebrow and continued down the cheek. The eyes themselves were a blank white, with no pupil. He was nothing like anyone we’d seen on Apokolips. Surprised by his sudden appearance, each of us prepared to attack. The man simply said in a deep voice, “Come with me if you want to live.” He turned back to the shadows and started moving. We each looked at one another, shrugged our shoulders as if to say, “What’s there to lose”, and ran after this stranger.
The stranger led us into the shadows through what was apparently a secret panel in the wall. We raced through a series of claustrophobic passages and through even more secret panels. Each path descending further and further downwards. I didn’t really think about it at the time, but I guess it was logical. I mean, castles on TV always have secret passages. Along the way, blue face didn’t say much. About the only thing he did say was his name, Raker, and that he was taking us somewhere safe where they wouldn’t find us. Before we knew it, we were in the sewers again. The perplexing caverns lay before us, but Raker seemed to know exactly where he was going. We continued to run full tilt, gasping for breath, splashing through knee deep sewage, and thankful we didn’t run into any subterranean beasts. Eventually Raker stopped halfway along an underground corridor. He reached into the stone wall and triggered something. A small section of the wall moved back to allow us in. The entrance had been perfectly hidden before Raker triggered the door. The room was tiny, pitch black, and stank of damp and rot. Raker sealed the door with all five of us squeezed into the small room. And that’s it; we’ve been hiding here for hours. The tiny room felt like a furnace with all of us packed in here. The overpowering stenches of mildew, sweat, and blood (our blood) almost made me pass out. We’ve been stuck in here, unable to see or speak, trapped with the knowledge that our homeworld is about to be attacked by Darkseid’s army. A little while back, we heard what sounded like patrols going by. They must be searching the sewers for us. Sounds like they were using some kind of creatures to sniff us out. We did our best to be completely silent while we waited for the danger to pass. After several hours without hearing patrols, we decided we got damn lucky that no one had found us.

Eventually, Raker lit some candles so we could see our surroundings and each other. All of us looked terrible; covered in sweat, sewage, and our own blood. Raker’s little hideout was obviously more like a home for him. There was a small cot, a table, and signs of being lived in were evident. Though it was hard to make out in the darkness, I could see hundreds of small symbols etched into the wall. It was the same symbol repeated over and over, but I couldn’t make out what it was in the faint light. Raker explained that each symbol represented the passage of one year of him living on Apokolips (I guessed it was like in the movies when a prisoner etched lines into their cell wall to mark the passage of time). Raker said that he’d been sent to Apokolips long ago by his people to liberate the lowlies and create order. When his mission failed, he was abandoned by his government and left here. He claims he’s been trying to provide supplies and moral support to the slaves ever since; something like a shining light in an endless pit of darkness. We listened to Raker for some time, Amp asked pointed scientific questions, while Marshal Law constantly fidgeted with a pistol. With his heightened senses, Badger recognized Raker as the individual following Amp and himself several days prior. Raker admitted to this, saying that he was trying to understand our motives since strangers were almost unheard of in the Armaghetto. When we ran into Raker in Darkseid’s fortress (which Raker informed us was called the “Tower of Rage”), he was in the process of stealing supplies to distribute to the lowlies. He became aware of our situation and decided to help.

It was pretty obvious to all of us that Raker was a good guy and had saved our lives. We shared our story with him, where we came from, why we were here, and what had happened so far. Raker listened closely making the occasional comment. He seemed inspired by our heroic actions on Earth, and by our sacrifice to save our friend Abraxis. Raker had actually heard of the Earth previously, but didn’t really know much about it. He was amazed that we came all the way to Apokolips to rescue Abraxis, without any real evidence that he was even alive. This thought weighed heavily on us all. We’d been so wrapped up in planning the rescue of Abe, it had been awhile since we considered the possibility that he
actually died right before our eyes months ago on Earth. All of us felt completely overwhelmed and downtrodden. We were now faced with trying to survive on this planet of hell, rescuing our friend (if he was even alive), getting back home to Earth, and preparing for an interplanetary invasion.

Once we finished our story, Raker immediately offered his help to rescue Abe. He agreed that if alive, Abe would be held in the dungeons of the Tower of Rage. He suggested that part of our original plan could still work. We originally considered using the underground caverns to sneak into the Tower of Rage, but the path was too confusing and there were too many creatures. Raker assured us that he could show us a path with few monsters that would lead straight to the dungeons in the Tower of Rage. Additionally, Raker offered to manually detonate the explosives hidden throughout the sewers, thus creating a diversion to allow the heroes to escape the Tower of Rage with Abe. After that, we could use the sewers to return to the place we arrived at on Apokolips. Amp could trigger the remote Thunder Cylinder device, and we’d be home. Then we’d have to rally the governments and superheroes of Earth to prepare for an invasion. All together this was a pretty tall order, but it was finally starting to sound like we had a chance of pulling it off.

The next couple days were spent laying low and preparing for our second assault on the Tower of Rage. Joey showed Raker where to find the hidden explosives throughout the sewers, and agreed to move a few of them based upon Raker’s advice. They wanted to ensure maximum property damage with minimal harm to the Lowlies. Meanwhile, Badger was memorizing the sewer route to the dungeons of the Tower of Rage, and the path to our original arrival point. His heightened senses made him the ideal choice to learn the route. Marshal Law traveled with Badger, eager for some kind of action. Law managed to kill several subterranean creatures, leaving our trails devoid of beasts. I was busy working up battle strategies to ensure we could handle masses of soldiers this time. The plan was for all of us to stay in stealth mode: Badger’s panther abilities should keep him pretty much invisible; Amp’s ability to silence our actions should be an invaluable asset; Marshal Law’s tracking should ensure we can navigate in the dungeons; and my reflexes should let me get the drop on anyone we encounter. Should we come upon any computer systems (or what passes for a computer in this place), Amp will try to hack them. Disabling security or re-engineering any kind of automated sentries would work to our advantage.

With a heavy heart, each of us agreed at the start of this mission that we would be willing to kill if necessary. Well, I guess Marshal Law wasn’t really very upset by this prospect, but the rest of us were. As we prepared for our attack on the dungeons of the Tower of Rage, all of us knew that this was it. This was our last chance to rescue Abe and warn the Earth about an invasion. If we failed, none of us expected to live to see another day.

We’re racing through the underground sewers, sloshing through knee-high filth, trying desperately to keep up with Badger. Following the plan and his senses, Badger is sprinting with the speed of the puma through the tunnels to our original point of arrival on Apokolips. A few times we have to stop to brace ourselves as explosions going off a couple miles away shake the tunnel. As we zoom through the caverns, I’m holding onto Marshal Law and ‘porting us short distances to keep up with Badger. Meanwhile, Amp is following behind us, flying several feet above the ground. Cradled in Amp’s arms, weak as a kitten and barely breathing, is a miracle. We got him! I don’t believe it! He’s barely alive, but we got him! Scion. Abe. Abraxis. Son of Galan. Prince of Coronis. We got him!
The plan had worked like a charm. We got into the dungeons, unfortunately having to put down quite a few guards in the process. We didn’t hold anything back, each of us giving and receiving vicious attacks. Amp disabled the security systems and got us access to the dungeon chambers. After searching numerous cells, we’d almost given up hope. We opened one of the most secure cells and peeked inside. We took one look at the occupant, a small shaggy looking wretch wrapped in blankets, and another wave of disappointment washed over us. The prisoner watched us through squinted eyes, his greasy tangled hair hanging in his eyes, his scraggy beard matted with filth. This poor soul had obviously been tortured and malnourished, his breathing labored. Like many other citizens of Apokolips, this one also appeared to have contracted some horrible skin disease. As we turned to leave and continue the search for our friend, Marshal Law overheard the prisoner utter one pitiful word through his dried and cracked lips, “… James.” James Arlington was the alter ego Marshal Law had used when he first joined the Challengers! It took a few moments to be sure because he looked like hell, but we’d found him! We had found Abe! He was alive! We whooped, hollered, and cheered! We helped Abe up, but he was extremely weak. He was unable to walk and murmured something about DeSaad stealing his cosmic powers.

Moments later we were racing out of the dungeons, explosions sounding in the distance. Raker had done it! He was setting off the explosives throughout the Armaghetto to create a diversion for us! I just wished we could thank him. If our plan worked out, we’d never see him again. We had to battle our way through the dungeon once the claxons started to ring. It was a bloody fight, but we savagely broke our way through their ranks. Nothing was going to stop us now. We slipped into the sewers and started the journey towards our original arrival point on Apokolips. The plan was to get there, trigger the remote Thunder Cylinder device, and get the hell outta here.

“Damn! It should work!” Amp shouted, his suit illuminated by the blazing red glow of the fire pit. We’d reached our original arrival point, the cliff-like edge of one of the fire pits. For whatever reason, Amp’s remote device hadn’t activated our escape route. For just a second, there had been a small semi-transparent swirl of light floating about four feet off the ground, then it blinked out and that was it. Amp had been fiddling with the remote for several minutes now, while getting frustrated and cursing under his breath. I worked with him, trying to explain why quantum flux could be the cause of the problem. Marshal Law and Badger were staying alert for trouble, and watching the explosions continue to wreak havoc across the Armaghetto. Abe lay at our feet, barely conscious but he wore an expression of contentment; his friends had come to save him. Amp and I continued struggling for some time; Amp moving components and changing settings faster than the eye could follow, while I drew glowing green diagrams in the air to demonstrate implausible concepts. We were hurriedly discussing theories, when we both suddenly stopping in mid-sentence. Comprehension sinking in, we both slumped our shoulders as if in defeat. “Well, I guess that’s it”, I said. Amp added, “There doesn’t seem to be any other hypothesis to explain it.” Then Law and Badger called out, warning of incoming Parademon patrols screeching across the sky and most likely looking for suspicious behavior. I called a retreat and we quickly snuck away to one of our designated hideouts.

Hidden in an old burnt out apartment building we discussed the situation while Abe rested. Joey explained to the group why the remote device didn’t work. He rambled on about quantum instability and electronic components trying to adapt to an entirely different set of physics in this dimension. The end result … we were stuck here on Apokolips. We came all this way, uncovered a plot to invade the Earth, rescued our friend, and now we’re trapped in
this god-forsaken place. That’s just f-ing great! Each of us lashed out with our frustration. Shouts and threats flew across the room as we vented our anger on one another. Just as Badger and Marshal Law were about to come to blows, a stern but shaky voice rang out, “Silence!” Abe was on his feet, leaning heavily against the doorframe to keep from falling over. He was an absolute wreck and was struggling to stay up, but he seemed driven. Each word was obviously an effort to get out, “Regardless of what happens to us … we must warn the people of Earth. They accepted me into their family when mine was lost … I will not allow them to suffer at the vile hands of Darkseid … we must warn them.” Abe started to slide down the doorframe, the exertion proving too much for him. I immediately ‘port by his side, caught him, and gently set him down.

Ashamed, the four of us exchanged sheepish looks. Abe was right, even if we can’t get home, we must find a way to warn the people back home about the impending invasion. By being prepared, they might be able to fight off the invasion and save lives. The question was, how do we let them know? Joey suddenly looked up with renewed vigor, “It just occurred to me that perhaps I could reconfigure this remote device to transmit a message. The message could travel the quantum instability, much the same way the Thunder Cylinder crosses cosmic distances.” I worked with Joey to slog through some of the theoretical implications, and sure enough, it might work.

So that was it. Jester, Amp, Marshal Law, Badger, and Scion. Reunited and trapped in another dimension never to return home again. Holding information that could potentially save the Earth. Oh well, I guess it’s just another day with the Challengers.
CHAPTER EIGHT

This chapter was read as a cut scene to the players at the end of Adventure 43.

The screen was filled with static; a loud hissing noise filled the air. Slowly, the static gave way to wavy horizontal lines, each line a jumble of rainbow colors. The fluctuations started to subside and details emerged. The image that resolved on the monitor was a vision of hell.

The picture showed enormous black buildings with gigantic smoke stacks breathing filth into an already polluted sky. The view panned the landscape, the camera image shaking slightly. You could see the ground was completely covered by dirty concrete and steel. The air was thick with smoke. The clouds were an eerie orange color, broken only by a fiery-red tendril of energy meters-wide pouring skyward. Its place of origin was a lake-sized pool of fire. The nearby conflagration gave off a bright-red hue illuminating the face of a man … a man you recognized.

A close-up revealed the bearded visage of Bradley Markus staring at you through bloodshot eyes. He was garbed in filthy brown robes and he was slightly hunched over. His face was covered in soot and numerous cuts; each wound caked with dry blood. He looked terrible. He looked tired.

The audio alternated between snippets of words and static. Slowly the sound became more defined, like a radio signal coming into range. You could now hear Bradley in mid-sentence, his voice slightly strange, like an audio file that had been filtered too many times. 

“… receiving this transmission … #### STATIC #### … repeat, this message is intended for the Challengers or anyone else on the planet Earth. To anyone receiving this transmission, please ensure this reaches the govern… #### STATIC #### … it’s vitally important.” Bradley sighed with exhaustion, “Hey Amp, are you getting all of this?”

The image nodded slightly in the affirmative. Another voice rang out, this one easily recognizable as the modulated speech of Amp. “The visual and audio receptors in my helmet should be recording your message. I apologize that we have to do this several times, but I want to utilize multiple encoding formats to ensure…” Amp’s explanation was rudely interrupted, a southern drawl evident in this new voice. “Fer Christ’s sake, Mister Wizard, can you cut with the mumbo jumbo and get the damn infomercial on tape already?!?!?” The speaker walked into view behind Bradley at that moment. His hair was pulled back in a dirty blonde ponytail, his grimy unshaven face peeking out from behind a set of mirrored sunglasses. A cigar could be seen clamped between his teeth as the glowing red illumination from the fire pit splayed across his face. Even disguised in a bulky suit of green and black armor, the mug of Marshal Law was immediately recognizable.

Law continued, “It’s bad enough we’re out here in the open, but you gotta ramble on about…” Marshal Law continued yammering, but the actual sound of his voice faded away to nothing. After a few moments, Law seemed to catch on that he wasn’t making any noise. His hands fumbled to his throat, a look of confusion spreading across his face. Next, you could hear a satisfied tone in Amp’s voice, “Ahhhh… that’s better. Now, Bradley, if you would care to proceed.”

Bradley started speaking again, giving a sideways glance at Marshal Law as he walked off camera still clutching his throat. “This message is intended for the Challengers or anyone else on the planet Earth. To anyone receiving this transmission, please ensure this reaches the governments of Earth - it’s vitally important. We’re broadcasting this message from the planet Apokolips. We’ve … #### STATIC #### … an invasion. The ruler of … #### STATIC
While the audio turned to static, the visual of Bradley talking continued to stay clear. You now noticed another figure far behind him that seemed to be pacing. This figure was also dressed in filthy brown robes like Bradley, but this individual’s hood drooped to cover the face. This person stalked back and forth in and out of camera view, obviously patrolling the area for signs of trouble. With the hood pulled up, there was no way to tell who the pacing person was. Eventually, the mysterious cloaked figure turned to face the camera. Even from this distance you could make out his pupil-less eyes, bestial facial features, and long fangs – it appeared that the Badger had traveled to Apokolips also.

The audio cleared slightly and Bradley could be heard again, “… came to this godforsaken place to find our friend … didn’t go as planned … what we found instead was …”

For a brief moment both audio and video turned to static and fluctuating lines. When the picture started to clear, no longer were you looking at a close-up of Bradley, the view was now from further away. You could see another man sitting down on the ground, resting against a rock near Bradley’s feet. He was a small shaggy looking wretch wrapped in blankets. You saw Bradley continued to speak even though you could only hear static. The disheveled man on the ground watched the camera through squinted eyes, his greasy tangled hair hanging in his eyes, his scraggly beard matted with filth. This poor soul was obviously malnourished and his breathing labored. As you observed this pitiful fellow, you noticed something familiar about him. You couldn’t place it immediately, but then … Great Scott! It was Scion! Abraxis, Son of Galan, Crown Prince of Coronis! Abe! Your friend and teammate, he was alive! You couldn’t believe it! The team saw Scion disintegrated by Darkseid himself months ago! Shocked, elated, and bewildered, you studied Scion closely, doing your best to discern his condition. Your mind reeled with the possibilities. As you observed him, you noticed he was wrapped within a blanket; his hands were not visible. It probably didn’t mean anything … but you couldn’t help second-guessing yourself. What if … what if his hands were bound and shackled under that blanket? What if this wasn’t Scion at all, but the Magistrate? Surely that couldn’t be the case, could it?

The audio portion continued in static. You studied the visual, desperate for clues to the identity of the shaggy man. Suddenly, the audio track was coming in clear. You heard Bradley continue, “If the Challengers receive a copy of the message, don’t worry about us. We knew this might be a one-way trip when we left Earth. We’ve already accepted our fate; we’re going to die here on Apokolips. The important … you must save the Earth from that bastard Darkseid. Whatever you do, don’t give …” Jester was interrupted by a shout from behind him. Badger was calling out, “Jester! Time to go! Two Parademon patrols heading this way. We gotta move now!”

The camera view raced forward. Just as the message terminated, the last image you saw was Amp’s arms reaching to pick up the man that might just be your long-lost friend.