



JEREMIAH L. SCHWENNEN

TITANSTORM

PROLOGUE

AN OMNIGENOS CHRONICLES CROSSOVER

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A crossover epic of superheroism and paradoxes by

JEREMIAH L. SCHWENNEN

Titanstorm: Prologue
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ISSUE 0: PROLOGUE

OR

"All That Any of Us Have Left"

–9:20 P.M. December 29, 2043–

Analysis Chamber, Ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise, Los Angeles, California

Bartholomew Van Doran / "Hypothesis" *** Timeline Prime

The alphagen who manipulated the world for fifty glorious years as the unfathomable Hypothesis stared at the flickering holo-display in front of him, but bleary, sleep-starved eyes could make no fresh sense of the data. No matter how brilliant his mind, no matter how prodigious his knowledge, he could see no solution for the problem before them.

Reality was collapsing all around him and—more terrifying than even that—Time Tracker was dying. While he knew the two events were not related, he found the conflux of both exceedingly inconvenient.

Bart stood and stretched, old limbs creaking. He wore his bright blue costume with its shiny black belt covered in pouches still, but only because it had been specially engineered to clean itself and to provide certain medicinal benefits that aided in his mobility. His once chestnut-colored hair was now steel gray and just as long and wild as he had always worn it. A face that had been wrinkle-lined by his mid-forties was now positively littered with crevasses and folds. He was mere months away from his one hundredth birthday, but he had no

reasonable belief that he would see that day come. The century before had been...

A stabbing pain lanced through his brain, and he staggered, barely catching himself on the computer console in front of him.

Zion rushed into the Analysis Chamber from next door in the surveillance suite, his young, strong hands helping Bart back to his feet. He wore a similar blue jumpsuit in some pathetic attempt at showing solidarity with his team leader... but the tall young Black man's chiseled physique and shock of dark hair worn in short, tight rows could not possibly have been more different than the other members of what he called their 'team.' He was the child of heroes from the time before the world had turned utterly against Earth's omnigeni. Circumstance had caused Zion to fall in with a group of somewhat reformed villains, yet the young man continuously tried to make them function like some idealistic superteam of the nineties. "Sir, you have to sleep," the young man said firmly.

"You work for me," Hypothesis snapped, "not the other way around."

"And if you keep pushing like this, I'll be unemployed," Zion said with a quick, genuine smile. In spite of all the young man had seen in his twenty-three years, he maintained a sense of optimism that Bart found wildly infuriating. His smile fading, the young man asked, "Was that the paradox timeline again?"

Bart nodded. "I need to see Perfect 10. Can you find her?"

"She's in her quarters, but she's in a terrible mood. Are you sure you want me to bother her?"

The man who had once counted himself the arch-enemy of the New Rebellion sighed. "We may only have a few days left before Augustus dies, and once Time Tracker is gone, all of the temporal energy we've been accumulating in the Window Room will become useless. She's the only other *pigen* we have left, and I need her insights."

Zion turned to leave, but after taking a step away he stopped. "What's it like, sir?"

“What’s what like?” Bart snapped. He had no time for the imprecision of youth. He’d spent most of a century trying to manipulate young omnigeni into doing the necessary—if often grim—work of saving the Earth from a doom he had predicted back at the end of World War III. But he had clearly failed. Dark Titan had ruled the world openly since their Ascension, and the destruction of this world was now a foregone conclusion—one had merely to look outside to see that. There were barely a handful of omnigeni left to oppose the nearly omnipotent despot, young or otherwise. That meant that any chance of averting a planetary apocalypse left to Hypothesis was now the one thing he hated most—not a careful analyzed scheme, but a mad, desperate gamble.

Zion asked, “What’s it like having memories of both timelines, sir?”

Instinctively, Bart’s hand went to his head. He had to be exceedingly careful when thinking of the paradox in his mind. Specifically, he had to be mindful of recalling events from the past. Probing too deeply into the set of conflicting memories in his brilliant *alphagenic* mind would trigger another debilitating migraine and cost them time they did not have.

Time was the problem. Time was always the problem. That was why he had become so certain that time also had to be the solution.

“It’s beyond description. When I shut down the Hypothetical servers and uploaded all of my clones’ memories into my mind, I wasn’t prepared to receive two sets of data for a forty-six-year period of time. Every day is a struggle to maintain the mental discipline required to coordinate the conflicting memories.”

Zion seemed like he was going to ask another question, but something stopped him. Bart stared at him for a long moment, influenced by the modicum of compassion that had incongruously burned in his heart since those memories had revealed the existence of a nephew that he had cared deeply for in this curious alternate timeline. That compassion made no sense to him, for in the timeline he knew to be his own, he had never met such a person—his sister had

lost her only child in utero. Yet the upload of memories from this second timeline had tainted his very personality with these emotional aberrations. The very notion of a timeline where omnigeni had grown and prospered with public acceptance for decades longer than in his own was almost beyond comprehension, yet he had extraordinarily detailed memories of forty-six years of variant, almost utopian, events.

“Well,” he said, exasperated, “get it over with and ask your question.”

“What was I like in the other timeline?” the young man asked.

The dangerous temptation to probe his memories for an answer stirred in Bartholomew, but he resisted. Simple logic gave an answer without risk of seizure or migraine.

“You were born in 2021, Zion. My memory upload from the other timeline only covered events until late 2020.”

“But I thought you pulled the server data in the 2030s,” Zion pressed.

Bart nodded. “All of the memory files from 2021 through the shutdown in 2034 aligned. The incongruence only exists in memory files dated between 1974 and 2020.”

Zion put one finger to the cleft of his chin, tapping in an absent gesture that reminded Bart very much of his mother—a fascinating development considering that Zion’s mother had died in the *Iotagen* Purge when he was only a young boy. He scarcely even remembered her, from what Bart knew, but he replicated her mannerisms almost as much as he replicated the obnoxious optimism his father had demonstrated in his youth.

“I wish we had taken more time to talk about all of this,” the young man confessed.

“Before the Ascension, it didn’t seem all that important, and afterwards, you were too busy helping TC plan her foolish, doomed crusade,” Bart growled. “Enough reminiscing. Bring me Isabella. Tell her to hurry—we have to make final arrangements before Time Tracker ruins everything by finally dying.”

XXX

–9:45 P.M. December 29, 2043–

Ground Floor Memorial, Ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise, Los Angeles, California

Zion Jackson / *No Codename**** Timeline Prime

After getting Perfect 10 to the Analysis Chamber to plot with Hypothesis, Zion realized that if things were as dire as they seemed, he would probably not find another chance to visit the Memorial.

Taking the stairs—he could handle them, and he hated to waste the power on the elevators when he was perfectly capable of climbing up and down a few dozen flights of stairs—he descended to the ground floor of the Ultimate Order Skyrise. Originally home to the secret headquarters of the last superteam to form before the Purges, the building had been abandoned when the FBI arrested the Ultimate Order and revealed their headquarters’ location to the world. In the days since the Ascension had put Dark Titan in command of the world, the ruins of the building had served as the headquarters and haven of one of the last organized omnigeni resistance cells in the world. Dark Titan had spent the past four years hell-bent on wiping out those powered individuals who had survived the Purges of the late 20s and all that followed, and only the scatter-field that surrounded the mostly-destroyed Skyrise kept Dark Titan from locating them now.

The ground floor of the building housed the Memorial, and though he lived and did most of his work several stories above, he tried to visit once a day. Usually he was the only one in the large atrium, and he could wander through the collages of photographs, newspaper clippings, and the occasional battery-powered holo-projection that cluttered every surface of the old entryway to the building. Sometimes he would light the candles that various visitors from the outside brought, but these days, there weren’t many people still coming and what candles remained were stumps. The only light in the place was the combination of lightning flashes from outside the thick panes of

glass fronting the lobby and the grainy blue light of dying holo-projectors.

In the beginning, people had still had hope. In spite of everything, they remembered the moment that they realized that the enigmatic hero known as Titan wasn't the savior they had been led to believe. January 1, 2039. From the moment of Dark Titan's Ascension and the beginning of the global storm front that still raged outside, they had flocked to this place with mementos of heroes they had once cherished. When Dark Titan had taken Chicago as their stronghold in late 2040, Los Angeles had seemed far enough away that one could hope that the troubles would not reach them. They came to the Memorial to remember the heroes they had turned against with the crystalline regret of hindsight.

Sadly, regardless of how physically far away Dark Titan was from them, Los Angeles was no safer than anywhere else. The world was breaking, as Hypothesis said so often. An endless thunderstorm had enveloped the Earth for almost five years, driven by power clearly beyond the scope of ordinary atmospheric forces... and uncountable millions were dead or dying. Soon, if Hypothesis was correct, that number would be counted in billions.

When Dark Titan—then called simply Titan—had been focused on capturing other omnigeni for the supposed safety of ordinary people, humanity had been all too happy to look the other way at the constant reports of murder. But after the Ascension, when the mighty omnigenos whose innumerable powers seemed to have no practical limits had started to come for regular humans, people had flocked to the Memorial to weep over lost champions and beseech those that remained to intervene on their behalf.

It was all tragic. It was all sad.

Zion made his customary circuit through the intermittent shadows of the lobby, stopping at the place where his mother and father were memorialized alongside their teammates in the New Rebellion. They had been heroes of the nineties—the beginning of the underground

omnigenos movement that swept America after the dismantling of the Doublelight Foundation signaled the beginning of the end for the United Nations' tolerance for superhero vigilantism. None of the Rebels were still alive, though Contrail had only fallen the previous year. Zion missed his unofficial uncle's stories of his parents' heroic exploits in their youth.

But not as much as he missed the reason he really came down to the Memorial.

He turned a corner to where he had put a holo-display of his best friend, and was shocked to find someone standing there.

"Excuse me?" he asked after a polite cough.

The figure shivered in a dark hooded raincoat, and water still glistened on its wrinkled surface—she hadn't been inside long. As she turned to face him, Zion realized she had a cybernetic leg, and the pale face that peered out from under the hood had the stretched quality of reconstructed flesh. Her brown hair was shaved down to stubble, and her fierce, dark eyes were the one thing that remained the same about her despite the countless hardships she'd endured.

"Hello, Zion," she said in a dry, cracked voice.

He winced. "Ms. Rollins," he said with a slight nod of his head. "I thought they told you not to come back here."

"Is the Memorial not open to the public anymore?" she asked. "I wanted to pay my respects to the fallen. I knew more people on these walls than you ever did."

Zion didn't know how to respond to that. It was certainly true. As the hero Challenger, Laura Rollins had been a member—and even the leader, for a time—of the original Next Alliance. She had gone on to a solo career for years afterwards and survived much of the worst of Titan's war on omnigeni thanks to the fact that she was a *kenogen*... a human with no omnigene.

But there was nothing ordinary about Laura Rollins. She was the living definition of the word mercenary—not a gun for hire, but rather a person driven entirely by outcomes without concern for ethics. His

father, who had known her all too well, had once suggested she change her code name to “Acceptable Losses.”

Steeling himself for an argument, Zion asked, “Can you please just give me some space? I want to talk to TC.”

Laura inclined her head and stepped away, her motion stilted by the lagging response time of her artificial leg. She hadn’t had access to a suitable cybernetics lab for its maintenance since the leaders of the enclave here in the Skyrise had thrown her out, and the old limb was clearly failing.

Once she had moved away, Zion fixed his eyes on the image of TC Hoffman. She was pretty in a rough-hewn way, with a sun-bronzed skin tone inherited from her biological father and a twinkling in the dark eyes that peered out from under brown bangs that might as well have come from her adoptive father. The product of her two dads as much as Zion was the product of his mother and father, TC had also lived too long without them—her bio dad had been lost a few years before the Ascension, with his husband disappearing shortly afterwards to try and find him. She had been like a little sister to him, and the last year without her had been harder than any other loss he’d ever experienced. He wished she were here now—as maddening as her combination of impulsiveness and conviction could be, it had been present in his life for so long that its absence was an unmistakable, daily injury.

As he tried to collect his thoughts, he felt Laura’s eyes on him. Sighing, he turned around and glared back at her. “What?” he asked.

“Something’s happening here,” she said. “Something big.”

“How do you know that?”

“I still have friends in the Skyrise, even if none of them have any political power,” she said with a half-smile. “Hypothesis is finally making his move. The old man doesn’t sneeze without you handing him a handkerchief, so I knew you would be prepping for whatever is about to happen... and you’ve always been too sentimental for your own good. So I waited where I knew you would be if you were getting

ready for something bold... and here you are. So tell me, Zion Jackson... what is it? What's the master plan that Hypothesis has been building towards for all of these years?"

"It doesn't involve you, Challenger," he hissed. "We're saving people, not killing them."

"You know, I knew your dad at a time where he wasn't nearly so sure of himself. I wish you would have known him back then—a little humility would go a long ways. And boy, you've got plenty to be humble about. Child of two of the most famous *iotagens* in history, and you come out a *betagen*? Do you know how disappointing that is?"

Zion moved without thinking, sudden anger surging in him as he lunged towards the paraplegic sexagenarian and smashed her into the wall, right in the middle of a section of photos of fallen members of the Psionic Collective. Zion was on the lowest end of the superstrength and superspeed continuums... but that meant he was still much stronger and faster than most people. Certainly fast enough to hit Laura before she could move out of the way and definitely strong enough to lift her.

"Why are you such a monster?" he demanded.

"I get results," she said, seemingly undisturbed by his attack. "You need me. If this is it—if this is the one, final plan to stop Dark Titan... you need someone like me. The future of humanity—*kenogens* and *omnigeni* alike—may require someone to get their hands dirty, and we all know that someone won't be you, Zion."

He felt a tight ball of tension form in his stomach as he realized she had a point. The architects of whatever was coming next—Hypothesis and Perfect 10—were both former villains. They would do what must be done and wouldn't worry about what had to be sacrificed along the way. But he'd already proven too often that he would challenge them. He had been raised to believe in the possibility of the heroic solution. He could no more set that aside than he could stop himself from breathing.

But Laura... Laura got results.



–11:18 P.M. December 29, 2043–

Hospital Room, Ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise, Los Angeles, California

Bartholomew Van Doran / "Hypothesis" *** Timeline Prime

“Open the damn windows!” Augustus Akambe shouted in a voice little more potent than the creaking of a tree limb in the wind.

From the chair beside his hospital bed, Bartholomew wrung thin, wrinkled hands. “Augie, we aren’t quite ready. You have to hold on.”

The countless machines—some antiques and others marvels of *alphagenic* innovation—that maintained the fading life of the cosmic villain known as Time Tracker beeped and hissed and whispered all around them. The sound of the ever-present storm raging outside the Skyrise was all but drowned out in the babble of medical noise. It was hard to even see Augustus through all of the wires and monitor devices attached to his paper-thin skin. A man of Native American descent, by way of the long-lost bilateral nation of New Valor, Augie had once had long, raven-black hair but it had all fallen out as his sickness advanced. Only the three ceremonial gold rings that pierced his left eyebrow gave any hint to his cultural background... otherwise, he simply looked like a tired old man used up by life.

From the doorway of the large room, Isabella said, “Perhaps a literal window will satisfy him.”

Bart turned to see that Perfect 10 had finally finished her work in the Analysis Chamber and joined him at Time Tracker’s bedside. She was far older than he was—older than just about anyone, from what he knew—but even with her massively depleted omnigene, she managed to ignore the passage of time. Still as beautiful as she was in the prime of her life, she didn’t look a day over thirty and she still dressed each day like she was on her way to an international gala. Today was a floor-length gown in a rose color that caused her lightly tanned complexion to almost glow. Her hair was bound up in a simple bun and she wore

only a single sentimental piece of jewelry, a ruby and gold ring on her right hand.

She entered the room and slid open the heavy plastic sheeting that hung across the room's floor-to-ceiling windows. The view from this room was spectacular, but only in the truest sense of the word. A spectacle of unimaginable proportions waited just beyond the thick glass.

Los Angeles was a wasteland. The Skyrise was one of three buildings of any notable height still standing, and it had lost its top fifty floors during the climactic battle between Omni and Titan on the eve of Ascension.

The perpetual storm raged, lightning flashing in dense cloud cover that seemed far too close to the ground. Bolts of radiance stabbed down into the smoking ruins of the once vibrant city, but few people seemed to notice. There were only a couple of thousand people in the remnants of Los Angeles, and most of them had found places underground to cower. But even subterranean refuges were dangerous in the wake of the so-called Titanstorm, as those places often flooded or became buried in the rolling tide of mud that flowed every day across the region. Five years of steady rainfall had irrevocably destroyed the fragile ecosystem of a place that had once seen only a little over a foot of rain in an entire year.

"Beautiful," Augustus said from between cracked lips as a particularly bright flare of lightning threw stark shadows through the room.

"Why Augie, I didn't think you cared about such things," Isabella said with a forced smile.

"Not you," the old time traveler snarled. The effort of that snarl left him in a coughing fit that caused several of the monitors attached to him to bleat out plaintive alarms.

Bart helped to ease him back against his soaking sheets and put one hand on the old man's forehead.

“I once heard that they had a cure for old age in New Valor,” Bart mused softly. That strange duality in his memory that caused him to feel compassion was getting the better of him.

Time Tracker whispered, “I never should have left there, you know.”

“This is no time for regrets,” Perfect 10 said as she finally came to stand next to Bart.

“Says the woman who rewinds time every time something doesn’t go her way,” Augustus said. “If I had your power instead of my own...”

“I haven’t had enough energy left to do a rewind in years,” Isabella said. She put one hand on Time Tracker’s frail shoulder and said, “We need you to hold out for another hour or two. Can you do that?”

Hypothesis looked to the monitors and sighed. They would be lucky to get an hour. Augustus was at his end, and there was nothing that could be done to save him. Worst of all, Bart had spent twenty years trying to understand why the old time traveler was dying. No cure had ever worked. No treatment had ever done anything but alleviate a few symptoms. And the cause of death would, inexplicably be, ‘old age.’

“I have fought her for as long as I was able,” Time Tracker said. “But since you all can’t win against that Titan creature without my help, I will fight a bit longer.”

“Her?” Bart asked, leaning forward. “Who are you fighting?”

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you now,” Augustus said with a sigh. “You have the energy you need from me, right?”

“Yes. We only need you to stay alive so that your personal timeline remains active—it isn’t your powers we need now, it’s your existence,” Perfect 10 explained. She too looked curious—Bart and Isabella had spent many a long night debating the mysterious origins of Time Tracker’s extremely specific powers, never with even a hint of an answer forthcoming from the old *pigen*. What had seemed like an obsession with appearing enigmatic during his villainous career had

clearly been more than just theatricality, but they'd never gotten to the truth.

Bart's natural desire for answers was powerful, but his pragmatism asserted itself as he said, "We don't have time for stories."

"You have time for this one," Time Tracker said. "It was Echidna."

And just like that, everything made sense. Echidna was a Class 7 xigen who had spent decades skulking around in the shadows of the world granting wishes to people in exchange for curious, esoteric promises. She'd been dead for decades, but those who had assumed that her passing meant that they could renege on their promises had learned the folly of that quickly. Once the promise was broken, the wish was reversed... usually with horrible consequences.

"She activated you?" Bart asked. "How fascinating."

"That explains your stupid thirty-two-hour limitation!" Perfect 10 exclaimed. "I've never been able to understand that—no other *pigen* on Earth has such a ridiculous handicap. I used to think it was subconscious—some sort of inadequacy in your brain that was limiting the scope of your otherwise staggering abilities. Oh, how I cursed your name over the years at how you wasted your potential."

The old man smiled and said, "32 years where I could move anything through time for thirty-two hours. Then, when the time came to pay the price for that at the end of those thirty-two years, she offered to give me another thirty-two, but only on the condition that I could no longer reach further backward than my first day and no further forward than my last. But now my extension has run out, and Echidna isn't here to offer me another."

Hypothesis arched one gray eyebrow. "Such power, but limited to only a sixty-four-year period of viability..."

"It didn't seem so bad. I'm ninety now, but the wishing witch activated my omnigene sixty-four years ago, when I was much younger and more foolish. *Exactly* sixty-four years ago, in fact. I was in New Valor at the time, so once you account for time zones... I have about forty minutes left."

Outside, a rolling cascade of thunder began in the distance and swiftly built, causing the building itself to tremble and eliciting a brief flash of light from the normally invisible scatter-field that surrounded the Skyrise. That device—one of Hypothesis' inventions, deflected Dark Titan's efforts to detect the omnigeni inside. Such a visible display of energy was a sign that local reality was no longer operating by the proper rules. The end of things was nearer than he had surmised.

"We have to make the final choices," Bart said, standing. "Forty minutes is barely enough time."

"That's what I was doing before I came in," Perfect 10 explained softly. "I made the final two choices and programmed them in. Sentimental, perhaps, but they may be the edge this gambit requires. I just need you and your little helper to push the buttons and make it happen."

"Go!" Augustus roared in a voice that suddenly sounded louder than it had in years. "Leave me alone with the fractures."

Not quite understanding, Bart stood without comment and turned to leave the room. As he did so, he saw what Augustus had been talking about.

The sky had changed. The cloud-choked vista beyond the window was full of thin, golden cracks. Jagged, sprawling lines of light split across clouds and air and even ruins of buildings on the ground below without regard for where they passed or what they touched, and they were spreading... quickly.

"Spacetime has come undone," Isabella gasped. "I can feel it."

They ran, Hypothesis and Perfect 10, directly towards the Window Room. As they moved—Bart's old body protesting vehemently against this abuse—he touched the little round communicator plate on the collar of his jumpsuit, signaling Zion to join them.

They arrived downstairs in the empty room used for housing the time windows that Bart had learned to form using the collected

energies produced by Augustus' omnigene. Hypothesis leaned against the bare wall, breathing heavily.

Isabella walked across the gridded metal floor to the control console on the other side, activating the holo-display and pulling up the coordinate planes.

"I have the eight entrances programmed, unless you feel the need to argue with my choices," she said without regard for his gasping for breath.

Between ragged intakes of air, Hypothesis said, "You made informed... choices using... my data. I... accept your... inputs."

"Good," she said. "Now I need your decision—where do we program the exit? Which of the tipping points did you determine most likely for success? Not here and now, surely."

Zion entered the room and immediately went to Bart's side. The young man explained, "No—this world is already doomed. If we're going to make a difference, it has to be in the past."

Bart answered, standing upright with Zion's support. "Window exits located in temporal points before 2017 fail because of some manner of time barrier originating in the paradox timeline. Efforts to disrupt Titan's timeline at its earliest points have proven ineffective, as we learned from Quaranteen's twin attempts. Simple deduction tells me that the best chance we have will be in the minutes immediately leading up to the Ascension. Whatever happened that night to transform Titan into Dark Titan must be prevented. Such transformations are often accompanied by brief periods of vulnerability—I would think this would be especially true in this instance, given the likely cost Titan paid to overcome Omni."

Perfect 10 frantically ran her fingers across the projected light controls on the console, and a satisfying beep and shifting of colors in the overhead lights indicated that the windows had now been programmed with both entrance and exit time periods. It would take a few more minutes for the system to transfer the geophysical coordinates from the computers in the Analysis Chambers.

“They will need direction,” Isabella said. “Someone will need to tell them what to do. Thirty-two hours is not much time to plan an assault on the most powerful omnigenos the world has ever seen.”

“That’s taken care of,” Bart said. He looked to Zion and said, “Right?”

Zion nodded emphatically. “It was in her gauntlets—Elliot put it in exactly like you wanted. You’ve uploaded the program, I assume. If the gauntlets didn’t discharge the download on the first trip, they certainly did on the second.”

“Assuming she even made it to her destination on the second trip,” Hypothesis muttered. “Desperate gambles. A lifetime of preparations and it all comes down to blind chance.”

“Dad would have called that ‘hope.’” Zion said with a smile.

“Your father was an idiot,” Perfect 10 replied with a snort. “Windows are spooling up now. Physical coordinates loading. Aperture generation in eight minutes.”

XXX

–11:38 P.M. December 29, 2043–

Analysis Chamber, Ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise, Los Angeles, California

Laura Rollins / “Challenger” *** Timeline Prime

With everyone occupied in visiting old Time Tracker’s deathbed, Laura had no difficulty getting into the Analysis Chamber. Once Zion had explained the plan to her, she knew she had an opportunity that would never come again. The splintering state of reality outside seemed to indicate that she would never have any chances whatsoever again, but she tried to stay focused on the goal at hand.

If Hypothesis believed there was a chance to change history, she would turn that to her advantage.

As one of the five original members of the Next Alliance, Laura had learned how to maneuver the delicate morality of heroes like her father and the rest of the Alliance. Fighting first alongside Amazing Boy,

Flicker, Volt, and Catalyst, and later with her best friend and fellow abduction survivor, Ms. Mega, Laura's career as Challenger had shown her firsthand the consequences of allowing ethics and codes of honor to limit the ability to get results.

The plan before them was astonishingly simple. Hypothesis and Perfect 10 were using Time Tracker's ability to move things through time to reach out and collect eight people from history to come together and strike against Dark Titan at a moment of the despot's greatest vulnerability. Knowing that Zion had been part of choosing which eight figures from across time were being gathered, she knew that the relentless ethicality he'd inherited from his noble parents would compromise the success of the mission. Even Hypothesis' cold-hearted practicality couldn't overcome the bull-headed convictions of the son of Victory and Solaria.

She opened the files to see who these hand-selected champions would be and couldn't believe her eyes.

They were arranged chronologically, and she was stunned at the choices that the last surviving alphagen and his cohort of lackeys had settled upon. Given the option to gather the most powerful omnigeni of all time at the peak of their might... these are who they chose?

From 1975, someone she'd never heard of, a man named Eric Eckhart. She noticed that he was an alphagen—a thinker. She moved on without reading any more, already disgusted. An alphagen was next to useless in a fight!

From 1992, they were choosing Biome. A true powerhouse, the nature-controlling leader of the Psionic Collective was actually a selection Laura could agree with... especially since 1992 would be before the epic battle with Red Blight that had permanently diminished her abilities. As she looked through the file information on Biome, she noticed something interesting—the events depicted did not match up with her own knowledge of history. According to this file, Biome had left the Collective to join Alliance East in late 1991... but that had never happened. And what was *Alliance East*? There had only ever

been one Alliance, unless one counted the trainees in the Next Alliance as a second iteration of the team. Alliance East was an unknown to her, and few living knew as much about Alliance history as she did.

Curious, she continued on to the next item.

She was shocked to see the next figure was one very familiar to her—Volt, her former teammate from the Next Alliance. Taken from 2000, he would be at the peak of his powers, before the deadly Brithagorus Syndrome ravaging his body claimed his life the next year. But again, the file told of events following the attack on their school by Rage Wraith that did not align to Laura's memories. And while Brian had been a powerful hero, he was far from the most combat-capable *iotagen* they could have chosen.

From 2002, they were taking Brawlmaster, the leader of the New Rebellion and a close friend to Zion's parents. A skilled fighter who straddled the line between *betagen* and *gammagen*, he was surely a sentimental choice, as, like Volt, he was being taken shortly before his death.

The next selection made Laura physically tremble with anger. Two years later, from 2004, they would be gathering Brawlmaster II, the sister of the original... a young woman with an absolutely identical power set to that of her brother. What possible good could two hand-to-hand fighters who fought with swords and bo-staffs be against Dark Titan? She smashed one hand into the console in front of her in frustration. With only one chance to save the Earth, these were the choices Hypothesis had made?

The next selection was scarcely any better, but at least she understood it. From 2018, they would be summoning Spider-Monkey. Though she had been thrown out of the Skyrise before Quaranteen's first mission to the past, she knew from her informants that TC had learned on that trip that Spider-Monkey was the brother of Dark Titan, and perhaps they were counting on some sense of familial loyalty engendering mercy or hesitation in their foe. That sort of calculation made sense to her.

She scrolled on to see a truly surprising choice—Constructika, a member of the Ultimate Order that had originally called the Skyrise home. Drawn from 2020, she would be early in her career, but since Danesha was a *kenogen* like Laura, she assumed what Hypothesis was really after was her suit of powered armor. One of the rare heroic suits in the world that was not built by, or based upon the work of, Dr. Anton Karn, Constructika had not been a particularly impactful figure in history. Her armor was impressive though, and her personal history with Perfect 10—the two had clashed many times—meant that perhaps the former villain had some insight that was not recorded in the files. These files simply didn't paint a picture of why Constructika was a wise choice, but she guessed that Perfect 10 was behind the selection, and that made it at least slightly more palatable than some of the others.

The last choice made the same kind of sense that Spider-Monkey did, as it was Fuse Box, taken from 2024. The far more powerful of the two siblings to Dark Titan, Fuse Box was a useful choice for reasons of potency as well as psychology. His ability to absorb and repurpose energy would help mitigate Dark Titan's infamously versatile control over energy wavelengths.

But that was it. Those eight people, representing amongst them only one genuinely impressive specimen of omnigenetic ability—Biome—were the plan?

"I don't think so," Laura said as she began to chew at her lower lip.

She worked at the controls carefully, as she had little time to make a change without it being noticed by those in the Window Room on the other side of the building. The computer was already beginning to transfer the details to the aperture controls there.

"They need you, Susie," she muttered, knowing that was only half the truth. Yes, they needed her... but so did Laura. Ms. Mega was the most powerful member of the Next Alliance aside from poor David who had already proven unable to defeat Dark Titan at the height of his abilities. Susan had only been active on Earth from 1999 to 2003.

When she left to fulfill her destiny on her home world, she had never returned.

Laura missed her and had harbored forty years of regret about how things had ended between them... but she earnestly believed that Susan's power could turn the tide. In many ways, Dark Titan reminded her of the parasitic Eventide, and Susan St. Eve's unique alien biology and tremendous *gammagen* abilities had proven capable of overcoming the nightmare of that being's attempt to invade the Earth...

If she was going to make a subtle enough change that it would not be noticed—a change to physical location for the time window rather than a change to temporal location—she had only two possible replacements: Volt and Brawlmaster I.

Deciding to eliminate the idiotic redundancy of bringing both Brawlmasters, she changed the targeting parameters on that file, desperately hoping she was remembering correctly where Susie would be located in the summer of 2002. She finished her work just as the computer compiled the final data packet and sat back with an sigh. It was done.

Before she left, Laura decided to investigate one more thing in these elaborate files full of events and references that contradicted her memories... herself.

The header of the file, containing basic biological information, told her all she needed to know. Somehow, this database contained an entirely alternate history not just for a few of the chosen time travel candidates... but for her as well.

Next to the entry for Codex Designation, Hypothesis' files listed Laura Rollins, AKA Challenger, as a Class 6 mugen. Not a *kenogen*.

Laura had never once demonstrated any sort of energy absorption abilities, let alone at that level of power.

"What's going on here?" she murmured. But before she could investigate any further, she felt the rumbling in the structure of the building that told her that she was out of time. They all were.

The temporal fractures spreading across the landscape outside the windows had reached the ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise.

She looked up at the countdown clock and saw... the time windows would activate in twelve seconds.

In twelve seconds, eight figures would be plucked from across time and deposited in the recent past to prevent this moment in time from ever coming to pass.

She wondered what it would feel like to have time unwound all around her.

XXX

–11:58 P.M. December 29, 2043–

Ninth Floor "Rooftop" of the Ruins of the Ultimate Order Skyrise, Los Angeles, California

Zion Jackson / *No Codename* *** Timeline Prime

"Sit with me," Perfect 10 said as Zion came through the door to the top floor of the Skyrise. The ceiling was gone here, so the rooms that had once been offices were now a sort of rooftop observatory... and Perfect 10 sat near the edge, watching as the world tore apart all around them.

Zion joined her in a folding chair on the edge of infinity, gazing out at the patches of golden-light-limned nothingness spreading out all around them. The scatter-field sputtered and sparked in the air a foot from the edge of the building, clearly failing.

"How will we know if it worked?" he asked quietly.

"We won't," Perfect 10 said. She sighed and said, "But maybe it did. I think I shall like facing the end clinging to that."

Zion nodded. "Do you feel strange?"

"How so?"

He struggled for words as the building trembled beneath them. Chunks of discorporating reality were being bitten out of the lower floors, yet the building still stood in defiance of natural laws. He wasn't really sure that natural laws mattered anymore.

He explained, “I feel slower. Weaker. I think... my omnigene has deactivated.”

“I wondered if mine had gone dark simply because this,” she gestured out at the sky, “is temporal in nature. But I feel it too. Mine has been mostly depleted for quite a while, but it’s gone now. Curious.”

“It is the Final Evolution,” Hypothesis’ voice came from the little communication disc on the collar of Zion’s jumpsuit. “I don’t know what that means... but that’s what Dark Titan calls it, according to my data tap. Time and space are collapsing in towards a center of reality-gravity in Chicago. This is what they wanted all along—this was Dark Titan’s end goal.”

“Can you answer one more question for me, sir?” Zion asked. “My last question ever, probably.”

“I make no promises. My mental faculties are fading swiftly—my omnigene has been depowered somehow.”

Perfect 10 muttered, “Now he must understand how frustrating it is for the rest of us to keep up with him.” She folded her finely manicured hands in her lap and gazed longingly at the gemstone on her ring.

Zion ignored her barb and asked, “Are you sure that the pre-2021 windows opened into the other timeline... the one from your clone’s memories?”

“No,” came the reply, “I’m not sure of that at all.”

“But you hope they did?” Zion asked with a slight smile. He couldn’t resist pressing the old villain one more time... it’s what his father would have done.

“The probabilities were favorable, but by no means certain. Look around you, boy... do you honestly think hope has anything to do with this?” Hypothesis snapped.

“From where I’m sitting, sir... hope is all that any of us have left.”

To Be Continued!

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