

DANGER ZONE ONE

01: WELCOME TO PALLAD CITY!



A NOVEL BY
MIDNIGHT

Danger Zone One, Vol. 1: Welcome to Pallad City!

Midnight

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Vol. 1: Welcome to Pallad City!

**Written by
Midnight**

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DANGER ZONE ONE DANGER ZONE ONE

FILE 1: Work Relations? Welcome to Pallad City!



Chapter One

Raymond Finkler's pudgy finger hammered a sequence of buttons on the wall-mounted keypad. Bold red text flashed to life across the small digital screen above. *Security System Override.*

The *clanks* and *ticks* of unseen shifting gears echoed throughout the empty steel corridor in which Raymond stood.

"I'll show 'em," Raymond said, struggling to keep the anxious unrest in his voice from rising above a whisper. His round body jerked forward, a lumbering frenzied mass beckoned by the welcoming hydraulic *hiss* before him.

Two sections of a massive reinforced steel door parted, expelling forth a burst of coolant vapor. An instant later both partitions had pushed enough away from one another to allow entry into a blackened void.

"Thought they could all just toss me to the curb like yesterday's trash?" Raymond muttered. His breathing heavy and erratic, he entered the shadow-clad realm ahead.

Overhead lights flickered on the instant his foot stepped into the room. A fluorescent glow washed over the laboratory, coating the area in the same nauseating white aura Raymond had grown accustomed to for the last ten years. But now he detested the putrid lighting more than ever before, to the point where it made the bile in his stomach rise.

Raymond had never seen the facility so utterly devoid of any human presence. It would still be an hour before the research and development directors, engineers, and data specialists arrived. But, for now, Raymond was alone, and *nothing* could stand in his way.

"Bury their heels in me, will they?" Moving further into the sprawling expanse of the lab, he ignored the half-completed remnants of military hardware and mechanical prototypes that littered the tables at his sides. His singular focus remained on the prize ahead.

Enclosed in a cylindrical glass container rested the very treasure he sought. The VX-II armored power suit. Nearly three times Raymond's height and plated in Taktus-7 explosive reactive armor, the suit was nothing if not imposing in its grand design. The original VX series models had been designed to aid in construction work, something Pallad City desperately needed after the Kurtow earthquake. But it didn't take long before Horizon Global Solutions began marketing their products towards more profitable ventures, namely, military applications. It was this business decision that propelled Raymond's employer from an already lucrative billion-dollar corporation into coveted megacorp status.

Raymond's fingers pressed up against the industrial-grade shatterproof glass—the only physical barrier between him and the VX-II. Still in the prototype phase, albeit a 'late stage' model, it was a glorious sight to behold. In the last few years of development, Raymond still couldn't believe how far these technological wonders had come. His eyes locked onto the suit's left arm. In place of a standard hand mechanism, was a Gatling-type cannon, utilizing a cyclic multi-barreled design—each one capable of rapidly discharging a barrage of 20mm shells, the same high-caliber ammunition employed by military aircraft. Chances are it was still equipped with the live rounds from yesterday's training exercise.

"Didn't think I was worth the dirt they trampled on?" Raymond spat. "Well, they thought *wrong!*" He could see his transparent reflection on the curved glass. Beads of

sweat ran down his face, his expression had been contorted into a manic gaze, his dark brown hair a disheveled mess. Despite being in his mid-thirties, Raymond could've easily looked a decade younger—but now his crazed demeanor would send even the bravest onlooker scrambling for cover, much less guessing his age.

Raymond adjusted his thick black glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose. He shuffled over to a nearby metal box protruding from the floor and placed his hand on the touchscreen panel. A soft chime gave an indication that the fingerprint sensors were scanning for his biometric identification.

The glass casing around the VX-II began to rise.

“Now they’ll *all* be sorry,” declared Raymond, a sardonic grin working its way across his lips. “From this day forward, Raymond Finkler gets the last laugh!”

The stark silence of the laboratory had been broken, now replaced with maddened howls of laughter.

It was getting late, and Reena Saffron was still in her bra and panties. Half awake, she darted around the bedroom, snatching up her white shirt and snaking an arm through the sleeve.

How could I have overslept—I’m so stupid!

Waving an accusatory finger at the Mr. Bearbot alarm clock on her nightstand, she frowned. “You didn’t do your job, mister!”

The inanimate object with its rounded plastic face just stared back at her. Reena *knew* that she had set him last night. *Or had she...?* It didn’t matter now as she sprinted around the room, wrestling her other arm through the shirt sleeve while searching for the rest of her uniform.

The previous night had been the first in her new apartment, as well as her first in Pallad City. With all the excitement of the big move, Reena figured on not being able to sleep a wink but never did she expect *oversleeping* would be a concern. Adding to that, she *still* hadn’t finished unpacking. Having arrived in the city late last night she had spent the better part of the evening unpacking the furniture, sound system (a going away present from her best friend, Haley), a few decorative paintings, and her coveted collection of stuffed animals that, now, neatly lined her shelves. But, in hindsight, organizing her clothes *first* may have been the best course of action.

Oh well...she thought, buttoning her shirt in record time...too late for regrets now. From her peripheral, she spotted a stack of boxes in the corner, one labeled in handwritten marker: *Clothes*.

Reena leaped over to the box, tearing the cardboard flaps open. The remainder of her attire lay at the top, folded and ready to go. “Gotcha!” she boasted, seizing a necktie. After a few moments of tussling with the rest of her uniform, she was finally dressed—except for her boots.

“Ugh!” Reena groaned, rushing over to another box. “Now where did I put *them*?”

The answer came fast, as she nearly tripped over the black footwear. She caught her balance just in time, hobbling on one leg before plopping her rear down onto the edge of the bed. Not missing a beat, she slipped the boots on.

“Shades open!” she ordered and, on command, the apartment’s Automated Comfort Control system kicked in. The window shades lifted, allowing beams of morning sunshine to streak into the room.

Reena winced as the blinding golden light came flooding in. Even in her frantic rush to get dressed, she couldn't help but pause and gaze out the window. It was the first time she was seeing the vast megatropolis of Pallad City in the day and from her own apartment. Sleek, angled skyscrapers, and streamlined architecture stretched on for as far as her blue eyes could see.

"Wow," Reena gasped in awe. "This is it." Everything she had worked so hard for, everything she had dreamed and hoped for, had finally come true. She was in Pallad City, and it was her big day.

Reena walked over to the other side of the room and stood proudly before the full-length wall mirror she had just put up last night. She turned, looking at herself from every angle, hardly sure if she wasn't still dreaming. After a firm pinch to the cheek, she was convinced this was no dream. Reena pushed a strand of black hair away from her eyes and straightened her Pallad City police uniform before throwing a salute to herself in the mirror, followed by a playful wink. "Get ready world, here I come!"



Chapter Two

“Is this Chief Hardiman’s office?”

Victor Hardiman had been slouched in his cushioned chair, seated behind a large office desk congested with file folders, digital clipboards, and sheets of electronic paper. The sudden intrusion and exuberant voice had stirred him into a straightened posture. He turned in his chair to the uniformed girl with black hair, nearly out of breath and hunched over.

“I was...” the girl began, panting for air, “...I was told he’d be waiting to see me.” With a slight smile and playful tilt of her head, she let out a short, embarrassed laugh. “But I kinda got lost, so I’m a bit late! There was a—”

The Chief waved his hand in a dismissive fashion. It was Monday morning, and that meant it was too early in the week for excuses. His mind had already entered a fog, trying to decipher the identity of this young girl and just *why* she was wearing a Pallad City Police uniform. “I’m Hardiman, and *you* are...?”

Then it hit him before she could even respond. His eyes widened and, in a fluster, he rummaged through the sheets of e-paper covering his desk. He found his answer near the top of the pile—and it was just as he had suspected. One hand gripping the paper and the other slamming down hard on the desk, Hardiman’s mouth dropped open.

“It can’t be,” he blurted out, “*you’re* the new recruit?!”

The girl perked up, her smile widening. If she was aware of Hardiman’s surprise, she hid it well. “Reena Saffron, reporting for duty! A pleasure to meet you, Chief!”

Now grasping the e-paper with both hands, Hardiman looked the document over in disbelief. Near the top of the sheet was her photo and, from behind the corner of the page, in his very office, there she stood, larger than life. This girl—Reena Saffron—was a mere eighteen years old according to her dossier and, though she appeared not a day older than sixteen, she had indeed graduated from the academy. *This was the replacement for Celia Denson, an officer with twenty years’ experience?* Denson had been one of the best on the force...

Hardiman could feel a throbbing pain begin to stir at the side of his head and a discomfort welling up at his right temple. It was the sign of another oncoming headache. He was getting tired of them and, within the last month alone, suffered from enough migraines to last two lifetimes. He ran his fingers through his graying hair and exhaled. At the age of fifty-three, Hardiman had expected his career getting easier over the years as he moved up from beat cop to the position of police chief, but if he had ever once counted on that, he knew now that such promised alleviation was merely fantasy.

Bastards at Central Division must be playing a joke on me! The thought shot through his mind. It was, after all, the only sensible answer. Standing before him wasn’t an officer, but a teenager that looked like she had just stepped out of high school. Either Central made a mistake, or they started handing out badges on the streets—and worst yet, to *kids!* Yet, the look on her face betrayed no hint of this being a prank. He took another glance at her file.

“Says you’re from Old Metro...” he remarked, paused and then added, “...that’s a pretty ritzy city.” He couldn’t figure it out; a majority of people who lived in Old Metro were fairly well off. If this girl’s parents were loaded, why did she want to be, of all

professions, a police officer? “And, according to this,” he continued reading, gritting his teeth as he said the words, “fresh out of the academy.”

“That’s right, sir!” Reena agreed, nodding profusely.

“Didn’t exactly finish top of class,” Hardiman commented, scanning over her final scores at the academy. This girl had nearly failed *every* training course!

Reena’s smile faded, replaced by an uneasy frown. She twiddled her fingers together. “But I *did* graduate with recommendations, sir.”

“Barely,” he muttered. She wasn’t lying. Despite her low grades and weak test scores, she had received numerous commendations. Hardiman had seen enough and, with a defeated sigh, the paper fell from his fingers and landed without so much as a sound on the desk. “Not that it matters,” he lamented. “Being particularly choosy isn’t a privilege around here.” And that was the truth. The Pallad City Police Department was short-handed, and if Central Division was going to start sending him children—whether he liked it or not—he desperately needed the officers.

Rising from his desk, Hardiman saluted the PCPD’s newest, and possibly youngest, recruit. “Welcome to the Pallad City Police Department, officer. Head downstairs to the armory and pick up your firearm and equipment.”

“Thank you, sir!” Reena gave him a firm return salute, her beaming expression full of excitement and pride. “I’ll be an asset to the force, I promise!” She turned and, with an exuberant bounce in every step, rushed towards the door. “You can count on me, Chief! I’ll uphold justice to the letter of the law in the name of the PCPD!”

Hardiman collapsed back into his chair, shoulders sagging as the door slammed shut behind the girl. Before he even knew what he was doing, his hand had already reached for one of the lower desk drawers and pulled it open. He bent down, hauled out his hidden treasures and placed them on the desk.

“Typical,” he said under his breath, fixated on the whiskey bottle and shot glass. “Always sending me the wet-eared greenhorns, and now even younger than ever before.” With one rapid snap of the wrist, a skill that Hardiman had clearly mastered, the bottle cap went flying across the room. He filled the shot glass and downed the contents in the blink of an eye. He ran his hand down the front of his face, fingers brushing against his weathered skin and pushing alongside the edges of his stark gray moustache. “Retirement can’t come soon enough.”

Reena twirled around, admiring her new police-issue duty belt. Equipped with nylon pouches containing double lock chrome handcuffs, OC pepper spray, and a 50,000-volt taser, each piece of equipment had been carefully decided upon by Central Division to comprise an officer’s formidable arsenal. But Reena had been most impressed with the taser. It was a T-ZZ model, similar to the one she had used at the academy.

“Here you go,” a voice called from across the armory. The armorer, a young officer named Kendal, walked over and handed Reena an object she’d never seen before.

“A bracelet?” Reena asked, clasping it onto her wrist. She held her hand up, examining the white circular design. It appeared to be made of a thin, lightweight plastic. “At least, it *looks* like a bracelet...”

“We call it an IDAC—Intel and Data Aid Communicator,” Kendal responded. “It’s your link to the department’s Command Division when you’re on patrol.” He motioned to

a slight indentation on the wristlet, “That’s the microphone for when you need to speak with a communications operator.”

“What does this do?” Reena asked, flicking a small button on the IDAC’s side. A blue LED flickered on the device and a flash of light burst forth. Directly in front of Reena’s face was now the transparent image of a triangular PCPD badge, rotating in mid-air.

“It’s a holographic display,” explained Kendal. “It can provide real-time maps, weapon schematics, and any other visual information you need. It’s also linked to the PCPD’s criminal records database—so mugshots, crime scene photos, and anything else we have on file will be at your immediate disposal.”

Reena tapped the small button a second time, and the hologram vanished. “Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this at the academy!”

“They’ve just been issued this month, so it’s still pretty new tech,” Kendal said. He directed Reena to a nearby table where a black metal case rested. “Have you ever fired a Halvok 99 before?”

Reena watched as Kendal opened the case, revealing a large handgun inside. “Uh,” she picked the gray and black plated weapon up, surprised by its heft, “not this particular model, but I *did* have basic firearm training.” It was hard not to feel intimidated by the gun’s size. The massive barrel was far longer than any pistol she had seen at the academy.

“The Halvoks have a bit of a recoil,” Kendal said, holding a finger in the air to expound his point. “Be sure to keep that in mind. Oh, and this Halvok’s already been keyed to your BID chip so only *you* can fire it, no different from any other firearm that’s registered to its legal owner.”

Reena remembered hearing time and again how every officer’s weapon was linked to their own signature Bio-Identification chip. This prevented any criminals from ever getting their hands on an officer’s weapon—or, in the event an officer ever lost their firearm, it would be rendered harmless. It made sense since nearly everyone already had a BID chip implanted in them, most at a very early age. The pain-free laser procedure that implanted the chip only took a few minutes and the chip itself was completely discreet, no larger than a grain of rice. Though the location of the implant was always left to the individual’s discretion, most people would typically opt for the arm or hand. BID chips had revolutionized the world. Unique to each person, each chip contained all pertinent identification numbers, medical history, and—in the case of the PCPD—allowed officers to use their Halvoks.

Bleep! Bleep! The abrupt noise averted Kendal’s attention to a nearby table where his netpad rested. The device gently vibrated and its ultra high definition screen emitted a soft glow, an alert to its owner that a notification had just been received.

Kendal picked up the netpad and glanced at the display. “Looks like the Chief just picked your partner.”

“That’s exciting,” Reena beamed, leaning in to catch a glimpse of the screen. But, much to her disappointment, Kendal pulled away, taking an uneasy step back. It was only then that she noticed the disturbed expression on his face. “Is something wrong?”

“Holy—” Kendal gasped, his skin now a deathly pale. “You’ve been paired with Madison Wynter!”

“Is that...” Reena scratched her head, mystified by the armorer’s sudden shift in composure, “...a *bad* thing? You look worried.”

“Are you kidding?” Kendal took an anxious step towards Reena, throwing his arms out in a frantic declaration. “There’s a *reason* they call her ‘Maniac’ Madison! Last name’s dead-on too, with a personality so cold she’d give a *snowman* the chills. The woman’s a walking disaster area!”

“R-really?” Reena stuttered. The distraught armorer had been staring at her like she was already a casualty of some impending doom.

“Madison Wynter,” repeated Kendal, making no attempt to hide the dread in his voice, “the ice queen of the PCPD...” He shook his head with grim certainty.

“Come on, she can’t be *that* terrible...” Reena tried to mask her creeping sense of unease, “...*right?*”

Kendal’s awkward silence may have well have been a notarized death sentence. “Uh, look,” he began, mustering his shaky nerves, “why don’t you test out the Halvok at the firing range? If Madison’s back from patrol, that’s where she’ll be.”

“Thanks...I think,” Reena replied. The armorer’s nervousness was contagious. *Just what have I gotten myself into?* Her thoughts raced on. *This officer, Madison Wynter, she can’t possibly be as bad as he claims...*

Chapter Three

Reena squeezed the trigger of the Halvok-99. Nothing happened. She tried to apply more pressure, but the result was the same.

“*Oops!*” Reena blurted aloud, flushed with embarrassment. The safety was still on! She was thankful that she’d been the only one in the PCPD’s indoor firing range. But, even alone, concealed between the stall walls at both sides, she couldn’t help feel a bit self-conscious at forgetting something as simple as taking her gun’s safety off. When Reena arrived at the range and found it empty, she was concerned that her new partner had already left for patrol without her, but now she was relieved—that’s *all* she needed, for Madison Wynter, the supposed *terror of the PCPD*, to see her make such a naïve mistake on her first day!

Reena adjusted her earmuffs, flipped the Halvok’s safety off, and aimed at the human-shaped paper target at the other end of the firing range. The gun almost felt heavier *now* than it did at the armory. She held the firearm tight with both hands, securing a decent grip on the handle in an effort to prevent any wobble that could throw off her aim. Taking a deep breath, Reena squinted at the stationary target ahead. *It’s just like basic training*, she thought. *All I need to do is...*

She applied pressure to the trigger and the Halvok screamed. A flash of light escaped the muzzle and a bullet discharged from the barrel. The recoil shoved Reena back with such force that it lifted her off her feet—she didn’t even see the bullet miss her target entirely.

“Whoa!” Reena cried out, her footing gone. The earmuffs had already been cast off from her head. She fell back, preparing to hit the ground. And then *something* caught her. “Huh?”

“Well, well, nice to see some able-bodied officers on the force!” a cheerful voice declared.

Before Reena could turn around to see who it was, she felt a hand reach down, cupping a firm grip on her butt.

“Some *more* able-bodied than others, am I right?” the owner of the lecherous hand boasted.

“*Hey!*” Reena shouted, spinning around. She came face-to-face with a male officer—at least she *thought* he was an officer. He wasn’t wearing a standard issue uniform, though his jacket sleeve was adorned with the PCPD shield. Even so, with his long hair and large mirrored sunglasses, he *still* didn’t look like he was with the Pallad City police.

“W-whoa,” the pervert stammered, pointing at the Halvok aimed at his face. “Careful where you’re pointing that, babe!”

For a moment, Reena wasn’t even aware she had been aiming the gun at the creep’s head but, once she realized it, she *didn’t* lower the firearm. “Watch it, buster,” warned Reena, “that’s sexual harassment, violation of code forty-two! Or forty-three, I forget...”

“It’s not safe to be, y’know, aiming a *loaded* weapon at someone,” the pervert continued with increasing anxiousness.

Reena lowered her arm, redirecting the barrel of the Halvok at her assailant’s crotch. “Take your *own* advice, pal!”

“All right, all right, you win!” he said, defensively throwing his hands up and stumbling back. “You’re the boss!”

“You’ll have to excuse my partner.” Another male—also *not* dressed in standard PCPD attire—approached with a half smile. “Name’s Sev, nice to meet you. My buddy here’s Gripps. Takes some getting used to him, but he’s not a bad guy, just an *asshole*. We’re with the special crimes unit on—”

Before Sev could finish, Gripps shuffled past his partner. “C’mon, we’re outta here, *partner*.”

“Sorry,” Sev apologized to Reena, shrugging his shoulders. “Catch you around, officer.”

“Friggin’ stuck up little...” Gripps mumbled, heading for the exit.

Following behind the disgruntled officer, Sev let loose a boisterous laugh, “Careful, Gripps. It’s not worth another suspension!”

Before they got out the door, Reena could hear Gripps continue, “...that’s one Grade-A *tease* right there, Sev!”

What a royal creep! Reena thought, narrowing her eyes. His partner seemed nice enough, though.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! A series of gunshots reverberated throughout the firing range. The sudden blaring succession caused Reena to jump. She glanced around, almost certain the range had been empty when she arrived—unless someone was at one of the *very* last stalls...

“I see you know how to handle yourself around the primitives,” a voice called out.

Reena followed the voice, right to the end of the stalls, setting her sights on a female officer with frosty white hair and a Halvok-99 in her hand.

“Good, ‘cause I don’t babysit,” the woman said, firing off another shot, “especially when it comes to rookie partners.”

“I didn’t know anyone else was here,” Reena admitted, looking over at the paper target—every bullet had found its mark with expert precision. “When I got here I hadn’t heard any shooting.”

“I don’t just come here to shoot,” the officer replied tersely, “I come here to *think*.”

She goes to the firing range to think? Reena knit her brow. *How is that supposed to work?* Then it hit her. This officer, could *she* be...?

“Are you by any chance—”

“Name’s Madison Wynter,” she responded her tone icy cold.

Doesn’t anyone around here wear a regular uniform? Reena asked herself. Like Gripps and Sev, Madison’s wasn’t dressed in standard PCPD attire. Instead, she wore a white button-down shirt with her sleeves rolled up and a pair of tight blue shorts. *So, this was her new partner?*

Madison holstered her gun and picked up a navy blue jacket slung over the stall.

“You’re with the special crimes unit, too?” Reena asked.

“Yeah.” Madison put on the jacket, flipping up strands of her platinum hair that had been pulled down by her collar. “We handle the stuff no one else wants to.”

Reena was more puzzled than ever. *Why would the Chief assign me to the Special Crimes Unit on my very first day? Unless this was some kind of test for new recruits, a sort of trial run, or initiation?*

Madison turned away, offering Reena view of the bold PCPD lettering on the back of her jacket. In seconds, she was already on her way out the door.

“No sweat, I’m ready for action!” Reena said, hoping to sound more self-assured than she really was while chasing after her partner. “So, do you go by Maddie for short?”

“No.”

Reena bit her lip. Madison’s curt reply sent a shiver down her spine. *So much for breaking the ice!*

“By the way, I’m Reena Saf—”

“I know,” Madison countered. “Read your file. Chief sent it ten minutes ago.”

Geez, Reena thought, shoulders slumped in defeat, *she isn’t very friendly at all*. She followed Madison through the exit and into the PCPD’s parking garage. Reena’s eyes lit up at the sight of the sleek jet-black cruisers, all parked in rows, each adorned with a red and blue light bar at the top.

“Oh wow,” Reena yelped. “Are these the new MVX models? I’ve heard about them at the academy, but...”

Madison approached one of the cruisers, but this particular model was different from the others.

“Whoa, this is a Hyper Interceptor!” Reena shouted, unable to keep her excitement in check.

Madison could only watch as the new recruit bounced from one end of the vehicle to the other, like some manic cartoon character. The girl looked underneath the cruiser, peered in through the passenger side window, darted to the car’s rear and examined the exhaust, then finally made it back to the front of the car, resting her hands on the hood.

“Unreal, I heard these have an 814 cc endothermic rotary engine with four electric motors and a turbo nitro charger,” Reena exclaimed, her enthusiasm showed no signs of waning. “But this one doesn’t look standard at all, *everything’s* been customized!”

“Know your cars, huh?” Madison said, opening the driver’s side door and entering the vehicle.

Reena heard the *click* that signaled the passenger door had been unlocked. She entered the cruiser.

“Hopefully you can handle an Interceptor *better* than you do a gun,” Madison remarked dryly.

“Heh, actually, I wasn’t very *good* at firearm training,” Reena admitted, “but I did *great* in the taser course.”

Madison rolled her eyes and hit the ignition button—prompting an electric *chirp* after it scanned and verified her fingerprint signature. “You can’t rely on a taser to save your life in a do-or-die situation.”

“Y-yeah, I guess that’s pretty true,” Reena sheepishly conceded.

Madison’s hands wrapped around the steering wheel, and she floored the accelerator. With a piercing *shriek* of rubber against the pavement, the Hyper Interceptor swerved out of its parking spot, sped across the lot, and up the exit ramp.

“So, um, Madison...” Reena began, hoping to strike up *some* form of amicable conversation—but she paused, clenching the bottom of her seat, holding on tight as Madison’s wild driving jostled her from side to side. “How long have you been with the PCPD?”

“Long *enough* to know that you won’t last through the week,” Madison shot back, not missing a beat. “Seen rooks like you come and go.”

Reena gulped. The day had just started and already it was looking pretty gloomy, regardless of the morning sunlight that streaked through the cruiser's windows as they veered onto the busy city street.

"And don't get any stupid ideas that we'll warm up to each other before then," snapped Madison. "This isn't some idiotic buddy cop movie. This is Pallad City. Eight out of ten rookies don't last their first day."

"Th-they really quit that fast?"

"The smart ones do," Madison replied. "The dumb ones usually go home in a body bag. I've run across your type a million times. Young. Inexperienced. Still have that innocent look on your face. This city can smell that innocence, like a wild beast would its prey. You're fresh meat, nothing more. And this city's carnivorous."

Reena sat quiet, mulling over Madison's biting words. *It can't really be as bad as all that, can it?*

An abrupt *beep* shattered the momentary silence and a monitor embedded in the vehicle's dashboard blinked to life.

"Interceptor Zero-Three," a female officer said, appearing on the screen, "there's been a disturbance reported at HGS Tower. No details at present. Please investigate."

"We're on it," Madison replied, stomping the gas pedal and striking a nearby button. The Hyper Interceptor's sirens wailed.

Chapter Four

“I’m still new in town,” Reena confessed, “what’s HGS Tower?”

“Corporate headquarters of Horizon Global Solutions.” Madison swerved around several vehicles before turning at an intersection. “A megacorp. They specialize in the development of military hardware.”

“A megacorp, huh? That’s impress—”

“*Sonuva—!*” Madison slammed on the breaks. The Hyper Interceptor came skidding to an abrupt stop, just in enough time to avoid colliding into a mob of frenzied pedestrians.

“What’s going on here?” Reena wondered aloud, watching as droves of screaming people fled to the street, none paying any regard to the oncoming traffic. Cars veered sideways, honked, and broke to an immediate halt while the angry motorists shouted curses from their vehicles. Reena turned to her passenger side window, sighting the source of the commotion: a towering structure that reached up into the clear blue sky like some lustrous steel titan. Black smoke belched from the front of the building, carried through the opened automatic doors and across the nearby plaza. Another wave of panic-stricken people escaped the structure and flooded onto the street.

Not far from the building’s entrance was a marble sign engraved with bronze lettering that read, *Horizon Global Solutions*. And, beneath that, more bold text: *The Sun Never Sets*.

Madison’s expression hardened. “Now you’ll see why they call Pallad City Danger Zone One.”

“...Danger Zone One?” Reena was unsure if she wanted to learn just what that ominous moniker meant but, in the pit of her stomach, she had a sinking feeling that it was already too late—she was about to find out.

Madison and Reena entered the blackened cloud, stepping into the lobby of Horizon Global Solutions. Both officers fanned the smoke away from their faces, but it provided little relief. Reena could already feel her eyes begin to sting, and a burning sensation flare up in her nostrils from the noxious odor of melted plaster and scorched metal.

The lobby was a wreck. Smoldering remains of the reception desk lay strewn about. What was left of the waiting area’s lavish furniture had been reduced to pieces of shredded fabric, charred upholstery, and splintered wood. Even the surrounding walls, lined with large scorched craters and riddled with hundreds of holes, hadn’t escaped the devastation.

“Wow,” Reena muttered, awed by the wholesale destruction. “What could’ve happened?” The ground *crunched* under her feet. She looked down, observing the uplifted floor tiles beneath her boots, all shattered into fragments.

“These impacts,” Madison approached the nearest wall, circling the diameter of a hole with her finger, “they were made by 20mm rounds. And, judging by the amount of them, I’d say the work of an autocannon.” She motioned to a still-smoking crater. “Looks like some explosive ordnance as well.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Reena said, her voice betraying a hint of uneasiness. This wasn’t sounding like something two officers could handle alone. What made her more nervous, however, was that Madison appeared unfazed by all of it.

“The PCPD, am I glad to see you!” A woman, dressed in a tattered business suit, emerged from the surrounding smoke. “I’m Fiora Melbourne, head of security division.”

“What’s the situation?” Madison asked, folding her arms.

With a sense of urgency, Fiora pulled out a handkerchief from the breast pocket of her suit and wiped a combination of sweat and dirt from her forehead. “An ex-employee’s stolen one of our prototype power suits!”

“Hold it,” the silver-haired officer kept her steely eyes locked on Fiora, “one suit did *all* this damage?”

“Yes,” Fiora nodded, “he went on a rampage through the tower.” She tapped a button on her chrome wristlet. A soft light discharged from the device, producing a holographic projection of a man’s face. Below the headshot flashed snippets of text relating to the person’s job title, age, eye color, and a wealth of other minuscule details, some surprising for an employer to have.

“That’s the employee you believe is responsible?” Reena chimed in, pushing forward to get a better look at the suspect.

“Name’s Raymond Finkler,” stated Fiora. “He’d been laid off this morning.”

“Looks like he didn’t take the news well,” Madison quipped, taking a glance at what was once a gold plaque emblazoned with the Horizon Global Solution’s logo, now little more than rubble at her feet. “How’d he get his hands on a power suit?”

Fiora deactivated the holo-projection. “Finkler worked in research and development; he must have entered the lab where the suit was housed before we changed the employee access codes.”

“Do you know where he is now?” Reena asked.

“He went down to one of the basement sub-levels,” informed Fiora, a visible anxiousness taking hold of her. “But he took his former supervisor, Gene Stayroff, with him—and Stayroff was the one who laid him off!”

“Great,” Madison groaned.

“No one’s been seriously injured yet,” Fiora continued, “but that suit’s an all-terrain combat model. You’ll need a tactical armored unit to take it down!”

“No time.” Madison turned, already walking away. “I want that suit’s combat and weapon specs.”

“I-I *can’t*!” Fiora exclaimed, more flustered than before. “It’s an experimental unit and that’s classified company information—I can’t disclose *anything* without top-level clearance!”

Stopping in her tracks, Madison shot Fiora an invidious glare. “Typical megacorp bureaucracy.”

“But you heard what she said, Madison,” Reena cautioned, “we don’t stand a chance against that suit without backup.”

Madison met her gaze with absolute indifference. “You coming, rookie? Or do you *quit* already?”

Chapter Five

The sub-level ruins deep beneath HGS Tower had been abandoned long ago. Now, the maze of neglected corridors and crumbling architecture endured only as a testament to Pallad City's past, a time before the infamous Kurtow earthquake two decades ago. Numerous irrigation, sewage, and coolant pipes lined the walls and ceiling, the hollow echo of running water still audible within. Drops of black oily liquid seeped from the old, rusted piping, trickling to the floor in a maddening inharmonious *plop, plop, plop...*

Loose electrical cords and frayed wiring hung overhead, no longer connected to a live power source. Fallen debris and hunks of collapsed metal made any attempt to traverse the sub-level corridor a trying feat—a fact Reena was already discovering. Had Fiora not activated the overhead emergency lamps, the sub-level would've been shrouded in total darkness. Though a number of the lights had burned out years ago, the soft red glow emanating from the remaining ones, at least, provided some form of visual aid.

Reena followed close behind Madison, who seemed to have no trouble navigating around the many obstacles found along the corridor. Reena watched as Madison, almost instinctively, knew when to duck beneath a hanging pipe, or sidestep around a slab of concrete without so much as batting an eye. The young officer, however, wasn't so swift on her feet, having nearly tripped and stumbled over countless obstructions ever since they first entered the sub-level.

Madison brushed her hand against the side of a wall, wiping away a thick layer of dust. Beneath the grime, lettering could just barely be made out.

Reena carefully stepped over a steel girder. "Find anything?"

"This whole sub-level was once part of the original HGS tower," Madison replied, reading the text to herself. "After the Kurtow quake, they rebuilt the new one over the ruins."

"No way!" Reena gasped, now close enough to see what Madison was looking at. Imprinted on the wall was faded writing: *LEVEL 31*

"That's crazy!" Reena uttered in disbelief. "This was really once the thirty-first floor?"

"Shit," cursed Madison, her attention now fixated on the corridor ahead. A new problem had arisen and, even in the dim lighting, it was discernable—the upcoming path forked into four separate routes.

"What's wrong—*oh*," Reena caught on to the immediate dilemma mid-sentence. The sub-level proved to be more of a labyrinth than she could have imagined, and it looked like it was only going to get worst.

Madison advanced on the diverging passages before coming to a complete stop. She was still for a long moment, her head shifting from one path to the next.

I wish I knew what was going on in her head, Reena thought to herself. *Maybe now she'll call in for backup?*

"Finkler won't be hard to find," Madison announced, gesturing to the corridor at the far right. "He went this way."

"But how can you be sure it's *that* one?"

"Being a cop is more than just carrying a gun, rookie," the officer bristled. "You need to be aware of your environment, analyze a crime scene, and evaluate your findings. Only one of these corridors has consistent wall and ceiling damage as if something

scraped against it. A power suit is bulky and cumbersome, especially for someone not accustomed to operating it. Finkler only worked R&D; he's likely using the suit for the first time, so he's bound to be clumsy. He inadvertently left us a trail."

Reena's face lit up, and she clapped her hands together. "Wow, that's awesome, Madison! You're a real detective!"

"Any *decent* officer should be able to do what I just did," Madison objected with a piercing hint of annoyance.

From the corner of her eye, Reena noticed something shifting on the floor. Before she could react, a shadow-clad creature emerged from the darkness and scurried passed her feet. "*Ugh!*" Reena cried, leaping back to distance herself from the large rat that darted between a pair of collapsed rafters and scampered into a hole in the wall. "It's *way* creepy down here!"

Reena's words were lost on Madison, who had already entered the far right corridor and was nearly out of sight.

"Have you ever taken down a power suit before?" Reena called out, hurrying after Madison as fast as she could while avoiding the various impediments scattered in her path.

"When we see action, hang back and stay out of my way," ordered Madison, her focus on a massive steel door at the end of the passageway. "Don't need a dead rook on my hands. Makes filing paperwork a bitch."

"I'm not a *kid*, you know!" Reena said with a frown. "I'm an officer, just like you!" She hoped her voice sounded convincing, but the words seemed weak for the occasion.

Madison continued walking forward, tossing her hand up in a flippant wave. "Yeah, whatever."

Behind Madison, Reena tightened her shoulders and leaned forward, sticking her tongue out at the officer. "*Blehh!*"

"P-please, Raymond," Gene Stayroff pleaded, hands raised in surrender, "don't kill me!" He backed up, tripping over a broken chair leg. He fell on his back with a hard *thud*.

"Begging for your life, little man?" Raymond Finkler cackled with glee. "Funny, just earlier today I was *begging* for my *job!*"

"It doesn't need to end this way," implored Stayroff, crawling to his knees. The VX-II armored power suit towered over him, the domed canopy offering a clear view of Raymond inside, his face contorted with rage.

"This place will make a fitting grave, don't you think, Stayroff?" Raymond swung the power suit's right arm out in a grand sweeping motion, drawing attention to their immediate surroundings.

They were in the gutted husk of what had once been a boardroom—now little more than a ramshackle vestige of decay like the rest of the sub-level.

"I didn't want to fire you," assured Stayroff, his voice trembling. "Our department had budget cuts, it wasn't personal—"

"I was a good worker," Raymond interrupted, his features distorting, overcome with voracious fury. "I never slacked off, I *always* showed up to work on time..."

Stayroff nodded, "I know, believe me, I know—but there was nothing I could do, you have to understand that!"

“Why didn’t you fire Langdon?” Raymond shouted. “He’s been coming in late for the last *month!*” He furiously worked the suit’s controls. The shifting of servos and cranking of motors resonated within the VX-II as it took a violent step forward. The enjoyment of watching his former supervisor shaken with fear was beyond compare.

“Raymond, don’t do this!”

“I worked myself ragged with the long hours,” boasted Raymond, “going above and beyond what was expected of me. And *this* is the thanks I get?”

Stayroff scrambled to his feet, ready to make a break for it, but he underestimated the power suit’s agility. The VX-II lurched in, extending its right arm and seizing Stayroff’s wrist. The mechanical fingers tightened, forcing a pained cry from Stayroff before lifting him off the ground.

“When I submitted the new power suit proposal,” Raymond continued, “you handed it off to the higher-ups, saying it was *yours*. You got all the credit, but did *I* complain? No, not good ol’ Ray.”

Dangling in the air, Stayroff tried to pry the metal fingers from his wrist, but it was no use. The suit held him with a vice-like grip.

“Called my wife this morning,” Raymond hissed, launching the suit’s right Gatling gun arm into a nearby concrete pillar, smashing the edifice into rubble. “Know what she said when I told her I was laid off?”

“Raymond,” cried Stayroff, wincing as the VX-II’s grip tightened, “think about this—think what you’re doing!”

“She told me not to bother coming home, said she always *knew* I was a failure!” Striking a control lever, the power suit spun sideways, hurling Stayroff across the room.

Stayroff howled, landing hard on what was left of a boardroom table. It shattered under his weight, dropping him to the floor. Stayroff’s body ached but, most alarming was the tingling sensation on his forehead. Touching the skin, he quickly pulled his hand back to reveal blood-soaked fingertips.

The VX-II advanced. “Of course, I know my wife’s been cheating on me behind my back, but that’s *another* story.”

Stayroff, disoriented, managed to stagger to his feet. Swaying back and forth, he tried to regain his balance and did—just in time to witness the VX-II’s fist headed his way. He dived out of the way, dodging the attack by sheer luck.

“Can’t say I blame her, though,” Raymond conceded. “It’s not like I’m ever home. You know why, Stayroff? Because I’m always putting in the extra hours *here* to get that promotion you promised me!”

Stayroff propped himself up against a wall. The blood trickled down into his eyes, obscuring his vision.

“I ruined my life for this company!” Raymond aimed the power suit’s weaponized arm at Stayroff. The autocannon’s electric drive kicked in, the Gatling barrel spinning in response. “So much for a little thing called corporate loyalty. Oh well, maybe you did me a favor. After all, I was tired of the job anyway—*dead* tired. Just like *you’ll* be any—”

“Make another move, and I’ll ventilate you!”

Raymond tensed up at the sound of the commanding voice that called out from behind him. He lowered the VX-II’s gun-arm, allowing Stayroff a momentary sigh of relief. Raymond turned around.

Madison trained her Halvok on the perp. “Get out of that suit, Finkler.”

Several feet back, Reena stood ready—her shaky hand preparing to grab the holstered firearm resting at her side.

“*The PCPD?!*” Raymond snarled with unreserved disgust. “Where were you people *last* week, when my car was stolen?”

“Um, M-Madison?” Reena whispered. “Wh-what happens if he *doesn't* get out of the suit?”

Before Madison could answer, panels of armor on the VX-II shifted—each one retracting with a series of *clicks* and *snaps*. Numerous slots had formed along the suit, from the chest all the way down to its legs.

“You picked the *wrong* day to get in my way!” Raymond bellowed, slamming his fist down on a button in the cockpit. “No one threatens Raymond Finkler! Not anymore!”

A barrage of missiles blasted out from the VX-II's newly formed openings, nearly a dozen of them, all corkscrewing towards their targets and leaving scorching smoke trails in their wake.

Reena's feet may as well have been fused to the floor. She was frozen, locked in place. It was as if time had stood still, her brain refused to function, and her body rejected any effort to evade the incoming bombardment of airborne death. The air escaped her lungs and gave way to a sense of hollowness in the hold of her chest. The missiles were almost on her. “*Oh...crap.*”

“You idiot—” Madison shouted, leaping at Reena, “—*MOVE!*” She tackled the rookie to the ground, both rolling under the missile salvo that zigzagged overhead.

The projectiles hit nearby walls, some curved upwards and struck the ceiling. A chain of explosions shook the sub-level and debris crashed to the floor, lifting a suffocating dust cloud into the air.

“If only *all* my problems could be solved that easily,” Raymond chuckled, surveying the area. Though the smoke and fallen rubble partially obscured his view, there were no signs of life. He cocked his head back with satisfaction—*this power felt good*. Now he'd be able to return to his task and settle the score with Stayroff, free of any further interruptions. He maneuvered the VX-II around but, to his surprise, Stayroff was gone. At Raymond's side was a gaping hole in the wall leading to a decrepit hallway, likely where his former supervisor had fled. Raymond smirked, guiding the power suit in that direction. “Don't wanna play anymore, Stayroff? Oh, but we're not finished—not *yet!* The *real* fun's just getting started!”

The VX-II vanished into the darkness beyond the breached wall. Smoke continued rising amid the metal scraps and residual fragments of structure that now entombed what was left of the dilapidated boardroom. An eerie stillness hung over the ravaged area, a brutal tribute to the bipedal war machine's death-dealing firepower.

Chapter Six

Buried beneath a sea of fist-sized pieces of seared concrete, Reena clawed her way up. Reaching the surface, she sucked in a deep, desperate breath of air. Stunned by the devastated wreckage encircling her, she slapped her cheeks. *Yup, I'm still alive!* But her uniform hadn't fared so well. Her navy-blue skirt had been torn to such a heightened degree that a portion of her panties was all but exposed. The top of the uniform didn't escape unscathed either, with a tear that extended from her missing left sleeve to her chest, offering a glimpse of her white bra. *My uniform's ruined!* Reena thought to herself. *And could it have possibly ripped in any worse places?!*

"Uhhh..." Madison's voice was weak but near.

"Madison!" Reena cried out. "Are you alright?!"

"I'll live," she called back. "That damn suit's a walking arsenal."

Reena followed the sound of her partner's voice, "I'm coming!" Pushing through the lingering smoke, she found Madison positioned on her back—her right ankle pinned down by an enormous iron beam.

"Shit," Madison cursed, trying to pull her leg free to no avail. Like Reena, her clothes had been left in tatters and dirt clung to her skin from the explosions. Fortunately, aside from some minor cuts, the injuries were minor—save for the throbbing pain of her trapped leg.

Reena reached under the fallen metal support and, with every ounce of strength she had, pushed upwards in an attempt to lift the obstruction. "Uhhh! It *won't* budge!"

"No use," Madison relented. "Get to the surface and call for backup—have them send in a tactical armored unit. I'm sure those idiots will create an even *bigger* mess of things..."

"But the perp," protested Reena, "someone has to stop him now, or he'll *kill* someone!"

"And what are you gonna do alone, rookie?" Madison barked. "You can *barely* fire your gun!"

Reena pressed a hand to her chest, energized by a newfound resolve. "I know you think I'm a quitter, but I'm not! If there's a chance I can save someone's life, well—" she gave a firm nod to emphasize her words, "—then I *will!*"

"Hold it!" Madison yelled, but it was too late, the young rookie had turned around, already sprinting away into the murky dust cloud.

"Just sit tight, I'll be back soon!" Reena called back, before vanishing from view.

Idiot rookie's gonna go and get herself killed! Madison thought. She tapped the I.DAC on her wrist and spoke into the bracelet's miniature microphone, "HQ, we have a situation. Get an armored unit down here, *now!*"

Gene Stayroff had reached a dead end. His panic-stricken journey through a succession of lengthy corridors hadn't let him to his escape. They led him nowhere. Stayroff, gasping for breath and chest heaving from exhaustion, stared blankly at a wall covered in large industrial piping. There was no place left to run. Even the slim hope of finding a floor grate or loose access duct to crawl through eluded him. He could only backtrack, and backtracking meant certain death. If he couldn't flee, he'd have to fight. And, to do so, Stayroff knew what he needed. He had to get his hands on a weapon,

anything would do. Corroded piping wrapped around the walls at his sides and larger bolted tubes ran along the ceiling overhead.

With option's limited, Stayroff wrapped his hands against a thick, horizontal pipe on the wall and pulled with all his might. Despite a series of agonized *creaks* and the flurry of flaking rust, it strained to break loose from the adjoining pipeline. Stayroff raised a leg, kicking his foot against the wall for extra leverage and then gave another desperate pull. The pipe snapped free, and Stayroff teetered back, surprised by the sudden release.

Stayroff held up his makeshift weapon. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing—and there was no way he wouldn't go down fighting, especially against some lowly grunt from the R&D division.

"Come and get me, you bastard!" Stayroff hollered in defiance. The words escaped his mouth a split-second before the thunderous sound of mechanized footfalls reverberated through the corridor. With each advancing stomp, a swelling awareness of unbridled terror took hold of Stayroff. His confidence wavered and then vanished altogether. Enveloped in a cold sweat, the very thought of fighting for his life had evacuated his consciousness. His body quaked, shaking him with such primal ferocity that the pipe fell from his fingers, *clanging* onto the ground between his feet.

Stayroff dropped to his knees. Fear had relieved himself of his senses and his bladder. Entering a state of catatonia, he could no longer hear the pounding metal crashes of the power suit's feet as it neared, not even when the armored behemoth's shadow swept over him like a dreadful curtain of darkness.

"What a sorry sight you are now, Stayroff!" Raymond roared with delighted laughter.

"R-Raymond, we can still make this right..." Stayroff's speech was garbled, bordering on incoherency. He had taken leave of his wits and only the empty shell of a frightened man remained. "I-I'll give you...your old job back...that's what I'll do..."

"Ha!" The VX-II's immense fist hovered close to Stayroff. "Why, so I can go back to being some little worm under *you*? Screw that! With this suit, for the first time in my life, I'm the one in control! Now, no one can talk *down* to Raymond Finkler!"

Reena hurried down the sub-level corridor as fast as her legs could carry her. Just like before, the power suit's bulky frame had caused a noticeable path of destruction in its wake. Following the damage along the wall, Reena turned a corner, certain that she was getting close. *I hope I'm not too late!*

By accident she brushed up against the wall, the back of her hand coming into contact with a pipe. A surprised *yelp* worked its way up her throat. She was too late to muffle the cry, despite clapping a hand to her mouth. *That pipe's freezing cold!*

Backing up, Reena felt a light tap on the top of her head. Another tap followed, then another. Glancing up, she located the culprit—water was dripping from a loosened ceiling pipe. A drop descended, landing between her lips. "Ick! That's *gross!*" Reena gagged, still tasting the repulsive blend of salt and rust on her tongue.

She could now hear a noise in the distance. She tilted her head, trying to listen. No, it wasn't just a noise, but a *voice!* There was no mistake, it was Finkler's.

"So, what's it going to be?" the voice boomed out from the power suit's speaker system. "I'm open to requests, Stayroff. Do you want me to snap your scrawny neck, or should I stomp you into the ground, like the little snake you are?"

Reena charged down the corridor. With each passing step, the voice grew louder. She reached a wall and pressed her back against it before peeking around the corner. Sure enough, there was Finkler, inside the power suit. He stood over Stayroff, who was still very much alive—though, judging by his soiled clothing and dirt-encrusted skin, he'd seen better days.

I made it in time! Reena thought to herself, relieved. But that relief was quickly replaced with a gnawing sense of trepidation. *What am I thinking? This isn't just crazy—it's suicide!* She believed Madison was insane for wanting to track down the rampaging suit without backup but, now, she'd topped that level of insanity by following after it alone. At least Madison had experience and was skilled with a firearm, but Reena knew her limitations. *You can barely fire your gun!* Her partner's words returned to haunt her. This was her first day on the job, and it was shaping up to be her *last!*

Reena gulped. *Maybe...maybe I made a mistake becoming a—*she stopped, banishing the fleeting uncertainty from her mind. *No, Reena—you can't think like that! Madison pegged you for a quitter, but she's wrong! This is it, you can do this! You're a police officer now!*

She drew in a breath, grasped the Halvok 99's handle, exhaled, and lifted the firearm out of its holster. She fumbled with the weapon for a moment, trying to get a satisfactory grip on it. The last thing she needed was to reenact her embarrassing spectacle at the firing range and have the gun's recoil knock her to the floor.

Reena jumped into action before any second thoughts could inhibit her, spinning around the corner and aiming the Halvok at the power suit's back. "H-hold it right there! You're busted, pal!"

Chapter Seven

Reena aimed her gun at the mech. “The charges are destruction of private property, reckless endangerment, stolen—”

“You PCPD pests don’t know when to let up, do you?” Raymond shrieked, striking the power suit's control gears with crazed ferocity. In response, the VX-II pivoted around to face the young officer, its left arm raised—the cyclical autocannon spinning.

He’s going to shoot! No sooner had the thought entered Reena’s mind than her finger tightened on the Halvok’s trigger. The gun fired. She braced for the recoil. It still succeeded in pushing her back, but she remained on her feet. The bullet struck the power suit, ricocheting off its reinforced armor, not leaving the slightest trace of impact.

A raw burst of adrenaline coursed through Reena. She fired again and again. The recoil intensified and, with every slug that discharged from the barrel, she was shoved further back. By the fifth shot, her arms quivered under the powerful recoil, and she was launched backward, landing hard on the ground. But she didn’t stop—she continued to squeeze the trigger. The Halvok let out a succession of deafening roars, its muzzle giving off the odor of heated metal.

Several of the bullets hit the power suit's leg and chest area, but most slammed into the nearby walls, leaving fist-sized craters upon impact and blasting apart pieces of piping.

Stayroff, on the ground, assumed the fetal position as fragments of concrete and shattered pipes rained down around him.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Reena slid along the floor, the recoil thrusting against her with each sustained decompression of the trigger. The tired, aching muscles in her arms screamed, but she wouldn’t allow herself to stop. Her aim was getting worse. More bullets were now missing the suit.

One bullet collided with the target’s domed canopy, causing Raymond to flinch and throw his hands up in defense. Even though he knew the power suit's entire surface was impervious, the sight of the incoming projectile had jarred him. It was, after all, the first time someone was shooting at him. The gesture had forced him to accidentally bump into a control gear that operated the VX-II’s left arm.

The VX-II’s weaponized arm swung to the side. The autocannon, rotating with intense speed, came alive. Each of the six barrels lit up, and a torrent of 20mm shells tore into the wall next to Reena.

The officer rolled to her side as a portion of the wall exploded into flying shards of metal and chunks of concrete. Debris crashed to the ground, but Reena avoided it by executing another roll. Once clear of danger, she took aim at the power suit and fired her Halvok.

She was way off the mark this time. The round tore into a large oxidized pipe just above the mech. Reena pressed the trigger again.

Click...

And again.

Click...

Reena didn’t even notice that the Halvok’s slide had retracted. Realizing her dire situation, she let the gun drop from her grip. *I’m out of ammo!* Her fingers had gone numb, all sensation pounded away by the weapon’s relentless recoil.

Raymond resumed control of the VX-II's arm, ceasing the Gatling gun's firepower and lowering the mechanical appendage. He observed the officer on the ground, pleased at the terrified look on her face. *Now this—this is real power!* Raymond gleefully told himself. With one power suit his whole life had changed. Last week he was little more than a meek, helpless weakling that served as a doormat for people to flatten under heel, to berate, boss around, and ridicule. But those days were gone. He had become someone that could stand up to his oppressors and strike terror into the hearts of his enemies. *Even the cops cower before me!*

"That's the best you got?" Raymond sneered. But, before he could continue his celebratory gloating, a steady drizzle of dirty water began hitting the top of his suit's canopy.

Reena noticed the water too. It was coming from the pipe directly above the power suit—the one she had shot by accident.

Most of the water was escaping from the hole created by the bullet, but more spurts were now jetting out of the surrounding rivets. The pipe let out a mournful *groan* and a series of bolts lining the rusted surface gave way, bursting one after another. Without warning, the entire tube ruptured open. A heavy downpour fell over the power suit, bathing the mechanized titan in a shower of brown water.

Inside the VX-II, Raymond let loose a wild bout of laughter. "It'll take more than a little water to rain on *my* parade!" He readied the power suit's left arm and took aim at the officer. The autocannon spun once again, preparing to fire.

Reena's heart had climbed into her throat. *This is it, it's over. I'm dead...*

"Any last words before early retirement, cop?" Raymond snorted with demented excitement.

Wait! Reena's eyes widened, homing in on the pool of water around the power suit's feet. *The water from the overhead pipe*, an idea flashed into her mind, *there's still one chance!* It was crazy, but it just *might* work. Behind the mech, Stayroff had pushed himself into the far corner of the corridor. The cowering man had nowhere to run with the suit blocking his only path of escape, but he *was* safely away from the water.

Reena snatched the taser out of her belt pouch, pointed it forward, and squeezed the trigger. A burst of compressed nitrogen blew off the air cartridge's blast doors. Twin probes launched out, zipping across the corridor. The probes, each still connected to the weapon by lengthy insulated wires, hit the water under the power suit's feet. A 50,000-volt electrical charge coursed through the water. Crackles of vibrant blue electricity surged around the suit, dancing up and down its metallic body.

"Wh-what's happening?!" Raymond cried, jerking back. Sparks flew out of the VX-II's control panel. Black smoke filled the canopy, complete with the stench of burning wires and scorched metal. "This isn't fair!" Raymond gagged. "I was winning! I was *winning*, dammit!" An uncontrollable bout of coughing overtook him. His vision blurred. Raymond, certain he'd lose consciousness at any moment, pounded on the button to retract the canopy. It was futile. All of the VX-II's controls had shorted out.

A final rush of electricity had assaulted the suit before the high-voltage currents sputtered to a stop. The VX-II was left standing motionless, smoke rising from every joint and crevice.

Did it work? Reena wondered, dropping to her knees. The taser charge had been spent. If her last-second gamble had failed, there was nothing more she could do.

The VX-II swayed to its side, and then rocked back, and—finally—tipped over, crashing to the ground. Raymond had passed out and was slumped face first against the control console.

“H-He’s down!” Reena cheered in disbelief. “I *actually* did it!

* * *

“**W**hat do you mean you’re *taking* the VX-II?” Fiora asked, distressed.

Madison shrugged and walked away. “We need the power suit as evidence.”

Fiora chased after the officer, shaking her head in stern defiance. “Absolutely not! That’s company property; we’re not letting a valuable asset be—”

“Take it up with my superiors,” Madison replied, not turning to acknowledge the woman. “You megacorp types are all alike, you know that? Always think you’re above the law.” Madison exited HGS Tower, leaving Fiora in the wreckage of the lobby.

Outside, the sun was already on its descent beneath the horizon. A group of officers from the tactical armored unit had Raymond Finkler handcuffed and were escorting him into the back of a police van. Nearby, the VX-II power suit was being dismantled by crime scene investigators.

Reena stood in front of the Hyper Interceptor with a smile on her face. She waved to Madison. “Good to go?”

“Yeah,” Madison answered coldly, opening the driver’s side door. “Nothing more we can do here.”

“Still think I’m a quitter?” Reena asked, entering the vehicle. She offered Madison a playful wink. “You thought I’d run at the first sign of trouble, right?”

Madison climbed into the driver’s seat and pressed the vehicle’s ignition button. “Only your first day, rookie. I’ve got money on you not making the rest of the week.”

Reena frowned. *She really is the ice queen of the PCPD!*

“Still,” Madison relented, looking at Reena from the corner of her eye, “taking down an armored power suit with only a taser—that was quick thinking.”

“You really think so?” Reena’s smile widened. She couldn’t believe her ears. Did the notorious Madison Wynter just praise her, even if she *did* say it in that oh-so-indifferent tone of hers?

“Wasn’t a compliment,” Madison reassured her. “Just making an observation. You do know—that trick with the taser—it couldn’t have worked if that ruptured pipe contained anything other than salt water.”

Reena scratched her head. “Huh?”

“The taser darts wouldn’t have carried an electrical current in fresh water. Only salt water conducts electricity.”

“Oh...”

“You *were* aware of that, right?” Madison asked accusingly.

“Uh, yeah,” Reena replied, a sweat drop forming on the side of her temple, “of *course* I was!” Despite her efforts to sound persuasive, she knew that the most gullible person on that planet wouldn’t have fallen for it.

“Yeah,” Madison muttered, not at all convinced, “that’s what I thought.”

Reena looked out the passenger side window. The setting sun had painted the city in a radiant golden aura. Madison had referred to Pallad City as *Danger Zone One*—

whatever that meant—but now the city looked peaceful, even beautiful. Her first day had been more eventful than she could have ever imagined, but she wouldn't give up. She was an officer with the PCPD now. Her dream had come true. That wasn't something she'd toss away, no matter what.

“Let's get moving.” Madison stepped on the gas pedal. The Hyper Interceptor took off, speeding onto the busy street.

Reena smiled, knowing she'd made the right decision coming to Pallad City. “You got it, partner!”

end_

DANGER ZONE ONE

FILE 2: The Main Event! Enter the Prima Arena?



Chapter One

Reena had arrived at work less than twenty minutes ago and already found herself in the Pallad City Police Department's interrogation room. She was hoping that her second day on the force wouldn't require any more confrontations with stolen power suits.

"This thing chafes my skin," Raymond Finkler grumbled, tugging at the collar of his bright orange jumpsuit. "Don't you people have anything more comfortable to wear?" He leaned back in his chair and gestured to a glass of water on the metal table before him. "And I don't drink water. I'd like some lemonade and—"

"I'm curious," Madison cut in, raising a folder into the air, "stealing that power suit—you come up with that idea yesterday morning when they laid you off? Or was it something you'd been planning for a while now? Maybe you'd think about it from time to time, but never act on it, just waiting for the right incentive to motivate you? Losing your job—did *that* do the trick?"

"I ain't talking until my lawyer gets here," Raymond declared with a smug grin, "so get *bent*, cop."

Madison shrugged, undaunted. "Your lawyer's late. Probably not even coming; must've had better things to do."

Raymond stiffened in his chair and motioned in Reena's direction. "And when's she gonna chime in? Isn't there supposed to be a routine? I thought you needed a good cop and a bad cop for this?"

"No," Madison replied, folding her arms. "This is bad cop, *worst* cop—and I'm *both*."

Reena stood in the corner feeling useless. With a frown, she twiddled her fingers and shifted with unease. This was her first time seeing an actual police interrogation. She had no clue what to say and, with Madison taking charge of the questioning, felt that she'd just get in the way by speaking up.

"That partner of yours, she's a crafty one," said Raymond. "An electrical attack was the suit's only vulnerability. I told those brainless monkeys at HGS to include internal shock-resistant insulation in the VX-II, but the fools wouldn't listen. Said it'd be unnecessary in a real-world combat situation. Boy, were they wrong! First real battlefield test and the suit gets owned by a taser. Just wait till the media gets wind of it. The shareholders will be in a panic—hell, HGS might even lose the military contract!"

Madison opened the folder she'd been holding, thumbing through a few sheets of the electronic paper within. "Your co-workers claimed you started acting strange a few weeks ago. Said you were real irritable, short tempered. That's unusual for you," she paused a moment, her eyes targeting him, "apparently."

"I'll tell you already, talking with those cretins was a waste of your time," Raymond chided.

"One co-worker gave us an interesting statement," Madison continued, reading from a sheet of e-paper," they said—and I'm quoting here, 'Raymond always seemed calm, laid back, and friendly. He was a bit on the shy side and, I think, because of his quiet nature, some people had the tendency to take advantage of him from time to time. It was a surprise when his behavior changed so drastically after our last quarterly review. I didn't know what was wrong, but maybe something at the review had bothered him? He appeared ill last week, often perspiring and behaving in an anxious manner. He'd sit at

his desk, fumbling around with random objects like he was worried or nervous, or something. He didn't look well. He was normally so easygoing too, it was a shock for everyone in the R&D division when he went off on the receptionist one morning and hurled a chair against the wall.' Some interesting reading I've got here, don't you agree, Finkler?"

Raymond gritted his teeth. "My co-workers are a bunch of troglodytes. They're worse than useless, the whole lot of 'em."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Madison asked, closing the folder. She tossed it onto the table in front of Raymond. "It sure got *me* wondering. What turns a quiet worker with no history of issues into a psychopath that appropriates an experimental power suit, smashes his workplace up, and then tries to kill their former supervisor?"

What's Madison trying to get at here? Reena wondered, tipping her head to the side. *Isn't this an open and shut case?* She had heard from the desk sergeant that Madison had been questioning Finkler for the last few hours. It made no sense.

Reena stepped forward. "Um, Madison, can I speak with you?"

"What do you want?" Madison irritated, turned to Reena. She approached her partner, voice low, "You've got an awful sense of timing, know that?"

"I was just thinking—well, kind of wondering, actually—why you're asking him all these questions?" Reena whispered.

"This is an interrogation, rookie. We grill the perpetrators here. Didn't they teach you that at the academy?"

Reena shook her hands defensively. "Oh, I know—it's not the procedure I'm asking about. It's just, well, all the evidence suggests Finkler reached his breaking point and experienced a mental breakdown, right? He took his frustrations out by doing the only thing he felt would do enough damage to his employer: steal the VX-II and go on a rampage. Could there really be any more to it than that?"

Madison squinted. "You think I'm reaching? I'm looking for more than what is actually here?"

"Uh, not *exactly*, but—"

"You *really* think this guy just went off the deep end?"

"Well," Reena hesitated, feeling as though she were being tested, "sure. I mean, doesn't it happen? Like, temporary insanity or something?"

"Yeah, it happens," Madison confirmed. "But it didn't happen *here*."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can read people. There's something else going on, and I think I know what it is. The guy's sane—his actions yesterday were brought on by something else. No one's going to feed me any of that temporary insanity crap with this one."

Something else? Reena pondered. *But what?*

"I need to get back to my job—so just stand here and don't say anything," ordered Madison. She turned back to Raymond.

"Have a good chat?" Raymond sneered. "Are we done with these questions? I'm bored."

"I'm still waiting for an answer," Madison persisted, "and *you'll* be sitting here all day if that's what it takes."

"You wanna know what made me snap?" he shot back, doing little to conceal his growing agitation. "Being surrounded by mediocrity, there's your reason. Stayroff

would've deserved the dirt nap. They *all* did. They thought they were better than me, and each with barely a quarter of a brain packed into their tiny skulls. And Stayroff, that bastard, was making me do triple the work and stealing the credit the whole time, handing my data off as his own to impress the higher ups!"

"Sad story," Madison said indifferently, "my heart's bleeding."

Geez, Reena cringed, thinking to herself, *she doesn't need to be that harsh!*

Madison didn't miss a beat. "When you were hired at HGS a decade ago, they gave you a psychological assessment as part of their standard background check. This test was required for employment there. *Everyone* had to take it, right?"

"Yeah, so what? I passed. I'm not crazy."

"They said you were of sound mind. A little high-stressed, but perfectly rational."

Raymond threw his hands up in the air. "What are you looking for? I told you that scumwad Stayroff was giving me the short end of the stick. And, at home—behind my back—my wife was cheating on me and letting someone else give her the short end of *their* stick—"

"Yeah, yeah..." Madison held up her hand to silence Raymond, "...but none of that *really* set you off."

"Then you're *way* off base, lady," he argued. "Listen, where do you think we are? This is Pallad City, the crime rates are so high here it shows just how ineffective you cops are. Half of you people don't even bother arresting anyone anymore. It's too much work. This is a perfect example, right here! Instead of being out on the streets doing your thing, you're standing here badgering me with questions that go nowhere. Why are you even asking me all this crap? This should be the easiest case you get all week—I got pissed, went out of control, end of story. You caught your criminal, congratulations. Like I said, I reached my limit and took the power suit to get back at those idiots. You don't need a degree in psychology to figure the story out."

"Still not buying it." Madison shook her head. "This morning we got back your blood test analysis. Some peculiar things showed up."

Raymond smirked. "Big surprise. I've got high cholesterol. Sit and spin, doc."

Madison made her way around the table, rested a firm hand on Raymond's shoulder, and leaned in. "You using, Finkler?"

"*Using?*" Raymond tensed. "Using *what?*"

"Don't play stupid."

"Look, I don't know what you're—"

Madison's grip tightened on his shoulder. "You don't want to make this hard, do you?"

"This is ridiculous!" Raymond wiped the accumulating sweat from his forehead. He couldn't help but steal a glance at the officer's cleavage bearing down near his face. His perspiration increased.

"You help me, I help you," Madison said.

"H-how are you gonna help me?" Raymond stammered, reaching for the glass of water on the table. But he was too slow.

Madison had already taken hold of the glass, cocked her arm back and rammed it, full force, into the side of Raymond's head.

"Aaaggh!" Raymond cried, collapsing out of his chair and landing on the ground. Shards of glass clattered around him.

Reena's eyes were enormous with surprise. "*M-Madison?!?*"

"Wh-what are you, *nuts?*" Raymond shuffled onto his back, a trail of blood running down his face. "This is police brutality! This is illegal!"

"Someone going to arrest me?" With her frigid, impassive glare fixed on Raymond, Madison motioned in Reena's direction. "Maybe her? Oh, wait—we're still in Pallad City. Half the cops don't even bother arresting anyone anymore, right?"

"Damn cop, you cut me—I'm *bleeding* here!" Raymond tried to scurry to his feet.

Madison swept her leg forward, kicking the chair. The object went flying, colliding into Raymond. He stumbled backwards, hitting the wall and slumping onto the floor.

"Madison, stop!" Reena protested. "You can't do this!"

"You asked me how I'll help you?" Madison advanced on the perp. "I'll help you by not breaking every bone in your body if you answer my question. *Are. You. Using?*"

Disoriented, he shook his head. "I'm not—"

Madison knelt down, burying her knee down on Raymond's chest and pinning him to the ground. "Just keep one thing in mind," she pointed to the I.DAC communicator on her wrist, "this device analyzes your voice and breathing patterns. It'll tell me if you lie. And, wouldn't you know it—I just *hate* being lied to."

"O-okay, I'll talk," Raymond pleaded. "I've been buying for the last few weeks!"

"What're you taking? Crystalium? Noxx?"

Raymond winced in pain as the officer pressed her knee deeper into him. "I don't know!"

"Now that," Madison squinted, "*that* sounded like a lie."

"I'm not lying," appealed Raymond, "I really *don't* know! I found a dealer—I was under a lot of stress, I needed something to cope! Never did any drugs before, I swear, I just asked for something that would relax me. Something to take the edge off...never knew what he was giving me, but it worked."

"Like a charm," Madison said, sarcastically. "Relaxed you to the point of going berserk, didn't it?"

"I don't know what happened," Raymond admitted. "The drugs, after a while they made me anxious, jumpy. It worked at first when I injected it—"

"You took it by syringe?"

"Yeah, and I'd feel great right after taking it but, the more I used, the effects wouldn't last as long. And this feeling of irritation, of anger—*rage*—would take over after the initial high. But that didn't happen at first..."

"Who's your dealer?" Madison demanded.

"I don't know his name..."

"You had a certain day you'd meet with him? A specific location?"

"Yeah..."

Madison pressed harder against Raymond. "You're going to let us know exactly where we can find him."

"Okay—*okay!* Anything you say!"

* * *

Reena hurried through the station bullpen, sidestepping fellow officers, cubicles, and cluttered desks, to keep up with Madison. “Don’t you think you were a little rough with him?”

“We got what we wanted, didn’t we?” Madison responded. “We know where his dealer will be this afternoon.”

“But you hit him and then—”

“What did you *want* me to do, bake him a cake?” Madison pushed open a door, pausing to give the young rookie a frigid glare. “Maybe then he’d have told the truth, is *that* what you’re thinking?”

“Well...,” Reena hesitated, “...not exactly.”

Madison continued out the door and into a hallway. “Thought so.”

Reena followed close behind her partner, pointing a finger at her I.D.A.C. “You told Finkler that it can tell you when someone lies—I read the operator’s manual, but I didn’t see that feature.”

“Of course not, I made it up.”

“*Really?*” Reena gasped. “Aw, I was hoping they could actually do that.” After a moment of silence, she rushed in front of Madison. Reena had to walk backwards to stay face to face with the officer. “Madison, one thing I still don’t understand...”

Madison sighed. “*Big* surprise.”

“If you found traces of a drug in Raymond’s blood, why even bother questioning him?”

“We *didn’t* find anything in his blood,” revealed Madison, “nothing that would incriminate him, anyway.”

“Hold on, you lied about that *too?*” Reena asked, dumbfounded.

“In the last few months there have been several new strains of narcotics that hit the streets,” Madison explained. “They don’t stay in the blood long; some can’t even be registered at all. They’re designed that way. We didn’t have incontrovertible evidence that Finkler was using.”

Reena perked up. “But *still*, you were positive he was—and it turned out you were right! *Wow!*”

Madison took a forceful step toward, bringing her face close to the excited girl’s own. “Don’t act so impressed, rook. It *wasn’t* difficult. Between witness statements, Finkler’s reported behavior, and a spike in blood pressure reported by the lab analysis, the pattern fit. Any officer that can’t put those simple pieces together shouldn’t be wearing a badge.”

Reena lowered her head and let out a soft, nervous laugh. “You make it sound so easy...” She folded her arms behind her back and rubbed the tip of her boot against the ground.

“Get moving.” Madison marched past Reena. “We’ve got a drug dealer to bust.”

Chapter Two

Shit, Ilfem Baro cursed to himself, *bad move!* The alleyway he'd fled into had led nowhere. For a brief instant, he considered scaling the brick wall that waited before him. It would be a tough climb and, though he was sure he'd be able to make it over, there wasn't a moment to spare. His pursuers were likely catching up. He'd have to stand his ground and—

"End of the line, punk!"

Before Baro could turn, a hand seized his shoulder and spun him around. "Wha—"

"Thought you'd get away?" Madison slammed Baro against the alley wall. Syringes encased in plastic autoinjectors fell from the pockets of his baggy jacket and clattered onto the ground.

Baro shook his head with feverish anxiety. "Those aren't mine! That stuff...it was *planted* on me, I'm an innocent man!"

"You're under arrest, asshole," Madison said, slapping handcuffs on his wrists. "Peddling drugs in Pallad City was a mistake."

"I'm coming—!" Reena ran into the alley and, in her haste, failed to spot a raised sewer grate. Her foot collided into the obstruction. "Aieee!" Flailing, she landed between a dumpster and several overturned garbage cans, crashing into a stack of empty cardboard boxes. Tumbling head over heels, she finally slid to a stop. Her backside scraped against the pavement. "Owwie!"

Madison's palm met her forehead. "Could you possibly be any more careless?"

Still on the ground, Reena realized her position allowed for a clear view up her skirt. She squeezed her legs together, preventing any unwelcome glimpse of underwear. "Eeek!"

"Just collect the evidence," Madison instructed, pointing to the syringes. "If you're *capable* of that."

"You got it!" Reena scrambled to her feet, attempting to catch her breath. "Wow, I could barely keep up with you." She brushed the dirt off her rear and tugged at her shirt, sticky with sweat. "You're incredibly fast!"

"You're just incredibly *slow*." Madison pushed the captured dealer towards the alleyway's entrance.

With an embarrassed half-smile, Reena rubbed the back of her head. "Heh, maybe *that's* why I never made the track team in school..."

"Get that evidence!" Madison shouted.

* * *

A holographic mugshot hovered over the circular projection device resting at the table's center.

Reena recognized the face. It was the drug-peddling perp they'd arrested earlier.

"Name's Ilfem Baro," Chief Hardiman said, pacing the briefing room with hands clasped behind his back. "He's a small-time drug dealer. They caught him a few years ago in Silica when he was attempting to sell some turbo dust to kids. Narco squad busted him."

“That stuff Baro was carrying this afternoon,” Madison straightened in her chair, “it wasn’t turbo dust.”

“That’s right,” Hardiman confirmed, while reaching across the table to pick up one of the syringe’s Baro had been carrying. “This is far worse. Analysis just came in. The injector contains a new designer drug called Afterlife and, while giving users a euphoric high, it’s also an extreme form of steroid derivative. Addicts not only exhibit aggressive tendencies, but some have demonstrated strength inhumanly disproportionate to their body mass.”

Reena leaned forward in her seat. “Is this what Finkler was taking?”

“Unfortunately, it won’t show up in any blood tests, so we can’t know for certain,” Hardiman answered. “Though we didn’t see any signs of abnormal strength in Finkler, it’s more than likely he was using. Gripps, you take it from here.”

Gripps, Reena scoffed to herself, more like Mr. Perv!

Gripps was the only other person in the briefing room. He stood casually with his back reclined against the wall, a toothpick dangling from his lips. “Afterlife’s become a gateway drug for the white collar crowd, marketed towards people who are under high stress and can afford to shell out the cash for a quick escape from the pressures of the corporate world. The mental side-effects of this drug match Finkler’s reported behavior. But, problem is heightened aggression and the ability to bench press a small vehicle aren’t the *only* results of taking Afterlife. Too much of it can do severe, irreparable damage to the brain. Over time, the user develops psychotic hallucinations, many even become homicidal.”

Hardiman held the autoinjector near his jugular. “It’s usually shot direct into the bloodstream via the neck.”

“And, as the Chief said, it’s untraceable in the blood,” Gripps added. “The stuff hasn’t been around long, but it’s getting popular—*fast*.”

Madison folded her arms. “Where’s it coming from? Do we have any leads on a source?”

“I’ve been on this case since we first found out about it, three months ago,” stated Gripps. “All my leads point to a man named Varik Moon. We believe he’s manufacturing Afterlife by the truckload.”

“So, why haven’t you picked him up?” Madison asked pointedly.

The hologram of Baro flickered out, and a new headshot took its place. The image clearly wasn’t from a criminal mugshot. The face of an attractive male in his late-thirties, with a perfect million-dollar smile, floated over the table.

“Can’t touch the bastard.” Gripps jutted his chin in the direction of the hologram. “He has his hands deep in the drug trafficking trade, we know that for certain. But Moon has a smokescreen of legit business dealings that he uses to cover up any and all underworld ties.”

Madison’s upper lip curled in disgust. “Figures.”

“We know he’s manufacturing the drug,” Gripps resumed, “but we don’t know where. We’ve got nothing, no cold hard evidence that would hold up in court to convict him. And any witnesses we have that agree to testify tend to meet with unexpected, fatal, accidents. Moon’s smart, he leaves no loose ends, every angle is always covered. To the public, he’s just your average businessman and an incredibly wealthy one at that.”

“Then how do we get him?” Reena hunched over the table, hanging on the officer’s every word.

Gripps removed the toothpick from his mouth. “We have to get inside his organization and find something tangible to connect him to the drugs—something *more* than circumstantial evidence.”

“All our attempts thus far have failed,” revealed Hardiman. “We’ve been discussing other options.”

“I’ve been working undercover, and I’ve got us an in,” Gripps paused, directing his words at Madison, “but it’s up to you, Wynter.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

“Moon runs an underground fight club called the Prima Arena,” Gripps explained. “It’s women fighters only. Word on the street is that Moon has a thing for strong women, particularly those who win the Prima Arena championship. If they catch his eye, he’s been known to bring them into his inner circle—a perfect avenue to uncover just what we need, direct from within. This might be our chance, our way into Moon’s organization!”

“Hold on a sec,” Reena spoke up, “a fight club like that, it has to be illegal, right? Can’t we just arrest Moon for *that*?”

“It’s not illegal, per se,” Hardiman sighed. “Obviously, it’s not sanctioned. But the whole thing’s a legal gray spot—the fighters aren’t *forced* to fight. And, though a sports commission is supposed to be involved, there’s a mess of loopholes that allow these types of underground fighting exhibitions to exist.”

“Busting him for operating the Prima Arena won’t do much, anyway,” insisted Gripps. “If we were able to make anything stick, and that’s iffy, his lawyers would have Moon cleared of charges within hours. We need to nail him on illegal drug manufacture and trafficking. It’s all or nothing.”

Hardiman looked troubled. “He’s right. We’re against the wall here.”

“The current reigning champ is Apega, the Iron Maiden,” Gripps reported. “I’m sure you can beat her, Wynter. If you do that *and* put on enough of a show to get Moon’s attention, he might bring you deeper into his organization than we *ever* could on the outside.”

A concerned expression shot across Reena’s face. “But won’t Madison have to participate in *numerous* fights just to get a *chance* at taking on the champion?”

“She’s got a point, Gripps,” said Madison. “It’s not like they’re going to let me have a title shot right out the gate.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Gripps responded with a satisfied grin. “I can get you a match with Apega in two days. You don’t have to fight anyone else. Believe me, I’ve been deep undercover—I’ve got the connections. There’s no doubt I can make it happen.”

“This is *your* choice, Wynter,” inserted Hardiman. “As you can imagine, it’s going to be extremely dangerous. I’m personally against it, but I *won’t* stand in your way if you decide to proceed.”

This is insane, Reena thought to herself. Can Madison really win one-on-one against a seasoned pro fighter? Did Gripps and the Chief know something she didn’t? The whole thing seemed like a long shot.

Madison was quiet for a long moment before offering a slight nod. “I’m in. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Three

Night had settled over Pallad City. The metropolis's electric neon glow could be seen from across the lake as Gripps parked his LT-Zero luxury sedan near the dock. A row of ramshackle brick buildings stood along the waterfront, once the property of the esteemed Garland Fishing Company. Over the last decade, the company had switched hands to new owners, ones without an interest in maintaining the fish processing plant or attending to the warehouses upkeep. These owners had found greater financial returns letting their investment fall into ruins, while using the docks for more illicit means. Ships were no longer bringing in fish, but a steady supply of illegal firearms and drugs. It wasn't until last year when the PCPD finally caught wind of the operation and put it to an end. The docks had remained abandoned since then, now serving as the ideal nocturnal meeting spot for some of Pallad City's shadiest underworld deals. And tonight was no exception.

"Nice plush vehicle you've got here, Gripps," Madison said with a derisive leer. "You pick the most expensive one? Always *were* good at wasting taxpayer money."

"Hey, it's not like I own it and I'm *not* taking it out on joyrides—it's part of my cover, babe," Gripps replied defensively. He cut the ignition and turned to Madison in the backseat. "Remember, when the time comes, I'll do all the talking. We clear?"

"Clear."

"Just so you know, the contact we're meeting up with thinks I deal in small time drugs like nu-ecstasy. He also believes I'm a compulsive gambler."

"Unlike you, Gripps, I actually *read* the briefing reports—I know the story." Madison settled her icy gaze on Reena, seated next to her. She raised a purple cloth mask in front of the rookie's face, the material held firm in her tightening fist. "And, for the record, this is the *last* time I ever let a rook pick my outfit."

"Aww, c'mon, I think it looks *great!*" Reena argued. "It's a luchador mask, they're super cool, and wrestlers use them to hide their—"

"This *isn't* a wrestling match!"

"True but, this way, no one will know who you really are," Reena explained with unrestrained excitement. "Say you previously arrested someone who's at this fight club—which is supposedly filled with all kinds of shady people—well, by wearing that mask your identity's perfectly safe! They won't be like," she deepened her voice, "*where have I seen her before. I think she arrested me once—yeah, that's her all right!*" Reena returned to her normal vocal register and gave Madison a thumbs-up, "Now they'll have no idea you're with the PCPD and your cover won't be blown!"

"Sounds smart to me," Gripps agreed. "Plus a fighter with an air of mystique might appeal to Moon even more. This could work in our favor."

"Yeah, that's easy for *you* to say." Madison looked over Reena's black and white checkered shirt with matching miniskirt, "And *you're* not the one who's wearing some stupid mask."

"But it goes great with your outfit, too," Reena said, about to lift up part of Madison's tan trench coat. "Don't you think—?"

"Stop that," Madison hissed, slapping away Reena's hand before the coat could be raised and her attire underneath exposed. "Let's just get this over with. Where's your contact, Gripps? He *will* show up, right?"

"Don't worry," Gripps assured her. "He'll be here."

“What’s that?” Reena asked, pressing her finger against the car window, in the direction of a faint blinking light.

“Right on cue,” Gripps said, hurrying to exit the car. He paused a moment, leaned back inside the vehicle, and whispered, “You two just wait here—and put on that mask, Wynter!”

“Hmph!” Madison pulled the mask over her head.

Gripps slammed the car door shut behind him, straightened his baggy white blazer and awaited the approaching shadow-clad figure.

Nikk Nitro stuffed the micro-flashlight into his pocket and walked towards the vehicle. “Dragging me out here on such short notice, you sure owe me one, man.”

“Noted,” Gripps replied, watching as Nikk emerged from the darkness, the last working overhead light on the dock catching him in its illuminated radius. “Working overtime? You look terrible.”

“Thanks,” Nikk said with weary disdain, his spiky green hair blowing in the cold night air, “just what I came out all this way to hear.” The man had a slouched, tired posture. His eyes looked like they could barely stay open and his face was layered with a noticeable greasy shine. He lit up a cigarette. The flame showcased the thick stubble on his chin. “I’ve been busy, and requests like yours don’t exactly make things any easier for me.”

“We’re good with the arrangement? Everything’s been taken care of?”

“Nah, I’m not sold yet,” Nikk contested, scratching his unshaven jaw. “I’m sticking my neck out here, buddy. Your fighter, she’d better put on a show, or I’ll look like an idiot. I’ve got a sterling reputation as a promoter, I don’t want it tainted. You do realize that most fighters work their way up the ladder *before* having a match with the champ?”

“Well, we’re going to speed up that process with my fighter.” Gripps wrapped his arm around Nikk’s shoulder. “Shouldn’t be a problem for a top dog like you, being the head organizer of the Prima Arena bouts and all, right Nikk? You simply pull a few strings, change around the roster a bit, and get us in that ring tomorrow night. What’s *one* fight, anyway? If my girl flops, it’ll be over before anyone knows it. And you’re getting some cash in your pocket whether she loses or wins.”

Nikk brushed Gripps’s arm away. “I still don’t know, man. I mean, I’ve never even seen her fight before. You bring her with you?”

“She’s here.” Gripps rapped his knuckles on the car’s rear passenger side window. “Let’s go, ladies.”

Reena emerged from the vehicle with Madison close behind, straightening her mask.

Nikk nodded at the disguised woman. “That’s your big fighter, huh? I admit, I like the mask, but let’s see the *whole* show.”

Madison hesitated a moment and then took off her trench coat, revealing a purple bra with black trimming, a matching bikini bottom, knee-high black boots, elbow and knee pads, and studded wristbands.

“*Niiiiice*,” Nikk said, savoring the view. He scanned the masked fighter up and down, his eyes settling on her well-developed breasts. “She’s certainly got the body for it.”

“Got the moves too,” Gripps insisted. “Well, what’s the deal? I’m not offering a peep show here. Are you giving her a shot against Apega?”

“Wait a minute,” Nikk aimed a finger in Reena’s direction, “who’s the kid?”

“She’s her trainer.”

“*That’s* her trainer!” The cigarette almost fell from Nikk’s lips. “Oh, brother!”

Reena clenched her fists at her sides, face turning red, “What’s *that* supposed to mean, buster?!”

“Don’t get all worked up, kid,” Nikk chuckled. “I didn’t mean anything by it.” Nikk pulled Gripps aside and lowered his voice. “Okay, here’s the deal, twenty grand and your fighter’s in.”

“Twenty—?!” Gripps barked, stopping mid-sentence to restrain his anger. “We agreed on fifteen.”

“Hey, if this broad’s as swift in the ring as you say, you’ll be getting a big payout when she beats Apega in the Prima Arena.”

“Fine,” Gripps said, gritting his teeth. He pulled out his netphone, tapped the touchscreen and, in seconds, had accessed the bank funds. “I’m sending the money direct to your account.”

Nikk took a long drag of his cigarette and walked past Madison. “You’re going up against the champion, lady. Hope you’re damn good.”

“Don’t worry,” claimed Gripps, “she’s good.”

“Better be,” Nikk said, vanishing into the night, “or she’ll be *dead*.”

Chapter Four

“It looks just like a wrestling ring!” Reena squealed with delight. “I *love* wrestling!”

“Yeah, except in *this* ring there’s no pre-determined outcome and someone’s likely to get killed,” Madison said, adjusting her mask.

Reena took another peek out the doorway. The stadium seating that encircled the large square ring was filled to capacity by a noisy crowd. Try as she might, Reena couldn’t spot a single empty chair in the entire venue.

“This isn’t the underground fight club I’d expected,” Madison said. Much to her surprise, the place wasn’t overrun with low-life scum, junkies, and back-alley criminals. Though some dregs of society could be sighted all the way in the nosebleeds, the seats closer to the ring were occupied by an entirely different class of people—people with platinum V-Lex brand netwatches that would take Madison a year’s salary to even put a down payment on.

“Hey, you in the sweat suit,” a female voice shouted. “You deaf?”

Madison nudged Reena with her elbow. “You’ve got a fan.”

“Huh?” Startled, Reena turned away from the door and backed up into the backstage hallway where a non-stop bustle of people shuffled through. She glanced around in search of the voice’s origin. “Who—?”

A woman in a blue leotard stepped forward. “You in the red, I’m talking to *you!*”

In the frantic preparation for the fight, Reena had nearly forgotten what she was wearing. She looked down at her red sweat suit and then back up to the woman. “Uh... yeah?”

“Don’t block the doorway, kid,” the woman demanded. “This is the fighter’s entrance.”

“You mean, Apega’s coming through *here*?” Reena asked, taken aback.

The woman folded her arms in defiant response. “Screw Apega, this is *my* entrance.”

“You’re fighting tonight too?” Madison asked.

“Bet your ass I am, sweetheart,” the woman answered, cocking a thumb in her own direction. “Name’s Sister Sade—and I’ll be the one to take that bitch down. So you may as well pack up that mask,” Sade gestured to Madison’s purple attire, “and that stupid get up, and hit the road. By the time I’m done with the Iron Maiden, she’ll be breathing through a tube.”

Before Madison could respond a brilliant explosion of light streaked through the door and into the hallway. The ceiling-mounted lights re-directed their radiant beams to the ring. The audience went wild. Around the stadium multiple large ultra-HD monitors turned on, flashing the words: PRIMA ARENA.

Near the ring, a flamboyantly dressed male announcer sat at a table, gripping his jewel-studded microphone tight in hand. His afro—obviously, a wig—had fiber-optic synthetic hair strands that changed random colors every few seconds. He adjusted his silver-rimmed sunglasses and smiled, exposing a mouthful of gold-plated teeth.

“Here we are again at the Prima Arena!” the announcer bellowed, his charismatic voice carried through the deafening sound system. “This electrifying edition will see not *one*, but *two* red hot vixens compete against our reigning champion, the Iron Maiden herself, the indomitable merciless mistress of mayhem, the carnation of domination... *Apega!*”

The crowd roared in a collective cheer, but even their united chorus was drowned out by a blaring heavy metal tune screeching out from the overhead speakers.

From the opposite side of the stadium, a blistering display of pyrotechnics ignited. Columns of fire rose up from canisters strategically placed between the fighter's entranceway and the ring. Geysers of sparks streaked high above the audience and spectacular blasts of confetti shot upwards, scattering brightly colored tissue paper across the arena.

"And here she is," the announcer continued, "the dread daughter of darkness, the angel of agony, our very own titan of torment!"

The audience directed their attention to the walkway, all eyes gazing upon an upright bronze sarcophagus—a *literal* iron maiden. Its surface was smooth, curving up at the top and forming what appeared to be a woman's pained visage. Hinged clasps that ran along the front of the casket snapped free, and the torture device swung open.

A female emerged, charging down a chaotic path bordered by climbing balls of flame and showering sparks. Her silver cape flapped violently behind her as she reached the center of the stadium. Grabbing hold of the ring's bottom rope with both hands, she propelled herself up and, in a dazzling display of acrobatics, performed a forward flip, clearing the top rope. Her feet landed firm on the canvas mat, and she threw her hands up.

The crowd erupted with a resounding wave of cheers and applause.

"Apega has entered the ring!" the announcer yelled. "Apega is in the ring!"

Apega flung off her cape, exposing a flesh-baring black and red leotard underneath. The outfit had a narrow vertical opening that ran between her breasts all the way down just below her navel. She wore red gloves and matching boots that were hiked up past her knees. Only one of her eyes could be seen—a vibrant green eye that beheld an unwavering confidence—the other concealed beneath strands of dark brown hair which hung past her shoulders. She thrust a finger skyward, and then redirected her aim to a singular glass-encased balcony high above the stadium and, with a smile, nodded.

"Whoa, she looks strong!" Reena said, standing in the hallway with mouth agape.

But Madison's interest had transferred from Apega to the balcony above. "So *that's* where you are, Moon."

Reena caught wind of what her partner was referring to. "Aw, but it's too far away to see who's up there! You really think that's where Moon's watching from?"

"Let's hope so," Madison replied. "Or this will all be for nothing."

Sister Sade shoved past Reena and Madison. "Out of the way, amateurs. You're about to see what a *real* fight looks like."

"Our first challenger to enter the ring of ruin is Sister Sade," the announcer revealed, "an up-and-coming fighter with nearly thirty wins under her belt. Sade's got the skills, but is she ready for the big time?"

Sister Sade approached the ring without the fanfare Apega had received. The crowd's raucous chanting turned to derisive taunts and boos. Sade offered the audience her middle finger before climbing between the ring ropes. Sade swung a flurry of punches into the empty air and then locked sights with Apega. "Kiss this ring bye-bye, honey. You'll be crawling out of it when I'm done with you if you're lucky."

Apega responded with a mocking, over-exaggerated yawn.

"Sister Sade looks ready for action," the announcer remarked, "but will she put the pain-laden moves on the Maiden? Let's get this rumble started!"

The ear-splitting clang of a bell struck, echoing out of every speaker in the stadium.

“Fight!” the announcer yelled.

Sister Sade launched herself at the champion, leaping up with knee bent. The incoming knee caught Apega under the jaw and sent her into a backwards stagger. Sade followed up with a high kick. Her foot connected with success against the side of her opponent’s head.

“The challenger’s starting out strong,” the announcer shouted over the crowd’s booming jeers. “This isn’t good for the Iron Maiden!”

“All talk and no action to back it up, huh?” Sade said, shoulder-checking Apega into the ropes. “How the hell did *you* ever become champion? You’re a friggin’ wimp!”

Apega fell back, arms clinging to ropes to prevent her from dropping to the mat. Her head hung low.

“Look at you, you’re pathetic,” Sade taunted. “At least put up a fight, sweetie—I don’t want it to look like you *threw* the match!” She cocked her arm back, took in a deep breath and hurled a punch at Apega. Only then did she spot the perverse grin lurking on the champion’s lowered face.

With incredible speed, Apega sidestepped the fist, spun around, and planted a powerful kick into Sister Sade’s back.

The announcer leaned forward, bellowing into his microphone, “Whoa, look at these dynamite divas go! Now *that’s* what we’ve come to expect from the champion!”

The audience was on their feet.

Sade cried out in pain, plowing into the ropes chest first, and then rebounding back. She twisted around and, before getting the chance to react, Apega’s hand clasped around her throat.

“Word to the wise, if you’re gonna talk like you’re hot shit, you better have the heat to make a fire,” the champion smirked, her fingers tightening around Sade’s neck. With one arm, she raised the challenger off her feet.

“I-I can’t breath...” Gasping for air, Sister Sade clawed at Apega’s wrist. “*Please—*”

Apega looked disappointed. “You begging already? Oh, baby, we haven’t even *started* yet!” With her free hand, she seized one of Sade’s breasts and squeezed.

“Aaaahhh!” Sade let out a long scream.

“This is my ring, bitch—and when you step into my ring, you belong to *me!*” Apega declared with sadistic glee.

Fighting the pain, Sister Sade mustered up her strength and raised her legs, wrapping them around the champion’s arm that still held an iron-clad grasp on her throat. She tightened her legs and tried to pry the champion’s grip loose.

“What’s that supposed to do,” Apega asked, letting go of Sade’s breast—but not her neck. She slammed the challenger hard against the ground.

“Ughhhh!” Sade’s back hit the mat. Apega crouched over her, hand still wrapped around her jugular, choking the life away.

“It looks like the Iron Maiden’s not even going to give Sister Sade a chance,” the announcer said, a hint of disappointment bleeding through. “This fight’s over before it even began!”

Sister Sade’s well-toned body convulsed. Her eyes widened, mouth gaped open in a wasted effort to capture a final intake of oxygen. Though her vision was blurring, she continued pounding her fists into Apega’s arm, hoping to slacken the champion’s resilient

hold. Sade's muscles weakened and soon her arms flopped to the side, her legs fell limp, and her eyes began to twitch. And, after a moment, even that stopped. Sade's eyes shut. She was motionless.

"Really?" Apega sniffed the air. The Iron Maiden let go of her victim and stood back, observing a puddle that had formed on the mat below Sade's waist. "You actually *pissed* yourself?" she cackled.

"This might set a new record for the champion's fastest knockout," the announcer declared. "And, yet again, a humiliating defeat for another challenger."

Apega spat on Sade and turned away. She walked to the edge of the ring, posturing for the audience by flexing her biceps and raising her arms in victory.

High above the ring, in the glass balcony overseeing the fight, Varik Moon reclined in a plush, velvet red chair. Despite the action occurring in the ring below, Moon was restless. He fumbled with a gold cufflink on his white suit. "How very typical."

Standing nearby, a well-groomed man in his late fifties, wearing a black suit, surveyed Moon's expression. "Are you dissatisfied, sir?"

"Our dear Apega is good—almost *too* good," Moon conceded. "These fights have been getting shorter and shorter every week. Such a shame new, raw talent is so difficult to find."

At Moon's other side stood a woman with fiery crimson hair, dressed in military-issue combat boots, a red plaid miniskirt, and black suspenders that clung to her bare breasts, just barely masking her nipples. "Let *me* back in the ring and I'll give you a show you won't forget."

"There's no question about that, Shivv," Moon agreed. "But you're *far* too valuable for this ring anymore. Your talents are needed at my side, watching my back."

Shivv feigned a smile. "As you wish, Mr. Moon."

"Lapan?"

"Sir?" the older man in the black suit responded.

"There's a second fight tonight, is that correct?"

"That is quite accurate, sir," Lapan verified. "Though I regret to say, I'm not familiar with this next challenger."

"Really? She hasn't fought here before?"

"No, sir, I don't believe so."

Moon steepled his fingers together. "Ah, now I'm intrigued."

Chapter Five

Apega continued pandering to the audience. Their thunderous applause masked the scuffling of Sade's boots against the mat. Only too late Apega realized the threat behind her. Sade swung her arms around the champion's neck and squeezed.

"You're no champ," Sade hissed. "Just a *chump!* And it's about to be lights out for you!"

"Wow," the announcer shouted, "Sister Sade's back on her feet and on the attack! She's got the Maiden in a sleeper hold!"

"Oh, I'm getting sleepy, all right—you're *boring* the hell outta me!" Apega's retaliation was quick and fierce. She blindly reached high behind her back until finding Sade's hair. Grabbing two handfuls of her opponent's mane, she heaved forward, launching Sade upwards and over her head.

Sade lost her grip on Apega and was sent tumbling to the ground. Before she could recover, the Iron Maiden had taken hold of her right ankle and, with inhuman strength, swung her through the air.

"You have no place in this ring," Apega decreed, spinning Sade round and round. "Now, get out!" She let go of Sade's ankle, launching the fighter out of the ring. She sailed over the ropes and crashed to the floor just inches in front of the announcer's table.

"Incredible!" the announcer cheered. "Sade is out of the ring and maybe out for good!"

Sister Sade laid face first on the concrete, her body frozen. It didn't look like she was going to get up anytime soon.

Madison watched from the fighter's entrance as two men ran over to Sade. After a moment of prodding her stationary body, one of the men looked at the audience and gave a thumbs-down signal.

A collective enthusiastic cry boomed throughout the stadium.

"And there you have it, Apega is *still* the reigning queen of the Prima Arena!" the announcer said.

"Apega's a monster!" Reena gasped. "Did you see how she tossed that fighter out of that ring like she was nothing?"

"I have a feeling I know why Apega never loses," Madison whispered into her partner's ear. "She's hopped up on Afterlife. She's way too strong for her physical build."

"That's not very fair," Reena grumbled.

"It's an underground fight club. What do you expect?"

"Too late to back out now," a familiar voice said.

Madison glanced at Nikk Nitro, standing behind her. "Wasn't planning on it."

"You do know that the Iron Maiden hasn't lost her last fifty-three matches, right?" Nikk asked. "Her opponents usually leave the ring crippled, at least the lucky ones do. But *all* leave humiliated. She takes extra pride in that. Honestly, I think she went pretty easy on Sister Sade—must be an off night for her."

"I'll keep that in mind," replied Madison.

"Not a bad idea," Nikk said, strutting off. "Best of luck."

The announcer started up again, invading the speaker system. “Up next is a new face to the Prima Arena, even if we can’t see it! Let’s hear it for the masked beauty known as Tundra, the self-proclaimed ice queen!”

“Tundra?” Madison looked on in disgust. *What idiot picked that name?* she asked herself.

Reena clenched her hands together in excitement. “That was such a great name I came up with, it sounds so cool!”

Madison raised a palm to her face, shaking her head. “Should’ve guessed.”

“C’mon, it’s time for your big debut,” Reena said, pushing her partner down the walkway and toward the ring. “Time to kick some butt!”

“You’re a little *too* excited about this,” Madison barked.

“That’s because I know you’re going to win!” Reena claimed with enthusiasm. However, though she’d never admit it, she wasn’t so sure. Her cheery disposition was only a front intended to boost her partner’s confidence. She didn’t like the idea of Madison participating in the Prima Arena one bit, but the decision wasn’t hers to make. All she could do now was offer her support.

Nearby, the two men who had checked on Sister Sade were carrying her away. As they walked by, Madison could see that Sade was still breathing, however faintly.

The undercover officers arrived at the center of the stadium. Reena climbed up onto the ring’s edge and pulled the ropes apart, allowing Madison easy entry into the so-called ‘ring of ruin.’

The crowd was about as receptive to the new fighter as they had been with Sister Sade. A volley of boos and jeers were directed at the masked challenger.

Madison entered the ring, scratching at her mask. *Damn thing itches like hell*, she thought.

Apega leaned back in the far corner of the ring, resting against the padded turnbuckles. “Well, well—get a look at *you!*”

“Will Tundra put the chill on Apega, or will the Iron Maiden make brisk work of this frosty newcomer?” the announcer asked the crowd with rising fervor.

“You can do it Madi—” Reena stopped herself short, “—I mean Tundra!”

Ignoring her partner, Madison walked to the middle of the ring, never taking an eye off her opponent.

“I just can’t wait to hear your singing voice.” Apega approached, cracking her knuckles. “When the hurt comes your way, you’re going to show everyone just how high you can hit those notes.”

“These voluptuous warriors look ready and willing,” shouted the announcer. “So let’s not keep them waiting any longer!”

A bell rang out across the stadium.

“Fight!”

Got to strike first and strike fast, before she even knows what hit her, Madison told herself. Wasting no time, she rushed at the champion, spun around, and thrust her leg out to execute a perfect roundhouse kick.

“Not bad,” Apega grunted. The challenger’s boot connected hard against the side of her skull. “First blood’s to you.”

Madison pulled her leg back but was too slow. Apega’s hands had already snapped into action, seizing hold of her ankle and, with one swift motion, heaved her to the side.

Before Madison could react, her entire body was pulled into the air. Apega spun her around in a half circle before letting go, sending the masked fighter hurtling across the ring. But Madison readied herself for impact. She landed on the mat, performed a forward roll, and rose to her feet.

She's got the strength of a combat android, Madison thought to herself, charging at Apega. *No screwing around, I need to put her down before she can get a hold of me again.* Madison threw a left punch at her target's head but, at the last second, pulled her fist back, feigning the attack.

"Wha—?" Apega had prepared to intercept the incoming blow but recoiled in surprise when it never arrived. She barely caught a glimpse of her opponent's right hand, positioned low, rising at her.

Madison planted an uppercut beneath the Iron Maiden's jaw, driving her a few steps back.

"Nice one!" Reena cheered from the ringside.

Acting on her brief window of opportunity, Madison let fly a flurry of blows into Apega's midsection. Like a seasoned boxer, she danced around the champion, hammering a continuous chain of strikes into her ribs.

"Unbelievable," called out the announcer. "Tundra's pummeling the champ—just *who* is this new fighter?"

Apega lashed an arm out, but Madison ducked in the nick of time. Still, it was enough to interrupt her offensive.

"Had your fun?" Apega quipped, twisting around. She jerked her neck forward, smashing her forehead into the masked foe's nose.

Madison wobbled to the side. An intense pain flared in her nostrils causing her eyes to water.

Even the audience's applause was drowned out by the announcer's hysterical shouting. "Apega lands a devastating headbutt! The tables have turned!"

"Dropkick, bitch!" The Iron Maiden leapt high, twisting her body midair and shoving both feet into Madison's chest. The powerful strike sent the disguised officer sliding across the mat, stopping just short of the ring's edge.

Reena was frantic. She leaned into the ring as far as she could without entering. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Madison gasped, sitting up and clutching at her chest. "She *really* is a friggin' monster!" Madison hadn't even managed to catch her breath when two arms coiled around her neck and hauled her up.

"You really think some novice upstart can just waltz in here day one and take *me* on?" Apega strengthened her headlock on the masked challenger. "You didn't earn your place in this ring and, for that, I'm gonna have some *extra* fun with you."

She's too damn strong, I have to think of something quick or it'll be all over, Madison warned herself as she scraped at Apega's arms, fighting to wrench the champion's grip loose. It was useless, she could feel her opponent's arms constricting tighter around her neck. The world around her was darkening.

"Feel that, do ya?" taunted Apega. "That's the oxygen being cut off to your brain."

I can't watch! Reena thought, clapping a hand over her eyes.

Madison tensed up, willing herself to overcome the enveloping blackness. She raised her heel and, with all her fury, brought it down on the bridge of Apega's foot. The Iron

Maiden grunted in pain, her grip slackening. It was the opening Madison needed. She slipped out and turned to face the champion. Her legs were shaky, but she marshaled her reserves in an attempt to stay upright. She had to strike *now*.

Hand still covering her face, Reena peeked through her fingers to witness Madison hurl a punch at Apega, knuckles connecting against the fighter's cheek. Elated, Reena threw her hands up, "You've got this! You can beat her!"

The champion shrugged off the blow like it was nothing and lunged for her adversary, locked her arms around Madison's waist.

"Get off me," Madison shouted, trying to push the champion away. She felt Apega's arms begin to squeeze her.

Apega lifted her prisoner off the mat and, with violent enthusiasm, shook from side to side. "I'll tear that mask off, along with the rest of your idiotic costume, before I humiliate you in front of all these people. But first—*first* I think I'll snap your back in two!"

Madison let out a cry of agony. Try as she might, she couldn't fight the pain that racked her ribs and spine. She was being shaken about like a rag doll and, even if she escaped, the toll it was taking on her body was massive.

"This isn't just *any* bear hug," the announcer declared. "This is Ashoka's Hell, one of Apega's sadistic signature moves. Tundra looks to be in trouble now that she's fallen into the torturous embrace of the Iron Maiden!"

"When I'm done with you," threatened Apega, "you'll want to wear a mask for the rest of your life. If you *live*, that is. You *hear* me, slag?"

"Hear *this!*" Madison roared, slapping the palms of her hands against both of Apega's ears.

"You bitch!" the Iron Maiden wailed, letting go of her prey.

Madison's feet met the ground. She was free, but her entire upper body ached, every nerve screaming in agony. She wondered how much longer she'd be able to keep it up before reaching her limit. Unlike Apega, she wasn't riding an Afterlife high.

"It's a rare day when a fighter escapes one of the champion's holds," explained the announcer. "This might be one for the records."

The crowd's incessant ruckus had been gradually dying down. Many spectators now watched in awed silence.

Apega stumbled forward, dropping to one knee. She made a valiant effort to stand but, losing balance, ended back on the mat, slouched over.

"The bell clap worked," Reena called out from the ringside. "You're amazing, Mad—uh, Tundra!"

"Bell clap?" Madison repeated, confused.

Reena motioned to her ears, simulating the act of smacking them. "What you just did to Apega—it's called a bell clap in wrestling. Now go for the knockout!"

Madison observed the downed champion. *The rook's right*, she mused. *That last strike on Apega's ears threw her equilibrium out of whack. It's now or never!*

Apega was still kneeling on the mat when Madison bolted forward, arm raised and preparing a hammer blow.

Only Reena spotted the gleam in the Iron Maiden's eye as Madison advanced. She tried to yell out, but it was too late.



“Gotcha!” Apega laughed, rising up and sidestepping her opponent’s incoming attack. “Now suck it—*hard!*”

“Sonuva—!” Madison braced herself but couldn’t avoid Apega’s outstretched arm speeding toward her face. Positioned horizontally, the appendage caught her in the throat—a perfect clothesline. Madison gagged and found herself plummeting to the ground. She landed hard on her back, unable to stifle a pained cry upon impact. The unexpected attack had left Madison splayed out on the mat, struggling to remain conscious. Her limbs fell limp, and she could only watch as the Iron Maiden towered above.

“Oh my, have I got something *special* for you,” Apega promised, grabbing both of Madison’s ankles. She lifted the masked wrestler’s legs up and spread them apart. “Nice and wide, bitch! You’ll enjoy this, believe me...”

“Madison!” Reena screamed. “C’mon, you need to get outta there! *Move!*”

Clenching her teeth, Madison fought to sit up, but her body wouldn’t respond. Her efforts only resulted in a violent bout of coughing. *Shit*, Madison cursed to herself. *Move, she says? I can barely breathe!*

“Let’s see if you’re a moaner!” Apega shouted, slamming her foot on her opponent’s crotch.

“Aggh!” Madison howled in response.

“The champ’s pulling out *all* the stops tonight,” the announcer declared. “She’s not holding back, not when she uses one of the most punishing moves in her arcane arsenal—the Examen Rigorosum!”

Apega pushed harder against Madison, twisting her foot in the process. “Come on, where’s those sweet little cries? I know you’ve got them in you.”

Madison strained to withhold an agonized yell but, despite her best efforts, couldn’t. She let out a long wail that got an excited response from the audience.

“I think they like it,” Apega said, licking her lips. “Well, they’re going to *love* what I got in store for you next.”

“Fight it, Madison!” Reena demanded, slamming her hands against the outside of the ring. “You’ve got to do something—*anything!*”

“I think your little friend over there’s talking to you,” Apega said, applying more pressure on her opponent. “Maybe, when I’m done with you, I’ll drag her over here and have some fun with her too.”

“Fun’s over for *you*, you iron bitch!” Madison screamed. She could feel a renewed surge of adrenaline coursing through her body. She gritted her teeth and, fighting through the pain, yanked an ankle free from the champion’s grip. She pulled the liberated leg back and, gathering her strength, snapped it forward.

“Why you little—” Apega’s words were halted by Madison’s boot, ramming deep into her stomach. A mouthful of spit escaped from between the Iron Maiden’s lips. She let go of her adversary’s other leg and hunched over, arms cradled around her abdomen.

“Amazing,” the announcer muttered into his microphone, dumbfounded. “This is positively amazing...we’re not watching a fight here, this is an all-out *war!*”

“You did it,” Reena exclaimed, leaping up and down. “I knew you could!”

Madison didn’t hear Reena’s praise. Her mind was racing, trying to decide on her next move. It looked like Apega was already recovering. Throwing caution to the wind, Madison pushed herself to her feet and dived at her target. She barreled against the champion’s legs, knocking her off balance.

Apega fell to the mat, face first. She'd been stunned for a brief instant, but it was all her opponent needed. Before she could move, the masked challenger's knee was digging into the middle of her back.

"You're done!" Madison warned, knitting her fingers under Apega's jaw. She burrowed her knee deeper into the Iron Maiden's back. "Give it up!"

"Never!" Apega said, anger burning in her eyes.

"Don't be an idiot," Madison said, pulling up against Apega's chin. "No matter what you do, you're *not* getting out of this hold!"

"That's what *you* think!" the champion replied, wincing in pain.

"What a startling upset," the announcer decried. "Tundra has now taken control of the ring! What will happen next?"

Several members of the audience began cheering for Tundra. Others shouted Apega's name in response, and soon the crowd was divided into opposing chants for their desired victor.

Elevated above the stadium, Varik Moon watched the fight with great intensity. "This new fighter's proving to be a formidable adversary for Apega."

"I agree, sir." Lapan said. "Quite a match."

"Who arranged for this fighter to appear tonight?"

"I believe it was Mr. Nitro, sir. Nikk Nitro."

Moon smiled. "The man deserves a bonus. This Tundra is a rare find."

Shivv, standing at Moon's side, tried to hide a venomous scowl.

Madison continued pulling on Apega's chin, while sinking her knee further into her enemy's back. "Just give it up already!"

"There's no submitting in this ring, slag!" the Iron Maiden shrieked, rocking to the side and nearly throwing Madison off. "You either walk out of here, or you get *carried* out!" Apega began shaking from side to side with such raw, brute force that her masked rival was now fighting just to maintain hold.

No freaking way, Madison grumbled in silence, *she's going to get loose!* She hung on to Apega with all she had, but her sweaty fingers were slipping from under the champion's jaw. Even her knee had slackened. There was no time to regain her grip—Apega gave one last furious jolt sideways, and Madison was cast off, rolling onto the mat.

Reena tugged at her hair in frustration. *Shoot, Madison almost had her! The Afterlife must've done a real number on Apega's nerves is she's barely feeling any pain after that!*

Madison hadn't even caught her breath yet when she sensed something coming at her. She pivoted, evading Apega's punch. But the champ retaliated with another strike, this one open handed and aimed at the face.

"You lasted longer than I expected," Apega conceded, raking her fingers across Madison's eyes, "but now I'm putting you to bed!"

Blinded, Madison swung a fist out, but it caught empty air.

"To your right!" Reena instructed. "Swing right!"

Madison followed her partner's direction, thrusting an elbow to the side. It made contact and prompted a pained hiss from Apega.

“No more foreplay,” Apega shouted. She bent down at the knees, paused a moment to ready her body, and then launched herself up. Executing a back flip, Apega’s leg swung up, her foot catching Madison under the jaw.

Madison’s vision had just started returning when the powerful blow struck her, propelling her off the ground and slamming her back against the ring ropes. She rebounded forward and landed face first on the mat.

“There you have it,” the announcer spoke up, “the Iron Maiden’s brutal Wheel of Woe! No one’s *ever* walked away from that one before!”

“C’mon, get up!” Reena pounded her hand on the mat. “Get on your feet!” But Madison was motionless. Worse yet, Reena couldn’t even tell if her partner was still breathing.

Chapter Six

Apega, basking in her triumph, stood over Madison's body and planted a foot on the small of her opponent's back. She raised an arm, index, and middle fingers pointed upwards to make a victorious 'V'.

"We all know that pose," the announcer claimed, his enthusiasm crackling out of the stadium's speakers. "It's the sign we've all been waiting for. The empress of the ring is going to unleash her ultimate finisher—it's a fan-favorite—the dreaded Brazen Bull!"

That was all the audience needed to hear. Any cries for Tundra had now washed away in a windswept sea of shouts that favored the Prima Arena's resident champ.

The Brazen Bull? Reena repeated to herself. *I don't like the sound of that, not one bit.*

"Don't fall asleep on us yet." Apega hoisted her masked rival's limp body up. "I want you to be awake for this. I'm going to make it slow and *incredibly* painful, trust me." Her opponent's body tightened in response.

Madison forced her eyes open and, with a fierce yell, launched a karate chop to Apega's throat. Gagging, the Iron Maiden stepped back, a look of horrified surprise on her face. Every muscle in Madison's body fought in rebellion, but she'd come too far to quit now. She had to finish this, even if it meant pushing herself to the breaking point.

"*Yes!*" With renewed excitement, Reena leapt up and down. "Way to go! *Wooahoo!*"

Madison rushed at Apega, leapt high and twisted her body sideways, scissoring her legs around the champ's head. With one swift motion, Madison spun mid-air and brought the Iron Maiden crashing to the mat.

"Here's a match for the history books," the announcer said, held rapt by the unfolding spectacle. "This newcomer's a fighting machine!"

The audience had returned to divided cheers for both fighters, now with invigorated zeal.

Stunned, Apega fumbled on the mat. She tried to get back on her feet, but it was taking longer than expected. The rage boiling within had clouded her mind. The questions tore at her. Why was she losing? She'd taken the Afterlife like she'd always done. She was stronger than her opponent, she knew that for certain. It was inconceivable that she'd be thrown at the mercy of a weaker fighter. "That...that *bitch!*" She tapped int

Enveloped in glistening sweat, Madison ran for the nearest corner of the ring. Breathing heavy and her heart pounding, she fought with everything she had to resist her body from shutting down. Every muscle was racked with pain, every nerve searing and crying out, but she wouldn't let herself give in. Not yet. Reaching the turnbuckle, Madison climbed the ring post.

Apega had recovered enough to rise to her feet. She wasted no time advancing on her enemy. "Get down here you—"

Madison crouched down in her elevated position and, once her target got closer, leapt forward, spiraling in the air so that her body landed horizontally across Apega's torso, forcing them both to the mat.

Apega gasped, landing on her back. She shoved Madison off her and rolled over, struggling to get on her feet again. Before she could react, two arms wrapped around her waist from behind. She was lifted up with a violent burst of her opponent's strength.

“Now it’s *my* turn!” Madison yelled, falling backwards while bridging her back and legs, slamming Apega down to the mat, shoulders first.

Reena held onto the bottom ring rope, using it to push herself up and down in joy. “Wow, a suplex!”

Madison hoisted Apega up and, straining every muscle in her body, managed to turn her adversary upside down. “It’s over!” She dropped into a kneeling position, driving the Iron Maiden head first into the mat.

“Tundra! Tundra! Tundra!” The crowd erupted into a riotous collective of approval. The audience was on their feet, applauding and shouting in favor of the Prima Arena’s newest fighter. The stadium itself shook with tremendous fury.

Apega lay sprawled out on the mat, motionless. Madison nudged the Iron Maiden with her boot, but it drew no response. Crouching down, Madison pressed her fingers against the woman’s neck, checking for a pulse. She was still alive, but that last blow had left her unconscious. It didn’t look like the former champ would be getting up anytime soon.

“We have a new queen of the ring!” the announcer declared. “Tundra’s put the deep freeze on Apega’s fiery reign! That punishing piledriver’s corroded the Iron Maiden’s unmatched victory streak!”

Reena climbed into the ring and hugged Madison. “You beat her—you actually *beat* the champ!”

“Ow,” Madison cried, her already aching body introduced to a fresh jolt of pain by Reena’s tight embrace. “Get off of me, you idiot!”

“It’s pandemonium,” the announcer continued. Even his voice, augmented by the high-tech speaker system, was being drowned out by the audience’s increasing cheers. “Apega has been defeated! Tundra is the new Prima Arena champion!”

Moon leaned back in his cushioned chair, softly clapping his hands together. “I’ve never seen anything quite like that.”

“Apega was past her prime,” Shivv said with disdain. “Her days were numbered.”

With the faint trace of a smile, Moon tilted his head in Shivv’s direction. “Is that your opinion, as a fellow fighter?”

“Handwriting was on the wall,” Shivv answered. “Only a matter of time before some second-rate scrapper knocked her crown off.”

“Now, now—let’s not take anything away from this new fighter,” Moon remarked, further amused by Shivv’s transparent jealousy. “Her victory wasn’t merely due to luck; at least that didn’t seem to be so from up here. What say you, Lapan?”

“Ms. Tundra put on a remarkable show, sir,” the white-suited man replied. “I do believe that the audience enjoyed it thoroughly.”

“As did I,” Moon confessed. “I’d like to meet her, face to face. Have it arranged, will you? You know what to do.”

Lapan bowed. “Consider it done, sir.” And, with that, he headed for the door.

Satisfied, Moon stood up and approached the glass window overlooking his stadium. Behind him, he could sense Shivv’s annoyance as if it were electricity in the air. “Don’t worry, my dear. You’ll always be the true queen of this ring.”

“Thank you, Mr. Moon,” Shivv said, trying her best to sound like she believed him.

Moon kept his back to Shivv, watching Tundra exit the ring. His grin widened.

* * *

Madison plopped down on the bench with a sigh of relief. She relaxed her muscles, welcoming the tranquil silence of the locker room. Near silence anyway—the room’s only other occupant was far from quiet, but it still beat out the deafening clamor of the stadium.

“That was just about the coolest thing I’ve *ever* seen,” Reena said, swinging her fists at an imaginary enemy, each playful punch passing through the vacant air. “You really *were* like a fighting machine!” Reena pressed her face close to Madison’s, looking at her partner in wide-eyed wonder as if she were some bizarre creature from another world. “How’d you manage it, Madison? Any normal person would’ve been laid out, but you kept getting up. No way could I’ve done that!”

“It was too close,” Madison admitted, pushing Reena’s face away. “That match could’ve gone either way. Nearly did.”

“Hopefully, Moon noticed. It’d be terrible if this all turned out to be pointless.”

“Damn right it would,” Madison said, using a towel to wipe the sweat off her body. “But, right now, all I want is a shower—and to take off this stupid mask.” She reached behind her head and began unzipping the mask.

“Ms. Tundra?” a soft voice asked.

“Huh?” Madison stopped, turning to a white-suited man that stood at the locker room’s entrance. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Lapan,” he answered, “Mr. Varik Moon’s personal assistant. Are you familiar with my employer?”

Madison feigned a smile. “Who here isn’t? Hope he liked the fight.”

“He most certainly did,” Lapan said. “In fact, he would very much like to meet you. Tonight is preferable. Delta Plaza in, shall we say, two hours?”

“I’d be honored,” Madison said.

“Excellent, I’ll inform Mr. Moon. And do wear something elegant, preferably *without* the mask.” Lapan shot a discouraging glare at Reena before returning his attention to Madison. “And please, come *alone*.” With that, he turned and exited into the hallway.

“Well, he was right to the point, wasn’t he?” Reena asked, before adding, “Uh, you do know where this Delta Plaza is, right?”

Madison pulled off her mask. “It’s a hotel on Ventura and Third. Real high-class place, costs a small fortune just to order a drink there.”

“A hotel!” Reena looked horrified. “Do you think he’ll try putting the moves on you? If he does, what’ll you do?”

Madison rolled her eyes. “Seriously, *that’s* what you’re concerned about? If my cover’s blown, I’ll have more to worry about than some creep’s wandering hand. Besides, I don’t plan on sticking around long enough to let anything happen.”

“We had a deal!” a voice shouted in the hallway.

That sounded like Apega, Madison thought to herself. She motioned for her partner to check it out. “See what’s up—*quietly*.”

“Gotcha,” Reena replied, slinking over to the exit and pushing her back against the door frame. She cautiously craned her neck out into the hall.

“I need it bad, man,” Apega pleaded, jabbing a finger into Lapan’s chest. “You know what that stuff can do to you if you stop taking it cold-turkey.” Her confident demeanor was gone, every word trembling with anxiety. Even her physique, well-built and imposing in the ring, now appeared battered and slouched.

“Please keep your voice down, Ms. Apega,” Lapan said, calm and expressionless. “You were fully aware of our agreement. No victory, no reward.”

“Don’t do this to me,” Apega begged, trying to keep her speech controlled and low. She dropped to her knees, her hands clinging to Lapan’s wrist. “C’mon, just one shot—just a little. I’ll do anything. I’m losing it here...”

“Too late for that, it seems,” Lapan said. “Perhaps you should have *won* the fight. Your loss cost Mr. Moon quite a bit of money. Be thankful he’s not cross with you. However, Mr. Moon appears to be taking it in stride and, as such, I’d suggest *you* take the opportunity to vacate the premises—promptly and *permanently*.”

“You cold-hearted bastard,” Apega cursed. “Just one more...one more shot of Afterlife. That’s all I want. Moon doesn’t even need to know.”

Lapan jerked his wrist free from the woman’s clutches. “I think not.”

“Damn you,” Apega hissed, slumping to the floor, eyes watering. “You’ll be sorry—you *and* Moon!”

Lapan turned his back to the fallen fighter and proceeded down the hall. “I trust you can see yourself out.”

Reena tiptoed back to the locker room bench where her partner sat.

“So?” Madison whispered.

“It looks like Apega won’t be fighting in the Prima Arena anymore,” informed Reena. “Moon’s assistant just fired her.”

Madison stood up, tossing her mask aside. “We’ve only got two hours before the meetup. Hopefully, Gripps can pull this all together in time—‘cause if this undercover operation goes south, getting ‘fired’ by Moon will be the *least* of my problems.”

Chapter Seven

“Hold still,” Reena ordered, trying to zip up the back of Madison’s red strapless dress. “It’s a tight fit—I guess we should’ve gone with a size larger, huh? Or maybe *two* sizes...” As soon as the words leapt from her tongue, Madison spun around, targeting the young officer with fierce eyes.

“What are you trying to say, rookie?” Madison asked, pulling at the taut chiffon material that hugged her waist. “You’d have to be a walking skeleton to fit into this crap!”

“You got it all wrong,” Reena protested. “I didn’t mean you’re *fat* or anything, it’s just—”

“Fat?!” Madison repeated in surprise.

“You have a really fit body and all, but...” Reena pointed to Madison’s chest, “...it’s your breasts. They’re too *big* for this outfit.” She followed up with a short, embarrassed laugh, before adding, “I kind of misjudged your measurements when I picked out the dress.”

Blushing, Madison turned away. “All right, enough with the stupid dress!” She marched clear across the hotel room, stopped at the door and seized the cold steel knob. “Gripps, get your ass in here!” The instant Madison pulled the door, Gripps tumbled into the room, nearly falling over.

“Leaning against the door and listening this whole time?” Reena asked, frowning. *He really is a perv*, she silently confirmed to herself. “Creep.”

Gripps offered an awkward smile and scratched the back of his head. “Hey, it wasn’t like I was *trying* to sneak a peek through the keyhole or anything.”

“Yeah, sure...” Reena muttered, not believing a word.

“Looking good,” Gripps remarked, motioning to Madison’s dress. “Moon won’t be able to resist.”

Uncomfortable, Madison tugged at the dress, trying to seal the long slit that exposed her bare leg. “This all better be worth it, Gripps.”

“Everything’s gone according to plan so far,” he shrugged.

“Barely,” Madison grumbled. “You weren’t the one in the ring with that psychotic woman. Hell, Gripps—you weren’t even in the stadium.”

“Someone needed to stay behind and prep the next phase of our little operation,” he said. “Don’t worry, babe—you’ll get the majority share of credit for taking down Moon.”

“Credit?” Madison squinted, looking at Gripps with disgust. “Stuff your credit. I’m only doing this to see that drug-running scumbag behind bars.”

“Fair enough.”

“What’s up with this Delta Plaza place?” Reena asked. “Do we know anything about it?”

“It’s a hotel and casino owned by one Halmar Vietta,” Gripps replied. “The place is about as swank and luxurious as they come. We’ve looked into it, but the business appears legit. You can see the place from here.” Gripps directed a finger out the window, aiming at a large skyscraper plastered with garish neon lights that seemed to illuminate the night. The building was close, no more than two city blocks away.

“The bastard’s probably there already,” Madison ventured, “sitting somewhere up in his ivory tower.”

“I’d also bet that he’s got eyes on *this* hotel right now,” Gripps said.

Reena raised an eyebrow. “You really think so?”

“That was the reason I booked this hotel room,” Gripps answered. “Moon’s smart, he’s not likely to invite some mystery woman to meet with him and *not* have one of his lackeys tail her beforehand.”

“So *that’s* why you didn’t want us to go back to police headquarters after the fight,” Reena said, nodding her head with a revelatory zeal. “I get it now, pretty clever!”

Gripps dug into his pocket, pulling out a silver makeup compact and what appeared to be a typical tube of lipstick. “You know what to do with these,” he said, handing them to Madison. “We have two disguised armored units on standby and a mobile communication transport around the corner from Delta Plaza—that’s where I’ll be too. We’ll be in contact with you the entire time. But if things get hairy in there, you pull out. No cowboy stuff. Got it, Wynter?”

“You’re starting to sound like the Chief,” Madison said flatly.

“I’m not kidding,” Gripps warned.

Madison shook her head. “Still say I should be going in with a wire.”

“No way,” Gripps said. “Too risky. Just try to search for a computer or netphone—any device to insert our data encrypter. He may even have physical documents locked away, some people are afraid to digitize valuable information in fear of getting hacked. But, if all else fails, use the small micro transceivers we gave you and bug the place, then get yourself the hell out of there.”

“You’re not talking to some wet behind the ears rook,” Madison snapped, stuffing the lipstick and makeup compact into her purse. “I know the deal. Now, if we’re all set, let’s get on with it.”

* * *

“**H**ere it goes,” Madison whispered under her breath, entering through the automated sliding glass doors. The Delta Plaza lobby was an immaculate display of marble columns, black leather sofas, and patrons in expensive looking attire. The walls were lined with spiraling golden trim and decorative baskets of artificial plants. A massive diamond-encrusted chandelier hung from the ceiling, sparkling with a luxuriant gleam that made Madison squint. The centerpiece of the lobby was a large water fountain depicting an emerald green dragon. Its body was coiled around itself, mouth open to allow a steady flow of water to stream out. Most striking were its ruby red eyes, made from what appeared to be *actual* rubies.

The faint sound of slot machines could be heard coming from some other unseen area of the plaza, but Madison’s interest had transferred to the polished wood reception desk nearby. A young blonde woman behind the desk nodded as she approached.

“Good evening, ma’am,” the receptionist began with a smile less believable than a pleasure-model android, “how may I help you?”

“I’m here to meet Varik Moon,” Madison answered. “He’s expecting me.”

“Ms. Tundra,” a familiar voice intruded, before adding, “I presume?”

Madison, trying her best to appear both impressed and flustered by her surroundings, turned to Lapan. This was one of the many reasons she hated undercover work—the

acting. “Oh, Lapan, it’s you!” She motioned to her face. “I was worried you, or Mr. Moon, wouldn’t recognize me without the mask.”

“Few people come here asking for Mr. Moon directly,” Lapan confided, signaling for Madison to follow him. “So good of you to come, I’m sure Mr. Moon will be delighted. Have you ever been to Delta Plaza before?”

“Never, sorry to say. I have a feeling it can get a touch,” she paused, “*expensive* here.”

“It undoubtedly can. Any interest in the casinos?”

“I’m not much of a gambler.” Madison followed Lapan out of the lobby and to an adjoining hallway. The man stopped short of an elevator and pushed his thumb into a button affixed to the wall.

“A fighter who doesn’t gamble?” he asked with an inquisitive tilt of his head. “Very interesting. But is combat in the ring itself, not a gamble? Can anyone truly be so sure of victory in such an unpredictable arena? One is never certain what their opponent can do, am I right?”

“Sounds like wise words from someone who had a little experience in the ring himself.”

“Ah, you flatter me, Ms. Tundra. In my younger years I dabbled, but now I’m merely a spectator. Besides, I fear I may be the improper gender to enter our Prima Arena.”

The elevator door opened but, before Madison could take a step forward, a woman emerged.

“Hold it, Lapan,” Shivv said coldly, “I’ll escort her up.”

“That will hardly be necessary, Ms. Shivv,” the white-suited man replied, a tinge of annoyance creeping into his well-articulated words. “Instead, perhaps you can check on ___”

A soft chime emitted from Lapan’s jacket pocket. He reached in and pulled out a netphone. Upon observing the device’s ultra-LED screen, his reserved demeanor changed, overtaken by a newfound uneasiness.

“Something wrong?” Madison asked.

“This appears to be a most pressing call,” Lapan answered. “Ms. Shivv, if you *could* escort our guest up, I would be in your debt. It appears I may be detained for a few minutes.” And, with that, Lapan was already marching down the hall, speaking quietly into the netphone.

Shivv ushered Madison into the elevator and pressed the button for the thirty-ninth floor. “What kind of stupid name’s Tundra?”

Yeah, that’s what I said, Madison thought to herself. “Speaking of names, I didn’t catch yours?”

“Didn’t throw it.”

The elevator door closed and they began ascending.

“Nice to see Mr. Moon has such *friendly* associates,” Madison said, not bothering to restrain her sarcasm.

“Listen, lady,” Shivv replied defensively, “you’re just some piece of ass I’m serving up to the boss, don’t go getting full of yourself after knocking some washed up has-been out of the ring.”

Madison pointed at Shivv, tracing the outline of the woman's risqué, skin-baring skirt and adjoining suspenders with her finger. "And what are you, the window dressing?"

Shivv's lip curled into a snarl. "Before Apega, I was the champion, and I ended *my* reign undefeated. That's a title I *still* hold today, bitch. Mr. Moon will get tired of you, just like all the others. And when you lose in that ring, you'll be tossed out with the rest of the trash, no different from Apega."

The elevator reached its destination and the door opened. Shivv didn't wait around.

"Good talk," Madison muttered. "Good talk." She followed the woman into a hallway, where two men dressed in suits and black sunglasses waited. *Can it get any more cliché*, Madison asked herself. She knew what came next.

"Just business," one of the men said, patting down Madison's legs, while the other checked her upper body, making sure to get a firm, very deliberate, handful of her breasts in the process. Madison winced and bit her lip. It took everything she had not to floor the bastard.

Shivv snatched the purse from Madison's hand and opened it up, rummaging through the contents. "Should've brought protection, Moon doesn't keep any," she snickered. Satisfied with her findings, or lack thereof, she thrust the purse back at Madison.

Son of a—! Madison felt a rogue hand crawl its way up her dress, a set of fingers working their way dangerously close to her panties. "You people sure are thorough, aren't you?" she hissed.

"Apologies," a man said, exiting from the room at the far end of the hall. "My men tend to get a little...overzealous, shall we say?"

Madison recognized him instantly. It was Varik Moon. Both the men frisking her had already stepped back the instant they heard his voice.

"She's clean," one said.

"Clean as they get," Shivv added, before including, "at least without a blood test."

Moon laughed. "Please don't mind Shivv here, she has a unique sense of humor." He pushed open the door at the hallway's end. "Come, I've been anxiously waiting to meet you, preferably in a more intimate setting."

"Of course," Madison replied, advancing through the doorway. Moon followed, closing the door behind them. She turned, catching one last glimpse of Shivv's fiery gaze as the door shut.

"I hope the suite's to your liking," Moon said. "I've made this place something of a second home as of late."

Madison was taken aback by the sheer size of the luxury suite. The modest apartment she rented on Terra Avenue may as well have been a hovel in comparison. "Classy place."

"I should say so," Moon grinned. "I own it."

"You bought the room?"

"The room?" Moon chuckled. "I own the *whole* building."

He owns Delta Plaza? Madison asked herself, surprised by the revelation. It was typical of Grippls to miss pertinent information on a case, but this was a major oversight. *How could that idiot not have dug deep enough to find this out?*

"Dare I say," Moon touched her cheek, almost affectionately, "you're even more beautiful *without* the mask."

“You’re too kind,” Madison responded, drier than she would have liked. Keeping up this bogus façade was all but maddening.

Moon caressed Madison’s bare shoulder and moved behind her. “What a perfect physique you have. Such a strong body, it’s no wonder you bested Apega in my arena.”

“She was a tough opponent.”

“Yes, she *was* one of the best.” Moon’s fingers ran down Madison’s back, brushing against the crimson-colored material before working their way back up to her dress’s zipper. “Red just so happens to be my favorite color. But it doesn’t quite suit you.”

“Oh?” Madison replied. *Yeah, well I hate the color...though not nearly as much as I hate being touched by a sick scumbag like you.* Madison tried to keep her thoughts in check. She had to remain focused. And, moreover, she still had to decide how far she’d let Moon go before taking action. There was little doubt that he had something incriminating hidden in Delta Plaza, especially if it was his so-called ‘second home.’ *There could even be some data in this very room capable of linking his criminal ties,* Madison told herself. If that were the case, she’d be determined to find it. Rendering him unconscious wouldn’t be too difficult if it came to that.

“Personally, on you I find all colors to be rather vulgar,” Moon said, unzipping the dress in a slow, methodical fashion. “The same goes for clothes. A body like yours should be laid bare, its beauty displayed like a sculpture, so that it may be admired by those who can appreciate such magnificence.”

Madison tightened jaw. The zipper was halfway down her back and sinking. “What about Shivv?”

“Shivv?” Moon repeated, confused. He paused, the zipper stopping its descent. “What about her?”

“She seemed uneasy about you spending time with another woman. I got the impression that—”

“Shivv’s my personal bodyguard, nothing more. An excellent employee but she has a tendency to get a bit *too* involved in my personal affairs.” His fingers resumed their efforts to open her dress.

Madison had no intention of letting it go any further. She took in a deep breath, tightened her hands into fists and prepared to spin around. One well-placed blow to the—

A loud knocking came from the closed door. Once again, Moon stopped. “What now?” he muttered. “Excuse me for a moment.”

The undercover officer watched as Moon advanced towards the door and, opening it ever so slightly, stuck his head into the hallway. She strained her ears to listen, but couldn’t pick up what Moon was saying, save for incomprehensible whispers. However, she heard a familiar voice respond to his. It was Lapan. Something was going on.

Moon turned to Madison, his face gravely serious. “I apologize, but this will only take a few minutes. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Madison said with the most sincere smile she could muster. This was the break she’d been waiting for—and it was almost too good to be true. Moon had left the room, the door shutting behind him. As soon as he was gone, Madison cleared the length of the room, opening up the cabinet drawer near the bed. It was empty. She dug into her purse and pulled out her makeup compact. Flipping it open, she struck the tan-colored center where the face powder should have been. Instead, her finger made contact with a square-shaped button, and a soft, nearly inaudible *beep* followed. The mirror, or

what *appeared* to be a mirror, in the top half of the compact blinked, instantly replaced by a digital screen with small flickering text: *Area Secure*. The room wasn't under camera surveillance by any of Moon's cronies. Madison took a sigh of relief. It was time to begin phase two. She held up the compact, running her thumb across the button in a circular motion. New text flashed on the screen. *Scanning...*

Madison had used devices like these before. Many times, in fact, as far back as her days with Death Widow, the private military contractor she'd been employed with prior to joining the PCPD. She hoped that it would prove as useful now as similar gadgets had proven in the past.

The modified compact continued its thorough scan for other electronics in the suite. It was taking longer than Madison expected. A grim thought ran through her mind. Maybe Moon *didn't* keep any valuable data stored here. Or Gripps might've been on to something when he suggested Moon may only keep paper documents on hand, for fear of being hacked. If that were the case, paperwork could be hidden anywhere, and she didn't have the time to ransack the room in search of it. Madison prepared herself for the worst case scenario. If she couldn't find anything, she'd plant the micro transmitters in the room as planned. Either way, she'd make sure that this undercover business wouldn't be a wasted effort.

"How bad is it?" Moon asked, trying to keep his voice at a whisper. He didn't want to hear the answer.

Lapan leaned in closer to his employer. Moon may have owned the building, and the hallway was empty, save for two burly bodyguards, but it was always best to err on the side of caution when discussing business. "There were unforeseen complications with the last batch."

Moon ran his fingers through his hair and spun around, nearly colliding into the decorative potted plant that rested in the corner of the hallway. "This is not what I want to hear, Lapan."

"I know, sir."

"What are we looking at here? Give me numbers."

"Six cases are carrying the bad batch. In profit, I estimate over a million lost—"

Moon had heard enough. "What if we distribute them anyway?"

"It's lethal, even in small doses. We'll have clients overdosing on amounts that would have previously been insufficient to give them a high."

"I see."

"I felt it should be brought to your attention, sir," Lapan declared, his apprehension palpable. "I can handle this if you're in the middle of something."

Moon threw a flippant hand gesture in the direction of his suite door. "She can wait, *this* is more important." He turned to the two men dressed in suits and sunglasses. "Follow us."

From behind the corner of the hallway, out of sight, a janitor stood, back against the wall. The baggy gray uniform obscured the outline of the janitor's body, and the protruding visor of their matching gray hat hung low, casting a shadow over any distinguishing facial features. The janitor sidestepped the bucket and dirty mop at their feet, and watched as Moon, Lapan, and the two suited men entered the elevator.

As soon as the elevator door shut behind the entourage, Reena pushed the brim of her janitor's hat up and took in a long sigh of relief. Her disguise had worked perfectly. She'd been able to move through the entire building without opposition and succeeded in hiding a microphone within the potted plant outside of Moon's room before his men, or Madison had arrived. Reena removed her earbuds, congratulating herself on a job well done. She'd heard every word Moon and Lapan had said.

"Gripps, you there?" Reena asked, raising her hand to bring the high-tech I.DAC wristlet near her mouth.

A voice crackled out of the bracelet's speaker. "I'm here. What's the status?"

"Moon just went into an elevator with some of his flunkies. It looks like they're heading downstairs, but no idea what floor they're stopping off at."

"I'll keep an eye out front, just in case he leaves the building."

"I doubt he will," reported Reena. "He left Madison in his suite. I've got a feeling he wasn't going far."

"Meaning that wherever he's manufacturing the drugs is likely inside the plaza," Gripps ventured. "You shouldn't stick around that floor too long—it'll raise suspicion if someone sees you."

"Gotcha," Reena replied, tapping a button on the bracelet to end the communication. She pushed her mop and bucket along, advancing toward the hallway's exit. She'd take the stairs to one of the lower floors and, if lucky enough, could scout out Moon's exact location. So far, all was going according to plan. Reena desperately hoped Madison had the same good fortune.

The disguised officer opened the exit door and left the hallway, never seeing the figure lurking around the corner, watching her with deadly intent.

Chapter Eight

Madison's scanner had been right. She lifted the gold-framed painting off the wall, revealing a sealed panel embedded into the plaster. There was a numeric keypad affixed to the panel's side. That could be a problem. She tapped a button on her modified compact and held it next to the keypad. Madison waited, hoping she'd be able to hack the lock.

Beep!

The panel slid open, showcasing a secret compartment inside the wall. Only one item rested within the dark crevice—a netphone.

Madison pulled out her lipstick and opened the tube to expose the tip of a USB-C connector, in place of where the cosmetic product's applicator would have resided. Snatching up the netphone, she plugged the USB-C plug into the phone's internal memory port. With the flick of a button on the lipstick tube, she proceeded to transfer all of the netphone's information directly to the PCPD's central computer.

"Oh, my—what do we have here?"

Madison recognized the voice and turned.

"I don't know what you're up to with that netphone, but please *don't* tell me," Shivv said, a twisted grin forming on her face, "not yet, at least." Shivv withdrew a plastic-encased syringe from her skirt pocket and raised it to her neck. She pushed the needle's tip against her skin and tapped a button on the autoinjector. A dose of Afterlife introduced itself into her jugular vein. "I wanna beat the living shit out of you first."

Madison's body was still sore from her fight with Apega. Taking on an opponent pumped up on Afterlife already proved to be no easy feat, and now it was looking like she'd have to give a repeat performance. The officer braced herself for what was to come.

"I spotted your little friend sneaking around the hallway." Shivv's eyes dilated, and her body stiffened. The drug was taking effect. "It got me thinking. You might be a cop—but, then again, I've *never* seen any pig fight like you did back in the Arena. Or maybe you're with one of Moon's rivals, looking to squeeze in on his business?" Shivv shrugged. "Don't matter either way. In a couple seconds, all you'll be is a memory, once I grind your bones into dust!"

Madison swept her leg out, kicking a nearby coffee table. The wooden piece of furniture spun into the air, headed for Shivv's head.

"Nice try!" Shivv rammed her elbow into the incoming table, shattering it into a flying tempest of splinters. She lunged forward, swinging her arm out.

Madison managed to sidestep the blow, watching in awe as Shivv's fist made contact with the nearby wall, smashing through the plaster and creating a large impact crater.

"Moon finished with you awfully fast, didn't he?" Shivv laughed. "Hot shit in the ring, but you must be *lousy* in bed." She threw herself at Madison, resulting in both women crashing to the floor and rolling into a sofa.

"Moon told me he was going to take the dog out," Madison choked out while trying to keep Shivv's fingers from wrapping around her throat. "But I see the bitch's still here!"

Shivv's upper lip receded back into a feral snarl. "Oh, I'll make you pay for that one..." She pushed herself on top of her opponent, cocked her arm back, and let a mighty punch descend. "I'll flatten your damned skull!"

Madison clamped her hands around Shivv's wrist, stopping the fist just before it reached her face. She spun sideways, casting Shivv off her body. The drug-fueled fighter slid along the floor, giving Madison enough time to leap to her feet.

Shivv rolled over, onto all fours, like an animal preparing to attack. "I'm going to tear you to pieces," she vowed, pouncing at her target.

Madison dropped down, allowing Shivv to sail harmlessly overhead. Moon's bodyguard collided into the wall, demolishing a shelf filled with expensive looking décor. The undercover officer watched as a hefty bronze bust, likely modeled after some mythological goddess, fell from the shelf, hitting the floor with a loud *crash*.

"Think you're real slick, don't you?" Shivv had already recovered and began turning around to resume her attack. "Only thing *slick* around here will be your blood when I—"

"Light's out!" Madison lifted the heavy bust off the floor and swung it upwards, catching Shivv under the jaw. The force of the blow lifted the fighter off her feet, hurtling her back against the wall. After taking a shaky step forward, she tipped to the side, collapsing.

Madison tossed the statue beside the unconscious woman and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Between the Prima Arena bout and going toe-to-toe with Shivv, the officer had more than enough excitement for one night. She located her purse and pulled out the compact. It was time to contact the rookie and wrap this case up.

* * *

Trekking back down to the lobby of Delta Plaza, Madison entered the women's public restroom. It appeared empty, just as she'd hoped it would be. Madison approached the sink and leaned, looking into the mirror. "I hear it's supposed to rain tomorrow," she said in a low voice. One of the toilet stalls behind her opened. Reena emerged, wearing her janitorial outfit and carting around a bucket and mop.

"Sheesh," Reena exhaled, "am I glad it's you." Prior to their undercover operation, the two officers had agreed on a specific location and phrase for when they were going to meet up. So far, that part of the mission had worked like a charm, but Reena still had her doubts about how the rest of the case was going to play out. "How'd it go?"

"I copied all of the data on Moon's netphone," informed Madison. "The files were likely encrypted, but Cyber Division can bypass those later."

"Moon went downstairs," Reena explained. "I heard him and his assistant talking about the drugs. They messed up the last batch, and it looks like they're manufacturing the Afterlife somewhere in this building."

"Or *beneath* it," Madison ventured. "It's the only place that makes any logical sense. Worth a look, at least..."

"But this lobby was the last floor the elevator would go."

"Yeah, the elevator—but not the stairs." Madison froze for a moment before looking the rookie over with intense scrutiny. "You *did* bring them along, right?"

"Them?" At first, Reena wasn't sure what Madison was talking about, and then it hit her. *Of course—the weapons!* "Oh, yeah, they're right here." She squatted down and slid open a secret compartment at the bottom of her mop bucket, revealing two Ventok 33 handguns nestled tightly inside. The firearms were much smaller than the Halvoks, but the Ventoks were the only guns Gripps had been able to fit into the modified bucket.

“Ventoks?” Madison sneered, taking one of the firearms Reena handed to her. “If it comes down to us having to use these, make your shots count, rookie. These things have minimal stopping power.”

“Well, hopefully, we won’t need to use them at all,” the young officer said, tossing off her janitor’s cap.

“Don’t count on that,” advised Madison. She made her way to the bathroom door and poked her head out with the utmost caution. “Looks clear. I spotted a staircase exit around the corner. Come on.” As soon as the last word left her mouth, she vanished out the door.

“Wait for me,” Reena pleaded in a hushed, but urgent, voice. She followed after her partner, the Ventok 33 held firmly in her hand.

Chapter Nine

The staircase had led Madison and Reena to the lowest sublevel of Delta Plaza. A rusted metal door waited ahead. Leading the way, Madison pressed her hand against the door and paused. She raised her Ventok 33 in cautious preparation. She pushed the door open, just enough to get an eyeful of what resided beyond.

“See anything?” Reena asked impatiently, trying to restrain the rush of excitement and nervousness welling up inside her.

“We hit the jackpot,” Madison stated, turning to cast a stern glance at her partner. “Just stay low, keep quiet, and remain close—copy that?”

Reena nodded, offering a mock salute.

Madison sighed and continued through the door, crouching down to remain out of sight. She shuffled behind a brick pillar not more than several feet away, pressing her back against it for cover.

Reena mimicked her partner’s movements, arriving at the pillar. She took a peek around the corner, her mouth hanging open in utter disbelief. The room was large, congested with lengthy rectangular tables, each one supporting an intricate assortment of chemistry sets—not dissimilar to the ones she remembered from high school science class. Bunsen burners were alight beneath glass containers filled with bubbling blue fluid. Men in hazmat suits attended the equipment with feverish diligence. Reena’s attention settled on one man, who had just finished pouring some of the liquid into a syringe before placing it into a plastic autoinjector. Her partner had been right. Varik Moon was manufacturing Afterlife underneath Delta Plaza and, by the looks of it, he was running a full-on factory.

“Got you now,” Madison whispered, spotting Moon and Lapan at the other end of the room. She could tell by Moon’s wild hand gestures that he was troubled about something. *Must be that ruined batch the rookie overheard him talking about.*

“What are we going to do now?” Reena asked softly.

Madison silently answered by removing a miniature wireless speaker from her makeup compact, and inserting it into her ear. She raised the compact to her lips and spoke in a low voice. “Gripps, you there?”

The speaker came alive. “I’m here, read you loud and clear.”

“Move in. We’ve got everything we need to nail Moon. We’re in the building’s basement. He’s cooking up his drugs as we speak—” Madison stopped short, looking to the other side of the room, “—I see a loading bay entrance on the south side. It probably leads to the street. Come in that way.”

“What are we looking at here? Anyone armed?”

“Expect resistance. Send in the full armored unit.”

“Okay, our ETA is five minutes; don’t do anything crazy before we get—”

Madison cut the communication. “Shit.” Across the room, she could see Moon and Lapan heading for an exit.

Reena scratched her head. “What’s wrong?”

“No way,” Madison muttered, watching Moon reach for the door handle. “After all this, I’m not going to let Moon slip out of here.”

“Didn’t you just talk to Gripps? Shouldn’t we wait for his backup?”

“Screw backup, I’m bringing this bastard in now. I want him dead to rights, arrested in his own drug lab.” With that Madison leapt up, dashing out from cover and shoving one of the hazmat-suited men aside.

“W-wait a sec!” Reena pleaded, but she knew it was no use.

“PCPD!” Madison yelled. “This is a bust!”

From across the room, Moon’s eyes went wide. “The hell?”

“The exit, sir,” Lapan said. “I’ll handle this.”

“No, you don’t!” Madison barked, watching as Moon seized the door handle. She was still too far away to get to him. But there was another way. She threw her arm sideways, pushing another man in a hazmat suit out of her line of sight, sending him careening over a table, taking out a set of glass chemistry equipment in the process. Madison squeezed the trigger of her Ventok. A bullet blasted out of the barrel, screaming across the room and colliding into a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall, just inches from Moon.

“Son of a—!” Moon howled as he was thrown back by the exploding fire extinguisher.

“Sir!” Lapan cried, unable to prevent his boss from tumbling to the ground. A white mist from the destroyed extinguisher spread around the immediate area.

The other men in hazmat suits stood frozen in place, exchanging worried glances with one another.

“Don’t move,” Madison warned, having reached her target. She stood over Moon, her gun trained on him. Her eyes darted up, offering an unyielding glare to Lapan. “And don’t *you* think about moving, either.”

“You certainly fooled me,” Moon hissed. “Never would have guessed you for a cop.”

“She won’t be one for much longer,” Lapan exclaimed, bolting forward with lightning quick reflexes, “sir.”

Madison could only watch as Moon’s assistant sprung into action, spinning his entire body into the air and sweeping his leg out, executing a perfect roundhouse kick. She was fast—but barely fast enough to avoid it. Jerking back, she only just managed to duck under his approaching leg, but could do nothing to stop his second attack. He spun again, his other foot snapping up and striking the gun from Madison’s hand. The Ventok went airborne, spiraled across the room, and hit the floor, sliding under a table.

Lapan readied himself into a combat stance. “If truth be told, I may be a bit rusty,” he said with a smile. “So you may yet survive for slightly longer than thirty seconds—only slightly, of course. I tend to be a punctual man.”

“Only thing you’ll be punctual for is a jail cell,” Reena stood behind Lapan, her gun aimed at his back. “You’re busted, pal!”

“Oh, well,” Lapan sighed. “I would have much preferred a one-on-one bout with Ms. Tundra, but if need be…”

“Look out!” Madison shouted. But it was too late.

Lapan turned on his heel, clasped his hand onto Reena’s gun and, with one firm jolt of the wrist, pushed back on the firearm’s slide and detached it, rendering the weapon useless.

“Huh?” Reena pulled back her dismantled Ventok, looking in disbelief at her gun, now missing its entire top half from the trigger upwards. “H-how’d you do that?”

“A police officer...” Lapan tossed the gun’s slide over his shoulder as if it were nothing, “...bad profession to be in, my dear.”

“Same goes for drug-running scum,” Madison snapped, bringing her heel down hard against the back of Lapan’s right leg.

The man let out a surprised yelp, buckling at the knee and losing balance. He fell backwards but, before hitting the ground, Madison advanced over him, ramming her elbow directly into his face. Lapan crashed onto the floor, wafting between consciousness while cradling a bloody nose.

Madison pointed a finger at Moon, who had remained on the ground since the fire extinguisher had exploded. “Give me any trouble, and you’ll get it worse, got it?”

Moon nodded his head.

A deafening blast of metal echoed across the basement as the loading bay entrance detonated inwards.

Reena cupped her hands around her ears. “Geez, *now* what?!”

“Hands up, everyone!” Gripps, outfitted with tactical body armor, charged into the room. A group of equally armored officers followed behind him, all sporting bulletproof ballistic shields and machine guns.

The men in hazmat suits were quick to comply.

“I want cuffs on everyone!” Gripps ordered, marching over to where Madison and Reena stood. A smirk creased his face when he spotted Moon. “Priority one, fellas. Get him out of here.”

On cue, two armor-wearing officers hurried over, lifted Moon up and snapped handcuffs on his wrists, before hauling him away. Two more officers attended to Lapan.

Madison folded her arms. “Took you long enough, Gripps.”

“Well, what can I say,” Gripps shrugged, “I figured I’d let you have your fun.”

“I’m done for the night.” Madison looked down at her red dress with disgust. “I’m going home and getting out of this atrocity.”

“Well, if you needed some help with that, I’d be more than happy to lend a hand and —”

“Stuff it, asshole,” Madison said, shoving a firm shoulder into the officer as she walked by. “Paperwork’s all on you for this one. Have *fun* with that.”

“Aw, come on, Wynter—we agreed to split the case, right?” Gripps cried, rubbing his arm where Madison had hit him. “That goes for split paperwork too. With the size of this bust, I’ll be filling out forms all night and into the early morning.”

“Sounds like you needed *something* to keep you busy,” Madison said, face stone cold. “I’m out of here.”

“Hey,” Gripps said, glancing between Madison and Reena, “in all seriousness, you two did some great work here tonight.”

“Thanks!” Reena said, thrilled at the praise. She certainly didn’t hear any of it from her partner.

“Whatever,” Madison mumbled, continuing to walk off.

“You know, Wynter,” Gripps called out, “we *also* made a great team. We should do this more often.”

“No thanks,” the white-haired officer responded. “I’m already *stuck* with one partner. At least she’s not *completely* inept, like you.”

Reena's face lit up. That was the closest Madison had come to complimenting her. Maybe she was getting through to her partner after all. "Hey, wait up!" she hurried after the officer, an enthusiastic bounce in every step.

"Eck!" Gripps felt a cold chill work its way up his spine. "No wonder they call Maniac Madison the Ice Queen of the PCPD!"

end_

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