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SANDERSON

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STEELHEART

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BRANDON SANDERSON

DELCORTE PRESS

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**For Dallin Sanderson,
who fights evil each day with his smile**

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Prologue

I'VE seen Steelheart bleed.

It happened ten years ago; I was eight. My father and I were at the First Union Bank on Adams Street. We used the old street names back then, before the Annexation.

The bank was enormous. A single open chamber with white pillars surrounding a tiled mosaic floor, broad doors that led deeper into the building. Two large revolving doors opened onto the street, with a set of conventional doors to the sides. Men and women streamed in and out, as if the room were the heart of some enormous beast, pulsing with the lifeblood of people and cash.

I knelt backward on a chair that was too big for me, watching the flow of people. I liked to watch people. The different shapes of faces, the hairstyles, the clothing, the expressions. Everyone showed so much *variety* back then. It was exciting.

“David, turn around, please,” my father said. He had a soft voice. I’d never heard it raised save for that one time at my mother’s funeral. Thinking of his agony on that day still makes me shiver.

I turned around, sullen. We were to the side of the main bank chamber in one of the cubicles where the mortgage men worked. Our cubicle had glass sides, which made it less confining, but it still felt fake. There were little wood-framed pictures of family members on the walls, a cup of cheap candy with a glass lid on the desk, and a vase with faded plastic flowers on the filing cabinet.

It was an imitation of a comfortable home. Much like the man in front of us wore an imitation of a smile.

“If we had more collateral ...,” the mortgage man said, showing teeth.

“Everything I own is on there,” my father said, indicating the paper on the desk in front of us. His hands were thick with calluses, his skin tan from days spent working in the sun. My mother would have winced if she’d seen him go to a fancy appointment like this wearing his work jeans and an old T-shirt with a comic book character on it.

At least he’d combed his hair, though it was starting to thin. He didn’t care about that as much as other men seemed to. “Just means fewer haircuts, Dave,” he’d tell me, laughing as he ran his fingers through his wispy hair. I didn’t point out that he was wrong. He would still have to get the same number of haircuts, at least until all of his hair fell out.

“I just don’t think I can do anything about this,” the mortgage man said. “You’ve been to me before.”

“The other man said it would be enough,” my father replied, his large hands clasped before him. He looked concerned. Very concerned.

The mortgage man just continued to smile. He tapped the stack of papers on his desk. “The world is a much more dangerous place now, Mr. Charleston. The bank has decided against taking risks.”

“Dangerous?” my father asked.

“Well, you know, the Epics ...”

“But they *aren't* dangerous,” my father said passionately. “The Epics are here to help.”

Not this again, I thought.

The mortgage man’s smile finally broke, as if he was taken aback by my father’s tone.

“Don’t you see?” my father said, leaning forward. “This isn’t a dangerous time. It’s a wonderful time!”

The mortgage man cocked his head. “Didn’t your previous home get *destroyed* by an Epic?”

“Where there are villains, there will be heroes,” my father said. “Just wait. They will come.”

I believed him. A lot of people thought like he did, back then. It had only been two years since Calamity appeared in the sky. One year since ordinary men started changing. Turning into Epics—almost like superheroes from the stories.

We were still hopeful then. And ignorant.

“Well,” the mortgage man said, clasping his hands on the table right beside a picture frame displaying a stock photo of smiling ethnic children. “Unfortunately, our underwriters don’t agree with your assessment. You’ll have to ...”

They kept talking, but I stopped paying attention. I let my eyes wander back toward the crowds, then turned around again, kneeling on the chair. My father was too engrossed in the conversation to scold me.

So I was actually watching when the Epic strolled into the bank. I noticed him immediately, though nobody else seemed to pay him much heed. Most people say you can tell an Epic from an ordinary man unless he starts using his powers, but they’re wrong. Epics carry themselves differently. That sense of confidence, that subtle self-satisfaction. I’ve always been able to spot them.

Even as a kid I knew there was something different about that man. He wore a relaxed fitting black business suit with a light tan shirt underneath, no tie. He was tall and lean, but *solid*, like a lot of Epics are. Muscled and toned in a way that you could see even through the loose clothing.

He strode to the center of the room. Sunglasses hung from his breast pocket, and he smiled as he put them on. Then he raised a finger and pointed with a casual tapping motion at a passing woman.

She vaporized to dust, clothing burning away, skeleton falling forward and clattering to the floor. Her earrings and wedding ring didn’t dissolve, though. They hit the floor with distinctive *pings* I could hear even over the noise in the room.

The room fell still. People froze, horrified. Conversations stopped, though the mortgage man kept right on rambling, lecturing my father.

He finally choked off as the screaming began.

I don’t remember how I felt. Isn’t that odd? I can remember the lighting—those magnificent chandeliers up above, sprinkling the room with bits of refracted light. I can remember the lemon-ammonia scent of the recently cleaned floor. I can remember all to

well the piercing shouts of terror, the mad cacophony as people scrambled for doors.

Most clearly, I remember the Epic smiling broadly—almost leering—as he pointed at people passing, reducing them to ash and bones with a mere gesture.

I was transfixed. Perhaps I was in shock. I clung to the back of my chair, watching the slaughter with wide eyes.

Some people near the doors escaped. Anyone who got too close to the Epic died. Several employees and customers huddled together on the ground or hid behind desks. Strangely, the room grew still. The Epic stood as if he were alone, bits of paper floating down through the air, bones and black ash scattered on the floor about him.

“I am called Deathpoint,” he said. “It’s not the cleverest of names, I’ll admit. But I find it memorable.” His voice was eerily conversational, as if he were chatting with friends over drinks.

He began to stroll through the room. “A thought occurred to me this morning,” he said. The room was large enough that his voice echoed. “I was showering, and it struck me. I asked ... Deathpoint, why are you going to rob a bank today?”

He pointed lazily at a pair of security guards who had edged out of a side hallway just beside the mortgage cubicles. The guards turned to dust, their badges, belt buckles, guns, and bones hitting the floor. I could hear their bones knock against one another as they dropped. There are a lot of bones in a man’s body, more than I’d realized, and they made a big mess when they scattered. An odd detail to notice about the horrible scene. But I remember it distinctly.

A hand clasped my shoulder. My father had crouched low before his chair and was trying to pull me down, to keep the Epic from seeing me. But I wouldn’t move, and my father couldn’t force me without making a scene.

“I’ve been planning this for weeks, you see,” the Epic said. “But the thought only struck me this morning. Why? Why rob the bank? I can take anything I want anyway! It’s ridiculous.” He leaped around the side of a counter, causing the teller cowering there to scream. I could just barely make her out, huddled on the floor.

“Money is worthless to me, you see,” the Epic said. “*Completely* worthless.” He pointed at the woman. The woman shriveled to ash and bone.

The Epic pivoted, pointing at several places around the room, killing people who were trying to flee. Last of all, he pointed directly at me.

Finally I felt an emotion. A spike of terror.

A skull hit the desk behind us, bouncing off and spraying ash as it clattered to the floor. The Epic had pointed not at me but at the mortgage man, who had been hiding by his desk behind me. Had the man tried to run?

The Epic turned back toward the tellers behind the counter. My father’s hand still gripped my shoulder, tense. I could feel his worry for me almost as if it were a physical thing running up his arm and into my own.

I felt terror then. Pure, immobilizing terror. I curled up on the chair, whimpering, shaking, trying to banish from my mind the images of the terrible deaths I’d just seen.

My father pulled his hand away. “Don’t move,” he mouthed.

I nodded, too scared to do anything else. My father glanced around his chair. Deathpoint was chatting with one of the tellers. Though I couldn’t see them, I could hear when the bones

fell. He was executing them one at a time.

My father's expression grew dark. Then he glanced toward a side hallway. Escape?

No. That was where the guards had fallen. I could see through the glass side of the cubicle to where a handgun lay on the ground, barrel buried in ash, part of the grip lying atop a rib bone. My father eyed it. He'd been in the National Guard when he was younger.

Don't do it! I thought, panicked. *Father, no!* I couldn't voice the words, though. My chest quivered as I tried to speak, like I was cold, and my teeth chattered. What if the Epic heard me?

I couldn't let my father do such a foolish thing! He was all I had. No home, no family, no mother. As he moved to go, I forced myself to reach out and grab his arm. I shook my head at him, trying to think of anything that would stop him. "Please," I managed to whisper. "The heroes. You said they'll come. Let them stop him!"

"Sometimes, son," my father said, prying my fingers free, "you have to help the heroes along."

He glanced at Deathpoint, then scrambled into the next cubicle. I held my breath and peeked very carefully around the side of the chair. I had to know. Even cowering and trembling, I had to see.

Deathpoint hopped over the counter and landed on the other side, our side. "And so, it doesn't matter," he said, still speaking in a conversational tone, strolling across the floor. "Robbing a bank would give me money, but I don't need to *buy* things." He raised his murderous finger. "A conundrum. Fortunately, while showering, I realized something else. Killing people every time you want something can be extremely inconvenient. What I needed to do was *frighten* everyone, show them my power. That way, in the future, nobody would deny me the things I wanted to take."

He leaped around a pillar on the other side of the bank, surprising a woman holding her child. "Yes," he continued, "robbing a bank for the money would be pointless—but showing what I can do ... that is still important. So I continued with my plan." He pointed, killing the child, leaving the horrified woman holding a pile of bones and ash. "Aren't you glad?"

I gaped at the sight, the terrified woman trying to hold the blanket tight, the infant's bones shifting and slipping free. In that moment it all became so much more *real* to me. Horribly real. I felt a sudden nausea.

Deathpoint's back was toward us.

My father scrambled out of the cubicle and grabbed the fallen gun. Two people hiding behind a nearby pillar made for the closest doorway and pushed past my father in their haste, nearly knocking him down.

Deathpoint turned. My father was still kneeling there, trying to get the pistol raised, fingers slipping on the ash-covered metal.

The Epic raised his hand.

"*What are you doing here?*" a voice boomed.

The Epic spun. So did I. I think everyone must have turned toward that deep, powerful voice.

A figure stood in the doorway to the street. He was backlit, little more than a silhouette because of the bright sunlight shining in behind him. An amazing, herculean, awe-inspiring silhouette.

You've probably seen pictures of Steelheart, but let me tell you that pictures are completely inadequate. No photograph, video, or painting could ever capture that man. He wore black. A shirt, tight across an inhumanly large and strong chest. Pants, loose but not baggy. He didn't wear a mask, like some of the early Epics did, but a magnificent silver cape fluttered out behind him.

He didn't need a mask. This man had no reason to hide. He spread his arms out from his sides, and wind blew the doors open around him. Ash scattered across the floor and papers fluttered. Steelheart rose into the air a few inches, cape flaring out. He began to glide forward into the room. Arms like steel girders, legs like mountains, neck like a tree stump. He wasn't bulky or awkward, though. He was majestic, with that jet-black hair, that square jaw, an impossible physique, and a frame of nearly seven feet.

And those eyes. Intense, demanding, *uncompromising* eyes.

As Steelheart flew gracefully into the room, Deathpoint hastily raised a finger and pointed at him. Steelheart's shirt sizzled in one little section, like a cigarette had been put out on the cloth, but he showed no reaction. He floated down the steps and landed gently on the floor a short distance from Deathpoint, his enormous cape settling around him.

Deathpoint pointed again, looking frantic. Another meager sizzle. Steelheart stepped up to the smaller Epic, towering over him.

I knew in that moment that this was what my father had been waiting for. This was the hero everyone had been hoping would come, the one who would compensate for the other Epics and their evil ways. This man was here to save us.

Steelheart reached out, grabbing Deathpoint as he belatedly tried to dash away. Deathpoint jerked to a halt, his sunglasses clattering to the ground, and gasped in pain.

"I asked you a question," Steelheart said in a voice like rumbling thunder. He spun Deathpoint around to look him in the eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Deathpoint twitched. He looked panicked. "I ... I ..."

Steelheart raised his other hand, lifting a finger. "I have claimed this city, little Epic. It is *mine*." He paused. "And it is *my* right to dominate the people here, not yours."

Deathpoint cocked his head.

What? I thought.

"You seem to have strength, little Epic," Steelheart said, glancing at the bones scattered around the room. "I will accept your subservience. Give me your loyalty or die."

I couldn't believe Steelheart's words. They stunned me as soundly as Deathpoint's murder had.

That concept—*serve me or die*—would become the foundation of his rule. He looked around the room and spoke in a booming voice. "I am emperor of this city now. You will obey me. I own this land. I own these buildings. When you pay taxes, they come to me. If you disobey, you will die."

Impossible, I thought. *Not him too*. I couldn't accept that this incredible being was just like all the others.

I wasn't the only one.

"It's not supposed to be this way," my father said.

Steelheart turned, apparently surprised to hear anything from one of the room's cowering, whimpering peons.

My father stepped forward, gun down at his side. “No,” he said. “You aren’t like the other. I can see it. You’re better than they are.” He walked forward, stopping only a few feet from the two Epics. “You’re here to save us.”

The room was silent save for the sobbing of the woman who still clutched the remains of her dead child. She was madly, vainly trying to gather the bones, to not leave a single vertebra on the ground. Her dress was covered in ash.

Before either Epic could respond, the side doors burst open. Men in black armor with assault rifles piled into the bank and opened fire.

Back then, the government hadn’t given up yet. They still tried to fight the Epics, to subject them to mortal laws. It was clear from the beginning that when it came to Epics, you didn’t hesitate, you didn’t negotiate. You came in with guns blazing and hoped that the Epic you were facing could be killed by ordinary bullets.

My father sprang away at a run, old battle instincts prompting him to put his back to a pillar nearer the front of the bank. Steelheart turned, a bemused look on his face, as a wave of bullets washed over him. They bounced off his skin, ripping his clothing but leaving him completely unscathed.

Epics like him are what forced the United States to pass the Capitulation Act that gave all Epics complete immunity from the law. Gunfire cannot harm Steelheart—rockets, tanks, the most advanced weapons of man don’t even scratch him. Even if he could be captured, prison couldn’t hold him.

The government eventually declared men such as Steelheart to be natural forces, like hurricanes or earthquakes. Trying to tell Steelheart that he can’t take what he wants would be as vain as trying to pass a bill that forbids the wind to blow.

In the bank that day, I saw with my own eyes why so many have decided not to fight back. Steelheart raised a hand, energy beginning to glow around it with a cool yellow light. Deathpoint hid behind him, sheltered from the bullets. Unlike Steelheart, he seemed to fear getting shot. Not all Epics are impervious to gunfire, just the most powerful ones.

Steelheart released a burst of yellow-white energy from his hand, vaporizing a group of the soldiers. Chaos followed. Soldiers ducked for cover wherever they could find it; smoke and chips of marble filled the air. One of the soldiers fired some kind of rocket from his gun, and it shot past Steelheart—who continued to blast his enemies with energy—to hit the back end of the bank, blowing open the vault.

Flaming bills exploded outward. Coins sprayed into the air and showered the ground. Shouts. Screams. Insanity.

The soldiers died quickly. I continued to huddle on my chair, hands pressed against my ears. It was all so *loud*.

Deathpoint was still standing behind Steelheart. And as I watched, he smiled, then raised his hands, reaching for Steelheart’s neck. I don’t know what he was planning to do. Likely he had a second power. Most Epics as strong as he was possess more than one.

Maybe it would have been enough to kill Steelheart. I doubt it, but either way, we’ll never know.

A single *pop* sounded in the air. The explosion had been so loud it left me deafened to the point that I barely recognized the sound as a gunshot. As the smoke from the explosion cleared, I could see my father. He stood a short distance in front of Steelheart with arms

raised, his back to the pillar. He bore an expression of determination on his face and held the gun, pointing it at Steelheart.

No. Not at *Steelheart*. At Deathpoint, who stood just behind him.

Deathpoint collapsed, a bullet wound in his forehead. Dead. Steelheart turned sharply, looking at the lesser Epic. Then he looked back at my father and raised a hand to his face. There, on Steelheart's cheek just below his eye, was a line of blood.

At first I thought it must have come from Deathpoint. But when Steelheart wiped it away, it continued to bleed.

My father had shot at Deathpoint, but the bullet had passed by Steelheart first—and had grazed him on the way.

That bullet had *hurt* Steelheart, while the soldiers' bullets had bounced off.

"I'm sorry," my father said, sounding anxious. "He was reaching for you. I—"

Steelheart's eyes went wide, and he raised his hand before him, looking at his own blood. He seemed completely astounded. He glanced at the vault behind him, then looked at my father. In the settling smoke and dust, the two figures stood before each other—one massive, regal Epic, the other a small homeless man with a silly T-shirt and worn jeans.

Steelheart jumped forward with blinding speed and slammed a hand against my father's chest, crushing him back against the white stone pillar. Bones shattered, and blood poured from my father's mouth.

"No!" I screamed. My own voice felt odd in my ears, like I was underwater. I wanted to run to him, but I was too frightened. I still think of my cowardice that day, and it sickens me.

Steelheart stepped to the side, picking up the gun my father had dropped. Fury burning in his eyes, Steelheart pointed the gun directly at my father's chest, then fired a single shot into the already-fallen man.

He does that. Steelheart likes to kill people with their own guns. It's become one of his hallmarks. He has incredible strength and can fire blasts of energy from his hands. But when it comes to killing someone he deems worth his special attention, he prefers to use their guns.

Steelheart left my father to slump down the pillar and tossed the handgun at his feet. Then he began to shoot blasts of energy in all directions, setting chairs, walls, counters, everything alight. I was thrown from my chair as one of the blasts struck nearby, and I rolled to the floor.

The explosions threw wood and glass into the air, shaking the room. In a few heartbeats, Steelheart caused enough destruction to make Deathpoint's murder spree seem tame. Steelheart laid waste to that room, knocking down pillars, killing anyone he saw. I'm not sure how I survived, crawling over the shards of glass and splinters of wood, plaster, and dust raining down around me.

Steelheart let out a scream of rage and indignation. I could barely hear it, but I could *feel* the shattering what windows remained, vibrating the walls. Then something spread out from him, a wave of energy. And the floor around him changed colors, transforming to metal.

The transformation spread, washing through the entire room at incredible speed. The floor beneath me, the wall beside me, the bits of glass on the ground—it all changed to steel. What we've learned now is that Steelheart's rage transforms inanimate objects around him into steel, though it leaves living things and anything close to them alone.

By the time his cry faded, most of the bank's interior had been changed completely to steel.

though a large chunk of the ceiling was still wood and plaster, as was a section of one wall. Steelheart suddenly launched himself into the air, breaking through the ceiling and severing several stories to head into the sky.

I stumbled to my father, hoping he could do something, somehow stop the madness. When I got to him, he was spasming, blood covering his face, chest bleeding from the bullet wound. I clung to his arm, panicked.

Incredibly, he managed to speak, but I couldn't hear what he said. I was deafened completely by that point. My father reached out, a quivering hand touching my chin. He said something else, but I still couldn't hear him.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, then tried to pull his arm to get him to stand up and come with me. The entire building was shaking.

My father grabbed my shoulder, and I looked at him, tears in my eyes. He spoke a single word—one I could make out from the movement of his lips.

“Go.”

I understood. Something huge had just happened, something that exposed Steelheart to something that terrified him. He was a new Epic back then, not very well known in town, but I'd heard of him. He was supposed to be invulnerable.

That gunshot had wounded him, and everyone there had seen him weak. There was no way he'd let us live—he had to preserve his secret.

Tears streaming down my cheeks, feeling like an utter coward for leaving my father, I turned and ran. The building continued to tremble with explosions; walls cracked, sections of the ceiling crumbled. Steelheart was trying to bring it down.

Some people ran out the front doors, but Steelheart killed them from above. Others ran out the side doors, but those doorways only led deeper into the bank. Those people were crushed. Most of the building collapsed.

I hid in the vault.

I wish I could claim that I was smart for making that choice, but I'd simply gotten turned around. I vaguely remember crawling into a dark corner and curling up into a ball, crying as the rest of the building fell apart. Since most of the main room had been turned to metal by Steelheart's rage, and the vault was steel in the first place, those areas didn't crumble as the rest of the building did.

Hours later, I was pulled out of the wreckage by a rescue worker. I was dazed, barely conscious, and the light blinded me as I was dug free. The room I had been in had survived partially, lurched on its side, but it was still strangely intact, the walls and most of the ceiling now made of steel. The rest of the large building was rubble.

The rescue worker whispered something in my ear. “Pretend to be dead.” Then she carried me to a line of corpses and put a blanket over me. She'd guessed what Steelheart might do to survivors.

Once she went back to look for other survivors, I panicked and crawled from beneath the blanket. It was dark outside, though it should have only been late afternoon. Nightworld was upon us; Steelheart's reign had begun.

I stumbled away and limped into an alley. That saved my life a second time. Moments after I escaped, Steelheart returned, floating down past the rescue lights to land beside the wreckage. He carried someone with him, a thin woman with her hair in a bun. I would later

learn she was an Epic named Faultline, who had the power to move earth. Though she would one day challenge Steelheart, at that point she served him.

She waved her hand and the ground began to shake.

I fled, confused, frightened, pained. Behind me, the ground opened up, swallowing the remnants of the bank—along with the corpses of the fallen, the survivors who were receiving medical attention, and the rescue workers themselves. Steelheart wanted to leave no evidence. He had Faultline bury all of them under hundreds of feet of earth, killing anyone who could possibly speak of what had happened in that bank.

Except me.

Later that night, he performed the Great Transfession, an awesome display of power by which he transformed most of Chicago—buildings, vehicles, streets—into steel. That included a large portion of Lake Michigan, which became a glassy expanse of black metal. It was there that he built his palace.

I know, better than anyone else, that there are no heroes coming to save us. There are no good Epics. None of them protect us. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We live with them. We try to exist *despite* them. Once the Capitulation Act was passed, most people stopped fighting. In some areas of what we now call the Fractured States, the old government is still marginally in control. They let the Epics do as they please, and try to continue as a broken society. Most places are chaos, though, with no law at all.

In a few places, like Newcago, a single godlike Epic rules as a tyrant. Steelheart has no rivals here. Everyone knows he's invulnerable. Nothing harms him: not bullets, not explosions, not electricity. In the early years, other Epics tried to take him down and claim his throne, as Faultline attempted.

They're all dead. Now it's very rare that any of them tries.

However, if there's one fact we can hold on to, it's this: *every* Epic has a weakness. Something that invalidates their powers, something that turns them back into an ordinary person, if only for a moment. Steelheart is no exception; the events on that day in the bank prove it.

My mind holds a clue to how Steelheart might be killed. Something about the bank, the situation, the gun, or my father himself was able to counteract Steelheart's invulnerability. Many of you probably know about that scar on Steelheart's cheek. Well, as far as I can determine, I'm the only living person who knows how he got it.

I've seen Steelheart bleed.

And I *will* see him bleed again.

PART ONE

1

I skidded down a stairwell and crunched against steel gravel at the bottom. Sucking in air, I dashed through one of the dark understreets of Newcago. Ten years had passed since my father's death. That fateful day had become known by most people as the Annexation.

I wore a loose leather jacket and jeans, and had my rifle slung over my shoulder. The street was dark, even though it was one of the shallow understreets with grates and holes looking up into the sky.

It's always dark in Newcago. Nightwielder was one of the first Epics to swear allegiance to Steelheart, and is a member of his inner circle. Because of Nightwielder there are no sunrises and no moon to speak of, just pure darkness in the sky. All the time, every day. The only thing you can see up there is Calamity, which looks kind of like a bright red star or comet. Calamity began to shine one year before men started turning into Epics. Nobody knows where or how it still shines through the darkness. Of course, nobody knows why the Epics started appearing, or what their connection is to Calamity either.

I kept running, cursing myself for not leaving earlier. The lights along the ceiling of the understreet flickered, their coverings tinted blue. The understreet was littered with its typical losers: addicts at corners, dealers—or worse—in alleyways. There were some furtive groups of workers going to or from their jobs, thick coats and collars flipped up to hide their faces. They walked hunched over, eyes on the ground.

I'd spent most of the last decade among people like them, working at a place we simply called the Factory. Part orphanage, part school, it was mostly a way to exploit children for free labor. At least the Factory had given me a room and food for the better part of ten years. That had been way better than living on the street, and I hadn't minded for one moment working for my food. Child labor laws were relics of a time when people could care about such things.

I pushed my way past a pack of workers. One cursed at me in a language that sounded vaguely Spanish. I looked up to see where I was. Most intersections were marked by spray-painted street names on the gleaming metallic walls.

When the Great Transfession caused the better part of the Old City to be turned into solid steel, that included the soil and rock, dozens—maybe hundreds—of feet down into the ground. During the early years of his reign, Steelheart pretended to be a benevolent—ruthless—dictator. His Diggers had cut out several levels of understreets, complete with buildings, and people had flowed to Newcago for work.

Life had been difficult here, but it had been chaos everywhere else—Epics warring with one another over territory, various para-governmental or state military groups trying to claim

land. Newcago was different. Here you could be casually murdered by an Epic who didn't like the way you looked at him, but at least there was electricity, water, and food. People adapted. That's what we do.

Except for the ones who refuse to.

Come on, I thought, checking the time on my mobile, which I wore in the forearm mount on my coat. *Blasted rail line outage*. I took another shortcut, barreling through an alleyway. It was dim, but after ten years of living in perpetual gloom, you got used to it.

I passed huddled forms of sleeping beggars, then leaped over one sprawled in the street at the end of the alleyway and burst out onto Siegel Street, a wider thoroughfare that was better lit than most. Here, one level underground, the Diggers had hollowed out rooms that people used as shops. They were closed up for the moment, though more than a few had someone watching out front with a shotgun. Steelheart's police theoretically patrolled the understreets but they rarely came to help except in the worst cases.

Originally, Steelheart had spoken of a grand underground city that would stretch down dozens of levels. That was before the Diggers had gone mad, before Steelheart had given up the pretense of caring about the people in the understreets. Still, these upper levels weren't terrible. At least there was a sense of organization, and plenty of burrowed-out holes to use as homes.

The lights in the ceiling here were faintly green and yellow, alternating. If you knew the color patterns of the various streets, you could navigate pretty well through the understreets. The top levels, at least. Even veterans of the city tended to avoid the lower levels, called the steel catacombs, where it was too easy to get lost.

Two blocks to Schuster Street, I thought, glancing through a gap in the ceiling toward the better-lit, gleaming skyscrapers above. I jogged the two blocks, then swerved into a stairwell going up, feet falling on steel steps that reflected the dim, half-functional lights.

I scrambled out onto a metal street, then immediately ducked into an alleyway. A lot of people said that the overstreets weren't nearly as dangerous as the understreets, but I never felt comfortable on them. I never felt safe anywhere, to be honest, not even at the Factor with the other kids. But up here ... up here there were Epics.

Carrying a rifle around the understreets was common practice, but up here it could draw attention from Steelheart's soldiers or a passing Epic. It was best to remain hidden. I crouched beside some boxes in the alleyway, catching my breath. I glanced at my mobile, tapping over to a basic map of the area, then looked up.

Directly across from me was a building with red neon lettering. The Reeve Playhouse. As I watched, people began pouring out the front, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd made it just as the play ended.

The people were all overstreeters, in dark suits and colorful dresses. Some would be Epics, but most would not. Instead they were those who had somehow gotten ahead in life. Perhaps Steelheart favored them for tasks they performed, or perhaps they had simply been born to rich parents. Steelheart could take anything he wanted, but to have an empire he needed people to help rule. Bureaucrats, officers in his army, accountants, trading gurus, diplomats. Like the upper crust of an old-school dictatorship, these people lived off the crumbs that Steelheart left behind.

That meant they were almost as culpable as the Epics in keeping the rest of us oppressed.

but I didn't bear them much ill will. The way the world was these days, you did what you had to in order to survive.

They had an old-fashioned style—it was the current trend. The men wore hats, and the women's dresses looked like those from pictures I'd seen of old Prohibition days. It was a direct contrast to the modern steel buildings and the distant thumping of an advanced Enforcement copter.

The opulent people suddenly began moving out of the way, making room for a man in a bright red pinstriped suit, a red fedora, and a deep red and black cape.

I ducked down a little lower. It was Fortuity. He was an Epic with precognition powers. He could guess the numbers that would come up on a dice roll, for instance, or foretell the weather. He could also sense danger, and that elevated him to High Epic status. You couldn't kill a man like him with a simple rifle shot. He would know the shot was coming and would dodge it before you pulled the trigger. His powers were so well attuned that he could avoid a machine-gun barrage, and he would also know if his food had been poisoned or if a building was rigged with explosives.

High Epics. They're blasted hard to kill.

Fortuity was a moderately high-ranking member of Steelheart's government. Not part of his innermost circle, like Nightwielder, Firefight, or Conflux, but powerful enough to be feared by most of the minor Epics in town. He had a long face and a hawkish nose. He strolled the curb in front of the playhouse, lighting a cigarette as the other patrons spilled out behind him. Two women in sleek gowns hung on his elbows.

I itched to unsling my rifle and take a shot at him. He was a sadistic monster. He claimed his powers worked best when practicing an art called extispicy: the reading of the entrails of dead creatures to divine the future. Fortuity preferred to use human entrails, and he liked them fresh.

I held myself back. The moment I decided to try to shoot him, his powers would activate. Fortuity had nothing to fear from a lone sniper. He probably thought he didn't have anything to fear at all. If my information was right, the next hour would prove him very wrong on the count.

Come on, I thought. This is the best time to move against him. I'm right. I've got to be.

Fortuity took a drag on his cigarette, nodding to a few people who passed by. He had no bodyguards. Why would he need bodyguards? His fingers glittered with rings, though wealth was meaningless to him. Even without Steelheart's rules granting him the right to take what he wanted, Fortuity could win a fortune in any gambling house on any day he chose.

Nothing happened. Had I been wrong? I'd been so *sure*. Bilko's information was usually up to date. Word in the understreets was that the Reckoners were back in Newcago. Fortuity was the Epic they'd target. I knew this. I'd made a habit—maybe even a quest—of studying the Reckoners. I—

A woman walked past Fortuity. Tall, lithe, and golden-haired, and perhaps twenty years old, she wore a thin red dress with a plunging neckline. Even with two beauties on his arm, Fortuity turned and stared at her. She hesitated, glancing back at him. Then she smiled and walked up, hips undulating back and forth.

I couldn't hear what they said, but in the end, this newcomer displaced the other women. She led Fortuity down the road, whispering in his ear and laughing. The other two women

waited behind, arms crossed, not daring to complain. Fortuity did *not* like his women to speak back to him.

This had to be it. I wanted to get ahead of them, but couldn't do so on the street itself. Instead I moved back through a few alleyways. I knew the area perfectly; studying maps of the theater district was what had almost made me late.

I hustled around the back of a building, sticking to the shadows, and arrived at another alleyway. From here I could peek out and see the same road, but from another angle. Fortuity ambled along the steel sidewalk outside.

The area was lit by lamps hanging from streetlights. The streetlights themselves had been turned to steel during the transference—electronics and bulbs included. They no longer worked, but they did provide a convenient place to hang lanterns.

Those lanterns left pools of light that the pair moved through, in and out. I held my breath, watching closely. Fortuity was packing a weapon for certain. The suit was tailored to hide the bulge under his arm, but I could still make out where his holster was.

Fortuity didn't have any directly offensive powers, but that didn't really matter. His precognition powers meant he never missed with a handgun, no matter how wild the shot seemed. If he decided to kill you, you had a couple of seconds to respond, or you'd be dead.

The woman didn't appear to be carrying a weapon, though I couldn't be certain. That dress showed plenty of curves. A gun strapped to her thigh, perhaps? I looked closer as she moved into another pool of light, though I found myself staring at her, rather than looking for weapons. She was gorgeous. Eyes that glittered, bright red lips, golden hair. And that lovely neckline ...

I shook myself. *Idiot*, I thought. *You have a purpose. Women interfere with things like purpose.*

But even a ninety-year-old blind priest would stop and stare at this woman. If he weren't blind, that is. *Dumb metaphor*, I thought. *I'll have to work on that one.* I have trouble with metaphors.

Focus. I raised my rifle, leaving on the safety and using the scope for its zoom. Where were they going to hit him? The street here ran through several blocks of gloomy darkness—broken only by the lanterns—before intersecting Burnley Street. That was a major hub of the local dance scene. Likely the woman had enticed Fortuity to join her at a club. The quickest route was through this dark, less-populated street.

The empty street was a very good sign. The Reckoners rarely struck at an Epic who was too public an area. They didn't like innocent casualties. I tilted the rifle up and scanned the skyscraper windows with my scope. Some of the glass-turned-steel windows had been cut out and replaced with glass again. Was anyone up there watching?

I'd been hunting the Reckoners for years. They were the only ones who still fought back, a shadowy group that stalked, entrapped, and assassinated powerful Epics. The Reckoners, *they* were the heroes. Not what my father had imagined—no Epic powers, no flashy costumes. They didn't stand for truth, the American ideal, or any such nonsense.

They just killed. One by one. Their goal was to eliminate each and every Epic who thought himself or herself above the law. And since that was pretty much *every* Epic, they had a lot of work to do.

I continued scanning windows. How would they try to kill Fortuity? There would only be

few ways to go about it. They might try to catch him in a situation impossible to escape. precog's powers would lead him down the safest path of self-preservation, but if you set up a situation where every path led to death, you could kill him.

We call that a checkmate, but they're really hard to set up. More likely, the Reckoner knew Fortuity's weakness. Every Epic has at least one—an object, a state of mind, an action of some sort—that allows you to void their powers.

There, I thought, heart leaping as—through the scope—I spotted a dark figure huddled in a window on the third floor of a building across the street. I couldn't make out details, but he was probably tracking Fortuity with a rifle and scope of his own.

This was it. I smiled. I'd actually found them. After all of my practicing and searching, I *found* them.

I kept looking, even more eager. The sniper would just be one piece of the plot to kill the Epic. My hands began to sweat. Other people get excited by sporting events or action films, but I don't have time for prefabricated thrills. This, however ... getting the chance to watch the Reckoners in action, seeing one of their traps firsthand ... Well, it was literally the fulfillment of one of my grandest dreams, even if it was only the first step in my plans. I hadn't come just to watch an Epic be assassinated. Before the night's end, I intended to find a way to make the Reckoners let me join them.

"Fortuity!" yelled a nearby voice.

I quickly lowered my rifle, pulling back against the side of the alleyway. A figure ran past the opening a moment later. He was a stout man in a smoking jacket and slacks.

"Fortuity!" he yelled again. "Wait up!" I raised my weapon again, using the scope to inspect the newcomer. Was this part of the Reckoners' trap?

No. That was Donny "Curveball" Harrison, a minor Epic with only a single power, the ability to fire a handgun without ever running out of bullets. He was a bodyguard and had been a man in Steelheart's organization. There was no way he was part of the Reckoners' plan—they didn't work with Epics. Ever. The Reckoners hated the Epics. They only killed the worst of them, but they would *never* let one join their team.

Cursing softly to myself, I watched Curveball confront Fortuity and the woman. She looked concerned, full lips pursed, gorgeous eyes narrowed. Yes, she was worried. She was one of the Reckoners for certain.

Curveball started talking, explaining something, and Fortuity frowned. What was going on?

I turned my attention back to the woman. *There's something about her ...*, I thought, my eyes lingering. She was younger than I'd originally thought, probably eighteen or nineteen, but something in those eyes made her *seem* much older.

Her look of concern was gone in a moment, replaced by what I realized was intentional rapidity as she turned to Fortuity and gestured onward. Whatever the trap was, she needed him to be farther down the street. That made sense. Trapping a precog is *tough*. If his dangerous senses got even a faint whiff of a trap, he'd bolt. She *had* to know his weakness, but probably didn't want to try to exploit it until they were more isolated.

Even then, it might not work. Fortuity would still be an armed man, and many Epic weaknesses were notoriously tricky to exploit.

I kept watching. Whatever Curveball's problem was, it didn't seem to have anything to do with the woman. He kept gesturing back toward the playhouse. If he convinced Fortuity

return ...

The trap would never be sprung. The Reckoners would pull out, vanish, pick a new target, and I could spend years searching for another chance like this one.

I couldn't let that happen. Taking a deep breath, I lowered my rifle and slung it over my shoulder. Then I stepped out onto the street and took off toward Fortuity.

It was time to hand the Reckoners my résumé.

2

I hustled down the dark street on a steel sidewalk, passing in and out of pockets of light.

I might have just decided to do something very, very stupid. Like eating-meat-sold-by-shady-understreet-vendors stupid. Maybe even stupider. The Reckoners planned the assassinations with extreme care. It hadn't been my intention to interfere—only to watch them try to get them to take me on. By stepping out of that alleyway, I changed things. Interfered with the plan, whatever it was. There was a chance that everything was going just as it was supposed to—that Curveball was accounted for.

But maybe not. No plan was perfect, and even the Reckoners failed. Sometimes they pulled out, their target left alive. It was better to retreat than risk capture.

I didn't know which situation this was, but I had to at least try to help. If I missed the opportunity, I'd curse myself for years.

All three people—Fortuity, Curveball, and the beauty with the dangerous air—turned toward me as I ran up. “Donny!” I said. “We need you back at the Reeve!”

Curveball frowned at me, eyeing my rifle. He reached under his jacket for his gun, but didn't pull it out. Fortuity, in his red suit and deep red cape, raised an eyebrow at me. If I had been a danger, his powers would have warned him. I wasn't planning to do anything to him in the next few minutes, though, so he got no warning.

“Who are *you*?” Curveball demanded.

I stopped. “Who am I? Sparks, Donny! I've worked for Spritzer for three years now. Would you *kill* me to try remembering people's names once in a while?”

My heart was thumping, but I tried not to show it. Spritzer was the guy who ran the Reeve Playhouse. Spritz wasn't an Epic, but he was in Steelheart's pay—pretty much anyone with any influence in the city was.

Curveball studied me suspiciously, but I knew he didn't give much mind to the lowlife thugs around him. In fact, he probably would have been shocked by how much I knew about him, along with most of the Epics in Newcago.

“Well?” I demanded. “You coming?”

“You don't give lip to me, boy. What are you, a door guard?”

“I went on the Idolin raid last summer,” I said, crossing my arms. “I'm moving up, Donny.”

“You call me sir, idiot,” Curveball snapped, lowering his hand from his jacket. “If you were ‘moving up,’ you wouldn't be running messages. What's this nonsense about going back? He said he needed Fortuity to run some odds for him.”

I shrugged. “He didn't tell me *why*; he just sent me to get you. Said to say that he'd been wrong, and you weren't to bother Fortuity.” I looked to Fortuity. “I don't think the Spritzer

knew about ... er ... that you had plans, sir.” I nodded to the woman.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. I was so nervous, you could have scratched off a lottery ticket by holding it against my knuckles. Finally, Fortuity sniffed. “Tell Spritz that he’s forgiven, this time. He should know better—I’m not his personal calculator.” He turned, sticking out his elbow to the woman and walking away, obviously assuming that she’d jump at his whim.

As she turned to follow, she glanced at me, long lashes fluttering above deep blue eyes. I found myself smiling.

Then I realized that if I’d fooled Fortuity, I’d probably fooled her too. That meant she—and the Reckoners—now thought I was one of Steelheart’s lackeys. They were always careful not to endanger civilians, but they had nothing at all against taking out a few hit men or thugs.

Aw, sparks, I thought. I should have winked at her! Why didn’t I wink at her?

Would that have looked stupid? I’d never really practiced winking. Could you do it the wrong way, though? It was a simple thing.

“Something wrong with your eye?” Curveball asked.

“Er, got a lash in it,” I said. “Sir. Sorry. Um, we should get back.” The thought of the Reckoners setting off their trap in time to take out Curveball—and me—as a nice side effect suddenly made me very, very nervous.

I hurried down the sidewalk, splashing through some puddles. Rain didn’t evaporate quickly in the darkness, and with the steel ground, there wasn’t anywhere for it to go. The Diggers had created some drainage, along with pipes to circulate air in the understreets, but their eventual madness had disrupted those plans and they’d never finished.

Curveball followed me at a moderate speed. I slowed down, matching his pace, worried he might come up with a reason to go back for Fortuity.

“What’s your hurry, kid?” he growled.

In the distance, the woman and Fortuity had stopped beneath a streetlight, where they had taken to searching one another’s mouths with their tongues.

“Stop staring,” Curveball said, walking past. “He could gun us down without even looking and nobody would care.”

It was true. Fortuity was a powerful enough Epic that—so long as he didn’t interfere with one of Steelheart’s plans—he could do whatever he pleased. Curveball himself didn’t have that kind of immunity. You still had to be careful when you were at his level. Steelheart wouldn’t care if a minor Epic like Curveball got himself stabbed in the back.

I tore my eyes away and joined Curveball. He lit up a cigarette as he walked, a flash of light in the dark, followed by the coal-red sizzle of the tip hanging in the air before him. “Sparks, Spritz,” he said. “Could have sent one of you lackeys out after Fortuity in the first place. I hate looking like a slontze.”

“You know how Spritz is,” I said absently. “He figured that sending you would be less offensive to Fortuity, since you’re an Epic.”

“Suppose that’s right.” Curveball took a pull on his cigarette. “Whose team are you in?”

“Eddie Macano’s,” I said, naming one of the underlings in Spritz’s organization. I glanced over my shoulder. They were *still* going at it. “He was the one who made me run after you. Didn’t want to do it himself. Too busy trying to pick up one of those girls Fortuity left behind. Whatta slontze, eh?”

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