

J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI'S

# RIISING STARS



Image  
issue  
**#13**

Digital  
Edition

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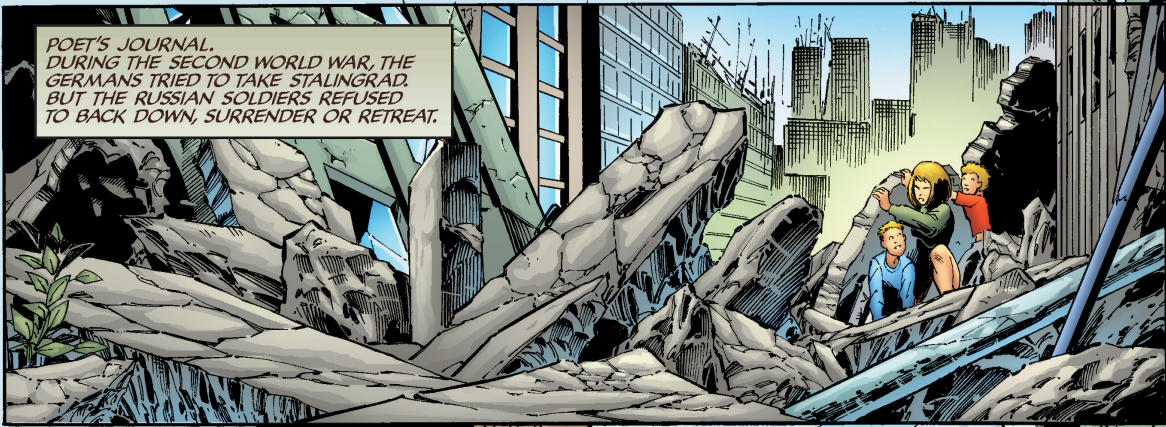
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and Dan Kemp

RISING STARS #13





POET'S JOURNAL.  
DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE  
GERMANS TRIED TO TAKE STALINGRAD,  
BUT THE RUSSIAN SOLDIERS REFUSED  
TO BACK DOWN, SURRENDER OR RETREAT.



THEY DUG IN, AND MADE  
THE GERMANS FIGHT FOR  
EVERY INCH OF GROUND.



I BEGIN TO  
UNDERSTAND  
HOW THEY FELT.

WELCOME  
TO CHICAGO.



RANDY AND I ARE TRYING NOT TO KILL THEM BECAUSE MOST OF THEM ARE OPERATING UNDER CRITICAL MAAS'S CONTROL.

WE CAME TO CHICAGO TO DRIVE HER OUT...AND ENDED UP IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN WE WERE PREPARED TO HANDLE.

SHE WANTS US TO KILL ONE ANOTHER, KNOWING ALL THE RESIDUAL POWER GOES BACK TO THE SURVIVORS.

WANTS ALL THE POWER FOR HERSELF SO THAT THE CRITICAL PERSONALITY CAN BECOME PERMANENTLY DOMINANT, WIPING OUT STEPHANIE MAAS FOREVER.

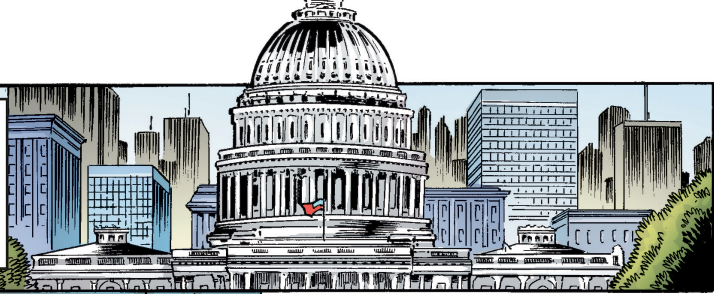
PRETTY...

THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY'RE DOING.

WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON IN THERE--



-- BUT THE PRESIDENT'S GETTING REPORTS ABOUT MASS DEVIATION AND LOSS OF LIFE. AND NOW SATCOM HAS PICKED UP INDICATIONS THAT A TACTICAL NUKE WAS USED, THOUGH FOR SOME REASON IT APPARENTLY DIDN'T DO ANY HARM. WE CAN'T LET THIS GO ON, WE HAVE TO INTERVENE.



MR. MILLER... JASON... NEXUS CORP HAS AGREED TO LOAN YOU TO US FOR THIS MISSION BECAUSE AS I UNDERSTAND IT, YOU TWO ARE PRETTY MUCH THE STRONGEST OF YOUR GROUP.

THAT'S RIGHT, SENATOR.

AND OFFICER BRIGHT, YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE OF THE BUNCH WITH ANY LEGAL POWER, COURTESY OF THE NYPD. WELL, I'M EXPANDING YOUR AUTHORITY TO INCLUDE THIS SITUATION.

WHAT DO YOU WANT US TO DO, SENATOR?

FIND OUT WHAT'S GOING ON, AND STOP IT IF YOU CAN. YOU'RE AUTHORIZED TO TAKE WHATEVER STEPS YOU FEEL ARE NECESSARY TO RESOLVE THE SITUATION.

LET ME CLARIFY: DO ANYTHING YOU FEEL IS NECESSARY. BUT STOP THIS.

SIR, I UNDERSTAND THAT SOME OF US WENT IN BECAUSE THEY WERE PROMISED IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION IF THEY COOPERATED.

YES... SOME BOYS IN JUSTICE GOT A LITTLE AHEAD OF THEMSELVES. MADE A DEAL THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE.



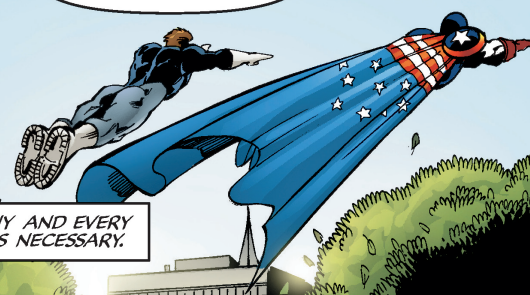
IF THINGS HAD WORKED OUT, WELL, MAYBE THEY WOULD'VE BEEN RIGHT AFTER ALL. BUT THE SITUATION HAS GONE FROM BAD TO WORSE. WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY CIVILIAN LIVES HAVE BEEN LOST AS A RESULT OF THIS CONFLICT. IF THINGS KEEP GOING LIKE THIS, PRETTY SOON THERE WON'T BE A CHICAGO TO LIBERATE.



SO THE OFFER... HAS BEEN REVOKED.



THE PRESIDENT DOESN'T CARE ANYMORE HOW THIS GETS HANDLED, AS LONG AS IT STOPS. THAT'S YOUR JOB. STOP THIS.



BY ANY AND EVERY MEANS NECESSARY.





HAVEN'T SEEN YOU AROUND MUCH LATELY.

NEXUSCORP'S HAD ME KEEPING A LOW PROFILE DURING THIS WHOLE CHICAGO BUSINESS. BAD FOR THEIR IMAGE.

YEAH...I'M FINE NOW... FINE.

HAVEN'T SEEN MUCH OF YOU EITHER. DOES FIX YOU UP OKAY AFTER YOUR DUST-UP WITH JOHN?

JOHN COULD'VE KILLED ME, BUT HE DIDN'T. HE SAID JASON WAS BEHIND THE MURDERS THAT STARTED THIS DAMNED CIVIL WAR IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT HE DIDN'T HAVE ANY EVIDENCE, AND NOW...

NOW I DON'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST.

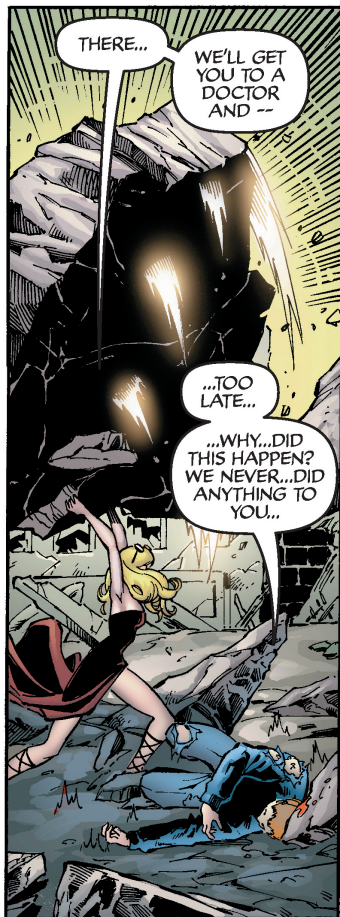


BUT I SUSPECT I'LL FIND OUT BEFORE ALL THIS IS OVER.



TRY NOT TO MOVE... I'LL GET THIS OFF YOU --

...AAAAGGGGHHH...

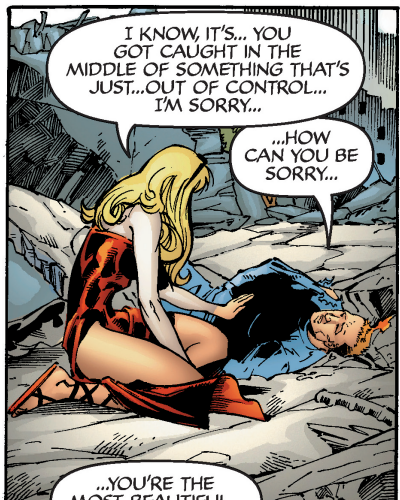


THERE...

WE'LL GET YOU TO A DOCTOR AND --

...TOO LATE...

...WHY...DID THIS HAPPEN? WE NEVER...DID ANYTHING TO YOU...



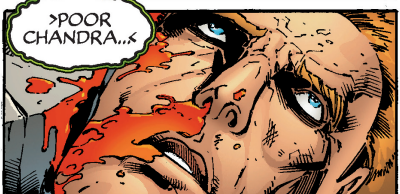
I KNOW, IT'S... YOU GOT CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING THAT'S JUST...OUT OF CONTROL... I'M SORRY...

...HOW CAN YOU BE SORRY...



...YOU'RE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL... THING I'VE EVER...

MISTER...? MISTER...?



>POOR CHANDRA..x



>...YOU WANTED HIM TO SEE YOU SUFFERING FOR HIM, BUT ALL HE SAW WAS WHAT THEY ALL SEE, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD TO WHOEVER'S LOOKING... EVEN IF SHE'S THE ANGEL OF DEATH.<

WHO... CRITICAL? WHERE ARE YOU?

> NOWHERE YOU CAN FIND ME. WITH EVERY ONE OF US WHO DIES, THE REST -- I -- GET STRONGER. AS WELL AS CONTROLLING MY GROUP NOW I CAN TOUCH YOUR THOUGHTS...EVERYONE'S THOUGHTS.<

YOU'RE INSANE.

> THEN YOU SHOULD BE WORRIED...WHAT'S IT LIKE, HAVING A CRAZY PERSON INSIDE YOUR HEAD, CHANDRA? <

> POOR LITTLE BABY... GRIEVING FOR A NORMAL...YOU'RE MAKING IT TOO EASY. ALL OF YOU. <

> AH...EVEN MORE OF US WHO'VE SEEN WHAT'S HAPPENING ON THE NEWS, COMING TO HELP YOUR SIDE. MORE WILLING BATTERIES COME TO MAKE A DONATION. <

> TED KRAMER. DEAR, SWEET TED. HE'S THINKING ABOUT HIS WIFE AND KIDS, ABOUT HOW HE DOESN'T WANT TO BE HERE. HE DOESN'T WANT TO BE A HERO. BUT HE FEELS HE HAS TO CARRY HIS WEIGHT. <

> OH, LOOK, THERE'S ED MASSIE...YOU KNOW THAT MOUSE STEPHANIE ACTUALLY HAD A CRUSH ON HIM ONCE? HE'S SCARED, SO VERY SCARED...HE DOESN'T WANT TO DIE...HE DOESN'T WANT TO KILL ANYBODY...BUT HE DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO GET OUT OF THIS. <

> THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE IT SO VERY EASY. <

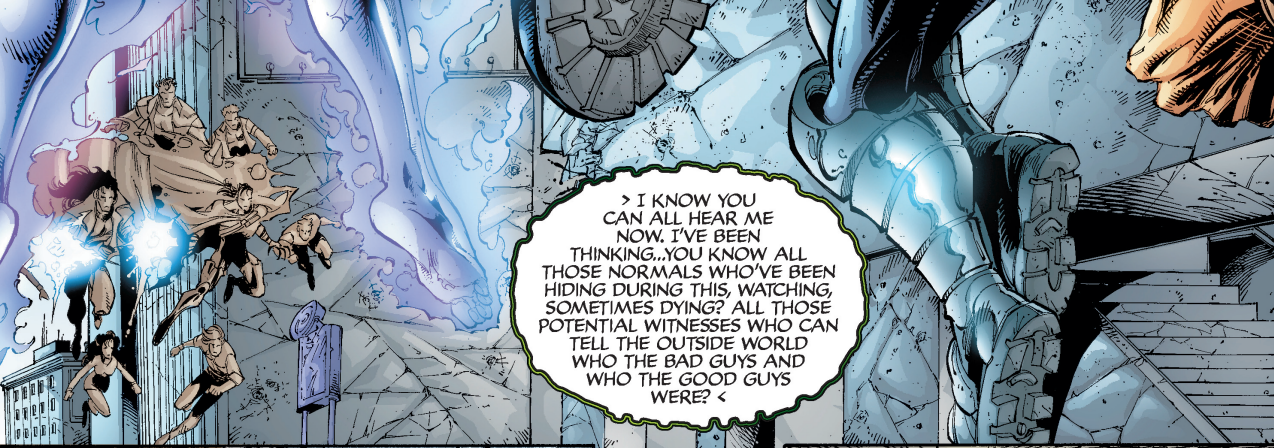
> BECAUSE THERE'S NOT ONE OF YOU WITH THE BALLS TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. EXCEPT ME. <

WHAT...WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

> I'M GOING TO GET EVERYONE WHO'S NOT ON MY SIDE...ON MY SIDE...BY MAKING SURE YOU'VE GOT NOWHERE ELSE TO GO. <

ARE YOU WATCHING FROM INSIDE, STEPHANIE? I HOPE YOU'RE SEEING IT ALL... BECAUSE YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE THIS.





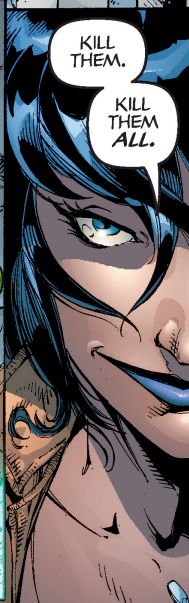
> I KNOW YOU CAN ALL HEAR ME NOW. I'VE BEEN THINKING...YOU KNOW ALL THOSE NORMALS WHO'VE BEEN HIDING DURING THIS, WATCHING, SOMETIMES DYING? ALL THOSE POTENTIAL WITNESSES WHO CAN TELL THE OUTSIDE WORLD WHO THE BAD GUYS AND WHO THE GOOD GUYS WERE? <



WHAT'S SHE --

I DON'T KNOW --

> WELL, I'VE HAD THE MOST WONDERFUL IDEA. <



KILL THEM.

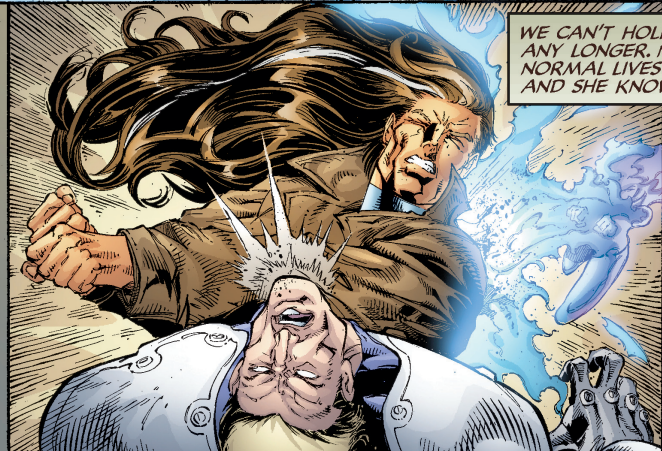
KILL THEM ALL.



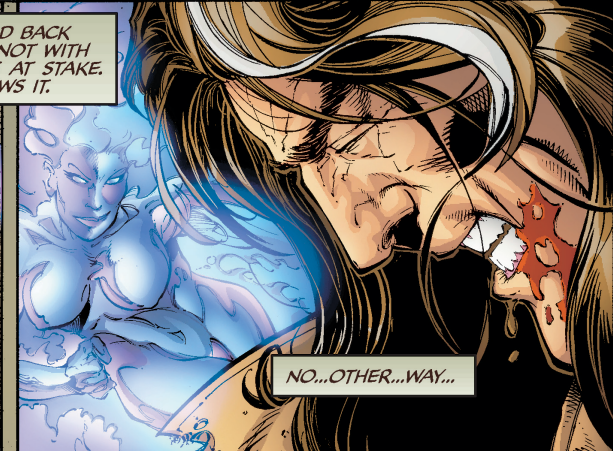
> KILL THEM ALL. <



NO!



WE CAN'T HOLD BACK ANY LONGER. NOT WITH NORMAL LIVES AT STAKE. AND SHE KNOWS IT.

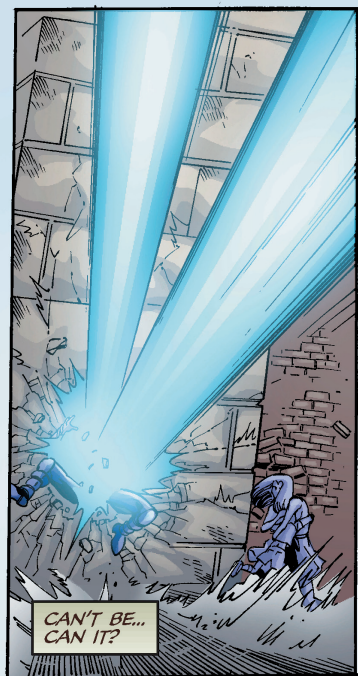


NO...OTHER...WAY...

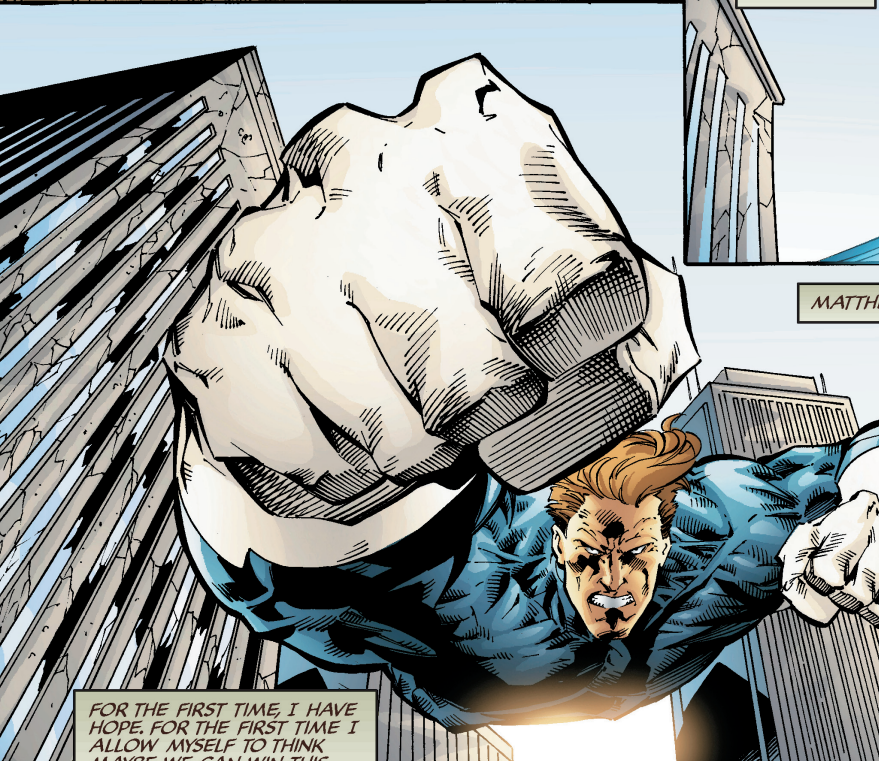




WHAT...?



CAN'T BE...  
CAN IT?



MATTHEW...



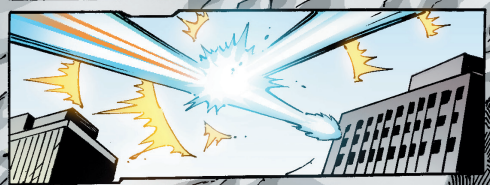
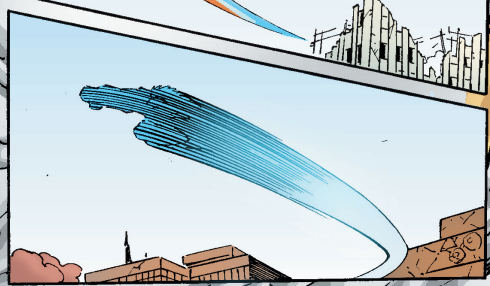
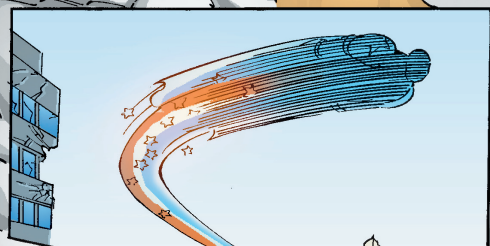
MATTHEW!

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I HAVE  
HOPE. FOR THE FIRST TIME I  
ALLOW MYSELF TO THINK  
MAYBE WE CAN WIN THIS.



THEN I SEE THE  
SECOND TRAIL...





WHAT THE HELL WAS...

IT WAS JUST ME, MATTHEW.



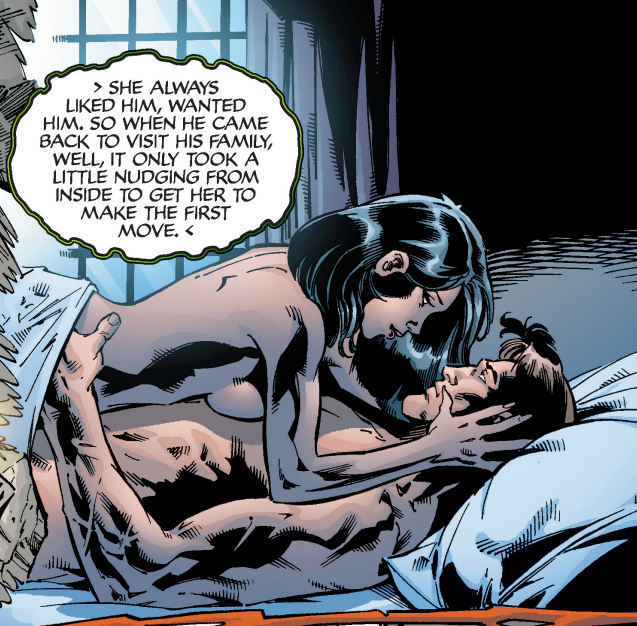
IT WAS ALWAYS JUST ME.

> JUST THE TWO OF US. <






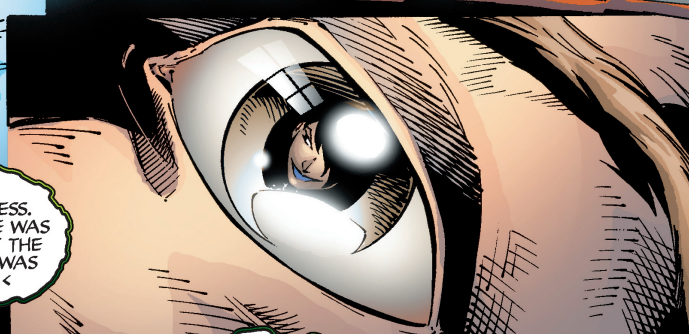
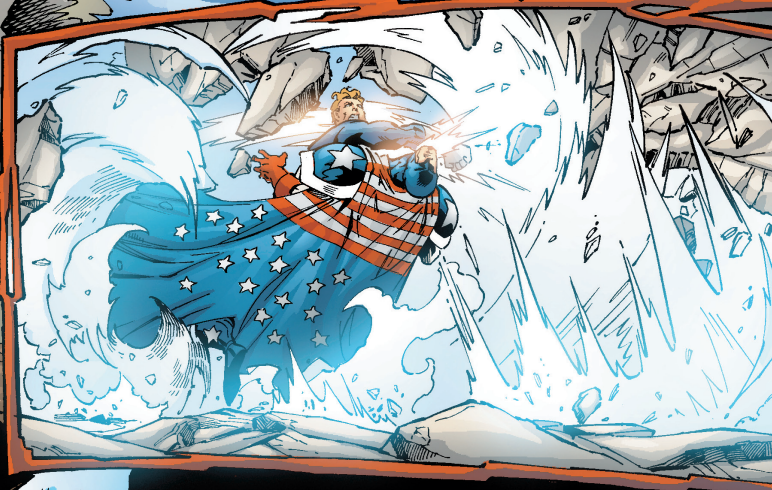
> JASON WAS THE FIRST ONE I INFECTED. BACK WHEN I WAS STILL MOSTLY TRAPPED INSIDE STEPHANIE. <




> SHE ALWAYS LIKED HIM, WANTED HIM. SO WHEN HE CAME BACK TO VISIT HIS FAMILY, WELL, IT ONLY TOOK A LITTLE NUDGING FROM INSIDE TO GET HER TO MAKE THE FIRST MOVE. <



> I WAS STILL WEAK...SO I TOOK HIM IN THE ONE MOMENT OF HIS OWN WEAKNESS. <



> TYPICAL MALE BLINDNESS. HE THOUGHT HE WAS INSIDE ME, BUT THE TRUTH WAS...I WAS INSIDE HIM. <



> AND WE GOT TO WORK...SENT JASON OUT TO KILL THE EXPENDABLES FIRST, START THE PROCESS. WITH EVERY DEATH I GOT STRONGER... AND COULD COME OUT MORE... AND KILL MORE... AND GET STRONGER... AND STRONGER... <





> I WONDER HOW STRONG I'LL GET... AFTER YOU'RE DEAD, MATTHEW. <



WE HAVE TO GET UP THERE --

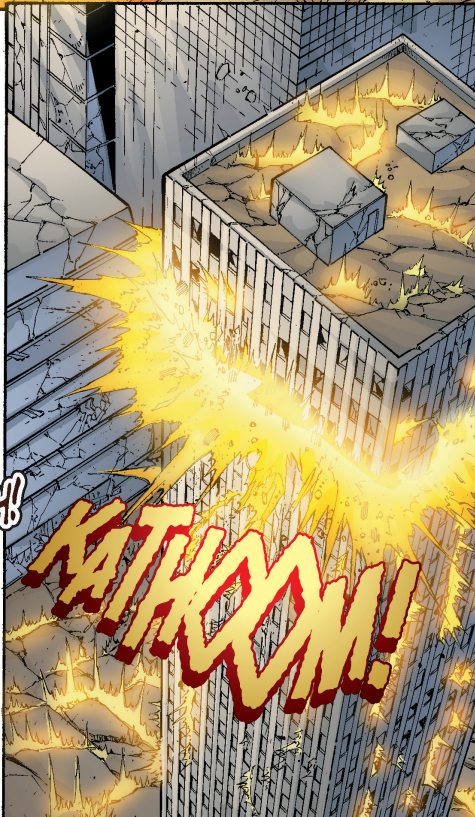
WE CAN'T... WE LEAVE AND THESE PEOPLE DIE --



-- GOD HELP HIM... HE'S ON HIS OWN.



YAAAAAHHHHH!



KATHOOM!



JASON.

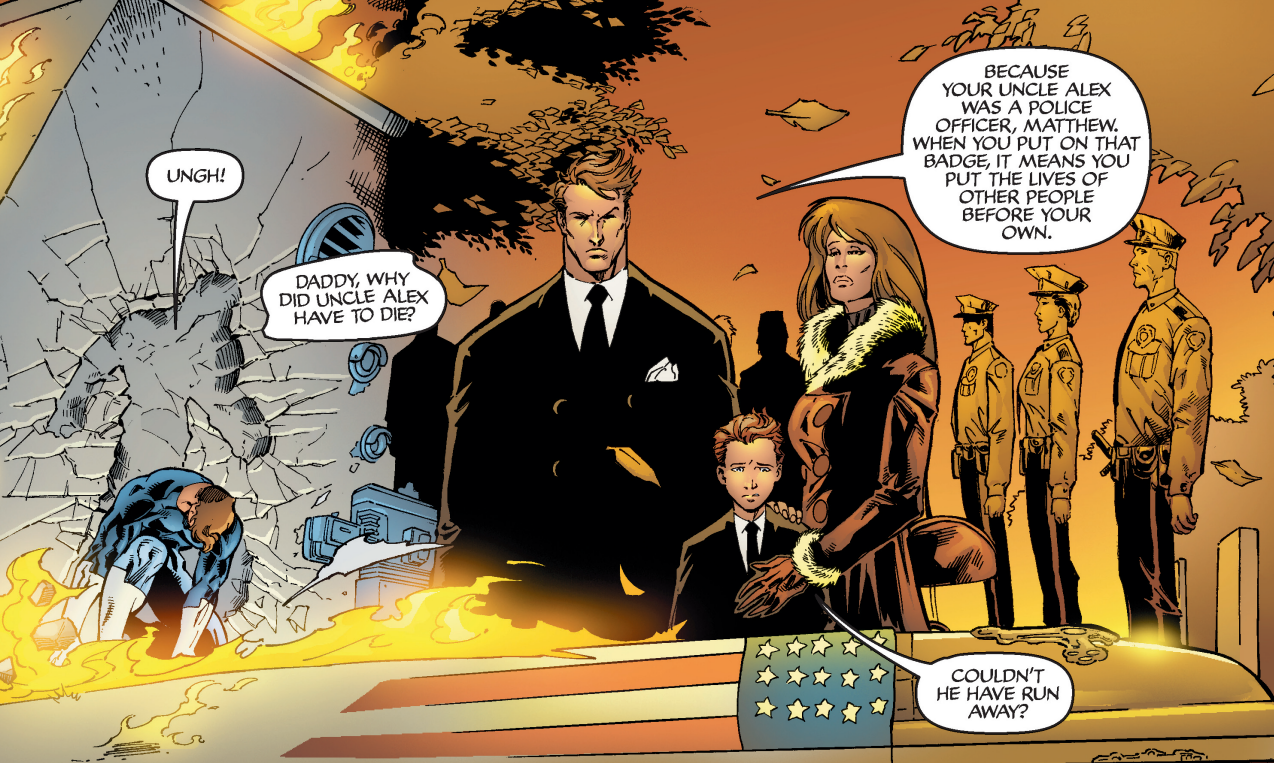
CAN YOU HEAR ME, JASON?

YOU'VE GOT TO FIGHT HER, JASON.

I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

I KNOW YOU CAN DO --



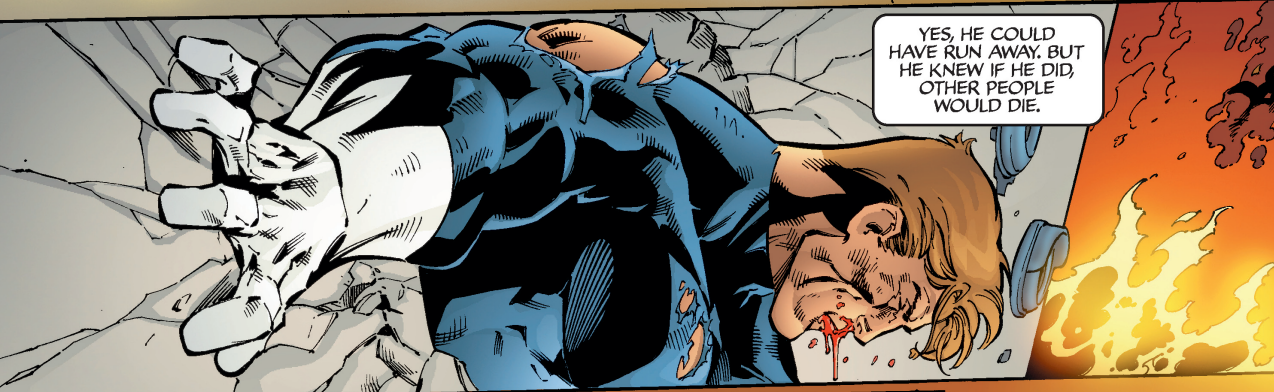


UNGH!

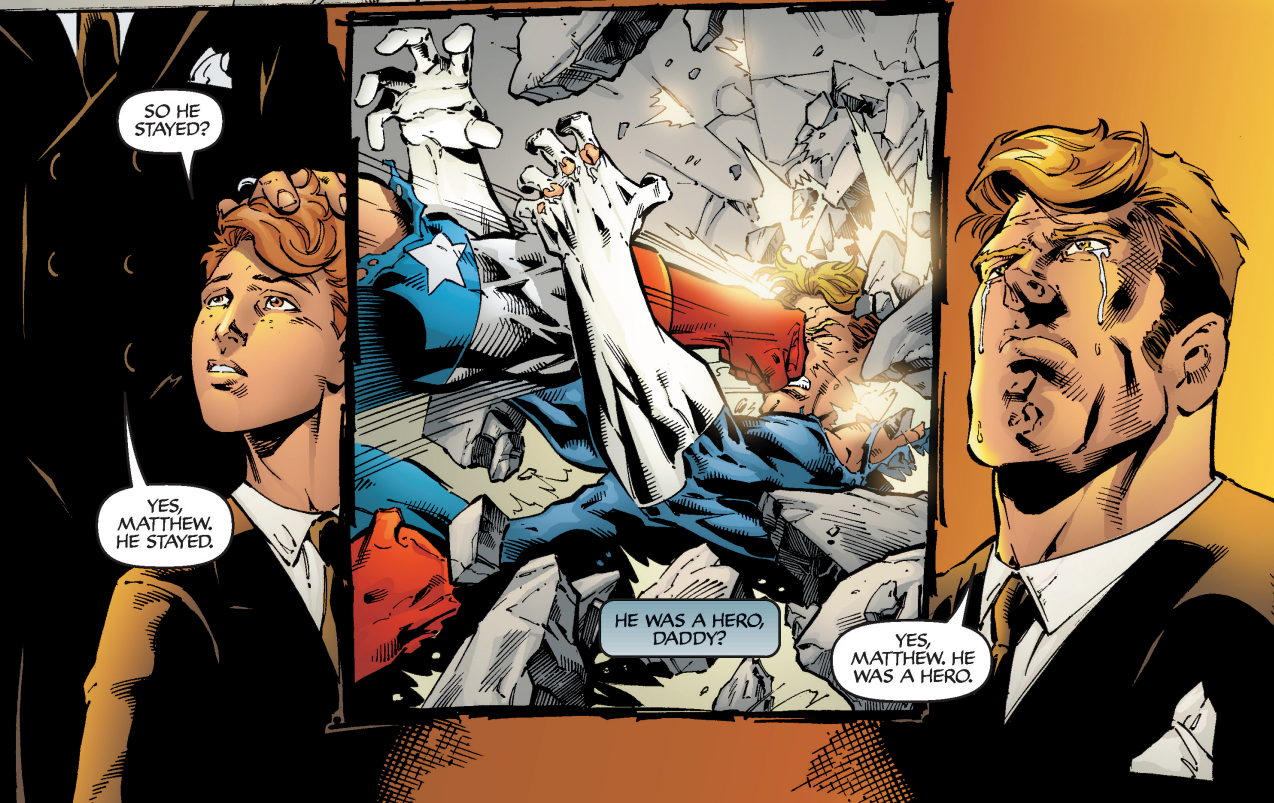
DADDY, WHY DID UNCLE ALEX HAVE TO DIE?

BECAUSE YOUR UNCLE ALEX WAS A POLICE OFFICER, MATTHEW. WHEN YOU PUT ON THAT BADGE, IT MEANS YOU PUT THE LIVES OF OTHER PEOPLE BEFORE YOUR OWN.

COULDN'T HE HAVE RUN AWAY?



YES, HE COULD HAVE RUN AWAY. BUT HE KNEW IF HE DID, OTHER PEOPLE WOULD DIE.



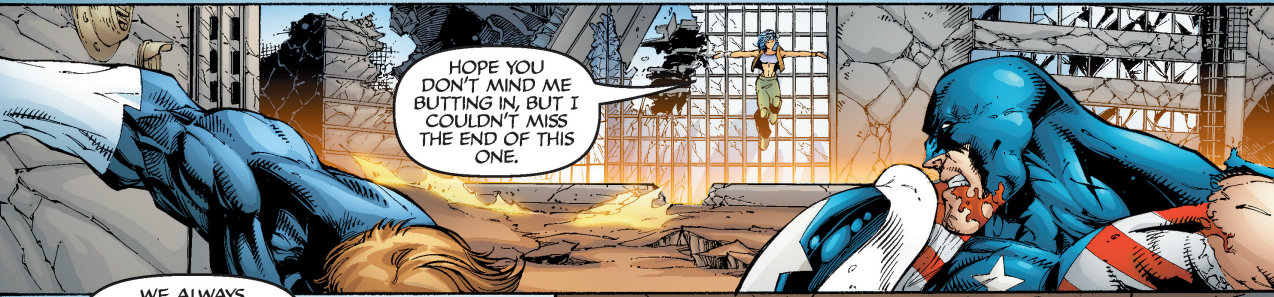
SO HE STAYED?

YES, MATTHEW. HE STAYED.

HE WAS A HERO, DADDY?

YES, MATTHEW. HE WAS A HERO.





HOPE YOU DON'T MIND ME BUTTING IN, BUT I COULDN'T MISS THE END OF THIS ONE.

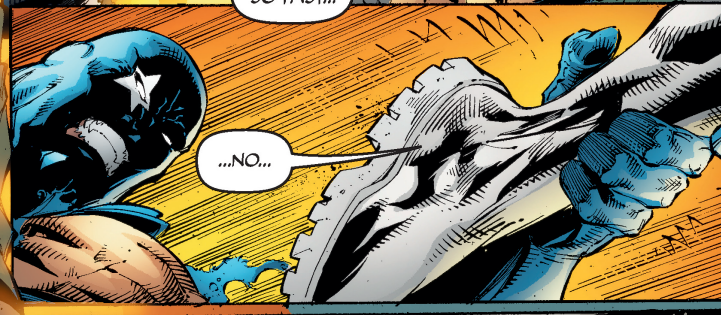


WE ALWAYS USED TO WONDER WHO'D WIN IF JASON AND MATTHEW FOUGHT.



...YOU...

NOT SO FAST...



...NO...



AGGHH!!

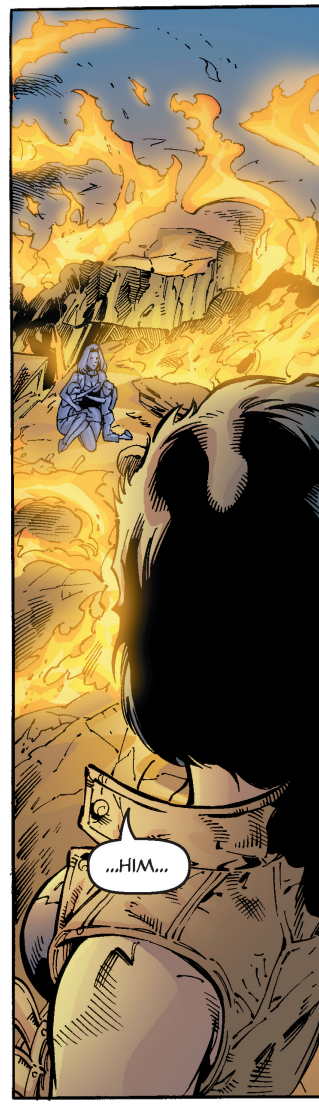
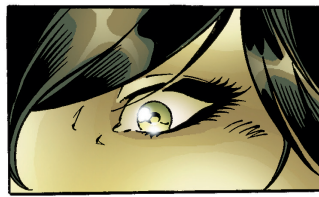




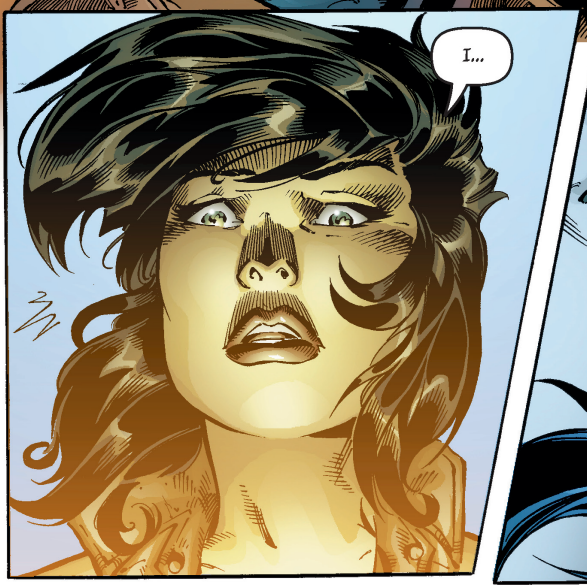
OKAY, THIS IS TAKING WAY TOO LONG.

FINISH HIM.

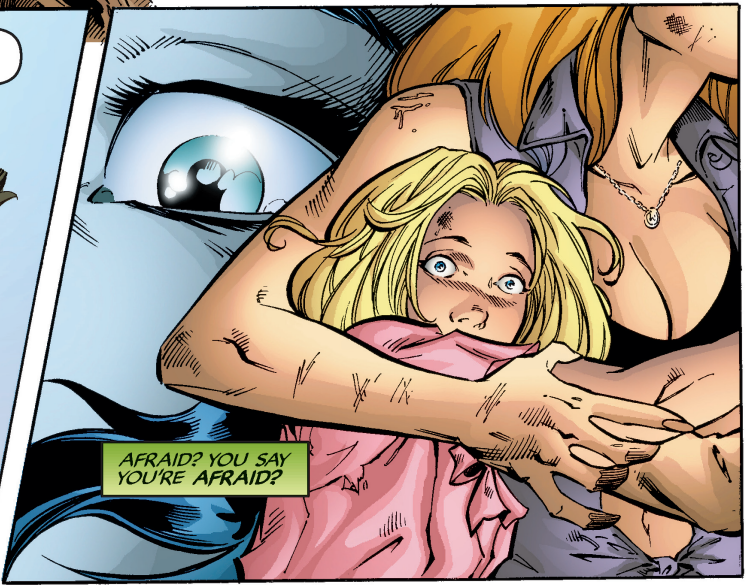
FINISH...



...HIM...



I...



AFRAID? YOU SAY YOU'RE AFRAID?



PLEASE, DADDY, NO...  
I DIDN'T MEAN TO  
BREAK IT...

I'LL GIVE YOU  
SOMETHING TO BE  
AFRAID OF! YOU  
HEAR ME?

I'LL GIVE YOU  
SOMETHING TO BE  
AFRAID OF!

HIDE BEHIND ME...HIDE BEHIND  
ME STEPHANIE, AND HE CAN'T  
HURT YOU...HE CAN'T GET TO  
YOU BECAUSE I'LL BE HERE...

BECAUSE IT'S NOT RIGHT  
TO BE THAT AFRAID.

I'LL NEVER LET YOU  
BE THAT AFRAID.

NO...NO,  
IT'S...

THEY'RE...  
AFRAID...LITTLE  
GIRLS...SHOULDN'T  
BE AFRAID...





MATT...MATTHEW?  
WHAT WAS I...

OH MY  
GOD...OH MY  
GOD...I DIDN'T...I  
DIDN'T WANT  
TO...

JASON!  
PLEASE, YOU  
HAVE TO --



NOOOOOO!

JASON!



WHAT  
HAPPENED?

I...DON'T  
FEEL CRITICAL  
INSIDE THEM  
ANYMORE.

MY GOD...  
LOOK...

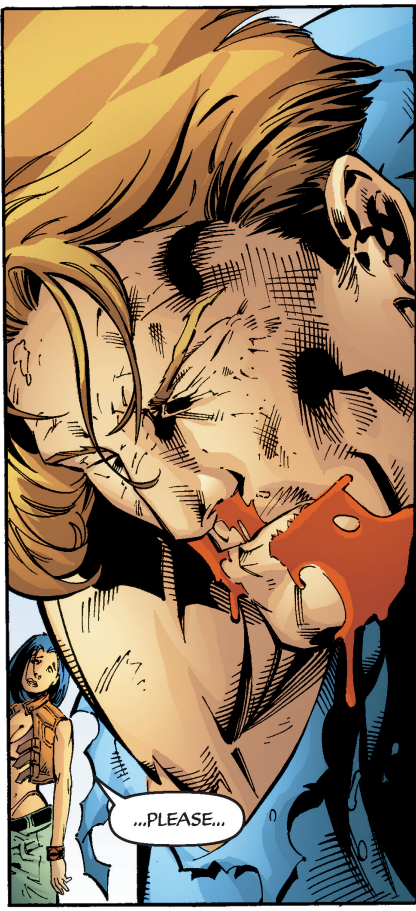


COME  
ON!



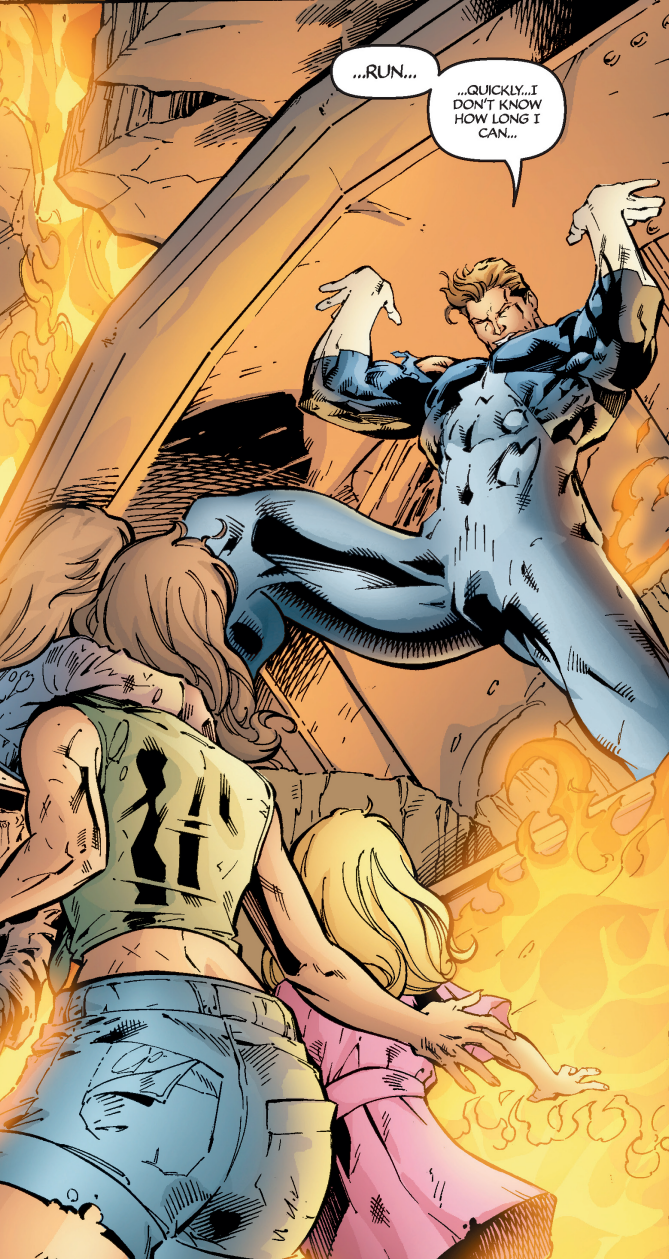
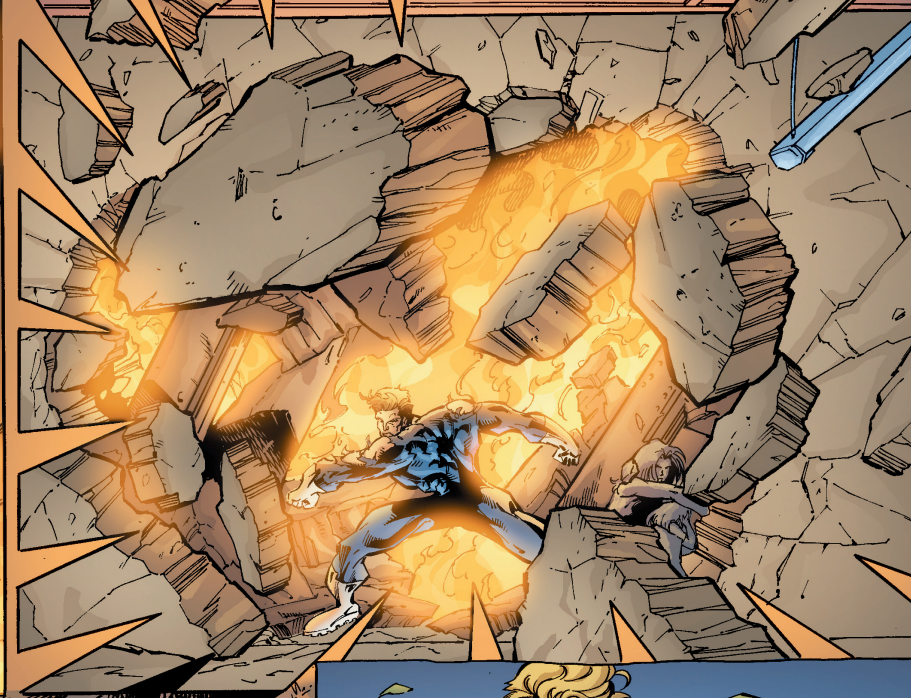
PLEASE...  
MATTHEW...YOU  
HAVE TO HELP THEM...  
BEFORE CRITICAL  
COMES BACK...I CAN  
FEEL HER FIGHTING TO  
GET BACK OUT  
AGAIN...

PLEASE!



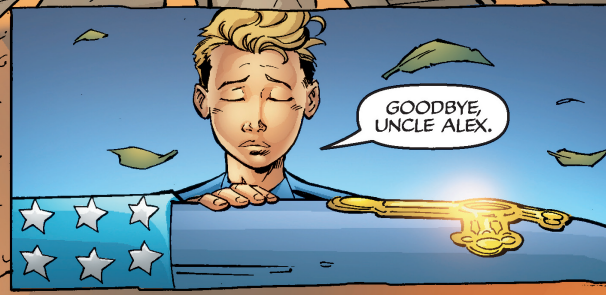
...PLEASE...



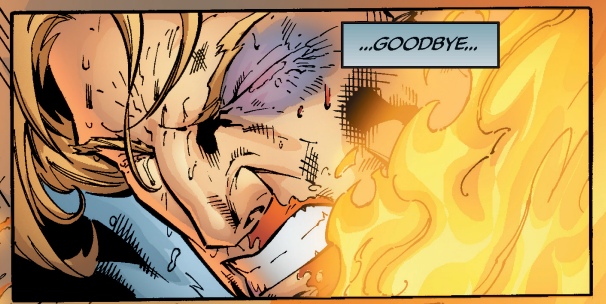


...RUN...

...QUICKLY... I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I CAN...



GOODBYE, UNCLE ALEX.



...GOODBYE...







STEPH...  
STEPHANIE?

I'M SORRY,  
JOHN...I'M SO  
SORRY, AND I'M SO  
SCARED...I DIDN'T  
KNOW SHE  
WOULD...

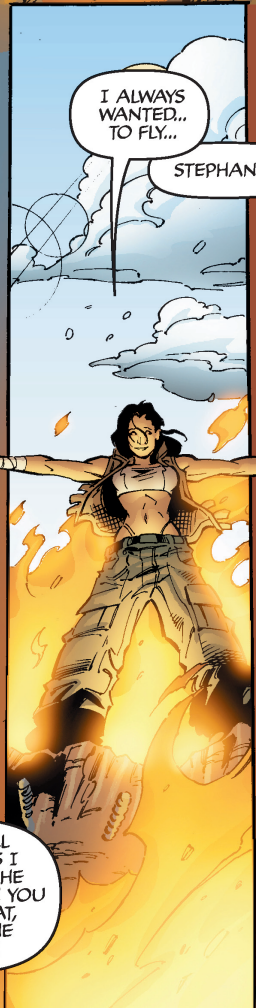
COME WITH  
ME, STEPHANIE.  
WE CAN GET YOU  
THE HELP YOU  
NEED TO --



NO. I CAN FEEL  
HER, DON'T YOU  
UNDERSTAND?  
FIGHTING TO GET BACK  
OUT, IF SHE COMES BACK  
AGAIN, IT'LL START ALL  
OVER...AND THIS TIME  
NONE OF YOU WILL  
BE ABLE TO STOP  
HER...



SHE HAD ALL  
THE ABILITIES I  
NEVER HAD. SHE  
COULD FLY. CAN YOU  
IMAGINE THAT,  
JOHNNY? SHE  
COULD FLY.



I ALWAYS  
WANTED...  
TO FLY...

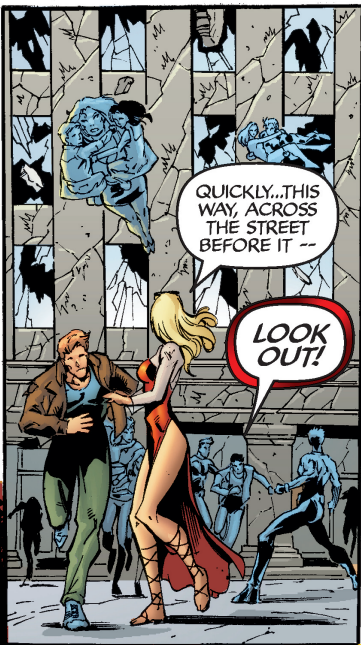
STEPHANIE...



NO!

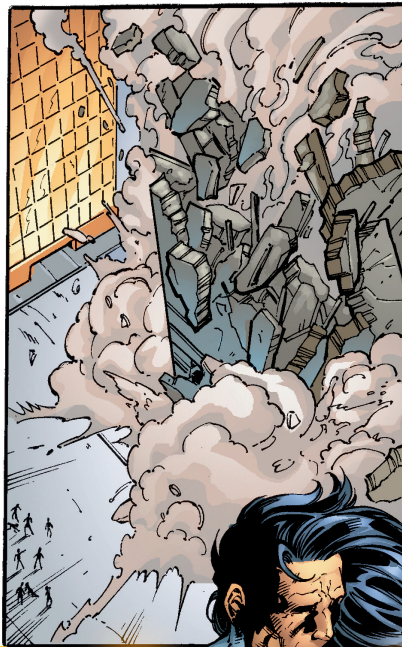






QUICKLY...THIS WAY, ACROSS THE STREET BEFORE IT --

LOOK OUT!



DID WE GET EVERYBODY OUT?

I...I THINK SO...

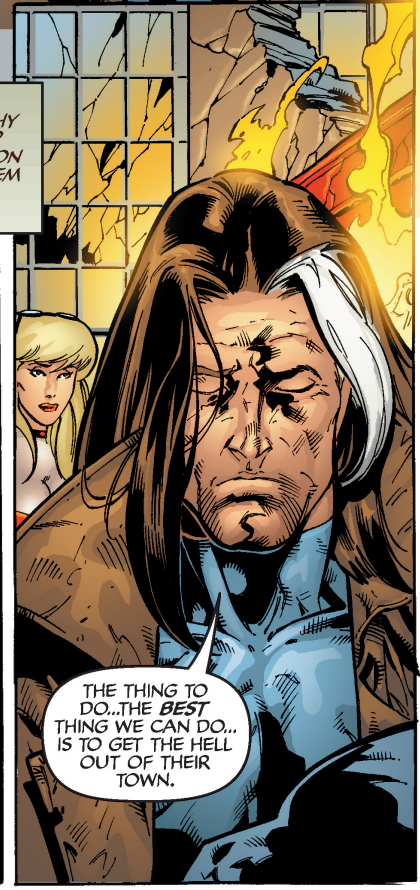
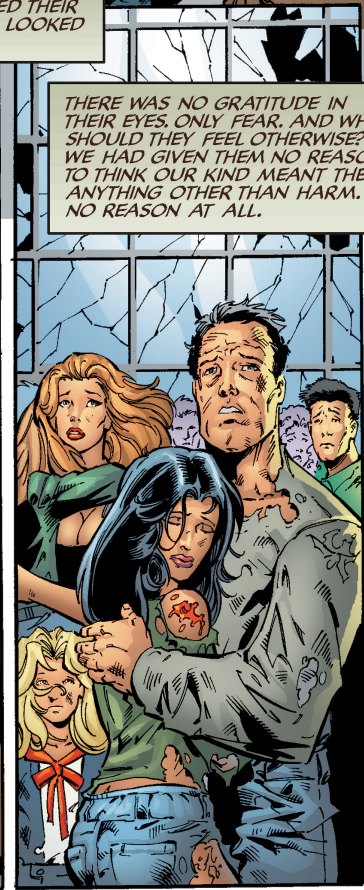
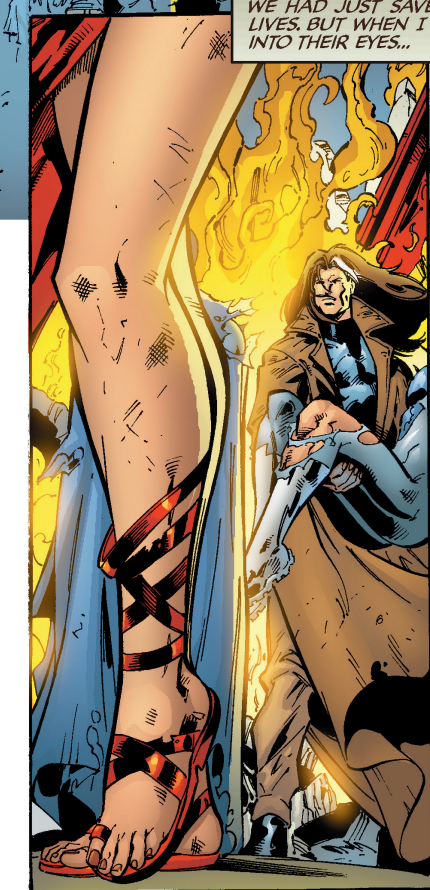
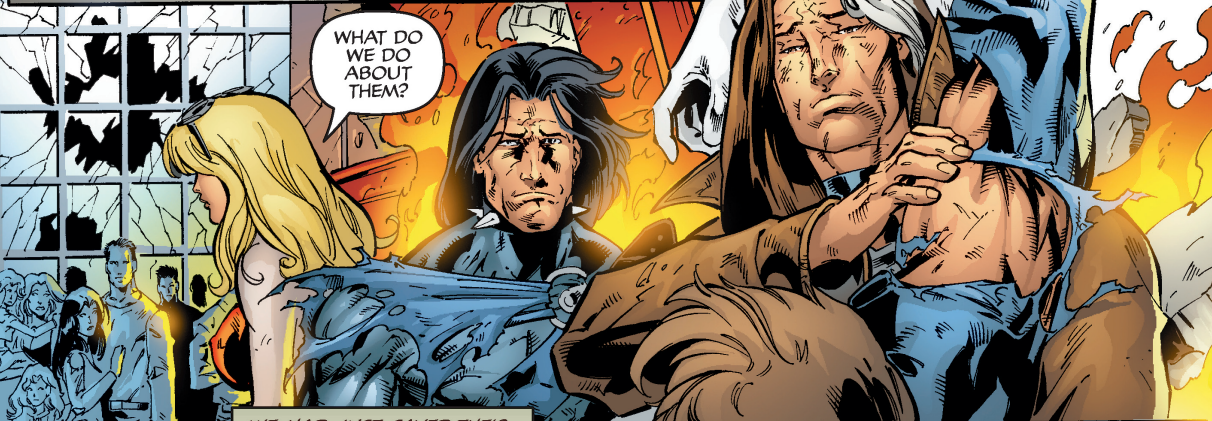
WHERE'S RANDY?

HERE.



...OHGOD..









RANDY...GET THEM OUT OF HERE. FIND A SAFE PLACE --

I'VE GOT ONE, BUT SAFE FOR HOW LONG, I DON'T KNOW.

THEN JUST... DO THE BEST YOU CAN. I'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU LATER.



WILL DO. COME ON...

A TERRIBLE PRICE WAS PAID HERE TODAY. BY US, BY THEM. ALL OUR GIFTS, ALL OUR POWERS... IS THIS ALL IT COMES DOWN TO? HAVE WE SQUANDERED IT ALL?

OR IS THERE STILL SOMETHING LEFT FOR US TO DO? PERHAPS THE SOMETHING WE WERE ALWAYS MEANT TO DO WITH THESE POWERS.

AT THE LAST, DID YOU FINALLY SHOW US THE WAY, MATT?





I JUST PRAY  
THERE'S STILL TIME.

FOR YOU.

FOR US.

FOR THE  
WORLD.