



Challengers of the Unknown #3

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Challengers of the Unknown
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"Ace . . . Ace wake up!"

Ace Morgan, pilot, astronaut, world famous leader of the Challengers of the Unknown slowly opens his eyes. As his pupils adjust to the sudden bright lights Rocky Davis, one of his best friends and fellow Challenger, stops shaking him.

"What .. What's going on, Davis?" Morgan said groggily trying to sit up but finding it too difficult with the world turning upside down.

"Take it easy buddy. It takes a while for the blood to get flowing!" Rocky says reassuringly.

"You have all been held prisoner here for thirty years." June Robbins daughter blurted out as she and the Swamp Thing stepped into Ace's line of sight.

"My God! June!" Morgan said as his eyes widened with excitement.

Gaining his strength, Morgan quickly rose to his feet and grabbed June Robbins the Second and passionately kissed her. The two embraced for a few seconds with June instinctively finding herself enjoying it before reality came back to her.

"Hey! Back off, mister!" She said while shoving the big blond Challenger back. "I'm not who you think I am! I'm June Robbins' daughter!"

"What?" Ace almost collapses again after losing his sudden burst of energy. "Can someone explain what's going on here?"

"It appears that we have been held here in these stasis tubes for an

extreme duration." Prof. Haley said while gesturing to the suspended tubes hanging from the ceiling. "By whom or for what purpose I can only speculate. But obviously while we have been 'gone' things out in the real World have changed!"

While the Challengers have been reviving Ace, Red Ryan, the fourth and final member of the adventuring quartet, has been exploring the vast chamber. Beside various hoses and wires running along the floor and walls he found a row of supply cabinets lining the southern most area. Opening the cabinet he was pleasantly surprised to find the Challengers uniforms as well as their pistols and gun belts. He quickly pulled his uniform on and checked the magazines of his own .45s.

"Hey guys?" Ryan said as he returned to the group carrying the bundle of clothes and equipment. " What kind of villain keeps us Prisoners but also keeps our gear close by and ready for us?"

Swamp Thing had wandered away from the team to quietly study a fifth stasis tube hanging beside the ones that had contained the Challengers.

"I...knew there..were four....but who is.. this?" Dr. Alec Holland said with some difficulty. His body being composed of mutated swamp material, it took extreme effort on his part to speak. He pointed at the tube as if to accentuate his question.

"Prof.?" Morgan questioned as he pulled his own suit on over the skin tight black shorts that all the Challengers had been wearing inside their tubes.

Haley casually walked over to the Control Board that was stationed in front of the tubes and studied it for a second before he reached up and pressed a certain button.

Steam hissed as the glass tube separated and divided like a medicinal capsule. As the Bottom half of the tube lowered to the floor, the Challengers peered hard to make out what was inside the now open container. As the noise of unseen turning gears stopped the prize inside was revealed. Another tube, this one smaller than the outside one, only about two-feet long.

“What the hell is it?” Ryan said as he pulled the small tube away from the wires and clamps that had safely kept the tiny glass container stable.” Nothing in here but purple and white jelly.”

The red haired daredevil playfully turned the capsule from end to end to watch the jelly ooze back and forth like some small child would with their new toy.

“When did we let ‘Oozy-Purple’ man join our group?” Red said while continuing to shake the small tube.

“Careful Ryan. You wouldn’t want to bruise Rex Mason, Metamorpho now would you?”

An ominous voice had come from out of the darkness as all of the Challengers simultaneously turned their heads upwards toward the deep, booming voice.

Duncan Pramble, Multi-Man stood on a balcony half way up the tall wall. Beside him stood his female companion of many years, the multi-colored Urania Blackwell, Element Girl.

“Multi-Man!” hissed Morgan. “We should have known that you could be the only one responsible for this!”

“Guilty as charged my friend.” Pramble mocked. “Only me. No one else has the vast intellect and hatred that I have, which is needed to pull off such a grand display of revenge!”

“Revenge? Just what have you been doing here for the past thirty years?!” Haley questioned.

“Questions. Questions. Questions. Should I stand here like so many other villains before me and monologue about my master plan? Wouldn’t it be so much more simpler to just kill you now! Quickly! Without giving you the chance to strike back and defeat me in gay triumph!” Pramble said, enjoying the sound of his own echoing voice.

“But...Where would the fun be in that? So, I suppose I must play my part in this tragic Universal Comedy and dramatically stand up here and tell you of the many times I have killed you in time-spanning adventures, set up by yours truly, purely for my own enjoyment!” Duncan Pramble pauses for effect. “How many times can any one man repeatedly be beaten by a group of men calling themselves “Challengers of the Unknown?””

Multi-Man leans forward and grips the iron railing of the balcony. His teeth clenching and a vein appears running along the top of his forehead.

“Why not just call yourselves the “Astronauts of Intrigue”?! I mean come on! You don’t walk away from an airplane crash and say “Hey! Let’s start saving the world because we’re living on ‘Borrowed Time’! You don’t devote your life to stopping Bad Guys like the Volcano Man .You don’t fight Aliens and Dinosaurs and you especially don’t beat...me!” Pramble bit down as he said the last part of his speech. He had raised his clenched fists up in defiance.

“Get on with it Pramble!” Ryan said as the Challs stood in stunned silence before the obviously mad man.

Multi-Man flinched at Ryans words. He was used to having a captive audience that hung on his every word.

“Here’s the Readers Digest version boys, try to keep up.” Pramble started. “ Thirty years ago while you fellows were off in the future rescuing Rip Hunter, Time Master, I awakened from my newest coma caused by yet another humiliating defeat by you guys, to discover that my newest power was Super-Intelligence. Not just Super-Intelligence mind you but Super, Mega, Supremo Intelligence! As in, no one smarter in the entire History of Mankind. I quickly extracted myself from the particular institution and set to work on my new Master Plan. Only this time I knew that it would work. I gathered a small group of the most intelligent people of the world and started creating things. Computers, Satellites, Cell Phones everything! You name it, we created it! It made me a very rich man, and then I could get started on my revenge. I waited for you to make your return to us lowly mortals from the future and when you did I gassed Haley’s lab. You pop in and you go to sleep. By this time the Mud Monster and June Robbins, God rest her soul, had already

departed, but I didn't care, I only wanted you four."

June had bit her lip at the mention of her mom in such a hateful tone. She could tell that Pramble hated these men beyond any realistic sense. His twisted vision of the World made her tremble at the thought that such evil existed in her life.

"I used Hunter's Time-Sphere technology to create my own Time Traveling machine. While my techs worked on the equipment, you four slept like a bunch of babies inside those comfortably designed Glass tubes." Pramble continued. "After all the humiliating defeats that I had been through with you I couldn't just simply kill you, I had to feel the joy of killing you over and over and over! And I did! Now here is the good part. I would send you guys back in Time, I would set you up in some kind of outlandish setting that was impossible for you to get out of!"

"Pramble! You sick sonuva - " Ryan had pulled his gun out and was ready to blast a hole through Multi-Man's face when Ace stopped him.

"Hold on Red. Let him finish..." Morgan said intrigued by the Villains story.

"I'm almost finished Ryan. Hold on a second and then you can kill me!" Pramble said sarcastically. "So here I was killing you over and over. I estimate over the years that I killed you Boys a few Thousand times or so. Give or take a Hundred. At first it was pure Panacea! But after a while it became monotonous. It became too easy. I was killing you guys three or four times a day! "

"How Pramble?" Haley interrupted. "How could you have killed us as you claim, but yet here we are, standing before alive and well?"

"That is truly the best part of this whole ordeal!" Pramble said with a smile. "As you all know, my power is the ability to come back from the dead and each time I am resurrected I have a new Super-Power. I simple infused a small sample of my DNA into each of you thus after an ample time of soaking in the old test tubes over there you come out as good as new, ready to be killed all over again!"

Rocky looked down at his left arm and noticed a faint scar from a wound

that he never remembers having.

“Where does Metamorpho fit into all of this?” June said while holding the small glass capsule.

“Oh him. Nowhere really. Young Rainie here came to me for help to cure her after she heard of my great scientific genius.” Pramble lovingly draped his arm around the white-faced girl. “ We met and fell in lust and Rex there came to spoil my fun. End of story. I hit him with a Molecular De-Stabilizer and he has been pudding ever since.”

“We’ve heard enough Pramble! This sick, twisted game of yours is over!” Morgan had also drawn his weapons and was advancing towards the balcony with all four Challengers following.” This ends now! No more games and no more speeches!”

“Ace Morgan you simple minded fool! You didn’t give me time to explain how I acquired the power of Super Charisma or how I’m going to be the next President of the United States.” Duncan Pramble clasped his hands before him against his chest “ Oh well. Let’s do this one more time and then it’s back into the tubes for you! Metal Men, kill them.”

As Pramble commanded, four strangely colored machine cabinets and control panels began to blur and take on a humanoid shape. Quicker than the challengers could react they were surrounded by four distinctively colored robots, three males and one obviously shaped female, the Metal Men!

Platinum, the silver colored female, stretched her body out while transforming her right hand into a large razor sharp blade and with an air splitting swing tried to decapitate Ace Morgan.

Ducking below her vicious attack Morgan blasted his handguns in fiery unison to no avail as his bullets bounced harmlessly off her perversely ample chest.

Another Robot, the Blue colored Iron, raised his massive Hammer shaped fist and smashed the floor to splinters as Rocky Davis

sidestepped the Robots punch.

Not wasting any time, Swamp Thing sensing that the Challs needed his help, leapt to Davis's side and delivered his own savage attack upon Iron. The Swamp creature's over-sized fist smashed against the Blue Robots face with a sickeningly wet crunch sending the walking machine flying back against the wall.

"Forget this!" Disgustedly Red Ryan opened fire on the source of all their anguish.

As Red-hot bullets bounced around Multi-Man, Element Girl transformed herself into a steel shield effectively protecting her beloved master.

With Ryan's attention elsewhere, the Red Robot Mercury twisted his body into the shape of a giant spring and coiled around the red headed stuntman. Pulling himself together and then releasing the tightly coiled spring with all his strength, he propels the surprised Challenger into the air to land several dozen feet away in a bruised bundle of flesh and bones.

"Ace! Obviously we are no match physically for these mechanical henchmen!" Haley said while dodging the oddly shaped, pudgy gray colored robot, Lead who had morphed into a small Wrecking Crane and was attempting to smash the brilliant scientist." If I remember my Hero History, Dr. Will Magnus constructed each of his robots with a Responso-meter. A device that gives each one a distinctive, human like personality! If we can get a hold on one of those, perhaps we could tap into their network and shut them down!"

"Sounds good Prof.!" Ace said while drop kicking Tina in the mid section causing him more pain than her." Red, get on it!"

"Ugh...Right away boss man..." Ryan said pulling himself up from the crumpled heap that he previously was seconds ago.

"Holland! We could use your help!" Morgan yelled at Swamp Thing as Tina's arm turned into a giant scythe and whistled over the Challengers blond head as he ducked out of its way! " Prof.! Where is the

Responsometer located at?"

"I think it's - -" Haley started but was stopped cold as the anvil shaped Lead smashed him to the ground knocking the senses out of him in an imaginary panorama of stars!

"Professor!" Rocky Davis screamed as he pulled a big computer cabinet over on top of Iron.

Davis vaulted over a high pile of rubble and was by the stunned scientist's side within seconds.

"Tell..Holland to ... go through the chest...The Responsometer is in..the chest." Haley said weakly as his eyes tried to focus on reality.

Mercury threw himself through the air and morphed into a giant javelin in mid-flight before ripping clean through Swamp Thing's massive chest! Reaching around faster than imagined, Holland quickly grabbed Mercury by the transforming ankle and smashed his powerful arm through the red robots now humanoid shaped chest! Even as the Swamp Thing's own wound was closing and reforming, he pulled with a mighty twist and ripped the grapefruit sized device from inside the robot's chest cavity!

Mercury began to convulse and twitch in uncontrollable fury as the last of his artificial life escaped from his continuously morphing body.

Swamp Thing tossed the Responsometer to Red as the remaining Metal Men focused all their rage towards the swamp creature!

"No my Metal Men! Kill the Challengers!" Pramble said with no effect as his robots began to lose control "The monster doesn't matter! Just kill the Challengers!"

In their fit of fury the Metal Men ignored their yelling master. All they wanted was revenge on the one who had just destroyed their friend.

"Quick Ryan! Holland won't last long under that kind of pressure!" Ace said even as the immensely powerful Mud Monster was taking a pounding even he couldn't endure for long.

The red-headed electronics genius had opened the Responsometer at its hinges and was trying to familiarize himself with the complicated design. Locating the desired wires and mechanism he began to rearrange the inside of the miraculous device.

As Red Ryan was quickly at work Swamp Thing finished regrowing his right arm for the second time. Platinum twisted into a giant pair of scissors as Holland pounded Lead into sparkling pile of nuts and bolts.

Prying with all his might Alec Holland tried desperately to keep the oversized scissors from cutting his torso in to. Platinum, seeing her remaining Metal Men all out of action, knew that she must be the one to bring these humans down. She would be the one to extract revenge for the sadistic slayings of her brothers.

“Hey Pramble..” Red said with a smile “Eat this!” Then he activated the now reprogrammed Responsometer.

With a flicker of light, Platinum released SwampThing and fell to the ground even as all the other defeated robots relaxed into a death like sleep.

“Your lucky it worked or you would have looked real stupid.” Rocky whispered to Red as he leaned over the recovering Prof.

“Alright Pramble as I said before, your games over! We’re through jumping through hoops for you!” Ace Morgan said with grim determination.

“Alas the mighty have fallen. What will the classic Villain do now?” Multi-Man said mockingly. “ I know! What about plan ‘B’?”

“What are you trying to pull, Pramble?” Rocky said while helping Haley to his feet.

“Have you noticed the floor you have been standing on this entire time? It’s a huge Time Platform. How else did you think I was able to transport your entire team at once?” Pramble said while raising his hand up to the

Challengers' view. He was holding a triggering device of some kind, which he slowly thumbed to life.

With a sudden realization Morgan yelled even as June had walked over to join the rest of the Team.

"Get back! It's a trap!" He screamed as light began to bend around the small group of Death Cheaters.

Machinery whined as the air charged with ear splitting energy and the lights dimmed due to the sudden drain of electricity.

"You see Challengers, once again I win!" Pramble said with a sickly grin. " I always win!"

The Four Challengers, Swamp Thing and the Metamorpho holding June Robbins the Second along with the Metal Men Platinum and the deactivated Mercury twisted into a blurring swirl of bodies as the Machine fully activated and ripped the fabric of Time apart. In an explosion of light, the Challengers and company disappeared, leaving the Platform once again empty.

"Score one for the Home Team!" Pramble smirked as he pulled the lithe body of Element Girl against him. " And the crowd goes wild!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK WHEN THE DC2 LAUNCHES THE CONTINUITY-WIDE MEGA-CROSSOVER EVENT, *CRISIS: THE APOKOLIPS IMPERATIVE!*

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Action Comics: This Looks Like a Job For...

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All-Star Comics #6 (2006)

All-Star Comics: Firestorm the Nuclear Man.

Meet college freshman Ronnie Raymond, DC2's newest superstar! When a nuclear accident gives Ronnie incredible powers, he does what any red-blooded American teenager would do - he becomes a superhero! But will real life and the savage Hyena get in the way of his fun and games? Look out World, here comes Firestorm the Nuclear Man!

Challengers of the Unknown #1 (2006)

Challengers of the Unknown: Out of Time.

It's been thirty years since the Challengers of the Unknown mysteriously disappeared, but when the Daughter of June Robbins starts getting strange phone calls about the Men That Lived on Borrowed Time she discovers that she may be the key to their salvation! Also, what does all this have to do with Duncan Pramble, Multi Man, once the greatest foe of the Challengers and now the most powerful and richest man in the World. Not only have all his past sins been forgiven, he is also set to become the next President of the United States!

Challengers of the Unknown #2 (2006)

Challengers of the Unknown: Out of Time, Part 2.

Challengers of the Unknown #4 (2006)

Challengers of the Unknown: Out of Time, Part 4.

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 5!

The Challengers have teleported into the heart of Apokolips. Now they must battle their way to freedom against an unstoppable Army and the devious Dr. Bedlam!

Challengers of the Unknown #5 (2006)

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Having escaped the clutches of Dr. Bedlam on Apokolips, The Challengers and their friends now find themselves trapped in the past. How far into the past? You've got to read it, to believe it! It's another heart pounding tale of high adventure!



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