## **Chapter Two – Birds**

Sunday, April 27, 2087

"Team Eagle is in place," Anna Lukic reported over the com radio from level 65 of the Joswang Finance Tower in downtown Detroit. "Are we clear to place the eggs?"

"Copy that," Sammy said from his perch in a nearby tower. "Stand by for approval. Albatross, what do you see?"

"No sign of any trouble, Mother Hen," Brickert responded, wiping his hands on his pants for the third time. Why palms? Why do you betray me? I don't need you to be sweaty right now.

He sat inside the security booth on the ground floor of the building with Natalia, Strawberry, and Hefani. Meanwhile six other teams worked inside the building placing explosives. Brickert had wanted to be on Anna's team, not guarding the security center leading his own team.

"I'm not a leader," he'd told Sammy, but his best friend wouldn't hear it. "I'll mess everything up. And I don't want Strawberry on my team."

"You being her leader was the only way she would go. I need you watching out for the other teams. Your friends. And it's time you started to lead. You're ready."

"I'm not the kind of guy people want to listen to ... or follow."

Sammy had folded his arms. "What kind of person is that?"

When he couldn't answer, Brickert threw his arms in the air. "Look at you. Tall, smart, eloquent."

"I'm eloquent?" Sammy laughed. "Tell Jeffie that."

Brickert had not been able to convince Sammy that the decision was wrong, so now he sat in the security room with his sister and two fellow Betas, watching security footage. Around them, the guards lay on the floor, tied up and unconscious.

"What do you see on the footage, Brick?" Sammy asked. "No sign of anyone else in the building?"

Brickert glanced around the room. He had a thumbs up from the rest of his team. "Copy that. We are good to go."

Via security cameras throughout the building, Brickert watched teams, comprised of Psions, Tensais, Ultras, Elite, and civilian resistance, converge on strategic targets on the upper levels of the building. The targets were the cloning labs, several floors for research and development of Hybrid clones grown in various research labs in skyscrapers throughout the continent. The resistance believed towers had been chosen because they were harder to infiltrate and destroy without mass casualties. Seeing dozens of copies of Sammy in glass tanks gave Brickert the heebie-jeebies.

"Mother Hen, Team Eagle is en route to deliver the egg," Anna said as her team spread out across the floor to place remote-detonated explosives.

"Team Hawk," Sammy said, "check in."

"Team Hawk is ready to rock," Al announced. Brickert thought he sounded a little more cheerful than normal. A sign that perhaps things were improving between him and Marie. "Are we clear to leave the egg, Mother Hen?"

"They're clear, Mother Hen," Brickert stated. "All teams are clear to proceed to deliver the eggs."

"All teams clear. Hawk, Eagle, Goose, Turkey, Falcon, Owl. All teams deliver your eggs and report."

One by one, the six teams moved in on their target locations. Brickert watched with pride as the teams worked as cohesive units, placing explosives in predetermined locations to inflict maximum damage on the cloning equipment and growing subjects, yet not damage the infrastructure of the building. They had already hit the Kadaber Tower in San Francisco. Zero casualties other than the clones themselves.

"One minute until the next security check, Albatross," Natalia reported.

"You ready to put in the code, Hefani?"

Hefani gave a thumbs up. "Roger, roger."

To ensure that the security center was manned and alert, the Joswang Tower's building systems ran a check every fifteen minutes. Guards had one minute to enter a four digit code given to them the day before, which they were required to memorize and destroy. Fortunately, the codes were generated and stored months ahead of time in the data banks at the Hive, which Sammy, Nikotai, and Jeffie had hacked four months earlier.

Hefani typed in the code of the day—4801—and clapped his hands. "Good for another fifteen minutes."

Everyone's attention returned to the myriad monitors mounted throughout the room. Brickert, Hefani, and Natalia studied the levels the other teams were on while Strawberry watched the cameras aimed at the lobby to ensure no one snuck up on the security center. From a neighboring skyscraper, Sammy and his team had eyes on the building for any signs of intrusion on the outside.

So far the operation was going as smoothly as the San Francisco mission.

Anna, Al, Justice, and the other team leaders moved their teams about the labs with surgical precision. Each bomb was armed, tested, and checked off a list which Jeffie kept up in the next tower overlooking the site. If they missed anything, she reported it to Sammy, who reported it to the team leader. So far, nothing had been missed.

Another fifteen minutes passed. Natalia warned the team again that it was time to input the code. Brickert didn't think twice about it until Hefani held up a warning hand instead of a thumbs up.

"I—I screwed up the code," he said. "Let me put it in again." He retyped it and hit SEND.

Everyone watched him.

"It says, 'Error.' What am I doing wrong?"

"I don't know," Brickert said, licking his lips, "but one more incorrect entry and we're gonna have some problems, I'll tell you."

"What did you put in?" Natalia asked.

"Same as always. 4810."

"It's 4801," Strawberry and Brickert said simultaneously.

Hefani winced. "Sorry, guys, I've put that code in so many times that my mind is messing with me."

Everyone's eyes left the monitors and watched Hefani to make sure he put the code in correctly. He did it slowly, saying each number aloud as he pressed it. When he finished, the computer screen told him he had completed a successful entry. Everyone let out a breath of relief and turned their attentions back to their monitors.

Next to Brickert, Strawberry stood and peered closely at one of the video feeds on her monitors. "What is that?"

"Where?" Brickert asked his sister.

"Right out—"

The door to the security center blew open. Gas containers flew into the room. Brickert held his breath and shot blasts in the direction of the canisters. Thirteens crowded into the room wearing gas masks and wielding guns. The sound of the bullets was deafening in close quarters. The four Psions put up shields, but the telltale signs of coughing told Brickert the battle might already be lost. The coughs came from Hefani, deep booming, gagging hacks.

*Hold it together, Hefani*, Brickert thought. He didn't dare say the words aloud for fear of breathing in the gas. Already his eyes burned and watered. In their gas masks, the Thirteens weren't able to communicate well, the attack less coordinated. But in the confines of the small security center, a room about four by five meters, they didn't need much coordination.

Sammy mentioned something about white noise coming through the coms, but Brickert still couldn't speak for fear of breathing in the gas. Under the hailstorm of bullets, the screens and equipment around him shattered, popped, and sprayed debris everywhere. Strawberry and Natalia drew close to Brickert, still shielding. Hefani fell to his knees as booming coughs exploded from his lungs. His eyes were large and watery, but he kept his arms straight in front of him, still protecting his front.

We have to get out of here!

Brickert had no idea how long he'd been holding his breath, but it felt like an hour. In reality, it had only been fifty or sixty seconds. His heart beat faster the longer he denied himself of air.

I told Sammy I wasn't a leader.

Two Thirteens dashed forward, perhaps unable to restrain themselves any longer. Brickert dropped down to one knee and fired several blasts up at their heads. One of them flew back, flipping over in the air. Bullets from his own comrades tore into his body. The other's mask shot back, exposing his face. He immediately started to gag and cough.

Have to fix this somehow ...

Brickert counted six more Thirteens in masks. If he and his team were to have any chance, they had to get out of the room so they could breathe and call for help.

Brickert mustered the last of the air in his lungs and bellowed to his team, "CHARGE THEM!"

The outburst prompted questions from the other team leaders over the com—questions Brickert couldn't answer—as he, Natalia, Strawberry, and Hefani pushed forward in unison. They pushed back the Thirteens until Hefani went to his knees again, now coughing so violently that flecks of blood came up with each breath. The Thirteens identified him as the weakest link and focused fire. Hefani kept one hand up to shield, the other down to break his fall.

Natalia sidestepped closer to him so her shields would provide him cover. Strawberry moved over to Brickert. Neither Hefani nor Strawberry had been involved in combat before. Brickert didn't want to think about what thoughts were going through their minds. He had to focus on what he could do to survive.

I'm not the right man for this job. I'm not a leader!

Gas continued to cloud the room in a yellowish haze. Their efforts to drive the Thirteens back succeeded in part. Brickert blasted at the enemy but his lungs were close to bursting. How could he concentrate with the need to breathe so persistent?

Don't break. Don't do it, he urged himself. Stay strong.

He tried to push forward again, but his lungs betrayed him, sucking down both sweet air and noxious gas. The reaction came at once. A burning in his chest coupled with the desire to retch. Eyes watering so badly that he couldn't breathe. Then came the irrepressible cough. It was a deep, barking boom that immediately led to another one and another one.

"Help us!" Brickert wheezed into his com. "Attack ... on the ... security center!" "Each leader send half your team downstairs now!" Sammy ordered. "I'm coming in, too. You four hold tight and keep your shields up."

"Gas," Brickert coughed. "They've got gas."

The words came with great difficulty. Brickert's world burned. His eyes, his mouth and nose, his lungs. Even his guts were aflame. The Thirteens continued to fire shots from just inside the doorway, unwilling to spread out around the room. *They have the upper hand. Do they not want to press it?* 

It was easy for Brickert to shield himself while on his knees. His body became a smaller target. The Thirteens could shoot forever and hit nothing. Pretty soon, however, Hefani's coughing turned to gagging. Then, without warning, he leaned over and threw up. The stench mixed with the gas was nauseating. Both his hands hit the carpet to brace his body. Bullets flew. Blood spattered the carpet, mixing in with the pool of vomit, and Hefani hit the ground, dead. Strawberry screamed and then began to cough.

The Thirteens chose her as their next target.

No! Brickert jerked his body to the side to cover his sister. Gotta get back to my feet. Gotta be a leader.

The same moment he tried to get up, a tremendous cough racked his body, so strong that it nearly knocked him over. The Thirteens turned their guns back on him. Brickert kept one hand up, but it wasn't enough. A bullet tore through his shin. The fire in his abdomen was nothing compared to the searing heat in his leg.

Seeing Brickert get shot seemed to rob Natalia of her sense of reason. Rather than moving in to shield for him, she charged the Thirteens with a powerful blast, unholstered her weapon, and fired. Her efforts forced them back; she clipped one Thirteen in the neck, causing him to bleed out. In the process she opened herself up to the Thirteens' attack. They took advantage, fired back at her, and hit her in the stomach.

"No!" Brickert screamed, finding his voice amidst the flames in his throat. "Get back! Get back!"

Natalia stumbled back, dropped her gun, and clenched her stomach while shielding herself as she hit a table with a *CRASH*. The table broke and collapsed around her. With Hefani and Natalia immobilized, and Brickert injured, the Thirteens moved in boldly for Strawberry. She fired blasts at them, coughing and shouting for help. Brickert scurried to help her. He saw the Thirteens' guns move away from Natalia's direction and back toward him, but didn't care. Only Strawberry mattered. Only his little sister.

Brickert fired blasts from both feet and shot himself into the Thirteens, bouldering into them with his body. He knocked two over but two others grabbed him and seized his arms. Fresh pain blossomed in his shoulder and he cried out from the agony. Shrieks

came from all directions, muffled by gas masks and clouded by the hissing from the canisters spewing out their contents into the air. Brickert struggled and fought, but the Thirteens wouldn't let go. Two more came forward and took hold of his ankles. Brickert fired blasts at the enemy to no effect.

He heard his sister scream his name as they carried him out of the room.

"Save Natalia!" he yelled back.

Brickert knew he was dead. He waited for one of them to put a bullet in his skull, but it didn't happen. Once they reached the lobby, the Thirteens hustled Brickert to the elevators.

Where are they taking me?

Two more Thirteens joined the group, each with a gun trained on Brickert's head. Their dark red eyes told Brickert they were exercising great restraint by not killing him. These beasts would jump on any excuse to splatter his brains across the wall. The elevator arrived quickly. Two sets of doors opened: one elevator for the Thirteens and Brickert, the other full of Psions.

The Psions poured from the lift. Al and Brickert's eyes met, but it was too late. When the doors closed, Brickert heard pounding on the sliding doors. One of the Thirteens pressed his thumb to a scanner above the columns of floor buttons. The panel of buttons popped open and revealed another, smaller panel set into the elevator wall. Brickert only saw two buttons on this new panel: one black and one red. The Thirteen pushed the red one.

The elevator car descended deep into the earth. The Thirteens held Brickert in such a way that they rendered his blasting useless. *Why don't they kill me?* The Thirteens weren't known for taking prisoners. Two guns jammed against his head, one on each side. They could turn him into pulp on a whim.

They need me, he realized. But for what?

The elevator ride lasted longer than he expected. When the lift came to a stop and the doors opened, the Thirteens pushed him forward. The air wafting in from the floor smelled like contaminated meat. The walls were covered in stains of brown, red, and black. The carpet, tattered and burned, was worse than the walls. Even the ceiling was dirty with splatterings of varying sizes and shapes.

Lining the hallway on both sides were small rooms. The smells coming from them were worse than the scent in the hallway. The squalor inside them made the hallway look somewhat tidy. A combined common room and kitchen was at the end of the hall. Several pieces of torn and abused furniture decorated it.

The Thirteens threw Brickert to the ground as more of them came into the room. Several guns pointed at him now while the Thirteens spoke to each other in shrieks. A couple of them left in a hurry. The others eyed Brickert hungrily. Their blood red eyes shone in the dim light. None of them wore gas masks now. Their scarred, tattooed, and pitted faces were on full display. A couple of them jerked rapidly, communicating to each other in silence. Brickert tried to figure out what they were saying, but even Sammy hadn't learned their form of speaking. He wanted to appear brave, but didn't dare meet their gazes. His head began to tremble, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up straight, and his cheeks burned as hot as irons. The horrible silence gave time for dread to settle into Brickert's bones.

The Thirteens had taken him into their den; it didn't seem likely he'd find his way out. In their eyes, he saw his death. How long could he last against so many? A minute? Two? What are you waiting for?

Two Thirteens who had left in a hurry returned with a camera. They trained it on Brickert, a red light blinking at the front, the lens trained on their prisoner. The Thirteens conversed in low, animalistic growls for several seconds while still staring at Brickert. The way they watched him made his stomach churn. One of them licked her sharpened teeth with a forked tongue. Another made claws with his fingers and scratched up his own chest until it bled.

Then, all at once, they pounced.

Brickert tried to blast them away, but their fists and feet were everywhere. Dozens of limbs kicking, punching, beating, breaking. Merciless. Pain erupted everywhere: ribs, face, arms, legs, groin. He couldn't keep up with the blows. Too many. Too fast.

His nose broke with a loud crack. His teeth shattered, newly regrown after being broken by the Thirteen in Colorado Springs. *God ... please ... save me or let me die now*.

Brickert felt his cheekbone crack, dull and far away, but fire blossomed at the tip of his skull when the toe of a boot knocked into him. His vision blurred. He heard them shrieking to each other in low tones, urging one another on. His ribs protested every puff of air, so he could only take small, shallow breaths.

Someone ... help me, Brickert begged. They're killing me. Sammy. Someone.

The beating went on until they stopped at the sound of a single shriek. Brickert couldn't move. His universe was agony. Pain was everywhere and in everything. The Thirteens dragged him to a chair by his arms, lifted him up, and dropped him in it. He was wet with blood or sweat or both. Through the wetness covering his face, Brickert saw one of the Thirteens place a sheet of white paper against Brickert's chest. Then, using Brickert's own blood, the Thirteen painted words on the paper while another stuck the sheet to Brickert's chest using a staple gun.

Brickert screamed as the staples pierced his flesh.

The camera turned on him again, surrounding him in light. Brickert's com was ripped from his ear and plugged into the camera. *They're going to broadcast this*. His chin hit his chest as he was unable to support his head any longer. Through his blurred vision, he read the sign, even as his own blood continued to drip down his face onto the paper like dark red raindrops. Ice flooded his veins when he read the words:

Remove the bombs or he dies.

Brickert was a dead man. His team would never remove the bombs. They would never negotiate with these animals.