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VALKYRIE

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts English

By

Eric Yanders

May 2017

VALKYRIE

English Department

Missouri State University, May 2017

Master of Arts

Eric Yanders

ABSTRACT

My thesis is a science fiction novella, entitled *Valkyrie*. My novella focuses on the character Valerie Byrne and her mission to save a utopian city, created in the wake of a third world war, from a megalomaniac android named Dr. Viper. Valerie witnessed her parent's death when she was nine years old, at the hands of the tyrannical government that was responsible for the war. During the conflict, she willingly transformed herself into a cyborg so that she may enact her revenge, and helped overthrow the tyranny that murdered her family. The novella follows her twenty years after the war ended, living as a wanderer and trying to find a new purpose beyond an aimless killing machine. That her abilities are embedded into her body makes it impossible to forget the pain. My thesis addresses the themes of revenge, loss, war, militarism and mechanization. The focal points I am using are Milan Kundera's writings on identity in *The Art of Novel*, specifically those pertaining to man being as much a participant in the world as caught in the trap of it, and the meditations of Dolezel and Deleuze, in *Heterocosmica* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, on oppressive and destructive societies. Valerie breaks the trap by breaking the cycle of the mechanized world taking advantage of the powerless.

KEYWORDS: man, machine, freedom, oppression, hero

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Michael G. Czyzniejewski
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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VALKYRIE

By

Eric Yanders

A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, Creative Writing

May 2017

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I dedicate this thesis to the academy, i.e., my family, who always encouraged my creativity and imagination, and gave me the best advice ever, “Write it down.”

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VALHALLA DECRYPTED: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO VALKYRIE

“Man should not be in the service of society, society should be in the service of man. When man is in the service of society, you have a monster state,” writes Joseph Campbell. “Is the machine going to crush humanity or serve humanity?”

In the world of *Valkyrie*, the heart of its mechanized existence is found within the shadow cast by militarism, war and dehumanization. The inner psyche of its inhabitants, the turmoil accumulated over the years of war and oppression by a technocratic government, called Infinite, is still seen even in the absence of gunfire. Everyone is trapped in a dichotomy of war and peace in a dystopian future. The story explores the way to break the cycle of the powerful taking advantage of the powerless.

Valkyrie started five years ago as a short story assignment for an undergrad class. I created it without thinking that its initial form would become the lynchpin for anything else, let alone a thesis or a novella. When I began writing, I had very little thoughts about militaristic nations, or a world full of cyborgs and dwindling resources. I had a deadline, came up with a few ideas, and decided on a superhero story. It was important the story hit all the right notes expected of the genre, and it was one in which I was well rehearsed -- having grown up on the likes of Batman, X-men and James Bond. My goal was to make my own super hero story, and turn it in on time.

As my mind raced with possible characters, powers, cities to defend and a gallery of villains, a woman named Valerie stood out in my mind. She was a character I had originally imagined as being a part of an ensemble-fighting unit. She was a possible wild card personality, someone who didn't quite fit in with the world around her. She doesn't

claim to be a part of the team, but hangs out with the team. Although she projects an aloof attitude toward the team, she is there alongside them when needed, and certainly would risk her life for any one of them.

When I first imagined her, she was so complicated, and needed to encompass so many things, it was hard to decide where to start. It was much easier to imagine what she would say, who she would meet and be a part of her adventures, wherever they led me.

It was the strangest case of writer's block I have ever encountered. The usual ideas about mapping out a story didn't apply. It was never a continuous stream of events. I would refine and add to parts of the story in my mind for enjoyment, and replay them for enjoyment. Imagining the story became far more interesting than blocking out a storyline. Thoughts about whom Valkyrie was, and what she would say in certain situations became a game of action/reaction. She was inviting me to get to know her. It was as if she strong armed me into her world, her life, and began telling me her story.

After getting to know her, the original setup of being part of a super hero group felt too small for her. I soon realized the name Valerie, on its own, was too human and too bland for the character. I liked it as a name for who she was, but needed one that reflected what she was in this setting. Valkyrie was a better fit because it sounded more mysterious, unique and otherworldly. The ensemble disappeared and she became the star. It was then, that the ideas came together into a single hero driven story. I was fascinated by the idea of a soldier who became a living weapon, a cyborg warrior, by choice. The superhero template I had in mind peeled away, and the sci-fi lurking underneath became the prominent focal point in her story.

When all was put into place, I went to work on a scenario for Valkyrie. The entire short revolved around a chase scene in a desert, complete with all the visual energy of stunts from a James Bond film. Although a mere eighteen pages in length, it marked a shift in who I am as a writer. Stylistically it demonstrated my moving, at long last, out of the in-joke style of narratives often found in fanfiction or the playground antics of children, and into being a participant in the genre. I look back on it fondly, as the beginning of a more nuanced approach in how I write.

Finished and delivered to class on time, I got the grade I wanted and stepped up my game as a writer. From then on, I did my best to make each story contain a greater depth in the narrative, and higher quality writing than the one preceding it. Over the last several years, I've always come back to original draft of Valkyrie in the same notebook that I created her and added more to her backstory and the history of her world, which became the framework of the finished narrative.

Valkyrie is set in the distant future, where humanity has just endured its most vicious world conflict. The conflict began with the creation of a new technology, Fracture, which was a new breed of nanobots that could restructure matter from the atomic level. At the time of its creation, the governing powers of the planet existed as four technocratic authorities. The use of Fracture was a debating point among them for some time, as was their concern how to govern this new technology. That is, until Infinite made a move to claim it all for themselves. They used the technology to launch an attack on the rest of the world, which resulted in decades of struggles, war and strife.

Although victory was achieved and Infinite, the biggest threat in world history, had been defeated, the earth existed in a bleak, uncertain state of decay. The specific

element of the accident prone world, present in Dolozel's rhetoric on Multiperson worlds in *Heterocosmica* when he discusses social restrictions on individuals, can be regarded as Valkyrie's world premise. "Under the dual restriction of rigid social organization and accidental randomness, the acting persons are deprived not only of intentionality but also of responsibility for their acting. Persons are not responsible for their life histories, because they are victims of supraindividual social forces and uncontrollable incursions of random events" (Dolezel 86). With war behind them, the earth moved into an era of upheaval and strife, as well as great achievement and strides. However, where this world is headed, is still a mystery.

Even with all these additions, I still didn't commit to writing an actual narrative. I was very apprehensive about approaching it, and as time went on the apprehension grew to the point where it became a pet project to add to its mythology without starting a story. I was afraid to touch it because I didn't have all of the elements.

When I re-read the original version a few times, I realized something was missing, but wasn't sure what. I wanted it to be well polished and fit into its true genre, but it was inescapable that I had written the first iteration of the story without much of an input in the science fiction aspect. Of course, it was present, but the question remained as to what I brought to the genre, and of what and how I was using the science to communicate with the reader. The nagging fear that authors I admired could handle this story better, was another aspect that didn't help. I also wanted the story to be my own, and not rehash another story, knowingly or unknowingly.

But, like before, when I thought of Valerie herself things began to change. My thoughts shifted from the action scenes to the machinery that surrounded her, and the

choices she made. I began asking what was it that I wanted to bring to the narrative, and I purely wanted to explore who Valerie was.

As a lifelong fan of the James Bond films, it is easy to see the influence the series had upon the creation of Valkyrie. Both the famous British superspy and Valerie share a snide and aloof persona, complimented by a taste for travel and the finer things in life. Bond is as much a reflection and voice of his crazy and outlandish world as he is caught in the middle of it. Films such as *Skyfall* and *Casino Royale* served as a stylistic influence. All the action scenes and special effects present how this drifter survives and what drives him on.

Both Bond and Valerie are lone wanderers seeking their own way in the world. They may act for, or because of outward forces for any number of reasons, but the main goal is always completely their own. This migrant barbarian aspect of their persona became apparent to me during the time of my studies: “The Migrant barbarians are indeed between the two; they come and go, cross and recross frontiers, pillage and ransom, but also integrate themselves and reterritorialize. At times they will subside into the empire, assigning themselves a segment of it, becoming mercenaries or confederates, settling down, occupying land or carving out their won State...” (Deleuze 222-23).

Even with the main location of the narrative, Archimedes, being a technological wonder most of the world lives in a dystopian dark age. The inhabitants of this period, including the citizens of Archimedes, are haunted by the wounds they still carry and Valerie mirrors this divide between the past and the future. Orphaned as a young girl, when members of the Infinite killed her family, she swore revenge. Over the next several years following the murder, she joins up with militias, armies and secretive agencies who

are all overrun by Infinite's might. Valerie makes a deal with one nameless military outfit, which results in her transformation into a cyborg, and sets about fulfilling her revenge. An act that not only is an example of carving out her own state, in Deleuze's words, but the idea of action being a person's identity. "The character of an action," states Dolezel, "is determined not so much by what is done as why it is done. Searching for the explanation of a particular action, we search for its motive" (p70).

The need to fulfill her revenge against those who were responsible for her parents' death became the hero's goal. Having a hero with a clear-cut goal, made it possible to turn all my imaginings, my thoughts into a sci-fi story that possessed a path. I asked myself what I wanted to see done with such a character in this setting. I began analyzing how Valerie would behave in a setting where humanity was literally advancing beyond comprehension, yet destroying itself with the same old follies. What would drive her on, and what would she seek in this divided world?

The two works by science fiction author Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, were what I looked to in order to plan my approach needed for this psychic distance. Having read them in high school, I understood Philip's talent for bringing the reader into the turmoil and confusion of a person swept up by an unfeeling world. Although both stories are set in two completely different realities, one where Nazis have conquered the world and the other a cyberpunk dystopia respectively, Philip always focused on identity and what strives individuals took to find their place in the reality they lived in.

One scene highlighting this in *High Castle* features a central character, Juliana, journeying to the fabled Abendsen house. Hawthorne Abendsen was an author in the

story, and addressed throughout the narrative as “The Man in the High Castle”. His bestselling book featured a possible world where the Nazis lost World War II, and the setting of Philip’s story featured America under Nazi occupation. Viewed by the rest of Nazi America as quaint sci-fi fluff, no one suspects Juliana as she journeys to ask him how he was able to write the book so convincingly. Once there, something incredible transpires, as he shows her the fiction in reality. The entire story revolves around systems of oppression, and the characters seeing the world as inescapable. In one moment, Hawthorne frees Juliana from the system in a bizarre and surreal psychic trance that breaks her from the world: ““It means, does it, that my book is true ...Germany and Japan lost the war? ‘Yes’” (p272). Although ambiguous, Juliana leaves the house, and timeline, she came from and disappears into the unknown. The system of oppression has been broken from this one person.

Another instance in Dick’s work, presented with a more subtle and concrete touch that I found, was in *Electric Sheep*. Rick Deckard, bounty hunter and main character, is on the hunt for deadly androids when in one scene he begins to question an officer. The initial talk between the two was casual until Deckard believed he wasn’t human and the officer replies with a disturbing notion: “Why? I’m not an android. What do you do, roam around killing people and telling yourself they’re androids...Maybe you are an android, with a false memory, like they give them. Had you thought of that?” (p110-111). Like the world around them, which has created androids as things purely to be subjugated, the value of human life is a foreign concept to these two. And it is either lost on them, or a crippling terror that nulls their every sensation that connects them to reality.

Deciphering what separates a person from the world is what Philip's stories obsessed over. It was the constant theme throughout all his work. Even though his stories often featured extravagant technological locations, everything in his stories boiled down to hardware either aiding or destroying the character's attempts to preserve who they were. The struggle came from needing to understand where they and their world separated. Finding where the machine ended and where they, as a person, began, was their first step in becoming an individual. "Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme versions, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent...In their propaganda, totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile" (Kundera 110).

Since I was taking a more action-oriented approach to such a story, I drew from Stephen King's talent for ramping up tension in normal situations. I re-read his writings in *The Gunslinger* to search of situations laden with tension, and analyzed the steps he took in creating the atmosphere. The narrative itself, about a loner tracking down a spirit on a quest for revenge, was also key in forming a relationship between Valerie and her world. The titular Gunslinger in King's novel is out to avenge innocent lives lost at the hands of an immoral spirit in a desolate world haunted by demons. One character, late in the narrative, comments on where this quest will lead him with "Where the world ends is where you must begin (247)." His journey ends with him coming to terms with how he is a reflection of the murderous cycle that created him.

In addition, a video game I had been a fan of when I was young, and was subliminally influenced by when creating the first iteration of *Valkyrie*, was what I

looked to for providing the texture of this world. The game, *Hostile Waters*, is set in a future where a pacifist world is drawn back into conflict by revolutionaries from a bygone era. The world retrieves a superweapon from the bottom of the ocean, a warship called Antaeus, to defeat the new enemy for them. The Antaeus has a powerful artificially intelligent computer, which the player assumes the role of during play. Inside the ship's computer, the memories and indeed the entire lives of its crew are programmed onto computer chips. The ship puts them into cybernetic bodies, which are then sent out into battle at the command of the player. Whenever they die, they are remade with the same memory, albeit with the new memory of how they died.

This cycle continues until the Antaeus is destroyed after achieving victory, and the game's narrator gives a speech over what this means for the humanity: "The forces of human extinction are routed. You have come back from the dead, gone to hell, and given the human race back its future" (*Hostile Waters*). Never referred to by supporting characters as anything other than a weapon, the Antaeus stands apart from the human race. The ship serves as a world within itself, and the soldiers are an extension of, as well as an effect of, the mechanized existence taking control: "Man does not relate to the world as subject to object, as eye to painting; not even as actor to stage set. Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence changes as well" (Kundera p36).

The motion and pulse of *Valkyrie* is determined by characters whose lives and actions mirror humanity's mechanization. As Valerie's character arc unfolds, she becomes the embodiment of the first step in the mechanized world fading away, and humanity remaking itself in the image of a brighter future.

PROLOGUE: SHADOW IN THE DUST

The burnt cinders of fallout from airstrikes in the north floated through the air. She watched the pale debris of what was left of nations and lives lost to history drift through the sky in an endless flow. Their forms hit the earth one by one without a sound, and disappeared among the cold white mountainsides. *The last of the nuclear strikes*, she thought as she dashed through the woods under the grey mix of snow and ash. It was not a comforting thought, but a promise she made to herself. After tonight, she would make sure of it. The embers continued to fall, and glaze off the side of her helmet and gray bodysuit that bore the chest emblem of a woman with sabers for wings. Agent Valkyrie was what her teammates called her, the only name of hers they knew. The Horsemen battalion knew no other name.

Although the landscape was different, the massive patches of scorched earth and lifeless bodies were all too familiar. For her, it was another battle added to a hundred others. The years of conflict, war and conquest all blended into one haze. It was hard to tell them apart, except that one day -- the one that took her parents. A day that drew onward into eternity.

Valkyrie listened to her breath match the rhythmic sound of her boots punch through the snow. She tried to stay focused, but when she closed her eyes, her parent's death played out in front of her. She was a child at the time, yet the event remained as clear as the day it happened. The stillness of the forest reminded her of the quiet absence in their lifeless bodies, and she could still smell the singe of their burned flesh. Her world

was taken from her in a second. Their death was what drove her onward and made her blood boil even now.

The snow and combat ash drifted in front of her, but she caught a glimpse of an Infinite Shock Sniper at edge of the trees in the distance. He walked along metal grating and the barrel of his rifle was longer than his arms. Its sheen reflected the glimmer of a light from far below the mountainside. The metal suit surrounded him and adhered to his body like a second skin, and in some places, was his skin.

Shock troopers were more weapon than human. They were linked via a radio heart monitor to their Lieutenants who still retained enough humanity to think. The hundreds of lines of wire and polymer that sheathed his face also fed nutrients into his body, regulated his temperature and connected to the computerized cross shaped harness in his chest. The dark layers that covered his face ended at a square opening, led into his neck and connected where there once had been a lower jaw. Glossy black, lifeless eyes were his last recognizable human trait.

She emerged from the trees and gripped the man's head midstride before he could react. The pressure applied to his neck was swift and vicious. The ripping of metal and shredding of wires through cold human skin was punctuated by the sound of a speaker blowing out and a sad last gasp of air. *Some human after all*, she thought, but didn't care.

Valkyrie focused on the faint red light across the divide. It was an alarm transmission system rigged into the facility's sensors. A five second window existed between when this Infinite Sniper's heart stopped beating, and when the whole base was alerted of his death. If her partner could get to the transmitter before time was up, they would have five minutes before the Lieutenant in the base, a kilometer below, would

know something was amiss. She would know if her partner made it into position or not by how soon the rest of the base arrived.

The red light, as small as it was at this distance, glowed as she let the sniper fall to the ground and counted the seconds in her head, *five, four, three, two*. Then, it disappeared, and she leapt up to the railing above the grating with the dead man's rifle in hand.

It took her a second to attach the grapple line to the guardrail. Its fiber strengthened with nanowire refined by a laser. Even if the mountain detonated, there was a higher chance that her line would remain in one piece.

She glimpsed the greenish gray figure of her partner, Gabriel. Valkyrie scaled the wall across the divide before she bungee jumped to the lair below. After ten seconds, the line strengthened and she ran straight down the rocks. She counted the minutes left before the distance between the dead sniper signal and the base no longer mattered, and if the operation would be blown as she charged down the rocks.

Her partner disappeared into an alcove at the side of the mountain containing the air hanger. If he could clear it out, she would keep the main base busy, and then the incoming reinforcements would stand a chance. Even if the element of surprise fell apart, she figured that there would be plenty of enemy deaths in it for her.

Then the scanner in her helmet came alive and picked up the transmissions from the room directly below her. Her helmet's angled shape served more than just fashion. It was untraceable when hacked.

"Strike op plans online, prepping landing craft assault patterns," one voice said.

"Squad leaders give sit reps, over," another said.

Their talk continued as she mapped out a general layout of the area based on who to kill. A figure emerged in her sight, it walked in a circle inside the overlook jutting through the rock below. It was her entry point.

The mountain soil blew across the window in the chilly air for just one moment, and buried the sight of the man below. The sheen of the uniform still lingered in her mind even if she couldn't see him. It was the uniform of a lieutenant. "Puppet Masters," the Allies had dubbed them. *A quaint name*, she thought, but to her they were all just dead men walking.

She unlatched the wire and curled her knees into her chest as she fell through the window. The glass shattered beneath her feet and she felt the man's body buckle as her heels pushed him into the floor. He didn't have time to look up. She turned and gunned down three men sitting at security feeds. The shots were silent, but as the bullets passed through them into the controls, the popping sound of exploding metal was louder than their muffled screams. Two soldiers emerged from behind the door across from her, their defenseless hands empty as their guns sat over their shoulders.

"What is going on?" one said, as a bullet hit him below the neck.

She rushed the other as he pulled the strap on his assault rifle. Her hand gripped his just as it slid down to the trigger handle and she jumped over his shoulder, dragged the gun across his neck, and leaned into his ear. "Just dropping by, gentlemen," she said as she broke his neck.

She pulled out the troop scanner embedded in the dead officer's shoulder, placed it at the side of her helmet and activated it. The device linked up with the camera controls on command. The actual console was smashed but the receiver was still transmitting. She

closed her eyes for a brief moment and when she opened them again the outlines of enemy troops on the other side of the walls were visible on her helmet visor. Although they were only a short distance, their forms were hazy, but it was a good enough start.

“Gabriel,” she whispered into her helmet.

A map in the corner of her helmet screen appeared with a single dot flashed at the edge. It was her partner’s location in the hangar.

“Have you disabled the security net yet?” he asked.

“I’m the only reliable eyes in this compound, Gabriel,” she said. “Do you have the hanger secure?”

“I will, for the moment I’ll need to work out the details,” he said. “Don’t wait up for me. Get to the array generator. You’ll hear my signal through the whole compound. This place must never fire another shot again.”

She started for the staircase and kept a close eye on the enemy movements throughout the surrounding levels. They were only a few, but it was the price to pay for only having one Puppet Master Sensor. Although she imagined there had to be hundreds more in the base. Before long she came upon a large trench with gold and red beams of light running along a grid panel that resembled snake skin. The lights tangled and coiled around its outline with veins running to a heart.

She activated the electromagnetic generators in the soles of her boots with a single mental command and ran along the wall. The magnetic pull was strong enough to keep her attached, and running as though she was level with the ground. A reading on her helmet plate told her if the material would be compatible with the generators or not, and as the magnetic signal weakened she dropped to the floor and crawled beneath the waves.

The lights were connected to only one piece of the heart that was the guidance array. Infinite could guide missile attacks and invasion forces all across the hemisphere from this base. If they could destroy it, Infinite's aerial advantage would disappear and they would have no way of knowing if someone was launching an attack against them.

She crouched and slid beneath an opening that led into a grand hangar with an elaborate machine shaped pyramid at its center. Walkways circled it. The beams of light coiled around the side of the hanger and continued beneath a translucent floor into the armory deep below. Small orbs drifted within the lines of transferring energy. A label on the plate wall read STAND CLEAR. Flash Lines, short range teleporter lines transferred metal based objects, namely weapons, to separate parts of the base in seconds.

"They're using flash lines to transfer weapons throughout the compound. Can you give me a layout of the deeper generator levels?" Silence was her answer. She called his name into her microphone and then paused as she waited on the walkway to the guidance array. When she heard gunfire in the microphone, a set of doors opened and Infinite troops swarmed her. An Infinite commander stepped forward.

"You're a clever one, you are," he said. "Shame you weren't clever enough to find a better partner. We have both of you now."

"Whatever shall I do?" she said.

She dropped the rifle and raised her hands as soldiers approached, their guns pointed at her head. Video footage played on monitors at the corners of the hangar of Gabriel pinned down in a gunfight.

“Bring her here,” he said to the troops that held Valkyrie. They surrounded her and guided her down the steps. When she made a move for her helmet, they clenched their rifles. “Wait!” the commander said.

She pulled her helmet off and dropped it to the ground revealing her pale face, long red hair and cruel green eyes. A small smile curled along the side of her face. Slowly, she raised her hands in the air. A faint hiss, at first barely enough to be heard, grew louder.

“It is an honor to have a Horseman in our midst,” said the commander. “Your fellow freedom fighter is also a Horseman, isn’t he?” When she didn’t answer he said, “Got any last words?”

Talk, pride and vanity were the things the Infinite elite were in no short supply of. *If their commander really knew what a Horseman was capable of, they would all be firing*, she thought. A lesser Horseman would be dead by now, but she counted the heads with each step she took down the staircase. She liked the odds, and relished the men’s calm silence.

“There is no way out for you,” she said.

“What?” the commander said.

Her eyes darted at the screens in the corners of the ceiling. All were shrouded in static as a deep rumble shook the entire base. The lights overhead flickered and dimmed as small pieces of gravel dropped to the soldiers’ feet. Their horrified faces turned to her as she raised her palms higher. The air throughout the room became static and the slow building hiss echoed through the chamber. The commander pulled out his side arm and aimed at her face as a large vein twitched in his neck.

“Kill her,” he said.

They opened fire as the static sound became deafening and flashing strobes of blue light bounced around the room. Seconds later, the guns were empty and Valkyrie was untouched. She stood behind a vibrant pulsing wave of energy that surged out from her palms. A shield of pure plasma that exploded bullets as soon as they touched it.

Each battalion of the Horsemen had a unique gift through Nano Augmentation. Her gift was inside her arms where tiny generators allowed her to manipulate high concentrated amounts of energy, and generate a powerful form of plasma. Millions of machines no bigger than the size of an atom were nestled in her bloodstream. The nanobots in her palms shapeshifted into carbon nanofiber filaments and allowed her to shape the emissions and aim the energy in any direction.

“How?” the commander said.

“My name is Byrne, Valerie Byrne,” she said. “And you poor souls never stood a chance.”

In an instant the plasma shield formed into two blades. She drove them through the two closest soldiers. There were few materials on the entire planet that could withstand her power. The extreme heat from the blades melted through their armor, and projected their bodies at the crowd. She dove for the rest, cleaving metal and limbs while each struggled to reload their weapons.

The arrogant commander charged her, swinging a rifle that he tore from one of his wounded soldiers. Valerie planted a hard kick to his lower sternum and felt his chest bone turn inward. A sharp wet exhale from his throat was the sound of his organs rupturing on themselves. Valerie grabbed him by the arm and twisted around him, carving the troops

that tried not to fire upon their leader. When all were dead, she turned to the commander and laid three fingers on his lower lip.

“Thank you for the dance,” she said and nudged his head back and watched his body follow it to the ground as she scooped up her helmet.

Valerie’s helmet showed hundreds of troops headed her way. She looked to the guidance array and back to the flash lines. Using her plasma swords, she carved open the lines as the troops entered the room. The free floating unstable particles ripped the entire chamber apart. The array went with it, and all fell as the building began to topple. Good enough odds for her.

She reactivated her magnetic soles and leapt from section to section as they fell, and carved up the occasional Infinite soldier as she passed. She landed and her enemy crashed into the ground.

A massive enemy robotic Mech tank turned its cannon toward Valerie. The behemoth’s scanners found her, but before it lined up, a gun unfolded from a metal harness on her back. It was as long as her arm, and requiring both to carry it. It was the most powerful type of Railgun on the planet. Each ratcheted bellowing clank of gunfire was enough to shake a person’s jaw, and each shot parted the snow as it flew through the tank’s body. When the Mech was a smoldering pile of rubble, she rolled her eyes at the Railgun as she folded it back up and placed it on the magnetic harness on her back.

“So blunt,” she said as if joking with an old friend. “No finesse.”

Valerie made her escape, but looked back one more time as reinforcements arrived. The wind rose and the snow continued to fall, but sunlight began to cut through the gray haze of dawn.

Chapter 1: SINCE WE'VE BEEN APART

It was twenty years ago when Maxwell Xavier met the Valkyrie. Ash and smoke swirled above molten flames and smothered out the morning light in a deep rusty haze of reddish grey. Flesh and mounds of metal lay strewn for miles and blended together in an endless mire of body parts, smashed vehicles, lifeless faces, shattered mechanized warriors and smoldering embers.

Young Maxwell hid among them beneath the dead hand of the statue of a god. He covered his mouth and nose with a dirty rag, but choked every time he took a breath of the hot air. The statue itself was a figure made in the likeness of no real god, but a part of some story Infinite used as propaganda. It blocked shrapnel from tearing his face apart during the night, and that was the only real beneficial thing the image had ever done.

Max rose from the ground and struggled to keep his balance against the constant impact of artillery. Each shot kicked up dirt and it stung like pin pricks as it rained down upon his dark skin. Warfare wasn't second nature for Max. He had been a soldier since he turned nineteen, and at thirty-one was considered by most to be a professional in order to have lasted this long, but he felt like a newcomer every time he went into battle. A faint taste of blood sat at the back of his mouth, but he wasn't sure if it was his own. He didn't remember being injured enough to bleed. He pressed his back to the statue arm, and inched along the frame as the gun seemed to grow heavier with every step.

His monitor helmet flashed the warning FIFTY SHOTS REMAINING. It annoyed him more than it helped. *Make the shots count or keep the enemy counting shots?* Max couldn't decide which would be better. If only he could see the water, he'd

know how far into the island he was. It would also tell him how far he needed to travel to meet up with the rest of his forces.

Gunfire and voices roared around him, yet the ringing in his ears drowned the battle into a faint echo.

He could see shapes lash out and fired at one another beyond the trees. Their silhouettes appeared among bright flashes and vanished among the battle haze and husks of buildings.

Max had made it this far, but perhaps this would be as far as he'd go. There wasn't enough rational thought in his head to dwell on it for long. He bolted out from the brush and crouched on his knees, but the pounding heartbeat in his head was his only sensation.

Everything but the drifting smoke was motionless, and he felt like he'd go mad. He fixated on a figure that appeared in the distance. Just as he took aim a group of guns cocked to his left and he dove for the dirt, but not before he felt his knee explode from a gunshot.

A crimson color pulsed at the back of his eyes and he wondered if he had been shot in the head as well, but he quickly realized blood coated his hands and leg. Maxwell rolled on his side and wailed in pain. There was no reason to stay quiet. A group of Infinite soldiers aimed at him. He took a deep breath and waited for the end.

A thunderous hissing sound cut through the moment of waiting and a blue wave blasted the lead soldier in a blinding flash. He could hear an array of gun fire, followed by more thunderous static shots, and a hacking echo. He waited again for his own death to come.

When the noise stopped, he dared not uncurl from his ball, but opened an eye to survey his surroundings. A lone person stood over his attackers who were now but a burnt mass. It was the same woman he'd aimed at in the distance, but hadn't the chance to take the shot. She was roughly five ten with a lean, strong build. He couldn't see her face, but her green eyes flashed through her helmet. She wore a grey combat suit that looked like a second skin. Across the front was an emblem of a woman with a halo over her head and wings made of sabers in the shape of a V. He'd heard of her before. She was the cyborg who couldn't die. She slowly walked by him, and he didn't know if he should be scared or not.

"Keep your aim on the right people young man," she said. Her voice was smooth and cruel but refined. "You may yet win the fight."

Something about her struck him as completely alien. It was the way she spoke, the specific fearlessness in her English accent and her bold stride. Her voice held the sound of sanity born from the madness around them. She was untouched by the threat and risk, but livened by challenge and empowered by the thrill.

She tossed him a vial and kept walking. He picked it up. A bone density regenerator. If he injected it into his knee, it'd be usable in thirty minutes, and he'd be like new – well, almost like new.

Maxwell knew what every soldier knew. He wasn't supposed to be here. War was something unnatural. It was something to be endured but not sustained. Yet he could see It was her home. There was nowhere else for this woman to be, and yet it seemed as though she were beyond and above all this. He injected himself with the vial, managed to stand, and started off after her. He had to drag his leg, but it was his best chance for

survival. It took time for the vial to kick in, but the woman never seemed to get too far ahead of him. He knew she was waiting for him, guiding him to safety, all along protecting him.

It was twenty years ago when he met Valkyrie, and it was still fresh in Maxwell's mind. The world marched on. Some had made it out of the war to live a normal life. Not in a clean or cohesive way, but to make a new future born from the chaos they had endured. That the chaos ended was enough for most.

He absent mindedly rubbed his knee. He didn't remember the pain anymore. Like most soldiers who had been wounded. They remembered it hurt, but it wasn't what he focused on. He had made it out alive, and he didn't have to kill anymore.

They had survived a life where killing was the order of the day. The fear that followed, of not being able to find something to take the place of killing, he had forgotten, too. Everything fell together. In the end it was simple. Don't think too much on it. But today, there was a reason to remember.

Maxwell stirred the dash of bourbon in his coffee as he watched the news on his web slip. The paper thin sheet of hard plastic played feeds and displayed articles from around the eastern hemisphere. There was enough info and uncertainty to make the day uneasy. A thin veil of alcohol floated in his body and kept him focused on what mattered. All distractions, little anxieties and apprehensions faded out to the edges, and left only the real details. It was his way of remaining detached.

The problem at hand, a job to be solved, was the only thing that remained.

He rested his face on his hand and remained fixed on the screen. He didn't need to watch the people on the train around him to know the look on their faces or the air of

insecurity about them. He saw them almost every day and more or less in the same spot. He had grown up in the war against Infinite, and even though he never was a perfect soldier, years of fighting taught him to know that people are easy to figure out.

Details were important to Max. He was the Defense Minister and it was his duty to the people of the city to notice the little details as well as the overall picture. Stalking enemy troops taught him that people have habits that countless others share, that repetition is the easiest trait to spot. And because all repetitions are born out of an internal need, it was the little ticks that were more important than what someone they drank, ate, or did every day. It was the glitch in a pattern that sent up red flags.

The train pulled into the station and the dozens got off were interchangeable with all the passengers who stepped on. Same daily routine, same seats, and sadly still the same sense of dread. Seeing their faces reminded him of why he needed to be the best. It was the unusual that his position taught him to look for. The occasional sharp jolt, the shifty eye pattern could be a sign that someone didn't belong, or someone had plans that weren't in the best interest of those around them.

Max noticed there was weariness and anxiety on the train that hadn't been there only a few weeks earlier, but it was to be expected. Everyone in the city knew what was going on around the world, but they had lived in relative peace. Eight hundred people had lost their lives on the island of Madagascar, only an hour away from Archimedes by plane. It was the biggest attack yet, and so close to the city, the war was suddenly too hard to ignore. Max had a plan that he thought might work. He rubbed his knee again.

The train moved and Maxwell looked out the window. Archimedes city, the great experiment, was a beauty and the view from this stop was breathtaking. Five synthetic

islands, built over the period of twenty-five years in the southern Indian Ocean. Maxwell felt pride in calling it home.

Originally a unified expansion plan by numerous nations, Archimedes was seen as a safe haven during the war. Forty three million people lived in the 147,000 square mile megalopolis. They came from all over the world to escape the terror, fear and death. People from every race, every nation, and every belief came, hoping they would be free. Some arrived when it was still being built, others flocked when it was finished. Alchemy tower, the 3 mile tall structure, was the control center of Archimedes.

The skyscrapers scattered along for miles, and were lined with sections of green foliage that enveloped their outline in subtle designs. Meant to double lifespans one day at a time, the plants emitted a therapeutic inhalant that rejuvenated the lungs, muscles and heart.

The first magnetic highway connected the islands, and floating cars ran across its surface. Unmanned, artificially intelligent police drones patrolled the sky, and weaved around the buildings. At the next stop, seven men dressed in blue and white armor, with a thin gold strip running down the center, sat around Maxwell. They were the Peacekeepers, the national police force of Archimedes, and special defense for members of the government.

For three minutes the train ran over open water on a bridge before it moved through the city proper. On every street corner sat prototype creation venders. These machines were the first of their kind, no bigger than an armchair. Using millions of nanobots, they created cheap food for everyone, one atom at a time. The programming for clothing was expected to be completed within a decade.

Maxwell wondered what his parents would have thought of this place, of who he had become, and everything else they never had a chance to see. But what saddened him the most was they never got to see how happy he and Felicia were, and now there was a baby on the way. Daniel. The name that he and Fey picked out for their boy was a good strong one. It was his father's name. He had to find a way to stop the war for not just the people on the train, in the city, but for his son.

The train pulled into Alchemy station and the tower above disappeared far into the clouds. Maxwell rose from his seat and headed toward the exit. Waiting just behind the turnstiles outside was Norman, Max's associate and direct subordinate.

"Don't look at me like that, Norman. You know I've got nothing to say."

"I was hoping you'd have a plan by now. Maybe even something to convince the president to stop asking the department if we have a plan."

"Who says I don't?" Max said.

"So we'll have something to say when President Abigail arrives? A good outlook?"

"I'm a realist wrapped in a romantic, Norman. Even if I had some good news to share, doesn't mean that tragic things don't happen."

"So you don't think the deal will go through?"

"That's what has got me. Just be sure you address her as President this time, instead of blurting 'Viv' like some heart broke ex."

"That was one time," Norman said.

"Right. In front of everyone. Right?"

"If I may..."

“What do you want me to say?” Max said. “That it’s a good idea for her to stick her neck out between a group of borderline nationalist wackos and a dictator who already thinks she owns the earth? Establish trust with energy sources, and call off the tensions? Of course it is a good idea, just not a clean one. Keeping it that way is going to require a lot of attention to detail. Or just telling her no, we should remain isolationist because we have what we need.”

“Did you and Fey get the music I sent?” Norman said.

Max looked up from his slip with a blank expression.

“Oh, yeah. We spent the evening on the east balcony and danced. The wind over the sea was beautiful. It was warm, but you wouldn’t have known with that breeze.”

“And what about that lyric at the end?” Norman said as Max brought up the lyrics from yesterday’s message on his web slip. The final lyrics were bolded.

Max knew that was coded speak, as was the song itself. Even while being an isolationist nation, one could never be too careful. Everyone in the defense department kept coded messages in casual conversations that were untraceable by other means. Norman and Max shared a love of classic music, and hidden in the lyrics were microscopic filaments that contained full briefings.

“Yeah I heard, but have we been given an update?” Max said as Norman tapped on his own web slip.

“It is all in what I sent you just now. All brand new from Griffin’s leading agents as of twenty minutes ago. As far as we are concerned publicly they don’t exist but the last update showed that the trail was going cold and they need our intervention fast.”

The two stepped into the elevator. Weather maps and temperature feeds appeared on the plate glass as well as a radio isotope which scanned for pockets of harmful radiation patterns around the ocean. A computer intercom above asked what floor they wanted.

“One nine four two,” Max said.

They looked out past the elevator glass to the city below. Overhead the song played a slow and mellow tune, “They say that time, heals a broken heart, but time has stood still, since we’ve been apart....” The sunlight peered through the elevator shield in a blue haze as the details of the city grew smaller below.

All readings on the glass shield disappeared. The computer intercom cut off the song as it spoke, “One nine four two.” Both doors opened, and Max took one last glance at the city below as he stepped out into the hallway. The large door at the end was metal with a marble pattern painted on it. As they approached, the door slid open and the intercom spoke again, “Matthias, Norman and Xavier Maxwell, Defense department.”

Inside was a crescent shaped table in an auditorium that dipped toward the window, with the other twelve members of the city committee sitting around and talking to one another. Max rubbed his temple as he approached his chair and the sensor in his contact lenses came alive. A dozen nano fibers embedded deep in the plastic would only activate when within range of a special signal in Alchemy Tower. Maxwell took his seat, and his contacts listed information on everyone sitting around him: birth date, position in the city, expertise, and address. Maxwell knew his colleagues well, as they did him. Any changes in either routine, health, or location would show up on the sensor. No secrets from each other. President’s orders.

“Rise,” Norman said, as the President entered the room with her guards and Max rolled his eyes at Norman’s eager reaction.

Abigail Shade was the head of Archimedes and keeper of advancement in a recovering wounded earth. She had returned from negotiations across the Atlantic, and arrived just days after the attack on Madagascar. She wore her determination on her brow, and Max could see the struggle she went through in her facial expressions. The nations of Vigil and Scarlett Throne were the last two remaining world powers after the Infinite War, with the exception of Archimedes on the American continent. The negotiations weren’t a failure, but they weren’t over yet by the look of it either.

“Be seated,” Abigail said, as she approached a podium rising from the floor. “As of right now, the Annexation of Vigil and the Scarlett Throne have both agreed to a temporary end to the tension against one another. But they will only get so far into peace without time on their side.”

The thickness in the air couldn’t even be cut with a knife. The notion of the two powers going into a conflict was very real. It was only a matter of time before their unstable leaders turned their sights to the other’s part of the map.

“Energy,” Abigail said while looking at one section of the table. “What is the report on Noah?”

“All things are moving along on schedule ma’am,” one member said. “Since we recovered the Noah platform’s signal enhancer last month, the satellite has been capturing solar energy in orbit and beaming it down via signal at regular intervals without trouble. We are looking ahead at expanding the radius of the transference capture, which

would allow us to power multiple locations along the globe. We can expect to power many friendly ports and city nations within the next decade.”

“Very well,” Abigail said. “I expect progress reports for the time being.”

The room fell silent. Without even looking, Max knew by the jolted movements and sharp subtle breathing that all heads were turning toward him and Norman. When Abigail’s eyes locked with his, he knew that it wasn’t even an assumption that they were looking at him. Max stood and walked to another podium on the opposite side of the room, parallel with the president.

“What is the situation?” Abigail said.

“My department and I have compiled all that we have over the incident in Madagascar,” Max began. “With additional Intel obtained within the last week, we no longer believe that this was an isolated incident, or an individual attack.”

Max tapped on his web slip and all the information popped up on the screens around the room. Norman also displayed photos and articles on the walls around them.

“Spain, Turkey, Greece, Uganda, The Red Sea, and more recently India and Madagascar,” Max continued. “All of the incidents recorded at these locations follow a similar pattern. Massive destruction caused by some manner of high explosive, yet there is little physical evidence left behind to suggest what was used and who was involved. Also relevant, all areas attacked, as we know, were either a part of or occupied by Infinite during the war.”

“Could these be separatist radicals?” Abigail said. “A group that wasn’t put down and is seeking revenge?”

“Nothing we have can confirm that,” Norman said. “We have kept tabs on any Infinite sympathizers and none have the influence or resources to carry out such an act.”

“In addition,” Max said, “we have received no demands for any attack. This is a select group with an intimate knowledge of these lands but is not interested in them.”

“What is your plan, Defense Minister?” Abigail said.

“I propose that we reopen the Horseman division.”

“The Four Horsemen?” a voice asked.

“Yes, the four armed battalions of enhanced soldiers that were used to combat Infinite,” Max said.

“I was under the impression that all were killed in combat,” the president said.

“All but the crown jewel,” Maxwell said. “One of them, Agent Valkyrie, was more than just a soldier.”

“If the threat is any indication, we’ll need an army to survive,” a board member said

“She was and still is an army,” Max replied. “The four were not just named so based on that wacked out faction’s fixation on mythology names. Each of the cyborg battalions were specifically designed to carry out a task during combat, which revolved around their engineered abilities. War, Death, Pestilence and Famine were all code names for the designated Fracture tech that was implanted in their bodies. War battalions were the tanks, and Valkyrie was a member of War.”

“How are you privy to such information?” a member asked.

“Because I knew one during the war, the same crown jewel who can help us now,” Max said.

“I’ll sanction this,” the president said. “Do whatever is necessary to recruit this agent, but I want full assurance that this being can be controlled and is dependable.”

“Madame President,” Max began, “controlling this agent is something that we cannot do, and I indeed do not plan on trying to. But I know that she is dependable.” The only sound in the room was the President’s deep intake of air, and followed by what sounded much like a sigh.

“Make it happen,” said the president. “Meeting adjourned.”

The room emptied, and the two men waited for the elevator doors to open once more. Inside, everything on the electronic screens returned as they had been before. Nothing changed, yet nothing felt the same. “Do you think we’ve learned anything in the time since we got here?” Norman said.

“We’ve learned enough to know when to back away from the world,” Max said, “but I don’t think this city can do that anymore.”

“The fighting will come here,” Norman said.

“Not if we can go out and meet it before it harms the innocent. Not if our agent meets the fighting out there first.”

“Well then,” Norman began. “How do we contact her?”

“I have a transponder that she gave me in the final days of the war,” Max said. “I’ll run it to the intelligence engineers and they’ll switch it on. It’ll give us her location. Something that her generals, I guess you’d call them, used to track horsemen. Then there is the trouble of finding her.”

“She’ll want to go back to that life?”

“It’s who she is,” Max said.

Chapter 2: TOOK TO THE GLOOM

The light's blinding golden glow loomed through the glass in Hong Kong dome, which rose to over a kilometer into the air, and coated the entire city. The freedom just beyond the Casino itself, with the safety of the rest of the city just in sight, was tempting to those looking to get away from the dread of owing vipers money in these parts.

Valerie's hair bathed in the rays of the glow as she sat at the end of the table, caressing three poker chips between her thumb and fingers. Ocean waves brushed against a rocky shore just beyond the dome behind her, but no one noticed. Those around the table leaned over their own chips and watched her eyes slowly open and close. Her aloof calm, the tilt of her head and the way she brushed her hair off the black slash of her white dress made it hard for them to guess if she held a winning hand.

Max watched her from the steps of the high rollers section. His hand lay gently on his firearm just inside his suit. It was holstered right below the photo of Fey in his jacket pocket. They didn't have to be far apart often, but Fey knew the score. It was a danger she feared and dreaded, but they had faced it over the years. It was a part of his job.

When Max and the Archimedes defense department reactivated the transponder, her signal led to this city. Max wasn't surprised. Hong Kong, and the rest of South East Asia, had done well in recovering, yet it still remained an area that encouraged those looking for quick money outside the law. Casinos like this were run by the wrong crowds. Ones that were in bed with people who had an eye on everyone and their families. Naturally, Valerie fit right in. No one would find a tell, or a tick that showed she didn't belong, and certainly not a sign that she was not like the rest of the people in the

room. Everything about her, from her composure to the focus of her face, was commanding. It gave him reason to smile.

When Max made it to the bottom of the steps, he moved in beat with a group of wealthy socialites and grabbed a drink from a passing tray. He glanced back to the high rollers' table. He took a moment to savor his drink when Norman's voice came over his earphone. It was no wider than a needle at the back of his ear, and unnoticed by a group of soldiers behind him.

"You absolutely needed to be here in person?" Norman said. "You couldn't send a group to meet her?"

"Nobody knows her well enough to just waltz up and ask her to risk her life for anyone," said Max. "Hell, I'm pushing it being the delivery boy. Point being she doesn't know you."

"Wouldn't she know who she gave it to?" Norman asked. "I mean you were the person she handed it to all those years ago, right?"

"War wasn't over yet. Who was to say that it wasn't me who activated it?"

"But, we were in Archimedes when we..." Norman began.

"The transponder only goes one way," Max said. "It isn't a rendezvous beacon for troops, it is a message that the "owners" are coming. The horseman weren't people, remember? They were seen as artillery. She gave it to me, after she took it."

"Speaking of taking," Norman said. "Have you taken a look at the designated party in question?"

"Of course. Why?" Max said looking back at the table.

The suits around the table had the panicked look of defeat, but Valerie was gone. He looked around the now electrified room flooded with high society's great banquet and wine induced dancing. The flashing strobes disoriented him before he glimpsed a gleam out of the right corner of his eye that looked familiar. Far across the room, Valerie collected her winnings from a booth, and blew a kiss to the boy standing behind the grate. The boy watched her as she walked toward the stairs and past the bitter group who'd lost their money.

Max kept up with her, but left enough distance as to not attract attention. The thought of being recognized or losing her made his skin crawl.

"She's on the move," Max said.

"Has she seen you?" Norman said.

"Well there's the thing about that," Max said.

"And that is?" Norman said.

"I'm not sure," Max answered with a smile.

Max kept walking until he left the casino and found himself on an enclosed walkway that connected the dome to the other side of the city. On the ledge just beyond the glass was a beggar looking inside, covered with filth. Miles below, through the plate glass floor, all along the cliff by the sea, was a large shanty town with small boats and large vessels arriving and setting sail. The largest of them, half the size of the cliff itself and sitting anchored out in the bay, was surrounded by small schools of fishermen, a trail that stretched from the town to the boat itself, like a stepping stone trail. Cranes on all sides lowered nets full of fish down into the water and people jumped from their boats to collect them by hand.

Looking ahead, Max saw Valerie leaving the walkway and stepping onto a platform rising up to an overpass with cars traveling along in huddled groups. Max got onto the next one and forced his way to the front, past thirty people dressed in worn out jackets and pants that had been washed to the point of deteriorated rags, and stood beside a family with gold draped over parts of their body. Valerie sat in a car up ahead, moving along at a slow pace. Max walked out into the street and moved along the cars until finding a cabbie. Getting inside, he handed the driver a wad of currency and spoke to him in Chinese.

“Wait, what was that, Sir?” Norman said thinking he was speaking to him.

“She is on the move, Norman,” Max said. “She is on the move and I’m a few cars away from her.”

“Funny how this works,” Norman said. “I’m curious about the ending.”

“Don’t worry,” Max said. A smile played about his lips. “I’ve got my eye on her and she isn’t going to get away.”

“I’m having a thought here, Max,” he said. “Maybe she isn’t losing anyone, but you are losing her because of an aging tracking ability?”

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” Max said. “But If I can see her then she isn’t worried If she believed she was being followed, then I wouldn’t stand a chance of...”

Valerie’s car pulled to the side of the road. Without thinking, he opened the door of the moving car, and the car screeched to a stop as he stepped out. He ran through the clogged road to amid a roar of frustrated shouts aimed at him. When he arrived inside the teal and white building that loomed over the roads on a tower, he headed towards the words TRANSIT LINE written in Chinese.

“I’m on foot again. Do you have anything Norman, or are you just a spectator at a ball game?” Max said.

“Yes, watch the old Army guys chase down the red head,” Norman said. “We seem to be getting a signal not far from you.”

“And which direction would that signal be coming from?” Max said.

Max passed through hallways and doors not open to the public. He flashed a badge he had been given earlier in the week by the Hong Kong security force to the people inside. On his way through a tunnel he deemed hopeless, a security feed showed a familiar strut, clothed in a white dress with two black streaks along its back. The red head was boarding a train, and Max took off for the platform.

“If I read this right,” Norman began, “she is heading somewhere around the train.”

“Really?” Max said.

“Yes you might want to get on the third one from the.... ugh wait,” Norman said.

Max got onto the platform and chose the train he felt looked the most similar to the one on the monitor. The train was relatively empty given the crowds in the building. The fine blue walls and carpet sparkled in the evening sun as if a large sapphire coated the inside. He felt the train begin to disembark, and he looked at the other two through the window remaining perfectly still.

“Max? I think you might be on the wrong one,” Norman said. “Next time she gives you a transponder, make sure it is one that hasn’t been damaged. Can you hear me?”

“Hello there, young man,” a voice said.

Max turned to Valerie. Her green eyes remained level with his, her chin held high as she walked past him. She stopped as if inviting him to follow.

“Max, who’s talking? Is that her?” Norman said.

“Nothing to worry about,” Max said as he pulled the radio out of his ear and let it dangle on his shoulder.

“Care to join me on a little trip?” Valerie said.

“Certainly,” Max said. “Did you know I was following you?”

“No,” Valerie said as she held up two wine glasses. “I didn’t have a clue,” but a wide smile gave her away.

The two sat at a regal glass table and a waiter brought a bottle of wine. She pulled the bottle close and poured them both a drink. The trains that left the dome traveled at four hundred kilometers an hour.

“Still keeping your gun sights on the right people?” Valerie said.

“I haven’t had to for a long time,” Max said. “There isn’t much reason for a minister to fight in person. War’s all gone and done for me.”

“Even so, the effect that war has on a person can be immense,” She said.

“Everyone but you,” he said. She had the same red hair, the same piercing green eyes, and her porcelain skin held the dew of youth that was apparent even under battle grime all those years ago. Sure, she had dressed herself up, but she was playing a different part. Her body was as strong as the day he met her. Her light lashes that were once a fluttering cloud, were now coated with black mascara and he couldn’t help but watch them as she blinked. Her brows were defined and her lips painted a precise red.

The sprinkling of faint freckles across her face had been blotted out with powder, but she was the same. “You haven’t aged a day.”

“I left time behind the day I became me, so said the experiment,” Valerie said.

“And what have you been doing since the war?”

“Married. Thinking about having a family,” Max said as he laid the photo of Fey on the table and slid it over to Valerie. She picked it up and took a good look before her usual sly smile curled across her face.

“She is too good for you, I am afraid,” Valerie said.

“She never gets enough of hearing that, you’ll be happy to know,” he said.

“I am,” she said. “That is why you are here, isn’t it?”

“Actually it is the situation in the news and the attacks on several....”

“No,” she said. “Spare me all that. We’ll get to that when we arrive at our destination. She is the real reason you’re here. And that is all I need to know. The effect people have on each other is what’s most valuable.”

He leaned back in his chair and let out a laughing sigh of relief. He grabbed the wine glass and took his first sip. It was rich and dry, reminding him of his morning routine. Reminding him of Fey. He watched the land whip by, and the dome giving way to vast small towns that worsened before they became better. Max’s smile faded. He’d met Fey in a place like this. “Was it that easy for you to figure me out?”

“News travels in the both the bright and dark parts of the world,” Valerie said. “A man like you would only be here if it was something that meant the world to you. Fighting sure doesn’t.”

“No, it never did,” Max said. “Never meant much to me at all.”

The towns gave way to country as the train passed by large strips of lush green plants. Max observed the electronic maps on the train ceiling that displayed their location. No stops between the dome and the coast line, which was coming up fast. Small stone structures, hundreds of years old, sat outside the train as it pulled into a small stop.

“Here we are,” Valerie said.

The two got off the train, but Valerie kept her glass and took an occasional sip. Max kept pace with her and enjoyed the pleasant quiet of the area. Faint sounds waves from the ocean and the dull hum of the train as it crossed the land in the distance were the only sounds. Valerie stopped at a withered wall that barely came up to her waist. *It could be a thousand years old*, he thought, *or a product of the wars*. She raised her glass to the vast ocean and held it suspended for a minute before taking a drink. Max didn’t know what the toast was about, or why it mattered but he didn’t ask. Valerie leaned on the wall.

“So, young man, what can I do for you?” she asked.

“Agent Hugh,” Max said as he pulled out a web slip the size of his palm and handed it to her, “Member of the Griffin resistance movement, currently fighting Vigil for control of the American continent. They keep their eyes on the rest of the world as well, in case something comes up that may involve them. Griffin has a mutual interest with Archimedes and sent him in to investigate the attacks. Shortly after the incident in Madagascar, he was rerouted there to see what had happened. According to Griffin, Hugh said he was onto something large, much greater than just a band of guys with a grudge, but never specified.”

“I hate it when people are vague,” Valerie said. “At least when they give you a concrete lie, you have something to work with.”

“Just one week after the attack, Griffin reported that Hugh was missing in action,” he said. “We are worried about the trail going cold, and you are the best one we have for dealing with the unusual and bizarre. Follow his trail, find the agent and we are sure that you will discover what he was onto. The president is prepared to bring you in as a full agent if you desire to comply, and a welcome citizen of Archimedes.”

“More flags and banners, eh young man?” Valerie said.

“That’s the way you want to put it then I can’t stop you,” Max said.

“You haven’t joined as many different groups as I have,” she said. “I’ve met people fighting for and from places that were reduced to ash in a few years. People who I fought for and people I destroyed. Both believed that they were fated to win. As if all of power and creation favored them.”

“Is this regret or remembrance?” he said with a nervous smile. “You may not age, but do cyborgs like you get sentimental?”

“No not at all,” Valerie said. “I was just thinking about this place. Out there was once an island. Well, the rock is still there, but it looked a lot different when I first saw it. It was a fortified instillation before I personally destroyed it. This whole area was a massive encampment for Infinite soldiers. I blew that stronghold on the island from the water. Just before it happened I came face to face with the commander. I’d taken his pistol at some point in the night and he hadn’t noticed. When he went to draw it, I showed it to him across the room. He looked like he would burst into tears.” She smiled and continued, “Just to be a good sport I threw it to the center of the room and told him to go for it.”

“Did he?” Max asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But I got there first. I wanted to look into the eyes of a ranking world conqueror before I pulled the trigger.”

“What did you see?” He let out a small gasp without realizing it as she turned to answer. She was close enough to study every mark, every nuance in her green eyes. He knew she studied him as well.

“I saw a boy who wanted to go home.” She held his gaze. It was rare human moment between the two of them. “I’ll keep this info,” she said, “and I’ll help you.” The moment was gone as he watched her eyes look past him.

She dropped her glass and shoved him aside as a bullet struck her in the chest. Max watched her fall without being able to catch her. He dove to block her from harm as he aimed his pistol at a vast jungle. A muzzle flash from a second shot illuminated the culprit. The bullet grazed along the side of Max’s wrist. He fired off twice in the general area of the shooter and pulled Valerie toward cover.

He didn’t think about the foolishness of his actions, since he was convinced she was already dead. It surprised him when she aimed a large onyx shaded firearm with a very fine barrel at their attacker. Max couldn’t tell if it was the massive recoil from her gun that knocked him down, or he had leapt away for his own safety. The shot dug a trench into the ground and blasted the vegetation some yards away, and granules of black soil rained down on him.

There was an unusual quiet mixed with the scent of freshly dug earth and burnt vegetation. Valerie rose a few feet from him. Max watched in a daze as she walked toward the small crater she had created. Her wound, a hole right through her left collar,

began to seal itself. It became a texture resembling robotic scales, and in an instant it was unblemished skin. The hole in her dress was the only sign that she had been shot.

“That didn’t kill you?” Max asked.

“My death is not the death you will know,” she said standing over the crater. Max could make out the feet of the slain figure. Valerie leaned down and picked up a gun drenched in dirt and ash. Letting it dangle at her side, her grip on the gun tightened until it shattered.

“What is it?” Max said.

“My first guide,” she answered.

“Do you need a transport to Archimedes?”

“Not my port of call, and I already have my own transportation,” Valerie said as she walked past him. In the distance, a jet rose up out of the ocean. It hovered above the water as it approached the coast.

It was an Equinox, a class of plane that carried the Horsemen into battle. Max had only seen pictures of them. The delta swept wings were massive, with four engine sections built inside. The cockpit had the piercing shape of a hawk’s head that ended in a pointed beak. It was a dark silver color that adapted to its surroundings. Max watched in awe as it took on the color of the ground and the vegetation around it, but regained his composure when he realized it headed for them. Valerie didn’t seem concerned, so he waited with her.

The massive machine hung gracefully beside them. It was surprisingly quiet for being so close. A small ramp extended from below the cockpit, and Valerie stepped

inside without a look back. It ascended into the sky and was gone from sight within seconds.

Max studied the body of their attacker. He recognized him as the young man behind the counter at the casino. *Another youth lost in another person's fight*, he thought. A peculiar headset that looked as if part of it was missing lay next to the man. *It must've been what Valerie took*. Max put his own radio piece back in his ear and said, "Norman, get our group up and running, and get down here fast."

"What happened?" Norman said.

"We were attacked."

"Are you injured?" Norman said with a bit of panic in his voice. "What about Valerie? Is she OK?"

Max hesitated before he answered. "We're both fine, and she's agreed to work with us."

"Is she there with you?"

"No, she's already gone," Max said as he studied the sky. "How well have we kept tabs on Infinite splinter groups?"

"I don't know. I'd have to look into it." Norman said. "Why?"

"Thinking I may have missed something." He stared at the kid on the ground.

"Just get a transport here, pronto."

Chapter 3: FORSAKEN

Valerie sat before a med system that scanned her shoulder. The machine was a small arm that attached to a flat module that ended in a crystal line. Inside were two rows of sensors that were designed for cybernetic implants and tissue. Two prongs would extend and retract from the module as a light from the crystal bathed the spot in her collar and went over her shoulders. Projected from an orb in the wall was the inside of her arm. Readouts of her health and the state of her nanobots were projected along with it. The machine gave off a small hum that became a whistle as it finished the scan and went on to a different part of her body. It was the only noise in the still cabin of the Equinox.

At one time, the walls were lined with pods the size of a person. If anyone but a Horseman got inside them, they would die a terrible death. When activated, the pod drove three sharp prods into the agent. Two in the arms, just below the elbows, and the third entered at the base of the neck just above the shoulders. Each entered a focal point for the nanobot's circulation and program centers. Any severe damage, such as limb loss, would be read by the machine and wires from a headset overhead would be linked into the neck. A low electromagnetic wave would pulse through it and trigger the nanobots to go into overdrive as the machine worked to replace the damage. It was not impossible for Valerie to die, but it was very hard.

The wires themselves would send signals to the onboard computer which would then transfer commands directly into their nervous system. It was a med bay and a command center in one. Her generals commanded them even when they slept. The feeling of being plugged into one wasn't too different than the day she, as Valkyrie, was

created. The vision and sensations of the process were a blur, but she remembered being suspended off the ground with feeds connected to her spine and shoulders. Her future teammates were going through the same thing around her. All with the same blank stare, icy eyes and open mouths staring upward into a dark sky. When the plane became hers, she took the pods out first. She dismantled them with her swords.

She looked through the windows at the opposite side of the cabin at the world below. The Equinox was at a steady holding pattern at the edge of the atmosphere. It was a standard tactical position for all Horsemen carriers. They stayed high enough for only the most advanced enemy equipment would pose a threat, yet most enemy troops would be unprepared for them to drop from their holding position to attack.

She would spend hours in orbit with her team, and days on occasion, for the call to attack. Each time was a thrill. It was what she waited for: the moment the plane began to descend, and the earth came up as if it was waiting for her.

When her creators were all dead, killed in nuclear attacks by Infinite, she and her team onboard were left to fight on their own terms. She became a regular detective from planning and being involved in operations. There was rarely time for her and the crew to converse. Not on any recognizably humane level, at least. Valerie looked away from the medical readouts and to the spot that once had been Gabriel's pod. She spoke with him more than any other Horseman. He'd been there when she came out from the procedure and went through a similar journey on adjusting to being a cyborg. There was one day during the war, she couldn't place when, that they talked in a helicopter as they looked out over a sprawling battle and watched the troops mobilize.

“It really is something isn’t it?” Gabriel said with a laugh. “Just look at them all. They’ll be gone and we will still be here. Successors. The only lives that matter.”

Valerie had the same talks with him and the crew as the war dragged on. But by the time the Horsemen creators were dead, more than half the cabin was empty. Gabriel was among the last to die, survived only by six other teammates including Valerie. She didn’t know how to take the silence at first. The quietness of the plane came across as a swift reprieve from their talks. She still felt empty when thought of Gabriel and the others.

The clicking sound of the med bot folding into the wall woke Valerie from her thoughts and she headed toward the wall behind the cockpit. A plate compartment slid open and a small shelf extended outward. Valerie pulled out the small weapon she used on shore and took it apart. She laid out its power source, barrel, and ammo cartridges in front of her. Her railgun from days long gone was now more than just a blunt instrument. With all the bells and whistles removed, it finally became more precise and ironically less complicated.

By nature of being a Horseman, she was the only one strong enough to hold the gun and withstand the force of firing it. Any other person would shatter their arm. The nano fibers in her palms would absorb all the excess energy from the exposed power source. Energy that would take any other person’s hand clear off.

As she reassembled the components and looked over her old body armor for damage, Valerie slid the web slip from Max into a computer in the center of the room. The screen flared with information from Griffin and Archimedes: readouts about location, attacks and parties believed to be involved. Valerie ignored that section,

knowing that the perceived parties would have nothing to do with the attacks. It carried with it a certain lack of stating the obvious. Something to be expected from Intel that was intentionally misleading.

“Computer,” Valerie said, as she finished putting together her railgun, “patch me through to Maxwell.”

“Who is this?” Max said, his voice resonating throughout the cabin.

“Who knew your encrypted number?” a voice said.

“Is this Norman I have the pleasure of addressing as well?” Valerie said.

“Uhm, yes. Yes it is,” Norman said.

“You can rest easy, this number was included in the info your man gave me,” Valerie said.

“Oh,” Norman said. “It is an honor to be speaking to...someone such as you.”

“Keep that to yourself. This isn’t a date,” Valerie said. “Is this all the data you have?”

“For the moment,” Max said. “We were hoping you would have some suggestions by now, and that you’d be on your way to Madagascar with some notion of agent Hugh’s whereabouts.”

“No,” Valerie began, “if he is still alive he isn’t there. There would be little sense in sticking around an area you’ve attacked. You can bet that if he is alive, his captors have long since moved on.”

“What do you suggest?” Norman said.

Valerie pulled the suit of armor off the rack and began putting it on as she tapped on the command console. “These areas all share ties with Infinite,” Valerie began. “But

none of them were ever more than occupied territories, with little to no governing involvement. Areas such as these were used as testing grounds, manufacturing, or intelligence facilities. Places that people have long since demolished or built over. The gradual increase in deaths in each attack were simply a side effect of how many people were living in the area.”

“How are you gaining all of this?” Max said.

“I’ve had my computer do some extra digging in Griffin’s database,” Valerie said, “Equinox’s decryption system is unmatched as I have found in the past.”

“That is a breach of an allied security,” Norman said.

“The words ‘Hugh was on to something big’ is not exactly helpful intel work,” Valerie said. “And by their own admission, Griffin doesn’t exist. It can hardly be said I hacked someone that isn’t real.” Valerie brought up images of the devastation from each attack as she pulled up more data from the computer. “Besides, I’ve heard of some of these places during the war. The complex in Madagascar, the empty massive outpost the citizens converted into a town? That was once a military communication’s array. For what, even I don’t know. Infinite abandoned it after they lost the last of their nuclear launch fields. I was diverted to the front and the free nation resistance took back control of the country.”

“That does give us something to go on,” Max said.

“Yes,” Norman said. “Now, these attacks look more surgical. With an intentional and decisive motive behind them. Spreading terror could only be a means of diversion. But what of the most recent attack? Eight hundred people?”

“By Griffin’s command,” Valerie said, listening to an audio recording on the computer. “Our missing agent was to intercept a suspected Infinite splinter group investigating the land surrounding the coast of Madagascar. I’m willing to wager that this communication array was more sophisticated than thought. Pity I wasn’t invited to the revolution. I would’ve been more thorough. My guess is that Hugh stumbled upon someone in a hurry and they didn’t have enough time to make a clean getaway.”

“Our boogie man is somebody looking for something,” Max said.

“We need to figure out what,” Norman said. “Would there be any way to conduct a thorough search of the base remains?”

“I’m not even looking into that,” Valerie said. “I’m looking into the mini assassin.”

“Our young visitor?” Max said.

“Yes,” Valerie said. “My plane has been working on a retrace for the signal for some time now. I feel that if we follow his transmissions we’ll find his superiors and get a jump on their next plans.”

“So you’re convinced that he had a big part in the same group that attacked a week ago?” Max said.

“I’ve seen enough Infinite puppeteer headsets to know what one looks like,” she replied. “Even if it was disguised.”

A silence fell on the cabin. The entire time she had been talking to Norman and Max she could make out faint chatting among their subordinates in the background. This time there was nothing. Valerie was not there but she could feel the intensity of the

silence. She pictured the looks on their faces and imagined how it must feel for them to know that Infinite had returned.

“Come now, gents,” she said. “Now’s hardly the time to get scared of ghosts. Now that we know Infinite is running the show, it should make it much smoother to decipher what it is they are after.”

“You’re right,” Max said. “What’s the frequency of the transmission? Can you give us the exact one you are searching?”

“I’d rather not give you an exact,” Valerie said. “Too much interaction with the frequency will set off an internal trigger, shutting it down completely. Infinite has a failsafe transmitter system, assuming they still use it. I’m sending you a distorted one that can be filled in by your own hacking team.” Valerie watched a black screen with a straight censor line across it. A blip of static sent a faint ripple through it like movement on top water.

“Have you found it yet?” Valerie said.

“It is very faint,” Max said.

“Triangulating the signal now,” Valerie said. An outline of the Western Hemisphere appeared behind the line across the screen. She watched the line, but it remained motionless.

“Do we have anything yet on your end?” Norman said.

“No,” she said.

“How long does this usually take?”

“My computer has been at it since I found it,” Valerie said.

“So we have no telling of when or where it will ever activate again,” he said.

“Found something,” Max said. “Do you see it, Valkyrie?”

“Yes, young man,” Valerie said looking at her screen. The wave was rocking off the charts, and she heard voices amidst the static. Yet one signal repeated itself every three seconds. A coded transmission that people wouldn’t understand.

“What is that noise?” Max said.

“It is a meta data cypher,” Valerie said. “Only cyborgs can pick it up.”

“What is it saying?” Max said.

“Trimurti,” Valerie said.

Trimurti was the capital of the Ocean commonwealth, standing on the remains of Malaysia. The nation was made up of Thailand, China, and much of the Indonesian islands. It explained why agents would be scattered throughout that part of the world.

“That’s the destination, then,” Norman said.

“Agent Valkyrie,” Max began, “keep analyzing the transmissions and get over there immediately. We will be on our way as soon as we have backup enforcement from Archimedes.”

“Be careful who you bring with you, young man,” Valerie began. “We wouldn’t want another incident like the one we just went through.”

“The further away from you I am right now, the better my chances of making it without being attacked,” Max said.

“That assassin wasn’t for me Max,” Valerie said. “He was for you.” She waited but there was no reply. “The first half of the meta data cypher mentioned you by name. And how the attempt was foiled by a third party. How shrill and dull a description of me. Yet you and Griffin were right to assume that this has to do with Archimedes.”

“Understood, contact us when you have an update,” Max said. “Archimedes
gunship out.”

“Flags and banners,” Valerie said under her breath. “This banner will stay under
this time.”

Chapter 4: TRIMURTI

Valerie programed the Equinox autopilot to keep at a holding pattern just at the outskirts of the city. The plane was made of an alloy designed shortly after the war began that negated radar tracking, but she kept it high and out of sight as well. Max and Norman were on their way with a security squad as their assault team. Once at the city they were to follow the signal step by step. She made it within two hundred miles of Trimurti before the signal began to fade.

It was then that she picked up a new signal that wasn't on the radio transmitter. It was faint, and barely noticeable, but intimidating nonetheless. It was an interference wave created by a specific gamma generation. Valerie knew this would be the only thing that could create a blip strong enough to disrupt a cyborg meta cypher. A generation that strong could only be done with a tritium based fusion material, weapons grade. Valerie was sure that all weapons grade nuclear materials had been used up during the war, or dismantled. The signature shouldn't have existed, and yet it was there. She made it the rest of the way on a private boat she rented with an elderly driver. He wanted to know where they were going and she told him to take her to the Ghost town.

Valerie watched an antenna drift by in the water that once had once sat atop a building at some point in time. She gazed into the water, at the shapes floating by. A few scraps of rusted metal that once had been a cannon drifted by as a hallowed out shell, the inside contained two oxygen tanks that connected to a tube under the water. Further below the water were two divers collecting fish from a net they set up, tied along the roof of a skyscraper that had sunk beneath the sea. Dozens more, dotted the sea floor, some of

them, a haven for crooks and gamblers, still had power. Once this area was known as the suspended city.

This whole section was built over the water and stretched for miles out. Infinite poured generations of work into this place, then everything changed when the war began. The resident authority in the day was a man named Bryan. He had been a top standing member for decades and he witnessed what no one in Infinite expected, most of his land rebelled against him.

It was a surreal sight to see buildings reflect off of the water and the lights among outlines of real buildings deep underneath the same water. The tallest of the buildings beneath the waves peaked anywhere from thirty to forty feet out of the water, and the riverfront portion of Trimurti turned it into a river town, a labyrinth of small bridges, walkways and boat docks. Every few yards in the water stood a new pair of building tops connected by a makeshift wood and metal neighborhood. Blank and detached faces peaked out of windows and atop the structures as Valerie passed by on a small boat with the driver behind her. They all would've been the children and grandchildren of the people who once fought here.

The fighting here was so vicious that it contributed to putting half the city beneath the sea, something apparent on the riddled sides of the skyscrapers both above and beneath the waves. When Bryan was overthrown this area became one of the fought over areas in the hemisphere during the war.

Valerie pieced together her gun as the man watched her work. Valerie turned and looked at him. He had a scarred face with deep cuts above his eyelid and a place on his chin where he might have once been shot. He was the same age as Valerie, yet they

couldn't have looked more different. The boat drifted further away from the towns as the buildings went deeper into the water and they drew closer to the hillside that overlooked both parts of the town. Lights still dotted some of the buildings from deep down. Valerie pulled out the piece of the headset and held it close to a web slip tied back to her plane's computer. The signal appeared once more. That is where she needed to go.

Valerie turned to the middle of the boat where a small dive mask and oxygen tank she purchased from the old man sat. She put it on and sealed the headset piece and scanner on the inside of the bubble that was the helmet. The old man asked her if she wanted him to wait for her. She handed him a sealed pipe with a massive stack of gold inside. Valerie took that gold in the earliest days of the war, and now he'd have more use for it than the wealthy miser that had it.

Valerie dove into the water and the boat drifted in the other direction. The slow pace seemed to suggest that the old man was thinking about what he would do now with the option. The sight of freedom and peace of mind was instantly recognizable to Valerie, as she almost never saw it anymore.

Lights from bedrooms and rooftop ballrooms glowed and beamed in her helmet glass. Valerie passed everything from a wedding and a gambling center to a man making love to two women in a greenhouse. After a while all the lights were gone and she was swimming among the blank haunted husks and shells that once held life. Then in the distance she saw a different kind of light. Tiny and hard to see. It was a light coming from a diving helmet. The transmitter in her diving mask went crazy with clicks and small jumbled messages. None of them distinguishable. More of them appeared inside the

buildings among a massive intersection. Beyond them the road was coated with rubble that ended with the outline of a tunnel.

Suddenly the connection in her helmet came alive and conversations, though a garbled mess, were coming through the headset she took from the assassin who attacked her and Max in Hong Kong. The closer she swam to the building at the left side of the street, the more the cluttered messages dissipated. In that moment several more lamp lights flickered in the windows and Valerie knew where she needed to go.

Valerie swam over the top of the building, following debris as to not arouse suspicion if spotted and then she flowed down a massive square vent into an open massive hallway. She moved about the hallway until coming to a staircase which she drifted down while keeping an eye on each entrance for the off chance that someone might be in sight.

When down to the basement area, a massive amount of lights flickered in unison through the stairwell and Valerie froze. When they dimmed she peeked through the window at the sight of seven men floating around a device suspended on what looked like a crate. One of the men finished tapping at a pad he held in his hands and the building itself began to tremble. The floor in front of them split open in a haze of oxygen bubbles. Valerie entered the room and the two closest men squirmed as she shoved both of their heads together and broke their necks. She took their oxygen tanks and crushed the faces of the other two. When looking down into the massive crack in the building floor, Valerie saw a platform that was connected to an elevator. It began to lower as she took the crate with her.

The platform took some time in lowering. An undeniable result of being down here long enough for the building to sink to the bottom of the bay. When it reached a stop it did so with a loud screech as the clamps that were designed to hold the platform in place fought against a half collapsed wall to lock it into place. The water level lowered as the crate landed in the center of the platform. She waited until it was down to her waist before she removed her helmet, and then took the scanner off and put it back on her armor.

As she latched it back on she heard a chirp in the device that suggested someone was waiting on the other side of the plate door in front of her. It opened and three gunmen entered the chamber, their jolted expression told Valerie that they weren't expecting her. The middle gunman went for his rifle, but not before Valerie drove two plasma swords into his chest.

"Beg your pardon, but I forgot to bring wine," she said.

Valerie tossed the body into the guard on her left as she pivoted and drove one blade into the mouth of the other. The third man was just getting up as Valerie leapt off the ground and landed knees first on his head. She drove the other blade into his throat for good measure. "Thank you for making a lady feel welcome, gents," she said.

She moved beyond the platform and into a large concrete chamber that stood at about three stories. It was an imposing atrium with three levels and an elevator at the far side of the bottom level. The particular metal sheen of the doors were jarring to look at when compared to the withered greenish gray concrete of the atrium walls. The longer she looked at them she swore that the room was shifting, like a house swaying in the wind.

At that moment another guard came into view one level below her. Valerie crouched down and hid behind a stone square column as she etched her way toward an opening in the wall. She jumped down on him, driving a plasma blade right between his shoulders, and hid his body amid the other columns. In that moment, the sound of a heart flat-lining filled the makeshift scanner she had acquired. An alarm system when key members are killed. More will be coming, any second now, and she had to hurry.

Valerie jumped down to the ground level, charged for a small hallway that curled around to the side of the elevator and kept an eye over her shoulder at the columns and the upper floors. The walls were too ragged from this angle to make out if there were other doorways. She counted seconds in her head to when she'd start hearing them approach, and her muscles tensed for the coming ambush. Moment by moment the days of war came back to her and it was if nothing ended, and nothing changed.

Then she came to a dip in the hallway. The walls narrowed and the floor dipped into a v in front of a large metal doorway. When she approached it, the door opened and she leapt into the room with her railgun drawn and a new sword flaring behind her back. The room was empty, save for a handful of computer console all facing a single screen that stretched the length of the left wall. No other exits to be seen. The only way in was behind her. She positioned herself at the far end of the right wall and sat behind a console.

The console was a classic Infinite design. No buttons to be found, only a projection field monitor. When the personnel assigned to this device used it, they would make a connection through a cybernetic connection. They wore them on their wrists, and a wire would insert itself into the device which would fuse into the bloodstream. A

projection of the computer interface would appear and the mental focus of the user would work the machine. Valerie placed her slip connecting to the Equinox computer on her wrist and held it inside the oval opening.

“Hack,” Valerie said.

A light from the Equinox slip scanned the inside of the device and its outer layer twisted like the tops of a Russian doll. The projection of the database appeared in the air just beneath the computer screen and she mentally navigated the system.

As Valerie worked the controls, the screen on the far wall came alive. Only an image of patchy half working static, but the computers around her came alive and a map appeared on the screen in front of her. A grid of numbers appeared over it and changed with each second. A trajectory line traced along the Asian continent and continued until it rounded about the east coast of the American continent and crossed across the Atlantic.

“A communications array?” she said.

The design of the compute felt familiar, yet the view was bizarre. Then she realized that these were orbital trajectory patterns from a specific device. Had they found something in orbit that they lost in the war? She pulled her wrist out from the console and tapped at the pad on her wrist, opening a communications line.

“Young man, Max, I’ve found what looks like....” Before she could finish the screen on the far wall went black and a beeping curser appeared. Letters and numbers fell along it in a waterfall before coming to the center of the screen. They formed a single line of letters and numbers that were in constant shift, until they stopped at a simple, but clear message.

Step into the next room. Let’s talk.

The communications device in her wrist didn't function properly anymore. The computers around the room shut down one by one. She got one last look at the data in front of her before her system went down too. The door remained open as the lights shut off, and the message still remained. No wonder they weren't coming, they wanted to see what she was up to. To gauge the extent of their enemy, they had to know what she was after. No use in playing it quiet anymore. Valerie made her way to the door as a sly smile curled across her face. She gave one last glance to the screen before she walked out of the room and headed back along the hallway.

"Hope you're ready to talk," Valerie said.

She made her way up a winding staircase before coming out into an atrium almost exactly like what she had entered from. Behind her was the elevator and above was another massive screen. In front of her, however, was a set of computer consoles as opposed to the blank room before. As she made her way toward one console three men appeared, all of them wearing a thick pack on their backs and commander armor.

Two stood at the edge of the second level, looking down at her just behind a metal hand rail with machine pistols pointing at her, and the third was on the ground floor. He stood with a smile on his face and never broke eye contact with Valerie. Over a dozen armed men in helmets stepped out from behind the columns at all three levels. Valerie held her hands out and her railgun pointed upward.

"Come closer," the ground commander said.

Valerie made her way past the consoles and toward the group of soldiers. When she was part way to the commander he held up his palm and she stopped. His eyes shifted

upward to the wall behind her. A deep voice resonated through the room with the sound of a large screen turning on.

“So it is true,” the voice said.

Valerie turned to the large screen behind her. The picture was intentionally faded and dark. She couldn’t see any features on the tall man talking on the screen, just his small glowing red pupils that were clearly mechanical.

“Giants do still walk the earth,” he said.

“Pardon me, but have we met?” Valerie said.

“Oh I think you would remember if we had,” he replied.

“Don’t be so sure, sweetie,” Valerie said. “So do you have a name or are you just the only channel on that screen?”

“I am many things, and have once lived by another name,” the man said, “but one thing I am above all is a doctor. And you can call me Viper.”

“Dr. Viper?” Valerie said. “Charmed. Now, are you going to come talk to me like you said in your message?”

“I am afraid not, my beauty,” he said. “As much as I would love to spend time with a Horsemen, I must deal with much more heavenly matters. I’m afraid this is as far as you come in my affairs. But I wouldn’t miss your final fight for all the power in the world.”

Valerie turned her attention back to the troops just as the three commanders floated into the air. The armor on their chest shifted and glowed as their speed and movement changed. Gyro jet packs. Their field of vision would stay level no matter the turbulence or distress. The commander flew at her in full speed.

“You’ll never see me.” Before he finished, she brought her blade to his face and he flew through it at full power. She held it steady as it went all the way through. Valerie could only assume what words he would have used to finish his sentence.

“Sure,” Valerie said.

“Shite!” the other two commanders said, and broke off in separate directions in the air. They took aim, but Valerie created two shields as she charged for the group in front of her. The commanders opened fire first. Bullets shattered around the shields as she jumped from the ground and imbedded a soldier’s head in the wall with a kick. She flipped backwards and implanted her sword in the skull of an attacker behind her. When she landed on her feet she pulled the sword out and at the same time tossed his body at a gunman. It was enough to throw him off. She charged and drove the blade into his heart as the other body bounced off of him. She turned back to the screen. Viper stood as still as a statue and stared at her.

The men around the room hesitated before one threw a grenade at her, and the rest resumed firing. When the grenade came close enough, she kicked it to the center of the room. There was a mass lunge for safety, and she went for cover behind a column along with two of her enemies. It was unfortunate they had forgotten there was a battle still in process. She sliced both of their heads clean off before they could protest. She threw one at the man who had tossed the grenade at her, hitting him square in the forehead. But the explosion was what knocked him to the ground.

Small chunks of concrete landed on his body, and more settled on the ground before he she watched him struggle to get back up. She knew that part of his struggle was the room actually was leaning and the ceiling of the atrium was crumbling.

What made this chamber different was that there was a small plate shield that looked outward. Rubble from the smashed buildings sat above it. There was a group gathered on the ledge behind the two commanders who floated in the air. Valerie stood with her plasma sword and shield ready for a whole new battle.

“Go on,” one commander said. “Show us what you’re made of. Bring it, bitch.”

Valerie threw her plasma sword at the commander and hit him dead center in the chest. His gyro pack made an almost suicide flight and slammed him to the ground. It sputtered and died still attached to his feet. The plasma sword, without her mental guidance, became a pile of superheated plasma that melted through the center of his body. His dead stare showed as much as anyone’s how shocked he was at the swiftness of her attack.

“Screw this,” Valerie said, as she pulled out her railgun, pointed at the ceiling and emptied the clip.

The plate shattered and the concrete flew away in massive chunks. Gallons of water poured into the chamber and flooded what looked like a makeshift swimming pool. Valerie formed two new swords as she crouched low and submerged herself in the rising water. The remaining troops fired wildly at her, but she dragged them under. In a matter of moments half the men in the chamber were dead and the remaining troops frantically threw grenades. She emerged from the water in a spinning fury, carving limbs from their bodies. The explosions rocked the building and the columns began to collapse. Sections of wall came down on them as Valerie thrashed through Viper’s men.

The commander clung to the walls and tried to find an escape route, but was caught by a stray rock that sent him into the water. He came up only to find the entire

room was under water. He watched as Valerie swam to him, and he pressed himself against the wall as if his body would somehow break through. She smiled as she stabbed him between the eyes. He was the last enemy in the room. She pulled a diving mask from the side of his armor. Even underwater and surrounded by the floating troops, Viper's laughter was unmistakable.

"Magnificent," He said. "You are indeed what legends are made of. The world is a much brighter place in my eye with you in it. This has been a touching meeting, but I must bring it to an end. I would ask you to stop interfering with my affairs, yet I believe you would ignore my wishes." She held the stolen breathing mask to her face and waited. "My generators will see you die right away. Seeing you has made me feel alive again. Goodbye."

The same blip that Valerie heard from the inside of her jet was now radiating through the water. It was a high-pitched ringing that wouldn't stop. She thought back to the device in the elevator shaft and looked for a quick exit. The rubble had crashed its way through the opening and buried many of the soldier bodies. The dead commander she had stabbed through the head was still floating upright, his functioning gyro pack still attached. Even in water, the devices were strong.

Valerie swam up to his body and pried the pack off his body before swimming through the opening. She didn't know how far she'd have to go to reach the surface of the water, but she prepared herself for a long climb.

A blue light from within the building grew, as did the high pitched sound. The building began to collapse inward. Valerie torpedoed herself upward until she was sure

she was out of the path of destruction. Once clear she hovered above the debris below that clanked and tumbled into a pile of destruction.

She spotted a massive object speed away in the distance. Its outline resembled a hover transport she'd seen in the past. It was shaped like a large brick with a dish poking out of the side of its frame. It headed away from the city as it drew nearer to the surface.

Valerie went after it at top speed. It was within touching distance before it left the water completely and she began to lose it. Then, she felt a strain on her pack, as if something had snagged her under the water. She reached around and felt a net that was being drug along by the hovercraft's outer hull. It must have been snagged when it attempted its getaway. Valerie killed the gyro engine clung to the net as she left the water. For a moment, it threatened to come loose, but she swung around and hooked herself onto the transport hull by lodging a sword into the metal.

As the city drifted out of sight, control to her wrist communicator returned and she realized what the data was she'd seen in the submerged base. Everything except one stream of numbers was useless. They were ones that she had seen before. It was a specific set of coordinates. Noah, they were going after Noah.

Chapter 5 NOAH

The gentle rain clouded the sky and blanketed the horizon in an endless flow. Energy from the relays throughout the compound bathed the haze in a bright white light. Droplets from the mist tickled along the metal and echoed through the long walkways. Samson was getting ready for an inspection and walked on thin polymer plating that sat over the metal and allowed people to walk over it without being fried. He rounded the corner of the corridor, and looked out on what resembled a snake's body. The winding metal paths led to rows of diamond shaped relay collectors. Their granite texture stood out even in the rain. All were lined up like corn rows before a pyramid structure that opened at its summit. The imposing outline was visible even now.

All of this was the harvester for the Noah orbital platform. All the work of several years under Infinite, but was now being refurbished to be put to use for the greater good.

"Looks good from my end," Samson said.

"Not likely," the inspector chief said through his earpiece. "There's some hands-on work you gotta get up close to do. It's what you're here for."

"Listen, Scotty," Samson said. "We've been through this. What? Maybe three times now, and each time I run the systems check for the communication signals. Everything is fine."

"Then there is no other reason for the transmission for the security coms and alert systems to keep shorting out. Unless of course, you aren't doing your job," the inspector said.

“Oh no problems there sir,” Samson replied. “I’ll be right on it again and it’ll be no different and all that time spent will just show the board that you like to spin gears for your amusement.”

“Three times in a week or two I can understand with all the restoring and rebuilding we are doing,” the inspector said. “But three times in one day? That is something I can’t ignore like you.”

“Switch to decaf,” Samson said as he wiped a smudge off his face in the reflection on the metal. He made his way to the end of the walkway and entered the service lift. It took him into the base of the head security outpost. It was a winding spire that branched outward from the main power structure. Samson turned to watch the water disappear behind a sheet of solid steel padded by several layers of concrete and polymer.

The smell of hot metal and cutting fluid intensified as the elevator moved downward and a faint strobe grew from below. The heat from the chamber caused the cool ocean air to vanish. Workers were busy rerouting equipment. Samson couldn’t stand loud noises, less when he was working, but the noise from the welders was within a manageable range. Still, he couldn’t help but think of how he would prefer to work in the electrical and programming side, instead of being an egghead engineer.

The gated panel opened as the service elevator stopped. Samson stepped out and waved at his fellow employees with only marginal interest. Some were people he’d seen this morning and again in the afternoon, all doing the same or new tasks. *One damn thing after another*, he thought as he stood before a large black column embedded in the wall at the end of the hall. Off to the side, was a long staircase leading up into the security station. All along its frame was a grid pattern that glowed with electrical light. Faint rays

from the sun, peering from behind the clouds in the sky, fine needles of light lingered on the walls all along the staircase. Last time Samson thought, last time right at this station. No more tedious tasks.

The screen displayed a symbol, and in the center was a prompt that read PLEASE ENTER COMMAND KEY, and underneath was a line of numbers. Samson said the numbers out loud as he typed in the code.

The grid surrounding the column came alive in a red glow, and it separated into three panels that stretched and made a large banner above him and to his sides. Lines of numbers and letters streamed like a river in front of him. Samson tapped at the screen, the stream stopped and the prompt returned.

“Begin system scan and retrace?” Samson read aloud. “I don’t know why, but I might as well get something going in this relationship. Especially, if I have to do this all day.”

He typed the data into the console again. Samson opened his mouth in agony as a sudden loud static sound filled his earpiece. His hand cupped his ear.

“Stop shouting in my ear,” he said. “I’m getting through it now!”

The system trace stopped along with the stream of data. The screen went black, but just as he tapped on his earpiece the symbol reappeared in the center of the black screen.

“You might want to get down here and take a look at this,” he said, but there was no reply. “Hello? You there?” A hiss in the earpiece grew louder as the occasional shout pierced through the static. Most of the erratic words were from people he did not recognize. The building around him began to tremble.

The words, “Unidentified aircraft attacking...” came through his earpiece loud and clear but were cutoff before the phrase ended. Even so, the message was clear. The chamber went dark as massive tremors shook the area and he grabbed for something to steady himself in the darkness.

“What was that?” a worker called out.

“Does anyone know what’s going on?” shouted another.

An explosion preceded another tremor and shook them to the ground. Samson saw light and rushing water roll into the corridor from the service elevator. “Everybody run!” Samson yelled as he charged to the stairwell on his end of the hall.

He could hear the sound of the others making their way up the winding spire, but he did not look back to see if any fell behind. Cracks formed in the walls as sections of concrete and steel fell into the rising water around them. They reached the surface and the water was no longer a threat.

Rising smoke trails dotted the compound, the stark black contrasted against the sunbathed compound. Samson watched a security guard guiding about thirty people to a tram. Some were making their way to evacuation boats. Samson started to follow, but stopped when he saw three objects rise from the ocean and shoot into the sky. He knew right away that they were missiles. Part of him hoped that they were heading away, but as he expected, they arched at their highest point in the sky and flew at the compound in what seemed to be an accelerated speed. He only had a chance to yell, “Get down!” before they hit.

The impact flung Samson on his back and an intense wave of hot air flowed over him. He waited to die while trying not to breathe in the sulfur laden air. When he didn’t,

he brushed fragments off his cut body, and stood. Some of the others around him hadn't fared as well. Broken glass and polymer lay on top and around the dead and wounded. The security guard, covered in glass and cuts, pulled a person from debris as others rose from the ground to help him.

Samson stood on his two feet just as he felt something cold press against the center of his back. His heart raced and his fists tightened.

"Turn around with your hands up," a voice said.

Samson turned to face a cybernetic mask with glowing golden eyes. At the base of the jaw and the center of the nose was a black material designed to resemble snake fangs. The creature stepped aside and revealed a line of armored troops, all wearing the same mask. The mass divided rank, and a broad shouldered man in a white lab coat stepping out from behind them. A streak of gray started at his coat tails and ran across his chest and shoulders. Samson did not recognize the uniform of the army or the man who stood in front of him. It didn't matter to Samson that the man's pale face was covered in large glowing wires, and a blue light in them branched out from the central connection at the back of his head. He would have been formidable no matter what he looked like.

The man stepped in front of Samson and stared into his eyes. Samson had a hard time keeping focused. The terror running through him from the bombing and the glossy texture of this enemy's face so close to his felt surreal. Then the stranger reached out to Samson's uniform and examined his patch. The stranger's hands were covered in a mechanical glove with a grid pattern.

"Engineer," the stranger said.

He inched his pointer finger closer to Samson's jaw and held his gaze.

“I am Viper,” he said as a tear streamed down Sampson’s face. He wanted to wipe it away, but dared not move his hands from above his head.

Samson glanced at the soldier who now held the gun to his head. The soldier watched Viper, waiting for a signal.

“No,” Viper said, “I like this one. He’ll do.”

The soldier lowered his weapon and Viper walked past Samson. Samson watched Viper, standing like a bullet, hands held together behind his back, as he observed the survivors. All of them stood around the wounded as the security guard inched farther out, shielding them from Viper’s sight. Viper didn’t flinch as he walked away and threw up one palm.

“Not these,” Viper said.

Three of Viper’s troops separated from rank and took aim. Samson shut his eyes as they opened fire, but each shot made his body jerk. When he opened them again, Viper smiled in front of him. He raised a fist and said, “Clean house.” All but the three gunmen disappeared throughout the base.

Samson felt the metal grip of Viper on his shoulder push him through the corridor, and the gunmen followed. “You will take me to operations,” Viper said as they waded across dead bodies.

Samson moved in a daze. Moments passed in clippings from a film filled with disbelief. They made their way to the landing platform which had remained untouched. They boarded a massive hover jet with bat like wings, and he watched smoke rising all across the base. They circled the compound until Samson pointed out the location Viper requested on a map. Gunfire resonated even up at their elevation. Samson thought of the

people he saw every day. He needed to believe it wasn't real, but he watched Viper show the location to the pilot.

“Roger, North West vector,” the pilot said.

“Tell Behemoth to dock there with us,” Viper said. “Have their team standing by.”

When the plane landed on the platform a massive hover craft lingered near an open dock where groups of soldiers and two mechs walked onto the base. The mechs drubbed heavy cutting equipment and a crane with wheels.

The three troops went into the compound. Gunshots and screams hung heavy in what seemed to be silence. He walked ahead of Viper and the soldier who still held him at gunpoint. He had to step over the bodies of guards. He didn't look at them, but he knew every one of them. They met up with Viper's men in front of a large metal door. The engravings at the sides, melding with the blue steel wall were part of an extensive locking mechanism.

Viper pulled up the digital map and the map was replaced by an outline of the door schematics. Samson noticed the golden eyes on the troops flicker as symbols flashed on the tablet. Then they raised their guns back at him.

“Would you kindly?” Viper said, pointing to the console beside the door.

Death that was only a few minutes old swelled up in his throat, and he thought of those to die behind the door. This time their deaths would be on his hands too. The guard shoved him forward with his gun. It was all that was needed, but he fought tears as his fingers tapped on the console.

“Both doors,” Viper said.

A whimpering sound escaped Samson, which he wished he could have kept hidden, and he finished his task. The doors opened to a room filled with men and women wearing lab coats and uniforms. The guards posted inside fired wildly at Viper's men, but they were no match for the trained soldiers. All guards were dead within seconds of the doors opening. Viper clutched Samson's shoulder and they walked into the room together.

"Greetings," Viper began, "my fellow intellectuals who strive for answers that will benefit mankind. This is your moment."

Viper pressed on Samson's shoulder until he was on his knees. Samson watched him pace in front of the people who looked back at him. Viper eyed them as he had done Samson. One scientist, an elderly man, eyed the gunmen in a daze, stood up slowly. Viper stepped in front of him, a sly smile curled across his face.

"I know what you are," the elder said, "I know what all of you are. All of you."

"Yes," Viper said. "You are the age. What were you, thirty? Thirty one, when the war began?"

The old man stared like a child reliving a dark secret. The eyes of a person who had someone ripped from them.

"You need not worry," Viper laughed. "We're not enemies. Infinite's ideology has no place in this new world. Make no mistake there is a new world on the horizon. A fresh start for the trampled and the triumphant. Both will be even now." Viper looked back at Samson. "You know why I brought this man here? He led me to you. He obeyed when others were killed, and died trying to help one another." Samson hung his head. "He is here," Viper continued "because he recognizes superiority. He knows that none

other than I can convince this world of the direction it needs to go. I am a man that the world has forgotten, that even Infinite forgot, but I am a conqueror. Join me, all of you, and I will let you take a taste of true conquest.”

“You’re not a world power or a leader,” the elder said fumbling in his lab coat. “You’re a cancer. And you and all your kind should’ve stayed in hell.”

He had a gun pointed at Viper, but before he fired, Viper swatted it out of his hands. He grabbed the old man by the throat and pulled him close.

“No, I’m venomous.” Viper said. The metal coils along Viper’s hands peeled back and the room became hot. A bright flash and a popping sound filled the room and when the strobe subsided, the old man was a charred mass convulsing on the ground.

Samson dove for the gun and leapt to his feet with the barrel pointed at Viper.

“Turn around and look at me,” Samson said.

None of the troops around Viper reacted. They just stared at him as Viper turned his head towards Samson who thumbed back the hammer on the gun. Viper threw up his palm and another flash flew from Viper and struck Samson in the arm. He dropped the gun and saw the finger bones poke through as his hand melted away. It hadn’t reached his brain until then, and he started screaming. The pain rippled across his body and he fell over limp on the floor. Viper spoke as Samson cuddled his arm.

“Fortunately, as a contingency, I have calculated the necessary number of you to detain in the event that you all fail to cooperate,” Viper said. “Exactly ninety percent of you will die.”

“We have the transmitter,” a robotic voice that entered the room said.

“Perfect. Execute,” Viper said.

Burst of gunfire and the heavy beating of boots echoed through the room. Samson rolled up into a ball in the middle of it all. He felt the cold metal hand of Viper curl around the top of his head. It was the last thing he felt.

Chapter 6 BEHEMOTH

The hovercraft had left Trimurti far behind and the sun had set. Valerie sheered an opening in the side of the submerge tanks of the hovercraft. Her plan was to make the hole small enough for no one to notice, yet big enough for her to fit inside. If the craft tried to submerge with her in the tank, she was going to cleave the whole thing open and carve her way inside the hull. If she had to sink the craft vessel while inside, so be it. Until then, she needed to know Viper's plans. She would only strike if she had to.

The vessel came to an unexpected stop, and the sprays of water stopped. Instead of the expected quiet, Valerie was almost thrown off from the blasts of guidance thrusters launched from its side. She wasted no time and carved her way inside between the jarring explosions.

Once inside, she crawled along the overhead vents until she could see a hallway below her. It led to the cargo bay, her first stop. Valerie removed a grate and hung onto the side of the opening as she slowly let her body down. She dropped when she was as close to the floor as possible. Her intent was not to make a sound, but the metal floors reverberated when she hit. Tensed and ready to strike, she held her crouching position in the middle of the hallway. She waited for someone to check on the noise.

When no one appeared, she squat walked along the metal wall, under the bay windows. She hid behind an open door that led inside, but her position gave a clear view to whoever might walk through the two doors at the opposite end of the hall.

The cargo hold was a troop and tank transport some time ago. It was a massive space and took up a majority of the craft's body. Any movement the guards made inside

echoed throughout its virtually empty shell. She wasn't interested in its cargo. She needed to get to the controls that were located within the bay. She assessed the four guards who stood next to the control console. She unsheathed a sword and started to approach, but stopped just as the cargo door at the far end of the bay came alive and shook the craft.

As the bay door slowly opened, the age of the metal showed in the growing light. Once a polished sheen, the walls had become pocked with rust stains. The metal around the door was in the worse shape. The seal must have broken and salt water had leaked in around the opening, creating pitted flakes of deteriorated metal around its edges. Beside the hole she had made to get inside, she knew the door was the weakest point. Opened or closed, it was where she'd make her next exit.

Three of the guards walked down toward the empty platform over the railway and the last stayed behind at console. Valerie drew closer to the doorway as two guards stood at the opposite sides of the room as the door lowered. Light filling the dank metal hold. Three mech exosuits walked slowly behind a three armed crane propped up on tank treads. It carried a metal object that ended in a translucent pyramid shape. Inside the pyramid was a small spinning oval that looked like a planet rotating on its axis. The occasional spark of blue flame flared from inside. *Looks important*, Valerie thought. And the three mech exosuits guarding it, make it even more so. The nearest guard's helmet microphone came alive, and she recognized Viper's voice.

"It is ours, men." Viper said. "Begin making preparations for the Leviathan to receive us."

Just the man she wanted to see. With renewed focus, Valerie grabbed the soldier behind the railing by the mouth and drove her sword up into the base of his skull. She leaned into the dead man's microphone.

"Going somewhere, Doctor?" she said. "You'll have to go empty handed, if you value your life."

"An angel is among us, gentlemen," Viper responded. "Find her and send her to heaven."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so certain about the heaven part," Valerie said. The other two guards turned around to Valerie's smile. She threw a sword into each of them. They fell to the ground as she stabbed the last guard in front of the console panel.

The roar of the Equinox engines filled the air as it swooped past and left a hail storm of bullets. The radio chatter filled with men all around the base taking aim at the plane.

"Good luck using bullets on that one, boys," Valerie said.

She activated the ramp controls. An exosuit mech charged as the door began to close. She bashed a control button that fired a pair of exhaust rockets lined up beneath the door. In theory, the exhaust rockets were designed to steer the craft in the event the engine took damage, but she used them as a way to make a fast getaway and to slow down the mech. The Noah platform began to disappear as the door closed.

She felt a sense of satisfaction until a loud groan of metal signaled the door had stopped moving. A massive robotic hand pulled the metal apart like it was a piece of cloth and stepped into the bay. Valerie watched two others climb in behind him.

So much for exit two, she thought. She turned to leave the way she came, but a chunk of metal she recognized as a piece of the cargo platform, flew by and blocked the hallway door. Valerie flipped backward just as a massive mechanical hand, half her size, landed where she stood. She unsheathed two new plasma swords and lunged at the exosuit. She moved between its legs and turned to slice off its ankles from behind. His massive body fell into the other one.

“Sure you want to do this?” Valerie said. The other mech picked up a smoldering foot and threw it at her. She dodged, and sparks rained down when it bounced off the wall.

“Cheeky,” Valerie said.

The other swung its right fist, but she stepped aside and crossed swords between its arm. She brought them together in a swiping up motion and clipped off its limb. Even as the arm fell, the exosuit mech thrust at her, but his shorten appendage missed its mark. The other mech lunged for her feet, but she leapt above it and brought her heels down on its plated head. When she saw that her effort merely left a cracked imprint of her boot, Valerie extended the rail gun and fired through its head.

The force of the gun rocked the entire vehicle and it swayed as if it drifted aimlessly through the water. Valerie was caught off balance for a second and thought about shooting her gun again, to throw the craft off course. The second cost her. She was hit in the back by another mech.

Valerie was a weightless force projected through the air. She hit the wall and an agonizing sensation crawled its way into her mind. It had been a while since she was hit hard enough to break a bone, but she recognized the sensation and the pain. The impact

of her face upon the metal was far worse, and the intense throbbing became anger. She rose to her feet as the nanobots healed her wounds. She felt her ribs, spine, hip and several bones in her legs reset and reform. Her smashed nose and fine cheekbones healed in an instant. It did little to appease her anger.

The mech dove for her and she curled into a ball and flung herself at him. Valerie smacked into the center of his torso. The impact of his frame against the metal wall turned the hover craft at a sharp angle. This time, she used the shift to her advantage. She held two swords out in a stabbing position and the momentum of the backlash threw the enemy into her blades. As soon as they went in, he was stuck. She was about to finish him off, but the mech grabbed a dead guard as if he were a doll, and struck her in the stomach.

Valerie thought she had been cut in half, but before she had a chance to look, the mech was already on top of her. Its weight alone was enough to pin her to the ground. As it pressed harder upon her, she activated the force field that melted through its arm. As it fell onto her she reshaped the shield into two blades that sheered through its torso. A flood of red blood fell out from its insides and a mechanical wail filled the cargo bay. Valerie kicked her way out from underneath him and rose to her feet.

Its robotic eyes stared up at her, but its exposed insides were very different. What was once a human, was now a limbless, meaty figure attached to the mech suit interior by a series of large tubes. She realized the fluid was a synaptic enhancer. It explained how they were as fast as she was, and hard to kill.

If I had a human heart, I might feel sorry for it, she thought as she jumped to the ceiling and brought her knees down on the man's unprotected chest. She felt bones

shatter under the impact, all of them his. He let out a wail louder than before. She figured that he was no longer a threat and walked away without the willingness to finish him off.

Valerie carved through the metal barrier blocking the door. She ran a test on her communicator as she ran through the door on the opposite side of the bay. Her communicator linked with the Equinox and came alive, but there were no voices, only a static hiss.

“Young man?” Valerie said into the communicator. “Are you there?”

She had arrived at the cockpit and stabbed the man inside through the heart, before she sat down in front of a massive touch pad that controlled the vehicle. Valerie went through the controls until she found a way to boost the signal of her communicator.

“Young man?” Valerie repeated. “Are you there?”

“Yes!” Max and Norman said in unison.

“Nice to hear from you boys,” Valerie said with a smile. “Can you track this signal?”

“Give us a moment,” Max said. “Where have you been?”

“I am at the platform now,” Valerie said. “Noah has been attacked, and a man named Viper is our criminal.”

Max spoke, but he was cut off before Valerie could make out what he said. An enormous wave smothered the glass as something massive emerged from the water ahead. Valerie couldn’t make out what it was, but an alarm rang in the cockpit. On the controls were the words MISSILE LOCK. Valerie made it to the doorway before a bright flash dulled her senses and the water consumed her.

Chapter 7 LEVIATHAN

When Valerie woke, her arms were restrained behind her back and she felt weightless. Her feet dragged along a solid floor. She couldn't tell where it was but she could still smell the ocean. They weren't far and there was still time.

The pain was intense, and Valerie had to force her eyes open. Even then it was as though her senses were being smothered by a chemical. Something in her was broken somewhere, the feeling was far too familiar. Being hit by something large at high velocities always gives a broad sense to pain, but she knew something was broken.

That didn't bother her as much as that it wasn't healing. *My regeneration isn't working*, she thought. *Why?* She breathed slowly to regain her composure and tried to form a plan. She caught a glimpse of a soldier's hand, and another on the other side of her. The two of them held her by the inside of her arms close to her shoulder. She moved along with them, but her body was limp and the lower part dragged against the ground.

Her instinct was to drive a blade through their backs and escape, but she managed nothing more than a flinch. Most of it was the pain, but the brace on her hands stretched above her elbows and stopped just below her shoulders.

No fighting it, she thought. Valerie kept her eyes open as best she could to take in her surroundings. She formed a new plan with each step. The halls were a greenish teal metal that was slick. Even for a ship it was a fortified material. Valerie figured for whatever reason the ship was designed, it was expecting internal damage. A constant sound lingered along with the numbing pain. It seemed to come from the walls

themselves. Rushing water. A pressure from being deep under the surface. A submarine perhaps?

Then her eyes shut on their own and the sensations took ahold of her again. She felt like a log in a rapid, flowing without a direction. The sights and sounds came at a fast pace. One that stood out to her was when the two soldiers were carrying her over a metal grate walkway. Below her, beneath the walkway, were the people scuttling back and forth among consoles and tried not to trip over metal tubing that carried power relays to generators. Soldiers stood at a level just above them, their gun barrels pointing at each of them. The faces of the soldiers glanced up to Valerie as she made her way across.

Lined around the consoles in long rows were large cone shaped structures that were covered with monitors. The middle section of each was pure energy, flowing up from a converter, embedded in the floor, live snowflakes were being pulled upward. All these surrounded a small box that sat atop a pyramid of electronics and wiring. Beneath was an electronic trench of wiring and tubing. Everything lead to a sharp golden spike at the top. It was the Noah transmitter that they had stolen.

Valerie watched one worker attach a conduit to its side and a loud rumbling started over head. Her last image was when she glanced upward, toward a device that resembled the inside of a beehive with blue lights flying around inside its frame. The lights sped up into a flurry and Valerie knew that whatever was being built was close to being finished.

Then her eyes closed and she was comatose once more. Until the drifting sensation stopped and she felt a chair beneath her. Her head still throbbed and her body was in pain, but her eyes didn't feel heavy anymore so she opened them. There was a

white table cloth with gold lining in front of her. Three men with rifles paced along the walls keeping an eye on her. At the other end of the table was a tall man in a chair. Tubes carrying a blue liquid attached to his cheeks. *Viper*, she thought. The tubes fluctuated as he drank from a glass. Beyond him was the device she caught a glimpse of in Trimurti. Just as she had thought, it was a weapon.

“Face to face at last,” Viper said. “You have many talents, my dear, not least of all being an irritating nuisance to my plans. But it would be a lie for me to say that our bouts have not been entertaining. Many thanks.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Valerie said.

“Oh, I would have never guessed,” Viper said sarcastically. “Given how much damage you’ve done to my men.”

“My back,” a voice said.

Two men entered the doorway behind Valerie with a medical table between them. Upon the table was the large giant that had been inside the Mech suit she fought and smashed on the Behemoth.

“Care to say that again to Walter here,” Viper said. “He is beside himself with grief over losing his fight with you. He doesn’t even have basic moto function anymore.

“My back, my back,” Walter said, with tears in his eyes.

A snide smile curled at the side of Valerie’s mouth as she chuckled in her throat. She leaned in toward Walter’s table.

“Does it hurt?” Valerie said.

Walter looked at Valerie with wide horrified eyes and a trembling lip. Valerie’s smile widened and she leaned forward in her chair toward Viper. The men along the

walls froze in their pacing and pointed their machine guns at Valerie. Viper rose from his chair and poured champagne into a glass.

“Ease up, men. Our lady isn’t going anywhere,” Viper said, “and you can stop trying to build up an attack, my lady. That harness across your arms is more than just a set of handcuffs.”

Viper walked over to Walter and hung his head over his. He placed both of his hands on his temples as Walter began to weep.

“I tried, master,” Walter said.

“I know, Walter,” Viper said. “I understand. But, we have her now. You’ve done your task, and that’s all I needed from you.”

Viper’s gloves pulled back and a surge of light passed through Walter’s head. He made no noise as his body contorted and convulsed on the table. Then he was dead. Viper returned to the table.

“Take it away,” Viper said. “I’ll have to work harder on my next one.”

“Charming,” Valerie said.

“A shame really,” Viper said taking a seat. “You have a bit of an attitude, my dear, and it shows in your work. I had such high hopes for the three of them. A sort of pet project on the side. I’ve longed to improve humanity. It’s why I became a scientist in first place.”

“You’re too kind,” Valerie said. “Quite a talent you have yourself.” You lose your hands during the war?”

“Observant,” Viper said. “Yes. I had to put them in. My own design. I’ve designed many an invention that you yourself may have come across. I could recognize

the look on my superiors faces whenever something had to do with the Horsemen. And I've always wanted to meet one of you."

"Lucky you," Valerie said.

"As you say, the pleasure is all mine," Viper said. "I have been studying you for some time. Thoroughly studying you, from battle and damage reports to casualty lists."

"My eyes are up here, honey," Valerie said.

Viper sipped his champagne and chuckled as the flow of the fluid in his tubes sped up. He stretched his arm out and tapped a plate touch screen. There was a sudden jolt in the floor as the room started to turn. The metal wall folded away from the glass and the view behind Viper shifted to the outside. Valerie saw a row of gun turrets emerged from submersible shields.

Underwater, Valerie thought. The perfect protection for a ship no one thought they needed to look for. The ship in its entirety was the size of a Destroyer. It was large, but not impossible to figure out. She was almost impressed.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Viper said without expecting a response. "Leviathan was the designation. I must confess to having but a mere name credit in the design. I only put in the footwork for the blueprints. At one point there were to be fleets of these scouring the oceans, all carrying devices similar to what you just saw." He looked at her. "Maybe someday there will."

The room continued to shift until Valerie saw the open ocean water beneath the afternoon sun. A line of rays filled the far side of the room and she wondered if there was anything she could discern from the light. She was certain, she was still in the Indian Ocean. That much she was certain of. Viper's eyes narrowed as he smiled.

“I can’t thank you enough for crossing paths with me,” Viper said. “Archimedes is our destination.” He watched for a reaction, and then continued. “That’s what you’ve been wondering, isn’t it? What you have been trying to figure out all along?”

Valerie kept her composure. *I’m not giving him an inch*, she thought and smiled. Her brain kicked into overdrive and mapped out everything she knew up to that point. *On a ship, submersible, and he likes to talk*, the thoughts went through her brain quickly. *He can talk though, he has that right. He has me. There isn’t a chance I can take these guys right now. That much he knows. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be so comfortable.*

“I missed the chance to get your friend, defense Minister Maxwell, in Hong Kong,” Viper said. “I had no clue it was you he was meeting there, but I’ll have another chance after I hit the city.”

“The devices, the ones planted at Trimurti,” Valerie said. “Those are what you are using with that thing behind the shield?”

“Yes, you are familiar with flash lines, aren’t you?” Viper said.

“Of course,” Valerie said. “They were introduced after I was made. But in order for them to work, you needed a second platform. A receiver for the transferring code. Without it, the signal breaks down. The teleported object is destroyed and the free particles become unstable.”

“All very true,” Viper said. “Care to figure the purpose?”

Valerie stared off toward the table as she dwelled on the reaction she saw at the bottom of the ocean, at Trimurti. The way the building imploded made an impression on her. Each part imploded onto itself, before sucked into the energy void. She even saw the reaction in the water itself.

“That monstrosity behind you runs on the same fundamental principle as a flash line,” Valerie began, “The unstable particles would be transferring the weapons grade tritium particles?”

“Indeed,” Viper said. “I call it the Hell’s Breath. I needed Noah as my device was designed to use nuclear material in its activation mechanism. As no nuclear material exists anymore, Noah was the ideal replacement to produce the reaction necessary. The device generates an unstable high frequency, high density, plasma before being teleported. The plasma breaks down further upon arrival, and carries with it the tritium base. The colliding particles build until the tritium then forces its matrix to collapse, and the colliding plasma creates a fusion reaction.”

“A bomb,” Valerie said.

“No, a beacon,” Viper said. “When the ashes settle, and their world is in ruin, the people will wade through one another, tooth and nail, clawing high enough just to cry for a savior. The hands they put their lives in always abandon them. On that day, when they see what I once saw, they’ll be ready for me, and my guidance.”

“World domination,” Valerie said. “So familiar. Even in defeat and exile, the apple never falls far from the tree.”

“See, that right there is my first disappointment about you,” Viper said, his voice suddenly turned deep. “Thinking that this is just about them. This plan has never been about them.”

“You misunderstand me,” she said. “I was speaking of you. This is all about you.”

Viper’s smile faded. He pushed his champagne out in front of him and glared at it.

“Do you know what this is?” he said.

“Something to drink?” She stated the obvious with a shrug.

“It is prewar, pre-technocracy even. It was made in some family’s vineyard. Found in a looted storage seller half way across the planet. Barely a blip in history, it promised a crisp finish and a wealth of taste.” He pushed his glass towards her, but she didn’t move. “I have no taste, no real senses left,” he said. “I haven’t the ability to enjoy it anymore. Not like other things.”

Valerie only half listened to his ramblings. She wasn’t interested in getting to know him, or getting close to him. That would take too long. However, she watched his awkward body movements with a great deal of interest. At first, she had thought she imagined his strange ticks and had attributed them to the confusion that came along with her pain. She saw them in a different light and realized a flaw she could exploit. The frigid and jolted movements in his upper body, the near perfect guide of his poster and the deep changes in his voice almost seemed mechanical. All of them added up to one thing.

“You’re not quite human anymore, are you?” Valerie said. “You’re not even as human as I am, let alone the people you control.” When he didn’t respond, she smiled. “Don’t tell me you’ve been carrying around a body that doesn’t belong to you since I destroyed that launch silo years ago.”

“I have a lot to thank you for,” Viper said, “but the cause of my condition isn’t one of them. This...” he made a swooping motion over his body, “wasn’t from combat. It was from betrayal. I knew the Infinite supreme authority could not recover, no matter how much they threw at the world, they were doomed to fall.”

“You turned on them,” Valerie said.

“Yes, and it landed me in prison when the army overwhelmed my insurrection. Over two hundred lives lost. It was as if they put more effort into going after me than trying to save the war. After hours of being tortured, I lay in my cell and realized what needed to be done. What was Infinite, I thought? With clear eyes, I saw for the first time. The ultimate power was in no one’s hand. It was just a system. They controlled it as their predecessors had done before them. Spoiled children with more power than thought possible, and unable to do more than what had been done before them. It was the same story over and over again.”

Viper stood from the table and walked over to the window. He reached out and touched the glass. Valerie noticed he rested his palm upon it, almost as if he savored its warmth.

“The sun,” he said. “I didn’t see it for years because of them. What else was to happen to the world? What was to happen to the people who put their lives in such hands?”

“Flags and banners,” Valerie said, unfazed by the speech.

“Traitors and tyrants!” Viper said and smacked the window with his palm. The noise echoed through the room, and Valerie waited in the silence that followed. The moment passed. He regained his composure and casually turned back to her. He no longer hid his mechanical movements from her when he walked back to the table. He placed his palms on its surface with a measured slowness and braced his body.

“And what is Archimedes if not the same?” he said. “They’re frightened youths who stumbled upon power they could never have predicted. Power they weren’t prepared for. Vigil? Scarlett Throne? All of them without discipline or control. The cycle of war is

waiting to continue. That much I am certain of. When the three are gone the world will be level and balanced once more. I will guide this new world to greatness and they will never know war again.”

“Well,” Valerie said, “I’ve met some people who can talk, but that’s some story. It has rebellion, war, betrayal, your return from the ashes and ends with you saving the little people. You’re a regular phoenix miracle, Doctor.” She leaned forward as far as her restraints would allow. “Only thing is, there’s one big glaring flaw in your claim to be our savior. The lives on your hands. Saviors usually give their own.”

It was Viper’s turn to laugh. “And how many people died at your hands?” he said. “The bloody trail left by your kind is legendary. It made people in positions like mine envious.” A cruel smile lit up his face. “Flash lines, orbital solar panels, carbon Nano fiber generators, tritium condensers, even the Hell’s Breath itself would not be possible without you being made.” His smile grew wider. “And that is how you come into play.”

“How so?” Valerie said as she leaned back.

“While I’ve been talking that emitter brace restraint on your arms has been generating a focused high frequency electromagnetic pulse. The pulse itself is an interceptor for the transmissions your nanobots are receiving from the generators in your bloodstream.” Valerie clenched her fists. “The longer they remain on you, the more it jams your nanobot reproduction.” She strained against the straps that held her to the chair. “You, for all your vaunted talents, are about to be as human as they come. You’ll be reduced to a fancy watch that doesn’t work, my dear.” Viper sat in the chair, held the champagne glass, and looked through the liquid. He took a sip and although she now

knew he couldn't taste it, he swished it around in his mouth and seemed to enjoy the ritual. "If you want to retain your power, your only choice is to join me."

"You?" she said. "I would never join forces with you."

"We need not bring old wars back from the grave," Viper said. "Let the dead die. You and I were enemies once, that is true, but I need only your word for us to become allies. Wipe the slate clean. Start fresh with a leader that has a direction in mind. Wars like ours need not ever happen again. Do something good with the powers that have harmed so many. Help me steer the world to a greater purpose."

"You are really cracked. You know that? But you do put on a good show, Doctor," Valerie began. "You have the sell down pat, but you don't know me. Not well enough to think I would buy it or fall for deluded little men like you. If there is to be a clean slate, as you put it, it will look much cleaner with you gone. I'll tell you what though, take the brace off and I'll make it all very quick."

"You have disappointed me for a second time, Valkyrie," Viper said as the champagne glass shattered.

"I figured you for so much more than just a police officer," he continued. "You're just another idealist with too much power for your own good."

"Hey," Valerie said cutting through his ramble. "You've disappointed me twice now too. One, for thinking that anything I've done is for a flag or a banner. And two, for designing this room without reinforced glass." Valerie leapt upright in her chair and flung herself across the table at Viper.

One of the guards pointed his gun as the other rushed in and grabbed the barrel. "No! You'll shoot the doctor!" he said. The guard got off one stray shot as Valerie steam

rolled Viper through the window and they tumbled along with the shattered glass into the interior of the ship below.

Valerie landed on top of him, and the impact broke her away from the brace. It sent a sharp pain ringing through her head. She got to her feet and started for a large hallway that exited the Hell's Breath chamber and connecting to the rest of the ship. The Hell's Breath cannon loomed before her just as the sound of troops running through the halls grew nearer. If she had a gun, her last act would be to scale the cannon and destroy its generators.

Even through the pain, she knew Viper's men were on their way. She was no good to anyone dead. Max and Norman needed to know. She knew the world would be a lot better off without either, and they needed to do whatever they could to blow the thing from the water.

Valerie ran in a half limp toward the door facing the Hell's Breath. When she entered the hallway, two troops moved toward her. She ran at them before they could raise their guns. She leapt and caught one by the neck, between her ankles. She wrapped her hands around the other's jaw and brought them both to the ground. The force snapped their necks at the same time.

A barrage of bullets came from behind her and it sounded as if an entire army had opened fire. The rounds whistled and ricocheted off the walls and floor. Valerie grabbed a dead man's rifle and ran. When she felt she was at a good distance, she turned and fired at the troops in short bursts. Valerie couldn't tell how many she'd hit, but she made each shot count.

She knew she had to play the war game differently. She wasn't able to take the punishment she had before. She needed to watch her every step, because one misstep would mean death. The second chances she had depended on so many times weren't there.

She made the effort to push the thought of death out of her mind. If there was a chance for survival, a chance to defeat Viper even in her current predicament, then she needed to keep going.

Her mind raced as the bullets passed her through the air. The device on her wrist that linked her to the Equinox wasn't working. It was undamaged, but the link between her and the Equinox transmitter had been severed by Viper. Flying out was not an option and going back to blow the cannon up was a bad idea. She would never make it. If she were going to die, she wished she had tried to blow the cannon when she had the chance. Once again, she pushed the thought of death and defeat out of her mind. She charged for the exit at the corner of the hall, and as she ran, the metal wall behind her was blasted apart by bullets.

She needed a better bearing of the area. The strange quality of the metal suddenly seemed familiar. She had seen it on the interior of underground passageways and fallout shelters. The curvature and alloy were combined and designed to block transmissions from entering or leaving. Valerie remembered the encrypted signals and figured that this is where they came from, as well as how they communicated about the ship.

There was something she had seen in the room with Viper. When the room rotated, there was a sphere outside the window. It was surrounded by antenna's turning on four towers around it. It had to be the ship's command center, she thought. If there

was a way of stopping this ship, or damaging the gun, she would gladly do it, but it was only possible with help.

She continued her strategy of short bursts of gun fire, and ducked through doors into different halls as she fled the never ending rain of ammunition. The thought she would run into troops coming from the other way stuck out in her mind, but she would have to deal with that when it happened.

Her arms and face stung from the occasional bullet that grazed across her skin. A line flowed down from her left arm, as red as her hair. The sight drove her on. Not like this, she thought. She remembered what she said to Max back in Hong Kong, when she stood up from being shot. Her death was not the one that people would know, and it certainly wasn't going to come here or now. In that moment Viper's loud voice echoed in the speakers throughout the Leviathan.

"Finding your way through the ship, my dear?" Viper said, but let paused to let Valerie absorb the full impact of his survival. "Did you think that I would die from a fall like that?" She heard his chuckle, and almost rolled her eyes. "No, not as long as there is still time. Not as long as you walk and breathe. We are two of a kind. You could've been a hero, the true shaper of the world. A destiny such as ours has been written and sought after for centuries. A true chance for humanity to know peace and bliss. Is that not heroic? I would only die if I knew that such an event had been accomplished. I will only die when you are gone as well."

Valerie came before a spiral structure that led into the transmitting station. Four of Viper's men emerged from around the corner of the spiral steps and took cover among the jutting nooks of the ship's walls. Valerie ducked behind the doorway and fired at

them, keeping a dead man beside her as a shield. She counted the seconds that past as she listened to her surroundings. The men from the corridor were almost upon her. She saw a grenade poking through the armor of the dead man shielding her.

Valerie popped out her gun clip. It was empty. Without hesitation, she took the grenade and pulled the dead body up in front of her. Valerie lobbed the grenade the same time she charged into the room. Bullets hit her human shield, and the impact knocked her down. The explosion shook the room and when she stood up the soldiers were dead. They never saw it coming, she thought. She looked down at their bodies

“My favorite type of henchman,” Valerie said. “Dumb and dead.”

She searched the dead men for ammo. She took all of their gun clips and all of their grenades, before she ascended the stairs of the transmission tower. The inside was similar to the top of an airport tower, a circle with one large computer console extending across the wall. The wall loomed over the area in a large egg shape. The grids with thin lights embedded inside the material resembled a golf ball. Setting the gun down Valerie put her communicator on the counter and attempted to recalibrate the signal.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to hack that my dear,” Viper said over the intercom. “You’ll be dead long before you get anywhere close.”

Valerie knew that the controls were under Viper’s complete command. She set the communicator down and picked up the gun.

“We are much more alike than you think or would admit my dear,” Viper said. “I knew that this would be what you’d look at first in my little tour. When you made your move, I was certain you’d be here. And now you are at your end.”

Valerie heard a boot pound at the bottom of the stair case and pulled the slash containing all of the grenades off of her shoulder. She pulled a pin off of one and tossed it down the steps.

“I keep telling you honey,” Valkyrie said. “I’m complicated.”

The grenades went off and the entire area became a molten flair of fire and smoke. The explosion was so great that she didn’t hear it. She fell to the ground and rolled beneath the counter as the entire room now sat at a slant.

“Dead and dumb,” Valerie said.

“Say again. Say again, Valkyrie,” a voice said. Valerie looked at the communicator on the floor in front of her and knew it was Max. She got to her feet and picked it up. A trail of sunlight peeked through a shattered section of the oval wall. Now she had a way of communicating.

“I’m on a submersible ship,” Valerie said. “It is heading straight to Archimedes. Viper and his men have taken a transmitter from Noah. He is using it to power a fusion device that he intends to destroy the city with. Can you track this transmission?”

“Yes,” Norman said. “My god, Maxwell. Look where they are. Only a hundred eighty nine nautical miles from the city”

“Don’t give me that Norman,” Max said. “Get us all there. Valkyrie, can you hold them off long enough? We can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Don’t let him use that weapon,” Valerie said. “Do whatever you can to sink the ship. Whatever it takes to destroy device.” There was a moment of silence between them. When he spoke again, he didn’t sound too much like the young man she once knew.

“We won’t. He won’t live past today,” Max said.

“I think you’ve learned a thing or two from me, young man,” Valerie said as she tossed the communicator just beyond the opening in the wall and made her way back to the stairs. She looked down at the shattered bodies and the smoking ruins. There was the hole in the floor at the base of where the staircase once stood. Inside there were three plastic enclosures that were shaped like prison cells. “The brig?” she thought.

Valerie jumped down, and landed with a thud. She held her gun at her side, and crouched over the opening. Her left knee exploded bullet shot through it. Valerie went limp and fell into the opening as she let out an angry moan. When she looked up she saw a group of faces looking at her from behind reinforced plastic cages.

Valerie recognized the nearest face right away. Leaning over her with a horrified look was Hugh, Griffin’s missing agent. He was slightly taller than her, had a toned build, tan skin and black hair. The others surrounding him were all scientists from Noah, and still wore their lab coats.

Valerie pushed herself off the ground and limped over to the electronic switches on a wall. “Let’s see what these do. Shall we?” she said, and flipped all of them. The cages opened one at a time and the people inside came out frightened, but thankful. Hugh took his shirt off and wrapped it around Valerie’s knee.

“I think I’ve never seen a more beautiful woman in my life,” Hugh said. “Thank you for rescuing us.”

“Don’t break out the champagne yet handsome,” Valerie said, “We’re a long way off from sinking this ship and getting home.”

“I love champagne too,” Hugh said. “They were keeping us alive to get information from us.”

“Of course,” Valerie said. “The only captured agent of a group thought to never exist.”

One of the doctors, a blonde lady with large glasses, stepped toward Valerie and handed her a pistol. Hugh stood up and went to a table full of equipment. The manner in which he geared up suggested that the equipment belonged to him.

“If you can save the transmitter, then we can still use Noah,” the blonde lady said.

“The transmitter is too attached to the rest of the ship. I’m afraid it is a lost cause now,” Valerie said.

“No, a majority of the transmitter can be remade,” she said. “I am talking about the node in the center of the pyramid. We are still trying to understand the material it is made from, as well as the full extent of its capabilities. Please retrieve it if you can.”

“Sure,” Valerie said in a painful laugh. “Now all I have to do is get all of you to safety, fight off Viper’s men, kill Viper, and take the pyramid thing.”

Hugh whipped around and tossed two grenades up through the hole Valerie fell through. The explosion was followed by the several cries. A group of Viper’s troops came through the brig door and Hugh mowed them down with a machine pistol. Two more, with burnt armor and massive injuries fell through the same overhead hole and attacked Hugh. He beat them with his pistol before shooting them in the head.

“I’m actually impressed,” Valerie said in her seat.

“Increased numbers will do nothing to save you,” Viper’s voice said.

“Again with the talk,” Valerie said. The microphone went to static as a large tremor shook the entire ship, and Hugh fell to the floor. Gunfire erupted from all around the exterior as the impact of explosions rocked it. Valerie knew it was Max.

“Looks like the cavalry is here, ladies and gentlemen,” Valerie said.

“I think your odds are improving,” Hugh said. “I’ll take them to the landing bay. Viper brought me in here on his jet.” Valerie got to her feet and limped toward Hugh.

“You know how to fly it?” Valerie said.

“I can fly anything,” Hugh said.

“Do you have a communicator?” Valerie said.

“Yes,” Hugh said.

“Set the scanner to 0800 Victoria,” Valerie said. “And tell the young man outside not to blow all of you out of the sky.”

The alarm blasted through the halls that were covered in thick smog. Valerie crawled through the opening and retraced her steps as they made their way through the lower level. She was home in the fighting and mayhem she knew more of than anything else. With each step her knee lost more feeling, and her walk became a war of keeping her battle stance alive. Along the halls and windows were groups of Viper’s men shooting back at distant flying machines. A flash from another explosion cut through the haze and Valerie saw she’d made her way back to the Hell’s Breath chamber.

Much of it had been blown open and the hallway, she once fled from when the impending forces attacked her, was now a misshapen fire pit. On the other side, amidst the technical trench she had been drug past, was the transmitter. She started for it just as Viper himself emerged from the flames carrying her railgun.

“Here we are,” Viper said. “I must confess, I am a bit hesitant to use this.”

“You’ve nothing to do now, Doctor,” Valerie said.

“On the contrary,” Viper said. A loud hum filled the room and static flared among the mechanical trench in front of her. She heard the Hell’s Breath turn behind her as it took aim.

“It is fully programmed,” Viper said. “It cannot be stopped. If I cannot live to see my dream to the fullest, then I will die knowing the greatest threat to peace has ended.”

“Then you and I finally have something in common,” Valerie said.

Viper let the gun slip from his fingers as the metal coils on his hands unfolded. Valerie hunched down and lunged for him as a flash of energy flew over her. She knocked him into the trench. At the end sat the transmitter. Valerie felt the bones in her fingers break as she punched the blue tubes along his face. That they shattered made the pain easier for her to bear. Yet something was happening to her, she knew it. Her movements were quicker, and her pain didn’t linger.

A small spark came from Viper’s hands. It was all he could create, and it enraged him. He swiped for her head. Valerie ducked but was kneed in the face. Viper grabbed her hair and flung her against the wall. He reared to punch again, but Valerie brought her foot to his diaphragm with a crack. It held him away. A wave of water swept across them. Everything became buried in a ghostly grey torrent of hissing smoke that ran across their skin. Viper reached for her head, but she grabbed him by the wrists, and stopped him just short of her skin.

“I’ll tear your face off!” Viper said. Valerie watched Viper gasp as a deep gash in her cheek healed instantly. Valerie’s eyes widened. That was it, she thought. He had said it was a nullifier. It had smothered her power, but not taken it away. A cruel smile twisted across her face.

“You’ll need these.” She gritted her teeth as she crushed Viper’s wrists and the hands dropped to the ground. She then lifted both of her feet off the floor and put them to Viper’s chest. She pulled with all her might

“And you’ll need these.” Valerie said. Both of Viper’s cybernetic arms came out by the joints. She tossed them aside, picked her railgun off the floor and aimed for Viper’s head. The top half of his body shattered as the round flew through him and into the Hell’s Breath generators. The machine tipped over on its side and metal began to levitate around it, in the shape of an atom, as it let out a loud roar. Valerie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could feel her connection with the Equinox restored, and when she opened her eyes again it was hovering just over the opening in the ship.

Valerie sheathed a new sword, a feeling she cherished, and cut open the pyramid on the transmitter. She grabbed the node and jumped toward the ramp that extended from the Equinox. She took one last moment to empty the clip at the cannon’s generators and started for the cock pit. When she entered the cock pit, filled with the sound of Max and Norman signaling a retreat, she jammed on the accelerator and watched the ship disappear behind her.

A deep blue light, like the strobe she saw beneath Trimurti, grew into a massive ball and trails of water were pulled in arches toward its center. It kept growing until the light collapsed and the ship was pulled apart.

Several squadrons of attack helicopters and hover jets were flying in the distance up ahead. Two of them, leading the group were obviously Max and Hugh.

“Is it time for champagne?” Hugh said.

“I’ll take you up on that,” Valerie said. “And as for you, young man. You’ve finally honed your aim. Not a scratch on me.” Max smiled.

“Agent Valkyrie,” Max said. “My pleasure.”

EPILOGUE

Valerie sat on a reclining chair beneath an umbrella on the beach and twirled a wine glass in her hand. The climbing gentle sunrise reflected off the ocean waves and turned the distant horizon a vibrant golden red. Through the lenses of her sunglasses, the sun was shaped like a bright gleaming apple surrounded by a golden sea. The wind had picked up to a steady warm breeze and drowned out the lingering night cold. It blew fine trails of sand that glanced off her pale skin and black bikini. She leaned back and let the wind toss her blood red hair in arcs. To her, dawn was a precious time.

As the early rays and wind caressed her, she closed her eyes and hummed. The ping of a bottle touching the mouth of her glass woke her. A tall young man stood next to her. His lightly tanned skin had small patches of hair that refined the definition of his toned figure. Hugh, all well and long since healed.

“Hugh,” Valerie said, “you are just a right fit with this lovely morning.”

“Did I put enough wine in your glass? You almost sound glad to see me,” Hugh said.

“Well, I’m getting there,” Valerie said as she took another small sip of wine. He smiled at her approval, and ran his hand over hers. He brushed sand from his temple and stared out at the horizon with her. Valerie wondered if he’d keep the moment of silence, but no such luck existed.

“I feel like a new man in moments like this. I feel I am only just now understanding your penchant for the ancient places.”

“If only you had one for not needing to talk,” Valerie said, “and never say *ancient* in my presence again if you want to live.”

Hugh crouched beside Valerie and took her hand in his. “I believe I owe you that already,” he said. “So you’d have the right.”

“Really darling, you should bring a chair of your own next time,” Valerie said, giggling at his boyish retort. Hugh took a sip of the wine from the bottle approvingly and then leaned in to kiss her neck. She turned her head and her lips met his. When they parted, she rested her forehead on his.

“I think we should go now. Ready the Equinox,” Valerie said as she rose from her chair. “We’ll be able to have more another time. Oh, and speaking of time, feel free to take as much as you like.” Valerie walked away from the ocean.

“So, my turn to clean up?” Hugh said.

“I believe it is,” Valerie said over her shoulder. Hugh took down the umbrella and placed the bottle in an empty ice bucket.

The further away from the beach she walked, the emptier she felt. All her thoughts ceased and her movements took on their own lethargic life. She intensely surveyed the approaching hills. Her walk slowed where the sand merged with dirt and turned to grass beneath her feet. Then, she made her way to the tip of an outcropping and stopped when the tower peeked over the distant horizon. Demolished, it laid in the dim sunlight like a giant metal gravestone. The last Infinite stronghold, long since forgotten. Hills surrounded her, and she watched the steady synchronized rhythm of the breeze blowing the tips of the green blades. Grassland for as far as the eye could see, an image broken only by the occasional bare patch or rusted shard sticking from the ground.

Twenty years had gone by and time left no trace of the battle, but Valerie wasn't fooled. The flowing outline of the earth echoed the shape of the rubble that now lay under it. Just a stone's throw from her feet, she saw the spot where the young soldier had fallen from the pulsating sword Valerie had stuck through his chest. The first person she killed in the last battle of the war. A few feet away from him was the body of a free nation soldier. The faces of the two of them shared a similar lifelessness. Equals in death. The one history everyone shared.

She stood there and mapped it all out. In the distance beyond their bodies, the artillery, vehicles, and buildings poured their smoldering guts into the sky in thick trails of flaming smoke. Around them lay the hundreds who fought on both sides, strewn about the concrete and shredded metal. It all melded together into the grim road to victory and the one she walked along back to the beach when all the fighting finally ended.

But on that first day there was no way to know if victory would be achieved. The land was a veritable maze of turret filled walls and heavy weaponry. The technocrats themselves put up more of a fight than most of the soldiers Valerie had encountered, and even getting through the entrance almost cost her both legs. An endless and everlasting battle, that is what she had thought it would be. It was all she knew, and everything she knew how to handle.

On the way to the tower, she met up with Max, who almost shot at her, again. In the days that followed, there was something particular she recognized in him. The way Max acted, spoke, and even walked. There was always something about Max that stood out to her as being essentially human. It was the defining feeling she associated with him. She recognized it in him for how little she saw of it anywhere else in the world.

For years she believed there was none of it left. Just by talking to Max on the first day, she felt something begin to rekindle inside of herself. She realized that it came from him and all the troops around them. And throughout the battle, no matter how grave it got, the feeling spread throughout the ranks of free nation troops, among both lifelong friends and complete strangers. For every ground they gained or lost, all of them could see the end of the tunnel. The push became fierce and Valerie knew what she saw whenever they fought. War was ending, and the freedom from being a soldier was close enough to be touched.

When Infinite was finally crushed and the tower defeated a week later, Valerie saw the joyful rejuvenation in their faces, and the way they jumped as they cheered. One would almost think they could lift off the ground and remain in the air, with the weight of war, a weight that had hung heavy over their entire lives, now gone.

Valerie didn't know what to feel that day. She returned to the beach and left without them knowing. That sense she had developed with Max turned into nothing. All those years of fighting turned into nothing as well. It wasn't even that the fighting was over that made her feel empty. It was just as if she was awaking for the first time. She didn't feel it until now. Like she had been waiting for herself to arrive in her own life.

Max went on to Archimedes with the others and people went their way. People changed, everything changed. Valerie never left this place, or the day her parents died, or the day her crusade began. Looking no different now than when she first became a Horseman. All of time coming to this one point, when she left the war and had to decide how to carry on. Valerie didn't know how to be human.

Almost by instinct, Valerie raised her glass. Her lips moved to speak but nothing came out. She couldn't think of anything to say. There weren't enough words to explain how she felt about becoming a part of the world, or finally letting the dead stay buried.

Valerie heard a light whistle that grew louder as the fluttering rhythm of the grass turned wild. She looked over her shoulder to see the Equinox approaching over the horizon. Its massive frame gleamed in the sunlight and the impression of its outline instilled a new sense of reality to her.

"Flying free at last," she said under her breath, and admired the jet as it closed in.

The Equinox came into position and the ramp extended over a barren patch of dirt. Valerie took one last look at the surrounding land, and the dwindling clouds making way for the golden rays to bathe the land. Each of the blades looked so green and the water was perfectly clear. The tower looked no different. It couldn't be clearer in the open light. Dead and buried beneath the withered weight of rust and bullet holes. Just as she had seen it in her mind for years, and whenever she closed her eyes. She looked away from it and knew for the first time, she would never return.

Hugh stood at the top of the ramp reading a label on a fresh bottle of red wine. He uncorked the bottle and held it out toward Valerie as she made her way to the top.

"Vienna," he said, "I've never been there. How is it?"

"It used to be beautiful," Valerie said as she took the bottle. She walked toward the window on the far side of the cabin, and the autopilot slowly lifted them away.

Valerie sat in a side chair and poured herself another glass.

"If you alter the auto pilot in time we could fly by it before your stop," Valerie said with a sly smile. "It would be a bit of a detour but it would be a longer flight for us."

“I think that my agency wouldn’t mind an extra day,” Hugh said.

Hugh disappeared into the cockpit in an excited flurry. Valerie sat the bottle down and stared through the window. The sun’s rays covered her. The engines kicked in and the plane took off. The sunlight drifted made changing shadows across the cabin. She stood to watch the islands disappear in the endless blue ocean behind them.

“Gents,” Valerie said as she raised her glass. “To us. To all who war kept forever.”

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