

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



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Chapter One: Rivals United

I'm not your average twelve-year-old boy. I was born heir to the Alpha of our Tribesian clan, my father. We were warriors. Our attire was similar to that of the various Indigenous tribes of America, but our hair wasn't sheared off or bound back. We wore ours in thick locs, decorated with patterns of small stones and bones. Our tribe seemed strong and destined to thrive.

Then it happened. One day, my birthright was taken from me. An explosion rocked our large island. The sea breeze that followed, carrying with it a strange, dark-blue smoke, enveloped everything...changing us—turning our skin from tan to near-black. Our dark eyes brightened, glittered, morphed, and became icy blue. It 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 clan, along with my beloved 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 our own good, she said.

Humans hadn't traveled 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 prove a great ally. Tempest was a marvel: a one-winged humanoid with netted, thin chains that covered his chest and tattoos inked on his arms. His

body art looked similar to the traditional markings of my Tribesian 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. Arcane led 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 and prepared me for the title of Wraith—a title I had to earn by defeating 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 hooved arm and man-like foot extended out on one side, and a man-like hand and hooved foot jutted out on the other.

I bested Chaos and thought my destiny was fulfilled, but I was wrong. Two of Sheol's three blue moons turned dark yellow, and Elder Arcane, outraged, had cried out that Tempest had doomed us all. A horrid creature, resembling walking mud, had emerged from underground in the distance, with winged beings hovering around it. Elder Arcane transformed, his dark gray cloak engulfed 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 gold 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 now...here I stand, readied with my Scorpion, facing the creature that had set its sight on us.

The monstrosity thumped heavily toward Elder Arcane, Tempest, and Cylus. Its maw opened, and it roared. The bawling sound echoed across the expanse and reverberated the ground under their feet.

"What is that thing?" Cylus whispered, glancing up at Tempest.

"It's an abomination that was never supposed to arise," Arcane answered grimly, his deep voice radiating with authority. "He will extend his gratitude to you and Tempest soon enough."

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

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

“In all of your years, Tempest?” Cylus asked, surprised. “You just killed a giant spider-snake not long ago.”

Tempest slowly shook his head, then stated, “Elder Arcane’s slain guardian did not emit a dark presence as profound as this creature.” Suddenly, the sludge creature slowed to a halt. Its body squelched and boiled as though a heap of bubbling mud. 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!” Arcane commanded.

Cylus and Tempest didn’t hesitate; both quickly 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 in bursts of steam from his snout and from the additional puncture wound in his chin. It appeared Arcane’s elite guardian teetered on the brink of death. However, Arcane pointed and shot a sparkler-like emission from his finger, which slowly seeped into Chaos’ wounds.

Cylus looked on in awe as a healed Chaos rose and meandered to his side. “Looks like I didn’t kill you,” Cylus remarked, scratching his face.

Chaos snarled at Cylus, then snorted steam from his snout. The minotaur upheld his hand, and purple energy gathered and swelled in his palm. Cylus gaped at the abrupt flash of power, which materialized into a double-bladed axe. Holding it aloft in his one human hand, Chaos shifted into a fighting stance, clearly prepared to take on the impending threat ahead. Cylus couldn’t help but wonder why Chaos hadn’t used that weapon against him during their battle. *He would’ve destroyed me with that*, the young Wraith thought. Nonetheless, he nodded and shot a determined gaze at the lurking danger.

Arcane surveyed Chaos, ensuring his guardian was fully revitalized, then shifted his eyes to the lurking abomination. He extended his halberd toward the sludge creature and its minions. The golden blade glowed with particles of red energy humming and orbiting around its polished surface.

The sludge creature took in the blade’s glint and snarled, then howled at its minions. In response, they rampaged toward the group. Tempest extended

his palm toward them, but Arcane waved off his effort. Tempest peered at him and nodded, then slowly lowered his palm. A nonverbal agreement between the two that an Elder could perhaps handle this threat without assistance. Tempest squinted, averting his gaze from Arcane's blade, which whirred, blurring into a sphere of red light.

The minions neared. Some burrowed into the ground while others trekked and flew across the surface. Their ear-splitting squeals blared from mouths oozing with drool and backed by rows of hooked teeth. Arcane shot the energy from his blade—which zipped through the air as a wide beam of red light—toward the swarm. The hovering minions' wings were immobilized while their trunks strained. The grounded minions wriggled against an unseen force. Arcane raised his free hand and balled it into a fist. Without warning, an enormous explosion thundered, engulfing the minions. The group shielded themselves from the wave of blinding light.

Arcane opened his hand, and a blue forcefield blanketed the group. Cylus glanced down and noticed he wasn't propelled away along with the passing debris. *What's happening?* he wondered. He slowly unshielded himself and looked about before fixing his gaze on Arcane, who stood firm with a hand outstretched, powering the forcefield. *He's so strong*, Cylus mused. *How did he do that?*

Cylus' astounded gaze took in the aftermath of Arcane's attack through the forcefield's transparent, blue tint. The majority of Arcane's victims wriggled on the surface, now no more than embers flopping about on the dead terrain. Their smoldering flesh sizzled, oozing out acrid smoke from their dying flesh.

The main threat remained, however, and continued its pursuit through a cloud of dissipating black smoke. A hole gaped under the sludge creature's shifting red eyes, and another howl emanated from that hole—a rough facsimile of a mouth. Suddenly, more of its minions thrashed from underground, hurtling debris, and scurried toward their enemies.

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

Arcane glanced 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!"

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"I did only what I was destined to do," Cylus shot back. "The only one worthless here is *you*."

Arcane lowered his scepter and phased toward Cylus, bridging the gap between him and the young Wraith in an instant. Cylus' eyes barely had time to widen in surprise before Arcane lifted him off the ground, his armored hand around Cylus' throat.

Cylus clutched Arcane's wrist, squirming in his grasp. "I've had enough of your insolence," Arcane growled. "You best choose your words more carefully when speaking to an Elder!" Tempest dashed toward Arcane and grabbed at his arm. After grimacing at Tempest, Arcane tossed Cylus to the ground, then locked eyes with his former elite guardian.

"Elder, enough!" Tempest barked. "We must work together!" Arcane slowly stepped closer to Tempest. The air between them radiated with palpable tension.

Cylus, still choking and gasping for air, gestured in a desperate plea for their attention. *Behind you! Look out*, he silently warned, miming the words with slowly moving lips and jabbing his finger toward the three minions that had appeared behind the pair. The creatures leaped into the air and were coming down for an attack.

Arcane and Tempest turned at the last second. The minions' screeching squeals rang out as they descended toward their prey.

Chaos phased into their path while the three creatures were still in midair and heaved his axe in a mighty swing. Cleaved in half, the severed trunks of the three creatures hit the ground and flopped like fish a few times—right before 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 ambled between them, moving in Cylus' direction. Cylus, still on the ground, stared up at the massive creature, almost cringing back as Chaos' arm jutted out.

The huge creature's hand opened above Cylus, fingers extending.

Cylus reached out and clasped Chaos' mighty hand, allowing the massive warrior to aid him to his feet. Cylus peered up at Chaos, still choking and clutching his throat. They gave a quick nod to each other, then faced Arcane and Tempest. The four of them exchanged a look that said it all. They were ready to fight. Together.

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Overlapping squeals drew their attention as more minions swarmed in to attack them.

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 targeted locations. After breathing the Noxin, the subjects underwent an extraordinary transformation. Their eyes glowed red-orange, and their abilities—strength, speed, and intelligence—far exceeded that of humans. They no longer hungered, thirsted, or had need for reproduction. Furthermore, they could resurrect, propelling themselves into a new cycle of life. It was the government and many scientist's shared vision of perfection: an answer to worldwide hunger and thirst. However, if the Phoenix wasn't able to resurrect for a prolonged period, they would weaken and possibly die.

The Anti-Noxin formula had been created as a precaution, should the Phoenix ever betray the humans. However, the use of this solution had brought forth the Wraiths, hyperpigmented beings capable of walking between the realms of life and death. Now, only one Wraith remained: Cylus.

Shortly after Cylus vanished beyond a void, the only true safe haven that remained for humans—a technologically advanced sanctuary called the HRC, or Human Resistance Corp, was attacked by volatile Phoenix. The HRC and I narrowly escaped, but many of the civilians were annihilated.

Afterward, 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 for combating the Phoenix at the safe haven and rescuing any survivors. Upon arrival, we navigated in stealth. Everything had gone 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 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 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 managed to push him back. After spewing some meaningless threats, he left.

Now I stand poised, taking in the decimated remains of the former vast fallout shelter that had housed a makeshift community only hours ago. I almost feel a smidge of despair for the HRC. Surely, the others didn't see what had transpired between Sol and me, or at least I hope they hadn't.

Tirzah stared in the direction Sol had exited. Her mind raced through a myriad of possibilities regarding the Phoenix leader's 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."*

You're damn right, Tirzah mused. She knew that whatever move she had to make, the conclusion would inevitably be the same. Sol. She brushed the long, black, silky strands from her face, then scanned her surroundings. She took in Shanna, who was sprawled and unmoving on the concrete floor, and rushed toward her. She kneeled next to the HRC general 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 she 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, her groggy voice far removed from her usual clear and authoritative tone.

"No." Tirzah shook her head. "You didn't fail. You're still alive, aren't you?" Approaching footsteps caused Tirzah's eyes to shift away from Shanna's disgusted expression. She took in Gabriel, with Marcus having an arm 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 as deliberate 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 the 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

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fueled his acceptance of 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 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 for his son and decided to raise him. That lifestyle didn't last long—his father's life was taken in a drive-by shooting, leaving Marcus to fend for himself again. 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 the unit could muster.

Jack Brawn, HRC's lead pilot, approached—nursing his head—slightly behind Gabriel and Marcus. He stood five-foot, nine inches. His Caucasian build was average. Blue eyes adorned his face, as did a blond mullet and goatee. The oldest of nine children, Jack had enjoyed his quiet childhood on a farm. Always willing to lead by example, he ultimately left farm life to pursue his piloting dream. To his siblings, he was an adventurer, a brave risk-taker, showing by example that 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 and had grown 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 medicinal expertise. She had sought out the HRC after her brother, Todd Langford—creator of the Anti-Noxin gas—urged her to find them before being killed by Sol. Needless to say, she had offered her hand as HRC's medic. The approaching soldiers were uniform in their attire, sporting black and green fatigues.

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

"I've been better," Gabriel grunted. His stern, stolid nature was intact, but his partner alongside him hissed while grabbing at the bloody stain on his flak jacket.

"Those fuckas ain't gettin' away with this," Marcus grunted. "Especially that coward-ass leader of theirs." His hard voice, though strained, was as strong as ever.

"He just kicked *all* of our asses," Nia grumbled. Even when she'd cuss, her innocence always seemed to show through somehow. "With minimal effort. How exactly is that *cowardly*?"

"Because..." Marcus groaned, frowning his eyebrows. "*He* is." The soldier shifted his frustration to Tirzah. "Isn't that right, pretty eyes?"

"I pose you the same question as Nia," Tirzah replied, then narrowed her red-orange 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 remarked, grinning. "I saw it, girl. You and that mothafucka have somethin' goin' on, don't you?"

Tirzah drew a sharp breath. *I didn't think he or any of the other HRC saw Sol and I talking*, she thought. Her heart suddenly pounded at her chest, though she feigned confusion. *No matter. I'll ensure what he witnessed is of no concern.* "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"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 toward Tirzah, but Shanna's abrupt movement caught the Phoenix' attention. Jack dashed toward Shanna and aided her to her feet.

Tirzah scoffed at Jack, then rose to her full height and replied, "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?"

Tirzah took a deep breath and rolled her eyes as though his passionate words meant nothing. "Look, I'm on your side, okay? We have a common

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enemy and goal.” She spread her arms. “So, how about you stop interrogating me?”

“I never trusted 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 hand against his wound.

Gabriel rushed to Marcus’ aid, noting the blood dripping through the second commander’s fingers. “He’s not going to last much longer like this,” he realized, eyeballing Shanna. “We’ve got to get him back to base.”

“What about the hostages?” Nia blurted out.

Shanna surprised them all by shakily closing in on Marcus, crouching and examining his wound. Nia’s question wasn’t to be ignored, but Shanna’s concern for her second commander clearly trumped anyone else’s issues at the moment.

“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’ wound, drawing a hiss. “We’ll continue our search for the hostages shortly. Gabriel, I need 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’ 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 at Marcus’ assurance. “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, with Tirzah following along. “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 chuckled. *Humans, they're so absentminded.* "It's times like these that I'm content not being human." She dashed away in a blur.

Then, it began. A male Phoenix—one of the last two who had survived the HRC's assault—dropped down from the rafters, readying to attack Gabriel, but Tirzah blocked its path. Gabriel and Marcus, startled, nearly fell backward. "Sooo sneaky," Tirzah commented, 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!" snarled the Phoenix. "Why are you assisting these incompetent cattle?"

Tirzah cocked her head. "Incompetent?" she asked. "Didn't you hear our conversation while you lurked about in the shadows?" The Phoenix growled in response. "Them and I have a common enemy. You're the one that's incompetent." Without warning, 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, then 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. Flames climbed around the Phoenix' body and gradually intensified.

Tirzah tsked and shook her head. "Already?" she muttered, underwhelmed. Gabriel continued to usher Marcus away, who looked back at Tirzah, gritting his teeth.

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

"Such a low-ranked Phoenix," Tirzah said. "Pitiful. You must've come here in an effort for promotion." She dashed toward the flaming Phoenix and punched his throat, extinguishing the roaring flames that had surrounded his short body. Tirzah's punch rocked the Phoenix backward and left him clasp his throat and gasping for air. "Unfortunate. You'll get no promotion

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after all.” Tirzah unleashed numerous punch-and-kick combinations, then knocked him to the ground with a vicious punch to his face. The Phoenix straining to recover, still grinned at her. “Pleasure from getting your ass kicked, huh? You’re a special kind of worthless.” Tirzah stepped toward him, but another Phoenix grasped her from behind and slammed her into the ground. Jack and Nia moved to help, but Shanna extended her arm.

“No!” she barked, watching the fight unfold. Nia and Jack stared at her, surprised, but Shanna jerked her chin toward the fight. “Let her handle this.”

The Phoenix lifted Tirzah and held her arms behind her. “Now!” Phoenix Two commanded. Phoenix One rose quickly and dashed toward Tirzah, his fist hurtling toward her face. She moved her head aside, and the clenched knuckles sailed past, connecting with Phoenix Two’s face instead. The second Phoenix rocked back and released 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, pulled him toward her and down, and kned his nose. Phoenix One reeled back and clutched at his face—just as Tirzah quickly grabbed and twisted his neck. A disgusting crunch accompanied the force she exerted. Phoenix One’s body fell limp to the ground, then she turned to Phoenix Two.

“I was wondering when you were going 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, throwing a kick toward her back. Tirzah caught his foot without turning. With a dramatic yawn, she slowly turned to face him. “You’re out of your league here—”

Phoenix Two leaped up, his other leg bending, and his free foot swung out in a second kick, but Tirzah ducked and kned Phoenix Two in his gut as he fell. A choked gasp escaped him as he plummeted to all fours. Tirzah quickly grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and hauled him to his feet. “As I was saying, you have no chance. What’s Sol planning on doing next?”

Phoenix Two, his fair-toned face contorted in pain, sputtered, “Do you not know our creed anymore?”

Tirzah slammed her fist into Phoenix Two’s face. Bones cracked and blood dribbled from the Phoenix’ mouth. “Correction! *Your* creed, not mine!” she rasped. Tirzah glanced over at the approaching HRC while Phoenix Two strained in her grasp. “Give me a sec,” she called to her companions. “We’re

going to find out what they're up to here real soon." She then faced the Phoenix, reared back her fist, and proceeded to punctuate each word in her next sentence with a punch to Phoenix Two's bloodied and broken face. "What...is...Sol's...next—?"

Phoenix Two shielded his face just before her knuckles could deliver another blow. "Loyalty is valued above anything else as a Phoenix!" he shouted, revealing missing teeth.

"Wrong answer!" Tirzah's next strike landed square in the Phoenix' gut. The force of her attack pushed air from his hanging mouth. "Now I've got to start all over again," she said, grinning and reeling back her fist. Clearly, Tirzah was enjoying herself.

"My creed isn't your creed!" he rumbled, mirroring Tirzah's declaration. 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—"

He never finished the sentence. Tirzah punched a hole through Phoenix Two's face. The HRC turned away in disgust as she slowly dislodged her bloody fist, which dripped with mushy bits of brain and fluids.

Tirzah grimaced at the lifeless body before dropping it 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 shrugged.

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

Tirzah wiped her hand on her thigh. "It's a long story, but in short, he meant us *Rebels*," she answered.

"Rebels?" Jack blurted out.

"Mhmm." Tirzah slowly nodded.

Chapter Five: Pinpoint

The sun rose on the horizon, and a blend of cirrus and cumulus clouds littered the sky, illuminated amongst blue and amber hues. The scenery was serene, animated by geese gliding gently by overhead. Turbulent wind shook their feathers but couldn't overtake their blaring honks. Above them, three sleek black stealth jets tore abruptly through the wind in a triangle formation. The thrusters roared, leaving behind contrails; then, their air brakes opened. The planes carried the strongest group of Phoenix and their leader, Sol.

"Flame One, prepare for hover landing," Sol commanded over his earpiece. The Phoenix leader's monotone voice was betrayed by his gleaming eyes, intense beneath his furrowed brows. Short, black hair topped his head, and a chin-strap beard and mustache wrapped his fair-toned face, which still bore the scar from Shanna's near-miss bullet. He was a tall man, average in build but not in actions. He had a hand 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—and help usher in the next natural step in evolution—the Phoenix. Sol's cherry-red suit and tie with his orange, collar shirt and black dress shoes might have looked outlandish next to the garb of the subdued comrade who answered over a headset.

"Affirmative, my lord," confirmed Arson in his typical deep and gritty tone. Arson's simple, black, motorcycle-like armored jacket with matching pants was offset by one eye-catching feature: a red-orange Roman numeral one emblazoned on his jacket's chest. His very tall—well over six feet—stature helped support his bulky body. With his bald head, tan-complexioned face, and black mustache and goatee, he looked like a dangerous man—and indeed, he was. A pyromaniac who possessed an extensive knowledge of explosives. For most, lounging close to the sound of lapping water was 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 that matched 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, and 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’s, 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 blond hair was spiked atop his head but shaved down at the sides. Freckles dotted his high cheekbones. Arson’s younger brother had practically been dragged into the Phoenix Blaze. Conscious sounded sullen, but he always sounded that way. He quietly hated Arson’s reckless killing and hurting of others, but he loved him all the same. He would follow where his brother led, even if that meant sharing the same aircraft as they currently did at present.

“I already gave the damn affirmative,” Arson snapped at Conscious, annoyed.

“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 while Conscious shifted loudly in his seat. He wondered if the others heard his restless movements over their mics.

“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, jerked his head aside. “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,” Sol instructed. “We may have defeated the humans in their counterfeit headquarters, but you three failed to dispose of them before my arrival. That is forgiven for now, only because I desired them to live with the despair of truly knowing what they’re against.”

“Understood,” the trio said in unison. The jets stalled, then descended to the Phoenix Blaze hangar. The Phoenix exited from their jets and approached 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 warned 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 and sneered. “Go right ahead.”

Arson threw a blindingly fast right hook, which Conscious ducked. Arson adjusted, aiming for Eclipse. She caught it without looking, her expression bland.

“Not baaad,” Arson complimented.

“Whatever.” Eclipse pushed 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. Let’s go to the Slay Field and work on our combat skills while we have time.”

“I was just ’bout to say that,” Arson seconded, wringing his arms in the air as if loosening his muscles.

“Waiting for you...Commander,” she huffed.

Arson grinned and led the way to the Slay Field.

Sol made his way down a scarlet-carpeted corridor after having exited the elevator, then entered the command center. Operators were aligned in rows of tables within the large area. Their fingers click-clacked rapidly on their

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keyboards; their eyes fixed on their monitors. Sol grinned and lurked around the room—his hands clasped behind his back, monitoring the work of his operators. He halted at a particular operator's screen that displayed the Slay Field, a sectioned-off area behind the Phoenix Blaze where Phoenix competed for rank and honed their skills. Captured HRC members were utilized as game while Phoenix were pitted against each other.

Arson was embroiled in such a duel with three other Phoenix, swiftly evading their attacks and countering with his own. Already, Arson had left one unconscious. He began to showboat, leaving himself open for attack, but dodged a blow designed to take him by surprise and countered with a spinning backfist dealt with enough force to break the attacker's jaw. The surrounding crowd roared, worked into a frenzy like fans at a rock concert. The assailant fell to the ground, blood and teeth spilling from his mouth. He strained to get up, holding his face as Arson closed in. Before Arson could land his next intended blow, he was kicked and knocked backward by the other Phoenix. Sol, watching on the monitor, furrowed his eyebrows and grumbled in response.

The third Phoenix followed up with a blur of punches, finishing with an uppercut that toppled Arson. Arson fell to one knee, gritted his teeth, then scrubbed his bloody lip with his forearm. With a deep growl of rage, he charged the Phoenix in a blur of speed, delivering a vicious jab to his gut. The Phoenix wheezed out a pained breath, his mouth agape, and Arson finished him off with a forceful haymaker that broke his neck. Standing over his body, Arson jeered down at him for an indulgent second, only to be grabbed from behind by the Phoenix with the broken jaw.

Sol looked on with his arms crossed, tapping his bicep, watching as Arson grabbed at the Phoenix' interlocked hands but couldn't unlock the hold around him. *Something must be done with him*, the Phoenix leader thought, his eyes grim. *His behavior's grown far too erratic to lead my Flame One.* Arson dug deep and roared, breaking free. He wound back a 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 over to Conscious, who held his modified grenade launcher. Eclipse, who was standing beside Conscious, a spectator to the battle that had just ended, tried to stop Conscious from giving Arson his weapon, but the older brother snatched it from Conscious' grasp, flashing her a nasty look right before he turned and aimed the weapon. The Phoenix with the broken jaw stared for a second in

disbelief, right before he tried to turn and run. Arson, grinning, pulled the trigger before his injured opponent got the chance. His eyes lit up as the other Phoenix 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, and 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 took out a lighter and lit it with his free hand, 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 get your jaw broken a second time. Now get outta here!" he ordered and took another triumphant draw of 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 with a roar.

Conscious entered the area and grabbed Arson's arm. "Do you *have* to act like a maniac all the time?" he grumbled.

Arson gave his brother a once-over, then grinned and took another 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 into Conscious' face, which he coughed out and fanned 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. *Such an embarrassment*, he thought. Respective leaders of the Phoenix were supposed to carry themselves with far more dignity. Such behavior wasn't acceptable, and it infuriated the usually calm Sol. Abruptly, the leader froze, then 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 over at him in one chorused turn of their heads.

"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 cracked his neck. "They know they have no chance of winning this war without help. That knowledge alone will leave them no other choice but to seek help from a

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source greater than themselves. Tirzah is no threat to us but could be the key to finding both 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. "Lord Sol, permission to speak."

"Granted," he replied, eyeing the operator and tilting his chin.

"Thank you, my lord. Intel has at last reached out to us. They've confirmed the location of a Rebel base."

Sol scrutinized the operator. "How accurate is this information?"

The operator's eyes lit up. "One second, my lord." He hastily typed 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 this directly to the mother screen, but—"

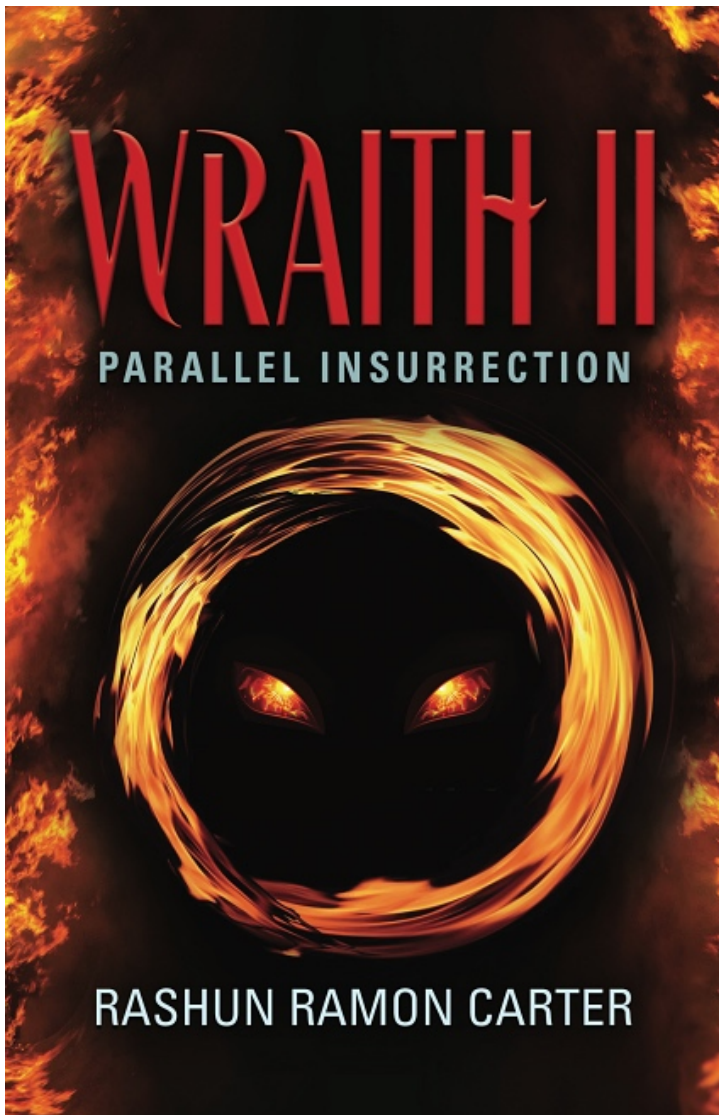
Sol held up his hand. "Yes, I know." An image crept its way out of the printer's feed, and the operator snatched it, dashing toward Sol. He handed the image over and bowed his head. Sol held it and smiled. "Perfect!" he hissed. "Well done. Continue to keep watch for additional information."

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

Sol eyeballed the image, a smile plastered on his face as he stroked his beard. "They've definitely found a prize greater than gold."

Closing

Did you enjoy the book? I certainly hope so! Even if you didn't, it'd be greatly appreciated if you left a review of your honest opinion about the novel. If you would, please use this address: [amazon.com/author/rashuncarter](https://www.amazon.com/author/rashuncarter) to access my Amazon author page. You can also leave your review on Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million, or on Goodreads.com (simply type my name in the search browser and select this book). Feel free to follow me on Instagram: [@humble_and_confident12](https://www.instagram.com/humble_and_confident12). Thank you again for your interest and time. Stay tuned for Wraith III: Influx! God bless!



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

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