

***The Course of Superhero Romance***  
*Chapter Thirty-Eight – Breaching the Entrance*

Shouldering his weapon once more, Major Vale turned to Sorina and Raymond. “Orders, Doctor?”

“We have to keep going,” she said without hesitation. “The Rikti aren’t fools, and we’ve taken down now how many of their patrols?”

“Nine, ma’am,” Halley replied.

“They won’t need to be rocket scientists to figure out where we’re heading.”

Raymond was inclined to agree. Understandably enough, Sorina had been unwilling to sacrifice caution for speed, which meant that while they’d been able to traverse the tunnels relatively unharmed, they’d given the Rikti more than enough warning that they were on the way. As he glanced over at her, he knew she was thinking the same thing, even with her goggles hiding her eyes.

To cover his concern for her, however, he turned to the other paramilitary team members. “Were any of the recon team carrying scanners of their own?”

“Yes, sir,” they answered, handing him the scanners they’d retrieved. Working as quickly as he could, he hastily rigged them together to pull all the information from each one, and then collate together into the data he’d gathered along the way. While conferring quickly with Etienne and Phillips, the two mages, Sorina handed him her own scanner.

Raymond watched as it slowly compiled the data into one larger map, areas slowly being delineated as the information was added, and he let out a low whistle.

“I think you guys need to see this.”

At the tone of his voice, Sorina broke off her conversation and moved to look over his shoulder while the rest of the team gathered around.

“*Bohze moi*,” she whispered, crouching down beside him to stare at the holographic display.

The recon team had done a remarkably thorough job in mapping the tunnels, but what had the group’s undivided attention was what appeared to be an enormous underground facility, constructed by the Rikti in secret, and of far greater scale than Vanguard had first believed.

Like Raymond, Major Vale let out a whistle. “A communications center, two weapons dumps, data repository, habitation areas, medical facilities, and unless I miss my guess, that-” He pointed to a small marker on the map. “That looks like the portal chamber. How the HELL did they get all that built?”

Sorina was tapping away at the keys, and a moment later, she nodded, her own suspicions confirmed. “At this point, we’re far enough underground to avoid detection even by the radar array at Point du Hoc, and with all the energy readings from the crashed ship, any fluctuations could almost have been written off as increased Rikti activity on the ship itself. And unless the metahumans fighting in the War Zone who’ve gone on pylon raids have actually made it inside the ship...”

“They haven’t,” St. John said ruefully. “Though not for lack of trying.”

She sat back on her heels, open dismay on her face. “If the recon team hadn’t found all this, we’d never have known it was there.”

She abruptly rose to her feet, her jaw set in determination. “But based on the maps from the recon team, we’re less than two hundred yards away from the entrance to this facility. At least then we won’t be fighting the terrain along with the Rikti.”

Raymond disassembled the networked scanners, but not before making sure that the same information was now on both Sorina's and his own. Tossing hers back to her, he affixed his to his gauntlet again. "Then I think it's time we pay the Rikti a house call."

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Motivated now not only by the nearness of their objective, as well as the intel taken from the fallen recon team, Raymond, Sorina, and the Vanguard operatives moved at an increased pace, pausing only to take out the few patrols that were stationed between them and the facility entrance. Since Sorina now knew the limitations of her technology within the teleportation exclusion field, she didn't bother some of the attacks Raymond had seen her use during the Steel Canyon incursion.

As they approached, though, Raymond was more aware of the sensation of moving downward even as they moved forward, confirming Sorina's earlier assessment that they'd progressed further beneath the surface. However, it was difficult not to wonder how they were going to get back *out* once they'd done what they'd come to do.

Then they rounded a corner and the whole team paused, weapons at the ready.

"Oh, bloody hell," Carleton cursed, and Raymond felt like he was speaking for all of them, for gathered in front of the large carved archway so reminiscent of Rikti architecture were two platoons of Rikti - twenty soldiers in all. And to make matters worse, from where they crouched in the shadows, they could see two Rikti who were quite distinctive by their lack of armor.

"Mentalists," Phillips murmured, clutching her staff a little tighter. "This is going to be ugly."

"It hasn't exactly been a cakewalk up until now," her partner reminded her.

"They've also got three communications officers," Raymond added, having scanned and detected the open communications relays.

“Can we pull them away from the entrance?” Sorina asked softly.

“We can try,” Major Vale replied, “but no guarantee they’ll follow.”

“Damn it, but I wish I had access to my teleportation programs,” Sorina cursed, but the two mages looked at one another, then over at her, straightening their shoulders.

“Ma’am, just tell us which two you want and we’ll bring them to you.”

“How?” Raymond protested. “The teleportation exclusion field won’t let you.”

“The teleportation field is based on technology,” Etienne said with a slight smile. “Magic, however, operates on its own level, something the Rikti have proven inferior at.”

“And if it still doesn’t work?” Raymond asked quietly.

“Then we worry,” Phillips said, her face somber.

Sorina hesitated, and Raymond knew she was weighing the odds of two different tactics. The first was to grab the mentalists, which would leave them vulnerable to almost certain Rikti reinforcements called in by the officers. The second was to grab two of the communications officers, minimizing the number of reinforcements, but as all eight of them knew, the Rikti had developed formidable telepathic powers, and two mentalists would be a serious threat to the group.

Finally she sighed and bowed her head. “We can’t leave ourselves open to the mentalists. The sheer weight of numbers we might be able to stop, as long as they don’t call in their chief soldiers.” She looked over at Etienne and Phillips. “When I give the signal, grab the mentalists and position them in front of us in their same relative locations. Pray, chant, I don’t care, but whatever you do, *don’t miss*.” She glanced over at the rest of the ops team, but they were already priming weapons and waiting for her signal. “Once the mentalists are in range, Phillips, Vale,

Carleton, target the one on the left; Halley, Etienne, St. John, and Positron, target the one on the right. We take them down, and I mean FAST, because after that the others will be all over us.”

“And when that happens, ma’am?” Halley asked.

“Kill them all, and I don’t care how,” Sorina replied. She lifted her hands to shoulder level and her gauntlets glowed with power. “On my signal... NOW.”

The mages’ staves abruptly flared with a burning bright light, and as Raymond watched, two gleaming auras of light surrounded the two Rikti mentalists, who had just enough time to react in surprise before they suddenly blinked out of existence, and reappeared in front of the ops team. As soon as they appeared, Sorina clenched her fists, gritting her teeth from the effort of holding the two mentalists in place.

Then there was no more time for thought as he focused his attention on the Rikti in front of him and threw every ounce of energy he could spare into an anti-matter blast. He was dimly aware of the others hammering away at the mentalists, while Sorina was utterly focused on keeping the Rikti from fighting back. But the two mentalists were all too quick to realize that if they took out Sorina, they’d be free to attack, so they brought their mental power to bear against her.

Sorina gasped and nearly stepped backward, but then she closed her eyes, resisting with everything inside of her. “*Nyet!*” she gasped, turning her face away to avoid looking at them, but they wouldn’t relent, and Raymond’s scanners could detect waves of psionic energy battering at the scientist.

“They’re coming!” Major Vale shouted, and the ops team renewed their assault against the mentalists, and finally one of them went down with an inhuman howl of rage. The other yielded

a moment later, but the Vanguard team had only barely enough time to look up and see the rest of the Rikti platoons bearing down on them.

“Take out the comms!” Sorina gasped, reeling backward, one hand to her head from the abrupt release from the Rikti mental assault. “Don’t let them-”

Too late, for Raymond saw the open communications relays spike from two of the communications officers, and just behind the advancing Rikti appeared two portals, glowing with a sickly green light. From each of the portals emerged two Rikti and two of the small, mutated forms that the heroes of Paragon City had dubbed ‘Rikti monkeys’ because of their quick, jerky movements and their agility.

As the platoons came into range, several of them drew weapons and opened fire on the ops team, while four others lifted their arms and began creating forcefields around their comrades.

“COMMS FIRST, THEN GUARDIANS!” Major Vale shouted over the noise as the Vanguard team began returning fire, and with Sorina doing everything in her power to slow down the advancing Rikti, Raymond and the others focused on the task of blowing the Rikti to hell.

At first, even as outnumbered as they were, as long as the Rikti had been careless enough to remain in a close group - the better, Raymond assumed, to allow their healers to keep them fighting - the Vanguard team had been able to slow their advance to a near crawl. But whether out of courage, foolhardiness, or tactics, the Headman blasters of the platoons began teleporting to other locations, forcing the ops team to split their attention away.

And unfortunately, Sorina couldn’t teleport them back, nor could the Vanguard mages let up their own attacks to summon them again.

Now caught in a bloody crossfire, it didn't take long before Phillips and Etienne were forced to break off their own attacks to try and heal the other members of the team through their magical arts, and the loss of firepower meant losing more ground to the Rikti. Sorina was facing the same dilemma herself - use her control over energy dynamics to revitalize her team, or attack the Rikti. And while she never seemed to stop moving, Raymond could tell this was exhausting her.

Eventually the mages gave up any hopes of attacking and focused all their efforts on keeping their teammates on their feet, while Sorina was alternating between immobilizing the Rikti and channeling energy to the ops team. But even as they took out the advance platoons, now it was five against thirteen as the reinforcements joined the fray.

"We can't keep this up forever!" Sorina cried, even as she raised her hands yet again to trap the Rikti in a gravitational field.

"It's those damn Guardians!" Major Vale shouted back. "We need a breathing space, even if it's just for a second, then we can take them out permanently!"

"Sorina, the Singularity!" Raymond yelled. "Its repulsion field!"

But she hesitated, and he realized that for her to summon it, she would have to drop her concentration and the gravitational hold she had over the Headman blasters that had appeared next to Halley and St. John and were firing at them.

Then she lifted her hands over her head, and with a loud hum and a swirl of reddish-gold energy, the gravitational anomaly appeared in their midst. As though detecting the threat to its creator, it abruptly pulsed, sending the nearest Rikti soldiers hurtling backward as its repulsion field activated.

The brief respite was all the Vanguard team needed to bring all their firepower to bear on the last two Rikti guardians, leaving the rest of the Rikti without their healing and forcefield capabilities. But there was no time for congratulations, not with eleven Rikti still attacking them.

Now that the Rikti no longer had the advantage of the Guardians, the Vanguard team began to regain some of their lost ground, forcing the Rikti back toward the facility's entrance. The four Rikti monkeys were the next targeted, removing the threat of their strange mindwarping abilities, followed by the general Rikti infantry, but exhaustion was rapidly taking its toll.

Raymond saw the brief flash of indecision on Sorina's face, then she lifted her hands, and his scanners once again detected the flow of energy from her body to one of the Headman blasters, and pale blue light seemed to surround it, then was absorbed by the ops team. For Raymond, it was the first time he'd actually experienced the effect of his armor somehow recognizing it as an alternate power source, and he was astounded to see his suit's power readings surge back to near normal levels.

However, the gravitational distortion field that Sorina had been using to lock down the Rikti suddenly collapsed, and one horrified look at Sorina as she fell to her knees told Raymond that she'd apparently not been in the radius of the revitalization.

"Doctor!" St. John yelled, pulling back slightly to cover her as she weakly scrabbled at her belt, searching for something. Pausing only long enough to blast two Rikti infantry away from her, the soldier pulled what Raymond recognized as a stimulant patch from his utility pack. Not wanting to waste the time she'd need to remove her gauntlet, he pressed it to the side of her cheek, the only immediately visible skin on her body.

As her head snapped back while the chemical stimulant surged through her bloodstream, Raymond and the others gunned down the last of the infantry, but the two remaining Headman

blasters briefly disappeared. One almost instantly reappeared beside Etienne and Phillips, but the ops team concentrated its fire and mowed it down before it got off more than a shot or two.

“Where’s the last one?” Raymond called out, his scanners searching for any sort of energy spike that would indicate its return, but there was nothing.

“It may have gone for reinforcements,” Major Vale said, leaning against the wall, trying to stifle the flow of blood from his shoulder where a Rikti energy sword had barely missed hitting a major artery.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, however, when the Headman blaster teleported directly beside Sorina and raised its weapon to fire.

“SORINA!” Raymond shouted, but riding the adrenaline surge that the stimulant had given her, Sorina had lunged to her feet, her hands glowing with energy, and bodily hurled the Rikti soldier into the ceiling, crushing its skull before letting it fall to the ground.

For a moment, she stood there, silently staring down at the remains of the Rikti, then she gave a long sigh and let her head fall forward.

“Two minutes,” she said weakly. “Patch yourselves up, check your ammo, and catch your breath. This job’s not done yet.”