

Sword of Defiance

Prologue

The Harder They Fall

Towerman

Real Name: Edward Tower

Three Years Ago

Heavy was the heart of the hero as he stared out into the night.

With bloodshot eyes stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse loft at his adopted home, Jupiter Bay. Not long ago this had been one of his favorite views. He had shared quiet moments here with his wife, Lisette, over a glass of wine. Sometimes it had been much more spirited as his ten-year-old son, Jean Pierre, discussed the merits of their favorite baseball team.

The skyline was different now, and his eyes kept drifting to the space that the Busiek Building had once occupied. He shook his head to rid himself of the unwanted memory and the echoes of the screams that followed. He was only partially successful. This time, one face was able to drift through the barriers he erected in his mind. It didn't matter if the others followed; her face was the most difficult to bear.

He let his eyes shift out of focus. The lights of the city danced off his haggard face. He had once loved this city. Jupiter Bay had been a place of dreams and progress. Now, he only felt its anguish and despair.

At this moment, he wanted nothing more than to leave this place behind with his tormented memories and move away with his family, maybe back to France, to be near his parents.

He sighed. He would not abandon his friends and colleagues while they faced their darkest hour.

His name was Edward Tower, though most people knew him better as Towerman. He was a veteran member plus current leader of the superhero team Vigilance, the country's oldest and most prestigious superhero team. However, he found no comfort in reflecting on his beloved team's rich and colorful hundred and thirty-seven years of history, for Vigilance had faced few days darker in its past than the ones experienced of late.

The man responsible for recent events called himself Purgatory. Out of nowhere, he appeared in downtown Jupiter Bay wielding the power of a god with the petty brutality of a common street thug. Without warning, he went on a violent rampage populace.

Edward led Vigilance against him in a chaotic one-sided battle. The god-like Purgatory incapacitated the entire team with shameful ease, destroying three hundred and sixty-seven innocent souls in the process. Among the dead were Vigilance members Lightningstrike, Shiverman, and Tranquility. Edward himself was trapped under tons of rubble from the Busiek Building Purgatory had collapsed on him. He was forced to use all of his super strength to prevent the debris from crushing the eight men and women who were "lucky" enough to be close to him. There in the confined space, they waited to be rescued by the extrication crews that they had hoped were coming. It took almost two days to be set free. In that time, three of those he had saved died from injuries sustained in the collapse.

He had felt Tranquility's loss the most. Her real name was Paige Bromming, and he had never known a gentler spirit. For seven years, he had been her mentor and friend. He had even walked her down the aisle at her wedding last year.

Tears burned in his eyes as the memory overtook him. With his great strength pressed to its

limits, he had been helpless to watch her slowly bleed out. With her dying breath, she had called out for her husband John. As her life left her, so did the small ambient light her powers provided, and the darkness overtaken them all.

Days later, he saw John at her wake. He was beefy man whom she met while volunteering at the Humane Society. John told Edward that he felt the exact moment she died as a weight fell upon his spirit. He then collapsed into Edward's arms sobbing.

When Edward was freed from the rubble of the building, he finally discovered what happened to his other friends and their enemy. It was his second-in-command, Powerhouse Morgan, who was left to face Purgatory alone. Powerhouse vanquished Purgatory, but at a heavy price: a crippling blow to his spine.

The doctors had already warned Edward that Morgan's chance of survival was dismal. Even if he did live, Solomon "Powerhouse" Morgan would be paralyzed for the rest of his life. Edward Tower almost wished that his friend would pass on. Solomon was a proud man. For him to be crippled in that powerful body was far too cruel a fate.

Edward shifted his focus from the building focus that had become a mass grave to stare at his own reflection in the window pane. He was a powerfully-built man in his mid-forties still in his dark blue superhero uniform with an ornate white T on his chest and abdomen designed to look like the letter was actively growing. Salted brown hair had gone completely white, and piercing blue eyes were leaded by dark circles and dulled from nights of restless sleep. Broad shoulders slumped under the heaviness of the grief.

It was the senselessness that weighed on Edward the most, for Purgatory did not attack out of a desire for revenge, money, power, respect, or even ideology. Those were motives that Edward could at least understand, if not condone. No, Purgatory's violent rampage from a much

darker motive. He had acted out simply because he could. Such lack of reason made the innocents' deaths feel that much more tragic.

He drove these thoughts from his head. The time to lose himself in his sorrow would come later. Right now, as leader of his depleted team, he did not have the luxury of grief. However painful it was for him, he had to rebuild the Vigilance roster immediately. He did not have a choice; Vigilance held the line against too many threats. He could name off a number of supervillains who would take this lapse in their infrastructure as an opportunity to strike them while they were down. It was all so overwhelming.

Frustrated, yet too tired to think with any real coherence, he turned despondently from the window and started for bed. He froze. A tingle on the back of his neck told him something felt odd about the emptiness of his home. Where was his family? He should have wondered about them before now, but he had been so distracted. Lisette, a night owl, almost never went to bed this early. She and Jean Pierre could be at their home in the country, but that did not seem likely. She would have at least left him a note.

He stared around at the large, empty room. The flashing lights cast flickering shadows around the room. He could only see the simple heavy furniture that that Jean Pierre had loved to jump off of when he was younger. The Romanesque sculptures that Lisette decorated their home with cast foreboding shadows in the dark.

He called out, "Who's here?"

In response, two red lights glowed to life several feet away: a pair of disembodied eyes.

"What the!" Edward shouted.

His initial surprise lasted all of half a second before twenty-five years, battle-hardened reflexes kicked in. His entire body burst upwards and outwards as he grew three times his size,

just under the twenty-foot height of his ceiling.

With his fists clenched and his voice augmented by his increased size he demanded, “Who are you? What do you want?”

The air around the red eyes shimmered and a dark cloaked figure faded into visibility. The newcomer held a scythe with a long black handle. Hovering just above the floor its ebony garments blended with the surrounding shadows. Only its eyes appeared from beneath the hood.

“Who are you!” Edward repeated.

The being stared at him for a long moment. When it did answer him, its voice was deep and otherworldly. “I am the Scythe. I warned you of my imminent arrival.”

“You!” Edward breathed.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Edward Tower did not possess a secret identity, which meant he had received plenty of hate mail, including death threats, so much so, that Jean Pierre was never allowed to retrieve the mail. Most of the time it was the ravings of mad men, scary to read but otherwise harmless. Still, there had been something odd about the most recent threat. It wasn't the usual violent, vulgar, or insane rant like the ones he had read before. In fact, it was its simplicity that Edward had found to be so unsettling.

It read:

Edward Tower,

I will come to end your life in two days' time. Meet your fate with honor.



His instincts had warned him of the letter's legitimacy, but he had ignored his long-trusted warrior's intuition simply because he was too overwrought at the time to pay it any heed. Now he found himself unprepared staring face-to-face with his would-be assassin.

A thought pierced his mind with terrifying clarity and raw panic flooded his voice. "Where is my family?"

He searched the shadows wildly for any signs of them. There was no one. He had walked straight to the window when he arrived home an hour ago. It had not even occurred to him to check up on his wife and son. How foolish could he have been."

The Scythe's hooded head shook slightly. "They are not here, Edward Tower. Do not worry for them. They are both safe and unharmed, sleeping in your other home. I thought that it would be more prudent to remove them from the premises."

"Why?" Edward demanded as he took a thunderous step forward. "If you harmed them in any-

Scythe remained motionless but his voice whipcracked out "I do not hide behind the lives of women and children! This is a field of honor, and I will not allow it to be tainted by innocent blood."

Edward could hardly believe what he was hearing. He snarled at the specter, "Field of honor?"

Scythe's red eyes flashed. "Yes, Edward Tower. I am here to kill you. I could have done so ten times over by now, but that is not my way. I am an assassin, but I am a man of honor first. You have lived a life full of integrity. I prefer to give you the opportunity to defend yourself. You deserve the chance to die fighting.

He positioned the weapon of his namesake before him. Scythe did not attack, but his intent

was clear.

Edward felt his self-control disintegrate as fury came claw its way to the surface. His friends were dead. He had failed to protect the citizens of Jupiter Bay. A criminal violated his home, kidnapping his wife and son. Every ounce of his sorrow and rage bottled up in the past few weeks burst out in one agonized scream.

Scythe's red eyes flashed in dark anticipation.

Edward's fists slammed down together with the intent to hammer the dark assassin's head. They crashed down onto the floor with a massive *KATHOOM!*

Scythe moved in a blur just out of range of the colossal crash. Light from the city glinted off the blade of his scythe as it sliced through the air.

Edward screamed as an intense pain slashed into his forearm. His hand convulsed as hot blood poured onto the floor. He could no longer feel his fingers.

Grabbing his injured limb in his other hand, Edward leapt back his eyes wide. For the first time he saw Scythe for the threat he was. This wasn't someone he could take with any triviality.

"How did you do that?" he asked in shock. "I have taken artillery rounds without so much as getting a scratch."

"This," Scythe said, holding up his weapon, "is more powerful than any artillery shell."

The assassin burst forward at blinding speed, gliding over the floor. Edward jumped back crashing the top of his head against the ceiling and tripping over his own heavy couch. He fell onto his back with an enormous **CRASH!**

Desperate, he grasped out for any weapon. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the man-sized statue of a roman soldier. He instinctively reached out for it, meaning to wield it against his foe. In his panic, he reached for it with his injured hand, his now deadened fingers rammed

uselessly against the statue knocking it over.

Unable to see Scythe in the darkness, he tried to scramble up to a better defensive position. His giant foot accidentally kicked his broken couch launching it out unintentionally. The broken furniture flew haphazardly through the air and clipped the charging assassin. The accidental blow was substantial enough to knock Scythe off-kilter, giving Edward the chance he needed to get to his feet.

At least I know I can hurt him. Towerman thought with fading self-assurance.

Scythe righted himself on the ground. He looked up at Edward with appraisal. His eyes flashed once more before he tore forward, back on the attack.

This time Edward was ready for him. Clutching his wounded hand with his other, he skipped forward as his foot leapt up in a punt-style kick at Scythe's head.

The ghostly assassin flowed to the side, avoiding his kick, while still charging. Edward just had time to see Scythe release his staff with one hand to hurl something up at him. To him, the death-dealer's white hands looked almost skeletal.

Any further musing ceased as a violent pain stabbed his right eye, instantly blinding it. A heavy mixture of viscous fluid and blood began pour from his destroyed socket around the imbedded throwing star. His still-good hand slapped his blind eye.

Edward's mind raced. *I am going to die unless I do something now!*

Panic and pain drove out all other thoughts. On instinct, he grew to his maximum height of fifty feet. Concrete, drywall, metal, and glass exploded around him with undeniable force as he crashed blindly through the barricade of the ceiling. The bulk of his weight teetered in the heavy winds above the towering height of his home. Beneath his feet, the reinforced floor began to buckle under the strain on its wanting structure.

Scythe gave neither the floor nor the superhero time to adjust. He attacked with brutal precision, slicing through both of Edwards's immense Achilles tendons.

Edward released a howl of pain and terror as his knees buckled and he tumbled backwards. His gigantic body tore through the structure of the roof and outer wall as he fell. His bleeding heels shattered his favorite window. He plummeted to the ground far below in a chaotic somersault.

As he fell, he thought Lisette and Jean Pierre. He thought of the nights he had fallen asleep in his wife's arms talking and inhaling the aroma of hair. Lavender. She had always smelled of lavender. He always wanted to grow old with her. He wanted to stare at the city through their window in their retirement years. Oh God, how he loved her.

He remembered swimming at the beach with Jean Pierre. He mourned the fact that he would not be there to guide him manhood. He wondered what kind of man he would grow to be. He thought of his fellow members of Vigilance. He hoped they would be able to go on despite one more loss. He was so proud to be among them. He even felt oddly grateful to Scythe. Not for his death, but for having the foresight and courage to remove his family from the battleground. He recognized that the dark assassin was not lying about that.

He crashed to the pavement back first. Remarkably, his massive body missed all the traffic below. Two cars slammed into his thigh and his torso before their drivers had time to react. Thanks to his other injuries, he didn't notice. On impact, his spine shattered in several places; his ribs were fractured and punctured both of his lungs. His consciousness swam in and out of clarity. His once invulnerable body that had done little to save him in the loft, now hellishly preserved his life after the devastating fall. His extensive injuries prevented him from returning to his normal size.

Time became fluid as he lay there in the street, drawing nearer to death's door. The screaming of the approaching sirens forced his remaining eye to open. He found himself staring at Scythe's two red eyes as the assassin hovered above his immense chest. Edward's mind focused completely as he reached the end of his life. He tried to react to his foe's appearance by reaching for him or fighting somehow, but his limbs would not respond. Ironically, he thought of his earlier reaction to Powerhouse Morgan's paralysis. Given the choice now, he thought he would embrace disability just for the chance to spend more time with his family. He knew that was not going to be an option for him. Silently rebuking his earlier skepticism, he wished his friend recovery.

His eye focused on Scythe intently. He spoke to his killer with considerable effort. "My family *grunt* are they-"

Scythe nodded, "They are safe. You have my word. You should be proud, Edward Tower. You have faced your death as a true warrior with courage, I'm sorry to say, that I rarely see."

Edward wanted to nod, but even that act was impossible for him. He spoke again, "Why-did. you. kill-" The rest of the question was lost as he gagged on the blood pooling in his lungs, drowning him.

Scythe reacted instantly. The blade of his scythe plunged through the hero's exposed neck. Blood sprayed in great gushes out of the hero's severed carotid arteries.

The people that gathered in macabre awe around the fallen hero screamed as the assassin struck. Scythe ignored them as he watched the hero die with the swift dignity that he deserved. The air around him shimmered as he faded into invisibility. He answered Edward Tower's question with brutal honesty, "Because I was paid to."

Edward heard the answer as the last of his life slipped from his broken body.

Heavy was the heart of the hero as he stared out into the night.