



THE NEW HEROES

Born to save the world



SAKAWARA

MICHAEL CARROLL

THE NEW
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TEN YEARS EARLIER...

THE LARGE-CALIBRE bullets slammed into Paragon's armoured chest and knocked him to the ground. He scrambled forward, took hold of Quantum's arm and dragged him back to the shelter of the fallen tree.

"You hit?" Paragon asked.

No answer. Quantum was barely conscious, his eyes rolling, but otherwise appeared uninjured.

Paragon checked his friend's pulse. It was strong but erratic. "Come on, man! You've got to stay awake!"

A voice came over his communicator. It was Josh Dalton, a member of The High Command. "We've got Dioxin," Josh said. "Energy was right – the girl was able to stop him. We've handed him over to the marines."

Titan's voice said, "Are you nuts? What could the marines do to stop Dioxin? The man's a walking acid factory!"

"True, but he's not bullet-proof. They could shoot him in the head."

"Enough chatter!" Paragon said. "Josh, get back here ASAP. We need to take out that tank!"

Titan yelled, "We can't make a dent in it, Paragon! *You're* the mechanical genius; any ideas on how we can stop it?"

"Find a weak spot," Paragon replied.

"We've tried. Can't find one."

"Then we're going to have to *make* a weak spot! Someone cover me – I'm going in!" Paragon activated his jetpack and soared towards Ragnarök's battle-tank, zooming low over the ground.

Ahead, close to the hundred-metre-long machine, Paragon could see the arcs of lightning issuing from Energy's floating body. The gun turrets on the battle-tank were firing at her, but somehow Energy remained unharmed.

Then Paragon noticed a pale blue blur zipping through the air around Energy: before the bullets could reach her, Titan was stopping them. Possibly even *catching* them.

Another volley of gunfire from the tank ripped into Paragon's chest plate, knocking him off balance. He zoomed up, out of the line of fire, and activated his communicator. "All right, people... This is what we're going to do. We need to tear a hole in that tank's armour and get Titan inside. Energy? I'm going to take out its main cannon – you just keep me covered and Titan will cover you!"

Paragon zoomed towards the battle-tank, its heavy gun turrets swinging in his direction. Missiles and plasma bolts streaked towards him, vaporised by Energy's powerful bolts of lightning.

He dodged left, then right, as the tank's twin flame-throwers scorched the air around him, then tucked his feet up just as he crested the rear of the tank's hull, the toes of his boots brushing the roof of a small jet-like pod.

There! That's the one! Fires in twenty-second bursts, then a gap of eight seconds before firing again. He pulled his last grenade from his belt and set down on the roof of the tank next to the powerful turret. This close, few of the tank's weapons could target him without hitting each other.

The cannon let loose with another deafening volley and Paragon counted down: *Three. Two. One.* The firing stopped. He rushed around the cannon towards the barrel, its heat blistering his skin even through his armour. He activated the grenade, dropped it down the barrel, then hit his jetpack's afterburners, pulling himself from the tank as fast as possible.



Energy allowed herself a quick glance at the battle-tank as its cannon exploded, then refocussed her concentration.

All around her, she could feel the energy from the

tank's plasma bolts, the heat radiating from its engines, the light from the midday sun, even the kinetic energy from the tank's weapons. She concentrated, channelling that energy into herself, converting it, letting it stream back out of her in the form of lightning, aimed at the ragged tear in the hull where the cannon had been.

"Come on!" she muttered through clenched teeth. *"Burn!"*

She sensed a sudden shift in the ambient energy levels around her. "I'm almost through!" she shouted to Titan. "It's starting to melt!"

Energy allowed herself to float closer to the tank. From here, she could feel the heat radiating from the white-hot metal – she absorbed that heat and converted it back into lightning.

"You did it!" Titan shouted. "Get to safety! *Now!*"

"No, you need someone to cover you!"

Then she felt Titan's strong hands gripping her arms, throwing her straight up into the air.

Still soaring, Energy spun about, watched as Titan rocketed towards the battle-tank and crashed his way through the weakened hull.

Seconds later, everything went cold.



A voice screamed through Paragon's headset. "Somebody help me! I can't fly! I'm falling!"

Paragon looked around quickly, then spotted Energy far above, tumbling down through the air.

He angled towards her and surged through the air. "Spread your arms and legs out!" he yelled. "Try to slow your descent!"

Can't slam right into her! Got to match her speed!

He arched high into the air, above Energy's position, then flipped over and dived head-first for the ground. He could see the ground rapidly approaching, and put on another burst of speed. *I'm not going to make it! No time to be subtle about this!* "Grab the line!" he shouted.

Paragon aimed his suit's grappling gun and fired. Energy spun about and grabbed hold of the thin cable as it shot past her.

Paragon set his jetpack to hover, then reeled in the cable, slowing Energy's descent. *She's still going to hit the ground, but she'll live.*

Energy landed feet first, tumbled once, then collapsed. Paragon dropped down next to her. "Are you OK?"

"No. I... I don't know what happened! It was like everything was just turned off! My power... It's gone!"

"Oh God," Paragon muttered. He activated his communicator. "Situation report!"

Silence.

"Max? Apex? Titan?"

Energy took hold of Paragon's arm and pulled herself to her feet. "Titan's inside the tank. You've got to go after him, Paragon!"

Paragon nodded, then pointed towards the west. "I left Quantum over that way. Find him!"

At least the firing has stopped, Paragon thought as he ran towards the battle-tank, ignoring the stream of Ragnarök's men who were now fleeing from it, some of them carrying or dragging unconscious comrades.

The machine was still lumbering forward, its enormous wheels gouging deep tracks in the dry ground.

When he was twenty metres from the tank, Paragon flew the remaining distance, straight through the ragged hole where the cannon had been.

He landed in a large room, the walls lined with pipes and tubes. In the middle of the room were the remains of a complicated-looking piece of machinery, now mostly in pieces. At its centre was a large metal ball. *Never seen anything like that before,* Paragon thought. The engineer in him wanted to know what the machine was, but right now he had more important things to worry about.

As he scouted the room he heard a faint buzzing from a computer set into one wall. One glance at the read-out was all he needed. "Aw *hell!*" He activated his

communicator. "Anyone who can hear me! Get out of the area ASAP! In three minutes this thing is going to self-destruct!"



Dioxin felt sick. He swayed, almost fell.

The three US marines guarding him backed away. "Don't trust him!" one of them shouted. "Down on the ground!" he roared at Dioxin. "Now!"

Dioxin couldn't remember the last time he'd felt sick. His pock-marked, acid-seeping skin was starting to itch. He looked down at his hands. *What's wrong with me?* He dropped to his knees, leaned over, retched. A thick stream of bile spilled from his mouth, the acid instantly scorching the ground. *Oh God. It's my own poison! I'm not immune to my own poison any more!*

Then one of the marines shouted, "Sarge! He's burning!"

Dioxin could feel his skin starting to blister and bubble. *The acid... Need to dilute it.* Dioxin looked around in panic, then spotted a large ornate fountain in the middle of the small town's square. He tried to push himself to his feet. *The water...*

The marine sergeant cocked his gun. "One more move and you're a dead man!"

If I can't get the acid off my skin I'm a dead man anyway! "Help me! The acid... It's killing me!"

The sergeant paused. "Yeah? Now you know what it felt like for all your victims."



"Paragon!" Titan's voice shouted as the armoured man entered the dark room.

Paragon could see one of Titan's legs protruding from beneath a piece of fallen machinery.

"I'm here!" Paragon said. "Where's Ragnarök?"

"Gone," Titan said. "I don't know what happened... It's like I've lost all my powers! I think my leg is broken."

Paragon looked around, spotted a thick steel beam and grabbed it. "Hold still. I'm going to get you free." He wedged one end of the beam under the machine. His muscles straining, Paragon pushed up on the beam. The machine raised a centimetre, then another.

Groaning from the pain in his shattered leg, Titan pulled himself free.

Paragon dropped the beam, allowing the heavy machine to crash to the floor. "We've got less than a minute. Can you stand?"

"I don't think so."

"OK... Nearest exit?"

"The roof..." Titan pointed to a metal ladder leading to an open hatch in the ceiling.

The armoured man reached down and lifted Titan up, threw him over his shoulder. He grunted. "You're damned heavy for a man who can fly."

Paragon pulled himself up the ladder and on to the roof. "Hold on to my legs!" he yelled at Titan, then activated his jetpack. They soared away from the battle-tank just as it exploded in a two-hundred-metre-high ball of flame.



Dioxin saw his chance: the marines were staring off into the distance at the fireball. Pain coursing through every inch of his body, he pushed himself to his feet, grabbed hold of the nearest soldier and put his hand on the man's neck. The soldier dropped to the ground screaming.

Before the others could react, Dioxin was on them, pressing his venomous, acid-dripping hands against their bare skin.

Then he turned towards the fountain and ran, painfully aware that his own skin was now beginning to peel away. He was sure that if he looked behind he'd be able to see his own blood-stained footprints.

Get to the water, wash the acid off! If I'm lucky, I won't

be too badly scarred. Since it happened – whatever it was – there hasn't been any new acid.

I'm cured.

The fountain – filled with life-giving water – was only a few steps away when something hard and heavy ploughed into Dioxin's back, knocking him face first to the ground. He screamed and rolled over on to his back.

Paragon stood over him, his armoured fists smouldering from the acid. "Stay down, you goddamned psychopath! You just murdered those men!"

Dioxin tried to crawl backwards away from him. "No! You've got to let me..."

Paragon slammed his fist into Dioxin's face. "Let you what? Let you get away?"

Dioxin kicked out at Paragon's legs, leaving a smoking, bloodied streak across the armour. "I'm not immune to my own acid any more! It's killing me!"

Paragon glanced towards the fountain. *He wasn't trying to escape. He was trying to get to the water...* For a moment, he considered letting the man burn himself to death.

Then he reached down, grabbed hold of Dioxin's arms and threw him into the fountain. The water hissed and bubbled as it splashed down over Dioxin's skin, turned red with blood and gore.

Dioxin collapsed, unconscious.

Paragon waded into the water and propped up Dioxin's head. *Don't want him to drown before he can go on trial for murder.*

As Paragon was stripping off his now-ruined armour, a dark green army truck screeched to a halt a hundred metres away. A thin, grey-haired old man climbed down. He was wearing an immaculately-pressed uniform with four silver stars on the shirt's lapels.

Paragon took off his helmet and walked over to the truck. "General Piers. What the hell happened here today?"

"I wish I knew. Our people are going over what remains of the tank. We've already picked up most of Ragnarök's men. And we've got your friends. They're all in a bad way. Looks like they're not superhuman any more. What about you?"

"I never was a superhuman, General." Paragon looked back towards the fountain. "What about Ragnarök?"

"He's gone. There was an escape pod on the roof of the tank. Moved too fast for us to track."

The general patted Paragon on the shoulder. "You did good work here today, son."

"General, you've got to keep all this secret. We can't let people know that the superhumans have lost their powers. It might only be temporary. But if not..."

"There'd be chaos. I understand. Every crook on the planet would think that all his birthdays had come at once. Max Dalton said the same thing."

A soldier approached. "Sir? Dioxin..."

"What about him, soldier?"

"He's..." The man looked sick and pale. "He's gone, sir. There's nothing left of him. Dissolved by his own acid."

"Can't say I'm sorry to hear that," the general said. "All right. Get a crew on to it and start mopping up. Treat it as a level-one biohazard situation. I want every remaining particle of that man's body bagged and labelled." He turned to Paragon. "So what next?"

"Someone has to follow that tank's path, find out where it came from. I want to know how something that big could have come this far without anyone noticing it. Then we've got to find Ragnarök and finish this once and for all."