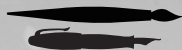


**THE
SECOND CHANCE
OF DARIUS LOGAN**

DAVID F. WALKER



Scholastic Press / New York

Copyright © 2024 by David F. Walker

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-82642-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

24 25 26 27 28

Printed in Italy 183

First edition, July 2024

Book design by Omou Barry



CHAPTER 1

Darius Logan ran for his life. And more than almost anything else, he hated running. His pounding heart drowned out all other sound. Fire filled his lungs. Every muscle felt like it was being torn apart. But the cop chasing after him—barely a block behind and gaining fast—kept Darius running as if his life depended on it, which it did.

His mind raced nearly as fast as his legs. He had to get away, even though he didn't know where to get away to. Darius had no real friends. No family. Nowhere to run. He kept running anyway, dashing across a street that cut through the decaying rubble of dead neighborhoods called Broke-land.

Crossing to the other side of the street, Darius ran to the end of the block and turned the corner. A side street stretched out before him, lined on both sides with four- and five-story apartment buildings. People once lived in these buildings. That was before The Attack.

No one lived this far into Broke-land—at least no one who could be considered fully human. This far in, the buildings were little more than burned-out shells. Block after block of giant tombstones, marking the

graves of entire neighborhoods long left for dead. And everywhere it stunk of death and decay, an overwhelming smell—like boiled garbage left out to rot—made worse by the humid night air.

Darius breathed deep through his mouth, trying to catch his breath. *I can taste the air*, he thought while fighting to keep from gagging. *And I'm pretty sure that someone, or something, is watching from the shadows.*

Nearly eight years had passed since The Attack, and nothing had been done to rebuild. Rumors frequently circulated about plans to do so, but reconstructing fiftysomething square miles of devastation would not be easy, especially considering the number of criminals, dropouts, and metahumans that had claimed what they simply called the Broke as their own. And so the Broke continued to crumble and stink and fester, its unofficial residents hiding in the darkness, and the only sign of life being a desperate Black teenager running from a cop.

None of the streetlights on the block worked anymore and clouds partially obscured the crescent moon, making it difficult to see. The nighttime shadows cast by the empty buildings stretched out like the bony fingers of a Grim Reaper come to claim all light.

Darius briefly considered turning around to see if the cop chasing him was any closer. And for a split second, he hoped that some cop-hating metahuman would jump out of the shadows and help him. But he couldn't count on the help of a mutant stranger, nor could he risk slowing down, not even to look over his shoulder. *Probably can't see anything in the dark anyway, and the last thing I want is to owe a metahuman any favors*, he thought as he kept running.

Halfway down the block, Darius couldn't go on anymore. A terrible pain stabbed at his side—like a hot knife jammed deep into his ribs.

Up ahead he saw a narrow alley running between two of the decaying buildings. Alleys like this cut through much of the Broke, and Darius spent most of his youth avoiding them. Back then, there were too many unknown dangers hiding in the narrow paths—desperate junkies willing to rob anyone to get a fix. The dangers had changed—the junkies were replaced by people who had either slipped through the cracks of society or had gone into hiding—but the need for caution remained. And of course, there might be some of those giant rats that ate people when there was nothing to be found in the garbage.

Darius thought about all the things that might be waiting in the alley. *None of it matters*, he thought as the stabbing pain worsened. *I have to stop and catch my breath.*

Darius stood about fifteen feet back in the alley—far enough away that someone running past wouldn't see him, but not so far back that he couldn't see the dark street he had just turned off. *Please, don't let the cop hear me panting like a dog.*

A wave of nausea overtook him as he breathed in the putrid air of the alley—someone or something had recently used it as a toilet. The stench overwhelmed Darius. He fought to keep from vomiting while at the same time trying to figure out how he had messed up so bad.

Ten minutes earlier, Darius had been in the abandoned remains of a parking garage with three other guys. He barely knew Karlito, the one who talked him into what quickly proved to be a mistake. The other two, Mickey and some guy they called Bay-Bay, he knew even less. That didn't stop Darius from tagging along when Karlito asked him if he wanted to make some money.

By nature, Darius didn't talk a lot. Over the years, as he drifted in and out of foster homes, juvenile detention, and the shelters that housed young people like him, he learned that most people really didn't listen to what he had to say, so he didn't say much.

Karlito, by comparison, never stopped talking. "I'm a man of a million ideas," he would say. And even though most of Karlito's ideas were bad, Darius said nothing. He should have. But he didn't.

Karlito's latest get-rich-quick scheme involved selling Adrenaccelerate—better known as eXXeLL—in an abandoned parking garage deep in the heart of the Broke. On the streets, a single dose of eXXeLL fetched more money than five times the same amount of cocaine. Of course, as far as illegal drugs went, possession of Adrenaccelerate with intent to sell was not just a federal offense, it violated the Global Enhancement Accords—the international laws governing people with superpowers.

"Cops ain't gonna mess with us in the Broke—nothin' there but mutants and freaks. Besides, it ain't like we're the Masters of D.E.A.T.H. or Doc Kaos," said Karlito—like he knew what he was talking about.

From the beginning, Karlito's plan sounded ill conceived. The presence of Mickey just made everything worse. Mickey was so stupid, Darius wondered if he had been dropped on his head as a child.

"That boy is so ignorant, stupid must be in his bones" is what Darius's mother would have said about Mickey, if she were alive. But if his mother had been alive, chances were pretty good Darius would never have found himself in the sort of circumstances that brought guys like Karlito, Mickey, and Bay-Bay into his life.

When the cops yelled, “Freeze! You’re all under arrest!” it took Darius a split second longer than the others to realize that he should run. The others bolted like roaches when the lights turned on, leaving Darius holding the bag, literally. Karlito thought it would be a good idea. “You the youngest,” Karlito said. “Something goes wrong, you a minor. Cops won’t come down on you as hard.”

It can’t go much more wrong than this, Darius thought, hiding in the foul-smelling alley, gasping for air.

The doses of eXXeLL Karlito stuffed into Darius’s backpack made being a minor irrelevant. The way Darius figured it, he had enough Adrenaccelerate in his backpack to send him away for life. *I’ve already got two strikes against me—I’m screwed if I get caught.*

The sound of feet pounding the pavement of the darkened street caught Darius’s attention. With nothing else making noise for blocks and blocks, the police officer’s running footsteps thundered like rapidly approaching cannon fire. Darius half expected the ground to shake. And just like that, the cop ran past the alley, never breaking his stride.

Darius took off toward the far end of the alley, stopping where it opened on to the block running parallel to the one he’d just left. More darkness greeted him. And maybe, just maybe, the faint sound of laughter. Burned-out streetlights obscured the abandoned and crumbling buildings. He stood in the opening of the alley, looking both ways, trying to figure out what to do, when it suddenly occurred to him. *I still have the eXXeLL on me.* In all the confusion and running, he forgot to ditch it.

Still fighting to catch his breath, he struggled to get his arms free of

the straps, and just as he was about to drop the backpack, Darius heard a voice behind him.

“Freeze!”

The single word seemed to bounce off the walls on either side of the alley.