

Just another day at the office...

It was grimly silent on the taped-off police perimeter surrounding the front doors of the office building in downtown Steel Canyon. Nervous cops in body armour fingered their weapons and adjusted hastily-donned body armour. Immediately behind the frontline cops, a special branch of the Paragon S.W.A.T. unit was busy suiting up in chemical protective gear. Right behind them, a small group of reporters and photographers milled about, scribbling on notepads or taking a random snapshot.

The front doors to the office building slammed open abruptly, stopping all activity. A stream of running people surged out into the daylight, and a few of the more alert officers moved smoothly to intercept the running mass of people to try to get them calmed down and find out what was going on.

Everyone started talking and yelling at once as the S.W.A.T. team brushed past the fleeing office workers and entered the building, weapons at the ready. The reporters tried to push their way towards the group of people, and the police tried to keep some semblance of order on their taped-off perimeter. The fleeing civilians either started babbling to anyone who would listen about what had happened, or collapsed in exhausted relief.

Unnoticed by anyone in the bedlam, a lone figure wearing battered-looking blue and white body armour carefully eased her way out of a side door onto a side-street. It was immediately obvious to even the casual observer that she'd been in one hell of a fight – she was smudged with soot and dried, caked-on green residue, and there were a couple of jagged tears in the left side of her armour. Dried blood had stained the armour below one of them, and she was keeping one hand clamped over it as if still in pain.

Despite the apparent injuries, she was still upright, and staying that way with an air of almost grim defiance. The costumed warrior cast a quick glance at the milling throng of people, her lips tightening a bit as she saw the pack of reporters competing for their 'scoop' from some of the office workers.

"Captain Vaeria," a voice spoke from behind her, startling her. "You wouldn't be trying to sneak out and avoid the praise and commendations, now would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I just might be," Vaeria shot back, silently cursing herself for not paying attention to her surroundings. Turning around, she found herself facing an older man with thinning black hair wearing a brown suit. A police badge was pinned to the left lapel of his jacket.

"Good lord, are you all right?," his expression shifted to concerned as he stared at her. "You look like you got hit by a truck!"

"This is my new look," she quipped dryly. "I heard that some companies were looking for heroes to endorse their medical products."

"That's not funny," he shot back. "You're bleeding!"

"Am I?" Vaeria glanced down to see that a few splashes of bright crimson had marked the toe of her boot, and the pavement at her feet. When she pulled her hand away from her side, her gauntlet was also stained red. "Oh, that. Probably coming from where I pulled out the crossbow bolt that some nut in a surgical mask shot at me."

"That's it, you're seeing the medics. NOW," the man said firmly, after flicking a startled glance at the blood-stained hole in her armour. "And you either go quietly, or I'll call some of that press gang over there to hound you into it."

"That's blackmail," Vaeria's eyes were unreadable behind her mask's visor, but her mouth thinned in an unmistakable expression of annoyance. "I'll be fine, Detective. I've been hurt worse than this before."

"You've just walked out of a building riddled with Vahzilok's flunkies," he replied calmly, nodding towards the front door of the office building. Glancing over, she saw stretchers being carted out the doors - covered stretchers that dripped green, smoking fluid onto the pavement. "You might have been contaminated with something nasty, and I can't..."

"All right, all right," Captain Vaeria threw up her hands. "I'll go and get patched up." Turning sharply, she started stalking towards a nearby ambulance. The detective grinned to himself, then strode after her.

"So, tell me," he said conversationally as he caught up to her. "How was it in there?"

"An office full of fanatics armed with knives and crossbows, backed up by ambulatory corpses spewing toxic slime," came the curt reply. "How do you think it went?"

Ducking under the ponderous swing of a necrotic arm, Captain Vaeria yanked the crossbow bolt out from where it was stabbing her in the side, wedged in the joint between two of the plates of her body armour. Her breath hissed sharply from between clenched teeth as she fought to keep from giving her opponents the satisfaction of knowing just how much it had hurt to do that.

She'd had no choice though - she could feel a cold numbness slowly spreading outwards from the wound, slowing her down and sapping her strength. The bolt had been drugged or poisoned, and she had time to briefly hope it was only temporary.

Two more crossbow bolts whipped past her head as she deflected a second swing from the reeking humanoid hulk attacking her. Vaeria quickly dodged to her left, putting the aptly-named Abomination between herself and the two 'Reapers' firing at her in order to buy herself at least a few seconds. Dressed in bloodstained smocks and redolent with the odour of rotting carrion, the two masked men circled around the Abomination, trying for another shot.

The lumbering patchwork cadaver had turned to follow her as she dodged, a horrible, liquid burbling rumble resounding from within its chest. A moment later a thick spray of corrosive green fluids burst from its mouth in a foul gout. Vaeria threw up an arm to protect her face as some of the toxic goop splashed onto her. The acrid stench of burning chemicals stung her nose and made her eyes water behind her mask.

"All right, that's ENOUGH," she growled under her breath. Temporarily banishing the pain with an act of sheer willpower, she dodged a follow up-swing and lashed out with a kick to the leg of the abomination. A loud snap rewarded her effort, and the knee she'd struck folded in a way that knees don't normally bend. As the hulking body toppled over, she launched herself at it one last time with a spinning roundhouse kick that snapped its head backwards with a bone-crunching finality.

Captain Vaeria didn't pause; as she landed from the kick that had downed the toxic corpse, she dove forwards in a somersaulting roll and used her momentum to spear one of the Reapers with the heels of both feet in the chest. He flew backwards into one of the office cubicles, falling hard with his head striking the edge of the desk. He didn't get back up.

Vaeria rolled back to her feet in a combat-ready crouch, circling the remaining Reaper. He was more cautious now, but she could still see the fanatical zeal burning in his eyes. The two combatants paused - and then Vaeria heard the heavy, rapid shuffling of several pairs of dead feet lumbering towards her from behind. Gritting her teeth, she risked a quick glance behind her.

A wall of mottled greyish-brown bodies haphazardly stitched together from random body parts and metal bits shambled towards her. Her eyes widened as she noted the large, squarish pack on the back of one of them, and she spun back sharply and dove for cover.

Ravaging flames stretched out hungrily in a widening blast of burning smoke and debris.

"Damn." The detective was silent a moment, then flipped his notebook shut and tucked it inside his jacket. "You're lucky you weren't killed."

"They tried," Vaeria shrugged as she stepped out of the ambulance, trying not to wince when her side complained. Clean white gauze peeped out from the hole in her armour. "What's important is that everyone got out safely."

"Yeah, they did," he nodded. "Thanks to you. I don't know how you do it."

"It's easy," she quipped, deadpan. "Study martial arts for a few years, get a costume, and you're all set."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," he snorted. "You put yourself at serious risk day after day. Why? It sure as hell isn't for fame or glory."

Vaeria opened her mouth to reply when something crashed into her, clamping a tight grip around her knees. Startled, she glanced down to see a wide-eyed little girl clinging to her, her expression radiantly happy.

"Thanks for saving my mommy, Captain Vaeria!" she squealed. "You're the bestest!" And then she was gone into the crowd again.

"Well, it's a dirty job sometimes," Vaeria admitted, a small smile finally appearing. "But it does have its rewards."

END