

PROLOGUE

# WARRIORS

**SPEEDBALL** could barely stand still. That wasn't unusual. Ever since the accident in the lab, his body had become a barely controlled generator of highly volatile kinetic-force bubbles. His teammates in the New Warriors were accustomed to his constant bouncing around, his inability to stay focused on anything for more than ninety seconds at a time. They barely even bothered to roll their eyes anymore.

No, Speedball acting antsy wasn't new. But the reason for it was.

"Earth to Speedball." The producer's voice was tinny in his ear. "You gonna answer my question, kid?"

Speedball smiled. "Call me Robbie, Mister Ashley."

"You know the rules. When you're miked and in the field, it's code names only. *Speedball.*"

"Yes sir." He couldn't resist tweaking Ashley. The man was such a suit.

"So," Ashley said.

"So?"

"The villains. *How many?*"

Speedball brushed crabgrass away from his leg. He leapt up into the air past Namorita, who stood leaning against a tree, bored. He bounced off Microbe's massive frame—the big guy sat sprawled in the grass, snoring—and came in for a featherlight landing right behind Night Thrasher, their black-cowled leader.

Thrash was all business, his hidden eyes peering through a pair of high-tech binoculars. Speedball looked past him at the house, old and wood-framed, concealed from its neighbors by a high fence. The Warriors—and their camera crew—stood about fifty feet away, hidden behind a pair of big oak trees.

A trio of muscular men appeared in the doorway of the house, all dressed in casual clothes: jeans, work shirts. Speedball touched a button on his earpiece. "Three villains."

"Four," Thrasher said.

Speedball squinted, managed to make out a muscular woman with dark hair. "Oh yeah. I see Coldheart in the back, emptying the trash." Speedball giggled. "Emptying the trash. Man, these guys are hardcore."

"Actually, they're all on the FBI's most wanted list." Ashley sounded almost worried now. "Cobalt Man, Speedfreak, Nitro...they all broke out of Rykers Island three months back. And they all got records as long as your arm."

Microbe had shambled up behind them—all 350 pounds of him—dressed in green and white with a thick belt full of compartments. "What's up?"

Thrasher motioned him to silence.

"Coldheart fought Spider-Man a couple of times," Ashley continued. "And get this. Speedfreak almost took down the Hulk."

Thrasher lowered the binoculars. "He what now?"

Microbe scratched his head. "These guys sound out of our league."

“Out of your league maybe, lardo.”

“Shut up, 'Ball.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“Ball,” Microbe repeated, a lazy smile on his face.

“Enough.” Namorita turned her head, barely interested. “What’s the plan?”

Speedball smirked. “Plan is you spend five more minutes in makeup, Nita. You think people wanna see that big ugly zit on your chin?”

She shot him the finger and turned away. Pierre rushed up to her, foundation brush in his hand.

Namorita was a blue-skinned beauty, an offshoot of the royal family of Atlantis. Cousin or niece or something to Prince Namor, ruler of the undersea city. One time, Speedball had tried to get into her pants; she’d held his head underwater for five minutes.

“I don’t know,” Thrasher said. He cast a worried glance back toward the house. “I’m not sure we should do this.”

“What?” Speedball almost jumped up into the air, then realized just in time he’d be blowing their cover. “Think of the ratings, Thrash. We’re dyin’ here. Six months we been driving around the country looking for goofballs to fight, and the best we’ve managed was a bum with a spray can and a wooden leg. This could be the episode that really puts the New Warriors on the map. We beat these clowns and everyone’ll stop bitching about Nova leaving the show to go back into space.”

Fernandez, the cameraman, cleared his throat. “I just wanna remind everybody that the crew’s on shift for another twenty minutes. After that, we go to time and a half.”

Everyone turned to Night Thrasher.

“Okay, listen up everyone.” Thrasher held out a tablet computer, displaying profiles of the four villains. “Nitro and Cobalt Man are the real

threats here. Coldheart's a hand-to-hand expert; we should take her out from a distance if possible. I don't know the current state of Cobalt's armor, but..."

"Ball," Microbe said again, leaning over to whisper in Speedball's ear. "Ball 'ball 'ball 'ball 'balllllll."

Speedball pulled out his iPhone, thumbed on some Honey Claws. Electronic riffs and a pumping bass line. Mercifully, it drowned out both Microbe's taunts and Thrasher's boring tactical briefing.

Speedball was tired and cranky. They all were, he realized. It had been Thrasher's idea to turn the New Warriors into a reality show, and at the beginning it seemed exciting. Times were tough for teenage heroes, and this was a chance to transform their frankly third-rate team into pop stars. The show enjoyed a brief spurt of attention, and Speedball became addicted to the public acclaim, the guest appearances on *The Colbert Report* and *Charlie Rose*.

But then Nova had quit, and the less said about his replacement—"Debrii"—the better. She'd washed out after two episodes. As the season wore on, the strain of travel and constant reshoots had worn on all of their nerves. And the ratings took a sharp dive, straight into the toilet. A second season looked really, really unlikely.

*It's too bad, he thought. When this started, we were all friends.*

Nita elbowed him roughly in the ribs, and he yanked off the earbuds. "What?"

"We've been marked."

Speedball looked over at the house, just as Coldheart turned to stare right at them. Then she ran inside, yelling, "Everybody in costume. *It's a raid!*"

The Warriors were on their feet. Fernandez hefted his camera, preparing to follow them.

“Standard attack pattern,” Thrasher called out. “Form on me—”

Speedball just grinned and leapt, kinetic-energy bubbles blasting out from him in all directions. “GO!” he yelled.

He could almost feel Thrasher’s exhausted sigh.

As Speedball arced in for a landing, halfway across the lawn, he thumbed his iPhone to another track. The show wasn’t broadcast live, but somehow, the stentorian theme music in his ears always got him pumped. And Speedball lived to get pumped.

“SPEEDBALL!” the announcer’s voice called in his ear. “NIGHT THRASHER! MICROBE! THE SULTRY NAMORITA! AND...THE MAN CALLED *NOVA!*”

He hated that part.

“IN A WORLD OF GRAYS...THERE IS STILL GOOD AND EVIL! THERE ARE STILL...”

“...*THE NEW WARRIORS!*” Speedball shouted the words along with the announcer—just as he crashed into the front door, splintering it to toothpicks.

The other Warriors ran up behind him, surveying the scene. The living room was stripped bare, like a crack den. A long-haired man whirled to greet them, half clad in a metal exoskeleton.

“Speedfreak,” Thrasher said.

“Holy crap.” Speedfreak reached for a silvery, red-visored helmet.

Grinning again, Speedball body slammed him, sending the helmet flying. They crashed together through the far wall, into the backyard. ‘Freak stumbled back over an old stump, surrounded by overgrown grass and weeds.

“I’d heard that clothes make the man, Speedfreak.” Speedball punched him hard, a solid left cross. “And in your case, it’s *totally true!*”

“Ungh!” Speedfreak flew back, fell to the lawn.

Fernandez, the cameraman, tapped on Speedball's shoulder. "Sound cut out for a minute there, bud. Any chance of that last part again?"

Speedball grimaced, motioned to Namorita. She rolled her eyes and stalked over to the dazed Speedfreak. She lifted him easily up into the air, tossed his limp form toward the cameraman.

Speedball crouched down and leapt up high, swooping back down with a flying kick. As his foot made contact with Speedfreak's jaw, he called out clearly: "In your case, Chuckles, it's *totally true!*"

Fernandez lowered the camera, gave a bored thumbs-up.

Speedball looked around. Night Thrasher and Microbe had Coldheart and Cobalt Man cornered against the far fence. Cobalt was struggling to fasten his high-tech suit over his big frame, while Coldheart slashed her energy swords through the air, keeping the Warriors at bay.

Microbe turned lazily to glance at Speedball. *Probably hoping I get my head kicked in*, Speedball thought.

"Wait a minute." Coldheart paused, holding up her energy swords in a defensive posture. "I know you guys. You're those idiots from that reality show."

"That's right," Thrash replied. "And *this* is reality."

Speedball shook his head. *Lame catchphrase, boss.*

"No," Coldheart continued. "No way. I'm not gettin' taken down by Goldfish Girl and the Bondage Queen." She sliced a crackling sword-arc through the air.

But Namorita was already inside Coldheart's defenses. Nita slammed a blue fist, hardened to withstand the ocean's depths, straight across the villainess' jaw. "Beg to differ, sweetheart."

Night Thrasher followed up with an acrobatic kick to Coldheart's stomach. "Can we edit out the part where she called me the Bondage Queen?"

“Yeah.” Nita smirked. “Because Night Thrasher sounds *so* much straighter.”

Coldheart was down—but where had Cobalt Man gone? And what the hell was Microbe doing, just standing there in the corner of the lawn, his back to them?

Speedball leapt over to Microbe. Surprisingly, the manchild stood over a writhing, subdued villain in an overcoat. Beneath the coat, an armored exoskeleton seemed to be dissolving away before their eyes.

“I got Cobalt Man!” Microbe said. “My bacterial powers are rusting his suit away. Guess I’m not such a loser after all, huh?”

“Learn to count, loser.” Speedball looked around. “Where’s the fourth bad guy?”

Nita leapt high up, the small wings on her feet fluttering madly. She stopped, hovering in midair, and pointed out over the house toward the road beyond. “I’m on it.” She turned to soar up and over the roof.

Thrasher and Microbe whirled back toward the house. They marched through the hole in the wall, heading after Namorita.

Speedball started to follow, then turned back at a sound. On the ground, Speedfreak grunted, trying to rise. Speedball kicked him hard, then turned toward the house. Fernandez followed, shouldering his camera.

Halfway through the living room, Speedball stopped in his tracks. Fernandez shot him a look, and Speedball motioned him ahead. The cameraman trotted on toward the front door.

Speedball took a long, careful look around the room. Beer cans were everywhere. On a folding table, pizza dripped and rotted, the one remaining slice soaking through a greasy box. A meth pipe still glowed, discarded on a pile of Xbox disks. Ancient paint cracked and peeled from the walls; stuffing leaked from the old sofa.

*This house, he realized. It's where you end up. When it all goes wrong, when things don't turn out the way you expect. When you make all the wrong decisions, and end up running for your life.*

Speedball had peaked early during the fight; now his adrenaline levels were crashing. He felt suddenly tired, useless, futile. He was glad the others weren't around—he'd expended a lot of energy, no pun intended, keeping his bipolar condition a secret from them. He felt very unreal, as though he were watching his own actions from a distance. Like some bored, faceless audience member, just getting ready to click away to another channel.

"Speedball!" Ashley's voice lanced into his ear. "Kid, where are you? You want to miss the climax?"

*No, he realized. No, I don't want to miss it.*

Speedball bounded out through the shattered front door in a burst of kinetic energy. He pivoted on the front step, posing briefly in case one of the cameras was recording him, then bounced out into the street.

Across the road, a crowd of elementary school kids had gathered at the edge of a playground. Some of them held books, computers; one kid carried a baseball bat. Night Thrasher and Microbe held them back, motioning firmly, while Namorita swooped down through the air toward a parked school bus.

A small figure dashed across the street, toward the school bus: purple-and-blue costume, long silver hair. Cruel eyes that looked like they'd seen—and done—terrible things.

Nita crashed down onto him from above, slamming him into the bus, caving in its side. Shattered window glass hailed down, covering both figures.

The man made no sound.

"On your feet, Nitro." Namorita stood in full battle stance, arms



upraised, legs planted firmly for the camera. “And don’t try any of your stupid explosions, because that’s only going to make me hit you harder.”

Speedball moved in to back her up.

Nitro knelt crouched on the pavement, leaning up against the dented bus. When he looked up, his eyes blazed with hate...and deadly fire.

“Namorita, right?”

Fernandez moved in, swinging the camera back and forth from Nitro to Nita.

Nitro smiled, and his eyes glowed brighter. “I’m afraid I’m not one of those bargain-basement losers you’re used to, baby.”

Nitro’s whole body was glowing now. Nita took a step back. Night Thrasher watched, tense and unsure. Microbe just stared, his mouth slack, eyes wide.

The kids had moved out into the street, also staring. One of them dribbled a basketball absently, nervously.

Thrasher strode forward, sudden alarm in his eyes. “Speedball... Robbie. Help me get these kids out of here!”

Ashley was chattering too, in his ear.

Speedball didn’t move, didn’t even nod. Once again, he felt like he was watching events, images, moving in a prerecorded pattern on some high-def screen. *Does any of this matter?* he wondered. *If it all goes wrong, if it doesn’t follow the right script, can we just do another take?*

*Or is this the last, the only take?*

Nitro was a ball of fire now. Only his glaring eyes were visible, searing into Namorita’s.

“You’re playing with the big boys now,” Nitro said.

The energy flared out from him, consuming Namorita first. She arched in pain, let out a silent scream, then dissolved into skeletal ash. The shockwave continued to spread outward, engulfing camera, camera-

man, school bus. Night Thrasher, then Microbe. The house, and the three villains sprawled in its backyard.

The children.

Eight hundred fifty-nine residents of Stamford, Connecticut died that day. But Robbie Baldwin, the young hero called Speedball, never knew that. As Robbie's body boiled into vapor, as the kinetic energy inside him burst forth for the last time into the void, his final thought was:

*At least I won't have to get old.*