

## **Chapter 1**

### **Scenes of the Past**

With the last remnants of the life-stealing storm fading with the retreating night, the young male penguin didn't consider life or death as he moved away from the warmth of the waddle to wander up a small rise. The light of the dim sun was just enough for him to scan the tundra for his mate. Beneath him, his newborn chick struggled for freedom, but he kept it tucked safely away to protect it from the cold morning air.

The pale sun was already sinking on the short Antarctic day when the male finally saw movement. Within moments the air around him filled with a symphony of voices as the male penguins celebrated the return of the females to the clan.

*Kaboom!*

A flash rippled across the sky. It outshone the setting sun in its brilliant display. Thunder echoed behind it causing the icy tundra to shudder and groan.

Startled from their songs, the colony worked as one creature with a thousand eyes to scan the darkening terrain for the source of the disturbance, fear gripped them. It was a deep fear that started in their guts, swelling up to permeate every part of their small bodies. It was a fear without an obvious source, and one they would never shake. Not a single member of the clan broke the silence. There was no wind and the air around them grew thin. Small bits of snow and ice drifted upward from the ground to float in the air around the flightless birds. Energy prickled their skin as the air crackled to life around them. The effect was subtle at first, then became oppressive. The colony fought the urge to flee.

Dark clouds sprang to life above them. Like an enormous school of fish, they swirled first in one direction and then in another. Within moments violent strokes of lightning tore at the ice and sent booms echoing across the land. The center of the clouds sank into a deep vortex. The wind howled and the land descended into darkness as the last rays of the pale sun were blotted out. A moment later a glow filled the center of the vortex. It quickly grew in brightness to replace the defeated sun.

The horror was too much for the colony. Panic filled the air in a cacophony of fright and they fled. Dozens of startled and dazed chicks littered the ground.

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In one great burst, the center of the monstrous cloud flared like a dying star; and a spear of light thrust down toward the icy tundra below.

*Ka-Boom!*

*Rruummmble!*

The impact of the spear of light sent icy chunks flying in all directions. The light bored a hole deep into the groaning ice shelf.

*Whoosh!*

A ring of energy exploded outward from the bottom of the shaft. The wave of death raced across the frozen land, sucking the breath from everything it touched. Fueled by each death, it spread from victim to victim. The wave passed completely over the colony of birds and across the tundra for several miles before collapsing back into the spear of light. Not a single member of the colony survived its touch.

Suddenly, the clouds scattered and the shaft of energy disappeared. A single ball of light remained suspended above the frozen land. Leaving the bodies of the penguins to mark its arrival, the ball descended slowly into the ice.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Flight to Freedom**

Diamond studied the blonde woman in front of him. She had entered his office a few moments earlier with a file in her hands and a curse on her lips. It really didn't surprise him. Heather Stone had worked by his side for years and he knew that she had the shortest temper of any of his employees.

"Is something bothering you, Heather?"

"I don't like the way the doctor treated you, sir. After everything you've done for him..."

"The doctor is one of the finest surgeons and meta-geneticists in the world, Heather. His experiments have produced results that no other geneticist has been able to duplicate."

"That's because no one else dares to." Heather muttered.

Diamond smiled but didn't correct her statement. "I'm sure your displeasure over the doctor's behavior wasn't the only reason you came to see me. Is that report for me?" Diamond pointed at the folder in Heather's hand. Given the level of technology available to them, printed documents were unnecessary, but Diamond knew that Heather preferred them. To satisfy him, she had most likely already made the information available through the Citadel's computers.

"Yes, sir," Heather passed the file to Diamond and began her briefing. "The DNA proved to be more useful than we expected. We got partial matches to several unsolved murders around the world. I had Curtis run him through Interpol."

"What did they say?" Diamond asked as he flipped casually through the file.

"The victims were all high profile individuals. The murders were all clean."

"Professional," Diamond corrected.

"Yes sir. Sir, you should know that Interpol wanted to know why we were asking about these cases."

"What did you tell them?"

"We said we were updating our cold case database and needed to fill in some of the details."

"Good. What did you find with the prints?"

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“His name is Wolff Kingsley. Blood and DNA confirm it. We discovered several aliases scattered around the world. Most recently, Blaine Braxton, a real-estate trader out of Austria, who worked largely over the Internet. Neighbors knew the face but didn’t know the man.”

“A cover.”

“Yes, sir. He was some kind of child prodigy. Intelligent, athletic, you name it. He has a master’s in political science and a master’s in mechanical engineering, an interesting combination. He spent time traveling the world right out of college, even spending some time with Tibetan monks. I haven’t figured that one out yet.”

“I suspect I know why,” said Diamond as he flipped through the file.

When he didn’t elaborate, Heather shrugged. If he wanted to tell her, he would.

“Extensive military training, including special and covert ops. Impressive record. You name the place; he’s been there. You name the job; he’s done it. He was the perfect soldier, and then he became increasingly difficult to control. There is no real explanation for it. His career ended with charges of insubordination. Unfortunately, he never showed up for the final decision. He simply vanished right out from under the noses of his escort at the Dulles International Airport. The military still wants him. They were interested in my investigation as well but I deflected them. My inquiry also sent up red flags in their computers, but the Citadel computers easily prevented any probes. The alias names pick up after that. Many are false. It will take weeks to trace through them all.”

“Then you should get started. I want everything within a week.”

“What?” Heather paused. She had never questioned orders before but she had already discovered enough to cause her concern. She leaned forward and spoke, “Sir, if you don’t mind me saying, he doesn’t belong here. If even half of what is in that file is true, he...”

“Your objection is noted, Heather. But I want to know everything there is to know about this man. Activate some of our deep-cover agents if you need to, but get me everything. Dreah has taken an interest in him.”

“No disrespect sir, but Dreah takes an interest in everyone.”

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“Dreah’s instincts are outstanding, Heather. I never ignore them.” Diamond stopped and looked up. He could see the doubt in her eyes. It wasn’t over Dreah’s instincts, Heather knew them as well as he did, her doubt was the baggage Wolff carried.

“It isn’t what she has said, it’s what she won’t say that troubles me,” said Diamond. “I can see it in her eyes when she looks at him. It’s why she sent Glip-2 up there to guide his plane in. It is why he’s here. I want to know what that is.”

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Missing Man**

“Fifty-two seconds.” Sweat dripped from Stein’s nose.

Aegis was convinced the man suffered from mind control. If Stein was a meta-human intellect, his behavior was the strangest Aegis had ever encountered. Perhaps he could convince Stein to grant them more time. If that failed, perhaps he could convince Stein to speak with Dreah.

“B-before you ask, Mr. Diogenes. No. I n-never l-leave the house. M-Mike could you come in here, please? Our...our guests should be leaving.”

*Telepathy, Aegis told himself. It must be some form of telepathy.*

“No, you only have forty-five seconds left. No more time. I-I am not reading yo-your mind either. One th-thousand six hundred twenty-one.”

The door next to Paragon opened and the butler came in. The temperature of the room dropped noticeably. Sword in hand, Paragon turned to face the man. As he stared into the man’s dark eyes, he couldn’t shake the feeling that they knew each other. His breath formed a cloud in the air before him.

Carol stopped scanning the books and stood up next to Aegis. “You’ve muttered several numbers, Mr. Stein. What is one-thousand six hundred twenty-one?”

Stein didn’t turn to face them. Something outside the window had his attention. He rubbed his twitching right hand and mumbled, “One-thousand six hundred twenty-o...one to one t-that you won’t l-leea-leave. Thirty-five seconds.”

“Mr. Stein...”

“No! Ms. Estingdale...you may not return later! Take the books and go, nothing more! Please! Please, go,” he pleaded.

Carol held the books to her chest and glanced at Aegis. Aegis looked at Stein and then at the butler. The tension across the shoulders of Paragon told him they were in danger.

“Only Child on sight in t-minus ten seconds,” said Kahori over the commlink.

Aegis tried to ignore her. He was at a loss. Stein was responding to his thoughts quicker than they occurred; yet, Stein denied reading his mind.

“Seven, six, five...”

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Aegis wished Kahori would shut up.

“Drop it, Control!” Envoy interrupted and the commlink went silent.

Gripping the curtain tightly in his trembling hands, Stein stood silently before the window with dust raining down on him. Suddenly, he stopped shaking and mumbling, and stared out the window. His eyes grew wide with fright and spittle dripped from the corner of his mouth. “Mm...mm,” he stammered and stumbled backward. The curtain ripped free from the window and Stein was sent tumbling over backward. He crashed into several stacks of books and scattered them across the floor.

Scrambling away from the window, Stein mumbled incoherently. Terror was etched on his face and tears streamed from his eyes. The tumbling books caused him to panic more.

Aegis leaped to his side and grabbed Stein’s wrists. The old man fought against him with surprising strength. Concerned, Aegis glanced up and saw Slipstream through the swaying curtain. The metal warrior stood before the window with dark energy leaking from his large black eyes.

“*V-v-vvvallo... mihi,*” Stein stammered. Spittle sprayed Aegis with each word. “*Vallo m-mihi!*”

Metal shrieked from behind the wall of books.

*Crash!*

As if desperate for freedom from eons of sleep, the Minotaur statue burst from the wall of books. As it moved, metal creaked and groaned, and mountains of books flew in every direction.

Screaming, Carol dropped to her knees and threw her hands over her head to shield herself from the books. Ignoring his own peril, Aegis leaped in front of Carol to protect her.

Paragon desperately wanted to turn to his friends, but forced himself to ignore the books pelting him. Fearing the man before him was the greater threat, Paragon kept his eyes locked on him. The butler also ignored the chaos enveloping the room and kept his eyes focused on Paragon.

The massive Bull glanced only briefly around the room before settling his metal eyes on Aegis. Even the movement of its eyes echoed through the room as they rolled inside its metal skull. Aegis stood over Carol and held the shield up to protect them. Metal creaked and groaned as the Bull swung its massive axe.

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*Clang!*

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*Crash!*

The window shattered and Aegis hurtled past Envoy. “Some negotiator,” she mumbled. Energy leaped from Envoy’s outstretched hand and the building’s wall disintegrated. Easing forward, she peered into the darkness and barely dodged the Bull’s deadly horns as it charged through the opening.

Slipstream didn’t move from the metal monster’s path, and the Bull’s massive hooves trampled him into the ground.

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The sounds of battle behind Paragon gnawed at his soul. Unfortunately, Aegis would have to deal with it. The horror before him was far worse, and would consume them all if he turned his back on it.

“It has been a long time, knight,” said Mike. The air around him grew colder with each word.

Frost formed on Paragon’s sword. “I would not have expected to find you here,” he replied as calmly as he could.

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Carol pushed books aside and looked around her. Behind her the Bull dominated the hole in the wall as it swung its massive axe at Envoy. She darted around the creature like an annoying mosquito stinging the metal beast with blasts of energy that left glowing red patches where she hit it.

Turning back to the room, Carol found Stein babbling and crying as he clawed toward a doorway. He continued to knock over stacks of books in his path. Carol raised her hand and three glowing pink lights floated in the air in front of her. A moment later, a single small faerie materialized out of each of the glowing lights. Their songs of admiration for Carol sounded like a thousand tiny bells. Pointing at Stein, she waved for them to follow him. They spiraled around her head and then darted after Stein as they giggled loudly and playfully. They left a trail of glowing pink sparkles suspended in the air to mark their path out of the room.

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Noticing the fog of her breathing for the first time, Carol looked up in time to hear Paragon address the butler. His words chilled her more than the cold air surrounding her.

“Winter Eagle,” said Paragon. Careful not to slip on the frost-covered floor, he took a step backward. “Why are you here, monster?” He raised his sword higher in defense. His wings flexed to better balance him on the slippery floor.

A glowing white light quickly spread from his sword, up his arm, and over his body. Once it had enveloped him completely, it flashed and was gone. Paragon stood before Winter Eagle wearing a suit of medieval plate mail armor. The steel armor was magically enchanted like his sword. It had a slight blue tint and covered him from his shoulders to his feet. He had chosen to forego the helmet, leaving his golden locks to fall loosely around his metal-clad shoulders. His wings extended outward behind him and caught the rays of the sun. He was the archangel Michael with the light of Heaven shining down upon him while he faced down the Prince of Hell.

Winter Eagle took a step forward and Paragon took a step back. Winter Eagle circled to the right but stopped when he saw Carol lying on the floor behind the hero. Carol was visibly shaken, and Winter Eagle could taste the fear in her heart. The air grew colder. “You know that no enchantment can stop the power of my touch. Your magical armor will not protect you.”

“It doesn’t have to,” replied Paragon. “My sword will do that.” To emphasize his words, he gripped the sword tightly with both hands, and leveled it at Winter Eagle.

Winter Eagle glanced briefly at him, smirked, and then looked back at Carol. “My business with the old man is none of your concern. Although I must thank him for giving me the opportunity to finally slay you.” Winter Eagle blew gently on the air, and a cloud of cold rushed toward Carol.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Une Ville Allée**

Samuel sprang up. Panting, he fought to understand what was happening. His head throbbed, and he felt sick. Beside him, Amanda groaned. Kicking out with her foot, she gouged his leg with her toenails.

“Ouch!” Samuel yelled as he jerked away from her. Leaping up, he staggered out of the tent.

“It’s too early,” Amanda groaned as she rolled over and went back to sleep.

Samuel stood on the beach and listened to the sounds of his sleeping friends. Even though the sun hadn’t started to rise yet, he knew his pounding head would prevent him from getting back to sleep. Bending over, he rubbed his temples.

A drop of blood fell from his nose to strike the sand.

Puzzled, he rubbed his nose, and pulled his hand away bloodied. Staring at it, he staggered and fell backward into the sand. Confused, Samuel wondered if he was dreaming. Even with a full moon, the beach was too bright. The surf sounded like thunder crashing against the sand. Despite the warm night air, he shuddered with a chill when a breeze hit his sweat-streaked spine.

He glanced up, and the moon’s bright light stung his eyes. He had to rub them for several moments before he could see clearly again. Leaning forward, he placed his finger against the side of his nose and blew hard. Dark blood painted the sand. He repeated the process with the other nostril, and more blood darkened the sand.

Glancing around the beach, he found the small boat beached several yards away. Early in the evening, the captain had taken it to return to the yacht. Now the waves rocked it against the sandy shore. A moan caused him to dismiss the boat and turn back to the tent. He stared at the closed flap and it grew silent inside. Amanda had fallen asleep again.

“Eeaaaa!” screamed Amanda.

Jumping forward, Samuel flung the tent flap back. Amanda lay curled in a ball with her arms wrapped around her legs. Blood flowed from her nose to pool in front of her. She shuddered and sobbed in her sleep.

“Amanda! Amanda!” Samuel shook her as he called her name, but couldn’t wake her.

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Running to the other tent, he dropped in front of it and ripped the zipper up. Moaning coming from inside the tent caused him to hesitate. Slowly, he pulled the flap back. Choking on his own blood, Terry lay on his back. Jessica lay across him, blood flowing from her nose and onto his chest.

Samuel rose unsteadily to his feet, and backed slowly away from the tents. His head swam with confusion. Turning, he fled toward the boat. Splashing through the water, he grabbed the edge and hauled himself into the craft. He landed on the body of the captain, crumpled in a pool of blood.

Samuel shrieked and scrambled out of the boat. He fell into the water and the strong waves crushed him to the sandy ocean floor. With strong hands, the surf held him under the water until he lungs threatened to burst. Only when the ocean pulled back to breathe itself did the grip relax enough for Samuel to push himself above the water's surface. He gulped handfuls of salty air and dragged himself up onto the sand. He stumbled to his feet. Without even looking at the tents, he fled the beach. He had no idea where he was going, and sought only to escape the fear that gripped him. The hours blurred as he ran, and the sun rose high over the island.

Some time later, Samuel found himself sitting on a rock and clutching his head. It still pounded, and he struggled to catch his breath. His nose had stopped bleeding, but he was exhausted. He was dizzy, and his vision was still blurry.

In his flight, he had clawed his way up the side of a small mountain, but he couldn't remember doing so. The white sand of the beach far below was radiant in the midmorning sun and stung his eyes when he looked at it. The tents fluttered under a soft wind, but there was no sign of life.

Hungry and weak, Samuel struggled to his feet, and started down the mountain. He didn't understand what had happened to him, but he knew he didn't want to spend another night on the island.

*Swhoosh!*

Samuel glanced around for the source of the noise. He was alone, so he started down the mountain again.

*Swhoosh!*

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Samuel turned around quickly, but the motion made him dizzy. He stumbled and nearly fell. The pounding in his head increased. Grunting, he pushed aside his curiosity, and started toward the beach. He wanted down the mountain, and off the island.

*Swhoosh!*

Samuel froze. Slowly, he turned around again. It took him several moments, but finally he spotted a small crack in the mountain just beyond where he had been sitting. He hadn't noticed it earlier. Slowly, he approached it.

He kneeled next to it, but could not see inside. He lay down on his stomach and inched over the edge. Below him was a small barren cave with a dirt floor. There was no source for the sound, but, strangely, it was bright inside the cave.

Uneasiness crept into him, but his curiosity kept him from fleeing.

The cave looked like any of a dozen others scattered across the islands in this part of the ocean, but there was something about this one that forced him to examine every nook and cranny. The detail he saw in every grain of sand, marveled him. The walls were cloaked in shadow, but he could see the insects in even the darkest corner.

Suddenly, the fear from the night before washed over him like a wave. It left him paralyzed. Desperately, he wanted to climb to his feet and run, but he couldn't. He wanted to look away, but he couldn't. Somewhere below him in the cave lay the source of the previous night's horror, and it wanted him.

Through the fear, the cave spoke to him. It was only a whisper, but it called for him to enter the cave. The compulsion grew until it was overwhelming. Against his will, he reached out and grabbed the rock below him. He pulled, and slid toward the crack.

"Help!" screamed Samuel, but there was no answer.

His arms worked independent of his desires and slowly dragged him into the cave. When he cleared the crack, he fell twenty feet to the cave's floor. The impact knocked the wind from his lungs, but before he could catch his breath, his hands gripped the rocky wall and pulled him to his feet. As he gagged for breath in the stale dusty air, his legs carried him deeper into the cave. Blood flowed from his nose, and his head pounded harder than ever. Samuel glanced over his shoulder at the cave's entrance as he was dragged around a corner and out of sight of it.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Une Ville Allée**

*Swhoosh!*

Glip-2, glowing red and pulsing rapidly, zipped past and out of sight.

“What do you think that is all about?” Kahori asked.

Sparrow didn’t respond. Several people gathered in front of the video wall had captured his attention. Slowly he rose to his feet and started for the area.

Kahori sat confused. Turning in her seat, she watched him. A moment later she got up and followed.

None of the people spoke, and a tear ran down one woman’s face as she raised a trembling hand to cover her mouth. The image on the wall showed a woman reporter. Behind her was the skyline of Paris with smoke rising from several spots around the city. A red banner scrolled across the bottom of the screen. It read, *Breaking Story: Paris; A Dead Zone. City Under Quarantine.*

*“...I say again, this is a breaking news story. Tragedy beyond compare has struck the city of Paris.”* The reporter disappeared as the view zoomed in on an aerial shot of the city. The woman continued talking, but her voice was broken by emotion. *“Authorities...are unsure what has happened at this time...They cannot establish communications with anyone in the city. The French military is currently setting up checkpoints, and preventing anyone from entering. As you can see, fires are burning throughout the city, and traffic has come to a standstill. Nothing...is moving in the streets. M...millions are presumed dead.”* The camera zoomed in to show bodies lying along the streets and cars crashed into each other. *“B-Bodies are...lying everywhere. Oh my God! I can’t do this...”* The woman’s commentary died as the reporter dropped her mike and fled the stage.

Everyone in the common area was stunned to silence.

“Aegis,” whispered Kahori. Sparrow looked at the young girl and saw her eyes tearing up. Her voice shook. “Aegis is there.”

## **Chapter 11**

### **Recovery of Lost Friends**

As Envoy turned, Sparrow leaped for her. The only thing she had time to do was brace for the impact. He collided with something between them and tumbled to the ground struggling with it.

“Control, we have hostiles on scene!” shouted Envoy as she surrounded herself with a force field. A flash of energy rebounded off it. She returned fire and an invisible target screamed as her pulse disintegrated the bush the attack had originated from. The man’s invisibility dropped and he crumpled to the ground.

“Tactical soldiers in stealth suits on scene,” said Envoy as her eyes began to glow and she scanned the area for heat signatures. “No identifying marks and there is nothing on thermal. Wavefront?”

*Boom!*

Paragon’s body shattered the last remaining portion of the stage wall. He sailed over everyone’s head to crash into a large marble statue. The statue shattered and the hero was left tumbling across the ground.

“Paragon’s down. Unknown assailant!” screamed Envoy into her commlink. In a blink she was next to the down warrior. At her touch, he groaned and rolled over.

Curious, Wavefront turned in the direction Paragon had come from. His eyes widened with surprise. “Slipstream looks bloody pissed!”

Slipstream stood behind the destroyed stage. Energy blazed from his eyes. His face was contorted with rage. His muscles bulged and his fists were clenched tightly.

Envoy glanced from Paragon to Slipstream. Like the others she was confused. Satisfied that Paragon would survive, she focused on Slipstream. Instantly, she was across the park and hovering over him. She could feel the energy blazing from his eyes through her force field.

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Sparrow tried to track what was going on around him even as he struggled with his invisible assailant. His attack had caught the man by surprise and Sparrow had quickly wrapped his arms around the man’s neck. The soldier’s struggle began to lessen, but pain erupted along the left side of Sparrow’s face. He lost his grip on the man and rolled away. He came up in a

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crouch before his invisible enemy. He kept his eyes focused on the ground to track them. An instant later, he dodged to the right as an energy blast tore up the ground where he had been.

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“Six more,” said Wavefront as he turned his attention away from Envoy and Slipstream. His eyes glowed. “One to the south, nine meters.” An energy blast from that direction struck an invisible shield around him. Wavefront grinned, “You think I’m a bloody drongo! I cheat.” Drawing his sidearm, he shot the invisible target. “Scratch one. Who’s next? I’m a’spewin for a fight!” As he advanced on the enemy, several blasts from different directions bounced harmlessly off his shield and he returned fire.

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Fenrir howled as his keen senses picked out a target. An instant later, he leaped upon the man and his claws ripped into the helpless man’s armor and gear. He leaped at another enemy even before the first one hit the ground. Energy blasts burned away patches of fur from his body but he barreled forward unhindered.

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Envoy poured as much energy as she could into her force field. She knew if Slipstream attacked her, she would need it. Suddenly his face relaxed and he turned to face her. The movement was unusual for him, and it unnerved her. An instant later he was gone and standing over Paragon. She sighed with relief. If he had chosen to attack her with such speed, he would have struck her without her having had a chance to react.

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Slipstream held out his hand to Paragon and assisted the winged warrior to his feet. Paragon’s sword appeared in his hands, and his wounds began to heal.

Smiling at Slipstream, he said, “Sucker punch, huh?” Slipstream’s face didn’t reveal what he was feeling, but Paragon knew it was regret. It seeped from the man and Paragon had no problem detecting it. “I don’t remember teaching you that one.”

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Wavefront’s force field easily held the blasts from his enemies’ energy weapons at bay while it allowed his own weapon’s energy to pass. He longed to pommel them, but when they

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realized their weapons were ineffective against him, they avoided contact. He had to settle for kicking the ones he gunned down.

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Fenrir barely held his animal instincts at bay as he carved a path of pain through the soldiers. His growls grew deeper as he longed to sink his teeth into their flesh. It was a desire that had been growing stronger in him since he had lost the ability to resume his human form. It had become a constant gnawing in his gut. Now, he found he was barely able to keep himself under control as the anger over his lost friends, and the powerful scent of the soldiers' fear mixed with their blood, threatened to overwhelm him. Drea had feared him losing control completely and had been working to keep him from field missions. Knowing the nature of this one, he doubted anything would have kept him from it.

Howling, he leaped at his latest target. Terrified, the man tried to flee, but Fenrir's clawed hand caught him in the side and hurled him twenty feet through the air. By the time he landed, Fenrir had already found another target.

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"At your ten, Envoy!" said Lady Gemini over the commlink.

Envoy lashed out with a wide burst and her target was blown backward.

"One at your three and another at your six. Two flanking Sparrow at twelve and six."

Sparrow turned and dropped as an opponent lashed out at him. An instant later a second opponent tackled him.

"Patching tactical to your sidekicks," said Lady Gemini.

Envoy lashed out with another wide burst, but didn't hit anything. She was impressed by the stealth technology used by the soldiers. Usually, her artifact would have punched through it by now.

*Shring!*

Envoy's sidekick announced the incoming data and she reached out to it through her artifact. Lady Gemini's images of their opponents appeared before her vision. Immediately Envoy's artifact analyzed the images and began streaming data on the strengths and weaknesses of the soldier's technology across Envoy's vision. The artifact further enhanced the images and within moments, the soldiers fully appeared in Envoy's vision. The alien metal catalogued the

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technology and adapted its own settings to account for it in the future. Any soldiers utilizing the same technology against Envoy would find their advantage of stealth nullified immediately.

“That’s a nice trick, Gem. You’ll have to tell me how you came up with it.” Envoy immediately flew after an enemy. As she passed Sparrow, she blasted one of the two enemies he was sparring with, the man dropped.

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Sparrow still had one enemy, and he struggled to keep the stronger man from getting behind him. He began to lose the struggle when they were both suddenly hoisted from the ground. The man lost his grip and Sparrow struck the ground hard. As he rolled over, he looked up to see Fluxstone holding the invisible man high over her head.

“How dare you! How dare you attack us while we mourn our friends!” screamed Fluxstone.

From the look on her face, Sparrow feared she was going to rip the man in half. Instead, she flung him across the park.

## **Chapter 15**

### **The Aegis**

Sparrow didn't like his options, but he knew his time was quickly deteriorating. He could continue to try to hack the computers and risk alerting security, or he could attempt to steal the shield during the twenty-second downtime between tests. Of course, blowing the window would alert the men in the break room. Sparrow glanced at his watch. He had already been in the room five minutes, and that was far too long. He made his decision, and slapped explosives along the edge of the window. He then raced back up the stairs to the window above the chamber.

Pulling his backpack off, Sparrow knelt over the glass. He pulled out a length of rope and laid it to the side. He then pulled his dart gun and exchanged one of the darts with his zip line. He stuffed it into his belt and pulled more explosives from his backpack.

As he applied them to the floor window, the computer monitor to his left brightened. In the reflection of the glass, Sparrow saw the two yellow eyes of Seraphim shift to red. The android turned its head in his direction.

"You are in an unauthorized area," said the android as it stepped down off its pedestal.

Sparrow jammed a detonator into the explosives, and rolled out of the android's reach. He leaped to his feet as the android's movements jerked equipment attached to it off the counters. With cables ripping free, the android swung at Sparrow.

The glancing blow caught Sparrow on his right shoulder. His foot caught on his backpack and spilled its contents as he hit the floor. Springing to his feet again, Sparrow ignored the sparks showering him from the exploding computer equipment.

*Boom!*

An explosion rocked the hallway outside the lab. The android paused and looked in the direction of the explosion.

*Boom!*

When the second explosion rocked the lab, Sparrow took advantage of the android's distraction and hurled a grenade at it.

*Kaboom!*

The explosion slammed the unsuspecting android into a counter.

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Sparrow darted across the lab and dived behind a counter just as Hagen staggered into the hallway outside the lab. Hagen's clothing was torn, and he favored his left arm. A single glowing red dot darted across the visor's black faceplate. Sparrow moved around the counter to put as much of it between himself and Hagen as he could. He pulled a grenade from his belt.

From the hallway Hagen searched the room. Inside the lab Seraphim climbed to its feet. Hagen keyed his access code into the keypad, but the lab door did not open when he pulled on the handle. He quickly keyed in the code again, but the door still did not open.

*Come on, come on*, encouraged Sparrow as he glanced around for the android. It was moving in his direction.

Stepping back from the door, Hagen focused on it. The visor's dot suddenly grew brighter and larger.

*Fsist!*

Energy from the visor shattered the door. The door's destruction dislodged Sparrow's grenade.

*Kaboom!*

Hagen slammed into the wall across from the lab.

Sparrow leaped to his feet and flung his grenade at Seraphim. The android wrapped its metal wings around itself, and the grenade exploded harmlessly against the shell.

*Kaboom!*

Sparrow dove for the stairs and rolled down them as he pulled a compact *H&K USP* from a shoulder holster. The modified tactical pistol had far more punch than the dart gun.

Hagen lay stunned against the wall for a moment before brushing glass and debris from his armor. Climbing to his feet, he blasted the hallway lights to plunge the area into darkness. He then shifted his visor to thermal imaging and searched the room for Sparrow.

"Where is he?" growled Ogre as he joined his friend in the hall. Ogre had mutated. His features were more bestial, and he crawled around on his knuckles like an ape. His left eye was swollen and red. Bloody snot ran from his overlarge nose. His costume was torn, and his torso was covered with lacerations. He had caught the brunt of both blasts in the hallway and had taken a moment to recover.

## Diamond Justice: The Psadan Evolution

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Hagen glanced at Ogre and the android answered, "He dove down the stairs. He's after the shield."

"Careful," added Hagen, "he's set up booby traps."

"Most of my systems are still off-line," said Seraphim. "My reflexes are slowed. He has been able to take advantage of that."

Hagen nodded and shifted his vision. He looked through the floor and saw Sparrow in front of the computers. "He's accessing the computers."

Ogre bared his fangs and moved into the lab. "Graaaaa! Thief! I'm going to suck the marrow from your bones!" Grabbing a table, he hurled it across the lab, and then he leaped across the room to the top of the stairs. With Seraphim right behind him, he leaped again and landed at the bottom. Hagen took up a position at the top to prevent Sparrow's escape.

Sparrow was waiting patiently for Ogre to reach the bottom of the stairs.

The beast lumbered cautiously forward with the winged android crouching behind him on the stairs. Ogre glanced right, and then left before looking up at Sparrow and grinning.

"What? No more grenades?"

Sparrow gave him his gun instead.

*Blam! Blam! Blam!*

The bullets stung Ogre deeply. "Graaaaaaa!" he roared and charged forward.

Sparrow dropped under Ogre's grasp, and rolled under the computer console.

*Kaboom!*

The explosives lining the window exploded. Glass showered the room, and Ogre was flung against the opposite wall.

Rolling out from under the console, Sparrow leaped through the shattered window and into the testing chamber. Seraphim's steel grip dug into his shoulder and ripped his uniform, but Sparrow managed to twist free and avoid capture.

The light of the room was blinding, but Sparrow's goggles quickly compensated. He dodged the laser as it fired at the *Aegis*. Grabbing the swinging arm, Sparrow jerked it around at his pursuers.

*Zzzz!*

## **Diamond Justice: The Psadan Evolution**

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The laser sliced along the room's wall and cut deeply into Seraphim's delicate internal circuitry. Its eyes flickered and damaged systems began to shut down.

"Graaaaa!" snarled Ogre. He jerked the android out of the window, and Sparrow turned the laser on him. It sliced through his arm. "Graaaaww!" Fueled by the pain, Ogre ripped the computer console from the wall and hurled it at Sparrow.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Death of a Seed**

Butch pressed his hand against his abdomen, blood oozed from the burn. His vision blurred, and he fought against unconsciousness. Fuentes had gained full control of the ship, and it wasn't responding to his commands.

"Going down!" he screamed through gasps for air.

"Evac, Maverick. Evac subject now!" shouted Meta-man. "Focus on Slipstream, not Fuentes!"

"About damn time!" Maverick responded. An instant later, he stood inside the airship. He caught himself on the ship's wall to keep from falling.

Meta-man still held onto the wall and Slipstream. Slipstream held his arms circled tightly around Fuentes. Fluxstone restrained the left arm of Fuentes, and the girl's right hand left glowing scars as she clawed at Slipstream's metal face.

Maverick took a deep breath and reached out to touch Slipstream. "I hope this is better than last time! Let's ride the wind, bitch!" In his mind, he pictured his destination and concentrated to pull all of them through space. Reality warped as Fuentes' natural defenses fought against the teleport. Maverick looked up and his eyes met Fluxstone's. "Shi...,"

The interior of the ship twisted and the space stretched outward, and then collapse into a single spot. An instant later it expanded violently.

*KABOOM!*

The side of the *Exodus* exploded outward and a wormhole formed between the ship and Maverick's intended destination. A fireball engulfed the interior of the ship. Fuentes and the heroes were sucked from the ship by the swirling chaos.

Fire from the *Exodus* spiraled through the wormhole and lit up the sky as it blasted through the upper floors of several high-rise buildings. The vortex shredded everything it touched. Debris and furniture were sucked up and carried along with it. Far out over the ocean, the horizon flashed and the wormhole collapsed. Flaming concrete, glass, and metal released from the wormhole rained destruction down upon the city. Flaming, Samson plummeted toward the ground several blocks from the stadium. The other heroes and Fuentes were nowhere to be seen.

## Diamond Justice: The Psadan Evolution

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“Brace yourselves!” yelled Butch as the *Exodus* spun out of control.

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Fire and smoke trailed behind the *Exodus* as it streaked toward the ground. Just as it was about to hit, the pod snapped back into the air as if it were attached to an invisible rope. Duo strained to hold the airship while also shielding themselves from flaming debris that rained down around them.

\*\*

“Maverick, status?”

Gemini worked frantically to get Maverick’s video feed back online. It was down along with Slipstream’s and Meta-man’s. She had no way of knowing if the teleport had been successful.

“No change in energy readings over the city!” shouted Jonesy.

“Thirty seconds to energy shaft!” shouted Edmond.

\*\*

Gemini watched as the twins lowered the *Exodus* to the ground.

“I love this job!” said Q-Zone.

Glancing behind her, Gemini watched as Q-Zone lowered his hand from the *Exodus*. He smiled and winked at her as he focused all his attention on a large piece of scaffolding held suspended in the air. Shadow Spirit appeared over several young adults under the scaffolding. Wrapping them in his shadows, he teleported them out of the area.

Q-Zone turned his attention back to the *Exodus*. Extending his hand toward it again, the flames dancing across it began to slow and then to freeze in place.

Turning away from the others, Gemini continued her search for Sparrow. Moving among the burning wreckage she didn’t find any sign of him, but she froze when she stumbled on Fuentes. The woman climbed to her feet. With one clawed hand she clutched Slipstream by his face, dragging him behind her like a rag doll. The metal warrior was conscious, but his prolonged contact with Fuentes had left him drained of strength. Gemini’s blood ran cold when dirt and debris drifted slowly from the ground around her and Fuentes.

“Control, I have a visual on Fuentes! Teleport was unsuccessful! Slipstream is down!”

Mustering as much courage as she could, Gemini swung her staff at Fuentes.

## Diamond Justice: The Psadan Evolution

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*Crack!*

Gemini's hands jarred from the blow to the back of the girl's head. She took a step back and tried to shake the pain from them.

Fuentes was unhurt and turned to glare at her. She raised her hand slowly toward Lady Gemini.

*"Tawagoto,"* mumbled Gemini.

*Whoosh!*

A wave of force struck her, hurling her backward.

*Crash!*

Gemini landed in a pile of broken speakers. Pain jolted her body and for a moment she fought panic as stars danced in her head. Through blurred vision, she saw someone moving over her. A rough hand clasped around her throat, and hauled her into the air. Pulling desperately at the vice-like grip, Gemini gasped for breath.

*Thwack!*

Fuentes jerked uncontrollably. Gemini landed back in the pile of speakers.

"Ow! Ow! That hurts," moaned Gemini as she rolled over and pressed her hand into her back where the corner of a speaker had jabbed her. Glancing up, she saw Sparrow kneeling on a piece of scaffolding high above her. He held a high-powered rifle aimed at Fuentes. Behind him the clouds groaned with anger.

*Thwack!*

Fuentes staggered again as Sparrow shot her with the rifle.

Gemini managed a smile, and she gave him thumbs up before rolling to her feet.

Unsteady, she picked up her staff and rubbed her sore throat.

"Alright witch, sympathy time is over." Twirling the staff high above her head, Gemini danced around Fuentes. Another shot rang out.

*Thwack!*

As Fuentes recovered from the blow, Gemini followed up Sparrow's attack with a series of blows from her staff.