



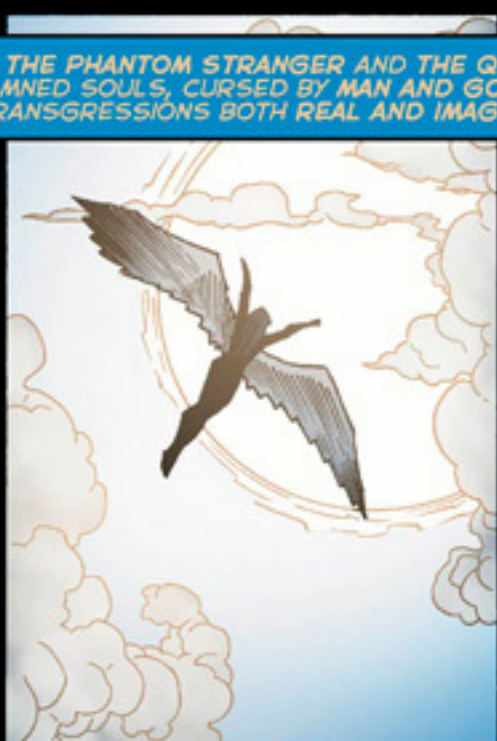
THE CARETAKER FLIES
SKYWARD ON WINGS OF
SALVATION--BECKONING
US TO JOIN HIM.



AND WE
DO:



PANDORA, THE PHANTOM STRANGER AND THE QUESTION:
THREE DAMNED SOULS, CURSED BY MAN AND GOD ALIKE,
FOR TRANSGRESSIONS BOTH REAL AND IMAGINED.



AND, AS
WE RISE,
FOLLOWING
THE GOLDEN
MESSENGER
INTO THE
HEAVENS...

...AS HIS FORM IS
SWALLOWED BY THE
PURE RADIANCE OF THIS
OTHERWORLDLY SUN...



...A PART OF ME FEELS THE
RISING OF AN UNFAMILIAR
HOPE, WHILE ANOTHER
PART IS GRIPPED...



...BY AN
ALL TOO
FAMILIAR
FEAR.

THE VISION OF HEAVEN
FADES--AND I FIND MYSELF IN
THE PAST. DAYS AGO (OR WAS
IT YEARS?) WHEN WE FIRST
ARRIVED HERE--WITHIN THE
FABLED REDEMPTION BOX.

WE'D TRAVELED ACROSS
A WORLD TO FIND IT--BUT
IN THE END, IT FOUND US:
DRAGGED US INTO ITS
SHADOWED DEPTHS.

WE'D HOPED THE BOX
WOULD BE THE KEY TO
GLOBAL SALVATION.
INSTEAD WE HUNG, LIKE
CONDEMNED CRIMINALS,
LIKE FAILED SAVIORS...

...ON
CRUCIFIXES
OF GLASS.

THE WAGES OF **SIN**

PART FIVE: THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE

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THIS CAN'T BE THE REDEMPTION BOX! IT...IT MUST BE ONE OF NIMRAA'S TRICKS!

A TRICK, PANDORA? PERHAPS.



BUT I THINK IT'S THE BOX ITSELF THAT'S PLAYED IT.

IT LURED US HERE--AND LIKE FOOLS WE TOOK THE BAIT.

BUT WHY, STRANGER?

HE HAD NO ANSWER. NEITHER DID I.



IN SILENCE, WE STRUGGLED TO FREE OURSELVES...

...AND, IN SILENCE, WE FAILED.

THERE WAS NO ENCHANTMENT IN THOSE BONDS (AT LEAST NONE THAT WE COULD SENSE), YET THEY HELD FAST.

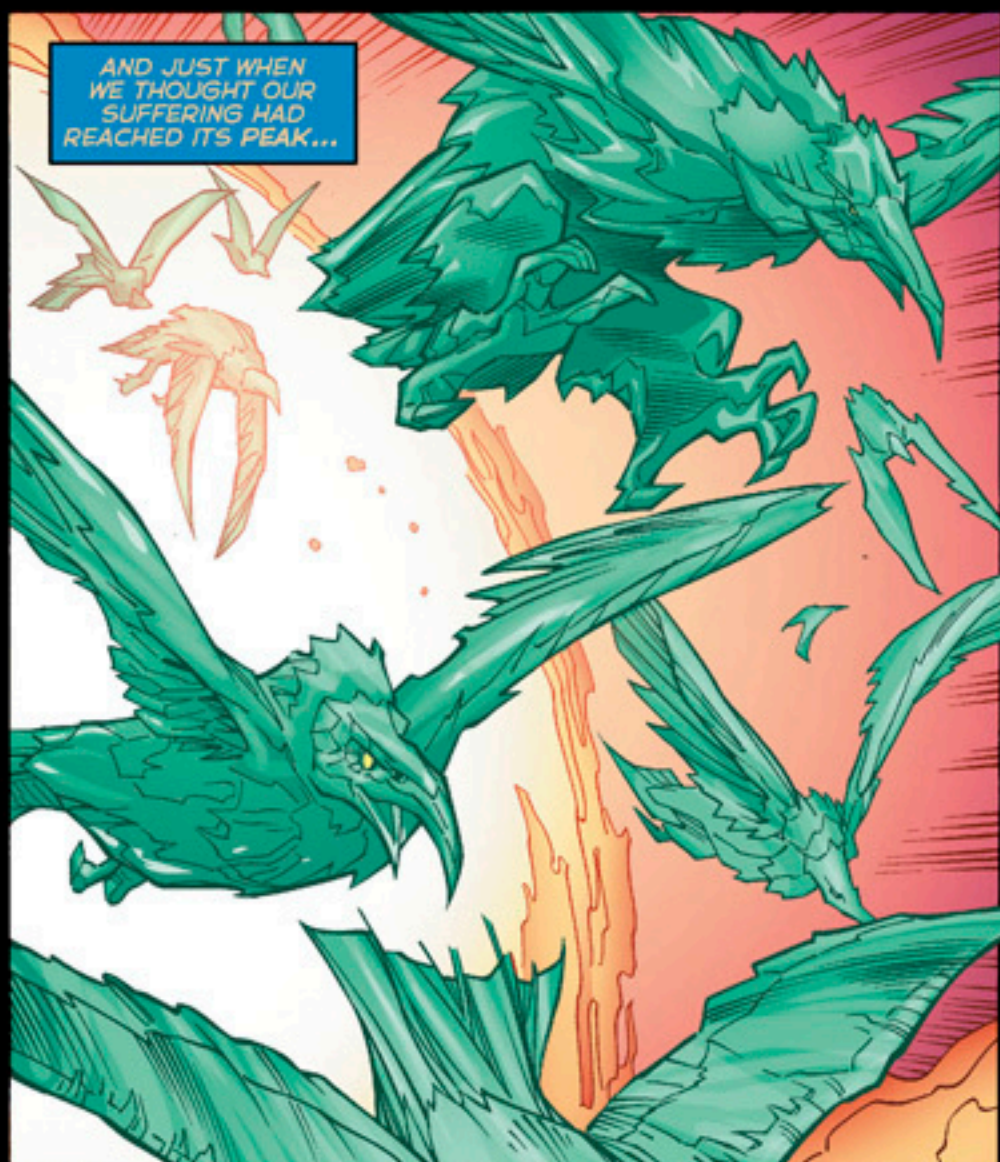


SO WE HUNG THERE, BAKING, IN THE MERCILESS SUN...

...AND IT SEEMED LIKE A CONSCIOUS ENTITY--ALIVE, MALEVOLENT--ROASTING NOT JUST OUR FLESH...



...BUT OUR SOULS.



AND JUST WHEN WE THOUGHT OUR SUFFERING HAD REACHED ITS PEAK...



...THEY CAME:
CRYSTALLINE
VULTURES...



... SWARMING
US...



... TEARING AT OUR
FLESH, CLAWING
AT OUR EYES...



...TILL WE
ALL CRIED LIKE
FRIGHTENED
CHILDREN. TILL OUR
BLOOD POURED
DOWN THE GLASSY
CROSSES...



...AND
DRENCHED
THE DESERT
FLOOR.

BUT THE BEASTS
OF THE AIR WERE
JUST THE FIRST
WAVE. THE BEASTS
OF THE EARTH...



...WERE
STILL TO
COME.



THEY
FEASTED
UPON US...



...THEN
LEFT US...



...TO
SUFFER.
TO WEEP.

TO DIE.

BUT I'D
ALREADY
DIED...