



Danger Trail #18
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Previously...

... Rose Psychic, Eel O'Brien, and Speed Saunders struggled through an ancient Templar stronghold while in battle with agents of the enigmatic Society of Six in order to reach a lost suit of mystical armor called the Suit of Sorrows; they allied with Walter Carmichael, the current champion of the Sacred Order of St. Dumas called Azrael, who was also present to find the Suit, and in succeeding, they also found an ancient skull that provided a complete recitation of the First Prophecy that now propels them. Meanwhile, Rose's other allies, the vampire Andrew Bennett, the man called Midnight and warrior-monk Trin Dee have also battled the Society of Six, and learned of their interest in Africa for a reason still unknown, locked away in piles of papers our heroes collected up and made off with; and now, both groups unknowingly converge on each other in a small Adriatic island that could tilt the balance of battles waged far and near on...

The DANGER TRAIL!

Issue #18: "Affairs of Blood and Fate, Part Two"

The Angel of Death!

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"I have to agree with Eel on this one," Cyril 'Speed' Saunders said as the four adventurers walked up the salt-caked, worn wooden stairs away from the dilapidated docks. His blue eyes glanced around at the low-built, rough-and-tumble buildings that sprawled haphazardly away from the shoreline and he shrugged up into his balmacaan jacket for warmth. "Are you sure this is where we need to go next? Because of all the places in the world I have every intention of visiting, Zandia isn't on the list."

Eel O'Brien stood next to Speed and pressed his sunglasses up closer to his face, not that he needed them. It was gray and dreary, and a drizzle fell from the sky that made everyone just a little more uncomfortable than before. "You know someplace is bad when I don't feel safe in my own element," he joked as he looked back at the others. "Where do we go from here?"

“There is no safe haven here for me or my people,” Walter Carmichael declared in a hard voice, narrow eyes focused on the broken cobblestone streets of the Prita, the main port town of Zandia. “The Church never came back after the betrayal of Father Sebastian, not even when his vile Church of Blood was overthrown after the Great War.”

“I don’t think the Catholic Church will want to help us if they find out about our activities anyway, Azrael,” Rose Psychic assured their newest ally. “Trucking in speaking skulls and heretical secret societies doesn’t sit well with the Holy See.”

“Still doesn’t answer our two main questions, Rose,” Speed said. “Where do we go, and is it anywhere here?”

The quartet had slowly moved down the road that skirted the town square, eyes peeled for trouble as the citizenry gave them wide berth. They carried a variety of packs and trunks with them now, as they continued to accumulate objects of power, and this weighed them further as the rain started to get harder, and their attitudes grayed with the weather and burdens until something caused Rose and Speed to stop fast and grin to each other.

“My apologies,” Speed said, with a wink at Rose. “From now on, I’ll keep that last name of yours in mind when I ask you if you know what you’re doing.”

“What?” Eel asked and looked down the road that led from Prita out into the countryside. From that direction came an old, battered car that sputtered and protested each foot it was made to travel. Behind the wheel was a man in a sleeveless blue jacket and a tattered blue fedora, and a mask.

The man called Midnight grinned and honked the horn, pulled the car to the side and slid up to sit on the open window. “Well, fancy meeting you here, Speed.”

“Midnight, ol’ bean! How are you doing?” Speed asked. He reached his hand out to shake, but Midnight jammed the opposite hand out instead, and the blond adventurer could see the heavy bandage on his friend’s

good hand. "Looks painful."

Midnight looked over the other four before he answered. "Could have been worse. The rest of the fall could have been really painful." He watched for reactions and sighed heavily when he saw them. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

"You *really* hate the Danger Trail, don't you?" Speed laughed as he opened up the trunk of the car and started to pack bags with the group's help. "You'd be less surprised and ambushed by it, if you just accepted it."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm Midnight. You guys are?"

"Eel O'Brien," the grifter said with a wry grin and a sarcastic salute. "This is my girl, Rose." Rose and Speed both regarded the man curiously at that comment but said nothing.

"I'm called Azrael," Walter said with a curt nod of his head as he personally moved the trunk with his armor into place.

"Well, good to meet you all. I was headed down to wait for another ship due in later this evening," Midnight explained as they all piled into the car, Walter in the passenger's seat. Rose chose to settle onto Eel's lap in the cramped back seat, but almost as if to put him back in his place, folded her lower legs up with Speed and winked at him as the mystery man set about turning the car around. "Special delivery, I'm sure you can figure out," Midnight continued to explain, knowing Speed and Rose at least would understand it was Andrew's arrival in question. "But I can haul you guys back to where we're staying."

"Where's that?" Eel asked as he tried to ignore the uncomfortable situation he put himself in.

"Turns out, our friend Trin Dee's people have a place here in the lovely, scenic rural land of Zandia," Midnight replied. "So we're on our way to a monastery of the... um... Faith of the Full Circle, is their formal name, I believe."

"I am unfamiliar with this sect," Walter said warily.

"Not surprising. They're Oriental in origin, spreading west slowly. I think this is as far west as they've gotten," Midnight answered. "But they're good eggs. Into giving people a chance for redemption, second chances."

Walter mulled those words and nodded slowly. "I can get behind that."

"So, Azrael. That's a pretty fancy handle for a person with an upper Midwestern accent," Midnight commented as the car sped along the low-lying Zandian farms. "I'm guessing you're not a local boy?"

"You're good," Walter replied as he stared straight ahead. "Michigan. Copper Country."

"Mill Valley, California, myself," he said without encouragement. After a few quiet seconds, he added, "You were voted Most Talkative in school, weren't you?"

"I've learned to talk when it's important." Walter glanced out his passenger window then added, "And I was a defensive tackle actually."

"Really? Wide receiver, myself."

"Well isn't that a buzz," Walter replied and looked at Midnight.

The car pulled up before a stone wall that encircled a small stone building, that stood on an isolated outcropping of the very rock that now housed the monks within. Trin Dee stepped forward, surprised to see Midnight's return so soon, and then smiled when she saw why, greeting Speed and the others with a low bow. She gave an arched look to Midnight when he chuckled at the sight of her.

"What's so funny? I'm the comedian, and I hate being left out of the joke," Eel said as he watched the silent exchange.

"Midnight finds my attire humorous," she said as she helped the others collect their gear and bring them into the compound. She was dressed in the gray robes of her order, and now that it was pointed out, Speed also chuckled. She flashed him an icy stare. "Midnight shares many things

with me. He may make light of this. *You, Mr. Saunders, can be respectful of the people who are taking you in.*"

Eel glanced at the mystery man and noticed how Midnight looked sheepish at Trin's words and he elbowed the mystery man in the ribs. "You hound. She's quite the tomato."

"Behave yourself, Eel," Dave Clark growled under his breath. "I've got to head back and wait for our package. You guys enjoy catching up."

Night had fully arrived by the time he'd returned and the ship had arrived. Money changed hands and Midnight was left with the steamer trunk in a quiet part of the pier. He undid the padlocks, let the chains slide out of place and opened the lid, allowing Andrew Bennett to step out into the night.

"My thanks, good sir," Andrew said in that velvet voice of his, unruffled by the mode of transport.

"Glad to be of help. Just wait 'til we get back to the monastery though. Rose's group popped up, and I get the feeling that can't mean anything good." Midnight led the way back to the car as Andrew followed along, the large trunk carried along in one arm as if it were a suitcase.

"How fortuitous," Andrew said as they got underway.

"Yeah, and just wait until you see who they picked up along the way," Midnight added as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "You two are gonna get along famously."

Neither of them had noticed the small party of people that disembarked the ship at another part of the pier. Not that it mattered; thanks to the underhanded dealings Midnight had set up, the trio had failed to notice them as well. Instead, Zara of the Crimson Flame marched along the wooden pathway over the harbor's water, flanked by two of the Society of Six. They kept careful watch for their mistress, as the priestess herself kept her imperious pace and gaze straight ahead. The night wind tugged at the rich red cloak that draped her body and kept her warm, as behind all three of them floated her fiery eye of a servant.

When she reached the same location that had provided the same initial look of Zandia as Rose's group had experienced hours earlier, they too paused and Zara regarded the town critically. "Quater, Quince, we will waste no time. We begin this very night. Our people call for us, and I will not delay a moment longer restoring our Sanguine Father to his glory."

"Of course, O Priestess," Quater and Quince replied simultaneously. The three headed toward the market square, and the lit windows of the tavern, where men who worked hard in the daylight now drank hard in the night hours; the general store, where the small group of older men played their checkers and talked of better days; those few homes where people remained up.

As the strange-looking trio paced down the cobblestone street, the flickering eye seemed to pulse softly, yellow to orange to red and back to yellow; as it did, several other window-panels were opened up, and people stared down. In the shadows of narrow alleys and cluttered tiny cul-de-sacs, darted messengers that brought hushed and excited news. Slowly, some of these shadows stepped into the comforting glow of the flickering eye, and the regal, sheltering gaze of Zara.

At the tavern, Quater and Quince opened the door and made space for their high priestess to enter with nonchalant ease, her eyes, her servant eye, and now her dozens of followers all staring at the full room filled with raucous, dirty, drunken men.

"I am Zara of the Crimson Flame. The time has come for the flickers of the Crimson Flame left behind in secret to step forward and reclaim their destiny. The time has come for Zandia to be brought back to the true light," Zara announced without looking directly at any one of the ruffians within. "Those who have waited, and prayed and kept this land primed for my arrival, step forward and be greeted warmly. Those who wish to choose this time to reach for something greater, step forward now and be greeted appreciatively. Those who choose this time to keep Zandia free from the great Sanguine Father and his High Priestess," she paused as the fiery servant shifted in the air around her and gazed upon one particularly angry-looking drinker as he gripped his heavy glass bottle by the neck, "die. Horribly."

The eye's flames shimmered in bluish-white and a searing beam of light lanced forward and incinerated the man. He had no time to even scream before he was nothing but ash, and a cauterized hand clutched around the neck of a heavy glass bottle.

The bartender stared and reached under the bar and pulled out whiskey. "Drinks for everyone!" he cried out as his upper lip beaded in sweat. "To celebrate the beautiful Zara!"

She smiled as the crowd cheered; many genuinely, others fearfully, all submissively.

London, England

The tall, lanky man knelt before the altar of God in St. Ethelreda's Church. He prayed fervently, rocked slightly as he spoke each verse in silence, lips moving quickly with each muted word. His hands were clasped so tightly, his fingertips had turned red, and his knuckles were white, and anyone else would notice how much it hurt. But this man, with his crisply-trimmed black hair, light blue eyes and pale skin, didn't notice that. There was no reason to notice such simple discomfort over the cilice he wore around his left bicep and the one around his right thigh. The cuff of small metal rings gently dug at his skin all day, and so crushing his fingers nervously went completely unnoticed.

He heard the footfalls that quietly trailed down the aisle toward him. Even in the depths of the most heartfelt prayer, he didn't lose attention of his surroundings. It was one of the reasons he'd been selected for this meeting, and the important assignment he was about to be given. The priest settled on the pew next to the man and folded his hands in prayerful contemplation, so as not to interrupt the tall, lanky man.

Finally, the lips ceased their silent work, and the man looked up at the priest with those watery blue eyes. "Father Boyd."

"Nicodemus," the priest said as he looked over at the man now, dark eyes meeting the blue ones. Father Boyd looked every day of his fifty years, and maybe more. "Thank you for coming, my son."

"I do what I can for my Father and His Son," Nicodemus replied as he kept his hands clasped tight. "Though something has gripped me with fear. I don't understand."

"You are about to be asked to undertake a mission for the Church," Father Boyd answered softly, and glanced around to ensure their solitude. "One that few others know about. You have the training, the clarity of mind, we think is needed."

"My calling doesn't hurt either, I would assume?"

"No. It doesn't. Universal holiness and all," Boyd answered bluntly.

"And having the deniability of my organization also helps, I assume," Nicodemus added.

"Opus Dei. Yes. My son, you've been asked to do this not because you or your fellows are disposable. You've been chosen because you are very good at what you do."

"What has the Lord seen fit to call on me to do, Father?"

"Glastonbury Tor." Father Boyd spoke the words as if they were all the answer that was necessary. The look on the man's face indicated that they largely were. "Something happened there a couple of months back. We need to know what. And if..."

"I understand."

"... if the Cup..."

"I understand, Father."

"The Vandal was involved, from what we've been able to determine."

Nicodemus let out a long, slow breath as he composed himself and pulled his hands apart. He stood up tall and bowed his head low. "Father, I will do all I can to see that the Cup of Christ does not fall into the hands of evil."

Father Boyd stood now as well and smiled weakly. "I know you will. All of us who know what you're stepping out to do, know you will. God go with you, Nicodemus." The priest gave the sign of the cross in the air before the tall man.

"And also with you, Father." Then the tall lanky man marched out of the church with a determined stride. He stepped out of the building, onto the cloud-covered night, shivered a little, and wondered if the rain would start soon. He hunched into his pea coat and headed down the street, to find his car and begin his journey.

Bristol (Whitchurch) Airport

"So, those of us who expected us to be back here so soon, raise your hands," Midnight said as he, Andrew and Trin stood at the edge of the airport, under the gloomy night sky. "Yeah, I didn't think so either."

"I suppose one of the dozen of us should have checked around to take custody of the Grail," Trin muttered. "I had my focus on other things though."

"I wasn't in much shape to think of grabbing up any trinkets, no matter how sacred," Midnight countered, and they looked over at the vampire.

"Yes, because the creature forced to flinch before the symbol of the Crucifix should have no issue handling the Cup of Christ," Andrew replied without a flinch of his stoic face.

"He does kinda have a point," Midnight chuckled. "Boy, you were really stuck weren't you? Africa, with no place to hide in the day, and slowing our pursuit of the Society and their people. Or you can help us find one of the greatest holy relics in existence."

Andrew allowed a polite chuckle, as it was very true. Indeed, that had been a lengthy discussion back at the monastery days past.

"It seems reasonable to assume that somewhere in Africa is going to be found the 'people that aren't people' the Prophecy discusses," Speed said as he pointed at the marks put onto the map. "We need to get in there and find out just what that

all means."

"What about this twice-named vessel of legend?" Trin asked. "Any ideas there? It seems to me that we should split up, but who goes where?"

"I can think of one object that might fit the twice-named vessel description, and makes sense that it would be involved in a battle between the Order of St. Dumas and whoever the Society and Black Beauty are working for," Rose suggested. She glanced to Andrew as if wanting confirmation, which the vampire offered with a single nod.

"Well?" Eel pressed.

"Pwyll's Cauldron," Andrew answered.

"In Celtic lands, before the coming of Arthur, and later the arrival of Christianity," Rose explained further, "there are legends of magic cauldrons, Pwyll's in particular, which Arthur takes as a spoil. It is supposed to raise the dead by placing the bodies inside, to be boiled." She and Andrew turned their heads toward Eel.

"What? I'm too busy with the screaming meemies just thinkin' about that to make a joke!" Eel protested.

"The Cauldron is dark magic, from the underworld of Annwyn, ancient and primordial power," Andrew continued. "The Grail is light and hope, a new way of thinking."

"The same vessel, with two different perspectives," Speed summed up. "Okay, I'm sold. We need to get the good guys to grab that so it stays the Grail by the end of the First Prophecy."

"You realize the shoeshiner has been keeping a close watch on us, right?" Trin asked, and interrupted Andrew from his reverie.

"Yeah. Wonder who he's working for, and what he's getting paid?" Midnight answered with a grin.

Andrew blinked and looked around. The trio were getting into the rental car, and the vampire chided himself mentally. He'd found that in recent

months, he'd been slipping into memories at inopportune, unexpected times while engaged in mundane activities, and wondered if it was something that came with three hundred plus years of existence.

"I think we're about to find out," Trin said as she pressed her hands up to her leather jacket in preparation. The three of them watched the man race toward them, each with different thoughts.

The man was well-dressed, but in a disheveled state. His hair was a tousle of brown, and his skinny frame in the disarray of a black suit made him look somewhat like a comical scarecrow, as he waved his arms for their attention. "Please! Please! You have to know what's going on!" he cried out to them.

"I'm not so sure I want to know what's going on with him," Midnight murmured to his companions.

Trin responded by suddenly drawing one of her swords and pointing it toward the man, who stopped so suddenly at the sight of the weapon, he fell backward. "Hey! No! I'm on your side!"

"American accent. Interesting. Long Islander, from the sounds of it," Midnight said. "What's up?"

"My name is Avery Updike," he said from where he sat sprawled on the asphalt, out of breath. "They've gone mad! That woman, Black Beauty, she's crazy! Talking about messing with things like the Holy Grail, and some sort of world-wide religion of blood, and new Dark Ages, and all this jive!"

"And what of it?" Andrew asked wearily.

"I want to help... make up for getting stupid and mixed up in all of this," Avery said as he slowly picked himself back off the ground. "Please, I can show you where these guys are, what they're doing."

"Well?" Midnight asked Trin and Andrew.

"I don't trust him," Trin said as she jabbed the sword in his direction.

"I agree. Unless he can tell us something useful," Andrew added.

"Oh, I got something useful," he said as he slowly reached for his coat pocket. "Don't stick me with that, I... I got a paper, something to help... I snatched it from one of those Society drips." He pulled out a folded-up parchment and handed it to Andrew, who reached out to take it.

"Well," Andrew murmured in surprise as he read the unfolded page. "Very well. This is interesting. It's part of the ritual that made the Society of Six. In particular, the part that explains how to undo them."

Midnight narrowed his eyes behind his domino mask. "Okay, I say that earns you a ride with us to Glastonbury, where you can give us some more help, and keep showing us you mean it. But one step outta line..." He nodded his head toward Trin, who just smiled before she flipped her weapon back into her jacket interior.

Avery gulped, nodded and crammed into the backseat.

Congo Basin

"Why am I here, and not the holy quest?" Azrael said as he arrived at the group's embarkation point. Despite the heat, and humidity, Walter refused to wait any longer to don the Suit of Sorrows, to truly don the mantle of St. Dumas's champion, and he looked resplendent in the chain and plate armor.

"Well, where do we start, really?" Speed said as the four of them piled into the truck and started out along the road away from the small town and into the thick jungles. "How about, we can't have Andrew here with us, and we can't have you with Andrew."

Eel gave a brief snicker that was silenced by Rose squeezing his hand hard and giving him that look that Eel was growing accustomed to getting. Instead, he stayed quiet, and thought about how that introduction had gone down.

"Creature of the night! Foul blood-thirsting fiend!" Walter cried out and drew his sword when he saw Andrew Bennett enter the building with Trin's

permission.

"No! It's okay!" Midnight said as he quickly moved in front of Andrew, while Speed stepped up next to Walter and put a hand on his sword arm. "He's not a blood-thirsting fiend. He's okay."

"A vampire. Cursed by God. If he isn't, then this should cause him no trouble," Walter said as he drew forth the cross he wore around his neck, and thrust it up at Andrew.

The vampire recoiled, a hiss showing his sharp fangs. "Don't test me, crusader! We fight the same battle, but I will not be challenged by your rigid dogma!"

Walter shook away from Speed, but a clang of metal was followed by his sword being pushed aside by crossed butterfly swords, as Trin barred his path now. Then Rose stepped up behind Trin, and gave an icy stare.

"We're allies in this, Walter," she said in a voice quiet, but firm. "Including Andrew. You'll have to accept that, at least for now."

"Azrael," he growled. "And as the champion of St. Dumas, it is bad enough my purity of effort is compromised by heresy and blasphemy, but I'll not—"

"False Angel of Death," Trin interrupted and caught his attention. "Remember? You want to be Azrael, and have us accept that? Learn to accept Lord Bennett's presence." She pulled her weapons back now and continued to stare into Walter's eyes. "It was difficult for me as well, at first. You learn to adjust. But the prophecy names you the false Angel."

He cringed at her words but dropped his weapon back into its scabbard and tossed it aside for now. "Blunt. I appreciate that. Fine. We have a vampire as well."

"See, Andrew?" Eel whispered. "Apparently, you grow on people. Like grave mold. Must make you feel great."

Andrew turned to look at Eel and felt a desire to sigh.

"Besides, I suspect we'll need you for whatever we encounter with the people who are not people," Rose added. "There's at least a Second

Prophecy of St. Dumas, and if it's here, we will probably need you to help with it."

"Isn't it gonna be really hot stuck in that tin suit of yours, Walt?" Eel asked as they started to be shadowed by the dark green canopy above.

"Azrael, and it doesn't matter. Our Savior carried his cross through the streets during and after great torture. This is a minor inconvenience," Walter answered without hesitation.

"Okay, good answer." Eel shrugged and looked around, tugging open his collar. "Tell me again why I'm still on this mission, honey? Seems to me, at any point since getting you past those Society crumbs, and picking up real tough guys, I've become excess baggage."

Rose smiled patiently, and patted his cheek softly. "Patrick... " She paused, her smile, mischievous and sweet at once, never wavered. "Patrick, there are things you need to learn."

"Oh, well, that explains it."

"Hey, when else are you ever going to get to explore darkest Africa?" Speed added as he maneuvered the truck along the final stretch of road before they set up a new camp and proceeded on foot. The remainder of the ride passed in relative silence as the darkness and the heat grew more oppressive, until at last, they reached their clearing.

"Okay, last stop, everybody out," Speed said as he shut the vehicle down and hopped out. "Get your gear and let's get ready to hustle. With all of the globe-trotting and planning and trying to carve each other up from time to time, it's safe to say that the bad guys have a good lead on us, even with our shortcuts."

In short order, the four heroes headed out, Speed in the lead to start, machete striking when needed to clear vines as the heat pressed down harder on them now that they had to exert themselves. The animal noises, the relentless green and splashes of brown, and constant movement of creatures in the distance kept them tense, senses on heightened alert as they pushed further in.

Rose consulted the map, and she and Azrael would occasionally lift their heads, and stare hard into the distant wilderness. "You're sensing something too?" the warrior asked.

"Yes. Something watching us," Rose admitted. "I can't pin it down. Nor does it always seem malevolent."

"Oh? Anything spying on us and keeping to the shadows is not something I consider a friend," Azrael stated plainly.

"Well, my senses see things differently," Rose replied. "Sometimes, it seems almost... protective."

"Let's hope you're the one that's right then, when it finally pops out to say boo," Eel said as he moved up closer to Rose. "Hey, Dad," he called out to Speed. "Are we there yet?"

"Only a few million more miles," Speed joked back as he slashed through another entanglement. He wiped at his forehead, and then the back of his neck and even he began to get the feeling now. The Trail was running straight through here, there was no doubt, and he wondered now who else was on it.

Glastonbury

"Well, here we are, back again," Midnight said as the car pulled up close to the ruins-topped hill. "Now what? It's not like we actually know where to look for the thing. Or have digging tools or anything. How do you want to handle this? Any suggestions, Mr. Updike?"

All four got out of the car and looked up at the green rise, taking a moment to consider their options. "They must be here already," Avery said. "She's got three of them with her, too."

"Three on three, that's not too bad, is it?" Midnight chuckled and cracked his knuckles instinctively, then winced in pain from his injured hand.

"They seem outnumbered, really," Trin admitted, not one to boast,

usually. The four of them started to move up the artificial hill and reached the ruins at the top.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my treacherous little toady,” Black Beauty said as the gorgeous woman seemed to slink out of a shadowy corner and turn her eyes on Avery.

Avery shrunk back and hid behind the other three. Down below, a level lower, they all could see the three members of the Society of Six around a small circle inscribed with strange symbols.

“Avery, you disappoint me, but maybe... ooo, maybe this big strong sheik of a man might make up for that?” she purred as she moved toward Midnight, only to stop short when Trin stepped between them.

“You two go and handle that ceremony, I’ll deal with Black Beauty,” Andrew said as he moved forward now as well. Trin and Midnight leaped down into the candle-lit dark as Andrew’s eyes matched with Beauty’s.

“Andrew,” she said with a broad smile. Her dark eyes swirled some, and turned a dark shade of purple instead. “Oh my. My my. Father would be *so* proud of you and your wife,” she added as she faced the towering undead lord without fear.

“Your father? Proud of us? How? You’re no Dee, who... ?”

“Oh silly Andrew. I’m older than that. My father invented that formula the silly old duffer of a hedge wizard dabbled with and showed to you,” Black Beauty said as her eyes grew darker, and Andrew felt as if he could see lightning flash within them. She slipped out a vial of liquid, it was oily and black, and sloshed in a small glass vial.

“Who are you?” Andrew was confused, as his memories stirred up and swirled around Dr. John Dee and his family and the book that contained that horrid ritual of undeath that led him to this existence. Moments passed without his notice, and cost him again.

“That would be telling, Andrew. Suffice to say, I’m not just some silly little gangster, and my beauty isn’t skin-deep,” she teased him with a

throaty chuckle then slammed the vial across his face as she slapped his cheek.

It broke and steamed against his skin and he felt it sink into him, and mingle with his body and freeze him. He felt cold, very cold, and his limbs went numb as he crashed to the ground. She knelt next to him and stroked his hair. "That formula is ancient. More ancient than any magician you would know of, Andrew. Don't worry, you'll get over this, I just can't have you getting in the way right now. Zara, she'd be very unhappy if I came back empty-handed a second time, and I'd hate to have to... get messy with her." She kissed Andrew's lips, and stood up, brushing her velvet dress smooth. "Ta, my dear."

Midnight and Trin crashed through the three straw dummies and into the stone floor, leaving them stunned and unprepared when Furst, Secund and Thrice of the Society of Six stepped forward from further in the dark. "This time, Midnight truly falls," Furst said as he drew a wicked looking curved dagger, and his brothers flanked Trin, still on her hands and knees. "Perhaps, when we retrieve the Cauldron from the depths of the Tor, we will use it to resurrect your bodies and add them to the ranks of the Crimson Flame."

A screeching of tires and a cry of surprise from above caused the Society to glance upward. Black Beauty stumbled away from the Cadillac that had just pulled in to the very front edge of the ruins, and she tumbled toward her allies, as a stranger leaped from the driver's side door. "Get out of there!" the tall, lanky man cried out to Midnight and Trin, who took the opportunity to shake off their fall. They shoved through the three created men and scrambled back up to the surface.

Avery had grabbed up Andrew and dragged him to the car as the stranger pulled out a handgun and fired down at the villains to give the adventurers cover for escape. "Get into the car!" he declared as the Society recovered their wits under the urging of Black Beauty.

"Stop them! Kill at least one of them, will you?" she screamed as they gave chase and she turned her attention to finding the desired vessel. "Enough games, girl, get the job done!" she snapped at herself.

Midnight and Trin staggered into the car as the new arrival back-

pedaled now and the car tore off under Midnight's direction as their rescuer fired a couple of last shots.

"Do you mind introducing yourself?" Trin asked, agitated, her weapons out, and ready to be used on someone.

"My name is Nicodemus," he said. "And at the moment, I think we're going to just have to get along." He pointed and the four conscious people in the car saw how the Society had commandeered Midnight's rental, to continue the pursuit.

The Jungles of Africa

"Well, I know I'm completely lost," Eel announced as the green canopy started to grow darker from the approaching twilight. "Anyone ready to join me?"

"Not me, the map's still making sense as far as I'm concerned," Speed said as he walked alongside Rose, who gave him a heartening smile. "How are you doing up there, Azrael?"

The champion of St. Dumas thundered through the tangles of vines and obstructions, grunting, but refusing to admit any weakness. "I am well! Do we draw near?"

"Honestly, I'm thinking we're going to find whatever's been marked on this map any minute now," Speed answered.

"I agree. In fact, I sense far more watching us than before. Different eyes this time, though. *Very* different eyes." Rose kept a closer watch now, her head darting first one way then the other.

"Your senses are very keen, human," said a low, growling voice, heavy and rough, unused to the English language. From out of the jungle shadows stepped four gorillas; particularly large-looking, and muscled, with suspicious, and intelligent eyes. As they shimmered into view, so did a large tiger, sleek and muscled, and it growled and stared with an intelligence that unnerved the four adventurers. "You have come too close to our home, butchers. But not in time to prevent our friend from alerting

us to your true threat.”

“Um, I don’t think you’ve been given the straight dirt, pal,” Speed said with his hands up high. “See? We’re friendly. We’re here to help you. There’s real villains coming, and we want to help.”

Eel leaned in to Rose and whispered, “Is Speed up there really chatting with talking gorillas like it’s nothing new to him?”

“Yes. Because he’s used to this. Now hush, Patrick,” Rose said with a wink and stepped up next to Speed. “Please. Let us help you.”

“Humans lie and murder and steal, constantly,” the gorilla snarled, as the others snorted, and one thumped his chest angrily. The tiger growled and nuzzled up against the leader. “It is why we have hidden our city, and why you will not be permitted to get closer... or to leave here.”

Azrael drew his sword and tensed. “I have a holy quest, and no blasphemous beast of the jungle will keep me from it!”

“Oh that’ll help our cause.” Speed rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. “We can talk about this! Really! The bad guys are coming! The tiger’s not wrong, but it is about us!”

“Uh, guys,” Eel interjected now. “I’m here ‘cause I’m the con artist right? That tiger... those eyes... I get the feeling that’s the bad guy.” He caught the way the tiger’s mouth curled into a smile, the delight in the green feral eyes as the gorillas slowly spread out to circle the adventurers. “So, what now?”

Meanwhile...

... the two cars raced across the winding stretches of road cutting across the green fields of southern England. The Society closed in steadily, and Nicodemus had grown frustrated when at least two shots struck home to no seeming effect.

“Yeah, that’s about par for the course,” Midnight grumbled. “Time to get back on the offensive. Updike, crawl up here, and take the wheel!”

Midnight rolled the window down and started to shift up out of the car, as Avery did as he was told, grabbing the wheel.

“Ah, that’s my reckless masked man,” Trin said with admiration in her eyes as she drew her swords out and crawled into the back seat and up to the rear window. “I hope the car is not precious to you!” she called up to Nicodemus.

Midnight had gotten onto the running board now, and gave a thumb’s up to Nicodemus when he heard the man reply, “It is only a material possession, spent well in God’s work!” Nicodemus on the other running board nodded in return as Trin kicked the rear window out after a couple of tries.

“Slow us down, Updike,” Midnight called down to the driver. “By ten miles per hour should do it!”

The car began to slow and the Society drew closer as a result. “You know the one thing I love about these guys?” he yelled out to his partners.

“What?” Nicodemus asked.

Trin pulled herself up out of the rear window and leaped into the air. She was graceful, like a ballerina as she spun and twirled between two vehicles. “They react so slowly to things!” she called out for Midnight and then crashed onto the roof, her blades jammed into the metal to stop her slide.

“How does she do that?” Nicodemus cried out to Midnight.

The mystery man shrugged and gave a boyish grin. “I don’t know, but I’m going to find out one of these days. That’s my girl!” He heaved himself into the air with a whoop, not nearly so graceful. Not graceful in the slightest, actually as he hurtled across the space like a brick and his shoulders and upper back crashed through the windshield.

The sudden intrusion caused the car to jerk to the side and Nicodemus shrugged. “When in Rome...” he muttered and leaped onto the now-exposed passenger’s side, and grabbed on with all his might as his feet crashed onto the running board and nearly slid off. Adrenaline and holy

purpose fueled him now, and he shoved his hand into the car and tore one of his foes from the car, and they smashed to the ground together in a tumble of dirt, gravel and blood.

The car rolled off an embankment now, tearing metal and shattering glass a clear signal that the chase had come to a sudden halt. Smoke floated up from the distance, but Nicodemus ignored all that until he had pummeled his foe insensate with his fists. Only then did he pull himself up, and limped to the edge of the road and watched as Trin and Midnight dragged their enemies behind; battered, torn, bloody, smiling and arm in arm.

“I fear that all of this excitement will have given our true enemy, that woman I saw, the time to do what she needed to do,” Nicodemus said to bring the euphoric couple back down to Earth.

Midnight nodded and wiped the blood from his mouth and set about securing the three Society members. He looked up at Trin, who slid her blades back into the jacket.

“You are correct. We will need to regroup, heal and let our ally recover, and figure out our next step,” Trin said as her face returned to its normal stoic mask. “Back to the monastery?”

Midnight nodded as they watched Avery drive back up to them. “Back to Zandia.”

TO BE CONTINUED in New Outsiders #48!

*Two groups of heroes in two different times face two different prophecies, innumerable foes and seemingly insurmountable odds to keep the world from falling into darkness! In the present day, Brother Blood gathers greater and greater power as his minions strike at the New Outsiders in more terrifying ways, while in the past, foes they don't even know are waiting for their chance to strike, and make the Time of Choices their own! Don't miss part three of **Affairs of Blood and Fate!***

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From the same author on Feedbooks

Danger Trail #1 (2007)

Danger Trail: The Blood & Dragon Affair, Part 1 (of 3)

Danger Trail #2 (2007)

Danger Trail: The Blood and Dragon Affair, Part 2 (of 3).

Ninjas and vampires and diabolical plots, oh my! King Faraday, Speed Saunders and the Enemy Ace are joined by a masked crime-fighter as they face two secret societies with a monstrous agenda! Pulp action at its finest as we seek out...the Danger Trail!

Danger Trail #3 (2007)

Danger Trail: The Blood and Dragon Affair, Part 3 (of 3).

Learn the mission of the Blood Red Moon! Uncover the mastermind behind the Black Dragon Society! Watch our heroes try and work together when some can't trust others, and one has no clue that there's cavalry coming to the rescue! Who would have thought marital strife could be so much danger for the heroes, or so entertaining for the readers! It's the conclusion to "The Blood and Dragon Affair!"

Danger Trail #4 (2007)

Danger Trail: The Verdant Darkness Affair, Part 1 (of 2)

Mightiest Mortals #1 (2007)

Mightiest Mortals: With a Stroke of Lightning!

Mightiest Mortals #2 (2007)

Mightiest Mortals: In a Crash of Thunder

Mightiest Mortals #3 (2007)

Captain Marvel: Under a Seal of Six Gods!

Justice League #8 (2007)

Justice League: Lucky Number 7.

What are the chances that a rash of good fortune across the globe could be the League's next case? Pretty good when this luck starts rewriting the laws of the universe and threatening the existence of

ages-old mystic defenses keeping ancient, primordial forces at bay!

Justice League #9 (2007)

Justice League: To See Tomorrow.

Why are there hawk soldiers of Thanagar on Earth? Who are the strange new superhumans appearing around the globe, testing and probing local governments? What exactly is the Justice League facing when a quartet of self-proclaimed heroes declares Earth "their last stand?" It's the beginning of an epic threat wrapped inside two strange mysteries that will leave the Justice League hoping that Earth survives "To See Tomorrow!"

Justice League #10 (2007)

Justice League: To See Tomorrow, Part Two (of Four).

"To See Tomorrow" continues as the stakes only get higher and secrets slowly start to unravel. Hawkman and the Martian Manhunter are caught between the Thanagarian invaders and their own satellite! The rest of the League is caught between Mon-El and Wandjina! And in the big picture, it's all symbolic of the Earth being caught between the enigmatic Overmaster and a still-hidden mastermind with dreadful intent!

Danger Trail #5 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Verdant Darkness Affair, Part 2 (of 2).

What connection lies between la Llorona's kidnapped children and Nyola's captured heroine Rima? What is drawing the natives of Central America and Mexico together? Speed Saunders, King Faraday and Midnight are joined by Doctor Occult to learn the truth before an Empire of Blood washes over the land!

Weird Western Quarterly #11 (2008)

Johnny Thunder: Steel Heart Iron Soul.

As Johnny Thunder, John Tane has evaded the deathbed oath to his mother never to do violence, and become Mesa City's great protector. Now he's about to be challenged on a whole new level when a powerful land baron makes a grab for greater wealth and glory, and the enigmatic renegade, Madame .44, has Johnny Thunder's heart in her sights! What might be his most dangerous

mission yet will also be the first chapter in a ballad of love and gunslinging like the Wild West has yet to see!

Danger Trail #6 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Man in Stitches Affair, Part 1 (of 2)

Danger Trail #7 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Man in Stitches Affair, Part 2 (of 2).

The Revenant Program proceeds apace as Saunders and Midnight must struggle with former ally King Faraday to find the evidence that can shut down Doctor Zero for good! Maybe, just maybe, newcomer Argent St. Cloud can help out!

Speeding Bullet #4 (2008)

Bulletman: The Birth of Bulletman, Part 4 (of 4): Man Made Gods. This is it! The mystery is revealed and the gloves come off as Bulletman duking it out with the Murder Prophet and his god of murder, the Nihilist! Can he come through his baptism of fire and blood intact? And even if he wins, does the Prophet truly get the last laugh?

Danger Trail #9 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Nation of Murder Affair, Part 2 (of 2).

As Speed Saunders and King Faraday join Argent St. Cloud to search for Michael Gallant, a wave of murders leaves the city of New York reeling as the heat rises, tempers flare, and Rue Morgue revels in the bloodbath!

Danger Trail #8 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Nation of Murder Affair, Part 1 (of 2).

Gangsters want Thomas Dewey dead at all costs, bringing Michael Gallant onto the case, Argent St. Cloud at his side! But when Murder, Inc. steps up to the challenge, can even he call on enough reinforcements to save the day?

Danger Trail #10 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Stolen Myth Affair, Part 1 (of 3).

It begins here! Threads woven from the start of the series, put into play centuries beforehand, all start to come together in this issue, as familiar faces return to the scene, dark forces gather for the

attack, and the secrets of the Trail yawn wide and threatening! All this and a special guest-star...the Queen of the Amazons!

Danger Trail #11 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Stolen Myth Affair, Part 2 (of 3).

Things heat up for our heroes as the Dragon Queen and the Queen of Blood unite to betray Vandal Savage; Savage raids Washington, D.C. to acquire the Ineffable Libram; and King Faraday and Speed Saunders face off with Queen Hippolyta and Rima the Jungle Woman! Things couldn't get any worse than this, could they?

Danger Trail Annual #1 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Savage Sins Affair.

As the Stolen Myth Affair heats up, as a covert war rages on the Danger Trail, take a peek inside the history of the man who has set this all into motion...Vandal Savage! Balloon Buster Steven Savage is doing just that as he uncovers threads and connections surrounding the many figures of the age that all lead back to this diabolical mastermind, some stretching back centuries! If the truth about him can't be unraveled soon, those threads will choke the present day and continue into the future!

Danger Trail #12 (2008)

Danger Trail: The Stolen Myth Affair, Part 3 (of 3).

Vandal Savage begins his plan to bring the world into his control! King Faraday, Speed Saunders and Midnight, along with their assembled allies, make their bid to stop him, but there are three queens in this game, and each one has their own vision for how the endgame should play out! It's the end of the first year on the Danger Trail...is it also just the end?

Speeding Bullet #1 (2008)

Speeding Bullet, Part 1 (of 4): Modern Gods.

James Barr has developed a special device that allows him tremendous powers! Now he steps into a new world of masked men and heroic deeds, but is he really ready to take his place among the world's newest gods? Will the Murder Prophet usher in an age of blood first?

Speeding Bullet #2 (2008)

Speeding Bullet: The Birth of Bulletman, Part 2 (of 4): Deepest Secrets.

James Barr steps into costume for the first time, and Bulletman is on the case of the Obermyer murders. But so is another person...the actual killer, a mysterious being called the Murder Prophet, who is paving the way for his master, and the police and the rookie hero struggle to catch up and stop him!

Speeding Bullet #3 (2008)

Speeding Bullet: The Birth of Bulletman, Part 3 (of 4): Bleeding Truths.

The race is on to uncover the real killer as Detectives Farley and Doherty try to dig through the murder mystery, Martin Obermyer meets the killer and Bulletman stumbles in a critical way, leaving him to face the fury of his wife!

Mightiest Mortals #4 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: Wielding Fists of Virtue.

Captain Marvel is caught between a throwdown with Ibac and Sivana launching an all-out assault on our hero and the Fawcett itself! As bad as that is, though, it gets worse for Kit Freeman...much worse! Meet Sabbac!

Mightiest Mortals #5 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: Scenes of a Day

Mightiest Mortals #6 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: Between Opposing Forces.

Freddy finds himself having the most startlingly worst day of anyone's life! Can it be worse than losing a close relative? What about the dark secret within another relative? Or the secrets being held by his best friend? It all comes crashing down on him in a terrible avalanche of revelations! All this while the city moves on without him!

Mightiest Mortals #7 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: From the Shadows of Twisted Minds.

Get ready for action and excitement! Freddy buries his cousin, Christopher Freeman, and has another showdown with his stepbrother Tim Karnes. And we discover just how fiendish Sivana

can be when he pushes Captain Marvel's every attribute in an issue in which the World's Wickedest Scientist...doesn't even appear! All this, and the fate of Beautia!

Mightiest Mortals #8 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: To the Truth of the Matter.

Billy and Freddy have their confrontations on secrets kept, power hoarded and relations hidden, all the while the forces of the law struggle to keep Lady Justice apart from her new champion and Miss Minerva asserts her innocence!

Mightiest Mortals #9 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: The Abyss of Blood Relations

Fawcett City goes on despite the gang war, despite the debut of new heroes, despite it all, Fawcett City goes on. Come and see how it does, as Chief Kitchens deals with the presence of Captain Marvel and what it means for his police force! And has Miss Minerva over-played her hand?

Mightiest Mortals #11 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: The Tide of Heroism.

The beginning of the stunning two-part finale to Captain Marvel's first year! Sabbac has gone on a rampage, and Ibac is taking advantage of the chaos! Bulletman struggles to intervene, but everyone wants to know where Captain Marvel is! All this and more (and boy, do I really mean it this time)!

Mightiest Mortals #10 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: The Punishment of Good Deeds.

Amazing origins issue as we discover the secret behind the magic words, and the history of Sabbac and Ibac! Freddy walks into a deathtrap, Victor Craize starts to feel the power of the people, and the police make a startling discovery about Miss Minerva!

Mightiest Mortals #12 (2008)

Mightiest Mortals: By an Act of Love.

This is it! Sabbac is on a rampage! Ibac sends his men out against the leaderless forces of his gangland opponent! Into the middle of this stands Captain Marvel and his allies! When the smoke clears, who will stand triumphant?

Nightwing #30 (2008)

Nightwing: The Riddle of the Sphinx.

Just when you'd think Dick's got enough trouble juggling Titans duties as Nightwing, solo duties as the Batman, and mentoring duties with Tim, things get harder. There's a new villain hitting the streets, one with a dangerous delusion, and Dick's not happy to see that Nightwing is apparently on the case, without Dick's permission! Come and join us for "The Riddle of the Sphinx!"

Nightwing #31 (2008)

Nightwing: Riddle of the Sphinx, Part 2 (of 2)

Dick must try to get to the bottom of the crazed King Tut and foil his rampages, but he also needs to figure out how to deal with the new Nightwing! As he digs up more information on both, all three men spiral into a collision course of tragic proportions, and Professor McElroy might just be the ultimate victim in all of this!

Justice League #11 (2008)

Justice League: To See Tomorrow, Part Three (of Four).

Things are falling into place at a rapid pace now... for the villains! With the League stretched thin across the globe, friends come racing to the rescue and the action only heats up! Watch Hawkgirl lead the storming of the JL satellite; witness Superman confront Mon-El over his mysterious mission; and thrill to the throwdown between Wonder Woman and the Persuader, as the master villain behind it all draws closer to his goal! All this and more!

Danger Trail Vol. 1 (2009)

This volume collects Danger Trail #1-12 as well as Danger Trail Annual #1. This is the complete first story arc in which our pulp heroes confront the treachery of the Blood Queen, the Dragon Queen and their mysterious backer. Stay tuned for Danger Trail #13 coming soon!

Danger Trail #13 (2009)

Danger Trail: The Brown Lady Affair, Part 1.

In the wake of the battle with Vandal Savage, Speed Saunders has set his sights on finding the Sigil of Seven; that quest being his only remaining link to the missing (and treacherous) Harriet

Cooper! His friends Argent St. Cloud and Michael Gallant, along with ally Doctor Occult, want to know what his intentions are, but first they must untangle a dark scheme involving the ghosts of Great Britain!

Mightiest Mortals #13 (2009)

Mightiest Mortals: Opening Passages.

As Fawcett City recovers from the fall of Ibac and Sabbac, our heroes find more things to be worried about. Susan Barr must prosecute the bloodthirsty Tim Karnes while reassessing her stance on costumed crime-fighters; Dudley must wrestle with what he should reveal to Billy, and Billy must deal with the fact that Freddy refuses to return to his crippled body!

Danger Trail #14 (2009)

Danger Trail: The Brown Lady Affair, Part 2 (of 2).

Speed Saunders must deal with the fact that the artifact Harriet had been searching for, the Sigil of Seven, is Doctor Occult's primary weapon against supernatural evil! In the wake of her treachery, what can that mean? And none of our heroes can take the time to figure it out now, as they struggle to save Michael Gallant from the Dagger of Koth!

Danger Trail #15 (2009)

Danger Trail: The Falkenstein Affair.

Once rivals of the air and enemies at war, now the Enemy Ace and the Balloon Buster must work together to penetrate the secrets of Castle Falkenstein and the strange mad scientist ready to bring two worlds together to fuel his rise to power!

Danger Trail #16 (2009)

Danger Trail: The Blood of Templars Affair.

Danger Trail #17 (2009)

Danger Trail: The Blood of Templars Affair, Part Two.

Things heat up for our heroes as they head into an ancient Knights Templar castle as one of three groups desperate to unlock its secrets and find a powerful relic that will decide the victor in the opening battles of a far greater war, one that has the attention of

the enigmatic Sanguine Father! A far greater war that echoes across the decades!

Danger Trail #20 (2010)

Danger Trail: Affairs of Blood and State, Part 6 (of 6).

Danger Trail #19 (2010)

Danger Trail: Affairs of Blood and State, Part 4.

Weird Western Quarterly #18 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: Lust Faith Love Treachery.



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