

Seven™

(Working Title)

By James C. Shooter

Based on concepts and inspiration from Denise V. Wohl

Copyright © 2007 Denise V. Wohl

February 25, 2007

FIRST STORY ARC (Seven Issues)

INTRODUCTION

Today:

A satellite dish perches on the thatched roof of a mud hut in the village of Borguindé in Burkina Faso, third poorest nation in the world.

There are only 12 vehicles in the town of Kirakira, Solomon Islands, but the Internet Café down the road from the Rest House—now open Sundays at the insistence of local patrons—boasts 14 computers.

On the wind-scourged tundra of the Finnmarksvidda, a low plateau west of the remote town of Varangerhalvøya, Norway, a *Sami* reindeer herdsman downloads a new ring tone to avoid confusion with his fellow herders' cell phones.

Access to information is nearly unlimited. Anywhere. Everywhere. From information, one may glean *knowledge*. Anyone. Everyone.

Knowledge is *light*.

Evil lives in *darkness*.

If evil were a man, he would be desperate. *It is. He is.*

He plans to plunge the world into an era of ignorance, fear and endless night. A new Dark Age that will dwarf all the Dark Ages of the past. *He* has vast power, unlimited resources and the will to wreak unimaginable horror upon the world.

Meanwhile...

Seven young people, each born with amazing abilities and a haunting sense of purpose, are inexorably drawn to New York City—the nexus of the gathering gloom—seeking *enlightenment*.

All they have to do is *find* it. Find *themselves*. Find *each other*. And overcome an ancient, insidious, utterly ruthless, cruel and wicked power beyond comprehension.

He knows they're coming. *He* is prepared for them. *He* has their deaths planned to perfection.

They have no chance. No hope.

And yet...they are the *only* hope.

Life and Light hang in the balance.

This is a time of momentous significance. *Right now*.

STORY OVERVIEW

Issues #1-2

Synopsis: As the City of New York suffers a mysterious and devastating blackout, young Milli Aiga makes her way from the Lower East Side to the Upper West Side to keep an appointment with her psychologist and counselor. Along the way, she faces many difficulties and dangers. She also meets, one by one, each of the others who comprise the Seven, metaphorically rising through the levels above this world on her quest for the Light of Knowledge, understanding—and ultimately, the ability to overcome the darkness of the Opponent.

Issue #1

“The Journey” Part I

In Alphabet City, on New York's lower east side, on the not-yet-gentrified stretch of Avenue C near Tenth Street stands—barely, it seems—a run-down, soot-stained, red-brown brick building. Once abandoned, once occupied by squatters, sold by the city for a dollar to the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, it is now a co-op owned by its formerly homeless tenants. The super, one of the original squatters, illegally rents out the dingy basement to various itinerants, mostly crunked-up, janky, displaced, or disaffected young people who would otherwise have nowhere else to crash. He does this partly out

of sympathy for them—he’s been there—and partly for the extra cash. At any given time there might be as many as ten such souls each paying \$15 a week for a tattered cot or a worn-out mattress and a few square feet of grimy floor space. The lucky ones get the uneven concrete floor in the middle or a nook under pipes that aren’t currently dripping. First come, first served.

On an unusually hot evening in early May, one of the current residents, Millicent “MILLI” Aiga, scrambles to get her act together. She has an appointment that must be kept, and she’s running late. Twenty-one, average height and routinely disheveled, Milli dresses in a low-budget/grunge femme/urban survivor style—a hodgepodge of what she can afford, scavenge and “liberate.” She’s pretty, underneath the bed-head hair and low-rent threads, though a healthier diet and a perhaps a trip to the dermatologist might help. Milli’s corner of the basement is a bit messy—gum wrappers on the floor, the half-empty soda cup from last night’s Happy Meal™ still sitting precariously close to the edge of the cardboard box that serves as her nightstand and her few belongings lying in disorganized piles. She’s rummaging around frantically searching for her cigarettes.

Milli finally finds the missing pack—but it’s empty! Somebody filched her last butt. #@!!*&%! She knows who it was—that smarmy dude sleeping in the cot under the stairs who’s always borrowing smokes and never buys a pack. Furious, Milli grabs a half-full bucket of water from under one of the dripping pipes, dumps it on his head and clomps up the stairs. The rudely-awakened dude sputters, “What did I do?!”

Meanwhile, across the room, sitting on her mattress reading the *Voice*, another tenant with a smug smirk on her face—the real culprit—lights up.

Milli, now in a foul mood, heads downtown. Ordinarily, she’d go uptown and west to get to the L train at 14th and First, but she needs smokes and she only has four dollars—not enough money to buy a pack. Her only shot is Jorge’s bodega just north of Houston. Maybe, she thinks, she can talk him into giving her a discount, or letting her owe him a couple of bucks one more time till she can scrounge some cash.

Suddenly, right behind her there is a thunderous BOOM as an underground explosion blows an Avenue C manhole cover seven stories into the air. A searing wave of concussive force slams into Milli, shoving her forward, singeing her hair, stunning her.

CUT TO A FLASHBACK: Milli arriving at the Upper West Side office of Dr. Meir Moran (MEIR), for the first time. Meir is a psychologist who spends two evenings a week counseling troubled young people *pro bono*. He’s an older man, weathered by travel and experience but brimming with life and light. His eyes are wells of wisdom, penetratingly intense, as deep as if they had seen ten thousand years and yet sparkling like a child’s. As part of her probation for a shoplifting rap, Milli is required to see Meir once a week for three months. Milli sits stiffly, uncomfortably, in a chair across from

Meir. He asks Milli if she knows why she's here. Because the Judge said so, Milli replies. Well, that's why you're *here*, Meir says, but...let's take it from the top. Why don't you tell me about yourself? he says.

BACK TO THE PRESENT: Milli shakes her head to clear it. A split second later, the manhole cover THUDS down edgewise only a few feet away from her, shattering the pavement. It would have killed her...! Milli slowly gathers awareness of the chaos around her. People are running, shouting, screaming. A column of blue flame ten stories high is spewing from the now-open manhole. Someone is shouting about a ruptured gas main. Of course—the explosion, the pillar of fire. All the stores and windows are dark inside—the explosion caused a power outage? Figures. Approaching sirens wail—but seem to cut off as they draw closer. Milli notices that all the cars and trucks on the street are still, all utterly dead. Very weird. Nothing is moving except the crowds of people fleeing. Drivers are getting out of their suddenly, inexplicably inert vehicles, puzzled, afraid. Some curse, kick fenders, some are immobilized by confusion or fear; some abandon their vehicles and join the fleeing throngs.

Milli hears another explosion, then another—perhaps only a few blocks away! Is it spreading?

Milli's brush with mortality sinks in. Abruptly terrified, she runs. Ahead of her, an old woman with a walker has fallen on the street. Pitifully, she cries for help. Lost in her own fog of fear, Milli runs right past her, almost tripping over the toppled walker. A few steps later, Milli realizes what she did—she nearly trampled the old lady! She stops and looks back. An old man, hardly more able than the old lady, is helping her up. Feeling lower than a slug's belly, Milli slinks away.

Milli stumbles on, slowly collecting herself. She passes a number of fire trucks and police cars, stalled and inert just like all the other vehicles. Even their lights and sirens aren't functioning. It's as if once they reached the blacked-out area they lost all power, just like the buildings did. Near Houston, however, the buildings' lights are on and the cars are running, though not moving much due to the traffic snarl the blackout has caused.

Milli looks back at the blacked-out blocks to the north. Not only are there no lights, but a strange, dark, dense cloud has formed over the area, and it's just sitting there. Though the sun is just now setting, and the rest of the city is in twilight, most of Alphabet City is black as midnight. Milli can still see—barely—the column of blue flame against the backdrop of darkness. What a strange, nasty kind of fire, she thinks, that makes so much heat and so little light....

Milli arrives at Jorge's bodega. A recently-hired (off the books, of course) handsome young man, well-built and tall-ish—about five-foot-ten—is sweeping up. Several

neighborhood girls varying from early to late teens are hanging around, utterly entranced by him, devouring him with their eyes, coveting his every glance, flirting, whispering and giggling. An older woman, who stopped in to pick up a can of habichuelas—quite unnecessarily, we suspect—asks the young man to put it on her bill and gives him a caress on the cheek before leaving with a wistful smile and a sigh. From the back somewhere, Jorge shouts that if those chicas out there aren't buying anything, they'd better leave. "Sorry," says the young man. The girls reluctantly leave, sighing and smiling wistfully just like the older woman.

When Milli enters, the young man puts the broom aside and goes behind the counter. "¿Español?" he asks, "or English?" Either, says Milli. The young man, whose full name is José Angel Salvador Mundo Gallardo Hidalgo, introduces himself as JOSÉ. He asks what he can do for her. Milli says she's a little short on money, and she was wondering if he could....

Before Milli can finish, Jorge's voice booms out from the back. If it's that girl from the flophouse on C, *no credit*. She owes him too much already. José shrugs apologetically.

Defeated, Milli shuffles out.

But, José follows her outside. Wait a minute, he says...there's something about her...he thinks—no, he *knows* he knows her...from some other time, some other place. Not likely, says Milli. José shrugs. He says he has a way of seeing things about people, about anything, actually, that most people can't. There's something different about her. Very different. For one, most girls get ga-ga eyes for him the minute they meet him. She didn't. Milli's first instinct is to laugh out loud—what a smug, conceited jerk!—but, then again, she saw how those chicas and even the señora were drooling over him. And, truth to tell, even *she* feels drawn to him...a little.

You need money, says José. Yes, says Milli. I...um...need to buy a token. I need to get uptown. It's kind of an emergency.

Here, he says, digging into his pocket, here's two dollars—all I have.

José cocks his head, eying her. I know you're lying, he says. You *do* have to go uptown, but you plan to use the money, along with the four bucks in your pocket, to buy smokes. But, it's okay. I want to help you. I'll give you what I can.

How do you know how much I have in my pocket? Milli growls.

I told you, I have a way of seeing things, he replies. Another thing about you I see is....

In the distance, uptown, another manhole blows. The thunderous sound rumbling down the Avenue makes José and Milli turn. José looks quizzically at the growing black cloud over Alphabet City north. Gas mains exploding, says Milli. Yes, but more than that, says José. This is...unnatural, no accident. There's something going on, something bad. You mean, like terrorism? Milli asks. Worse, says José. Way worse.

Suddenly, another deafening blast shakes the ground, followed by the roar of a towering jet of flames. *Another* manhole explosion—just around the corner.

All around them, the lights go out. Everything stops. And a new cloud of blackness begins to form above, soon to merge with its predecessor into an even greater umbrella of darkness. Only a glimmer of fading light from the west illuminates the street.

Screams come from the utterly blacked-out apartments across the street. José again cocks his head, staring at the building. This is bad, he says. A Mamá can't find her baby. The viejo upstairs needs his medicine, but he's lost in the dark. Ai! Lots of trouble. I've got to go. He starts across the street.

Wait, shouts Milli. What are you going to do? Help them, he says. I see pretty well in the dark.

As José races into the apartment building, he shouts back to Milli, "You be *careful!* You're...important! *Needed!*"

Who, me? says Milli, sarcastically.

Everyone—but especially you, right now, shouts José as he vanishes into the building. *And stop smoking!*

The thought crosses Milli's mind: how did he open that door? All the buildings around here have automatically locking doors. You need a key, or someone has to buzz you in... and buzzers don't work if the power's off.

Milli heads south, toward Delancey and Essex. She can get the F train there. Along the way, she stops at a discount place and buys a pack of cigarettes—just like José knew she would. Milli scoffs again at the notion that he had met her before. Not likely that the counter boy at the bodega would have been anywhere she's been....

CUT TO A FLASHBACK: Milli, telling Meir her unusual background. Milli, by now making herself at home and comfy, is sprawled in the chair across from Meir, one leg over the arm of the chair and one foot on the coffee table, totally inappropriately, though Meir doesn't seem to notice. Milli tells of being born and growing up in Antarctica, at a Chilean research station, running away at an early age and scrounging an existence

wherever fate dumped her—Buenos Aires, Sidney, Tokyo, Cape Town, Berlin. Now that she's in New York, she's officially been on every continent. But, she says, she never felt like she belonged anywhere. Meir points out that since Antarctica belongs to no one nation, and in fact belongs to *all* nations, philosophically, at least, Milli belongs *everywhere*. Why not look at it that way?

Milli shrugs. She's always felt...dunno...detached? Not a part of anything, or missing something. She's here completely illegally, with fake papers, of course, and if they ever find out, she'll be deported. Do you know where they'd send me? she asks. Easter Island! Because her father was born on Easter Island, which supposedly means she's part native, the government of Chile would "return" her there, according to their screwed up official policy. Easter Island! The remotest inhabited place on Earth! Doesn't she feel "remote" enough already?

BACK TO THE PRESENT: Milli finds herself in front of that rarest of things, a working pay phone. She glances uptown at the roiling dark clouds over the blacked out sections. Worth a try, she thinks. She calls Meir, using the change from the cigarettes—the last of her money. She explains to Meir that there's some kind of blackout going on and she's having trouble getting there. Postpone, maybe? Meir says no. He's tired of her being late, missing appointments and making lame excuses. He'll be in his office till 10 PM. If she's not there by then, he'll have to report to the judge that she was absent. He hangs up.

Milli swallows hard. If Meir tells the judge she didn't show, that means jail for sure. And, maybe, if they discover that her papers are forged, Easter Island.

Feeling very scared, Milli heads for the subway entrance.

CUT TO: A large, windowless building in the fifties, on the West Side, a former telecom switching center, closed down several years ago due to obsolescence and recently sold to *Umbra Holdings, Inc.* On the top floor, in what was once the executive suite, the sole owner of Umbra Holdings, one Mr. Kass MURK, sits alone at the head of a large conference table. The room is nearly completely dark, lit only by a single ceiling light over the center of the conference table, its dimmer switch set low. The double doors open and a woman, MURIEL, tall, and slender with dark hair and pale skin that seems almost eerily luminescent in the faint light enters, leading six "candidates" into the room. Muriel shows them to their seats, then stations herself by the door. Muriel is unarmed, not physically imposing, and yet there's something dangerous about her....

One of the six, Hammond GROSSE, the hugely overweight, famously callous, heartless and gluttonous Chairman and CEO of Grosse Industries, asks why it's so dark in here? Murk replies that he prefers it darker. He is tolerating the brightness of the room as a courtesy to his guests.

Murk begins. The six have been invited here because they are all powerful people with a craving for more—more power, of course, and more of everything that comes with it—the very best of what this world has to offer—without restriction—all their fondest, wildest, darkest whims fulfilled.

Murk claims responsibility for the blackout that is crippling the Lower East Side—and it's just beginning, he says. He plans to cast the entire world into darkness...the darkness will beget chaos...and from chaos, a clever man—or woman—can forge power.

Tonight is just a test, says Murk...and a way of demonstrating his capabilities to them....

Capabilities? says Grosse. So, you blow up some gas mains. The lights go out for a while. Big deal.

Not only are the lights out, *nothing* electrical works—cars, computers, phones, televisions, radios...not even flashlights—nothing with an electrical system, Murk replies. He has found a way to create a *blackout field* with properties similar to an *electromagnetic pulse*. The electromagnetic pulse phenomenon was discovered during the Cold War—a sufficient discharge of energy creates a wave of electromagnetic force that can disrupt electronic equipment.

Murk continues: Most telephone and communications buildings—like the one they're in—were built without windows to help them *resist* electromagnetic pulses, so that communications couldn't be easily shut down by an enemy attack. Or by sunspots, for that matter.

So this place protects you from your own gimmick? Grosse asks.

No building on Earth can thwart *his* blackout field, says Murk...and he doesn't need protection against his own "gimmick." *My* equipment, says Murk, runs on a *different* kind of power. He chose this building as his place of business because he prefers having no windows. It's not ideal. He'd like something more...cavernous....

If you can do what you say, Grosse asks, what do you want with us?

Murk says that forces are already gathering against him. He needs allies of his own.... If they agree to join him, he will make them more powerful and more dangerous than they can imagine. With him, they will reshape this world to suit them, and reap the benefits.

Grosse is skeptical. Murk's saying he can make a "field" that keeps even flashlights from working?

It's easy for you to believe in minute electrical waves radiating through the air, and streams of electrons racing back and forth through wires, Murk muses. Why is it difficult for you to believe I have a way to stop them? There is so much more to this world than you know, so much more than you can imagine, so much one can use, if one knows how and believes....

Could be all just a trick, says Grosse...an illusion....

Isn't everything? says Murk.

CUT TO: Milli approaching the subway turnstiles at the Essex Street Station. She looks around. The coast seems clear—and she jumps the turnstile.

Immediately, however, a plainclothes Transit Cop starts running toward her from down the platform. "Police!" he shouts. Stay where you are!

Fat chance, thinks Milli. Another arrest? No way. Nowhere to run underground. She leaps the turnstiles and races up the stairs to the street.

Outside she flees down the street with the cop in hot pursuit. He's gaining. Suddenly, she regrets every puff of cigarette smoke she ever inhaled. She rounds a corner—there's a cab stuck in traffic! She leaps into the back seat, slouches down and tries to discreetly cover her face. It works. The cop runs past. She's safe.

"*What are you doing?*" The cab, as it turns out, already has a passenger—HAYDEN Beritsson. Milli sputters that she didn't notice that the hack light was off and there was already someone in the cab. Out the window, though, she sees the cop headed back their direction, looking around. Milli nervously asks if she could possibly stay in the cab for another minute or two. "I'm Milli," she says. "Could you please talk to me and make it look like, you know, I'm just another passenger here?" Hayden introduces herself, but isn't okay with this. If Milli's in some trouble with the police, she's going to have to get out.

The cop passes and heads back down the subway stairs. He didn't see her. Milli exhales.

"Look," says Milli, "all I did was jump the turnstile because I didn't have a token and I have to.... For the first time, Milli really looks at Hayden. She's tall and startlingly pretty. Feeling plain and inadequate, every blemish on her face suddenly throbbing, Milli can't help but allow a "wow" to slip out. This Hayden is...what word is good enough? Beautiful? Splendiferous? *Majestic?*

Hayden, a little uncomfortable with the way Milli is staring at her searches for anything to say. She explains that she's trying to get to Battery Park City where her ailing aunt

Thelma lives. Also feeling incredibly awkward, searching for anything to say, Milli says that the reason traffic is so screwed up is that there's a blackout uptown. Hayden says she's had this weird feeling of dread for the last few minutes that she's in danger somehow, that something's going to explode...that the *lid's* going to blow off of... something.

Milli's eyes go wide. She flings the door open and ducks down to look under the cab. There's a manhole there! Get out of the cab, she screams. Somehow, the terror and desperation in her voice are enough to convince Hayden and the driver, who both scramble out and away from the cab.

KABOOM! The manhole explodes with tremendous fury, demolishing the cab.

All around them, lights go out. Cars stop running. And overhead, a dark, ominous cloud starts to grow.

The force of the blast has toppled over a bus. It's starting to burn, and people are trapped inside. Hayden races over to the bus, and *sticks her hand into the flames!* Milli can't believe her eyes...but, suddenly the flames vanish! It's as if she absorbed them, or something. Then, abruptly, there's a brilliant blue flash of lightning tracing a jagged path into the sky and a deafening peal of thunder—*coming from Hayden!*

Milli glances around. In all the darkness, chaos and confusion, only she was looking at Hayden, only she saw...but what did she *see?* Hayden realizes that Milli witnessed what she did. I took the heat from the fire and made it into something else, Hayden explains. Look, she continues, I think we'd both better get away from here. Now, I really have to get to my aunt's place....

Hayden heads downtown, running. Milli backs away, eyes fixed on Hayden's retreating figure. The only light is from a few trash can fires still burning. Dumbfounded by all she has seen and experienced tonight, Milli isn't watching where she's going....

SLAM! Suddenly a *bike messenger* rams Milli. She goes down hard.

CUT TO A FLASHBACK: Milli telling Meir more about her sordid past. Half the time she feels like the victim, she says, and half the time like the one who's causing the problem and hurting people. The abuser, offers Meir. Yes. Milli goes on. It's like, when she thinks about things too much, she always gets everything wrong. When she does something right, it feels like an accident. Those times are not accidents, says Meir. *You got it right, didn't you?!*

BACK TO THE PRESENT: Milli comes to looking up at the bike messenger. Are you okay? he asks. She is, if sore. Though it's very dark, Milli can see that he's gigantic—

six-foot-seven, as it turns out—nice looking, incredibly fit and lean—and there’s something about him, something friendly and nice that makes her comfortable with him and unafraid right away. His name is Nassor Utsungi, and he’s from Zimbabwe. His friends call him NAZ. Milli introduces herself. His deliveries for the day finished, just before the blackout, Naz was on his way to his home uptown—a small place he shares with other messengers. All of them are also artists, like him, he says. It’s great.

Milli explains her problem—getting to the Upper West Side. Naz says he’ll give her a ride on the handlebars. It’s the least he can do, considering that he ran her down—though she really ought to look where she’s going.

Soon, Naz and Milli are zipping uptown at amazing speed. Once out of the blackout area, they’re outrunning cars! This guy is definitely not your average bike messenger.

It’s also amazing to Milli that outside the blackout area, everything is instantly normal—the second, you’re out from under those black clouds, everything works again....

CUT TO: Murk’s meeting room again as Murk addresses the six.

All of you have excellent credentials, says Murk, but don’t flatter yourselves. There are many more like you, others that will jump at the chance if you choose not to cooperate. Now...you must *decide*.

Murk points to Sheila DELACEY, the beautiful, ex-model known as the “Vice Queen,” whom, it is said, controls much of the business of illegal substances and pleasures of all kinds in New York, Vegas and Miami. “All yours, Mr. Murk,” she purrs.

Murk points to Scarlatta “SKINNER” Lametta, a tall, solidly-built woman. She’s a brutal mob enforcer, with a well-deserved rep for toughness. She routinely beats up men, even some far bigger than her, and she’s a wizard with a straight razor—she *earned* her nickname. “I’m in,” she says.

Murk points to Sauda Q’dirah, Esq., high-powered lawyer, power broker and politico, called “SQUID” because her tentacles reach everywhere. “You can count on my support,” she says.

Murk points to Claudio “CLAWBACK” Garra, vastly wealthy, prototype “vulture capitalist,” known for his greed and rapaciousness. “Deal.”

Murk points to Kame “SLACK” Kuramoto, big-time, totally corrupt labor leader. “We gotta contract,” he grumbles.

Finally, Murk points to Grosse. He hesitates...then says, “All right.”

Murk makes a subtle gesture to Muriel. Muriel nods and slips out of the room.

Murk continues addressing the six. Those who will oppose us are uniquely gifted. You would be amazed by the things some of them can do. Soon, you'll be able to do amazing things as well. I already *can*...I can match them trick for trick.

For instance, Murk says, all of you have agreed—but I *know* one of you is lying.

Everyone at the table stiffens. Grosse, who usually perspires a lot anyway, fidgets nervously, sweating heavily. Murk's eyes cross Grosse...to Skinner. Ms. *Skinner*, he says....

Skinner looks surprised. She tenses as if ready to try to fight her way out. Muriel slips back into the room and nods to Murk.

Ms. Skinner, Murk says, the dissenter in our midst is sitting next to you...*Ms. Delacey*.

Delacey, relatively cool till now, growls that she has ten armed men waiting outside—nobody better so much as lay a finger on her.

Murk tells her that Muriel has already “taken care” of her bodyguards. She's alone.

Delacey bolts. Skinner grabs her.

Ms. Skinner, says Murk, I believe this sort of thing falls under your department—please take care of Ms. Delacey. Skinner smiles and drags Delacey screaming out of the room.

We'll need a replacement for her, says Murk. But for now, let's get started....

CUT TO: Naz and Milli enter another blackout area in the Fashion District. Naz slows down. It's hard to see.

People have started fires in trash cans and on the streets. Firelight seems to be the only illumination that works. Others stumble around, lighting matches, flicking their Bics or using improvised torches.

Naz sees an ambulance and several police cars—all utterly inert—pulled up in front of a tall building. A thirty-something guy who has obviously just run down the stairs from a high floor is telling the cops and EMS people that there's a woman on the forty-sixth floor apparently having a heart attack. Every second counts, but the elevators don't work. Nothing works. Two EMS techs scramble to unlimber a stretcher—no choice but to

climb the stairs fast as they can and bring her back down—and they hope, get her out of this area to a hospital that still has electricity.

Naz tells Milli he's sorry, but he'll have to let her off here. He jumps off the bike, sprints past the EMS techs and into the building at blinding speed.

Milli stands there for a moment *thinking*...it's almost ten now! Maybe if she "borrows" Naz's bike....

Milli straddles the bike and tries to peddle the way she's seen so many people do—but she's never ridden a bike before! They don't do much bicycling in Antarctica....

Milli falls in a heap. Oww....

Suddenly Naz appears, carrying the victim while the EMS techs are still prepping for the climb. It took him under a minute! He turns her over to EMS and is standing over Milli before she can even get up.

I know you're desperate, he says, but there may be other people I can help, and I need my bike. He picks up the bike and takes off, waving to Milli and wishing her good luck. He didn't even seem to be mad, thinks Milli. He just wanted his bike back.

Milli shrugs and trudges on. Up ahead, she can see that Port Authority is still alright. She heads that direction.

As she rounds a corner, Milli sees a gang of looters carrying torches ransacking a store. She freezes—but they see her! Hey, a *girl*, one shouts. Get her!

Terrified, Milli flees. They pursue.

In the darkness, Milli gives them the slip. Near exhaustion, near tears, trembling, she slumps down on the curb.

Suddenly, a Hummer comes rumbling down the Avenue! A vehicle...! That WORKS!

Milli's heart leaps! She's got to flag them down.

In the Hummer, two shadowed figures, a large-ish, muscular woman and a relatively slender woman who's driving, talk. The bigger woman is wondering why this crate still runs. Different kind of power, says the slender woman—Murk's. Alternative fuel...sort of. Where are we going? the bigger woman asks. One of the usual spots, says the other woman. We have several around the city....

Suddenly, Milli is right in front of them, waving her arms desperately. Instinctively, the slender woman—Muriel—swerves, runs up on the curb and rams a mailbox. Some of the cargo in the back of the Hummer spills out. Milli gasps. Are those...*body bags*?!

Yep, says the big woman, Skinner, stepping down from the Hummer. She roughly grabs Milli. Eleven of ‘em, chickadee, she growls. Muriel also climbs down from the vehicle, which is dented, but still serviceable. I suppose we’ll have to make it twelve, says Muriel....

END ISSUE #1

Issue #2

“The Journey” Part II

9:30 PM. It is dark and desolate on 37th Street west of Eighth, in New York City’s Fashion District. The only light is from a few trash can fires.

MILLI struggles in the viselike grasp of big, muscular, female mob enforcer SKINNER. The mysterious, dangerous MURIEL looks on. “Hurry up,” Muriel says. Skinner wraps one huge hand around Milli’s throat and starts to squeeze. She can’t breathe! We see the scene from Milli’s POV as she struggles futilely—her bugged-out eyes focused on Skinner’s cruel face. Her vision begins to blur and fade...

CUT TO MILLI’S *VISION*: We APPROXIMATELY MATCH the shot of Skinner’s face from Milli’s POV—but in *this* shot, it’s MEIR’S face, kind and sympathetic—and he’s not holding her by the throat. In fact, she’s in a misty “dream” version of Meir’s office, sitting in her usual chair. Vision-Meir is sitting in his usual chair, too. Milli explains to Vision-Meir, briefly, aided by phantasmagorical images swirling around them, the events of last issue: she was on her way to see Meir, there were gas main explosions and blackouts, she met three really different people—JOSÉ, HAYDEN and NAZ—and wound up in the hands of these evil people, who, oh, by the way, are killing her. Vision-Meir is very calm. He observes that she is indeed, quickly dying. He urges her to think about what she learned from her experiences today, think about how that might relate to getting her out of her current predicament.

“What’s the use?” Milli says. This brutish woman has cut off her air. She’s passing out—having *hallucinations*, already. Everything has faded to black...can’t *see*....

“Can’t see?” says Vision-Meir. Hmf. What *José* could see was not limited by sight....

“But I can’t even *think*,” complains Milli.

Vision-Meir replies, “*You* convinced *Hayden* to trust her instincts when relying on thinking would have killed you both”

“You don’t get it,” Milli says. “This woman is huge!”

“So,” Vision-Meir says, “you *think* you can’t win. But Naz conquered every obstacle, didn’t he?”

Vision-Meir continues, “Picture yourself free. Imagine yourself walking away unharmed. If you can do this, often the steps between where you are and where you *choose* to be, where you *see* yourself, where you *will* be, become clear.”

“Forget it,” says Milli. “It’s *gotta* be too late by now...”

“Nonsense. This is a *vision*,” says Vision-Meir. This conversation took no time at all.

“Knowledge is light,” he adds. “Light...will save you.”

BACK TO THE PRESENT: We reestablish the scene. Skinner is holding a very limp looking Milli off the ground by her throat, as before. Muriel is growing impatient. She demands to know what’s taking so long.

Skinner shows an unexpected shred of humanity. The “chickadee” (Milli) is hardly more than a kid, and she’s always had a bit of a soft spot for kids.

Muriel rolls her eyes.

Skinner has her head turned toward Muriel as they discuss her “soft spot.” Unnoticed, Milli, who’s not *quite* entirely out of it reaches into her pocket...and pulls out her *cigarette lighter*...

Muriel tells Skinner that if she’s too squeamish, she, Muriel, will deal with this trashy little bit of human flotsam that had the misfortune to see what they were up to (transporting the bodies of Sheila Delacey and her ten bodyguards, whom they murdered, to a dumping place). Skinner’s ego is threatened. “No, I’ll do it,” she growls. Then, suddenly, she realizes that the sleeve of her jacket on the arm gripping Milli is ablaze! She shrieks in pain and drops Milli to the ground. Gasping for air, Milli scrambles away.

That probably wasn’t the kind of ‘light’ Meir meant, Milli thinks, looking at her lighter, but...whatever.

Skinner pats out the flames. She's a bit scorched, but not badly hurt. She and Muriel stalk toward Milli, who's still scuttling/crawling away, not yet able to run. Hoarsely, Milli yells for help.

Suddenly two POLICEMEN come running, each carrying a flare for light, each with his gun drawn. They help Milli to her feet. Milli sputters out that these people have dead bodies in their truck and they tried to kill her and....

Muriel approaches the officers coolly and politely. She apologizes—apparently they scared this young girl without meaning to. One cop checks the back of the Hummer and sees the body bags. Muriel calmly unzips one and a *mannequin's arm* flops out. The cops open more. All mannequins! Muriel explains that she and her partner are part of a crew shooting an indie film about a terrorist attack. They rented these mannequins from a supplier here in the Fashion District to use as props—to fill the bodybags—and they were returning them when this weird blackout happened. The girl saw them and misunderstood, and, well, you know kids....

One cop asks Milli what she's doing here. It's dangerous to be out during a blackout. Milli says she has to get to an appointment on the Upper West Side. Fast. The cop tells her that the blackout seems to have stopped spreading and that some trains are still running uptown from Port Authority. Milli thanks the officer and heads toward the PAT Terminal, still befuddled about what just occurred.

Milli makes sure she's far away and out of sight before the cops leave the scene. Cautiously, she peers around a corner to look back at Skinner, Muriel and the Hummer. Sure enough, once the policemen are gone, the Hummer roars to life again and zooms off—though no other vehicle under the umbrella of the blackout functions. Mannequins my @\$#%!, she thinks. Dunno who they are, what's up or how they pulled off that trick, but she *knows* the truth. They *were* trying to kill her, and those *were* real bodies. But... who's going to believe *her*? And, she bets, they're counting on that.

In the Hummer, Skinner asks Muriel how she did that. The bodies *are* real, not mannequins, but....

Think of it as the Jedi mind trick, she says. We—those who serve Mr. Murk—are good at deceit. “Don't worry, once Murk *initiates* you,” Muriel adds, “you'll be able to do things a lot more amazing than that. You're going to be one of the *Principals*...one of the *Dark Seven*.”

CUT TO: The headquarters building of KASS MURK. We shoot the establishing shot from high enough that we can see a fair portion of the city to the south and east, and therefore, see a number of areas where the blackout holds sway: Alphabet City, Soho, much of midtown east, and more. We pull in to see that Murk is on the roof, looking out

over the city. He wears *very* dark glasses. Behind him are his “recruits” (except for Skinner): GROSSE, SQUID, CLAWBACK, and SLACK. (DELACEY, of course, was eliminated). Murk senses that Skinner and Muriel’s arrival is imminent. Something... *troubling* happened on their mission. Something disturbing. But, then again, things that feel ominous often prove to be *opportunities*.

Sure enough, seconds later, Muriel and Skinner join the rest.

“What happens next?” asks Grosse.

Murk replies that the five must prepare to be transformed. He instructs them to go to the preparation chamber.

“Where’s that?” asks Slack.

“I’ll open the way,” says Murk. Murk doesn’t move, but suddenly, in response to his *will*, the door to the roof stairwell opens, and inside, a series of doors along the prescribed route open. Faint floor lights, like airplane emergency lights, illumine—barely—the path. Spooky...but the five follow the path....

As they vanish inside, Murk turns to Muriel. “Tell me *everything* that happened on your errand.”

CUT TO: Milli emerging from under the blackout cloud a few blocks from PAT—and suddenly, things seem amazingly normal. Everything works. People crowd the streets, pushcart vendors, staying out late, are doing land office business and traffic is thick and heavy. Everyone’s talking about the blackout. As Milli enters the South Terminal, someone has a satellite radio set up on a stack of plastic milk cartons blaring at top volume. A newscaster is reporting that the blackout seems to be contained, that FEMA is on the scene in lower Manhattan, that the Mayor urges people to remain calm, that Con Ed says it isn’t their fault and that everything’s going to be fine. Hundreds of people gather around to listen, and even Milli pauses for a second. Then, something—*someone*—catches her eye. A hundred feet or so away, walking her direction, toward the Eighth Avenue doors of PAT, is the most...*interesting* young man she’s ever seen. He’s tall-ish, over six feet, with sandy brown hair and (as she sees later) gray-blue eyes. He’s dressed casually—nice, not geeky, not totally L7 (square) or weird, but waaay not counterculture/post-modern subversive/urban decay, like, say, her. Total look: a little too straight and... hmm... wholesome? In three words, *not her type*...and yet...there’s something about him that’s intriguing. Mesmerizing.

CUT TO: Timothy “TIM” Bell, the object of Milli’s fascination. As he walks toward the doors, an OLD BEGGAR, whose legs are stumps, asks him for change. Hundreds, thousands of people have passed the Old Beggar, more every second, utterly ignoring

him. Tim stops, digs in his pocket and comes up with a five dollar bill. “All I can manage,” Tim says, handing the bill to the Old Beggar. “You’re new here,” says the Old Beggar. “Watch yourself. Hold your wallet.” Tim thanks him and walks on.

As Tim walks away, the Old Beggar muses to himself, “’bout time you got here. Hope it ain’t too late.”

As Tim approaches, Milli is transfixed. There’s something about him....

Tim notices Milli, too. She is *so* not his type, but...somehow strangely appealing.

Tim weaves through the crowd heading toward the doors. As he’s about to pass by Milli, she tries to move to let him by and ends up bumping into him! He zigged when she thought he was zagging. A very minor accident, (or is it?)—no harm, no foul.

Milli babbles an apology. Tim says he’s sorry, too. Standing too close, their gazes locked, they are lost in a split-second moment that seems to last forever.

Then, suddenly Tim whirls around and grabs a weasel-y looking guy behind him. Tim snatches his wallet out of the weasel’s hand just before he can slip it into his own pocket. Busted, the weasel squirms out of Tim’s grasp and runs, darting through the crowd like, well, a weasel.

Tim turns to Milli, who is just beginning to grasp what just happened. “I ought to have you arrested,” Tim says sternly.

“What did I do?” Milli stammers (the same words said by the dude she falsely accused of stealing one of her cigarettes in issue one, BTW), simultaneously realizing in horror: *He thinks I bumped him to help that slimeball jack his wallet!*

“Ahh...I’ll let it go,” Tim says, walking away, “but maybe your next mark won’t. Think about it.”

Milli wants to go after Tim, try to explain, but, ohmygod, the TIME! Milli heads for the subway.

CUT TO: Murk’s HQ. He and Muriel observe the five from a glassed-off area reminiscent of a recording studio control room. The five recruits are gathered in a vast room wanly lit by torches that burn with bluish flames. It is a dark, evil temple of sorts. Murk likes blue fire—so little light, such hideous destructive power. The five—Skinner, Grosse, Slack, Squid and Clawback are naked, though very discretely, from our POV. Grosse, embarrassed by his gross, fat body, asks why. “Nothing must come between you and that which transforms you,” says Murk via hidden speakers.

“What are we being ‘transformed’ into?” asks Grosse.

“What you already are inside,” says Murk. The blue flames from the torches begin to grow and swirl around the five. In the dark depths of the room, beyond the edges of perception, there seem to be a shadow even darker than the ambient darkness. This is evil itself—*Nogah*, the Eleventh Dimension, the Realm of Darkness, which is to say, the manifestation of the Dark Lord. Fear rises in the hearts of the five. Too late to turn back.

“What are we supposed to do?!” shouts Grosse as the flames close in.

“Nothing,” says Murk. “Just *want*...in that wonderfully selfish, evil way that you always do.”

The flames wash over the five—they seem to consume them.

Then it is over. The five remain. In the shadows, we can’t quite see them clearly—but we sense that they have become things ominous and deadly.

Grosse *screams*! He seems to *shrivel*—his immense bulk melting away until he is a lean, thin, hungry shadow of what he was. All of them writhe in pain. Skinner slams her fist into the concrete wall—and it *shatters*.

Murk turns to Muriel, who looks on from the shadows. He’s pleased. “Six, now, including myself. We need one more....”

CUT TO: Milli rushing downstairs to the IND. She’ll take the A or C to Columbus Circle, then the 1 train to 86th and Broadway. She doesn’t have the fare, but...screw it, even *she* can’t be unlucky enough to encounter two Transit Cops on the same day. She slips through the turnstile. Once on the platform, she looks around. No one saw her... she thinks...and an A train is pulling in. Perfect. She boards the first car and breathes a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, a voice from behind her, with a distinct Australian accent, grimly says, “You’ll pay your fare when you get off. I’ll follow you to the token booth, and you’ll pay. Or I’ll drag you to a policeman.”

Milli whirls to see a red-haired, tough-looking-but-pretty, ruddy/fair-skinned girl glowering at her. This is Gabrielle “GABY” Bullaibullai, dressed as if she were a longshoreman (which at this point, she is). “What the #&!&@ is your problem,” says Milli. Gaby just glares. She can’t stand injustice or anyone getting away with anything.

Suddenly, the lights go out and the train lurches to a halt. Even the emergency lights don't work. It's pitch black. Milli knows what happened—the blackout has gotten to them! There are only a few people in the car, but their terror is palpable.

CUT TO: Murk's HQ, to a dark, vast room we haven't seen before, where Mr. Kass MURK sits alone before a laptop computer. He is deep in contemplation. One might think he was in a trance if not for the subtle sound of the occasional mouse click. Muriel enters.

After long moments, he turns from the computer screen to speak to Muriel. "The cards," he says, "have revealed a sign."

"Tarot?" asks Muriel.

"No. Internet poker," says Murk, turning the screen so Muriel can see. "Texas Hold 'em." He points to the board (the five community cards). The queen of spades is among them. "The queen of spades has appeared six times in a row," says Murk. "That would be my Queen of the Night. She's out there... 'in play,' you might say. I will find her. Tonight. I can feel it."

We notice that the *queen of clubs* is one of Murk's hole cards—that is, *in his hand*—but it isn't mentioned. (It, too, has appeared there six times in a row.)

Sensing his desire, Muriel says, "You'll need transportation." Something in her manner suggests that she would have Murk find his Queen standing before him now—*her*. But she turns and leaves.

BACK TO MILLI: Panic is erupting in the subway car. Milli fumbles for her lighter. *Flick*. Though its flame is small, the light it casts helps a lot. There are eight other people in the car besides Milli and Gaby, all of them still afraid, but much relieved by the light. Gaby tells Milli to follow her. Milli bristles slightly at being ordered around, but does so. Gaby leads the people from the first car toward the back of the train. Car by car, passengers join the group, following Gaby and the light of Milli's lighter. By the time they reach the last car, there are forty or so.

Gaby tells everyone to wait there while she and Milli look for an emergency exit. They climb down from the rear deck of the last car and find their way to an old, long closed maintenance platform just a hundred feet or so down the tracks. It looks like there's a stairway to the street, but the way is barred by a heavy iron gate locked with padlocks and thick chains. "Now what?" asks Milli.

Gaby considers her options for a second. No choice. *She rips the gate open with her bare hands!*

Milli is dumbfounded. That took incredible strength! Gaby looks a little chagrined. She doesn't like letting people see what she can do. "Let's go back and get the others," Gaby says. Milli nods and follows her, still agape.

As Gaby and Milli lead the group toward the now-open exit, Milli's lighter finally runs dry. Suddenly, it's utterly black again. "Doesn't anybody else have a lighter?" Milli bleats. "I can't believe that nobody else here smokes!" Nope. One man says he has a mini flashlight on his keychain, and though the battery's brand new, it won't work. Half a dozen others say the same thing. What kind of blackout is this?! Panic starts to well again....

Then, suddenly, a small beam of light pierces the darkness, coming from above up the stairs. Everyone rushes toward the light. Gaby shouts for everyone to calm down, be careful and not trample each other, and somehow they don't. Milli, then Gaby are the last to head up the stairs. There's a tall-ish male figure shrouded in the darkness halfway up the stairway shining what *appears* to be a mini-flashlight down to the platform. One of the people whose flashlight didn't work asks how come this guy's flashlight *does* work. What kind of batteries is he using? "Um...*organic*." says the tall figure. "All natural." The questioner looks puzzled, but shrugs and moves on.

Milli recognizes the voice...! *It's the guy who thought she was helping the pickpocket!* As she passes him she averts her face, hoping he won't recognize her—and she notices that there doesn't seem to be a flashlight in his hand! Ohmygod, the light is coming from his *finger*! Gaby notices that, too. Milli almost blurts out her amazement, but...no. these people, whoever, *whatever* they are, obviously don't want attention, and they've done her and everyone else here a major solid. She almost owes it to them to keep her mouth shut.

The stairs lead to a grated hatchway that opens out of the sidewalk on Eighth Avenue. As Milli climbs the last few steps to the pavement she notices that the lock on the hatchway seems to have been *melted* or *burned away*! She starts to touch the globby remains of the lock—*ouch*! It's still hot! No sign of any welding equipment or cutting torches around....

The street is lit dimly by scattered small fires, some probably ignited by one of those manhole explosions, and some, in trash cans, by people desperate for any light at all. In the dimness she sees Tim—and Gaby—heading east toward Times Square. There seems to be a major panic-riot going on there—*major* violence born of fear. What are they thinking?! They could be killed!

But Milli has her own problems. She's late already, but, at this point, she doesn't know what else to do except trudge onward. If she can't get to Meir's place, well, at least she tried.

As Milli crosses 47th street, she sees *light* in Times Square. It's coming from the roof of that building where the Olive Garden is, by the Michelangelo Hotel, as if somebody set up a big floodlight there that was illuminating—to some extent, anyway—the whole Square. But how can that be...? She catches herself in mid-wonderment. Him again. Probably with that strong chick's help....

Already she hears the sounds of the riot, the sickening din of violence start to ebb. All it took was light....

Milli walks on up Eighth. The blackout seems to have spread far to the north now. Good. If it reaches 86th and Broadway where Meir's office is, maybe he'll be more understanding about her being so late.

Suddenly Milli stops. "Why even try?" she thinks. The heck with this. Why not just do what she has every time she's been in trouble before? Bail out. Run away. Find some sucker she can con into taking her away to some other place, some new set of problems in yet another anywhere that isn't here—a place she won't belong, just like all the other anywheres, just like here.

So tempting. She's so tired. She plods on, but robotically, purposelessly, her mind awirl with random thoughts of escape, but mainly with despair and hopelessness.

As Milli nears Columbus Circle, she sees a young, Asian-looking guy bending over a woman who is lying in the street. Did he mug her? Is he robbing her? Milli quickens her pace, not knowing exactly why. If he is a bad guy, what's she going to do about it? Looks like he's just holding her hand, but....

As Milli draws near she sees that the woman is really bugged up. Looks like she was trampled in whatever chaos went on in this neighborhood. Then suddenly—really, *suddenly*—she looks a lot better. And the Asian dude—Chenyhadayan "CHEN" Krishnan, as she'll later learn—is helping her up! Even her clothes, which were pretty ripped up a second ago, seem to be mended—and spring-fresh clean! The woman, still dazed and clearly not quite aware of what just happened, thanks Chen for helping her up and goes on her way. Chen says, "You're welcome," and smiles, but the minute the woman turns the corner, he slumps against the wall. He looks exhausted.

Milli asks, "Are you okay?" Fine, he says. He just needs to catch his breath.

Chen asks Milli what she's doing out so late on a crazy night like this—but there's a distinct spark of recognition in his eyes, as if he knew her, or sensed something familiar about her—just like José did. For that matter, she got the same feeling from each of the other five people she met tonight—the helpful ones, that is, not the bad guys. But she's never seen this dude before. Has she?

Milli explains that she's trying to get uptown to an appointment. But it's probably futile at this point—she's so late and it's still so far, and there's no way to get there except walk. The subways are down, busses and cabs don't work, even if she could afford any of them, which she can't. She's broke.

That's not good, Chen says. He has no money on him, but he can get her as much as she needs if they can find an ATM. Milli says thanks anyway, but ATMs don't work either. For me, they will, says Chen, matter-of-factly, and for some reason Milli believes him—but, nah. No thanks. This guy seems too clean-cut and decent to become her sucker-du-jour, too nice for her to use and screw over. And she's sick of begging, scrounging, scraping and charity—at least for tonight. Nah.

Milli trudges on. Chen asks if she minds if he walks with her a while. Suit yourself, she says.

Chen and Milli talk. Milli asks what happened with that woman. How did he do... whatever it was he did? Chen shrugs. Hard to explain. He helped her. What are you, a Boy Scout, Milli asks? Do you go around randomly doing good deeds? Helping someone else is the best thing you can do for yourself, Chen says. Always.

As they approach Columbus Circle, Chen says, “Aha!” There's your ride. Up ahead, Milli sees a horse-drawn carriage. But there's something wrong. The horse has one leg raised—is it broken?

Chen runs over to the distraught driver. What happened? There was a near-riot here, says the driver. Somebody knocked a signpost over and ol' Daphne tripped on it, and came up lame. He's heartbroken.

Let me see, says Chen stooping down beside the horse.

“Are you a veterinarian?” asks the driver.

“No,” says Chen as he gently strokes ol' Daphne's broken leg, “but I play one on TV.” Chen laughs at his own joke.

“What?” says the driver.

“Ol’ Daphne’s fine now,” says Chen, standing up.

“*And so she is!*” thinks Milli, looking on in awe. Indeed, the horse is whole again—and all refreshed, perky, and ready to go.

The driver is stunned. How did he do that? For that matter, what did he do? Chen doesn’t reply, but asks if the driver will do him a favor in return—take his friend to 86th and Broadway.

Yes, gladly says the driver, and soon Milli is off in style. Chen slumps onto a park bench. It’s been a long, exhausting night.

Riding along in the briskly moving carriage, Milli thinks maybe she does belong here. These people she met tonight seem to know her, weird as that seems. These amazing, remarkable people...! She can’t believe that she didn’t get any of their numbers and not even the names of a couple of them (Tim and Gaby). She remembers the words José said to her as they parted: “You’re important! Needed!” Could it possibly be true?

Soon, Milli arrives at the building where Meir’s office is. The lights are still on up in this neighborhood, and everywhere north of 72nd—and, miraculously, though ten o’clock has long since passed, the light is still on in Meir’s office! She can see his window from here. Two blocks to go. She’ll make it!

Suddenly, Milli sees a young woman dressed in urban salvage clothes—looking very much like herself—running out of a deli carrying a six pack. The counterman, carrying a baseball bat, chases her—obviously, the young woman “liberated” that beer. As the thief races down the sidewalk, looking back at her pursuer, she slams into an older, blind man. She caroms off of him, keeps her feet and keeps running. He falls. The counterman runs right past him. The blind man struggles to get his bearings. His cane has fallen into the gutter. On his hands and knees, he feels around for it futilely.

Milli asks the driver if maybe they should stop and help that guy. The driver says it’s better not to get involved.

CUT TO A FLASHBACK: Milli running past, partly running over the old lady with the walker at the beginning of the first issue. She relives the horrible feeling she had after she did that. Then she thinks about what will happen if she doesn’t make it to Meir’s office in time...and for once, she stops herself from thinking too much—she *knows* what is right. Like Meir said, it’s not an accident when she does the right thing. And what was it that Chen said? “Helping someone else is the best thing you can do for yourself. Always.”

All righty, then....

BACK TO THE PRESENT: Milli tells the driver to stop. She thanks him for bringing her this far—close enough, she says. She hops down from the carriage. Fine with him. He’s got to get ol’ Daphne back to the stables near the Javits Center and get home. He and ol’ Daphne turn around and head south.

Milli runs back to the blind man, who’s still feeling around for his cane. Milli picks it out of the gutter, helps him up and hands the cane to him.

The blind man thanks Milli for helping him. People should help each other, he says. Milli glances up and sees Meir’s office light go out. Look, she says nervously, if you’re okay, I *really* gotta go....

Go, he says, he’s fine now. And be careful! he adds. This is a dangerous night, and people like you are important. Needed.

Milli hustles on her way, thinking...those the same words the guy at Jorge’s bodega—José—said to her...*again!*

“And stop smoking!” the blind man shouts after her.

As Milli approaches the entrance to Meir’s building, she runs into Meir, who’s just leaving. Meir says she’s too late. Because of the blackout, he’d decided to give her till midnight, but it’s 12:02 AM. He had to draw the line somewhere. Milli protests that she would have been here a couple of minutes ago, but she stopped to help this blind guy—which sounds phony even to her. Milli tries to explain how harrowing the journey was. Meir is plainly annoyed that she didn’t keep her appointment, but he’s not made of stone. He can see that she’s been through a lot. All right, he says, I won’t report you as absent.

“And this counts as one of my court-ordered visits, right?” says Milli.

“Nope,” says Meir. “Call tomorrow to set up a make-up appointment. Good night.” Meir hails a cab and leaves.

Milli is utterly frustrated, exhausted and fuming. She tried to do something good, and this is what she gets...! (utterly forgetting/ignoring the fact that Meir gave her a pass for missing the appointment). Agonizingly, she begins the long, horrible trek home.

Whatever brief sense of belonging and happiness she felt riding in the carriage has been shunted out and stomped on by bone-weariness and bitterness. She plods downtown, re-entering the blackout as she crosses 72nd. It’s still going on. Great. Not bad enough she has to walk, but she has to walk through a nightmare.

Suddenly, a black stretch limo with deeply tinted windows pulls up beside her. A car? That works?? She shrinks back a little, remembering what happened the last time she saw a vehicle that worked under the blackout cloud.

A rear window hisses down. A man's face, barely visible in the dimly lit passenger compartment smiles at Milli. Hello, he says. My name is Kass. Kass Murk. You look like you can use a ride.

Milli hesitates—then gets in.

“Where are you going?” Murk asks.

Milli takes a long look at Murk. Not too nice. Just right, in fact. Her ticket to some other place, some other set of problems? Maybe. “Anywhere but here,” she says.

“Good,” says Murk. “Very good.”

END ISSUE #2

Issues #3-4

Story – rough outline (with some scenes fleshed out): Though tempted by Murk's looks, charm and obvious wealth, Milli's instincts say *no*—or *not yet*, anyway. Murk, a perfect gentleman, takes Milli home to the flophouse in Alphabet City. He wants to win Milli over to his side, not try to compel her in any way. En route, he subtly demonstrates his power, which both intrigues Milli and freaks her out a little. As soon as Milli disappears inside the building, Murk, with a snap of his fingers, ends the blackout. She'll need light to get down the stairs....

The next day, Milli is awakened by a knock at the basement door. It's late morning and she's the only flophouse resident home, sleeping in, recovering from her long and hard yesterday. She's wearing the same clothes—she was so tired she just crashed on her cot. Turns out it's José at the door! He knew, from what Jorge said, that she lived in the “flophouse on C.” All he had to do was walk up Avenue C. When he got close, he somehow just *knew* where she was. Hard to explain. He sort of sees without seeing...the easiest way to say it is that he *felt her light*. Milli says she's heard about people who can “feel” light and tell colors by touch, for instance. As soon as she says that, she feels foolish for even considering such nonsense—but, on the other hand, José found her, didn't he?

Milli tells José all that happened after she met him—leaving out her encounter with Murk. None of his business, she thinks. José seems to suspect that she's not being fully forthcoming, but says nothing. Milli dwells unintentionally on her encounters with the guy she collided with in PAT (Tim). José doesn't yet know why, but it seems important to him that they find that guy—but where? Milli says, well, he's obviously an out-of-towner...he didn't look rich...maybe he'd try to find a cheap place to stay. The Y, for instance...?

José *knows* she's right.

Soon, José and Milli arrive at the McBurney YMCA on West 14th Street. He's here, says José. But it's a big place, says Milli, and she doesn't even know the guy's name. Just then, Tim comes striding out! Even before Milli says so, José understands at a glance that Tim is one of the six, including himself, that Milli met along the way last night.

Milli tries to talk to Tim, but forget it. He still thinks she's a pickpocket's accomplice. Noticing that José seems to be with her, Tim warns him to hold his wallet—unless he's another one of her partners in crime. Tim's in a hurry—has an appointment. Seeya. He strides away.

Milli feels all hollow inside, complicated by a profound sense of yearning. What's up with that?! She doesn't know him at all, he thinks she's a creep, he's waaaay not her type, and yet she's got this serious, gnawing attraction thing for him....

As he walks away, Tim hesitates and glances back. He knows very little about her, she's a thief, she's waaaay not his type, and yet, he has this strange fascination...a sense of *longing* for her.... He shrugs and marches on.

Now what? Tim mentioned having an appointment, and suddenly Milli remembers that she's supposed to call Meir and reschedule. But, she says, reaching reflexively into her pocket, she doesn't even have the price of a phone call...or does she? She pulls out a *wad* of bills, several hundred dollars, easy—a fortune to her! She realizes that Murk must've put it there, but how...? (And where else did he have his hands without her knowing about it?!) José raises an eyebrow, but says nada.

Milli calls Meir. Be here in two hours he says.

Milli has to go home and clean up. She's feeling pretty grungy. José has to go to work. He left Jorge a note saying he'd come as soon as he could....

Milli goes home, showers, then goes out and buys herself a magnificent breakfast/lunch at Christine's—a super-cheap Lower East Side joint that's a decent, bargain eatery for

most folks, but for Milli, is livin' large. She also stops and buys herself a really cool new pair of boots. She takes a *cab* to Meir's! *Yee-ha!*

As Milli is entering Meir's office, she literally bumps into Tim—again!—as he's leaving! Omigod, *he's* seeing Meir too! Both of them stammer apologies. Tim, almost instinctively touches his hip pocket, just making sure his wallet is still there. He was trying to be discreet about it, but Milli notices. His continuing suspicion of her cuts her to the quick and she scuttles away into Meir's office, leaving Tim in the outer office where Meir's secretary usually sits, though at the moment, she's powdering her nose. Tim, feeling terrible that he insulted Milli (however justified it may have been), starts to slink away. But there's that *longing* again.... (We notice, but we're not sure if Tim does, that there's a *file folder* lying open on the secretary's desk.)

Inside Meir's office, Milli, all flustered, stops and gets a grip. José said it's important that they hook up with this guy and so does the gnawing feeling in her gut. Just a minute, she tells Meir. She runs back to the outer office. Too late. The guy's gone.

Milli's session with Meir goes rather strangely—she wants to tell him all about the events of last night, but it seems that all she can talk about is the guy who mistook her for a pickpocket's assistant. She doesn't mention that she's talking about his previous patient. That's such a freaky coincidence even she doesn't quite believe it yet. She also sort of glosses over the part about him lighting the way for the people trapped in the subway, and flood-lighting Times Square to quell the riot—a little bit because Meir might think she's nuts, and mostly because she just can't get herself off the subject of how she feels about him, and how he must hate her. Meir, as usual, says wise and wonderful things, especially about how thoughts are the seeds of reality, how words have power, how we create the world around us. His teachings will loom large later....

Toward the end of the session, the secretary buzzes Meir. There's a call he must take. He excuses himself and goes into his private office. Be right back. Milli notices a *file folder* sitting on the table next to Meir's chair. Hmmm....

Later, Milli arrives home to find José waiting for her. How did he get in? she wonders. *Magic*, he says, deadpan. Milli remembers that she saw him get into a security building without a key before (issue #1). Hmm.

José says Jorge fired him for not showing up on time. Doesn't matter. It's far more important that the good people Milli met last night get together, more important than any job. He's not sure why, but it must have something to do with that weird blackout. Got to find the others.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. Milli opens it, and there stands Hayden!

Hay dreamed about Milli and their meeting all night. More than that, she says, she's was (intellectually) curious about Milli—how she knew the manhole was going to blow, etc. Hay tracked Milli down logically—she found out online where the blackout started, came to this neighborhood and searched methodically, asking people along the way. Strangely, she had a feeling that it was this building when she first saw it, but checked with everyone she saw on the street before becoming confident enough to knock on the door.

After the three compare notes (Milli again leaves out the part about Murk), they wonder how they can find the others. Hay says she knows how to find this amazingly fast bike messenger guy, Naz. Come on outside, she says.

The three see a bike messenger—not Naz—approaching. Hay flags him down. Generally, a bike messenger won't stop for anything or anybody, but when someone as devastatingly beautiful as Hay waves to you—who *wouldn't* stop? Hay asks the messenger who's the fastest in the city. He says that would be Naz, who works for Triumph Couriers. Most messengers know each other and everybody knows, or knows *of* Naz.

Hayden calls Triumph on her cell. Could they please send their fastest messenger, Naz, for a pick-up? Sure.

Seconds later, Naz arrives.

They bring Naz up to date....

How to find the other three...? Milli says she learned something about Tim at her shrink's office. He goes there, too, and she snuck a peek at his file.

Suddenly, Tim enters!

José gives Tim the basics.... Tim realizes these are others like Gaby, whom he met.

Tim explains that he came to New York to see Meir, whom a counselor of his back in hometown Pittsburgh recommended as a great teacher. Tim came to talk to Meir about the unique abilities he has and what his purpose might be—but once he was face to face with Meir, well...he found it difficult to just start chatting about something he's kept secret all his life. Meir simply took it that he was a nice, normal young man seeking his way in the world. Meir listened and gave him good, solid advice—"tools" he called them—and, even though they aren't custom-tailored to his situation, they make sense, even for him. Maybe they work for everyone.

Anyway, he saw Milli again at Meir's office, and well, her file was lying open on the secretary's desk, with her address in plain view. He felt a little strange about just

showing up here uninvited, but Meir told him to listen to his inner voice, and, um—he just wanted to see her again and get this thing between them straightened out. Besides, Milli and José showed up uninvited where *he's* staying.

Milli tells Tim what befell her last night. José gives Milli a sidelong look when, again, she leaves out the part involving Murk. Milli wonders how much José knows in that freaky way he knows things. But, hey, it's none of their business. Murk was nice to her and he might be the ticket out of her current troubles—heck, he might be the ticket to everything she ever wanted. That's a door she doesn't want to close yet, and it's *none of their business*. Deep inside, though, she suspects—make that *knows*—that he had something to do with last night's blackout, and all the bad things that happened as a result. She hushes that little, nagging inner voice, though.

Just two left. Tim says he can get in touch with Gaby. He has her number. He calls Gaby's cell....

Shortly after Gaby arrives, straight from her job handling baggage for a cruise line at the docks, Chen wanders in! He had a dream last night about coming here, to this very place. He's learned to pay attention to dreams.

Soon, everyone is up to date. Now what? Chen says, clearly, whoever, whatever caused the blackout is the danger, the reason they're all here....

Milli says she still isn't sure why *she's* here, other than the fact that “here” is the basement where she lives. She's not like them. She can't do anything special. And, she doesn't want or need more complications in her life. She doesn't know what they intend to do, but she sure doesn't want any part of it (except, secretly, she thinks that hanging around with Tim doesn't seem like such a bad idea...). José points out that Milli is the connection that got them together...they're all linked somehow to *her*. Milli can't deny that, but...oh, well. She'll string along for a while and see what transpires.

And so, the Seven are together...sort of.

So...what now? Tim asks.

Each of them—except Milli—has things to do. Hay has her seriously ill Aunt to care for, José needs to find another job, Naz has his deliveries and a sidewalk art show this evening with his fellow messenger/artists, Tim has an interview for an internship uptown, Gaby just wants to get home and wash away the sweat and grime of the day, and Chen has classes at NYU—and a Reike healing session to attend. Milli has nothing in particular going, except that she's got a couple of hundred bucks burning a hole in her pocket. She figures she'll start at Trash and Vaudeville on St. Marks, then work her way over to Broadway and downtown from there.

Chen suggests that they get together later. Here. Why here? asks Milli. Because we all know where it is, he says, and beyond that, he feels...that there's something very special about this particular place, about being in the middle of *Alphabet City*, in this very basement. He doesn't quite know why yet, but this place is...important. Chen makes a note on the pad he always carries. Got to remember to call my lawyer later, he mutters to himself.

Meanwhile...

Murk is in his opulent, well-equipped game room, slumped in a chair in front of the TV. There's a soap opera on. His eyelids are drooping....

OUR POV SHIFTS TO DIRECTLY BEHIND MURK. Except for Murk and the TV, the rest of the room is misty/dreamy looking (a clue that Murk has fallen asleep, and that what we're seeing from this point on is a dream).

Same POV. The dream-TV show, *The Edge of Night* (or similar, TBD), is returning after a commercial.

FOCUS ON THE TV: In some windswept, romantic setting, Murk (!?) and Milli (!!?) embrace. TV-Murk offers Milli the world, literally. TV-Milli, seething with lust and desire, agrees to be his Dark Queen. They kiss.

BACK TO REALITY: Muriel has entered. She is behind Murk, and can't see that he's asleep. She asks Murk what his plans are for tonight. Murk awakens with a start. Oh, he says...yes, tonight. Muriel apologizes for awakening him. She's a little surprised that he was asleep. He *never* sleeps.

Murk says that despite the fact that his Dark Seven is incomplete, he has decided to proceed with his plan to plunge the world into a New Dark Age.

Muriel cautions that it may be unwise to start with only six of the Dark Seven.

Milli will be his Seventh, he says. He's sure of it. Very Soon. As Muriel said, he almost never sleeps, and when he does, his dreams are *always* prophetic. Begin the final phase, he says. Summon the five recruits. Muriel nods and leaves.

Outside the game room, Muriel's usual ironclad demeanor starts to crack. She braces herself against the wall, and—what's that? Tears welling in her eyes?! She's in love with Murk. *She* should be his Seventh, not that ragged, useless guttersnipe. Muriel forces herself to regain control, straightens up and stalks away down the hall.

At Grosse Industries Corporate Headquarters in West Caldwell, New Jersey, CEO and Chairman Hammond Grosse is on the phone, eating a hero sandwich (there are six more on a platter in front of him), and talking with his mouth full, as usual. He is newly thin and trim after his transformation by Murk (much to the shock and amazement of his employees), but even hungrier and more voracious. He's firing a loyal, productive, long-term employee just before his stock options vest—*over the phone*. His secretary interrupts, timidly, fearfully. There's someone named *Muriel* on line two who insists on speaking with him. Grosse hits the hold button, and to his secretary's horror, orders *her* to finish firing the sucker on line one, and takes Muriel's call.

Muriel's instructions are plain and simple. "Clear your schedule."

Grosse tells his secretary he's going on vacation as of tomorrow. Cancel his appointments. She sputters something about the board meeting, and the President of Harada Industries who has flown all the way from Japan to meet with him, and...! No buts, he says. Cancel. And turn down the lights in here! Why is it so \$@#*&% bright?

Grosse slams his office door on his secretary, cutting off her meek protestations that she's turned the lights down three times already, and if she turns them down again, they'll be off! Grosse hurriedly stuffs a bunch of business documents into a drawer, locks his desk, puts on his new, slim-cut suit jacket and heads toward the door. He hesitates, eyeing the half-dozen subs still sitting on the desk. No time to eat them—so he extends a hand toward them and *simply absorbs them!* Burping, he exits his office.

(Hammond GROSSE is a human "black hole," things material are drawn inexorably toward him. He absorbs/"consumes" anything and everything and literally warps space and time around him. Murk has nicknamed him "VACUUM." He is the opposite of José.)

Scarlatta "Skinner" Lametta gets a similar call from Muriel on her cell while she's throwing back a Jack Daniels at a seedy joint on Mulberry. Minutes later, she smashes into an apartment building on Mulberry, leaving two badly injured door guards in her wake. She confronts the boss, a white-haired, Sicilian man, who, at the moment, is getting a manicure. Skinner says she's taking a leave of absence for as long as she wants. The boss says no, that would be...inconvenient. Six thugs surround Skinner. Skinner says she wasn't asking. With awesome strength, she clobbers the six, dumps the boss's Sambuca on his head and storms out. Like Grosse, she also complains about too much light.

(Scarlatta "SKINNER" Lametta has hideous strength, berserker imperviousness and bitter, unshakeable resolve. She is the opposite of Gaby.)

At her (at this point, not surprisingly, dimly lit) Whitehall Street office, with its magnificent view of Battery Park and the Statue of Liberty, Sauda “Squid” Q’dirah receives the same call from Muriel. She cancels dinner with the Governor, and walks out. In too much of a hurry to wait a few seconds for the elevator, she simply alters her own body’s phase-state and sinks right through the floors below, like a ghost, until she’s at street level. Taxi!

(Sauda “*Squid*” Q’dirah is a transmuter of matter, can change the phase of substances from solid to liquid, liquid to gas, etc.; can, with difficulty and to a limited extent, transform one element into another, i.e., lead into gold. Therefore, she is no longer “Squid,”—Murk has re-nicknamed her “PHASE,” which fits her power. She is the opposite of Hay.)

In a (not surprisingly dimly lit) meeting room at a midtown hotel, Kame “Slack” Kuramoto, International President of the American Congress of Labor Organizations, is in the final, critical phase of a labor contract negotiation. He has already wrung endless concessions from the management negotiators, enough to put the businesses they represent in danger of going out of business, but is demanding more. The two sides, under pressure from the Department of Labor and the President himself, have pledged to stay at the bargaining table, night and day, if necessary, until an agreement is reached. When Muriel calls, Slack takes it, listens, then grunts an affirmative. He turns to the table...the air around him seems to darken and shimmer—and, suddenly, all of the management representatives are exhausted, yawning, barely able to keep from falling asleep right at the table! And, they don’t seem to care about anything, except maybe sleep. They call for an adjournment—screw the Department of Labor and the President. Fine, says Slack. He storms out. This will probably lead to a strike, businesses failing, and thousands out of work—but nothing matters to Slack right now except “clearing his schedule.”

(Kame “SLACK” Kuramoto has the power to erode the will, sap energy, enervate and enfeeble, induce ennui, surrender and defeat. He is the opposite of Naz.)

In the exclusive, opulent Park Avenue Racket and Tennis Club, Claudio “Clawback” Garra relaxes in the hot tub. He’s complaining to the attendant about the “excessively bright” lights. His cell phone (forbidden there, but he ignores rules) rings. It’s Muriel.

Moments later, Claudio’s in his chauffeured car, wrapped in towels!—he didn’t even bother to dress, though he has his briefcase. He’s headed crosstown, to his penthouse home. He’s on the cell again, this time to his office, cancelling all his meetings. But, his junior partner says, there are millions at stake in various pernicious deals, there are one-sided arbitrations pending, investors to fleece and naïve entrepreneurs ripe for a claw back...! Nothing can be done without him! Claudio says, postpone everything, give all their vulture capital investments temporary waivers of default and let them fail if it comes

to that, but don't bother him until...whenever. He hangs up. He's in a tremendous hurry to get home and pack a few things. There's a huge traffic tie-up, caused by a tractor-trailer stalled in an intersection. Claudio lowers the window, and sticks his hand out. There's a dark shimmering in the air...and suddenly, the truck seems to *vaporize*, separated into its component quarks by Claudio. The truck driver lands with a thud on the pavement on his butt. Whahoppen? He scrambles out of the way as traffic begins to move again....

(Claudio "*Clawback*" Garra wields a dark form of the Power Cosmic; i.e., influence over forces of the Unified Field, but only in a destructive way; corrupting, unmaking, destroying. Therefore, he's no longer "*Clawback*"—Murk has re-nicknamed him "*BREAKDOWN*," which fits his power. He is the opposite of Chen.)

Soon the five join Murk at the Umbra holdings building, ready to play their roles in the impending apocalypse.

And, by the way, *Murk*, possesses *all* the powers of darkness. He's an accomplished wielder of dark energy; a manipulator of fear who wields despair like an icy blade and the emptiness of selfish desire like a bludgeon. Murk is the opposite of Tim.

Besides the uncanny abilities of the first six of the Dark Seven, *Muriel's* impressive martial arts skills and temptress looks are deadly assets. (She *wants* to be Milli's opposite, but....)

And so, six of the Dark Seven, plus Muriel, are together and ready to act.

In the days that follow...

Through Tim, the five of the Seven who have not met Meir—José, Hay, Naz, Gaby and Chen—finally meet him. Meir becomes their unofficial teacher and advisor, though he never really learns of their supernal nature—he thinks he's working with a bunch of normal young people! Their troubles and dilemmas, ultimately, are fundamentally no different than *anyone* might face, and the tools for dealing with them are the same. Meir guides the Seven without ever knowing they are the Seven!

Because of Meir's teachings, the six—not so much Milli, or not till much later, anyway—start to become aware of their true natures. It doesn't come all at once, it's never handed to them on stone tablets. It comes from insight, knowledge and understanding—and it's not till issue #7 that they truly believe it, but the Seven are souls who *chose* to be born on Earth now, at the time of the world's greatest need. They have come here to represent the Light at a time when knowledge and light are on the rise, and, therefore evil has been forced toward desperate and very dangerous measures. Each of the Seven is influenced

by one of the Sephiroth, and each embodies aspects of his or her corresponding Sephirot. Notwithstanding, like every soul born in flesh they are *all Malkhut*, all human, complete with all the limitations, frailties and foibles endemic to our kind.

Chen, via his family's lawyers and business affairs people, *buys* the Avenue C flophouse. Though it'll take several days to complete the transaction, he's already arranged for the occupants of the occupants of the basement, except Milli, to move to much nicer quarters rent free for a year, and he will allow all the upstairs tenants to stay. Milli feels something between flabbergasted and outraged. Talk about high-handed...! He just waltzed in and totally messed with her world, her space, her life! It's hard to be angry at Chen for long though, and the place is instantly nicer, and she doesn't have to scrape up \$15 a week anymore....

The romantic tension between Tim and Milli grows. He actually asks her out. She can't, um...because she already has a date. Tim feels like the bottom of his stomach fell out. So does Milli, actually, but she steadfastly does *not* follow her heart, her feelings, her inner voice and therefore heads uptown to meet Murk, way out of sight of the other six. *It's none of their business!*

The six get together in the basement. Where's Milli? Out, says Tim, glumly. José who knows what's happening better than anyone is deeply troubled, but...what can he do?

Hay, all business, wants to know what they're going to do. Chen says he had a dream.... He thinks they should go to a place he dreamed about in Bogota (pronounced Buh-GO-tah), New Jersey. He has a rented mini-van waiting outside.... Hay can't believe that they're going on some wild goose chase to New Jersey, having no idea why, because of a *dream*, but.... Off they go.

Meanwhile, Milli is having a grand time on her date with Murk—nothing but the best for her. He wines her, dines her, takes her to a show, gives her gifts.... She suppresses the gnawing in her gut. Screw Tim and those other weirdoes...high-handed messing with her flophouse (Chen), seeing right through her and prying into her business(José), being so beautiful that it makes her face hurt (Hay—and she's smart, too!), looking down her judgmental nose at her (Gaby) and just being awesome (Naz). Murk makes her feel like *she's special*...like a queen...or something.

The Seven less Milli arrive at a huge, old, defunct and abandoned theater on Queen Anne Road near Route 80 in Bogota. This is the place, Chen says, and José confirms that there's something nasty going on inside. Baaaad vibes....

The six sneak in through a basement door, ripped open as quietly as possible by Gaby. Tim provides light and they see rows and rows of rotting logs on which are growing

millions of mushrooms! It's a fungus farm! But these mushrooms aren't like any known varieties. Weird.

Further in, they find vast stores of weapons, ammo, communications equipment and even vehicles—trucks, Hummers and other 4WD transportation, many armed with machine guns and rocket launchers.

Upstairs they can hear a lot of voices. A meeting going on? José, who sees well in the dark and therefore can stick to the shadows, will go to investigate....

Meanwhile, Murk and Milli ride in the back of Murk's limo, going where, Milli doesn't know. The windows are so dark, they might as well be opaque. Murk asks where she'd like to go. Milli, half kidding, says she's heard that Paris is nice. It's the City of Lights. Everything they've done is so...dark. Dark restaurant, dark theater, dark limo.... Pull over, Murk commands Muriel, who's driving (and fuming inside, but betraying nothing). Muriel stops the car and opens the door for Milli and Murk. (Milli doesn't recognize Muriel, whom she saw in issue #1 because she's disguised by the same sort of "Jedi mind trick" that made the bodies look like mannequins. In fact, Milli sees Muriel as a man in chauffeur's livery!

Milli steps out of the car...into Paris! Impossible, but...real! She touches things to see if they're real. Yep. She speaks to passersby, who reply in French! The city is alight and beautiful. Murk excuses himself. Why don't you wait for me at the sidewalk café? he says. He won't be long—just some minor business....

Milli takes a seat at the café. She sips espresso. The chauffeur stands close by, awaiting orders.

The fact is that Milli is lost in an illusion. Our POV shifts back to reality. Milli is sitting on a crate, sipping imaginary espresso from an imaginary demitasse and thinking it's the best she ever tasted. Muriel edges toward her from behind. She uncoils a fine steel garrote hidden up one sleeve....

Inside, José observes the meeting. It is a gathering of scores of assorted sociopaths—99, to be exact—each one a would-be leader of a militia/terror cell. One, an experienced anti-Fed militiaman from out west somewhere—a Timothy McVeigh type—is onstage, lecturing, using a slide presentation, about how to recruit and train a militia squad after the coming collapse of society. Someone in the audience shouts out that they've been hearing about this "collapse" for a while, now. When will it come and how? he asks. And who is this mysterious bigshot who's supposed to make it happen?

Right on cue, Murk enters. It was dark before, for the slides, but it seems to get darker as Murk takes the stage. There is a murmur, then the place falls silent. Murk lectures, using

his own “slide presentation,” i.e., images that appear on the screen, *though there are no slides and the slide projector is in fact, turned off*, about the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of an era in which they, Militia Captains loyal to him, will rule by terror. The “slides” preview the post-apocalypse world to come—the world sheathed in a dark, dense cloud under which no electrical devices—except Murk’s—can function. The end of the Age of Information. Worldwide chaos, panic, and emerging from that, a new world order. *His* world order. All the best of the Dark Ages once again, with the clever, the strong and the loyal in charge.

During Murk’s speech, the others of the six sneak in to join José, watching and listening with growing horror.

Murk explains that he caused the blackout in NYC, and he intends to do the same on a worldwide scale. He has stockpiled vehicles, communications gear and other equipment—and *only* his equipment will work after the apocalypse. He has also stockpiled weapons. There will be food shortages after the apocalypse, because most crops will not grow under the blackout conditions—which will last seven years before fading slightly into a permanent twilight—so he has a specially developed, nutritionally-rich alternative food supply not dependent on sunlight that’s being grown right here (the mushrooms), exclusively for his loyalists. Eventually, other crops will be grown again, and livestock raised again, under *his* control, on *his* agri-complexes, *his* way.

Murk says he has initiated the final countdown. Only a few pieces remain to be put into place. If any doubt him, let them quit, leave, desert. But then, they will be among the sheep instead of the wolves. He starts to leave...then turns. By the way, he says, we have enemies who will try to stop us. They’re hiding in the back of the room. As he says that, the lights come up a bit—Murk’s doing—and the six are suddenly in plain sight!

Ninety-nine thugs charge them.

Murk exits, stage left.

Outside, Murk heads toward the “café” to join Milli. Milli is slumped over, head down on the table. Murk asks what happened. Muriel says, I think the poor girl is tired. She fell asleep despite the espresso. Muriel apparently thought better of killing her. Murk tells Muriel to get Grosse and the rest here right away...that rabble inside will never be able to deal with the six of the Light. Muriel says they’re standing by, just outside the stage door. Murk obviously anticipated this entire thing....

The six fight for their lives against the 99 thugs—and though none of the six are trained fighters, they’re waaay too powerful for mere violent thugs to take out. Then, Grosse, Phase, Breakdown, Skinner, and Slack charge in. Now, it’s a fight.

Murk and Milli, with Muriel behind the wheel drive off. Time to take the sleepy girl home. Yes, she says, leaning on his shoulder, but it was a wonderful eve...ZZZZZZZZ.

At one point, in the midst of battle, Chen comes across a badly-injured one of the 99, accidentally hurt by his own troops. Chen can't bear his suffering and *takes time out to heal him!* That weakens Chen for a minute—and what does the healed fellow do? He tries to kill Chen! Hay has to save him, putting herself in danger, and in fact the whole battle is almost lost because of it! Tim and the others are furious at Chen!

Most of the 99, having been trounced, or just plain terrified at the superhuman display they're witnessing take off, leaving the dark five to go it alone. No problem.

In the middle of the fray, Hayden's cell rings. Worried that it's about her Aunt, she steals a glance, and...oh, no, it's the nurse! (A visiting nurse stays with Hay's Aunt 24/7). Hay ducks out of the line of fire and takes the call. It is, as she feared, bad news. Her Aunt is in crisis, maybe dying. Through the din of combat she screams to Chen that she has to go *right now!* Her Aunt may be dying!

Chen tosses her the keys to the van! Go, he says.

Hay slips away. The battle goes on.

Nearly overwhelmed at first, the six, then five after Hay splits, rise up to do pretty well in their first test. It's a draw, for all intents and purposes. The sound of wailing sirens cuts it short. Phase changes the phase of the floor under the remaining five of the Light to liquid consistency. They fall through to the basement, giving the dark five time to escape to their waiting helicopter and take off, just before SWAT teams swarm in.

The five good guys also beat it—but before he goes, Tim *burns the entire mushroom crop.* The others destroy the weapons, vehicles and equipment. At least they did *some* damage to the bad guys. True, says José, but from what he overheard, this was just one such group of militia leaders, one armory. Murk has 10,000 of them.

Now what? The five are out in Jersey somewhere with no wheels. No problem, says Chen. He tries to wave down a passing pickup truck. The driver has no intention of stopping, but when he slows down for a stop sign, Gaby lifts the back end off the pavement. His drive wheels spin uselessly. The driver thinks he's being carjacked. No, no, nothing like that says Chen. He has an offer for the driver.

Soon the pickup pulls up in front of Hay's Aunt's building. The five scramble out—Tim, Chen and Naz were riding in the cargo box, Gaby and José up front. Chen trots over to an ATM and gives the driver \$1,000 for the ride. Thanks, the driver says, and drives back to Jersey happy.

The five join Hay at her Aunt's bedside. Auntie's in a bad way. Hay pleads with Chen to heal her. Chen hesitates, touches her hand...*I can't*, he says. What do you mean? says Hay.

Chen says, he might be able to, but it *wouldn't be right*. The power of healing is not meant to contravene nature. Hay's Aunt is a very old lady, and...it's near her time. He, Chen, feels it's wrong to interfere. The end of her path is not up to him.

Hay screams at him. Tim says, but you healed one of the bad guys! Naz and José are deeply disturbed and upset. To Naz there is only triumphing over obstacles, even this. He can't understand accepting...defeat, in a way, the victory of death. He says to Chen, if you won't heal her, he says, then help *me* do it. Give me the power. I know you can. José has endless compassion...but he also can see that Chen is sincere, and right.

Get out! Shouts Hay. Leave, all of you!

Chen touches Auntie one more time. Suddenly, she seems to be resting easier. What did you do? asks Tim. I took her *pain*, he says...grimacing. The others have to help him to the door.

They leave.

Once outside, they go their separate ways without a word.

At the flophouse, Milli sleeps and dreams of Paris.

END OF ISSUES #3-4

Issues #5-6

Story – rough outline (with some scenes fleshed out): Somehow, Milli's dreams of Paris turn into a nightmare about being deported to Easter Island. She wakes up trembling and sweating.

Milli also awakens to find more money in her pocket and more gifts from Murk waiting at the door. Wow....

In the days that follow, the Seven are pretty much estranged from each other. Chen has more dreams about the plans of their adversary. Hayden doesn't want to hear about it. She doesn't want anything to do with Chen. Tim has landed a job as an intern at a

network and is already occasionally appearing as an extra on an MTV/TRL (“Total Live Request”)-type show. He’s on his way to becoming a host, maybe having his own show. He’s kinda busy—so busy that he even stops going to sessions with Meir. José, despairing of finding kitchen or bodega work, has become a street magician, doing magic tricks on the sidewalks near Rockefeller Center for small donations from passersby who don’t realize that his “tricks” are real magic. He’s crashing with Naz and his messenger buddies, sleeping on the floor, as most of them do. He cares about Chen’s premonitions. So does Naz. So does Gaby. She wants justice done to Murk and his thugs. She’s ready to go after Murk and his minions alone if necessary, but José cools her down. It has to be all of them, all Seven, or it’s suicide.

Murk continues to court Milli. Though she can’t help feeling drawn to the rest of the Seven, and in particular to Tim, she finds Murk’s wealth, power and... what? charisma? charm? animal magnetism? whatever—very tempting. Murk offers easy living, everything anyone could want. When she’s with him he *seems* so nice. He *is* so nice. Ninety percent of Murk is nice, good—and that’s the only part Milli sees. And, during the times she’s with Murk, wallowing in the luxury he offers, Milli finds that it’s so very easy to think just of herself and her desires.... She overlooks things that might trouble her otherwise.

In Murk’s own mind, even his evil plan is ultimately for the best—it will be an orderly world, with much of the burden of *free will* removed. There will be a cost, of course, a catastrophic cost, but you can’t make an omelet without catastrophe from the eggs’ point of view.

Murk hasn’t let on to Milli about his plans, or who he really is. He will, when the time is right. Murk is, in fact, a soul that has been reincarnated many times, not failing *tikune* (correction), but *rejecting* it. Murk has embraced the Darkness, has become the Champion of the Angel of Death, and means to perpetrate an act of destruction that will plunge Earth into a New Dark Age of ignorance.

On the other hand, Murk learns much about Milli, especially about her somewhat checkered past. Some information he subtly elicits from her, some he simply *discerns*, like José. Some of what he discovers might prove... useful.

Murk takes his minions to the fortress he is building—a vast complex carved out of Manhattan’s solid bedrock foundation deep beneath Grand Central Terminal. They will need an impregnable fortress from which to establish their hegemony after the end of the Age of Enlightenment. This is it, almost finished.

There is already a labyrinth under Grand Central Terminal that extends hundreds of feet below the surface consisting of subway tunnels, train tunnels, Con Ed’s electrical and steam-pipe conduits, sewers, storm drains and more; lost, forgotten passageways,

abandoned platforms and endless, winding crawlways. These places are home to New York's infamous "Mole People," the homeless, disenfranchised and often insane denizens of the darkness below. But this labyrinth lies at the *uppermost* reaches of Murk's stupendous subterrane. It is the "penthouse" of his Hellish headquarters-to-be, and the perfect disguise—who would suspect that there was a huge, dark-but-opulent, high-tech, HQ below?

(Of course, Murk has several secret entrances that bypass the labyrinth, including one from a private, underground garage where he keeps many of his limos, cars and other vehicles.)

How could such a gargantuan grotto be constructed, especially without anyone finding out? The answer, discovered by the minions, is that the labor consists of an army of what one can only call *demons*. Are they manifestations of Murk's mind, his *own* demons, literally made corporeal? Or...from somewhere else? Murk smiles and says nothing. The demons scuttle furtively here and there in dark recesses, just at the edges of perception. They're putting finishing touches upon this hellish habitation. You can hear the clink-clink-clink of their chisels....

At the very bottom of the deepest pit, on the floor lies a massive, sealed hatch. Murk orders it opened. Ponderously, it irises open and the red-orange glow of volcanic fire paints the chamber. This, says Murk, is the gateway to the Earth's core. This shaft reaches deep into the molten heart of the Earth...the source of all volcanic activity. It is essential to Murk's plan.

Meanwhile...

Only José has a clue that Milli is seeing Murk. The way José sees it, the key to getting Milli away from Murk and to reuniting the Seven is to get Milli together with Tim, first.

José asks Milli if he can arrange a meeting between her and Tim. Milli says she'll think about it.

At her next session with Meir, Milli pours out her heart about her dilemma. (She leaves out all the super-human/supernatural details, but otherwise lays it out to Meir—there's this guy, Tim, she has tremendous...*attraction* to, and, sort of with him comes this group of people, friends, who are all cool and have been good to her, and...well, there's this other guy, Murk. She kinda has the hots for him, too...but....

What does your heart tell you? Meir asks.

Heart, schmart, Milli says. The friends are a pain in the butt, really. Murk gives her everything. One of the friends, José, gave her two bucks, once. Big deal.

He gave you all he had, says Meir. No one can give you more than all. His was the greater gift....

José arranges for Tim and Milli to get together. Though the attraction between them is palpable, it goes badly. Milli is being totally self-involved...and Tim is, too. It gets ugly. Milli says some nasty things. Tim storms out. José is distraught, but what can he do?

Meanwhile...

Murk takes his minions to a fabricating plant in Elizabeth, New Jersey. There they see a huge, monstrous, infernal *apparatus*—just about completed. Grosse recognizes several of the components—his company made them! Murk says he had many companies each contribute a small part of the device, so that no one would understand the nature of the entire, completed machine. This is the device, he tells them, along with his own power, that will accomplish the apocalypse. He's lying. His power would not be enough. He must complete the Dark Seven first—it will take the exponentially greater power borne of their union to make this machine work—but, thinks Murk, they don't need to know that. Muriel knows it. Inside she's suffering. Why, why doesn't Murk choose her...?

The Seven drift further apart. All of them are human, all of them have failings, weaknesses, flaws. José takes the easy way out sometimes, taking advantage of his irresistible appeal and the various favors that engenders. Gaby gets so overwrought about every little, petty misdeed or mistake, people are afraid to be around her. Furthermore, she's seriously considering leaving New York and going back to hunting down her deadbeat, pond-scum father. Naz occasionally gets sick of trying! Then, at other times, becomes so obsessed with winning, such a win-at-all-costs freak at things as petty as Parcheesi, that no one wants to do anything with him. Chen gets more and more involved with his charity volunteer work and donations. He can't help enjoying the approbation and admiration he gets doing such things. Can it be that it's becoming more about his ego than the charities? He also makes some lousy decisions, donating vast sums to bogus operations, con schemes and a few "charities" that put 98% of what's raised into the administrators' pockets.

Hayden's Aunt dies. She represents her family at the funeral. She plans to go home to Switzerland as soon as she's settled some of Auntie's affairs, in a few days at most. She's distraught. She needs someone to talk to, but knows few people here—except the rest of the Seven, and she's through with them. She ends up calling Meir. He says wise and comforting things.

Milli is planning to move out of the flophouse. The only thing that keeps her there is that she can't decide whether to take an apartment—she has lots of money these days—or

move in with Murk. He hasn't officially asked her yet, but she knows that the door is open. Hmm.

On a moonless night, Murk and his five minions create another blackout to cloak their activities, then cause a panic at Grand Central, clearing the place. Police erect barriers around GCT and environs, thinking that it's a terrorist attack. Under cover of the blackout, four Sikorsky Skycrane helicopters (powered by Murk's Dark Energy) airlift the monstrous apparatus that is key to Murk's plan to the roof of the terminal. Phase alters the phase state of the roof and the apparatus sinks right through as if it were sinking in water. Skinner, helped by Murk's magic, lowers the immense machine to the floor inside, and the process is repeated to work the thing down to the bowels of the fortress below, finally to the deepest pit, where it is secured over the hatchway to the Earth's core. This infernal machine and Murk's own power will give him control over the Earth's molten magma core and *all the world's volcanoes*. The volcanoes will serve to do on a grand, worldwide scale what the erupting manholes did in Manhattan.

This is what Chen's dreams warned of. Naz, Gaby and José are beside themselves. Naz asserts some leadership. When the above starts to happen, he demands that each of the Seven join him and meet with Meir for advice. Naz is so charismatic, it's hard to resist. Even Hayden says she'll come. Milli, too. Why not? No date with Murk tonight. He said he had some sort of business thing to take care of.

One problem. Meir isn't available. Naz finds a way. Meir has to travel from the Upper East Side to Brooklyn for one of his commitments. Naz says they'll meet with him on the subway train.

They do. Even Hayden. Even Milli.

Meir's words, the tools he offers them are inspiring—even though he has no idea that what is in question is what they should do about the crisis at GCT. He thinks he's counseling them about some personal, or maybe school thing. He speaks to them about the Tree of Life, about the fundamental nature of the Universe. Finally, just who they are and what they represent begins to become clear to them. *Insight...*

Inspired, six of the Seven head to GTC. Milli refuses to go with them: "What am I gonna do except get in the way?" She alone doesn't really believe what the others do...that they were born/came here on purpose, with a mission. Naahh.

As the six near GCT they wonder how they'll get in. The police cordon is airtight.

A voice calls to Tim. It's the legless beggar he gave a five to at PAT just after he arrived in New York. He knows all the public places in NYC. He gets them into the labyrinth

through an unknown passage accessible only from a forgotten door in the basement of the Waldorf Astoria! Once they're underground, they thank him and go it alone.

The six enter the labyrinth. There, they encounter Murk, the five others and Muriel. It's a trap. Here, underground, in the dark, in his element, on his terms, Murk means to try to eliminate the only force on Earth that can stop him. Huge battle.... Those of the Dark are winning. The six are scattered and battered back into the dark recesses of the labyrinth. It looks bad.

At home Milli stews. There's nothing on her brand new, big, flat-panel, plasma screen TV except news coverage of the crisis at GCT. She misses Murk. More, she realizes, she misses the others of the Seven. Especially Tim. Make it that *jerk* Tim. She's still miffed at him.

Tim, at that moment, is hard pressed, separated from the others, cornered by Murk.

Not quite believing that she's doing it, Milli heads for GCT. A cab gets her most of the way there. An accomplished sneak, and no stranger to the ins and outs of GCT, Milli ferrets her way in, slipping past the police cordon. At a portal to the labyrinth, she pauses—it is phenomenal, almost uncharacteristic of Milli to have dared what she has so far. Taking the first step into the darkness is the hardest thing she has ever done. But the wisdom of Meir has enabled her to find strength and courage inside she didn't know she had. Flicking her Bic, she enters the labyrinth.

This alone, Milli's mere presence and the commitment to the Seven it represents, gives them strength. They battle back against the Dark ones. The tide turns.

Tim, badly hurt and at the end of his strength, rallies. He drives Murk back into the darkness. Murk senses that things have changed...his window of opportunity to destroy the six is closing.

Fearing defeat and the end of all he has worked for, Murk commands a retreat. The Dark ones break off and slip through a hidden portal into the fortress. Even if the Seven found their way there, Murk thinks, his fortress is impregnable. Everyone accounted for... except Muriel. Where is she?! They can't wait for her. The portal is sealed and re-camouflaged.

Tim pursues Murk but loses him. However, he finds Muriel. She was caught in a cave-in caused by Breakdown, to cover his own retreat. Muriel is partly buried in rubble, trapped, injured—not catastrophically hurt, but there's no fight left in her. Tim approaches her cautiously. It's not a trick, not a trap. He tries to help her.

(Muriel is at her lowest ebb. No matter what happens, she loses. If the Seven are united and defeat Murk and his minions, she goes down with them. If Murk succeeds in defeating the Seven by seducing Milli to become *his* Seventh, and goes on to rule the world, she, Muriel, will always be a servant, always a handmaiden to Murk and, worse, to his Dark Queen Milli, whom she hates with boundless passion.)

Muriel can't believe that Tim is helping her. If the situation were reversed, she'd simply kill him. Tim wonders why she has to be that way. There is a palpable, powerful attraction between the two of them. Muriel, though no one knows it yet, is the dark equivalent of Milli (as Murk is the dark equivalent of Tim). As Murk tends to bring out the selfish and wicked side of Milli, Tim inspires the Light within Muriel. If only it could be, Muriel thinks. She kisses him.

Milli is drawn to Tim and inexorably, inevitably homes in on him. She arrives as Muriel is kissing Tim...and he's kissing back. He is a man, after all, and Muriel is nigh irresistible. They don't see Milli. Hurt, jealous, angry, Milli backs off, slips away, and through her tears finds her way back to the street. She walks home, her mind seething.

When Muriel feels strong enough to stand, she leaves Tim. She knows that there's just no way. Her lot is cast with Murk and the Dark, no matter what. Tim knows it too. He lets her go, feeling that longing feeling again, but mostly feeling very, very sorry for her.

Tim finds his way back to the surface and meets up with the other five. Milli was in the labyrinth, Chen says. He could feel her presence. It's what gave them a chance. Tomorrow they should all get together. Maybe this "Seven" thing will work after all.

Hayden says, it *better*. She points out that whatever the Dark ones' purpose was, it was accomplished. They, the Seven, may have won the fight, but the bad guys achieved their objective. She deduces...no, actually she has a *premonition* that there's big trouble ahead.

Muriel finds her way to the portal and enters Murk's fortress. Murk is aware of her little tryst with Tim. She was just conning him into letting her go, she says. Good work, says Murk. He also knows that Milli saw them (Tim and Muriel), and anything that drives a wedge between Tim and Milli works for him. Great news, says Muriel. An unexpected fringe benefit.

Murk has never quite been able to "read" Muriel. He chalks that up to her martial arts training, a disciplined mind, blah, blah, blah.... But he wonders, just who was/is being conned, Tim...or *him*.

The next morning, immigration authorities arrive at the flophouse and arrest Milli. She thinks Meir must have ratted her out!

(Actually, it was Murk—all part of his plan.)

Milli is put in jail. She has one phone call. Who can she call? After all this time with him, she still doesn't have Murk's number! She calls Meir, partly for help and partly to confront him. Meir says there's nothing he can do—*proof* to Milli that it was him.

The prosecutor tells her that she'll probably do time here, and maybe in Chile as well once they deport her...and the Chilean government will no doubt "repatriate" her to Easter Island. Her public defender attorney concurs. Not much can be done. Milli is devastated. And bitter. And furious. The world sucks! She hates all of it, everybody, everything.

Late that night, the wall of Milli's cell seems to become unsolid—and Murk steps in. Come with me, he says, and leads Milli out through the wall. Milli is nonplussed by this, of course, and yet she's used to apparently impossible things occurring when she's with Murk. Paris, for instance.

(Making the wall unsolid was Phase's work, though Milli doesn't see her.)

Murk takes Milli to his waiting limo. Muriel drives them to Fort Tryon Park near the northern tip of Manhattan, close to the highest point on the island. Milli and Murk leave Muriel with the limo and walk up the hill toward the cliffs, Milli carrying the bottle of champagne they opened in the car, and Murk carrying two champagne flutes. There, high atop a windswept, romantic cliff overlooking the Hudson River, Murk tells her his plans. He leaves out messy details, like possibly millions dying, focusing on the remaking of the world into a better, more orderly, Utopian place.

And another thing—Murk has found the secret of immortality. Once he has Milli on board, once he completes his Dark Seven, he can work black magic that will make them immortal (and free of the cycle of tikune!). They, and the other five of his inner circle will live and rule *forever*.

Milli is at her lowest ebb. She's hurt and bitter about Tim, guilt ridden because she hasn't been a paragon of virtue lately either, feeling that all is lost with Tim, certain that her future is totally bleak and desolate unless...it's with Murk. And she *does* have the hots for him. She can feel desire eroding her will, consuming her, enticing her to surrender to pleasure and passion.

She tries to hush that little, nagging inner voice....

Murk and Milli embrace. Murk offers Milli the world, literally. Milli, seething with lust and desire, agrees to be his Dark Queen. They kiss.

Then, suddenly, Milli clocks Murk as hard as she can with the champagne bottle. This guy's a monster. She *knows* what is right. Murk staggers back, dangerously close to the cliff. Milli winds up for another whack....

Suddenly Muriel knocks the bottle out of Milli's hand. She followed them to the overlook—was it jealousy, or to protect Murk?

Jealousy.

She throws Milli against a rocky outcropping. Milli slams into it hard, then goes down in a heap.

Muriel sees to Murk. He'll be all right.

Now what? Murk says throw Milli in the trunk and head back to the fortress. He needs to think about what to do.

In a dark-but-palatial den in Murk's fortress, Murk ponders while Muriel awaits orders. Milli lies unconscious, now sedated and shackled for good measure, on a couch. Finally, Muriel dares to make a suggestion. Kill her. No, says Murk. He still needs her to complete his Dark Seven. All is lost without her. Now that he's met her, *felt* her infinite potentialities, *tasted* her boundless potential and peered down the well of her bottomless desire, no one else could possibly do.

Muriel dares all. What about *me*? she says. You don't really know me....

Muriel pours out her heart and reveals her true nature to Murk. She, too, is a very, very ancient soul...one of the oldest. She never dared tell him, fearing that he might see her as a *rival*...a threat to be destroyed. But all she wants is him...oneness with him... completing his Seven.

Murk looks at her as if for the first time. She is dropping her defenses, laying the black depths of her soul and mind bare to him. She is very alluring. He takes her in his arms. They kiss. Yes. She will be his Queen.

What should we do with *her*, Muriel purrs, indicating Milli. *Kill her*? No, says Murk. We will simply let her suffer that which she has always feared most.... (Murk is trying to make this sentence sound as if dying is too good, too swift and clean a fate for Milli, that she should have a fate worse than death, but in truth he *still* can't bear for her to be dead. He is irretrievably, hopelessly in love with her. If Muriel senses that, she says nothing. Milli will die soon enough. A weakling like her will never survive the apocalypse.)

What seems like a very long time later, Milli awakens to find herself on Easter Island. All alone. She slumps next to one of the monoliths and cries.

Back in Manhattan, at the flophouse, the other six mourn Milli's plight. (They think she's still in jail.)

At his fortress, Murk transforms Muriel, as he did the others. Now she is truly his Dark Queen (and Milli's opposite).

With the rest of his Dark Seven around him, Murk "pulls the trigger." His infernal apparatus roars to life, sending waves of power to the Earth's core. All over the world volcanoes erupt! Strange, dark, dense clouds begin to form above them, and underneath those clouds nothing electrical works. The clouds and the blackout they create are spreading. Soon the whole world will be engulfed.

END OF ISSUES #5-6

Issue #7

Story – rough outline: The blackout is spreading, the world is falling into chaos. The Seven, less Milli, are gathered at the flophouse. Because of Chen's dreams and their experiences in the labyrinth, they know where the source of the trouble lies—deep under Grand Central Terminal. They barely made it out of there last time, with Milli's help. Should they go back there without her?

They call Meir. They get a recording. Meir is "out of the office." In fact he is in the outer office glued to the TV, watching coverage of the unfolding worldwide chaos—until the satellite feed fails and the TV goes blank. Still he sits and stares, pondering....

At the flophouse, Naz says no matter that they can't reach Meir. They know what's right. They know why they're here. They head for GCT.

In his board room, a control center, Murk, lounging with Muriel, watches the catastrophe he has planned so long progress.

CUT TO: Milli, desolate, bereft, alone on Easter Island, huddled beside a monolith. Or is she...? The fact is that Milli is lost in an illusion. Our POV shifts back to reality. Milli is huddled in a filthy nook deep in the labyrinth. Rats scuttle by. From other dark recesses, other eyes peer at her....

The six wend their way down through the labyrinth to reach Murk's fortress. They actually pass within a few meters of Milli, but none of them sees her and no one, not even José, sense her nearness. Milli is so lost in her delusion, she might as well *be* on Easter Island.

The six reach the "impregnable" fortress. With power that amazes Murk, they smash their way in!

But the Dark Seven, united, are more powerful. They engage the six—and drive them back with overwhelming force!

The six fight for their lives. All over the world, chaos grows. The terror cell leaders watch with awe...and anticipation.

CUT TO: Milli, crying her eyes out on Easter Island. Suddenly, a familiar voice makes her look up. It's *Meir*. What's he doing here?!

Milli and Illusion-Meir talk. Their conversation rambles, but one way and another, they recall and review Milli's experiences, the lessons she learned, the things she's been taught. Illusion-Meir is gentle, friendly reassuring. She can get out of this fix if she wants to. She got out of Skinner's deadly choke hold (issue #2), didn't she?

Meir walks away. Milli calls after him. What's she supposed to do? Click her heels and say, "No place like home?" The light will save you, says Illusion-Meir as he walks over the hill, out of sight.

Milli stares at the sun, hidden behind misty clouds, just now rising.

Suddenly, Milli is *aware*! She realizes that she's sitting in a nook in the labyrinth, staring at the flame of the *lighter* that is cupped in her hands in front of her.

At that moment, Chen and José immediately know something's, happening, something's different. Tim knows immediately—it's her! It's Milli! Hayden (!) intuits *exactly* what happened. The six rally. The tide starts to turn. The Dark Seven fall back.

Milli finds the six. "Now we are Seven," says Naz. "Now we are *One*," says Milli. "Let's roll."

Murk understands instantly what has transpired. This is *nnnnnot* good.... He commands the rest of the Dark Seven to go to the pit and defend the infernal machine at all costs. He will go to the board room/control room and try to expedite the blackout process....

Muriel leads the Dark six to the pit. There they'll make a stand. Six of the Light attack them there. Milli, sensing that Murk has separated from the rest, follows his trail.

Muriel and the Dark ones fight hard. It's a losing battle...until Muriel summons the *demons!* The demons who built this place swarm to attack the six of the Light. Now, it's a fight.

The sudden onslaught of the demon forces drives back five of the six. Tim stands his ground—but the demon stonemasons bring down an archway over his head! He dives to evade it—but is battered to the ground by falling rubble.

Muriel takes advantage of the momentary respite to seal the containment around the bottom of the pit—it's an adamantine shell of vanadium steel, intended to seal off the portal area, should a volcanic backfire have occurred—but it will serve to hold out the ones of the Light—at least for a while.

One of the six of the Dark sees that Tim is trapped *within* the containment...with them! Perfect, says Muriel.

Muriel goes to Tim, who's half buried in rubble. Muriel frees Tim. Again, there is a palpable, powerful attraction between the two of them. She kisses him...!

The five of the Light outside the containment try to hammer their way in. It'll take time....

Meanwhile, Milli smashes through the traps and defenses protecting Murk. She's awesome, empowered! It's as though she can do anything the others can do and then some. She is the fulfilled potential of humanity.

Milli breaks into the control room. Murk, though terrified, stands ready to fight.

Milli doesn't want to fight. She wants to talk. She sits down. Murk is nonplussed.

Milli talks about what she's learned. What can be. It's a speech reminiscent of Daniel Webster's closing argument to the Devil's Jury in "The Devil and Daniel Webster." It touches Murk, though his soul is hardened by centuries of selfish desire, anger, hate and darkness. Then, Milli plays her trump card. *She takes Murk into a better world, a better place, just as he took her to Paris.* She shows him what could be if he chose another path. She shows him the Light. Where is it? It's inside him.

Murk comes back to reality with tears streaming down his face. She's right.

Now, *he* knows what's right. He knows what to do.

He's got to stop the apocalypse.

Frantically Murk tries to shut down the infernal machine. *It won't respond to the controls!*

Murk and Milli rush to the pit. He'll have to shut the machine down manually. As Murk and Milli run down the passageways toward the pit, Milli suddenly falters...Murk races ahead. Milli feels as though she's been stabbed. She fears something has happened to Tim...! She gathers herself and presses on.

Murk arrives inside the containment through a hidden hatchway. Murk shouts to Muriel to shut the machine down! Muriel just stands there. Murk wrestles with the manual controls. In seconds, it will be too late! A gauge shows that the blackout cloud is nearly complete—and once it is, it cannot be undone.

Muriel strikes Murk from behind with tremendous, deadly force. Murk falls, mortally wounded.

Milli arrives, limping, to see Murk lying on the floor, dying. Just then, the others of the Light smash their way in.

The gauge on the machine reaches 100%. The entire world is enveloped in darkness.

But this fight isn't over....

Hayden tells Muriel to give it up. Without Murk, they are only six. No, says Muriel, *you* are only six. She gestures...and *Tim* comes to her side! This is our new Seventh, she says, as Tim wraps his arms around her, caresses her. You swayed Murk, Muriel says to Milli. I took advantage of the opportunity to sway this dear, sweet boy—I can be *very* persuasive. And then, she adds, I eliminated poor Murk. *Interesting* man, says Muriel, but flawed. He was obsessed with *you*, for instance, Muriel says, indicating Milli. I *hated* that. Muriel continues, we might have had something...delicious...but.... *I don't need him anymore*. Now, *I* will rule.

Kill them, Muriel orders her minions. The Dark ones attack Milli and the other five. It's no contest. Milli, Chen, Gaby, Naz, Hayden and José are being overwhelmed, beaten down.

Meanwhile, Muriel and Tim embrace. Muriel tells Tim that he will rule the world at her side, her Dark Prince Consort. Seething with lust and desire, Tim says he can't wait. They kiss.

Then, suddenly, Tim emits a brilliant, blinding burst of light, like a thousand flashbulbs going off at once! This woman's a monster. He *knows* what is right. Temporarily blinded, Muriel staggers back. Tim stalks toward her....

The rest of the Seven, suddenly re-empowered, clobber the Dark ones. They fall back. Muriel has one more trick—she commands Breakdown to disintegrate the machine! It vanishes...and volcanic fire roars up from the now-wide-open shaft. Muriel and her five use the diversion to cover their escape.

Murk is far beyond Chen's power to heal him. Milli comforts Murk. He says, this time...tikune.... He passes.

When Murk dies, the demons, who have stood by idly since he fell, vanish.

A thunderous roar rises from the still-open volcanic shaft wrenching the Seven's attention back to the ongoing cataclysm. José says the whole Earth above them is dark. He can feel it.

Hayden has figured out the basics of Murk's infernal plan. The shaft, she says, extends to the Earth's mantle—physically—and magically to the world's volcanoes. The energy from the volcanoes, magically altered by Murk's machine, caused the blackout. Well... she can alter energy, too. She walks to the very edge of the portal...and thrusts her arms into the torrent of fire! Naz says, she can't do it alone. Fighting the intense heat, Naz edges close to the portal and places a hand on Hay's shoulder. One by one, the others gather around Hay. Milli is the last. Their clothes smolder....

Remember what Meir says, Tim shouts over the roar. Light is stronger than darkness!

All over the world the rumbling, spewing volcanoes slowly fall silent! The eruptions cease...and then, from every volcano in the world...*brilliant, blinding light streams forth!*

The clouds sheathing the Earth break up...fade...and finally are gone!

Chen seals the portal.

The Seven make their way to the surface. As they go, Chen *fills in* the fortress with the same solid bedrock from which it was hewn. It is a fitting tomb for Murk.

As the Seven pass through the labyrinth, the Mole People, led by the beggar from PAT, applaud and cheer.

Next stop—home, and sleeping for, like, a week....

EPILOGUE:

Later, the Seven get together at the Avenue C flophouse. They feel pretty normal—the peak of power they felt at the end of the battle has ebbed—but they feel as though it’s still there, still within them if again it is needed, if they are again, Seven as One.

Chen has realized that he can use some help with his charitable works. He has started a foundation. He’ll fund it, but he wants José to administrate it. José will make a great conduit for Chen’s endless bounty, since he can see right through the scam artists and tell who and what are really needy. Gaby announces that she has gotten a job as an assistant to an investigative reporter who is renowned for uncovering corruption. She loves it. Nothing makes her happier than exposing evil and seeing justice done. Hayden has heard from her fiancé in Switzerland. Seems he met someone else while she’s been gone. Just as well, she plans on staying here. And she’s gotten a job working for a forensic accountant. She loves numbers. Milli has a job, too. She’s working for Jorge now at the bodega! Hey, it’s a start.... Naz says he’s putting more and more time into his artwork. And, by the way, he has a gift for each of them—a tee shirt, with a design that he created that represents their true natures, based on the Tree of Life. It’s, like, their superhero costume. Nobody particularly wants to wear a costume—but the tees are actually pretty cool. They put ‘em on. “We are Seven,” says Naz. All together say, “We are One.”

FIN