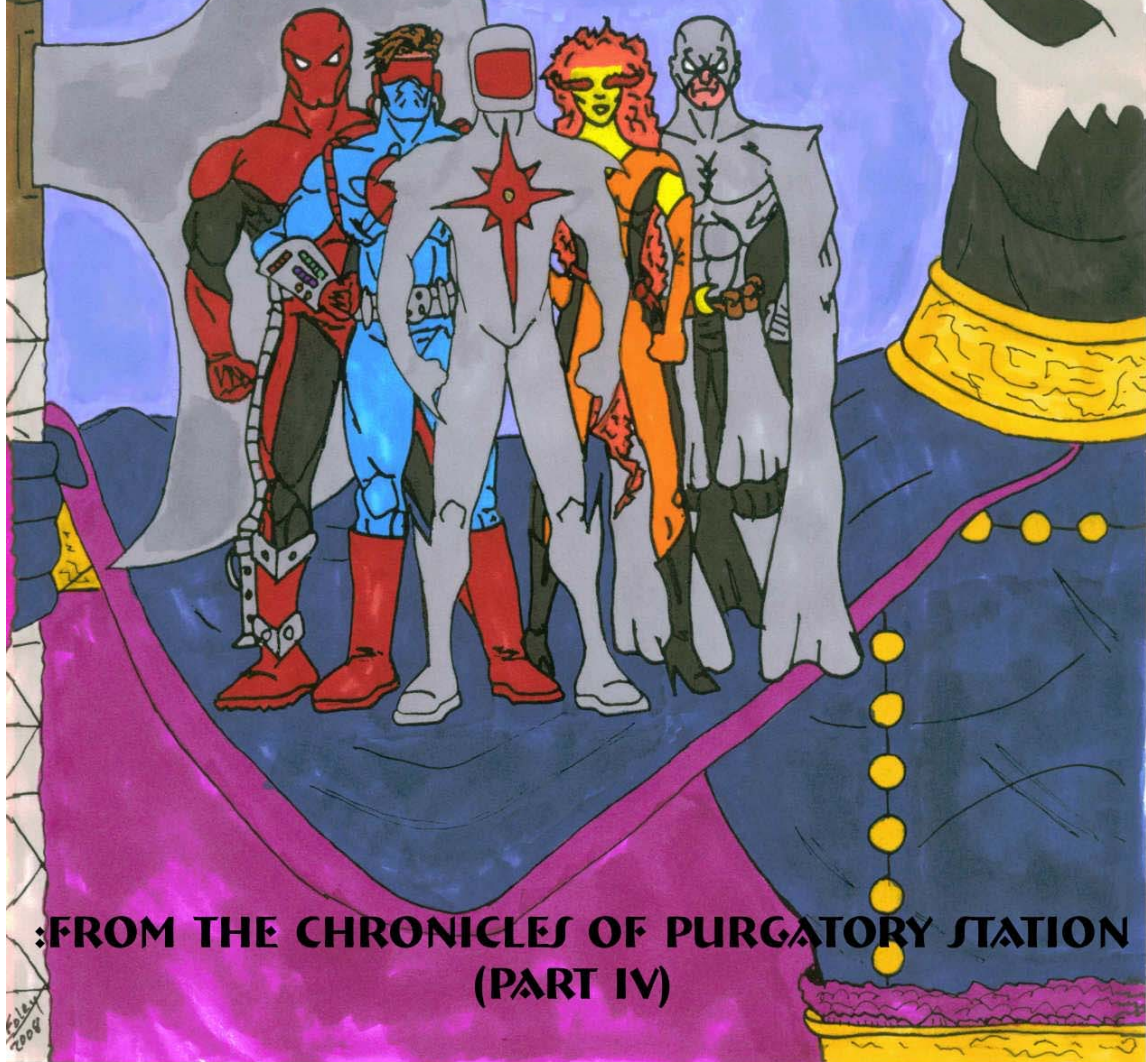


FALL OF THE ABSOLUTES

BY
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Fall of the Absolutes
:from the Chronicles of Purgatory Station
(Part IV)

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The Nocturnal Knight sits on a stiff chair in the attic of First Redeemer, his headquarters, with only the moonless night spying through the skylight. He remains motionless with his elbows positioned upon the armrests and his chin propped against his interlocked fists. Thoughts run through his mind with the velocity of a falling star, and they follow a unifying theme—how did everything go so very wrong?

Months ago, the United States of America incarcerated Freedom. He was perhaps the truest Colossal in Purgatory Station and among few the Nocturnal Knight could completely trust to watch over the city after his unavoidable death. Freedom, who the city loved, but the government hated. He was their greatest creation, but now he is their most spurned son.

Furthermore, Sydney no longer speaks to the Knight, nor does she don the ridiculous garb of the Devil Woman. The city wonders what to make of the Devil Woman's sudden appearance and even quicker departure, but the Nocturnal Knight knows what made her lose heart. He knows all too well, and he could only blame himself. Like with so many others, he let her down completely.

The Shadow Serpent returned soon after the Nocturnal Knight resorted to the unthinkable and lost the last shred of integrity he thought he'd retained. The Mega-Mal's reemergence proved his victory. The Knight couldn't fault the Serpent for flaunting his return. Not many can walk away from a sniper-shot to the forehead. Not only does the monster continue to kill innocent citizens of Purgatory Station, but he's also dousing the

spirits of the people and making the Colossals look like inept imbeciles. If the Knight didn't know better, he'd think a conspiracy may be at work.

Finally, Pastor Irons, his confident and only friend over the last twenty-two years, abandoned him soon after the Nocturnal Knight's last encounter with Sydney. Irons knew he put that young woman up to cold-blooded murder, and the man of God simply couldn't live with that. Irons gave the Knight an ultimatum: hang up the cloak and Kevlar or lose Irons forever. Like so many times before, the Knight took the only option he believed viable. Irons soon disappeared.

Though only the ceiling between the attic and First Redeemer's sanctuary separates them, they might as well be on different planets. The old pastor was serious about leaving the Knight's life forever and has kept his promise.

Staring at the dark, wooded floor, the Nocturnal Knight could only think of one other time in his life things were so bleak, so hopeless. It was seventeen years ago. On that awful night, the Absolutes, a team he helped found, were massacred.



On that day they fell like amateurs, and, like the failure he now considered himself, he didn't even have the honor to die with them.

The Nocturnal Knight had just finished preventing the knife-for-hire Mega-Mal known as Slit from assassinating Ulrakistan's visiting ambassador when his transmitter sounded. Each member of the Absolutes largely operated independently, so when a call came in it meant an acute situation threatened.

He met the rest of his team in a seemingly abandoned, overgrown bunker at the top of Forlorn Mountain in Wilderness Park. Solar Flare owned the bunker, though he never bothered to notify the rest of the team how he'd come to do so. He also never enlightened them as to where the state-of-the-art technology within the bunker had originated.

When the Nocturnal Knight entered, he observed the rest of the Absolutes sitting at a round table with six empty seats. One of those seats belonged to the Knight. The rest had yet to be filled.

"You've arrived," Solar Flare said.

"So I have," the Nocturnal Knight glumly responded as he sat down in a whoosh of cloth and a clank of equipment from beneath his cloak.

As was his habit, he quickly took stock of those surrounding him.

To his right sat the young Firestreak. Unlike the Nocturnal Knight, most of Firestreak's red and black uniform served no purpose other than to hide his face. He did have one interesting feature, however. He wore a pair of jet boots that must have originated with the Meta-Agent Program. The Knight heard rumblings that MAP had discovered antigravity properties and thus become lax with rounding up archaic flight technologies, such as Firestreak's boots. That would serve as the only reason Firestreak was allowed to operate unfettered with them, unless, of course, he was secretly a MAP

member ... The Knight made certain this wasn't the case. How Firestreak came across such equipment would be his secret until the Nocturnal Knight wanted to know badly enough.

Little did the Knight know that by daybreak, the United States government will have recovered those boots and little else.

Next to Firestreak sat Dr. Density. The doctor swore up and down his blue and red costume was necessary to the proper functioning of his Densometer, but the Knight didn't see why a giant atom had to be screened onto his chest to in order to assist with the operation of his equipment. Like most of the Absolutes, Dr. Density hid his face so his identity could remain anonymous. While he allowed his brown hair to remain exposed, a pair of red goggles and blue cloth obscured the rest of Dr. Density's countenance.

Cometress could be found across from Dr. Density. Her eyes glowed red and her hair cracked yellow and sparked orange as it shifted and shuffled with the predictability of an open flame. She wore no mask, but with the gold sheen that passed for her skin, the Nocturnal Knight wasn't convinced she was even human, much less a citizen of Purgatory Station with an identity to protect. However, her orange and black body suit appeared to be real cloth, so perhaps she was one of them after all.

Finally, next to Cometress resided Solar Flare. But for the red and yellow emblem upon his chest, Solar Flare was covered in a malleable silver shell. It fit perfectly the contours of his body and formed points at his shoulders, fists, and outer calves. A red visor hid his facial features which, along with his other-worldly appearance, prompted the nation to speculate wildly as to his origins and thus nickname him "the cosmic man."

Solar Flare finally informed, “Now that the Knight is here, let’s begin. The PSPD notified me an unknown Mega-Mal has taken the Gaiman Observation Deck hostage. They’d like us to intervene and stabilize the situation.”

“He’s taken the Gaiman Observation Deck hostage, or he’s taken hostages on the Gaiman Observation Deck?” the Nocturnal Knight questioned.

Solar Flare shifted in his seat and paused before he said, “Just the deck. He allowed the visitors to leave.”

“That seems odd,” Dr. Density commented. “It’s certainly not consistent with most Mega-Mal behavior.”

“Are we even sure this is a Mega-Mal?” Firestreak added with his palms up.

Cometress ribbed, “What? You think he’s a tourist?”

Firestreak speechlessly glanced in her direction, but with his entire face covered, it was impossible to guess his reaction.

“The PSPD’s primary concern is the six-foot, glowing axe he’s wielding. Mega-mal or not, we can’t let someone lug something like that around,” Solar Flare said.

“Finally, we agree on something,” the Nocturnal Knight grinned.

“So if he hasn’t taken any hostages, what does he want?” Firestreak asked.

Solar Flare answered, “He won’t say. The word is that he’s just standing there with his axe, waiting.”

“Waiting? This case grows more peculiar by the moment. He’s waiting for what?” Dr. Density inquired.

Cometress snapped her fingers, emitting a red spark, bounded from her seat and quickly replied, “Let’s go find out.”

Before everyone followed Cometress' lead, Dr. Density quickly conveyed, "I think we should recruit Turf for this mission. I spoke with him a few days ago. He wants to become part of the Absolutes. He wants to be one of us."

"I already told you," Solar Flare interjected, "he's too inexperienced."

Firestreak argued, "So was I in the beginning, but you all helped train me."

"You just want someone on the team younger than you," Cometress teased.

Dr. Density nervously rubbed his hands and blushed beneath his mask. He said, "I all but promised him."

"You had no business doing so," the Nocturnal Knight chastised with ancient pebbles in his voice.

"We could use his power," Dr. Density continued.

"I'm with Density," Firestreak assisted. "With this unknown Mega-Mal and his 'glowing axe,' we might need some extra muscle. Turf has power to spare."

Cometress huffed, "We've got the power of *two* suns. Isn't that enough?"

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The Absolutes flew in, Firestreak carrying Dr. Density and Cometress hauling the Nocturnal Knight. Solar Flare took point. They first saw the giant axe burning red like a strange creature from the unknown depths. As they moved in closer, the outsider came into focus as well.

For some of them, the figure was not a welcome sight.

“Density,” Solar Flare called out over the bay’s winds. “You talk to him. Firestreak, I want you behind him. Open fire the minute you think we’ve got a problem. Cometress and Knight stand on opposite sides.”

“And you?” the Nocturnal Knight questioned from the corner of his eye.

Solar Flare stared at the mysterious individual as he replied, “I’ll stay above and cover all of you. If I have to fry this guy, all of you be ready to take cover.”

The Knight sneered, “Take cover while we’re on top of a bridge in the middle of Massachusetts’ Bay? Great advice.”

Solar Flare ignored the Nocturnal Knight’s comment.

They landed and took their positions according to Solar Flare’s instructions. He hovered a distant twenty feet above.

Dr. Density kept fifteen feet of space between him and the odd being. “Looks like something out of a Tolkien novel,” he muttered to himself.

The figure held his axe horizontally before his body, utterly at ease. He was mammoth, at least seven feet tall, and with his medieval cloaks and helmet sculpted to appear like the fleshless face of a demon, he did indeed appear like a villain of demented fantasy.



The axe-wielder seemed to study Dr. Density for a moment, then looked to his left at the Nocturnal Knight, then slowly faced the Cometress, and finally glanced over his huge shoulder at Firestreak.

His weapon, arcing with red flickers and embers, remained lowered but at the ready.

At last, the intruder propped his axe against his body and pointed to the night sky at Solar Flare without looking at him. He then used the same gauntleted hand to wave the rest of the Absolutes away.

The Nocturnal Knight dared not remove his eyes from the obvious threat standing in front of him, but nonetheless yelled up to Solar Flare, “Looks to me like he wants you one-on-one, Flare.”

The Cometress quickly reminded, “That’s not how we do business, Knight. We work together.”

Chuckling morosely, the Nocturnal Knight quipped, “Oh? The power of *one* sun may not be enough? That’s news.”

Dr. Density also refused to remove his eyes from the gargantuan figure as he demanded, “Let’s get this over with.” His heart raced as he shifted from foot to foot. His lower back had grown moist. Density was not a superstitious man, but when he woke up that morning he had a feeling he would never see his wife and children again. Such unsubstantiated misgivings were as foreign to him as the metal comprising the radiant axe from which he could not remove his eyes.

“Talk first; show of peace,” Firestreak prompted.

Cracking his knuckles, the Nocturnal Knight added, “Action if he doesn’t comply.”

The Cometress grinned and said, “Always.”

Solar Flare said nothing. He watched ... and waited for the inevitable.

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Adjusting the Densometer encircling his right forearm to the point his body could withstand a tank shell, Dr. Density next calmly held up his hands as a sign of nonaggression.

They faintly heard a helicopter approaching in the distance.

“It’s obvious you’re not from around here,” Density began. “We’re the Absolutes. You might say we’re the protectors of Purgatory Station. We don’t want trouble, but, unless you have a permit for that thing, we need you to hand over the axe.”

Only the night’s slight breeze dared make a sound, then, almost too fast for any of them to follow, the immense man rushed at Dr. Density, his cloak flapping behind him like a sail come loose in a tsunami, and swung his illuminated axe at the Absolute’s emissary. Beneath his red goggles, Dr. Density’s eyes grew huge as he knew the foreboding he’d felt all day had intolerably reached fruition. Luckily, at the unbelievably last second, the stranger pivoted the axe so that its blunt end nailed the doctor square in the chest and made a sound like the crunch of stone against stone.

Relief at having avoided a skewering almost filled Dr. Density’s heart until he realized the force of the blow sent him careening through the air and over the guardrail of the Gaiman Observation Deck.

Though the attack took only a fraction of a second, Cometress was already in the air and headed to intercept Dr. Density's plummet. In a blaze of orange hair and red eyes, she coolly alerted, "I've got him."

Solar Flare had not moved during the entire episode. After the assault against Density, he finally yelled, "Attack!"

Firestreak ignited his jet boots and lifted off, gaining the high ground against the stranger. Just as the axe-wielder turned to face him, the red and black Colossal's forehead emitted a series of interspersed white dots before firing a psionic concussion blast strong enough to pulverize a minivan.

Their enemy impossibly caught the discharge upon his axe, twirled it like so much cotton candy, then flung it at the WPUG newscopter that had ultimately arrived to report on the climatic conflict.

When Firestreak's redirected eruption struck the helicopter, it—and all within—were reduced to miniscule fragments and particles.

"Oh, my G—!" Firestreak screamed with his head in his hands and his eyes wide. "No!"

Nocturnal Knight looked up at Solar Flare and muttered, "I think we're definitely dealing with a Mega-Mal."

The villain dropped his axe so that its blunt end rested upon the ground. Again, he pointed at Solar Flare, then briskly waved Firestreak and the Nocturnal Knight away.

Reaching behind his back, the Nocturnal Knight pulled out two obscured and likely useless escrima sticks, ready to battle. He assumed an offensive stance, then called out to Solar Flare, "What is this, Solar Flare? Does he know you?"

Still hovering above, Solar Flare kept inert and spoke no words.

The Nocturnal Knight glanced at their leader then quickly formulated a few theories, none of which he liked.

Suddenly Cometress reappeared with Dr. Density in tow as he punched a series of commands into the Densometer. She dropped him to the ground and when he landed, the cement beneath his feet cracked as he haphazardly sunk. He'd take no more chances with axes, blunt or otherwise.

"He's okay!" Cometress declared as she took up position next to Solar Flare. "I caught him before he hit the water."

"Not that it would have mattered," Dr. Density hissed as he stared down the fiend with the glowing weapon. "I prepared for impact with the bay. Still, it was nice to stay dry and have a lift back up."

"Yeah, and it was nice to strain every muscle in my back hauling you," Cometress deadpanned.

Firestreak, still reeling from the devastation of the helicopter and all within, landed next to Dr. Density and shook his head. "How can you joke? I don't believe what he did ... What he did with my ... How?"

"Enough talk," the Nocturnal Knight said.

"Agreed," Cometress added. "Let's finish this."

As though in accordance, the brute leapt through the air, catching Dr. Density and Firestreak by surprise, and swept their legs out from under them with the six-foot handle of his weapon. He then ran to meet the Nocturnal Knight head-on as the Cometress trailed her teammate.

Solar Flare shrieked, “Knight, no! Quietus is too powerful for you! Do not engage!”

Though a rarity while engrossed in combat, the Nocturnal Knight became distracted for a mere instant and turned his head a fraction of an inch at Solar Flare’s warning. He murmured, “How do you know his name?”

Such hesitation was all the time Quietus needed. He flung his axe in a wide arc and tore through the armored gut of the Nocturnal Knight with the ease of a lightening bolt through the sky.

The Knight fell silently in a heap.



“This can’t be happening,” Firestreak moaned as he climbed to his feet and took in the horrifying scene across the deck.

“It’s happening,” Dr. Density gravely replied. “We’ve got to end this quickly.”

Cometress landed in front of the slumped Knight. Her hands radiated with a supernatural energy urging release. Her fingers splayed, she yearned to liberate it in the face of this Quietus and crack his skull-faced helmet in half.

“Get him to safety,” Solar Flare ordered her.

“But—”

“Now, Cometress,” Solar Flare demanded, still aloft. “Other than me, you’re the only one fast enough to get him to cover and return in time. I can’t leave, so you’re the only chance he’s got.”

Cometress growled at Quietus, “You’re mine when I get back.” She then scooped her ally up and whisked him away to the mainland of Purgatory Station.

The monster appeared unafraid.

Solar Flare finally descended and hovered a few feet above the ground, directly before Quietus. “Take position,” he commanded Dr. Density and Firestreak.

“Triangulate and surround the target.”

“About time you got involved,” Firestreak uncommonly admonished. He then questioned, “Can we do this without Cometress?”

Dr. Density assured, “She’ll be back in a few seconds.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Solar Flare declared. “Density, are you up to full capacity?”

“Any more and I’d fall through the floor,” he replied.

“Good. With the Knight gone, Firestreak and I can cut loose. No mercy, Firestreak, all right?”

“He’ll get the same compassion he gave those people in the helicopter,” Firestreak answered.

The air crackled with unbridled power, and before all Hell broke loose, Dr. Density swore he saw Quietus’ shoulders shake, as though chuckling.

With the Nocturnal Knight cradled in one arm, Cometress used the other to throw open the skylight of First Redeemer's attic. She descended and laid the Knight down upon a nearby daybed.

"You'll be okay?" she asked as she looked out the skylight with her mind on other things.

Grunting, the Nocturnal Knight replied, "Fine. The axe cauterized the wound. Didn't seem to hit anything major. Just need time to rest."

Walking away and preparing for takeoff, Cometress said, "It's safer for you this way."

"But not for you."

Looking over her shoulder, Cometress asked, "What?"

"He knows him," the Nocturnal Knight enlightened while gritting his teeth.

"Solar Flare—he knows that monster. He called him by name."

Cometress turned to fully face the Knight. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we're fighting Solar Flare's battle for him. He knew he couldn't take this character down on his own."

"We're a team, Knight," Cometress replied matter-of-factly. "Solar Flare doesn't need to fight alone. Teamwork is what we do ... Most of us, that is."

The Nocturnal Knight looked away from her.

"I'll see you soon," she said before jettisoning through the attic skylight.

The Knight turned and watched her trail of energy, then whispered, "I hope so."

The wind roared in Cometress' ears as she hurled her body between skyscrapers, but, once she'd cleared the city and approached the Gaiman Observation Deck, her screams of rage roared far louder.

Firestreak's skeletal remains were nothing more than a smoking heap in the corner of the deck. Only his equipment and bits of tattered red and black uniform clung to his charred bones.

Solar Flare hung above Quietus, pouring every ounce of cosmic force through his fists against the murderous Mega-Mal.

Quietus did not relent nor wane.

Standing as far away as possible, Dr. Density shielded his goggled-eyes with his arms and did his best to evade being atomized by Solar Flare's intense power. Cometress saw the ground he stood upon had sunk two inches and threatened to give completely away if he grew any denser.

Drawing her closed fists to her chest, Cometress beckoned every reserve of power she had at her disposal and prepared to add to Solar Flare's onslaught.

As she came within feet of Solar Flare, just as she was about to couple her might with Solar Flare's and end Quietus' terror forever, the unthinkable occurred.

Quietus absorbed everything Solar Flare hurled at him, brushed it off with a shrug of his mammoth shoulders, and then barbarously heaved his axe at the leader of the Absolutes. It ripped asunder the silver celestial shell covering his body with ease.

ΩΩΩ

Still static, the Nocturnal Knight remains seated in his attic, reliving that terrible night. Gaiman Observation Deck, as well as most of the middle section of Kirby Bridge, had been obliterated by Solar Flare's rupture. No one, not even the Nocturnal Knight, could have guessed the cosmic man housed so much raw, devastating energy within his heart.

Though he'd already been incinerated before the explosion, the United States government managed to locate both of Firestreak's jet boots. The right boot had landed on the shoreline in Boston. The left one traveled all the way to the middle of Purgatory Station.

They found not a shred of Dr. Density's person. Only his Densometer remained, directly beneath the site of the explosion at the bottom of the bay. Why the Densometer had dropped straight down while Firestreak's boots traveled miles in either direction proved a mystery to most. The Nocturnal Knight had yet another theory, however, and if ever proven correct would mean Dr. Density had suffered a fate far worse than death.

Of course, Solar Flare and Cometress were instantly obliterated as well. In seventeen years, there's been no reason to believe either survived their encounter with Quietus.

The Mega-Mal known as Quietus entered the chronicles of infamy the day he brought about the fall of the Absolutes. They'd even made a movie about it, though no one had actually seen their last moments and so therefore the film took quite a bit of creative liberties. In fact, other than the Nocturnal Knight, no one even knew what Quietus truly looked like.

To this day, the Nocturnal Knight doesn't know for sure why Quietus appeared and what purpose he had. As always, though, he had his suspicions, and each revolved squarely around Solar Flare.

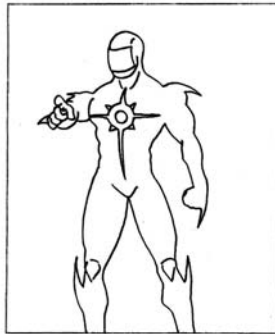
"It's time to hang it up," the Nocturnal Knight mutters under his breath. "You're no good any more, old man. The Knight's time has passed."

A sheen of light suddenly illuminates the attic as a ball of fire crashes through the closed skylight in a shower of glass.

The Nocturnal Knight slowly stands up, eyes wide and his soul basking in disbelief.

Finally the brilliance diminishes and the Knight sees a silver figure standing before him.

"Get yourself together, Irons!" Solar Flare rebukes. "It's only a matter of time before Quietus finds me again!"



To Be Continued ...