

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOWLING ANTARCTIC WIND CUT through Beams' body like a knife, causing him to instinctively pull his thick fur coat more tightly around his body. The visor of his helmet was battling against the cold, its automatic heater keeping the icy wind from frosting over it, though even then, Beams had to shoot very slight beams of hot energy every now and then to keep it from frosting over entirely.

I always knew that Antarctica was freezing, but I didn't even know it could get this cold, Beams thought, fastening the chin strap of his helmet to keep his chin warm. *This Texas boy is used to winters where it gets to forty degrees, not seventy degrees below zero. Glad I took that warm coat Space offered me. Otherwise, I would have frozen to death the second I stepped out of that portal.*

Shivering slightly, Beams raised his head to look ahead. Mr. Space was ahead of him, trudging through the thick snow. Like Beams, he wore a thick fur coat of his own, which was apparently a special kind of coat designed for IEA agents who went to cold areas. According to Mr. Space, the coats — affectionately called oven coats — could not only keep a person warm in the heart of an iceberg but also radiated just enough heat to prevent excess frost from forming on the tips of the furs.

Mr. Space himself looked like an Eskimo in his big parka, his face covered by an expressionless mask which looked kind of like a gas mask. The touchscreen on his arm was active, showing their progress through the snow to the city known as the Lost City, according to the IEA's records. Beams would have asked how much longer they would need to walk until they got there, but deep down, Beams knew that he would know well before Mr. Space's GPS would, because the Dread God's touch was still upon him and the Dread God would never forget the place where he died.

Looking over his shoulder, Beams was pleased to see that Shade was managing to keep up with them. The G-Man agent was, like Beams and Mr. Space, wearing a full-sized fur coat and parka, complete with protective mask. Hers was smaller than theirs owing to her thinner physique, but it didn't seem to slow her down at all. It helped that she used her powers to shove aside vast amounts of snow in her path, which seemed like a rather ordinary use of such an extraordinary power to him.

Only problem is that her mask hides her cute face, Beams thought, turning his attention back to Mr. Space ahead of him. *Not sure why Bolt seems to treat her like an annoying fly. If I had a girl that cute constantly flirting with me, I'd feel lucky as hell.*

Beams shook his head. He vaguely recalled Bolt mentioning having a girlfriend of his own, which might explain it, but Beams still thought Bolt should be more appreciative of the attention Shade paid to him.

But Shade's attractiveness doesn't matter, Beams thought. *What matters is how helpful she will be here on this mission.*

Prior to leaving the headquarters of the Interdimensional Elite Agency, Mr. Space had insisted on taking Shade with them to the Lost City because he thought her powers might be useful out here, especially if they ran into any Darzens that might be lurking around or near the city. Hypno had gone with Bolt, Captain Galaxy, and Aster to find the Starborn, which meant that only Mr. Space, Beams, and Shade were heading to the Lost City to find the God Slayer that they could use to defeat the Dread God.

Well, Sparky is helping, too, Beams thought, *although he's actually still on the Adventure to provide backup in case anything happens down here.*

Beams wasn't quite sure what to expect as they drew closer to the Lost City. The IEA didn't know very much about the place, other than it had been built by the Dread God and his worshipers millions of years ago and had once had many human inhabitants, who were mostly slaves for the Darzens. Beyond that, details on the Lost City were sparse because the IEA hadn't seen any reason to investigate what the files on the Lost City called 'empty ruins in the middle of a wasteland,' especially with more pressing issues to deal with.

It was unlikely that the Dread God or any of his minions were here because Beams knew that the Dread God had bad memories of the place and wanted to avoid it as much as possible. But no one knew exactly what to expect once they got to the city, so all three of them were ready to fight any Darzens that might be lurking around the ruins.

I suppose the Dread God could have sent his minions here ahead of time to set up a trap for us, Beams thought as he trudged through the heavy snow, wincing slightly at a particularly cold gust of wind. But it seems to me that any Darzen who got here would probably be frozen into statues. Besides, that's even assuming the God Slayer is still around. If the God Slayer is broken or has decayed from a lack of use, then the Dread God would have no reason to send anyone here.

But Beams pushed that thought out of his mind. He had to keep positive because their situation was tough enough as it was and the last thing he needed was to let despair overwhelm him. Besides, even if the God Slayer was not around anymore, Bolt and the others might be able to find the Starborn on their own quest, who could hopefully help them fight the Dread God.

The Starborn sound pretty powerful, based on what Bolt told me about them, Beams thought, but are they strong enough to defeat the Dread God? That's the question I don't know the answer to.

"Space!" Beams shouted into the microphone attached to the inside of his helmet. "How much farther until we reach the Lost City?"

"Not much farther," Mr. Space replied, his voice resounding through Beams' helmet. "According to my GPS, we should be there within five minutes, if not sooner."

"Five minutes?" Shade repeated in despair. "In five minutes, we'll be popsicles. Why didn't we just dimension-hop directly into the City? Can't your advanced dimension-hopping tech do that?"

"Yeah, but the IEA hasn't mapped out the Lost City aside from its general shape, so if we teleported directly into the center, we could end up anywhere," said Mr. Space. "As a general rule, you shouldn't attempt to dimension-hop to anywhere you're not familiar with. Heard lots of stories about agents ending up in horrible situations because they tried to take a shortcut. Better to dimension-hop a mile or so outside the City and make the rest of the trek by foot. Safer that way."

"What's so safe about walking through an Antarctic blizzard?" said Shade. She shivered. "Man, I feel so sorry for the G-Men agents Cadmus sends out to the government base in Antarctica back in my universe. Makes me glad I don't have to go there."

"Enough talking," said Beams. "Regardless of how we get there, we need to keep our wits about ourselves. Knowing the Dread God, he's probably anticipated we'd try this thing and sent some of his minions ahead of time to set up a trap to ensnare us."

"Darzens don't do the cold very well, though," said Mr. Space. "Their energy forms are more or less unaffected by it, but their armored bodies can suffer from frozen joints if exposed to intense cold like this. But that doesn't mean the Darzens can't survive out here at all, of course, because I'm sure they have some way of dealing with the cold."

"They would have to, considering how they used to rule this place," said Beams.

"Not necessarily," said Mr. Space. "Evidence the IEA has collected suggests that Antarctica was a lot warmer back there, more tropical. The Lost City was abandoned partially due to the change in climate

from tropical to freezing, which forced the original fans to abandon it in search of warmer climates. Of course, there's also the fact that they were all slaves there and didn't want to stay in the city where they were enslaved, but still, climate change was also a big factor in their migration."

"You sure know a lot about this place despite claiming that you guys don't have a whole lot of information about it," said Beams.

Mr. Space glanced over his shoulder. "I didn't say we had *no* information on the Lost City. We know some things, but just not enough to tell us what the city was like back in its heyday. Even if the Darzens aren't here, we should keep our guard up just in case the ruins are unstable or there are traps left over by the previous inhabitants from before the time they left."

Beams nodded but said nothing in response. He just glanced around at the swirling snow around them, imagining Darzen warriors lying underneath the snow, just waiting to jump him and the others when they least expected it.

Suddenly, Mr. Space came to a stop and held out his arm to stop Beams and Shade. "We're here. Look below."

Stopping in front of Mr. Space's arm, Beams was glad that Mr. Space had stopped them because they had reached the edge of a tall cliff, whose bottom he could not see. Nor could he see what Mr. Space was pointing at until a sudden break in the storm happened, giving him a bird's eye view of a sight he would never forget.

The ruins of a massive city stretched out in the bowl-shaped valley below them, stone and metal structures rising from the earth and snow like the fingers of a giant. Looming buildings which resembled ancient skyscrapers towered above their smaller counterparts, while wide streets were darted with holes like knife wounds.

At one point, the Lost City must have been a beautiful and majestic place, but its best days were clearly long behind it. Some of the taller buildings had collapsed or fallen over, while the roofs of several other standing buildings had caved in, allowing snow to accumulate within them. The Lost City was silent and still, with nary a hint of life in its limits.

What caught Beams' eye, however, was the massive temple-like structure rising from the center of the city. It resembled the Temple of Dread back on Jinkopa, looking almost like a photocopied version. Whereas the original Temple of Dread was still in decent shape, however, this ancient temple looked as if it had been abandoned for years. One of the towers had even collapsed outright at one point, leaving nothing but a massive pile of stone and snow where it once stood, while another tower leaned against the tower nearest it and there seemed to be a hole in the roof of the main temple itself.

Before Beams could see much else, however, the howling snow returned, blocking his view, though in his mind's eye he could still see the temple itself quite clearly.

"That's the Lost City?" said Shade, looking at Mr. Space. "Never seen anything like it. It's beautiful, in a haunting sort of way."

"Legends say it was the most beautiful city not just on Earth, but in all the multiverse before the Dread God was killed," said Mr. Space. "In any case, we're actually here now. I bet the God Slayer is in that abandoned temple in the middle of the city."

"That's probably the most logical place to start looking," said Beams, nodding. "But, er, how do we get down there without hurting ourselves?"

Mr. Space gestured at a pathway to the side that Beams had not noticed before. "This pathway should take us down to the city limits, but be careful, because the steps are probably frozen and the ones that aren't frozen might give way under our weight."

“Then what are we waiting for?” said Shade. She hugged herself. “Let’s get down there and start a fire in one of those buildings or something. It *has* to be warmer than being out in the wind like this.”

“Okay,” said Mr. Space. He turned toward the path. “Follow me. It shouldn’t take us long to get down there, even if we take our time.”

Just as Mr. Space took a step forward, a loud, bellowing cry suddenly rose above the howling wind. It was followed by another cry in response, and then another, until soon bellowing war cries could be heard on all sides.

“What the heck?” said Shade, looking around in alarm. “Where is all of that screaming coming from? The Darzens?”

“Can’t be,” said Mr. Space, drawing his sound blaster from its holster and holding it before him defensively. “The Darzens don’t do war cries, not like this. But I don’t know who it could be.”

Beams didn’t, either, but then he heard footsteps in the snow nearby and saw a heavy wooden staff coming through the snow toward Shade, who apparently didn’t hear it coming.

“Shade!” Beams shouted. “Down!”

Beams shoved Shade down to the ground, but the wooden staff slammed into his helmet and sent him staggering backward, his head spinning from the blow.

Then Beams’ foot stepped off the cliff and he plunged to the ground below, screaming the entire time.

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