

8 BALLER

Issue #2 - "Best Laid Plans"
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Jumping through a dimensional portal feels a lot like all the queeziness and disorientation of the worst roller coaster you've ever been on, just without the wind and constant screaming. That is, unless the screaming is that little voice in the back of your head. And mine...mine was shouting and wouldn't shut up.

'What was I thinking?' It's a simple question with an answer I couldn't even begin to explain, or at the moment even understand. In the last thirty seconds before the jump my whole world was scrambled. I'd seen a mirror image of myself dual wielding .45's and leading a gang of thugs for Arachnos. I'd watched, unable to move, as one of my crew was gunned down in front of me. But none of that compares to seeing my younger brother Jaden, who died in my arms two years ago yesterday, pulling the trigger.

All I wanted to do was bring him back. All I wanted to do was what I failed to do two years ago. I wanted to save him.

The whole jump from this dimension to the next took just a fraction of a second. In that time I had to come up with an answer to the question, 'What was I thinking?'. I had to come up with a plan. But seriously, what kind of a plan can you come up with in a split second?

As I was thrown through the portal at the other side and I hit the cold, black, metal plating, I looked up and found myself in the center of an Arachnos portal chamber. And there, surrounded by at least a hundred well-armed Arachnos soldiers, the answer was crystal clear.

Not a very good one.

The element of surprise was definitely on 8 Baller's side. No one, including himself, ever expected a hero to show up there, in the heart of the Arachnos lair. Eight took full advantage of that brief moment of hesitation. He grabbed the barrel of the closest assault rifle and yanked it from the hands of its owner. Excruciating pain shot through the body of the Arachnos wolf as the attached gun strap dislocated his shoulder. The pain ended an instant later as Eight thrust the butt of the same rifle into the wolf's forehead.

The odds were a hundred to one, on the optimistic side. A good portion of the Arachnos invasion force was right there in that room. But so was the one reason 8 Baller needed to tear through them all. Somewhere in that horde of black and red uniforms was Jaden.

Eight swung the rifle like a Louisville slugger clearing a path to the grated stairs in front of him. At 6'8" he towered over most of the room, but the stairs would give him

a better vantage point both visibly and strategically. When a huge Arachnos crab managed to grab the rifle, Eight relinquished it, followed by a pounding right with his armored glove. The crab, and all its eight mechanical arms, went sailing through a crowd of soldiers. It made a spectacular wrecking ball.

Miraculously, Eight made it to the base of the stairs with the swarm of soldiers closing in around him. He had barely lifted his foot when searing pain tore through his skull. He fell to his knees cradling his head with both arms. The pain was inside, the kind he couldn't get at, the kind he couldn't ignore. Defiant, he lifted his right knee to stand and the fist inside his head tightened its grip returning him to his knees.

"What do we have here?", a hauntingly beautiful voice said as translucent black fingertips reached down to gently lift 8 Baller's chin.

A pair of long black legs materialized in front of Eight. The pain subsided enough for him to slowly raise his head, but he could feel fingers inside his brain scanning through his thoughts and memories like he was an open file cabinet. He looked up and stared into the pale white eyes of Ghost Widow. Her long white hair flowed around her. She floated gracefully, merely inches above the ground. Her body remained transparent and slightly luminescent. She spoke, but her lips were motionless.

"I'd say you were lost.", said the voice coolly inside Eight's head. "Or is there more?"

Eight shook his head as if to shake loose the grip she had on him. "Get...out!", he managed to say through gritted teeth. But it was useless. Her touch was tender, while on the inside she was violently ripping his mind apart. Memory by memory, moment by moment she browsed his childhood, his years with the Hellions and Freedom Faction right up to the moments before he jumped through the portal.

A smile formed as the corners of her lips curled and she gently brushed her hand across Eight's cheek. "How brave.", she said. "And incredibly foolish."

Her smile vanished as she closed her hand in a tight fist and the pain in his head increased exponentially dropping his head to the floor.

"Take him away.", Ghost Widow ordered. "We'll have a little fun with him later."

It took four Arachnos soldiers to lift 8 Baller from the ground, and as they did, he managed to raise his head once more to Ghost Widow. As the pain induced blackout began to flood his vision, he saw through Ghost Widow's transparent body, standing beside his alter ego 8 Brawler, his target...Jaden. As 8 Baller faded into unconsciousness, some in the room swore they even saw him smile.



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Large surgical lights illuminated Eve's body as it lay atop the metal table. Several layers of padding had been placed for comfort, although the android didn't need it, it seemed the courteous thing to do. The panels in her torso had been removed, revealing the damage caused by a barrage of automatic weapon rounds.

Ipo stood over her, surveying the damage and running various systems checks and diagnostics. Originally he'd built her as a life support tool for the team. A mere piece of equipment like a cell phone, or a raptor pack.

She was actually the 3rd version of the model. His first attempt, Mobile Life System 1 or MLS-1 as it was called, was hardly more than a vacuum cleaner that dispensed healing nanites. The second model, aptly named MLS-2, took on a more humanoid form and had an electrical power supply which proved unable to withstand the duration of longer missions and special task forces. Not to mention that it kept shorting out in the sewers and thus earned the name "Sparky".

On his third attempt, Ipo wanted to go beyond a piece of equipment. He wanted to build something that was a PART of the team, a member of it. So he gave it a fully humanoid female body, a micro nuclear reactor, and a name. The 3rd Version, or 3ve for short, became Eve.

She was in pieces, but the damage wasn't extreme. A few core systems were shot but the armoring surrounding the micro reactor had prevented a radiation breach. It was all repairable, but it would take time.

"What was he thinking?", Ipo asked, unable to focus on the task at hand while the last two hours replayed continually through his mind.

He placed the tools forcefully to one side, "It's one thing to just stand there in the middle of a fight. But to actually WARN an opponent before he's fired upon, and then...to jump through the portal WITH the enemy?!"

Ipo shook his head in disbelief, "How do I make sense of that Mike? Because the only thing I've got...the only thing I can come up with so far, is that he was working with them the whole time."

But Ipo knew that wasn't the answer, "I can't believe that. I just can't."

Michael Angelo sat in a nearby chair, his head was filled with just as many questions as his teammate's. A few of which, he'd been able to put together a few answers for.

"It was his brother.", Mike replied. "The one that shot Eve. That was his brother."

Ipo glanced over at Mike with a wrinkled brow, "Eight doesn't have a brother."

Mike simply nodded, "Yes he does...or...he did. Until two years ago last night."

Ipo turned around and leaned his back against the table. "It's been a long day Mike. Do you want to clarify what you're talking about?"

Michael Angelo was a telepath, a blind telepath. He has the ability to tap into other people's minds to see what they see or, to make them see things that he wants them to see.

"Last night, when we cleared out that warehouse of Skull members, I jacked in to Eight and...well...he was replaying the entire event from two years ago in his head. It was like brain Tivo or something.", Mike reached up and slowly removed his red glasses.

Then he continued, "He and his brother, Jaden, were members of the Hellions. Only, the Hellions didn't like his brother. He was weak, too much brain, not enough brawn, too honest I don't know. Take your pick. So they set him up. They set him up to be gunned down by the Skulls. Eight found out about it, but he was too late. It was a blood bath. The Skills killed Jaden. Then Eight...he killed everyone else."

Michael hung his head as he viewed the memories as clearly as they were his own. "It was bad. Real bad. And that kid, the one with the uzi's, the one that lit up Eve. Somehow, THAT was Jaden. Or, at least Eight believes it was."

Ipo nodded slightly, "So that's what he meant before he went through the portal. He's going after his brother."

"Yeah.", Mike nodded as he ran his hand over his eyes then put his glasses back in place. "But man, that's not what scares me the most right now."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Arachnos, 8 Brawler and his crew. I had a quick look inside their heads and I can tell you two things for sure. Number one, is that 8 Brawler was just as surprised to see Eight as Eight was to see him. And number two, I don't think they were retreating. It was more like...they were simply following the next part of their mission.", Mike stood up and walked to the edge of the table beside Ipo.

"I'm not so sure we won today."

Ipo walked to a nearby computer and punched in a few keystrokes. After a few mo-

ments a connection was established and Citadel's monotone voice was heard on the other end, "Yes Ipo. What do you require?"

"I was just checking in after this morning's Arachnos offensive. I just wanted to make sure everything was in the green now.", Ipo said slightly optimistically.

"Atlas Park: status normal. Perigrene Island: condition unknown.", replied the android.

"Perigrene!? I hadn't realized they'd hit Perigrene.", Ipo tried to make connections between the two in his head then he continued. "Michael Angelo was able to tap into a couple of the invaders minds. He may have something useful."

"If that's the case, you two had better get over to Portal Corp immediately. Request me once you get there."

Ipo knew it was impossible, but it actually sounded as if Citadel was concerned. "We'll be right there."

Ipo closed the connection then glanced at Michael Angelo, "It looks like Eve's repairs will have to wait a little longer."

Mike smiled, "I've always wanted to see Portal Corp."

As the two headed toward the Talos Island teleporter Mike continued, "Hey, is it just me or did Cid actually sound worried?"