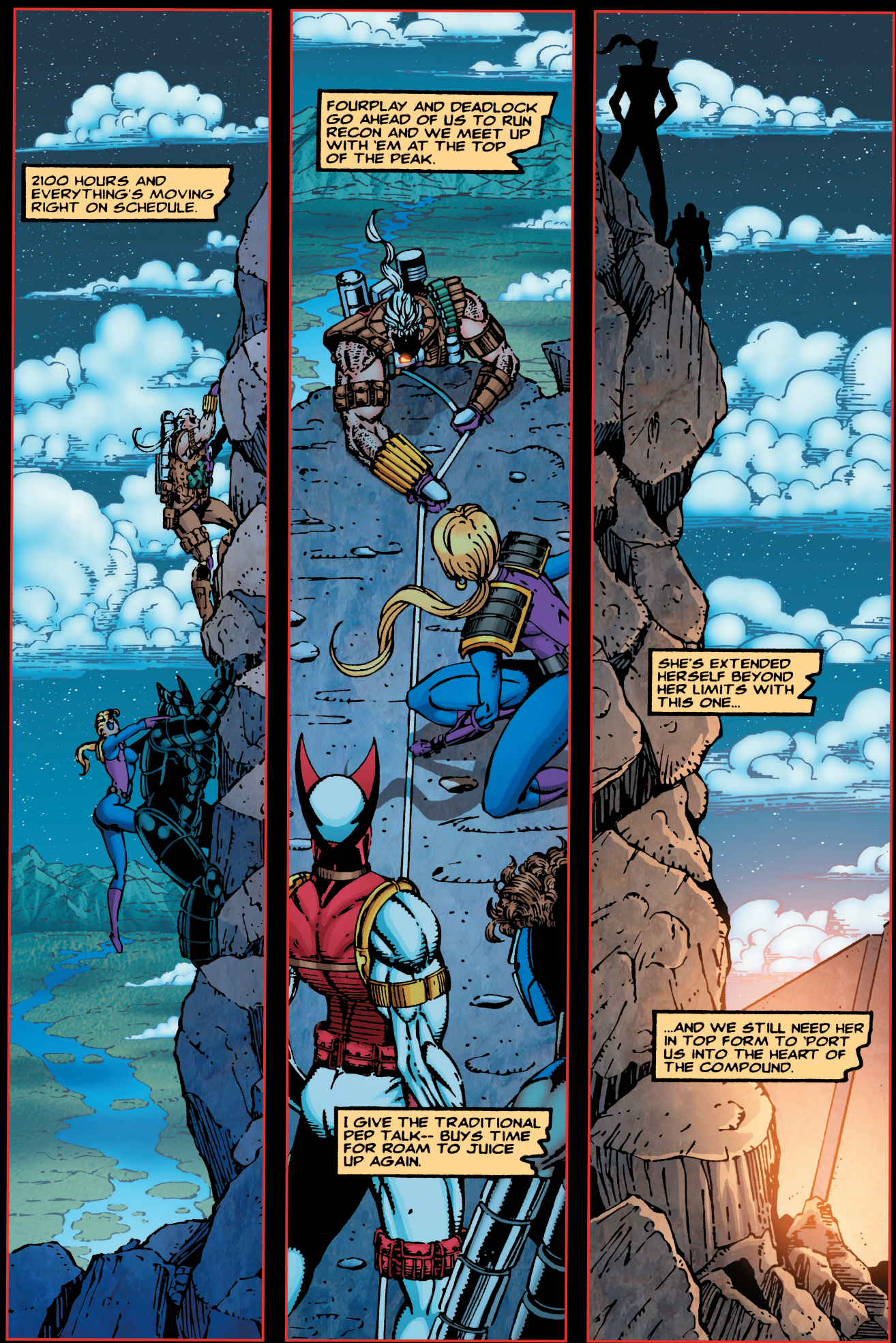

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image
BLOOD BROTHERS
PRELUDE
BLOODSTRIKE
DAN FRAGA
LIEFELD


GOT AN UNEXPECTED CALL FROM OUR SOURCE UP AT CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE A WHILE BACK, ROAM. LOOKS LIKE THERE'S A PROBLEM DEVELOPING WITH ONE OF G.A.T.E.* INTERNATIONAL'S ARMED FACILITIES.
DETAILS WERE SKETCHY, BUT WITH ALL THE FIRE POWER AT G.A.T.E.'S DISPOSAL, ANY LITTLE SLIP-UP COULD POSE A SERIOUS THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY IF IT'S NOT TAKEN CARE OF IN A HURRY.
BASE IS LOCATED OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF ARIZONA; CI SHOULD BE PATCHING THE COORDINATES THROUGH TO YOU ANY MINUTE NOW. YOU PICKIN' ANYTHING UP?
I'M PROCESSING THE INFORMATION AS WE SPEAK, CABBOT.
BASED ON WHAT I HAVE SO FAR, IT SHOULDN'T TAKE MORE THAN AN HOUR TO CHARGE MY CELLS FOR LONG DISTANCE TRANSPORT--
GOOD. I'LL GET THE REST OF THE TEAM TOGETHER--WE'LL BE MOVING FIVE BODIES THIS TIME, ROAM.
LATER ON TONIGHT OUR FINE FRIEND AT G.A.T.E. WON'T KNOW WHAT HIT HIM--
*GENETIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL ENGINEERING.
--AND I GUARANTEE HE'LL WISH HE NEVER HAD THE PLEASURE O' TANGLIN' WITH BLOODSTRIKE!


2100 HOURS AND EVERYTHING'S MOVING RIGHT ON SCHEDULE.
FOURPLAY AND DEADLOCK GO AHEAD OF US TO RUN RECON AND WE MEET UP WITH 'EM AT THE TOP OF THE PEAK.
I GIVE THE TRADITIONAL PEP TALK-- BUYS TIME FOR ROAM TO JUICE UP AGAIN.
SHE'S EXTENDED HERSELF BEYOND HER LIMITS WITH THIS ONE...
...AND WE STILL NEED HER IN TOP FORM TO 'PORT US INTO THE HEART OF THE COMPOUND.


THEY CALL THE PLACE JERICHO.
IT'S AS MASSIVE AND IMPRESSIVE AS ITS LEGENDARY NAMESAKE.
MUST'VE COST G.A.T.E. A FORTUNE.
SHAME FOR THEM IT'S ABOUT TO COME TO AN END.
WHATEVER THE PROBLEM IS HERE, SOMEBODY HIGH UP MUST REALLY WANT TO TRASH THESE GUYS...
...OTHERWISE, WE WOULDN'T BE HERE.
ROAM TELLS ME SHE'S WARMED UP AND READY TO GO, SO WE MOVE OUT.
FROM HERE ON IN, WE'VE GOT ONE OBJECTIVE-- MAKE SURE JERICHO COMES A TUMBLIN' DOWN!


ONCE WE'RE ON THE GROUND, EVERYTHING MOVES ALONG PRETTY MUCH ACCORDING TO PLAN.
DEADLOCK AND FOURPLAY CREATE A DISTURBANCE OUTSIDE THE MAIN GATE...


...WHILE ME AND TAG TAKE THE PARTY INSIDE.
IT'S DEAD QUIET AS WE REPEL DOWN THE WALL INTO THE COMPOUND...
PDM!
...BUT I TAKE CARE O' THAT WHEN WE RUN INTO OUR FIRST SET OF GUARDS.
PDM!
I TAKE 'EM DOWN QUICK--
--AND WE GET GOING AGAIN BEFORE ATTRACTING MORE ATTENTION THAN NECESSARY.

OR SO WE THINK.

MIDWAY THROUGH THE TUNNEL, WE RUN HEAD-ON INTO A SECOND BAND OF GRUNTS--MAKIN' IT PRETTY CLEAR THE FOLKS IN CHARGE ARE ONTO US.

NOT THAT IT MATTERS IN THE FINAL WASH OR ANYTHING--

--'COS THESE MOOKS ARE *HISTORY* WHETHER THEY KNEW WE WERE COMIN' OR NOT.

THROUGH IT ALL, TAG DOESN'T SAY A WORD.

SHE DOESN'T *HAVE* TO, EITHER, 'COS SHE'S ABOUT THE CLOSEST THING TO WHAT THEY CALL "POETRY IN MOTION" I'VE EVER SEEN.

SHE'S AS SWIFT AS SHE IS SILENT...

...AND AS DEADLY AS SHE IS BEAUTIFUL!

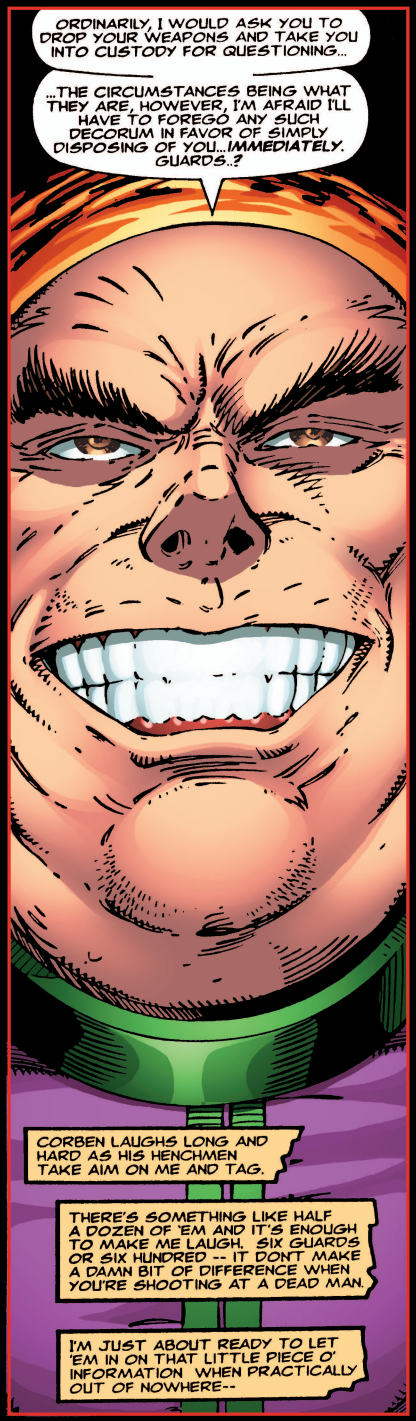
ME? I'M NOWHERE NEAR AS GRACEFUL.

I JUST TAKE AIM, CLENCH MY TEETH AND LET THE BODIES FALL WHERE THEY MAY.

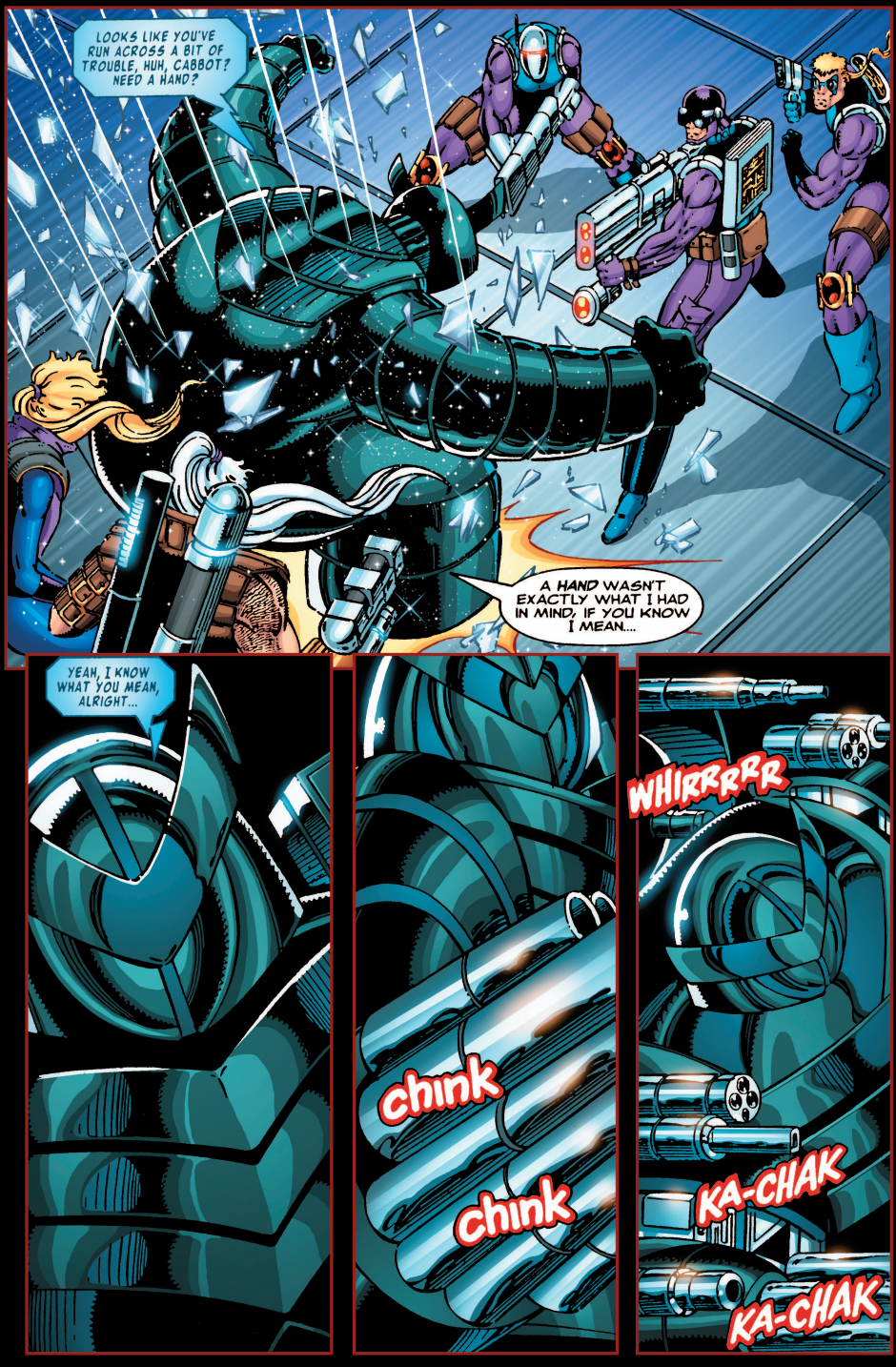
AND THAT THEY DO-- IN GREAT ABUNDANCE.


WHEN THE SHOOTING STOPS, I COUNT TWELVE MEN DOWN.
NOT BAD, CONSIDERING I'M JUST GETTIN' WARMED UP.
TAG SAYS SHE'S ANXIOUS TO GET GOIN' AGAIN, SO I NOD THAT I'M READY AND WE START MOVIN'.
ALL OF A SUDDEN, THOUGH, I GET THIS WEIRD FEELING--LIKE I'M DOIN' SOMETHING I'VE DONE BEFORE--AND I FREEZE UP.
STUPID FLASHBACKS ALWAYS HITTIN' ME AT THE WORST TIMES--REMINDIN' ME OF THINGS I DID BACK WHEN I WAS STILL ALIVE.
IT TAKES ME A FEW SECONDS, BUT I RIDE THE WORST OF IT OUT.
UNFORTUNATELY, A FEW SECONDS IS ALL IT TAKES FOR SOMETHING TO GO WRONG--
--WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENS ONCE I'VE GOT MY HEAD BACK TOGETHER AGAIN!

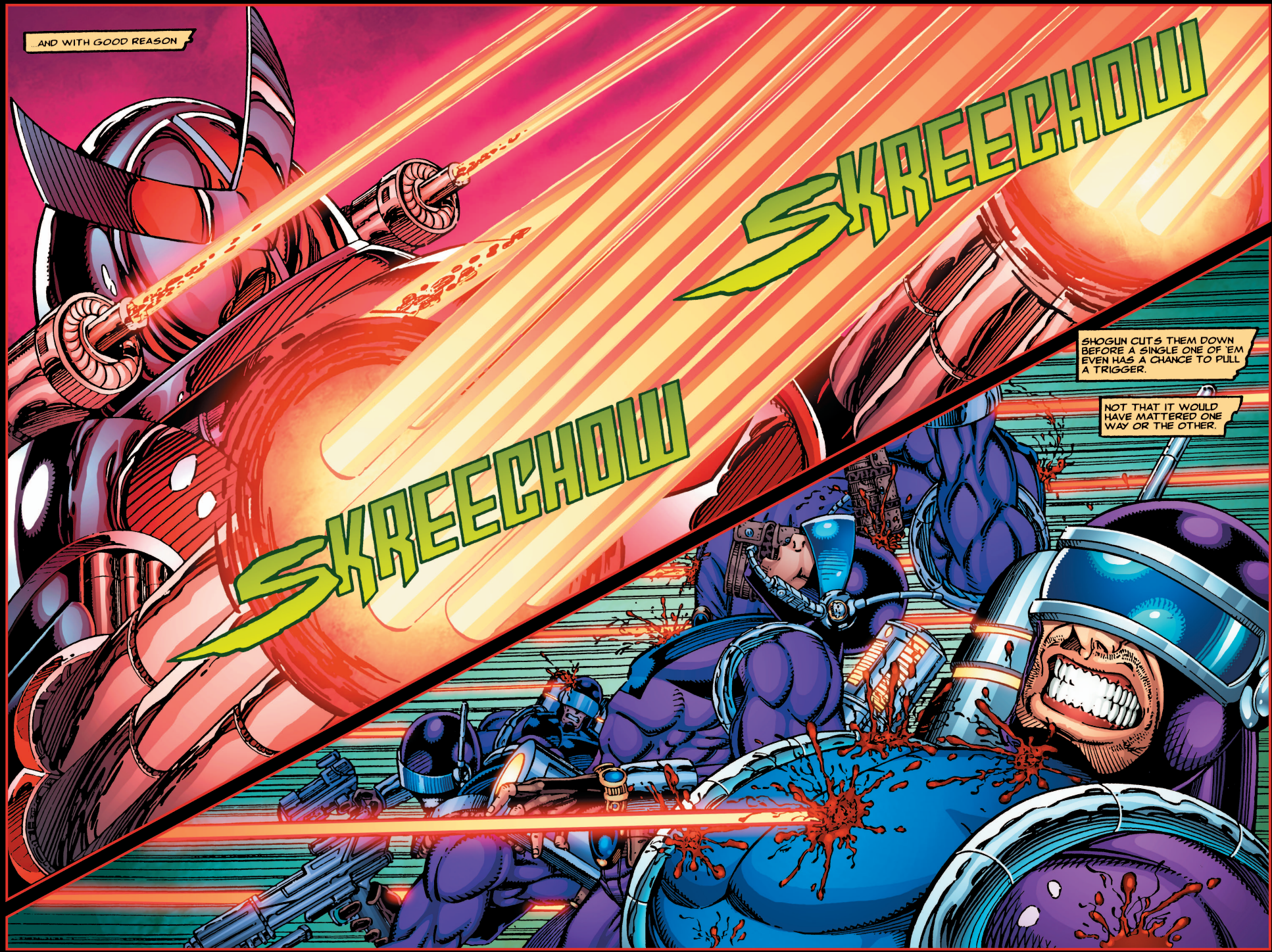

GOOD EVENING, MY FRIENDS.
I AM COMMANDER CORBEN...AND YOU--
--WHOEVER YOU MAY BE--HAVE MADE THE UNFORTUNATE MISTAKE OF TRESPASSING ON A G.A.T.E. INSTALLATION.


ORDINARILY, I WOULD ASK YOU TO DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND TAKE YOU INTO CUSTODY FOR QUESTIONING...
...THE CIRCUMSTANCES BEING WHAT THEY ARE, HOWEVER, I'M AFRAID I'LL HAVE TO FOREGO ANY SUCH DECORUM IN FAVOR OF SIMPLY DISPOSING OF YOU...IMMEDIATELY. GUARDS..?
CORBEN LAUGHS LONG AND HARD AS HIS HENCHMEN TAKE AIM ON ME AND TAG.
THERE'S SOMETHING LIKE HALF A DOZEN OF 'EM AND IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ME LAUGH. SIX GUARDS OR SIX HUNDRED -- IT DON'T MAKE A DAMN BIT OF DIFFERENCE WHEN YOU'RE SHOOTING AT A DEAD MAN.
I'M JUST ABOUT READY TO LET 'EM IN ON THAT LITTLE PIECE O' INFORMATION WHEN PRACTICALLY OUT OF NOWHERE--

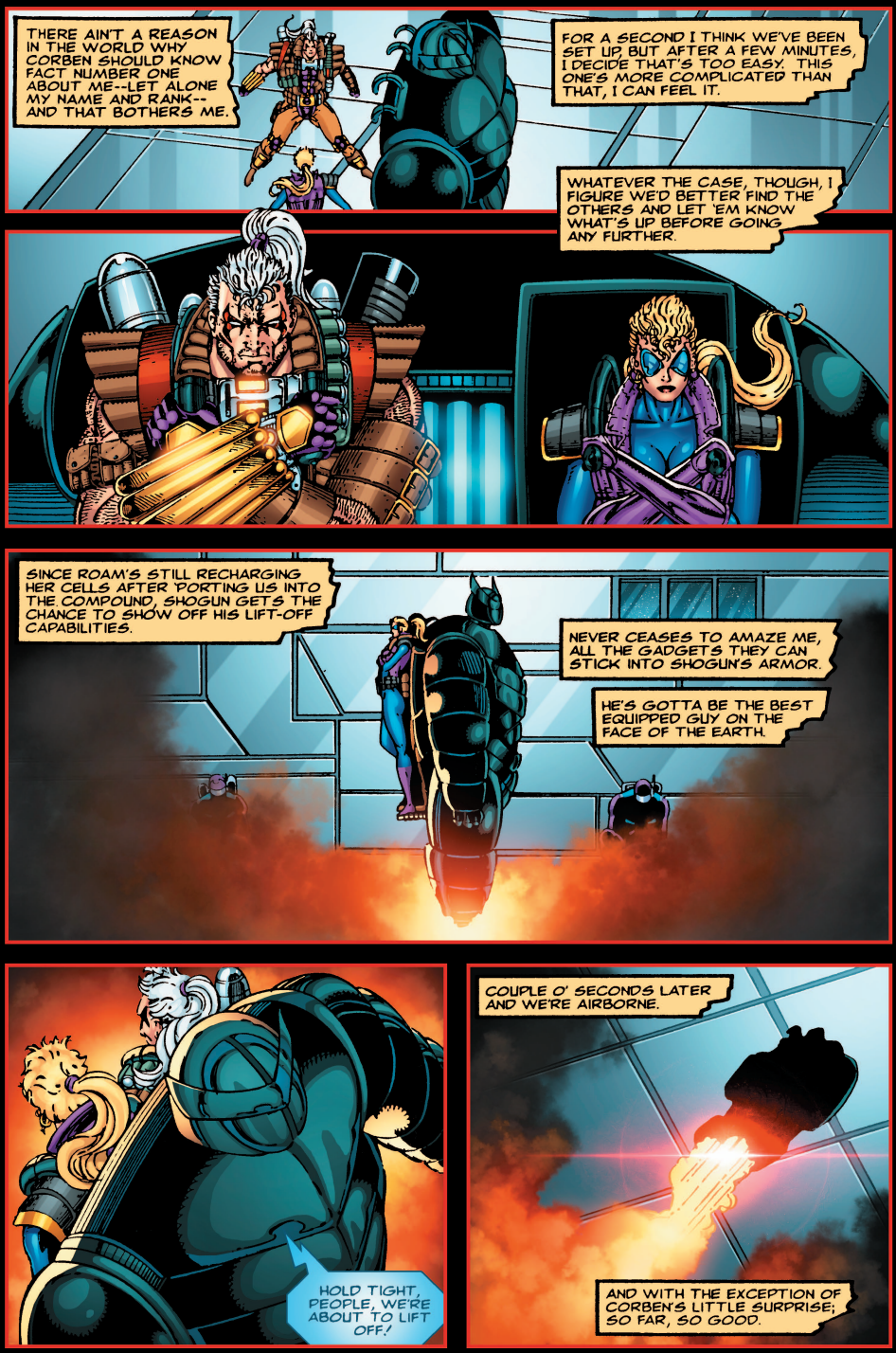

--THE CAVALRY ARRIVES!
SHOGUN LOOKS LIKE AN ANGEL OF DESTRUCTION AS HE CRASHES DOWN THROUGH THE SKYLIGHT AND, JUDGING BY THE WAY CORBEN AND HIS GOONS REACT, I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE MAKING THAT COMPARISON.


LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE RUN ACROSS A BIT OF TROUBLE, HUH, CABBOT? NEED A HAND?
A HAND WASN'T EXACTLY WHAT I HAD IN MIND, IF YOU KNOW I MEAN...
YEAH, I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN, ALRIGHT...
chink
chink
WHIRRRRR
KA-CHAK
KA-CHAK


THAT'S THE GREAT THING ABOUT A GUY LIKE SHOGUN. NOT ONLY IS HE THE SIZE OF A TANK, BUT HE'S BUILT LIKE ONE, TOO.
ONCE HE'S GOT ALL HIS WEAPONS SYSTEMS UP AND RUNNING, THAT ANGEL O' DESTRUCTION COMPARISON STARTS SOUNDIN' MORE AND MORE LIKE THE TRUTH...
...ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE ON THE RECEIVIN' END OF ONE OF THE LARGEST MOBILE ARSENALS EVER CREATED!
AM I TO PRESUME THIS IS SUPPOSED TO INTIMIDATE ME?!!
YOU CAN SAVE YOUR PARLOR TRICKS FOR SOMEONE WHO GIVES A DAMN, OKAY?! GUARDS--!
CORBEN'S MEN DON'T LOOK TOO EXCITED AS HE ORDERS THEM TO SHOW US WHAT THEY THINK OF OUR "PALTRY DISPLAY OF POWER"...


...AND WITH GOOD REASON
SKREECHOW
SKREECHOW
SHOGUN CUTS THEM DOWN BEFORE A SINGLE ONE OF 'EM EVEN HAS A CHANCE TO PULL A TRIGGER.
NOT THAT IT WOULD HAVE MATTERED ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.


SHOGUN'S POLISHING THE LAST OF 'EM OFF WHEN I REALIZE SOMETHING'S UP WITH CORBEN.
HE'S BEEN HIT TOO MANY TIMES TO BE STANDIN', BUT THERE HE IS-- LAUGHIN' LOUD N' CLEAR LIKE SOME KINDA CRAZED HYENA.
JUST AS I'M STARTIN' TO PUT TWO AND TWO TOGETHER, CORBEN STARTS DISCORPORATING --HE'S NOTHING MORE THAN A LOUSY HOLOGRAPHIC PROJECTION!
THOUGHT YOU HAD ME THERE, DIDN'T YOU, COL. CABBOT?
TOO BAD. YOU'D DO WELL NOT TO UNDERESTIMATE ME, MY FRIEND -- JERICHO IS A FAR TOUGHER NUT TO CRACK THAN YOU'D EVER BELIEVE, CONTRARY TO WHAT YOU MAY HAVE BEEN TOLD!
GOOD-BYE... FOR NOW!
WITH THAT, HE BLINKS OUT AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, I'VE GOT THIS COLD FEELING IN MY GUT.
NOT BECAUSE HE'S TRYIN' TO CONFUSE US BY PLAYIN' CAT AND MOUSE--
--BUT BECAUSE HE KNOWS MY NAME.

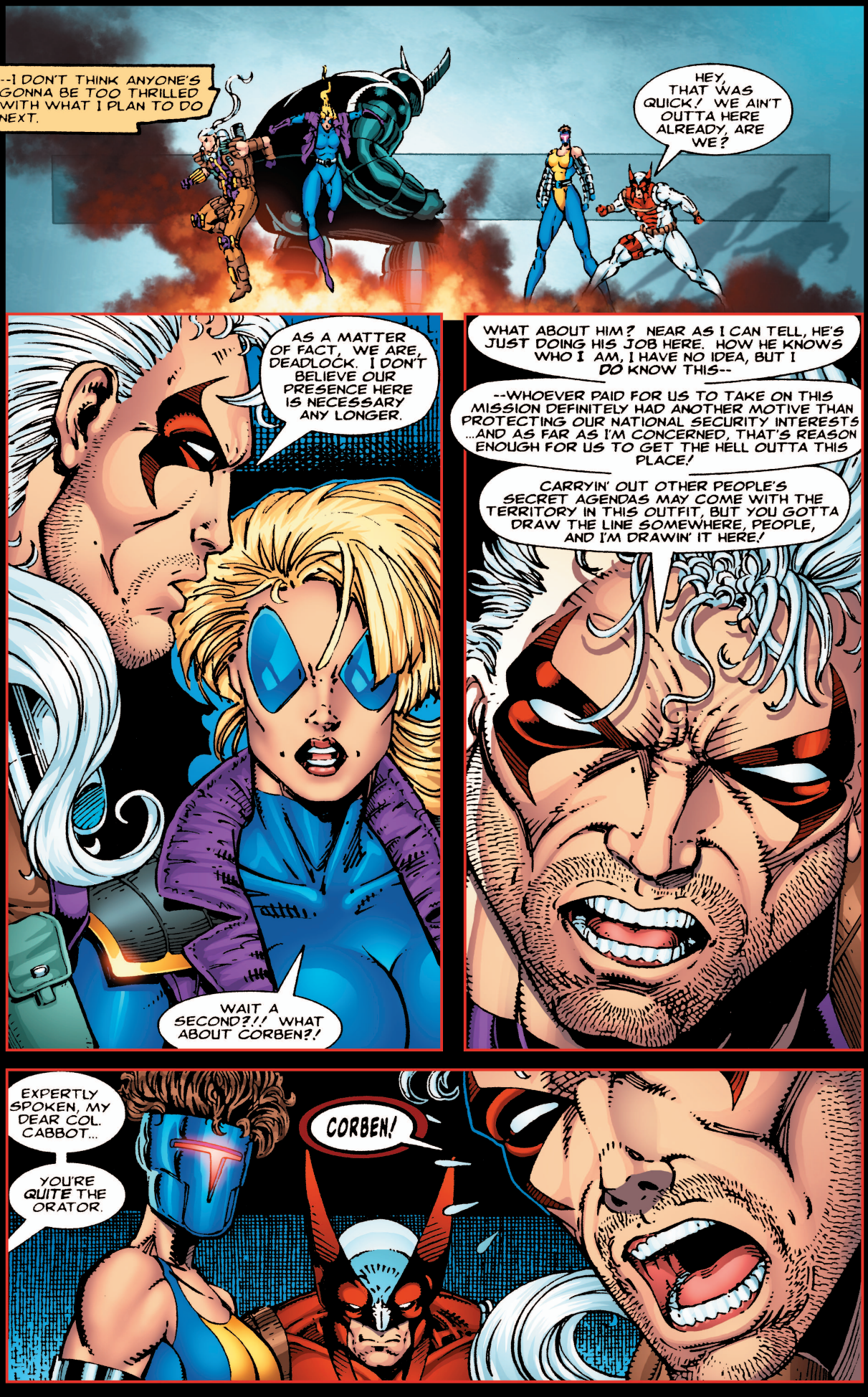

THERE AIN'T A REASON IN THE WORLD WHY CORBEN SHOULD KNOW FACT NUMBER ONE ABOUT ME--LET ALONE MY NAME AND RANK--AND THAT BOTHERS ME.
FOR A SECOND I THINK WE'VE BEEN SET UP, BUT AFTER A FEW MINUTES, I DECIDE THAT'S TOO EASY. THIS ONE'S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT, I CAN FEEL IT.
WHATEVER THE CASE, THOUGH, I FIGURE WE'D BETTER FIND THE OTHERS AND LET 'EM KNOW WHAT'S UP BEFORE GOING ANY FURTHER.
SINCE ROAM'S STILL RECHARGING HER CELLS AFTER 'PORTING US INTO THE COMPOUND, SHOGUN GETS THE CHANCE TO SHOW OFF HIS LIFT-OFF CAPABILITIES.
NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME, ALL THE GADGETS THEY CAN STICK INTO SHOGUN'S ARMOR.
HE'S GOTTA BE THE BEST EQUIPPED GUY ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH.
HOLD TIGHT, PEOPLE, WE'RE ABOUT TO LIFT OFF!
COUPLE O' SECONDS LATER AND WE'RE AIRBORNE.
AND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CORBEN'S LITTLE SURPRISE; SO FAR, SO GOOD.


I JUST HOPE THINGS ARE GOING AS SMOOTHLY FOR DEADLOCK AND FOURPLAY....
C'MON, FOURPLAY, GET A MOVE ON!
I MIGHT AS WELL BE TAKIN' THESE MUTTS DOWN ALL ON MY LONESOME!
I MEAN, WE HAVEN'T GOT ALL NIGHT--
--RIGHT, BUDDY?
UNNGH!

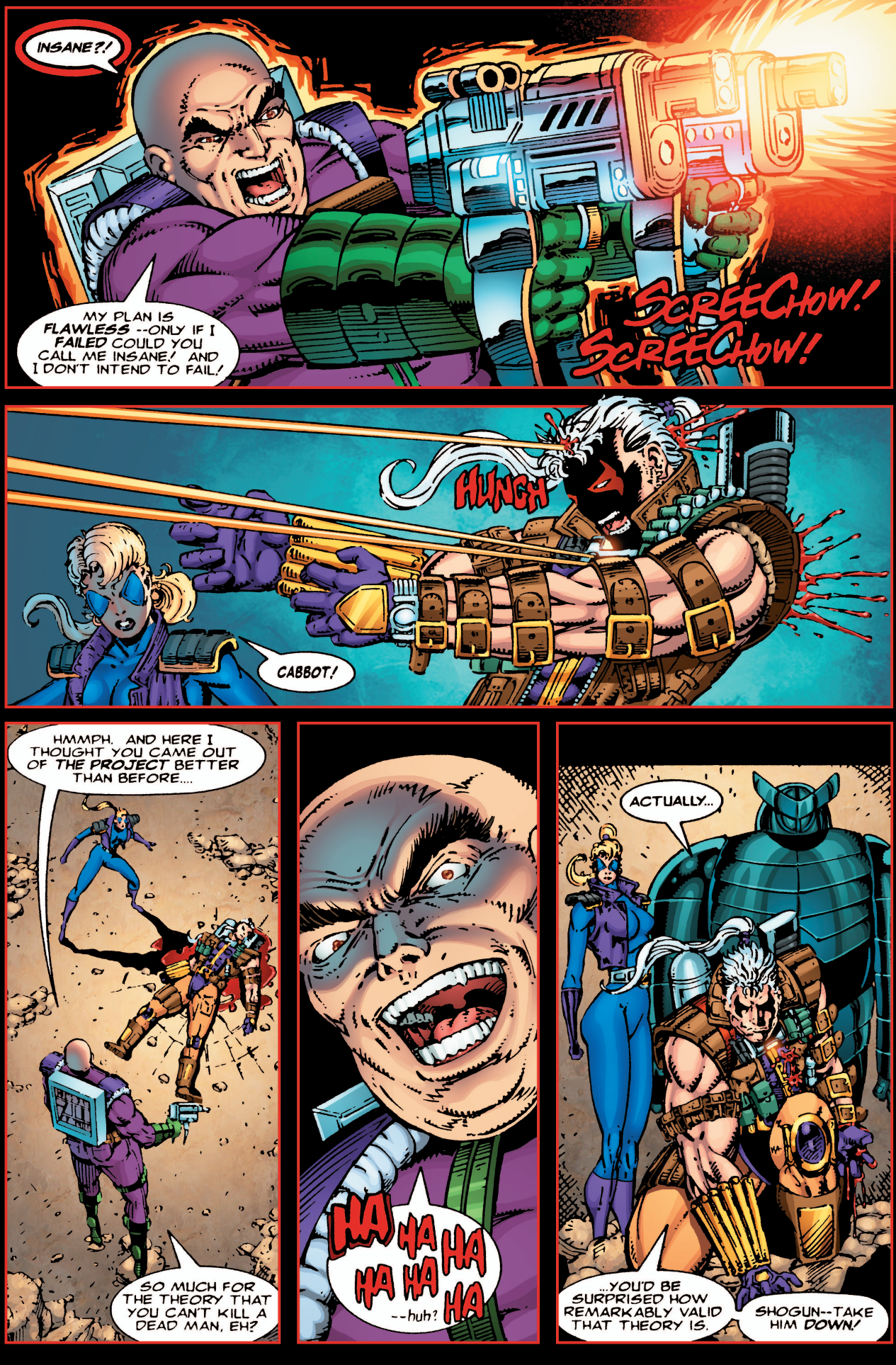

HUGG!
AW, COME ON! WHAT'S IT TAKE TO GET A DECENT FIGHT OUTTA ONE OF YOU LOSERS?
WHAK
WE COME ALL THE WAY OUT TO THE MIDDLE OF NEVADA FOR CRIS'SAKES--
GHAA!
--AND IT LOOKS LIKE THE LEAST YOU COULD DO IS HAVE A LITTLE FUN WHILE WE'RE HERE!
GAK!
I MEAN, I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE REST OF YOU, BUT I'M HAVING A BALL!


AH, NOW THERE'S A COMFORTING THOUGHT.
DID YOU EVER STOP TO THINK YOU MIGHT ENJOY ALL OF THIS JUST A LITTLE TOO MUCH?
AFTER ALL, LOOK WHERE YOUR DEVIL-MAY-CARE ATTITUDE GOT YOU THE FIRST TIME AROUND....
HAH! YOU'RE ONE TO TALK.
LEAST I DON'T GOT PLAYING IT SAFE TO BLAME FOR MY CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS, DARLIN'. I MEAN--!
SHUSH! I THOUGHT I HEARD SOMETHING--!
DARN RIGHT, YOU HEARD SOMETHING--

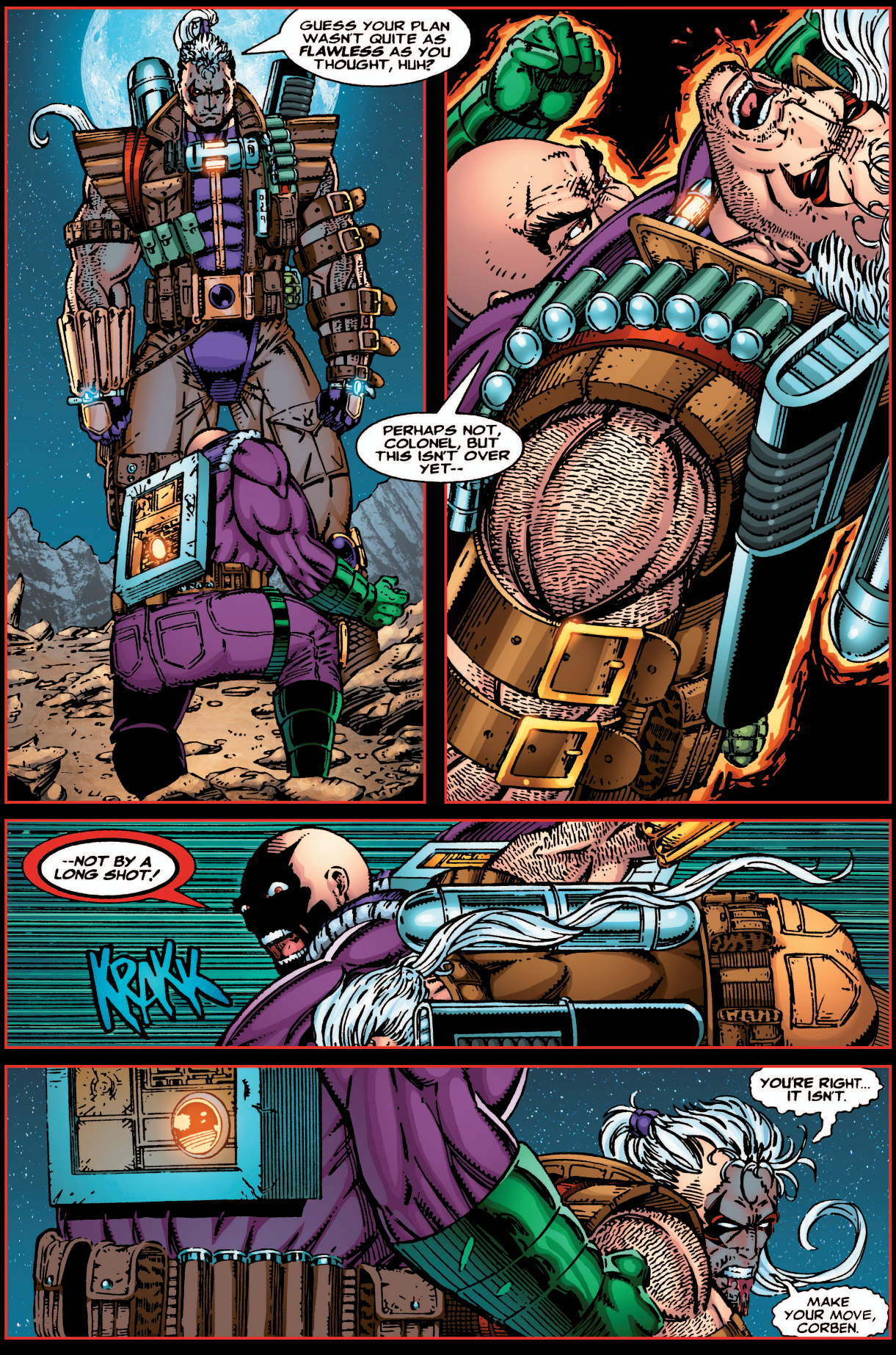

"--AND THAT SOMETHING'S CALLED SHOGUN!"
VROOOOOM
SHOGUN BRINGS US DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF WHAT LOOKS LIKE THE STAGING AREA FOR A SMALL WAR AND I CAN SEE DEADLOCK AND FOURPLAY HAVE MORE THAN TAKEN CARE OF THEMSELVES IN OUR ABSENCE.
THEN AGAIN, THERE'S NOT MUCH THAT COULD STAND UP TO EITHER ONE OF 'EM, LET ALONE THE TWO OF THEM TOGETHER.
BOTH OF 'EM LOOK PRETTY ANXIOUS TO HEAR WHAT'S GOIN' DOWN INSIDE--
--BUT AFTER HAVING TIME TO THINK ON THE WAY OVER--

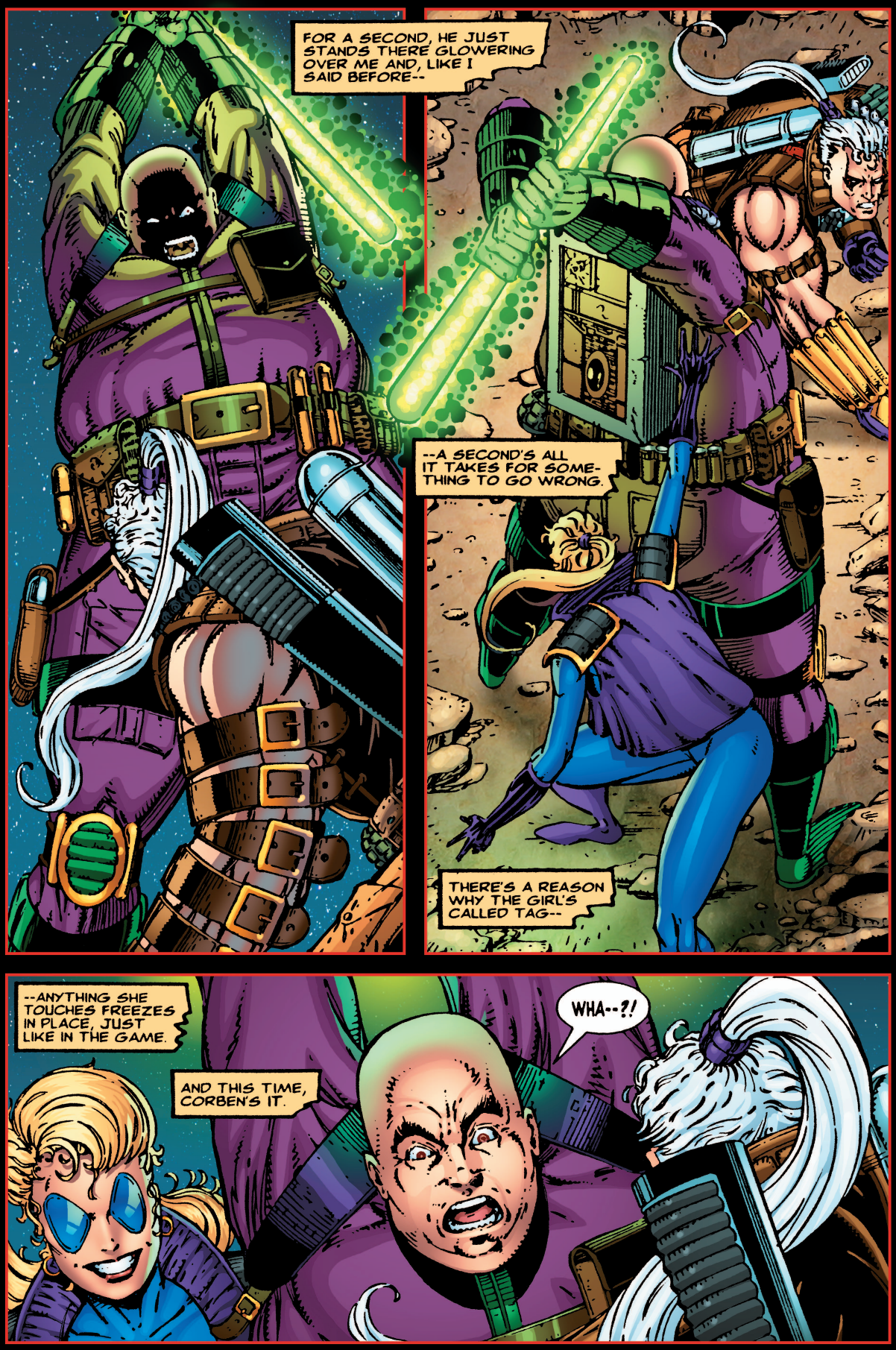

--I DON'T THINK ANYONE'S GONNA BE TOO THRILLED WITH WHAT I PLAN TO DO NEXT.
HEY, THAT WAS QUICK! WE AIN'T OUTTA HERE ALREADY, ARE WE?
AS A MATTER OF FACT, WE ARE, DEADLOCK. I DON'T BELIEVE OUR PRESENCE HERE IS NECESSARY ANY LONGER.
WAIT A SECOND?!! WHAT ABOUT CORBEN?!
WHAT ABOUT HIM? NEAR AS I CAN TELL, HE'S JUST DOING HIS JOB HERE. HOW HE KNOWS WHO I AM, I HAVE NO IDEA, BUT I DO KNOW THIS--
--WHOEVER PAID FOR US TO TAKE ON THIS MISSION DEFINITELY HAD ANOTHER MOTIVE THAN PROTECTING OUR NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS ...AND AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, THAT'S REASON ENOUGH FOR US TO GET THE HELL OUTTA THIS PLACE!
CARRYIN' OUT OTHER PEOPLE'S SECRET AGENDAS MAY COME WITH THE TERRITORY IN THIS OUTFIT, BUT YOU GOTTA DRAW THE LINE SOMEWHERE, PEOPLE, AND I'M DRAWIN' IT HERE!
EXPERTLY SPOKEN, MY DEAR COL. CABBOT...
YOU'RE QUITE THE ORATOR.
CORBEN!


YES, IT'S ME AGAIN.
AND I HAVE TO COMMEND YOU--YOU CAME SO CLOSE TO DISCOVERING THE TRUE REASON BEHIND YOUR DEPLOYMENT TO JERICHO...
...SO CLOSE, IN FACT, THAT IT MAKES EXPLAINING WHY I MUST NOW DESTROY YOU THAT MUCH EASIER!
YOU SEE, YOU COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE CORRECT WHEN YOU SUSPECTED A HIDDEN AGENDA SURROUNDING YOUR MISSION HERE. LIKEWISE, YOU WERE DEAD ON IN ASSUMING I WAS MERELY DOING MY JOB WHEN I ATTACKED YOU DURING OUR INITIAL CONFRONTATION.
AFTER ALL, COLONEL, YOU WERE CLEARLY THE AGGRESSOR AND IT IS, IN FACT, MY DUTY TO PROTECT THIS INSTALLATION FROM ALL FORMS OF AGGRESSION--A DUTY I HAVE TAKEN PRIDE IN PERFORMING--AND PERFORMING WELL--FOR THE DURATION OF JERICHO'S EXISTENCE!
A JOB WELL DONE ISN'T ALWAYS REPAID IN KIND, HOWEVER. IN MY CASE, IN FACT, IT WAS QUITE THE OPPOSITE!
THE HIGHER UPS HERE AT G.A.T.E. WERE CONVINCED BY SOME UNKNOWN FACTION THAT I WAS SLACKING OFF IN MY DUTIES--THAT I WAS PAST MY PRIME! I WAS GOING TO BE LET GO, DAMN THEM!
BUT NOT NOW. NO, THAT'S WHERE OUR SECRET AGENDA CAME IN. YOU SEE, IT WAS I WHO REQUESTED YOUR PRESENCE HERE, COLONEL.
I KNEW IF I COULD STAVE OFF AN ATTACK BY YOUR STRIKEFORCE THERE WAS NO WAY THEY COULD EVER LET ME GO. THEY WOULD BE LOSING FAR TOO GREAT AN ASSET--!
YOU HIRED US TO--THAT'S INSANE!


INSANE?!
MY PLAN IS FLAWLESS --ONLY IF I FAILED COULD YOU CALL ME INSANE! AND I DON'T INTEND TO FAIL!
SCREECHOW! SCREECHOW!
HUNGH
CABBOT!
HMMPH. AND HERE I THOUGHT YOU CAME OUT OF THE PROJECT BETTER THAN BEFORE....
SO MUCH FOR THE THEORY THAT YOU CAN'T KILL A DEAD MAN, EH?
HA HA HA HA HA HA
--huh?
ACTUALLY...
...YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW REMARKABLY VALID THAT THEORY IS.
SHOGUN--TAKE HIM DOWN!


KA-chink
KA-chink
KA-CHOOM!
MY POWER PACKS--! WITHOUT THEM I CAN'T--
FLY? TELEPORT AWAY? TAKE YOUR PICK--YOU'RE NOT DOIN' ANY OF 'EM ANYMORE.
WHUMP!

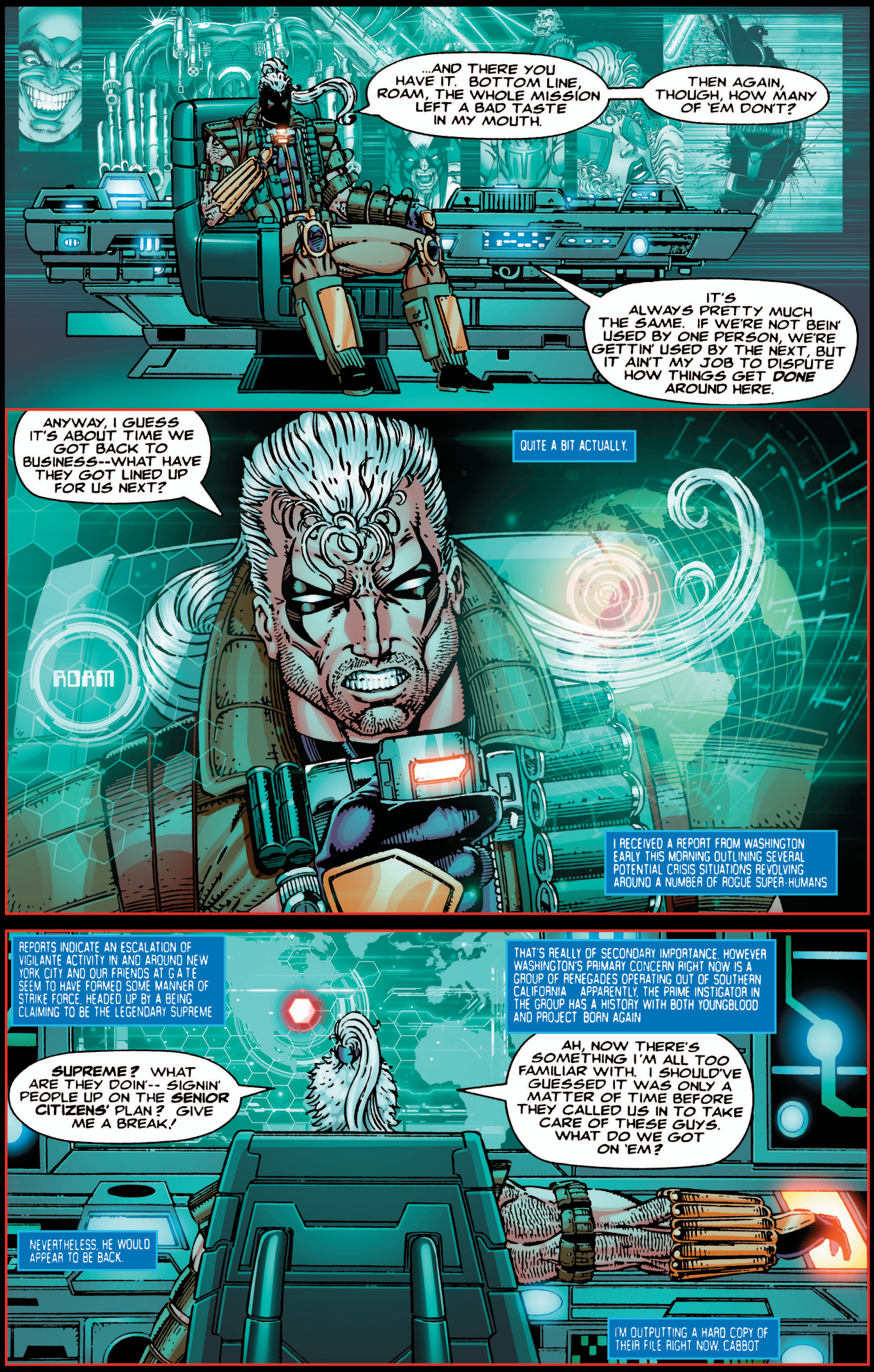

GUESS YOUR PLAN WASN'T QUITE AS *FLAWLESS* AS YOU THOUGHT, HUH?
PERHAPS NOT, COLONEL, BUT THIS ISN'T OVER YET--
--NOT BY A LONG SHOT!
KRAKK
YOU'RE RIGHT... IT ISN'T.
MAKE YOUR MOVE, CORBEN.


FOR A SECOND, HE JUST STANDS THERE GLOWERING OVER ME AND, LIKE I SAID BEFORE--
--A SECOND'S ALL IT TAKES FOR SOMETHING TO GO WRONG.
THERE'S A REASON WHY THE GIRL'S CALLED TAG--
--ANYTHING SHE TOUCHES FREEZES IN PLACE, JUST LIKE IN THE GAME.
AND THIS TIME, CORBEN'S IT.
WHA--?!


BY THE TIME I'M ON MY FEET, CORBEN'S GETTIN' PRETTY NERVOUS.
HE'S GOT BEADS O' SWEAT RUNNIN' DOWN HIS FACE AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN HE KEEPS MUMBLIN' SOMETHING ABOUT CUTTIN' A DEAL WITH US.
I AIN'T BUYIN'.
COMMANDER CORBEN HERE SEEMS TO BE A TAD UNCOMFORTABLE WITH HIS PRESENT SITUATION, SHOGUN.
IN FACT, HE SEEMS DOWNRIGHT MISERABLE.
"WHY DON'T YOU PUT THE MAN OUT OF HIS MISERY."


KBLAM!
KBLAM!
KBLAM!
SPLORCH
SPLORCH
SPLORCH
KBLAM!
KBLAM!


SHOGUN TURNS OFF THE HEAT AND IT'S SO QUIET YOU CAN HEAR THE BLOOD DRIPPIN' WHILE IT EMPTIES OUTTA CORBEN'S BODY.
SILENCE LIKE THAT ALWAYS REMINDS ME OF ONE O' THIS JOB'S PRIME BENEFITS--
--YOU KILL THE GUY, YOU DON'T HAVE LISTEN TO HIM WHINE ABOUT HOW PERFECT HIS PLAN WAS WHILE YOU'RE HAULIN' HIM OFF.
SO THERE HE STANDS, LOOKIN' COLD AND LIFE-LESS AND WITH HIS EYES STILL OPEN. ALL IN ALL, IT'S A PRETTY PATHETIC SIGHT...
...BUT THAT'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU WANNA JERK AROUND WITH BLOODSTRIKE.
ROAM--
"--GET US OUT OF HERE."
SH-WVVMMMM


...AND THERE YOU HAVE IT. BOTTOM LINE, ROAM, THE WHOLE MISSION LEFT A BAD TASTE IN MY MOUTH.
THEN AGAIN, THOUGH, HOW MANY OF 'EM DON'T?
IT'S ALWAYS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME. IF WE'RE NOT BEIN' USED BY ONE PERSON, WE'RE GETTIN' USED BY THE NEXT, BUT IT AIN'T MY JOB TO DISPUTE HOW THINGS GET DONE AROUND HERE.
ANYWAY, I GUESS IT'S ABOUT TIME WE GOT BACK TO BUSINESS--WHAT HAVE THEY GOT LINED UP FOR US NEXT?
QUITE A BIT ACTUALLY.
ROAM
I RECEIVED A REPORT FROM WASHINGTON EARLY THIS MORNING OUTLINING SEVERAL POTENTIAL CRISIS SITUATIONS REVOLVING AROUND A NUMBER OF ROGUE SUPER-HUMANS
REPORTS INDICATE AN ESCALATION OF VIGILANTE ACTIVITY IN AND AROUND NEW YORK CITY AND OUR FRIENDS AT GATE SEEM TO HAVE FORMED SOME MANNER OF STRIKE FORCE, HEADED UP BY A BEING CLAIMING TO BE THE LEGENDARY SUPREME
THAT'S REALLY OF SECONDARY IMPORTANCE. HOWEVER WASHINGTON'S PRIMARY CONCERN RIGHT NOW IS A GROUP OF RENEGADES OPERATING OUT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA APPARENTLY, THE PRIME INSTIGATOR IN THE GROUP HAS A HISTORY WITH BOTH YOUNGBLOOD AND PROJECT BORN AGAIN
SUPREME? WHAT ARE THEY DOIN'-- SIGNIN' PEOPLE UP ON THE SENIOR CITIZENS' PLAN? GIVE ME A BREAK!
AH, NOW THERE'S SOMETHING I'M ALL TOO FAMILIAR WITH. I SHOULD'VE GUESSED IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY CALLED US IN TO TAKE CARE OF THESE GUYS. WHAT DO WE GOT ON 'EM?
NEVERTHELESS, HE WOULD APPEAR TO BE BACK.
I'M OUTPUTTING A HARD COPY OF THEIR FILE RIGHT NOW, CABBOT


"IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING, BATTLESTONE, BUT IT LOOKS WE'RE FINALLY GONNA GET THE CHANCE TO SETTLE OUR DIFFERENCES ONCE AND FOR ALL--BROTHER TO BROTHER!"
TO BE CONTINUED IN BRIGADE #1!