

The Human Resistance Corp must band together with, Tirzah, a Rebel Phoenix, to overcome her insidious counterparts. Meanwhile, in Sheol, Cylus delves deeper into the parallel world in search of aid to overcome a new grotesque threat that has emerged.

# **Wraith II**

## **Parallel Insurrection**

by Rashun Ramon Carter

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# WRAITH II

PARALLEL INSURRECTION

RASHUN RAMON CARTER

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## **\*Chapter One: Rivals United\***

*I'm not your average twelve-year-old boy. I was born an heir to my father, the Alpha of our Tribesian clan. Our attire was similar to that of the various Indigenous tribes of America, but we wore our hair in locs, decorated with patterns of small stones and bones. Unfortunately, that day, my birthright was taken from me. An explosion rocked our large island. The strong sea breeze carried strange, dark-blue smoke; it enveloped everything...changing us. Turning our skin from tan to near-black. Our dark eyes brightened, glittered, morphed. Becoming icy-blue. The change was terrifying. Before I could grasp what had happened, the Phoenix were there, invading our island. Human in appearance...almost. Their eyes blazed red-orange. They slaughtered my tribe, along with my father. We fought, but the Phoenix were stronger and faster.*

*Tirzah was my savior. A Phoenix with sun-kissed skin and long, straight black hair that cascaded down her back, she prevented the others from killing me. She was not dressed in simple black like the rest of her kind. Her red robe billowed, beneath which I saw red and black armor encasing her chest. Burgundy-red leather pants trailed down her legs, ending in soot-black boots. She told me of their intent: to kill all of what my clan and I had become.*

*We were now Wraiths, born from the Anti-Noxin, the dark-blue smoke that had spread across our island from the explosion. Tirzah told me I had the ability to walk between the realms of life and death. As proof, she trained me how to open and close voids. Strangely, she refused to tell me how she knew. It was for my own good, she said.*

*Humans hadn't come to Tribe Island for a very long time, not until the Human Resistance Corp broke the chain. A group of people who stood against the Phoenix, they provided sanctuary for Tirzah and I and had run an analysis on me at their headquarters. Sol—the Phoenix leader—would later use a video message to persuade me into believing the Human Resistance Corp and Tirzah were using me and could not be trusted.*

*So, I formed a void and crossed into the realm of the dead, leaving them behind. I would soon discover Tempest, a living thunderstorm who would also prove a great ally. Tempest was a marvel: a one-winged humanoid covered in netted thin chains from shoulders to chest, through which I could*

*see tattoos that matched those inked down his arms. They looked similar to the traditional markings of my Triberian clan. Armored pants and boots covered his gray skin. On his wrists were fierce spiked wrist cuffs. The blue moon's glow had illuminated his head, round and bald, when I met his dark eyes.*

*He told me about one of this world's most powerful beings, Elder Arcane, who created him, and could generate and manipulate arcane energy. The leader of an army called the Royal Restless. At Tempest's hideout I was entrusted with a weapon called a Scorpion, a long rope with a hook at one end and a blade at the other. Tempest trained me for my preparation of earning the title of Wraith. I'd have to defeat Elder Arcane's elite guardian, Chaos, a towering monster with the head of a bull. Fur covered his massive body around his gold breastplate. A hoofed arm and man-like foot on one side, and a man-like hand and hoofed foot on the other.*

*I bested Chaos and thought everything would be fine, but I was wrong. Elder Arcane, outraged, said Tempest had doomed us all. A horrid creature, resembling walking mud, had emerged from underground in the distance with strange winged beings hovering around it. Elder Arcane then transformed from his dark gray cloak in a bright light. When the light faded, shiny black armor covered his legs and most of his body. Small, gold spikes lined his shoulders, and a spiked gold belt circled his waist. A cross was etched into his golden breastplate and mirrored the emblem centered on his long halberd. I could see, behind his golden mask, his red eyes scanning the distance. Thunder rumbled. I looked past Arcane and saw lightning flash in Tempest's eyes. And here I stand, readied with my Scorpion, facing the creature that had set its sight on us.*

The creature stomped toward Elder Arcane, Tempest, and Cylus, then roared. Tremors quaked their feet.

"What the hell is that thing?" yelled Cylus, covering his ears.

Arcane's eyes navigated down to Cylus. "It's an abomination that was never supposed to arise. He will extend his gratitude to you and Tempest soon enough." His deep voice radiated with authority.

"In all of my years, I've never seen such a titan," Tempest said. His words howled like rushing wind. He shook his head and darted his gaze to Arcane. "How have I never heard of such, Elder?"

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“He’s beyond your time,” Arcane replied. “There was no reason to speak of him...until now.”

“In all of your years, Tempest?” Cylus asked, bewildered. “You just killed a giant spider-snake not too long ago...” He crossed his arms. “Guess that was just another day in the Undead Wastelands, huh?”

“Hush, child!” Tempest hissed. Suddenly, the towering, slimy, sludge creature slowed to a halt. Its body squelched and boiled. More winged creatures—resembling five-foot centipedes—erupted from the sludge. Some scurried down to the ground, while others hovered like hummingbirds.

“Both of you, get behind me now!” Arcane commanded. Without hesitation, both Cylus and Tempest dashed behind him. Over his shoulder, Arcane caught a glimpse of Chaos, who clutched the gaping wound on his chest from the previous battle with Cylus. Raspy breaths vented steam from his snout. Arcane pointed. A sparkler-like emission shot from his finger and seeped into Chaos’s wound. The wound sealed. Cylus looked on in awe as Chaos rose and meandered to his side.

“Guess I didn’t kill you after all,” Cylus said, scratching his face. Chaos snarled at Cylus, then snorted steam from his snout before upholding his hand. Purple energy gathered and swelled. It roared and materialized into a double-bladed axe. Chaos wielded it and readied himself into a stance. Cylus nodded and shot a determined gaze at the lurking danger.

Arcane sized up Chaos, then shifted his eyes to the lurking abomination. He extended his halberd toward the sludge creature and its minions. The golden blade glowed. Particles of red energy orbited. The sludge creature took in the blade’s glint and snarled. It roared at its minions. In response, they scurried toward Arcane. Tempest extended his palm toward them, but Arcane waved off his effort. Tempest peered at him and nodded, then slowly lowered his palm. He squinted away from Arcane’s blade. The particles had whirred into a sphere of red light.

The minions neared. Some burrowed into the ground, while others trekked the surface. They gaped and squealed. Drool, backed by rows of hooked teeth, oozed. Arcane shot the energy—it zipped through the air as a wide beam of red light—toward the swarm. The hovering minion’s wings were immobilized, while their trunks strained. The grounded minions wriggled against an unseen force. Arcane raised his free hand and balled it. An enormous explosion thundered, engulfing the minions. The group shielded

themselves. Arcane opened his hand, and a blue forcefield blanketed the group. Cylus glanced down and noticed he wasn't propelled with the passing debris. He slowly unshielded himself and looked idly about. The group gasped when they took in Arcane. He stood firm with hand outstretched, powering the forcefield.

"Whoa! How did you do that?" Cylus asked, wide-eyed. Arcane growled in response. The dense, black smoke dissipated, revealing the sludge creature's onward pursuit. Its minions thrashed from underground, hurtling debris, and scurried toward them.

"Barely, if at all affected," Tempest noted, eyeballing the creature. He stepped to Arcane's side. "Elder, what can we do?"

Arcane peered at him. "This is not a matter of *can*. It's a matter of what we *have* to do. In this moment we have to survive." He pointed his halberd at Cylus; his deep voice escalated. "If this worthless imbecile hadn't bested Chaos, we wouldn't have this abomination in our midst!"

Cylus arched his eyebrows. "If I'm so worthless, then why did you just protect me?"

Arcane lowered his scepter and phased toward Cylus. He snatched his throat and lifted him. Cylus clutched Arcane's wrist, squirming in his grasp. "I've had enough of your insolence! You best choose your words more carefully when speaking to an Elder!"

Tempest dashed toward Arcane and grabbed at his arm. Arcane tossed Cylus to the ground, then locked eyes with his former elite guardian.

"Elder, enough! We must work together!" Tempest cried.

Arcane slowly stepped closer to Tempest. A palpable tension radiated the air. Cylus, who clutched his throat, choking and gasping for air, gestured in a desperate plea for their attention. He peered up—wide-eyed—and pointed behind them. Three minions had leapt into the air and were coming down for an attack. They turned at the last second. The minion's screeching squeals rang out as they descended to their prey.

However, in the last instant, Chaos phased into their path and sliced them in half with a mighty swing. The severed trunks flopped like fish. Chaos smashed them into gooey slush with his hoofed foot. Steam spewed from his snout as he turned to Arcane and Tempest. He snarled and walked

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between them, toward Cylus. He proceeded to aid the young Wraith to his feet. Cylus peered up at Chaos, still choking and claspng his throat. They nodded in unison, then eyeballed Arcane and Tempest, who nodded back in agreement but turned at the sound of overlapping squeals. More minions were poised for attack.



## **\*Chapter Three: Lurking in the Shadows\***

*My name is Tirzah, and yes, I'm a Phoenix. A Rebel Phoenix, to be exact. Like my counterparts, I mimic the obsolete humans in appearance. A few years ago, the government launched missiles packed with Noxin, a powerful red-orange gas, at randomly pinpointed locations. After breathing the Noxin, the subject's eyes would burn with a fiery red-orange glow. Their abilities—strength, speed, and intelligence—far exceeded that of humans. They no longer hungered, thirsted, or had need of reproduction. They could resurrect, propelling themselves into a new cycle of life. It was their vision of perfection: an answer to hunger and thirst. However, if they didn't resurrect for a prolonged period of time, they would weaken and possibly die.*

*Anti-Noxin had been created as a precaution, should the Phoenix ever betray the humans. This solution, the Anti-Noxin, also brought forth Wraiths, hyperpigmented beings capable of walking between the realms of life and death. Only one remains now: Cylus.*

*Shortly after Cylus vanished beyond a void, the safe haven—a technologically advanced sanctuary—of the HRC, the Human Resistance Corp, was attacked by Phoenix of the Phoenix Blaze—formerly the White House. The HRC and I narrowly escaped, but many of the civilians were annihilated.*

*Afterwards, Shanna Cooper, the HRC general, and a short, African American woman with shoulder-length black hair, full lips, and small eyes drew up a plan of combating the Phoenix at the safe haven and rescuing any survivors. Upon arrival, we navigated in stealth. Everything went well, until a Black Haze grenade, an explosive that projects a shocking fog at the Phoenix, was launched prematurely into the open. I witnessed the HRC gun down some of the Phoenix, but at some point, I was knocked unconscious.*

*I awoke to Gabriel and Shanna squaring off against Sol, the Phoenix leader and primary culprit of the Noxin gas's creation. He detested humans and viewed them as inefficient insects that should be erased from existence. I could have helped, but felt they had to realize firsthand what opposed them. Sol defeated both of them and then had simply wandered about, searching for something or someone. Finally, we had locked eyes.*

*I told him Cylus wasn't present, and the headquarters he had been seeking was in fact where we stood now. Displeased, he attempted to choke me, but*

*I pushed him back. After spewing meaningless threats, he left. Now I stand poised, taking in these decimated remains of a former vast fallout shelter that housed a makeshift community. I almost feel a smidge of despair for the HRC. Surely the others didn't see what had just transpired between Sol and I, or at least I hope they hadn't.*

Tirzah gazed off in the direction Sol had exited. Her mind raced with a myriad of his possible next moves. Sol's last words repeated in her head: *"As you should know, loyalty is valued above anything else. I'll be seeing you again...imposter."* She chuckled. *You're damn right,* Tirzah agreed. She knew that whatever move she had to make, the conclusion would always be the same. Sol. She brushed the long, black, silk-smooth strands from her face, then scanned her surroundings. She took in Shanna, who was laid out, sprawled unmoving on the concrete floor, and rushed toward her. She kneeled next to her and caressed her thumb across Shanna's bruised forehead. Tirzah sighed and slowly shook her head.

"Unfortunate, but it was necessary," she muttered, cradling Shanna's neck. With a gentle shake, she whispered, "Shanna...can you hear me?" Shanna's angelic face grimaced at Tirzah's velvet-smooth voice, and her mouth let out a groan. Tirzah smiled and propped Shanna against her thigh. "It's going to be okay. We were able to retrieve one of the hostages, and now we have to find the others."

Shanna rubbed her throbbing head. "I failed again," she moaned. A groggy voice at the moment. Far different than her usual clear and authoritative inflection.

"No," Tirzah said, shaking her head. "You didn't fail. You're still alive, aren't you?"

Shanna sighed with a disgusted look.

Tirzah darted her eyes toward approaching footsteps. She took in Gabriel, with Marcus draped over his large, broad shoulders.

Gabriel Niles, HRC's commander, was a brown-eyed, six-foot, three-inch Caucasian man with short brown hair and a stubble beard. Brave as a lion and considerate as a judge. Just as his mother had raised him to be. Following her footsteps meant he would have stepped into the Marine Corp. However, as fate had it, his mother's footsteps had disintegrated during the outbreak of war. He had been at Shanna's side when her father died in her arms. He had felt her loss deeply, and that, more than anything, had fueled

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his desire in accepting her offer to take on the mantle of HRC first commander.

Marcus Stone, HRC's second commander, was a gray-eyed, six-foot, African American man with a bald head and a chronically clean-shaven face. His athletic body trudged alongside Gabriel's. In similar fashion, Marcus had also trudged his way through a difficult life. A life with a drug-addicted mother who overdosed and involuntarily abandoned him. His father, a once high-profile drug-dealer, worked up the faintest sympathy afterward and decided to raise Marcus. That lifestyle didn't last long—his father's life was taken in a drive-by shooting, leaving Marcus to fend for himself. This led ultimately to an arrest for shoplifting and his subsequent deposit into an orphanage. After adoption, he was later recruited into Black Ops. This served as a direct pipeline to the HRC. Although he felt his experience should have landed him the lead commander role, following orders was something he was long accustomed to. He and Gabriel occasionally butted heads, but the task at hand required every bit of teamwork.

Jack Brawn, HRC's lead pilot, approached—nursing his head—slightly behind Gabriel and Marcus. He stood five feet, nine inches. His Caucasian build was average. Blue eyes donned his face, as did a blonde mullet and goatee. The oldest of nine children, the pilot had enjoyed a quiet childhood on a farm. Always willing to lead by example, he left the farm in pursuit of his piloting dreams. To his siblings he was an adventurer, a brave risk-taker, showing them that if they wanted more than farming out of life, opportunities were out there for the taking. Jack normally walked with a strut in his step that accompanied his southern accent, but now he staggered.

Nia Langford, a tough-willed Caucasian fitness fanatic, also approached. She had short, wavy, black hair and brown eyes. She grew up in a two-parent household with little-to-no problems—a sheltered life, some would say. Sometimes she seemed naïve, but always, highly intelligent. In fact, her brains had earned her expertise in medicinal knowledge. She had sought out the HRC after catching wind of the war and had offered her hand as HRC's medic.

The approaching soldiers were uniform in their attire, sporting black and green fatigues.

"You all okay?" Tirzah asked, her eyes wandering to Shanna.

"I've been better," Gabriel grunted. His stern inflection was well intact.

Marcus hissed, grabbing at the stab wound in his gut. “Those fucka’s ain’t gettin’ away with this. Especially that coward-ass leader of theirs,” snarked Marcus. Marcus’s robust voice was as strong as ever.

“He just kicked *all* of our asses,” Nia grumbled. Though she’d cuss, her voice always wreaked of innocence. “With minimal effort. How exactly is that *cowardly*?”

“Because,” Marcus grunted, frowning his eyebrows. “*He* is!” The furious soldier shifted his frustration to Tirzah. “Isn’t that right, pretty eyes?”

“I pose you the same question as Nia,” Tirzah replied and narrowed her eyes. “But consider giving me a different answer.”

Marcus slid from Gabriel’s shoulder, still nursing his gut. “I was hopin’ you would say that,” he said, grinning. “I saw it, girl. You and that mothafucka’ have somethin’ goin’ on, don’t you?”

Tirzah drew a sharp breath. Her heart rate increased, though she wore a careful expression of disguised confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play these damn mind games with me. I saw both of y’all talkin’ ‘bout somethin’, and it damn sure didn’t look like no argument!” The HRC whipped their heads to Tirzah. Shanna’s movement garnered her attention. Jack dashed toward Shanna and aided her to her feet.

Tirzah scoffed at Jack, then rose to her feet. “If you *really* saw everything...” She crossed her arms and cleared her throat. “...then what do you make of the chokehold he attempted on me?”

Marcus slowly shook his head. “I don’t even know, but I do know that all you did in return was give him a pussy-ass shove! Why didn’t you fight him like the rest of us?” The second commander glared throughout the verbal tug-of-war.

Tirzah took a deep breath and rolled her eyes. “Look, I’m on your side, okay? We have a common enemy and goal.” She spread her arms. “So, why don’t you stop interrogating me?”

“I didn’t trust you in the first place! You ain’t goin’ to play us for some fools!” he exclaimed, stumbling toward her and pointing. “That *common enemy* you’re talkin’ ‘bout was *right* in front of you, and you ain’t do shit except—” Marcus groaned and fell to a knee. “Shit,” he hissed, pressing his wound. Gabriel rushed to Marcus’s aid.

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“He’s not going to last much longer like this. We’ve got to get him back to base,” Gabriel said, eyeballing Shanna.

“What about the hostages?” Nia blurted out. Shanna surprised them all by shakily closing in on Marcus, crouching and examining his wound.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” Shanna murmured. She reached a bloodied hand into her back pocket and pulled out a gauze bandage. Shanna applied pressure to Marcus’s wound, drawing a hiss. “We’ll continue our search for the hostages shortly. Gabriel, I need for you to get him back to base.” She pressed against her knees and rose to full height. “I’ll radio a bird for you.” She tilted Marcus’s chin. “Hey!” she exclaimed. Marcus’ eyes slowly rose to hers. “You’re tougher than this, Stone! Pull it together! You’re about to be headed to West base. I need for you to hang in there, okay?”

“You ain’t...gotta...worry ‘bout me,” he stammered, raising a thumb. Shanna smiled.

“That’s what I’m talking about. Now go on, you two. Hop to it.”

Gabriel nodded and started toward the stairway they had come from. Tirzah followed.

“Uh-uh,” Shanna scolded, grabbing her arm. Tirzah peered down at the grasp, then slowly up at Shanna. “You’re staying here with us.”

“I’m aware of your conflicted thoughts,” Tirzah said, gently removing Shanna’s hold. “But I’m not the one you need to worry about.” Jack and Nia closed in. “You two should know that better than anyone.”

“And whatever makes ya’ say that?” Jack asked.

Tirzah shook her head and snickered. “It’s times like these that I’m content to not be human.” In an instant, she dashed away in a blur. Then, it began. A male Phoenix—one of the last two who had survived HRC’s assault—dropped down from the rafters, readying to attack Gabriel. Tirzah blocked it. Gabriel and Marcus, startled, nearly fell backward. “Sooo sneaky,” Tirzah said, grinning. “They may have forgotten about you, but I sure as hell didn’t!” The Phoenix strained, fury burning in his eyes. “Your shiny black attire may have camouflaged you better up in those shady rafters, if you hadn’t been so noisy.”

“You don’t belong with them! Why are you assisting these incompetent cattle?” snarled the Phoenix.

Tirzah cocked her head. "Incompetence? Didn't you hear our conversation while you lurked about in the shadows?" Tirzah asked. The Phoenix growled in response. "Them and I have a common enemy. You're the one that's incompetent."

Her grin vanished, and she leveled the Phoenix with an intense punch to his gut. He doubled over and groaned as the air left his lungs. Tirzah followed up with a heel to the back of his head. He plummeted to the ground face-first and held his head. The Phoenix quickly rolled away.

The HRC soldiers looked on in disbelief. "We forgot to take out those last two Phoenix during our initial attack!" Nia exclaimed. "But where is the other one?" she whispered, surveying the surroundings.

Jack's jaw dropped. "That there peach is more unbelievable than a flyin' lion!"

The Phoenix rose to his feet, panting, and initiated a resurrection.

Tirzah tsked and shook her head. "Already?" she grumbled, disappointed. Flames climbed around the Phoenix and intensified. Gabriel continued to usher Marcus away. Marcus looked back, gritting his teeth. He spat out a glob of blood.

"C'mon, man, we're almost there!" Gabriel urged, repositioning Marcus, who groaned.

"Such a low-ranked Phoenix," Tirzah said, shaking her head. "Pitiful. You must've come here in an effort for promotion." She dashed toward the flaming Phoenix and punched his throat. The flames vanished. He clasped his throat and gasped. "Unfortunate. You'll get no promotion after all." Tirzah unleashed numerous punch-and-kick combinations. He was knocked to the ground by a vicious punch to his face. The Phoenix strained to recover, but still grinned at her.

"Pleasure from getting your ass kicked, huh? You're a special kind of worthlessness." Tirzah stepped toward him, but another Phoenix grasped her from behind and slammed her into the ground. Jack and Nia started to run to her aid, but Shanna extended her arm.

"No!" she barked, watching the fight unfold. Nia and Jack gaped, but Shana pointed her chin toward the fight. "Let her handle this."

The Phoenix lifted Tirzah and held her arms behind her.

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“Now!” Phoenix Two commanded. Phoenix One rose quickly and dashed toward Tirzah, aiming a blow at her face. She moved her head to the side, and the punch landed on Phoenix Two’s face instead. The second Phoenix was rocked back and broke his hold. Phoenix One’s eyes widened, and he continued his assault, but Tirzah blocked and evaded each of his blows with ease. She caught both of his fists and kned his nose. Phoenix One spun and grabbed his nose. Tirzah quickly followed up and twisted his neck. A disgusting crunch accompanied the force. Phoenix One’s body fell limp to the ground. She turned and stepped toward Phoenix Two.

“I was wondering when you were going to show up to come to the rescue,” she teased, crossing her arms. “Too bad he didn’t dial 9-1-1 sooner, huh?” Phoenix Two snarled and rushed at her. He faked a punch and quickly dashed behind her, lunging a kick toward her back. Tirzah, without turning, caught it. She yawned and slowly turned around. “You’re out of your league here—” she began.

Phoenix Two leapt and tried to connect a kick with his other leg. Tirzah ducked and kned Phoenix Two in his gut during his fall. A choked gasp escaped his hinged mouth as he plummeted to all fours. Tirzah snatched him up and locked eyes. “As I was saying, you have no chance. What’s Sol planning on doing next?”

Phoenix Two groaned. “Do you not...know our...creed anymore?” he sputtered.

Tirzah punched Phoenix Two in the face. “Correction! *Your* creed, not mine!” she fumed. Phoenix Two strained in her grasp. The HRC ambled toward them. Tirzah glanced over. “Give me a sec,” she called to her companions. “We’re going to find out what they’re up to here, real soon.” She punched Phoenix Two after each following word. “What...is...Sol’s...next—”

Phoenix Two shielded his face. “Loyalty is valued above anything else as a Phoenix!” he shouted, blood draining from his nose and mouth.

“Wrong answer!” Tirzah barked, punching his gut. Phoenix Two’s mouth hinged open.

“Now I’ve got to start all over again,” she said, grinning. She reeled back her fist.

“My creed isn’t...your creed,” he grumbled. Tirzah raised an eyebrow and nodded. “But you should know I’ll never go against my own like you have.”

You're no true Phoenix, Tirzah. Neither is any of your kind. Do as you may, but—" Without warning, Tirzah punched a hole through Phoenix Two's face. The HRC turned their heads in disgust. She slowly dislodged her bloody fist, dripping with mushy innards. The limp body dropped with a thud.

"Dammit," she hissed, wringing her hand through the air. "I thought for sure he'd have something to say."

Nia vomited, attracting Tirzah's attention. "Hey, could've been worse," Tirzah told her with a shrug.

"What did he mean when he said *your kind*, Tirzah?" asked Shanna.

Tirzah brushed her hand against her pant sleeve. "It's a long story, but in short, he meant us *Rebels*," she answered.

"Rebels?" Jack blurted out.

"Mhmm," Tirzah murmured, slowly nodding.



## **\*Chapter Five: Pinpoint\***

The sun rose on the horizon, and cirrus and cumulus clouds littered the sky, illuminated amongst blue and amber hues. A flock of geese fluttered gently by. Roaring wind shook their feathers but couldn't restrain their blaring honks. Suddenly, from above them, three sleek black stealth jets tore through the wind in a triangle formation. The thrusters roared, leaving behind contrails. Their air brakes opened.

"Flame One, prepare for hover landing," Sol said over a headset. The Phoenix leader had a dead-toned voice, betrayed by his conniving eyebrows. Short, black hair topped his head, and a chin-strap beard and mustache wrapped across his fair-toned face, which had a streak from Shanna's near-miss bullet. He was a tall man, average in build—though not in actions. He was one of the culprits involved in developing the Noxin gas. Shortly after the government-issued experiment, he injected a modified version of Noxin into himself. His actions were governed by a singular purpose: to eradicate the lesser lifeforms—humans—in an effort to help the next natural step in evolution—the Phoenix—to flourish. Sol's cherry-red suit and tie with his orange, collar shirt and black dress shoes might have looked outlandish next to the comrade who answered over the headset.

"Affirmative, my lord," confirmed Arson in his typical deep and gritty tone. Arson's look was far more subtle than his lord's: a simple, black, motorcycle-like armored jacket with matching pants. The only eye-catching feature, a red-orange Roman numeral one, was emblazoned upon his jacket's chest. His very tall—well over six feet—stature helped support his bulky body. Bald head, a tan-complexioned face with a black mustache and goatee, he looked like a dangerous man—and indeed he was. A pyromaniac who possessed an extensive knowledge about explosives. For most, lounging close to the sound of lapping water is therapy. However, Arson preferred the catharsis of kabooms and cigars.

"Ten-Four, Lord Sol," Eclipse replied from her cockpit. Her smooth voice carried the faintest accent. The petite female Phoenix wore a sleeveless, snug, leather-like bodysuit the same color as her jet. A red-orange Roman numeral one was centered on her chest. Her shoulder-length, straight, black hair was tethered in a braided ponytail. Silver, double-curved barbells pierced her eyebrows. She brushed away a few loose strands that dangled before her slanted eyes.

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“Copy,” mumbled Conscious. A deep voice like his brother, Arson, but modulated. Conscious stood nearly six feet but had a slight build. His attire mirrored Arson’s, but his pale skin, not so much. His dirty blonde hair was spiked but shaved down at the sides of his head. Freckles dotted his high cheekbones. Arson’s younger brother had practically been dragged into the Phoenix Blaze. Conscious sounded sullen. He always sounded sullen. He quietly hated Arson’s reckless killing and hurting of others, but he loved Arson. He would follow where his brother lead, even if that meant sharing the same aircraft, like they’re doing now.

Arson furrowed his eyebrows. “I already gave the damn affirmative, Conscious.”

“Lord Sol said, ‘*Flame One*,’ not Arson and Eclipse,” Conscious shot back.

Arson growled at him over his headset.

“Does it matter?” asked an exasperated Eclipse.

Arson took a deep breath. Conscious shifted loudly in his seat. He wondered if the others heard his restless movements over their microphones.

“Your interjection is much appreciated, Eclipse,” Sol said.

Eclipse peered at Arson’s plane and smiled.

“It’s comforting to know I’ll have you to rely on if I demote Arson,” Sol continued.

Arson, wide-eyed, rattled his head. “Not necessary, my lord. I—I—”

“Quiet,” Sol interrupted. “Following our hover-landing, I’m going to the command center to scour every possible whereabouts of the Rebels.”

“Our orders?” muttered Conscious.

Arson narrowed his eyes at him, then refocused. “You three will report to the Slay Field and continue honing your skills. We may have defeated the humans in their counterfeit headquarters, but you three didn’t dispose of them before my arrival. That is forgiven for now, only because I allowed them to live with the despair of what they’re against.”

“Understood,” they said in unison. The jets stalled and descended to the Phoenix Blaze hangar. They exited from their jets and walked to the

entrance. Arson and Conscious opened the doors for Sol, while Eclipse extended her hand in a welcome gesture.

Sol ambled past them and stopped. “When you report to the Slay Field, I want your primary focus to be on your melee tactics.” They nodded. “Let’s see if you can still fight as well as you can fire your weapons.” He continued down the hallway and entered an elevator. “You will be notified when I find the Rebels.”

“Yes, lord,” they affirmed in unison.

“Do *not* waste the time I’ve given you,” he said, as the elevator doors sealed shut. Arson shifted his neck from side to side and shadowboxed.

“What are you doing?” Eclipse asked, squinting.

Arson grinned. “I used to loove boxin’ back in my heyday,” he answered, continuing his match with his invisible partner. Eclipse rolled her eyes.

“You used to love *watching* it, you mean?” Conscious clarified.

Arson moved in his brother’s direction; his jabs grew more rapid as he closed in on Conscious. “Why don’t I show you how much *I* watched?”

Conscious crossed his arms. “Go right ahead.”

Arson threw a right hook with blinding speed, but Conscious ducked. Eclipse was next in the hook’s path. However, she caught it without looking.

“Not baaad,” Arson said.

“Whatever,” Eclipse replied, pushing his fist back. “You didn’t choose me as your third for my looks.” She swiped away more dangling strands. “And Sol didn’t say we had time for games. So, we should go to the Slay Field and work on our combat skills while we have time.”

“I was just ‘bout to say that,” Arson said, wringing his arms through the air.

“Waiting for you...commander,” she huffed. Arson grinned and led the way to the Slay Field.

The elevator opened. Sol made his way down the scarlet carpeted corridor. He entered the command center. His operators’ rapid typing click-clacked through the room, their eyes fixed on their monitors. Sol grinned and lurked around the room—his hands clasped behind his back, monitoring the work

## *Wraith II: Parallel Insurrection*

of his operators. He halted at a particular operator's screen. It displayed the Slay Field.

Arson was in a duel with three Phoenix, swiftly evading their attacks and countering with his own. He had knocked one down, leaving him unconscious. He began to showboat and left himself open for attack, but then dodged a blow designed to take him by surprise and countered with a spinning backfist. The backfist hit with enough force to break the attacker's jaw. The surrounding crowd roared and frenzied like fans at a rock concert. The assailant fell to the ground, blood spilling from his mouth. He strained to get up, holding his face, but Arson closed in for another attack. Before he could land the attack, he was kicked and knocked backwards by the other Phoenix. Sol arched his eyebrows and grumbled in response.

The Phoenix followed up with a blur of punching combinations and finished with an uppercut that toppled Arson. He fell to one knee and gritted his teeth, then scrubbed his bloody lip with his forearm. He growled and charged at the Phoenix with blinding speed, delivering a vicious jab to its gut. Air escaped the Phoenix and left his mouth gaped, then Arson finished him off with a forceful haymaker that broke his neck. Arson stood over his body and gibed, then was grappled from behind by the Phoenix with the broken jaw.

Sol looked on and crossed his arms, tapping his bicep, watching as Arson grabbed at the Phoenix's interlocked hands, but couldn't undo the hold. He dug deep and roared, breaking free. Arson wound back his fist, but the Phoenix held his hands up in surrender. Arson grinned and raised his own in triumph. After a brief dance around the arena, he shuffled to Conscious, who was holding his modified grenade launcher. Eclipse tried to stop Conscious from giving Arson his weapon, but he snatched it from his younger brother and glared at her. Arson aimed. The Phoenix with the broken jaw tried to turn and run, but was engulfed in the ensuing explosion. The crowd's roar intensified. The Phoenix flailed and screamed in pain. He fell to his knees and initiated a resurrection, gazing at the sky. Another explosion followed. The flames ceased. The Phoenix rose to his feet and turned to Arson, rubbing his jaw.

"That was a coward's way out, youngin'! Next time, take the punishment!" Arson scolded, pulling out a cigar. He lit it, took a few puffs, then pointed at the Phoenix. "You're only alive because of what you are. Remember that!" The Phoenix nodded and kneeled. "Get better, or next time you're goin' to have *two* broken jaws. Now get outta here!" he ordered and puffed on his cigar. With the cigar between his teeth, he spread his arms and spun in

circles. “Now, who’s ready for some more action?” The crowd responded in an uproar.

Conscious entered the area, passing by Arson. He grabbed Arson’s arm. “Do you *have* to act like a maniac all the time?” Conscious grumbled.

Arson took a pull off his cigar. “I do what’s necessary. Now get in there and show why you’re worthy of Flame One status, like I did.” A cloud of smoke slithered toward Conscious’s face. He coughed and fanned it away. “Or get beaten and demoted for bein’ *too soft!*” Conscious took a deep breath, watching his brother approach Eclipse.

Sol shook his head and continued down the row of operators. He suddenly stopped and hurried to the front of the command center, where a giant projector screen rested. He gazed at his busy operators, then slammed his fist into the screen, shattering it. His operators stopped instantly and looked at him in unison.

“Why have I not heard of the Rebels’ whereabouts?” he shouted, pacing back and forth. “Is it not clear that the HRC’s next move is likely to align themselves with them?” His operators glanced at one another. Sol creaked his neck. “They know they have no chance of winning this war by themselves. That knowledge alone will leave them no other choice but to seek help from a source greater than themselves. Tirzah is no threat to us but can be key in finding the Rebels and the HRC’s true headquarters. Like the humans, she’s powerless in her efforts to bring her sense of peace to this world.” Sol spread his arms. “*We* are the peace of this world. Evolution, in the form of Phoenix!” An operator in the back row stood and bowed his head. Sol tilted his chin.

“Lord Sol, permission to speak,” the operator said.

“Granted,” he replied, crossing his arms.

“Thank you, my lord. Intel has at last reached out to us. They’ve confirmed the pinpoint location of a Rebel base.”

Sol squinted. “How accurate is this intel’s information?”

The operator’s eyes lit up. “Yes! One second, my lord.” The operator typed vigorously on his keyboard and waited as his printer spit out an image. Sol turned to the shattered projector, and the operator nervously continued, “I would’ve uploaded directly to the mother screen, but—”

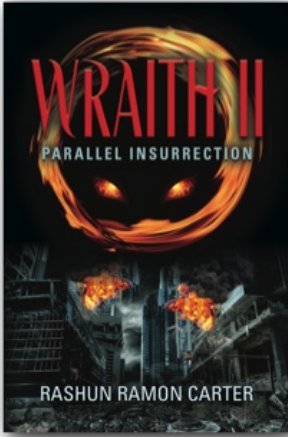
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Sol held up his hand. "Yes, I know." An image crept its way out of the printer's feed, and the operator snatched it, dashing toward Sol. He handed the image over and bowed his head. Sol held it and smiled.

"Perfect!" he hissed. He nodded at the operator. "Well done. Continue to keep watch for additional information."

"Yes, my lord," the underling said, hurrying back to his monitor.

Sol eyeballed the image. A smile plastered his face as he stroked his beard. "They've definitely found a mine more worthy than gold."



The Human Resistance Corp must band together with, Tirzah, a Rebel Phoenix, to overcome her insidious counterparts. Meanwhile, in Sheol, Cylus delves deeper into the parallel world in search of aid to overcome a new grotesque threat that has emerged.

# **Wraith II**

## **Parallel Insurrection**

by Rashun Ramon Carter

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