



## **Challengers of the Unknown #2**

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*Challengers of the Unknown*  
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*Somewhere else.....*

Twelve Windows shattered as the 150 foot tall Robot took another gigantic step. Its bucket-like head swiveled to the left as a blazing red beam sizzled from its eye sockets igniting a parked tractor trailer! The explosion rocked the already ravaged city with flying metal and debris! Its head rested on a barrel shaped body that was framed on both sides by two massive arms that ended in horse-shoe shaped claws that opened and closed spasmodically as the robot took each block spanning step. Its pillar-like legs were supported by feet the size of city buses that crushed cars and people alike without discrimination!

Minutes earlier Red Ryan had disappeared inside the left leg of the mechanical monster through an emergency access hatch that he had discovered on his third pass around the unstoppable giant! After blowing the small door open with plastique he had luckily found a maintenance ladder that led straight up through the dimly lit interior of the metallic menace! Ryan had abandoned his jet pack at the bottom of the ladder due to the tight fit that barely contained his well chiseled frame. He was by no means as big as that ape Rocky but he did pride himself on staying in shape. Besides the ladies liked the muscles!

" Red! Progress report!" Ace chirped in the Stunt man's earpiece.

" I'm inside the robot, Commander sir! Yes, sir! Up front and ready for action!" Ryan could joke around with the blonde fighter pilot like this. After all their years together these four men were closer than most families.

Ace Morgan and Rocky Davis circled the robot's head wearing their own powerful jet packs. The metal giant not even attempting to swat away the comparatively small threats.

“ Get to the head and set the rest of your Explosives! We’ll try to contain the Civilian casualties as best as we can!” Morgan barked back over their sophisticated communications system.

“ Ace, maybe I should have been the one to go inside? You know how reckless the kid gets when he does the solo act!!” Rocky said with his heavy New York accent.

“ Ryan will be fine. He won’t let us down!” Ace said as the giant monster took another step bringing down a corner drug store! “ Davis! Six o’clock! Civilians!”

“ I’m on it!” Rocky yelled as he took his jet pack into a spiral dive that rocketed him in between the legs of the robot.

The red headed girl screamed as the Wall around her started to crumble and fall apart! The brick and mortar separated and dropped right on top of her! Even as the dust and debris settled down the blur of motion that was Rocky Davis, ex-boxer and professional wrestler, zipped through the thick smoke clutching the terrified little girl!

“ Take it easy little lady! I’ve got you!” Rocky reassured the frightened child as he made a wide swing around the devastated building. Landing next to a huddled crowd of people that took refuge behind a large wall, the curly haired Challenger handed the scared girl to a wounded police officer that had a sling wrapped around his left arm.

“Make sure she gets back to her parents.” Davis commanded.

“Of course I will, sir! Thanks for the help!” The officer answered politely.

“We’re just doing our duty, same as you!” The ex-boxer said as he throttled his jet pack once more and sped up into the air and angled back around to head in the direction of the giant robot

Meanwhile inside the robot, Red Ryan pulled himself up to the top of the maintenance ladder to stand in a flat narrow hallway. He could see a steel door at the end of the passageway. Sweat dripped from the stuntman’s forehead as he approached the door. Even with the various fans

and vents, inside the machine was still hot and noisy.

“Ace. I’m at the base of the head. Another few minutes and I should be placing the explosives inside the target area!” Ryan said as he reached for the door’s latch.

Suddenly as Red’s hand made contact with the metal handle a shattering charge of electricity shot through the red-headed Challenger! Ryan’s toenail’s popped as he felt his blood begin to boil! Despite his best efforts, the stuntman could not open his hand! Electricity danced from one tooth to another as the awesome force contacted with his fillings! With an eardrum shattering crash Red was violently thrown back fifteen feet to slam against a wall of circuits and wires!

“ Red! Speak to me!” Prof. Haley was monitoring the rest of his Team-mates from inside the Monitor Womb of Challenger Mountain. “Ace, Rocky ! Red’s vital signs just bottomed out! He’s in trouble!”

Inside the Robot, the smell of burnt flesh filtered through the narrow corridor. Red lay burnt and bleeding on the cold steel floor. Every attempt he made to raise himself up failed. He couldn’t do anything but lie there and listen to his ragged breath squeak from vaporized lungs! His mind swirled as he felt himself fall back into a black oblivion devoid of all sound and light!

*Opening his eyes, he is in a steamy Jungle; a 6 foot tall Raptor is pulling a chunk of his stomach away from the rest of his body. Large birds of prey circle overhead waiting for the pack of reptiles to finish with their meal, leaving the morsels for the lesser animals.*

Ryan swoons again. His body numb of all feeling, only his mind is aware of the ever-changing surroundings—

*Now Ryan is flying through the air, in his hand is the refrigeration unit that he had whipped up from the spare parts in the Challengers jet. Below him is the rampaging fifty foot tall Volcano Man. As Red angles his body so that he hits the volcanic monster dead center in the chest he pulls the safety off of the weapon! Just a few more yards and Ryan can activate the compact machine.*

*Once inside, the homemade weapon will freeze the fiery giant into a block of solid ice. Diving head first into the lava-like interior, the fearless youth feels his skin vaporize off his bones. He activates the unit even as the muscle and tendons of his body fry off and burns to miniscule bits of ash that instantly disintegrates!*

*In the blink of an eye, Red is laying on his back in the dusty dirt floor of an old Western town. Blood has begun to flow from a quarter-sized bullet hole directly between his eyes. A rough looking Cowboy with a scarred face looks down on him, His six-gun smoking from its recent eruption.*

"I've ...*died*...before...?" Ryan mumbles through a mouth that no longer feels anything.

"What did he say?" Rocky asks. Looking at his partner Ace.

"We've....*all*....*died*..before..." Ryan once again gurgles. This time as his eyes roll back in his head and he takes his last gasp of air.

"Ace, Rocky..." Prof. Haley said with a sudden realization " He's right! Can't you both feel it? A sense of déjà vu!"

"Amazing." A voice from behind Haley causes him to spin around in his oversized chair to see who has just walked in through the doorway.

"Multi Man!" hisses Haley. "What are you doing in our headquarters? How did you get in here?"

"Fascinating! You all are actually experiencing cellular recall! My scientist said the drugs would prevent that. No matter." The tall, powerfully built man casually pulled out a small handgun from his coat pocket and fired it at the Professor. A thin red laser beam cut across the room and separated the Professor's head and right arm from the rest of his body in one clean stroke!

Duncan Pramble, Multi Man, disgustedly tossed his pistol on the now vacant seat. He ran his left hand slowly through his slicked back dark hair and spoke out loud to nobody in particular.

“Let’s pack it up! This game is over.” He said half bored.

Instantly workers started to appear from everywhere. They loaded the Professor’s body onto a stretcher taking great care not to damage it any further. A tall man wearing a clean suit and mask carried a small vacuum cleaner looking apparatus into the monitoring room. He thumbed the machine on and began to methodically suck up any blood droppings left behind by the previous crew. Once done, he walked directly out the door leaving as he had entered, in complete silence. During all the cleaning Pramble had absent-mindedly flopped down into the big chair knocking his pistol off into the floor, which was systematically retrieved, by one of his loyal flunkies. He stared at the still working monitors and watched as his robot crushed and killed the remaining two Challengers.

The Daughter of June Robbins had been waiting in the cold rain for three hours. She had flown Colorado after agreeing to meet with the complete stranger that had been harassing her for the past few weeks over the phone. She had told her boyfriend that she was going to the California to cover some big story, not entirely lying to him. June turned around to once more to look through the 20 foot tall chain link fence at the mountain that was roughly a mile away.

Challenger Mountain was still impressive after all this time. It looked like a huge gravestone planted in the ground by some long forgotten god. Even from this distance she could make out the security lights that lined both sides of the long road that lead all the way to the base of the mountain. The mountainside was dotted with random lights that looked like tiny stars that had fallen to Earth and had sprinkled the hillside with bits of Heaven. Even with the Challengers being gone this long she knew that there had to be some type of security staff on duty. During her research, she had found that a private corporation had bought the famous headquarters about twenty years ago and that it was being used as a research facility. What they were researching no one knew.

“ You... Look just like...your Mom...” The voice like seaweed said from

behind the young woman.

Turning June Robbins couldn't help but gasp as she saw the size of her mysterious stalker. He was easily 7 feet tall and his shoulders looked wide enough to hold the weight of the world on them.

"Don't...be..afraid.." The stranger said reassuringly.

"I'm...not." June lied. Trying to see his face below the wide brimmed hat that covered it in dark shadow. The overcoat he wore was obviously in tatters but it still did a good job of concealing what the giant looked like.

"Believe it...or..not...I'm a...good guy..." The giant said as he slowly raised his huge arm and pulled the hat off to reveal a green hairless head.

"I...I..." Was all June could make out. She tried in vain to hold back the trembling that was spreading through out her entire body. Ignoring every instinct to turn and flee as fast as she could, she stood paralyzed. June studied the face of the tall stranger. It was different shades of green like a plant and veins like roots covered the top of his head. She now noticed that he smelled like freshly cut grass with a small hint of mint.

"I'm...Swamp Thing.....or...Dr. Holland..." The creature said without emotion. "Whichever...you...prefer.."

"I know who you are." She said. "But I just never thought I would meet you.."

"No time...The Challengers are ...inside...the Mountain..." Swamp Thing said as he pulled his coat off to reveal the rest of his powerful body.

"What? They're inside their own Headquarters?" June asked with deep concern and doubt.

"Prisoners...I will provide distraction....you... free.. them.." He said as he walked to the Fence and ripped a wide gap in the Steel Links as if they were tissue paper.

"Wait! Wait! That's your plan?" She screamed as he slumped off into the

huge field surrounding the mountain.

As Swamp Thing disappeared into the night June hesitated for a second then she also plunged into the hole in the fence. She knew that if security were on the ball then it wouldn't be long before someone came to investigate the damaged barrier. Without thinking and cursing her own stupidity she started sprinting towards the beckoning monument.

Even with the full Moon out tonight the shadows were still deep in all the dips and gullies in the open field. June had already hidden from two passing jeeps that scanned the yard with bright spotlights. The swamp creature had not lured all the security to his location but he was getting most of their attention.

Even though he was a quarter mile away June could see that he had made it to the base of the Mountain to a huge hanger like door that served as the main entrance to the facility. The entire front of the mountain was now lit up with various floodlights and the sound of gunfire could be heard for miles around! A jeep exploded against the rocky mountainside, the sound reverberating across the vast plain.

Steeling herself, the beautiful longhaired blonde made her way cautiously to the hanger door. Giving the creature more credit than she had thought that he possessed, Swamp Thing had graciously moved the fight further on down away from the now damaged door. The fighting had increased in tempo as the small army called in all units to try and stop this monstrous green fighting machine.

Stepping through the door June paused just long enough to strip the weapons off of two dead guards. She has always prided herself on being prepared and this situation, no matter how crazy, was not going to be any different!

Swamp Thing crushed the head of the guard that had tried to blow his face off with his shotgun. Even though it was hard for him to communicate, because his throat was no longer made for speech, Holland was by

no means a stupid man.

Dr. Alec Holland was a brilliant biochemist seeking to develop a regenerative drug that would prove invaluable to the Medical Community. That is until a rival company sent a hitman to kill Holland. But when the two men struggled, a fire was started and, thoroughly soaked in his own formula from the broken beakers, Holland ignited into a blazing ball of human wax. Seeking refuge in the nearby swamp, Holland plunged into the icy waters to save himself, but without consideration to the chemicals that saturated his body. As he floated in the black water dying, a strange metamorphous occurred. The combination of the chemicals, fire and the vegetation of the swamp water changed Holland. He was no longer human but now a new hybrid of both animal and vegetable. He was a Swamp Thing!

A Grenade exploded to his left, ripping his Arm apart! Swamp Thing reached around with his right arm and plucked the full-grown man up like a rag doll and flung him up into the cool night air.

Standing alone among dead bodies and crumpled machinery Holland's shoulder sprouted a thin branch that quickly grew down his left side. As it reached just below his waist, fingers began to form from twisting vine like twigs. Once formed the new arm thickened and solidified into a devastating log like limb. Picking one guard up by the leg, he walked back to the hanger door the guard barely moving as he gasped for breath and tried to calm his nerves.

Inside the Lobby of the vast complex, Holland found June Robbins studying a glowing computer monitor.

"Didn't... get... far..." He noted.

"I can't make any of this out. All the floors appear to be empty! They must be using this place just for storage." She said.

Dropping the wounded guard in front of the wall of elevators, Swamp Thing gestured with his new arm.

"Take us...to...the Challengers..." Holland commanded.

Hesitating at first but realizing that no job was worth risking being torn limb from limb, the guard slowly limped to the control panel and punched in his personal code. The three rode the elevator in silence. The large cargo cab dropped several floors to the basement level laboratories located deep under ground. Having difficulty standing due to his blood loss the guard led the couple down a long, wide hallway and through a large bay door that could easily accommodate any size forklift.

“What the Hell?” June muttered through a gaping mouth.

The Huge Chamber stretched on for what seemed like miles. Tanks of some type lined both walls and hoses and tubes ran everywhere. The well-lit room was filled with the hum of machinery and the gurgling sound of running water. The ceiling was fifty feet into the air and every square inch of space was covered with various wires or cables.

“There...” Holland said pointing to the direct center of the chamber while ignoring the Security Guard who had passed out on the cold steel floor from his injuries.

Five large 10 Foot long tubes were suspended from the ceiling. Cables and hoses ran up from the floor to connect at various points at the bottom of the cylinders.

Spotlights shone down to illuminate the transparent containers. Figures could be made out floating in some type of solution, but the details were obscured by the frothing bubbles.

Walking to one of many control panels June began to study the complicated switches and knobs.

“One of these must open the tubes...” She began to say.

Without warning Swamp Thing shattered the closest tube with his powerful arms as a milky like liquid spilled out onto the chamber floor!

“Hey! Will you stop that?! Not everything can be solved with brute strength! We have got to know what we’re dealing with here!” She screamed at the green giant.

Swamp Thing only pointed to the shattered tube.

Rocky Davis lay on the ground in a puddle of the milky fluid. wires and leads were attached to his body. He wore skintight black bikini briefs that barely covered his well-chiseled frame. But both of the would-be rescuers could easily tell that he was alive.

Miles away in a magnificent skyscraper, Duncan Pramble stood in the moonlight staring out of his fifteen-foot tall bedroom window. The faint glow of the Moon barely illuminated the huge room but it was enough light for Pramble to turn around and gaze upon the slim figure sleeping in his over-sized bed. Her green hair and white face glowed freshly under the natural light. Their hours of passionate lovemaking had left her exhausted so Pramble allowed her to sleep. The ring on his right hand had begun to beep with a red glow the minute that the fence at Challenger Mountain had been compromised. The ring's tiny circuitry had activated the instant the assailants had begun their assault on his Mountain.

Resigning himself to the coming contest, Pramble continued to stare out over the vast city that stretched on for miles.

"Tina my beauty. It's time we awakened your Brothers." Multi Man said.

From the far corner a pair of eyes opened with a light blue glow. Moonlight glinted off of a sleek silver body as the woman stepped from out of the shadows.

"Yes Master. We are ready." Said Platinum of the Metal Men.

*To be continued!*

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