

Prologue

I've seen Steelheart bleed.

It happened ten years ago; I was eight. My father and I were at the First Union Bank on Adams Street. We used the old street names back then, before the Annexation.

The bank was enormous. A single open chamber of white pillars and red carpeting with broad doors that led deeper into the building. Two large revolving doors opened onto the street, with a set of conventional doors to the sides. Men and women streamed in and out, as if the room were the heart of some enormous beast, pulsing with a lifeblood of people and cash.

I knelt backward on a chair that was too big for me, watching the flow of people. I liked to watch people. The different shapes of faces, the hairstyles, the clothing, the expressions. Everyone showed so much variety back then. It was exciting.

"David, turn around, please," my father said. He had a soft voice. I'd never heard it raised, save for that one time at my mother's funeral. Thinking of his agony on that day still makes me shiver.

I turned around, sullen. We were to the side of the main bank chamber in one of the cubicles where the mortgage men worked. Our cubicle had glass sides, which made it less confining, but it still felt fake. There were little wood-framed pictures of family members on the walls, a cup of cheap candy with a glass lid on the desk, and a vase with faded plastic flowers on the filing cabinet.

It was an imitation of a comfortable home. Much like the man in front of us wore an imitation of a smile.

"If we had more collateral . . ." the mortgage man said, showing teeth.

"Everything I own is on there," my father said, indicating the paper on the desk in front of us. His hands were thick with calluses, his skin tan from days spent working in the sun. My mother would have winced if

she'd seen him go to a fancy appointment like this wearing his work jeans and an old T-shirt with a comic book character on it.

At least he'd combed his hair, though it was starting to thin. He didn't care about that as much as other men seemed to. "Just means fewer haircuts, Dave," he'd tell me, laughing as he ran his fingers through his wispy hair. I didn't point out that he was wrong. He would still have to get the same number of haircuts, at least until all of his hair fell out.

"I just don't think I can do anything about this," the mortgage man said. "You've been told before."

"The other man said it would be enough," my father replied, his large hands clasped before him. He looked concerned. Very concerned.

The mortgage man just continued to smile. He tapped the stack of papers on his desk. "The world is a much more dangerous place now, Mr. Charleston. The bank has decided against taking risks."

"Dangerous?" my father asked.

"Well, you know, the Epics . . ."

"But they aren't dangerous," my father said passionately. "The Epics are here to help."

Not this again, I thought.

The mortgage man's smile finally broke, as if he was taken aback by my father's tone.

"Don't you see?" my father said, leaning forward. "This isn't a dangerous time. It's a wonderful time!"

The mortgage man cocked his head. "Didn't your previous home get destroyed by an Epic?"

"Where there are villains, there will be heroes," my father said. "Just wait. They will come."

I believed him. A lot of people thought like he did, back then. It had only been two years since Calamity appeared in the sky. One year since ordinary men started changing. Turning into Epics—almost like superheroes from the stories.

We were still hopeful then. And ignorant.

"Well," the mortgage man said, clasping his hands on the table

right beside a picture frame displaying smiling ethnic children. “Unfortunately, our underwriters don’t agree with your assessment. You’ll have to . . .”

They kept talking, but I stopped paying attention. I let my eyes wander back toward the crowds, then turned around again, kneeling on the chair. My father was too engrossed in the conversation to scold me.

So I was actually watching when the Epic strolled into the bank. I noticed him immediately, though nobody else seemed to pay him much heed. Most people say you can’t tell an Epic from an ordinary man unless he starts using his powers, but they’re wrong. Epics carry themselves differently. That sense of confidence, that subtle self-satisfaction. I’ve always been able to spot them.

Even as a kid I knew there was something different about that man. He wore a relaxed-fitting black business suit with a light tan shirt underneath, no tie. He was tall and lean, but solid, like a lot of Epics are. Muscled and toned in a way that you could see even through the loose clothing.

He strode to the center of the room. Sunglasses hung from his breast pocket, and he smiled as he put them on. Then he raised a finger and pointed with a casual tapping motion at a passing woman.

She vaporized to dust, clothing burning away, skeleton falling forward and clattering to the floor. Her earrings and wedding ring didn’t dissolve, though. They hit the floor with distinct pings I could hear even over the noise in the room.

The room fell still. People froze, horrified. Conversations stopped, though the mortgage man kept right on rambling, lecturing my father.

He finally choked off as the screaming began.

I don’t remember how I felt. Isn’t that odd? I can remember the lighting—those magnificent chandeliers up above, sprinkling the room with bits of refracted light. I can remember the lemon-ammonia scent of the recently cleaned floor. I can remember all too well the piercing shouts of terror, the mad cacophony as people scrambled for doors.

Most clearly, I remember the Epic smiling broadly—almost leering—as he pointed at people passing, reducing them to ash and bones

with a mere gesture.

I was transfixed. Perhaps I was in shock. I clung to the back of my chair, watching the slaughter with wide eyes.

Some people near the doors escaped. Anyone who got too close to the Epic died. Several employees and customers huddled together on the ground or hid behind desks. Strangely, the room grew still. The Epic stood as if he were alone, bits of paper floating down through the air, bones and black ash scattered on the floor about him.

“I am called Deathpoint,” he said. “It’s not the cleverest of names, I’ll admit. But I find it memorable.” His voice was eerily conversational, as if he were chatting with friends over drinks.

He began to stroll through the room. “A thought occurred to me this morning,” he said. The room was large enough that his voice echoed. “I was showering, and it struck me. It asked . . . Deathpoint, why are you going to rob a bank today?”

He pointed lazily at a pair of security guards who had edged out of a side hallway just beside the mortgage cubbies. The guards turned to dust, their badges, belt buckles, guns, and bones hitting the floor. I could hear their bones knock against one another as they dropped. There are a lot of bones in a man’s body, more than I’d realized, and they made a big mess when they scattered. An odd detail to notice about the horrible scene. But I remember it distinctly.

A hand clasped my shoulder. My father had crouched low before his chair and he was trying to pull me down, to keep the Epic from seeing me. But I wouldn’t move, and my father couldn’t force me without making a scene.

“I’ve been planning this for weeks, you see,” the Epic said. “But the thought only struck me this morning. Why? Why rob the bank? I can take anything I want anyway! It’s ridiculous!” He leaped around the side of a counter, causing the teller cowering there to scream. I could just barely make her out, huddled on the floor.

“Money is worthless to me, you see,” the Epic said. “Completely worthless.” He pointed. The woman shriveled to ash and bone.

The Epic pivoted, pointing at several places around the room,

killing people who were trying to flee. Last of all, he pointed directly at me.

Finally I felt an emotion. A spike of terror.

A skull hit the desk behind us, bouncing off and spraying ash as it clattered to the floor. The Epic had pointed not at me but at the mortgage man, who had been hiding by his desk behind me. Had the man tried to run?

The Epic turned back toward the tellers behind the counter. My father's hand still gripped my shoulder, tense. I could feel his worry for me almost as if it were a physical thing, running up his arm and into my own.

I felt terror then. Pure, immobilizing terror. I curled up on the chair, whimpering, shaking, trying to banish from my mind the images of the terrible deaths I'd just seen.

My father pulled his hand away. "Don't move," he mouthed.

I nodded, too scared to do anything else. My father glanced around his chair. Deathpoint was chatting with one of the tellers. Though I couldn't see them, I could hear when the bones fell. He was executing them one at a time.

My father's expression grew dark. Then he glanced toward a side hallway. Escape?

No. That was where the guards had fallen. I could see through the glass side of the cubicle to where a handgun lay on the ground, barrel buried in ash, part of the grip lying atop a rib bone. My father eyed it. He'd been in the National Guard when he was younger.

Don't do it! I thought, panicked. Father, no! I couldn't voice the words, though. My chin quivered as I tried to speak, like I was cold, and my teeth chattered. What if the Epic heard me?

I couldn't let my father do such a foolish thing! He was all I had. No home, no family, no mother. As he moved to go, I forced myself to reach out and grab his arm. I shook my head at him, trying to think of anything that would stop him. "Please," I managed to whisper. "The heroes. You said they'll come. Let them stop him!"

"Sometimes, son," my father said, prying my fingers free, "you

have to help the heroes along.”

He glanced at Deathpoint, then scrambled into the next cubicle. I held my breath and peeked very carefully around the side of the chair. I had to know. Even cowering and trembling, I had to see.

Deathpoint hopped over the counter and landed on the other side, our side. “And so, it doesn’t matter,” he said, still speaking in a conversational tone, strolling across the floor. “Robbing a bank would give me money, but I don’t need to buy things.” He raised a murderous finger. “A conundrum. Fortunately, while showering, I realized something else: Killing people every time you want something can be extremely inconvenient. What I needed to do was frighten everyone, show them my power. That way, in the future, nobody would deny me the things I wanted to take.”

He leaped around a pillar on the other side of the bank, surprising a woman holding her child. “Yes,” he continued, “robbing a bank for the money would be pointless—but showing what I can do . . . that is still important. So I continued with my plan.” He pointed, killing the child, leaving the horrified woman holding a pile of bones and ash. “Aren’t you glad?”

I gaped at the sight, the terrified woman trying to hold the blanket tight, the infant’s bones shifting and slipping free. In that moment it all became so much more real to me. Horribly real. I felt a sudden nausea.

Deathpoint’s back was toward us.

My father scrambled out of the cubicle and grabbed the fallen gun. Two people hiding behind a nearby pillar made for the closest doorway and pushed past my father in their haste, nearly knocking him down.

Deathpoint turned. My father was still kneeling there, trying to get the pistol raised, fingers slipping on the ash-covered metal.

The Epic raised his hand.

“What are you doing here?” a voice boomed.

The Epic spun. So did I. I think everyone must have turned toward that deep, powerful voice.

A figure stood in the doorway to the street. He was backlit, little more than a silhouette because of the bright sunlight shining in behind

him. An amazing, herculean, awe-inspiring silhouette.

You've probably seen pictures of Steelheart, but let me tell you that pictures are completely inadequate. No photograph, video, or painting could ever capture that man. He wore black. A shirt, tight across an inhumanly large and strong chest. Pants, loose but not baggy. He didn't wear a mask, like some of the early Epics did, but a magnificent silver cape fluttered out behind him.

He didn't need a mask. This man had no reason to hide. He spread his arms out from his sides, and wind blew the doors open around him. Ash scattered across the floor and papers fluttered. Steelheart rose into the air a few inches, cape flaring out. He began to glide forward into the room. Arms like steel girders, legs like mountains, neck like a tree stump. He wasn't bulky or awkward, though. He was majestic, with that jet-black hair, that square jaw, an impossible physique, and a frame of nearly seven feet.

And those eyes. Intense, demanding, uncompromising eyes.

As Steelheart flew gently into the room, Deathpoint hastily raised a finger and pointed at him. Steelheart's shirt sizzled in one little section, like a cigarette had been put out on the cloth, but he showed no reaction. He floated down the steps and landed gracefully on the floor a short distance from Deathpoint, his enormous cape settling around him.

Deathpoint pointed again, looking frantic. Another meager sizzle. Steelheart stepped up to the smaller Epic, towering over him.

I knew in that moment that this was what my father had been waiting for. This was the hero everyone had been hoping would come, the one who would compensate for the other Epics and their evil ways. This man was here to save us.

Steelheart reached out, grabbing Deathpoint as he belatedly tried to dash away. Deathpoint jerked to a halt, his sunglasses clattering to the ground, and gasped in pain.

"I asked you a question," Steelheart said in a voice like rumbling thunder. He spun Deathpoint around to look him in the eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Deathpoint twitched. He looked panicked. "I . . . I . . ."

Steelheart raised his other hand, lifting a finger. “I have claimed this city, little Epic. It is mine.” He paused. “And it is my right to dominate the people here, not yours.”

Deathpoint cocked his head.

What? I thought.

“You seem to have strength, little Epic,” Steelheart said, glancing at the bones scattered around the room. “I will accept your subservience. Give me your loyalty or die.”

I couldn’t believe Steelheart’s words. They stunned me as soundly as Deathpoint’s murders had.

That concept—serve me or die—would become the foundation of his rule. He looked around the room and spoke in a booming voice. “I am emperor of this city now. You will obey me. I own this land. I own these buildings. When you pay taxes, they come to me. If you disobey, you will die.”

Impossible, I thought. Not him too. I couldn’t accept that this incredible being was just like all the others.

I wasn’t the only one.

“It’s not supposed to be this way,” my father said.

Steelheart turned, apparently surprised to hear anything from one of the room’s cowering, whimpering peons.

My father stepped forward, gun down at his side. “No,” he said. “You aren’t like the others. I can see it. You’re better than they are.” He walked forward, stopping only a few feet from the two Epics. “You’re here to save us.”

The room was silent save for the sobbing of the woman who still clutched the remains of her dead child. She was madly, vainly trying to gather the bones, to not leave a single tiny vertebra on the ground. Her dress was covered in ash.

Before either Epic could respond, the side doors burst open. Men in black armor with assault rifles piled into the bank and opened fire.

Back then, the government hadn’t given up yet. They still tried to fight the Epics, to subject them to mortal laws. It was clear from the beginning that when it came to Epics, you didn’t hesitate, you didn’t

negotiate. You came in with guns blazing and hoped that the Epic you were facing could be killed by ordinary bullets.

My father sprang away at a run, old battle instincts prompting him to put his back to a pillar nearer the front of the bank. Steelheart turned, a bemused look on his face, as a wave of bullets washed over him. They bounced off his skin, ripping his clothing but leaving him completely unscathed.

Epics like him are what forced the United States to pass the Capitulation Act that gave all Epics complete immunity from the law. Gunfire cannot harm Steelheart—rockets, tanks, the most advanced weapons of man don't even scratch him. Even if he could be captured, prisons couldn't hold him.

The government eventually declared men such as Steelheart to be natural forces, like hurricanes or earthquakes. Trying to tell Steelheart that he can't take what he wants would be as vain as trying to pass a bill that forbids the wind to blow.

In the bank that day, I saw firsthand why so many have decided not to fight back. Steelheart raised a hand, energy beginning to glow around it with a cool yellow light. Deathpoint hid behind him, sheltered from the bullets. Unlike Steelheart, he seemed to fear getting shot. Not all Epics are impervious to gunfire, just the most powerful ones.

Steelheart released a burst of yellow-white energy from his hand, vaporizing a group of the soldiers. Chaos followed. Soldiers ducked for cover wherever they could find it; smoke and chips of marble filled the air. One of the soldiers fired some kind of rocket from his gun, and it shot past Steelheart—who continued to blast his enemies with energy—to hit the back end of the bank, blowing open the vault.

Flaming bills exploded outward. Coins sprayed into the air and showered the ground.

Shouts. Screams. Insanity.

The soldiers died quickly. I continued to huddle on my chair, hands pressed against my ears. It was all so loud.

Deathpoint was still standing behind Steelheart. And as I watched, he smiled, then raised his hands, reaching for Steelheart's neck. I don't

know what he was planning to do. Likely he had a second power. Most Epics as strong as he was possess more than one.

Maybe it would have been enough to kill Steelheart. I doubt it, but either way, we'll never know.

A single pop sounded in the air. The explosion had been so loud it left me deafened to the point that I barely recognized the sound as a gunshot. As the smoke from the explosion cleared, I could see my father. He stood a short distance in front of Steelheart with arms raised, his back to the pillar. He bore an expression of determination on his face and held the gun, pointing it at Steelheart.

No. Not at Steelheart. At Deathpoint, who stood just behind him.

Deathpoint collapsed, a bullet wound in his forehead. Dead. Steelheart turned sharply, looking at the lesser Epic. Then he looked back at my father and raised a hand to his face. There, on Steelheart's cheek just below his eye, was a line of blood.

At first I thought it must have come from Deathpoint. But when Steelheart wiped it away, it continued to bleed.

My father had shot at Deathpoint, but the bullet had passed by Steelheart first—and had grazed him on the way.

That bullet had hurt Steelheart, while the soldiers' bullets had bounced off.

"I'm sorry," my father said, sounding anxious. "He was reaching for you. I—"

Steelheart's eyes went wide, and he raised his hand before him, looking at his own blood. He seemed completely astounded. He glanced at the vault behind him, then looked at my father. In the settling smoke and dust, the two figures stood before each other—one a massive, regal Epic, the other a small homeless man with a silly T-shirt and worn jeans.

Steelheart jumped forward with blinding speed and slammed a hand against my father's chest, crushing him back against the white stone pillar. Bones shattered, and blood poured from my father's mouth.

"No!" I screamed. My own voice felt odd in my ears, like I was underwater. I wanted to run to him, but I was too frightened. I still think of my cowardice that day, and it sickens me.

Steelheart stepped to the side, picking up the gun my father had dropped. Fury burning in his eyes, Steelheart pointed the gun directly at my father's chest, then fired a single shot into the already-fallen man.

He does that. Steelheart likes to kill people with their own guns. It's become one of his hallmarks. He has incredible strength and can fire blasts of energy from his hands. But when it comes to killing someone special, he prefers to use their gun.

Steelheart left my father to slump down the pillar and tossed the handgun at his feet. Then he began to shoot blasts of energy in all directions, setting chairs, walls, counters, everything alight. I was thrown from my chair as one of the blasts struck nearby, and I rolled to the floor.

The explosions threw wood and glass into the air, shaking the room. In a few heartbeats, Steelheart caused enough destruction to make Deathpoint's murder spree seem tame. Steelheart laid waste to that room, knocking down pillars, killing anyone he saw. I'm not sure how I survived, crawling over the shards of glass and splinters of wood, plaster, and dust raining down around me.

Steelheart let out a scream of rage and indignation. I could barely hear it, but I could feel it shattering what windows remained, vibrating the walls. Then something spread out from him, a wave of energy. And the floor around him changed colors, transforming to metal.

The transformation spread, washing through the entire room at incredible speed. The floor beneath me, the wall beside me, the bits of glass on the ground—it all changed to steel. What we've learned now is that Steelheart's rage transforms inanimate objects around him into steel, though it leaves living things and anything close to them alone.

By the time his cry faded, most of the bank's interior had been changed completely to steel, though a large chunk of the ceiling was still wood and plaster, as was a section of one wall. Steelheart suddenly launched himself into the air, breaking through the ceiling and several stories to head into the sky.

I stumbled to my father, hoping he could do something, somehow stop the madness. When I got to him, he was spasming, blood covering his face, chest bleeding from the bullet wound. I clung to his arm,

panicked.

Incredibly, he managed to speak, but I couldn't hear what he said. I was deafened completely by that point. My father reached out, a quivering hand touching my chin. He said something else, but I still couldn't hear him.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, then tried to pull his arm to get him to stand up and come with me. The entire building was shaking.

My father grabbed my shoulder, and I looked at him, tears in my eyes. He spoke a single word—one I could make out from the movement of his lips.

“Go.”

I understood. Something huge had just happened, something that exposed Steelheart, something that terrified him. He was a new Epic back then, not very well known in town, but I'd heard of him. He was supposed to be invulnerable.

That gunshot had wounded him, and everyone there had seen him weak. There was no way he'd let us live—he had to preserve his secret.

Tears streaming down my cheeks, feeling like an utter coward for leaving my father, I turned and ran. The building continued to tremble with explosions; walls cracked, sections of the ceiling crumbled. Steelheart was trying to bring it down.

Some people ran out the front doors, but Steelheart killed them from above. Others ran out side doors, but those doorways only led deeper into the bank. Those people were crushed as most of the building collapsed.

I hid in the vault.

I wish I could claim that I was smart for making that choice, but I'd simply gotten turned around. I vaguely remember crawling into a dark corner and curling up into a ball, crying as the rest of the building fell apart.

Since most of the main room had been turned to metal by Steelheart's rage, and the vault was steel in the first place, they didn't crumble as the rest of the building did.

Hours later, I was pulled out of the wreckage by a rescue worker. I

was dazed, barely conscious, and the light blinded me as I was dug free. The room I had been in had sunk partially, lurched on its side, but it was still strangely intact, the walls and part of the ceiling now made of steel. The rest of the large building was rubble.

The rescue worker whispered something in my ear. “Pretend to be dead.” Then she carried me to a line of corpses and put a blanket over me. She’d guessed what Steelheart might do to survivors.

Once she went back to look for other survivors, I panicked and crawled from beneath the blanket. It was dark outside, though it should have only been late afternoon. Nightwielder was upon us; Steelheart’s reign had begun.

I stumbled away and limped into an alley. That saved my life a second time. Moments after I escaped, Steelheart returned, floating down past the rescue lights to land beside the wreckage. He carried someone with him, a thin woman with her hair in a bun. I would later learn she was an Epic named Faultline, who had the power to move earth. Though she would one day challenge Steelheart, at that point she served him.

She waved her hand and the ground began to shake.

I fled, confused, frightened, pained. Behind me, the ground opened up, swallowing the remnants of the bank—along with the corpses of the fallen, the survivors who were receiving medical attention, and the rescue workers themselves. Steelheart wanted to leave no evidence. He had Faultline bury all of them under hundreds of feet of earth, killing anyone who could possibly speak of what had happened in that bank.

Except me.

Later that night, he performed the Great Transfersion, an awesome display of power by which he transformed most of Chicago—buildings, vehicles, streets—into steel. That included a large portion of Lake Michigan, which became a glassy expanse of black metal. It was there that he built his palace.

I know, better than anyone else, that there are no heroes coming to save us. There are no good Epics. None of them protect us. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We live with them. We try to exist despite them. Once the

Capitulation Act was passed, most people stopped fighting. In some areas of what we now call the Fractured States, the old government is still marginally in control. They let the Epics do as they please, and try to continue as a broken society. Most places are chaos, though, with no law at all.

In a few places, like Newcago, a single godlike Epic rules as a tyrant. Steelheart has no rivals here. Everyone knows he's invulnerable. Nothing harms him: not bullets, not explosions, not electricity. In the early years, other Epics tried to take him down and claim his throne, as Faultline attempted.

They're all dead. Now it's very rare that any of them tries.

However, if there's one fact we can hold on to, it's this: Every Epic has a weakness. Something that invalidates their powers, something that turns them back into an ordinary person, if only for a moment. Steelheart is no exception; the events on that day in the bank prove it.

My mind holds a clue to how Steelheart might be killed. Something about the bank, the situation, the gun, or my father himself was able to counteract Steelheart's invulnerability. Many of you probably know about that scar on Steelheart's cheek. Well, as far as I can determine, I'm the only living person who knows how he got it.

I've seen Steelheart bleed.

And I will see him bleed again.