

Warriors of Risnar: Worlds Away

Chapter One

The explosives were set. All that remained was to bring the hotel down, right in the middle of bustling Miami Beach.

Selena eyed the twenty-story structure through binoculars, though she was situated in a spot where she'd have a perfect view of the destruction. She preferred to see the finale up close, to imagine herself in the midst of the flashes and flying debris. There was nothing like the end, when obliteration struck.

At such times, she reflected on those who had inhabited her target. The people who had walked those floors, who had laughed, lived their lives, dreamed their dreams, never considering how such a place was fleeting. As life itself was fleeting. Never anticipating how it would conclude in thunder and lightning.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust," Selena breathed. The past and present were coming together as she viewed the seemingly impervious edifice. It had withstood hurricanes and the sometimes more cataclysmic spring breaks. But it had never faced Selena Baumer.

It was a shame that there was no hush before the death, a moment of silence before annihilation. Miami Beach was Miami Beach, full of traffic and surf and seagull screams and the laughter of tourists. Had Selena deigned to look beyond the concrete wall behind which she hid, she'd have seen the colorful parade of sightseers. A never-ending procession of humanity, in all its wide-eyed and wide-mouthed eagerness to gobble up the next experience, the next selfie, the next breathless post of what they ate, what they drank, and who they saw on the backdrop of pastel beaches and the even more pastel buildings. Living it up as she, the goddess of destruction, readied to bring it all down.

Selena's heart beat hard as it always did before the instant of execution. Whether overseas or stateside, in a remote village or in the middle of a city, the excitement was the same. Heady. Intense. Almost arousing.

No, not almost. Definitely arousing.

She quelled a nervous giggle.

The voice in her earpiece had started the countdown. The seconds lingered, yet they somehow flew past as well. The triggering mechanism was slick in her sweating palm. The sun beat down mercilessly on the concrete and glass edifice, a blinding glare. Would it rob her of the spectacle of the flashes, of the balls of fire? Would the structure fall without granting her the full performance?

"Five...four...three..."

Breath held. Lips licked. *Please.*

"Two...one..."

Oh, please.

"Light it up."

It hit her as it usually did, a wave of emotion that was a mix of terror and maddened delight. It was what Selena had been made for, when the goddess of destruction announced her reign.

She triggered the explosives.

The sounds came first, a series of loud pops. Then, to Selena's exultant delight, the bright red flashes at the base of the old hotel. As those continued, a low roar rose over the melodious

glee that was Miami Beach's usual soundtrack. It was a sound that could not be mistaken as anything but an explosion by anyone who'd ever gone to an action movie.

More pops. Flashes from midway up the building, which was already descending like an elevator heading straight to hell. The ground shook beneath Selena's feet as the giant's lowest levels fell. A *whoosh*, as if a mighty wind had blown up the coast, drowning out thin, distant screams of humans and car alarms. A crash of thunder as flames licked from the bottom of the collapsing structure, flames swiftly eclipsed in the rising smoke and billowing dust.

As if in slow motion, it crumpled, one floor falling on the next, more dust and debris swelling from the hotel's agonizing death throes. The rumble of its cry was deafening. The penthouse was the last part to display its cracking façade before the gray shroud of disintegrating concrete covered it from sight.

The final tremors, shivering up Selena's legs. The last moans of the condemned. The dry swish of wind settling. The patter of finely crumbled remains sprinkling down in a shifting mist. Silence.

It lasted all of a second before the hoots, cheers, and wild applause reached Selena's ears. She grinned, but the best moment had passed.

The voice in her ear confirmed it. "Seaside Inn is down. Good show, people, especially you, Boom-Boom. Let's give it a few minutes, then we'll do our check to make sure the old lady is completely done."

Selena lowered her binoculars, traded them for her radio. "Copy that. Nice job, gang."

She came out from behind the concrete bunker. The spectacle was over, the crowd beyond the yellow caution tape already dispersing. The first twinges of that familiar letdown feeling were worming into Selena's consciousness as she headed for the demolition site. She could see it had gone down in textbook style; nice, neat, and as safe as pulling down a high-rise ever got.

Sweat drenched her hair under the hardhat that smashed down the white-tipped, blue-spiked 'do. Her grin upheld by the idea of the next job, Selena headed toward the blasted corpse of the former concrete-and-steel giant, the latest victim to fall before the needs of modern city construction.

The owner of the demo company met her halfway to the blast area. Selena's pulse quickened at the pained smile on Jack Donald's mug. It was the expression people wore when they were about to hand out crappy news.

She squinted through her safety glasses. A plume of smoke and dust curtained the spot where the hotel had stood seconds before. No sign of girders reaching out, no slabs of wall still standing as far as she could tell. No indication it had gone awry.

Donald hailed her with a cheerful tone that was as big a warning as the smile on his sunburned face. "Nice job as always, Boom-Boom."

She halted and parked her hands on her hips. "But?"

"Hey, no, this was textbook. Not a damned inch off the mark with this demo."

"So what's wrong with what else?" Because something was up. Most of Selena's thirty-one years were a shitstorm of something being up. She knew the smell of unpleasant news.

Donald dropped his faded brown-eyed gaze and rubbed the back of his scarlet neck, an apologetic look chasing off his fake cheer. He hissed as he realized how burnt his skin was. Skin cancer-magnet gingers didn't belong in south Florida, but they flocked to live there anyway.

"Welp, we just signed a contract."

"That's bad?"

"For the company? Hell, no. Big money. Government." He cleared his throat. "Military."

Selena caught on. No wonder the poor bastard was forcing her to drag every word out of him. “Uh-huh.”

“Out of state, so we’re going to have to uproot. Not much fun in that scenario, huh?”

“Moving sucks.” Even temporarily, packing up was a drag. But not when the money was right. Large-scale demolitions were top dollar and worth the headache of putting in a change of address. Donald was trying to polish a mountain of poo before he lowered the boom on Boom-Boom.

“It’s the old high-security training base in Carolina. Ever been there?”

“No, but I know the one you’re talking about.”

“Hasn’t been used in years. The buildings are practically collapsing on their own. Word is, they’re going to use it for full-scale mockups of overseas hotspots for high-stakes troop training. Replace the whole damned installation.”

She wasn’t interested in the spiel. “Let me guess: my administrative discharge from the Army bars me from being in on it.”

He shuffled, resembling an embarrassed kid instead of a guy knocking on fifty. “Yeah. I don’t get it, you know? It wasn’t a dishonorable discharge. It’s not as if you’re deemed an enemy of the state.”

“I’m a disgruntled former soldier who happens to be excellent at blowing shit up. A real hazard when it comes to disagreements and nasty breakups.” She waved off the apology he began to stutter. “How many weeks am I off for?”

Donald kicked his steel-toed boot against the concrete ground. “Fuck.”

“Okay, how many months? Two? Three?”

“It’s a big site. Like I said, we’re talking a major move, Selena.”

“It’s bad when my given name comes into play. You’re not maintaining any sort of presence here?”

“Taxes and such would kill us if we did. I’m yanking the whole business up the coast. Just this contract is worth a couple of years. If we do a good job, the Army might throw us a few more. At least, they say they will.”

It was Selena’s turn to kick the ground, hers a gesture of frustration. She barely managed to stop from flinging her hardhat across the rubble-strewn landscape of the empty lot. “Don’t give me a song and dance. You’ve landed on your feet where scoring government cheese is concerned, and your fortunes are assured for the foreseeable future. Maybe all the way up to the moment you retire. Am I right? I am. Congratulations to you, and fuck me.”

He stared at her, shocked. Perhaps even hurt by the tirade.

Selena knew she’d gone too far. What else was new? Donald was a standup guy, not deserving of her screaming about her screwed-up life. She held up her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, Boss. I’m completely out of line here. I *am* happy for the company. This is incredible for you and the rest of the gang. Please don’t let my disappointment rain on your parade. Honestly, congratulations. You deserve this.”

He nodded, contrition again filling his expression. “Hey, I’d be pissed off too. Look, you’ve done great work for me. Nobody better. I’m giving you two months’ severance, plus I’m calling the biggest company I’ve got connections to. I’ll put in a good word for you, if you don’t mind a move yourself.”

She shrugged. What else could she do?

“I know a guy, old friend of mine, he’s bound to hire you. Take this gig, and you’ll be hanging in Vegas, having a fantastic time. You’ll be laughing your ass off at the thought of me swatting mosquitos in the marshes.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“This other firm is a step up for you. I wouldn’t lie.”

“Thanks for the referral. I appreciate it.” She waved at the blast site. “Guess I’ll finish this up then.”

“You can head on out. You did terrific today, like you always do. Hell, I’ll make it three months’ severance.”

“Damn. That *is* a sweet contract they awarded you.”

“Take a vacation. Do an internet search on nice houses in Vegas, and keep your phone nearby for the call from George. That’s my friend’s name, George Douglas. I’ll tell him to get in touch within the week.” Concern was making way for nervousness, Donald’s eyes darting sharply, taking in her demeanor.

Selena only nodded, her lips tight. She wouldn’t take exception to his sudden rise of anxiety. No one wanted an explosives expert near the toys when she’d just been canned. It wasn’t a safe scenario—but then no one had ever accused Selena “Boom-Boom” Baumer of being safe.

She didn’t say goodbye. Selena turned from her ex-boss and stumbled from the pleasant life she’d built after her discharge, heading toward her car sitting within view of the mockingly cheerful glitter of the Atlantic Ocean.

* * * *

When life was awesome, Selena loved the sparkling Florida beaches. When it wasn’t so great, the more private and enigmatic Everglades better suited her mood.

It was to the misty wetland that she retreated to lick her wounds. Her favorite parking area had a dirt road to the side that she could take her F-150 down. Sure, the sign next to it said *Authorized Vehicles Only*, but when evening approached, there was little chance she’d be busted. The parks were too understaffed, even with tourist dollars to shore them up.

She parked the mud-splattered truck before the track turned too boggy, in a spot that boasted tall sawgrass and a glinting pool. She knew from previous visits she might spy a turtle or egret in the area. Selena grabbed a beer from the cooler riding shotgun, considered for an instant, and grabbed a second. Maybe leaving the rest of the six pack she’d bought on the way over in the pickup would keep her from drinking the whole damned bunch.

Sitting on a dry bit of ground near the tiny inlet of water—but not too close, in case critters more dangerous than turtles and wading fowl were around—she had her doubts about the longevity of the beers she’d left behind. Halfway into the second bottle, she was waist-deep in self-pity, and the tide was rising fast.

“How many times does a bitch have to start over?”

As if to answer her, something splashed in the water, behind a screen of sawgrass. A spray of drops and large ripples emerged from the stretch of stalks. The nighttime chorus of peepers went silent for a few beats before blasting into full song again. Selena glanced at the baseball bat she’d laid beside her.

“Probably just a snapping turtle.” Those got pretty huge. At any rate, even if that stand of sawgrass was an alligator’s boudoir, it was far enough away for her to not worry over.

Selena dismissed ideas of dangerous reptiles to watch the sky purple toward night. The stars began to pop out, one by one. With so few lights in the vicinity, the pinpricks of distant suns would soon carpet the darkening heavens. She wouldn't see such sights in Vegas, not with all that neon to blind and dazzle the eye.

How long would that last before the rug was pulled out from beneath her again? Probably the moment she began to feel settled. At home.

"You are a hard woman to get alone, Boom-Boom."

With a startled oath, Selena jumped to her feet, grabbing the bat on the way up. She peered at the shape that had materialized between her and her vehicle. A black-haired woman. A vaguely familiar face, Selena thought, though the gloom fought her efforts to readily identify it.

A low laugh issued from the apparition. "Chill, lady. P-F-C Anneliese Thompson, from the fifty-eighth. Afghanistan. Remember me?"

"Shit. Thompson!" Now she recognized the features of the Native American she'd become acquainted with in another place. No shock, given that female soldiers in the Helmand Province had been few and far between. Selena should have recognized her immediately.

Knowing who her surprise visitor was did not answer the most important question of the moment. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Looking to recruit you for another war. You have the skills we need." Thompson glanced at Selena's bat. She didn't seem too impressed. "What you're really wondering is how I turned up in this bog, where you're obviously hiding from the world, maybe to drink yourself blind? We put a tracker on your truck, hoping to grab some alone time to talk. We couldn't visit in that densely populated street you live on."

Selena shook her head, trying to catch up to the machine-gun fire of words. "Tracking me? Recruit me for my skills? What are you talking about? I'm out of the Army."

"Me too." Thompson gazed up, her expression wondering. "Damn, it looks weird to me already. I know this sky, but it doesn't look right anymore."

"You aren't acting normal. You'd better start making some sense, and fast."

Thompson shook herself, returned her attention to Selena. "Sorry. This kind of took me by surprise. I didn't think I'd be coming home for any reason. But when they said they needed somebody who could explode shit, I thought of you."

"I told you, make sense. Or move so you're not between me and my truck."

"Yeah, this must be strange for you. Hold on to your ass, because I'm about to blow all the circuits. Do you believe in life on other planets?"

Selena tightened her grip on the bat. Thompson seemed lucid, but she acted far from rational. Following Selena into the Everglades. Telling her she was looking for a person who could blow crap up. Wearing that bizarre green vest that appeared thick and stiff, like body armor. And what was with the utility belt on her waist, an accessory worthy of Batman, with the longest flashlight ever slung from it? At least there was no sign Thompson carried a firearm.

PTSD. It's all the rage for those of us who saw combat. Wasn't she hurt in an explosion?

Selena eyed her warily. "Extraterrestrials, huh? It's a massive universe out there, so it's possible, I suppose."

"Good. Let me introduce you to your first alien. Arga, come on over and say hi."

The shape of a huge man, maybe the biggest Selena had ever seen, moved from around her pickup. Son of a bitch, had he been hiding there the whole while? Selena tensed and readied the bat.

He edged closer, giving her a better look in the dying light of the day. Stripes. He was painted all over in stripes. He was naked and painted all over in ivory stripes over deep brown skin.

Can't be naked. His pole's not out and waving. Wait—what the fuck is up with those ears?

He stood next to Thompson, his eyes shimmering like silvery twin moons in his striped face. Under large, pointed ears. Striped fox ears.

The earth shifted beneath Selena's feet. She choked, "What the hell is this shit?"