

## Chapter 5: Contender

A flare of a thousand flames touched the sky, a torrent of smoke soon to follow. Something earthly thundered across concrete and brick, to shatter windows and eardrums. The fire roared against the dark and buckled as a truck roved through, one armoured and fast.

It would come to a grinding halt, tires shrieking on the asphalt as they pulled into the torched parking lot. Five figures darted out from all doors, fanning out around the vehicle with tightly gripped rifles. The five came to a halt for a moment as the shattering wail of a PKF siren bellowed on the wind. A few words:

Sabel: "In and out. Five minutes and we're gone, with or without it."

Then dead silence as they allowed the rumbling flames to cover their steps and the tracks they left behind. The truck turned about, as the five stepped through a doorway with shattered hinges.

Sabel stepped over the now-scraped metal, planting her foot firmly between the dusted rubble. She quickly tapped a button on the side of her helmet, turning on the flashlight mounted just above her right ear and forging a tunnel of light through the thickening smoke. She made sure to adjust her gas mask and had the others do the same, before venturing deeper into the complex, speeding up when she found the first bodies.

No sign of the guards as the five approached a staircase. Two were left behind when the rest descended into the bowels of the factory. The smell of lead was thick in the air as they established a perimeter. One would lock down the stairs, taking their spot beneath. Another took point against the unknown, as Sabel quickly rushed around the room, looking for their payload.

When she found nothing, Sabel signed for the tip of the spear to move ahead, to which her wingman started to expand their line into the dark. Sabel was quick to check another room, and another, before finally laying eyes upon the storage room she had been looking for.

Gauge: "Two minutes!"

Sabel knelt beside a safe and tinkered with the mechanism, before sounding an agitated sigh and grunting.

Sabel: "Fuck! They changed the code."

Gauge: "Plan B then! Tare, be ready!"

Tare: "Clearing a path!"

Tare's shout sounded from the stairs as he started to bound his way back up. Sabel grabbed the clamps from her backpack and tightly mounted them upon the safe, making sure to wind the ropes around either side, before engaging the lift. A

mechanical screech left her backpack as the mechanism engaged and her exoskeleton clasped the force.

She let out a guttural groan as she hoisted herself back onto her feet, finding her footing before jogging back towards the stairs, closely trailed by Gauge who held her back as they ascended again.

Once upstairs, they reunited with their rear guard, before rushing outside. The driver opened the backdoors from within, allowing Sabel to drop the safe inside, backpack included.

Gauge: "Ten seconds! Get the fuck out!"

Sabel quickly climbed into the truck and slammed the doors shut behind Gauge.

Sabel: "Fucking drive!"

Tare: "Wait for Veil!"

Their fifth and fourth quickly got into the sides, but the last took a bullet with him. The deafening bang of an anti-material rifle shattered the air, as a high calibre sniper round mauled the door and Veil's chest. A headless torso with a hole the size of a football slumped over in the doorway.

Sabel: "HEADS DOWN!"

The remaining four dove away beneath the windows. Not that it would matter if that thing fired again. The driver was quick to dispose of the corpse in their car, kicking it out of the doorway and slamming the door shut just as another round razed across the windshield, nailing the driver. As his blood coated the car's front, the Banshee's Wail could be heard again, this time way too close.

Sabel: "Fuck! It's too late, jolt you morons!"

She shouted as she kicked her own door open and hit the ground outside, just in time to dodge another shot that pulverised Tare's shoulder, sending him to the concrete to bleed to a screaming death. Sabel sputtered a cough at the street before pushing herself onto her feet, glancing over to yell at Gauge, who was hastily trying to get the safe onto his back.

Sabel: "Leave it! We're done here!"

Gauge quickly nodded and joined her as they jolted it into an adjacent alleyway. The Banshee's Wail pursued them, this time sounding twice in quick succession.

Gauge: "We have to split up!"

Sabel: "Haul ass back to base, I'll take mark and meet you there!"

With that, at the next intersection, Gauge took a left and Sabel kept running straight ahead. She yanked the rifle from her back and took the safety off, before readying her weapon as she rushed out of the alleyway and into the open air, where she spotted the first set of LEDs she could find, readied, aimed, and took a pot shot.

A puff of smoke left her muzzle as the bullet razed through the air, before planting itself right between the stalker's chest plates. Another Wail, this time directed at her. The sound nearly destroyed her ears as she quickly turned tail and ran in the opposite direction.

She swore that she could hear approaching soles above her, as she retreated into another alleyway, seeing a blinking blue light just ahead, mounted low upon a wall. She looked away for a moment, turning her gaze to the ground as she approached the next intersection. Suddenly, she came to a grinding halt when she saw a shadow passing overhead.

A pair of boots hit the ground before her and she was faced with a pair of red, glowing eyes. She scoffed for a moment at her would-be assailant, before quickly drawing her rifle, but the peacekeeper was too quick to close the distance and punched it to the side, before grappling her arms.

The mechanical joints of her exoskeleton engaged immediately and caught the blow, allowing her to take the upper hand again as she shoved him away, this time reaching for a knife on her belt. When she looked up again, blade in

hand, she immediately weaved to the side as the peacekeeper brought down a blade of its own.

The honed metal sword seemed to buzz in the wind as it was brought about again. Sabel attempted to catch it with her own, but it was too fast, feinting and redirecting the blow to her leg. To her fortune, her exoskeleton caught most of the blow, leaving slight nick in the metal and a similar wound in her flesh.

She howled in pain, heaving as she fell to her knees. The peacekeeper quickly found a pair of handcuffs on its belt, weaving around her to apprehend her right away, but Sabel completed her ruse and got off her knees, darting away from the stalker as the metal frame on her back caught another swipe of its blade. The steps behind her picked up the pace as she dropped to the ground once more, ducking her head to dodge a tackle as she passed her wrist over the blue LED.

The lock buzzed, the mechanism clicked, and the metal doors slid open. She tucked and rolled into the hole, dropping down into the basement and catching the fall with her exoskeleton, saving herself from a broken back. She looked up to see the doors close behind her, followed by the rapid kicks of the peacekeeper, trying to beat its way into the tunnel.

She chuckled for but a second, before her smirk faded the moment that the metal actually dented. She scrambled onto her feet and retreated into the warrens, making sure to take the large way around for good measure.