

CHAPTER I

Lightning Raid

CRIMEN

CRIMEN is an international criminal organization which has its roots in centuries-old secret cartels, such as the Black Coats and the Gentlemen of the Night. [...]

Involved in many terrorist operations, CRIMEN has considerable logistical resources to offer, sometimes even rivaling those of CLASH. [...] An opaque secrecy surrounds the identity of the organization's leaders as well as its goals—if it has designs beyond simple criminal activity. [...]

CRIMEN is classified as an alpha priority among global threats.

*Extract Files Hexadata
File No. 56.986*

The night was calm in the suburbs of Washington.

The deserted streets that meandered among a set of anonymous office buildings were dimly lit by scattered streetlights. The nocturnal silence was broken only by the dull roar of air conditioning systems. There was apparently not a soul in the small business district, which had teemed with life during the day. One could just imagine the presence of a drowsy security guard keeping one eye on a wall of surveillance monitors.

On the roof of one of the buildings, four guards were conducting their rounds. But, unlike the building, which was similar to any of its neighbors, these guards stood out. They dressed in dark paramilitary uniforms with high-tech headgear that left only the bottom of their faces uncovered; they carried sophisticated automatic rifles. They looked more like trained soldiers than watchmen. Suddenly, one of them paused. He had noticed an intruder and immediately began to move in, followed by his comrades with perfect military coordination. The intruder in question was a beautiful woman, whose presence on the roof was completely incongruous. She was dressed in a kind of dark red leotard; her face was framed by silver hair and adorned with a black lily-shaped tattoo framing her right eye. She was unarmed but stood proudly, as if confident of herself and her right to be here. Her attitude took the guards aback for a second.

“Don’t move!” one of them cried. “Identify yourself now or we open fire.”

The woman smiled in response and ran at the guards with startling boldness and speed. Shots rang out but she dodged them with the same agility. As the sentries struggled in vain to adjust their aim, they failed to hear the distinctive sound of an arrow in flight. Two of them fell, hit in the shoulders by bolts dosed with a powerful anesthetic. On reaching them, the woman with the silver hair spread her arms and two swords of blue light materialized in her hands with an electrical noise. With a gesture, she cut her first opponent’s rifle in two while the second lined her up for a point-blank shot. Before he could pull the trigger, he was seized forcefully from behind by a man who emerged from the shadows.

The newcomer was a muscular Native American in jeans and leather jacket, his face masked in war paint. The two men fought a moment until the Lakota methodically applied a sleeper hold. The guard’s struggles grew weaker and he finally collapsed, sinking to the ground like a disjointed puppet. Meanwhile, the fencer had taken out the last guardian. She and the man glanced at each other, then carefully concealed the four unconscious bodies before moving to the door that led to the building’s interior. The woman touched a hand to her ear.

“Dark Flyer,” she said, “Rakar and I are on the roof. Security has been neutralized. Still nothing to report down there?”

“Received five by five, Lys,” replied an electronic sounding voice. “I confirm, the area is still deserted.”

Black Lys, a founding member of Hexagon and the current team leader, nodded.

“Archer,” she said, “no surprises waiting on the roof?”

“Negative, Lys,” the headset replied. “We’ve neutralized the only soldiers CRIMEN posted there.”

“Lys looked around for her teammate—the Mysterious Archer—hidden on one of the nearby buildings. His unerring shots had opened the way for them, as planned. Without being able to see him, she gave him a thumbs-up.

“OK,” she said. “You and Plasma stay in position and monitor the area. If reinforcements show up, I’d like to know about it as soon as possible. Especially if they come by air.”

In the guardhouse, Rakar was busy with a computer. He inserted a thumb drive into the wifi-USB port and launched a program.

“Flyer, I’m connected,” he said. “You should receive data momentarily.”

“Receiving now,” his teammate replied. “The good news is that I’m able to open the security door and give you a rough map of the building. The bad news is that it’s impossible to hack CRIMEN’s files from this station.”

“We never thought it would be easy,” Lys said.

She stood near the door to the building’s interior, looking for any danger. The bio-energy blades in her hands emitted a constant glow. As Dark Flyer had promised, the electronic locking mechanism disconnected and the door swung slightly ajar. Rakar opened it all the way and glanced at the stairs that led into this lair of the international criminal organization. He nodded, indicating to Lys that the coast was clear and the two superheroes began to descend, following the Dark Flyer’s directions.

In a narrow cul-de-sac with a direct view of the CRIMEN building, a large, dark van merged with the background. Without really being invisible or camouflaged, it was as if the eye refused to settle on it. Its body was a deep shade of black that the light seemed to slide off of. This marvel of technology had been created by NeroTek, the industrial group that Dominik Nero, aka the Dark Flyer, had inherited from his father, when he’d also inherited his superhero identity.

The young man was seated in the back of the van at the center of a complex computer network so sophisticated that it would be the envy of any military headquarters. His athletic body was, for the moment, strapped into a bio-interface, and his determined face was focused on the multiple holographic screens around him. These displayed streams of data that he deciphered with one eye, while the other followed Rakar and Lys’s progress into the CRIMEN complex. They appeared as flashing dots moving through the three-dimensional model of the building.

This infiltration was a particularly risky mission. They had decided on it a few days ago, after the Mysterious Archer had lived up to his name, yet again, by providing his teammates with secret information about the criminal organization. They had, over time, built up a complete archive of various superhumans on the planet, including the members of Hexagon, which included their powers, weaknesses, affiliations and even their secret identities. These valuable files were comparable to the Diamond Files of CLASH, the UN’s global anti-terrorist organization. Such information couldn’t be left in the hands of CRIMEN.

According to the Archer, these sensitive files were located on a central server which would, once hacked, allow them to delete the cartel’s entire database. This server had recently been transferred to Washington and was located in a single, heavily guarded, office building. After a period of observation, Black Lys—the group’s leader since the death of Jeff Sullivan—had come up with a plan. The window of opportunity was brief, before the Mysterious Archer’s source went stale and CRIMEN decided to move to its data. The plan looked good to the Hexagoners, at least on paper, and they were used to working together.

They had passed the first hurdle. Lys, Rakar and the Archer had neutralized the guards posted on the roof. They had gained the only possible access to the building without raising an alarm. The swordswoman with the energy blades and the young Lakota were inside the building. Now it was up to the Dark Flyer to guide them as best he could. It would be difficult to avoid any patrols on the way to the central server, but they were confident they could eliminate any resistance they met without a problem.

On the roof of a building near the CRIMEN base, the Mysterious Archer and Plasma monitored the surrounding area. Sitting on a small ledge, the Archer reviewed his various arrows before storing them carefully in a quiver. His costume was an orange-red paramilitary uniform lined with utility pockets and reinforced with Kevlar plates. A concealing hood cast a shadow over his face and a powerful crossbow rested at his side. This was the weapon that had neutralized the two guards at long

range and in the darkness of night in the city. Plasma, who wore a flamboyant skin-tight costume, paced impatiently. The blonde was only twenty years old and didn't like waiting and watching while her teammates went into action. Her companion's total silence left her completely exasperated.

"I'm sick of this!" she finally exploded. "Why should we be on watch when there's nothing happening? We should go help."

"Calm down," the Archer replied with a slight trace of a Scandinavian accent. "We all have our roles to play in this mission. Lys decided that she and Rakar and were the best able to reach the heart of the building unseen. Our part is to cover their rear."

"Lys isn't infallible," the young woman muttered. "If my father were here—"

"But your father isn't here any longer," the Archer interrupted coldly. "Lys has taken over the reins of Hexagon. As I recall, you voted for her."

Plasma didn't answer and walked a few steps away, both sad and angry. Her father, Jeff Sullivan, had been a founding member of Hexagon, and had been the leader of the group for all its history. He had died a few months ago on the Moon, in a battle against the Necromancer, a sinister villain who had been scheming to destroy all life on Earth. This loss had been terrible for the team. Jeff Sullivan, the Man of Brass, had been a true hero, loved and respected by his teammates. More than that, he had been a loving father, who had agreed to allow his daughter Kathryn to join Hexagon when her energy powers manifested, so he could protect and train her. The young woman's pain was still fresh and, even if she had voted for Lys to head the group, she couldn't help thinking that her father would have done better. The fact that her boyfriend, Rakar, was exposed to danger, and she couldn't do anything to help him, contributed to her bad mood.

Suddenly she froze. Her power to generate a nuclear reaction in her body gave her increased sensitivity to various forms of energy, and she had felt an intense source of power approaching. Her eyes scanned the sky to try to identify the threat she felt.

"Archer!" she said.

The bowman stood up, alerted by Plasma's tone. He came and stood beside her, watching. His sharp eyes analyzed the sky and he grunted assent.

"I should go?" the young woman asked.

"Not yet. Using your atomic power at night, so close to a CRIMEN stronghold, would draw attention to us prematurely. It may be nothing; let's wait a little."

Kathryn Sullivan clenched her fists in frustration and calmed the rising power in her body. She held her breath, waiting for a sign.

Rakar and Black Lys had moved into the building stealthily. It was an empty shell full of empty rooms, staircases, and endless dark corridors. The two heroes came across several security patrols and neutralized them in silence, with the coordinated efficiency of trained fighters. The Dark Flyer's remote guidance allowed them to move without getting lost in the maze and they had already deeply penetrated the building. As they progressed, Rakar planted explosives at regular intervals. Hexagon didn't intend to leave a CRIMEN den standing.

"I imagine that the central server is well buried," said the Lakota.

"We expected that," said Lys. "We knew that entering through the roof would require us to go through the whole complex, but the main entrance was too risky."

"You're not far," interrupted the Dark Flyer's voice. "It's directly below you, three levels down in the sub-basement."

Rakar and Lys took the last stairs and emerged in a wide corridor which ended with a single, heavily armored, door. It was locked and four CRIMEN soldiers stood guard in front of it. They took up firing positions when the two Hexagoners appeared and, without warning, opened fire. Rakar ducked into the cover of the stairwell while Lys advanced, seeming to parry the bullets with her swords. Her gestures were superhumanly precise and not a single one of the projectiles made it past.

"Rakar, I'll buy you some time," she cried over the noise of gunfire. "Use one of your Indian tricks to get us out of this!"

"Already on it!"

Crouching where he was safe from the shots, the Lakota poured two ingredients into a small gourd. He shook it and sealed the top as his mixture became active. Then he plunged into the corridor

and threw in the direction of the guards. A shot broke the container and its contents exploded with a dull thud, spreading acrid smoke. Rakar quickly handed a brownish root to his teammate.

“Chew this. It will immunize you to the effects of my potion.”

Lys didn't hesitate and, despite the bitter taste of the antidote, she noticed that the fumes from the explosion didn't affect her. The CRIMEN soldiers, on the other hand, suffered the full effects. Their lungs were racked with violent coughing and, once the smoke cleared, Lys could see that they were on the ground, sinking into unconsciousness. Rakar stepped among them, unconcerned.

“They won't wake up for several hours,” he said.

Lys studied the electronic lock.

“Flyer,” she called. “Do you think we can unlock it?”

“I'm working on it, but I need a closer relay.”

Rakar took a new thumb drive from his jacket and connected it to the device.

“Like this?”

“Wait... the data is arriving,” the Dark Flyer said. “OK! This is good! I'm in.”

Several lights on the lock changed color and the door opened with a heavy hiss. Lys and Rakar entered the server room. There was a tingling chill but, paradoxically, the atmosphere was stifling. Many coils carried cold air to keep the mainframe—a large monolith flashing and humming ethereally—from overheating. Rakar hurried to sit in front of the terminal. He inserted a high-density disc, specially developed by the Dark Flyer, containing viruses that would cause a diversion while Hexagon extracted the sensitive data and erased it from the CRIMEN servers around the globe.

“OK, I've done my part,” Rakar said. “The rest is all yours.”

“I'm starting the extraction,” the Dark Flyer said.

Rakar joined Lys at the door, and the long wait began.

The Mysterious Archer sighed, annoyed.

“You were right,” he said to Plasma. “Trouble's coming.”

The woman stared at the night sky without being able to distinguish anything, but her energy senses told her of an approaching source of power. Something big.

“Do you see it?” she asked, surprised by the acuity of his gaze.

In response, Archer picked up his crossbow.

“Flyer?” he called. “An unexpected opponent has reared his head. Do you have it on the radar?”

“Wait... Oh, Hell! Yes, it's a troop transport helicopter. I detect two heavyweights inside.”

The Archer turned to Plasma.

“Permission granted to open fire.”

Kathryn Sullivan smiled and let the dormant nuclear fire within her flow through her body. She transformed into a fiery figure surrounded by orange flames; the heart of the sun in human form. Her light illuminated the block and she exuded intense heat. With all the ardor of her youth, she took off and flew in the direction of the threat.

In his van, Dominik Nero was sweating profusely. The work of extracting data from the CRIMEN server was already difficult, but now his radar indicated the arrival of a serious threat... then a second appeared.

“Damn! Here comes more!” he shouted into the communicator.

This time it was by land. The Dark Flyer saw a futuristic truck park in front of the cartel's building. The side door of the trailer slid open and a number of armed soldiers emerged and ran to the building entrance. But that wasn't what worried the superhero the most. Two massive suits of armor emerged in turn from the vehicle. Dark Flyer swallowed hard. These were Annihilators, the most formidable weapon in the arsenal of CRIMEN; able to stand up to superhumans as powerful as Homicon or John Mist. These massive battle suits were the ultimate weapons of war.

“Rakar, Lys, you two get out of there!” he warned. “They've arrived in force, with Annihilators.”

“Received, five by five,” replied Lys, her voice still calm. “Where are you in copying the data?”

Dark Flyer glanced at his computer.

“Just fifty percent. It's too little, you won't have time to get it all. Get out, I'll cover you!”

“Negative! Continue to hack their system. You hear me?”

But without waiting for an answer, Dominik Nero had disengaged from the van's control center. An automatic system began to place the different parts of a lightweight version of his Dark Flyer armor onto his body. The suit was black and gray, with a stylized red eagle on the torso, and was studded with numerous weapons. It gave him his powers and his superhuman strength. The operation took only a minute and the superhero emerged from the van, ready to fight.

In the depths of the building, Lys was still trying to communicate with the Dark Flyer.

"Reply!" she said. "I gave the order to continue extracting the CRIMEN files. Rakar and I are perfectly capable of handling the situation."

The Lakota had already advanced into the hallway, his heavy tomahawk in hand. He walked slowly, all senses on alert.

"I don't believe this!" Lys said. "He's not responding any more. He's abandoned the mission."

"I hear them coming," Rakar said.

Suddenly they heard a scream through their earpieces. It was a familiar voice: Plasma's! Rakar froze, heart pounding, his mind flooded with memories of his visions. Without thinking, he rushed up the stairs.

"Rakar!" Lys cried. "Come back here! We shouldn't split up."

She staggered as the whole building was shaken by a powerful blast. She lost sight of her companion and materialized her swords, ready to fight. The ceiling of the server room burst open and cables dropped through the opening. She heard the voices of the CRIMEN soldiers who were about to swarm over her.

Above the buildings, Plasma had just destroyed the cluster of rockets one of the helicopters had fired at her. The explosion had shaken her and she couldn't help crying out. She blamed herself immediately. Returning to the fight, she hurled plasma streams at the vehicle. She broke off as several CRIMEN soldiers wearing jet-packs jumped out of the helicopter and began to rise toward her. They opened fire but the bullets vaporized as they came in contact with her aura of nuclear fire.

With a few aerial maneuvers, Plasma neutralized this airborne squad. She melted their packs, timing it so they would come down on the roof where the Mysterious Archer was waiting. He took pleasure in knocking them out and demonstrating that his arsenal was not his only asset.

Plasma was smiling triumphantly when a force like a powerful blast of wind sent her crashing into the wall of a building. Her flame flickered and her mind was dazed for a moment as she saw two Annihilators flying toward her. Her eyes widened and she mobilized all her power to take off and avoid another kinetic burst. Her heavily armored adversaries immediately pursued, and she had to use evasive maneuvers to avoid their shots. As they passed over the Mysterious Archer, he took an arrow armed with an explosive charge and targeted one of the Annihilators. His shot was perfect, as always, but the armored suit didn't seem badly affected. Still, he had managed to get their attention and one of them turned back to deal with him.

Plasma stopped her evasive tactics and turned on her opponent, firing on him with all her power. Atomic lightning shot from her hands and staggered the Annihilator, but he kept on course and crashed into the young woman with stunning force. Kathryn Sullivan gasped as she was driven up into the sky. The two mechanical arms encircled her in a crushing grip. She winced in pain and gathered her powers. Laying hands on the armored wrists, she concentrated heat as intense as the surface of the sun. The metal began to melt and the embrace gradually loosened. Plasma slipped free and streaked away from her foe, casting a glance as she did to see how the Mysterious Archer was doing.

On the roof, the other Annihilator wasn't giving his full attention to an opponent he considered negligible. He deployed the guns mounted on his forearm and the Hexagoner had no choice but to run for cover. But at every break in the fire, the Archer fired back, though his arrows invariably missed their target. Confident, the Annihilator didn't budge from his position as he kept up his barrage in the hope of turning the super-hero into a colander. He didn't notice the arrows that had been missing had lodged in the roof to form a perfect circle with him in the center.

Sheltered behind a wall, the Mysterious Archer activated a small detonator, causing the mini-bombs attached to the arrows to explode in unison. The roof collapsed on itself and the Annihilator was caught in a landslide. He fell to the empty offices one level below, and was buried under a ton of rock. While the Annihilator tried in vain to free his armor, the Archer leaned over the hole and pointed

his crossbow at his armor's main servo-motor. His shot short-circuited the line that controlled the Annihilator's movement. Satisfied that his foe was down for the count, the Archer raised his eyes to follow his teammate and see how he could help her.

In front of the CRIMEN building, Dark Flyer faced several infantry, though their fire didn't worry him. His attention was focused on the two Annihilators. If he had been wearing his usual armor, the fight would have been easy, but this was a streamlined version, easy to carry, but not conducive to a confrontation like the one that loomed ahead.

As the soldiers deployed around him, he threw a half-dozen smoke grenades to impede their movements. He was using his suit's radar so the obscuring cloud didn't bother him at all. He took advantage of their confusion to launch into a brief melee. The armor's mechanical power allowed him to incapacitate most of his opponents, quickly and effectively, but without finesse. He noted that not all of the men who had left the truck were there; some must have entered the building. Rakar and Lys would have to fend for themselves; the important thing was to neutralize the Annihilators.

The two armored combatants began to move toward him, cutting off any chance of retreat. Two mini-laser turrets emerged from Dark Flyer's shoulder and fired brilliant rays at his targets. The Annihilators jumped out of the way with an agility that belied their massive appearance and countered with a barrage of short-range rockets. The Dark Flyer stepped back to avoid these but was still shaken by the force of the blasts. Activating his jets, he took off, quickly gaining altitude to fire an ionic burst that he hoped would interfere with his opponents' electronics systems, but they had disappeared from his screens. They had also taken flight and maneuvered to hem him in on both sides. Dark Flyer took two powerful punches that sent him crashing to the pavement. Several pieces of his armor cracked on impact and Dominik Nero cried out in pain. He had no time to recover as both Annihilators began strafing him. He rolled away but couldn't avoid all the bullets. One of them even penetrated his armor to lodge in his right shoulder.

Dark Flyer leaned against the CRIMEN truck, trying to recover, while the Annihilators landed in front of him and brought their pulse cannons to bear. The Hexagoner employed his mechanical strength to rip the trailer door loose and held it in front of him. A kinetic blast was deflected by this improvised shield; the Dark Flyer took the opportunity to move forward and strike one of his opponents with the piece of metal. The Annihilator was thrown back violently and crashed against a wall.

Without thinking about the pain in his shoulder, the hero threw himself on the second Annihilator and engaged in a mechanized fistfight. The impact of the punches they exchanged broke all the windows in the neighborhood, but neither man retreated a step. One of the Dark Flyer's sensors sounded an alarm, indicating an energy peak nearby. With a glance, Dominick saw that the other Annihilator had risen and was preparing a kinetic blast. The Hexagoner waited until the last moment and then took off as the burst was fired. His opponent caught the brunt of the attack and collapsed, his battle-suit offline.

Overhead, Plasma and her opponent were still engaged in an aerial dogfight, and she gave chase in between the neighborhood buildings. The young woman was beginning to tire but continued to fire her energy bolts at her pursuer. The Annihilator seemed to anticipate this, no doubt thanks to its sensors, and managed to dodge the most dangerous attacks. It retaliated with heavy weapons and explosions filled the sky like new constellations, though neither party gained an advantage.

Plasma decided to try a more direct attack. At short range, the energy radiating from her body was likely to tamper with her opponent's armor. She turned her radiation output up and dived at him, dodging several shots and slamming into the Annihilator at full force. The battle-suit took the impact head on but was only just pushed a few yards back as its turbines compensated for Plasma's momentum. She concentrated, and her hands blazed with nuclear fire capable of liquefying titanium.

The Annihilator's metal armor slowly began to melt and he reflexively lashed out with a violent punch. It caught the young woman in the face and she screamed as her vision dimmed and her whole body went numb. Her flame flickered out and she fell.

As noxious smoke poured from his armor, the Annihilator took advantage of the superheroine's fall to put her in his sights. This time, he intended to finish her. He aimed carefully, accounting for the speed of her fall. As he fired, an arrow lodged in his elbow, deflecting the shot. The Mysterious

Archer—in the midst of climbing down the front of the building—was simultaneously taking aim at the Annihilator with his heavy crossbow. He fired several bolts almost simultaneously. Each projectile struck a sensitive point in the armor: the joints, fuel lines, electronic balancing system, fuel tank, etc. In a few seconds, the Annihilator found his systems frozen and followed Plasma in a downward plummet.

Inside the building, Rakar had reversed the route he had taken to get to the server and emerged on the ground floor. A heavy, pungent smoke filled the vast hall, whose floor was pierced by a gaping hole. A dozen CRIMEN soldiers surrounded the opening and the Lakota took advantage of the obscuring smoke to slip in and take them out of action, one by one. The vision of Plasma dead or dying filled his mind, and he didn't stop, even when he saw Lys pinned down by enemy fire through the gaping hole.

As he came out of the building, Rakar looked up and saw his lover, unconscious and falling. Time seemed to slow down. He saw the Mysterious Archer, hanging from a rope along a wall, pointing his crossbow at Plasma. Rakar cried out when he saw him fire an arrow. The missile, which ended in a rubber ball, hit Kathryn Sullivan in the face and the shock woke her. She activated her power to break her fall but still crashed onto a parked car. Rakar raced toward the point of impact as the disabled Annihilator crashed next to her.

Sore everywhere, Plasma managed to stand back up. Her flames had slowed her fall, but she had a number of bruises, including one on her beautiful face caused by the Mysterious Archer. As she staggered through the debris of the car and the Annihilator, Rakar came to her and embraced her forcefully.

“Ouch!” she complained. “Be gentle, I hurt everywhere!”

“You're alive!” muttered the Indian.

“Of course, what did you think?”

The Mysterious Archer appeared beside them.

“Lovebirds, we still have work to do.”

He pointed to the Dark Flyer, who was facing the last Annihilator. The three Hexagoners looked at each other, and then rushed into battle.

In the basement, Black Lys was in trouble. The CRIMEN assault had pushed her into the corridor and the server room was now inaccessible, full of heavily armed soldiers. The server was lost and, no doubt, the cartel's valuable data was now sealed away behind unbreachable firewalls. The operation had turned into a disaster.

Lys was furious! If Rakar and Dark Flyer had obeyed their orders, the situation would have been different. With the help of her Lakota teammate, she could have held the room long enough for the Dark Flyer to finish copying the files and introduce the virus. They had acted without thinking and compromised the mission. She sighed, thinking that this would never have happened with Jeff Sullivan. The Man of Brass had a knack for giving orders that were always obeyed.

It was time to leave. Lys rushed up the stairs, dodging between bullets, and ran to the exit.

“Hexagoners,” she shouted into her communicator. “I'm ordering a retreat. Use plan 4-B. We meet at the Hexajet, in thirty minutes. I repeat: the Hexajet in thirty minutes!”

In front of the building, her teammates were finishing off the Annihilator. The battle armor was powerful, but had no chance against four super-heroes acting in concert.

“Received five by five,” the Dark Flyer replied. “Dispersing now.”

Plasma, Rakar, and the Mysterious Archer nodded and each fled in a different direction in order to cover their tracks. Their silhouettes disappeared into the dust raised by the titanic clash. As a final farewell to CRIMEN, Rakar triggered a small remote and the building exploded on all sides, before collapsing on itself, covering Hexagon's retreat.



Jeff Sullivan
(drawn by Luciano Bernasconi)