

(Excerpted from *Guardians: Desolate Souls*, by Clyde Wolfe)

CHAPTER 1

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September

Waves of flame undulated up the wall as it toppled toward her. She braced for the impact, leading with her right shoulder. The brunt of the force slammed against her, ravenous flames singeing flesh while the masonry crumbled around her. It charred the tips of her hair, smoke stung her throat.

Valkyrie shrugged off the blow. While the wall's collapse might have crushed a normal person's body, Valkyrie's superhuman strength and durability allowed her to come out of the collision unscathed. The bite of the fire hurt worse; she had been hit far harder in her time than any mere wall could muster.

The same could not be said for those people huddled behind her. Though her body shielded them from the worst of the fiery avalanche, Valkyrie could only protect them so much. Choking debris scattered across the room, combining with the smoke and fumes to potentially lethal effect. If she didn't get these people out of the doomed building soon. . .

The ceiling groaned and buckled, the center bowing a good two feet lower than it should be.

"Hold on!" Valkyrie tossed her spear aside and lunged to catch the ceiling before it could flatten her charges. She was able to arrest its descent just above her head, minor chunks of Sheetrock falling free to add to the mess. The weight was nothing compared to Valkyrie's capabilities, but her vaunted strength was meaningless when the two floors above the one she was holding up came crashing down atop her.

Someone screamed, and the world was filled with debris and smoke.

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Shockwave's jaw clenched.

"What can we do?" Vector stood between him and Pulse, staring in horrific awe at the swaying buildings towering over them. It was as if at any moment the briefest gust of wind could topple the burning and crumbling structures.

"Whatever we *can* do." Even as he said it, Shockwave, leader of the superhero team the Guardians, wasn't sure what they could do.

Sirens filled the air as local first responders flooded the scene. The Guardians had arrived mere moments before the first set of fire trucks and ambulances. There hadn't been another explosion since the initial blasts, an entire city block worth of apartment buildings simultaneously erupting in violent blasts of fire and force.

It was too neat, too coordinated to be an event of happenstance. At worst it was an act of terrorism or a plot of one of the superpowered villains at large. At best, well, there really wasn't an *at best* kind of scenario. With that much devastation and the precarious nature of the ruined buildings, there were going to be casualties. Chaos and death come to life. If all the residents and workers in those buildings had managed to survive the initial blasts, it would be beyond a miracle. The best the Guardians or anyone else could hope to do was find and rescue those still alive. Even if the landscape was akin to an inferno few rescuers could enter and hope to survive themselves.

"Val is already inside," Shockwave said. "She dropped me and Pulse off on the street and flew into the wreckage. We caught sight of Ichabod making his way toward the scene

from overhead. I'd be surprised if he wasn't already inside, as well."

Pulse chimed in, "Hector and Gina both called in to say they were on their way, too."

A dark mask concealed Shockwave's mouth and nose, but the glare he shot the younger man was noted. "*Sludge* and *Lady Luck*," Shockwave stressed the code names of those Guardians not yet present, "Are on their way. But there's only so much us without super-skin can do. Most, if not all, of those buildings are going to come down. The three of us are going to have to find ways to contribute even if we can't just up and walk into burning buildings without taking a scratch."

"That a hint of jealousy I'm hearing, boss man?" The glare Pulse received this time made the younger hero snap his jaw shut.

Chunks of stone masonry were toppling off the twenty-story structures. Pieces smashed into the asphalt and concrete with the force of small meteors, cracking and cratering the ground. If even the smallest piece of debris were to hit a person there was a good chance they would not survive the experience.

"How many people do you think are trapped in there? That's a lot of buildings." Concern covered Vector's face. The youngest of the Guardians, she had come racing from her dorm in Manhattan to Queens in moments. Super-speed had its advantages. "Maybe I can get in and pull some people out," Vector continued. "I should be fine unless the whole thing comes crashing down."

Pulse winced at Vector's statement. He tried to hide the reaction by turning his face away.

"Do it," Shockwave said with a curt nod. "Just make sure you're not in there when the place *does* come down—and it will. Just a matter of time."

He watched Vector steel herself and set her sights on the closest opening. She was moving and inside the building

faster than a person could blink.

Shockwave turned away. He knew the kid was good at what she did and could take care of herself. But it was always an act of will for him to give her any tasks carrying the risk of harm. He couldn't help it. Vector was of an age to have been his child, if he'd ever had any.

First responders were on scene and looking for their own ways inside the disaster zone, each decked out in hazard gear with helmets and air tanks. More men and women were arriving in emergency vehicles every second. For all the good it would do.

"So what do we do, boss man?" Pulse asked. The earlier attempt to inject some levity into the situation was gone, replaced with a seriousness Shockwave would have liked to see more often on the younger hero.

"We—" A loud *crack* stole the rest of Shockwave's reply.

One group of firefighters approached the apartment building on the corner of the block, placing their own lives in danger to fulfill their duty, when a large section of the outer wall ripped free four stories overhead. It was large enough to crush the six firemen with room to spare.

Shockwave took a quick step forward and threw up his hands. The space between him and the falling rubble rippled, his power to generate focused sound waves causing the rubble to twist in mid-air. Shockwave concentrated on pulverizing the dangerous object with kinetic resonance waves before it could cause injury or worse.

For a second it looked as if he had succeeded. The wall section crumbled and broke into smaller chunks, but gravity won the clash of dominance, and as fast as he seemingly halted the drop, the pieces picked up speed. The firefighters took note of their predicament and braced. Perhaps a few might escape with minor injuries alone.

Flashes of light slammed into the smaller wall sections

before they had completed half the journey to their potential victims. The bolts of bio-plasma blasted them into even smaller pieces. Pulse sent another flurry of bolts toward the dangerous debris, and Shockwave redoubled his efforts. By the time the remnants of the wall section hit the firefighters, they were nothing more than an inconvenient shower of dust, the largest pieces being the size of a man's fist. With their fall robbed of momentum, even these chunks would do little than leave a few bruises.

One of the firefighters looked in their direction and gave them a thumbs up. Then the first responders disappeared into hell.

Shockwave lowered his arms. He didn't bother to turn to his companion as he finally responded, "Whatever we can, Pulse. Whatever we can."

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Valkyrie spat out a chunk of stone. Dust still coated her tongue and tickled the back of her throat. Other people were coughing nearby, though she could not see anyone through the thick dust haze. The noise was a good sign, or at least as good a one as she was likely to get. The collapse had snuffed out the flames in the immediate area, as well. So long as there were no further collapses, she would be able to get her charges clear of danger.

After regaining moisture in her mouth, Valkyrie called out, "Is anyone badly hurt?"

The only response was more coughing.

Her spear was buried somewhere in the rubble, yet that was the least of her concerns. Without the weapon, Valkyrie's strength would slowly fade, but it would be days before she reverted to "mortal" status by changing back. As an archaeologist, Jessica Tolbert drew her mighty powers from the ancient spear. It made her stronger, faster, and allowed

her to fly. Not only that, but her physical appearance changed; Jessica grew several inches, her blond hair lengthened and became more lustrous, and a mystical armor clad her limbs when she clasped the spear and transformed into Valkyrie.

For now, all that mattered was rescuing as many people from the disaster zone as possible. Valkyrie waved away the worst of the dust cloud and moved toward the nearest sounds of distress.

She found them coated in a thick layer of masonry dust, surrounded and half-buried by the collapse of the upper floors. Two kids, a boy and a girl, each younger than ten years old by the look of them, and a middle-aged man. The kids were hurt, but nothing looked life-threatening; the boy's face was covered in scratches and cuts, the little girl had a shallow laceration on her left arm. Blood trickled from their injuries, mixing with the ever-present dust.

The man, however, was in bad shape. His blood dripped thick from his forehead, a flap of skin leaning forward to reveal glistening white bone. A support beam pinned him to the floor, pressing down from shoulder to hip, his lower torso completely blocked from view by a mound of debris. Aside from his head, only one arm was clear and he was ineffectively trying to claw himself free.

There were other bodies littering the scene, but a single glance let Valkyrie know they were beyond help. She turned her gaze from the corpses to the living.

"I'm here to help," Valkyrie said as she reached the children. The little girl looked up at her with round, wide eyes. The boy stared at one of the bodies, tears welling up and leaking down his cheeks.

"Do either of you think you have any broken bones? Pains inside?" Valkyrie knelt on the remnants of an office desk and reached for the kids. Neither moved to reach back. "Can you tell me how you're feeling?"

It was the little girl who responded. "Mommy's hurt."

Valkyrie followed the child's line of sight. One of the bodies belonged to a woman roughly her own age, the angle of her neck and the awkward appearance of her ribcage was a sight no child should have to see, especially of their own parent. Valkyrie moved to block the view.

"I'll try to help your mommy in a minute." She hated lying, to children no less, but there was no time for hugs and tears. To emphasize the point, the building swayed. Valkyrie could hear something tear off the structure and crash to the street below. "But first she told me I need to get you two to safety. Before I can do that, I need to make sure that flying won't hurt either of you."

"Flying?" the boy asked with a touch of curiosity. It was the first reaction she'd received from him.

Valkyrie leaned down and smiled. "That's right. I'm a superhero and I can fly like a bird. It will be the fastest way to get to the ground, but I need to know that the two of you can hang on the whole time."

Faint excitement crept into the tear-streaked face of the boy. A twinge of guilt passed through Valkyrie, but she swallowed it away. First things first, get the kids to safety. She stood and reached a hand out to each child.

Their responses were tentative, but once the young girl clasped Valkyrie's hand the boy wasn't far behind. A section of the building's facade was gone, leaving a gaping hole opening to air. At least Valkyrie wouldn't have to make an exit and possibly endanger rescue workers below.

Before she could guide them to their serendipitous exodus, the voice of the trapped man called out to her. "You're Valkyrie," he said through a groan. "Of the Guardians? Is Ichabod here?"

Valkyrie's glanced over her shoulder. For all his effort, the man was just as trapped as he had been, a growing pool of blood being fed by a steady drip from his forehead wound.

"I'll come back for you," she said.

"No!" The man's outburst startled the children and caused him to go into a coughing fit.

"I promise," Valkyrie responded. The children clustered at her legs, one pair of tiny hands clasping at her belt. She hated wasting the time, but wouldn't just leave a victim behind without reassurance. "But I've got to get these kids out of here first. I'll come right back."

A section of floor on the other side of the room tumbled into an inferno below. Flames licked the edges of the hole, finding purchase and expanding to their floor once more.

"If you're here," the man said as his fit subsided. "If you're here then he's. . ." A short fit of coughing wracked his body. Something wet and red dropped out of his mouth and tumbled into the pool of his own blood. "You need to get me out of here. Now! You don't understand!" The man reached out to her with his free arm. Pain warred with the desperation on his face. "I'm a warden—"

Another *crump* of nearby explosions shook the building. Steel girders groaned beneath her feet, the stress of the calamity taking its toll on the support structure. A stentorian groan suffused the air.

Reflexes and instinct kicked in. Valkyrie scooped up the children and ran toward the hole in the wall. The flames were getting hotter, the building moments away from dissolution. She made the only choice she could.

Valkyrie leapt out into the cool air, ignoring the ranting of the trapped man behind her and hugging the children tight to her body. They soared out into the open air. The kids held tight to her armor as they descended to the ground below. Even as her feet touched the cracked asphalt of the New York street, Valkyrie was prying the children from her body as gently as possible and handing them off to waiting EMS personnel.

Another explosion rocked the air. Every eye turned to witness the building Valkyrie had just rescued the children from implode.

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