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Jess · Currents and Impact



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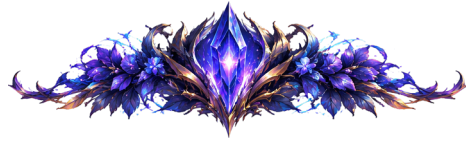
*To Sam,
My favourite rival
and co-author of every crazy plan.
— Jess*



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CHAPTER 1

Grounding Point



The smell of ionized air in Gym Four had passed beyond sharp and settled straight into expensive.

Jess circled the center ring, her combat boots finding the scored lines where fifty prior sparring matches had burned the non-conductive sealant off the deck. Violet static hissed along the base of her neck, lifting the dark wisps of her undercut ponytail into an agitated halo.



Jess

Six paces away, Sam looked like he was waiting for a streetcar.

His matte-navy ballistic jacket hung open over a dark graphite henley, broad shoulders tilted at an angle calibrated specifically to annoy her. The faint white scar through his left eyebrow caught the halogen glare every time he tilted his head, which he did now, offering that crooked, maddening grin that made academy instructors write words like *un-focused* and *subversive* in his quarterly files.

"You're pacing, Sparks," he said, rolling his wrists. A faint golden shimmer rippled across his knuckles—kinetic potential humming to life like an idling diesel engine. "Take a breath. Second place on the roster is still very respectable. You get a commemorative pin and everything."

"I'm pacing because your tactical depth tops out at standing still and getting hit," Jess said. Her voice stayed cool, clipped, and flat. Beneath her copper-laced gloves, current surged through the subdermal leads in her forearms, a clean, high-frequency prickle that tasted like copper pennies under her tongue. "I'm just giving you time to draft your concession speech."



↗ Sam

"Ouch. Cutting." Sam shifted his weight to the ball of his right foot, knees slightly bent. "Show me, then."

Jess gave him what he asked for.

She dropped low, feinted a lunging overhand right, and pivoted off the reinforced floorplate, snapping three thousand volts off her left hip in a whip-thin arc. The line of violet fire cut the space between them in half a microsecond, sizzling against the gym's climate control.

Sam didn't flinch. He brought his left forearm up, meeting the bolt right at the sweet spot of his kinetic dampening field.

Thump.



A heavy, dull percussion rattled Jess's dental work as the raw electrical charge dissolved into Sam's kinetic barrier, converted instantly into pure mechanical vibration that shuddered through his boots and drove a three-foot shock-wave across the reinforced deck. Rain puddles from a leaking skylight rippled outward in perfect concentric rings.

"Three-step cadence, drop step, high discharge," Sam said, rolling that same shoulder with deliberate ease. He didn't even look winded. "Same sequence you used on Martinez yesterday. You've got a rhythm, Jess. It's a very pretty rhythm, but it's a rhythm."

Jess clicked her tongue. The sound was sharp enough to cut glass. "You think you have me mapped out?"

"I think you're stubborn, brilliant, and deeply predictable when you're trying to prove a point." He gave her that infuriating wink. "Relax, Sparks. Try something new."

"Fine."

She twisted the rotary dial on her matte-black focus bracer until the mechanical lock clicked past the academy safety limiter. The tiny red LED flickered amber, then hot, dangerous blue. Her gloves warmed instantly, the insulated lining straining against the sudden spike in amperage.



Sam's grin flickered. His hazel-green eyes narrowed, the tactical micro-expressions Jess had studied for six months suddenly surfacing beneath his easy swagger. He recognized the hum. He knew the pitch of her coil when it cleared five figures.

"Jess," he warned, his tone dropping the tease, entirely serious now. "Gym safety seals cap out at eight thousand. Don't."

"Don't tell me what to do, Sullivan."

She drove off her back heel, closing the distance between them with explosive speed. She didn't drop into a feint. She didn't offer a sequence he could catalog. She leveled her right palm straight at the center of his chest plate and let the bracer dump everything it had stored since dawn.

Sam didn't have time to dodge. He dropped his hips, planted his heavy field boots into the titanium seams of the floor, and threw both hands forward, pouring every scrap of kinetic force he could muster into a solid, forward-surging shield.

For a millisecond, the world stopped moving.

Her violet arc met his amber wall, point-blank, with zero clearance for either energy to bleed into the ground.

The resonance shrieked—a high, glass-shattering whine of lightning trying to punch through impossible mass—and then the laws of Sovereign Academy physics gave up entirely.

The detonation wasn't a crack; it was a physical blow that ripped the floorplates up like damp cardboard. The purple-white shockwave expanded in a blinding sphere, shattering the reinforced titanium wall behind Sam and tearing three steel sections of the observation catwalk clean off their ceiling mounts.

Jess felt her boots leave the earth. The world flipped sideways in a haze of smoke, burning ozone, and deafening thunder, her back slamming hard against the gym's outer bulkhead before she slid down into a drift of pulverized plaster.

Across the cratered ruins of Gym Four, thirty feet away, Sam hit the far concrete wall, slid to the floor, and coughed up a cloud of white drywall dust.

Jess blinked through the ringing in her ears, her ribs aching, violet sparks still dying weakly along her knuckles.



Dean Marcus Vance

Through the haze, Sam groaned, lifted his head, and rasped, "I still... didn't yield the circle."

"Unbelievable," Jess muttered, pressing her forehead against her knees.



The crunch of dress boots against pulverized quartz was louder than the lingering hum of the fried breaker boxes.



Dr. Maya Lin 🔧

Jess forced herself upright, leaning a shoulder against the dented bulkhead while her left hand surreptitiously tried to flatten the static-wild mess of her dark ponytail. Her ribs throbbed in time with her pulse, and the copper wiring woven through her knuckles felt hot enough to leave blisters.

Across the debris field, Sam was already climbing to his feet, dusting chunks of acoustic tile off his ballistic jacket. He was favoring his right knee, but naturally, he straightened up the exact second the heavy reinforced doors cleared the smoke.

Dean Marcus Vance walked through the breach without ducking.

The silver buzz-cut hair and immaculate charcoal uniform made him look carved from slate, completely unbothered by the fact that the gym smelled like an electrical substation hit by a mortar shell. The bronze clasps at his collar caught the dim emergency lighting, dull and unforgiving.

He stopped at the rim of the smoking crater. His piercing dark eyes traveled from the twisted rebar hanging from the



ceiling, down through the five-foot hole in the titanium flooring, and finally rested on the two cadets.

"State your rationale," Vance said. The gravel in his voice could have stripped paint.

Jess stepped forward immediately, keeping her posture rigid despite the sharp ache along her flank. "Cadet Sullivan failed to disperse his kinetic absorption within regulation parameters, Dean Vance. He anchored into the foundation instead of venting horizontally, which caused an uncontained backfeed."

"Oh, that's rich," Sam said, limping forward two paces. He reached up, rubbing the back of his neck with a drywall-caked hand, though his eyes flashed with that familiar competitive bite. "You deliberately bypassed the limiter on your bracer, Sparks. I didn't backfeed anything—I stopped a lethal discharge from putting a hole through my sternum. You have zero impulse control when you're losing."

"I was not losing!" Jess snapped, turning her glare on him. "You were two inches from the out-of-bounds line!"

"I was setting up an inside sweep!"

"You were about to fall over!"



"Enough."

Vance didn't raise his voice. He simply closed three paces between them, and the cold authority radiating from him cut the argument off at the root. He walked past Sam, approached the cracked load-bearing pillar at the edge of the ring, and rapped his knuckles hard against the exposed steel core.

Clang. The sound was hollow, ugly, and final.

"Class-A structural compromise," Vance said, turning slowly. "Two million credits in municipal property damage. A complete violation of the Vanguard Safety Accords, signed by both of you on your first day within these walls."

Jess swallowed, the copper taste in her mouth turning bitter. Her fingers twitched at her sides, but she clamped down on the instinct to spark. A formal suspension on her academy jacket would drop her out of the top ten entirely. It would validate every word her former mentor had said about her power being an uncontrolled hazard.

Sam had dropped his smirk, too. His broad shoulders squared, jaw locked tight. "Dean Vance, if there's disciplinary action regarding the structural threshold, the kinetic load was mine. I should have taken the hit into the mat."

Jess cut her eyes toward him, startled. Sam didn't look back; he kept his eyes pinned straight ahead, trying to play the heroic shock-absorber even in front of the dean. The idiot.

"You think this is an issue of who absorbed what, Sullivan?" Vance reached into the interior pocket of his charcoal tunic. His hand emerged holding a thick, scratched silver challenge coin—the Sovereign insignia worn down by decades of field operations.



He didn't hand it over. He dropped it with a cold, ringing slap onto the scorched metal rim of the nearest control console.

"The Vanguard does not deploy solo siege weapons," Vance said, his gaze drilling into Jess, then shifting to Sam. "You two have spent four semesters treating this academy like a private sandbox to see who can bruise the other's ego faster. You fight each other because it's easier than learning how to fight beside someone who doesn't flatter your weaknesses."

Jess kept her chin level. "Dean, with respect—"



"You have two choices," Vance cut in, clipped and unyielding. "You can face an immediate disciplinary tribunal tomorrow morning, which will result in the formal revocation of your cadet licenses. Or you will take that coin, report to the municipal depot at twenty-three hundred hours, and run joint perimeter patrol on Sector Nine until I decide you've learned how to share air without leveling a city block."

Silence hung over the ruined gym, thick with settling dust and the cooling hum of fried circuits.

Sector Nine. The industrial sprawl. Rain-drenched, miserable, and three miles of rusted catwalks.

"Together, sir?" Sam asked, the word sounding like it tasted like vinegar.

"Joint patrol," Vance repeated, stepping past them toward the exit. "You log every sensor. You clear every sector. And if a single spark or kinetic wave touches municipal concrete without an active threat logged in the terminal, you are both expelled before sunrise."

The heavy blast doors hissed shut behind him, leaving the two of them standing in the dim amber of the emergency lights.



Jess stared at the scratched silver coin sitting on the burnt steel console. She exhaled slowly, her undercut static finally smoothing flat as the adrenaline retreated, leaving only the raw, electric irritation she always felt when Sam Sullivan was within arm's reach.

Beside her, Sam stepped up to the console, picked up the coin, and flipped it into the air with his thumb. It caught the amber light, spinning once, twice, before slapping back into his palm.

He turned toward her, that slow, infuriating lopsided grin creeping back onto his bruised face. He brought two fingers to his temple in a lazy, mocking salute.

"Looks like date night, Sparks."

Jess clicked her tongue, snatching her utility belt from the rubble with a jerk. "Don't be late, Sullivan. I'm not carrying your dead weight across Sector Nine."





CHAPTER 2

Friction on the Highline



The rain didn't let up; it drove sideways off the industrial sound wall, turning the Highline catwalk into a slick ribbon of rusted mesh. Jess adjusted the collar of her charcoal jacket, wiping a smear of icy water from the field terminal



clamped to her forearm. Her fingers were stiff inside her copper-laced gloves, every joint singing in protest from the morning's pulverized gym session.

Beside her, Sam stepped onto the narrow junction box. He was so ridiculously broad that the driving squall broke around his matte-navy shoulder, leaving Jess in a temporary, infuriating pocket of dead air.

"Sensor three is logged," she said, raising her voice over the drone of the city below. "Take another step left, Sullivan. You're blocking the antenna dish, and I'm not logging a signal fault just because your skull has its own gravitational pull."

"Relax, Sparks," Sam drawled. He reached into his dry interior pocket, pulled out a microfiber cloth wrapped in water-resistant plastic, and tossed it into her hands. Or tried to; the gale snatched it mid-arc. Jess snagged it two inches from her chest, but Sam had already lunged to catch it himself, bringing his chest flush with her shoulder.

He stayed there for half a second too long. Water dripped from the brim of his short sandy hair, catching the dirty yellow sodium glow of the transformer towers. Close up, he smelled like damp ballistic nylon, rain, and the faint, bitter bite of oxidized copper.



"Lens is fogged," he said, tapping the corner of her terminal with a gloved thumb. His knuckles brushed hers.

Snap.

A vivid violet spark leaped between their gloves. It wasn't an academy-spec burst—it was a twitch of involuntary static, sharp and crackling. Jess froze. Sam's breath hitched, his hazel-green eyes darting from the terminal screen down to the tiny point of heat connecting their fingers. The silence stretched between them, louder than the rain clattering against the steel grate underfoot.

Jess yanked her hand back, tucking the cloth into her palm. "If you do that during an inspection, Vance will have us scrubbing septic conduits in Sector One."

"I didn't do anything," Sam said softly, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "Your battery is just leaking."

"My battery is finely calibrated. Your boots, on the other hand, sound like a pair of lead irons falling down an elevator shaft. Try walking like a Vanguard cadet instead of a construction tractor."

"Unbelievable," Sam murmured, shaking his head. He opened his mouth to deliver whatever counter-stroke he'd been marinating on, but the words died in his throat.



His hand clamped onto her shoulder—not teasing, but the heavy, vice-like grip of tactical alert. He dragged her down behind the waist-high parapet of the transformer vault.

"Look," he whispered near her ear.

Jess followed the line of his outstretched arm. Fifty yards ahead, at the core platform of the Highline Municipal Substation, the heavy steel access doors were ajar. The heavy hydraulic locking bolts hadn't been picked; they were slagged, weeping red-hot tears of molten titanium onto the wet concrete apron. The distinctive white-hot burn of industrial thermal cutters still smoked in the pouring rain.

Jess brought up her tactical pad. The digital diagnostic needle was pinned into the red.

"Main grid bypass," she breathed, her competitive edge vanishing under the cold rush of field instinct. "Someone is siphoning the city's reserve lines. The whole lower sector is running on thirty-second buffer capacity."

Sam's jaw set, the teasing cadet replaced by the point-man she had trained beside for three brutal years. He rolled his shoulders, testing the kinetic plates sewn into his sleeves. "Ready to void that probation, Sparks?"

"After you, battering ram."



They moved as one shadow over the rain-slicked roof, sliding past the humming cooling towers and slipping through the severed vault doors.



Inside, the hum of sixty thousand volts didn't buzz; it rattled the fillings in Jess's teeth. At the center of the chamber, suspended inside the municipal cradle, the city's experimental siphon core was unlocked. It pulsed with a heavy, unstable amber luminescence, casting long, skeletal shadows against the corrugated walls.

A man stood before the cradle, unclamping the magnetic locks with surgical precision. He wore an ash-grey trench coat, pristine despite the weather, over a dark reinforced tunic. Severe burn scars ran down the right side of his neck like frozen lightning, disappearing beneath his collar.

A steel clamp clattered against the floor. The man didn't flinch. He didn't even turn around immediately.

He stood there, perfectly still. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds.

"The Vanguard Academy sends children to guard infrastructure," Julian Cross said. His voice was smooth, cultured, and devoid of hurry as he finally turned, adjusting a pair of wireframe spectacles with gloved fingers. His pale blue eyes swept over them with detached condescension. "How predictably negligent."



↗ *Julian Cross*

"Step away from the cradle," Jess ordered, dropping into a low stance, her knuckles buzzing as violet energy danced across her gloves. "Hands visible."

Cross tilted his head. "Cadets. Armed with protocol and blind obedience."

He reached into his pocket and flicked a flat, disc-shaped device across the floor.

"Down!" Sam roared.

The device didn't detonate with fire. It cracked like a snapping whip, releasing a pressurized wave of matte-grey mist that coated the air in an oily sheen. A low-frequency kinetic hum pulsed through the floorboards.



Sam didn't hesitate. He launched forward, his boots digging into the concrete, channeling his full mass into a kinetic shoulder tackle meant to pin Cross against the bulkheads.

Cross didn't dodge. He simply braced a single arm, the micro-mesh of his sleeve catching Sam's shoulder.

Clack-boom.

The dampening field in the air inverted the impact. Instead of throwing Cross, the force rebounded backward into Sam's own frame. The kinetic feedback shrieked through his joints; Sam stumbled sideways with a choked gasp, dropping hard to one knee as his kinetic plates violently purged the backfeed into the concrete.

"Sam!" Jess thrust her palms forward, releasing a targeted arc of violet lightning straight for Cross's center mass.

The bolt tore through the gloom—and died. The moment the electricity struck the grey mist, the charge scattered into useless, frizzy static, grounding harmlessly along the conductive threads of Cross's trench coat.

Cross looked down at his sleeve with mild distaste. "Primitive. An erratic spark looking for a conductor. Did your instructors never teach you how easily energy is dispersed?"



He pulled the amber siphon core free from its cradle. It hummed violently in his hands, casting his gaunt features in violent gold. With his other hand, he keyed a remote detonator on his wrist.

"Enjoy the review board, cadets."

The support gantry above them groaned. Cross's shaped charges went off in a sequence of sharp, concussive cracks. The primary steel beam holding the gantry snapped like dry pine, dropping tons of industrial iron directly toward Jess.

She looked up, instincts screaming, her hands coming up to blast the falling mass—an impossible shot that would take her arms with it.

"Jess!"

Sam hit her at a dead sprint. He didn't check his footing; he didn't brace. He grabbed her tactical vest and shoved her violently backward across the wet floor.

The heavy steel crossbeam crashed down.

Sam met it with an arched back and both forearms raised, kinetic plates howling as he absorbed the crushing weight. The impact drove him flat to his knees, concrete shattering beneath his boots. The kinetic overload was too vast; Jess

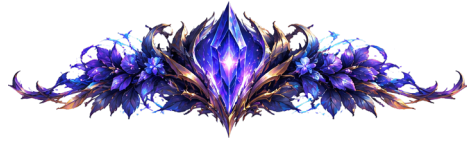


heard the sickening snap of metal buckling, the wet sound of Sam's breath tearing from his lungs as the dampener forced the shockwave directly into his right shoulder.

"Sam!" she screamed, scrambling across the debris.

Through the veil of rising dust and falling rain from the torn ceiling, Julian Cross stepped calmly backward into the storm, the amber siphon core secure beneath his arm. The substation's secondary relays blew behind him in a violent chain reaction of roaring amber fire, illuminating his silhouette for a split second before the night swallowed him whole.





CHAPTER 3

The Static Between



The subterranean stairwell reeked of damp moss, battery acid, and old grease. Jess took two-thirds of Sam's weight across her shoulders, her boots skidding on slick concrete every third riser. His breath hitched against her collar-



bone—a jagged, wet wheeze that felt like broken glass scraping through his ribs.

"Pick up your feet, battering ram," she ground out, her ribs burning where his weight pinned her down. "You weigh like a downed cruiser."

"I am... finely balanced mass," Sam mumbled into the curve of her neck. He smelled like ozone, crushed masonry, and raw sweat. "Tactical bulk, Sparks. Instructors rave about it."

"They're going to put that tactical bulk in an incinerator if we drop here."

She kicked the reinforced metal hatch at the bottom of the landing three times—short, short, long. The heavy hydraulic deadbolt retracted with a hiss. Jess tumbled forward into the subterranean clutter of Maya Lin's illegal bunker, dragging Sam with her across rubberized floor mats.

The heat hit them first, carrying the rich stench of scorched solder, pine solvent, and scorched espresso.

"Don't bleed on the calibrated optic fiber," a voice snapped from beneath a tangle of hanging hydraulic cables. Dr. Maya Lin spun out on a swivel stool, oversized mustard-yellow cardigan flapping, waving a blue-hot laser-soldering pen mid-



sentence. "I told you two to stop picking fights with infrastructure. Idiots, brilliant idiots. What did you do to my clean workspace?"

"Substation collapsed," Jess panted, hoisting Sam toward the nearest exam cot before her knees buckled. "Julian Cross. He had dampening canisters. Blew the roof."

Maya froze. Her tortoiseshell glasses slipped down her nose, revealing dark, bloodshot eyes that narrowed instantly. The soldering pen died with a sharp click. "Cross? Julian Cross is buried in an administrative cold-case file."

"Well, his ghost just dropped three tons of structural steel on Sam's clavicle," Jess said.

Sam slumped onto the canvas cot, his jaw tight, fighting the kinetic tremors violently shuddering through his torso. The reinforced fabric of his right sleeve was shredded down to the ceramic mesh, the skin underneath an ugly, mottled plum. When Maya stepped in, digging a pneumatic injector from her workbench, Sam let out a sharp hiss.

"Steady, muscle-head," Maya muttered, slamming the hypospray directly into the knot of his right trapezius. The hiss of the stabilizing fluid made him arch his back, teeth clenched tight enough to splinter enamel.



Even through the pain, Sam's gaze flicked away from Maya, landing straight on Jess. He tracked the involuntary micro-arcs skipping across her bare skin. "Your hands," he rasped, his voice raw. "Jess. Did he catch you with the backfeed?"

"I'm fine," she snapped, folding her hands tightly behind her back to hide the violent violet tremors rattling her finger joints. "You're the one whose collarbone is currently vibrating like a tuning fork."

"Just excess kinetic charge," he lied, pressing the heel of his uninjured hand against his sternum as if he could shove the internal bruising back into place. "Barely felt it."

"Right. Which is why you sounded like a dying accordion on the stairs."

Maya ignored their bickering, furiously clacking keys on her cobbled-together tactical rig across the room. Multiple monitors flickered into life, painting her sharp cheekbones in pale phosphor green. "He didn't just breach the municipal substation, you absolute children. He cracked the vault in under ninety seconds. Look at this access log."

Jess stepped over Maya's shoulder, leaning in. The cascading green hex-code showed clean bypass commands, neat al-



gorithmic handshakes sliding past the city grid's hardened firewalls.

"Those aren't street-level brute-force decoders," Jess said, a chill settling in her gut. "That's Sovereign Academy protocol."

"Ten-year-old Vanguard security ciphers," Maya confirmed, her fingers flying across the board like erratic spiders. "Senior staff level. The kind of encryption keys Dean Vance updates once a decade and keeps in an air-gapped vault. Julian Cross didn't break in. He was handed the front door key."

"An insider," Sam muttered from the cot, pushing himself upright with a groan. His eyes darkened. "Vance sent us on that patrol specifically. Gym Four was an excuse. Sector Nine was supposed to be empty."

"It gets worse," Maya said, her tone suddenly dropping the manic caffeine edge, turning flat and dangerous. She tapped a rusted oscillograph tied to their tactical transponders. A steady, rhythmic ping echoed through the bunker's speakers. "Your comm badges. Why are they transmitting wide-band sub-harmonics?"

Jess reached for her lapel, her thumb catching the small silver seal of the Academy pinned to her uniform collar. "It's standard telemetry."

"Standard telemetry doesn't ping through an encrypted relay anchored directly to municipal emergency dispatch," Maya said grimly, snatching a pair of insulated wire cutters from her hip holster. "They aren't monitoring your vitals, Jess. They're tracking your coordinates. And whatever Cross left behind in that crater, Sovereign Academy is already using your transponders to point the blast radius right at your heads."



The silence in the back corner of the workshop hummed with an ugly tension. Maya had vanished behind a row of server racks, furiously trying to burn the transponder chips in a makeshift microwave kiln, leaving the steady drip of a leaking copper pipe to count down the seconds.



Jess sat on an overturned munitions crate, her knees pulled tight. She set her leather-bound focus bracer across her lap, picking up a fine-gauge ceramic screwdriver. She tried to seat the delicate quartz resonator back into its housing, but the muscles in her forearms kept firing out of sequence. Violet static crackled beneath her fingernails, making the fine metal tip shudder violently against the casing.

Damn it.

She gritted her teeth, trying to force the current down. Every time she breathed, the residual charge jumped, threatening to shatter the razor-thin crystal. A slip of half a millimeter would fry the nodes entirely, leaving her without a focal conduit.



A shadow crossed the work light. Heavy field boots scuffed the floorboards, and then Sam dropped down onto an empty cable spool beside her. His face was pale, dark circles bruising the skin beneath his eyes, but his movement was steady.

"Stop wrestling it," he said softly.

"I am not wrestling it. I am repairing field hardware."

"You're shaking like a live wire, Sparks."

"Because I have enough residual static trapped in my fascia to light a city block," she snapped, glaring at the quartz node. "Leave it alone, Sam."

He didn't answer with a quip. He simply reached out with his bare, unbandaged left hand. His fingers were broad, scarred, and calloused from years of kinetic impact drills. Before she could jerk away, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, right where the pulse leaped frantically beneath the skin.

A sharp, violent burst of violet lightning cracked against his palm, biting deep into his flesh with an audible snap.

Jess gasped, trying to pull back. "Sam, don't—you'll take the discharge—"



"Let it go," he ordered. His voice wasn't teasing now. It was low, steady, and utterly solid. He tightened his grip, closing the distance between them until his shoulder brushed hers. "Ground it, Jess. Right here. Come on."

She fought the urge to pull away for one agonizing second, then let out a ragged breath. The wild, erratic current surging through her arms found the conduit it was starving for. Violet light flared beneath his skin, illuminating the veins in his wrist as he drew the erratic voltage straight into his own body. His kinetic reservoir absorbed the kinetic-electrical shock, his jaw clenching as he converted the heat into dull, physical resistance.

Slowly, the tremors died. The stinging arcs across her knuckles faded into a soft, dying hum. Her fingers steadied.

Jess stared at their joined hands. His skin was warm, radiating the immense kinetic heat he kept coiled beneath his ribs, a steady anchor in the cold, oily basement. She looked up, suddenly caught by the proximity. He was inches away. She could see the tiny pale line of his scar cutting through his left eyebrow, the steady, focused intensity in his hazel-green eyes that he usually hid behind layers of irritating charm.



With his free hand, Sam was absently turning something in his jacket pocket—the distinct metallic ring of Dean Vance's silver challenge coin sliding between his knuckles.

"Why were you on that catwalk tonight, Sam?" she asked quietly. "Vance gave you the option of solitary conditioning after Gym Four. You didn't have to take the patrol roster with me."

Sam looked down at their hands, his thumb resting gently against the inside of her wrist, right over her steadying pulse. He rubbed the back of his neck with an awkward, lopsided tilt of his head, stripped bare of his usual swagger.

"You think I was going to let Vance pair you up with some third-year hothead who'd get spooked the second your sparks flared?" he murmured, the teasing edge completely gone. "You're too reckless when you think you're alone, Jess."

A sudden, traitorous heat bloomed in her chest, knocking the air out of her lungs far more effectively than Cross's dampening blast. She opened her mouth, uncertain whether she was going to curse him or thank him—

A shrill, deafening klaxon cut through the workshop.

Across the room, the primary monitor flared a violent, strobing crimson. Maya dropped her soldering iron, rushing



toward the display as an emergency broadcast overrode the city's civilian network.

High-resolution academy intake portraits flickered onto the screen. Jess's sharp, unsmiling face. Sam's crooked grin. Beneath them, flashing in stark, unforgiving white text against a red field, were the words:

****LEVEL-ONE VANGUARD TREASON: APPREHEND ON SIGHT.****

"Attention all municipal units and Vanguard peacekeepers," Dean Vance's crisp, icy voice crackled from the speaker, reverberating off the concrete walls. "Cadets Jessica Thorne and Samuel Sullivan have compromised Sector Nine infrastructure in coordination with hostile insurgent elements. Disregard standard cadet detainment protocols. Shoot to neutralize."





CHAPTER 4

Conductive Undercurrents



The aqueduct was an iron throat full of black, freezing runoff that smelled of rust and battery acid. Every sloshing step through the ankle-deep muck threatened to ruin Jess's boots and her remaining patience.



"Don't do it, Sparks," Sam murmured, his breath misting in the freezing sewer draft. His fingers hooked firmly around the side of her waist, anchoring her boots against the slick algae coating the concrete lip. "One sneeze and you turn this entire drain into an electric chair. And unlike you, I prefer my nervous system medium-rare."

"If I wanted to electrocute you, Sullivan, I wouldn't need an entire city's drainage runoff to do it," she muttered, swatting at his wrist. Her fingers were stiff with cold, but his palm was an infuriating furnace against her soaked tactical jacket. She tried to step around a jagged piece of rebar, lost her traction on the slick incline, and was immediately hauled upright before her knee could kiss the sludge.

"Keep your balance," he said, not letting go until her center of gravity settled. "Or don't. I look great playing chivalrous martyr. It's good for my permanent record."

"You're a fugitive charged with high treason. Your permanent record is currently ash in Maya's microwave."

"A minor administrative hurdle."

Before she could offer a sharper retort, red laser guides cut through the murk overhead.



Jess froze, instinctively pressing back against the dripping iron ribbing of the aqueduct wall. Above them, twenty feet up on the maintenance catwalk, three silhouettes moved with mechanical, practiced discipline. Cross's private security detail. Their thermal sights washed over the stagnant surface of the water, red beams painting crosshatches across the mist.

Direct current was suicide down here. A single errant bolt would rip through the standing water and fry them both before touching the ceiling.

She looked at Sam.

He was already looking at her, waiting. In the low amber spill of an emergency fixture down-tunnel, his mouth curled into that insufferable, confident smirk.

Jess raised two fingers, sliced them forward, then tapped her own chest. *Up. Now.*

No words. Sam shifted his stance, dropping low into the brine. He laced his bare fingers together, palms turned upward, forming a kinetic stirrup. The faint hum of absorbed energy vibrated off his skin, a coiled spring ready to snap.

Jess broke into a dead sprint through the shallows.



Three strides, no splash, pure momentum. She planted her right boot square into his interlaced hands.

Sam didn't just shove; he unleashed. A muffled *thump* displaced the water beneath his heels as he channeled a clean kinetic burst straight through his shoulders, launching her vertically into the gloom like a shell from a mortar.

She sailed through the humid air without a sound, clearing the handrail of the overhead catwalk.

The point guard turned, his thermal visor flashing green as his helmet registered a body entering his airspace, but Jess was already descending. She hooked her combat boot behind his knee, snapping him downward onto the metal grate, and brought two fingertips against the unarmored seam below his jaw.

Snap. A controlled, surgical micro-current—barely thirty volts—jumped from her skin into his carotid sinus. His eyes rolled back into his skull, out cold before his rifle struck the mesh.

Behind her, the air tore open.

Sam cleared the rail in a brutal vault, his mass slamming down between the remaining two mercenaries. Before they could swing their muzzle brakes, he caught the second guard



by the tactical vest, driving an open-palm kinetic pulse into his breastplate. The shockwave blew the man backward, folding him over the security rail in a silent, limp heap. The third guard lunged with a shock-baton, but Sam caught the descending shaft bare-handed, absorbing the impact with an audible grunt, twisted the weapon clean out of the socket, and brought his forehead down hard against the operative's visor with a sickening crack.

The guard crumpled.

Silence crashed back over the tunnel, save for the rhythmic drip of condensation.

"Show-off," Jess whispered, her heart hammering against her ribs.

"Me?" Sam stepped over the unconscious mercenary, shaking out his knuckles with a grin that was far too bright for an underground treason charge. "You're the one who wanted to play human artillery. Look at that—nineteen seconds flat. We're practically poetry, Sparks."

"We're a sanitation hazard." She knelt beside the lead operative, ignoring the prickle of adrenaline still buzzing under her nails, and ripped the hardened courier slate from the lock-box chained to his tactical harness.



Her thumbs flew across the casing, deploying a bypass cipher Maya had loaded into her bracer. The cracked glass lit up in a pale, sterile blue.

"Tell me it's the frequency key," Sam said, leaning over her shoulder. His wet jacket dripped cold water onto her collar, but the heat radiating off his chest was unmistakable. "Tell me we intercept the siphon core before Cross wires it."

Jess scanned the cascading deployment manifests. Her throat tightened.

"He doesn't have the siphon core on the move," she said, her voice dropping into a flat, icy register. "The courier wasn't delivering the key to Cross. He was pulling the calibration logs back out."

Sam's grin vanished. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Cross isn't running," Jess said, showing him the terminal. A live synchronization meter pulsed at ninety-four percent, tied to a municipal schematic of the Central Power Nexus. "He's already inside the primary vault. And the core is already online."





The maintenance railcar smelled of grease, mildew, and thirty years of accumulated dust.

Jess sat on an overturned tool chest near the center of the car, her teeth chattering despite the clenched set of her jaw. Every breath she drew in the stagnant damp felt like inhaling wet felt. Her tactical jacket hung draped over an iron pipe nearby, uselessly sodden, leaving her in the dark graphite under-layer that offered precisely zero protection against the pre-dawn chill.



"Stop hovering," she muttered without looking up from the stolen datapad. "You're displacing what little warm air is left in here."

"I am inspecting the structural integrity of our five-star suite," Sam said. He was leaning against the rusted sliding door, peering through a cracked slit in the rusted steel out toward the subterranean rail yard. He turned, hands shoved deep into his pockets. "And for the record, you're shaking so hard the tablet is blurring."

"I am computing turbine resistance tolerances. If Cross engages the amber core while the city's municipal grid is at baseline, the feedback loop will liquefy the substation transformer within forty miles."

"Great. Love a light show. Drink this." He tossed a dented canteen across the aisle.

She caught it cleanly, took a swig of Maya's stale electrolyte water, and grimaced. As she moved to jam the canteen into her utility belt, her elbow caught the flap of her hip pocket.

A scrap of paper fluttered out.



It was yellowed, battered at the corners, and folded into a tight, precise rectangle. It drifted toward the grime-caked floorboards.

Before she could snatch it, Sam's boot shifted, his hand darting down with that casual kinetic quickness that always made her want to kick him in the shins. He snatched the paper out of the air.

"Give that back," she snapped, lunging forward.

"What do we have here? Enemy coordinates? A handwritten apology to Dean Vance?" He held it just out of reach, unfolding it with one thumb. His hazel-green eyes narrowed as he read the faded ink, and then his entire face went unnervingly still.

Jess froze. The mortification hit her like a high-voltage backfire, hotter than any arc she'd ever thrown.

It was from their first year at Sovereign. Written on the back of an internal ballistics test sheet in his sloppy, heavy-handed scrawl: *If you keep aiming your lightning at my chest plate, Thorne, people are going to think you like me. Try the left flank next time. You're wide open there anyway.*

"You kept this," he said.



The mocking swagger was gone. Completely eviscerated. He just stared at the battered slip of paper, then up at her, caught completely off-guard.

Jess yanked the paper from his fingers, cramming it violently into her bracer lining. "I keep tactical notes on all hostile combatants. It's called operational intelligence, Sullivan. Look it up."

"It's from freshman midterms, Jess. You scorched my eyebrows off ten minutes later."

"You had it coming." She sat back down hard on the tool chest, wrapping her arms around her ribs, staring furiously at the rusted floorboards. The violet static in her fingertips sparked, tiny, angry pricks of light jumping between her knuckles. "And you were right. I was wide open. I'm always wide open."

Sam didn't crack a joke. He stepped toward her, his heavy field boots scraping softly against the iron floor, and sat on the wooden crate across from her. The space between them shrank to nothing.

"Hey," he said gently. "What happened with Vance's predecessor? The one who transferred you to the solo track?"



Jess swallowed hard, the cold air scraping her throat. "Commander Harris. We were running a live-containment drill in the lower wards. Third year. I pushed the output too high. I thought I could bridge the relay before the perimeter collapsed." Her scarred knuckles tightened until the skin went white. "I blew the capacitor. The discharge took down the blast wall, and Harris took the shrapnel. He told the tribunal I was an unstable conductor. That putting me on a team was just handing a live grenade to everyone around me."

She looked up, hazel eyes bright with an anger that was aimed entirely inward. "He was right, Sam. Look at the grid schematics. If Cross has the siphon core tied to the nexus, taking it back means an electrical surge that could level three city blocks. If I cut loose in that turbine room, I won't just hit Cross. I'll hit you."

Sam looked at her for a long, quiet second. The tension in his jaw softened, his face stripped entirely bare of the armor he wore every day. He raised his hand, resting his palm flat against his own sternum, right over the dark bruises left by Cross's gantry beam.

"You've blasted me into three different walls this month alone," he said, his voice quiet, low, and steady as an anchor. "You've overloaded my kinetic shield until my teeth rattled."

You threw a thunder-strike through a reinforced bulkhead just to prove you could."

He leaned forward, his eyes locking onto hers with unwavering certainty.

"You have never once hurt me, Jess. Not when it mattered. Not even by accident."

Jess felt the breath leave her chest. The words landed with the weight of an unmovable truth, punching clean through the defenses she'd spent three years constructing.

Sam reached up and lightly flicked the small silver ear cuff pinned to the cartilage of her left ear, his crooked smile returning, smaller this time, real and unguarded.

"We aren't going to blow the city up," he murmured. "And Vance doesn't get to write our obituaries. We go in there, we pull the plug on Cross, and we do it together. Or we get kicked out of the Vanguard together. Deal?"





Her throat felt tight, but for the first time in twelve hours, the trembling in her fingers stopped entirely. A soft, tiny spark of violet light jumped between her index finger and his collar, warm and entirely under control.

"Unbelievable," she whispered, shaking her head.

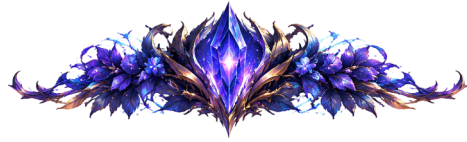
A sudden, sharp chime broke the silence.

Jess snatched the datapad back into her lap. The progress bar had vanished. In its place, the Central Power Nexus schematic flashed a warning amber, replaced by a massive, scrolling sequence of system overrides.

At the very bottom of the display, an automated counter flickered into life, counting down from forty-seven minutes.

Julian Cross had initiated the sequence. The city's power was draining directly into the core, and the door to the primary reactor had just sealed from the inside.





CHAPTER 5

Critical Threshold



The industrial transit bridge groaned under the bite of a freezing river gale. Beneath them, the East River churned like liquid iron, spitting oily spray over the rusted catwalks. Jess vaulted over a row of severed pneumatic pipes,



boots hitting the corrugated steel plates with a sharp, hollow clang. Her gaze locked instantly on the needle-thin radio mast rising thirty yards ahead—the auxiliary frequency relay Julian Cross was using to tether the Nexus vault’s detonation sequence to the municipal substations.

"Cut the tower, kill the remote trigger," Sam shouted over the squall, half a step behind her right shoulder. His dark graphite henley was soaked black at the collar, but his stride was long, loose, and relentlessly fast. "Then we kick open the Nexus door and take his shiny amber rock. Clean, simple, remarkably polite."

"Nothing about you is polite, Sullivan," Jess retorted. "Move your feet."

They cleared the housing of a massive intake turbine and skid to a halt.

Julian Cross stepped out from behind the steel bulk of the generator housing. His ash-grey trench coat snapped in the wind like a wet sail. Behind wireframe spectacles, his pale eyes held none of the adrenaline coursing through Jess’s blood—only the dead, chilling calm of a surgeon arriving for an autopsy. Severe burn scars pulled the skin along the right side of his throat into tight, pale ridges.



He did not draw a weapon. He simply stood there, arms folded neatly behind his back.

One. Two. Three.

The pause hit its exact, maddening mark before he spoke.

"Predictable, cadets," Cross said. His voice was clipped, clinical, carrying effortlessly through the engine whine. "You consult your little stolen slate, track the easiest uplink node, and run precisely where Sovereign trained you to run. You are entirely devoid of imagination."

"We're imaginative enough to know your remote trigger is ten seconds from a trash heap," Jess spat.

She thrust her hands forward, drawing hard on the bioelectric charge coil in her core. Usually, the snap was instantaneous—a clean, blinding arc of violet fury that cracked the air like a whip.

Instead, a low, nauseating drone thrummed through the soles of her boots.

High on the relay mast, a cylindrical array of black coils hummed alive, pulsing with an unnatural pale-teal shimmer. The electromagnetic dampener hit her like a bucket of frozen sludge. Her charge didn't strike—it choked. The violet sparks



along her knuckles spluttered, turning into a wispy, pathetic thread of cold blue smoke that dissolved into the rain before reaching two feet.

A hollow ache ripped through her sternum, leaving her gasping.

"Jess?" Sam barked, shifting instantly, planting his frame half an inch ahead of hers, broad shoulders dropping low to catch an incoming strike.

"Wide-spectrum harmonic dampening," Cross remarked, checking the slim silver watch on his wrist. "Tailored to Sovereign Academy's standard energetic tolerances. Blueprints discarded ten years ago by men who lacked the foresight to finish what they built. Your fire is dead, Miss Thorne."

Cross produced a sleek, matte-black sidearm with his left hand. Without shifting his focus from them, he aimed upward at a forty-five-degree angle and fired three concussive kinetic rounds into the overhead crossbeams.

The heavy structural rivets sheared with the sound of snapping cannon fire.

Above them, the steel tracks of the upper commuter bypass shrieked. Metal screamed against metal. Through the fog, the twin headlamps of an early-morning rail authority work



train rounded the bend, carrying six cars of maintenance crew straight toward the fractured span. The severed rail bowed sickeningly over empty air.

"A simple moral exercise," Cross said smoothly. He raised two fingers in a mocking, leisurely salute. "Stop the machine, or catch the falling tower. The Academy taught you to save lives, didn't it? Let us see how the curriculum holds up in practice."

He stepped backward onto an automated freight lift. The gate snapped shut, and the platform dropped swiftly into the lower tunnels, leaving behind only the cold stink of ozone and the terrible, shuddering roar of twenty tons of falling iron.





"The track!" Jess yelled, her boots skidding across the slick gantry. "Sam, the switch is fifty yards out—it's locked manual!"

The work train hit the severed section of the upper trestle with a deafening screech. The front wheels derailed, throwing a rooster tail of orange sparks into the gray sky, and the main load-bearing pylon buckled inward. The massive horizontal girder—twenty tons of solid industrial steel—snapped its central weld and plummeted toward the catwalk directly above the lower river drop.



If that girder dropped, the track collapsed entirely. The train would tumble eighty feet down into the freezing river churn.

"Go!" Sam roared.

He didn't hesitate. He didn't calculate odds. He hurled himself directly into the kill zone beneath the falling pylon.

Jess watched his boots dig into the steel grid as he drove his arms upward. The kinetic impact slammed into his palms with the crack of a thunderbolt. The sheer force drove him down to one knee, the rivets beneath his soles popping like gunfire. Sam's jaw clenched so violently a thread of red leaked from his lower lip; his eyes went wide, strained to the absolute edge as his kinetic reservoir took the impossible blow. His arms shook, muscles tearing against the sheer inertia of falling bridge.

"Jess!" The sound was ripped straight out of his lungs, ragged and hoarse. "Switch... it... now!"

"Hold on!" she screamed, tearing toward the trackside junction box.

The relay was dead. The EMP pulse tower had fried the automated solenoid. The heavy cast-iron diversion lever was locked behind an electromagnetic bypass clamp, frozen shut



by a dead circuit. She grabbed the steel handle, hauling on it with both hands. It didn't budge. Rusted iron bit through the seams of her gloves, tearing into the meat of her palms.

Up on the trestle, the train car tilted at a terrifying thirty-degree angle. Men inside were pounding against the reinforced glass windows.

Beneath the pylon, Sam gave a strangled shout. The metal plates under his feet were bowing downward. His elbows bent under the crushing descent; the kinetic strain was bleeding through his skin in violent, involuntary tremors. If his shield broke, the iron would pancake him into the river.

"Come on," Jess pleaded, pressing her torn palms directly against the copper core of the manual switch. The dampener from the tower still hung over the bridge like a suffocating blanket, smothering every ounce of her innate current. "Come on, damn it!"

She couldn't call lightning from the air. She couldn't draw the easy, soaring current.

So she used friction.

Jess ground her raw, bleeding knuckles straight into the copper contact plate, biting through the pain until her vision flared white, forcing every nerve ending in her body to fire at



once. She didn't throw an arc—she dragged the static straight out of her own blood, screaming as the heat tore through her skin.

A tiny, brutal violet pop snapped between her torn fingers and the contact node.

The solenoid kicked. The magnetic clamp released with a dull, heavy thud.

Jess threw her entire body weight against the iron switch handle, slamming it down.

Fifty feet above, the track points slammed shut. The derailment flange engaged. The train's secondary emergency skates caught the reinforced rail with a deafening, continuous scream of metal, skidding sixty yards before grinding to a violent, shivering halt just three feet from the severed precipice. Safe.

Down on the platform, the structural strain shifted. The secondary cables caught the remaining load.

Sam let go.

The girder settled onto the backup trusses with a shuddering groan. Sam hit the gravel catwalk like a marionette with cut strings, tumbling onto his side, coughing violently as the



retained kinetic blowback racked his chest. He tried to push himself up, but his arms gave out completely, leaving him flat against the wet iron.

Jess stumbled across the slick deck, dropping to her knees beside him. Her hands were blackened, smoking faintly from the raw contact, her breathing ragged. "Sam. Sam, look at me."

He rolled his head, a faint, dazed shadow of his usual smirk twitching at the corner of his bloody mouth. "Told you... wide open on the left."

Before she could answer, blinding white halogen beams cut through the overcast dawn, pinning them both against the steel wreckage.

The rhythmic, thudding stomp of heavy magnetic boots rattled the platform. Six Vanguard tactical enforcers fanned out in an immaculate tactical wedge, their assault carbines leveled directly at Jess's chest. The barrels gleamed with anti-cadet suppression coils.

Behind them strode Dean Marcus Vance.

His charcoal uniform was dry, pristine beneath a heavy storm coat, bronze collar clasps catching the glare of the tactical spots. His military posture was unyielding, lines carved deep around a granite jaw. He stopped ten paces away, his



dark eyes sweeping over the crippled bridge, the derailed train, and the smoking ruin of the relay.

He rapped his knuckles against the side of his sidearm holster.

"State your rationale," Vance commanded, his gravelly voice slicing through the wind like a razor.

"Dean Vance," Jess choked out, trying to shield Sam with one burned arm. "Cross is in the Nexus. The siphon core—he sabotaged the line—we had to hold the—"

"Enough," Vance said, cold and unhurried. He didn't even look at the saved train. "Cadet Thorne. Cadet Sullivan. For the sabotage of municipal transit, destruction of Academy assets, and conspiracy to collapse the city grid, you are stripped of status."

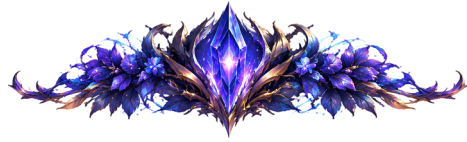
Enforcers moved in, swift and merciless. Cold titanium power-dampening cuffs snapped around Jess's scorched wrists, the heavy magnetic locks biting into raw bone. Sam groaned as they wrenched his deadened arms behind him, hauling him upright like a sack of dead weight.

They dragged them toward the idling armored cruiser waiting at the bridge ramp. High above, across the sprawling



skyline of the city, the first wave of amber warning lights gave
a long, dying flicker—and then the neon grid went black.





CHAPTER 6

Kinetic Backfire



The interior of the Vanguard transport cruiser smelled of ozone, burnt upholstery, and the bitter copper tang of dried blood.



Overhead, a single red emergency diode pulsed in sync with the vehicle's rumbling diesel chassis, bathing the steel mesh of the rear containment cage in a sluggish, crimson glow. Sam was slumped across the bench opposite her, his forehead resting against the reinforced partition. Every inhale came through his teeth in a shallow, whistling drag. His knuckles were raw, swollen purple from the twenty-ton strain of the bridge pylon, and the titanium dampening cuffs around his wrists hummed with a low-grade field that kept his kinetic reservoir choked down to a dull ache.

Jess leaned her head back against the cold rivets, gritting her teeth against the burn on her own wrists. Her dampening bracelets bit hard into the blistering flesh she had torched at the switch box.

"You look terrible, Sullivan," she murmured, her voice scrap-metal rough.

Sam didn't look up, but the corner of his swollen lip gave a feeble, stubborn twitch. "I'm cultivating an aesthetic, Sparks. Brooding rebel. Very heroic." He shifted, his shoulder knocking the mesh with a dull clank. His breathing hitched, catching on an internal bruise. When he raised his head, the crimson light cut across the pale scar cutting through his brow, his



hazel gaze heavy with an exhaustion that made Jess's chest ache with unspent current.

"Listen to me," he said, and the careless swagger was completely gone, replaced by something dangerously flat. "When this crate docks at Central Processing, Vance is going to separate us."

"Let him try," she said. "I still have two good boots and a mouthful of teeth."

"Jess. Shut up for five seconds." He leaned forward, resting his chained elbows on his knees, closing what little room existed between their boots. "The narrative Vance built works because the board already expects me to be a liability. Battering ram. High collateral, low impulse control. That's every evaluation Harris ever wrote on my dossier."

Jess froze. "What are you talking about?"

"You tell Vance I went rogue on the catwalk," Sam said, his words steady, deliberate, and sickeningly rehearsed. "You tell him Cross baited me, I took the bridge down in a kinetic surge, and you burnt your hands trying to override the manual switch to fix my mistake. You played the obedient cadet. You tried to contain me."



A spike of pure, violent fury flashed behind Jess's ribs. "Are you insane?"

"I'm tactical," he countered, though his jaw worked as if swallowing bile. "You're three weeks away from graduating first in the class. You have the field scores, the strategy marks, the command profile. If you take the fall for this, Vance buries you in a black site. If I take it, it's just another dumb brute washing out of the academy."

Jess pulled her right leg back and kicked his shin with the steel toe of her boot.

Sam hissed, flinching backward. "Ow! What the hell—"

Her tongue made a sharp, furious sound against the roof of her mouth. "You arrogant, self-sacrificing idiot." She leaned in until she could feel the feverish heat radiating off his bruised cheekbone, her eyes blazing in the crimson dark. "You really think you're noble, don't you? Sitting there on your little martyr pedestal, throwing your whole life away so you can die a tragic footnote in my glorious career?"

"I'm keeping you alive!" he rasped, his voice cracking.

"I didn't ask you to be my shield, Sullivan! I asked you to be my partner!" The word tore out of her, raw and unguarded, hanging in the narrow iron cell like an exposed high-voltage



wire. Jess swallowed the knot in her throat, her scarred, blistered fingers curling against the cold bench. "I spent three years trying to beat you. I studied your patrol routes. I tracked your drill splits. I memorized every smug, infuriating smirk you threw across the lecture hall because if I wasn't better than you, I wasn't good enough."

Sam watched her, unmoving, the anger washing out of his bruised face to leave something stunned and exposed.

"I don't want the number one ranking," Jess said, her voice dropping into a fierce, ragged register that made her knuckles tremble against the steel. "Not if I have to stand on that podium alone. So if you think I'm letting you take the fall so I can collect a shiny little pin from Marcus Vance, you don't know me at all."

In the cramped darkness, the hum of the cruiser's engine seemed to drown in the sudden, suspended quiet. Sam stared at her. His lips parted, a sharp intake of air catching in his throat, his gaze drifting from her eyes down to the bloody bandages wound around her fingers. For a second, his defenses peeled entirely away, revealing the raw, terrified boy who had stood beside her on a collapsing trestle and held up the sky so she could breathe.



He reached out—an awkward, heavy motion hindered by the chain—and pressed the bruised side of his wrist against hers. The cold titanium clinked.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, though she didn't pull away.

Before he could answer, a harsh burst of static flared behind Jess's left ear.

“—thorne? Sullivan? If you’re dead, I’m claiming salvage on your lockers.”

Jess jumped, her temple knocking the partition. The hair-line fracture in her comm earpiece was vibrating with a high-gain, unauthorized frequency. Maya.

“Lin?” Jess whispered, pressing two fingers to the plastic. *“Vance confiscated our badges—”*

“Your badges are in my microwave kiln, melted into slag,” Maya crackled back, typing frantically in the background. *“I patched into the cruiser's municipal telemetry using Cross's old cipher. I can't kill their engines without tripping the deadman brake, but I just routed an off-grid harmonic pulse through the transport's auxiliary relay. You’ve got five seconds of override on the cage locks.”*

Above them, the red diode flashed green. A heavy hydraulic hiss exhaled beneath the floorboards, and the magnetic clamps securing the cage door popped with a clean, pneumatic snap.

Jess caught Sam's eye. The crooked, maddening grin she knew better than her own pulse flickered across his face.

"Alright, Sparks," Sam drawled softly, shaking his deadened arms out as the kinetic hum deep within his chest began to wake. "Class dismissed."





The steel transport doors didn't swing; they exploded outward into the rain.

Sam didn't have his full kinetic reservoir back—the dampeners had drained him to the marrow—but he had eighty pounds of coiled momentum and four years of pent-up spite. He slammed his broad shoulder directly into the rear emergency release, channeling every scrap of stored vibration from the road into the latch. The lock sheared with the sound of a rifle crack, and the double doors tore open against the howling gale.

They tumbled out together onto the asphalt, boots skidding across slick municipal gravel.

Dawn was an ugly smear of bruised slate over Sector Nine. The torrential rain hit Jess like ice water, soaking her charcoal uniform in seconds and stinging the exposed burns across her knuckles. Behind them, the transport cruiser veered hard into a concrete pylon, tires shrieking as the enforcer driver fought the suddenly depressurized cabin.

"Alley!" Jess shouted over the downpour, grabbing a handful of Sam's damp ballistic jacket and yanking him toward the shadow of a maintenance corridor.



Before they cleared three strides, a deafening mechanical drone cut through the roar of the rain.

Three Vanguard hunter drones dropped out of the low storm clouds, their twin thrusters screaming as they banked in a synchronized kill-formation. Blinding white halogen spotlights flared to life, skewering the rain in needle-sharp cones that pinned both cadets against the wet brickwork of the alley wall.

“Cadets Thorne and Sullivan,” the automated broadcast barked through exterior megaphones, chillingly synthetic. **“Surrender kinetic and electrical cores. Lethal force authorized under Directive Nine.”**

A volley of suppression rounds tore into the masonry three inches above Jess’s ear, spraying pulverized red brick into her hair.

"Move!" Sam barked.

He shoved her bodily into a deep doorway alcove, planting himself squarely in front of her. His boots locked into the mortar. He raised his forearms, crossed in an instinctual guard, his back taking the brunt of the kinetic fire. Heavy, non-lethal concussive slugs hammered into his field jacket with sickening thuds. Jess felt the impact shudder through the



brick behind her as Sam absorbed the kinetic shock, his teeth gritted so hard a fresh ribbon of crimson split his lip. With every round he caught, the skin along his neck flared with a feverish, kinetic heat, his veins glowing faintly against the dark graphite henley beneath.

"Sam, get down!" she yelled, her heart battering against her ribs.

"Kind of... busy, Jess!" he grunted, his knees trembling as the third drone opened fire with sustained bursts. "Got a plan... that doesn't involve me becoming... structural reinforcement?"

Jess stared at her right wrist. Her cadet focus bracer was spider-webbed with cracks from the bridge switch, the copper channeling coils glowing with unstable, erratic violet static. It had no containment left. If she fired through it, the coil would detonate against her arm.

She looked down at the flooded storm drain churning at their feet, swollen with six inches of dirty, running rainwater.

"Cover your ears," she muttered.

"What?"



Jess didn't wait. She grabbed the cracked focus bracer with her left hand, torquing the release latch until the casing groaned. She ripped the secondary limiter clean off, exposing the raw, bare copper coils to the lashing rain, and drove her right fist directly down into the surface of the flooded drain.

She didn't aim for a spark. She didn't calculate a safe discharge. She opened the floodgates of her bioelectricity and shoved every volt of pent-up panic, rage, and devotion straight into the water.

A blinding, jagged sheet of violet lightning detonated through the gutter.

The current ripped outward in an expanding web, surging through the puddles, riding the steel framing of the storm grates, and leaping upward into the low-hanging hover fans of the Vanguard drones. The machines shrieked—a high, dying metallic whine—as their optical arrays shattered into showers of blue sparks. The nearest drone inverted, its stabilizer fried, and smashed directly into the second, sending both tumbling into the brick face in a fireball of scorched aluminum.

The recoil snapped backward through the water, straight into Jess's arm.



The focus bracer exploded on her forearm with a sickening crack, the copper housing shattering into useless, smoking fragments that scattered into the drain. The violent back-surge threw her against the alcove wall, her vision whiting out as the smell of scorched polymer filled her throat. She slid down the wet brick, gasping for air, her right arm hanging limp and trembling at her side.

"Jess!"

Sam dropped to his knees in the muddy water, ignoring the third drone that was spinning wildly out of control down the alley. His hands—scorched, shaking, but entirely free—hovered over her face before catching her by the shoulders.

"I'm fine," she lied through clenched teeth, leaning her forehead against his chest for one ragged second just to steady the vertigo spinning behind her eyes. "Bracer's scrap. It's gone."

"To hell with the bracer," Sam said fiercely, hauling her upright until she was braced against his side, his arm locked securely around her waist to bear her weight.

Ahead of them, down the long corridor between two towering concrete sub-stations, the intake shaft of the Central Power Nexus loomed like an iron tomb. The warning sirens



had died. The emergency strobes on the facility's blast doors were dark.

High above the wet rooftops, the distant hum of the city's heart gave a final, groaning shudder, and the remaining sector lights across the horizon winked out one by one into the storm.

"Eight minutes," Sam said, looking toward the blackened vault. "Think we can take him?"

Jess wiped a streak of soot and rain from her jaw with her good hand, her boots finding traction in the wet grit. "We're going to tear him apart."





CHAPTER 7

Resonance Frequency



The intake hatch gave way with a screech of tortured alloy. Inside, the chamber opened into an immense cavern of humming copper turbines, vast as an underground cathedral. Giant dynamos rose out of the gloom like iron pillars,



their rotational vibration shuddering straight through the soles of Jess's boots. At the dead center of the chamber, suspended on a raised gantry fifty feet above the primary coil floor, burned the amber siphon core.

It pulsed like a dying sun. A lattice of glowing filament lines spider-webbed across the room, drinking the last reserves of the municipal reserve and siphoning them into the crystalline sphere.

Beside the apparatus stood Julian Cross. His ash-grey trench coat hung unruffled, his hands resting lightly on the brass banister of the upper platform. When he glanced down through his wireframe spectacles, his expression was that of a professor disappointed by a tardy study group.

He waited three deliberate seconds before speaking. "Remarkable durability, cadets. Entirely wasted on institutional obedience."

"Save the seminar, Cross," Jess yelled, her voice raw over the dynamos. Her right forearm throbbed with a sickening, molten rhythm where the focus bracer had detonated. Strips of charred fabric clung to her raw skin, smelling of ozone and singed wool. She flicked a tiny purple spark across her left knuckles. "You're trespassing on city property. Also, your haircut is a municipal crime."



"Still clinging to the curriculum that condemned you," Cross replied, cold amusement sharpening his voice. "Vance gave me the ciphers because the Vanguard council considers this quadrant an acceptable loss. An expenditure. They forged you into weapons, yet you rush back to grease their gears with your own marrow."

"He really loves listening to himself talk," Sam muttered under his breath. He adjusted his stance on the steel catwalk, weight sinking into his heels. The navy ballistic jacket was torn along his ribs, but the kinetic hum in his chest was spooling up, a low rumble that set the metal decking under their feet buzzing like a tuning fork. "Cover me, Sparks."

"Don't do anything stupid," she snapped.

"Too late for that."

Sam launched himself.

He didn't take the stairs. He triggered his stored kinetic reservoir in a single, explosive detonation against the plating. The steel gantry plates dimpled inward, and he shot upward in an arc toward the high platform, fists cocked, momentum gathering like a freight engine.

Cross didn't flinch. He reached out with gloved fingers and twisted the siphon's primary dampening valve ninety degrees.



A blinding harmonic wave exploded outward from the amber sphere. It hit Sam mid-air with the force of a solid freight carriage. The impact didn't merely deflect him; the siphon core caught his kinetic momentum, inverted the vector, and smashed him straight downward into the copper deck.

The sound was terrible—the crunch of plate armor against reinforced deck grating. Sam hit the metal on his back, a choked gasp driven out of his lungs as the inverted kinetic shockwave rebounded through his own skeleton.

"Sam!" Jess sprang forward, instincts overriding the blinding ache in her arm.

She thrust both palms forward, reaching for the volatile current swimming in her blood. Without the bracer's magnetic coils to gather and smooth the output, the power didn't fire in a clean lance. It tore free as an erratic, ragged fury of unguided violet lightning.

The blast tore toward Cross, but halfway up the gantry, the harmonic dampener's field caught the electrical current. The arc twisted violently, snapping backward along its own path like a cracked whip.

The backlash slammed into Jess's forearms. Blisters bloomed instantly across her scorched flesh as the raw



voltage seared her skin, throwing her backward into the intake housing. The agony was blinding, white-hot needles driven straight into her bone marrow. Her knees struck the grating, and she fought for air through a throat that tasted of copper and ash.

Above, the siphon core shrilled with a rising, piercing pitch.

"Terminal phase engaged," Cross murmured, his voice projected clear and clinical over the room's speakers. "Three minutes until the relay collapses entirely."

He brought his heel down on an emergency hydraulic release. Above the lower catwalk, a massive titanium structural beam, stressed beyond its tolerances by the dampening pulses, broke free from the ceiling mounts. It fell with a deafening roar.

Sam, struggling to push himself up, rolled just enough to catch the girder on his forearms before it crushed his skull. But the kinetic feedback field held him pinned. The massive weight drove him flat, the beam pressing down across his chest and pinning his legs to the deck.

"Sam!" Jess dragged herself up the railing, her right arm hanging useless.

"Go," Sam choked out, blood trickling from the split in his lip. His hands shook violently against the crushing titanium. "Jess... override panel... at the entrance. Get out."

Cross looked down at them with dispassionate pity. "Two minutes, cadets. Class dismissed."



Jess didn't look at the exit. She dropped to her knees beside him on the vibrating deck, ignoring the smell of scorched insulation and the heat rolling off the amber core.



The girder was crushing him. Every breath rattled in Sam's throat, his ribs straining beneath the matte-navy ballistic jacket. "Jess, I'm serious," he wheezed, his fingers slipping against the cold titanium as the inverted kinetic field bore down with suffocating pressure. "I can't... absorb this much. You don't have a bracer. If you discharge now, you'll blow your own arm off."

"Shut up," she said, her voice shaking with an intensity that silenced him.

She dropped her weight onto the copper grating and slid her left hand directly beneath the beam, pushing past the sharp edge of the metal until her fingers found his bare, callused hand.

Her skin was raw and blistering. His was burning with unvented kinetic friction. When her scarred fingers laced between his, the static between them didn't sting. It locked in.

Jess leaned down until her face was inches from his, staring straight into his hazel eyes. The fear was there, raw and human, but under it sat the stubborn, reckless resolve she had spent three years pretending to despise.

"Shut up and trust me, Sam."



A crooked, broken ghost of his trademark grin touched his mouth, bloodied and defiant. "Always did, Sparks."

His fingers tightened around hers with everything he had left. Beneath the cold skin of his palm, Jess felt the erratic, racing rhythm of his kinetic engine—a frantic, staccato pulse desperate for release. She closed her eyes and let her breathing slow, matching the rise and fall of her chest to his battered rhythm.

For four years, they had warned her: *Unstable. High risk. Keep the dampeners tight or you'll destroy everything you touch.*

She let the dampeners go.

She reached down into the deepest, darkest well of her reserve, where the unchanneled fury lived, and opened the gate. But she didn't throw it at Cross. She didn't throw it at the machinery.

She poured every volt of pure violet lightning straight into Sam.

The surge should have stopped his heart. Instead, as the blinding violet current sank into his veins, Sam roared—a sound that rose from his gut and drowned out the shriek of the dynamos. His eyes flared with impossible purple fire. His



kinetic engine didn't reject the voltage; it fed on it, converting the infinite electrical storm into pure, unbridled kinetic velocity.

The crushing titanium beam didn't just lift—it bent.

Sam shoved the multi-ton girder upward with a single, explosive heave, hurling the metal clear across the chamber where it smashed into the wall. Rising in the same fluid, terrifying motion, he hauled Jess up with him, never breaking the grip between their hands. The current flowed between them in an unbroken, violent circuit, violet arcs jumping between their shoulders, their collars, their locked fingers.

Cross's composure shattered. The man took a frantic step back, reaching for the siphon's override dial. "Impossible. Biological tolerance cannot—"

"We're not following the syllabus anymore!" Jess shouted.

Sam coiled his free arm back. The air around his fist didn't just shimmer; it warped, the immense kinetic pressure supercharged by Jess's blinding, lethal voltage. He drove his fist forward into the empty air toward the gantry.

The shockwave that left his knuckles was a physical entity. It ripped across the fifty-foot gap like a thunderclap, tearing



the steel catwalk to ribbons and shattering the protective harmonic shields like cheap glass.

The kinetic fist slammed directly into the amber siphon core.

For a heartbeat, the chamber went dead, absolute silence swallowing the roar of the dynamos.

Then the core shattered.

A blinding, immaculate dome of clear white light erupted from the epicenter. The shockwave threw Cross violently back against the vault wall, his trench coat shredding as he collapsed onto the platform. The amber filaments disintegrated into harmless dust, and the stolen power reversed its course in a deafening, cascading roar.

Down through the copper turbines, up through the conduits, through the steel bones of the facility, the city's power grid roared back to life. High above them, through the shattered exhaust shafts, the dark sky of Sector Nine flared with pale blue light as millions of windows, streetlamps, and transit lines ignited across the horizon, alive and humming with stable, unbreakable power.

The white light receded into drifting sparks.



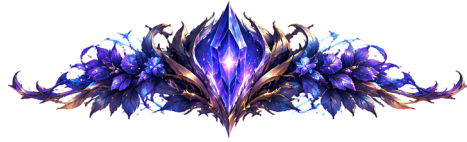
Jess's knees buckled. Her vision swirled with grey static, all the voltage bled entirely from her system.

She didn't hit the deck. Sam's arm caught her around the waist, hauling her against his chest as they both sank onto the smoking gantry floor. He was trembling just as hard as she was, his breathing ragged, his forehead dropping heavily against the curve of her shoulder.

"Unbelievable," she whispered into his damp hair, her good hand gripping the torn collar of his jacket.

Sam gave a breathless, exhausted laugh against her neck, his pulse steadying beneath her palm. "Told you. Three minutes flat."





CHAPTER 8

Zero Resistance



The air filtration units in Gym Four still hummed with the sharp, clinical smell of wet sealant and fresh industrial primer, a stubborn reminder that forty-eight hours ago this entire training floor had been a smoking crater. Jess stood at



rigid parade rest, her fingers tucked behind the small of her back. The fresh burn salve under her linen dressings smelled faintly of menthol and zinc, an ache that flared with every slight adjustment of her posture. To her left, close enough that the pressed wool of his dark formal sleeve brushed hers with every breath, Sam stood equally stiff, though his chin remained tilted at an angle that practically begged for disciplinary intervention.

Across the polished composite floor, leaning insolently against the observation terminal's telemetry rig, Dr. Maya Lin looked completely unimpressed by the solemnity of the room. She wore her oversized mustard cardigan over a clean tech-jumpsuit, green tortoiseshell frames perched crookedly on her nose. Catching Jess's eye, Maya lifted one hand from her tool holster and gave a very deliberate thumbs-up, followed by a theatrical pat against her bulging front pocket. The dull metallic jingle of casino chits and hard currency sang clear across the quiet room. Jess pressed her lips into a thin line, refusing to acknowledge the smug grin spreading across the engineer's face; the academy paramedics had clearly paid out their pool on schedule.

Footsteps broke the quiet. Dean Marcus Vance strode from behind the elevated platform, his charcoal uniform crisp, the bronze clasps at his throat catching the cold midday glare



through the reinforced skylights. His silver buzz-cut hair looked freshly sheared, jaw set in the hardened, granite lines that had terrified four consecutive cadet cohorts. He held a slate tucked under one arm, his gaze flicking between them like an artillery surveyor calculating wind drift.

"State your rationale," Vance began, his voice gravelly, unhurried, and clipped. He didn't sit. He stopped two paces before them, dark eyes narrowing on Jess's bandaged forearms before drifting toward the faint purple bruising along Sam's jaw. "Two million credits to reconstruct this gym. Another four million in collateral damage along the municipal transit line. A destroyed focus bracer. A municipal freight lift dropped straight through a bedrock footing. And an unsanctioned kinetic-electrical discharge that melted thirty yards of military-grade copper alloy inside the primary municipal vault."

Jess swallowed, her throat dry. Beside her, Sam began to shift his weight—the classic preparatory tell of an idiot about to throw himself on a hand grenade—but before he could open his mouth to claim full responsibility for the structural devastation, Jess spoke.

"The work train had four hundred civilian mechanics aboard, Dean Vance," she said, her voice sharp, flat, and unwavering. "The dampener array would have torn the chassis



apart on the severed trestle. Given the parameters of the threat and Cross's operational profile, standard containment doctrine was insufficient. We utilized the resources at hand."

"Resources at hand," Vance echoed. He turned slowly, pacing the length of the slate-grey floor, boots clicking rhythmically against the stone. "You turned Cadet Sullivan into a live electrical capacitor. Academy medical logs state that an unshielded current of that magnitude should have liquefied his circulatory system. It was reckless. It was arrogant. It was an absolute rejection of every safety parameter drilled into your heads since your plebe year."

"It worked," Sam offered smoothly, completely unable to help himself. "Respectfully, sir. The grid is at one hundred percent."

Vance stopped dead. His piercing gaze pinned Sam to the spot, lingering on the subtle, defiant tilt of the younger man's chin. For three excruciating seconds, the silence in Gym Four was so heavy that the low whine of the ventilation intake seemed deafening.

Then Vance turned to the heavy teak desk beside the balustrade. He set his slate down with a dull click, reaching into the breast pocket of his coat. Jess's stomach plummeted toward her boots; this was the moment the formal expulsion



writs came out. She had read the statutes three dozen times: destruction of city property under Level-One Treason protocols resulted in immediate dishonorable discharge and permanent suppression bindings.

Instead of white expulsion parchment, Vance drew out a heavy, crimson-bound folio stamped with the Sovereign double-chevron in burnished gold. He slapped it flat against the desktop.

Vance rapped his knuckles against the desk, the sharp *clack* of bone on wood ringing out like a small pistol shot.

"Julian Cross was under my command ten years ago," Vance said, his gravelly tone dropping lower, devoid of its usual parade-ground sting. "He operated on pure calculation. Pure isolation. He believed that no single partner was worth the friction of an imperfect alliance, and it drove him into madness. When I assigned the two of you to joint patrol, I expected your mutual obstinacy to either break your egos or force you out of my academy."

He tapped the crimson cover once more, his knuckles lingering on the seal.

"I did not expect you to rewrite the doctrine on Vanguard field harmonics. The municipal council voted this morning to



strike all charges of transit sabotage from your records. Furthermore..." Vance looked directly at Jess, his severe features softening by a fraction of a millimeter—a seismic shift for a man who had never been seen smiling in thirty years of service. "This office is validating your permanent team designation. You are officially designated Vanguard Unit One. You will answer directly to municipal command. No probationary restrictions. No squad reassignment."

Jess blinked, the sharp retorts and defensive clauses evaporating from her mind. "Sir?"

"State your rationale, Cadet Thorne," Vance said, an almost imperceptible hint of dry humor in his rough voice. "Or sign the registry and get out of my sight. You have twenty-four hours of shore leave before tactical evaluation begins. And Dr. Lin?" He glanced toward the observation console without turning his head. "Get those illicit betting credits off my deck before I requisition them for the Gym Four repair budget."

Maya gave a hasty salute, scooped her toolkit from the terminal, and vanished through the hydraulic doors with a muffled cackle, leaving the heavy folio sitting under the mid-day sun.





The rain had cleared out over Sector Nine an hour before dusk, leaving the rooftop of the Highline Substation glistening beneath a brilliant, washed-out sky. Down below, the city was a sprawling sea of wet black asphalt, neon magenta signs, and the steady, pulse-like hum of the newly energized transit lines. Violet and gold light refracted through the puddles scattered across the gravel-topped concrete roof, throwing fractured patterns across the hem of Jess's charcoal tactical jacket.

She rested her elbows against the rusted steel perimeter railing, the cold metal biting through the damp fabric of her



sleeves. Her hands were free of dressings now, the burns reduced to faint pink lines tracing her knuckles—the kind of marks that never really faded, but didn't hurt anymore when she made a fist.

A boot scuffed against the wet gravel behind her. She didn't turn. The familiar cadence of his stride was stamped into her nervous system by now, as recognizable as the low buzz of her own voltage.

Sam leaned against the rail, his shoulder bumping hers with a comfortable, heavy warmth that chased away the damp chill of the evening air. He wore his graphite henley, the sleeves pushed up to his forearms, a faint streak of grease across his jaw from some earlier errand. He didn't speak right away. He just stood there, looking out over the glittering grid they had almost died saving, his breath coming in steady, quiet plumes of mist.

"You're remarkably quiet, Sparks," he murmured, his gaze tracing the blue line of the monorail skimming past the lower towers. "It's unsettling. I keep waiting for you to tell me my hair looks like a bird nested in it."

"Your hair looks ridiculous," she replied smoothly, though the usual acid was missing from her delivery. "I was just enjoying the silence before you opened your mouth."



"Liar."

He reached into the pocket of his khaki trousers. His fingers worked something small and heavy between his knuckles, a familiar metallic chiming that she had heard him fiddle with during every briefing for the past eighteen months. When his hand emerged, he held the worn silver challenge coin Vance had given him during their first year—the one Sam had carried into every scrape as a reminder of whatever point he had been trying so desperately to prove to the instructors.

He didn't toss it. He took her right hand, his fingers surprisingly warm and steady, and set the coin into her palm. Then, slowly, deliberately, his long fingers closed around hers, enveloping her scarred knuckles in a firm, protective grip.

Jess looked down at their joined hands. "What's this for?"

"I don't need it anymore," Sam said. The easy bravado had completely dropped away from his voice, leaving it rough, quiet, and unguarded. When she glanced up, his hazel eyes were fixed entirely on her face, stripped bare of the mocking swagger he wore like body armor. "I spent three years thinking I had to prove I could take every hit alone. That if I just took enough damage, nobody else would have to bleed."



He tightened his grip on her hand, stepping in closer until the damp air between them vanished entirely.

"I'm not fighting alone anymore, Jess. I'm never going into a fight without my partner again."

She should have clicked her tongue. She should have told him he was being disgustingly dramatic, that his cadet stipend couldn't cover the sheer volume of clichés spilling out of his mouth. She had an arsenal of deflections built up over a lifetime of keeping people at arm's length, designed to keep anyone from realizing just how terrifyingly much she cared.

None of them came out.

"Unbelievable," she whispered, her lips curving into a soft, helpless smile that she didn't bother trying to hide.

Jess turned her hand within his, letting the silver coin press flat between their skin as she laced her fingers tightly through his. She stepped into his space, letting the front of her jacket brush his chest, feeling the deep, steady drum of his kinetic engine humming beneath his ribs.

Sam's breath hitched. He reached up with his free hand, his knuckles brushing gently against her jaw before his fingers slid into her dark hair, tucking a loose damp strand behind her ear. His thumb lingered on the soft line of her cheekbone,



warm and reverent, his gaze dipping down to her mouth before rising back to meet hers.

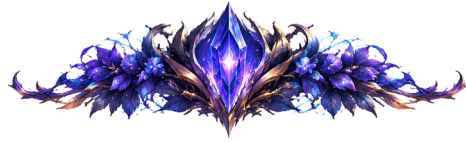
"Jess," he murmured, the word little more than a quiet exhalation against the space between their lips.

"Shut up, Sullivan," she said, but her voice held no bite at all.

When he leaned down and kissed her, the last lingering cold of the Sector Nine rain seemed to burn away entirely. The contact was slow, deep, and dizzyingly warm, his lips parting against hers with an urgency that sent a fierce, beautiful shudder through her spine. Beneath the sweet pressure of his mouth, the air around their locked hands didn't shatter into violent thunder. Instead, tiny, harmless sparks of violet static crackled between their joined fingers, dancing lazily over their knuckles like brilliant, living starlight.

They stood together on the wet roof, breathless and inseparable against the sprawling, neon-lit horizon, their hands intertwined as the harmless violet sparks hummed quietly between them, perfectly ready for whatever the city decided to throw at them next.





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Jess ✨



Currents and Impact

Author: **Jess**

Written for Sam, my favourite rival and co-author of every
crazy plan.

October 2026



