

THE STARGUARDS
Earth Legacy

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PART TWO

**The E-Corps: Team 2 - Of Land, Air, Sea, and
Beyond**

Prologue: Earth 2226

"Simon?"

"Hello, Xaul," he said. "It's been a while.

"I'll say." Xaul hadn't believed it when his PA, Caroline, had told him that Simon Exmoor was waiting to see him, but here he was, his old aide from Consention Base, just like old times—almost. "What can I do for you?"

Xaul Relentus was a little perplexed at Exmoor's presence. After he had effectively been fired as Relentus' aide and sent back to Earth, Simon had resigned soon after; his whereabouts and profession a mystery. And now, the mystery that was Simon Exmoor had reappeared. It made Relentus smile: *Some things remained the same.*

Simon walked slowly around Xaul's office, absent-mindedly lightly touching objects he remembered from the time of the Axalan War. Located within the white-walled edifice that was the new United Nations building in New York, Xaul's office was set up to remind him of his quarters on Consention Base. This was imaginatively emphasised by the magnificent holographic images around the walls displaying views of the deep space fields and stars he would have had from his old quarters—his only indulgence. His office door just had his name on it, nothing fancy, and no need for his title Emperor-General. If anything, Xaul almost dreaded seeing his title. He still felt he wasn't big enough for the job, plus he got too much of a ribbing about it from Della.

He indicated for Simon to sit in one of the comfy white armchair, while he walked around the old oak desk to his own chair. Simon still looked young for a two-hundred-odd year old man; still tall, his brown hair growing long and wavy, his blue eyes accentuating a handsome face, but something about him seemed different. Even his usually crisply ironed blue three-piece suit and white shirt were wrinkled as if he had been sleeping in them.

"Drink?" Xaul asked, reaching into a cabinet behind his desk which held a small array of discreetly hidden bottles and tumblers. He poured himself a small whiskey; a superstitious habit to keep the cold of space out of his bones. Simon shook his head, declining. Xaul took off his own suit jacket and slung it over his chair, sitting down. He waited for Simon to begin.

Simon closed his eyes and smiled as if at some distant memory. He smile wasn't a confident one. "I know I'm kind of *persona non grata* around here," Simon looked weary as if he hadn't slept for days, "but I had to see you again, especially now. I need to warn you." He looked earnest and if Xaul could believe himself, more than a little

worried. Xaul indicated for him to continue. "Earth is in danger," Simon said.

Xaul's brows knitted together, his steely blue eyes squinted at his visitor. Simon noticed Xaul's blue tinges in his hair were almost blending into the new grey that was sprouting, but he was still in excellent health and kept his body in trim shape for a man in his fifties. "Danger? Again? What danger? From the Axalans? The war's over, Simon, has been for five years now!"

Every now and again, the Emperor-General liked to escape the Earth-bound desk of duty. He had just returned from touring the front lines of the new Constitutionate the ever-expanding territories of humans, Bions, and Axalans. The Axalans had assured him that the surrounding systems around Axala were devoid of life, but teeming with life-supporting worlds. Now ships with mixed crews were out exploring them. The world set up for all of the Constitutionate peoples, Home, was only the first of many such worlds and Xaul was proud that he had helped establish them. Earth was at peace. He was at peace. But now Simon Exmoor, the immortal man, he had not seen in almost five years was stirring things up again.

"Look, Simon, I know you had your reasons for keeping your past and your knowledge of the future secret, but what threat is there now and why didn't you mentioned it before?" an exasperated Xaul asked. He stood up, pacing the room toward a faux window looking out upon the stars, arms folded, his soldier's body stretching his suit's limits.

Simon shook his head as if clearing it of confusion. "Because I don't know when the threat will happen," Simon confessed. At Xaul's exasperated look and before he could ask more questions, Simon threw up his hands and explained. "Xaul, I've never told anyone what I'm about to tell you; and it can't go any further than this room." He waited for Exmoor to nod his assent. Simon took a deep breath. "I am the last living Exmoor on Earth. If certain factions found this out, I would certainly be killed leaving the Exmoors on the brink of extinction, and Earth would be royally screwed. After I tell you why, and if you don't hate me even more by then, you will need to find Lynn Kellis and tell her. And then the two of you will need to plan for the future for if you don't then the Earth and all the people on it will die!" Simon had tried to keep his voice down and calm and he looked at Xaul with such conviction that Xaul was compelled to listen.

"Okay, Simon, tell me what it is you think is going to happen," Xaul said.

Simon nodded. He looked relieved, having lifted the burden of a couple hundred years off his chest. He

managed a wry smile. "Well, funnily enough, to paraphrase Kellis, it all started when the Starguards came to Earth!"

Earth. The Past.

"In my tenure as a Starguard, I have acted in ways that I have seen necessary to rid this world of its evil, but my methods have apparently not met with your approval. You see me as evil as the evil I fight. So why am I here, in front of your media? I am here to tell you a few truths, now that you have placed me too high on the pedestal that you feel you have to tear it down.

You saw me as a hero once. But I was never a hero, none of us were. We did what we had to do. It's called survival, a basic instinct that everyone does, everyday. Since the untimely deaths of my colleagues, a year ago, deaths I do not have to atone for, I have been the sole super-being on this world and I had sought to keep my own counsel, but your governments persuaded me to aid them in their own global agendas, which I did, against my better judgement, to bury my grief and to better my perception and understanding of this world. But everything I did and said to save you, help you, understand you; you turned your backs to me. So be it. I regret that I ever helped you.

I was never and am no longer yours to order around. As for your so-called politicians and entrepreneurs, rubbing their hands together, hoping to make money and political gain from me: no more! I am not your gravy train. With all my powers I could have bent you all to my will, subdued you, but that is not my way. I thought that you needed protection, not from the outside, but from yourselves. I thought that you needed guidance, you were losing your way. But I realised that you needed none of these things. You do need controlling. But I won't be the one to do that.

You may as well know, now, that I am not from this world. Where I am from, all are superior. But you, you Humans, Terrans, Earthlings, Man or whatever you call yourselves, are a diluted strain, inferior, forgotten, and alone. Your entertainment devices depict real and imaginary tales of war, destruction and invasion. You spread violence, live to spread violence, breed violence. You dream of such things, waiting for visitors from afar; welcoming them in peace, only to turn against them in war. Well, we came. And you didn't want us.

Duplicity rules the human heart, hand in hand with ignorance. You want a utopia that will never come! You will always destroy it. I could have brought myself to control you, even destroy you, you and your dark, ugly ways—I still can. But I care no longer. I am leaving this world.

Humans, you are walking down a path of destruction in which this world shall surely burn. And none, least of me, shall shed a tear. As far as I'm concerned, you

humans can go to hell!"

The speech that changed the world commentators had called it. In one fell swoop, Altair had altered Earth's perception of itself within the universe. There were others out there in the dark cosmos. Who and where were they? Were they friend or foe? One of them had just exiled himself from Earth.

As one pundit put it: "We just turfed out Superman!"

A United Nations judge condemned Altair in absentia:

"Altair, you are wracked with guilt, hiding away from the knowledge that you destroyed your friends; the Starguards. Look at yourself. Look within yourself and atone for your sins."

Altair was found guilty of crimes against humanity. If he were ever to return to Earth, he would be executed—if such a feat were possible by mere humans.

The repercussions of the power vacuum soon caused chaos around the world. Doomsday scenarios were envisaged, riots, looting, crime waves, and wars escalated. World War Three loomed.

The U.N. had acted quickly and within months had initiated the E-Corps Phase 2 project. Superheroes would once again grace the Earth. But as Altair had warned, others would want power and control.

CHAPTER ONE

New York - Three years later

"I lost her!" Arthur sighed, the tall blond-haired man stood hunched in a doorway, trying to minimise the traffic noise in the background.

"Dammit, Arthur! Where!" The frayed voice crackled over the comm Unit.

"I'm down town, not far from the old Sword Building."

"We've waited a long time for her to resurface. And now she does we can't find her. The timing cannot be a coincidence. Did we get anything from the files?" The voice asked, almost exasperated.

"No, sorry, every Van Tager file was fried and the Sagerhawk files have disappeared. We don't have their IDs, except for the washout." He tried to sound more confident.

"Okay, I'll handle that one. Keep on searching. You have to find her or it's World War Three! And Arthur, pursue, but do not engage, wait for the team!"

"'Kay, boss," Arthur sighed again. "I'm on it." He punched off the comms. Looking up at the skyscrapers, he would have loved to have visited everyone of them, but he only had one mission to accomplish: finding Pandora Wake.

United Nations Building, New York

"...and while E-Corps Team One had been primarily U.S. based, Team Two will be an international group as indicated by their motto: Of Land, Sea, Air, and Beyond," General Abe Westonheimer said, though it stuck in his craw that this new powerful group of nationalities had a U.N. mandate. The new E-Corps also had bases in America, Britain, Japan, France, Russia, South Africa, Australia, Peru, and more; some more secret than others.

Westonheimer was still a tall, lean soldier at heart and wore his steel-grey pin-stripe suit like a uniform. In his late seventies now, he was still a likeable straight-talking fellow American even for a politician. Standing here before all these go-getting journalists, he realised he was getting too old for this. Superheroes were a young man's game.

Outwardly, he smiled, he hated press conferences, especially late afternoon ones to re-play in time for prime time audiences, but he had been bullied into a joint conference with the new U.N. E-Corps Liaison Agency by White House Chief of Staff, Kay Slaydon; revenge over the loss of Team One and their chief financier, Penthor Thane. The Starguards débâcle had almost cost the government the recent elections, but they had scraped through on the basis that they had the experience of super-powered humans to handle the ensuing crises.

And it had been Westonheimer himself, who had anonymously leaked the rumours that a second superhero team existed, when the current administration looked set to lose. People wanted their heroes back to protect them from rogues like Altair and whoever delivered such heroes would win. And the U.N. had snapped at the opportunity to authorise and harness the new team.

"Any more questions?" Westonheimer asked, scanning the conference room as hundreds of frantic waving hands shot up into the air simultaneously.

A chorus of incoherency arose as reporters stood up and shouted questions, talked over each other, and tried to record anything of note.

Westonheimer held up his hands for quiet. "Okay, okay, I get the first question: who are the team?"

There was a "shush" from someone at the side of the room as Westonheimer read out the names on the team. At least there was an American leading them, Westonheimer conceded to himself.

"Team Two is led by Marine. Suffice to say I cannot divulge personal details or facts that would give their identities away," Westonheimer said, though he knew that Marine was Malcolm Dereign, aged thirty four, an American former Lt. Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps with a distinguished career. Sharp, lean-muscled, all-American blond-haired, blue-eyed soldier-hero from San Diego. "As his name implies, Marine is what we call telequatic..." there were murmurs of surprise and delight at a new power classification, but Westonheimer continued, "... with the power to manipulate liquids, like water," though blood was his favourite; the battled-hardened Westonheimer had been left slightly squeamish at the trials. Marine was somewhat aggressive and demanded absolute obedience from his team; Westonheimer's type of soldier. Though there was a cynical edge to him when it came to his superiors.

"Marine's second is Dee; that's D.E.E.," Westonheimer spelled out, "A strange name, I know, but there you go." Westonheimer smiled though he too was baffled by it. Teddi Meadows, thirty, an Australian computer expert, had a non-military background, which rankled Westonheimer a bit, but he did not resent her for this for Dee was the most powerful being on the planet, perhaps the universe. While the scientists did not fully comprehend Dee's powers of megativity, an ability to harness the universe's primordial superforces, Westonheimer told the gathered press:

"Dee's powers are electromagnetic in nature..." to say the least. Dee was the personification of M-theory, an equally exciting and terrible concept to scientists. There was nothing, in theory, that Dee could not do with the purple energy she had been infused with, but no one

knew exactly what that meant. Not your typical superhero female, Dee resisted E-Corps publicist requests for pin-up poses. She was a bit too short, curvy, and homely for some, looking for acceptance as the outsider; an unknown colleague crudely commenting that the only six-pack she would have would be the beer can variety. But only her DNA had responded to the megativity process. Teddi had fretted privately in her files that she had too much power; it was frightening. Westonheimer didn't blame her for he would be, too.

Third would be the most popular of the heroes, Westonheimer had been told: "Velocity Victor, the super-speedster." With his good looks and flopping-spiky hair, the colour of which he changed each week, Hiko Nomora, the youngest member at twenty-five, was a former Japanese army Lieutenant, his inclusion mitigated fears of a Japanese military build up. The predictions of his popularity would prove correct as the gregarious super-speedster was a media sensation, always amiable and quick to acknowledge the public's support for him. Called Niro to his friends, a nickname from his grandfather, he had played baseball in his superhero guise for a local Tokyo team, playing several positions at once, but when sponsorship for the 'superhero's team' went through the roof, he was suspended to avoid cheating allegations. He took it in good grace and now only showed up to throw the first ball before each game. When asked by the E-Corps press officer, who wanted to shorten his moniker: "What do we call you, Mr Victor? V? V-Man? Or Double V?" He coolly replied: 'Mr. Velocity will do fine!' he had smiled from his masked face.

"And last, but not least, Alto Rey, who can generate intense rays of heat and light, used as directed beams or to fly, thus he is the 'high king' or sun of the Andes." Westonheimer felt like an idiot reading out these bios. He could kill Slaydon for her suggestions, but this is what the public and media went for; real-life cool, cute, 'comic-book' heroes.

Jhonny Perez, a Peruvian scientist from Trujillo, the oldest member at forty, was also an accomplished mountain climber. He was not as powerful as Dee, but he was formidable in his intellectual powers; the Andean Einstein he had been called at University, even before taking PhD degrees from Oxford and Stanford. Perez had been part of Doctor Frans Sagerhawk's team on the original E-Corps project until it was discovered that his DNA was a match to be transformed, much to his delight. It was brought up in his psych-evaluation that as a child he was afraid of the dark after having fallen down a mineshaft, but that it now had no bearing on him, especially as he was virtually a modern-day sun god. He

had preferred not to go by the name Inti, the old Inca god name, which he thought would be blasphemous. His Inca ancestry was a source of great pride to him and he himself was handsome in a native princely way with his wide toothy smile, high cheekbones, large nose under a mop of thick black hair. He had honed his scientist's body into that of a warrior by running the ancient roads through the tumbled heights of the Andes.

Westonheimer concluded, "Their powers have been augmented by manoeuvre-suits, as worn by Team One and The Starguards. You know these as the thin, computer-assisted armour able to withstand immeasurable battle damage. Visors act as a third eye, mini-servos as extra muscle if needed, and power packs provide extra fire-power."

Westonheimer surveyed the grouped reporters who lapped up all the information he gave them, wishing he was a few years younger. This was probably his last major public event. Resisting the urge to wipe an imagined tear from his eye, he looked over to his left and introduced the next member of E-Corps Team Two press team. "Well, folks, that's me done, but I now leave you in the capable hands of Vittoria Piazza, the attaché to the U.N. Secretary General and head of the U.N.'s E-Corps Team Two project who will answer general questions. Thank you," he bowed out.

There was polite sustained applause for Westonheimer's exit, a young Brazilian woman taking his place on the stand. Her deep brown eyes and swept back black hair over coffee-coloured skin spoke earnestly of the need for change. The cost of the E-Corps programme had run into the billions, a lot of money even for the U.S., the U.N., and the late Penthor Thane combined, who had originally sponsored the programme. It would be Piazza's job to smooth over any difficulties and present a normal human, if not a pretty face, upon the new heroes.

Neither Piazza nor Westonheimer had gone into detail about the background of the E-Corps. Ten subjects, five of each gender, had been chosen, but only eight had passed the final grade. There had been two failures from the E-Corps project; Jayne Ambrose, who had dropped out due to mitigating circumstances and Pandora Wake who had been rejected due to her borderline psychosis. They were still at large. And it was widely known within intelligence circles Pandora Wake had stolen a manoeuvre-suit along with the dagger-axe, a weapon of her own design. There were rumours that she had become a mercenary, whereas Ambrose had disappeared from the intelligence radar all together. Covert efforts had been made to find them, without success. And it was a secondary, but secret, mission for Team 2 to achieve this and to recruit or eliminate them as required. But first,

the razzmatazz had to be seen to.

Plazza spoke for almost an hour, her smiling face a refreshing compliment on the E-Corps team. Team Two would commence operations immediately, with Plazza handling further media enquiries and support. The conference over, Westonheimer breathed a sigh of relief as the reporters milled around spewing out live reports and speculations on all aspects of the new team. They finally filed out of the conference hall, like noisy students leaving a lecture theatre.

Westonheimer declined Plazza's offer of a celebratory drink, wanting instead to escape back to the comforts of the Pentagon. A private jet whisked him back to Washington, Westonheimer spending most of the flight absent-mindedly looking out the window on the world below. There was a lot to think about—the future, for one thing.

Walking through the corridors of the expansive seat of military power, he occasionally smiled back, shared a joke, or shook the hands of many colleagues, officers, and staff who generally and favourably commented on his TV performance and the new E-Corps team. Westonheimer took it all in stride until he got back to his office.

Closing the door and sitting at his desk, he reviewed the new E-Corps team. The new administration and the U.N. had good reason to suppose that their man-made heroes would be the saviours of the world, but Westonheimer knew that underneath those masks and with all their power, they were still only human. *Young humans at that*, thought Westonheimer, as he started writing on headed paper.

It was time for him to leave the stage and pray that the next generation held their nerve and kept the world safe, whatever it took, just as he had done for decades.

"And may God have mercy on us all," the old General sighed as he signed his resignation letter.

Manhattan, New York

"We should have recruited Altair to the team," Mal muttered again. "He should have stayed on Earth instead of running off God knows where."

On the third anniversary since the death of the Starguards and E-Corps Team One, and for the first time the new team decided to get together in a bar, sans uniforms and no shadowy escorts, to salute lost comrades in arms. Their mere presence and global membership had averted World War Three, but there were still other hostile elements to with.

Teddi groaned. "For chrissakes, it's been three years, Mal," her Australian accent kicked in. He's a criminal and he ain't coming back. He ran off into space for crying out loud. That must tell you something. Where can

he go?" Teddi looked around from their booth, which was far enough near the back and away from other patrons so they wouldn't be overheard.

She felt comfortable away from the base in simple civilian clothes, in her case blue jeans and a green sweater, but she always felt as if she was being watched.

The four team members had watched Westonheimer's briefing on the bar's TV, trying not to react when the bar's customers or TV reporters commented on or debated their names and powers. But they were contented that there seemed to be a favourable vibe to their presence. They had almost choked with laughter when the last question had been, "So where are the E-Corps members, now?" and without a beat and with the straightest of faces, Vittoria had answered: "The team is on duty; always on standby." And flashed them her most pleasant smile.

Once the conference was over, they had gone back to their conversation, Mal usually leading it back to the topic of Altair, his favourite anti-hero.

But for whatever reason, Mal seemed more agitated, Teddi thought, though he acted relaxed drinking back the beers there was a tenseness to his movement and muscles. He too wore jeans with a grey t-shirt with 'U.S. Marines' across the front in some ironic statement, while the bottom of his 'USMC' tattoo could be seen poking from his right upper arm sleeve. Mal brooded over his beer.

"He must be dead by now," Jhonny joined in, taking a sip of his bottled beer. He was an unlikely scientist dressed in his usual red-checked shirt with rolled up sleeves, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. He spoke in his quiet Peruvian manner; his predictable speech about the nature and affects of space on a physical body about to be heard again, but Niro countered him.

Ever ready to play foil to Jhonny, the two were fast friends; the odd couple Mal called them as Niro was always fastidiously groomed; clean-shaven with his hair back to its original black spikes, the colour of which he could change in seconds. While Jhonny was the cowboy, Niro was a laid-back city-slicker wearing a lilac-coloured shirt with baseball-shaped cuff-links, black slacks, and polished black shoes. His shades were pushed up onto his head. He finished his thoughts: "Unless he had a space ship and is waiting for the rest of his people to come. Hopefully they'll come in peace," Niro half joked. Teddi and even Johnny laughed, but Mal was adamant.

"You do have a man-crush on Altair, don't you?" Teddi jested.

"I'm being serious," Mal scowled. "We, meaning my government, should have handled things differently. And

we..." he waved his hand at them, "should have been activated far sooner and formed a team around him. I don't think Altair killed the Starguards or Team One, but we never gave him the chance to explain." He was leaning forward to get his point across, but now he sat back and played with the fluting on the beer glass in front of him. His eyes betrayed his seething anger at being mocked.

"Well world opinion doesn't agree with you Mal," Teddi said, "And not for the first time. He killed people, and then he ran, into space, I have to say again: Into. Space. What sane person does that?"

"Can you do that, Teddi?" Niro asked. "I've always wanted to ask. Surely your powers would protect you."

Mal snorted, "She's indestructible, Niro."

Teddi ignored Mal, shrugging. "I think so. I've been put into vacuum chambers and survived. I'm discovering new powers every day!"

"Si, she can," Jhonny confirmed, with an air of scientific certainty. "Teddi can survive anything, even a nuclear explosion. Her powers are only limited to what she thinks is possible," he said.

Teddi glanced over to Mal. He looked her in the eye, but no barbed comment about 'thinking women' emerged. He slurped on his beer with a knowing smile on his face. Teddi's freckles disappeared as her face flushed red.

"That's awesome," Niro nodded his head in amazement. "We should have a race one day, like Superman and The Flash in the comics." He looked around eagerly for agreement. "You know, for charity or something."

"Maybe," Teddi smiled.

Jhonny looked at his watch. "Hey, guys, vamos! I'm late for the labs." He downed his beer and reaching for his briefcase, stood up ready to leave.

"Wait a minute, *muchacho*" Niro said, "Shouldn't we toast the Starguards? That's why we're here!" He held up his glass of beer.

Jhonny sat back down. "I don't have a beer." He tapped his empty glass. But Teddi poured some of hers into his glass.

"I'm not a big drinker, so there. Let's raise our glasses," she prompted. "To the Starguards and Team One. Gone, but not forgotten."

"To the Starguards and Team One," intoned the three men; their glasses clinking together. They finished their drinks, Mal wiping his mouth.

"Well, I'm staying for another," he said. "Anyone else?"

Jhonny shook his head, already committed to his lab work.

Niro grinned, "I've got a TV interview in Tokyo before

my baseball game in..." he looked at his watch, "Twenty minutes, so a quick whiz and then I'm off."

"Really? Tokyo in twenty minutes?" Mal sounded impressed, "From New York?"

"Yep!" Niro was please Mal was impressed. "Still interested in a race, Teddi?"

Teddi laughed. "Not today, Niro, but weren't you banned form baseball?"

Niro shook his head. "Well yes, Velocity Victor was, but I just play as plain old Niro now, the clumsy outfielder. Can't believe they won't let me play five positions at once. I was good for the game, getting more bums on seats and all that." He shrugged, letting out a wistful sigh as he waited for Jhonny.

Dee stayed seated. "I'll stay for an orange juice, if that's okay, Mal?"

"No problem, Teddi," Mal shrugged nonchalantly, as Teddi gestured to the waiter, who took her order.

Jhonny gave Niro a knowing look, who answered with a furtive wink. With a last goodbye they left for their respective appointments leaving Mal and Teddi alone.

Teddi's juice was set down in front of her.

"So?" Mal shrugged, giving Teddi a flick of his eyebrows.

"So," Teddi repeated, sipping her orange juice, while peering over the glass rim at Mal.

"You still hang around as if I can give you something," Mal teased.

Teddi blushed, "I'm not the one hanging around, Mal. I may not be your type, but I know you want me, just out of curiosity. What are you waiting for?" She suggestively looked over at her commander.

Mal looked her over. Teddi was more of a handsome woman-type than an out-and-out beauty. She was slightly overweight even with vigorous exercise, with short brown limp hair. But that didn't matter to Mal; he'd had worse while in the Marine Corps. But what he couldn't understand was that as Dee, Teddi was better to look at, her hair more lustrous and her body more voluptuous and feminine. She did not wear a mask yet in her Dee persona no one recognised her either in person or on camera; it was like she has some natural disguise linked to her powers. Mal called it her 'magic makeover' though she detested the term. He wondered why Teddi did not use her power to look great all the time. And now, with his quarter-back good looks and flirtatious manner, he'd managed to over-play his hand and attract the most powerful woman in the universe. And that did matter to Mal. He had seen Dee in battle training, the fury in her eyes, almost as if she was possessed by her power. Teddi scared him.

"Seriously, Teddi, I'm just afraid that with your power you'd melt my cock." He grinned at her and took a swig of his beer. "I'm not that interested." He sat back in his chair with a satisfied grin on his face.

Teddi just stared back at Mal. Had he been playing with her all this time? A flicker of emotion raced through Teddi. How could she, a plain girl from a little outback town in the Northern Territories have attracted a man like Mal?

How stupid am I? Teddi thought to herself. She saw purple flash before her eyes and she fought down her energy and any more emotion. She gulped down her orange juice, picked up her bag, and stood up to leave.

"Teddi?" Mal called after her.

Teddi reluctantly turned around expecting the usual apology.

Almost with a curl on his lips, Mal said: "You may be the most powerful person in the universe, but you've still got a thing or two to learn about being a woman." He turned back to drink his beer.

Pursing her lips in humiliation and suppressed anger, Teddi marched out of the bar.

Mal shook his head in amusement. Teddi may have had the power, but he had power over her. And she had to understand that. Mal laughed to himself and downed his beer. He was about to get up and order another when someone planted a fresh beer in front of him and a tumbler on the table beside him.

"Mind if I join you?" a sultry female voice asked.

Mal looked up from the black high heels, to a black trouser suit with a revealingly open white blouse tucked inside, and his look of surprise turned into a smile, as he recognised the woman. He hastily looked around to see if Teddi had left. He had expected a visit, the reason why he had been adamant that no security details had been attached to them in their down time.

"She's gone," confirmed the woman with an assured smile.

Mal turned to look at her. "Well then, hello stranger, you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"Am I? You're still not tempted to turn me in?" Pandora Wake purred in her Southern accent.

"Nope, we can share a drink or two," he smiled back, admiring Pandora's full-lipped beauty and red hair accentuating her mascaraed blue eyes. *Damn, she's sexy!* Pandora smiled again as if knowing Mal's thoughts; Mal feeling his blood rushing to his loins. She downed her drink and clunked her glass onto the table. Mal started to order another drink for her. "Watcha drinking?"

But Pandora waved away the barman.

"A cocktail of revenge, for starters?" She leaned in

toward Mal, who now knew this was about business and not pleasure. He resisted the urge to look down her suggestively unbuttoned white blouse. "Have you thought about my offer, Mal? It's been two months now. A woman can only wait for so long!" she almost whispered. "Times are changing, movements coming into being, and I need leaders. I think you could be such a person."

"Leaders or the leader?" Mal replied.

Pandra shook her head. "I've already told you there is already a leader..."

"I know, I know, to control and to kill people, yadda yadda" Mal said, somewhat pedantically.

"You don't need to put it like that," Pandra admonished him, looking disappointed.

"But that's the bare bones of it though, yes?"

"Yes, but it is much more than that. We will kill people we don't like, people who don't like us and what we stand for, and people who hold this world back.

"And they would be...?"

Pandra laughed. "Oh, Mal, there is so much you do not know about this world. There are figures who have stood in the shadows for millennia, clouding our history, and killing people like us off. Even now, I am being hunted by one of them. Well it's our time to hit back and take our rightful place."

Mal was confused, not knowing what Pandra was on about, but was still interested.

Pandra studied Mal, pursing her lips, before carrying on in hushed tones: "I know you're an admirer of Altair." Mal's ears pricked up at his name. "He was part of a group we despised, and while we're not a cult of Altair, but we do abide by so-called Altairian principles and policies. I've never known who I really am and what my place in the world is, but I feel I owe it to Altair to change the world; make it better, balance things out, even if it means having to do horrible things. This world needs a new world order."

Mal shivered. Something about Pandra's musings made her feel otherworldly or cognizant beyond her years. He looked around, making doubly sure there were no undercover agent types around or that anyone was watching them together. He thought about Pandra's words.

Altair's departure had left a power vacuum. For years, chaos had risen as the numbers of supra-vigilantes and villains in manoeuvre suits increased. Team Two were the only viable bulwarks. Altair's speech had a profound affect upon Mal. The world did need a strong hand to guide it, without all the red tape and G-number summits. Mal knew he was becoming more and more disenfranchised at the notion of an Earth-protecting superhero group controlled by a mish-mash of corrupting powers or

humanitarian peaceniks. The world needed a radical solution. It needed a new ruler, like him.

He gazed over his beer at Pandora who held his gaze.

"I can't believe a lesbian is trying to turn me to the dark side."

"Hey, less of the lesbian cracks and you know there's more to the world than just black and white; it's practically shadowy grey all the time. I mean look at Altair. He was supposedly a hero, but he did things his way. He wasn't evil, but the governments tried to bring him under their control. But he was right, this world needs controlling properly and I think we, our group, can do that, whatever it takes." She stared into Mal's eyes for a reaction.

Mal found he couldn't compete in eye contact and looked away. "Okay, whatever, I'm in. Now what?" Mal quipped.

Pandra shook her head and smiled, sensing something else was on his mind. "So what's up between you and Teddi?" She changed the subject.

"Wha...? Nothing! You been listening to us?"

"Of course, keeping tabs on you all. There seems to be a bit of friction between you and tubby."

"Don't call her that," Mal protested, though he had called her worse. "She may be no Barbie, but she's all right."

"So you two getting it on?" Pandora was intrigued, her smile widening, as she leaned across the small table.

"No," Mal snorted. "She's got a crush or something on me, that's all, but I'm not interested."

"She's the most powerful person on this planet, Mal, or is that what you're afraid of. You don't like powerful women, just the bimbo Barbie doll types. You disappoint me. I didn't think you'd be so shallow."

Mal shrugged. "Does this have any reflection on me joining your little group? Is it made up of all women and you're afraid I'll shag them all? What is this?" His hackles were up.

Pandra laughed. "Geez, Mal, lighten up. I'm just teasing. Just trying to see how deep you are into Teddi." She gave Mal a cold look. "One day we might have to kill her. I need to know now if you'd be up to that." She gave Mal another intense stare.

Mal found himself laughing. "Kill Teddi? You just said it yourself; she's the most powerful person on Earth. Her powers are greater than all the other E-Corps and world armies combined. Kill her? Who are you kidding, Pandora?" He smirked.

"We do have a way to kill her," Pandora stated matter-of-factly, wiping the grin from Mal's face.

"How?" Mal was still dubious.

"I can't tell you that, but I do know it exists and someday we'll prove it." Seeing Mal's lingering doubts, Pandora laid it out for him. "Mal, this is going to get very ugly, very public, and innocent people will die for the greater good. Can you handle it?"

Mal thought about it for a while and all the things he could do to change the world for the better. But he also looked at the flip side, his friends, colleagues, and family all suffering and turning against him; a traitor to the cause—but it was their cause, not his any longer. He balanced the two decisions in his minds and weighed the scale of consequences. "Yes, I believe we can come to some arrangement," he solemnly nodded.

"We can get started whenever you want," Pandora said, leaning in dangerously close to Mal's face.

"You teasing me again?" Mal felt he was getting the run-around.

"I do more than tease," Pandora said, as she stood up to leave.

Mal stood as well, anticipating some afternoon action to seal the deal, but she curtailed that notion with a shake of her head.

"I'm not a man-eater, Mal, at least not tonight. I'll be leaving alone and unmolested, if you don't mind."

"Oh!" Mal could only blurt out, the bulge in his jeans flattening. "So how can I contact you?"

"I'll get in touch with you, figuratively speaking," she smiled, "So long." She flashed a final smile, put on a pair of dark shades, and sashayed out the door, turning every man's head in her wake.

Mal sat back down, ordered another beer, and shook his head. "Women!"