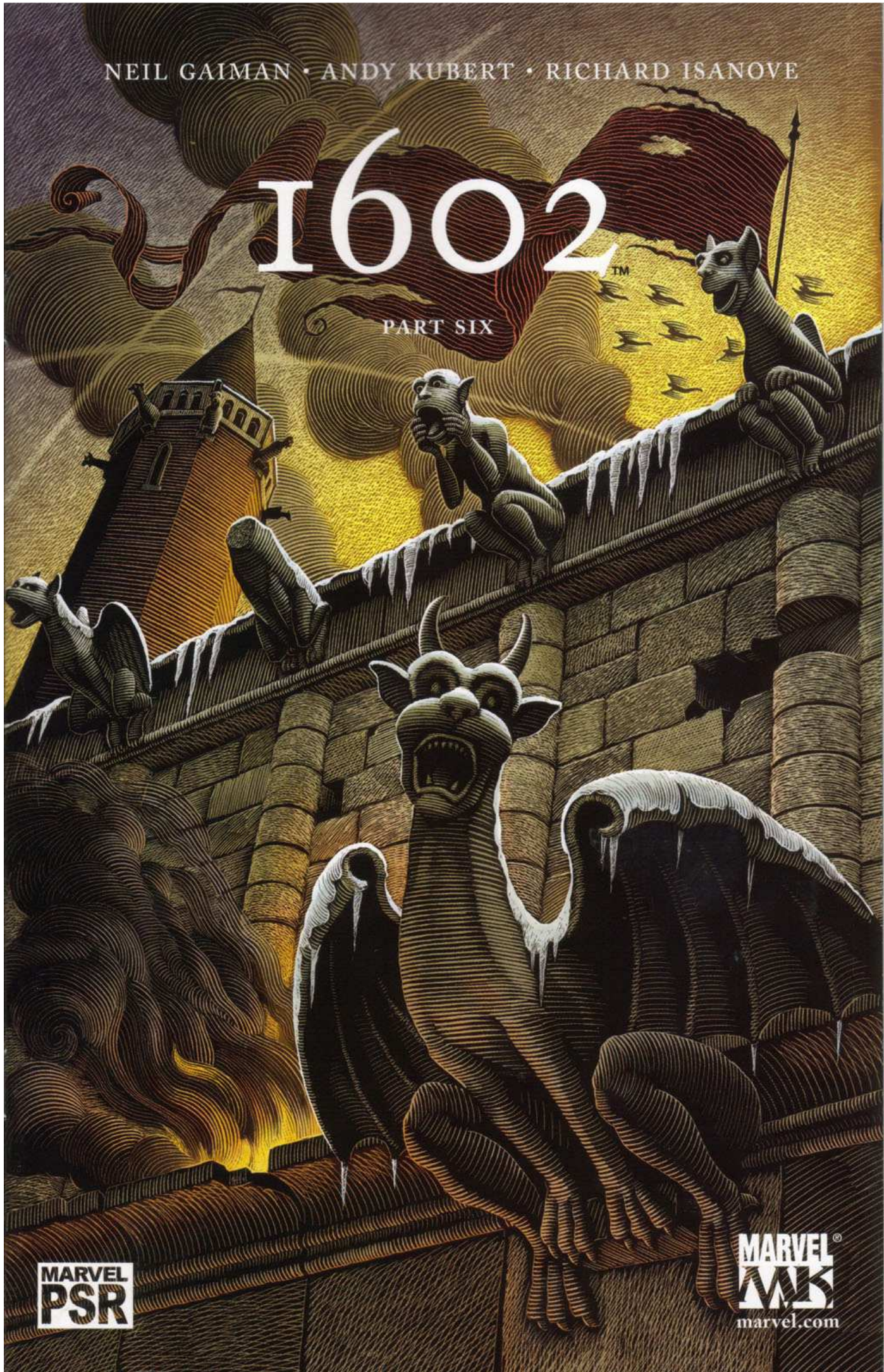


NEIL GAIMAN • ANDY KUBERT • RICHARD ISANOVE


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PART SIX



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STEPHEN STRANGE, I AM AFRAID I CANNOT HELP YOU TO YOUR FEET. BUT IF YOU IMAGINE YOURSELF STANDING, THEN YOU WILL BE STANDING.

GOOD.

YOU HAVE NO LIPS TO SPEAK WITH, AND I AM USING MY MIND TO TALK DIRECTLY TO YOURS. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

Where am I? Who are you? Are you an angel? A demon?

LET ME SEE...

YES. I MAY ANSWER ALL OF THOSE QUESTIONS. I AM NEITHER AN ANGEL NOR A DEMON. I AM A WATCHER. WE ARE ON YOUR PLANET'S MOON.

What's happening?

HMM... REPHRASE YOUR QUESTION TO MAKE IT MORE SPECIFIC AND THUS ANSWERABLE.

Well, you said you owed me an explanation. What am I doing on the moon? What manner of creature are you?

NO. THOSE WERE THE **WRONG** QUESTIONS. BUT I SHALL ANSWER THEM. YOU ARE ON THE MOON BECAUSE I NEEDED TO TALK WITH YOU. I AM A WATCHER, ONE OF MANY WATCHERS. WE OBSERVE EVENTS ACROSS THE UNIVERSE AND WE DO **NOT** INTERFERE.

AND I OWE YOU AN EXPLANATION.

IN THE LAST MONTH, I HAVE PUSHED YOUR MIND. I HAVE SPOKEN THROUGH YOUR MOUTH, AS IF I WERE YOU.

You...were you the one who made me certain that the world was ending?

You're helping me to save it?

THE SURVIVAL OF ONE WORLD, OR EVEN OF ONE UNIVERSE, IS NOT SOMETHING THAT WOULD IMPEL ME TO ACTION, DOCTOR.

BUT IT IS TRUE THAT YOUR PLANET NOW HAS MUCH LESS THAN HALF A YEAR BEFORE THE TEMPORAL STRESSES DESTROY IT ENTIRELY.



I HAVE DISCUSSED THE MATTER EXTENSIVELY WITH THE OTHER WATCHERS. ORIGINALLY, MOST OF US WERE OF THE OPINION THAT THE PARATEMPORAL FAULT LINE WOULD INITIALLY MERELY DESTROY YOUR WORLD.

OBVIOUSLY, IT WOULD THEN EXPAND DESTRUCTIVELY IN ALL DIRECTIONS AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT, GIVING US, OH, AT LEAST SEVERAL HUNDRED MILLION YEARS UNTIL IT CONSUMED EVERYTHING.

AFTER MY LAST REPORT, HOWEVER, WE WERE FORCED TO REINSPECT OUR FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES.

WE CONCLUDED THAT THE DESTRUCTION OF THIS UNIVERSE, WHILE STILL BOUNDED BY THE SPEED OF LIGHT, WOULD OCCUR WITHIN AN EXPANDING SIMULTANEITY, WHICH WOULD, PARATEMPORALLY, HAVE BEGUN IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE INITIAL NANOSECONDS OF THIS UNIVERSE.

AND THEN IT WOULD EXPAND OUTWARD FROM THIS UNIVERSE--WE CALL IT 616--TO ENGULF ALL THE OTHERS...

I do not understand. Please...explain more simply.

SIMPLY? VERY WELL. IF YOUR WORLD DIES NOW, STEPHEN, IT WILL TAKE EVERYTHING WITH IT.

NOT ONLY THIS UNIVERSE, BUT ALL THE OTHER UNIVERSES AS WELL. EVERYTHING THERE IS, WILL END.

OR RATHER, TO PUT IT EVEN MORE SIMPLY, EVERYTHING WILL NEVER HAVE BEEN.

What... what is making this happen?

MY HYPOTHESIS IS THAT IN A LITTLE MORE THAN FOUR HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW, SOMEBODY WILL BUILD A CHRONAL ENGINE, POWERED BY AN UNSTABLE SIMALTERNITY, WHICH WILL, ON ITS TRANSLOCATION TO THIS ERA, BECOME A MICROSCOPIC SIMULTANEITY.

THE FORERUNNER COULD BE SEEN AS AN INFECTION, WHICH THE UNIVERSE MUST CREATE ANTIBODIES FOR, WHICH THEN DESTROY THE HOST ORGANISM.

IF THE UNIVERSE CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AN ORGANISM.

DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?



No. I'm sorry... I don't understand. Your concepts mean nothing. They're just words.

AH. MORE SIMPLE. I SHALL MAKE THE ATTEMPT.

ALL OTHER METHODS OF TIME-TRAVELLING THE WATCHERS HAVE OBSERVED UNTIL NOW MAKE USE OF THE VARIOUS PLIABLE PROPERTIES OF TIME. THEY TREAT TIME AS A RIVER.

AN EVENT ROUGHLY FOUR HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW, ON THE OTHER HAND, WILL SIMPLY PUNCH A HOLE THROUGH TIME, A LITTLE MORE THAN A DOZEN YEARS AGO, AND DEPOSIT SOMETHING IN OUR RECENT PAST.



IT IS THE ARRIVAL OF THIS SOMETHING WHICH BEGINS THE CURRENT CYCLE OF DESTRUCTION.

What manner of something?

ALMOST CERTAINLY A HUMAN BEING. MY COLLEAGUES AND I HAVE OBSERVED AND PONDERED, AND WE ARE ALMOST ALL IN AGREEMENT ON THIS.

AND WE BELIEVE THAT THE DAMAGE TO THE FABRIC OF TIME BEGAN WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THIS ENTITY, WHATEVER IT IS.

You don't know?

I... WAS NOT WATCHING. I BLAME MYSELF, ALTHOUGH MY FELLOWS TELL ME THAT MY FAILURE WAS INEVITABLE. SOMETHING MAY HAVE STOPPED ME.

Who would stop you watching?



THE UNIVERSE FOLLOWS CERTAIN LAWS, STEPHEN STRANGE, AND, LIKE YOU, I AM A CREATURE OF THE UNIVERSE. SOME LAWS I UNDERSTAND, SOME I DO NOT. I AM YOUNG, AS WE RECKON THINGS.

IN TRUTH, YOURS IS A YOUNG SOLAR SYSTEM, AND IT IS THE ONLY ONE I HAVE WATCHED.



AND THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.



EVERYTHING HAS ITS SEASON. IN SPRING, THE WORLD BRINGS FORTH BLOSSOMS. IN CHERRY SEASON, YOU GET CHERRIES.

BUT A SEASON HAS DAWNED OVER THREE HUNDRED YEARS EARLY: A SEASON OF HEROES AND MARVELS. MY OWN CONCLUSION--SEVERAL OF MY COLLEAGUES LAUGH AT ME--IS THAT THE TWO ARE CONNECTED.

THAT THE UNIVERSE FIGHTS TO SAVE ITSELF.

TO SAVE EVERYTHING, THE HEROES HAVE COME.



THE HYPOTHESIS MY STAIDER COLLEAGUES PREFER IS THAT THE ARRIVAL OF THE ENTITY THEY REFER TO AS THE FORERUNNER IS, IN ITSELF, THE SIGNAL TO THE UNIVERSE FOR THE SEASON OF MARVELS TO BEGIN.

AND THAT ENTITY'S ARRIVAL ALSO CREATED THE SIMULTANEITY.

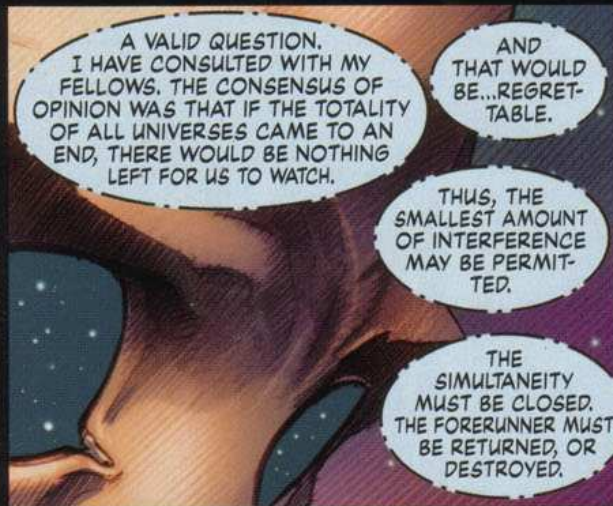


You said you were not permitted to interfere. Yes?

THAT IS CORRECT.

But you brought me here, and told me this.

You are obviously interfering. Why?

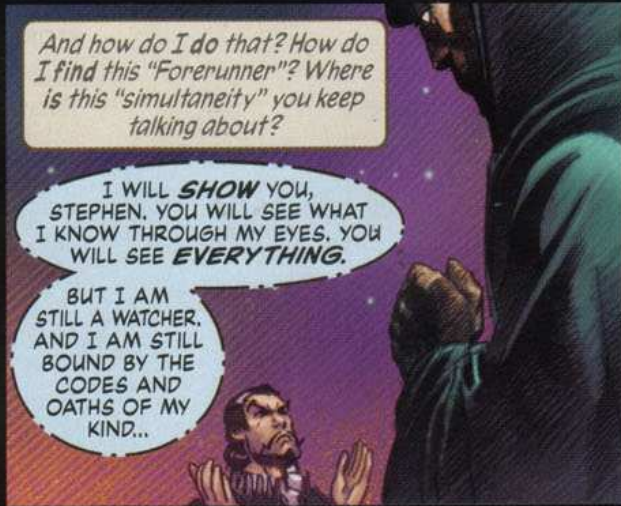


A VALID QUESTION. I HAVE CONSULTED WITH MY FELLOWS. THE CONSENSUS OF OPINION WAS THAT IF THE TOTALITY OF ALL UNIVERSES CAME TO AN END, THERE WOULD BE NOTHING LEFT FOR US TO WATCH.

AND THAT WOULD BE...REGRET-TABLE.

THUS, THE SMALLEST AMOUNT OF INTERFERENCE MAY BE PERMITTED.

THE SIMULTANEITY MUST BE CLOSED. THE FORERUNNER MUST BE RETURNED, OR DESTROYED.



And how do I do that? How do I find this "Forerunner"? Where is this "simultaneity" you keep talking about?

I WILL **SHOW** YOU, STEPHEN. YOU WILL SEE WHAT I KNOW THROUGH MY EYES. YOU WILL SEE **EVERYTHING**.

BUT I AM STILL A WATCHER. AND I AM STILL BOUND BY THE CODES AND OATHS OF MY KIND...




"THERE IS ONLY ONE INJUNCTION I MUST LAY UPON YOU, STEPHEN. IT IS THIS:

"WHILE YOU LIVE, YOU MAY SAY NOTHING OF WHAT YOU KNOW TO ANY SOUL. YOU MAY NOT ACT IN ANY WAY UPON WHAT YOU KNOW.

"LIKE ME, YOU ARE CONDEMNED ONLY TO WATCH."

...only to watch...



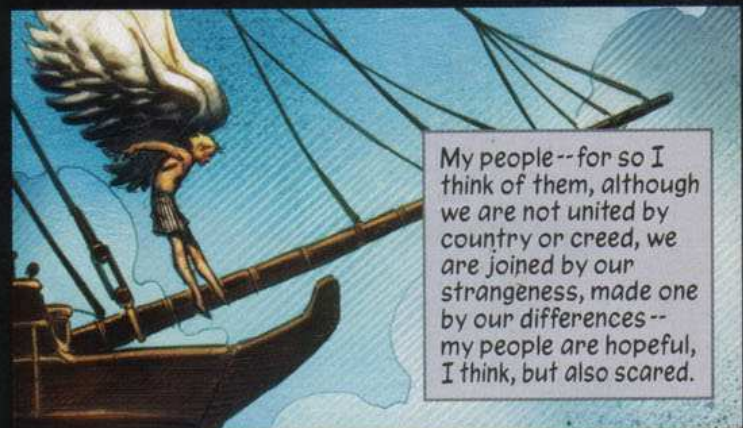
Our ship is travelling fast. Almost too fast. For the folk on the ship, as long as they stay out of the wind, they are comfortable, more or less, although some of them say they find it chilly.

For me, I am at home here in the sky. And what is one winged lad, when compared to a whole flying ship?



I would hazard that we are covering thirty, perhaps even forty miles in every hour, a speed that even I could not keep up for long.

And every hour brings us closer to Latveria, and closer to Doom.



My people--for so I think of them, although we are not united by country or creed, we are joined by our strangeness, made one by our differences--my people are hopeful, I think, but also scared.



We go to release prisoners. We go to reclaim a stolen weapon. We go to fight a just war.

And perhaps we go to our deaths.

But if we die, it will be a death of our choosing. A good death, if such a thing can be.

We follow rivers and hills, small villages and farms. Sir Nicholas knows Europe like he knows his own face, and he is our navigator.



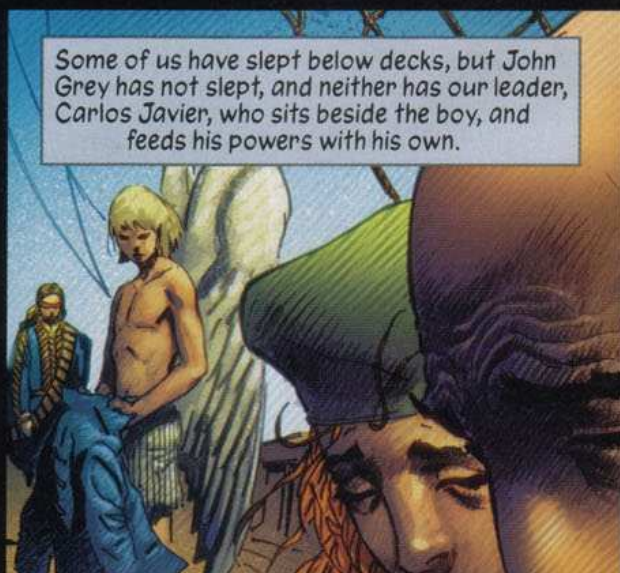
Dougan, his man, is loyal to Fury, although like all of us, he is scared.

We avoid cities and towns, where we can.



Master Grey says that, while he can keep the ship moving, he doubts that he could raise it again, so we travel without stopping, hour after hour, towards the south and towards the east.

Some of us have slept below decks, but John Grey has not slept, and neither has our leader, Carlos Javier, who sits beside the boy, and feeds his powers with his own.





Where were you?

I was flying. I wanted to stretch my wings.



You know that you aren't meant to draw attention to yourself!

I think our flying ship is doing that perfectly well on its own.



Just... get dressed. You're a disgrace--parading about, near naked like that.

Excuse me, Scotius. Can you tell Carlos that we need to get higher. The Austrian Alps are ahead of us. Latveria will be beyond them.



Sir Nicholas. Why does he hate me?

Why? He's scared, and he's jealous. He thinks she likes you, and that troubles him.

She? Who is she?



I... I need to talk to all of you about fighting tactics. We'll be in Latveria in hours. We know that Doom has cannons and explosives. We do not know what else he may have.

Tell the others to meet me in the Captain's cabin.



Yes sir. What about Master Grey, and Master Javier?

Leave them be. They are keeping us in the air. I don't know how they do it, but I do not want them distracted.

And lad... Put your shirt back on.

Doomstadt. The Deep Cells.

There b'aint enough room in here to sit down. I can stand, but that'd be all. I amn't properly able to move my arms. It's been a week since he sent down food.



But there be only two things I could do now, and one of them is to give up, and to die.

And t'other is to push myself as far as I can against the wall on my left and then throw myself, as hard as I can over to the right...



Oof.

Doom thinks I be mad.

That there be rock below me and above me and on every side of me. And he be right...

And in the years we've been prisoned here, I have done this a thousand times. And each time he do punish us all.



Oof.

But there do be a crack.

BOOM!

In the rockface, there be a crack, that was not there before...

Doomstadt. The High Cells.

Master Murdoch? What's happening?

Hush, Donal. I'm listening. I'll tell you soon.



"Listening? But how can you hear--?"

"Hush your noise, and let me listen. Otto's talking..."

"Now, young man, tell me, why should I believe you?"



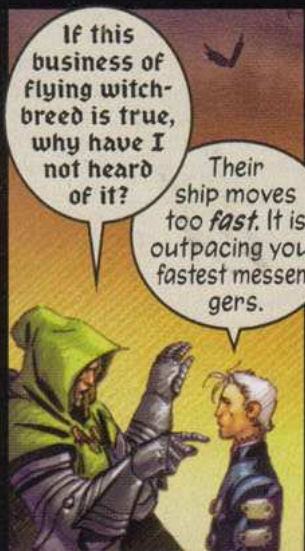
Because I tell the truth.

There is a flying ship coming here. It is manned with witchbreed creatures and demons. They seek to make war on you.



There has never been any love lost between Latveria and the Inquisition. Did not your own Grand Inquisitor condemn my father's breeding studies as heretical?

If he *did*, then think of this as his olive branch.



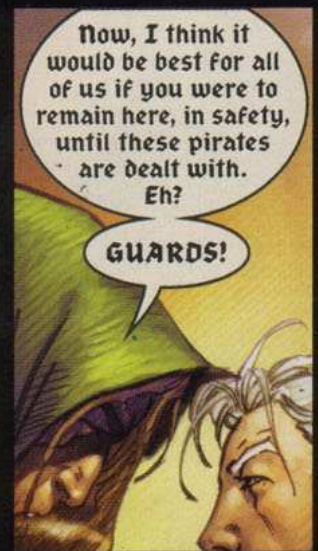
If this business of flying witchbreed is true, why have I not heard of it?

Their ship moves too *fast*. It is outpacing your fastest messengers.



I have some very fast messengers.

It seems you are telling the truth, my friend.



Now, I think it would be best for all of us if you were to remain here, in safety, until these pirates are dealt with. Eh?

GUARDS!





He's gone?

An interesting trick. And one that we must investigate further. But that can wait.

Sire! The thing in the dungeon has started again...



When the boat-creatures are dead, we'll deal with it permanently. Reed will be heartbroken, of course, but still... hearts can be mended.

Now. We need cannons. And archers. And vulture fliers...



"I want all the cannons we have, primed and loaded. And I want them aimed at the sky."

BOOM!



Matthew-- what's happening? What did you hear?

It sounds like a miracle is on its way, and will be blasted from the clear sky before ever it reaches us.



Matthew... the cart they brought us to the castle in... is it still in here?

It's in the courtyard. If they'd moved it, I would have heard.

Can you get out of here? Out of this cell? Can you get us down to the courtyard?



You're asking the impossible.

So that's a "no"?

It's more of an "I'll try my best."



Wait until they are closer...

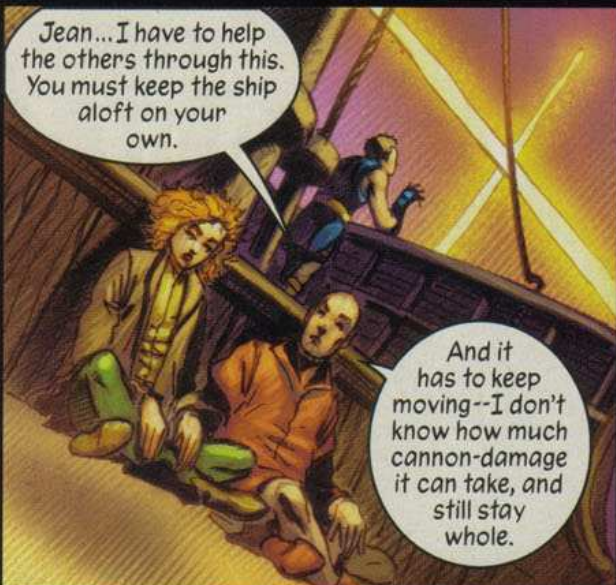
now!



Hah! Missed us! If that is all we have to contend with, this battle is already won!

It's not going to be that easy...

...they're just finding our range. Our first task has to be to take out the cannons.




Jean... I have to help the others through this. You must keep the ship aloft on your own.

And it has to keep moving--I don't know how much cannon-damage it can take, and still stay whole.



I'll do... whatever I have to do...




The first order of business is to get you all down there, and to destroy their weapons, before they blow us from the sky.

Angel, you carry Scotius. Once you've got him down, come back for Sir Nicholas.

But he's only a--

Only a human? Perhaps. But I'm dangerous enough, in my own way.



You're thinking that I hate you, Master Somerisle.

And you have given me no cause to love you.

But I have no plans to drop you. Rest easy on that score.




Watch out!

What?




I thank you.


Just get me down safely.




Robbie--can you create an ice-bridge from here to the castle top?



I do not believe so. It's too far--I need the air to be wetter. If only there was rain, or mist, I could do so much...



You can still deflect cannonballs. Do so. I shall be in the minds of the cannoneers, showing them our ship is lower, or higher, than they believe. But some may still slip through...



...so for now you and Henry shall stay here, to defend the ship.

Against what? You have not taught me to catch cannonballs.

Against them.



Oof.

BOOOOM!

Not... impossible...

It's not that the most dangerous woman in Europe imagines for a moment that Otto Von Doom will lose this battle...

...but she doubts that such an opportunity to plunder will come again soon.

And besides, he is beginning to bore her.

KKRSHSHH!

Whore.



I wouldn't know what manner of monster it is that Doom keeps in his basement, but we owe it our *thanks*...

...for loosening the bolts that held our chains, and for what it's done to this wall.



There.

Matthew?

Yes, Donal?

How will we get down to the courtyard?



Well, the way I see it, we have *two* options. We could call a guard, talk him into opening the cell door, overpower him, go down through the castle--*hiding, fighting*, all that... but it's an awful lot of work.



So let's do it the *easy* way.

Which is?



We wrap your chains around me...

...and you hold *very tight*...



Brother John. Oh my poor *brother*...

...he is a *monster* to keep you so, and *use* you so...



...while I...

...think about...

...how much easier...

...something like this is to do...

...without chains...

...or a passenger.



Quickly, my friend.



Even with his ears covered, the crash of thunder is deafening: louder than the cannons, louder than the monster in the dungeon...

...it leaves him disoriented, although he can still smell the ozone lightning flash.

That was close, he thinks, as the rain begins to pour from a previously cloudless sky...





Remarkable, Bobby. You can identify rain correctly. A *miracle*. Now, if I may draw your attention to the matter at hand...?



Have you ever seen an *ice-storm*, Henry? When the rain is freezing, but still water. It doesn't turn to ice until it touches the ground...and then it ices all it touches...

Uh...no.
Then watch...



It looks just like this.



The ship...it's *trembling*. Jean's in trouble! Get us back up there!

Fly? In this frozen rain? Look at my *wings*, Scotius. We'd tumble from the sky like Doom's men!



The cannon-fire has stopped.

We've won. Damn it, we've won!

Which will be very comforting if the ship crashes and kills us all, sir.



Fire! FIRE, damn you!

We cannot fire *anything* in this most unusual storm.

Master, most of the cannon have been destroyed. The rest are encased in ice. The vulture fliers are *dead*. What do we *do*? Shall we *hide*? Shall we *flee*?



FLEE? I should send you back to the birthing pens that spawned you, you worm...

If this storm is their doing, then they have given us lightning, which means they have given us everything I need to ensure victory!

Otto?
It's over.



Remember *me*? You kept me under a *waterfall*. You imprisoned my friends in the darkness. You made my sister ornament your vile bed-chamber...

But...I don't understand...

I set them free, Otto.

As I said. It's over.

It doesn't matter. You fools don't understand. I have the weapon. TELL them, Reed. Tell them what I'm holding.

All I need is the LIGHTNING. And you four, you shall die first. You shall die so SWEETLY...

It's from another world--or another time!



Oh, sweet Jesus and all the angels, look at him...

He's dead, Susan. Or as good as dead. Cry if you need to.



Mayhap I should tread on him, stomp up and stomp down, till there b'aint be nothing left of him.

Save your feet, Benjamin.

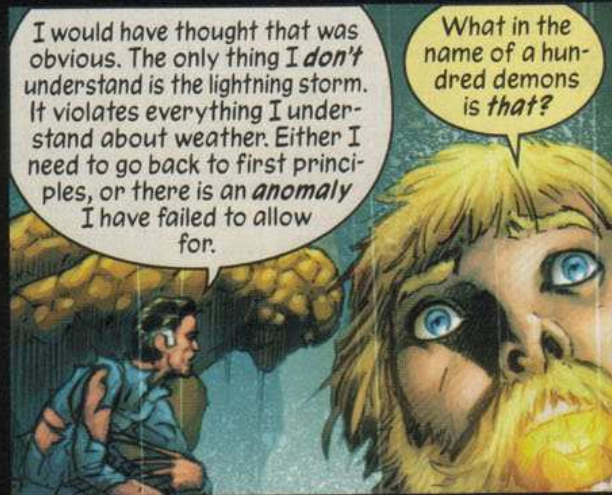
You know, I warned him, poor deluded fellow.

Did he say that ball-thing was from the future?



I would have thought that was obvious. The only thing I don't understand is the lightning storm. It violates everything I understand about weather. Either I need to go back to first principles, or there is an anomaly I have failed to allow for.

What in the name of a hundred demons is that?





I would hypothesize, in the absence of other evidence, that that is my anomaly.



Reed! Damn my eye, it's good to see you!



And you, Nick. We must *talk*; there are several things that are troubling me. To begin with, let us posit that Time is fluid but static--

Not now, old friend. Soon.



Sir Nicholas. We've never met *by day* before, but I'm...

I know who *you* are. Who's *he*?

He's the Treasure of the Templars. And he's also your secret weapon. Or maybe he's carrying it.



Domdaniel,
Spain.

Master--
the Witchbreed
have succeeded in
their attack on Doom
...I watched the
castle fall...

James
has arrived in
London.

He
has imprisoned
the warlock Strange,
and all of Fury's
associates.

Fury himself has been
proclaimed a *traitor*-- there
is a price on his head.

Master... I must
have run five times across
Europe in the last two
days.

You are
condemned from
your own mouth,
monster.

Well done,
Toad. Are there
any more of
them?

No,
thire. It ith
ath I thaid.
Jutht the
three.

Good. Then he shall join his
sister and the former Grand Inquisitor
at the stake in the courtyard. And you
have bought your life, creature.

Thank
you,
thire.

"Burn him.
Burn him
now.

"Burn
them
all."

To Be Continued...