



**Challengers of the Unknown #4**  
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Anthro

*Challengers of the Unknown*

Issue 4: "Out of Time, Part 4"

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*...And there came a day, unlike any other, when the world's greatest heroes faced their greatest threat... Coveting the legendary Anti-Life Equation that would make him the Master of the Universe, the evil god Darkseid brought death and destruction to Earth... Now, the fiery, black planet Apokolips hangs above the Earth and the two worlds go to war! Separate and taken by surprise, the heroes of Earth struggle just to survive!*

*... First blood was drawn in Metropolis. Striking a deal with Lex Luthor for the comatose body of Superman's half-brother Kru-El, Darkseid's chief scientist Desaad transforms the Kryptonian into the rampaging killing machine called Doomsday! A fierce battle ensues and for the first time, Superman falls in battle! Dragged in chains to Apokolips, the Man of Steel is Darkseid's prisoner...*

*... On Oa, the Green Lantern Corps is sabotaged and betrayed by an agent of Apokolips. The Central Power Battery is destroyed and the Manhunters, ancient enemies of the Guardians of the Universe have launched a successful assault on the planet. Oa falls, and the mysterious new Manhunter Grandmaster sends a prisoner to his ally Darkseid—the Guardian Appa Ali Apsa!*

*Meanwhile, on Earth, Green Lantern Hal Jordan finds himself, inexplicably, in possession of the only working power ring in the universe, and uses it to save Coast City from a massive tidal wave threatening the Pacific seaboard—and to soundly defeat Kalibak, the son of Darkseid in a fearsome brawl!*

*... As the captured Guardian Appa Ali Apsa is taken to Apokolips, he escapes briefly before he is recaptured over Metropolis—but not before he can bathe one particular Earthling in a weird emerald light... changing Kyle Rayner's life forever!*

*... In Gotham City, the alien assault hits the hardest and the city falls to the brutal General Steppenwolf, but not before the Dark Knight Detective is able to smuggle out (with the help of Nightwing) the one man Darkseid wants the most: Scott Free, the vaunted Mister Miracle...*

*... Following the nefarious Virman Vundabar through a boom tube, the New Outsiders become stranded on Apokolips itself. And while part of the team launches a desperate mission to rescue one of their own from the clutches of the despicable Desaad, the rest of the team joins the Hunger Dogs in a bold uprising against Darkseid himself...*

*Heroes will rise and heroes will fall. And the DC2 will never be the same again...!*

### *CRISIS: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 5!*

Black smoke choked the sky of the dark planet Apokolips, as the endless factories churned out whatever foul material or product they produced. The streets were filled beyond capacity with hopeless bodies, The Thetadrones wander from place to place in a permanent stupor. The sun never shines on these poor oppressed people yet they never seemed to mind. It was not a good idea to think about happier times or places. Such thoughts usually ended with the sudden disappearance of whoever dared to dream of such things.

The only light that filled the sky was the eternally blazing Fire-Pits! Flaming miles into the atmosphere, the raging infernos continuously blasted the air with incalculable power! As the huge flames licked the horizon one central building hummed and glowed with waves of power.

Inside one of the main laboratories of Doctor Bedlam, The Doctor and his always-loyal "Animates" labored with row upon row of otherworldly control panels and computers!

" Quickly my Animates! Whatever power source we have snared we must bring it to us!" Bedlam said between clenched teeth as flecks of spit flew with each word. " Great Darkseid will indeed be pleased with

Doctor Bedlam if I find him another destructive power!”

The Animates worked at a feverish pitch as even Bedlam set about to help materialize the unknown energy upon his Transportation Platform. As always, the Doctor’s endless duty was to continually search for and find his Dark Master any new means of conquering or destroying the enemies of Apokolips! Darkseid was a terrible master that lived for nothing but death and destruction!

As sparks flew from a now useless bank of computers, Bedlam barked orders and flung himself to the central control station!

“Now my soulless creations! We have it! Bring up the Matter Stabilizers! Slowly! slowly, you unthinking dolts!” Bedlam screamed as he slammed one switch after another trying desperately to control whatever his flunkies had accidentally snared!

Smiling with pride, Bedlam saw the outline of his mysterious prize beginning to materialize on top of his platform! Energy pulsed as wave after wave of power ripped through the lab! With a triumphant flare, light exploded within the chamber sending animates and machinery flying against the walls! Bedlam pulled himself up from where he had dropped behind the sturdy control station. Smoke began to lift as his eyes adjusted from the sudden glare of light.

In the center of the platform stood the Challengers of the Unknown along with the Metal Man Platinum, Swamp Thing and the daughter of June Robbins. All were stunned by this sudden change in location. One minute they had been deep within Challenger Mountain fighting their hated arch-nemesis, Multi Man and his Metal Men and now God knew where they had found themselves!

“Uh...Ace...What’s going on here? Where are we?!” Red Ryan was the first to speak.

“Not for sure Red. Pramble sent us somewhere, I just don’t know where!” Ace Morgan, Astronaut and the leader of the Challengers answered matter of factly.

Without giving the Challengers time to make their move Bedlam screamed to his Animates. "Get them you idiotic puppets! Darkseid will want to study these creatures!"

"Decisions made, team. Everybody saddle up for action! " Rocky Davis said as he drew his pistols from his side holsters and shattered the face of the first assailant that grabbed his arm with a red hot bullet!

"Close formation guys! Our ammos limited so make every shot count!" Ace said taking command. "Red with me! We'll snag the man screaming all the orders! With any luck we can end this quickly!"

As dozens of Animates flooded the platform, Swamp Thing snatched up two of the metal beings with his powerful tree-trunk like arms and smashed them together sending steel parts and wiring everywhere!

Making sure that she stayed behind the giant Swamp Thing, June Robbins surveyed the unusual situation that the group had instantaneously found themselves in. The Challengers had already made a dent in the small army that was attempting in vain to overcome them. Swamp Thing was ripping through his foes with no effort, while at the same time taking great care to keep her safe. And finally, the Metal Man Platinum just stood watch on the platform guarding her fallen comrade Mercury who had had his "Responsometer" torn out of his chest by the Swamp creature. As she patted the two-foot long capsule that contained the jelly like form of Metamorpho at her side the wall erupted behind her!

Three of the Animates had armed themselves with fifteen-inch long metal rod like weapons that fired tremendous destructive force when triggered!

One of these aimed their weapon at the Swamp Thing but before he could discharge it, Red sent a bullet burning through his skull even as Rocky tackled the other two!

Ace had slipped around and captured the seeming master of this strange lab.

"Unhand me you Earthling trash!" Bedlam screamed as Ace poked him

in the temple with his Pistol.

"Where are we?" Morgan interrogated the bearded man, as Professor Haley secured the two doors that led out of the chamber.

"Your threats are of no concern to me!" Bedlam said, "I fear no one save the great Darkseid!"

"Darkseid?" Ryan said as he examined the strange metal rod weapon that he had picked up from the chamber floor. "Great! We must be in some kind of dark future where this 'Darkseid' has taken over the world!"

"You fool! You're not in some type of Time Conundrum! You stand upon the face of the mightiest citadel of destruction in the entire universe! You stand upon Apokolips! Bedlam said with a sick pride.

"Great! Now what?" Rocky Davis said as he leaned against the main control console.

"Mister helpful here, is sending us back to the Earth..." Ace commanded.

Accidentally, Red Ryan thumbed the firing stud on the "Mega Rod" blowing a basketball sized hole through not only Doctor Bedlam but also the control panel, barely missing his black haired partner Davis, by inches!

"Dammit Red!" Rocky screamed, "You almost fried me you idiot!"

"Hey! I'm sorry! I didn't....." Ryan said apologetically.

"Look!" Prof. said pointing at the now dead body of Doctor Bedlam.

Bedlam's features had begun to shimmer and fade. Within seconds the details of the Doctor were gone to be replaced by the smooth profile and body of one of the Animates.

"I'm not sure what's going on here but I have a feeling we need to get out of here as quick as possible!" Morgan said as he nudged the inert

form of Bedlam with his foot. "Professor, do you think you could operate this machine to send us back?"

"Given enough time I should be able to, but..." Haley had stooped down and was examining the large hole that had been blown through the machine by Ryan "I don't think this thing is going to function properly without the correct repairs being performed!"

Frustrated Ace Morgan rubbed his blonde crew cut covered head.

"Does anybody have any good news?" Morgan clenched his teeth.

"I can be of assistance." Platinum said with a metallic twinge to her voice. "I should be able to interface with this alien machinery and repair whatever damage has been done."

"Oh great! Now the steel girl says something!" Ryan said with a sneer.

"The faster I repair it, the faster I will get back to my beloved master Duncan Preamble." Tina said without concern for the others feelings.

"Our only hope lies on a brainwashed robot who only minutes ago tried to kill us!" Red shot back while fastening the Mega Rod to his belt. "That seems to be on par with our group!"

Platinum had walked over to the control panel and extended her hand out. As her fingers contacted with the metal surface of the controls tiny tendrils stretched out and merged with the computer.

Meanwhile, three floors down Bedlam had transformed his "Pure Mental Energy" essence into another Animate. Years ago, Bedlam had given up his physical body to exist as only pure energy. He could, at will, inhabit any of his Animates' bodies and change their features to match his own. As the Animate's features shifted into the Doctor's he began barking orders at the dozens of faithful servants standing at attention in the huge Warehouse.

Within seconds Doctor Bedlam had organize an army of Parademons

and Animates each armed with enough destructive firepower to decimate a small city.

Even as Bedlam's army was making its way back to the main lab, Platinum had withdrawn from the computer.

"I have downloaded the layout of this entire citadel. The parts we need for the necessary repairs are located in a central storeroom in the basement. I will take us there." Tina said as she stepped toward the door.

"Hold on lady!" Rocky said stepping between the metal girl and the door "From the sound of the alarms going off down the hall I don't think it would be safe for us out there!"

"Rocky's right! But without those parts we're not going anywhere!" Haley said to Ace.

"Alright. Prof, you and June stay here. Swamp Thing you stay and guard them. The rest of us will get the parts we need." Morgan said as he also armed himself with one of the Mega Rods. "If she knows the layout of this place then she must also know some shortcuts that will keep us away from the bad guys!"

### *Somewhere else...*

Anthro and his Hunting party had once again returned triumphantly to the Bear Tribe. They had killed several large predators and now had enough meat to last his tribe for many Moons. The first boy on earth paused briefly to kneel before and pray silently to the tribes new god. Since the appearance of their shiny god, the Bear Tribe had prospered like no other tribe. Disease and death were practically gone and the hunting had never been better. They had won every battle and had brought in several new men and women to their camp. Their new god was a good one.

As Anthro stood and made his way to his cave to see his wife Embra, he thought of how lucky his people were to be blessed by the god's

presence. He knew that deep down every man, woman and child would gladly give their life in battle to keep this god for themselves. No man would ever take the new god away from them!

The Challengers had made their way to the storeroom, retrieved the parts they needed and were on their way back to the lab when they encountered the first wave of Parademons. The veteran death-cheaters had made quick work of the small band of troopers becoming very efficient with their newfound weapons in a relatively short period of time. The Mega Rods were fantastic weapons with what appeared to be a limitless power supply.

As Rocky strapped on the holster of a big laser pistol, the Prof.'s voice echoed through the communication system in everyone's ears.

"Hurry up Guys! From the sound of things a very large group of angry soldiers are coming my way!" Haley said trying not to sound frantic.

"Give us a few minutes Prof. We're on our way back!" Morgan said as he took off in a trot to keep up with the rest of his party.

Back at the main lab, June listened at the door to what sounded like a few dozen warriors running towards them down the outside hall.

"I'm not sure we can keep them out of here with just a simple locked door." She said to Swamp Thing.

"Stand.....Back." Came the voice like wet seaweed slapping against concrete.

With a mighty swing of his thick arm, Alec Holland struck the door control panel sinking his oversized green fist deep within the wall effectively destroying the door opening mechanism.

"That's just great mean green." June said with severe distaste "I hope the others don't need to get back in here!"

Swamp Things shoulders slumped with dawning disappointment.

Haley worked rapidly disengaging broken connections and apparatus in preparation of the new components. As he fumbled for one of the tools that he had found in a storage cabinet, June walked over and handed it to him.

"You don't talk much do you?" she said with a questioning glance that was more than just small talk.

"You have to realize that this ...whole situation, is hard for us to digest." Haley said, pausing from his work long enough to give the young woman his undivided attention.

"To think that we have been kept in suspended animation for thirty years to only be thawed out whenever that fiend Pramble wanted to kill us again, is crazy."

"It's not a good feeling to know that you have been someone's puppet like that." He added.

June started to say something but thought better of it. These men have seen so much in their lifetime that she could never understand what they have been through.

As Morgan and his crew rounded a corner they were stopped dead in their tracks by a full battalion of Parademons. Instantly everyone opened fire on each other. The close quarters of the long hallway worked to the Challengers' advantage, they were able to take out the first row of opponents without getting blasted by the remaining obedient soldiers.

Quickly Platinum shoved Rocky aside while handing him the much-needed supplies. She dived at the small army while at the same time her body contorted and twisted into the shape of a giant circular saw blade! Spinning at fantastic speeds, she cut a path directly through the mindless warriors, decapitating every single member of the armed mob. As she landed her lower body transformed into a tank-like wagon with four wheels.

“Hop in! We have wasted enough time already!” The female Robot ordered.

“I didn’t know she could do that!” Ryan said with disgust. “That would have come in handy a long time ago wouldn’t it lady!?”

The Challengers earpiece communicators hummed to life.

“Guys, You’re going to need to come to the back door. Holland demolished the front one to keep our visitors out!” Prof. Haley said. “If there is a back door.”

“I think I have another idea.” Ace Morgan said as he looked around at the various equipment and weapons the recently destroyed Parademons had been carrying.

Down the hallway Doctor Bedlam and his Animates were stationed outside the door of his Main Laboratory. He knew that having his creations fire aimlessly at the steel-reinforced door would do absolutely no good. After the incident a hundred years ago when he accidentally transported a raging Black Hole into the center of the building, which ultimately resulted in the destruction of Armagetto for miles around, the building had been re-built to be durable enough to withstand tremendous forces. He knew nothing short of a full sized Dyno-Therm Bomb would penetrate these walls. His troop’s small weapons would do no more than scratch the dull gray paint. Minutes earlier he had sent a squad of Parademons to retrieve the much needed explosives.

“Where are my bombs?!” Bedlam bellowed. “If you want something done right then you have to do it yourself.....”

The Doctor was cut off short as three plate-sized objects came sliding down the hallway. As the metal devices skidded along the smooth floor, a light on the top of each one began blinking. As the objects drew nearer to the group, the lights began to blink faster in tandem as more time went by.

“Damn those Earthmen!” was all Bedlam had time to say as a trio of tremendous explosions rocked the large hallway! The Animate bodies were instantly vaporized as the bombs blew the troops into nothingness!

Inside the lab, Haley and his group were violently shaken as the wall and door were peeled open like an aluminum can. Swamp Thing was the only one still standing on his feet as the smoke cleared and the faces of the returning Challengers smiled through the huge hole now occupying where the door and wall had been.

“Someone needed a backdoor?” Red Ryan asked with a sly smile as he threw the replacement parts at the Professor.

“I figure you have about five minutes to get the repairs done before we’re up to our lucky necks in more soldiers!” Morgan said as he helped June to her feet. “And this time we don’t have the luxury of having a locked door between us and them!”

As Haley, Red and a reluctant Platinum were busy assembling the main control panel, several flights below them the now recognizable features of Doctor Bedlam began to transform onto the face of another one of his Animates.

“Now I am really mad!” Bedlam ranted to himself. His personal store-room was almost completely depleted of his precious metal creations. Only about a dozen had survived the multiple battles against the Earthmen! But despite all this, he would rather die a slow, painful death than to have to explain this debacle to his dark master.

Having his faithful servants gather up all the remaining Dyno-Therm Bombs in his arsenal, Bedlam was taking no chances this time. He would rather destroy his entire lab than to let these unworthy worms escape from his clutches!

“The repairs are complete and this machine is operational.” Tina stated flatly. “But, without the complete understanding of the entire mechanics of this alien equipment I can only return us to the last signal that this computer had received.”

“Meaning, that wherever Pramble was sending us, is where we are going!” Haley spelled it out in English for his teammates.

“Anyplace is better than here!” Morgan said positively. “Whatever we face, we’ll face it together just like we always do!”

“Amen to that brother!” Rocky reinforced. “What are we waiting for? Let’s do this and get the hell out of Dodge!”

As the small group returned to the platform to stand next to the deactivated Mercury and the capsule containing the gelatinized Metamorpho, Tina made last-minute preparations and then as she walked over to the group her arm stretched so that her right hand remained fastened to the complex machinery controls.

“What the hell?” Ryan mumbled.

“Someone must remain behind to manually activate the equipment.” Platinum said mechanically. “Unwilling to sacrifice myself for my master’s most hated enemies, I must instead compromise by sacrificing my appendage.”

“What....” Morgan began to say as Tina triggered the Transportation Platform, which instantly transformed the Challengers into particles of light.

As Bedlam and his Animates slowly crept down the hall to peer into the now demolished lab, he recognized the sudden flash of light. In disgust he stopped in his tracks and with a slow realization he knew that the Earthmen had escaped his wraith.

All that remained of the Earthlings was a stiff metallic arm cut off just above the elbow and stretched the entire length of the lab from the

control panel to the platform. It hung rigidly in the air like some gravity defying monument.

“Someday... I’ll find those accursed Earthlings! When I do, they will beg me to kill them to release them from the terrible pain and agony that I plan to inflict on them!” Bedlam’s voice echoed down the empty hall. His Animates stood behind him, emotionless as always.

**CRISIS: THE APOKOLIPS IMPERATIVE CONTINUES IN**  
***NIGHTWING #8!***

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