



**Action Comics #8**  
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*Action Comics*  
Issue 8: "For All Mankind..."  
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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...*

*... At the same time, the Challengers of the Unknown also find themselves on the dark planet, battling Doctor Bedlam...*

*... Against all odds, Nightwing safely delivers Mister Miracle to his fellow New Gods in Metropolis... and the Teen Titans foil Dr Bedlam's plan to use the Forever People to discover the Anti-Life Equation! But it is Lex Luthor who, feeling his usefulness to Darkseid is at an end, breaks the truce and launches a preemptive attack against the occupying forces of Apokolips, bringing Metropolis into the war...*

*... In a lethal gambit, G. Gordon Godfrey seizes control of the US Government, but in a daring raid on the White House, the Suicide Squad face off against the Female Furies in a race against time to save the city from nuclear annihilation!*

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

**CRISIS: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 9!**

The US Army helicopter flew over the evacuated island of Manhattan,

and, peering out the window, Lois Lane could hardly believe the devastation. She had heard that the Air Force had actually taken down an Apokoliptian battleship here, and that the invaders responded with a barrage of carpet bombing that all-but laid the city to waste. But neither side would admit defeat: as she watched, a battle still raged near Central Park, with the 1st US Marine Corp holding a critical position against a horde of screaming dog soldiers.

The flyboy next to her pointed to a place of relative safety near Times Square, where the military had set up their command post, and he expertly eased the 'copter down.

Lois didn't wait for the rotor to stop turning, leaping out and rushing across the street to the decorated general waiting for her.

"Thank God you're safe!" Sam Lane hugged his daughter, leading her to the bustling makeshift command HQ that had once been the corner of Broadway and 42nd Street, the 'copter pilot trailing behind them. "How're Lucy and your mother?"

"They're fine. Or at least as safe as anyone can be right now. The truce may have fallen apart in Metropolis, but Lex Luthor has taken in thousands of people to the underground bomb shelters he built beneath the city. I was able to convince him to give a spot to Mom and Lucy."

Once Sam Lane, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had assured himself everyone was okay, he allowed himself to vent his anger and frustration.

""You shouldn't be here, Lois. This is a hot zone, and not a place for journalists! This was damned irresponsible—."

"I'm not here on *Planet* business, Dad." Sam Lane's strong-willed daughter interrupted him. "I need to see her. I *need* her. The *world* needs her."

The Chairman blinked for a second, then realized who his daughter meant.

"That's impossible." He sputtered. "She's invaluable to the war effort *here*. She practically took down that Apokoliptian battleship by herself

yesterday—."

"Dad!" Lois interjected, and Sam Lane saw something in his daughter's eyes he had never seen before. He had a sudden image of her as a little girl: she had just stepped on a nail, and he held her tiny foot in his hand to extract it— she had bitten her trembling lip, but she had not cried. It was at that moment that Sam Lane had stopped regretting he and his wife never had a son. But now there *were* tears in those wide, blue eyes. But resolution, as well. The same resolution that usually got Lois Lane anything she wanted. "Dad, I wouldn't ask if I didn't have a good reason. There's a chance— a chance that we can turn this thing around... "

And because Sam Lane trusted his child, and knew her for a lot of things (and none of them selfish) he didn't dismiss the idea.

"Fine. You can talk to her. But it'll have to wait a few hours. She's on the front line; communications are fuzzy at best and I can't spare a unit to bring her in."

"No problem." Noted the 'copter pilot, a silent observer up till then. "I can fly us in."

"Out of the question!" Sam Lane exclaimed, angry at that suggestion that his daughter should fly into a combat area. "Just who the hell do you think you are, airman?"

There was a flash of blinding emerald light, causing Sam to cover his eyes. When he could see again, he was annoyed at the smirk on the flyboy's face— and shocked at his outlandish new uniform.

"Dad," Lois said. "This is my new friend Green Lantern... "

"JIGUNDUS CRUSH YOUR BONES, WOMAN, GRIND YOU INTO PASTE AND SLURP YOU DOWN HIS THROAT!"

The aptly named Apokoliptian giant thrashed through a squad of infantry grunts, scattering bodies like they were toy soldiers. He was using a tree he had ripped from the ground as a cudgel, and was clearing a

swath through Central Park to the target of his ire.

Wonder Woman turned from the enemy hover tank she was demolishing, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"I don't *think* so... " She tossed her hair from her face, dusted off her hands and faced her new opponent.

Jigundus charged, his tree trunk raised. He towered over Wonder Woman, more than twice her size, but she stood her ground and waited for him. He hacked at her, intending to smash her into the ground.

She caught the tree trunk between her hands, wrenched it out of his, and while he stood there dumbfounded, she reversed its motion and used it like a Louisville Slugger, sending the giant crashing backward through a stand of trees. He groaned, tried to lift his head, then crashed back down to the earth.

The Marines at her back cheered and renewed their assault, routing the remaining dog soldiers.

"She hits one out of the Park, and the crowd goes wild!"

Pausing to catch her breath, Diana watched as a masked man in an odd green and black uniform, floated down from the sky, trailing behind him, and tethered by the ring on his right hand, a transparent emerald bubble that carried General Lane and a woman she had never met.

"Green Lantern, I presume?" She extended her hand as the hero landed in front of her, his ring releasing his passengers.

Hal shook her hand with a deep respect. "At your service, ma'am. And call me Ha—, uh... GL."

"Nice work, Madame Ambassador." Sam Lane stepped forward. "That 'Jigundus' bruiser was the one who went on a rampage in the Financial District. We lost three platoons to him this morning."

"He'll be resting for a while now, General." Diana assured him. "At least long enough for the boys from S.T.A.R. to get him restrained and in

custody."

"Wonder Woman, I'm Lois Lane—" The woman with the general blurred, stepping forward, unfazed by the sudden explosion and the sounds of battle coming from the other side of the Park.

"Wonder Woman, Lois is my daughter. She's come from Metropolis, and I think you should hear what she has to say." Sam Lane interjected.

Diana raised one finely sculpted eyebrow.

The air raid sirens droned on and on in the deserted streets of Fawcett City. Thus far the invasion had left the placid jewel of middle America relatively unscathed, and most of the citizens had been able to retreat to the bomb shelters leftover from the Cold War. But all that was about to change.

The two heroes stood on the roof of the Amalgamated Broadcasting Corp building, their capes fluttering in the wind; they squinted in the distance, identical furrows on their brows. On the horizon, the enemy army of mechanoids was rolling towards the city, their spiked wheels tearing up the ground and smoke rising in their wake.

"They don't stand a chance." Captain Marvel the Elder clapped a hand on his son's shoulder, the wind ruffling his gray hair.

Captain Marvel the Younger beamed, a smile that was indistinguishable from his father's.

"*Captains!*"

From out of the sky came two figures. Wonder Woman and Green Lantern landed on the rooftop next to the caped heroes, urgency writ on their faces.

"We need your help! *Superman* needs your help!"

The gray-haired Captain frowned and looked pained. "Wonder Woman, is it? I'm sorry, didn't you hear? Superman fell on the first day of the war. The reports out of Metropolis are that he's dead."

"Those reports are propaganda, and just what Darkseid wants us to think." Answered Green Lantern.

"Darkseid?" Frowned the younger Captain.

"The tyrant of Apokolips. The one behind this invasion."

"Are you telling us that Superman is alive?" Hope dawned on the age-worn face of Captain Marvel.

"He was when they took him." Wonder Woman looked serious. "I just spoke to the last person to see him on Earth, the *Daily Planet* reporter Lois Lane. She said he was still breathing when they took him away."

"Holy Moley... !" The Captains exhaled in unison.

"She said they spoke before he went into that final battle with that monster." Wonder Woman went on. "She said he told her he was going to need help— and that he told her to find me, Green Lantern and Captain Marvel!"

The Captains were speechless.

"Don't you see, the big man needs our help!" Green Lantern chimed in. "If he's still alive, he's a prisoner on Apokolips. And from what I've seen and heard, that's bound to be no picnic. We have to rescue Superman!"

The words hung dramatically in the air, and for a moment, no one spoke. Perhaps they were all imagining the torture and deprivations the Man of Steel was enduring on that foul place.

As if to remind them, in the skies overhead, Apokolips rumbled, a fire pit spurting a great jet of flame. In answer, the war machines rumbling towards Fawcett City picked up speed.

"He'd come for any one of us." Captain Marvel the Elder declared with

resolve. "But we can't leave Fawcett City at the mercy of this horde. There are still innocents in the city, the old and the infirm... " He gestured to the advancing army, almost at the city limits.

"Agreed." The younger Captain cracked his knuckles. "I'll go with Wonder Woman and Green Lantern, Dad, while you do what you do best—defend Fawcett!"

"No." Captain Marvel the Elder surprised them. "Not this time, son. A few months ago Superman came to me for help, and I—." His throat caught. "Couldn't help him [**Editor's Note: This occurred in *Adventures of Superman #2***]. I won't let him down again."

"But—."

"No 'buts', Billy." The elder hero took his son by the shoulders. "I have to do this. And Fawcett needs you. I just wish you didn't have to fight alone... "

"He won't C.C... ." Came an ethereal voice.

On the rooftop next to them materialized two new figures: a tall man in red spandex with a shiny, pointed helmet, and another, the one who had spoken, dressed quite formally, his head wrapped in a turban, clutching a wand with a triangle on the end.

"Ibis! Bulletman!" The elder Captain gasped, going to his old friends. "But how— Jim, you must be close to a century old by now... "

"Eighty six, to be precise." Jim Barr, the Bulletman answered with a crooked smile and a vigor that defied his age. "But Prince Amentep here just waved his Ibis-stick a few times, and I'm feeling better than I have since the 40's!"

"Time is no impediment to Ibis the Invincible!" Spoke the bronze-skinned man in the red turban. "I am myself thousands of years old! But there is little time for a reunion, C.C. Batson. We will fight with young William and throw back these other-dimensional invaders! A different task falls to you. My immortal beloved the Princess Taia has looked into the mists of prophecy and she has seen clearly: if Superman perishes at the hand

of Darkseid, then so perishes the Earth!"

"Then there's no time to waste." Captain Marvel the Elder squared his shoulders. He turned to his son, who was struggling with the wisdom of Solomon to find an excuse to take his father's place, but at last had to give in, and return his father's fierce embrace.

The small group allowed them a moment, but soon the roars and cries of the approaching army became audible.

"Captain, we have to go." Said Wonder Woman, not without compassion.

With a final squeeze and thump on the back, Captain Marvel released his son, and faced the other heroes, his eyes bright.

"I'm ready." He said, and without another word, he raised his arm and lifted off. Leaving the defenders of Fawcett City to their task, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman took to the sky after him.

The throne room of Darkseid was lit only by iron braziers emitting greasy grey smoke. Shadows danced crazily on the cold stone walls. Muffled screams (they never stopped!) came from not far off, but the only sounds inside the hall was the labored breathing of the prisoners and their occasional groans.

Superman hung from the energon field behind the great stone throne itself, the inerton chains that sapped his strength still wrapped around him. He was drifting in and out of consciousness, wracked not only with pain, but by the thoughts of what must be happening on Earth...

When had he been taken? Hours, days, weeks ago? It was hard to tell. The cruel little man with the kryptonite syringes visited him often, as he did the other two prisoners, keeping him dazed and sedated with who knew what sort of chemicals. But Desaad was also the only source of news that Superman had. And the little man took glee in whispering the

words of horror and destruction into Superman's ears, like a lover's secret.

*"Gotham has fallen to Steppenwolf. Even know, he hunts the Bat... "*

*"Your American capital was vaporized in a nuclear assault. Millions are dead... "*

*"Devilance is hot on the heels of Scott Free, and soon the so-called Mister Miracle will join you on this wall of pain!"*

*"Luthor has broken the truce. Metropolis will pay the price!"*

*"The Hellborers are falling, and soon, the Infernal Machine will be ready, and the Earth itself shall be gutted with fire!"*

He had no idea how much of this was true, and how much was calculated to make him despair, but if even a little bit was... he had to escape. He had to protect his adopted home, his loved ones. He desperately hoped that Smallville was deemed too insignificant for the invaders...

He tested his chains again, for the thousandth time. They clinked and clattered and he strained, the veins on his neck standing out. But it was no use. The unearthly metal did not budge. He slumped against his bonds, gasping.

*\*Conserve your strength.\** A strange voice echoed in his head. *\*The time is not right.\**

Superman lifted his head, surprised to find the green figure of the Martian Manhunter stabilized, at least for a moment, and his eerie red eyes focused on the Man of Steel.

*Can you... hear my thoughts?*

*\*Yes. Remain calm and do not let on that we are in communication.\**

Superman let his head hang down, as if in defeat, but he was suddenly excited.

*Are you the Martian Manhunter that used to fight crime on Earth all those years ago?*

*\*Yes. I am also in communication with the Oan. He has somehow lost a great deal of his natural power.\**

On the other side of Superman, a moan of agony came from the small, blue-skinned alien.

*Can you get us out of this?*

*\*No. But perhaps he can... He is expending a great deal of energy. I think he is attempting to drain the energon and inerton radioactivity. Do you not feel it weakening? I am able to maintain my shape for minutes at a time now... But it is costing him dearly... \**

Superman risked another glance at the Oan, appalled at what he saw. The alien's face was sunken in, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. His entire body seemed to tremble.

*It's killing him! Tell him to stop!*

*\*I have. He will not heed me.\**

His teeth clenched, Superman vowed that this was another thing Dark-seid was going to answer for...

At that moment, the Lord of Apokolips was on the balcony of his palace, overlooking the teeming misery of Armagetto. He watched the mindless theta-drones marching in orderly files into his factories, the snarling dog soldiers wielding their cruel whips on the lowlies, and the parademons patrolling the red skies. His citadel was vast, and a portion of it was actually under siege. The rabble who called themselves the Hunger Dogs had brazenly risen up in revolt, and had several times now attempted to breach his defenses. He had already dispatched forces to destroy them.

But he barely took notice of this. His deep-set, red eyes were focused on the blue and green world that hung in the sky over Apokolips. Here, all his schemes were coming to fruition. Soon he would have all he needed to complete the Anti-Life Equation... and that would give him access to the Great Mysteries...

And then nothing in the multiverse would stand in his way.

Funny that the locus of it all would be that insignificant little world called Earth...

As he considered this, he saw on the horizon three figures in the sky, flying towards his citadel. They were not parademons.

**"Vundabar."** He rumbled at the figure awaiting his master's pleasure. **"We are about to have some visitors from Earth. Prepare them a fitting reception."**

In the short time that Hal Jordan had possessed the power ring he had seen some terrible and amazing things. Apokolips definitely fell into the first category. On the trip from Earth to the dark planet he did not take his eye once from the smoldering, throbbing hellish nightmare before him. He felt like Dante descending into the Inferno.

*Abandon hope all ye who enter here...*

His companions, on the other hand, most assuredly fell into the second category. It was unspoken among them that this was probably a suicide mission. There they were, just the three of them, flying straight into the belly of the beast, into the heart of darkness itself— because it was what they needed to do.

And Hal decided he would not want to be anywhere else.

Because if it were true that the Corps were destroyed, and that this Darkseid had something to do with it, he had some buddies to avenge.

Wonder Woman peered into the distance, appalled by what she saw. She had been through war and traveled through the Underworld itself, but she had never seen such horror and despair and hopelessness. The landscape of Apokolips below them was like something out of Tartarus, flames and soot reaching up into the air. She could make out what could only be the Palace of Darkseid, still miles away, but imposing and arrogant even at this distance.

"Remember," She told the two heroes flying on either side of her. "We go in hard and fast, find Superman, and get off-planet. This is a raid, not a full-on assault."

"Yes, ma'am!" Green Lantern said in a steady voice. She liked him. For being so new to all this, he seemed to be handling this well.

Captain Marvel, on the other hand— she *was* in awe of *him*. He politely deferred to her on tactical matters, but the man stood taller than any other mortal she had ever known. There was a nobility on his brow she had only ever seen before on a god— he exuded leadership, and she knew that if he asked, she would follow him into the dragon's den.

All in all, if she had to die here on this strange, hostile world, she couldn't have asked to do it among better company.

"Wonder Woman!" Came Cap's rich, calm voice. "We have incoming."

Up ahead, the sky had filled with parademons. The winged creatures snarled and came on, armed to the teeth and between the heroes and their objective.

"So much for the element of surprise. Lantern... " Wonder Woman prompted.

"I'm on it."

Green Lantern jabbed his fist at the onrushing foes, and from his ring

sprang an enormous green wedge, parting the mass of parademons as the heroes barreled straight through them, unmolested.

"Neat trick." Captain Marvel grinned at Hal. "Alan Scott would be proud."

"Who?" Hal could spare little attention for anything else, concentrating on maintaining his emerald construct.

But before Cap could answer, something big hit the wedge, nearly causing Hal to lose it. Through the wedge they could see what looked like a giant robot out of a bad Japanese cartoon. But where its head should be was a cockpit, and inside sat a monocled man in what looked like a Prussian military uniform, cackling with glee. The robot raised its arms and rapid fire laser beams assailed Green Lantern's construct.

"I won't be able to hold this much longer... !" Warned the Emerald Gladiator.

"I'll take care of this." Captain Marvel declared, and zoomed off, outside the protection of the wedge.

Virman Vundabar jerked and yanked at the controls of the Killbot, flailing with glee at the quickly failing emerald wedge. He never saw Captain Marvel swoop around behind him.

The World's Mightiest Mortal slammed into the Apokoliptian Killbot, knocking it out of the sky. Vundabar screamed as the giant battlesuit crashed into a hellspore factory, multiple detonations blossoming around him and sending a fireball into the sky. But the Killbot arose from the ashes, and this time, Vundabar was no longer laughing.

"KILL, KILL, KILL!" He spat into his communicator.

As one, the parademon squadrons forgot about their pursuit of the two heroes behind the green wedge, and converged on Captain Marvel!

"Go!" Cap waved to Diana and Hal. "I'll keep them busy. Remember what Ibis said. *Find Superman!*"

Wonder Woman had been on the verge of turning around and going to his aid— but she knew he was right. They couldn't ask for a better diversion. And in Fawcett City, the sorcerer Ibis had said: ... *my immortal beloved the Princess Taia has looked into the mists of prophecy and she has seen clearly: if Superman perishes at the hand of Darkseid, then so perishes the Earth!*

"Come on!" She beckoned to Green Lantern, and not waiting to see if he followed, shot with all speed towards Darkseid's palace.

They took some plasma gunfire from dog soldiers on the battlements of the citadel, but Wonder Woman deflected it with her impenetrable bracelets and Green Lantern throw up an emerald shield. They hit the stone wall of the palace like two arrows shot from the bow of Apollo himself, smashing through stone and steel and every other obstacle in their path. Green Lantern had to work to keep up with her, shaking his head in admiration.

They landed in what appeared to be an armory, dust and smoke settling around them, and klaxon alarms making it hard for them to hear or think. A troop of parademons rounded the corner, weapons blazing. The heroes leaped into action. Wonder Woman charged their ranks, their beams ricocheting from her bracelets. She tore into them, and bodies flew. Green Lantern was a half-step behind her, watching her back and sending parademons smashing into each other with glowing green hands. The scuffle was over in seconds.

That was when Hal noticed something strange going on with his ring. It sputtered, and seemed to be tugging him in a particular direction.

"Huh? That's never happened before... "

Going to a wall laden with weapons, Wonder Woman pulled down an especially nasty-looking double bladed axe. She nodded, satisfied, then looked to Hal.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, I think I'm reading this wrong... " A frown creased the forehead of the Green Lantern. "If I didn't know better, I'd say there was a Guardian here. And very close by!"

She didn't know what a Guardian was, but Wonder Woman had an instinct.

"Follow it!"

The two ran through the halls of Darkseid's palace, this time Green Lantern leading the way and Wonder Woman coming up the rear with her battle-ax. They encountered some little resistance, but nothing that hindered them for very long. Concern for Captain Marvel and what he must be enduring put urgency in their steps.

Soon they came to a vast, open chamber, lit garishly by fires. It was mostly empty, but a huge stone throne sat at the far end of the hall. And behind the throne were crucified three pathetic figures.

One of them was Superman.

He looked up at them, but instead of hope or relief on his face, there was horror!

"No!" He croaked, his voice weak. "Get out of here! It's a trap!"

But by then it was too late. Abruptly, all light was snuffed out, and they were plunged into total darkness.

And from nowhere and everywhere at once, came the sound of deep, malignant laughter...

Hal's ring blazed into life, but only managed to illuminate the area in a tight circle around him and Wonder Woman. The Amazon Princess was crouched and ready for the inevitable fight.

Darkseid's laughter echoed hollowly through the chamber.

*My god, he has an Oan prisoner... !* Hal's mind raced, unwilling to fathom the amount of power necessary to hold one of the Guardians of the Universe. Did this mean Kalibak's claim about the destruction of the Corps was true... ?

**"Did you really think I would leave my prize trophies unguarded?"**

Darkseid's menacing voice reached them, sounding as if he was right behind them. He and Wonder Woman turned about, squinting to pierce the preternatural darkness, but only eliciting more laughter.

**"You are rats, trapped in a cage. Time to squash you."**

With that, there came the sound of multiple engines revving, from all directions.

"GL, we need light!" Wonder Woman's voice was desperate, strained. He could barely make her out, holding the axe aloft against an unseen foe.

The harsh motor-noises grew exponentially louder, and Hal poured all of his will into his ring and the room exploded into green light... And just in time. All across the room, the walls were breached in a sudden detonation of stone and dust, as screeching lunatics on hover-bikes careened inside, whooping and chattering in glee!

*"The Suicide Jockeys ride again!"* They cried! *"Our lives for Darkseid!"*

The heroes barely had enough time to figure out what was going on before the riders sped full tilt at them! The first explosion would have destroyed them both if Wonder Woman had not acted with the speed of Hermes, roping one with her lasso and swinging it back upon the others. The explosion took more of the kamikaze attackers down, but still more came on. Hal threw up a hastily erected shield, upon which two more Jockeys sacrificed themselves, but another two swung in from the other side. Wonder Woman heaved with her battle-ax, lopping off the lead Jockey's front end and causing it to lose its steering ability and detonator. She caught it in her hand and hurled it back into their ranks, the explosion taking out the second Jockey and starting a chain reaction of more explosions.

And still they came on, laughing and screeching as they gave their lives for Darkseid.

*J'onn, this is insane! We have to get free **now!** We have to help them! Superman sent urgently to his Martian ally.*

*\*I know! The Oan has stepped up his efforts... Can't you feel the energon field weakening?\**

In fact, Superman could. This was his chance. He strained harder against his inerton chains, his every muscle bulging, his every nerve firing at the same time. This was the hardest thing he had ever done— he felt his heart pounding in his chest, the vein at his temple throbbing... ! The first link suddenly bent, giving way to his inexorable will... !

With a strangled cry, Superman *burst* his chains just as the energon field sparked and overloaded! The Man of Steel fell on his knees to the floor, gasping for breath and weak as a baby— but free at last!

The Martian and the Oan had collapsed nearby from the strain, groaning weakly. But, as weak as he was, Superman did not hesitate to throw himself into the fray. He leaped across the distance between him and his

rescuers, intercepting a Suicide Jockey that had honed in on the back of the unsuspecting Green Lantern. The Man of Steel tackled the hover-bike and rolled to the floor with it— then it exploded, and he screamed in real pain.

Wonder Woman watched in horror as Superman intercepted the death meant for Green Lantern, cringing at the sound of his agonizing cry. She ducked under a zooming bike, her battle ax slicing it from stem to stern as it lost control and slammed against a far wall, and she dashed to the side of the suddenly still Man of Steel.

She hurled the wreckage of the flaming hover-bike off of him, relieved to see his mighty chest rising and falling ever so minutely. His eyes fluttered and opened.

"Diana... " He managed. "You hang out in some rough places."

Wonder Woman smiled against her will. "I was about to say the same thing to you."

All around them burned and smoked the debris of a dozen or more Suicide Jockeys and their bikes, all dead— burned and twisted in the ruin of Darkseid's throne room. The walls of the room were crumbling and destroyed, revealing the red skies and smoke of Apokolips, a foul-smelling wind whipping through the open-air chamber.

There were flights of parademons in the skies above, but they seemed hesitant to approach, and no more Suicide Jockeys appeared over the horizon. The heroes seemed to have earned a reprieve.

Green Lantern rushed to where the little blue man in the red robe lay unmoving on the floor, bathing him in the green light of his ring.

"Fix him, damn it!" Hal grited his death.

{Guardian Appa Ali Apsa. Condition critical. Approaching catastrophic organic system breakdown. Recommendation: return subject immediately to vicinity of the Central Power Battery on Oa. Chimed his ring.

With that, the Oan actually revived enough to open his eyes. His chest heaved and he labored for breath. Hal winced. The Guardian looked so *frail...*

"That is impossible 2814," Gaspd Appa Ali Apsa feebly. "The Central Power Battery is destroyed. The Corps is betrayed and scattered. Oa is in the hands of our ancient foes, the Manhunters."

"No... " Hal breathed.

"Your ring... It should not work... *How... ?*" The Guardian frowned, but the effort was costly, and it caused him to cough, blood flecking his lips.

"I don't know!" Hal tried to soothe the Guardian, forming a pillow and mattress beneath him. "But it's full of juice! Like it's turbo-charged.

But this mystery was too much for Appa Ali Apsa to contemplate. He reached out, grabbing Hal by the front of his uniform, pulling him close in.

"You must protect him... In the great city I found him... He has no idea the power he holds now... "

"Who?"

"The Torchbearer... !"

And with that, the Guardian's eyes closed and his hand fell limply to his breast.

"We must go." Came a new, unfamiliar voice. The Martian Manhunter regained his form and pulled himself to his feet. He staggered under his own weight for a moment; it would be a while before any of them recovered from their stay on Apokolips. "Before it is too late."

Green Lantern stood, bearing the prone body of the Guardian, and Wonder Woman helped Superman to his feet, allowing him to lean against her.

**"It is already too late, Martian."**

All of them whirled at the sound of the dreaded voice. Darkseid stood framed in a hole in the wall, smoldering flames flickering at his feet.

**"From the minute all of you stepped foot on my world it was too late."**

His eyes blazed and red beams shot from them. Green Lantern juggled his burden into one hand and jabbed his fist at Darkseid's attack. An emerald stream of light lanced out for the Omega Beams, and the two forces collided to devastating effect. The explosion caused the entire room to shake, and the feedback sent GL flying backward, dazed.

Darkseid stomped into the room, his every footfall cracking stone tiles on the floor. The look on his face was one of profound annoyance.

It was the Martian Manhunter who got to Darkseid first, hurtling across the room so fast he became a blur. He hit Darkseid head on— to little effect. The god had braced himself, and J'onn J'onzz rebounded on impact, skidding across the room until he landed in a heap and was still.

Superman almost fell again as Wonder Woman released him to charge Darkseid. She ran at him full tilt, the battle-ax raised above her head. The dark god merely laughed and allowed her to come on, only lifting an eyebrow as she smashed the weapon into his chest. The blade shattered into a thousand pieces against Darkseid's granite hide, and he lashed out at her with an almost negligent backhanded swipe that sent her crashing into a far wall.

Superman screamed her name and summoned everything he had left for

a running swing at his captor. Darkseid only smiled scornfully and raised his hand— and caught Superman's fist in his own! He glared down at the pained Man of Steel, squeezing his hand and forcing Superman down.

**"If you are the best this world has to offer, then Earth is surely doomed!"**

The dark god's other arm rose, the fist clenched and ready to land the pulverizing blow to Superman's defiantly upturned face.

Then Darkseid was hit from behind with a force like unto a divine thunderbolt!

The dark god released Superman and staggered forward, rearing in pain— a sensation he hadn't felt in untold eons. He whirled, real anger boiling within his breast now!

Face to face with him, crawling from the crater his comet-like entrance had created, was Captain Marvel!

Superman could hardly believe his eyes. There he was, larger than life, his idol, his inspiration, the World's Mightiest Mortal, Captain Marvel! His skin tingled with excitement and terror at the same time. Cap looked fierce, his jaw squared, crouched in a fighting stance— but Darkseid was a god. And a very angry one now, at that!

**"I don't know who you are, human, but you are about to receive the privilege of meeting the most gruesome end I have ever dealt a foe!"** Darkseid snarled.

Captain Marvel laughed. "Tell it to your giant killer robot." He shot back. "You may not find all the working parts to reassemble that one! And you can call me Captain Marvel!"

With a roar that shook the room, Darkseid rushed his foe. Despite his

size and immensity, the dark god was fast, in fact, he was an excellent combatant! But to do damage, he first needed to connect. Possessed of the speed of Mercury, Cap dodged the fearsome blow that smashed a hole in the spot he had stood only a fraction of a second before. He lashed out with his fist, doing little or no injury to Darkseid except to add the force of the blow to the god's own momentum and send him crashing into a wall across the room.

Captain Marvel turned on Wonder Woman and hissed: "Get them out of here! Now!"

The Amazon Princess was just regaining her senses, and could barely register what he meant.

Darkseid was wasting no time. He emerged from the stone and dust of his impact, burning with fury.

"GO!" Cap yelled at her, then rocketed across the room at Darkseid, catching the god by surprise with his attack.

In increasing admiration and awe, Wonder Woman watched as Captain Marvel pummeled Darkseid, not really hurting him, but not giving his enemy time to recover and counter-attack. She could feel the blows like waves of concussion from where she stood. But she could also see that this tactic would not work for long; Captain Marvel was doing little real damage to his foe, and sooner or later Darkseid would throw off the barrage and unleash his full might and fury.

And Darkseid had already demonstrated he could take them all down, especially in their weakened state.

But Captain Marvel would not allow this. He was giving them the time they needed to escape. Buying it with his life. She would not allow that to be in vain.

"GL, we've got to get out of here!" She yelled across the room, running over to Superman. Green Lantern was getting groggily to his feet, his hand on his aching head.

"But—!"

"No buts!" She yelled over the concussion of the blows Captain Marvel continued to rain down on the temporarily stunned Darkseid. She was struggling with Superman at the same time, as he tried weakly and in vain to move past her and go to the aid of his hero.

Green Lantern took in the situation and grasped it in a second. His throat caught, but he nodded to Wonder Woman, and used his ring to scoop up the still forms of Appa Ali Apsa and the Martian Manhunter, encasing them in a protective green bubble.

"Get out of my way, Diana!" Superman cried frantically. "He needs our help! We can win this right here!"

He didn't get it, or he refused to see it. He could barely stand himself, GL was dazed and drained and both the Martian Manhunter and the Oan Guardian were at death's door, if not knocking on it even now. Darkseid was physically unstoppable. If they were to defeat him, it wouldn't be by force of arms, and certainly not by them in their weakened and battered state.

At that moment, the dark god found an opening in the flurry of blows Captain Marvel was raining on him, and used it to land a punch of his own. The World's Mightiest Mortal cried out and was sent smashing first into what remained of a ceiling, then falling with a crash to the floor.

"**NO!**" Superman took advantage of Wonder Woman's own shock at the fall of Captain Marvel to slip past her.

Darkseid had regained his dire mirth and was laughing again as he rose, advancing to finish off his opponents.

Captain Marvel may have been down, but he was not out. Ignoring the menace only a few steps away from him, he pulled himself up, his eyes on Superman.

"Remember, Clark. For all mankind... "

He noticed Wonder Woman looming over the Man of Steel and nodded his approval at what she was about to do.

"*Capt—!*" Superman dropped like a stone from the double-handed blow Wonder Woman brought down on him. He crumpled at her feet, out cold.

Captain Marvel nodded once, then, his jaw set in grim resolve, he turned back to Darkseid.

**"Touching, but for naught."** The dark god sneered. **"You can count the rest of your existence in seconds, Captain Marvel. And then your friends will be again at my mercy."**

"I don't think so." Said the World's Mightiest Mortal, with no trace of bravado. This was simply the truth. He would not let Darkseid have them.

Then, trusting that Wonder Woman knew what she had to do, he went at Darkseid with everything that he had!

Slinging the unconscious Superman over her shoulder, Wonder Woman yelled to Green Lantern: "Now! *Hurry!*"

He had been waiting for the moment. Sparing only a millisecond for the titanic clash occurring only feet away, Green Lantern shot into the air, trailing his green bubble and the bodies within.

Her instinct warring with her reason, Wonder Woman almost threw herself into fearsome battle between Darkseid and Captain Marvel. The two stood in the center of the room, trading blows that would have leveled mountains, neither bothering to waste the effort to block. The only difference was, while Darkseid was taking the blows and laughing, Captain Marvel was being beaten to death!

But he was doing the impossible. He was holding back the god. He was giving them their one chance to escape. She would not allow that sacrifice to be in vain!

*You are the noblest, most heroic soul I have ever known, She silently sent to him as she took off after Green Lantern, carrying the unconscious Superman over her shoulder. May all the gods gather you to their bosom...*

Darkseid drove his fist down hard upon his opponent, watching with satisfaction as he fell to his knees, swaying and weak-limbed.

The dark god's lip curled. This human was finished. He would be dead in seconds, his mighty heart already fluttering weakly in his chest. He looked up: Wonder Woman and Green Lantern were dwindling into the distance, headed for Earth, but they were still close enough for his Omega Beams!

Darkseid's eyes glowed crimson...

A feeble, trembling human hand shot up, fist clenched, and clawed at the dark god's side.

*"I— said— NO! SHAZAM!"*

And in the spaces between the nanoseconds, before the magical thunderbolt hit, C.C. Batson, the World's Mightiest Mortal thought about what he had done with his life... And he smiled.

The explosion on the surface of Apokolips could be seen and heard even from Earth orbit. Both Wonder Woman and Green Lantern had to turn and watch, appalled at the magnitude of the blast. It came from where Darkseid's palace had once stood.

"The anger of the gods themselves was in that thunderbolt." Wonder Woman noted with tempered satisfaction.

Hal nodded appreciatively. "Must have detonated all those weapons we saw in the armory. Nothing could have survived that."

But Wonder Woman looked grim and disagreed.

"Darkseid did. But Captain Marvel gained us a little time. Let's go... "

They had rescued Superman, the Martian Manhunter and the Guardian. And they had dealt Darkseid a blow he would not soon forget.

Together, they continued on towards Earth, nursing the glimmer of hope that had been lit in their breasts...

### Epilogue

Parademons and dog soldiers crawled through the wreckage of Darkseid's palace, with Desaad himself leading the frenzied search. The sycophantic schemer was on his hands and knees, shifting rubble and rocks, desperate for some sign of his lord and master.

The dark god emerged at last, crawling ignominiously from a mountain of debris, a fury upon him like unto no other that Desaad had ever seen.

"My dread lord! You live!" Desaad crowed.

Darkseid's eyes blazed and his Omega Beams shot at Desaad, encompassing the torturer in a red nimbus of agony! Desaad wiggled and twitched, taking almost as much delight in the pain as his cruel master did.

**"Of course I live, dolt. I am Darkseid."** He shut off the Omega Effect, allowing Desaad to fall, sniveling, to the earth. **"If only Captain Marvel had survived as well, so that I might know the joy of tearing him apart atom by atom. But that accursed thunderbolt vaporized the body. So frail, these humans, and yet they have a capacity to surprise unlike**

anything else in the multiverse... "

Desaad whined and drooled, but pulled himself to attention before his lord.

"**Worm, is the Infernal Machine ready?**" Darkseid growled, his tone leaving Desaad in no doubt that there was only one right answer.

"Yes, dread lord!"

"**Excellent.**" The Master of Apokolips craned his head up at the blue and green world that was an affront to his sight. "**Prepare it for launch. I am weary of this world...**"

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