

J. S. Vaughn About 71,500 words
jsvaughn.author@gmail.com
Address
Phone Number

Go Squad

by J. S. Vaughn

Chapter 1

Caledonia at night.

“Good evening and welcome to Carl Tucker Tonight.”

One of the largest metropolises in the country.

“Caledonia is the third biggest city in the United States. Millions of people live here.”

Home to the feared and revered vigilantes, the only team to patrol a major city at night, protecting its citizens from misdeeds, transgressions, delinquency, and general... malfeasance? Felonies and villainy were just more of a professional law enforcement type deal, especially considering what counted as felonies and villainy to the Caledonia Police.

Possession, no matter how much, felony. Loitering, no matter that curfews being unconstitutional, villainy. Probable cause, basically whatever they felt it was, grounds for search and seizure.

They were all about the neighborhood and making sure the denizens of Caledonia felt safe, often from the uniformed sentinels immune to true justice.

Firas hated it. Hated giving what they did a name, a brand, a power he wasn't willing to acknowledge. They were supposed to be shadows, rumors, figments of overactive imaginations. To his chagrin, the rest of the team loved the moniker and adopted it for their unofficial outfit. Someone was posting their exploits for thousands to see, turning them into a movement.

He'd argued against it during team meetings. "We're supposed to be secret." But the others disagreed: people needed to see someone was fighting back. Hope mattered, even if it came with hashtags.

"For a hundred and fifty years, it has been the hub of American commerce. If any one place can say that they helped build this country, it's Caledonia. So we should care what happens here. Unfortunately, what's happening now in Caledonia is almost all bad. In fact, it's a disaster. Crime has been never higher. Arrest rates have skyrocketed. Our fine boys in blue are being pushed to the very ends of their abilities to enforce law and order in this, our city, no more than in the inner city. What's happened to our beautiful Caledonia when our mothers and children can't walk the streets without some gangbanger threatening to bust a ca..."

Firas pushed the home button on his phone, pulled the ski mask over his face and smelled the night air. He always wished he had some enhanced sense so he could sniff out a lead or hear the cries for help a mile away and dole out justice. He had to make do with his normal nose but really mostly relied on his police scanner he bought at a pawn shop.

"This is Rogue leader. Radio check-check, cop-copy," Firas said into a handheld ham radio as he squeezed the call button on its side.

"Reading you five-by-five, Rogue leader," the voice crackled back. "What's your twenty?"

"Five-by-five" means the signal has excellent strength and perfect clarity. Firas loved radio jargon. He demanded that they all learn the codes that were standard for all ham radio users. The Go Squad were originally miffed they had homework but eventually appreciated how frickin' cool they felt when they expertly asked each other where or how they were using jargon instead of speaking as they would on a regular phone call.

“I’m on the rooftop on State and Telegraph. Any action on the waves tonight?”

“Affirmative,” the voice replied. “Radio band talk of an increase in burglary and muggings in the Little Poland neighborhood. Could be worth a patrol.”

Firas grinned, his pulse quickening with anticipation. “Loud copy,” he said, then secured the radio onto his belt.

Bolting in the direction leading to Little Poland, which was a good 30 blocks away from where he was, he knew there would be a few gaps between buildings that were tougher than others. He almost loved this part as much as taking on a mugger.

The Go Squad were hardly ever caught on camera, any phone footage usually being too dark or blurry to be definitively anything other than outlandish claims for viral attention... or conjecture of the viewer who wanted to believe in something more. The first such broadcast, an excited social media influencer called an encounter with them heroes but were gone without a trace before she could start recording. Anytime they saw themselves in any uploads or mentioned as part of the criminal element in the mainstream news, that’s what they were called.

The first such broadcast—an excited social media influencer posting shaky phone footage—called them heroes. Said they appeared from nowhere, stopped a mugging, vanished like ghosts. She’d coined a name for them: The Go Squad. “Because they GO when nobody else will,” she’d explained to her growing follower count, hashtagging every post. #GoSquad. #CaledoniaHeroes. #WhereIsGoSquad.

Firas hated defining what they did every night, giving it a name gave it a power he wasn’t willing to acknowledge. They were always meant to be shadows, rumors, figments of overactive imaginations. The rest of the team felt differently and loved the moniker and adopted it for their unofficial outfit.

He reached a door vestibule and performed a wall run on its side, going into a kong vault, safety rolling over the industrial air conditioner, then fell down half a story to the landing below. He strode onto the next building over an alley, executed a lache from a scaffolding, diveroll over a stack of lumber from the construction being done on the roof and full sprinted to the building's ledge before doing a safety landing onto the building across the alleyway that was a story lower.

He knew this terrain intimately, had come to familiarize himself for years during his freerunning training he began when he was a young boy. Doing this blindfolded would be something he knew he could do if he had to, knowing better of course than to actually try. That was strictly reserved for practicing with the others within the confines of the training facility, someone always watching unobstructed and spotting for safety.

His heart raced but he wasn't winded. The excitement to find some action coursed through his veins. Within seven minutes time, Firas had reached the center of Little Poland, a neighborhood with a four block radius, and as the name would suggest, a place where you can find the best pierogies in the city. During the day, Firas often came here for lunch while working at the Parkour Instructional School that he owned, where he started patrol this night. He would even take this route across the rooftops to get here, for practice and for fun.

Breathing heavily, he unclipped his radio and crackled it to life. "This is Rogue leader," he announced, "I'm in position."

"Record time, Rogue leader," the radio responded. "You in some kind of mood tonight?"

"Just feeling it tonight, I guess," he replied.

"Hang tight," the radio spoke. "Just throw a line in the pond and wait for the nibbles. I'm sure something will come along. A nearby benefit event is just ending."

"What's the event?" he asked.

“Some campaign stop for a politician. What do you care, Rogue leader?”

“Just wanted to know the type of crowd to expect.”

Firas slumped down on the edge of the building and peered out into the street. Just like Batman, he thought. Or Daredevil. Probably more Daredevil than Batman. No, he decided and thought, I’m my own identity. I have none. That’s what separates me from those comic book heroes. I’m real. I’m wearing nondescript tactical body armor, pants, utility belt, Lycra ski mask and gloves. All black. No cape. There’s no distinguishing marks on me. I’m a shadow. Hey, that could be a good superhero name. No, no name. I’m not ‘Shadow,’ that’s not my name either. I’m just me and nobody will know that. The people will either be saved by me or feel the pain of street justice, depending on which side of the line they are standing.

All the same, he liked to imagine this is what Batman or Daredevil experienced on patrol.

A woman screamed. He snapped to standing, listening for the direction.

"Leave me alone!" The cry came from the distance.

Hearing where it was generally coming from, Firas dove down below to the fire escape he was standing above and shimmied down the side of it as quickly as he could. When he landed on the street, he sprinted to where the crime was taking place. Running past an alleyway, he stopped and hid behind the corner of the building. Three men were surrounding a terrified woman.

Perfect, he thought. He unclipped his radio and reported, “This is Rogue leader, assault in progress. Alley of Renata’s Bakery on Grand. Engaging hostiles, over.”

“Copy. Be careful, leader,” the radio acknowledged.

Firas crouched and went around the corner to hide behind a dumpster. He could hear them taunting the woman.

"Come on," a devious voice urged. "We won't bite unless we have to. Just give us what you got."

In moments like this, and this was his 64th such engagement since he started doing patrols if his counting was right, he remembered how bad his legs shook the first time. He nearly vibrated on the floor like an electronic tabletop football piece as he yelled timidly at the baddies. This time, it was only a mild shake that he used as a reminder that it was time to get down to business.

The three men were cornering the woman and her face was awash with fear.

"Okay," the voice continued. "Have it your way."

The lead goon shrugged, smiled and stepped towards her to put his hand on her shoulder. The woman, terrified, screamed until Firas appeared behind him.

His nerves, knowing that he'd given up the element of surprise in that moment, always got in the way of him delivering an awesome one-liner. He had practiced saying some things in the mirror but felt silly every time. His team discussed this in their meetings, what they should say, if they should say anything at all. Some were much better at it than others.

"This ain't Burger King," he blurted.

The lead goon stopped in place like a record scratch and he and the other two turned to face Firas.

"What?" the goon asked.

Darn it, Firas thought. "You know. You said, 'Have it your way,'" he badly imitated. "So I said, Burger King because... nevermind," he entreated before following up with a devastating elbow shiver across his face that floored the goon standing in front of him. Left and right goon jumped back in surprise, left goon bailing and out of the alley, right goon swinging a hook that

Firas ducked under before rising up with an uppercut to his chin, knocking the goon off his feet half a foot into the air before crashing down to the pavement.

Standing with his two open hands ready in front of his face, ready to parry another attack, Firas checked to see if anyone was getting up to try again. They were scrambling away and were out of sight in seconds. The woman that was being accosted, stunned, slowly regained composure.

“Th... thank you,” she said, gratefully.

“Don’t thank me,” Firas responded with his back turned to her so she could not see his eyes. “Just... do me a favor and don’t tell anyone I said ‘This ain’t Burger King,’ and we’re even.”

“Uh... okay?” the woman uttered.

“What’s that?” Firas gestured behind her. She turned to face the direction, saw nothing and looked back, not seeing Firas anywhere.

She checked in with herself to make certain whether that bizarre encounter actually occurred or if she was dreaming. It was unfortunate enough to be mugged. To be saved by a masked vigilante was implausible. She wondered if that was actually a thing that happened in real life as she walked back to the sidewalk to reenter reality.

Once she was out of sight, Firas peeked his head from behind a nearby dumpster to make sure no one was around to see him reemerge from the shadows. Firas dashed down the alleyway into the darkness and dove behind the obscurity in her line of sight right before she turned back from his distraction. He dusted off his hands and nodded in self-approval for another job well done. Citizen saved, mystique aura preserved, no credit taken. He’d sleep well this night.

He always wondered how the ninjas and Batman did it in the movies, just disappear after the hero act was done. He considered magician smoke bombs but even then, where does one go? This part of the job was always pretty awkward, so he found it best to just avoid it whenever possible, perform an Irish exit with side of made-you-look.

“Come in, leader,” the radio crackled.

Firas popped the radio into his hand and brought it to his face. “Go for Rogue leader,” he chirped cheerfully.

“Status?” the radio requested.

“Justice has been meted,” he bragged.

“Say again?” the radio said. “Justice has been what, over?”

“Meted,” Firas repeated. “Justice’s been meted.”

“You mean ‘met?’”

“No, ‘meted.’ Look it up,” he flared, squeezing the radio in his hand.

The talking part of hero business was really the actual hard part.

“Okay, ‘meted,’ copy that, boss. I’ll just assume you mean you’re okay.”

“More than,” he assured.

“Great. Good job, leader. As for me, I just helped an old lady get her cat down from a really high telephone pole. I’m going to call it a night,” the radio informed.

“You’ve earned it, Nightingale,” Firas said.

“Nice work tonight, Firas,” the Nightingale said.

Firas rolled his eyes, saying, “No first names over comms.” So unprofessional.

“Don’t forget about our dinner plans tonight. No body armor,” she said.

“Alright, alright,” Firas said, getting embarrassed. “See you there.”

“Signing off,” the voice said. “No better place.”

"No better time," Firas responded, letting go of the call button. A moment later, he squeezed it and added, "Thanks, Ruth."

Chapter 2

They didn't often allow their children to accompany them on their excavations.

Normally, it would have been out of the question with the nature of their work. The various situations they would find themselves in, political sensitivities to maneuver, local customs that frowned upon the inclusion of children, and just school schedules and a sense of normalcy to uphold all precluded bringing the whole family on work trips. This one, though, was in the States and during the weekend.

Mr. Faraz Bacchus and Mrs. Naima Bacchus, ancient art and antique specialists and collectors, were more likely to be gone for days, sometimes weeks at a time, usually in remote corners of the Earth after receiving a tip from researchers or their connections in the military about possible locations of rare treasures, "treasures" at least among the niche demographic of those enamored with these trinkets and chairs no one could sit in anymore.

Ahdia and Firas were ecstatic to have the opportunity to tag along because for the first seven and five years of their lives, respectively, they were always left behind with a nanny or dropped off at a childcare in a military complex of which apparently their parents had connections to be able to do so. Neither had any personal military background to speak of so it was of mild curiosity to them how their parents were involved but, as with all things that were since birth, it was just the way things were. What was explained to them by their parents was that some of the travels they engaged in required more than the usual considerations of typical

globetrotters. Sometimes, to enter nations with frosty or hostile relations with the United States, it required a heavier authorization than simply receiving the necessary vaccinations or permissions from the embassy located stateside.

They were heading for Glacial National Park in Montana. First they flew from their home in the Caledonian suburbs and then drove a rather large truck that the U.S. Army conveniently provided, very much presented, as though the military personnel were nothing more than a valet, to Faraz at the airport.

The drive was long and this may have been tedious and cause for boredom and agitation for children their age but Firas and especially Ahdia were enthralled with the chance to talk to their mom and dad, who always had amazing and interesting things to tell them. Sometimes it was about the artifacts and antiques they found, where they came from and who was recorded to own them and other times, it was, oddly enough, about space.

“So, when your mother and I found the battle axe in Cambodia,” Faraz recounted to his children as he drove. They were seated between Naima and himself in the bench seating of the truck, “The constellations were aligned in exactly the same way that the King’s prophets recorded them when they hid away the supposed chosen one in the cave, along with the royal weapons...”

“... and tea sets!” Naima added.

“Yes, the royal weapons and the tea sets,” Faraz confirmed. “Well, a chosen one must have Maghrebi, too, right?”

“What’s a chosen one, papa?” Ahdia asked.

“Ah, a beautiful question, my queen,” he replied. “Every thousand years, or longer, when the stars revealed the time and space continuum was reverberating across the cosmos...”

“Dear...” Naima chided.

“Oh, they’re precocious!” he replied. “They know what I’m talking about, right my king and queen?”

“Even astrophysicists with advanced degrees wouldn’t know what you were talking about. Most of it are your father’s own interpretations, my darlings,” she said.

Firas and Ahdia smiled but did not betray any recognition of what was being said. They just loved listening to him, whether or not they fully understood what he was talking about. Naima chuckled and raised her eyebrows knowingly.

“Alright, alright,” Faraz relented. “Let me think on it.”

When they arrived at their destination, the sun had already set and so the only thing to do was to set up their tent, a campfire and prepare their dinner.

"Alright, my king and queen," Faraz announced, clapping his hands together as he surveyed the clearing. "Your mother and I have a proposition for you both."

Firas and Ahdia perked up, eyes bright with anticipation. It had been weeks since they'd spent real time with their parents.

"A challenge," Naima said, her eyes twinkling. "Whoever can set up their sleeping area in the tent first gets to choose tomorrow's breakfast. And you know what that means."

"Pancakes!" Firas shouted.

"With chocolate chips!" Ahdia added.

"But," Faraz held up a finger, "your mother and I will be timing you. And we're very discerning judges. Quality matters as much as speed."

The children nodded eagerly, already eyeing the equipment bags.

"On your marks," Naima said. "Get set... go!"

Firas and Ahdia scrambled to the truck bed, each grabbing armfuls of gear. Firas, always faster, sprinted back to the clearing first, his sleeping bag bouncing against his shoulder. Ahdia followed, more measured, carrying her load with both arms.

Faraz watched from the corner of his eyes as his children unpacked their things and set up their tent. Firas was struggling with the tent poles, his small hands fumbling with the elastic cords that connected them. His face scrunched in concentration, frustration building as one section kept popping apart.

Ahdia had already laid out her sleeping bag inside the half-erected tent. She glanced over at her brother, saw his difficulty, then quietly moved to the other side of the tent to "adjust" her own area. As she did, her hand drifted to the problematic pole section near Firas, steadying it just enough that when he tried again, the pieces clicked together smoothly.

"I got it!" Firas exclaimed, not noticing his sister's subtle assistance.

Naima caught Faraz's eye and nodded toward Ahdia, who had already retreated to fussing with her sleeping bag, face carefully neutral.

"Firas, my king," Naima called out. "Would you gather some kindling for the fire? Your father will help you find the right kind."

"Okay!" Firas bounded off into the darkening woods with Faraz.

Once they were out of earshot, Naima sat down beside Ahdia, who was meticulously arranging her belongings. "You helped him with the tent poles."

It wasn't a question. Ahdia froze for just a moment, then shrugged. "He was getting frustrated."

"That was kind of you," Naima said gently. She reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. "But my sweet, sometimes the kindest thing we can do for people we love is let them struggle a little."

Ahdia looked up, confused. "But I didn't want him to feel bad."

"I know, my queen. And your heart is so big, wanting to protect your brother." Naima pulled Ahdia close. "But Firas needs to learn to solve problems on his own. If you always smooth the way for him, he won't grow into the person he's meant to become. Do you understand?"

Ahdia was quiet for a long moment, processing. "But what if he can't do it?"

"Then he learns something from failing. And that's okay too." Naima kissed the top of her head. "You don't always have to fix things for other people, Ahdia. Sometimes the best thing you can do is just... be there. Let them know they're not alone, even when things are hard."

"Even if I could help?"

"Even then." Naima smiled. "The world needs your gifts, my darling. But it also needs you to trust others to find their own strength. Can you try to remember that?"

Ahdia nodded slowly, leaning into her mother's embrace.

By the time Faraz and Firas returned with armfuls of kindling, the fire pit was ready and Naima had started preparing their dinner. Firas proudly displayed his haul, and Faraz made a great show of examining each stick for quality.

"Excellent work, my king! You have a natural eye for combustible materials."

Firas beamed.

With their bellies full after their meals and the darkness of the wood around them embracing the light of their fire, Faraz continued.

“Every few millennia or so, and not every millennium, if you look into the night sky, and you know what it is that you should be looking for, it will reveal to you that something in the deep nothingness of the universe is at work. And for some unknown reason, that work directly affects our little world, the Earth. And particularly, one of its inhabitants. Using today’s modern sciences, it has been discovered nearly fifty years ago that it’s not just an alignment of the stars that pave the way for this mysterious effect, but the manner in which they too are affected. Deeper into the cosmos than we as mere mortals can fathom, farther away than even God can see, a giant phenomenon that is blacker than the darkest night and bigger than we can possibly dream... stirs.”

Ahdia and Firas were entranced at this. The vaguery of whatever their father was describing only allowed their own minds to fill in the gaps of their understanding with fantastic and wonderful, even frightening imaginings.

“What is it?” Ahdia asked in wonder.

“It’s called... a black hole,” Faraz revealed. He paused a moment to let that sink in with their thoughts.

“A hole?” Firas eventually blurted. “That’s it?”

“Not just any hole, my son,” Faraz said. “This is an astronomical mystery that could hold the answers to all the questions of the universe. But no one knows what’s inside because once anything gets caught within the massive vortex it creates, nothing escapes. Not the most powerful rockets, not even a ray of light.”

“Not even light?” Ahdia asked.

“That’s right, my queen,” Faraz replied. “It will bend a light that is shone too close to it into itself. That is how powerful it is. And for the most part, it just continues doing what a black

hole does; that is, it spins and devours anything that gets caught in its reach, called its ‘event horizon’. But, every few thousand years here on Earth, something... escapes!”

The children gasped at Faraz’ dramatics and Naima smiled at how adorable her babies were.

“How? And what is it?” Ahdia asked.

She never ceased to amaze and impress Faraz with her curiosity and drive for knowledge, even at such a young age. Just when he thought he couldn’t be more proud of her, just like that, he was.

“No one knows for sure,” Faraz said. “Scientists call it Hawking’s radiation but they’ve never actually seen it themselves. They merely suppose it based on what they know and feel sure of. They don’t know much about it other than that: plain theory.”

“So how do you know, papa?” Ahdia asked.

“Oh, didn’t you know, my sweet?” Naima chimed in. “Your father knows everything! Or so he says.”

The children giggled as Faraz smiled and said, “Right you are, mother, father knows it all. No, your father is no world-renowned scientist. I am a humble art and antiquities collector. But like astronomers, I study things that are exceedingly old and contain many stories of our world. And from the studies your mother and I have done in our careers, we’ve learned many things that those eggheads in lab coats at MIT would never come to know even if it flew out of a cave and bopped them on their eggheads. Like the legends of the chosen one, the one that was hidden with the royal guard and the royal tea sets. In fact, your mother and I have unearthed many treasures that all have a connection to this legend, to this idea of a chosen person who, by records in scrolls by prophets and scholars, and in the art of the tea sets, the linens and of course

paintings and sculptures and such, coincides with the stirrings of the night sky from a place beyond the stars. Some of the interpretations of these artifacts reveal that this chosen one is given immense powers, incomprehensible feats achieved like feeding entire nations who were facing famine or defeating entire armies in moments. One story your mother and I discovered in the art and scrolls was a victory by the chosen one for the king by making the enemy armies freeze in place, unable to move and then made them all disappear!”

“Where did they disappear to?” Ahdia asked.

“No one knows but some believe that they were not actually made to disappear but were made to never arrive at the battle field in the first place,” Faraz described. “The chosen one of that time was revealed to jealous and covetous nations who wished to possess the chosen one for their own nations. This caused armies to invade the location of the chosen one. Then, in a blink, all who knew of the chosen one suddenly did not have any recollection of where they were and were all no longer within the borders of the chosen one’s nation. What that means remains uncertain but the nearest that I can come to understanding in modern science is the theory of Schrödinger’s cat.”

“All possible things happening all at once,” Ahdia blurted out.

Faraz leaned back and focused his sight on his child. He darted his eyes to Naima who was equally stunned.

Noticing their dumbfound looks, Firas chimed in, “She heard you talking about it on the phone the other day to the person who sent us here. She thought we were getting a cat.”

Naima giggled, “Not in this timeline!” and Faraz continued, “Still very remarkable, my queen! Yes! That is precisely what Schrödinger’s cat theory means. These chosen ones, because of their powers, would burn out and die very quickly once they received these powers and so a

guard was always there to protect them, usually a group from the royalty that was in power at the time. But during their times imbued with the power from the cosmos, they would have such an impact on the world that they were revered as gods themselves.”

Firas yawned, his head nodding in sleep. It was evidently getting late. Naima gestured to Faraz their sleeping boy and Faraz nodded. "Time for bed, my king and queen."

“No, papa,” Ahdia protested, yawning herself. “I want to know more about the black hole.”

Naima picked up a sleeping Firas into her arms and carried him into the tent. Faraz did the same but Ahdia was fighting sleep. “How come we can’t see a black hole?”

“It’s too far away, it’s too powerful to get close without getting trapped in its pull,” Faraz said as he carried her into the tent.

“I want to see it one day,” Ahdia said. “I want to know what’s inside.”

“What if you get sucked in?” Faraz asked as he tucked her into her sleeping bag.

"I won't," she said as sleep won her over.

“Oh? Well, you are already trapped in one event horizon, my queen,” he said giving her a hug. Ahdia gently laughed before she closed her eyes and he watched her doze off.

The next day, while their parents were setting up their equipment on their campsite, Firas and Ahdia were playing their favorite games in the woods nearby. It felt good to Ahdia to breathe clean, clear, open air of the woods and exploring her surroundings.

“Red light, green light, one, two, three!” she said and turned from the tree trunk she was facing at Firas who was encroaching on her. He was standing still, suppressing a smile.

Earlier, they played hide-and-go-seek. Finding her brother was just a vehicle to checking under rock formations and giant exposed roots of trees, digging through shrubs and looking

around the canopy of trees, as though Firas was swinging through them on vines. She had to admit, though, he was very good at hiding well. And when she did find him, he would take off like a shot and leave her in his dust trail. After about fifteen minutes of exploring, she realized that when it would be her turn to hide, she wouldn't be doing herself any favors by comparing efforts.

Changing gears to playing stoplight, in which there was considerably less running involved, there he was, just standing there, and in fact, looking as though he were in mid-movement.

"Red light, green light, one, two, three!" she shouted again and quickly turned around to see how much closer Firas was to her.

His arms were bent at the crooks, legs in stride but unmoving. What was strange was that he was no closer to her than the previous round. Making note of it, she did another round and again, Firas was unmoved, exactly in the same position. After one more time and Firas again having been completely still, she left the tree she was positioned by and approached him. When she was near him, she saw that his face was equally without life. His eyes were open but he wasn't breathing, evident when she put her hand by his nose and mouth to feel for breath.

"Firas?" she called, growing fearful.

Firas did not respond.

A hand jabbed her side from nowhere. Ahdia screamed.

And, as was customary between the two of them, Firas howled with laughter. Before Ahdia realized Firas was playing to her paranoia when he quickly unfroze and poked her, he was off like a bolt.

“You thought you were the chosen one, didn’t you?” Firas teased. “You thought you could make me disappear?”

A flush of rage filled her and she took off running after him, even though she knew there was no way she would be catching him.

Firas was always doing that. Not just scaring the bejeezus out of her any chance he got but running, flat-out running at top speed whenever he could because he knew he was good at it. There were enough times that Firas escaped certain consequences, from school, around the neighborhood, on the army base, from their parents, by simply hitting the bricks faster than anyone he came across. Of course, parents would always be there when he eventually came home from any escapade he was on and consequences were as inescapable as the pull from a black hole, but anyone else who weren’t his legal guardians were lucky if they caught a glimpse of the hand in the cookie jar rather than the cloud impression of himself he left in his wake.

Still, he had scared her. In the woods, no less. To her, it was like a fear multiplier. He would pay because, she reasoned, these were the woods, not the vast and winding roads of the subdivision they lived in and it was nearly lunch time. Unless Firas had nature survival skills that she wasn’t aware of where he could catch his own food to clean and roast over a fire he makes himself, there was only one place he would eventually end up. So instead of chasing him, she ran straight back to where her parents were setting up camp. Revenge would soon be hers.

When she arrived, she saw Firas, once again frozen. Seizing the chance, she pounced on him and wrapped her arm around his neck and shoulders.

“Get off me!” Firas said, roughly shoving her off.

Startled, Ahdia searched her brother for what was going on. “You started it!”

"No, Ahdia, stop," Firas said. "Mom and dad. They aren't here."

Chapter 3

The alarm rang and she heaved her arm over her half asleep head to the nightstand to silence it. She purposefully picked the most annoying ringtone available on the phone because she admitted that waking up was one of the hardest things for her to accomplish throughout the course of a given day, most days. An annoying, obnoxious sound that was supposed to be the plan to anger her awake. In hindsight everyday, it was a terrible idea to wake up pissed off all the time but she was committed now, years deep in a sleep experiment that was yielding interesting findings: waking up was just as hard but now she was cantankerous about it, too.

She didn't have a job to go to but sleeping in past a certain time of the morning, usually the hours in the double digits or the ones with "PM" after them, felt more decadent and overindulgent than the actual penthouse she lived in, courtesy of an inheritance from her late parents, along with the massive insurance payout that came with their estate. Work was something she'd heard about people doing out there, in the world, a good long distance away from the ivory tower she resided in midtown Caledonia.

Rarely did she find herself actually out in that world, where people had schedules to keep, and lives they seemingly cared about doing stuff with. One of those occasions was later tonight, drawn out of her hermit hole, albeit an inordinately well provisioned, luxuriously furnished and nostalgically designed hermit hole, by her brother and his girlfriend Ruth. They - well, Ruth more accurately - got the two of them to finally agree to a night out together, one that

had been perpetually pushed back for ages, with flimsy excuses from Ahdia of having been too busy with non-existent events being the usual cause for rescheduling.

Of course, everyone knew, Ahdia's plans consisted of smoking, drinking, video games, endless hours of TV and ordering in. That was Ahdia's world ever since their parents disappeared after a trip they took to Montana, over ten years ago. If they were around, it was possible that Ahdia would have continued pursuing a career in engineering, following in her mother's footsteps. They would likely have pushed her and encouraged her the way they had her whole life before they were proclaimed dead by the insurance company, who dropped a fat check on her and her younger brother as some kind of balm for the searing pain their absence left with them. She couldn't speak for Firas but for her, it was an inadequate remedy.

It seemed to Ahdia that Firas, was much better at the whole "moving on" thing. Eventually, after a period of mourning and self-loathing not unlike her own time with the endeavor, he took his inheritance and did something with himself. He became a small business owner, operating a school that taught freerunning, or "parkour" as the kids like to call it. She didn't get it but it was great that he took his passion and ran with it, no pun intended. Even if what he loved seemed trivial to her, and it certainly did to her parents when they found out that Firas was running around rooftops with his spare time, at least he got off his butt and did something. Anything, unlike her.

When she arrived at the restaurant, Ruth was waiting but Firas was nowhere in sight. That was unexpected because in recent years, he had become this responsible, serious, disciplined dude that would have made their father proud.

"Hi, Ahdia!" Ruth greeted her warmly with a hug.

“Hi,” Ahdia said back, only meeting her energy by about half. Ahdia hated hugs but she was game to participate if people seemed like they were coming in hot with one. They were always so listless, wet noodle, floppy embraces, both parties always left feeling a little bit weird about it after. It was the customary thing to do between family and their partners so she played along.

Ahdia had known Ruth for years, the length of time she and Firas had been dating. Another accomplished go-getter, Ruth was an ER doctor, about as high-stakes and stressful as Ahdia could imagine. When she thought about it, it felt like being around a completely different species, different brains and observed behaviors. Their natural habitats were certainly on opposite sides of the world; Ruth of the brainy, persistent, stalwart side, Ahdia on the side where they hit the snooze button more times than they’d care to admit.

“Where’s Firas?” Ahdia asked.

“Running late,” Ruth answered.

“They won’t seat us until we’re all here,” Ahdia remarked.

Ruth shrugged. “Tried his cell. Went to voicemail. Must be tied up?”

“That’s really unlike him, no? He’s usually very punctual and considerate? Like, annoyingly so,” Ahdia reflected.

Ruth chuckled softly, widening her smile, saying, “I wouldn’t say ‘annoying,’ but definitely those other things. I don’t know. I’m sure he’ll be around or call any minute now.”

They sat in the bar and had a drink, closing the tab assuming Firas would be showing up, running as usual, sweating as it was habitual, apologizing with some totally plausible excuse. After an hour passed, Ruth’s smile disappeared along with her drink, which didn’t stop her from absentmindedly stirring the ice with vigor while staring at the front door.

“Maybe the subway shut down and he’s stuck underground,” Ahdia reassured even though she was nervous herself.

“Maybe,” Ruth agreed, unconvinced.

Eventually they parted company and Ruth said she would check his apartment and let her know if she finds him there or not. Ahdia thanked her and headed back to her luxury perch brought to her by dead parents while thinking about her now missing brother.

It truly was weird that Firas was a no call, no show. She didn’t want to worry about it because the last time she worried about missing family members, she was punished with unlimited funds and the lap of luxury. If I end up with a yacht, I swear to God... she thought as the elevator doors opened. She got in, swiped her keycard against the sensor and reached to push the button way up top above all those other lowly buttons.

There was blood on it.

Instinctively, she checked her own fingers, thinking she had cut herself unknowingly and left that mark but that made no sense when she gave it a second more of thought. She pushed the lobby button on her way out and she hadn’t been out of her apartment to necessitate pushing her own floor in days. She pushed it and anxiously awaited as the elevator began its ascent.

Only those with a keycard could effectively choose her floor and the only two people who had access were herself and... her brother. Firas. It had to be him. Halfway up and she realized that he must be in serious trouble, bleeding and if he came to her place, something he’d always been reluctant to do, it must have been for a good reason. Was he on the run? He’s definitely injured, that much was certain.

The door was slightly ajar and she pushed her way through.

"Firas?!" she yelled. "Firas? Are you here? Where are you?"

She frantically ran through her unnecessarily large abode—great time to appreciate the square footage, Ahdia—looking into every room she passed, calling Firas' name. When she found him on the bathroom floor, gripping his midsection like he was literally holding his guts in, her brain did that thing where it cycled through every movie death scene she'd ever watched. This is fine. Totally fine. Just like that Grey's Anatomy episode. Except real. And my brother.

“Hey, sis,” he weakly uttered. “Long time.”

“Firas?” she exclaimed as she rushed to him, kneeling in front of him. “What...”

Under any other circumstance where she would find a mortally wounded family member in her bathroom, she would have grabbed the towel to put pressure on the wound, called 911, maybe even recall a first aid course she had taken years ago to be a camp counselor as a teen. What froze her instincts was seeing that Firas was dressed in black tactical gear, a ski mask apparently tossed off by him strewn on the floor. There were questions that superseded any inner prompting to help her baby brother.

“What are you wearing?” she finally managed to ask.

“Can we...” Firas let out as he breathed heavily, wincing. “... talk about that later? Can you please get Ruth?”

“Ruth? No, baby bro, we need to get you to the hospital,” she protested.

“No!” he yelled, followed by a distressed groan. “No... Ruth. No hospital.”

“Why not? You’re seriously injured. What happened?” Ahdia cried, speaking hysterically.

“Ruth. Please... no hospital...” Firas expressed, faltering into unconsciousness.

His grip on his midsection loosened as he slumped in his already reclined position. That natural tendency towards an injured family member finally kicked in and Ahdia grabbed the

towel off the rack, pressed it against her brother's stomach with one hand and with the other, tried to wake him up.

"Firas? Firas! Firas, wake up!" she urged. He did not respond. "Oh god, oh god, oh god!"

She reached into her pocket to pull out her phone to dial for an ambulance but hesitated. Okay, dying brother says no hospital. In literally every crime show on USA Network at 2 AM, this is when you find out your family member is in witness protection or running a meth empire. Was Firas a criminal now? Did he owe money to someone? Was this some Breaking Bad situation where her engineer parents' legacy skipped her and went straight to pharmaceutical crime?

From what Ahdia knew of movies—and she knew a lot of movies—the only reason people who were injured and bleeding didn't want to go to the hospital was because they would have to report a gunshot wound and that would involve the authorities. But those characters were usually criminals and there was no way her little brother was that. He was a lot of things, a gym rat, a professional parkour athlete, a gentle soul, a strong-minded individual but definitely not a criminal.

It crossed her mind, though, that he was right about something. It had been a while since they last saw each other. She couldn't remember the last time. It would have been sooner if she hadn't dodged their invites on so many occasions. Months? Over a year? The days living with no responsibilities and scheduling concerns really blended the days into one another and she really couldn't be sure. In that case, she reasoned, it was possible that things have changed for Firas and he was dabbling in crime.

No, that makes no sense, she conceded again. If he needed money, that might be one thing but the amount they were endowed with was almost impossible to exhaust if they tried.

Was this a gunshot wound she was putting pressure on? She had no clue. Feeling that she was wasting valuable time, she pursed her lips and closed her eyes before dialing Ruth.

After a few rings, Ruth answered, "Hey, Ahdia, I just got to Firas' place and he's not here..."

"Firas is here, at my place and he's hurt! Badly!" Ahdia interrupted. "Please hurry here, he asked for you! He's bleeding really bad!"

#

Ruth arrived in fifteen minutes with a medical bag that looked like it cost more than Ahdia's couch. Probably did. Doctor money was real money.

She moved fast. Professional fast. The kind of fast you see in TV medical dramas where everyone knows exactly what they're doing and nobody hesitates. Ahdia tried to help by staying out of the way, which was harder than it sounded in her own apartment.

They'd moved Firas to the guest bedroom—less blood on expensive things, more space to work. Ruth had her gloves on, scissors cutting through his tactical gear like it was tissue paper, revealing the damage underneath.

Ahdia looked away. Tried to, anyway. Her eyes kept drifting back.

"Pressure here," Ruth instructed, guiding Ahdia's hands. "Don't let go."

Ahdia pressed. Felt warm blood seep between her fingers. This was nothing like Grey's Anatomy. Nobody was making quips or having relationship drama. It was just... quiet. Terrifying. Real.

Ruth worked methodically. Removing fragments—metal glinted in tweezers, tiny and mean-looking—dropping them into a bowl. Four pieces. Maybe five. Ahdia had lost count around the time she started feeling lightheaded.

"That's all of them," Ruth said, not looking up. "But the damage..."

She trailed off. Ahdia recognized that tone from TV medical dramas. That was the "this patient isn't going to make it" voice, usually followed by a dramatic pause and someone yelling "don't you die on me."

Ruth reached for her bag—not the fancy doctor bag, but a smaller case she'd brought separately. Metal, about the size of a jewelry box. Or a drug case. Ahdia's brain helpfully supplied: definitely drugs.

"What's that?"

"Something I've been working on." Ruth opened the case. Inside: vials of clear liquid, a syringe, some sort of small electronic thing that looked vaguely science-fictional. "Cellular regeneration therapy. CR-7."

Ahdia blinked. "You invented... what?"

"It accelerates cellular repair. For trauma patients." Ruth's hands moved fast, connecting the vial to the syringe, checking measurements. Very Breaking Bad, except less meth and more saving her brother's life. "Been developing it for three years. Published some early results, got laughed out of a conference. Dismissed as 'improvisation.'"

"Is it safe?"

Ruth's hands paused. Just for a second. "I've tested it on tissue cultures. Some animal models. Results were... promising."

"But not on people."

"Not on people."

They both looked at Firas. Pale. Barely breathing. Definitely dying if they didn't do something.

"He won't make it without this," Ruth said quietly. "Blood loss is too severe. Even with a transfusion, the damage is too extensive. His body's shutting down faster than it can repair."

Ahdia watched Ruth inject the clear liquid into Firas's IV line—when had she set up an IV line? Doctor things, apparently—and it looked like water. Probably wasn't water.

"What does it do? Like, actually?"

"If it works?" Ruth monitored the IV drip, adjusting the flow. "His cells repair faster than they break down. Tissue regeneration accelerated. Not by much—maybe double normal healing speed with what I have on hand. But double might be enough."

"And if it doesn't work?"

Ruth met her eyes. Professional mask cracking slightly. "Then I just experimented on my boyfriend without his consent and it didn't help."

They sat in silence. Firas's breathing stayed shallow but steady. The TV would have dramatic music here, Ahdia thought. Maybe that beeping sound that flatlines. But real life was just... quiet. Waiting.

"How long until we know?"

"Few hours. If his vitals stabilize by morning, it worked. If they don't..." Ruth didn't finish.

Ahdia nodded. Nothing to do but wait.

And try not to think about how her brother might die on her ridiculously expensive sheets while his girlfriend performed illegal medical experiments in her guest bedroom.

Thursday nights used to be so much simpler.

Somewhere around 4 AM, Ruth said Firas needed blood. His type. Which, conveniently, Ahdia shared. Perks of being siblings, she guessed.

Ruth set up the transfusion—more TV medical drama stuff, except Ahdia was actively involved this time, needle in her arm, watching her blood flow through a tube into her brother. Very weird. Zero out of ten, would not recommend as a bonding experience.

"How's he doing?" Ahdia asked after Ruth had taken what felt like all her blood but was probably just a pint. Maybe two. She wasn't great at estimating these things.

"Stable." Ruth checked his pulse again. She'd been checking it every twenty minutes for hours. "The treatment's working. Cellular repair is accelerated. Not as much as I'd hoped, but enough to keep him alive."

"That's good, right?"

"It's incredible." Ruth's voice had that weird mix of pride and terror. "It's also not nearly enough. At this rate, he'll be stable in a few days instead of dead in a few hours, but full recovery is going to take weeks. Maybe longer."

Chapter 4

Ahdia had been watching him breathe for three hours.

Not creepy at all, she told herself. Perfectly normal to stare at your brother to make sure his chest keeps moving. Very regular sibling behavior.

Ruth had been in and out all night, checking his vitals every twenty minutes with the focus of someone who was either saving a life or documenting a failure. Possibly both. She'd brought that tablet at some point, typing notes between pulse checks, occasionally muttering medical terms that sounded very impressive and meant absolutely nothing to Ahdia.

When Firas's eyes finally opened—blurry at first, slowly coming to focus, then sharply seen—Firas almost wished he had died instead of facing his older sister, who was staring at him crossly, probably for bleeding on her bedsheets.

"Hey, Ahdia," he groggily croaked. "Good... morning? What time is it?"

"Try afternoon," she corrected. "How you feeling, Firas?"

He swallowed while closing his eyes, assessing his current physical state. He was in a great deal of pain, as it turned out. "Not bad. Been better, I suppose."

Ahdia scoffed, unamused. "I'll bet."

Ruth, hearing the banter and the tenor in Ahdia's terse counters, flew in, stopping for a brief second to see that Firas was awake and then glided to his side, taking his hand. "Firas..." she said as tears gathered in her eyes.

"Hey, Nightingale," Firas smiled, mostly just with his eyes.

Ahdia was feeling touched at the display so she allowed the lovebirds to goo-goo eye each other for an additional few seconds before interjecting, "So, what's the prognosis, doc? Is he going to make it?"

Not breaking eye contact with Firas, Ruth replied, "It's a good sign he's awake. He lost a lot of blood but luckily, you were on hand to provide a transfusion."

Firas furrowed his eyebrows and squinted towards his sister, lifting his head to see she was sporting a bandage near the pit of her elbow. He couldn't tell if Ahdia looked uncomfortable or irritated. It was always hard to tell with her. He dropped his head on the pillow and said, "Thanks for the blood."

"I'd say, 'anytime,' although I don't want to suggest it's okay for this being some sort of regular occurrence. They have whole-ass buildings called hospitals where we don't have to jerry-rig a blood transfusion using what's on hand. Normal people go to them when they're bleeding like it's going out of style!" she yelled, realizing she had lost her temper.

"Yeah, well," he said after he was sure she had let it all out. "I knew I lost a lot of blood and you, sis, were always the emergency plan if I ever found myself in this situation."

Ruth checked his vitals again—pulse, temperature, that thing where she pressed two fingers to his wrist and stared at her watch. Very doctor-like.

"The treatment's working," she said, more to herself than them. "Cellular repair approximately 1.8 times normal rate. Tissue regeneration visible on basic scans."

"That's good, right?" Ahdia asked.

"It's incredible." Ruth's voice had that weird mix of pride and terror. "It's also not nearly enough. At this rate, he'll be stable in a few days instead of dead in a few hours, but full recovery is going to take weeks. Maybe longer."

Firas shifted, winced. "Weeks? I need to—"

"You need to stay in bed," Ruth cut him off. Professional voice back. "The treatment kept you alive. It's not a miracle cure. Your body's still healing from massive trauma. You try to go out on patrol before you're ready, you'll undo everything."

"But the team—"

"Will manage without you. Night Knight's been leading the tactical side for years anyway."

Firas's jaw tightened. Ahdia recognized that look. That was the look he got when someone told him he couldn't do something and he was absolutely going to prove them wrong or die trying.

Literally die, in this case.

"Firas," Ahdia said quietly. "She saved your life with science fiction medicine. Maybe listen to her?"

He sighed. Heavily. The kind of sigh that meant "fine, but I hate it."

Ruth's fingers were flying across her tablet again. Taking notes. Documenting. That's what researchers did, right? Document everything?

"What are you writing?" Ahdia asked.

Ruth looked up. "Proof of concept. If this works—if he recovers fully, even slowly—it changes everything I've been trying to prove for three years."

"And if he doesn't recover fully?"

“Then I just proved the treatment has limitations I can’t overcome with the equipment I have access to.”

Which, Ahdia thought, was a very science way of saying “I did my best with what I had and hoped it would be enough.”

Sounded familiar.

Ahdia lowered her brow and pressed her lips together firmly before slowly asking, "Why would you have to plan for this sort of thing?"

She saw Ruth open her eyes and mouth slightly wider before turning away. "Because..." Firas began. "... I do things sometimes that things like this might happen."

Ahdia scrunched her forehead and braced herself. "What things?" she asked.

"Ahdia, we should let him rest..." Ruth defended.

"No," Firas objected gently. "It's okay. She helped save my life, she deserves to know."

Ruth stood down as she slowly turned her gaze to Ahdia.

"What is going on?" Ahdia asked, suddenly worried.

Firas sighed heavily. "Ruth, can you please? I'm really exhausted."

"Sure, sweetheart," Ruth agreed and pondered where to start.

A few years ago, about a year and a half after your parents disappeared and after Firas opened his freerunning school, he was still feeling an emptiness in his life and no matter what he did, he couldn't fill that void he had inside him, a feeling that was consuming him slowly, more and more, until it got to a point where he felt like he would collapse into himself. Then, one night, he saw someone getting beat up in the park and he said he didn't know what possessed him to get involved, but he did and helped the person who was being attacked. Saved him. But in the

process, he hurt his hand because one of them broke a bottle over him, which he blocked. He ended up at the emergency room of the hospital I work in.

I patched him up, sent him on his way, and I didn't think twice about it. But about a week later, he was back, his head gashed open, saying he fell. Another few weeks go by and he's back, this time with cracked ribs.

I told him, "You must be the most accident prone man I've ever met."

He said, "Or I'm just getting into accidents so I can come back and see you."

So corny! But I like corny. And I liked him. I patched him again, sent him on his way and didn't connect with him until the next time he came back, but not because of an injury. He came to ask me out on a date. I said yes.

When we were out together, he took me to the Overlook, where we could see the whole city as the sun was setting. He made a picnic, Subway sandwiches and a bottle of wine, but I didn't hold it against him. It was really nice. It was like all of Caledonia was lighting up just for us.

But then, suddenly, we were surrounded by a group of men. They were part of the gang that'd been terrorizing Caledonia at the time and they were saying the park was theirs at night, that we had to pay a tax. I was really frightened because there were so many of them, honestly, like five or six guys and Firas stood up, went up to the leader of them, the one that was doing the talking and before I knew it, they were scrambling all around me, going after him.

I thought he was dead or at least badly injured for sure but what I saw was Firas moving much faster than any of them, using their weight against themselves and, I swear, it was like watching water move between rocks. I don't know how else to explain it. It was like a flow, like a

dance, and they were being made to look foolish by him for every attack they tried to land on him.

Eventually, I worked up the nerve to pick up the wine bottle and smash one of them on the head, so I helped! Firas says that was the moment he fell in love with me. I didn't know it at the moment, but I was falling in love with him watching him take on a whole gang by himself and coming out on top in a matter of seconds.

We've been inseparable since. I've even made what I think were helpful suggestions by having him wear body armor when he went out on patrols. After a while, I took lessons at the Parkour Academy, but not just for freerunning, but also Krav Maga and jiu-jitsu that he taught after hours to the recruits, others he trained individually; only a handful of students who stood out to him during freerunning classes.

Eventually, I joined him on some night patrols. And I wasn't the only one. Apparently, the Academy was a great recruiting station and there were plenty of people who felt the same way we did about taking back the city from the criminal element that had been victimizing Caledonia for years.

When we had a small group of reliable traceurs, we organized and called ourselves the Go Squad. There are enough of us to take shifts so none of us have to go every night. And, as you can guess, some personalities are more colorful than others.

We all took codenames because we only met when Firas introduced us and maintaining our real identities was our best way to protect that life. He said it was the best way to protect ourselves and those we love so they don't get dragged into our messes. And for four years, we've done just that. Kept this secret life to ourselves, stayed in the shadows, watched each other's backs.

There's Night Knight, Gloom Girl, Crimson Sable and Battlea. My codename is Nightingale. We don't reveal anything about our real lives. We don't know each other's real names. In fact, we only recently started showing each other our faces.

Firas never took a codename. He thought the whole thing was making a joke of what he started but he didn't stop others as long as we only used it among ourselves and never made the news. That was our first and most important rule: stay secret, stay hidden, never take credit.

We, the Go Squad, have talked about why we do this and we all seem to have our different reasons. Night Knight is ex-military, he's revealed that much to us but it's obvious in the way he talks and acts. He says this has been a great outlet for him to put his marine skills to use. He probably suffers from PTSD but he's a great teammate, especially when it comes down to a tussle. Gloom Girl says it helps her depression, Sable had a wife murdered by the gang and that's all we know about him. And Battlea says doing patrols helps her with her anger issues.

I do it for all the times gunshot victims hobble their way into the ER or get dropped in our drive and for all the ones we can't save because... well, they never should have been shot to begin with. Oh, that's another rule. No guns. Night Knight still argues for it but he never crosses the line. But really, I do it for him, for Firas. I fell in love with him but I also fell in love with what he does and I fell in love with what I now do.

We all have our roles. Obviously, as the trained medic, that's my duty. We have mechanics and engineers... I'm pretty sure Gloom Girl is an exotic dancer because of her footwear and also all the singles she pays with but I can't be sure. And I don't judge her if she is! Aside from Firas, she bankrolls us hardest for gear and supplies. But we all contribute in the ways we can to support each other. And we all throw down with the best of 'em, if need be.

Mostly, we're just helping people, though. We stay on rooftops and fire escapes and keep our eyes and ears open for anyone in trouble. Just last night, I helped an old lady find her cat, but before I did, I stashed my body armor, belt and mask, just looking like a regular citizen dressed in all black at that point, and got her cat down from a telephone pole. It's usually like that for the most part and, honestly, I am grateful for those nights we don't run into the gangs.

Because when we do... I feel really bad for them.

Chapter 5

"Okay, so now tell me what happened tonight," Ahdia insisted after processing everything Ruth shared. "Is this normal? Is this why you wear Kevlar? Because you get shot at regularly?"

"No," Ruth said. "Tactical body armor was my idea because broken ribs aren't very treatable, so avoiding that is huge but in general, we don't engage against armed enemy combatants."

"Explain that," Ahdia urged, pointing at Firas' stomach. "That is engaging armed enemies. A gunshot."

"Shotgun, actually," Firas corrected, immediately regretting it, then sheepishly explained, "Close range... that's why... it went through."

"Oh, that's much better," Ahdia said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Look, Ahdia," Firas spoke gingerly. "After mama and papa..." Firas exhaled, unable to speak the words. "... I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I thought starting a business would give me something to do but that didn't work and I don't know what else I could have done to avoid eventually putting a bullet in my brain or hanging in the closet."

Ahdia pursed her lips and turned away from looking at her brother before she couldn't contain her emotions any longer.

Firas continued. "I wasn't planning on going out on patrol last night. I had the night before and I had plans with the two of you for dinner. I was looking forward to seeing you again, Ahdia. Sorry it was like this."

Ahdia sniffled. "Yeah, dramatic much?"

Firas chuckled and groaned. "Don't make me laugh. Anyway, I was on my way when I was passing the Natural History Museum on Grand Ave. It was past closing so the truck that was parked out front with hard looking men surrounding it caught my attention. I ducked into a cafe across the street to just watch. I'm sure they were just movers, right? But the next thing I see, the front door busts open and more guys are shoving a man out, like, definitely with force against his will. They threw him into the truck and drove off."

Ruth's eyebrows raised. She was just as curious as Ahdia was to hear what happened.

"You followed them?" Ruth cried, a swell of disappointment and shock flooding her.

"Yeah..." Firas admitted, resigned in shame. "Sorry."

"They had guns, didn't they," Ruth admonished.

"Of course they did!" Ahdia shouted. "Look at him!"

Firas knew he was in the wrong and outgunned in the room. "Yes, I know. I should have done a lot of things differently."

"You should have called!" Ruth lambasted.

"I know," he agreed. "I didn't want to worry you and I thought this would only be recon. In, out, scout and mark for a return."

Ruth almost didn't want to hear more. "So?"

"As the truck was pulling away, I hopped on the back and rode it all the way to the docks. I peeled off unnoticed and changed into the suit," he continued.

"I said no body armor," Ruth said through gritted teeth.

He shrugged. Ruth knew he could never help himself, ever. She rolled her eyes, indicating him to continue.

"I made it to the roof of the warehouse they pulled him into and peeked in from above. The guy they shanghai'd was being grilled by a suit with a haircut. From where I was, using my binocs, I could tell it was none other... than Harding Kain."

"Harding Kain?" Ahdia chimed. "The Presidential candidate?"

"The one and only," he confirmed.

Ahdia almost laughed at the absurdity. She had seen countless Harding Kain ad spots on all the channels she surfed to pass the days while sipping Big Gulps. The guy was as polished as a turd could shine, with his fake hair, fake tan and obviously tailored suit to hide his gut. She wasn't planning on voting but if she did, it was definitely not going to be for this guy.

"What's Harding Kain doing in the docks of Caledonia Harbor?" Ruth wondered.

"Exactly. When I saw it was him staring down a trembling... I don't know? Anthropologist? Museum docent? Either way, what's he pulling this Godfather, Goodfellas nonsense for when he's got a campaign to win? Must have been really important. Anyway, before I know it, Kain is snapping his fingers and some muscle heads wheel in a box and place it right in front of the museum guy. They open it and... I can't describe what I saw. I don't think anyone can. It's... Ruth, I haven't seen anything like this in my wildest dreams."

"Try," Ruth encouraged.

Firas stared blankly to search his memory and narrowed his eyebrows. "It was like... like I could see all sides of it, even though I was obviously only on one side of it."

"It was a mirrored box?" Ahdia guessed.

"No," he dismissed. "Like I said, it wasn't anything that I can really explain. It... was like it wasn't really there... like it was a projection or something but that wouldn't make sense because how could a projection show me all sides of a solid object? Do you see how crazy that sounds? But I swear I did! It looked like a... a ball? No... egg, maybe? A lemon? Or a football? But it was going in and out of itself, constantly changing shape but at the same time remaining the same. That's still not a good description. I was dumbfounded and completely outside my head that I wasn't careful about leaning on the glass and broke through. Luckily, I landed on a scaffolding only a few feet below but obviously I was blown and I ran like hell before they started opening fire on me! Blam! Blam! Blam! I was booking it across this narrow catwalk as bullets were ricocheting right under my feet! I kash vaulted over some crates when I reached the end of the catwalk, rolled into a room and shut the door behind me. There was only one way out through the window so I did a wall run and climbed out and found myself back on the roof. By then, the muscle heads with the guns were also on the roof so I had to make it to the water. It was my only chance. I ran as fast as I could and I thought I was clear to make a dive when a dude out of nowhere appeared out of a trapdoor right in front of me. Before I even could think, I pop vaulted over him and I was falling to the water. But when I was falling, he fired his shotgun and it hit me square in the armor."

"Most of it didn't make it through but enough did to cause internal damage," Ruth let him know. "I can't be sure your organs are intact... I got out all the bullet fragments but I do need to get you properly examined. I'll get what I need in the morning and bring it here. You can't move. You have to stay in bed."

Ruth was checking Firas again. He'd been talking for maybe ten minutes and she'd checked his pulse three times, adjusted his pillows twice, and kept glancing at her tablet like it might spontaneously reveal better news.

"What?" Firas asked, noticing.

"Your recovery rate is slowing," Ruth said. "It was accelerated for the first twelve hours, but now it's plateauing. Back to maybe 1.5 times normal healing, dropping toward baseline."

"That's... bad?"

"It's not good. The therapy needs consistent cellular support—specialized isotopes, synthesis equipment I don't have. What I gave you was field medicine. Improvisation." She set the tablet down, frustrated. "I kept you alive. But I can't get you back to fighting shape. Not with what I have access to."

"How long?" Firas asked.

"For full recovery? Weeks minimum. You won't be cleared for patrol for at least a month. Maybe longer."

Firas closed his eyes. "The team—"

"Will be fine. Night Knight can handle tactical. I'll coordinate medical. Gloom Girl's been itching to take point anyway." Ruth's voice softened. "You built a good team, Firas. Good enough to run without you while you heal."

Ahdia watched her brother struggle with that. The guy who couldn't sit still, forced to stay in bed for weeks. The leader who had to watch his team operate without him.

"There's nothing you can do?" he asked Ruth.

"Not without proper lab resources. Synthesis equipment, medical-grade materials, regulatory clearance I definitely don't have." Ruth shook her head. "What I gave you was

prototype-level at best. To take it further, I'd need access to a research facility that wouldn't laugh me out the door. Or arrest me for unauthorized human trials."

She said it like a joke. Ahdia didn't think it was funny.

Ruth looked at her tablet again. At the data proving her research worked, just not well enough. "I saved your life," she said quietly. "But I can't give you back what you had."

Firas squeezed her hand. "You saved my life. That's enough."

Ruth nodded. Didn't look convinced.

Ahdia understood that feeling too.

He squeezed her hand. "I'm fine. I'm going to be okay."

Ruth felt reassured, seeing color in his face and speaking to him. They sat in silence, appreciating life and having it when it could easily have been taken if not for the armor.

"You stupid idiots," Ahdia seethed.

Firas and Ruth turned their heads to Ahdia, standing by the window with the city at her back. "You're out there playing cops and robbers and think this is a game?"

"Sis..." Firas started.

"Don't 'sis' me!" Ahdia cut off. "What in the world is wrong with you two? You!" she yelled, pointing at Ruth. "You're a doctor! You of all people should know better!"

Ruth turned to look at her, indignant. "Excuse me?"

"Allowing my brother, the man you claim to love and care for, to go out playing Batman and you go with him like you're Batgirl or something! It's a joke! It's a sick joke that you guys either aren't seeing or are deluded into thinking what you're doing makes any kind of sense or making any kind of difference!" Ahdia rebuked combatively.

"And sitting in your penthouse all day everyday is doing anybody any good?!" Firas volleyed in defense. "When was the last time before tonight that you saw the sidewalk except to hit up 7Eleven for more Slurpees and Parliaments?"

"Nice," Ahdia dismissed, turning away in anger.

"At least we're out there doing something with our lives instead of counting down the days feeling bad for ourselves until we die. At least if we die, it'll be fighting, not cowering in the safety of our tower."

"You know what...!" Ahdia violently started.

"All you do is waste time feeling bad for yourself that our parents are gone," he growled through the agony of his injury. "When are you going to let go and live your life?"

"And when are you going to grow up and see that running around doing karate against the putty patrol should have stopped in third grade?! Or is taking artillery to the sternum not a clear indication of that?" she said.

"Stop it! Both of you!" Ruth interrupted before Firas responded. "Just... ugh... stop. Please."

Ahdia looked at Firas, struggling in pain and Ruth checking to make sure he didn't bust his stitches.

"Forget this," Ahdia muttered as she stormed out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Firas yelled.

"Out!" Ahdia replied.

This is insane, she thought when she reached the streets. She pounded the sidewalk with every step and lit a cigarette as she did. Her mind raced in a feverish velocity as she tried to recall everything she just learned in the past few hours.

Her brother and his girlfriend started a wannabe-superhero team with other wannabe-superheroes. This would never have happened if their parents were still with them. Life would have made sense. She would have been an engineer and her brother would have been competing in parkour tournaments or something like that. Surfing in Bali, maybe or... really anything he wanted. This? It didn't compute. One didn't add up to the other.

Crimson Sable? What a joke. Gloom Girl? What the actual? This felt like a bad dream, like a nightmare that she couldn't slap herself hard enough to wake from. She kept waiting for that annoying ringtone she set to wake herself up whenever she felt this messed up while dreaming. It just wouldn't come no matter how long she waited.

And before long, before she realized where she was walking, she found herself at the edge of the city, by the water. By the docks.

She scoffed. There's no way her brother was describing what she thought he was describing... an object in four dimensions. That was only theoretical from what she knew of all the YouTube videos she watched while eating her cereal. When he was describing his nightly escapades punching out evildoers, she was more likely to believe him. If he was describing seeing a spherical object from all sides at once, this was clearly an elaborate prank he was pulling to get back at her for bailing on all their plans; dye pack of blood and his doctor girlfriend Ruth in on it, Firas had the time and money to pull something like this off.

Ahdia wanted to see for herself and defiantly marched towards the warehouse.

"We'll see," she muttered.

Chapter 6

When Ahdia arrived at the warehouse, she approached the door to get in. Trying the handle, she found it was locked. She went to the bay doors to try it even though, if they were even open, she didn't have the muscles to hoist up the door on her own.

It started raining. She felt vindicated, not seeing any criminal activity and definitely not four-dimensional objects. Still, she needed to be certain.

Remembering what Firas supposedly recounted, she decided that she needed to get on the roof. If she couldn't get in the building, she would at least call it a night and be able to legitimately call shenanigans on Firas and Ruth if she at least got to peek in through the windows. The only windows on the building were lining the walls under the top tiered roof. She went to the left side of the warehouse, keeping her eyes open for any entrance or landing she could climb on to reach the top.

If her weird brother could do it, she figured how hard could it be? Not seeing anything on the right, she circled around to the back and then to the left side. It was sheer wall on both sides and she was miffed that she was starting to get impressed that Firas was actually able to somehow get on the roof with nothing apparent to climb on. She knew he thought he was a superhero but as far as she knew, his power was only that he jumped around on buildings. Since when could he fly to the tops of them in single bounds?

Maybe climbing to the top wasn't her best option. She looked around for something to bash in the front door with. Searching the premises, she found an old broken piece of wood, part of a shipping crate most likely, and struggled to carry it to the front door. When she got there, she placed one end of it on the ground, leaning the other against her body as she took a moment to catch her breath, move the wet strands of hair out of her face and then hoisted it using both hands over her shoulder.

"Careful," a voice from behind her startled. Ahdia's heart jumped into her throat before she turned to see Ruth standing there, wearing a North Face windbreaker with her hood up. "You might get a splinter. You should really wear gloves when you're out on patrol."

Ahdia, realizing it was just Ruth, turned her attention back to the the door, saying, "I'm not on patrol. Don't be dumb. What are you doing here?"

"Really? Besides the dinner wear you're sporting, out on a closed dock in the middle of the night, breaking and entering into a suspicious warehouse really gives off the wrong impression," Ruth said glibly.

Trying to ignore her, Ahdia raised the plank in her hands a bit higher, getting ready to strike the door handle. "There it is. People making assumptions just because of the way I'm dressed," Ahdia sneered. "Typical."

"Before you do that..." Ruth quickly cut in before she struck the door. "You do that and the night's over before it begins. That loud noise is going to draw all the wrong kinds of attention and if we're lucky, we'll be behind bars."

Ahdia hesitated. "And if we're not lucky?" she asked.

Ruth raised her eyebrows, pouted her lips and tilted her head down, her eyes looking to her right before she began walking away. Ahdia blinked the rain pouring down her head out of

her eyes as she watched Ruth walk away. Shaking her head, she redetermined that breaking the door down really was the only way. She took a deep breath, gripped the plank and stretched her arms above her head as high as she could.

From somewhere above her, she heard a light banging against metal. She drew her attention to the direction and a moment later, saw Ruth leaping from the top of a stack of shipping containers onto the roof. Ahdia's jaw dropped watching the majestic arc Ruth created, a stride that reminded her of a gazelle hopping along the African plains she saw once on Animal Planet. She dropped the plank next to her and ran to where she could get a better angle of the roof to spot Ruth.

She cupped the tops of her eyes to shield from the rain to see Ruth, standing with her hands in the pockets of her windbreaker and, if she knew any better, smugly smiling at her.

"How'd you do that?" Ahdia called to her.

"Easy when you know how," Ruth called back.

Ahdia was pissed. She could plainly see how Ruth got to the top of the stack of shipping containers. Knowing how didn't make it easier for her to climb on top of the first landing, a single unstacked shipping container next to a stack of two, next to a stack of three, next to a stack of four from where Ruth made her leap. Being fair, struggling onto the crate was made more difficult by the rain, and she used an improvisation of a garbage bin she tipped upside down to stand on to climb up.

Ruth knelt down, keeping an eye on Ahdia, amused at her fumbling attempts at each level. The stack of two, without the help of her garbage bin, was uncomfortable to witness as Ahdia came close to losing her grip once she jumped high enough to just grip the edge. At eight and a half feet, that was no easy feat and Ruth admitted to herself that she was impressed, even

though it took multiple attempts and Ahdia's above average height and reach played to her advantage.

When Ahdia made it to the top, as Ruth suspected would happen, Ahdia hesitated after looking at how high up she was. The top of the roof she needed to land onto was a few feet below the plane Ahdia was on but the gap felt inordinately long, too long for human traversal.

"That's impossible!" Ahdia protested.

"Clearly not!" Ruth said, standing, presenting herself where Ahdia proclaimed impossibility.

Ahdia swore under her breath. There was no way she was going to climb back down, something that she realized was probably almost as dangerous as falling from this height once she got onto the stack of three containers. She was pot-committed, just like the time Phil Hellmuth was in the World Series of Poker she saw on ESPN. The commentator said that it was a fallacy, she remembered, that you can always back out no matter how much you commit and often, that's the best play, but in that moment, that felt like nonsense.

She moved as far back as she could on the ledge, about eight feet wide. Psyching herself by taking quick breaths, she darted forward before her nerves stopped her. Ruth's eyes widened on Ahdia's approach, taking her hands out of her pockets and bending her knees to prepare for however Ahdia was going to land; short or long. Ruth honestly didn't think Ahdia had the courage to go through with it.

After four momentum building strides, she timed her leap when she got to the very edge as though she were bowling, thinking about the Professional Bowlers Association broadcasts she watched on ESPN2 while drinking Pabst Blue Ribbons. To the surprise of all parties present and

witnessing, Ahdia cleared the gap by a good foot and landed safely... before tumbling forward to the ground anyway because her legs gave way to the anxiety of the event.

Ruth rushed to her to help her onto her feet, excited and happy for Ahdia's success in not dying. "Nicely done!" she congratulated. "I'm really impressed! I didn't think you had it in you!"

Ahdia barely registered any of what Ruth was saying, swallowing the urge to vomit. When she had a moment to adequately gather herself, she peered over the edge to see how high up she was. The darkness and rain made it look like an endless abyss, even though it was actually about 35 feet high. She was glad she hadn't done this surveying of the gap beforehand because she also learned just then that she experienced slight vertigo from such height, even though she lived on the highest rise in Caledonia.

While Ahdia was marveling her own accomplishments, Ruth scouted the rooftop and saw the indication she was looking for. "Over here," she said.

Ahdia broke away from her self-admiration and joined Ruth, who was pointing at a window frame with a clearly broken pane of glass.

"This must be where Firas broke through," Ruth commented.

The windows were on an incline so it was reasoned that he was leaning too much of his body weight against it when it broke. They cautiously climbed in, another not-so-safe activity that Ruth made look easy, jumping gracefully feet first through and landing on the catwalk below. Remaining crouched, she inspected the chipped paint from the ricocheted bullets.

Ahdia kicked off the remaining glass shards along the bottom of the frame and found a safe enough surface to grip her hands on as she slowly, clumsily lowered herself down and let go to drop a few feet above the catwalk. Luckily, no mobsters or gang bangers were in sight but Ahdia had to admit, so far, everything corroborated Firas's story. This was either something he

really actually experienced or the elaboration of the prank was deeper than she could imagine. Until she saw the four-dimensional object for her own, she reminded herself to stay skeptical.

"That's the room he went into," Ruth deduced. "Let's go the other way, down the stairs, to see what we see," she said and headed in that direction.

Ahdia tried to ratchet up her awareness and wished she had spidey-senses, like Spider-Man does on Disney+, to detect danger before it occurred so she could avoid it. The only tingle she felt were the goosebumps on the back of her neck and on her arms.

They quietly made their way down the grated stairs, a slight "ting" with every step, and hid behind a set of crates near the stairwell.

"Let's stay quiet and search the area," Ruth suggested. "Stick together."

They were half-crouched, stepping lightly and moving around towards the center, where they could see a box, possibly the one Firas described. It had an insignia ink-stamped on the wooden panels, a logo in the shape of a diamond and the word "TRIOMF" emblazoned below it. Ahdia's anticipation was getting the better of her as she felt her heart beating in her ears more and more with every step they took. When they reached the crate, Ruth looked nervously at Ahdia before she put her hands on the lid.

"Hold it!" they heard from the dark corner of the warehouse. They weren't alone.

A man emerged, holding a handgun, trained on them, switching between the two of them repeatedly and closing in to where they were.

"Put your hands up!" he barked.

Chapter 7

They slowly raised their hands. Ahdia started having the feeling that her brother wasn't making things up after all but for some reason, she kept it in the back of her mind that this man could be one of their buddies, Ruth was leading her into the warehouse as part of the ploy and they weren't in any danger at all. Until she saw a mystical object in which she could see all the sides of from one perspective, all of this was subject to disbelief. The thought at least helped assuage the panic-scream her brain was doing internally.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the man demanded.

He was built stockily, had a black blazer over a gray turtleneck, sporting a crewcut barely hiding his scalp. Ahdia wondered if guys like these came out of some evil henchman catalog that villains subscribed to.

"Evening, sir," Ruth responded. "We were just out for a stroll and needed to get out of the rain, you know how it is."

"Yeah, right," he said, close enough to be able to smell his cologne, distinctively Fahrenheit by Christian Dior, definitely way too much.

He took out a hand radio from inside his coat and squawked, "I got two intruders here, in the warehouse."

Wiseguy & Sonoma.

Ruth subtly looked at Ahdia who could only calm herself to notice that Ruth was trying to get her attention by coming up with dumb names of fake stores.

Amazon Prime Suspect.

When Ruth saw that Ahdia was paying attention, she motioned with her eyes to the box.

Not knowing what exactly she meant, Ahdia's panic intensified.

Suddenly, while the man with the gun was slightly distracted by talking on his radio, Ruth moved quickly, slightly ducking out of the way of the line of fire the man was drawing, stepped in closer, turning her back against him with his arm above her right shoulder.

Ahdia, hoping Ruth meant to duck and hide behind the crate, did so. She squeezed her knees against her chest and tightly shut her eyes.

Target.

In the very next moment, the man with the gun squeezed the trigger. Ruth immediately grabbed his arm and yanked it down over her right shoulder. A sickening crunch could be heard as the man's elbow bent in an unnatural manner. He roared in pain before Ruth climbed up the man's slightly bent knee by stepping on his thigh and wrapping her legs around his neck. She then landed two successive elbows down onto the top of his head, dazing him, followed by dropping her entire body weight back and down as hard as she could. Still gripping his neck with her thighs, she used the momentum to flip her quarry forward, headfirst onto the ground. He was unconscious on his back while Ruth laid on top of him with her knees by his ears.

Ruth knew since he radioed for backup, they had precious few seconds remaining before they were outnumbered. She called out for Ahdia as she got up and did a catpass over the crate and over Ahdia, where she ducked behind.

"Ahdia..." Ruth said weakly, seeing the bullet the thug fired went through the crate and hit Ahdia's chest.

Already in shock, Ahdia looked up from staring at the blood on her hands to Ruth, whose concerned and defeated eyes met her own. "I'm... shot," she said.

Then, footsteps could be heard stampeding into the warehouse. Ruth peeked over the crate to see a group of men, dressed similarly filing in through the open door front door.

"We gotta get out of here," Ruth said hurriedly before looking at Ahdia, who was fading fast.

Ahdia looked up at the light that was shining on them, like a spotlight. It was somehow getting brighter as the edges of her vision were closing in darkness.

"Ahdia?!" Ruth echoed in Ahdia's ears as she slumped over.

The last thing Ahdia saw before she passed out was Ruth being hit in the back of the head with the butt of a pistol.

"Ahdi," her mother called.

"Mom?" Ahdia said, unsure where her mother's voice was coming from.

They were back in their house in the suburbs of Caledonia, the one she was raised in from birth to when they disappeared. She was in the hallway from her bedroom to the kitchen.

"Ahdi, come wash up for dinner," her mother's voice said again.

She could smell the couscous dish, her mother's own recipe with dried fruit, ready to be dipped into by the bagita that she baked earlier in the day. It had been so long since those aromas filled her nostrils.

Ahdia approached the kitchen to see her mother, as alive as she had remained in her memory, removing her apron as she saw Ahdia, giving her a warm smile.

Suddenly, Ahdia's ears started ringing, louder and louder.

Her eyes fluttered open.

She heard footsteps and saw she was laying on a dusty floor in a vast and dimly lit room. Ruth was kneeling down, her arms tied behind her back. She was surrounded by men with guns, too many to count, some shrouded in the darkness where the light didn't illuminate.

They had apparently left her on the ground, laying on her side, assuming she was dead.

"First we had a boy wonder bust through the roof and now we have two little birdies stuck in the rafters," a man spoke.

He was pacing back and forth, unarmed and dressed differently than the others. He was not in shape like the men around them, evident by his rotund figure, with thickset rings adorning his stubby fists, a three-piece gray suit with a black dress shirt and the least convincing hair-hat she'd ever seen.

Harding Kain, in the flesh.

"Heard this was where the party was," Ruth replied, unwavering in her snark.

"From who?" he demanded as he stepped to her, grabbing her face by the chin.

Ruth remained quiet.

Kain released and took one step away, suddenly turning and slapping Ruth with the back of his hand, embellished with heavy rings. Ruth yelped and spit blood but returned to give Kain a teasing smirk.

"The voters are going to want to know your stance on women's issues, Harding," she taunted. "My face is going to be hard to explain away to that particular demographic."

"Oh, little bird," Kain mused, walking to the edge of the ring of light. "What makes you think you'll get the chance to show your face anywhere to anyone again?"

With his back turned to her, he walked up to one of his men who handed him a lead pipe about a yard long. He gently tested the weight against his hand and smirked, handing it back to the hired bruiser to take his blazer off. Handing the blazer to his human coat rack, he unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves.

Ruth didn't betray any emotions on her face but her eyes were windows into her fright and terror. Whatever this man said, he had the clout and influence to do it and more, get away with it. Turning around with the pipe in his hand, he was walking jauntily, twirling the pipe like an unskilled drum major towards Ruth who squirmed and struggled against her constraints.

Watching her writhe drew out a guttural laugh from his belly. "What's the matter?" he chaffed. "Don't worry, little bird, I'll get you to sing." With that, as if he were winding up a golf swing, he measured his stroke to her face and slowly raised the pipe above his head. Ruth saw fire in his eyes, blinded by a lust for violence. She closed her eyes, not wanting that to be the last thing she saw.

"What the...!" she heard and opened her eyes. The whole room was suddenly pitch black.

"No better time than here!" a voice, one she recognized, cried from the shadows.

She jumped to her feet and silent-ran in a direction she remembered there was a gap between men.

"No better time than now!" a chorus of shouting voices responded.

Slowly, flashlights blasted on from the men, one by one. Apparently, smoke grenades had detonated and the flashlight beams cut through like light sabers. Ruth, running blind, ran into what felt like a fleshy brick wall.

"Nightingale!" the wall greeted, holding her by both shoulders.

"Night Knight!" Ruth realized, nearly crying in relief. "Thank God you all made it in time. I was about to get brained!"

Night Knight turned her around and used a combat knife to cut her bindings. Gloom Girl was standing by him, obscured by smoke and shade. She handed a set of infrared vision goggles to Ruth. Ruth put them on and activated them.

It made everything she saw coated in blue but she was able to see heat signatures of all the warm bodies who were stumbling blind in the smoke. She could see heat signatures moving faster around other signatures, and she recognized their motion to be the Go Squad, Battlea and Crimson Sable, surging through the bodies with flying kicks, baton strikes and body momentum takedowns.

Ruth wiped the blood from her mouth and snickered, running back in the direction she came from.

In the cloud of smoke, with their training, all the unsuspecting blind bodies struggling in the kill zone became an amorphous freerunning track. In coordination, the group ran, jumped and pushed the muscle heads around, into each other and into practiced, harmonized movements and coordinated attacks.

The house lights turned back on; one of the thugs reached the breakers to switch them back. The Go Squad removed their infrared goggles, by then having dispatched of most of the guards, and only three men were left standing, surrounded.

One of the guards made a break to attack the nearest traceur, Gloom Girl, and found himself being flipped onto his back when, in one fluid motion, she placed her hands on his wrist and shoulder, turned around while stepping under his arm, pulling him towards her. Throwing him off balance over her squatting lower center of gravity, she used his momentum to lift him, a

man with a hundred pounds on her, over herself. The ground knocked the wind out of him but she kicked his lights out for good measure.

The other two, watching a clearly smaller girl do that to their burly companion, were stunned long enough for Battlea to step behind them to smash their heads together.

The smoke cleared and The Go Squad were left standing amid a sea of incapacitation. Ruth, seeing that they had taken every one out, relaxed her tensed muscles, but noticed something.

"Where's Kain?" she called out.

"Here!" he yelled from the catwalk above them, holding a rocket launcher.

Ruth was the first to see him and yelled, "Scatter!"

The Go Squad all turned to face him but he had already pulled the trigger.

Chapter 8

Ruth and the Go Squad dove, each in a direction towards the respective wall they were nearest to, fanning out like a bursting firecracker of human bodies. They covered their heads as they landed, thought of their loved ones.

The explosion roared.

But it was distant. Wrong. Like hearing thunder from the next county over.

Ruth's ears should be ringing. Her body should be shredded. She should be dead.

She peeked up from her defensive position.

Concrete under her palms. Rough. Wet from rain.

She was outside.

Ruth sat up slowly, every movement careful, like her body might fall apart if she moved too fast. The warehouse was fifty feet away. On fire. Burning so hot she could feel the heat from here.

They'd been inside that.

She looked down at her hands. No burns. No blood. Her tactical gear wasn't even singed.

Around her, the Go Squad was getting to their feet, moving like sleepwalkers. Crimson Sable touched his own face like he was checking if it was still there. Night Knight stood frozen, staring at the flames. Gloom Girl was on her hands and knees, hyperventilating.

The unconscious goons were scattered across the dock. All of them outside. All of them breathing.

And Harding Kain—Kain and his security detail were all tied up. Roped, zip-tied, chained. Professional work. The kind that takes time.

None of them had been restrained when the rocket fired.

"Wha..." Battlea muttered, just as bewildered as the rest of her team, staring at the warehouse that was on fire.

Ruth's mind tried to process it. They'd been inside. The RPG fired. They should be dead. Instead they were outside, unharmed, and their targets were somehow bound.

This wasn't possible.

Ruth forced herself to move, checking each team member. Aside from shock—understandable shock from somehow teleporting away from certain death—they were all uninjured.

"What's going on, Nightingale?" Crimson Sable asked, taking his ski mask off and shaking his head.

"Keep your mask on, Crimson," Night Knight ordered. "We're still on duty!"

Crimson was too flustered to listen.

"Gale?" Gloom Girl called weakly, scared. "What's happening? How did we get here?"

Ruth opened her mouth to speak but no sound would come out. She scanned her surroundings. Counted heads.

Her heart dropped.

"Where's Ahdia?" Ruth called out, panic rising in her voice.

The team looked around, checking behind crates, near the bound thugs. Nothing.

"She was right next to the crate," Battlea said, voice shaking. "When the rocket—"

"We have to go back in!" Ruth started toward the burning warehouse.

Night Knight grabbed her arm. "Ruth, no one could have survived that blast if they were still inside—"

"She saved us somehow! We have to—" Ruth's voice cracked.

The warehouse groaned, part of the roof collapsing inward. Flames roared higher.

"Nightingale..." Gloom Girl whispered.

Ruth stared at the inferno. Ahdia had been at the center of it all. The crate. The bullet wound that should have killed her. And now she was gone.

"We need to move," Night Knight said quietly. "Before cops show up."

Ruth didn't respond. Couldn't tear her eyes from the fire.

"Gale," Battlea said firmly. "We have to go. Now."

Ruth nodded numbly, letting herself be guided away. She looked back over her shoulder at the warehouse.

At Ahdia's pyre.

Chapter 9

Two nights after the warehouse.

Caledonia.

A city nestled in between twin rivers and a latitudinal location that hits the sweet spot of all the seasons. Goldilocks would have chosen Caledonia after tasting Canada and Mexico.

"Well, good evening and welcome to Carl Tucker Tonight. Presumptive Presidential nominee, Harding Kaine, as you may have heard, fired back at the media today in Caledonia."

Like most cities, it is stricken with a severe case of multiple personality syndrome. During the day, a bustling and busy economy keep the ants marching to their jobs, hobbies and other interests. It has decent theatre and even a few well regarded restaurants. Tourists come for the mild climate, the friendly atmosphere and the famed hospitality.

"Mr. Kain has been forthright about the burglary and subsequent explosion in his own personal warehouse business in Caledonia Harbor, praising the police for their response and shunning any accusation that he was involved in any criminal behavior. 'Don't believe the liberal press,' he said in his press conference earlier today."

At night, a near police state emerges as local law enforcement, led by Police Chief John Whitford, cracks down on the criminal element harder than any other city in the country. The denizens shutter their windows and doors to protect against, not just the supposed rising crime rates in the city, but also from drawing the ire of the gestapo tactics of the police.

"The only crime I see Mr. Kain committing is being a hard working American, burning the midnight oil at one of his businesses that he keeps a personal and close eye on, something, I believe, we can expect when... I mean, if he should win the election come November."

The truth was, actual crimes, not just the behavior and actions deemed illegal by the local municipality, like muggings and assault, because of the police state, were usually only perpetrated by those who had ins with the so-called guardians of the peace and public. Firas saw that even before he ever decided to patrol the city from the rooftops. The news would usually only report what suited the narrative that the city wanted to maintain; that it was the poor and minorities committing the crimes that necessitated such aggressive tactics. When Firas walked the streets, careful to avoid the cops after the curfew that was in place, more unofficially than a publicly announced time to avoid any legal dispute, he observed that it was the police who were looting pharmacies to then flood the neighborhood with drugs, who were shooting folks before any warning and then claiming they felt their lives threatened, or even outright ignoring calls for emergency assistance if they weren't from the right people. The ones who paid the cops for "protection". From the criminals, of course.

"He asks the big questions that matter, like questions of whether statues are next? George Washington? Thomas Jefferson? It's not a joke. Suddenly, our founding fathers are considered evil slave-owners by the fanatics on the left. It means that Jefferson must be purged from public praise forever. Let me be frank, up until a hundred and fifty years ago, slavery was the norm, it had been for thousands of years before that. Sadly."

This was the implicit understanding that was established through the deliberate public relations campaign that had been a standard practice for over a hundred years, not just in Caledonia, as it has been the model of law enforcement since the days of slavery, but especially

here. Police Chief John Whitford outlasted many a sitting mayor and had each of them in his corner for every policy and practice his police force administered, promising "law and order," which really just meant over-policing the poor neighborhoods and turning a blind eye from white collar crimes.

"This does seem like a turning point, not just on the right but on the left. These events of the last two days, where even a potential sitting President of the United States can't safely operate in this city without thugs with Uzis and drive by shooters terrorizing their business..."

Ruth closed the app on her phone and tucked it in her utility belt. Nightly, especially during their patrols, Ruth ruminated on this, the bigotry, the intolerance, knowing that even though it felt like she ultimately wanted to help the police do their job in protecting and serving the citizens, they found themselves at odds with what they've seen the police doing in the course of their duties. The Go Squad had always resisted tangling with the police but if they weren't wearing a badge, much of what they'd seen them do wouldn't give them pause to act.

Tonight was different. Ruth's mind was elsewhere, to the night of the warehouse, of when they mysteriously survived what was all but certain doom. She tried to compare it with all the training that Firas put the Go Squad through, from the first days at the Parkour Academy where most people were there for one-off lessons, usually on a date or bachelor party activity, but also a select few others, like Ruth and the other Go Squad members who showed talent and a proclivity. The more they returned, the more challenging the day's lessons among the simulated building structures and scaffolding in the converted warehouse space became. Eventually, when Firas folded the individuals he scouted for his team together to have group training sessions, the team would learn to move as one and without any second thoughts. They became so intimate and aware of each other that Firas was eventually able to train the team to run their routines in

complete darkness: swinging on bars, scaling and traversing walls, lifting and tossing one another to reach grips, and the whole while, making their footfalls as inaudible as possible. For months, they trained in these peculiar and challenging ways, eventually incorporating hand-to-hand combat lessons into the mix: krav maga and judo. Firas's grand design was then revealed, what would be both their power and safety net in their dealings with those who might commit injustice against Caledonians. He presented everyone with a set of nightvision and thermal goggles and a utility belt that contained among other things smoke grenades. Training in the dark with complete trust among the group allowed them to ease nearly effortlessly into the vision obstructing mist to perform their various maneuvers that Firas choreographed for them and of which they all knew like the back of their hands.

None of these things, these grueling, intensive and dangerous things, prepped her for what she was grappling with since the impossible occurred a couple nights ago against Harding Kain.

Two snaps of a finger close to her face caught her attention.

"Gale?" Battlea asked, waving a hand in her face after Ruth turned to her. Her black Lycra ski mask was folded up on her forehead and her annoyed expression was clear. "Can you hear me? Are you with us?"

"Yeah," Ruth replied, sighing. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

Battlea rolled her eyes and repeated, "I said, I don't think we're going to catch any fish here. Night Knight just radioed in and said he's heard there's police band chatter about activity at the Junctions."

Ruth nodded her head in understanding and looked at Gloom Girl, standing by the ledge of the roof they were on, peering through a set of binoculars at the streets.

"Gloomy?" Ruth called. Gloom Girl lowered her binocs and turned to Ruth. "What do you think? Should we make the trip and displace out of here?"

"Couldn't hurt," Gloom Girl replied. "It's been real quiet for a while now,"

Ruth shrugged. "Let's do it, then," she agreed.

They didn't fly high over buildings and get mistaken for birds or planes. After all, they were just normal people dressed in light black tactical gear. They jumped, bounced, rolled and dove. But when a person in a high enough building who happened to be looking out their window at night saw their movement, they would swear they weren't running; they were gliding across the rooftops.

This was their training, the work Firas spent his whole life honing for this purpose. If the Go Squad members were mistaken to have any kind of powers, it was near perfect topographic knowledge and recall of the Caledonia cityscape; every landing, fire escape, awning, trellis, even missing bricks in walls that gave enough of a usable hold to bound from. If the Go Squad were dropped in any other city, they'd be seriously hampered in their traversing abilities for at least a few weeks until they learned the area well enough to jump off a building's edge with full confidence of what they needed to do to not roll an ankle or fall to their deaths.

Battlea won the unspoken race that the Go Squad always engaged in whenever they did paired or grouped patrols. Gloom Girl finished second and Nightingale struggled in at third. Battlea and Gloom Girl exchanged looks with one another as this wasn't typical. Nightingale was the best of them, even more graceful than Firas who taught her. She was the standard they all strove for.

"You alright, Gale?" Battlea asked, watching Ruth catching her breath.

"Yeah," Ruth said, gulping down a 0.5 liter hydration pack she produced from her utility belt. "Why?"

"You know you don't have to do this right?" Battlea offered.

"Do what?" Ruth asked, wiping the water from her chin.

"We know you're worried about Firas," Gloom Girl said.

"Of course I am," Ruth replied, matter-of-factly. "We all are."

"Yeah, obviously," Battlea said, raising her mask. "But it's clearly affecting you."

"How?" Ruth defended.

"You've been in la-la land all night and were sloppy in a lot of the passes on the way over here," Battlea pointed out, placing a finger against her palm with each point.

Ruth took a deep breath and raised her own mask. "You're right. I am distracted," she admitted. "And, yeah, Firas' injury is weighing on me but I've really been more messed up about what happened at the warehouse."

Battlea and Gloom Girl avoided any and all eye contact. Instead, Battlea grimaced and Gloom Girl squashed an imaginary bug under her shoe as she held her hands behind her.

"Right," Battlea said. "That."

"I mean," Ruth continued. "What part of that makes sense to any of us? You? Gloom Girl?"

Gloom Girl raised her hands in innocence, saying, "I've just upped my medication. I can't think about it or I get panic attacks."

A pang of sadness over that admission struck Ruth. "I'm sorry, Gloomy."

Battlea put her hand on Gloom Girl's shoulder. "Yeah, kid. We're here for you. We're all messed up about it."

"I feel like we all just wanted to accept it so we don't have to think about," Ruth noted and Gloom Girl slowly nodded her head. "And I think it's because it's easier to do that than try to figure out what the heck happened. I mean... Kain had us dead to rights. We were clustered and he fired that RPG at us. I'm not making that up right?" They silently agreed. "So... thoughts? Any explanations? I actually considered the smoke bombs were maybe defective and had some kind of hallucinatory side effects? Seems far-fetched but it's the best I can come up with."

The three of them stood around each other silently.

"I'm going street-level. I need space," Gloom Girl said, breaking away and pulling her mask off when she turned away from them so they couldn't see her face, stuffing it into a pocket of her utility belt.

"Gloomy..." Battlea called fruitlessly as Gloom Girl hopped over the roof edge onto the fire escape below and out of sight. "Great," Battlea uttered, turning to face Ruth as she gathered her mask on her forehead. "Did you have to do that with her around? You just heard her say she upped her meds. You know she's sensitive."

Ruth was angry with herself, knowing Battlea was right. "Lea," Ruth exhaled as she dropped her head back and closing her eyes. "I'm going nuts. I could use whatever meds she's on myself."

"Yeah, but what good is that going to do you? You know Glooms just avoids dealing with stuff head-on. We're different," Battlea assessed. "At least you're not alone. If you didn't think to call us for backup before you went in that night and then tried to explain everything that happened to us, we'd probably clip your wings and keep you grounded for a while. Maybe keep you cozy with a strait jacket."

Ruth walked over to the ledge to look at the street level, watching Gloom Girl lightly jog to a spot in an alley way in the dark. "I wish I can just let it go. But honestly, the weirdest part is Ahdia."

Battlea narrowed her eyebrows and came to stand next to Ruth. "Firas' sister?"

"Yeah. I saw her get shot. There was blood on her clothes. Then I got knocked out and when I came to..." Ruth shook her head. "She was just gone. In the fire."

"You did say the round went through the crate. Maybe it slowed the bullet enough that she could move."

Ruth shook her head. "I thought of that. But the blood... and then how did we all get out? I know I got my head knocked pretty hard but..." Ruth groaned. "None of it makes any sense."

Battlea didn't have a response. The truth was that she felt just as bewildered as Ruth.

"Nightingale," the radio crackled, Gloom Girl's voice coming through. "Police activity, eastbound heading our way."

They peered in the direction Gloom Girl reported and saw the siren lights of a squad car. It was apparently pulling over a minivan.

"You think the soccer moms are at it again?" Battlea joked.

Ruth squeezed the call button on her hand radio. "Put eyes on, Gloomy," Ruth ordered.

"Acknowledged," Gloom Girl said. She pulled out a GoPro camera that was on a headband, activated it and placed it on her head.

Ruth knew these supposedly routine stops were twice as likely to go wrong at night in Caledonia than if it were during the middle of the day. She scanned the area for all the ways she could make it to street level in the fastest ways possible if she needed and then watched the two police officers approach the minivan from both sides, as was normal police procedure.

"They both unclipped their holsters," Battlea noted.

She was right; the cops both rested their hands on their pistols. The driver side officer knocked on the window and the driver opened it. The officer shined his flashlight into the person's face, blinding them.

Ruth squeezed her radio and said, "Gloomy, you got audio?"

"Standby," she replied and reached into her utility to pull out a collapsed audio device. She opened the fan and connected the sound amplifier into the hand radio with an AUX cable in another pouch on her belt. She squeezed the radio and announced, "Go for audio."

Ruth and Battlea listened to the tinny audio broadcast through.

"Where you heading?"

"Home."

"Where from?"

"Out for dinner. It's my daughter's birthday."

"Yeah, right. Step out of the vehicle."

"Why?"

"I said, step out of the car."

The officer on the passenger side door attempted to slide open the minivan door.

"I want to know why! I have the right to know what crime I've committed."

"Right now, it's obstruction if you don't do what I say."

"No! I didn't do nothing wrong! I don't have to get out of the car."

The officer then drew his weapon and pointed it at the driver. The frightened cry of a child could be heard, both from the radio and on the street.

Chapter 10

That same night.

"Get out of the car! Now!" the officer demanded loudly.

His partner also drew his weapon and pointed it into the back of the minivan where the child was.

"You seeing this?!" Gloom Girl radioed.

"Confirmed, Gloom Girl," Ruth replied. "Do not engage. Maintain visual surveillance and monitor the situation."

The driver slowly opened the door.

"Hands! Show me your hands!" the officer demanded.

"Mommy!" the child screamed.

"Please, officer, that's my six-year-old, please don't hurt us," the driver pleaded, raising her hands.

"Step out of the vehicle!" the officer shouted. "Slowly!"

When she had her feet on the road, the officer grabbed her arm and forcefully pulled her toward the ground, laying her out on her stomach.

"What the hell?!" Gloom Girl was heard.

"Stand down, Gloomy," Ruth repeated as calmly as she could.

The officer on the passenger side suddenly used his flashlight to bust open the passenger side door. The child screamed even louder as the mother on the ground, who had a police officer kneeling on her back, begged through tears to not hurt her child. The passenger side officer slid open the door and had his gun trained on the child. He reached with his free hand to unbuckle the car seat and then pulled the child out violently.

“What did we do? What is this about?!” the mother yelled. “Why are you doing this?”

The passenger side officer put the child on the floor and kicked the child's knee pit to make them drop. He then applied a set of handcuffs.

“That’s it,” Gloom Girl said before the audio cut.

“Gloom Girl!” Ruth barked into the radio. “Stand down! Come in!”

“Damn it. I’m going in,” Battlea announced, pulling down her mask as she stepped up onto the ledge and dropped down the face of the building onto an elevated platform that the window cleaners left two stories down. She landed with a thud and a loud clang that drew the attention of the officers. She immediately did a safety roll off the edge, grasping the platform to hang down to soften a drop onto a ledge on the wall and then turned to land on the street.

Gloom Girl ripped off the GoPro and clipped it to her chest. As she sprinted up from behind the officer handcuffing the child, she pulled out her mask and yanked it down over her head. When she reached him, he was distracted by Battlea’s diversion, so Gloom Girl roundhouse kicked the handgun out of his hand with her right, followed the motion to plant that foot on the ground and spun to follow with a sidekick with her left leg to the officer’s knees, the way he did to the child but with much more force.

The officer on the mother couldn’t see what was occurring on the other side of the minivan but turned to see what the commotion was, allowing enough time for Battlea to close the

ground she needed to land a flying double side kick, sending the cop brutally into the open driver side all the way through to the passenger seat.

A thud could be heard on the passenger side from the officer's impact as the van rocked on its sides, making the child flinch while Gloom Girl bent to elbow strike the ribs, crumpling him down, then reached up to hold onto his wrist. She raised her leg above his head and locked the back of his neck under her knee, then jumped with her other leg to wrap under around his arm. Like a pendulum, she used her body weight to swing him to the ground. Landing on her back with the cop, face down, locked in an arm bar, he yelped in pain as she applied firm pressure with the leverage she created.

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief as she saw with her binoculars that the two takedowns were fast and before backup was requested. Battlea helped the mother up to her feet and then swung around to the sidewalk as Gloom Girl attached the handcuffs the cop was holding onto his wrist. Battlea helped strap the other cuff behind his back and then opened the passenger door, causing the unconscious cop to tumble out from the passenger seat.

In the distance, Ruth heard the whop-whop of a helicopter getting louder and louder. Looking up towards the sound, she saw a police helicopter in the distance heading their way. It couldn't have been for them, she assumed but kept her eyes on it as it distinctly looked like it was heading straight for them. She didn't want to risk being wrong.

"Bail, bail, bail," she repeated on the radio for the two on the street to hear. "Helo inbound, could be for us. Scatter!"

Gloom Girl smiled and waved at the little girl after she helped her back into her car seat. The minivan started off down the road. Battlea nudged Gloom Girl, urging her to run and they sprinted down the alleyway.

A spotlight from the helicopter shattered the dark of the alley they were in, revealing them as clear as day. “This is the police!” a voice through a megaphone demanded. “Stop where you are!”

As they reached the end of the alleyway, Battlea called out, “Divide and conquer?”

“Yeah!” Gloom Girl agreed and split into opposite directions, Battlea going east.

Meanwhile, Ruth flitted from rooftop to rooftop to try to keep up and not get spotted by the helicopter. She looked up and saw that the helicopter turned westbound.

Her radio blared Battlea’s voice, “Nightingale, Nightingale! The helo turned west and is on Gloom Girl’s six. Do you copy?”

“Copy, Battlea,” Ruth responded. “I’m in pursuit. Hang tight, Gloomy!”

Her performance was affected before, they were right and she knew it immediately when they called her out. Now, she was laser-focused in. Her best freerunning always came to her when she wasn’t thinking and was reacting to the topography, when she trusted her memory and instincts. At times, she even surprised herself after a particularly daring maneuver but only well after she was home, usually while showering off the night’s patrol. It was also whenever a teammate needed help when she found that extra gear for her motor.

Gloom Girl was almost balletic in her movements but speed wasn’t her strongest attribute. If she had any chance of losing a helicopter, it was by finding cover and maneuvering tight spaces. Ruth knew if she followed the helicopter, it would just lead her to Gloom Girl but too late, after they reached her. She needed to anticipate where Gloom Girl would go.

“I’ve got bogeys! They’ve sicced dogs on me!” Battlea reported through the comms.

Ruth stopped in her tracks. She suddenly had a choice to make. She could double back and try to draw off Battlea’s tail onto her and hope Gloom Girl finds somewhere to hide as she

suspected she would be able to, or leave Battlea on her own, hope for the best and continue to find Gloom Girl.

"Nightingale to Night Knight, come in Night Knight," she barked into her handheld.

"Go for Night Knight!" he cried through the radio.

"Are you okay?"

"Ask me in a few minutes! I got ambushed by the fuzz. I'm high tailin' it right now!" he replied. It sounded like he was running.

"Where's Crimson?" she asked.

"On my way to Battlea," Crimson cut into the frequency, sounding relaxed.

"What, are you taking a taxi? You don't sound like you're in a rush," Ruth commented.

"Something like that," Crimson Sable said as he prepared to leap off the train he was riding on top of.

"Everyone on comms," Ruth said. "Elvis has left the building, I repeat, Elvis has left the building!" she said before clipping her radio and continuing to where she thought Gloom Girl would be.

"Elvis has left the building," was their code phrase to separate, lay low, and wait for an all clear transmission. They never had to use it before because this level of police attention was brand new. They weren't even aware anyone, let alone the police, knew of their existence.

The helicopter spotlight locked onto Gloom Girl and it seemed like no matter what she did, they knew where she was. She knew of a construction site that she could duck into and find cover but it was across one of the rivers and she was almost certain the bridge would be a bottle neck for them to cut her off. She was running out of breath, her legs were beginning to feel like

jelly, and her hand grip strength fatigued. She decided to risk it figuring that if she didn't try for it, she was done for anyway.

The bridge was in sight but she knew it meant a dead sprint, something she didn't have in her body at the moment. Seeing scaffolding on a building face, she turned a quick corner and disappeared under the awning, holding on to the bars to stay off the sidewalk. She breathed hard as she grabbed a hydration pack from her utility, draining it down her throat and then dropping it to the ground. The helicopter rotors echoed in the awning she was hiding, hovering like a hawk waiting for the mouse to make its move.

It was only appropriate that the helicopter chose her, she considered as she slowed her heart rate. She was, after all, the one that disobeyed the order from Nightingale to stand down. But how could she stand down? Every time they had seen something like this in the past while on patrol, their general rule was to just record it with their cameras and not intervene. Let YouTube do the rest in exposing the police. But a child was being arrested. Was that cop even going to be able to apply adult sized cuffs onto a six-year-old?

After a few more breaths trying to psych herself up, she descended to the sidewalk and bolted with everything she had left. The helicopter was caught off guard but quickly found her running on the bridge. Controlling her breathing as much as she could, she pushed herself up the incline and reached the top, stopping when she saw the line of police cars cutting her off at the pass. She turned around to see another set of police cars coming to a stop behind her.

"It's over!" a loud voice said through a police megaphone. "Get down on your knees and put your hands on your head."

She felt her heart pounding twice for every second and her lungs burning as she gasped for air. She laced her hands on her head but to expand her lungs for air and wandered to the edge of the bridge.

“Get down! Right where you are!” the voice demanded.

She looked over the edge and saw the water below, wondering if she could survive the fall. Even if she did, swimming was almost harder than sprinting for miles as she had just done and they’d just be waiting for her on the shore. As her breathing and heart rate slowed, Gloom Girl climbed up the railing and balanced on the ledge.

“Don’t do it! Get down now!” the megaphone blared.

She looked to her left at the police and held up a rude gesture. She did a swan dive off the bridge. Ruth was watching from a building near the bridge through a pair of binoculars.

"No!" she screamed when she saw Gloom Girl jump.

Chapter 11

That same night.

The helicopter decided to go after Gloom Girl in the shell game. A selfish part of her was relieved but the team-first mentality Battlea harbored knew she was faster than Gloom Girl. Gloom Girl was agile, downright bendy, but it would take pure speed to try and lose a helicopter on foot. Speed and creativity.

She was sprinting on street-level. The goal in her mind was to run to a spot where she knew she had a stash... a small duffel bag hidden in various points throughout the city that contained a baseball cap, overalls and a bomber coat. Firas' idea and one that Battlea always thought was a bit on the paranoid side; when would they ever need to do a quick change? Well, here was a golden opportunity and she was glad that when she needed it, it was available... as long as she could get there without being seen.

She turned a corner and stopped dead in her tracks. A police blockade. For little old me, she thought. She turned 180 degrees and took a few steps before an identical impediment blocked the next block. In moments like these, as far as her training in Firas' school went, there was always an out. A foothold or handhold that normal people don't see. All it takes is one to get over.

She turned to her left and right, scanning for an escape—a hole in a wooden fence leading into a construction yard. That was it. She did a dead dash and leapt, jamming her foot in

the hole the size of a can of coke and used the forward momentum she had and pushed herself up and over. She landed on an unexpected dirt hill.

Tumbling down, she didn't panic and performed one safety roll after the other until she reached the bottom. Recovering smoothly from the last roll onto her feet, she continued sprinting into the darkness of underneath the concrete floor that was being suspended by girder support beams. Battlea felt the urge to chuckle, thinking about all the trouble the cops put themselves through to trap her, until she had to stop due to a sheer wall about twenty feet high. She was trapped.

Voices of excited men floated in from behind her, flashlights beaming from the entrance of the construction site. Battlea turned away from the direction but stayed near the wall in the cover of darkness.

As she was afraid of, the site dead-ended and she was literally cornered in the foundations built for what was intended to be a new skyscraper. She knew her only option was to fight her way out and that wasn't going to last very long.

Seeing a group bustling their way into the under way she was in, she ducked behind a work bench and held her breath. She wondered what it would be like, getting arrested. She wondered if she should ditch her utility belt so when she was apprehended, she could claim she was just some crazy woman in the eyes of a judge and not a street vigilante. It would be a flimsy defense but plausible and that might be all the cards she had left to play in her hand.

A wave of cops canvassed the dark, gradually illuminating the whole area, like the tide flowing onto the coast. A police officer slowly advanced onto the work bench she was hiding under. Battlea reached over her head and grabbed a wrench that was laying on top. She heaved it as far as she could in the dark air over the line of cops and it clanged against a far support beam.

Everyone turned and faced their flashlights to the beam that rang out an unexpected sound. Seeing her chance, she bounded from her hiding spot to the nearest officer and swung around him using his body like a pole, finishing with a double kick to the officer next to him, sending that one flying back, while dragging the unsuspecting officer she was using as a sling to the ground. Landing next to him, she delivered an elbow to his face, connecting with a Plexiglas face mask that was attached to the helmet he had on. Still, a strong enough blow dazed him, giving her time to stand up to face whoever else might be next for her to attack.

The next nearest officer shouted, "Found her! She's here! Open fire!"

Open fire? Seemed a bit excessive. That was her cue to dive towards the officer on the ground that she first kicked. She did a safety roll on top of his laid out body, turning him over on top of her. A few trigger-happy cops fired and hit their fellow officer in the bulletproof vest he was wearing that Battlea used as cover. She heard her human shield cry out in pain.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" someone quickly yelled.

"Fire in the hole!" someone else yelled before popping a canister in his hand and rolling it towards her.

Recognizing it to be either tear gas or a stun grenade, she knew the timing from when the pin was pulled was up to six seconds and she hoped it wasn't too late before she quickly rolled over onto her stomach, did a modified stationary catpass from prone and kicked back the rolling detonating device.

The second she did so, the officer who sent it dove out of the way. It flashed after a loud pop. A flashbang, she noted, judging by the sudden ringing in her ears. At least she wasn't blinded she figured and hoped that maybe some of them were.

She laid back and did a kip-up to get on her feet. Scanning the environment, she registered about ten flashlights still blocking her way. These cops were intent on using lethal force. She'd go down fighting, she accepted. Getting arrested wasn't an option.

A shot fired and buried itself into her body armor under the right clavicle bone. She fell down onto her back, sucking air after she felt it all knocked out of her. The pain was tremendous but her adrenaline allowed her to roll over and army crawl back towards the work bench. It was over, she knew.

A commotion could be heard and Battlea was surprised she made it all the way to the workbench, sitting and leaning on it to catch her breath. When she peeked around, she saw a cloud of smoke and a flurry of movement from what seemed to be a bow staff.

Crimson! she recognized. She reached into her utility belt to put on her infrared goggles and saw her teammate, Crimson Sable, fluidly disabling anyone he could get to, one by one, with elegant lines of successive strikes.

The smoke would clear soon and he'd be exposed, she knew. She pushed aside the choking pain in her chest and scrambled towards him.

"Sable!" she called, so that he wouldn't mistakenly strike her. "Behind you!"

She landed a vicious left overhand, hopping to build momentum as though she were throwing a baseball to home from the outfield, on the soft part between the body armor and helmet on the neck of an officer wandering obliviously in the smoke directly behind Crimson.

"Thanks, chica," he said, proceeding to plant what turned out to be a rebar staff on the ground to block an attempt by a cop to hit him with a swinging rifle butt to the midsection. Crimson executed a turning kick to the cops helmet and used the rebar to balance himself, reversing the kick for two immediately successive kicks, enough to take down his target.

"We gotta make waves!" Battlea yelled.

"Agreed," Crimson replied dropping the rebar in a loud heavy clang as he knelt down, grabbed a flashbang from the cop he just felled, pulled the pin and threw it towards the remaining cops.

As the smoke cleared, only a few cops were left unharmed but confused as to what just happened, dazed from the stun grenade. The two of them were out of sight.

When they reached a rooftop of a nearby building, Battlea collapsed on a brick roof door vestibule. Crimson knelt in front of her, taking off his goggles and examined her to make sure she wasn't badly wounded. No blood, which was good, but he knew from experience how much it still hurt to be shot in the armor.

"That's going to be a nice bruise tomorrow," he commented.

"Maybe if you're nice to me, I'll show it to you later," she managed to crack.

"That a promise? Because if so, you have a deal, señorita," he smiled. "I thought you said there were dogs."

"Freeze!" a voice from the ledge of the building shouted. They were coming up from the fire escape.

"These guys won't quit!" Crimson shouted, standing up between her and the cops.

One by one, the remaining group of cops in the SWAT team filed onto the roof, their semi-automatic weapons drawn on them with flashlights. Crimson held his hands up.

"Get on your knees!" he ordered.

Crimson didn't move. He looked back and down at Battlea. They shared an understanding look; they'd go down fighting.

"I said get on your knees!" the cop ordered again, coming close enough to put the muzzle inches from Sable's face.

Crimson Sable quickly pushed the muzzle with his right hand, moving it slightly to the left of his head as the officer reacted and fired. The loudness was expected even if it still rang in Crimson's ears. Ignoring it the best he could, he threw an open hand quick jab at the officer's throat, causing him to choke. From the ground, Battlea kicked the cop's knee in a sickening crunch, crumpling him to the floor.

Crimson knew he needed to act fast to get to the others, but the other officers began pulling their triggers at him.

To the surprise of everyone, none of their weapons fired, allowing him the window to land a form perfect sidekick on the sternum of the nearest officer to him.

And again, to the surprise of everyone, including Crimson, the officer was kicked like a rag doll clear off the roof to the next building, apparently kicked so hard, he left behind his weapon and helmet.

Everyone froze, staring at the officer writhing in pain a block away, then turned their attention to Crimson to see if he was some sort of three-headed beast. Nope, just a normal looking dude in black tactical gear in a fighting stance, looking just as shocked as they did.

Someone finally snapped out of it and yelled, "Open fire! Open fire!"

That shook everyone awake. Sable jumped, rotating his hips to be horizontal in the air, landing a downward kick on the shoulder of an officer, leveling him into the ground in an impact crater. They kept pulling their triggers but none of their weapons fired.

Battlea shoulder charged an officer into another officer and they both violently crashed through the ledge, about ten yards away, falling onto the fire escape. Dumbfounded, she looked

over at Crimson after he uppercut another SWAT cop ten feet straight up into the air. They looked at each other and both shrugged while in fighting stances and then looked at the remainder of the SWAT team left standing. They made a quick calculation and retreated down the fire escape, picking up their downed teammates to drag back with them.

"Crimson..." Battlea said, relaxing her stance and looking around at the damage they inflicted. "What the hell is going on?"

Crimson Sable followed the retreating police to the ledge and watched them urgently descend the stairs. He turned around with his hands up like Rocky and yelled, "I'm a freakin' superhero!"

Chapter 12

Night Knight jumped. They watched him expectantly. He shook his head, got into an athletic position and looked like he was focusing. He jumped again, straining as he did so, trying to get as high as he can and landed, disappointed.

"I swear, it was like..." he gestured with his hand, making a long majestic arc, while making a sound with his mouth, "Fffffwwwweeeuuuhhhh!"

Ruth crossed her arms. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, from him, from Sable, and from Battlea but knew she had to because of what she saw Gloom Girl do. She saw her jump. Then she blinked out of sight and the next thing she knew, Gloom Girl seemingly fell out of the sky onto the roof she was on, blocks from the bridge.

She remembered Gloom Girl being stunned, the same look she had on her face when something like this happened that night in the warehouse.

"I thought I was going to get arrested," Night Knight continued. "I was on the rooftops when on one particular jump, I just frickin' flew. Well, it was more like a super-jump if I'm being honest, not like Superman flying. But it was like a quarter-mile, based on how many blocks I covered in a single bound!"

Firas polished the dagger he brought from Ahdia's place and put it down on the filing cabinet behind his desk. He turned around and looked at everyone, the Go Squad, each and every

one of them with a crazy story to tell from the night before. He came out of his office where they were standing around in the activity area of his school.

Ruth stepped closer as she said, "Firas, I know it sounds crazy. I was there and I'm still struggling to believe it."

"Look, look, look!" Sable exclaimed, waving his hand for everyone to gather. He was watching the TV that was mounted on the wall. The news was on. It was footage from a news helicopter of the bridge and Gloom Girl.

The news anchor said, "... reports of a burglar and alleged assault perpetrator jumping then..." as the footage showed Gloom Girl jumping and disappearing in mid-air. "... vanishing into thin air. The police are withholding speculation but experts think this is the work of a master illusionist."

Firas narrowed his focus and couldn't believe what he just saw.

The news went to commercial, a campaign ad for Harding Kain. Ruth shut the TV off and said to everyone, "It probably has something to do with what happened that night at the warehouse. We all teleported out of there, out of range of the RPG. We were all dead if not for that."

"Maybe I did it!" Gloom Girl added. "I mean... I don't remember doing it, but I don't remember doing it last night, either. Maybe my powers are panic-based?"

"None of us can do it again," Battlea added. "We've been trying."

Firas' eyebrows narrowed as he looked down pensively. He shook his head, closing his eyes. "Let's... table that for now. What was with the police presence last night?"

"Yeah, that was extra as hell," Gloom Girl added.

"If what you all are telling me is true..." Firas began, looking up and struggling to find the words. "... and you all can't control your... 'powers'... we may have to discuss... disbanding."

The air left the room.

"Disbanding?" Night Knight repeated.

"It's for everyone's safety," Firas added.

"No offense, jefe," Sable cut in. "If any one of us cared that much about our personal safety, we wouldn't be going out every night dressed like urban ninjas looking for trouble."

"We're not quitting," Battlea agreed.

"Look," Firas said. "What do you think? I started this. I trained you all. And guess what? That makes me responsible for you all. And last night, it could have ended in the worst ways," he said, looking at Gloom Girl. "We have to consider ending it before it comes to that."

"Even if we disband," Gloom Girl spoke up, "You know we're still going out on our own. We're safer together."

No one could think of anything to say, knowing that to be indisputable.

"My question is," Night Knight said. "How did the cops know where we were all going to be? It seems like all of us faced down a whole precinct each. They kettled us in three different areas of the city at the same time. What are the odds?"

"What are you saying, Night Knight?" Firas asked.

"I'm saying... who among us... leaked?" he explained slowly, looking at the expression on everyone's face. Everyone did the same and everyone landed their attention on one person.

Gloom Girl looked highly uncomfortable. "What?" she defended against everyone's stares.

"Gloomy," Ruth said. "We know."

Gloom Girl dropped her jaw. She closed her mouth and bit her lip. "That's not fair. I don't know a thing about any of you."

"No one should," Firas added. "That's how I recruited you all. Individually. But you're the most public figure in the room."

"I don't even talk to my dad anymore. Do you guys know that?" she demanded.

"We do," Ruth said. "Of course. But that doesn't mean your father, the Caledonia Police Chief, doesn't have the means to track you anyway."

Gloom Girl shook her head, hating being in the room in that moment but also wondering what Ruth just proposed. She mulled it over. "I... I don't know," she said, crossing her arms and facing away.

Sable felt for Gloom Girl and spoke up. "I'm a director at a non-profit," he offered. "My day job. We do community organizing for things like food drives and consumer advocacy. My name is Victor. Victor Hernandez."

Gloom Girl looked at him and smiled gratefully. He returned a warm smile.

Battlea then said, "I'm Leah Turner. I'm a barista at the Bean Post. I'm also the jammer on the Caledonia Roller Derby team." Standing next to Gloom Girl, she put her arm around her. Gloom Girl put her head on Leah's shoulder.

Night Knight decided he would join in on the confession circle. "Ben. Bukowski. I'm a..."

"Personal trainer," everyone said at once.

He smiled sheepishly. "That obvious, huh?"

"I'm Ruth Carter. I'm a doctor," she said. "We trust you, Tess. That's not what Night Knight... Ben was saying."

"It's about time you all did this," Firas remarked. "It was starting to get weird."

A moment of silence settled over the group as they processed the weight of their reveals.

Tess took a breath. "There's something else I need to say."

Everyone looked at her.

"I've been... posting about us. On social media. The Go Squad stuff, the videos, the hashtags—that's me. I started it." She rushed ahead before anyone could interrupt. "I know you said stay secret, Firas, but people needed to see. Someone was fighting back. Caledonia needed that hope."

Firas closed his eyes. "Tess—"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier. But it's working. People believe in us. They actually have hope that things can change." She looked around at the team. "And now with these... powers? We could actually be what I've been telling them we are. Real heroes."

Battlea squeezed her shoulder. "People did need to see. You weren't wrong about that."

Night Knight shifted uncomfortably. "Though it does mean we're kind of... public now. That's more exposure than we planned."

"Exposure that's giving people hope," Ruth said. "That matters."

Firas opened his mouth, closed it. The Go Squad name still bothered him—the branding, the hashtags, the mythology building around them. But she wasn't wrong. People were watching. Believing.

"Just... be careful what you post," he said finally. "If we have powers now, we're in a different category. Bigger risks."

"I know," Tess said. "I will be."

The silence returned, heavier now.

"Firas," Ruth said quietly. "What about Ahdia?"

Firas's expression darkened. He looked away.

"She didn't make it out," he said, his voice tight. "The warehouse. She was... she didn't make it."

Another silence. Gloom Girl looked down.

"I'm sorry, man," Night Knight said.

Firas shook his head, blinking rapidly. His jaw clenched. "Honestly? Maybe it's for the best." His voice cracked slightly. "My sister was already dead inside anyway. All she did was sit in that penthouse watching TV eight hours a day and eight hours a night, living on raspberry freezes and gummy bears. She gave up on life years ago." He wiped at his eyes quickly, forcing the words out. "At least this way it was quick."

The room went dead silent.

Ruth's mouth hung open, caught mid-inhale. A tear on Firas' cheek stopped, suspended, halfway down his face. Battlea's hand reached toward Gloom Girl, fingers extended, motionless in the air. The fluorescent lights hummed but didn't flicker. Dust particles hung in the air like stars.

Everything stopped.

From behind a foam parkour obstacle in the corner, Ahdia Bacchus—dead sister, deceased sibling, gone—stood up.

She walked across the frozen room. Her footsteps made no sound. She stopped in front of Firas, whose eyes were locked on the floor, a tear caught mid-fall.

She shook her head.

Then stuck her tongue out at him.

"Very mature, Ms. Bacchus."

The voice came from behind her. Ahdia spun around, heart slamming against her ribs—or rather, against the Hyper Seed that sat where her heart should probably be concerned about things.

A drone hovered at eye level, maybe ten feet away. Small, sleek, wrong in a way she couldn't articulate. Metallic but not quite solid. Like it was deciding whether to be real or not.

She'd seen it before. In the warehouse. During her training. Outside her penthouse window. She'd thought it was paranoia, or a trick of light, or her brain finally giving up on reality entirely.

It had been watching the whole time.

"What the—"

Light erupted from the drone. Not like a flashlight. Like a surgical beam carving reality apart. It touched her chest, her arms, her face. She felt it scan her, painting her, marking every particle of her existence with information she didn't understand.

"Wait—"

The light intensified. The drone's surface rippled.

And space inverted.

That's the only way she could describe it afterward. Not that she moved. Not that she teleported like in Star Trek, where they killed you and made a copy somewhere else—though honestly, how would you even know the difference?

This was worse.

Her particles knew they should be elsewhere. Every atom of her body screamed that "here" was a lie. Distance collapsed into meaninglessness. She was on the rooftop and in the academy simultaneously, and her brain couldn't process which was true, so it decided both were and neither were and—

Reality edited itself around her.

When space reassembled, she was somewhere else. Had always been somewhere else. Had never left.

She doubled over and threw up.

The academy activity area snapped back to motion.

Ruth's mouth finished opening mid-inhale. The tear on Firas's cheek completed its journey down his face. Battlea's hand reached Gloom Girl's shoulder. Night Knight's eyes completed their blink.

Everyone processed Firas's words at once.

"Wait, what?" Ruth's voice cut through the silence like a blade. "What did you just say?"

Firas blinked, looked around. His eyes found the space where Ahdia had been standing. Empty foam parkour obstacle. No sister.

Had she been there? Had he imagined—

"Did you seriously just say 'maybe it's for the best' about your sister dying?" Ruth's voice was quiet. Dangerously quiet. The kind of quiet that came before hurricanes.

"I didn't—" Firas started.

"She was shot protecting people she didn't even know!" Ruth stepped toward him. "She died in that warehouse trying to help us, and you just—"

"Ruth—"

"'Already dead inside'?" Gloom Girl's voice was small, hurt. "That's what you think about people who are depressed?"

Firas's face drained of color. "No, I didn't mean—"

"Then what did you mean?" Battlea's arms were crossed. "Because it sounded like you meant exactly that."

"I was grieving, I didn't—" He looked around desperately.

Of course she hadn't. She was dead. She died in the warehouse. He'd been spiraling, imagining things, the grief making him see—

"Grieving doesn't make you cruel," Night Knight said quietly. "That was cruel, man."

The dagger on the filing cabinet behind him. He'd brought it from her place. Evidence she was gone. Proof he'd lost her.

He'd meant every word he said.

And he hadn't meant any of it.

Firas sat down hard on the foam block, head in his hands.

"I don't—" His voice cracked. "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to—"

Ruth's expression softened slightly. She sat down next to him. Didn't touch him, but close enough.

"You process it," she said. "You feel it. You don't make it about whether she was good enough to deserve being alive."

Firas nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

In the corner, where Ahdia had been standing—where he'd imagined her standing—the air was still and empty.

Chapter 13

Ahdia finished throwing up and looked up.

Rooftop. Definitely a rooftop. The parkour academy rooftop, specifically—she recognized the air conditioning unit Firas had told her cost three grand to replace after someone (Night Knight) tried to do a wall run on it.

She was on her knees on gravel that was digging into her skin through her jeans. Her mouth tasted like stomach acid and regret. Her entire body felt like it had been translated into a language it didn't speak and then translated back wrong.

"Apologies for the disorientation," a woman's voice said. "Translocation affects everyone that way. It doesn't improve with repetition."

Ahdia looked up.

Two people stood near the rooftop's edge. The woman was late fifties, early sixties, silver-gray hair, sharp eyes, dressed like she'd stepped out of a very professional, very expensive conference room. The man next to her was younger, maybe forties, military bearing even in civilian clothes, holding two cups of coffee like they were props.

Both of them watched her with the calm assessment of people who'd seen much worse than a twenty-something throwing up on a rooftop.

"Ms. Bacchus," the woman said. "I'm Director Harriet Bourn. CADENS. This is Colonel Bentley Mack." She gestured to the man, who nodded. "We need to talk."

Ahdia wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "You've been watching me."

"Yes."

"The whole time."

"Yes."

"Since the warehouse."

"Before that, actually. We were monitoring Kain. You became relevant when you bonded with the Hyper Seed."

Ahdia stood on shaky legs. Her tongue-out moment. They'd seen it. Recorded it, probably. Had footage of her being petty and childish while her brother thought she was dead.

"Where's my brother?" The words came out sharper than she intended.

"Downstairs. With his team. Time resumed normally after we extracted you." Bourn's expression didn't change. "They're processing what he said about you."

Good. Let him process. Let him sit with "already dead inside" and "maybe for the best" and—

"You should sit," Bourn said. It wasn't a suggestion.

A metal folding chair sat a few feet away. Ahdia didn't remember it being there. Then again, she didn't remember much between "tongue out" and "throwing up on gravel," so her observational skills weren't exactly reliable right now.

She sat.

Mack stepped forward, offered her one of the coffee cups. "It's terrible," he said. "But it's caffeinated."

She took it. He wasn't wrong. It tasted like it had been brewed sometime last week and reheated in a microwave that had seen better days.

Bourn moved to stand in front of her. "What do you know about CADENS?"

"Literally nothing. Except you have creepy drones and you kidnapped me with physics."

"We didn't kidnap you. We relocated you for a conversation."

"That's just kidnapping with better PR."

Mack almost smiled. Bourn's expression remained neutral.

"CADENS," Bourn said, "is the Cataclysm Activity Detection and Engagement Network Sentry. We monitor and respond to cosmic-level threats. Events that fall outside normal understanding. Dimensional incursions. Reality fractures. Artifacts like the Hyper Seed."

"So you're like... government X-Files."

"Something like that."

Ahdia took another sip of terrible coffee. "And you want something from me."

"We want to show you what we know. Then we'll discuss what happens next."

The FAERIS drone materialized next to Bourn. Same one that had painted her. It hovered silently, surface rippling like oil on water.

"What is that thing?" Ahdia asked.

"Field-Adaptive Entanglement Reconnaissance and Infiltration System," Bourn said.

"FAERIS for short. Advanced surveillance and translocation technology. This particular unit has been tracking you since the warehouse."

"Tracking me."

"Among other things." Bourn gestured to the drone. Light erupted from it—not painting this time, projecting. A holographic display materialized in the air between them. Empty for now, waiting.

"You've been operating under the assumption that you were hidden. Training in secret. Helping your brother's team without them knowing. We need you to understand: you were never hidden. We've been watching since the beginning."

The holographic display flickered.

"FAERIS," Bourn said. "Warehouse incident. Night of August 14th. Begin playback."

The display resolved into an image. The warehouse. Two nights ago.

Ahdia watched herself—past-self, surveillance-self—stumble through the entrance in business-casual pajamas, wielding a wooden plank like it was a sword.

"Wait," Ahdia said. "Is that... what I was wearing?"

"Business casual pajamas," Mack confirmed. "And a wooden plank."

On the display, Ruth appeared. Past-Ahdia lowered the plank, looking relieved.

"We had three drones positioned around the warehouse," Bourn said. "Monitoring Kain's activity. You and Dr. Carter were... unexpected variables."

The guard appeared on the display. Ruth moved. The gunshot.

Past-Ahdia stumbled backward, hand going to her chest. Blood spreading across her shirt.

Ahdia touched her chest without thinking. No scar. No wound. The Hyper Seed had—

"FAERIS," Bourn said. "Her vitals at impact."

The drone's surface rippled. "Heart rate dropping. Blood pressure 60 over 40. Survival probability: 3.7%."

"You should have died," Mack said quietly. "We thought you did."

The display showed chaos. The Go Squad's arrival. Smoke grenades. Ruth being freed. Kain on the catwalk with the RPG launcher.

The rocket fired.

"Then this happened," Bourn said.

On the display, everything stopped.

The rocket hung mid-air, exhaust frozen mid-flare. The Go Squad locked in diving positions. Smoke suspended like sculptures.

And Past-Ahdia stood up.

"What the hell?" Ahdia whispered.

"FAERIS," Bourn said. "Time dilation parameters."

"Gravitational anomalies detected across 47-meter radius," the drone reported. "Subject vital signs: heart rate zero, respiration zero, body temperature dropping. Subject remains ambulatory."

Ahdia watched herself stumble around the frozen warehouse, wide-eyed and panicking.

On the display, Past-Ahdia approached the wooden crate. Reached inside.

The footage showed the moment of contact. The Seed—that impossible four-dimensional egg-thing that hurt to look at—collapsed into light. Poured into Past-Ahdia's hand, up her arm, into her chest.

The display flickered. FAERIS readings spiked. Past-Ahdia convulsed, eyes rolling back.

"What happened there?" Ahdia asked, leaning forward.

"We're not sure," Bourn said carefully. "Our sensors detected massive energy discharge. Visual distortion. Something that might have been communication, but we couldn't capture it. You were unconscious for 2.3 seconds. What did you experience?"

Ahdia's hand went to her chest involuntarily. "I saw... things. Images. It was like having a whole encyclopedia downloaded into my brain in two seconds except I couldn't read any of it. Just flashes. Something massive—I can't even describe it, like trying to describe a color that

doesn't exist. A moon forming. Earth, but wrong, like from space billions of years ago. And..."

She paused, struggling. "This sounds insane."

"Ms. Bacchus, you bonded with an interdimensional artifact while dying. 'Insane' is baseline."

"I felt like I was being watched. By something huge. And then it was just... over." She looked at the display. "When I came to, the bullet wound was healed. I knew I could freeze time. I didn't know how I knew. I just did."

On screen, Past-Ahdia gasped, stumbling backward. Her hand went to her chest. The bullet wound was gone. The Hyper Seed was inside her now. Part of her.

"That's when we knew," Bourn said quietly. "Previous Temporalists took decades to achieve initial bonding. You did it while dying. In less time than it takes to blink."

"How many?" Ahdia asked. "Previous Temporalists. How many were there?"

"Records suggest seven over the past three millennia. None in the last four hundred years. We thought the lineage was extinct."

On the display, the explosion continued its slow-motion bloom. Past-Ahdia ran back into the warehouse, grabbed Kain from the catwalk, started binding him with rope and zip-ties.

"You saved him," Mack said. There was something in his voice. Not quite approval, but close. "Kain. You could've left him in the blast. No one would've known."

"I thought about it," Ahdia admitted. "But that would make me a murderer. I already had enough therapy topics without adding that one."

The corner of Mack's mouth twitched. Might've been a smile.

The footage showed Past-Ahdia dragging the last unconscious thug outside. The fireball was thirty feet wide now, consuming half the warehouse.

Past-Ahdia sat on the dock's edge, legs dangling over the water. Trying to figure out how to unfreeze.

"We thought you'd be trapped," Bourn said. "Ancient texts suggest Temporalists aged decades during their first freeze. They'd enter 'The Unmoving' and couldn't release it. By the time they figured out how, they'd lived years in frozen time. Aged that amount in a single instant when they released."

"How long was I in there?"

Bourn looked at the drone. "FAERIS?"

"Duration: 47 minutes, 18 seconds subjective time. Real-time passage: 0.00 seconds."

Ahdia stared at the drone. "You can measure that? To the second?"

"FAERIS tracks temporal variance to the millisecond," Mack said.

Bourn's expression was carefully neutral, but Ahdia heard it anyway. Impressed. Maybe concerned. "The fastest learning curve we've ever recorded."

On the display, Past-Ahdia whispered something. Time snapped back. The explosion was instantaneous from everyone else's perspective. The Go Squad landed outside, confused. Ruth looked around frantically.

And Past-Ahdia ran.

The footage ended. The holographic display went dark.

"That's when we made our decision," Bourn said. "You bonded with the most dangerous artifact on the planet. Demonstrated unprecedented learning speed. And chose to save lives over tactical advantage." She paused. "We needed to know if you were an asset or a threat."

"So you kept watching."

"Yes."

The FAERIS drone's surface rippled. The display flickered back to life.

"Your training period was... informative," Bourn said.

New footage. Ahdia's apartment building. Night. Two days after the warehouse.

The display showed Past-Ahdia climbing the stairs. All thirty-four floors. Wheezing by floor fifteen. Nearly collapsing by floor twenty-two.

"You could've frozen time and walked up without effort," Mack observed.

"I didn't want to use it," Ahdia said. "I had this feeling—instinct, maybe—that using it was costing me something. I thought maybe I could... not do that."

"That lasted about six hours," Bourn said.

The display fast-forwarded. Same day, afternoon. Past-Ahdia in her living room, staring at a coffee mug.

Past-Ahdia yelled something at the mug. Slammed her hand on the counter.

The world froze.

"Emotional trigger," Ahdia said quietly. "I had to get angry."

"And then calm down to release it," Bourn said. "We watched you practice. FAERIS, how many successful freeze-release cycles in the first training session?"

"Seventeen successful cycles," the drone reported. "Subject endurance increasing. Duration extended from 6.4 seconds to six hours continuous freeze within 48-hour period."

"Six hours?" Ahdia said. "I thought it was like... a few minutes."

"Time gets weird when you're the one freezing it," Mack said.

The display showed hours of footage, compressed into minutes. Past-Ahdia freezing and unfreezing. Over and over. Holding it longer each time.

By the end of the montage, Past-Ahdia was holding a freeze for six hours of frozen time. Walking around her apartment like she owned the stopped world.

"Then you got ambitious," Mack said.

The display shifted. Different location. Ruth's apartment building. Night.

"Oh no," Ahdia muttered.

The footage showed her breaking into Ruth's apartment. Gloom Girl's studio. Crimson Sable's community center. Battlea's place.

"You were gathering intelligence on your brother's team," Bourn said. "Learning their capabilities. Weaknesses. Resources."

"I was trying to understand them," Ahdia protested. "I wanted to help but I didn't know how—"

"We know." Bourn's tone was matter-of-fact. "You were training yourself for tactical support operations."

The display showed Past-Ahdia gently tapping Battlea's punching bag.

Time unfroze.

The bag swung like it had been hit with a battering ram. The chain groaned. A ceiling bolt bent.

Ahdia stared. "How hard did I hit that?"

"FAERIS?" Bourn prompted.

"Force amplification ratio: 1:47," the drone reported. "Subject's gentle contact translated to 47 times normal impact force upon temporal release."

"Forty-seven times," Ahdia repeated. "I barely touched it."

"By the end of two days," Bourn said, "you could hold a freeze for thirty minutes. Move through secured locations without leaving traces. Amplify force with precision control. You went from 'can barely unfreeze' to 'tactical asset' in forty-eight hours."

She paused.

"Then the police ambush happened."

The display went dark again. Waiting.

Ahdia sat there, coffee cup forgotten in her hands. Cold now. Still terrible.

She'd known, abstractly, that she wasn't as hidden as she'd hoped. Some instinct had warned her she was being watched. She'd seen the drone outside her window and convinced herself it was paranoia.

But watching herself from the outside—seeing every fumbling attempt, every mistake, every moment she thought was private analyzed with timestamps and threat assessments and capability evaluations—

"You've been watching me break into people's apartments," she said. Her voice came out flat. "Training. Experimenting. And you just... took notes?"

"We needed to understand what you were capable of," Bourn said. "And what you would choose to do with those capabilities."

"So this was a test."

"Everything is a test, Ms. Bacchus. You just didn't know you were taking it."

Ahdia looked up at her. Bourn's expression was still neutral, still professional. But there was something in her eyes. Not quite sympathy. Assessment, maybe. Like she was still deciding something.

"The force amplification," Mack said, pulling her attention. "Did you figure that out intentionally or was it an accident?"

"Accident," Ahdia admitted. "I dropped a book while everything was frozen. When I unfroze, it shot across the room like I'd thrown it. So I tested it. Pushed things gently in frozen time, watched them fly when time resumed."

"Forty-seven times amplification," Bourn said. "That's significant. A gentle push becomes a knockout blow. A tap becomes a battering ram."

"I was trying not to kill anyone," Ahdia said. "I thought if I could help them without them knowing, maybe—"

She stopped. Because what? Maybe Firas would somehow appreciate her despite thinking she was dead? Maybe she could prove she wasn't worthless from beyond the grave?

"You wanted to help," Mack said. It wasn't a question.

"I wanted to not be useless," Ahdia said quietly. "For once."

The rooftop was quiet for a moment. Wind rustled against the air conditioning unit. Somewhere below, the Go Squad was probably still processing Firas's words. Still thinking she was dead.

Still not knowing she'd saved them. Twice.

"Your psychological profile," Bourn said, and Ahdia's stomach dropped, "suggests significant depression, social isolation, lack of direction. Multiple therapists over the past decade. No employment history longer than three months. Estrangement from family members."

"Wow. You really did your homework."

"We needed to know if you'd be reliable."

"And?"

Bourn didn't answer immediately. She glanced at Mack, who gave the slightest shrug.

"You climbed thirty-four flights of stairs because you didn't want to waste life force helping yourself," Bourn said. "Then you spent that life force helping people who didn't know you existed. Broke into their homes not to steal, but to understand them. To prepare to protect them."

She leaned forward slightly.

"Your profile says you're unmotivated. Unreliable. Can't commit to anything. But in forty-eight hours, you taught yourself capabilities that took previous Temporalists decades. And you used them to save lives."

"So what does that make me?" Ahdia asked. "Asset or threat?"

"That," Bourn said, "depends on what you do next."

The FAERIS drone's surface rippled again. The display flickered.

"The police ambush," Bourn said. "That's when we knew for certain."

Chapter 14

"Knew what for certain?" Ahdia demanded.

Bourn stood, brushing invisible dust from her suit. "I'd rather show you the rest at our facility. The rooftop drone projection has limitations. And we should get you off this roof before your brother's team finishes their discussion downstairs."

"Your facility."

"CADENS operations center. Secure. Climate controlled. Better coffee." Mack's expression suggested this last point was debatable.

Ahdia looked at the holographic display, still flickering with the promise of more footage. More surveillance. More proof that she'd never been as hidden as she thought.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice, Ms. Bacchus." Bourn gestured to the FAERIS drone. "But if you want answers about what we know, what's happening with Kain and the police, and what your parents were actually doing in Montana—you'll come with us."

The Montana comment hit like a punch. Ahdia's parents. CADENS knew something about her parents.

"Fine," she said, standing. Her legs still felt shaky from the first translocation. "But if I throw up on your fancy facility floor—"

"We have protocols," Mack said.

The FAERIS drone moved closer. Light began to gather at its center.

"Oh no," Ahdia said. "Not again—"

The beam painted her. Bourn and Mack stepped closer, into the targeting zone.

"Deep breath," Bourn said. "It doesn't help, but people feel better if they try."

Space inverted.

This time Ahdia knew what was coming, which somehow made it worse. Her particles scattered across impossible distance. Location became meaningless. Her brain tried to hold onto "rooftop" and "somewhere else" simultaneously and failed at both.

Reality folded.

When it unfolded, she was on her knees again. Different floor. Not gravel. Polished concrete. Very polished. She could see her reflection in it as she threw up.

"Protocol Sigma," Mack said calmly into his radio. "Command center, level three. Standard cleanup."

Ahdia wiped her mouth, looked up.

She was in what looked like a command center from a sci-fi movie. Multiple holographic displays floated in the air. Workstations with screens showing data streams she couldn't parse. People in tactical gear and lab coats moving with purpose. The far wall was floor-to-ceiling screens showing... were those satellite feeds? Drone footage? Live feeds from cataclysm events around the world?

"Welcome to CADENS," Bourn said. "This is where we actually work."

A person in janitorial uniform appeared with a mop and bucket, completely unfazed by the woman throwing up on their floor. Clearly this happened often enough to have a protocol name.

Ahdia stood on shaky legs. "You said better coffee."

"I said we had coffee. Better is relative." Bourn gestured toward a door. "Conference room this way. The footage is already queued."

Mack offered his arm. Ahdia ignored it, walking under her own power even though her legs felt like jelly and her inner ear was pretty sure gravity was a suggestion, not a rule.

The conference room was smaller than the command center. A table. Chairs. A larger holographic display already humming with standby power. The FAERIS drone followed them in, settling into position near the display.

Ahdia collapsed into a chair.

"Water?" Mack offered, producing a bottle from somewhere.

She took it. Drank half in one go. The room was still spinning slightly, but at least she wasn't actively throwing up anymore.

Bourn sat across from her. "The police ambush. Three simultaneous engagements across the city. Every member of the Go Squad kettled by coordinated police response. We were monitoring their communications. They knew exactly where your brother's team would be."

"How?"

"That's what we wanted to know." Bourn nodded to the FAERIS drone. "Show her."

The holographic display came to life.

The footage showed Past-Ahdia running. Ten blocks from the warehouse docks. Uphill. Lungs burning, legs like expired Jell-O.

The timestamp in the corner read: Night of the warehouse explosion. Hours after bonding.

She ran all the way back to her penthouse. Ten blocks. Uphill. Her lungs burned and her legs felt like they were made of expired Jell-O, but she kept going because what else was she supposed to do? Stand around at the docks and wait for the police to show up and ask why there was a cosmic artifact-shaped hole in a wooden crate?

She didn't notice the weirdness until she passed a guy walking his dog. The dog was mid-bark, mouth open, but no sound came out. The guy was frozen mid-step. His watch—one of those fancy digital ones that probably cost more than her monthly groceries budget back when she used to buy groceries—showed numbers that weren't changing.

Ahdia kept running. Passed a couple arguing on the sidewalk, both locked in place like someone hit pause on the universe's remote. Passed a taxi that had stopped in the middle of the street, driver slumped over the wheel, not moving.

It was like she was carrying an invisible bubble with her. Or maybe a force field? Like in that X-Men movie with the blue lady who could run really fast. Or wait, that was The Flash. DC and Marvel really needed to get their speedster situations sorted out.

Everyone within maybe twenty feet of her just... stopped. And when she ran past them, they started again. She could see it happening in her peripheral vision—people jerking back to life after she passed, looking around confused, checking their phones to figure out why they'd just lost thirty seconds.

In the conference room, Ahdia leaned forward. "Wait, I was freezing time while running? I didn't even know I was doing that."

"FAERIS," Bourn said. "Duration of unconscious freeze during subject's return trajectory."

"23 minutes continuous," the drone reported. "Radius: approximately 6.1 meters. Subject maintaining temporal field unconsciously while in motion."

"Twenty-three minutes," Bourn said. "Maintaining a time freeze while running at full speed. Without even realizing it."

On the display, Past-Ahdia reached her building, gasping for air, chest burning. The doorman was frozen mid-wave. She ran past him toward the elevator, hit the call button.

Nothing happened.

Right. Because time was frozen. Because she was still doing the thing.

The elevator wouldn't come. The lights above it weren't changing. Thirty-four floors up and the elevator was about as useful as a chocolate teapot.

She looked at the door marked STAIRS.

"You've got to be kidding me."

She pushed through the door and started climbing.

By the third floor, her thighs were burning. By the seventh, she was gripping the railing like it was the only thing keeping her upright. Somewhere around floor ten she passed what she thought was the gym level—there was a gym in the building, she was pretty sure, or maybe that was just something the real estate agent had said when her parents bought the place. She'd never actually checked.

By the fifteenth, she was pretty sure she was going to die. Like, actually die. Heart attack at twenty-three because she'd spent the last however-many-years eating gas station food and watching TV twelve hours a day instead of doing literally anything that resembled exercise.

Her heart was hammering so hard she could feel it in her ears. Her vision was getting spotty. The Hyper Seed in her chest was ice-cold and her heart was trying to explode and this was it, this was how she died, in a stairwell, frozen in time, and no one would find her body for weeks—

Wait.

She stopped on the landing of floor twenty-two, bent over, hands on her knees, wheezing. Her heart was going so fast it felt like a hummingbird was trapped in her ribcage.

What if she could... slow it down?

She'd frozen time around her. An invisible bubble. What if she could make the bubble smaller? What if she could make it just... herself?

She focused on her heart. On the frantic pounding. On the Hyper Seed that sat right next to it, cold and heavy and there.

Slow down. Please. Just a little.

Her heartbeat stuttered. Then settled. Not stopped—she wasn't trying to kill herself—but slower. Steadier. Like she'd been sitting on the couch instead of climbing what felt like Mount Everest in business-casual pajamas.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh that's—"

Her vision swam. She grabbed the railing as the stairwell tilted sideways.

Right. Slower heart meant less blood pumping to her brain. Her legs were still screaming for oxygen. Her lungs were still burning. She wasn't actually fixing anything, just... redistributing the crisis. Making her heart not explode while the rest of her suffocated.

But hey, at least she wouldn't have a heart attack in a stairwell. Silver linings.

She kept climbing. Floors twenty-three through thirty-four. Each step felt like wading through concrete. Her vision kept going spotty. She had to stop twice to keep from passing out, leaning against the wall until the gray edges receded.

When she finally pushed through the door to the penthouse level, she let go of the time bubble around her heart.

Her pulse SLAMMED back to full speed. The sudden pounding was so violent she actually gasped, stumbling forward, catching herself against the wall. It felt like her heart was trying to escape through her ribs.

She was sweating through her shirt and her legs felt like overcooked spaghetti and her heart was having what could only be described as a panic attack, but she was alive.

She stumbled to her apartment door. Got the key in the lock on the third try. Pushed inside.

And found Firas on her couch.

Not moving.

"Firas?" Her voice came out small.

He was lying on his side, one arm under his head, like he'd just crashed there to sleep. His mouth was slightly open. His chest wasn't moving. At all.

"Firas!"

She dropped to her knees next to the couch, grabbed his shoulder, shook him. Nothing. He was warm but he wasn't breathing and oh god oh god she'd killed him, she'd somehow killed her brother with her stupid cosmic time powers—

Wait.

She looked at her hands. Looked at the clock on the wall. The second hand wasn't ticking.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me."

She'd done it again. Frozen time. The panic had triggered it.

She forced herself to breathe. Or tried to. The Hyper Seed was ice in her chest, radiating cold through her whole body. It hurt. It hurt so much but she pushed through it, focused on the thought: Let. Go.

Nothing happened.

Please let go. I don't want this. Turn off. Stop. Unfreeze. Ctrl-Z. Whatever the opposite of freezing is, do that.

Still nothing.

Firas wasn't breathing.

"Please," she whispered. "Please please please I can't—I can't do this again, I can't lose—"

The clock ticked.

Firas took a breath. His chest rose and fell. His eyes fluttered but didn't open. He was just asleep.

Ahdia sat back on her heels, shaking. The Hyper Seed in her chest pulsed once, then settled. Still cold. Still there. But quieter.

She'd done it. Unfrozen. Twice now.

So apparently the trigger was emotion. Get scared, freeze time. Calm down, unfreeze.

Great. Super useful for someone with clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder. What could possibly go wrong?

Firas mumbled something in his sleep and rolled over. Ahdia stood up on shaky legs, went to the kitchen, and stared at the coffee mug she'd left out that morning.

She needed to learn how to control this. Because if she didn't, she was going to accidentally freeze her brother to death the next time he startled her by showing up unannounced.

The next afternoon.

Ahdia stared at the coffee mug on her kitchen counter.

"Freeze," she whispered.

Nothing happened. The steam rose lazily from the cup. The clock on the microwave ticked to 2:47 PM.

"Stop. Pause. Time out. Za Warudo!" She'd tried everything from voice commands to anime references. Her hands were raised like she was Force-choking the mug. She felt like an idiot.

The Hyper Seed hummed in her chest—she could feel it, a cold ember lodged where the bullet wound had been. But feeling it and using it were apparently two different skill sets.

The instinct kept nagging at her: using this power cost something. She didn't know what or how much, but she could feel it draining her.

Great. She had cosmic superpowers and they were literally killing her. Very on-brand for her luck.

She tried again. Concentrated harder. Thought about the warehouse, about the rocket crawling through the air, about moving Ruth like she weighed nothing.

The mug sat there. Mocking her.

"Come ON!" She slammed her hand on the counter.

The world stopped.

Everything. The steam froze mid-curl. The digital clock stopped changing. The hum of the refrigerator cut out. Even the dust particles in the afternoon light hung suspended.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh shit."

She walked around the mug. It worked. It actually worked. She'd done it by accident—by getting frustrated—but she'd done it.

Now how did she turn it off?

She tried thinking unfreeze. Nothing. She tried snapping her fingers, clapping, even doing a little dance she'd seen on TikTok once. The world stayed frozen.

Panic started creeping in. What if she was stuck like this forever? What if everyone else was frozen and she was the only person moving for the rest of—

Time snapped back.

The steam continued rising. The clock read 2:47 PM. No time had passed.

Okay. Okay. She could do this. Get mad, freeze time. Relax, unfreeze time. Simple enough.

Except it wasn't.

Over the next several hours, she practiced. Got frustrated, froze time. Calmed down, unfroze. Froze. Unfroze. Each time she held it for maybe five, ten seconds of frozen time before she lost concentration.

By midnight, she was exhausted. Her chest ached where the Hyper Seed sat. She felt hollowed out, like she'd run a marathon.

But she'd done it. Seventeen times.

Day two, she woke up with a theory.

If time was frozen, then technically she could practice for hours without any real-world time passing. Yeah, it would cost her something—she could feel that much—but if she was careful, learned to be efficient, maybe she could make it work.

She could buy more time by spending time. The irony wasn't lost on her.

She stood in her living room, moved the coffee table aside, and froze time.

This time, instead of unfreezing immediately, she held it. Pushed past the five-second mark. Ten seconds. Twenty. A minute. Her chest ached but she kept going.

She needed to learn what she could do.

First test: moving objects. She picked up a throw pillow and tossed it across the room. In frozen time, it sailed through the air at normal speed—her normal speed—and landed on the couch. When she unfroze time, would it just appear there or would it fly?

She let time resume.

The pillow stayed on the couch. Just appeared there, like it had teleported.

Interesting.

She froze time again. This time she picked up the pillow and threw it hard—as hard as she could—then unfroze immediately.

The pillow shot across the room like it had been fired from a cannon, hit the wall, and knocked a framed photo off its hook.

"Oh shit!" But also—"Yes!"

She was amplifying force. A gentle push in frozen time equaled a massive push in real time.

She spent the next hour—frozen-time hour, which was maybe three minutes of real time—testing this. Pushing the coffee table. Dropping books. Flicking a pen.

Everything she did in frozen time got amplified when time resumed. The harder she pushed, the more force. The physics didn't make sense but she wasn't about to question it.

By the end of the first day, she'd spent maybe six hours in frozen time. Her chest felt like ice. The Hyper Seed was cold, so cold it hurt.

But she could freeze time at will now. Hold it for minutes. Move things. Amplify force.

She needed more practice. Real-world practice.

And she had an idea.

Over the next two days, Ahdia became a ghost.

Ruth's apartment first. Nice building, the kind with a doorman who definitely got paid more than Ahdia ever had at any job she'd quit after two weeks. She froze time in the lobby, walked past the security guard mid-yawn, caught the elevator door someone had just exited. The rest she took via stairs because frozen elevators felt like a lawsuit waiting to happen.

Ruth's door was unlocked. Which, okay, what the hell? You fight crime at night and you don't lock your door?

Inside, Ruth was asleep, frozen mid-breath. Ahdia practiced stepping around the bed without bumping anything. On the nightstand: The New England Journal of Medicine with sticky

notes. Next to it, Trauma Surgery: A Practical Guide. The kind of books you read when you're already a doctor but can't stop trying to save people.

In the closet, behind winter coats Ruth would never need in Caledonia's mild climate, the tactical gear. Black Lycra, utility belt, infrared goggles. Like something out of that show about the billionaire with the cave. Or wait, was that Batman? She could never keep the DC and Marvel stuff straight.

Photos on the fridge. Ruth and Firas at some restaurant, both smiling like people who didn't patrol rooftops looking for trouble. Ahdia practiced picking up the photo, looking at it, putting it back in the exact same spot. Her hands didn't shake. Good.

Next: Gloom Girl. Tess Whitford. Tiny studio, window cracked open on the fire escape. Prescription bottle on the bathroom sink: Sertraline 100mg. Ahdia knew that one. Hadn't helped her either.

Tess was asleep on a futon, still in her work clothes. Another depressed girl just trying to make rent. Yeah. Ahdia got it.

Victor Hernandez ran a community center in the part of town where "nonprofit" meant "we're one grant away from closing." Ahdia froze time in the hallway, walked past a janitor mid-mop, found the office door propped with a doorstop. Sloppy. But convenient.

The desk had flyers for food drives, ESL classes, after-school programs. A donation jar with maybe six dollars in coins. And tucked in the corner, a photo in a frame: Victor and a woman on their wedding day, both grinning. The woman's face was scratched out with black marker, deep enough to gouge the glass.

Ahdia didn't touch that one.

She practiced moving through the office without making sound. Even though time was frozen and no one could hear her anyway, muscle memory mattered. That's what the training montages in movies always said.

Leah Turner. Battlea. The Bean Post barista who also happened to be a roller derby jammer, which Ahdia only knew because she'd watched that Ellen Page movie about roller derby at 3 AM once while eating an entire box of Thin Mints.

Ahdia froze time outside the coffee shop at closing, followed Leah home, slipped in behind her before the door shut. Waited while Leah got ready for bed, then explored once she was asleep.

Punching bag in the corner, held together with duct tape and spite. On the bookshelf: The Dance of Anger, Radical Acceptance, three different workbooks about managing rage. A roller derby helmet covered in stickers. A name tag from the Bean Post with a smiley face drawn on it in Sharpie.

Ahdia tested her amplification on the punching bag. Gentle tap in frozen time. Unfroze.

The bag swung like she'd hit it with a baseball bat. The chain groaned. One of the ceiling bolts bent.

"Oops," Ahdia said to the empty apartment. Or, not empty. Leah was sleeping in the next room. But close enough.

By the end of two days, Ahdia could hold a freeze for thirty minutes. Could slip in and out of places without leaving a trace. Could amplify force with enough control that she probably wouldn't accidentally kill someone.

Probably.

And she'd seen enough to know that Firas's team wasn't special because they had powers. They were special because they kept showing up anyway.

That second night, the Go Squad went on patrol. And Ahdia followed, ready to put everything she'd learned to the test.

Two nights after the warehouse. The police ambush.

Gloom Girl jumped off the Frederick Douglass Bridge.

Ahdia froze time, ran up the bridge, and plucked her out of mid-air. Placed her just above the roof where Ruth was standing with binoculars.

Gloom Girl has teleporting powers now. That's the story, anyway.

By the time she unfroze, her lungs were burning. She'd just sprinted up a bridge. At full speed. While carrying a person.

Her heart was hammering. Her legs felt like jelly. She bent over, gasping, thinking about slowing her heart rate again like she'd done in the stairwell.

Then she remembered how that went. The dizziness. The gray edges. The way her pulse had slammed back the second she let go, worse than before.

What else could she slow?

She looked down at her trembling legs. Wait. What if it wasn't about her heart? What if—

She focused on her leg muscles. Same cold pressure from the Hyper Seed, but directed down instead of at her chest.

Slow down. Just you.

The burning stopped. Not completely gone, but manageable. Like she'd been walking instead of sprinting. Her heart rate dropped naturally—her body didn't think it needed the oxygen anymore.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh that's way better."

She was still sweating though. Still hot. Her muscles didn't know they were working, but her body sure did.

"For such cosmic power," she muttered, wiping her forehead, "it sure is a sweaty one."

Mack let out a low whistle. "She figured out selective time dilation. Her own muscles. Mid-climb."

Ahdia looked at him. "Is that... hard to do?"

"FAERIS," Bourn said. "Previous Temporalist development timeline for selective biological manipulation."

"Average development time: 12 to 47 years post-bonding," the drone reported.

"You did it in under an hour," Bourn said, looking at present-Ahdia. "That's what made us decide you were worth recruiting. You problem-solve with cosmic abilities the way most people problem-solve with everyday tools."

The footage fast-forwarded. Time stamps jumping. FAERIS drones tracking different locations across the city.

"We had eyes on all three ambush sites," Bourn said. "Ruth on the Frederick Douglass Bridge. Battlea and Sable at the construction site in Little Poland. Gloom Girl and Night Knight near the waterfront."

The display split into three feeds. Simultaneous police operations.

"Coordinated perfectly," Mack added. "Someone fed Chief Whitford their locations. All three teams kettled at the same time."

The footage focused on one feed. Past-Ahdia appearing in the shadows near the construction site.

"Then you showed up," Bourn said.

The display showed montage: Past-Ahdia at three locations. Construction site—repositioning police dogs, amplifying punches. Frederick Douglass Bridge—catching Gloom Girl mid-jump. Waterfront—adjusting Night Knight's trajectory.

"Three simultaneous interventions within twenty minutes," Bourn said. "Ensuring no one died—police included."

"FAERIS," Mack said. "Total power usage duration for police ambush intervention."

"Six hours continuous temporal manipulation across multiple sites," the drone reported. "Force amplification applied 47 times. Life force expenditure: 23% of total reserves."

Ahdia's face went pale. "Twenty-three percent? In one night?"

By the end of the compilation, the Go Squad thought they had superpowers.

Present-Ahdia sat back in her chair. "I wanted them to be okay. I wanted them to think they could do this without me."

"You gave them confidence," Mack said. "Made them believe in themselves."

"While exhausting yourself," Bourn added.

The display shifted. An alley. Past-Ahdia collapsed against the wall, crying silently into her sleeve.

Present-Ahdia looked away. She didn't need to watch that part.

"Ten minutes before you could stand," Mack said quietly. "You limped home. Took eight ibuprofen. Passed out on the couch."

"And woke up the next day to do it again," Bourn finished.

The display shifted again. New footage. The day after the police ambush. The parkour academy, time frozen.

Past-Ahdia standing in front of frozen Firas, tongue out.

Then—

The footage showed Past-Ahdia standing in front of frozen Firas, tongue still out. Then she stumbled, catching herself against a foam obstacle.

Past-Ahdia pressed her hand to her chest. The same place where the Hyper Seed had entered. She looked pale, shaky.

In the conference room, present-Ahdia leaned forward. "I could feel it. Like something was burning through me. Every time I used the powers, it got colder."

"Colder?" Bourn asked.

"The Seed. In my chest. When I freeze time, it's cold. Really cold. But after—when I let go—it feels like it's taking something from me. Like I'm emptying out."

The footage continued. Past-Ahdia slid down to sit on the floor, knees pulled up. She looked exhausted. Scared.

"That's when you realized," Mack said quietly.

"That the power wasn't free," Ahdia finished. "That it was costing me. I didn't know how much or what exactly, but I could feel it. Like... like running on a battery that doesn't recharge."

Bourn looked at the drone. "FAERIS, bio-sign analysis from that session."

"Cumulative degradation detected across all power usage instances. Pattern consistent with permanent cellular depletion, not temporary fatigue."

"Permanent," Ahdia repeated quietly.

The footage showed Past-Ahdia sitting there for several minutes. Then standing. Walking over to where Firas was frozen mid-conversation with Victor.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then unfroze time and walked away before he could turn around.

The holographic display went dark.

The conference room was quiet except for the hum of equipment. Ahdia sat motionless, staring at where the footage had been.

"That was two days ago," Bourn said quietly. "You figured out your powers were draining you. That you couldn't keep using them without consequence. And then you hid behind a foam obstacle to stick your tongue out at your brother."

"I was processing," Ahdia said weakly.

"You were regressing," Bourn corrected. Not unkindly. "After everything you'd accomplished—saving your brother's team twice, mastering abilities that should've taken decades, preventing multiple deaths—you heard what he really thought of you. And it broke something."

Ahdia looked down at her hands. Still shaking slightly from the translocation. Or maybe from watching herself on surveillance for the past hour. Hard to tell.

"My parents," she said. "You've been monitoring this thing—the Hyper Seed. Did they... was their work in Montana connected to this?"

Bourn and Mack exchanged a look.

"Your parents," Bourn said carefully, "were working with CADENS when they disappeared in Montana. Or rather, working adjacent to us. They were tracking reports of a Hyper Seed manifestation. We were monitoring from a distance."

Ahdia's chest tightened. "They died looking for this thing? For the thing that's inside me now?"

"They died protecting it," Mack said. "From people who wanted to use it. People like Kain."

"The Montana excavation wasn't an accident," Bourn continued. "Your parents discovered the Seed's location. Someone else did too. There was a confrontation. An explosion. By the time our team arrived, your parents were gone. The Seed was gone. We thought it was destroyed."

"Until Kain had it," Ahdia finished.

"Until Kain had it," Bourn confirmed. "We don't know how he acquired it. But we'd been tracking him for months before the warehouse. When you bonded with it—when you became it—you inherited your parents' legacy."

"Lucky me."

Bourn stood, walked to the window. The CADENS facility stretched out below—multiple levels, dozens of personnel, screens showing global cataclysm monitoring.

"Our analysis suggests you're running on a finite energy source," Bourn said, not looking at Ahdia. "The Hyper Seed bonding replaced approximately half your life force with... something else. Every time you use your powers, you're draining what remains. At your current rate of expenditure—six hours of active manipulation, force amplification, multi-site intervention—you

have maybe eighteen months. Less if you keep pushing yourself the way you did during the police ambush."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

"Eighteen months," Ahdia repeated numbly.

"Unless we can find another way," Mack added. "CADENS has been studying Temporalists for decades. We have resources, research, ancient texts. Maybe there's a way to slow the drain, or restore what's been lost."

Bourn turned back to face her. "But we need your cooperation. We need you to work with us, not hide from us. We need you to trust us."

"Trust the shadow government that's been spying on me?"

"Trust the organization that knew you were at critical energy expenditure and intervened before you killed yourself helping people who don't even know you exist," Bourn said sharply. Then, softer: "We extracted you from that academy because if we'd waited any longer, you would've spent the rest of your life—however short—watching your brother mourn you while you hid in the shadows. That's not living. That's dying slowly."

Ahdia wanted to argue. Wanted to say Bourn was wrong, that she had a plan, that she was fine.

But she'd been watching herself on surveillance for an hour. She'd seen herself collapse in an alley, crying. Seen herself climb thirty-four flights of stairs rather than use her powers. Seen herself give everything to protect people who thought she was dead.

Bourn was right. She'd been dying slowly.

"So what do you want from me?" Ahdia asked finally.

Bourn sat back down across from her. "First, we want you to stop killing yourself. Second, we want you to let us help you figure out how to survive this. Third—" She paused. "Kain is still out there. Chief Whitford is still hunting your brother's team. And you're the only one who can help them without exposing what they really are."

"No pressure," Ahdia muttered.

"Exactly the right amount of pressure," Bourn said. "The question is: are you going to keep hiding and burning through your life force alone? Or are you going to work with us?"

Ahdia looked at the darkened holographic display. Looked at Bourn's steady gaze. At Mack's quiet support.

"Work with you how?"

"Training. Research. Mission support." Bourn stood. "Kain is escalating. Chief Whitford is escalating. We need eyes on both of them, and you're the only asset who can operate in ways they can't detect or counter. In exchange, we give you every resource we have to extend your life expectancy beyond eighteen months."

"You want me to spy for you."

"We want you to stop Kain from acquiring more artifacts. Stop Whitford from weaponizing the police against enhanced individuals. And let us study your capabilities so we can understand what's coming." Bourn's expression didn't change. "Your personal life—your brother, his team, whatever family drama you're processing—that's yours to handle or not handle. We don't care. We care about preventing the next cataclysm."

Mack leaned forward. "But we do need an answer. Are you in or not?"

Ahdia thought about the footage. About collapsing in an alley, crying. About helping people who'd never know. About dying slowly while pretending it was noble.

About having eighteen months left. Maybe.

"What happens if I say no?"

"We keep monitoring," Bourn said simply. "We intervene when you're about to do something that gets you killed. We track Kain and Whitford without your help. And when whatever cosmic threat is coming finally arrives, we hope we're prepared enough without a Temporalist on our side." She paused. "But you keep burning through your energy alone. And you die in eighteen months, give or take. Alone."

The word hung in the air.

Alone.

Like she'd been for years. Like she'd be forever if she kept hiding.

"I'm in," Ahdia said quietly. "But I have conditions."

Chapter 15

"What conditions?" Bourn asked.

Ahdia set down the water bottle. Her hands had stopped shaking from the translocation. Mostly.

"You've been watching Caledonia. You know what it's like down there. Police state. Whitford's thugs beating people for existing while Black. Kain in bed with all of it. People are terrified."

"We're aware of the sociopolitical climate," Bourn said.

"The Go Squad is the only thing giving them hope," Ahdia continued. "Real people standing up to corruption. Not some government agency. Not some shadowy organization with acronyms. Just... people. Who decided they'd had enough."

Mack nodded slightly. "They've become symbols."

"Exactly. And if Caledonia finds out it was all me—that my brother's team doesn't actually have powers—that hope dies. They become frauds. The city goes back to accepting that nothing can change."

Bourn's expression didn't shift. "You want us to help you maintain a deception so a handful of parkour vigilantes can continue street-level operations against corrupt municipal authorities."

"Yes."

"And you believe this matters."

"It matters to them. That's enough."

Bourn and Mack exchanged a look. Some silent communication Ahdia couldn't read.

"The sociopolitical stability of authoritarian regimes," Bourn said carefully, "has strategic implications. Populations under systematic oppression become... vulnerable to external influences. Maintaining indigenous resistance movements can prevent larger destabilization events."

Ahdia blinked. "So... yes?"

"We'll provide support," Bourn said. "FAERIS surveillance of Go Squad operations. Real-time threat assessment. Translocation to intervention points. Extraction afterward. You provide tactical assistance during frozen time. They maintain belief in their capabilities. Caledonia maintains hope. We gather operational data on your power usage and limitations."

"Everyone wins," Mack added.

"Except I'm still dying in eighteen months."

"Which brings us to our research division," Bourn said. She stood. "Follow me."

The CADENS facility was bigger than Ahdia had realized from the command center. Bourn led them through corridors lined with screens showing surveillance feeds from around the world. Ahdia caught glimpses: satellite imagery, drone footage, what looked like underwater volcanos, something that might've been the Northern Lights except it was green and pulsing wrong.

"How many of these places are being watched?" Ahdia asked.

"Currently? 247 active monitoring sites," Bourn said. "Down from 890 during the Cold War. Cataclysm activity has decreased since the 1960s."

"Why?"

"Unknown. Working theory: dimensional barriers strengthened after atmospheric nuclear testing stopped. Or testing weakened barriers and they're slowly recovering. Or complete coincidence. We don't have enough data."

They stopped at a door marked RESEARCH DIVISION - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Bourn scanned her palm. The door opened.

Inside was controlled chaos. Workstations covered in equipment Ahdia didn't recognize. Holographic displays showing equations that made her head hurt. People in lab coats moving between stations, arguing about graphs, scribbling on whiteboards.

And in the center, a man hunched over a workstation, talking rapidly to himself while typing.

"—can't be right, the temporal variance should be inverse not proportional unless the field radius affects decay rate which would mean—" He looked up, saw Bourn, and immediately stood so fast his chair rolled backward into a filing cabinet with a loud crash. "Director! I didn't—sorry, I was just—the readings from the warehouse event were—"

He was Japanese, Ahdia's height, probably mid-to-late twenties, wearing a wrinkled button-down with the sleeves rolled up. His glasses were slightly crooked and he had that specific exhausted look of someone who'd been awake for thirty hours and forgotten about it.

"Dr. Ryu," Bourn said. "This is Ahdia Bacchus. Our Temporalist."

"Yes! I know! I mean, I've been studying your—not YOU, obviously, that would be—I mean the data from your power usage, which is fascinating, not that you're just data, you're a person, obviously a person, a very—" He stopped, took a breath, adjusted his glasses. "Sorry. I talk too much when I'm excited. Also when I'm nervous. Also in general."

Ahdia found herself smiling despite everything. "It's fine. I watched a lot of Agents of Shield. You remind me of Fitz."

His face lit up. "Oh my god, Fitz! Yes! People say that! Though I'm not as good with engineering as he is, I'm more theoretical physics and dimensional mathematics, but the—" He caught himself. "Sorry. Doing it again."

"Dr. Ryu will be your handler," Bourn said. "He manages FAERIS operations and will serve as your tactical support during missions."

"I'm your guy in the chair," Ryu said, then immediately looked embarrassed. "That's a Spider-Man reference. You probably don't—"

"I know," Ahdia said. "I've seen Homecoming like six times."

"Seven for me. Well, eight if you count the time I fell asleep and had to rewatch—" He stopped again. "Right. Professional. I can be professional."

Mack was definitely smiling now.

Bourn continued as if the exchange hadn't happened. "Dr. Ryu has been monitoring your power usage since the warehouse incident. He'll brief you on what we know, what we don't know, and begin baseline testing to understand your capabilities and limitations."

"I've prepared a presentation," Ryu said, gesturing to a holographic display. "It's only forty-seven slides. I cut it down from ninety."

"We'll skip the presentation," Bourn said. "Run the physical assessments first. I want baseline biometrics before she uses powers again."

Ryu looked briefly crushed, then rallied. "Right. Yes. Testing. I can do testing." He gestured to a door at the back of the lab. "Medical bay is this way."

Bourn and Mack left.

Ahdia followed Ryu into the medical bay. It looked like every sci-fi show's idea of a futuristic hospital—white walls, holographic monitors, equipment that hummed with what she assumed was very expensive technology.

"Okay," Ryu said, pulling up a workstation. "So. Baseline biometrics. We need to understand what the Hyper Seed bonding did to your physiology before we can figure out how to slow the degradation. Or stop it. Ideally stop it." He gestured to an examination chair that looked uncomfortably like a dentist's chair crossed with a tanning bed. "If you could just—"

Ahdia sat. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"Everything?" He pulled up a screen showing what looked like a full-body scan template. "Heart rate, blood pressure, cellular composition, temporal field resonance, dimensional signature, neurological patterns—basically if it can be measured, I'm measuring it."

"That sounds deeply invasive."

"It's non-invasive! Completely! The scanners are passive. You just sit there. Well, lie there. It works better if you lie flat." He adjusted the chair so it reclined. "There we go. Comfortable?"

"Not remotely."

"Great! That's—I mean, sorry. Do you need a pillow or—"

"I'm fine. Let's just get this over with."

Ryu typed something and the equipment hummed to life. Panels descended from the ceiling, projecting soft blue light across Ahdia's body. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it felt weird—like someone was looking at her too closely, seeing things she couldn't see herself.

"Okay," Ryu muttered, eyes on his screens. "Heart rate elevated but that's probably stress from translocation. Blood pressure... hmm. Cellular degradation markers are... oh."

"'Oh' what?"

He looked up, adjusted his glasses. "Sorry. Just—the Seed integration is more thorough than I expected. It's not just sitting in your chest like a foreign object. It's connected to your cardiovascular system, your nervous system, your skeletal structure. It's..." He searched for words. "It's replacing parts of you. Slowly."

Ahdia's chest tightened. "Replacing me with what?"

"With itself." He pulled up an image—her ribcage, glowing faintly where the Seed sat. Threads of light spread outward like roots through a garden. "Every time you use your powers, it spreads a little more. Converts your biological tissue into something else. Something that can channel temporal energy."

"So I'm turning into a Hyper Seed."

"Essentially. The process is slow—eighteen months at current usage rates before you're more Seed than human. But..." He zoomed in on one of the light-threads. "The tissue it converts isn't dead. It's still you. It still functions. It's just... different."

Ahdia stared at the image of her own chest, watching her ribs glow with alien light. "Can you stop it?"

"I don't know. Maybe? CADENS has been studying Temporalists for decades, but most of them died before we could collect meaningful data. You're the first one we've had access to this early in the bonding process." He looked at her, earnest. "But I'm going to try. That's what all this is for—understanding the mechanism so we can intervene."

"And if you can't?"

His fingers started drumming on the armrest. That processing pattern she'd seen in the surveillance footage. "Then we make the eighteen months count."

The scans finished after about twenty minutes. Ryu printed out what looked like a full medical workup, muttering to himself as he read through the data.

"Okay," he said finally. "Good news and bad news. Good news: your baseline physiology is adapting remarkably well to the Seed integration. Your body isn't rejecting it, which is—well, you're alive, so obviously it's not rejecting it, but I mean at the cellular level there's no immune response, no inflammation, no—sorry. Rambling."

"And the bad news?"

"The temporal field generation is inefficient. You're burning way more energy than you need to for the same effect. It's like—" He searched for an analogy. "Like running a car engine at maximum RPM to go thirty miles per hour. You're getting where you need to go, but you're destroying the engine in the process."

"Can you fix it?"

"Maybe. If we can teach you to control the field more precisely. Right now you're doing everything by instinct—which is impressive, don't get me wrong—but instinct isn't efficient. It's

like the difference between flailing in water and actually swimming. Both keep you afloat, but one uses way less energy."

He pulled up another screen. "I want to run some controlled tests. See if we can refine your technique. But first—" He gestured to another door. "We need to get you equipped."

The equipment room looked more like an armory. Ryu led her past racks of weapons—some she recognized, most she didn't—toward the back where several mannequins stood wearing tactical suits.

The suits were black with dark gray armor plates across the chest, shoulders, and thighs. Utility belt included. They looked like something from a ComicCon booth.

"CADENS is really going all-in on the superhero aesthetic, huh?" Ahdia said.

Ryu smiled. "It's designed specifically for you. Well, for Temporalists. The fabric is—" He gestured at it. "Here, let me show you something. Cover your ears."

"What?"

He pulled out a handgun from a nearby locker. "Trust me. Cover your ears."

Ahdia stepped back and covered her ears.

Ryu fired at the suit.

The sound made her flinch. The bullet hit the shoulder plate with a spark and a scuff mark, then ricocheted into a target range behind the mannequins.

"Bulletproof," Ryu said, holstering the weapon. "The armor plates, anyway. The fabric itself is impact-resistant but not bullet-stopping. It will, however, handle the temporal shear when you freeze time. Normal clothes deteriorate—fibers can't handle the stress. This can."

He pulled the suit off the mannequin and handed it to her. "Temperature regulation, sensor-transparent for our monitoring equipment, and surprisingly light. Try it on."

Ahdia took it. It was lighter than she expected. "Changing room?"

"Same one as before."

The suit fit perfectly. Again. Still creepy that they'd extrapolated her measurements from surveillance footage, but at least it moved well. She did a few test lunges, stretched, twisted. Full range of motion, barely felt the armor plates.

When she came out, Ryu had another piece of equipment ready.

"Okay," he said, holding up what looked like a headset—minimal design, clipped to one ear with a clear lens that covered one eye. "This is your HUD. Augmented reality display. Put it on."

Ahdia took it. The clip fit comfortably over her ear, the lens settling in front of her right eye.

The moment it activated, her vision lit up with data.

Heart rate markers appeared over Ryu as she looked at him: 78 bpm. A small readout in the corner showed her own vitals. Distance markers appeared when she focused on objects across the room. Zoom function activated when she concentrated on details.

"Whoa."

"Right?" Ryu was grinning. "I designed the interface. Video game HUDs, like I said. You can track FAERIS-monitored individuals, see threat assessments, magnify your vision up to 20x, access tactical data during operations. It's all gesture and eye-tracking controlled. Very intuitive."

Ahdia turned her head, watching the display shift and adapt. When she looked at Ryu again, additional data appeared: [DR. SHIBA RYU - CADENS PERSONNEL - CLEARANCE LEVEL 7 - HEART RATE: 82 BPM].

"I can see your heart rate went up."

"Yeah, well, I get excited about tech." He adjusted his glasses nervously.

"I'm also detecting," Ahdia said, putting a finger to the headset, "elevated levels of awkwardness. It's over 9,000."

Ryu laughed—genuine, surprised. "Did you just—did you make a Dragon Ball Z reference?"

"I contain multitudes." She grinned. "Also I watched a lot of anime at 4 AM when sleep wouldn't come."

"Okay, I'm raising your clearance level." He gestured to the testing circle. "Just kidding, I don't have that authority. But we need to test the gear with your powers. The display should stay functional even in frozen time. I'm also going to test something experimental—the HUD's AR communication protocol. Step into the testing circle."

Ahdia walked to the marked circle on the floor.

"Now freeze time," Ryu said, fingers already moving across his workstation. "And don't freak out when you see me."

She focused. The cold weight spread. The world stopped.

The HUD stayed active. Data still flowing, displays still functioning. Ryu's heart rate marker frozen at 82. The distance readouts steady. Everything working.

Then an augmented reality image flickered to life in her peripheral vision—Ryu, but smaller, translucent. This version was moving, adjusting his glasses, looking directly at her.

"If you can see this, wave your hand," AR-Ryu said.

She waved, completely confused.

"Excellent! Okay, this is going to sound weird, but I'm not actually me right now. I'm a cybernetic mapping of my brain running through the HUD's processors. The system operates on picosecond framerates, so it can function even in your temporal field. I can talk to you, answer questions, provide tactical support—and when you unfreeze, everything we discuss gets uploaded to real-me's brain instantly. He'll—I'll—remember this conversation like it just happened. Which, from my perspective, it did. Or will. Time travel grammar is confusing."

Ahdia stared at the AR projection. "This is deeply weird."

"Oh absolutely. But functional! Try asking me something only I would know."

"What show did I reference earlier?"

"Dragon Ball Z. Over 9,000 joke. See? I have all of real-Ryu's memories up to the moment you froze time." The AR image grinned. "Okay, you can unfreeze now. Watch what happens."

She let go. Time resumed.

Real-Ryu blinked, then immediately grinned. "Did the AR work? Did it—oh, you asked about Dragon Ball Z. Yeah, I remember that now. It's like I was there, but also I wasn't? This tech is so cool."

"That," Ahdia said, "is the weirdest thing that's happened to me. And I have a cosmic artifact in my chest."

"Fair. But it means you'll never be alone during operations. I'll always be there. Sort of." He checked his screens. "Everything else maintained integrity too—suit, HUD, communication.

You could hold a freeze for hours and we could have full conversations." He looked up at her.

"How does it feel?"

Ahdia looked down at herself. Black tactical suit, armor plates, utility belt, HUD displaying information across her vision. She looked like someone from one of those shows she used to watch at 3 AM. Someone capable. Someone dangerous.

Someone who wasn't her.

"I feel like I'm cosplaying," she said. "Does it have to be black?"

"You're equipped," Ryu corrected. "There's a difference."

She puckered her face like she was sucking a lemon and asked, "Does it have to be black?"

"Just for dinner," he replied as he pulled up another screen and she couldn't tell if that was a joke. He handed her a small device that looked like a watch. "This is your panic button. If something goes wrong—if you're injured, if you're stuck, if you just need immediate extraction—you press this and the nearest FAERIS unit will paint you for translocation. Emergency protocol. Bourn authorized it specifically for you."

Ahdia strapped it on. The weight of it was oddly comforting.

"Anything else?"

Ryu hesitated. "One more thing. It's—you don't have to take it if you don't want to. But..." He pulled out a simple black domino mask. "For anonymity. I know you're invisible during operations, but in case someone sees you before you freeze time, or after you unfreeze—"

"A mask."

"A mask," he confirmed, looking slightly embarrassed. "I know it's very comic book, but—"

"I'll take it."

The mask was lighter than it looked, made of the same material as the suit. She put it on. It settled against her skin comfortably, secure without being tight.

Ryu pulled up a reflective surface so she could see herself.

Black tactical suit with armor plates. Utility belt. HUD headset over one eye. Domino mask. Earpiece nearly invisible.

She looked like someone from one of those shows she used to watch at 3 AM while eating gas station snacks. Someone capable. Someone who had their life together enough to fight crime.

Someone who definitely wasn't her.

"I look ridiculous," she said.

"You look dangerous," Ryu corrected. "In a good way. In a 'don't mess with me because I can stop time and you'll never see it coming' way."

Ahdia turned away from the reflection. Everything fit. Everything worked. The suit moved naturally, the mask didn't slip, the HUD responded to her eye movements.

She felt like a kid playing dress-up in her parents' closet.

"What now?" she asked.

"Now," Ryu said, "we test your temporal control. See if we can make you more efficient. Buy you more than eighteen months."

He led her to a larger testing area—looked like a training room, padded floors and walls. In the center, various objects were set up: a pendulum, a ball suspended mid-drop, a holographic timer counting down.

"Okay," Ryu said, settling at a workstation on the edge of the room. "I want you to freeze time, but this time, try to feel what you're doing. Where the energy is coming from, where it's going. The more aware you are of the mechanism, the more control you'll have."

Ahdia stood in the center of the room. Focused on the cold weight in her chest. The Hyper Seed.

She froze time.

The pendulum stopped mid-swing. The ball hung in the air. The timer frozen at 00:03.87.

"Good," Ryu's voice came through the earpiece—must have queued up a message. "Now try to shrink the field. Make it smaller. Just the room instead of the whole facility."

Ahdia focused. Imagined the bubble contracting, pulling inward. The cold in her chest intensified, but she felt it—the edge of the field drawing closer, tighter.

"Perfect!" Ryu's voice, excited. "You just reduced energy expenditure by thirty percent. Try it again, even smaller."

She practiced for what felt like an hour in frozen time—probably only a few minutes outside. Expanding the field, contracting it, shaping it. Learning to feel the boundaries, the limits, the cost.

By the time she let time resume for real, she was exhausted. But also—

"I felt it," she said. "I could feel the shape of the field. Like it was part of me."

Ryu was grinning at his screens. "You just cut your energy usage in half. If you can maintain that level of control during field operations, you've bought yourself another year. Maybe more."

"Really?"

"Really." He looked up at her. "You're a remarkably fast learner. Most Temporalists took years to achieve this level of control. You did it in an hour."

"I watch a lot of training montages."

"Well, it's working." He saved his data, stood up. "You should rest. Tomorrow we'll start coordinating with FAERIS, practicing translocation protocols, running through intervention scenarios. But for now—you've earned a break."

Ahdia pulled off the mask. Her face was sweaty underneath, her hair matted. "Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"Right. Quarters." Ryu gestured toward another door. "Basic but functional. Probably better than the penthouse you've been hiding in for months."

"Hey. My penthouse has excellent TV."

"Our quarters have TV too. Also running water, a bed that's not a couch, and food that didn't come from a gas station."

"Sold."

He led her through more corridors—she was starting to lose track of the facility's layout. As they walked, he pulled something from his pocket.

"Oh, almost forgot." He held out a small badge. Silver crest—a shield with a crack down its center—with the acronym CADENS embossed across the top. Below it, a single word: AUERBACH.

Ahdia stopped walking. "What's this?"

"Your codename. If you choose to accept it." He looked uncertain. "Director Bourn thought—well, it's your last name. Your parents worked with CADENS. It felt... appropriate. But if you want something else—"

"Auerbach," she said quietly, taking the badge. It was heavier than she expected. Solid. Real.

Her parents' name. The name she'd been avoiding thinking about for years. The name that came with too many questions and not enough answers.

"You don't have to use it," Ryu said quickly. "We can come up with something else. Chronos, Tempus, um... Freeze Frame? That one's terrible, sorry—"

"No." Ahdia ran her thumb over the engraving. "Auerbach is fine. It's... it's good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She pocketed the badge. It felt like accepting something. She wasn't sure what.

They continued walking until they reached a door marked TEMPORARY QUARTERS 7.

"This is you," he said. "Door locks from inside, bathroom has toiletries, there's a tablet on the desk with facility maps and protocols. If you need anything, the comm system is—" He stopped. "Actually, you probably just want to sleep."

"Desperately."

"Right. Sleep. Good. I'll—I'll let you do that." He started to leave, then turned back. "Hey. For what it's worth? You're doing really well. I know this is all overwhelming—new powers, new organization, dying slowly—but you're handling it better than I would."

"You don't know how I'm handling it."

"I've been watching the surveillance footage," he said gently. "I know how you were handling it before. This is better."

He left before she could respond.

Ahdia went into the quarters. Small room, single bed, desk, bathroom. Clean and impersonal. Government housing at its finest.

She sat on the bed. It was softer than her couch.

She was wearing a superhero suit. She had a mask. She had a handler who could talk to her through time itself. She had eighteen months to live. Maybe more if she got better at not dying.

This was her life now.

She lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, and tried to decide if that was better or worse than hiding in her apartment watching TV twelve hours a day.

At least this way, she thought as sleep pulled her under, at least this way she was doing something.

Even if that something was slowly turning into a cosmic artifact.

Small victories.

Chapter 16

Ahdia had seen a lot of surveillance montages in spy movies. Usually set to upbeat electronic music, showing the hero team getting really good at stuff through the magic of quick cuts and time compression. She'd always wondered if real surveillance was that neat.

It wasn't.

Ahdia watched it happen over days. Time got weird when you spent twelve hours a day in an underground bunker watching surveillance feeds—hours blending together, day and night losing meaning.

The CADENS facility—hidden somewhere under Caledonia, she assumed, based on the elevator ride that felt like it went down forever—was less "high-tech command center" and more "government office building that happened to have alien technology in the basement." The monitors showed FAERIS feeds in grainy night-vision green. No soundtrack. Just her and Ryu sitting in uncomfortable chairs, watching the Go Squad try to figure out their powers.

The cold weight in her chest pulsed. The Hyper Seed. Power Extempore. The thing that was draining her life force with every use. She tried not to think about that, tried to focus on the screens, but the weight was always there, always reminding her.

Ryu sat next to her, perfectly still except for his fingers, which drummed a complex pattern on the armrest. She'd learned that meant he was thinking, processing something. His CADENS badge read "Dr. Shiba Ryu - FAERIS Operations." Apparently he was the only person

who could consistently interface with the drones without them going haywire. Something about pattern recognition. Neurodivergent brain architecture interfacing with fourth-dimensional tech in ways neurotypical brains couldn't.

She got that. Her brain didn't work the way brains were supposed to either.

A few nights later, the CCPD was raiding a community center in the Old Caledonia district—"probable cause" for a drug operation, which Ahdia had learned meant "we don't like the people who gather here." The Go Squad was already in the area. Ruth's idea—patrol the neighborhoods the police targeted most.

The feeds showed five cops entering the center, aggressive, weapons drawn. People inside—mostly kids and community organizers—scattering.

Then the Go Squad arrived.

But before they did, many days ago, on the monitors, the Go Squad was scattered across the Parkour Academy, each trying to recreate what happened during the police ambush.

Tess went first, because of course she did—she'd "teleported" off that bridge, and she was determined to do it again.

The FAERIS feed showed her in the main training area, trying everything she could think of. Jumping. Spinning. Snapping her fingers. Clicking her heels together like Dorothy. Arm movements. Breathing techniques. Meditation poses. Nothing worked, and Ahdia watched her get more and more frustrated with each failed attempt.

This was weird. Watching someone try to activate a superpower you were secretly giving them. Like being the Wizard of Oz but Toto already pulled back the curtain and you're just hoping Dorothy doesn't notice.

Ryu watched with her, said nothing. They weren't picking Tess's trigger yet. For some reason, they were being pickier with hers, though Ahdia couldn't quite articulate why—maybe because the teleportation was the flashiest, the most dramatic, the one that would get the most attention.

Tess kept trying, getting more desperate with each failure. Still nothing.

Night Knight was in the obstacle course section. Ben. He had that athletic stance going, remembering the ambush, trying to recreate the moment before the super-jump. Low, coiled, ready to explode upward.

He tried it—crouch, athletic position, jump. Regular jump. Three feet vertical, maybe. He landed, tried again.

Ahdia looked at Ryu. He looked back, tilted his head slightly.

"That one?" he suggested.

She nodded.

Ben crouched again and jumped, and this time Ahdia felt time slow around him—not freeze, just dilate. Within that temporal bubble, the FAERIS activated, amplifying his trajectory so that what should've been a three-foot jump became thirty feet. He grabbed a ceiling beam, hung there, shocked at what he'd just done.

Ahdia stared at the screen. "That actually worked."

"You create the time bubble," Ryu said, making notes. "FAERIS amplifies within it. Symbiotic."

"This is much better than what I thought I'd have to do."

"Which was?"

"Much sweatier."

At the community center, Ben, Night Knight, was outside. Crouch, jump, through a second-story window. Landed in the middle of the cops, scattering them, jumped again before they could react, up to the rafters.

Ahdia felt the pull in her chest, the Hyper Seed pulsing. Her fingers gripped the armrest. Cost paid.

Battlea was in the sparring area—Leah, trying to recreate the speed-charge from the ambush. She tried running faster, tried thinking about speed, tried whatever people in comics did to activate powers. Nothing worked until she got frustrated and yelled at the punching dummy—not words, just sound, rage, the same guttural battle cry from the ambush—and then charged it.

Ahdia glanced at Ryu. He raised an eyebrow.

Good enough?

She shrugged. Sure.

Leah yelled again and charged, and time slowed around her—Ahdia's temporal bubble forming. Within it, the FAERIS amplified her velocity, normal running speed multiplied through the temporal distortion. To outside observers, superhuman velocity. She hit the dummy at what looked like impossible speed and it flew backward, chain snapping.

Leah stood there, breathing hard, staring at her hands like they belonged to someone else.

Ryu typed. "Vocalization plus forward momentum."

At the community center, Leah was at the main entrance watching a cop aim his weapon at a group of kids trying to get out. Battle cry. The sound tore from her throat and she

charged—superhuman speed through the doorway, shoulder-checking the cop before he could fire. He flew backward, hit the wall, slumped. The kids scattered to safety.

A vein pulsed at Ahdia's temple. She pressed her fingers against it.

Crimson Sable took longer. Victor. He tried everything in the weight section—flexing, grunting, punching air, meditating for some reason. Nothing worked.

Then he stopped, thought, remembered. He'd been reaching for a cop's gun during the ambush, right when the strength activated, his hand extended with fingers positioned like he was going to grab something.

He made the gesture, reached out with that same hand position.

"That works," Ryu stated and tapped away at the keyboard.

She felt the cold spread from her chest, time slowing around Victor's arm, his hand, his muscles. The temporal field formed and the FAERIS activated within it—force amplification, multiplying his grip strength exponentially. When he grabbed the barbell rack and pulled, it tore free from its bolted mounting and he stumbled backward, holding six hundred pounds like it weighed nothing.

Ryu noted it. "Specific hand position plus grasping motion."

At the community center, Victor came through the back door and saw two cops dragging a community organizer toward their cruiser. His hand shot out—that gesture—grabbed a cop's rifle and crushed the barrel like it was a soda can. The cop dropped it, stumbled back. Victor grabbed the other cop's tactical vest, lifted him off the ground one-handed, tossed him gently into a pile of gym mats. The organizer ran.

Sweat beaded on Ahdia's forehead. She wiped it away, gritting her teeth.

Back to Tess, still trying, still failing. Jumping, gesturing, nothing working, and Ahdia could see the frustration building.

Ruth came over and the feed showed her talking to Tess, probably asking what exactly she did on the bridge, what was happening when it worked.

Tess thought, remembered, made a gesture.

Middle finger. Raised to the sky.

Ahdia watched, then looked at Ryu.

He looked back, both eyebrows raised. Really? That's what we're going with?

She shrugged. Why not?

Tess made the gesture again—middle finger raised, eyes focused on the far wall—and Ahdia felt it, time dilating around Tess, creating the temporal bubble. Within it, the FAERIS responded. Ryu tracked Tess's eyes on a secondary monitor, iris position, focal depth, reading where she was looking, where she wanted to go.

The drones executed within Ahdia's temporal field—space folding, quantum entanglement translocation. Same particles, different location.

Tess vanished and appeared across the room, collapsed, laughing, triumphant.

Ryu typed. "Gesture plus eye-tracking."

At the community center, Ruth's voice called the play and Tess teleported first—inside, middle finger already raised at the lead cop. He spun toward her and she was gone, that weird displacement of air like reality hiccupping. Reappeared behind him, tapped his shoulder. Gone again before he could turn. The cops were whirling, trying to track her, failing completely. She appeared right in front of the lead cop, middle finger raised, vanished. Appeared behind him with

zip-ties and by the time he figured out what was happening he was bound and she was three rooftops away.

Ahdia's nose started bleeding. She grabbed tissues from Ryu's desk, pressed them to her face.

Ryu was already pulling up a secondary screen—biometric data. Heart rate spiking. Blood pressure elevated. Internal temperature fluctuating. He'd been monitoring her vitals the whole time, some kind of CADENS sensor tech she hadn't noticed him activate.

"Your hemoglobin is dropping," he said, still typing. Not a doctor, but he read the data like one. "Temporal manipulation is causing microbleeds. Capillaries can't handle the stress."

Ahdia pressed tissues to her nose. "I'm fine."

"You're not." He pulled up another graph. Cellular degradation markers. "Each use accelerates breakdown. Your body is aging microseconds faster than it should. Compounds over time."

"How much time do I have?"

Ryu's fingers stopped drumming. He looked at the data, at her, back at the data. "At this rate? Eighteen months baseline. Maybe two years if you're conservative with usage. But..." He gestured to the bleeding, the shaking. "Quality of life degrades faster than lifespan. You'll feel it before you die from it."

She wiped blood from her lip. "Can you fix it?"

"I'm not a doctor. I can monitor, warn you when you're approaching critical thresholds. But stop it?" He shook his head. "Only you can do that. By not using the powers."

"That's not an option."

"I know." He updated his notes, probably adding: Subject prioritizes mission over health. Pattern consistent with self-destructive vindication-seeking. "I'll keep monitoring. Tell you when to stop."

"And if I don't stop?"

His fingers started drumming again. Processing. "Then I'll document what happens. For science."

Ruth didn't have a power, not like the others. They all agreed—maybe hers hadn't manifested yet.

But the feeds showed something. When Ruth called out positions during team training, the others moved better, fought better, like her words were amplifying them—or maybe the FAERIS were responding to her callouts as much as to the others, treating her commands as targeting data.

Ryu watched this for a long time, finally typed. "Leadership vocalizations plus team proximity."

Ahdia wasn't sure if that one was real or if Ruth was just really good at tactics. The line was blurring.

They documented everything, Tess filming it all, though Ryu noted she wasn't posting this footage, not yet. Keeping the power mechanics secret. Smart.

Ahdia watched Firas on the feeds. He was there, at the training sessions, but not participating—just watching with an expression that was hard to read. Pride? Concern? Jealousy? She'd seen that look on her own face in mirrors, the look of someone being left behind while everyone else moved forward.

At the community center, Ahdia watched it happen on multiple screens. Ruth coordinating from a rooftop two blocks away, FAERIS picking up her tactical commands. The others, positioned around the building, moving on her signal.

They moved like water, like a choreographed fight scene from one of those Hong Kong action movies Ahdia used to watch at 2 AM when sleep wouldn't come. Every movement precise, every power triggered perfectly, Ruth's voice threading through it all, coordinating, timing, directing.

Ahdia felt it in her chest—not just presence now, but pain. The cold weight of the Hyper Seed burning as she created temporal field after temporal field, layering them across the team. Within each bubble, the FAERIS executed—space folding for Tess, force amplifying for Victor, velocity multiplying for Leah, trajectory extending for Ben. Her time manipulation, their capabilities. Symbiotic. Exhausting.

Thirty seconds. That's how long it took—thirty seconds and five cops were disarmed, incapacitated, zip-tied. The civilians were safe. The Go Squad was gone.

The feeds showed people in the community center, stunned, then cheering. Phones out, recording, posting. Someone had filmed the whole thing from inside and the video was already going viral.

Ahdia watched the FAERIS feeds shift to follow the team as they regrouped on a rooftop four blocks away. Even in night-vision green, she could see they were celebrating—high-fives, Tess probably already scheduling the social media posts, Leah and Victor comparing notes, Ben practicing his jump crouch, getting it perfect.

Firas wasn't with them.

Ryu made a note. "Full combat application successful. Team synchronization optimal. Power reliability: 100%."

The bleeding wouldn't stop and Ahdia couldn't get her hands to stop shaking. Ryu looked at her—concerned, professional—didn't say anything, just handed her more tissues.

He turned back to his monitors, pulled up a file. His psychological assessment of her. Updated it with a few keystrokes. Ahdia could see the screen from where she sat: "Subject demonstrates increasing physical deterioration. Continues operation despite clear signs of life force depletion. Pattern consistent with vindication-seeking behavior superseding self-preservation."

He didn't tell her to stop. Just documented.

Social media exploded. Tess was posting again—not the training footage, but the patrols, the saves.

Ahdia switched one of the monitors to Tess's social media. Watched her on a different FAERIS feed, in her apartment, editing the community center footage. Cutting clips together. Writing captions. The post went up while Ahdia watched:

"They said we couldn't make a difference. They said Caledonia was lost. They were wrong. #GoSquad #CaledoniaHope #WhenNobodyElseWill"

The video—thirty seconds of perfect superhero choreography. Teleportation, super-jumps, inhuman speed, impossible strength. The comments started immediately. Hundreds, then thousands. People sharing, crying, thanking them.

Another feed showed Tess reading the comments, tears in her eyes, typing a response: "People need to see this. They need to know someone's fighting for them."

#GoSquad trending locally, then regionally. People filming from windows, posting shaky phone footage of teleportation, super-jumps, inhuman speed.

Caledonia was noticing: The civilians who were singing their praises in the Youtube videos of their exploits. And the officials who were examining those same videos more and more closely.

Ahdia sat in the uncomfortable chair, watching the screens. The Go Squad, believing they had powers. The city, believing in heroes. Her brother, somewhere else, believing he wasn't good enough anymore.

Ryu's fingers started drumming again, that pattern, processing something.

He pulled up a new file on the screen. Mission parameters. Target location. Risk assessment.

The Go Squad had a new plan, something big, something that needed their full power set.

Ahdia read the briefing and felt the cold weight in her chest grow heavier, felt the blood still trickling from her nose.

They were going to be fine, she told herself. They had powers now. Real powers. They could handle it.

On the screen, the team, laughing, celebrating, completely in sync.

Chapter 17

SETTING THE TRAP

The footage played for the fourteenth time.

Harding Kain watched the rooftop surveillance with the same attention he'd given quarterly earnings reports for thirty years—looking for the number that didn't add up, the pattern that revealed the weakness.

There. Freeze frame.

The smaller woman—the one who'd put three officers in the hospital last week—crossed the rooftop in what looked like a blur. The time code in the corner tracked normally. The surrounding environment remained continuous. But she'd covered thirty feet in less than two seconds. Olympic sprinters couldn't do that. Not even close.

"Run the scanning thing again," Kain said.

His tech specialist—Reed, good kid, MIT dropout, sufficiently motivated by both money and fear—typed without looking up. "Spectral analysis shows the same result, sir. Electromagnetic anomaly during the movement. Military-grade frequency signature."

Kain leaned back in his chair. The leather was Italian, the office was corner suite, the view was Caledonia's skyline at sunset. TRIOMF. The private security contracts. The subsidiaries that kept the money clean and the operations invisible. His father had started with one armored car company and a dream of controlling more than he protected. His grandfather

before that had run union-busting goons in the thirties. Three generations of Kains, each finding new ways to monetize fear and call it safety.

Harding's innovation had been making it respectable. Presidential, even.

And now a handful of amateurs in Halloween costumes threatened to expose what three generations of Kains had carefully hidden.

No.

Not amateurs. That was the problem.

They moved like professionals. Fought like soldiers. Coordinated like a unit that had trained together for years, not months. And those impossible moments—the burst of speed, the impossible dodge, the punch that sent a two-hundred-pound man through a brick wall—those weren't adrenaline or luck.

Someone was helping them.

Someone with resources.

The door opened without knocking. Only one person had that privilege.

Chief John Whitford entered carrying a manila folder stamped CLASSIFIED in red letters that had faded to pink from handling. He looked like someone had told him Santa Claus was running a child trafficking ring—the expression of a true believer learning his faith had been misplaced.

"You look troubled, John."

Whitford dropped the folder on Kain's desk. "Read it."

Kain didn't touch it yet. He'd learned long ago that people who couldn't wait to deliver bad news usually wanted to see you flinch. Better to make them say it first. Establish dominance through patience.

"Summarize."

"Tech signatures. Military-grade surveillance drones detected during seventeen separate Go Squad operations over the past six weeks." Whitford jabbed a finger at the folder. "Marcus was right. Someone's watching them. Federal-level equipment."

"FBI? CIA?"

"Neither."

Kain opened the folder. Frequency analysis. Electromagnetic profiles. Satellite tracking data. The kind of intelligence that cost careers to obtain. The kind Whitford couldn't have acquired on his own.

"Then who the hell are they?"

"CADENS." Whitford said it like a curse. "Cataclysm Activity Detection and Engagement Network Sentry."

Kain had survived in business and crime for three decades by knowing things other people didn't. He'd made it a point to understand the architecture of federal power—which agencies mattered, which were theater, which could be bought and which had to be avoided.

He'd never heard of CADENS.

That meant they were either irrelevant or terrifying.

"Explain."

Whitford pulled out his phone, pulled up a document, read like he was delivering a eulogy. "Shadow group funded through Special Access Programs. Black budget. Completely autonomous operational authority. Only the Secretary of Defense has direct contact with their leadership, and even he can't give them orders."

"Someone can."

"One person. Director. Codename: Overseer."

Kain processed this the way he processed all new information—through the filter of cost-benefit analysis. An autonomous federal agency with black budget funding and advanced technology wasn't just a problem. It was a strategic impossibility. Every agency served someone. Every program had oversight. Complete autonomy was a myth comfortable people told themselves so they could sleep at night.

Except apparently it wasn't.

"And how," Kain said slowly, "did you acquire classified intelligence on a shadow government program that doesn't officially exist?"

Whitford's smile had sharp edges. "Golf."

"Excuse me?"

"The Secretary of Defense and I golf regularly. Montclair Country Club, every third Thursday when he's in town." Whitford sat down uninvited, which meant the information was either very good or very bad. "He was less than pleased about learning that CADENS tech was being used to help vigilantes beat up local precincts."

"He told you this."

"He implied it. Heavily. After his third whiskey." Whitford leaned forward. "Apparently the Overseer doesn't clear operational details with the Pentagon. Just does what they want. And what they want, currently, is to monitor enhanced individuals in urban environments. Go Squad qualifies."

Kain understood immediately. "They're using us as a test case."

"We're the rats in the maze. Go Squad are the subjects. CADENS gets to watch how enhanced individuals operate in real-world scenarios against organized opposition."

"We're opposition now? Not law enforcement?"

Whitford's jaw tightened. "My officers look like fools on every news cycle. 'Vigilantes outsmart police again.' 'Community says Go Squad more effective than CCPD.' 'Where are our tax dollars going?'"

"Your ego is showing, John."

"It's not about ego. It's about institutional credibility. Every time Go Squad makes us look incompetent, people ask why we can't do what they do. Why we need military equipment and qualified immunity if a bunch of parkour enthusiasts can do it better."

There it was. Not just anger—fear. Whitford was worried about obsolescence. About being replaced by something more effective. About his power structure crumbling under the weight of proof it wasn't necessary.

Kain understood that fear intimately.

"So the Secretary of Defense is angry, but powerless. And in his powerlessness, he shared information he shouldn't have."

"Can't be helped," Whitford said, repeating what was clearly the SecDef's exact words. "CADENS operates under Overseer's complete control, not his. But he did slip some information that could be useful."

Whitford pulled another document from inside his jacket. This one was printed on plain paper, no classification stamps. Deniable.

Kain read in silence. Technical specifications. Operational parameters. Vulnerabilities.

When he finished, he looked up.

"This changes things."

"That's what I thought."

Kain stood, walked to the window. Caledonia at sunset looked almost beautiful from up here. Almost enough to make you forget what it was built on.

Go Squad operated with apparent immunity because federal overwatch made them untouchable. But every system had weaknesses. Every protection had gaps. And Whitford had just handed him the map.

"Their leader," Kain said. "The medical one. She's the tactical center. Every operation flows through her decisions."

Reed had finally cracked the facial recognition yesterday. Took three weeks running the warehouse footage through every database he could access—legal and otherwise. The woman had been captured without a mask during the raid. Low quality surveillance, obscure profile, but the kid had persistence. And algorithms.

Ruth Carter. ER doctor at Caledonia General. No priors. Spotless record. The last person you'd expect running vigilante operations.

But Reed had gone deeper than facial recognition.

The file on Ruth Carter was three hundred pages. Background checks. Financial records. Published research papers. Professional history that didn't match her current position.

#

Earlier that morning, Kain had called Reed into his office.

The file was already open on the screen when Reed arrived. Publications. Credentials. Research that shouldn't belong to someone working emergency medicine.

"Johns Hopkins medical degree," Reed said, pulling up her credentials. "Top of her class. Published groundbreaking research on cellular regeneration therapy three years ago. Presented at international conferences. Should be running a research department or leading clinical trials."

Kain scanned the publications. The research was sophisticated. Innovative. The kind of work that pharmaceutical companies would pay millions to acquire.

"Why is she in an ER?"

"Politics, looks like. She challenged the chief of surgery over patient care protocols. Got sidelined. Been stuck in emergency medicine ever since."

Kain understood institutional punishment. He'd used it himself. Take someone brilliant, bury them in work beneath their skill level, wait for them to quit or break.

But Ruth Carter hadn't quit. She'd kept researching. Kept publishing. And apparently started running vigilante operations on the side.

"She's wasted where she is," Kain said.

"Yes sir. But she's also the tactical center of Go Squad. Every operation flows through her decisions. She's the weak point."

Kain studied the research papers on screen. Cellular regeneration. Accelerated healing protocols. Experimental treatments that conventional medicine wouldn't touch.

TRIOMF had medical contracts. Government bids for trauma care, emergency response protocols. Ruth Carter's research could be worth eight figures if properly monetized.

"I want her research," Kain said.

Reed looked up from his notes. "Sir?"

"The cellular regeneration protocols. The experimental treatments. All of it. Once we've eliminated Go Squad, we acquire the research. Patent it under TRIOMF subsidiaries. She won't be in a position to object."

Reed hesitated. "Sir... she's Black. You really want to—"

"I want to win." Kain turned from the screen. "Personal feelings are expensive luxuries. Her research is valuable. The fact that she's Black is irrelevant to its value."

His grandfather would have rejected her work on principle. His father would have stolen it and found ways to justify the theft.

Harding Kain had learned that prejudice was expensive. Money didn't care about skin color. Results were the only metric that mattered.

And Ruth Carter had results worth taking.

"Once the trap is set and Go Squad is neutralized, we move on her research. Have legal prepare acquisition documents. Medical board complaints. Patent filings. Make it look clean."

Reed nodded, making notes.

"She built something valuable while they kept her in an ER," Kain said. "That's the problem with institutional punishment. They suppress talent without capturing it. We'll do better."

#

Whitford understood immediately. "You want to pressure her."

"I want her to make a choice. Save herself or save her team. Make it public enough that CADENS can't intervene without revealing themselves. Make it brutal enough that Go Squad questions whether they're actually helping or just getting people killed."

"Break the leadership, break the team."

"Break the team, break the narrative. Break the narrative, remind people why they need order. Why they need someone strong enough to protect them from chaos."

"You're going to run on this."

"I'm going to win on this." Kain turned. "Set the trap. I want them confident. I want them thinking they're protected. I want them walking into it believing they're invincible."

Whitford stood. "I'll coordinate with tactical."

"You'll have what you need."

Whitford paused at the door. "There's one more thing."

"What?"

"The anomalies. The impossible movements. Even with CADENS watching them, they're too good. Something else is happening."

Kain had thought about that. The woman with the speed—impossibly fast. The big guy with the strength—punches that should have glanced off armor instead shattered bone. The way five people coordinated perfectly without radio communication.

"Maybe they are enhanced," Kain said. "Maybe CADENS gave them more than surveillance."

"Or maybe someone else did."

That was an uncomfortable thought. Another player on the board he didn't know about.

But Kain had built his career—inherited it, refined it, weaponized it—by turning unknowns into advantages.

"If they're enhanced, we'll need more than conventional force to stop them."

"What did you have in mind?"

Kain smiled.

"Get Dr. Jericho from holding. It's time we had another conversation about his collection."

Kain's vault was climate-controlled. Sixty-two degrees. Forty percent humidity. The same specifications Jericho had insisted on when Kain's people had emptied the museum's sub-basement three weeks ago.

Every artifact from the private collection was here now. Catalogued. Secured. Under Kain's control.

Along with the curator who'd overseen them.

Dr. Jericho looked worse than when they'd grabbed him. That happened in holding. People deteriorated. Lost weight. Lost hope. Became pliable.

Kain had learned this from his grandfather. The union-busters hadn't broken strikes through violence. They'd done it through isolation. Take someone from their support structure, their routine, their sense of safety—and they'd tell you anything. Do anything. Become anything you needed them to be.

Jericho had been a museum curator. Respected. Published. Comfortable. Now he was whatever Kain required.

They stood in the vault together. Jericho in handcuffs. Kain in a tailored suit. Surrounded by objects that predated human civilization.

Crystalline structures on steel shelves. Metallic alloys in hermetically sealed cases. Objects that hurt to look at directly, like they occupied space incorrectly. Twenty-three artifacts total. Each one authenticated as impossible. Each one worth millions to the right collector.

Or worth something else entirely to someone who understood their real value.

"Walk me through them again," Kain said.

Jericho's voice was hoarse. He'd answered this question before. Multiple times. But Kain wanted to hear it again. Wanted to see which artifact made his eyes change. Which one carried weight beyond academic curiosity.

"Most of them are inert. Or appear to be. We documented electromagnetic anomalies. Temperature fluctuations. But no active properties we could test safely."

"And the others?"

Jericho's gaze drifted to a case in the back. Something about the way he looked at it. Fear mixed with fascination.

There.

Kain walked to the case. Jericho followed because the alternative was being dragged.

Inside: a crystalline object about the size of a fist. It pulsed with faint light. Red, then amber, then red again. Rhythmic. Like a heartbeat.

"The Heart of Tamois," Jericho said quietly.

"Tell me."

"Recovered from a dig site in Peru. Private expedition funded by collectors who wanted answers the academic establishment wouldn't provide. Carbon dated at 4.7 billion years."

"Older than Earth."

"Older than the solar system. The object shouldn't exist."

"What does it do?"

Jericho's hands were shaking harder now. Not from fear. From something else. Memory, maybe. Or witnessing something he couldn't explain.

"We don't know. Not exactly. The electromagnetic readings were off the scale. Temperature fluctuations. Temporal distortions in its immediate vicinity."

"Temporal," Kain repeated.

"Time moves differently near it. Milliseconds. Nothing significant. But measurable."

Kain studied the artifact through the case. The pulsing light. The sense that it was aware.

Watching. Waiting.

Go Squad had impossible abilities. Someone—or something—was giving them enhancements. And here was an object that affected time itself.

Not a coincidence.

"Figure it out," Kain said.

"What?"

"What it does. How it works. Whether it's useful." He gestured to the vault. "You have everything you need here. Equipment. Monitoring systems. Time."

"I can't just—we documented these artifacts for years without understanding them. You're asking for answers we don't have."

"Then find them. You're an anthropologist. You study dead civilizations, decode their technology. Do that."

"In how long?"

"Forty-eight hours."

Jericho stared at him. "That's impossible."

"Then you'd better work quickly." Kain walked toward the vault door. Stopped. "Dr. Jericho? You've spent your career studying dead civilizations. Objects from species that no longer exist. Now you get to discover if their solutions still work."

He left Jericho there. In the vault. Surrounded by impossible objects. With the Heart pulsing its rhythmic light.

Alone with twenty-three artifacts that might contain answers and living.

Or might contain nothing at all and dying.

In the hallway, Whitford was waiting.

"He'll do it?"

"He'll do it."

"And after?"

"After, we test the Heart. See if the transformation can be controlled. See if we can create something strong enough to stop enhanced individuals."

"You're talking about human experimentation."

Kain looked at him. "I'm talking about leveling the playing field. Go Squad has powers they shouldn't have. We're going to match them."

"With artifacts from civilizations that died billions of years ago."

"With tools that work. The source doesn't matter. Results do."

Whitford nodded slowly. "When do we deploy?"

"Once we have the Heart. Once we've confirmed its functions. Then we set the trap."

"And Carter?"

Kain smiled.

"Carter gets to watch her team fall apart. Gets to choose between saving them and saving herself. Gets to learn that powers and federal protection don't mean invincibility."

He walked back toward his office. Back to the view of Caledonia at sunset.

Three generations of Kains had built this city. Built this empire. He wasn't going to let a handful of vigilantes tear it down.

Not when he had access to weapons that predated human civilization.

Not when he could turn their advantages into their weaknesses.

Not when he was this close to winning everything.

#

Later, in his office, Kain reviewed the surveillance footage again. Looking for patterns.

Weaknesses. The precise moment when Go Squad would make a mistake large enough to exploit.

His private line rang. The one that wasn't connected to anything. The one that shouldn't work.

He stared at it for three rings before answering.

No caller ID. No origin trace. Just the soft hum of a connection that shouldn't exist.

"Mr. Kain." Not a question. A woman's voice. Precise. Clinical. Like someone who'd learned English as a technical specification rather than a living language.

He'd received three calls from this number over the past six months. Each one had provided intelligence he couldn't have acquired otherwise. Artifact locations. Museum security schedules. Jericho's research notes before the kidnapping.

He still didn't know who she was.

"I'm listening," Kain said.

"The Heart of Tamois. You have acquired it."

Statement, not question. She always spoke like that. Declarations of fact. As if uncertainty was a concept that didn't apply to her.

"I have."

"And Dr. Jericho is attempting to unlock its properties."

"He is."

Silence on the line. Not dead air. Something else. Like the space between words carried information he couldn't parse.

"He will fail," she said finally. "The Heart requires specific activation protocols. Protocols his civilization does not possess."

Kain leaned back. Every conversation with this woman felt like negotiating a contract where the other party could read every clause in advance. "You're offering to help."

"I am offering partnership. You require tools to neutralize enhanced individuals. I require the artifacts gathered and their properties tested. Our interests align."

"What do you want in return?"

"The subjects eliminated. Permanently. No capture. No interrogation. Complete removal from the board."

Kain processed that. She always called Go Squad "subjects." Never vigilantes. Never targets. Subjects. Clinical terminology. Like reading from a lab report.

"Why?"

"That is not your concern. You wish to win your campaign. I wish to see these individuals removed. The Heart provides both outcomes."

He should ask more questions. Press for details. Every instinct from three decades of business and crime told him that taking resources from someone whose motives you didn't understand was suicide by installment plan.

But she'd been right before. Three times. The artifact locations were exactly where she said. The security vulnerabilities were exactly as described. The information about Jericho's collection was perfect.

And he needed weapons that could stop enhanced individuals.

"What are the activation protocols?"

"I will provide them when Dr. Jericho has completed his preliminary analysis. Forty-eight hours, as you specified. After that, you will have what you need."

"And you'll have what you need."

"Correct." A pause. "The subjects display capabilities beyond conventional enhancement. This complicates elimination."

"CADENS?"

"No. CADENS observes. They do not enhance." She said it as simple fact. "The source of their abilities is irrelevant to your objectives. Focus on elimination, Mr. Kain. Not comprehension."

"You know something about them."

"I know they must be removed. That is sufficient."

The finality in her voice ended the question. She'd given him what he needed to know and nothing more. Same as always.

"I'll have Jericho proceed as planned," Kain said.

"Excellent. I will contact you in forty-eight hours. The Heart will be functional. Your trap will be ready. The subjects will be eliminated."

She hung up.

No goodbye. No closing pleasantries. Just the dial tone and the lingering sense that he'd agreed to something with implications he didn't fully understand.

Kain set the phone down. Stared at it. Wondered, not for the first time, what he'd gotten himself into.

But the answer was simple. He'd gotten into winning.

Everything else was just cost-benefit analysis.

And if this mysterious woman wanted Go Squad eliminated—for whatever reason she refused to share—then their goals aligned.

For now.

He pulled up the surveillance footage again. Watched the woman with the impossible speed. The man with the impossible strength. Five people moving like they'd trained together for years, enhanced beyond human limits.

Problematic, his contact had called them.

He was starting to think that was an understatement.

Chapter 18

The tip came through Ben's contact at the precinct. Usually reliable. Usually clean.

"Weapons cache in warehouse district. District 7, near the docks. Kain's people moving product tonight, 2100 hours. Minimal security. Window's tight."

Ruth studied the building schematics on her tablet. Two floors. Loading dock access. Multiple exits. Standard layout for the area.

"Thoughts?" she asked.

Ben adjusted his gear. "Fits the pattern. Kain's been moving operations since the warehouse raid. Makes sense he'd use the docks."

Tess pulled up surveillance feeds on her laptop. "Three heat signatures inside. No vehicles in the lot yet. If they're moving product, we're early."

"Good," Victor said, checking his gloves. "Hit them during setup. Before they're organized."

Leah cracked her knuckles. "I like it when they're not organized."

Ruth ran through the plan one more time. Standard insertion. Victor and Ben through the loading dock. Tess and Leah from the roof access. Ruth in tactical support, coordinating from the perimeter with comms.

They'd done this twelve times in the past month. Kain's operations were getting sloppier. Desperate. After the warehouse, CCPD couldn't openly protect him anymore. He was exposed. Scrambling.

Made him more dangerous.

Tess's phone buzzed. She glanced at it. "Another one."

"Another what?" Leah asked.

"Kid wants an autograph. Posted on the Academy's public page." Tess showed her the message. Ten-year-old asking if the Go Squad could sign his schoolbook. His older sister had been saved from a carjacking two weeks ago.

"That's the third one today," Ben said.

"Fifth," Tess corrected. She scrolled. "And someone left flowers at the Academy. Note says 'Thank you for my daughter.' No name."

She kept scrolling. Stopped. "Oh. Oh no."

"What?" Victor leaned over to look.

Tess turned her phone around. Twitter thread. Someone had made a fan account. @GoSquadWatch. They'd assigned codenames.

BATTLEA - The Brawler

NIGHT KNIGHT (or is it Knight Night?) - The Tactician

CRIMSON SABLE - The Shadow

GLOOM GIRL - The 'Porter

NIGHTINGALE - The Leader

"Wait," Ben said, frowning. "How do they know our codenames?"

Victor read further. "There's like... hundreds of posts using them. Battlea this, Night Knight that."

Leah looked at Tess. "Did you—"

"What? No!" Tess said. Too quickly. Too innocent.

Victor narrowed his eyes. "Gloom Girl."

"I didn't leak anything," Tess said. "I just... may have used them. In a few posts. Months ago. Hypothetically."

"Firas is going to love this," Ruth said, unable to hide her smile.

"Or kill me," Tess muttered.

Ruth felt something tighten in her chest. They did this because it was right. Not for recognition. But knowing people noticed—knowing they cared—knowing they'd given them names—

It made the risk feel different. More real. More worth it.

"Everyone check in," Ruth said into her radio. "Comms clear?"

Four confirmations came back. Clean signals. FAERIS drones were overhead—she could feel them, that subtle hum of enhanced capability. Like wearing a weighted vest and taking it off. Everything lighter. Faster. More precise.

She still didn't understand how it worked. Some kind of amplification technology CADENS had developed. Firas had mentioned it once, vaguely, said they'd been approached by someone who wanted to help. Military tech, experimental.

Ruth hadn't asked too many questions. Results mattered more than process.

"No better place than here," Ruth said into the radio.

The team responded as one: "No better time than now."

Their rally cry. The thing they said every time before insertion. Started as Firas's line when he founded the Squad. Now it was tradition.

"Moving in," Victor said.

Ruth watched from her position across the street. Loading dock rolled open. Victor and Ben slipped inside. Smooth. Professional. They'd gotten good at this.

Thirty seconds.

"Clear inside," Victor reported. "Setting up position."

Tess and Leah hit the roof access. Standard approach. Ruth tracked their progress through the building layout on her tablet.

One minute.

"Something's wrong," Tess said suddenly. "There's nobody here. Warehouse is empty."

Ruth's instincts flared. "Abort. Everyone out. Now."

"Too late," Ben said.

The lights came on.

Not warehouse lights. Floodlights. Police spotlights. Dozens of them, all focused on the building. Sirens wailed. Vehicles screeched into the lot—patrol cars, SWAT vans, at least fifteen units.

A voice boomed through a megaphone: "This is CCPD. You are surrounded. Exit the building with your hands visible."

"Shit," Leah breathed.

Ruth's mind moved fast. Ambush. False intel. They'd been set up.

"Smoke and scatter," she said into the radio. "Formation Delta. IR goggles. Move."

No panic. They'd drilled for this. Go Squad wasn't just powers and luck—they'd trained for when things went wrong.

Smoke grenades deployed. Four of them, filling the warehouse with thick gray cover. Ruth heard the crackle of breaking glass as her team kicked out windows, rappel lines deploying.

CCPD moved in. Ruth could see them through her IR scope—heat signatures advancing through the smoke, slow and cautious.

Her team was faster.

Victor dropped from a second-floor window, hit the ground rolling, sprinted for the fence line. Two officers tried to cut him off. He vaulted the fence before they got close, disappeared into the neighboring lot.

Tess went through a side door, smoke grenade in each hand. Threw them at the patrol cars. More cover. She ran low, fast, using vehicles as shields. Reached the perimeter and was gone.

Ben and Leah emerged together, coordinating without words. Ben laid down a flash-bang—not to hurt, just to disorient. Leah used the chaos to scale a fire escape, reached the next building's roof, vanished.

They were out. Clean. No casualties.

Ruth felt a swell of pride. They didn't need the enhancements to be good. They were good because they'd trained.

And then her scope went dark.

Not the optics. The IR feed. It just—died.

She tapped it. Nothing. Pulled it off, checked the battery. Full charge. It just wasn't working.

Her radio crackled. "Anyone else losing equipment?" Tess's voice, distant.

"IR's down," Victor confirmed. "GPS too."

"What the hell—"

And then Ruth felt it. The absence. That weighted vest dropping back on her shoulders. Everything heavier. Slower. Like moving through water instead of air.

The enhancements were gone.

"Powers are down," Leah said, and Ruth heard the edge of panic. "I can't—they're just gone."

Ruth forced her voice calm. Professional. "You don't need them. You're trained. Stay focused."

But even as she said it, she understood the danger. They'd gotten used to the edge. Used to being just a little bit faster, stronger, more precise than they should be.

Now they were just people.

Against an entire police precinct.

"Fall back to secondary positions," Ruth ordered. "Stay in smoke. Use training. You've got this."

Movement caught her eye. Someone coming through the smoke near the warehouse. Not police. Wrong silhouette. Too big.

Ruth raised her scope, tried the thermal. Still dead. She switched to night vision—old school, no batteries needed. The amplified starlight showed her a figure walking through the smoke like it wasn't there.

Seven feet tall. Maybe more. Armored, but not SWAT gear. Something else. Custom. The way he moved—not human. Too smooth. Too confident.

Victor saw him first. "Contact. North side. What the hell is that?"

The figure reached through the smoke, grabbed a fleeing officer by the vest, threw him. Not pushed. Threw. The officer flew fifteen feet, crashed into a patrol car. The impact dented the door.

"New player," Ruth said into her radio, heart racing. "Enhanced. Real enhanced. Everyone stay clear."

But Victor was already moving. Tried to flank, get position. Too fast—the figure turned, caught Victor's punch mid-swing, twisted his arm.

Victor went down hard. "It's a goddamn tank!" he gasped through the pain.

"Victor!" Tess's voice, sharp with fear.

Leah charged in, landed three hits to the ribs. Perfect form. The kind of strikes that should drop anyone.

The Tank didn't even flinch. Just backhanded her like swatting a fly. She crashed through a wooden pallet, didn't get up.

Ben tried next. Military training, precision strikes. Went for the joints, the weak points.

Might as well have been hitting a statue.

Big hands grabbed Ben by the throat, lifted him off the ground. Casual. Like picking up a child.

Ruth ran. Abandoned her position, sprinted toward the warehouse. "Put him down!"

The Tank turned. Looked at her. Behind the helmet's visor, she couldn't see eyes. Just darkness.

He dropped Ben. Ben collapsed, gasping.

And started walking toward Ruth.

She should run. Every tactical instinct said run. Draw him away, lose him in the alleys, regroup.

But her team was down. Her team was hurt. And police were closing in from all sides.

If she ran, they'd be captured. Or worse.

Ruth made the decision. "Everyone fall back. Get clear. I'll draw him off."

"Ruth, no—" Tess started.

"That's an order."

Ruth ran. Not away—toward. Straight at the Tank, then past him at the last second. He turned, followed. Good. She was faster. She could lead him away, buy time for her team to escape.

The docks weren't far. Quarter mile, maybe less. Ruth ran hard, boots pounding concrete. Behind her, heavy footfalls. Steady. Not even running. He didn't need to.

He was faster anyway.

Ruth burst onto the docks. Shipping containers stacked three high. Narrow passages. Multiple paths.

She tried to lose him in the maze. Ducked left, vaulted a crate, sprinted through a gap. Came out near the water.

Dead end.

The docks stretched out behind her, maybe thirty feet. Water beyond that. Black. Cold. Forty-degree water this time of year. She'd last maybe ten minutes before hypothermia.

The Tank emerged from between containers. Took his time. Each step methodical. He knew she was trapped.

Ruth reached for her radio. "Team, sound off. Everyone clear?"

Static.

She tried again. "Anyone copy?"

Silence.

She was alone.

The Tank stopped ten feet away. Reached up, removed his helmet.

Ruth expected scars. Modifications. Something to explain the strength.

Instead: a face. Normal. Maybe thirty. Clean-shaven. The kind of guy you'd see at a coffee shop and never look twice.

"Dr. Carter," he said. "You should have stayed in the ER."

"How do you know my name?"

"Everyone knows your name now." He rolled his neck, stretched his shoulders. "Mr. Kain sends his regards. Says your research will be very valuable. Once you're out of the way."

Ruth's hand moved to the medical kit on her belt. Sedatives. Trauma shears. Bandages.

Nothing that would stop whatever this was.

"You're enhanced," she said, stalling. "Real enhanced. Not like us."

"Finally figured that out?" He smiled. "Your tricks stopped working the moment the EMP hit. Ours didn't."

EMP. That explained the equipment failure. The absence of enhancement. They'd been set up from the start.

"What did they give you?" Ruth asked. "What kind of enhancement?"

"The kind that matters." He took another step forward. "The kind that can't be turned off with a magnet."

Ruth looked past him. The maze of containers. The narrow passages. No escape that way—he'd catch her in three steps.

She looked behind her. The dock. The water. Bad options.

"You know what happens next," the man said. "Make it easy. Don't run."

Ruth ran.

Toward the water. Sprinting. The edge of the dock fifteen feet. Ten. Five.

She heard him behind her. Close. Too close.

Ruth reached the edge, tried to pivot, dive sideways into cover.

A hand caught her jacket. Yanked her back.

She stumbled, turned. The man stood between her and escape. Water at her back.

Nowhere to go.

"Brave," he said. "Stupid, but brave."

He raised his fist. Pulled it back. The kind of windup that would cave in her skull.

Chapter 19

Ruth closed her eyes.

Heard the whistle of the punch coming.

Felt the wind of displacement.

And then—

Nothing.

She opened her eyes.

The fist had stopped. Inches from her face. Mid-swing. Frozen.

Not hesitated. Frozen. Like someone had paused time.

Behind the fist, the man's face was locked in mid-snarl. Eyes fixed. Mouth open. Not blinking.

Ruth looked past him.

Twenty feet away, barely visible in the darkness, a figure stood with one hand outstretched.

Small. Bleeding. Swaying like they could barely stand.

Ruth knew that posture.

"Ahdia?" she whispered.

#

Six meters. That's how far the bubble extended.

Ruth could see the edge of it. Not a visible line—more like the difference between being underwater and surfacing. Inside the bubble, everything was frozen. The man's fist. His snarl. Even the ripples on the water behind her had stopped mid-wave.

Outside the bubble, the world continued. She could see shipping containers in the distance, their shadows shifting as clouds passed over the moon. Could hear sirens wailing from the warehouse district. Could feel the cold wind off the water.

Two realities, occupying the same space. And she was standing at the edge of both.

Ahdia staggered forward. Each step looked like it cost her. Blood ran from her nose. Her left arm hung limp. She was dressed in black—tactical gear, but worn and torn. Like she'd run through hell to get here.

"Don't move," Ahdia said. Voice hoarse. "You're at the edge of the... the freeze. If you step outside, you'll unfreeze too. Just... stay still."

Ruth stayed still.

Ahdia circled the frozen man. Studied him like a doctor examining a patient. Tapped his shoulder blade—gentle. Light. The kind of touch you'd use to get someone's attention.

Nothing happened.

Ahdia closed her eyes, took a breath. Her hand started shaking. The bubble flickered.

For half a second, Ruth felt time snap back. The fist moved. The snarl became a shout.

Then it froze again.

Ahdia opened her eyes. "Sorry. Can't hold it as steady as I used to."

Ruth watched her circle again. This time, Ahdia positioned herself carefully. Placed her fingers on specific points: knee, shoulder blade, solar plexus, other knee. Each touch gentle. Precise.

Medical precision, Ruth realized. Ahdia was placing strikes like a surgeon marking incision points.

"This is going to be weird," Ahdia said. "When I unfreeze him, he's going to keep punching. But you won't be there anymore. I'll move you. Just... don't freak out, okay?"

"Okay," Ruth said, because what else could she say?

"On three," Ahdia said. "One... two..."

The world snapped back.

The fist continued its swing—but Ruth wasn't there anymore. She was ten feet to the left, standing on solid dock, watching the man's punch hit empty air.

All four of Ahdia's touches hit simultaneously.

The man's knees buckled. His shoulder twisted. His breath left him in a whoosh. He crashed to the dock, hard. Enhanced or not, physics still applied. Four precise strikes hitting at the exact same instant, each amplified by whatever Ahdia had done in frozen time.

The man tried to get up. Ahdia's hand shot out. The world froze again.

Ruth watched Ahdia stagger forward, barely keeping upright. Place her hands on the man's armored chest. A gentle push. Like moving furniture.

The freeze dropped.

The man launched backward like he'd been hit by a truck. Flew fifteen feet, crashed through the side of a shipping container. Metal buckled. He didn't get up.

The freeze dropped completely.

Ahdia collapsed.

Ruth moved without thinking. Doctor mode. Caught Ahdia before she hit the dock. Lowered her down gently. Checked vitals by instinct.

Pulse racing. Skin burning up. Pupils dilated. Breathing shallow and rapid.

"Ahdia. Look at me. Focus."

Ahdia's eyes rolled, tried to find Ruth's face. "Saved you... like I saved all of them..."

Ruth's mind connected pieces she hadn't wanted to see.

"The powers," she said quietly. "Their powers. That was you."

Ahdia's laugh was bitter. Wet. "They needed... to believe..."

Ruth looked at the frozen man in the shipping container. Looked at where she'd been standing moments ago. Looked at Ahdia bleeding on the dock.

All of it clicked into place.

Tess's teleportation—moving people in frozen time.

Victor's impossible strength—gentle taps becoming devastating blows.

Ben's superhuman jumps—repositioning during freeze.

Leah's speed—same principle, same manipulation.

Every impossible thing they'd done. Every time they'd felt enhanced. Every mission where they'd succeeded against impossible odds.

Ahdia had been there. Watching. Manipulating. Dying by inches to give them powers they never actually had.

"You've been dying to give us powers we never had," Ruth said.

Ahdia's eyes closed. "Worth it."

"You're burning up." Ruth checked her pulse again. Faster than before. Erratic. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Since the warehouse. Since the explosion. Since you all..." Ahdia's voice faded. "Needed to matter. Needed to help. He said I was already dead inside, so... might as well be useful while..."

She stopped breathing.

"Ahdia!" Ruth pressed fingers to her neck. Pulse still there, but weak. Fading. "Stay with me. Come on."

Ruth pulled her medical kit. Basic trauma supplies. Nothing for this. Nothing for whatever was happening at the cellular level. This wasn't an injury. This was collapse.

Her radio crackled. Static. Then: "Dr. Carter."

Ruth grabbed it. "Who is this?"

"My name is Ryu. I'm here to extract the asset."

Ruth looked up. A drone descended from the darkness. Not FAERIS—different model. Larger. This one had actual lights, visible tech, real presence.

"The 'asset' is a person," Ruth said. "And she's dying."

"I'm aware." The drone landed near them. A panel opened, revealing what looked like a medical stretcher. Advanced. Nothing she'd seen in any hospital. "CADENS can help her. But we need to move. CCPD three minutes out."

"What the hell is CADENS?"

"Come with her and find out. Or stay and watch her die. Your choice. Clock's ticking."

Ruth looked at Ahdia. Unconscious. Barely breathing. Cellular breakdown visible even without proper equipment—the way her skin looked, the temperature, the pulse pattern. This was critical.

"I'm not leaving her side," Ruth said.

"Then you're coming with us. Hold on."

The stretcher extended. Ruth helped load Ahdia onto it—gentle, supporting her neck. The drone rose. Ruth grabbed the rail.

Light erupted around them. White. Blue. Colors that didn't have names.

The world inverted.

Ruth's stomach turned inside out. She tasted copper. Felt gravity go sideways. Saw the docks fold into themselves like origami made of reality.

And then—

Solid ground. Different ground. Somewhere else.

Ruth threw up. Couldn't help it. The translocation—whatever that was—hit her body like poison.

She wiped her mouth, looked up.

They were in a medical bay. Impossible equipment. Monitors showing readouts she didn't recognize. A table that looked like it belonged in science fiction.

Ahdia was being lifted onto it. Automated arms moved with precision, attaching sensors, starting IVs, monitoring.

Ruth stumbled forward, doctor instincts overriding shock. "Tell me what's wrong with her."

A woman stepped forward. Thirties, maybe. Professional suit. The kind of presence that said leadership. "She's dying. But you already knew that."

"Who are you?"

"Director Overseer Bourn. CADENS. And you're Dr. Ruth Carter—emergency medicine, Johns Hopkins, cellular regeneration research that conventional medicine laughed out of

conferences." Bourn gestured to the monitors. "We need to talk. But first, let's stabilize your friend."

Ruth approached the monitors. Started reading data. Her medical training kicked in automatically, parsing the readouts even though half the terminology was unfamiliar.

"Cellular Degradation Rate: Accelerating"

"Temporal Phase Variance: 47%"

"Telomere Integrity: 18% (CRITICAL)"

"Projected Viable Function: 18 months \pm 6 months"

Ruth stared. Telomere analysis took weeks in a standard lab. DNA sequencing, cellular assays, multiple samples. This readout had appeared in seconds. Whatever technology CADENS had, it was decades beyond anything she'd seen at Johns Hopkins.

She wanted to ask how. Wanted to understand the mechanism, the equipment, the protocols. But Ahdia was dying on the table, and professional fascination was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"Eighteen months," Ruth said quietly, pushing past the impossible technology. "Best case scenario."

"That's if she stops using her powers completely," Bourn clarified. "Every use accelerates breakdown. Tonight's intervention alone depleted another 4%."

Ruth did the math. At Ahdia's current rate of use—every Go Squad patrol, every impossible save, every manipulation—she was burning through her remaining life force at exponential rates.

"At her current rate..."

"Weeks. Maybe less."

Ruth's hands clenched. She was a trauma surgeon. She'd lost patients. She'd made impossible choices in the ER. Had learned to compartmentalize, to focus on what she could control.

But this was different. This was cellular breakdown from manipulating time itself. This wasn't medicine. This was cosmology wearing a medical chart.

"Can you stop it?" Ruth asked.

Bourn's expression didn't change. "Can you un-shoot someone? Put aged cells back together?"

"No."

"Neither can we. We can only slow it. Make the time she has left... matter."

Ruth stared at the numbers. Eighteen months maximum. Weeks at current usage. Every time Ahdia helped them, every impossible save, she was dying a little faster.

"Sit," Bourn said, pulling up a chair. "I'll explain everything. And then you can decide if you want to help her, or watch her burn herself out trying to save people who don't even know she exists."

Ruth sat.

She listened.

And her entire understanding of reality came apart.

#

An hour later, Ruth stood in the observation room watching Ahdia sleep. Stable. For now.

CADENS had given her the broad strokes:

Ahdia bonded with something called the Hyper Seed at the warehouse. It gave her temporal manipulation—time control. She'd been using it to help Go Squad, creating the illusion of powers through FAERIS drone amplification and direct manipulation.

Every use depleted her life force. Cellular breakdown. Temporal aging. The more she helped, the faster she died.

CADENS had been monitoring since the warehouse. Trying to keep her alive. Trying to understand what she was.

They'd been monitoring Ruth too. For two years. Since her first papers on cellular regeneration. They'd recognized her value before any of this happened.

"You saw what she can do," Bourn said, joining Ruth at the window. "Imagine that scaled up. Imagine using it against actual threats. Cosmic-level incidents. Things that would make Kain look like a playground bully."

"You want to use her," Ruth said.

"We want to keep her alive long enough to transition the team to truth. FAERIS drones are learning. Evolving. Eventually they'll be able to provide real enhancements without her temporal manipulation. But we need time."

"How much time?"

"Months. Maybe a year. If we're lucky."

Ruth looked at Ahdia through the glass. Small. Broken. Alone.

Trying to save everyone while pretending she didn't need saving herself.

"Your research," Bourn said quietly. "Cellular regeneration protocols. Could they work on temporal degradation?"

Ruth's mind moved. She'd developed those treatments for trauma victims. Gunshot wounds. Burns. Cellular damage from physical stress.

This was cellular damage from temporal stress. Different mechanism. Same result.

"Possibly," Ruth said slowly. "The principle is similar. Accelerate cellular repair. Reduce breakdown rate. I'd need to adapt the protocols. Test dosages. Monitor effects."

"You'd have access to our resources. Full lab. Synthesis equipment. Isotopes you can't get anywhere else."

Ruth understood immediately. "You've been watching my research."

"For two years. Since your first paper. We knew you'd intersect with our work eventually."

"You knew I'd be useful."

"We knew you were brilliant. And that brilliance would be needed." Bourn gestured to Ahdia. "We just didn't know how."

Ruth looked at her friend through the glass. Dying because she couldn't stop helping people.

"What's the offer?" Ruth asked.

"Keep her alive as long as possible. Help transition Go Squad to truth when FAERIS achieves independence. Be our liaison—they trust you."

Ruth looked at Bourn. "You want me to manage the lie."

"Manage the transition. There's a difference."

Ruth turned back to the window. Ahdia was waking up. Confused. Afraid. Alone in an impossible place.

Ruth made her choice.

"I need to see your lab first," she said. "And I need full disclosure on what you know about her condition. Everything. No secrets."

Bourn smiled. "Deal. Dr. Ryu will give you the tour. Then we'll discuss terms."

"One more thing," Ruth said. "I tell my team I got separated during the fight. I tell them I'm clear. They can't know about this. Not yet."

"Agreed. We'll translocation you back near the Academy. Make it look like you escaped on your own."

Ruth nodded. Pulled out her phone. Typed: "Had to split off. I'm clear. Meet at Academy."

She looked at Ahdia one more time.

Then she followed Ryu to the lab, to see if she could do the impossible.

Save someone who was dying to save everyone else.

Chapter 20

Dr. Shiba Ryu walked fast. Not running—just that specific pace of someone who spent twelve hours a day in a lab and forgot that other people needed time to process things like "shadow government facility" and "cosmic threats."

Ruth followed through corridors that seemed to go on forever. Every twenty feet, another door. Another lab. Another impossibility.

"—so the cellular regeneration protocols you published in 2023 were genuinely groundbreaking," Ryu was saying, talking over his shoulder without slowing down. "The way you approached accelerated healing through localized metabolic manipulation—that's exactly the kind of thinking we need. Most researchers get stuck on macro-level solutions but you went micro, which is brilliant, and I know I'm talking too much but I get excited about this stuff and—"

He stopped so suddenly Ruth almost ran into him.

"Sorry." He adjusted his glasses. Finger-drummed on the doorframe. "I do that. The talking thing. My brain moves faster than my mouth and then my mouth tries to catch up and it just..."

"It's fine," Ruth said. Her brain was still processing "shadow government facility." Everything else was just noise.

"This is the main research lab." Ryu scanned his palm. The door opened.

Inside looked like every medical research facility Ruth had ever seen, if those facilities had budgets measured in billions instead of millions. Synthesis equipment that would make pharmaceutical companies weep with envy. Centrifuges. Spectrometers. Gene sequencers. Holographic displays showing molecular models she'd only seen in textbooks.

And in the corner, a desk buried under paperwork and coffee cups and for half a second believed they moved her desk.

"This is where you'd work," Ryu said. "If you agree. Full access to everything. Synthesis capabilities, isotope libraries, computational modeling. Whatever you need."

Ruth walked to the nearest workstation. Pulled up a display. The interface was intuitive—someone had designed this for actual doctors, not just technicians.

"The temporal degradation data," she said. "Can I see the full workup?"

Ryu typed something. A holographic model appeared—Ahdia's cellular structure, rendered in impossible detail. Red threads spreading through healthy tissue like roots through soil.

"The Hyper Seed integration," Ryu said quietly. "It's converting her. Slowly. Every time she uses her powers, it spreads a little more. Replaces biological tissue with something else. Something that can channel temporal energy."

Ruth studied the model. Years of trauma surgery gave her a framework for thinking about damage. This wasn't trauma—it was transformation. But the principle was the same: healthy cells dying, being replaced by something else.

"The mechanism," Ruth said. "It's cellular stress. Just like gunshot trauma or burns. The stressor is different—temporal manipulation instead of physical damage—but the cellular response is identical. Accelerated apoptosis. Telomere degradation. Metabolic collapse."

"Exactly." Ryu pulled up another screen. "We've tried conventional interventions. Nothing works. The temporal nature of the stress makes it impossible to treat with standard medicine."

Ruth's mind was already moving. She'd spent three years developing cellular regeneration protocols for trauma victims. The treatments worked by accelerating the body's natural healing—providing the metabolic building blocks to repair damage faster than it accumulated.

Physical trauma. Temporal trauma. Different sources. Same cellular breakdown.

"My CR-7 protocol," Ruth said slowly. "The cellular regeneration treatment I've been developing. It's designed for trauma patients. Gunshot wounds. Burns. Severe tissue damage."

"I've read your papers. It's revolutionary."

"It never got institutional approval. Too experimental. Too risky." Ruth gestured at the equipment around them. "I've been working on it in stolen hours between ER shifts. Testing on small samples. Never had the resources for proper trials."

"You have them now."

Ruth looked at the holographic model of Ahdia's cells. Dying. Transforming. Weeks left, maybe less.

"The principle is the same," she said, thinking out loud. "Accelerate cellular repair. Provide metabolic support. Reduce the degradation rate. I'd need to modify the isotope ratios—temporal stress probably affects different cellular pathways than physical trauma. And the dosage would need careful calibration. Too little won't help. Too much could accelerate the transformation."

Ryu was already typing. "I can synthesize whatever formulation you need. We have isotopes you can't get anywhere else. Computational models to predict cellular response. We can have a test batch ready in hours."

"Hours?"

"This is CADENS. We don't wait for grant approval."

Ruth stared at the equipment. At the data. At the possibility that she could actually do something instead of watching someone die.

"It won't be a cure," she said. "Best case, it buys time. Extends the timeline from weeks to months. Maybe a year or two if we're lucky."

"That's more than she has now."

Ruth nodded slowly. "I'll need Ahdia's full cellular workup. Blood samples. Tissue samples if you have them. Baseline metabolic data. I need to understand exactly how the Seed is affecting her before I can counter it."

"Already compiled." Ryu pulled up a file. "Everything we've collected since the warehouse. It's all here."

Ruth opened it. Hundreds of pages. Data that should have taken months to collect. CADENS had been watching Ahdia since the beginning. Documenting her degradation. Waiting for someone who could do something about it.

Waiting for Ruth.

"You said you've been monitoring my research for two years," Ruth said.

"Since your first paper on metabolic acceleration. We knew it would be relevant eventually."

"You knew I'd be useful."

Ryu hesitated. "We knew you were brilliant. The world just hadn't figured that out yet."

Ruth looked at him. Really looked. He meant it. Not manipulation—genuine respect. Someone who actually understood what she'd been trying to build while hospital administrators buried her in the ER.

"Okay," Ruth said. "Show me the synthesis lab. We're going to need to move fast."

#

Four hours later, Ruth held up a vial of pale blue liquid.

"This is it," she said.

Ryu looked up from his workstation. "You're sure?"

"No." Ruth set the vial down carefully. "But it's the best shot we have. Weeks to eighteen months, if it works. Two years if we're lucky."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then she dies faster." Ruth pulled up Ahdia's chart. "I'll need to be present for every dose. Real-time adjustments. Clinical judgment."

"How often?"

"Every three days to start. Weekly once she stabilizes." Ruth looked at him. "This only works if she stops using her powers every night."

"Good luck with that."

"Yeah."

Ryu studied the vial. "Why couldn't we figure this out? We tried everything. Standard protocols, gene therapy, metabolic support. Nothing worked."

"You tried what's in the literature," Ruth said. "I've been treating trauma patients off the books for three years. Keeping people alive who should have died. The papers I published were incomplete."

"On purpose?"

"Hospital administrators don't approve experiments. So I didn't tell them everything." She picked up the vial again. "You can synthesize anything. But you don't know which patients need which dosages. When to push. When to pull back. That's not science. That's art."

Ryu nodded slowly. "That's why we needed you."

"Before we do this," Ruth said. "Tell me the truth. Why does CADENS really need her alive?"

His fingers stopped drumming.

"Cosmic threats," he said finally. "Dimensional breaches. Things we can't stop. Ahdia might be the only Temporalist who can."

"And if she dies?"

"We hope FAERIS learns fast enough."

Ruth looked at the vial. Three years of research. Four hours of synthesis. One impossible chance.

"I'm not doing this for CADENS," she said. "I'm doing this because she's my friend."

"I know." Ryu stood. "That's why you'll succeed where we failed."

#

On the way back to medical, Ryu took a detour.

"There's something you should see," he said, leading her down a side corridor. "It's relevant to the long-term plan."

He stopped at an observation window. Inside, a test chamber. A training dummy in the center. And hovering above it—a FAERIS drone.

Ruth had seen them before. Small, spherical, silent. They'd been overhead during every Go Squad operation. Providing the "enhancements" that were actually Ahdia's time manipulation amplified and distributed.

"Watch," Ryu said.

He pressed a button. "Execute enhancement protocol."

The drone descended toward the dummy. Lights pulsed along its surface. The dummy's arm suddenly jerked—faster than should be possible. The motion looked wrong. Accelerated.

"No temporal field," Ryu said quietly. "No Ahdia. The drone did that by itself."

Ruth stared. "It's replicating her powers?"

"At about 10% effectiveness. But yes. The drones have been learning. Observing how Ahdia manipulates time, how she creates the enhancement effect. They're developing the capability independently."

"How long have they been doing this?"

"Three days. Started small—minor accelerations, barely measurable. But the effect is strengthening." Ryu pulled up a graph showing exponential growth. "At current progression, they'll reach 50% effectiveness in six months. Full capability in a year, maybe eighteen months."

Ruth understood immediately. "When Ahdia dies, the team won't lose their powers."

"Eventually. If FAERIS evolution continues at this rate. If we can keep Ahdia alive long enough for the transition."

She watched the drone hover. Pulsing with stolen knowledge. Learning to replicate what had been killing Ahdia for months.

"They're becoming sentient," Ruth said.

Ryu hesitated. "We don't use that word. Not yet. But... maybe."

"What happens when they don't need her anymore?"

"I don't know. The drones are learning from her technique, but they're also developing beyond it. Adapting. Finding more efficient methods." He gestured at the test chamber. "In theory, they could eventually provide enhancements that are safer, more sustainable than what Ahdia does through sheer force of will."

"In theory."

"In theory."

Ruth watched the drone for another moment. Then: "Does Ahdia know?"

"Bourn told her. Part of the original recruitment pitch. 'Help us long enough for FAERIS to learn, then you can step back.'" Ryu's expression darkened. "But Ahdia can't step back. Every time someone's in danger, she intervenes. Burns through her life force like it's infinite. The treatment you just developed? It buys her time. But only if she stops trying to save everyone every night."

"And she won't."

"Would you?"

Ruth thought about the ER. The patients she'd fought to save when administration told her to let them go. The experimental treatments she'd administered off the books because institutional medicine moved too slowly and people were dying now.

"No," she admitted. "I wouldn't."

The drone tilted in the chamber. Watching the observation window. Almost like it knew they were there.

Ryu noticed. His fingers started drumming faster.

"That's new," he said quietly.

"What?"

"That level of environmental awareness. The drones weren't doing that yesterday."

They watched as the FAERIS unit slowly rotated to face them directly. Hovering.
Observing.

Learning.

"Come on," Ryu said, stepping back from the window. "Let's get you to medical. Ahdia should be awake by now."

#

Ahdia woke up not knowing where she was.

White ceiling. White walls. The hum of equipment. Monitors showing numbers she didn't understand. IVs in her arm. Sensors taped to her chest.

Hospital. She was in a hospital. Again.

No—not a hospital. The equipment was wrong. Too advanced. Too quiet. And the walls had no windows.

Memory came back in pieces. The docks. Ruth. The man with the fist. Freezing time.
Collapsing. Translocation—

CADENS.

She tried to sit up. Her body didn't cooperate. Everything hurt. Her chest felt like someone had replaced her lungs with broken glass.

The door opened.

Ruth walked in carrying a small case. She stopped when she saw Ahdia awake.

"Hey," Ruth said quietly.

"Hey." Ahdia's voice came out hoarse. "I'm alive?"

"For now." Ruth pulled a chair over. Sat down. "How do you feel?"

"Like I died and came back wrong."

"Close." Ruth opened the case. Inside, a vial of pale blue liquid. "You almost did die. On the docks. In the translocation. Twice in medical before we stabilized you."

Ahdia stared at the ceiling. "Why didn't you let me?"

Ruth's hands stopped moving. "What?"

"I was done. I saved you. That's all I needed to do. Why bring me back?"

"Because you're my friend."

"You barely know me."

"I know enough." Ruth prepared an injection. "I know you've been dying to give my team powers they never had. I know you've been burning through your life force every night because you can't stand watching people get hurt. I know you think that makes you useful instead of worthy."

Ahdia looked away. "It's the same thing."

"It's not."

"If I'm not useful, what am I?" The words came out harder than she meant. "I'm not... I don't have anything else. No job. No life. I watch TV twelve hours a day and order gas station food and hide in my apartment because going outside means I might have to be a person and I don't know how to do that anymore. The only thing I'm good at is stopping time. Take that away and I'm just..."

She stopped. Couldn't finish.

"Just what?" Ruth asked gently.

"Nothing."

Ruth set down the syringe. "You saved my life tonight. You've saved Victor. Ben. Tess. Leah. Firas. Every person we've helped for months. You've been dying by inches to give them hope. How is that nothing?"

"Because they don't know." Ahdia's voice cracked. "They think they're heroes. They think they have powers. They don't know it's me. Invisible. In the background. Fixing everything while they get to be... people."

"You're a person too."

"I don't feel like one." She finally looked at Ruth. "I feel like a tool that wears skin. Something that gets used until it breaks. And then what? Then I'm just taking up space."

Ruth was quiet for a long moment.

"I used to think that too," she said finally. "Hopkins wanted me for research. Brilliant work. Groundbreaking. Then I challenged the chief of surgery and suddenly I'm in the ER. Twelve-hour shifts. Gunshot wounds. Overdoses. Watching people die because the system's too slow or too cheap or too corrupt to save them. I thought—if I'm not doing the research, if I'm not changing medicine, what's the point? I'm just another body in scrubs."

"What changed?"

"I realized the ER was where I could actually help people. Not publish papers. Not collect accolades. Just keep someone alive who shouldn't make it through the night." Ruth picked up the syringe again. "You think you're nothing without your powers. I think you're someone who's been dying to save people who don't even know your name. That's not nothing. That's everything."

Ahdia felt something crack in her chest. Not the Seed. Something else.

"What's in the vial?" she asked.

"Hope." Ruth met her eyes. "I developed a treatment. CR-7 Temporal Variant. It should slow your degradation. Buy you time. Eighteen months, maybe two years."

"Should?"

"I've never treated temporal stress before. But I've kept fifteen trauma patients alive who hospitals wrote off. This is the same principle." Ruth held up the syringe. "Different mechanism. Same art."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then you die faster." Ruth didn't look away. "But I'm not letting you die without trying. Someone should fight for you as hard as you fight for everyone else."

Ahdia stared at her. At the treatment. At the possibility that she might have more than weeks left.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because you're worth saving." Ruth said it like fact. Like it wasn't even a question. "Not because you're useful. Because you're a person who deserves to live. Even if you don't believe it yet."

Ahdia's eyes burned. She hadn't cried in months. Maybe years. Crying meant feeling things and feeling things meant acknowledging she was still alive enough to hurt.

"I don't know how to be worth anything except this," she said.

"Then I'll teach you." Ruth prepared the injection site. "But first, let's keep you alive long enough to learn."

The needle slipped in. Ahdia barely felt it.

The treatment was cold going in. Then warm. Then it spread through her chest like someone had replaced the broken glass with something that almost felt like breathing used to.

Not fixed. Not healed. Just... less wrong.

"How long?" Ahdia asked.

"Until it works or doesn't." Ruth withdrew the needle, applied pressure to the site. "We'll know in a few hours. If your cellular markers improve, we continue treatments every three days. If they don't..."

"Then I had weeks anyway."

"Yeah."

Ahdia closed her eyes. Felt the warmth spreading. Felt her chest expanding without quite so much pain.

Felt like maybe she had more than weeks.

Felt like maybe that mattered.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Ruth squeezed her hand. "Get some rest. I'll be back to check on you in an hour."

She stood. Started to leave.

"Ruth?"

She turned back.

"Don't tell him," Ahdia said. "Please. Not yet."

Ruth didn't ask who. She already knew.

She just nodded and left Ahdia alone with the monitors and the warmth spreading through her chest and the possibility that she might live long enough to figure out how to be a person again.

If she could just learn how before time ran out.

Chapter 21

The first rule of losing your superpowers is you don't talk about losing your superpowers.

The second rule of losing your superpowers is you definitely don't post a vlog about it where your face is visible and you use everyone's real names because that would be stupid and also maybe get you killed.

So here she was. Recording anyway.

Tess adjusted the camera on her tripod, sat back on her bed. Her room was a mess. Clothes everywhere. Empty energy drink cans. She should probably clean up before filming but honestly if she was about to die tonight, who cared?

"Hey guys, it's your girl, Gloomy. If you're watching this, I'm either dead or I finally got the guts to post it, and I genuinely don't know which is more terrifying."

She glanced at the door. Nobody was coming. They were all downstairs.

"It's been one day since the docks. Since the tank cop almost killed us. Since Gale disappeared and our powers just... stopped working."

She paused.

"Well, most of them."

She raised her middle finger at the camera. Focused. The familiar feeling of space folding.

She disappeared.

Reappeared across the room.

Walked back, sat down.

"See? Mine still works. Knight thinks it's because mine was always tech-based—FAERIS drones doing the actual teleporting. Which means maybe all of it was tech. Maybe we were never actually super. Just regular people with really expensive invisible support."

She stared at the camera.

"That's what's breaking everyone. Not that we lost our powers. That we maybe never had them to begin with."

She counted on her fingers.

"Sable's strength? Gone. He's dealing with it by being pissed at literally everything. Battlea's speed? Gone. She's gone quiet, which is way worse than when she's yelling. Knight's accuracy? Gone. He's over-planning every detail because if he stops thinking he'll have to start feeling and I think that might actually kill him."

Her voice cracked a little.

"And Gale... Gale's just gone. No word, no message, nothing. She disappeared after the warehouse and we don't know if she's dead or captured or—"

She shook her head.

"Can't think about that. Focus on what we can control."

She stood up, paced a little.

"Firas suggested we rescue Dr. Jericho. The artifact expert who got kidnapped from the museum. The guy who was researching the same artifacts that gave Kain his powers. The Tamois Heart. Turned him into whatever that thing at the docks was."

She sat back down.

"If anyone knows what's happening to us, it's Jericho. Problem is, Firas is downstairs right now bleeding through his bandages because he won't admit his chest wound isn't healed. He suggested the plan, worked out half of it, but he can barely walk. So it's just us. Four people. Three without powers. Going after a billionaire with private security and whatever cosmic bullshit Kain's got now."

She looked directly at the camera.

"Great plan, right? Super tactical. I'm sure nothing will go wrong."

Beat.

"If I don't make it back... tell my dad I tried. Tell him I was doing something good even if I sucked at it. And tell him there's a photo folded inside that picture frame on his desk. Maybe he should actually look at it sometime."

She reached toward the camera.

"Team's meeting downstairs in five. Time to find out if we're brave or just idiots."

Her finger hovered over the stop button.

"Probably both."

She pressed stop.

#

The camera was back on when Tess got downstairs. She set it up on the table facing the planning area. Documentary mode. If they were doing this, they should have a record.

Firas was sitting at the table, laptop open, wincing every time he shifted his weight. The chest bandages were visible under his shirt. He shouldn't be here. He definitely shouldn't be planning a rescue mission. But here they were.

Knight had printed schematics spread across the table. Sable was checking equipment. Battlea was sitting on the couch, arms crossed, saying nothing.

Which was how Tess knew she was terrified.

"Okay," Firas said, pulling up intel on his screen. "Kain's hosting a gala event at his mansion tomorrow night. Wealthy donors, politicians, the usual corrupt assholes. Heavy security on the perimeter, but inside? Just catering staff and house staff."

Knight pointed at the mansion blueprints. "Three entry points. Front door—obviously not happening. Service entrance here, kitchen access. And loading dock basement entrance here."

"We need someone inside distracting Kain," Firas continued. "Someone who can pass as a wealthy donor. Someone who can keep him occupied while the rest of us search for Jericho."

Everyone looked at Battlea.

She didn't look up. "No."

"Leah—" Firas started.

"I said no."

Sable leaned against the wall. "You're the only one who can pull it off."

"Pull off what, exactly? Playing dress-up for a billionaire creep while you guys search his mansion? Hard pass."

"We need you," Knight said quietly.

Battlea finally looked up. "You need me to put on a tight dress and smile while Kain ogles me for an hour. That's what you need."

Silence.

Firas closed his laptop. "Yeah. That's what we need. And I hate asking. But Jericho might be our only shot at understanding what's happening to us. What happened to Gale. Why our powers are gone."

Battlea stared at him. At all of them.

"Fine," she said finally. "But I'm picking the dress. And if he touches me, I'm breaking his hand."

"Deal," Firas said.

#

Twenty minutes later Tess was filming Battlea trying on a red dress in her room.

It wasn't a dress. It was a weapon disguised as fabric. Tight, floor-length, with a slit up one thigh that went all the way to "are you kidding me" territory.

Battlea stood in front of her mirror, tugging at the neckline.

"I look like I'm auditioning for a spy movie."

"You look hot," Tess said from behind the camera.

"I look like bait."

"You look like hot bait."

Battlea glared at the camera. "You know you can't post this if you shoot my face."

"That's what face blurring is for, duh."

Battlea turned back to the mirror. Adjusted the slit. "I hate this. I hate that this is the plan. Distract the creepy billionaire with my tits while you guys do the actual work."

"Hey." Tess lowered the camera. "You're not just bait. You're getting us in. You're the reason we have access. That's not nothing."

"It's also not punching cops in the face, which is what I'd rather be doing."

"We can punch cops after we rescue Jericho."

Battlea almost smiled. Almost.

Sable appeared in the doorway. Stopped. Stared.

"Wow."

"Don't," Battlea warned.

"I'm just saying—"

"I know what you're saying. Don't."

Sable held up his hands. "You look good. That's all I'm saying."

"I look like I'm about to seduce a Bond villain."

"Well," Tess said, camera back up. "Technically you are."

Battlea flipped her off. Tess filmed it. Documentary gold.

Knight appeared behind Sable. "We need to go over the comms plan—" He stopped.

Blinked. "Oh."

"Yeah," Battlea said. "Oh. Everyone get a good look? We done objectifying me?"

"You're not being objectified," Firas said from the hallway, leaning against the wall like standing upright hurt. Which it probably did. "You're being weaponized. There's a difference."

Battlea considered this. "I hate that that makes me feel better."

"We work with what we have," Firas said. "Right now what we have is Knight's planning, Sable's muscle, Gloom Girl's teleportation, and your ability to make Kain forget we exist. That's the play."

Battlea tugged at the dress one more time. "If this goes wrong and I die in this dress, I'm haunting all of you."

"Noted," Tess said, still filming.

"I may be fine with that," Victor added.

Battlea looked at herself in the mirror. At the dress. At what she was about to do.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Let's rob a billionaire."

Firas stepped forward. Met her eyes in the mirror.

"No better place than here," he said.

The team responded: "No better time than now."

It was their thing. Rally cry. Confirmation. The thing they said before going into the field.

Battlea nodded. Turned to face them.

"No better place than here. No better time than now."

#

The next night, Tess sat in the surveillance van two blocks from Kain's mansion. She had twenty minutes before showtime.

She pulled out her phone. Scrolled through the feeds.

@CaledoniaNights had posted a video. Ring camera footage. Three nights ago. The Go Squad stopping a mugging outside a bodega on Morrison Street. Knight's staff work. Sable's takedown. Clean. Professional.

14,000 likes. 2,300 shares.

Top comment: "These are the real police."

Second comment: "Squad saved my cousin last week. We owe them."

Third: "Why aren't we funding these people?"

She scrolled further. Someone had made a compilation. "Go Squad Saves Caledonia - 47 Confirmed Interventions This Month." Set to some epic orchestral music. 89,000 views.

Another post. Photo of Battlea (in costume) outside Rodriguez's Bodega. Mr. Rodriguez had his arm around her. Caption: "Stopped a robbery. Wouldn't take payment. I gave her coffee anyway. #GoSquad #CaledoniaHeroes"

Tess smiled. Screenshotted it. She'd show Leah later.

Her phone buzzed. New post from @WestSideWatch:

"Go Squad spotted entering vehicle near Academy. Think something's happening tonight. Stay safe, Squad. We got your backs."

47 replies. All variations of the same thing. Support. Gratitude. Hope.

Tess put her phone away. Checked the feeds.

Battlea was stepping out of the hired car. The red dress caught the evening light.

"You're on," Tess said into comms. "Looking good, by the way."

"Feeling like bait," Battlea muttered.

"Hot bait."

"Not helping."

But hours earlier, back at the Academy, Knight had spread the mansion blueprints across the planning table.

"Battlea enters through the front as Sophie Clement, wealthy French donor. Sable and I go in through the service entrance as catering staff. Gloom Girl stays in the van two blocks out, monitors comms and security feeds."

Firas had pulled up a photo on his laptop. "We're looking for Dr. Jericho. Artifact expert. Last seen at the museum before Kain's people grabbed him." He'd brought up another window showing mansion interior layouts. "If he's anywhere, he's in the basement research level. That's where Kain keeps his collection."

"What if he's not there?" Battlea had asked.

"Then we get whatever intel we can and extract. Hard drives, documents, anything that tells us what Kain's doing with those artifacts."

At the mansion, Sable and Knight rolled a catering cart up to the service entrance. White server shirts. Black bow ties. Just another delivery for the gala.

A guard at the service door waved them through without looking up from his phone.

Knight's voice came through the comms. "We're in. That was... easier than expected."

"Don't say that," Tess said from the van. "You'll jinx it."

Back at the Academy, Knight had pulled a catering cart from the corner, started loading equipment into hidden compartments. "Thermal goggles under the tablecloth. Smoke grenades in the champagne ice bucket. Data drives in the bread basket. Zip ties in the napkin dispenser. Everything hidden in plain sight."

Sable had picked up one of the server shirts. "We've done the catering staff thing before. Guards never look twice at waiters."

The kitchen at the mansion was chaos. Real catering staff rushing around preparing hors d'oeuvres. Nobody paid attention to two more servers pushing a cart through. Sable and Knight blended in, moving toward the basement access.

They made it to the basement. The door was unlocked—just staff access, no guards down here yet. They moved quickly through the hallway, Knight checking room numbers against the blueprint on his phone.

"Vault should be at the end of this corridor," he whispered.

Back at the Academy, Firas had said, "RFID cloner. Get close enough to any guard's security badge, this'll clone the signal. Should open most of the electronic locks including the basement vault."

"Should?" Sable had asked.

"Ninety percent chance. If there's biometric locks too, you'll need to improvise."

At the vault, Knight pulled out the RFID cloner, held it up as footsteps approached. A guard walked past, badge clipped to his belt. Beep. Signal captured.

The guard kept walking, oblivious.

Knight pressed the cloner to the lock panel.

Red light.

"Shit," Knight whispered. "It's not working."

Sable tried the handle. Locked solid. "Biometric?"

Knight pulled out the thermal goggles, pressed them to the door. Strange heat signatures inside. Not human-shaped. Too distributed, too weird.

"Something's in there," he said. "Artifacts, maybe. But we can't get in without an actual guard's fingerprint or retinal scan or whatever."

"So we improvise," Sable said. He looked at the door. Heavy. Reinforced. "My powers are more, like, momentum based...?"

Knight rolled his eyes, braced his shoulder against the frame, and threw his weight into it. The door didn't budge. "Yeah, this isn't happening. We need to find another way. Let's search the rest of the basement."

They moved down the hallway, checking doors. Storage. Wine cellar. Mechanical room.

No Jericho. No research lab.

"He's not down here," Sable said.

"Then we go upstairs. Get what intel we can from his office."

Upstairs, Kain descended the mansion's grand staircase. He wasn't fully dressed—no blazer, shirt collar open, sleeves rolled up. Like he was doing Battlea a favor by seeing her early.

"Ms. Clement," he said, taking her hand. Kissed it. Held it too long. "Welcome. I'm sorry the place is in such a state. We weren't expecting you for a few more hours."

Battlea smiled. Wilting flower. Play the part. "I should have called ahead. But I was in the area and thought, why not?"

"Not at all, not at all." Kain looked her up and down, not even trying to be subtle. "It's a pleasure anytime."

In the van, Tess grimaced. "He's so gross."

Back at the Academy, Battlea had studied a photo of Kain. "So I just... keep him occupied? Talk about rich people stuff?"

"Art," Firas had suggested. "He collects it. Especially ancient artifacts. Egyptian, Greek, Amazigh. If you mention you're interested in antiquities, he'll talk your ear off. Guy loves showing off his collection."

"Great. I know nothing about art."

"You know it when you see it, right?"

"That's porn."

Kain led Battlea through the mansion. Out to the villa grounds. Sprawling acreage, immaculate landscaping, and a massive tacky statue of himself.

"It's... magnificent," Battlea said, trying to sound impressed.

"I know," Kain said, completely serious. "It's nothing, really. You should see my place in the south of Marseille. Ever been?"

Battlea's earpiece crackled. Knight's voice, cautious: "He's fishing. That's in Sophie Clement's cover story. He might've read up on her."

"Often," Battlea said smoothly. "But I prefer to stay in Paris, where I can keep a close eye on my business."

Kain smiled, seemed satisfied with the answer. "A woman who understands priorities. I like that." He gestured back toward the mansion. "Come. Let me show you my office. I have something that might interest a woman of your... refined tastes."

Battlea's earpiece: Knight's voice, surprised. "Wait, that worked? He's taking you to the office?"

"Lead the way," Battlea said to Kain.

They walked back inside. Kain led her upstairs to the second floor, down a hallway to a set of double doors.

"Second floor office," Battlea said casually. "What a view you must have."

"To see the sunset," Kain said, opening the doors. "Very nice choice, isn't it?"

The office was massive. Basically a small ballroom with a desk at the far wall, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the western grounds. Art on every wall. A massive painting of an ancient monument with a tear in the sky above it.

Knight's voice in Battlea's ear: "We're coming up. Stall him."

There was someone else in the office. An older man in a lab coat, hunched over a workstation near the desk. Equipment Battlea didn't recognize—spectrometers, containment fields, holographic displays showing molecular structures.

And in the center of it all, suspended in a crystalline chamber: a heart.

Not biological. Pulsing with red and gold light that hurt to look at directly.

Kain waved dismissively at the man. "Dr. Jericho, take a break. We have a guest."

Jericho looked up, startled. Adjusted his glasses. "But the resonance calibration—"

"Can wait," Kain said firmly. "Give us the room."

Jericho glanced at Battlea, then at the Heart, clearly reluctant. "The temporal stability is still fluctuating. If I leave now—"

"Ten minutes," Kain said. "Then you can get back to making me a god."

Jericho gathered some notes, shot one more worried look at the Heart, and left through a side door.

Battlea heard a soft thud through her earpiece—Knight and Sable had him.

"So," Kain said, turning to Battlea. "You mentioned an interest in antiquities?"

"I did," Battlea said, trying not to stare at the Heart. "This... what is that?"

"The Tamois Heart," Kain said, pride in his voice. "The Amazigh worshipped it as divine. A gift from gods. But it's technology. Dr. Jericho has been researching its properties. Learning how to replicate it. Scale it. Imagine—power like this, mass-produced. Distributed to whoever I choose."

The office door opened. Knight and Sable slipped in.

Kain turned.

Battlea grabbed his arm, wrenched it behind his back. "Sorry about this."

"What—" Kain started, then yelped as she twisted harder.

Knight locked the door. Sable shoved Kain into his desk chair while Knight zip-tied his hands.

Knight was already at Jericho's workstation. "Holy shit. This is it. The artifact from the museum. And all his research." He started copying files. "Resonance patterns, cellular integration protocols, temporal manipulation theories..."

Sable was staring at the Heart. "That thing's... it's doing something. I can feel it."

"Don't touch it," Knight said sharply.

"Who are you people?" Kain demanded.

"Concerned citizens," Battlea said. "And we're taking Jericho and all this research."

"You have no idea who you're robbing—"

"TRIOMF executive, presidential candidate, corrupt billionaire experimenting with cosmic artifacts," Sable listed. "Yeah, we know."

Knight pulled a data drive. "Got it. Research files, ledgers, everything. Including proof the police chief is on your payroll."

"We need to get Jericho and go," Battlea said.

Kain's eyes went to something under his desk. His foot moved slightly.

Tess's voice crackled through the comms from the van. "Wait—I'm seeing security mobilizing. Multiple guards heading to the second floor. Did someone—"

Kain smiled. Foot still on the panic button under his desk.

"Shit," Knight said. "He called security."

"How many?" Sable asked.

"All of them," Tess said. "You need to get out NOW."

Heavy footsteps in the hallway. Lots of them.

The office doors burst open. A dozen TRIOMF security forces filed in, weapons drawn.

The team was surrounded.

Chapter 22

"Open fire!" one of them yelled.

The budda-budda-budda of assault rifles filled the office. Battlea and Knight looked at each other, then moved.

Battlea grabbed Kain—still zip-tied to his chair—and spun him around as a shield. The wheeled chair rolled between her and the firing line. The guards couldn't shoot without risking their boss.

Knight dove behind the desk. Sable was already there, ripping open the catering cart's hidden compartment. Smoke grenades. Thermal goggles. Everything they'd prepared.

"Gloom Girl," Knight said into comms. "We're pinned. Need an exit."

From the van two blocks away, Tess watched the feeds. Button cam showing muzzle flashes. Mansion security cams showing TRIOMF forces filing in.

She could pull them out. Teleport them one by one. But Jericho was still in the side room, unconscious. And the research data was copying—thirty seconds left on the download.

"Copy's not done," she said. "Hold them off."

Knight pulled out two smoke grenades. Yanked the pins. Threw them in high arcs.

They landed between Battlea and the firing line. Dense white smoke billowed, filling the office.

Sable grabbed thermal goggles from the cart, tossed a pair to Knight. Put on his own. The world shifted—heat signatures blooming through the smoke. A dozen guards. More filing in from the hallway.

Knight called to Battlea. "Battlea! Incoming!"

She turned, caught the goggles he threw. Slipped them on.

Then she pushed.

Kain's chair rolled forward, gaining speed. The guards tracked it, didn't fire—their boss still in the seat. The chair hit the lead guard, knocked him down.

Battlea let go, grabbed the chair itself as it passed, swung it overhead once—full rotation, building momentum—then brought it down on the guard to her right.

The wooden chair splintered. Crack of breaking wood. She was left with two sturdy armrest pieces. Makeshift batons.

Knight vaulted the desk, sprinted into the smoke. Found a heat signature, low and off-balance. Grabbed the leg, yanked up hard as he stood. The guard went down face-first.

Sable went the other direction. Slid on his knees into the smoke, came up behind a guard, wrapped his arm around the man's throat. Used him as leverage to swing around and kick another guard.

Battlea and Knight ended up back to back in the center of the smoke. Fighting blind guards who couldn't see them.

Battlea push-kicked a guard into another. The first went down. The second stumbled.

Knight grabbed a rifle from a dazed guard, yanked it free, used the butt to strike the man behind him. The guard dropped.

Battlea parried an attack with her wooden baton—forearm block, redirect the energy—then drove her elbow into the guard's chest. Ribs cracked. She spun, extended the armrest in an arc, connected with another guard's head.

Knight saw a heat signature three steps away. Two running steps, then jumped—knees tucked to chest, then extending both legs horizontal with force. Flying double kick.

The guard crashed through the office window. Fell two stories to the garden below.

The broken window created a draft. Smoke began to dissipate.

Faster than they wanted.

Sable was grappling with a guard when the smoke cleared enough to see. The guard slammed the back of his head into Sable's face. Sable stumbled back, dazed. Released his grip.

Completely exposed.

More guards poured in through the door. Fresh. Armed. Not blinded.

Battlea used a dazed guard she'd just punched—grabbed his vest, swung around him for leverage, kicked the guard next to him. Then wrapped her arm around his neck from behind, grabbed his rifle, pointed it at the reinforcements.

"Gale?" she called out, breathing hard. Unsure what to do as the men began to circle.
"Little help?"

Knight scanned for Ruth through the smoke. Couldn't find her heat signature.

Wait. Ruth wasn't here. Ruth was at CADENS with Ahdia.

They were alone.

A guard tackled Knight from behind. They went down. Knight on his back, guard on top.
The guard pinned Knight's arms, pulled a knife.

Sable tried to move, help, but three guards surrounded him. Weapons drawn.

Battlea held the rifle on the entering reinforcements, but the guard she was holding was struggling. Thirty seconds before he broke free.

They were losing.

Then the lights went out.

Not the smoke—the actual lights. Every fixture in the office. Emergency lights. Even the moonlight from the windows seemed to dim.

For one second: total darkness.

Then Tess was there.

She'd teleported from the van to the mansion's electrical box in the basement. Flipped the breakers. Thirty seconds of darkness. Enough.

She appeared in the office—northeast corner, eight feet up, standing on the decorative crown molding like it was a balance beam. Impossible angle. Surveying the chaos below.

Thermal goggles on. She could see everything.

Knight on the ground, guard with knife raised. Battlea surrounded. Sable cornered.

She jumped.

Dropped seven feet, landed on the guard above Knight. Knees-first into his back. He went down hard.

Grabbed Knight's hand. Teleported.

They appeared on the opposite side of the room—fifteen feet diagonal, behind the guard formation. Knight rolled to his feet.

Tess jumped again—literally just jumped, parkour-style—caught the chandelier chain, swung her momentum forward, released at the apex.

Flew across the room. Appeared mid-flight on the other side of Battlea's position.

Grabbed her arm. Teleported.

They materialized on top of the desk. Two seconds to breathe.

"Jericho?" Battlea asked.

"Got him," Tess said. She'd grabbed him from the side room during the blackout. Ported him to the van. "Data drive?"

Knight checked his pocket. "Downloaded."

"Then we're leaving."

The lights came back on. Emergency power kicking in.

A dozen guards, weapons raised, surrounded the desk.

"Hands up!" the lead guard yelled. "Now!"

Tess looked at the guards. At the windows. At the spatial layout of the room.

Forty feet to the nearest window. Twenty feet to the door. Twelve guards with clear firing lines.

She could port them all out. One at a time. But the guards would shoot before she finished.

Unless—

"Trust me," she said to Knight and Battlea.

She grabbed both their arms.

Teleported.

They appeared at the window—the one Knight had kicked the guard through. Broken glass. Fifty-foot drop to the garden below.

The guards turned, started firing.

Tess jumped through the window, pulling Knight and Battlea with her.

They fell.

Second story. Thirty feet of empty air. Garden approaching fast.

Tess teleported mid-fall. They appeared back in the office for a split second—she grabbed Sable's arm, surrounded by guards—then teleported again.

Now four of them falling. Garden approaching fast.

Tess teleported again.

They appeared fifteen feet to the left. Still falling, but trajectory changed. Heading for the fountain instead of concrete.

Teleported again.

Ten feet right. Momentum shifted.

Again.

Each teleport mid-fall, changing their vector. Not stopping the fall—redirecting it. Using spatial jumps like parkour uses walls: redirecting momentum, controlling descent.

Final teleport—five feet from impact.

They appeared horizontal over the fountain, momentum carrying them forward instead of down. Splashed into the water at an angle. Not a drop—a dive.

Tess surfaced first. Then Knight. Then Battlea.

Above them, guards at the window, trying to track where they'd gone.

Tess grabbed their arms again. Teleported.

They appeared three blocks east. In the alley where the rest of the team was supposed to extract.

Sable was already there. Tess had grabbed him during one of the mid-fall teleports. He was soaking wet, looking confused.

"What the hell just happened?" he asked.

"Gloom Girl happened," Knight said, catching his breath.

Battlea pulled off her thermal goggles. The red dress was torn, soaked, ruined. She started laughing. Couldn't help it.

"That was insane," she said.

"That was fun," Tess corrected.

Then the van pulled up. Firas driving. He leaned out the window.

"Everyone alive?"

"Mostly," Knight said.

"Jericho?"

"In the van," Tess said. "Unconscious but breathing. Got all his research too."

A door opened. The alley apartment. A woman in her sixties stepped out. Bathrobe. Slippers.

She looked at them. Soaking wet. In tactical gear. One in a torn red dress.

"Go Squad?" she asked.

They froze.

She smiled. Huge. "I knew it. I told my daughter you operated in this neighborhood." She pulled her phone out. "Can I get a picture? She won't believe me otherwise."

Tess blinked. "Ma'am, we really need to—"

"Please? Just one? You saved my nephew last month. The thing with the guys and the—" She gestured vaguely. "You know."

Battlea looked at the others. Shrugged. Walked over.

The woman took a selfie. Battlea soaking wet in a ruined dress, the woman beaming.

"Thank you," the woman said. "For everything you do. We see you. All of us. We see you."

Then she went back inside.

The team stood there for a second.

"That was weird," Sable said.

"That was nice," Battlea corrected.

Firas nodded. "Then let's get out of here before—"

The mansion exploded.

Not literally. But light exploded from it. Red and gold, pulsing outward. Dimensional, not physical. Space folding.

They felt it in their bones. The same way Tess felt teleportation but wrong. Inverted.

"What—" Battlea started.

From the mansion, a figure walked out through the front wall. Not around it. Through it. Like it wasn't there.

Kain.

But not Kain.

His eyes were wrong. Flickering between colors. Between states of being. The Tamois Heart was embedded in his chest, pulsing with impossible light.

He looked at the sky. Then at the team, three blocks away.

Smiled.

Then walked away. Through a building. Out of sight.

"We need to call someone," Knight said.

"Who?" Sable asked. "The cops? The cops who work for him?"

Tess was already pulling out her phone. Started to dial Firas's number—wait, he was right here, driving the van.

Before she could figure out who else to call, her phone rang. Unknown number.

She answered. "Hello?"

"No better place than here," Ruth's voice said.

Gloom Girl wanted to change her codename at the sound.

Not waiting for the customary response, Ruth continued, "I saw what just happened. Get somewhere safe. I'm sending help."

The call ended.

Thirty seconds later, a VTOL aircraft appeared overhead. Silent. Cloaked until it was directly above them.

The ramp lowered.

Ruth walked down. In full tactical gear.

"Need a ride?" she asked.

Chapter 23

The CADENS transport interior looked like it cost more than Caledonia's entire police budget.

Ruth watched the team file up the ramp. Tess first—still dripping from the fountain, thermal goggles hanging around her neck. Knight and Sable next, helping Battlea. The red dress was destroyed, torn and soaked, but she was walking.

Firas stayed with the van. Someone had to drive Jericho to safety, get the research data secured. He gave Ruth a look—you sure about this?—before driving off.

Ruth was not sure about this.

But the transport doors closed anyway.

"Sit," she said. "We need to move fast."

The team sat. Didn't argue. When someone in tactical gear shows up in a stealth aircraft, you follow instructions first, ask questions later.

The transport lifted. Silent. Fast. Cloaked.

Ruth pulled off her helmet. Let them see her face.

"Okay," Battlea said. "What the hell is happening?"

"Long version or short version?"

"Medium version," Knight said. "With explanations."

Ruth nodded. Looked at each of them. "You know how your powers stopped working after the docks?"

"Yeah," Sable said bitterly.

"They were never yours to begin with."

Silence.

"Explain," Tess said quietly.

"You've been enhanced. Temporal manipulation distributed through drone networks.

Someone with actual powers was amplifying you. Making you faster, stronger, more accurate.

You thought it was you. It wasn't."

Knight's face went pale. "The whole time?"

"Every fight. Every mission. You were being helped."

"By who?" Battlea asked.

Ruth hesitated. Ahdia had been clear. Don't tell them. Not yet.

"By someone dying to keep you safe," she said carefully. "Someone who thought giving you powers was worth their life."

"That's not an answer," Sable said.

"It's the answer you're getting." Ruth's voice was firm. "What matters is the enhancement stopped because the person providing it nearly died. They're in treatment now. Recovering. And once they're stable, the drones will resume operations."

"Drones," Tess repeated. "FAERIS."

"Yes."

"I thought those were just surveillance."

"They were that too."

Knight leaned forward. "Who are you people?"

Ruth took a breath. This was the part Bourn would kill her for.

"CADENS. Cosmic Anomaly Defense and Neutralization Service. Shadow government organization. International black budget funding. We monitor and respond to cosmic-level threats that normal governments can't handle."

"Like Kain," Battlea said.

"Like Kain. Like the artifacts. Like the things that left them here." Ruth pulled up a holographic display. Showed thermal imaging of Kain—growing. Massive. "He used the Tamois Heart. Integrated it. He's transforming into something else. Getting bigger. Stronger. If we don't stop him in the next few hours, he'll either die or become something worse."

"What's worse?" Sable asked.

"Fully transformed. Unstoppable. The kind of thing that takes armies to bring down." Ruth met his eyes. "A monster with a grudge."

Ruth's comm crackled. "HAZARD to command. Target is mobile. Heading northeast through the city. Moving fast. Smashing through buildings, vehicles, everything. Trail of destruction."

Ruth cursed under her breath and pulled up the tactical map. Red dots showing Kain's last known positions, moving fast and unpredictable.

"Where's he going?" Knight asked.

"Nowhere. Everywhere." Ruth zoomed in on the pattern. "He's razing Caledonia. Block by block."

"So we slow him down," Battlea said.

"If we can."

"Who?" Knight asked.

Ruth didn't answer directly. "First, we need intel. Jericho knows how the Heart works. How Kain's abilities function. What his limitations are." She gestured to the pilot. "Set down where Firas has the van. We're picking up our prisoner."

#

They set down three blocks from where Firas had parked the van.

Jericho was awake. Sitting in the van's back, hands zip-tied, looking terrified.

Ruth approached. Full tactical gear. Helmet back on. Intimidating.

"Dr. Jericho," she said. "We need to talk."

"I don't know who you are," he said. Voice shaking. "But I'm not—I didn't—Kain made me—"

"Save it." Ruth pulled up the research files on a tablet. "Resonance calibration. Cellular integration protocols. Temporal manipulation theories. You've been helping him weaponize the Heart for six months."

"He kidnapped me from the museum!"

"And then you kept working. Enthusiastically." Ruth showed him his own notes. Detailed. Excited. No sign of coercion. "You wanted to understand it. Crack the code. Publish the breakthrough of the century."

Jericho looked away.

"Here's what's going to happen," Ruth said. "You're going to tell us everything. How the Heart works. How to stop the integration. How to prevent this from happening again. And then you're going into protective custody until we clean up this mess."

"And if I don't?"

Ruth leaned closer. "Then Kain wakes up. And the first person he's going to blame for his transformation is the scientist who told him it would make him a god."

Jericho went pale.

"Protective custody sounds great," he whispered.

#

Back on the transport, Jericho talked.

The team listened. Ruth translated the science into language they could understand.

"The Heart isn't technology," Jericho explained, hands still zip-tied. "It's organic. A seed from something vast. It integrates with biological systems, enhances them. Kain thought he was gaining power. Really he was being consumed."

"Can it be reversed?" Ruth asked.

"No. Once integration begins, it's irreversible. The Heart is rewriting his biology." Jericho pulled up molecular diagrams on the tablet. "Massive muscle growth. Bone density increasing exponentially. He's becoming huge. Strong. Durable."

"So he's just... big and strong?" Knight asked.

"Exactly. Like the enhanced officers you've fought before, but scaled up. Fifteen feet tall, maybe more. Strong enough to tear through concrete. Durable enough that conventional weapons barely scratch him." Jericho hesitated. "But there's a problem. The integration is accelerating. His body is rejecting the transformation even as it's completing. He's dying. Fast."

"How fast?" Ruth asked.

"Hours. Maybe twelve at most. The cellular stress is catastrophic. Eventually his biological mass will fail and the Heart will consume what's left."

"So he dies anyway," Sable said.

"Or completes the transformation first." Jericho met his eyes. "Becomes fully integrated. Permanently enhanced. A twenty-foot monster that won't stop."

Ruth's stomach dropped. "What are the odds he completes before he dies?"

"Based on his current acceleration? Sixty percent. Maybe higher if he continues using his abilities."

The transport went quiet.

"So we have to stop him before he completes," Battlea said. "How?"

"You can't," Jericho said bluntly. "He's fifteen feet tall and growing. Stronger than anything you've faced. More durable. There's no conventional weapon that works on something that size."

"Then what do we use?" Tess asked.

Jericho looked at Ruth. "Another Temporalist. Someone who can manipulate time. Slow him down. Freeze him. Create windows where he's vulnerable."

Knight caught on immediately. "The person who's been enhancing us."

Ruth didn't confirm. Didn't deny.

"They're recovering," she said carefully. "Not cleared for field operations."

"But they could do it?" Battlea pressed. "Stop Kain?"

"Theoretically." Ruth looked away. "At significant cost."

The team exchanged glances.

"The person enhancing you," Knight said carefully. "They're at your facility. Recovering. And now you're asking them to fight a temporal god."

Ruth didn't answer.

"Who are they?"

Ruth met his eyes. "Someone who's been protecting you since the beginning. Someone who thinks you're worth dying for. That's all you need to know."

"That's not enough," Battlea said.

"It's going to have to be."

Victor laughed. Not humor—disbelief. "This is insane. This whole time, someone's been watching us. Helping us. Like a ghost." He shook his head. "And we don't even get to know their name?"

Ruth was quiet.

"That doesn't help," Tess said.

The transport banked toward CADENS facility.

Below, the city spread out. Unaware. Sleeping. No idea how close they'd come to cosmic disaster.

Victor caught it. "You know them."

"Yes."

"And you're not telling us because they asked you not to."

"Yes."

"Even though we have a right to know."

Ruth looked at him. Said nothing.

Victor turned away.

"How long?" Battlea asked quietly.

"How long what?"

"How long do they have? If they fight Kain."

Ruth didn't answer.

"How long, Ruth?"

"Weeks. Maybe less."

Silence.

"Then we need another option," Knight said. "We can't ask someone to die for us."

"It's not your choice," Ruth said. "It's theirs."

Ruth's comm crackled. HAZARD's voice, urgent.

"Command, target is downtown. Main Street. He's destroying everything."

Ruth pulled up the tactical feed. Kain tearing through the city. Twenty feet tall now.

Buildings collapsing behind him.

The transport banked toward CADENS.

"Then what do we do?" Tess asked.

Ruth didn't answer.

The transport touched down. CADENS facility.

Ruth stood. "Wait here."

She walked down the ramp.

Bourn was waiting. Full tactical gear. Expression grim.

"Ryu says she's awake," he said. "Asking what happened. Saw the feeds from the mansion."

"Does she know about Kain?"

"She knows." Bourn met Ruth's eyes. "And she's already asking when she can deploy."

Ruth's chest tightened. Of course she was.

"How long does she have if she fights?"

"Ryu estimates days. Maybe a week if we're lucky. The temporal strain of freezing something that size, that strong..." Bourn shook his head. "It'll accelerate everything."

Ruth looked back at the transport. At the team waiting inside.

"Bring them to the briefing room," she told Bourn. "They deserve better than sitting in a transport."

Bourn nodded. "And you?"

Ruth looked toward medical. Where Ahdia was recovering. Where she'd soon be asking her to deploy. To die faster.

"Give me ten minutes," she said. "Then I'll join you."

#

The briefing room looked like mission control for a space program.

Wall-sized displays showing global threat assessments. Satellite feeds. Drone networks. Real-time tactical overlays of every major city.

Tess stood in the center, turning slowly. Taking it all in.

"This is insane," she said.

Knight was examining a holographic projection of enhanced individual tracking.

"They've been monitoring meta-humans worldwide. Hundreds of them."

Sable found himself on a personnel file. His photo. His real name. Every mission the Go Squad had ever run. "They know everything about us."

Battlea sat in one of the tactical chairs. It adjusted to her automatically. "I could get used to this."

The door opened. Bourn entered, Ruth behind him.

"You've seen what we do. You know what's at stake."

"And you want us to join," Battlea said.

"I'm offering." Bourn pulled up a display. CADENS recruitment files. "You're free to walk away."

"Just like that?" Knight asked.

"Just like that. What you've seen here stays here."

Tess looked at the others. "Can we think about it?"

"Of course."

Bourn pulled out four cases and set them on the table.

Tess opened the nearest case. Inside was a tactical suit—black and form-fitting, with armor plating along the torso and shoulders. The material was lighter than it looked, flexible and reinforced at the joints.

Knight examined his and found integrated comm systems in the collar, medical sensors woven into the fabric, and heads-up display contacts in a small case.

Sable held up the gloves with their reinforced knuckles and grip padding.

Battlea found boots with mag-lock soles for vertical surfaces.

"Hell of a sales pitch," Sable said.

An alarm cut through the room. Red lights. Urgent.

Bourn's expression shifted. "What—"

A technician's voice over the intercom: "Director Bourn, we have a situation. Downtown Caledonia. Multiple cosmic-level threat signatures."

The wall displays shifted. Security feeds from downtown.

And everyone stopped breathing.

Kain stood in the middle of Main Street.

But not Kain anymore.

He'd grown. Fifteen feet tall. Twenty. Still growing. Bones restructuring. The Tamois Heart pulsing in his chest—visible through translucent skin.

A kaiju in the making.

And behind him: four others.

Enhanced cops. Seven feet tall. Torn CCPD uniforms. Tanks.

Buildings collapsing. Cars crushed. People running.

"Jesus Christ," Battlea whispered.

The feeds showed CADENS Strike Teams deploying. Setting up perimeters. Establishing containment protocols.

But it was slow. Methodical. By-the-book.

And Kain was fast. Growing. Adapting.

"Response authorization required," the technician said. "Waiting on clearance from—"

"Override that," Bourn snapped. "Deploy all available units. NOW."

"Sir, protocol requires—"

"I said NOW!"

The team watched. CADENS personnel scrambling. Suiting up. Loading into transports.

But they were minutes away. Maybe more.

And on the feeds: civilians dying. Right now.

Tess looked at Knight. Knight looked at Sable. Sable looked at Battlea.

Battlea stood. "We're not waiting."

"The suits aren't calibrated—" Bourn started.

"Don't care." She grabbed hers from the case.

The others did the same.

"You can't," Ruth said. "Without powers, you're—"

"We've been without powers before," Knight said, pulling on his suit. "We'll manage."

"This isn't street gangs," Bourn said. "This is—"

"Our city," Tess interrupted. "Our people. Our fight."

They moved toward the door.

Bourn stepped forward. "You're making a mistake. You'll die out there."

Tess turned back.

"Probably," she said. "But at least we'll die doing something. Not waiting for authorization."

Ruth grabbed her tactical gear and started suiting up.

"Dr. Carter—" Bourn started.

"I'm going with them."

"Ahdia—"

"Ryu can handle it."

She moved toward the door.

Bourn didn't stop her.

Bourn stood alone in the briefing room. Watching the feeds. Tess, Knight, Sable, Battlea, Ruth—five people running toward certain death.

Chapter 24

She was running backward.

Or standing still while everything ran backward. She couldn't tell. People walked in reverse down the street, their movements jerky and wrong. Rain fell upward, droplets leaping from puddles back into the sky.

She reached for the Seed—the familiar cold pressure in her chest—tried to freeze it, stop it, make it normal.

Nothing happened.

The world kept rewinding. Faster.

A car drove backward past her. A pigeon flew tail-first into a tree. Someone's coffee leaped from the gutter back into their hand.

Then: a feeling.

Not a voice. Not words. Just a feeling from her chest where the Seed sat.

She looked down. Blue light pulsed through her skin, visible beneath her hoodie. Each pulse matched her heartbeat. Each pulse sent the world back another second.

The feeling said: Wrong direction.

She tried to speak. Couldn't. The rain was too loud, falling upward, hissing as it climbed.

The feeling again: You only ever pull. Slow. Stop. Backward. What if you pushed?

The world inverted.

She fell.

Not down—through. Through layers of frozen moments stacked like photographs. She saw them as she passed: the warehouse explosion, frozen mid-blast. Gloom Girl suspended above the bridge. The police ambush, bullets hanging in air. All of them dissolving as she fell past.

The feeling: You can't freeze moments. Only delay them.

She landed.

A hallway. Long. Doors on both sides.

Blue doors on the left. Red doors on the right.

She'd always opened the blue ones. Always.

One of the blue doors swung open.

Inside: Montana. The campground. Herself at eight years old, sitting on a log, watching the trees.

Little Ahdia looked up. "You've been stuck here. We all have."

Adult Ahdia stepped toward the door. One foot. Then the other.

Behind her, a red door opened.

She didn't turn. Didn't need to. She could feel it—light, movement, forward momentum. Everything she'd been avoiding.

Little Ahdia: "You keep looking back. What if you looked forward instead?"

Adult Ahdia stopped. Turned.

The red door pulsed. Warm. Alive.

"I'm scared," she said.

Little Ahdia smiled. "Good. That means you're moving."

Something vast moved through the hallway.

She couldn't see it. Couldn't process it. Just felt it pass—watching, witnessing. Massive and patient and old. Like the hallway was too small for it but it moved through anyway because it was curious.

It didn't stop. Just passed. Observing.

The red door pulsed again.

She reached for it.

Everything CRACKED.

Light flooded through—not blue, not cold—RED, hot, forward, fast.

Something incomprehensible touched her mind.

Not hostile. Not kind. Just there. Vast and dimensional and curious. She saw herself spread across infinite moments—every choice, every timeline, every possible Ahdia—all of them moving forward, not frozen.

All of them reaching for the red door.

The thing pulled back.

A voice. Cold. Final. NOT the Seed.

"Wake up."

She jolted awake gasping.

White ceiling. Monitors screaming. CADENS medical bay.

The IV was torn from her arm. She didn't remember doing that.

"Hey, hey—" Ryu's voice, close. "You're okay. You're—"

She tried to sit up. The room tilted.

"Whoa, easy." His hand on her shoulder. Gentle. "You've been out for three hours."

Three hours.

She blinked. Tried to focus. Ryu was standing next to the bed, glasses slightly crooked, looking like he hadn't slept in a week. Which, knowing him, he probably hadn't.

"What happened?" Her voice came out scratchy.

"You passed out. Ruth said—" He stopped. Adjusted his glasses. "You were in pretty bad shape when they brought you in."

"Where's Ruth?"

He hesitated.

"Where's Ruth?"

"She left. With the others."

Ahdia's stomach dropped. "Left where?"

Ryu didn't answer. Just pointed at the monitor on the wall.

She looked up.

The screen showed downtown. Smoke. Fire. Buildings with chunks missing. And in the middle of it all—

"What the hell is that?"

"Kain." Ryu's voice was quiet. "He used the Heart. The Tamois Heart. He's been growing for the past hour."

The thing on the screen was twenty feet tall. Maybe more. Still shaped like a person, but wrong. Translucent skin. Too many joints. The Heart pulsing in its chest like a second sun.

"Ruth and the team went after him," Ryu said. "About thirty minutes ago."

Ahdia stared at the screen. Watched Kain grab a car. Throw it through a storefront.

"They don't have powers," she said.

"I know."

"They're going to die."

Ryu didn't answer.

She swung her legs off the bed. The floor was cold against her bare feet.

"Ahdia—"

"I need the treatment." She stood. Held the bed rail until the room stopped tilting. "Now."

"You can't. The treatment isn't stable yet." Ryu moved between her and the door. "Using your powers will—"

"Give me the treatment."

The door opened. Bourn stepped in, still in tactical gear. His expression was grim.

"You don't understand," he said. "You need eight more doses. Three weeks between each one. That's six months."

On the monitor, Kain grabbed another car. The team was still somewhere between here and there. Moving toward him.

"I don't have six months," Ahdia said.

Ryu adjusted his glasses. "You collapsed at the docks. Cellular degradation. You've been unconscious for eighteen hours." He gestured at the IV port in her arm, residue of blue-white serum still visible. "Ruth developed a treatment. We administered the first dose. You're stabilized, but still severely damaged. Your cells need time to integrate each dose. If you take them too soon—"

"We're out of time," Bourn said.

The phrase hung there.

Out of time.

Ahdia's hand went to her chest. Where the Seed sat. Cold. Heavy.

Her expression shifted.

She shoved past Ryu to the cabinet across the room. Pulled it open. Grabbed all eight autoinjectors. Lined them up on the bed. Sat down. Closed her eyes.

The Seed flared red.

Not blue. Red.

The monitors screamed.

"She's accelerating!" Ryu was at the monitors now, typing frantically. "She's giving herself the three weeks!"

Fifteen seconds passed.

Ahdia gasped. Opened her eyes. Grabbed the first autoinjector. Pressed it to her arm. Click. Hiss.

Eyes closed. Red again.

Ryu's face darkened as he watched the readings. "Energy expenditure is exceeding regeneration. It's a net loss."

Ahdia opened her eyes. Saw their faces. Grabbed the second autoinjector anyway. Injected. Eyes closed. Red.

Ryu was typing frantically. His words finally appeared on the tablet: $RATIO = 1:2000$

Another line: $TOO\ FAST = CELLS\ BURN$

A third: $TRY\ 1:1500$

Ahdia opened her eyes. Saw it. "It's not like there's a dial I can turn!" She looked at her hands. "Or a needle gauge to monitor!"

Third injection. Eyes closed. Red.

"Even at perfect ratio, she's only getting fifty percent max," Ryu said to Bourn. His voice was tight. "It's a zero-sum problem."

Ahdia opened her eyes. The room swam.

Fourth injection.

Ryu held up his fingers. Started counting. One. Two. Three. Trying to give her a rhythm.

Ahdia closed her eyes. But his fingers were glacially slow from her perspective. She couldn't tell if she was matching it or not.

Fifth injection.

Ryu grabbed a pen from the desk. Started tapping it. Steady. Rhythmic. A metronome beat.

Ahdia tried to hear it through the acceleration. Like listening underwater. Distorted. The Seed burned red in her chest. She opened her eyes, gasping.

Sixth injection. Eyes closed.

The taps were barely audible now. Like hearing them through a wall. Through an ocean.

She was losing the ratio. Just holding whatever she could hold.

Seventh injection.

Ryu was waving the tablet at her. She could barely see it through the red haze. The words: SLOW DOWN

She couldn't. Didn't know how.

Eighth injection.

Her body was screaming. The Seed flickered red-blue-red. Unstable.

She let go.

Collapsed forward.

Ryu and Bourn caught her.

"Did it work?" Her voice was hoarse.

Ryu checked the monitors. "First few integrated. Last ones barely worked. Maybe thirty percent total regeneration."

On the feeds, the team was making contact with Kain now.

"Is that enough?" Bourn asked.

"I don't know."

Ahdia stood. Hospital gown, barefoot, barely upright.

"It has to be."

She reached for the Seed.

Red.

The world blurred.

She was gone.

The medical bay was empty. Monitors flatlined. Cabinet empty.

Ryu and Bourn turned to the feeds.

Waiting.

#

The light came first.

A FAERIS drone materialized in the intersection, beam scanning down. Then the pull—that sick wrongness of space folding.

Ahdia appeared.

Hospital gown flowing around her bare feet. Hair loose. Hands spread wide at her sides.

The Seed flared blue.

Kain froze mid-step. Fist raised, twenty-three feet of translucent horror locked in place. His hand—still wrapped around those teenagers—stopped. The kids hung there, suspended, terrified but alive.

The Tank cops froze. Edgar with Sable in his grip. Ogden's fist inches from Battlea's face. Philips and Orlansky mid-charge.

Everything else kept moving.

The civilians saw her appear. Saw the impossible. Saw the kaiju and the enhanced cops suddenly stop like someone hit pause on reality.

For three seconds, nobody moved.

Then they ran.

The Go Squad didn't run.

They stood there in the street where they'd been driven back together. Knight helping Battlea to her feet. Sable leaning against the wall. Gloom Girl on her knees, breathing hard. Ruth beside them, throat still raw.

Staring at Ahdia.

She stood in the radial center of them. Twenty feet away. Hands still spread. The strain visible in every line of her body—shoulders tight, jaw clenched, hospital gown soaked with sweat.

The Seed pulsed blue through the thin fabric.

"Is that—" Knight started.

"Ahdia," Ruth whispered. Her voice barely worked.

Ahdia's eyes were closed. Focusing. Holding Kain. Holding the Tanks. Holding the freeze on five massive targets while everything else moved freely around them.

Civilians were fleeing now. The ones who'd come back. The ones who'd fought.
Scrambling away from the frozen kaiju, from the impossible sight of a girl in a hospital gown
standing in an intersection holding reality still.

The Go Squad didn't move.

Ahdia opened her eyes.

Looked at them.

Saw Ruth's throat—bruised, already darkening. Saw Battlea holding her ribs. Saw Sable's
arm hanging wrong. Saw Gloom Girl's split lip, Knight's limping stance.

Saw her team.

Ahdia's eyes were closed. Focusing. Holding Kain. Holding the Tanks. Holding the freeze
on five massive targets while everything else moved freely around them.

Civilians were fleeing now. The ones who'd come back. The ones who'd fought.
Scrambling away from the frozen kaiju, from the impossible sight of a girl in a hospital gown
standing in an intersection holding reality still.

The Go Squad didn't move.

Staring at her.

At Ahdia.

At the girl who shouldn't be standing. Who should still be unconscious in CADENS
medical. Who'd appeared in a hospital gown and bare feet and stopped a twenty-three-foot kaiju
mid-strike.

Who'd saved them.

Who'd saved everyone.

Chapter 25

The FAERIS drone moved. Not far—just shifted position, hovering over Gloom Girl's shoulder now. Close. Like it was waiting for something.

The silence stretched, awkward and heavy.

Ahdia stood there, arms still outstretched, hospital gown soaked through with sweat. A nosebleed was starting—just a trickle, but there. Her whole body was trembling.

The Go Squad stared.

She broke first.

"Uh... hi, guys, first-time caller, long-time fan, I'm Ahdia, Firas' big sister."

Battlea took a step back. "What the hell is going on? Are we dead? We're dead, right?"

"Definitely not," Crimson Sable replied, staring suspiciously at the frozen tank cops.

"Oh yeah? How do you know?" Battlea asked, on the verge of breaking down.

"Because if we were dead, this would be a tropical beach and you'd be wearing..." he nodded his head at her. "... not that."

"We're not dead," Ruth confirmed and didn't take her eyes off Ahdia. Clinical assessment mode was kicking in automatically—nosebleed, trembling, sweat, barefoot, hospital gown. She shouldn't be standing at all.

She moved closer. One step. Two. "How are you feeling? You took the rest of the treatment, didn't you?"

Ahdia's laugh was shaky. "Yeah, what gave it away?"

"Well, you're here at all for one." Ruth gestured at the frozen kaiju behind them. "But couple that with this demonstration of this whole new ability..."

"Oh, about that, yeah, turns out I could do it all along." Ahdia's voice was getting thinner, the strain showing. "Fun fact, I'm not actually freezing Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch over there. I'm doing the other thing. Who knew?"

Gloom Girl narrowed her eyes with the comprehension. "You're speeding us up?"

"Oh, yeah, look at you, Gloom Girl, penny for the pretty lady," Ahdia said, impressed and bleeding.

"So why haven't you?" Ruth pressed.

"To be fair, I just figured out that I could about fifteen minutes ago." She gestured weakly at the FAERIS drone. "Would have gotten here sooner but I had to find one of those guys to hitch a ride. They do a really good job of cleaning up their toys when they're not using them, over there at CADENS HQ."

Silence fell.

Then Gloom Girl stepped forward. "You knew about her?" Looking at Ruth now. "This whole time?"

Ruth opened her mouth, then closed it.

"You've been working with CADENS." Gloom Girl's voice was flat. "You knew. You've been lying."

"I—"

"How long?" Crimson Sable's grip tightened on his bo staff. "How long have you been lying to us?"

"Okay, whoa, hold on." Ahdia's voice cut through. "This is not on Ruth. She didn't know about me until, like, two weeks ago? Maybe three? Time's been weird." Blood from her nose was reaching her upper lip now. "And she's been trying to help me not die, so maybe we could table the whole trust-issues intervention until after we deal with Godzilla over there?"

Ruth felt the team fracturing around her. She saw it in their eyes—the trust breaking.

"This isn't—" she started.

"It's not her fault," Ahdia pressed. "CADENS approached her. She didn't ask for this. I'm the one who's been—" She swayed slightly, wiped blood from her nose with the back of her hand. "Look, I know what you're thinking. Why didn't she tell you? Why all the secrets? And the answer is... me. I asked her not to. Because I'm Firas's sister, the one who couldn't even leave her apartment for dinner, and you guys—you're out here actually doing things. Saving people. Being, like, actual heroes." Her voice got quieter. "And I didn't want you to know that someone like me had powers when you didn't. That felt... wrong. Like the universe screwed up the distribution or something. Like I didn't deserve it." She looked at each of them. "But you guys? You've been doing this with no powers at all. Just... guts and gear and giving a damn. So yeah, I kept it secret. And yeah, Ruth helped me do that. At first it was about being painfully, audaciously, anti-social and my anger towards Firas but then it became about something else. I started wanting you guys to look all enhanced and amazing because... because even without me, you guys are, well... super."

Night Knight was shaking his head. "We trusted you."

"You still can—"

"Can we?" Battlea's voice was sharp. "Because it seems like you've been keeping a lot of secrets."

Ruth felt it slipping. Everything. The team. The mission. All of it crumbling because she'd made a choice months ago and now—

"We don't have time for this!" Crimson Sable's voice cracked through the argument. He was pointing—not at them, but at Ahdia.

They all turned.

Ahdia's nose was bleeding freely now. Her knees were shaking. The blue light from the Seed pulsing erratically through her gown.

"I can hold this," she said, voice tight. "But not forever. So if someone wants to, I don't know, make a plan? That would be great."

They all looked at Ruth.

Their tactician. Their leader. The one who'd been lying to them for months.

The one who still had to call it.

Ruth's mind was racing. Ahdia holding Kain and the Tanks in frozen time—no, not frozen. Accelerated. Everyone else moving at impossible speed while Kain stood still. Which meant...

Her expression shifted.

"Wait." She looked at Ahdia. "So you're saying we're all moving at unimaginable speed while they stand still in normal time?"

Ahdia nodded, blood still dripping from her nose.

The team was following Ruth's train of thought. She could see it clicking into place—Night Knight's eyes widening, Battlea straightening despite her injuries, Crimson Sable's grip shifting on his bo staff. Even Gloom Girl's expression changed from anger to understanding.

They all nodded to each other with that new understanding.

Ruth looked at her team. At the frozen kaiju. At the possibilities.

"Then let's run."

Chapter 26

The cold hit her feet first.

Ahdia stood alone in the intersection, barefoot on asphalt that hadn't seen cleaning in probably a decade. The hospital gown flapped around her knees in the wind. Blood dripped from her nose onto the pale blue fabric, spreading in dark splotches that looked like some kind of depressing Rorschach test. A psychiatrist would have a field day with this image. Girl in hospital gown, bleeding, barefoot downtown at night, facing down what the actual hell was that.

Kain stood twenty-three feet away. Or rather, twenty-three feet tall. Hard to tell which measurement mattered more when you were looking up at someone who'd left "human" behind somewhere around the fifteen-foot mark.

He'd grown since the last reports. The Tamois Heart pulsed in his chest—visible through skin that had gone translucent in places, like wax paper stretched too thin. Veins of sick greenish light threaded through his torso, pulsing in rhythm with the artifact embedded where his sternum used to be. His bones were visible. Restructuring. Cracking and reforming with sounds that carried across the empty street like gunshots.

Behind him, four enhanced cops fanned out. The Tanks. Each one stood seven feet tall, torn CCPD uniforms barely containing the muscle mass that had erupted from whatever the hell Kain had done to them. She recognized them from the CADENS briefing Ryu had shown her between treatment doses. Ogden—the one with the scar bisecting his left eyebrow. Philips—neck

thick as a tree trunk, the one who'd strangled Ruth. Edgar—bald head catching streetlight, knuckles already bloody. Orlansky—youngest looking, maybe late twenties, but his eyes were wrong. Too wide. Too aware of what he'd become.

They looked at her like she was dinner. Or entertainment. Maybe both.

Kain tilted his head, studying her. The movement was wrong—too smooth for something that size, like watching a building decide to look at you.

"Well," he said. His voice had changed too. Deeper. Resonant. Like someone had run it through a subwoofer and forgot to turn the bass down. "This is unexpected."

Ahdia wiped sweat from her upper lip with the back of her hand. The motion made her sway. Her legs felt like they belonged to someone else, someone who'd run a marathon without training. Someone who hadn't left their couch in months.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm getting that a lot tonight."

"You look like you escaped from psychiatric." Kain stepped closer. Each footfall cracked pavement. "Or possibly intensive care. Hard to tell with that fashion choice."

"It's called 'hospital chic.'" The words came out more slurred than she'd intended. When had her tongue gotten so heavy? "Very in right now."

Ogden laughed. It sounded like rocks grinding together.

"She's delirious," Philips said. "Blood loss. Look at her."

"I'm looking," Kain said. He crouched—or tried to. The movement was awkward, incomplete. Like his joints didn't quite bend the way they used to. He settled for leaning down, bringing his face level with a second-story window. "I'm looking at the girl who should be dead. The one who took a bullet to the chest. Who fell three stories into an explosion. Who by all rights should be a smear on warehouse concrete."

"I got better," Ahdia said.

"Clearly." His eyes—still human-sized in that enormous face, which made them look weirdly small—tracked over her. Taking inventory. "But not much better. You're barely standing."

"I've had worse Tuesdays. There was this one time I tried to make pad thai from scratch and ended up setting off the smoke alarm for like, six hours straight. My neighbor called the fire department. Twice. This is maybe top five bad Tuesdays. Top three if you count that thing you're doing with your face."

She was rambling. Buying time. Scanning peripherally without moving her eyes too obviously. The team was positioned. Rooftops. Fire escapes. Gloom Girl on the bank building. Battlea behind the overturned bus. Night Knight somewhere with smoke grenades and tactical patience. Crimson Sable with his staff. Ruth coordinating, medical kit ready, probably already planning triage for when this went sideways.

And there—movement at the far end of Main Street. A car. Moving fast. Too fast for civilian traffic.

Firas.

Her little brother, driving like he'd learned from action movies instead of the DMV.

Ahdia felt something in her chest shift. Not the Seed—that was its own presence, cold and wrong and pulsing with power she could barely control. This was different. Warmer. More painful.

He'd come.

Despite the eulogy. Despite everything. Despite her being a hermit disaster who hadn't left her apartment in months before all this cosmic bullshit fell into her bathroom.

He'd come.

"You're stalling," Kain said.

"Am I?" Ahdia smiled. Blood on her teeth. She could taste it. Copper and salt and the weird chemical aftertaste from whatever Ryu had been pumping into her veins for the last two days. "I thought I was making conversation. You know, pre-fight banter. It's traditional. I've seen it in like, every action movie. The hero and the villain exchange quips. Usually the hero has better one-liners but I'm working with limited material here. Blood loss and exhaustion aren't great for comedic timing."

"You're no hero," Kain said.

"No," Ahdia agreed. "I'm really, really not."

The car was closer now. Half a block. Kain hadn't noticed. The Tanks hadn't noticed. They were focused on her. On the bleeding girl in a hospital gown who looked like a strong breeze would knock her over.

Which was fair. A strong breeze probably would knock her over.

Kain straightened—or tried to. He was still growing. She could see it. Bones cracking. Skin stretching. The Tamois Heart pulsing faster, brighter, that sickly green light spreading through his torso like infection.

"What are you?" he asked. Genuine curiosity in his voice. "A girl in a hospital gown who should be dead?"

The car was one block away now. Accelerating. Firas had seen them. Was lining up the approach.

Her chest heaved. Gasping for air that wouldn't come fast enough. The Seed pulsed in her chest—cold pressure, ice cubes instead of lungs, that familiar wrong feeling she'd been living with since the warehouse explosion.

She smiled.

"Something like that," she said. "I've definitely had better days. My feet are cold. This gown doesn't cover nearly enough. And I'm pretty sure I'm concussed. Or possibly having a stroke. Hard to tell the difference at this point."

Kain took a step toward her. The pavement cracked under his weight.

"But you're about to have a really bad fifteen seconds."

Kain's expression shifted. Confusion. Then realization.

The Tanks moved first.

All four at once, rushing her from different angles. Ogden from the left, Philips from the right, Edgar straight ahead, Orlansky circling behind. Coordinated. Trained. Fast for something that size.

The Seed pulsed in her chest.

Time stopped.

The street went silent. The Tanks froze mid-stride—Ogden's foot suspended above cracked pavement, Philips's arms outstretched, Edgar's mouth open in a roar she couldn't hear, Orlansky mid-turn. Four statues of enhanced muscle and twisted bone, halted in the space between one breath and the next.

Ahdia moved.

She walked between them—barefoot on cold asphalt, hospital gown flapping—and repositioned them like chess pieces. Turned Ogden forty-five degrees to his right. Shifted

Philips's trajectory inward. Nudged Edgar's momentum just slightly off-center. Each adjustment small. Precise. Just enough.

There'd been a cartoon like this. Saturday mornings, she thought. Or maybe Sunday afternoons. The coyote would set up elaborate traps and they'd backfire spectacularly. Rube Goldberg machines of violence.

She stepped clear of the impact zone.

Released.

Time resumed. The Tanks collided—Ogden slamming into Philips at full speed, Edgar plowing into both of them, Orlansky tripping over the tangle of limbs and mass. The sound was spectacular. Bone and muscle and concrete, all meeting at high velocity.

They went down in a heap.

Kain stared. Recalculating.

Then he moved.

Fast. Impossibly fast for something twenty-three feet tall. His fist came down like a wrecking ball, aimed at where she stood.

The Seed pulsed.

Time stopped.

His fist hung above her, massive and translucent in places where skin had stretched too thin. She could see bone beneath. Restructuring. Growing. The Tamois Heart's sickly light threading through his knuckles like infection.

She walked to his left. Out of the strike path. Ten feet. Fifteen. Far enough.

Released.

His fist cratered the pavement where she'd been standing. The impact sent cracks spiderwebbing outward. He stumbled forward, off-balance, too committed to the strike.

She was already gone.

He spun, searching. Found her standing twenty feet away, swaying slightly.

"Stop—" he started.

She couldn't hear the rest over the ringing in her ears.

Her vision swam. The street tilted. Or maybe she did. Her legs felt like they belonged to someone else. Someone who'd run a marathon without training. Someone who'd forgotten to drink water for a week.

Her chest burned. Not the Seed—that was its own cold presence. This was her lungs. Her muscles. Her body screaming that it was done, it had nothing left, stop asking it to do impossible things.

Philips had gotten up. Had his service weapon drawn. Was aiming at her.

The Seed pulsed.

Time stopped.

She walked to him through frozen air that felt thick as honey. Each step took effort. Her bare feet slapped pavement. Cold bit at her toes. Sweat soaked through the hospital gown despite the night chill.

She reached Philips. His gun was aimed where her head had been. Finger on the trigger. Ready.

She took the gun from his frozen hand. Ejected the magazine. Let it fall. Counted the bullets—one, two, three, all the way to fifteen. Pocketed them in his uniform pocket. Put the empty gun back in his hand. Adjusted his grip so it looked right.

Stepped clear.

Released.

Philips pulled the trigger. Click. His expression shifted—confusion, then panic. He pulled again. Click. Click. Click.

Ahdia smiled. Blood on her teeth.

Her knees shook. The world grayed at the edges. She bent forward, hands on her knees, gasping. Like she'd played full court basketball after sitting on her couch for six months straight. Like she'd run until her lungs forgot how to work. Like she was drowning in air.

Kain was moving again.

Not swinging this time. Closing distance. Smart. If she couldn't freeze him before he reached her—

His hand shot out.

She tried to move. Too slow. Too exhausted. Her body wouldn't listen.

His fingers closed around her waist.

He lifted her off the ground. One-handed. Effortless.

Then he started squeezing.

The pressure was immediate. Crushing. Her ribs creaked. The air left her lungs and wouldn't come back. She couldn't breathe—couldn't gasp, couldn't scream, couldn't do anything but hang there in his grip while he slowly compressed her like an empty soda can.

"Not so clever now," Kain said.

She tried to activate the Seed. Felt it pulse weakly. Not enough. She was too exhausted, too oxygen-deprived, too close to passing out. If she froze time now, without proper control, without the strength to hold it—

She'd fail. She'd die. Or Firas would.

Firas.

Movement. Corner of her eye. Through vision that was tunneling, graying, fading.

A car. Moving fast down Main Street. Too fast.

Her little brother, driving like he'd learned from action movies instead of the DMV.

One shot at this.

She had to time it perfectly. Freeze too early and Firas would hit a frozen Kain at full speed—the car would crumple, he'd die, she couldn't stop it. Freeze too late and she'd be dead, crushed, unable to help him.

The pressure increased. Her ribs bent inward. Something cracked.

The car was half a block away. Accelerating.

Kain hadn't seen it yet. Too focused on her. On squeezing the life out of the girl who'd embarrassed him.

One block away.

She tried to breathe. Couldn't. Her vision was almost gone. Just a pinprick of light in a sea of gray.

Half a block.

She could hear the engine now. Screaming. Firas had the accelerator floored.

Come on. Come on.

Kain's grip tightened. Final squeeze. Going to crush her completely.

The car was twenty feet away. Fifteen. Ten.

Kain started to turn. Hearing it finally. Too late.

Five feet.

"You..." She pushed through the words. No air to speak them. "you...had...enough?"

The car hit him.

NOW.

The Seed flared—red, not blue, pushing forward not pulling back—and time accelerated around her. Around Firas. A bubble of speed in a world of frozen impact.

She gasped. Air rushed into her lungs. Kain's hand was still around her waist but not moving, not squeezing, frozen at the moment of impact.

The car was frozen too. Hood crumpling against Kain's leg, metal buckling, glass spiderwebbing.

And Firas—

She pulled.

Not physically. Couldn't reach him. But the acceleration bubble expanded, grabbed him, yanked him into her timestream.

He tumbled out of the driver's seat, through the open door (when had he opened it?), landing in a heap on frozen pavement.

She dropped from Kain's grip, loosened by the collision. Fell. Caught herself—barely—on hands and knees. Gasping. Shaking.

For a moment, they just breathed, slumped on the destroyed pavement.

The world was silent. Frozen. Kain's face locked mid-reaction, realizing too late what had hit him. The Tanks scattered across the intersection—Ogden and Philips still tangled from their collision, Edgar pushing himself up from pavement, Orlansky on one knee. All of them suspended. Stopped.

The car's hood was crumpled against Kain's shin like aluminum foil. Steam rising from the radiator in frozen wisps. Glass fragments hung in the air, catching streetlight.

They were alone. Just her and Firas, moving at normal speed in a world that had forgotten how.

"Hey, Ahdia. Ruth told me you learned some new tricks." He brushed off his arms.

She looked up. Firas was sitting on the pavement, back against the frozen car's passenger door. Jeans. T-shirt. Civilian clothes. But his eyes tracked over her—assessing injuries with the same clinical precision Ruth used.

"Hey, little bro." Her voice came out rough. Throat raw from screaming that hadn't happened yet. Or had already happened. Time manipulation did weird things to cause and effect.

He was already moving. Standing. Crossing to her. Hands hovering like he wanted to help but didn't know where to touch without causing more damage.

"You look—"

"Gonna' stop you right there." She wiped sweat from her face. "I just have a pet peeve when family you haven't seen in a while immediately start with how fat or skinny you've gotten?"

"That's not what I—" He stopped. Started over. "I'm sorry. This... this is all because of me. I shouldn't have come to your place, I should have just gone to the hospital."

Ahdia looked at him. Really looked at him. Her little brother who'd grown taller than her sometime when she wasn't paying attention. Who'd built a parkour academy and a vigilante team and a whole life while she'd been rotting in her penthouse. Who'd stood over what he thought was her corpse and said she'd been dead inside anyway.

"I know," she said.

Not 'it's okay.' Because it wasn't okay. The words had hit like bullets. Had confirmed every terrible thing she'd thought about herself in the dark hours between 3 AM and dawn when the TV finally went to white noise and she was alone with her thoughts.

But he'd come.

Despite everything. Despite her being a disaster. Despite speaking ill of her dead.

He'd come.

"We need to talk about it," she continued. The words felt heavy. Important. "Later. When we're with more polite company."

Firas almost smiled. Almost. "Later."

"Later," she agreed.

He was already moving. Stripping off his jacket, then his button-up shirt. Underneath—
Black tactical fabric. Body armor plates. The Go Squad suit.

Ahdia blinked. "Why are you—"

"Habit." He was already working the quick-release catches. The suit was designed for rapid removal—armor plates connected by reinforced fabric, the whole thing coming apart in sections. "Wore it under my clothes. Just in case. Stupid, probably. But—"

"But you're the guy who packs a go-bag," Ahdia finished. "Even when you're benched."

"Yeah." The suit came free. He held it out to her. "You can't fight in a hospital gown."

She looked at the suit. At him. At the blood soaking through the pale blue fabric of her gown.

"Firas, you need—"

"I'm benched. You're not." His voice was firm. Final. "It'll be loose. You're smaller. But it's better than nothing."

She took it. The fabric was still warm from his body. Smelled like him—parkour chalk and Old Spice and that laundry detergent he'd always used. The one that claimed to smell like 'Mountain Fresh' or 'Arctic Breeze' or some other marketing department fantasy.

"The team?" she asked.

"Positioned. Rooftops. Fire escapes. Ruth's coordinating." He gestured vaguely upward at the frozen cityscape. "Waiting for your signal."

Ahdia looked past him. At Kain, frozen mid-impact. At the Tanks scattered across the intersection. At the car with its crumpled hood and Firas's blood probably on the steering wheel from where he'd white-knuckled the drive here.

He'd driven into a fight he couldn't win. For her.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." She took a breath. Let it out. "Let's give them an opening."

Firas stepped back. Found position against the building across the street. Out of the impact zone. No armor now—just jeans and a t-shirt and absolute faith that his sister wouldn't let him die.

Ahdia stood in the center of the intersection.

The Seed pulsed in her chest.

They were waiting for her signal.

She took one more breath. Looked at Firas.

He nodded.

She stood up, gathered as much air in her chest as she could and shouted, "No better place than here!"

From the tops of the surrounding buildings, every Go Squad member rained down on their enemies while screaming back in reply.

Chapter 27

"No better time than now!" sung the choir of warriors from above as they leapt from rooftops, falling toward the intersection.

The girl in the hospital gown—barefoot, bleeding, barely standing—raised the black tactical suit above her head in one hand.

She blinked.

The hospital gown was gone, replaced by Firas's black tactical suit, body armor, utility belt—all of it on her in the space between one blink and the next. Too big in the shoulders, sleeves too long, hanging loose on her smaller frame. Still barefoot.

Defiant.

The Seed flared in her chest.

The falling fighters accelerated.

Not imperceptible, though. Not like before. She was weakened—Kain could see her swaying, breathing hard, trembling. But fast enough.

The Go Squad became blurs. Streaking downward with devastating force.

Battlea hit Tank Ogden. Impact like a car crash. Ogden went down, cratering pavement.

Crimson Sable struck Philips. Same force. The street shattered beneath him.

Edgar tried to dodge. Night Knight course-corrected mid-strike, impossible angle, caught him center mass. The street buckled.

Orlansky raised his arms. Nightingale went through his guard. He collapsed, arms bent wrong.

Gloom Girl didn't strike a Tank.

She blinked out mid-fall. Reappeared beside Firas—who barely had time to register her presence before she flipped off the entire intersection and yanked them both into translocation.

Four Tanks down. Five fighters standing in black tactical suits, forming a perimeter around the girl in the center.

The girl who'd just turned five falling humans into weapons.

Kain stared.

"What are you?"

The girl didn't answer. She was swaying. Breathing hard. Trembling. Barely standing.

But the others—

Tank Ogden moved—not much. Just a groan. Fingers scraping pavement as he clawed up from the crater.

Before he could rise, Crimson Sable's staff caught his temple. Fluid. Precise. Ogden's head snapped sideways. He dropped.

Didn't move again.

Tank Philips was already crawling, one hand grasping for the nearest fighter.

The staff sweep came low—Crimson Sable taking the legs. Gloom Girl struck from above. Pincer attack.

Philips stopped moving.

Tank Edgar surged up. Charging straight for Nightingale.

The team intercepted before he made three steps. Training kicked in. Protect the medic.
Protect each other.

Night Knight got there first. Restraint hold. Crimson Sable followed. Double-team
takedown.

Edgar went down hard.

Stayed down.

Tank Orlansky was the last one standing.

The youngest. Eyes wide. He'd watched the others fall. Watched the coordinated assault
take down enhanced cops like they were nothing.

He was still enhanced. Still seven feet of muscle and bone. Still dangerous.

He swung wild. Desperate. A backhand that would cave in a skull if it connected.

The fighters moved as one.

All five converged on Orlansky. Coordinated assault. Each creating an opening for the
next. Battlea got there first. Impact strike. Crimson Sable swept his legs. Gloom Girl hit from the
side. Night Knight secured. Nightingale delivered the final blow.

Orlansky collapsed.

Four Tanks. All taken down for good.

The fighters stood. Breathing hard. Injured but alive.

They'd won.

The air smelled wrong—ozone and copper and something burnt. Pavement dust hung in
clouds where the Tanks had cratered concrete.

Then something happened.

Light.

Sickly greenish light—the same shade as the Tamois Heart in Kain's chest—began rising from Ogden's body. Not like steam. Not like smoke. Like something being extracted. Pulled from bone marrow and blood. The enhanced cop's back arched. A convulsion. Then slack.

The husk that remained looked smaller. Deflated. Empty.

The light streamed across shattered pavement, drawn like iron to a magnet. Toward Kain.

When it hit him, the sound was wet. Organic. The noise of flesh accepting what it shouldn't.

Power flooded through his veins. The Tamois Heart pulsed brighter, faster. His bones cracked. Restructured. His skin stretched. He felt himself growing—twenty-three feet to twenty-five, muscle mass expanding, strength multiplying.

The fragment had returned to him.

More light. Draining from Philips. From Edgar. From Orlansky. Four streams of sickly green essence flowing across pavement, converging on Kain like tributaries finding a river.

The temperature dropped. Kain could feel it even at his size—the air going cold as something fundamental was pulled from four corpses into one living body.

He'd distributed portions of the Tamois essence to the Tanks. Made them weapons. Made them bait.

And now—

The fragments slammed into him. One after another. Power surging. Growing.

Twenty-five feet. Twenty-eight. Thirty-one. Thirty-five.

The Tamois Heart pulsed whole again. All fragments reclaimed. Integration accelerating. But it wasn't stopping.

"NO! STOP!" Nightingale's scream cut through the sound of bones restructuring. "You're feeding him!"

But there was nothing to stop. The light was already flowing. The damage already done.

The fighters stood frozen—watching four bodies collapse into empty husks, watching Kain grow with each second, watching their victory turn to ash.

"We killed them."

The words came quiet. Hollow. Kain couldn't tell who said it. Didn't matter. They were all staring at the same thing—four bodies collapsing into husks. What had been police officers. Human beings with families, with names, with lives before he'd twisted them into weapons.

The fighters just stood there. Understanding what they'd done.

Ahdia—the girl in the center, the one in the oversized tactical suit, the one who'd turned the team into weapons—swayed. Trembling.

Kain looked down at them. At the five fighters. At the four corpses. At the girl who'd just figured out his trap.

"Thank you," he said. His voice had become thunder—the sound of buildings learning to speak. "I was wondering how to reclaim those fragments."

The fighters stood in silence.

Four Tanks down. Four police officers dead. Their bodies empty husks on shattered pavement.

And Kain—stronger than ever. Whole again.

Still growing.

Thirty-eight feet. Forty.

The integration wasn't stopping. The Tamois Heart pulsed like a dying star—brighter with each beat, consuming him, transforming him. His skin stretched translucent. Bones visible beneath, restructuring, cracking, reforming. Becoming something worse than what he'd been.

Something that barely resembled human anymore.

Ahdia swayed in the center of her team. The oversized tactical suit hung loose on her trembling frame. Blood from her nose had soaked through the collar. She'd turned five humans into living weapons. She'd saved them.

And she'd fed the monster.

Chapter 28

Ahdia's legs gave out.

She dropped to one knee, caught herself with one hand on cold pavement. The tactical suit hung heavy on her frame. Everything hurt. Her lungs burned like she'd sprinted miles. Her vision swam at the edges.

Four bodies on the ground. Four cops. Ogden, Philips, Edgar, Orlansky. Empty husks where men used to be.

And Kain—forty feet tall now, still growing, bones cracking and reforming with sounds like gunshots, skin stretched translucent over restructuring anatomy, the Tamois Heart pulsing in his chest like a dying star.

"We have to move." Ruth's voice. Nightingale. Medical precision cutting through shock. "Now. Before he—"

Kain moved.

Faster than something that size should move. His fist came down like a building falling.

The Seed pulsed weakly in Ahdia's chest. She tried to reach for it, tried to freeze, tried to—

Nothing happened.

Too exhausted. Too depleted. She'd burned everything she had left just getting the team here, just surviving the car crash, just changing clothes in a blink.

Battlea shoved her.

The fist cratered pavement where Ahdia had been kneeling. The impact sent cracks spiderwebbing twenty feet. Shrapnel exploded outward. A chunk of asphalt the size of a basketball whistled past Ahdia's head.

"Scatter!" Night Knight's voice. Military command. "Don't let him track patterns!"

The team moved.

Battlea sprinted left, fastest on the team, drawing Kain's attention. Crimson Sable went right, staff ready. Night Knight fell back to tactical position. Ruth grabbed Ahdia's arm, hauling her up.

"Can you run?"

Ahdia nodded. Lied. Her legs felt like water.

Kain turned toward Battlea. Watched her sprint. Then his hand shot out—not a punch, a grab. Fingers the size of tree trunks closing around empty air where she'd been a half-second before.

She'd changed direction. Roller derby instincts. Reading momentum and exploiting angles.

"Keep moving!" Night Knight yelled. "Don't stop!"

Crimson Sable swung his staff at Kain's ankle. The impact should have shattered bone. The staff bounced off like hitting concrete. The vibration traveled up Victor's arms. He stumbled back.

"It's not working!" His voice cracked. Grief and rage mixing with fear. "He's too—"

Kain's other hand swept low. Backhanded. Casual. Like swatting a fly.

The blow caught Crimson Sable across the chest. Sent him tumbling. He hit the side of a building thirty feet away. Crumpled. Didn't move.

"Victor!" Battlea screamed.

She changed direction. Sprinting toward him instead of away from Kain. Stupid. Instinct overriding tactics.

Kain's shadow fell over her.

"Leah, NO!" Ruth's scream.

The fist came down.

Battlea dove. Rolled. The impact missed her by inches. Pavement exploded. She kept rolling, came up running, reached Victor.

He was breathing. Conscious. Groaning.

"I'm okay," he gasped. "I'm—"

Kain's hand reached for them both.

Night Knight hit from the side. Not Kain—hit Battlea and Crimson Sable, full-body tackle, driving them out of the grab radius. All three tumbled. Kain's fingers closed on empty air.

"Futile." Kain's voice echoed. Thunder. Buildings learning to speak. "You've already lost. You fed me. Made me whole. Now watch what that bought you."

He raised both hands above his head.

Going to bring them down on Night Knight and the others. Going to crush them like insects.

Ahdia tried to move. Couldn't. Her body wouldn't respond. She'd pushed too far. Used too much. Cellular regeneration at thirty percent wasn't enough for this.

The Seed pulsed. Weak. Barely there.

Come on, she thought desperately. Come on, just one more freeze. Just one more—

The hands started to descend.

Ruth was running toward them. Trying to reach Night Knight. Trying to do something, anything.

She wasn't going to make it.

None of them were.

Ahdia reached for the Seed one more time. Felt it flicker. Felt it respond—barely, weakly, not enough.

Not enough.

The hands fell.

Then the sky screamed.

The sound came first—a shriek of displaced air, something moving faster than sound, tearing through atmosphere like the world was being ripped apart.

The cruise missile hit Kain dead center in the chest.

The explosion was white. Blinding. A miniature sun blooming in downtown Caledonia. The concussive wave hit like a physical wall. Windows shattered for three blocks. Car alarms started screaming. The pavement beneath Ahdia's feet shook.

Kain's hands never completed their descent.

He went down.

Forty feet of restructuring flesh and bone and Tamois-infected tissue hit the street like a falling building. The impact cratered the intersection. Sent up a cloud of dust and debris that blotted out the streetlights.

Silence.

Then the sound of boots hitting pavement.

Figures emerged from the dust. Black tactical gear. Military precision. Weapons ready. At least twenty of them, fanning out in coordinated formation.

CADENS.

Leading them—a man Ahdia didn't recognize. Older. Gray at the temples. Moving like someone who'd done this a thousand times. He raised one hand. The strike team halted.

"Overseer," he said into his comm. His voice carried in the sudden quiet. "Target is down. Repeat, target is down."

A pause. Then a woman's voice through his earpiece, loud enough for Ahdia to hear: "Confirmed kill?"

The man—Bourn, his name tag read—approached the crater where Kain had fallen. Massive body sprawled across shattered pavement. Tamois Heart no longer pulsing. Skin going gray. Eyes open and empty.

"Confirmed," Bourn said. "Kain is dead."

Ahdia sat on the pavement, legs splayed, hands braced behind her, chest heaving. The oversized tactical suit was soaked through with sweat. She stared at Kain's corpse.

Dead.

They'd won.

Ruth was helping Night Knight up. Battlea was checking on Crimson Sable. Everyone was alive. Everyone was—

"Overseer wanted authorization before engaging," Bourn said. He was still talking into his comm. Casual. Like he hadn't just fired a cruise missile into downtown. "Pentagon wanted assurances. SecDef wanted contingencies. We stopped waiting."

A pause.

"Some things are more important than careers, ma'am."

The CADENS strike team began securing the perimeter. Setting up equipment. One of them—a woman with a medical kit—approached Ruth.

"Ma'am, we're here to assist with—"

Ruth waved her off. "I'm a doctor. ER. I've got this." She was already checking Night Knight's ribs. Then she looked past the CADENS operative. Past the strike team. "Where's Firas? Where's Gloom Girl? Did they—"

"Safe," the operative said. "Translocated out before engagement. We tracked them to—"

The ground shook.

Not like the missile impact. This was different. Smaller. Rhythmic. Like a heartbeat.

Coming from the crater.

Bourn turned. Raised his weapon. "What the—"

Kain's body was moving.

Not breathing. Not alive. Moving.

Collapsing inward.

His chest caved in first. Like an invisible hand was pressing down, compressing bone and flesh and Tamois-infected tissue into something smaller. Tighter. The Tamois Heart at the center pulling everything toward it.

"Fall back!" Bourn yelled. "Everyone back!"

The CADENS team retreated. Ahdia tried to stand. Her legs wouldn't work. Ruth grabbed her arm, started dragging her.

"What's happening?" Ahdia gasped.

"I don't know." Ruth's voice was tight. Controlled. Terrified. "But we need to move. Now."

Kain's body was shrinking. Forty feet becoming thirty. Thirty becoming twenty. His arms pulled into his torso. His legs compressed. Everything flowing inward toward the Tamois Heart like water circling a drain.

The temperature dropped. Ahdia could see her breath now. The air going cold as something fundamental was being violated.

Fifteen feet. Ten. Five.

The body that had been Harding Kain compressed into a point no bigger than a basketball. Floating two feet above the crater. Spinning slowly. Impossibly dense.

Then it started pulling.

Debris first. Chunks of pavement, shattered glass, pieces of the destroyed cars—all of it sliding across the ground toward the point. Accelerating. Faster. Disappearing into it like it was being swallowed.

"Singularity!" Someone shouted. One of the CADENS operatives. "It's forming a singularity! Everyone out! NOW!"

The pull intensified. Ahdia felt it—a tug on her body, gentle at first, then stronger. The oversized tactical suit rippling in a wind that wasn't wind. Her hair whipping forward.

Ruth was pulling her the opposite direction. Away from the point. But the pull was winning. Inch by inch, they were sliding back toward it.

Bourn was screaming into his comm. "We need immediate evac! The artifact is collapsing into—"

His words were lost in the sound of a building starting to creak.

Ahdia looked up.

The bank building to her left was leaning. Imperceptibly at first. Then visibly. Pulled toward the singularity. Windows shattering. Structural supports groaning.

It was going to fall.

And when it did, it was going to take everyone with it.

Chapter 29

The pull was gentle at first.

Like a breeze. Like standing too close to a subway platform when the train comes through. Just enough to make Ahdia's hair lift, the oversized tactical suit ripple against her body.

Then it got stronger.

Debris slid across pavement toward the singularity—chunks of asphalt, shattered glass, pieces of the destroyed cars. Slow at first. Then faster. Accelerating as they got closer to the point where Kain's body had compressed into something no bigger than a basketball, spinning slowly two feet above the crater.

Ahdia tried to stand. Her legs wouldn't work. She was on her knees, one hand braced against the pavement, watching pieces of the city start to move.

"Everyone back!" Bourn was screaming into her comm. "Fall back! NOW!"

The CADENS team was already moving. Professional. Trained for this kind of thing. They grabbed equipment, hauled injured operatives, ran for the perimeter.

But the pull was getting stronger.

Ahdia felt it now—not just on her hair and clothes. On her body. A tug. Gentle but insistent. Like gravity had decided downtown Caledonia had a new center, and everything was going to find it eventually.

Ruth grabbed her arm. Tried to pull her up. "We need to move. Can you—"

The bank building groaned.

Ahdia looked up. The whole structure was leaning. Windows shattering in cascading waves. Steel supports creaking. The sound was wrong—metal screaming as fundamental forces pulled it apart.

It was going to fall.

And when it did, it would take everyone on this street with it.

"Go," Ahdia said.

"What?" Ruth's grip tightened. "No. We're not—"

"GO!" Ahdia shoved her. Hard. Ruth stumbled back. "Get them out! All of them!"

She could see the others now. Battlea helping Crimson Sable stand. Night Knight favoring his ribs. Gloom Girl emerging from shadow near the overturned bus. The CADENS operatives running, dragging equipment.

All of them in the pull radius.

All of them going to die if someone didn't stop this.

Ahdia stood. Her legs shook. The Seed pulsed weakly in her chest—barely there, almost depleted. She'd burned everything she had left just getting here, just surviving the fight, just staying conscious.

But she had enough for this.

She had to have enough for this.

Ruth was still backing away. Eyes locked on Ahdia. Understanding dawning. "No. Don't you—"

Ahdia walked toward the singularity.

"Stop her!" Ruth's voice cracked. She lunged forward. Battlea moved too—both trying to intercept.

But the pull fought them. Wind screaming, debris flying. They couldn't get close enough. Couldn't reach her.

Each step Ahdia took was harder. The pull intensified. Wind that wasn't wind whipped her hair forward. The oversized suit rippled and flapped. Her bare feet scraped pavement as she fought to move closer.

"AHDIA!" Ruth's scream. Desperate. Furious. "Don't you DARE do this!"

She kept walking.

The singularity pulsed. That sickly greenish light—the same shade as the Tamois Heart that had been in Kain's chest—spiraled inward. Impossibly dense. Matter compressing into a point that shouldn't exist. Physics being violated on a fundamental level.

Ten feet from it, the pull became brutal.

Ahdia stopped. Planted her feet. The pavement under her cracked from the force. She could feel her body being tugged forward. Inch by inch. Drawn toward the point.

This was far enough.

She spread her arms wide.

Right hand toward the singularity. Left hand back toward the city.

The Seed flared in her chest.

Red light erupted from her right hand. Not blue. Not the freezing, stopping, pulling-back blue she'd been using. This was the other direction. Acceleration. Pushing time forward. Making things burn faster, consume quicker, reach their end.

She aimed it at the singularity's core.

Burn out. Collapse faster. Get to the end and stop existing.

The green light of the compressed Tamois essence pulsed brighter. Spinning faster. The pull intensified. Buildings groaned. Car alarms screamed. Glass shattered for blocks.

Not enough.

She raised her left hand.

Blue light erupted. Freezing. Slowing. Creating a buffer around the acceleration, a temporal shell to contain it. Keep it from spreading. Let it burn itself out in isolation.

Two opposing forces. Red and blue. Acceleration and deceleration. Forward and back.

Both running through her body at the same time.

The pain was immediate.

Her skin cracked. Not metaphorically. Literally. Fissures spreading across her hands, up her arms, spiderwebbing across her chest. Light showed through—not blood, something else. Something that shouldn't be visible in three-dimensional space.

She was screaming.

Couldn't help it. Her body wasn't built for this. Wasn't designed to channel opposing temporal forces simultaneously. The Seed could do it—the artifact was cosmic, beyond human limitation. But her body was the conduit. And it was tearing apart.

The singularity pulsed. Faster. Brighter. The red acceleration was working—burning through the Tamois essence, consuming it, pushing it toward collapse.

But not fast enough.

And she couldn't hold this much longer.

Her vision was fragmenting. Reality splitting at the edges. She could see—not just the street, not just the singularity. Other things. Other places. Dimensions bleeding through as her perception expanded beyond human limits.

The hallway. That hallway from the dreams. Doors on both sides stretching into infinity.

No. Not now. Stay here. Hold it together. Just a little longer.

Her knees buckled.

The opposing forces were too much. Her body was dissolving. Radiance spilling from every fissure. She was becoming something else—something not quite human anymore.

Going to fail. Going to lose it. Going to—

Hands covered hers.

Warm. Human. Real.

She couldn't turn her head—couldn't look—but she knew.

Firas.

"I'm not losing you again!" His voice. Strained. Terrified. Determined.

He was here. In the pull radius. Hands over hers. Helping channel the power.

"No—" She tried to speak. Could barely form words. "You can't—no Seed—you'll—"

His body was already breaking down.

She could feel it. The opposing forces running through him. Red and blue. Acceleration and deceleration. His hands cracking. Light showing through. But he didn't have the Seed. Didn't have the artifact anchoring him. He was just human. Just flesh and bone and determination.

He was dying.

"Let go!" She tried to pull away. Couldn't. The power locked them together. "Firas, let GO!"

"No." His voice was calm. Too calm. Like he'd already made his choice. "We do this together."

The singularity pulsed brighter. Spinning faster. The acceleration working. Almost there. Almost collapsed.

But both of them were dissolving now.

Ahdia reached with one hand—couldn't maintain the full containment, losing the balance—fumbled at the utility belt of the tactical suit. The autoinjector. The eighth treatment. The one that would stabilize her cellular regeneration. The one that could save him.

She found it. Pulled it free.

Reached for Firas. To inject him. Give him something to anchor to.

Her vision fragmented. Reality splitting faster. The hallway bleeding through—not at the edges anymore, everywhere, consuming her perception.

No. Not yet. Just need to—

But she couldn't hold on. Couldn't stay.

Her hand with the autoinjector was dissolving. She could see through her own fingers. Radiance instead of flesh. The injector falling—no, floating—no, existing in too many dimensions at once.

"Firas—" She tried to say his name. Tried to hold on. Tried to stay.

She couldn't.

The hallway snapped into focus.

Not vision fragmenting anymore. Not bleeding through at the edges. Full. Complete. Real.

Ahdia stood in the hallway from her dreams. Infinite corridor stretching in both directions. Doors on both sides—thousands of them, millions, more than could exist in three-dimensional space. Each one a different color. Each one pulsing with its own light.

She looked down at herself.

Not human anymore. Not flesh and bone and blood. Light. Energy. Something that existed in more dimensions than three. She could see her own structure—not just surface, but depth and time and probability. Past versions overlapping with present. Future possibilities branching like fractals.

She tried to scream. No mouth. No lungs. No vocal cords.

Just awareness.

The doors weren't doors. They were timelines. Universes. Possibilities. She could see into them—glimpses of other lives, other choices, other versions of herself. One where she'd never left her apartment. One where she'd died at the warehouse. One where Firas lived and she didn't. One where neither of them existed at all.

Too much. Too vast. She was going to lose herself in this. Scatter across infinite possibilities and cease to be anything coherent.

Then something looked back at her.

From the end of the hallway—impossibly far and also right in front of her simultaneously—something vast turned its attention her direction.

Not human. Never human. Bigger than galaxies. Smaller than atoms. Existing in all moments at once.

Bellatrix.

Recognition flared between them. Not words. Not thought. Just acknowledgment. Two things that shouldn't exist in the same space, seeing each other clearly for the first time.

The entity that had scattered Seeds across reality, looking at one of the humans who'd picked one up.

Ahdia wanted to ask questions. Wanted to demand answers. Wanted to scream why, why did you do this, why did you make me into this, why did any of this have to happen.

Bellatrix didn't answer.

Just looked. Acknowledged. Then turned its attention elsewhere.

Dismissal. Or maybe permission. Hard to tell when communication happened in dimensions she didn't have names for.

Then something grabbed her.

Pulled.

No—ripped.

Violent. Brutal. Like being torn apart and reassembled simultaneously. The hallway shattered. The higher dimensions collapsed. Her multi-dimensional awareness compressing, folding, cramming itself back into three spatial dimensions and one temporal.

Back into a body.

Back into flesh.

Back into HUMAN.

She gasped. Air flooded lungs she'd forgotten she had. Her heart slammed against ribs that had just reformed. Her skin sealed over light and energy and things that didn't belong in this reality.

She was kneeling. Pavement under her knees. Cold and solid and real.

Firas was right there. Inches away. Face to face. Still kneeling where they'd been channeling the power together. His hands had been covering hers—were they still? Hard to tell. Everything was moving, pulling, chaos.

And something was pulling her.

Backward. Away from him.

She looked down. Pain in her stomach—sharp, immediate, real. The autoinjector pressed against her abdomen. Firas's hand on it. He'd injected her. While she was gone. With what she'd brought from the CADENS facility.

He looked up at her. Serene. Strangely smiling.

She looked past him. The singularity. Still there. Still active. Still pulling.

Then she felt it—hands gripping her from behind. Ruth's hands on her right arm, the one that had solidified enough to hold. Ruth's face contorted with effort, screaming something Ahdia couldn't hear over the roar in her ears.

Behind Ruth—

The human chain.

Crimson Sable gripping Ruth's waist. Battlea holding Crimson Sable. Night Knight anchoring Battlea. Gloom Girl at the back, arms wrapped around Night Knight, her legs braced against the overturned bus.

All of them pulling. Screaming. Straining. Hauling Ahdia back from the singularity's edge.

They'd come for her. Formed a chain. Risked the pull. Refused to let her go.

The treatment was already working—rapidly regenerating her cellular makeup, pulling her back to humanity. That's what brought her back from transcendence. That's what saved her.

"NO!" Ahdia lunged at his hands, tried to stand. Tried to hold on to him.

The chain held her. Ruth's grip tightened. "Ahdia, we can't—the pull—"

He was still smiling. Peaceful. Like he'd finally figured something out. His lips moved.

She couldn't hear him over the singularity's roar. But she could read the words.

"Oh hey," he said. "I knew you were in there somewhere."

His body dissolved faster. The cracks spreading. Luminescence consuming him from the inside out.

Ahdia's fingers grasped at empty air where once they held her brother. "Firas, please—"

The singularity pulsed.

Firas was pulled toward it. Not dragged. Just—moved. Like space itself had shifted and he'd gone with it. He kept his eyes on Ahdia the whole time. Still smiling.

He reached the singularity's edge.

Looked back at her one more time.

Then went in.

Light and energy and everything that had been her little brother—pulled into the point.

Compressed. Absorbed.

Gone.

The singularity pulsed one final time.

Then collapsed.

The red acceleration had finished its work. Burned through all the Tamois essence.

Consumed it completely. The point of impossible density spun faster, tighter, smaller.

Then winked out.

Just—gone. Like it had never existed.

The pull ceased. Air rushed inward to fill the vacuum. The pressure change hit like a wall. Debris clattered to pavement. The leaning bank building groaned but held.

Silence.

The team collapsed. All of them. The chain breaking as they fell to the pavement in a heap. Gasping. Shaking. Alive.

Ruth still had Ahdia's arm. Hadn't let go. Was pulling her into the pile. Into arms and hands and people who were crying and breathing and there.

Ahdia knelt in the center of them. Surrounded. Held.

The space where Firas had been was empty.

No body. No trace. Nothing.

Just pavement and debris and the fading scorch marks where the singularity had been.

Her little brother was gone.

She'd been saved because he'd chosen this.

And she hadn't even gotten to say goodbye.

Chapter 30

The glass was cold against Ahdia's forehead.

CADENS command center. Twenty-four hours after downtown. Twenty-four hours since she'd watched her little brother dissolve into light and get pulled into a singularity.

She breathed. Fogged the window. Watched the condensation fade.

"You holding up?" Dr. Ryu's voice behind her. Shiba. She'd started thinking of him as Shiba after spending twelve hours getting debriefed yesterday. First-name basis happened when you almost ended the world together.

"I'm standing," Ahdia said. "That counts for something."

"It does." He moved next to her at the window. Didn't push. Good. She appreciated that. "Overseer wants to see you. When you're ready."

Ahdia nodded. Kept staring out at the hangar. CADENS operatives moving equipment, running diagnostics. Business as usual. Like downtown hadn't almost created a black hole that would've consumed the entire city.

"How's the team?" she asked.

"Checked out clean. No temporal anomalies, no residual Seed energy, no cellular degradation." Shiba adjusted his glasses. "Victor's arm is in a sling but that's from the pull, not the temporal forces. They got lucky."

Lucky. Right. They'd formed a human chain to pull her back from the edge while Firas—

She pushed off the glass. "Let's get this over with."

#

Overseer's office looked the same. Same desk. Same chair. Same woman who'd sent Ahdia into situations without backup and expected results.

"Auerbach. Have a seat."

Ahdia sat. Didn't lean back. Ready to bolt.

"How are you recovering?"

"Fine, just dandy."

"Good." Overseer's expression softened slightly. "I'm very sorry for your loss. I wanted to make sure I told you that."

Sure. Thanks for the condolences after the fact. After not sending support when Ahdia had begged for it. After letting her go in alone against Kain.

"Sure," Ahdia said. Kept her voice neutral. "Thanks."

Overseer knew there was tension. Good. Let her sit with it.

"That was quick thinking yesterday," Overseer said. "Using opposing temporal forces to burn out the Tamois essence while containing the collapse. Impressively, you did it on your own."

"I had the Go Squad," Ahdia corrected. "They formed the chain. Pulled me back. They almost died doing it."

"Of course," Overseer said. "They held their ground against a Terminus-level gravitational anomaly. Unarmed. That takes remarkable courage."

"It probably shouldn't give you ideas," Ahdia said. "It just happened to work out this time. They used timing and positioning. Next time, they die."

"And yet, you let them help. That took guts. Leadership. How did you know the temporal acceleration wouldn't tear them apart?"

"Oh, you know. Most of what we do is guess and theorize because cataclysm science is still in its nascence."

Overseer chuckled, recognizing Shiba in that statement. "Yes, it is."

"I guessed," Ahdia said. "The Seed was channeling through me, not them. They were pulling on flesh and bone, not exotic energy. As long as they stayed outside the acceleration field's direct path, physics would mostly apply."

"That's a hell of a shot in the dark. And your brother—"

"Don't." Ahdia's voice went flat. "Don't analyze that."

Overseer held her gaze for a moment. Nodded. Reached into a desk drawer, pulled something out, tossed it onto the desk.

The CADENS badge.

"It's yours if you want it," Overseer offered.

Ahdia looked at it. Leaned back in her chair now. "I can't use my powers anymore. The Seed's dormant. Maybe permanently."

Overseer shook her head. "We don't value that nearly as much as we value what you bring to the table regardless. Your methods are not CADENS ways of doing things, but that's where you'd be an asset."

Ahdia picked up the badge. Felt the weight. Cold metal. Official. A life that wasn't hers.

She put it back on the desk.

"I'm flattered," she said. "But I'm ready to go back to my life. The couch has been booty calling me."

Overseer smiled. Disappointed but appreciative. "Let me know if you ever change your mind. Until then, I trust you can keep CADENS under your hat."

Ahdia mimed zipping her lips, throwing away the key. "It's not like you won't have FAERIS tracking me anyway."

"We have no reason to monitor you anymore, Ms. Bacchus." Overseer stood. Ahdia stood too.

They shook hands.

"It's been a pleasure and a privilege," Overseer said.

Ahdia gave a side smile. Turned to leave.

"One last thing." Overseer's voice stopped her. "How close did you come to draining all of your life force yesterday?"

Ahdia blinked slowly. Considered answering. Considered telling her about the hallway, about seeing Bellatrix, about dissolving into light and nearly not coming back.

Instead, she smiled.

Overseer watched her leave. Sat back down. Pushed the intercom button.

"Please send in Dr. Ryu," she requested.

"Yes, ma'am," the voice replied.

Ruth, Leah, Victor in an arm sling, Ben and Tess sat in Ahdia's penthouse. CADENS had released them that morning after twelve hours of medical checks and debriefing. No temporal anomalies. No cellular degradation. Just exhaustion and Victor's pulled shoulder from the human chain.

They'd agreed to meet here. Process yesterday together before going back to their lives.

If they could.

"Welcome to Carl Tucker Tonight," the cable news anchor greeted from the TV. The team sat scattered around the living room, not quite looking at each other. "When the nation's first response to prank calls from some yahoos with too much time on their hands is to scream like chicken little that the sky is falling, we have to wonder what kind of leadership we have currently steering the ship. Just because officials have a hint of something possibly happening, in this case a supposed critical gas leak in the city's center, all of Caledonia gets completely evacuated? The National Guard gets called in? Where were they while crime has been running rampant and overwhelming our city's noble police force...?"

"I wish they let us keep the suits," Victor complained, clicking off the TV.

"Lot of good it did you," Ben joked.

"My arm might have been taken clean off without it!" Victor responded.

"We don't need them," Ruth said.

"Right," Victor agreed. "We already have 'uniforms'. Still... being bulletproof..."

"I mean we don't need them because we're done," Ruth clarified. "The Go Squad. It's all over."

Tess chafed in her seat. "What? Why?"

"Guys... come on. Do I have to spell out why?" Ruth asked.

"We have the proof to expose the cops," Leah offered.

"And my consumer advocacy group has filed a lawsuit against the money we paid to the Kain PAC," Victor added. "Ahdia may not get her money back but neither will Kain. That money will get frozen."

"And?" Ruth challenged. "You guys know Kain is no worse off than before, right? He's already rebuilding his mansion. His campaign is just rolling right along. What we do... what we're done with now is and has been insignificant."

"When we expose the Police Chief, it's gotta connect to him, though," Ben said.

"Wrong," Victor said. "Ruth's right. It'll connect to the PAC. His hands will be clean."

"And what about Ahdia?" Ruth continued. "We haven't seen her since yesterday. Since downtown. Where is she? She just sends me access to her penthouse and bank account and doesn't make contact? No, there are too many reasons we need to keep laying low. The Go Squad is too dangerous. Anyway, we're not the Go Squad without Firas. He started all this. It was always his."

"Ruth..." Leah said.

"What?" Ruth replied.

"You've been holding us together," Leah said quietly. "Since it happened. Since he—" She stopped. Couldn't finish. "You're the one who made sure we all got out. You organized the chain. You've been carrying us."

Ruth looked at her deeply, then connected one by one with the others, each nodding when she did.

"Okay," she said, wiping a tear from her eye. "Then listen to me now... this world... doesn't need us. We're just a bunch of crazies running around, hopping around rooftops in our pajamas in the middle of the night. And we just lost—" Her voice cracked. "We just lost Firas. Yesterday. He's gone and that's—" She stopped. Breathed. "That's as much of a price I'm willing to pay to keep doing this. I can't lose any of you, too."

"You won't," Ahdia said.

They all turned to see her standing in the doorway, her hands buried in her bomber coat. Ruth smiled as soon as she saw that it was her. Then, Ruth noticed a duffel bag by her feet.

#

"Dr. Ryu, come in," Overseer said as he entered her office. "Have a seat."

He sat down and fixed his tie nervously.

"Are you anxious, doctor?" Overseer asked.

"No," he lied. "Why? Do I seem anxious?"

"It's why I asked," she said.

"Well... I thought maybe you were calling me in here to admonish me for letting Auerbach leave the facility early."

"No, I understand why you did." Overseer pulled up a holographic display. Medical scans. "But we need to discuss what happened with the treatment protocol."

Shiba leaned forward, adjusting his glasses. "Ma'am?"

"She lied to us." Overseer highlighted a section of the scan. "The eighth treatment. The one she told you she'd completed before leaving the facility."

"She didn't take it." Shiba's face fell.

"Medical analysis confirms she left at approximately one-third cellular recovery. Far below combat readiness, let alone channeling opposing temporal forces through her body." Overseer closed the display. "She walked into a Terminus-level event critically compromised. It's a miracle she's alive."

"That was... tactically unsound," Shiba said carefully.

"It was reckless. And effective." Overseer's expression was unreadable. "Which brings me to the second issue. Kain."

Shiba blinked. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I thought—downtown, the singularity—"

"You saw the press conference this morning?" Overseer pulled up another display. News footage. Harding Kain, very much alive, standing at a podium.

"I was dealing with equipment inventory," Shiba admitted.

Overseer played the clip. Kain's voice, smooth and practiced: "—tragic incident involving what appeared to be an experimental weapon. We believe this was an attempt by criminal elements to impersonate me and destabilize my campaign. I was, thankfully, nowhere near downtown at the time. The authorities are investigating—"

She muted it. "He's spinning it. Claims the entity at the singularity was a lookalike. Some kind of bioweapon or cataclysm construct."

"That's..." Shiba searched for words. "That's absurd. We have footage. Thermal signatures. Energy readings from the Tamois Heart in his chest."

"And he has lawyers. And a story that doesn't require the public to believe in cosmic artifacts and temporal singularities." Overseer leaned back. "We can't touch him. Not officially."

"The authorization," Shiba said quietly.

"The authorization that never came." Overseer's voice was flat. "I requested executive clearance to intervene six hours before Auerbach went downtown. Do you know when I received it?"

Shiba waited.

"Forty-seven minutes ago," Overseer said. "Fourteen hours after the event concluded. With a note thanking us for our 'patience and restraint during the review process.'"

Shiba sat back. "They wanted us hamstrung."

"They wanted plausible deniability. If Auerbach failed, no connection to CADENS. If she succeeded, no political fallout from officially acknowledging cataclysm threats." Overseer closed all the displays. "Either way, Kain walks free. We're left cleaning up gravitational anomalies and explaining to city officials why downtown looks like a meteor strike."

Silence filled the office.

"So what do we do, ma'am?" Shiba finally asked.

Overseer looked out the window at the hangar bay. "We document everything. We build the file. And we wait."

"For what?"

"For Kain to make a mistake. For the authorization to mean something. For whoever's pulling strings above us to realize that threats like this don't go away just because we pretend they don't exist." She turned back to Shiba. "In the meantime, we do our job. Monitor cataclysm activity. Track the Seed-bearers. And hope that next time, a depressed girl with time powers and a death wish isn't our only line of defense."

#

"Guys," Ahdia started. "I just wanted to say... thank you."

They all replied with acceptances and rejections of the gratitude all at once. Once they stopped, they kept their eyes on her because she was still standing there, looking like she had more to say.

"You guys saved my life yesterday. Downtown. The singularity." Ahdia's voice was quiet but steady. "When I was channeling those opposing forces, when I went... somewhere else... you pulled me back. Formed that chain and hauled me out of a collapsing dimension. You guys are..." She smiled slightly. "You're super."

This time, they stayed quiet, a pride welling in each of them.

"Even without me helping you in the background, you guys are real, genuine heroes. You inspired me to get off the couch and do something worth a damn. At first, I thought it was just to prove to Firas that I wasn't a screwup. I've learned so much about you guys and about myself since then. And what I've learned... is that this city needs us. This world, this universe, this dimension and all others. Between the corrupt cops, to Kain and the people who support that madman, and things happening that people don't know about, cataclysms that either provide unthinkable advances for humanity or threatens it entirely. I know I can't go back to my life the way it was before you guys but you're the only family I have and my family is unbeatable."

#

"How can we say no to that?" Tess said, smiling and wiping a tear.

"We don't," Victor said. "We keep up the fight. We stay vigilant. We stay ready."

"And we help the people who need it the most," Leah added.

"Because there's no one but us," Ben said.

They all looked at Ruth.

"This doesn't work without you, boss," Ahdia said.

#

"If we do this," Ruth said, "we start over. Build it up from the bottom because we're not just beating up muggers and getting old ladies safely across the street anymore."

The Go Squad began to smile, seeing Ruth come around.

"We need to be ready for cataclysms, cops and Kain," she added.

"Oh, my," Leah tagged on.

Victor put her in a playful headlock with his good arm and she put her arms around him in return.

"So...?" Ahdia asked, wanting a confirmation.

Ruth bit her lip and squinted in thought.

#

As the sun set on Caledonia, five figures stood at the top of an ivory tower, the highest point of the city. They wore form-fitting tactical suits—not the CADENS armor from yesterday, but their own gear. Custom. Familiar. Theirs.

They walked to the edge and looked down as the wind whipped.

"All clear," Ahdia said through their earwig comms from inside the MCC on the roof of her penthouse. The stolen CADENS mobile command center hummed softly as it cloaked, becoming invisible. "Happy hunting."

"Copy," Ruth said, finishing her climb up the roof access. She checked in with the squad—Leah, Victor (favoring his bad arm but here anyway), Ben, Tess—nodding at each one before stepping onto the ledge.

She turned back to them.

"This is it," Ruth said. "Yesterday, we lost someone. Today, we keep going. Because that's what Firas would've wanted. Because people still need help. Because we're the Go Squad, and we go when nobody else will." She paused. "It's not just Caledonia anymore. Not just muggers and corrupt cops. It's singularities and cosmic entities and things we don't have names for yet. No better place."

"No better time," the team said together.

Ruth dove.

The others followed.

Ahdia watched on the monitors as the FAERIS drones tracked their movements. They fell into formation. Leah and Ben peeled off first, deploying wingsuits, gliding to their patrol zones. Victor and Tess went next, splitting opposite directions.

Ruth dove faster, passing the lowest buildings before deploying her wingsuit. She pulled up to level off, hurtling overhead through the avenue. The HUD in her goggles lit up with police activity.

"You got it, Ahdia?" Ruth radioed.

"Everyone's in position," Ahdia replied. "Ready when you are."

Ruth retracted her wings, tucked into a roll, hit the rooftop across from a robbery in progress. The landing was textbook.

And then—

She levitated. Just slightly. Just enough. The gift Ahdia had given them all, now channeled through stolen CADENS equipment. Still working.

Ruth's feet touched down gently.

"Thank you," she said into her radio.

From the stolen MCC, surrounded by monitors and illegally repurposed FAERIS systems, Ahdia watched her team touch down across the city. The technology hummed around her—tech she wasn't authorized to use, in a vehicle she'd taken without permission, supporting vigilantes CADENS officially didn't acknowledge.

Overseer wanted her to wait. To document. To build files.

But people still needed help tonight.

Ahdia replied, "Go get 'em. I got your back."

EPILOGUE

"—and I want to assure the good people of Caledonia that I was nowhere near downtown during this tragic incident." Harding Kain's voice was smooth. Practiced. Perfect. "We believe this was an attempt by criminal elements to impersonate me and destabilize my campaign."

Camera flashes. Reporters shouting questions.

Kain smiled. The smile of a man who'd already won. "The authorities are investigating. I have full confidence in our law enforcement and our intelligence agencies to get to the bottom of this terrorist attack."

More flashes. More questions. He raised a hand.

"That's all for tonight. Thank you."

He stepped away from the podium. Aides flanked him immediately—practiced choreography, moving him through the press of bodies toward the exit. Handshakes. Reassurances. The performance continued until the elevator doors closed.

The moment they did, Kain's smile dropped.

"Clear," one of the aides said into his earpiece.

The elevator didn't go up. It went down.

Down past the parking garage. Past the mechanical floors. Past the levels that appeared on any blueprint or building schematic. The elevator descended for forty-seven seconds—Kain had counted once, back when descents like this still made him nervous.

Now he just waited.

The doors opened to a corridor of seamless white. No doors. No windows. No security cameras visible, though he knew they were there, embedded in the walls themselves. Biometric sensors tracked him with every step.

He walked alone now. The aides had stayed above. This level didn't exist for them.

At the end of the corridor, a door that wasn't a door. Just a wall that recognized him and opened.

Beyond it: the facility.

The first thing anyone noticed was the sound. Humming. Constant. Harmonic. The life support systems for the tanks created frequencies that human ears almost couldn't register. Almost. It made your teeth ache if you stayed too long.

Kain walked past the first row of tanks.

Inside each one, suspended in opalescent fluid, floated a body.

His body.

Dozens of them. Identical down to the cellular level. Each one in a different stage of maturation. Some looked sixteen. Some twenty. Some middle-aged. All of them had his face.

He stopped at Tank 47. Empty now. That had been him—the version that had gone downtown, that had confronted Auerbach, that had been consumed by the singularity along with the Tamois Heart.

A acceptable loss.

"You look tired," a woman's voice said.

Kain turned. She stood at the far end of the row, silhouetted against the blue-green glow of the tanks. Tall. Elegant. Wearing a white coat that was somehow both clinical and ceremonial.

"Forty-seven was our best integration," Kain said. "The Tamois Heart had fully bonded. Years of work. Gone."

"And yet you're here." The woman walked forward. Her face became visible in the tank light. Ageless. Beautiful in a way that was slightly wrong—like a painting where the proportions were mathematically perfect but somehow inhuman. "That's the point of redundancy."

"I know the point." Kain's voice had an edge now. "I'm living it."

"Are you?" The woman smiled. "Forty-seven thought he was special too. Thought the Heart made him more than a vessel. Look where that got him."

She moved past him, trailing fingers along Tank 51. Inside, a version of Kain that looked nineteen floated in suspension, unaware of the conversation happening inches away.

"How long until we can reintegrate a Heart?" Kain asked.

"We have three more in storage. We can begin the bonding process within a week." The woman turned back to him. "But that's not what you should be worried about."

"What should I be worried about?"

"Agent Auerbach saw Bellatrix."

Kain went still. "During the singularity?"

"According to the readings CADENS picked up, yes. She transcended. Briefly. Made contact with higher-dimensional space." The woman's smile widened. "She saw the hallway."

"That's not possible. The Seed was dormant, we made sure—"

"Nothing is ever certain with the Seeds. That's why they were scattered in the first place. To see what would happen. Who would find them. What they'd do with them." The woman walked toward a control panel, pulling up holographic data. "Bellatrix doesn't interfere. She observes. But she acknowledged Auerbach. That means something."

"What does it mean?"

"It means the girl is more important than we thought. It means her death might have consequences we can't predict." The woman turned off the display. "It means we proceed carefully."

"The plan was always to eliminate her once the Seed went dormant."

"Plans change." The woman moved toward the door. "Focus on the election. Win the presidency. That's your role. Let me worry about the girl."

She left.

Kain stood alone in the tank room, surrounded by sleeping versions of himself.