

PROLOGUE

December had been cruel to New York. The sky sucked its breath on the first of the month, then roared a four-week aria of frost and bitter winds. Aer traffic was shuttered for ten days straight while relentless snow sent Manhattan hiding under tempic cover. Glimmering white panels stretched from building to building, shrouding all the streets at fourth-floor level, turning eighty percent of the island into a lamplit subterrain.

The winter storm ended four days after Christmas. The canopies retracted and generators gorged on the light of the prodigal sun. By the thirty-first, no one cared about the lingering chill. Champagne corks would soon be popping all over.

It was the eve of the Turn and the city smiled in anticipation.

By eleven o'clock, the aerstraunts had taken flight: a hundred giant saucers made of carbon steel and aeris. They drifted like blimps around the Manhattan skyline, offering music and cocktails and rotating vistas. Skyboats from the U.S. Ceremonial Guard hovered steadily at a thousand feet, their projectors primed and ready for the midnight light show.

While the citizenry reveled, twenty-one aerocycles soared east across Newark Bay in a synchronous V. The riders were dressed all in white, from their bleached leather jackboots to their tempis-plated speedsuits to their sleek bresin headshields that looked like welding masks. Their belts were loaded with sidearms that fired everything from gas pellets to stun bolts to good old-fashioned hollow-points.

The squadron turned south at Bayonne, then crossed the Kill Van Kull on to Staten Island. The moment they passed the ferry dock of St. George, the riders spotted the first hint of trouble down below. A dozen emergency vehicles had converged outside an art house cinema, a single-screen retroplex with Romanesque trimmings and an electric-bulb marquee that was obsolete to the point to quaintness. Bystanders pooled behind the cordon to rubberneck, though there wasn't much to see beyond the mob of first responders.

The squadron leader ordered nine of his men to keep their sniper scopes on the theater exits, then sent another eight to do a top-down thermal scan of the building.

“The rest of you are with me,” he said through the transcom. “Stay close. Don’t speak. Don’t do a goddamn thing until I tell you to.”

The lone woman in the group knew that Gingold was talking directly to her. She was still new to the unit—so new, in fact, that she didn’t have the security clearance to be on this mission. But Cedric Cain had shouted all the right arguments at all the right people, and an emergency exception had been made. No one could deny that Melissa Masaad was a well-tested expert on chronokinetic alien weirdness. If she couldn’t get to the bottom of this latest strange occurrence, then no one could.

Everyone at the crime scene craned their necks as four aerocycles de-shifted above the street. The vehicles descended in graceful unison, as if lowered on wires. Once the wheels touched the pavement, the engines whirred to a stop and the glowing white tires reverted to steel mesh and rubber.

The riders disembarked from their hoppers. A rookie policeman nervously reached for his pistol until an older cop stopped him.

“Stand down. It’s all right. They’re Integrity.”

The police had been warned that federal agents were coming, but nobody said they’d be shades. The National Integrity Commission had been operating behind a shroud of secrecy since its creation in 1913, and had been restructured so many times that even insiders had trouble naming the current director. All the public knew, all they *needed* to know, was that they protected the nation from foreign threats. Seeing Integrity agents on U.S. soil was a rare and disturbing occurrence. No one liked the thought of foreign threats in St. George.

The operatives pulled off their helmets. Melissa, as always, earned her share of curious glances from the crowd. Her cheekbones were overpronounced. Her dark brown eyes were a little bit larger than they had a right to be. And her twelve-inch ropes of dreadlocked hair—a style so uncommon that it didn’t even have a name in this country—was simply too exotic for sheltered minds to process.

But for once she wasn’t the most conspicuous member of her team. That honor went to her new commander.

Oren Gingold was a formidable figure at six-foot-two, with a lean dancer's build, a sharp-angled jaw, and a fine brush cut of salt-and-pepper hair. In his heyday, before his wayward mission in Palestine, he'd been a conventionally handsome man. Now he only drew stares through the cybernetic cameras that had replaced his eyes. The mirrored black lenses were embedded firmly into his sockets and surrounded by scars, as if a horrible accident had fused a pair of sunglasses to his face.

Sylvester Soo mulled his words carefully as Gingold crossed the police cordon. He had only just recently earned his shield, and he knew as well as anyone that careers were shattered on the frowns of Integrity agents. These people could drop mountains from the sky with a phone call.

Soo peeled off his glove and extended a clammy hand. "Welcome. Hi. I'm—"

"I know who you are," Gingold said, his soft voice marred by a sandpaper rasp. "Any more of you inside?"

"Uh, no, sir. We cleared out on Poe-Chief's orders."

"What's the latest?"

"Well, from what it seems, the whole thing happened 'round forty minutes ago. A strange light—"

"I know all that. I said give me the *latest*."

Soo blinked at him confusedly. "I'm sorry?"

"The intruders," Gingold snapped. "Did any of them leave the building?"

"No, sir. No. I fig none of those folks are in a condition to run."

"You fig or you know?"

"I know," Soo corrected. "Sure as summer. Sir."

Melissa examined the five elderly women being treated under the marquee. Some were bruised. Some were bleeding. One of them had a fractured wrist. The only infirmity they shared, aside from a severe case of shell shock, was a beet-red nose and forehead. Sunburn at the cusp of midnight. That was new.

She crouched beside the nearest casualty, a willowy matron of exquisite attire. Her tight bun had come unraveled, spilling long silver hair over her ears, her brow, her dull, vacant stare.

Gingold photographed the woman through his special lenses, then transmitted the image. Two hundred miles away, in a Washington, D.C., office building, analysts ran her facial map through Integrity's databases. The results came back as a murmur in Gingold's earpiece.

"Cassandra Dewalt," he informed Melissa. "Owns the theater. What happened to her face?"

"I have no idea, sir. Permission to ask her?"

Gingold shot her a stony look. "Careful," said a smoky voice in Melissa's earpiece. "He's not keen on sass."

Cedric Cain was the wily old operative who'd recruited Melissa into Integrity, the only person in the agency she even remotely trusted. He'd hacked the image feed from Gingold's optics and now watched from his bedroom in Bethesda, Maryland. Melissa couldn't count the number of encryptions on their private voice link.

"Go ahead," Gingold said to her. Cassandra Dewalt seemed lost to the wind, though Melissa could detect a spark of life behind her hazel eyes.

She deactivated the tempis from her gloves, then touched Cassandra's shoulder. "Ms. Dewalt, can you hear me?"

Cassandra hugged herself anxiously, her vacant gaze still fixed on the ticket booth. "I once sold a seat to Irving Dudley," she creaked. "Long ago, back when he was just a councilman. He smiled at me and asked me my name. I don't . . . I can't remember what film he was seeing . . ."

"Ms. Dewalt, my name's Melissa Masaad. I'm an associate with Integrity. If I could ask you some questions . . ."

Cassandra flinched, as if she'd just woken up from a bad dream. She looked at Melissa with frantic eyes. "Please. This theater's been in my family for three generations. Please don't take it from me."

Melissa shook her head. "We have no cause to do that."

"Yes we do," said Gingold.

"Yes we do," Cain echoed. "The old gal runs a smoke-easy underneath the lobby. She also muds on Mondays."

Melissa sighed. Forty-four years before tobacco was criminalized, the government outlawed the sale and exhibition of foreign films. The act of showing one, even in private, carried a minimum penalty of ten thousand dollars and full asset forfeiture. Melissa was afraid to ask how Integrity knew of Cassandra's crimes. They weren't allowed to spy on U.S. citizens.

She squeezed Cassandra's shoulder. "Ms. Dewalt, we don't care about your other activities. We only want to know about the intruders."

"They came out of the light," Cassandra said. "They came at us so fast. Like they were falling."

"Can you describe this—"

"They came right out of the screen!"

One of Gingold's flying operatives hailed him on the transcom. His voice crackled with wind static. "Thermal scan complete. All clear, sir."

Gingold motioned to his two men on the ground, then spoke into his transmitter. "All right. Everyone regroup. Baggers and scanners inside. The rest of you, clear the crowd."

He turned to Detective Soo, his scarred brow arched in suspicion. "How'd you do it?"

"Sir?"

"If these people are the ones we think they are, they're extremely dangerous. How'd you take them down?"

Gingold and Melissa watched Soo closely as he struggled to form an answer. "As much as I'd love to take credit, sir, the truth of the matter's that none of us fired a shot."

He turned his head and took an anxious look at the theater. "Far as we know, those folks showed up dead."

The Dewalt Vintage Filmhouse was a cultural landmark, the oldest standing cinema in the city. The distinction was bittersweet for the owners, as the Cataclysm of 1912 had wiped out all their competitors at the time. The great white blast had missed Staten Island by a mile, leaving its residents with a deep survivor's guilt that could still be felt today. Commemorative photos of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens lined every wall of the lobby. A brass plaque above the concession stand proudly declared the building to be *temporis-free*.

Gingold led his team into the main theater, a musty chamber of mahogany and red velvet. Antiquated bulb sconces lit the four hundred seats. Dust swam like minnows in the projector beam.

Melissa barely had a chance to register the scattered bodies in the room before the movie screen stole her attention. A twenty-foot scorch mark scarred the canvas, as if someone had taken a giant cattle brand to it. The fabric was seared in a perfect ring.

Two states away, Cedric Cain sat up in bed and studied the image on his lapbook computer. “Oh, that is interesting. That is very interesting.”

Melissa checked her particle scanner. From the dancing gauges, it appeared this was no longer a *temporis-free* building.

“A teleportal,” Cain mused. “Just like the one your friends used last year.”

Had Melissa been able to reply without arousing suspicion, she might have reminded Cain that the last portal didn’t leave any char residue. It also didn’t spit out corpses.

Gingold crouched to inspect the nearest cadaver, a lanky man spread face down in the center aisle. Though his dress shirt and slacks looked perfectly fine, his skin was ashen and covered in frost burns. An icy mist emanated from his wavy brown hair.

Melissa moved behind Gingold as he turned the corpse over. The victim’s steel-gray eyes were frozen wide, his lips curled in a silent scream.

“Partial recognition,” Gingold said. “Central gives it a twenty-two percent match. Masaad?”

A cold grief washed over Melissa as she recognized the deceased, a man who’d been a mystery to her as much as a miscreant. He’d stolen cars, led policemen on chases, rusted the pistols of federal agents. Yet despite his crimes, he’d showed a remarkable concern for the well-being of others. He’d been a good man in a bad situation. He didn’t deserve this fate.

“Masaad?”

The voice in her ear grew soft with concern. “Melissa?”

“Yes,” she replied to both Gingold and Cain. “That’s Zack Trillinger.”

She turned her attention to another casualty. This one lay crumpled on his back over two rows of seats, his shaggy blond hair dangling lifelessly over the cushions. Unlike Zack, David Dormer had

managed to close his eyes before dying. He looked hauntingly at peace in his current pose, as if he had died sleeping.

Gingold raised David's right arm and studied his misshapen hand, the one flaw on an otherwise gorgeous sixteen-year-old. An ill-timed gunshot had robbed the boy of his ring and middle fingers. Melissa had been there when it happened.

"The Australian," Gingold scoffed. "Good riddance."

Melissa wasn't a big fan of David either. The boy had threatened her with her own handgun and then blinded her with lumis. But he'd shown a clear devotion to his friends and had been downright fearless in the face of danger. He might have grown up to be someone truly extraordinary. That alone made his death a tragedy.

Four rows beyond David, a pale arm poked into the aisle. Melissa muttered a curse under her breath. She already knew who it belonged to.

Gingold followed her gaze, then cracked his first smile of the night. "Our little doormaker."

Both Melissa and Integrity believed that Mia Farisi had created the spatial warp at Battery Place, the huge round portal that had enabled her and her people to escape capture back in October. The wormhole was an unprecedented use of temporis, one with staggering implications. The biologists at Sci-Tech practically drooled at the thought of cutting the girl open. For them, Christmas had come fifty-one weeks early.

Cain winced at the dead girl on his computer screen. "Ah, hell. Goddamn it."

Melissa reactivated the tempis on her gloves, then pulled Mia into the aisle. She looked achingly sweet in her beige dress and high heels, an ensemble that might have complemented her olive skin were it not for the frost burns. Trickle of blood ran from her nostrils, marring her cherubic features.

Melissa looked closer. There was something about Mia's arms that bothered her, an incongruity with her visual recollection. The girl had lost at least ten pounds since Melissa last saw her, but that wasn't—

"Found the chinny!"

An armored operative lifted Theo off the floor, brandishing his corpse as if he were a trophy stag. Melissa lowered Mia to the ground, then joined the agent at the back of the theater.

“He’s not Chinese,” she told him. “If you can’t be bothered to read the files, at least show some respect for the dead.”

The agent shot her a murderous glare. “I read the files. These people were killers.”

“Not this one.”

Melissa crouched to examine the late Theo Maranan, the most baffling and enigmatic member of the group. Though his appearance was normally disheveled, he looked shockingly dapper now in a three-piece suit. His face and hair had been groomed to perfection. For a moment, Melissa wondered if Theo had dressed for his own burial, a possibility not entirely far-fetched, as the man had a talent for looking ahead.

She dolefully examined his frost scars. *What happened, Theo? Why didn’t you stop this?*

Gingold took a puzzled look around the theater. “Is that it?”

“Is that all the bodies?” Cain asked Melissa. “What about the others?”

Good question, Melissa thought. She scanned the gaps between the seats, her heart pounding with anxious hope. *Maybe they got away. Maybe—*

“Found them,” an agent yelled. “Over here.”

Melissa moved to the front of the theater, where the Great Sisters Given lay quiet and still.

One was tall and skinny. The other was short and curvy. One had cherry-red hair and sharp green eyes. The other had jet-black tresses and the wide brown stare of a doe. They didn’t seem to share a single trait, yet Amanda had assured Melissa that she and Hannah Given were biological siblings. All they truly had in common was their insane predicament, a tale that Melissa still longed to hear.

Melissa’s mind flashed back eleven weeks to a windy rooftop in Battery Place. As the sisters dangled over the ledge, Melissa had noticed a matching despair in their expressions, as if everything in the world had suddenly stopped mattering.

“Wouldn’t you rather keep living?” Melissa had asked them, genuinely unsure of what they’d say.

“That’s all we want,” said Hannah.

“That’s all we ever wanted,” said Amanda.

Now the sisters lay conjoined in a messy heap, their heads pressed together, their hands locked in a frozen clasp. There was a palpable grief on both their faces, a pain that seemed to go far beyond the physical. For all Melissa knew, they’d been looking right at their killer before he or she pulled the final trigger.

The swinging doors flew open. Eight operatives charged in with their stretchers and scanners and black-fiber body bags.

Gingold watched Melissa as she hurried toward the exit. “Where are you going?”

“To canvass the witnesses some more.”

“The ghost drills are coming. In twenty minutes, we’ll see the whole thing for ourselves.”

Melissa shrugged. This place was already teeming with phantoms. If anything, she hoped Cassandra Dewalt would take her to the hidden smoke-easy underneath the lobby. It seemed both women could use a cigarette.

As usual, Cain was one step ahead of her. She could hear the flick of his lighter in her earpiece.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “This isn’t how I wanted it to end.”

“I know,” she said. “I believe you.”

She stepped back outside and worked her way through the rabble, until she was alone, just a stone’s throw from the marina. Looking up, she saw the Mark of St. George, the illuminated clock tower on the roof of the ferry terminal. Termites had eroded its support beams over the decades, turning a once-proud landmark into a safety hazard. Rather than rebuild, city officials had replaced it with a sixty-foot ghostbox. Now the Mark of St. George existed solely as a hologram, a life-size specter on a twenty-four-hour playback loop. Though it gleamed with sunlight even on the rainiest of days and vexed countless birds with its intangible perches, the clock still kept perfect time.

As the hands reached ten seconds to midnight, the U.S. Ceremonial Guard began their light show. Millions of New Yorkers stopped what they were doing to watch the great celestial countdown in the sky.

10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .

Melissa lowered her head and stuffed her hands in her pockets, her mind venturing deep into next year. Though her case had suffered a tragic setback tonight, there were still blanks to fill. People to find.

7 . . . 6 . . . 5 . . .

At the top of her list was Peter Pendergen, the getaway driver, the man the fugitives had traveled twenty-five hundred miles to meet. Either Pendergen had betrayed them or he'd simply failed horribly in his mission to protect them. Either way, the Irishman had a lot to answer for.

4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . .

Except there was something about the crime scene that continue to plague her, something about Mia Farisi. The girl's arms had become thinner since Melissa last saw them. But more than that—

1 . . .

—they were longer.

The sky erupted in lightworks—starbursts and roses and ethereal balloons, set against the backdrop of a spectral American flag. The Turn was a patriotic rechristening of an old familiar holiday, created by Teddy Roosevelt in 1913 as another venue to promote national exceptionalism. Let the rest of the world blow their noisemakers and call it New Year's Eve. The Eagle, as always, went its own way.

On the roof of the ferry terminal, at the base of the clock tower, a tall and reedy couple watched Melissa with interest. They were an elegant duo in their long English waistcoats and virgin wool slacks, with pulse-heated filament gloves that had yet to be invented on this Earth. While the man's fine white hair stayed perfectly still in the wind, the woman's long brown locks flapped chaotically.

The pair conversed in a foreign tongue, a complex mixture of Asian and European languages that had become the lingua franca of their era.

"This won't last," Esis cautioned. "The woman already creaks with doubt."

Azral scowled at Melissa's distant figure. "Let her. She's no longer a threat."

A portal opened up inside the Mark of St. George. A six-foot man stepped through the surface. Neither Azral nor Esis turned to look as he passed through the illusory wall of the tower. They'd felt him coming from miles away.

The man moved to the ledge, standing snugly between the mother and son. Esis clutched his arm and gave him a crooked smile.

“My heart returns,” she cooed. “He teases with his fleeting presence.”

Azral regarded him with soft deference. “You didn’t need to come, Father.”

“There’s no risk,” the patriarch insisted. “I was careful, as ever.”

With his family, Semerjean Pelletier didn’t need to wear his many masks. He didn’t have to force his words through crude English, or pretend to be interested in the inane prattle of others. Shame he only had a few minutes to enjoy his freedom.

He focused his gaze on Melissa. His sharp blue eyes turned cold, severe. “We should kill that one.”

“Not yet,” said Azral.

“You underestimate her, *sehgee*. The woman is clever.”

“That cleverness will aid us in the future, should these soldiers become a problem again.”

Semerjean pursed his lips, frustrated. There was once a time where he could see the strings in all their splendor. Now his foresight had become withered with age, and no amount of *temporis* could fix it. He had to entrust the long-term planning to his wife and son.

He flipped a hand in surrender. “*Fine*,” he said in unintentional English.

Esis caressed his shoulder. “My poor darling. If you wish to return to us—”

“No,” Semerjean insisted. “I’m still needed where I am.”

“I just hate to see you suffer so.”

Semerjean sighed. It was indeed a chore to live among these ancients, with their stench and chemicals, their fallacies and histrionics. But they weren’t all unbearable. Some were pleasant. Some were amusing. Some even surprised him.

He stood with his family, under the stars and lumic projections, while the locals continued to celebrate another pointless trip around the calendar. Even here, from his high perch, he could smell the flavored poison in their cups. He could hear their discordant warblings of “Auld Lang Syne.”

Semerjean felt nothing but pity for the hopeless beasts below, these oblivious cattle. They had four years left until the end of their world, and all they could do was sing.