

## **Rightstarter** **Game-Changer**

A taxi cab pulls up to the front of the Paradyme Building in downtown Chicago. A 27-year-old black man steps out of the cab and, after paying the driver, looks at the building for a moment. “Hmph... Tetran headquarters...”, he thinks to himself while scoffing. Leon Spriggs is his name and he has a great deal of history with this building and the people in it. However, if he has his way, that history will end today.

Leon Spriggs is a +Positive (Plus-Positive): a human being possessing a genetic abnormality that naturally grants them abilities far beyond those of normal human beings. In this day in age, +Positives number at one to every hundred-thousand and, while they have existed for over 50 years, the world isn't wholly able to see past their “differences” yet. However, that isn't to say that there isn't a place for +Positives in the world; that is where the Paradyme Building fits in.

It serves as the administrative headquarters for the American government's branch of the international Tetran program. The Tetran serves as a black-bag option for high-risk military situations; they serve as, what many might consider, “the great equalizer” on the world stage. Every member nation of the United Nations retains at least two Tetran squad rosters and America possesses three. However, the name Tetran is derived from the program's policy that each squad retain only 4 active members. As destructive as +Positive abilities tend to be, the higher-ups deemed it necessary to limited

the number of operatives in the field on any given mission. Leon is a member of this program, but he's actually supposed to be on leave.

He stands in front of the building for a few moments and thinks to himself, gradually moving from reminiscence to aggravation, "To think, I used to be just a cop. Most people would think that my being a +Positive made me more than that, but I like to think that being just a cop was enough. But really, that's the whole point, isn't it? I wanted to be more. I had no idea a place like this... an organization like this even existed. But then, that just means that the people in charge were doing their jobs. It was almost unbelievable... it looked like the chance of a lifetime, the chance to help really make a difference in the world. I can't believe I was ever that naïve. I wonder if that's what the military looks like to normal people."

As he approaches the building, he remembers that his bereavement is supposed to start today and thus his father isn't far from his thoughts. He remembers back to the day five years ago when he told his father that he'd been recruited into the Tetran. Leon, his sister Sonya and his father had just finished eating. Sonya had left the table already when his father, David, said, "So, son... this program? Is this really what you want?" Leon was quiet for a moment before he said, "Part of me really wasn't sure at first. But the more I think on it, the more I realize just how much good I can really do in the program. I can get better training and do way more than I ever could on the force. Yeah, I think it's for the best."

“Well...” David Spriggs struggles with his words for a moment, but then he looked in his son’s eyes and said, “... you haven’t needed my permission in a long time, son. Don’t know why you thought you needed it now.” The two of them laughed and David said, “If you think this is the path that you want, then I’m happy for you. Just be mindful, son. Be mindful.”

That memory soon fades as he enters the building and is immediately greeted by the receptionist Paula in a warm, pleasant tone. “Leon! How are you doing today? I was so sorry to hear about your father. In fact, I thought you were on bereavement for the next week or so?” Her sincerity almost catches him off guard for a moment, sends him back to reality as he says, “Thanks, Paula and I am, but I had a bit of... business to attend to here in the office. Got a meeting up on 26 that just couldn’t wait.” He turns to leave, but then he softens up a bit, goes back and says in an equally pleasant tone, “Paula, why don’t you take your break a little early? Don’t you have a doctor’s appointment today?” Confused, she says, “But... my appointment isn’t for another hour.” He leans in and says in a more stern and serious tone, “Trust me... you need to head out early... take care of an errand or two, you know.” Her eyes meet his and she can see what his intent may be and she simply says nervously, “Okay... Leon. Okay.”

As he walks away from the receptionist desk, he detects a bit of shakiness to him as he thinks, “Hated to scare the girl like that, but this is some place... that she doesn’t need to be.” Normally, he’d head straight to the elevator in the lobby, but not today; today he’s taking the stairs. As he ascends the stairwell, his mind drifts backward. He

sees himself from one year ago with his father in his living room, having a drink together and Leon remembers being incredibly disturbed as he said, “It wasn’t right, dad. I mean... they didn’t do anything wrong. They did nothing wrong!” He slams his fist on the coffee table and his dad placed his hand on his shoulder and said, “Is it possible that you just don’t know the whole story, that there might be more going on that you don’t know about?”

Leon took a hard shot of his bourbon and said, “No! Believe me, I thought of that. I wanted to believe that. But it’s true, dad. They were simply... in the way of the powers that be.” His voice quivered as he continued, “And... and that couldn’t... be... allowed.” He buried his face in his hands and there’s a stark moment of silence before his father can even respond. Leon then said, almost with tears in his eyes, “Sure we’ve had issues with China in the past, but it didn’t justify this. They weren’t involved... they just happened to live there. They didn’t deserve that. Jared knew. HE KNEW WHAT WE WERE DOING!! And he... he didn’t say anything. I... I’m just as guilty as they are. I didn’t try to stop it!”

His father leaned over to him and said, “Son, could you have known? Look at me, boy! Could... you... have... known?” Leon looks up, his eyes were bloodshot as he said, “I didn’t find out ‘til they lowered the boom. It didn’t feel right... not like the other missions... but no. No, I didn’t know.” His dad looked him dead in the eye and said, “Then, boy... you ain’t got shit to be guilty for.” Leon struggled to speak and eventually said, “First Tricia... Dan... and Tricia! Now this? I can’t do it, I can’t do it anymore!”

“Son, there are people in this world... that have no problem doing whatever they want to get whatever they want. You know this, as well as anyone. There are people in our own government that would just as soon turn ‘pluses’ into weapons as soon as look at ‘em. You know that now too. You believed in them, son. You believed... and they shit on that belief. All you can do now is keep your own head on your shoulders. Know that things are smellin’ pretty sour right now and it’s liable to get worse. When it does, you pull anchor, you hear me?!” In response, Leon said, “But dad, you know that they won’t just let me leave.” His father looked at him unfazed and said, “You. Pull. Anchor. Always... always make sure that what you do in life are all things that you can live with, son. And if they aren’t, you do your damndest to make sure that you make ‘em right.”

That memory and an encompassing tingling sensation shock Leon back to the present as he continues to climb the stairwell, passing floor 12 with tears in his eyes. Almost in response to his father’s words, Leon whispers, “I’m sorry, dad. I couldn’t get it right.” Soon, he reaches the 18<sup>th</sup> floor and catches sight of a bulge on the stairway rail ahead of him. The sight of it insights another memory in him; this time, it’s one a little more recent.

Three months ago, in an underground bunker in China, Leon, clad in his all black mission gear, approached what he believed to be an unsuspecting scientist. However, once he reached twenty feet of distance, an automated gun suddenly extended from the ceiling and trained right on his face. As he was caught dead to rights, the scientist he was watching suddenly said in slightly broken English, “Tetran Operative Designate:

“Centurion”. Name: Spriggs, Leon; serial number 86479. I have been expecting you, young man. I began to wonder if you got my message.” As the scientist turned around, Leon raised his hands and said, “You made it pretty difficult to ignore, Dr. Jian, considering the fact that you hacked every form of communication I use; even the ones that I’ve made sure no one knows about.”

The gun quickly deactivated and Leon stepped forward as Dr. Jian asked, “So... you actually came alone?” Leon, slightly apprehensive, said, “You said for me to come alone, didn’t you?” Dr. Jian simply stared at Leon for a moment and asked him, “Remove your mask, young man, it’s rude to address your elders in such a manner.” Leon obeys and the doctor says, “When you let me go all those months ago, I thought for sure that it was a trap... that your superiors were attempting a ruse to discover my lab’s location. But after so much time passed and no attempts at a raid, I knew that there was something different about you. Come with me.” He led Leon further into his lab to one of his many lab tables and said, “Could it be assumed that you are having a crisis of faith in regards to your... ‘handlers’?” Leon’s silence spoke volumes to Dr. Jian who responded, “I thought as much.”

Dr. Jian began fiddling with a number of chemicals and devices as he continued, “Fear not, you are not the only one to stray from the Tetran’s flock. However, as you are, you will not succeed.” Confused, Leon asked, “So what? I need some kind of special training or something?” Jian scoffed at the notion and said, “Hmph... no. You need this.” Jian then swiftly turned around and stuck an automated syringe in Leon’s arm. Once the

contents entered his veins, Leon cried out in pain and shouted, “Ow! What the fuck was that?!” Jian, calm as ever, simply said, “The instrument of your freedom, but that was but one part of it.” Jian handed him a circular calculator-like device and said, “This is the other.” Leon took it and said, “How can you be so sure that I’m going to use this?” Jian simply turned back to his lab table and said, “You wouldn’t have come... if you hadn’t resolved to already.”

The sharp tingling sensation that has increased dramatically throughout his ascent shocks Leon right back to the present. His resolve restored, Leon continues up the stairwell and, in an almost seamless motion, he grabs at the bulge, revealing it to be a small package. He swipes it from the railing and, in almost the same motion, slips the package in his pants pocket. The sharp tingling he feels in every inch of his body is almost all-encompassing, but he simply keeps on climbing, all doubt vacant from his mind.

Minutes later, he reaches his destination on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor. As he opens the door to conference room 12, he’s greeted by a multitude of familiar faces. His squad leader Jared “Firelite” Crawley, his girlfriend Tricia “Red Zone” Washington, Daniel “Shift” Taft and their director, General Arthur Sands are waiting for him and he immediately thinks to himself, “All present and accounted for.” They all move over to him, giving their condolences as Leon stays silent and simply accepts it all.

From the back of the room, without getting up from his seat, General Sands asks, “Would you mind telling me what this is about, ‘Centurion’?” Leon notices that Sands

specifically called him by his call-sign, meaning that he has no patience today, which suits him just fine. Without speaking much, Leon moves to the front of the room and stands at the conference podium. He takes a deep breath and begins as calm as can be, “I know a lot of you are confused as to why I’m here today. There are some concerns that need to be addressed. I’ve been a member of the Tetran program for almost five years and the four of us have been a squad for over three years. When I first joined, there almost seemed to be a... an almost limitless amount of potential with an organization like this. The things I thought that we could accomplish, the good we could do. Looking back, I realize now that I really didn’t get the way things worked.”

There’s an air of confusion throughout the room as Tricia asks, “What’s going on, baby?” Nonchalantly, Leon responds, “Oh, I’m getting to that. My view of the world has changed extremely and I can’t say that I like what I see. If there’s one thing that I always held true, it’s that if you can’t count on anyone, you can count on your squad. But I guess that’s just not true... is it? Trish, I know you’ve been cheating on me with Dan. How long, I don’t know; can’t say I care either. And don’t try to deny it; you’re fast, not invisible. You’re definitely the biggest mercenary personality I’ve ever met, so this shouldn’t have surprised me.”

The look on Tricia’s face is one of purest shock, but not of denial and Leon doesn’t just stop with her, “Daniel, you were always a dick, but I thought that maybe there was a human being under that shifting mass of skin and bones of yours. But after you bailed on me in Prague in the middle of that search and rescue and now this shit with

Trish... no, you proved it, you're really just a dick. Fuck you." He then turns and looks Jared dead in his eyes and says, "Jared... you're my squad leader. Man, I would've backed any of your plays, backed you in any fight. And you couldn't be straight with me? I respect you and believed in you, but to find out the things that you've been keeping from us... the things we've really been doing. And there's the perfect segue to our last contestant..." He then turns and stares Sands dead in the eyes, more intensely than any of the others and says, "...General Sands. You know for a fact that everything I've said is true. You know it because you've watched it happen and you know that there are even more "incidents" that I could be naming as well. The raids, the "territorial disputes", etc.; the things you've had us do and you had to pull this shit on me."

General Sands simply listens, visibly unaffected as Leon continues, steadily becoming affected, "'Tetran Protocol: Article 19: Should an unexpected familial emergency arise while an operative is in the field but not in a life or death/combat situation, they are to be notified and, if necessary, substituted.' Sound familiar, General? Doesn't matter though, right? After all, the mission supercedes all else, right? It was a simple reconnaissance mission! Hell, we were over-staffed. We were gone three more weeks and I didn't even find out what happened until we got back. MY FATHER DIED AND, NOT ONLY WAS I NOT HERE TO BURY HIM, BUT MY SISTER HAD TO ENDURE THE LOSS BY HERSELF!!! SHE'S SIXTEEN AND SHE HAD TO DEAL WITH IT HERSELF!!!"

As the room maintains its stunned silence, behind the podium, Leon regains his composure and pulls the small package from the stairwell from his pocket. He opens it, revealing the small device and presses a code sequence into it and continues, “In light of everything that’s happened, especially recently, I hereby tender my resignation from the Tetran Program.” With blinding speed, Leon throws the device at the wall behind him and it sticks flat to it and sparks to life. A pulse wave emits from the device and a series of alarms suddenly start blaring and the room immediately locks down as metallic panels slide over the wall paneling. The group quickly starts to scramble with Jared shunting his hands forward and, suddenly, his face turns ghostly white as nothing happens. Soon, that same expression is shared by Tricia and Dan and they start shouting at Leon, but at this point, he has completely stopped listening.

As his former teammates rush at him to get him to release them, Leon swiftly stomps his foot, causing a massive shockwave that knocks them all for a loop. Leon Spriggs’ +Positive ability is that he can absorb ambient kinetic energy and metabolize it to increase his physical attributes; and after his 26 floor trek to this confrontation, to say that he’s brimming with energy would be an understatement. Leon says as his “teammates” attempt to get their bearings, “Now you’ll all get to see firsthand what I’ve learned in my time here and you’ve only got yourselves to blame.” He soon cracks his knuckles and his “teammates” realize the frightening truth; their abilities have been negated, while Leon’s are still active.

Forty-five minutes later, downtown Chicago is now in chaos as the top of the Paradyme Building is ablaze and literally chunks of the building are missing in what many on-lookers are calling a possible terrorist attack. With the fire fighters, police officers and E.M.S. workers scramble to help those that need it, Leon Spriggs works his way through the crowd with slightly torn clothing and a scuff here and there. Through the chaos, Leon finds a hot dog vendor a block away from the Paradyme building and buys a hot dog with everything on it. The vendor sees his condition and asks, “Hey, buddy. Were at the Paradyme tower? You okay?”

Leon, after taking a bite out of his hot dog, says, “Sometimes... a man has to do what he has to do to balance the scales... he has to do his damndest to make things right. Not everyone’ll see that, but then, it’s not always for everyone... is it? You take care, man.” Leon finishes his hot dog and walks away, leaving the vendor dumbfounded, but leaving himself with a feeling that he hadn’t felt in a long time. He felt no regret. Things have changed now, but no matter what they say from here on, no one will keep him from doing what’s right. It’s the most powerful feeling in the world and he’s going to need every bit of it... for the war to come.