

Chapter One: Y'all's Daddies Are Looking for Y'all.

The heat index was in the triple digits, but the three young men worked together to bring the ultimate American muscle car back to life, with a few upgrades. Every inch of metal was sanded down till the steel shined like the aluminum foil they used to wrap their lunches in. Next, the few rusty spots were cut out and hand shaped replacements were welded back in place and sanded flat before a paper-thin layer of Bondo was used to cover any small pitting. Finally, it was sanded down again to a mirror finish before the base coat of midnight blue paint was applied from front to rear, to serve as a base layer for the second coat. Baby blue paint was swirled with the darker base color to be misted with real silver flake over the base coat during the tacky phase of it drying using a direct jet nozzle to achieve a chameleon styled paint finish. Then it was allowed to dry completely under propane powered heat lamps in a sealed garage before the three clear coats were applied in the same manner. It had taken months to dig enough wild ginseng root, catching newts by the dozens for sale as bass bait, and grabbing cottonmouths or timber rattlers by the head to milk their venom sacks for sale to create anti-venom. But all twelve ounces of true silver flake was worth the ultimate sparkle on the 1969 Chevrolet Camaro SS.

The hood had to be cut and inducted just to make room for the Edelbrock dual intake manifold and twin-mounted Fuel Injected Holly Four Barreled Carburetors sitting on top of the bored and stroked 454 big-block. The frame had to be reinforced to keep the 427 six speed manual transmission from twisting the frame when the car lifted its front tires off the ground in first gear. The reinforcements also added more weight to the front end for when they wanted to just rocket off the line in second gear. The distributor cap had been twisted one-sixteenth of an inch out, just to make the idle sound as rough as the loping cough of a beast dying from a lung infection. Yet it would run as smooth as butter sliding across a hot griddle when the accelerator was held with a

slight bit of pressure against the brakes, or when the five-point harnesses felt so *ab-so-fucking-lutely* necessary as it floated down a dark country highway, at night, with no lights, like a low flying beast of legend, and the speedometer needle vibrating in the middle of the mileage counter.

All that mechanical power, all that hard work, the absolute attention to detail into the individual stitches in the buckskin leather for the reupholstery of the seats, both front and back, the care and compassion into making sure the paint went on just right, and yet they failed to do one thing. Label the fucking wires properly. When it came time to wire it up for its maiden voyage on the strip for Friday night under the lights, with all the other teenagers in town, there was a failure to check the rear turn signals. This left no defense to be had when the dash cam video from the cruiser proved it was a legal stop. Because the boys turned left, from a left turn only lane, on a green light, with their signal flashing... for a right turn at the rear of the car.

The driver was being responsible and abstaining as his buddies laughed at him and took the first sips of their cold beers, just before their whole world came crashing down. They had just picked up two of the cheerleaders from the high school varsity squad, the girls had bought the beer for their party, and they were willing to let the boys crash the cheer squad's celebration party for winning the state championships, especially since the footballers were grieving for yet another season of 1 and 9. All they asked for was a ride to the party.

When the blue lights came on the two rebels without a cause groaned as they just knew their lives had come to an end before their senior year even started. Yet neither noticed the two girls swear and try to crawl into the floorboard of the backseat. Their only thoughts were to grab the open beers from the girls, sing along with the song on the radio "DO YOU WANT TO DRANK",

chug those two beers, and laugh at the circumstances. Until the moment they learned what true terror was.

The officer shined his light around in the front seat until he saw the tall boy can sticking up above the passenger's thighs and began to laugh. Then he shined the light into the backseat and fell quiet. He was so dumb struck that he had to shine the light back and forth across the backseat, from corner to corner, only stopping on the angelic face of each girl, several times. The only thing the officer could think of to say was "Yall's daddies is looking for y'all."

The girl behind the driver was the only daughter of the duly elected sheriff who had been running uncontested in the county since he retired from the US Navy as a Senior Chief Petty Officer, Vietnam Veteran and former Raider Craft Instructor for the Combined Arms Amphibious Assault School. The other girl was the little princess of the only federal judge in the entire tricounty area.

The young man sitting in the back seat volunteered to accept the plea deal for the illegal purchase of alcohol, minor in possession, and underage drinking, which would all just never get filed if he kept his word to bring signed enlistment papers to the judge's office in 2 weeks or less. He gladly accepted the generous offer, because both the judge and the sheriff learned shortly after the deal was offered and accepted that neither girl had their panties on when they got out of the car. It was a choice between military or chain gang, which was personally run by the sheriff and his department, the young man happily held up his word and returned that Monday morning with orders for Paris Island, one month before the rest of his senior class would graduate high school.

Chapter Two: Always tip the waitress more.

Two fireteam leaders passed a spent shell casing back and forth based on who won the bet as to whether the stripper or the waitress would drink the body shot from between the breasts of the other woman. The loser would pay for a lap dance for one of the four men to keep the strippers rotating to the table like a revolving door. Neither of them went to the stage to hand over cash to the dancers, but the waitress always got paid the cost of the next round as a tip every time she came to the table, or double if she took a body shot. The two boots, the only two who were deemed ready for the next week's training, were confused as to why it seemed like every dancer in the club came and sat with these two broken old men who never tipped the dancers while they were on stage. The strippers even seemed to be competing for the old guys' attention. At 24 years old, these old geezers were starting to make the other customers in the bar angry because they were getting most of the attention from all the dancers and waitresses in the club.

When quarter till midnight rolled around and the last call was announced the 6-3, 280-pound Navajo cursed as he was still holding the casing in his hand, meaning he was the one who had to bite the bullet. He then looked at the young men and said, "Alright boys, the parties over and we got PT in a few hours, get a move on." He then patted the smaller man on the shoulder and said, "You won Wayward. I'll put the kids to bed," and then turned towards the door and the complaining younger men. The smaller guy grinned ear to ear and said, "Good night, Bear. I'll see y'all in the morning."

As they got into the taxi there were so many questions, and Bear did his best to pass on the knowledge the two old fogies had learned during their time in the fleet, "First off young padawans, always tip the waitresses more than the cost of the drinks for the first few rounds. No matter what country or kind of bar you're in. The next round will always be delivered before the

first runs out or anybody else in the bar gets theirs. Meaning, you'll get priority treatment over the cheap one- and five-dollar tippers. Plus, they know which strippers are into partying and which ones are just out to take your money. How you treat the waitresses also tells the strippers a lot about you. Get them to do body shots from each other's chest and they will both get tipsy and extremely horny; they have men lusting after them all night long, but licking a woman in public is different. Tell her that the body shots are meant for you, then offer the waitress the price of a lap dance to take a shot off of the stripper or vice versa, chances are it will be strong. Do that a time or two and watch the rest line up. Most of the good dancers won't even seriously talk to you unless a waitress points her in your direction. Tip the waitress with some money, get her and the dancer tipping each other with some liquor, and you just might get lucky enough to get tipped over in their bed."

At OH Four Thirty, a brand-new lieutenant, fresh from OCS, stood next to the outgoing platoon commander and was highly pissed off to find out that one of his "short timers" was AWOL for PT. When the pickup truck squalled to a stop in the barracks parking lot, everyone stopped to look at what was going on. A tall, athletic redhead jumped out of the passenger's door, the flannel shirt she was barely wearing flew open and gave every man standing-in-formation a clear view of her washboard abs, laser shaved mound, and lusciously sculpted breasts. The missing fire-team leader crawled from the middle of the bench seat, was quickly grabbed for a deep and passionate kiss that drew cat calls from several of the buildings in the quad. As he managed to break away from her, he hopped up and down as he struggled to get his tennis shoes on.

This slowed him down just enough that the driver was able to run around the back of the truck with her bountiful tits swaying and bouncing under a platoon PT shirt, in a manner that left no doubt to anyone with a heartbeat and sight, about the freedom from any breast restraints

underneath it. He looked up just in time to catch the blonde as she leaped towards him in a way that forced him to catch her and swing her around demonstrating the lack of panties too. As she slid down his body to stand on her tip toes while still kissing him, it caused her shirt to ride up and show off her taught ass to the guys with a glimpse of the shapely and naked heaven below it. The redhead had already jumped back into the truck and slid over to stop behind the steering wheel while her girlfriend kissed him goodbye as well. When the last kiss broke, he helped her into the truck, closed the door and complained that she was stealing his PT shirt, and he would be out of uniform. She pulled the shirt off tossed it to him, and the women's laughter as they drove away, was drowned out by the roar of approval from all the men who had come out to see what was going on.

As the young man ran up to the platoon two minutes late to formation and tugging his T-shirt on, the senior lieutenant could only shake his head at the scratches and bite marks all over the young man's neck, chest and back. He could smell the scent of sex and alcohol clinging to the young man from twenty feet away. "Lance Corporal, you're late, out of uniform, drunk and obviously have had more than enough exercise for the day. Get cleaned up and meet the Staff Seargent after PT to discuss your punishment." The young man stopped dead, stood at attention and sounded off as loud as he could "Sir, Yes, Sir", then began jogging to the barracks. As the rest of the platoon started to jog off five minutes later, "Fly Like an Eagle" blared from the stereo system in a certain room, on the fourth floor, where an almost sober Marine sang along at the top of his lungs.

Later he confessed to the Staff Sergeant and officers that the only reason he was late was because the gate guards were being truly and offensively M.P.'ish. "They didn't want to let the driver drive on base because she was naked and had no shoes on, so I had to give her my T-shirt

and shoes just to get on base. Then they wanted to write the passenger a ticket for not wearing a seatbelt, because she was bent over my lap to make sure there was plenty of lubricant for the driver to play with 'my stick shifter' as she approached the gate." At the end of it all, he grinned like the cat that got caught swallowing the canary whole. While standing tall and at attention he accepted his punishment and dismissal by bellowing out "Absolutely worth it, sir."

A few minutes later, he looked the Staff Seargent straight in the eyes, and humbly stated in a quiet voice, "I'm truly sorry for being late boss. I hope the new guys don't pick up my bad habits, but I'll do my best to teach them right for you."

With a solemn grin the 38-year-old veteran of several wars stuck his hand out to shake Wayward's hand and said, "You've got one deployment left, do the best you can for them, and then go home and enjoy that well-deserved rest. Now, get, out, of, my, office, you, dirt, bag!" Each word of the last sentence was yelled and punctuated with the slap of a rolled-up copy of the Non-Judicial-Punishment paperwork that he would have to add to the young man's records later.

Chapter Three: Breathing Dirt.

"Lance Corporal was my favorite rank; I was meritoriously promoted to it three times. All the privileges and none of the responsibilities of a full blood stripped Corporal...", then as he looked away from the campfire and into the dark, he added so quietly that almost no one heard him "Until SNAFU becomes FUBAR, and the bleeding starts." As the finishing notes of "Salisbury Hill" faded away, the intro of "The Immigrant Song" began thumping and a young lady heard him. She had kept her eyes on him ever since he walked up wearing an unbuttoned camo shirt. The shadows from the flames played havoc with her senses as they danced across his chest and stomach muscles. She thought she was looking at the most beautifully cut piece of beef she had

ever seen. She just knew she had to wake up in the morning with his arms still wrapped around her naked body. She would also find out why he strutted around like some kind of want-a-be pimp-daddy when he had so much else going for him.

The one they called Wayward Angel came to; he was staring at a clear blue sky, with a leaf hovering in it as if it was suspended in time. He couldn't move, couldn't blink, couldn't hear anything, and couldn't even remember where he was or what was going on. Then he began to hear a dull bass drum go thump, thump, thump, a pause and then a repeat of the thump, thump, thump. The leaf started to move, and dirt sprayed across his face like Mother Earth was pissed at him and had just spat in his face, and it made him turn his head to his left. That was the moment the pain started to hit him as fast as he had woken up. The hurt locker set in, starting with both ears, his head, the whole right side of his body: shoulder, ribs, and hand. When his legs came online, he would have sworn someone had poured molten glass across right his knee and foot.

Everything was tinged red when he reopened his eyes, and he had to blink several times to clear it. Only then did he realize he was trying to blink blood from his line of sight. He rolled on to his left side just to try and get away from whatever was hurting him and saw another body lying next to him, well most of one anyway. Part of the right arm and leg was missing, and he knew he had to help the man. When he examined the arm, he saw a piece of shrapnel stuck into the end of the upper bone of the man's arm, the Humerus or funny bone. Why did he even know that, and why was it not as humorous right now, at least the heat from the still glowing metal had cauterized the wound. He crawled on top of him, jerked the man's belt off and tied it around the guy's thigh to try and prevent him from bleeding out.

She got what she wanted, well, almost. He was lying behind her mumbling in his sleep, and she was happy she had gotten his attention. During the middle of the night, she had gotten up to go pee and put on his camouflaged uniform shirt, because it smelled so heavenly. There was the sweet smell of the bonfire from the night before and his musk permanently mixed into it from his time of wearing it. She had originally thought it was supposed to be grey, light green, and tan, until he explained that salt from his sweat, and the many oceans or seas he had swam through while wearing it, had faded his clothes to a pale comparison of the black, dark green and brown that it was supposed to be. She had been woken up by the local airwing doing their first non-firing pass before starting their morning gun and bombing practice runs at the range just a half mile from where his parent's house was. No wonder they could afford twenty acres so cheaply, it came with a hell of a 6 AM alarm clock.

His own leg was throbbing, and he felt like he had pissed himself; when he looked down, he was terrified because he could not believe what he was seeing. His foot was all wrong. Not only were the toes pointed outwards and the sole of the boot on it pointed at his face, but it was growing out of his right knee. When he sat up after taking his own belt off to try and use it as a tourniquet, he noticed that his foot was still where it belonged. He just had grown an extra one, ass backwards, out of his knee. Then what he was seeing started to make a little more sense, it was the other guy's foot that had embedded itself leg bones first into his own leg, right through the top of his knee cap. He had enough common sense to tie off the tourniquet, just before he was dumb enough to rip the alien foot out of his own leg. The pain was so intense that he screamed at the top of his lungs.

As she was trying to wiggle around to face him and wake him with light kisses across his face she got one hell of a Charlie-horse in her calf muscle. Damn, it hurt so bad, maybe she should have drunk more water last night like he told her too. He had been so sweet, he carried her to his bed because she was too drunk to walk, and he laid down next to her and rubbed her back until she went to sleep. All because he did not feel right taking advantage of her while she was too drunk to consent. That's OK, as soon as she got this leg muscle to calm down, she would pay him back for clam jamming her, then putting her away wet and frustrated last night. He was so lucky she loved his blonde haired, blue eyed, chiseled Viking sex god look. Just then the first A-10 from the local Air Force Base began its first practice hot run of the day.

The other man came to, sat up, and started screaming. "Chi sei? Dove siamo? Santa madre di Dio, mi fa male la gamba? Cosa mi hai fatto?" Why did he know the man was speaking Italian? Why did he understand him? Why didn't he know the answers to the questions the man was asking? And what the hell was that thumping? Just then the sound came rushing back to him. There was the thunderous growling BRRRRRT of the A-10's signature gun raining hell from above, the dull thump-thump of a Mark 19 firing 40-millimeter grenades, in short bursts, to rain mayhem on someone down range. Interlaced with that was a slightly higher pitched rattle of someone firing an M-Two-Forty-Nine on pure auto, when this was over, he would have that SAW gunner's ass for wasting ammo. Then came the sound of men yelling back and forth to one another "AMBUSH FRONT!!!"

"PUSH THROUGH!!!"

"COVERING!!!"

"MOVING!!!""

And it all came flooding back. He was working as an Italian translator with the link-up team.

They were to hook up with the UN Forces' San Marco Battalion, as part of the UN operations.

He knew what he had to do. He reached his bloodied right hand up to the back of the Italian soldier's neck, twisted his hand up into the Italian's gear, rolled over, and started dragging them both towards the friendlies. He was yelling "CORPSMAN" with every movement of his aching right arm and leg, just to keep from passing out from the pain. All he could smell was the mixture of the acrid sweet stink of cordite, that he had come to know and love, the aromatic fragrance of the burning trees around him, the dirt he was breathing in when face down, and a sweet bacon-like scent that sent shivers down his spine.

She was confused when he grabbed her by the back of the shirt and twisted his hand around in it so tight, she could barely breathe or move her arms. Then he rolled off the bed and slammed her face first into the floor like some kind of WWE move. Now she knew why those wrestlers looked so dumb when it happened to them on tv, she felt just as stupid as they looked, but she hadn't quite lost consciousness. He was yelling for some "Poor Man" as he dragged her across the bedroom floor on his belly. This guy was fucking nuts, and she was being terrorized out of her mind. Yeah, everybody knows "Don't stick your dick into crazy," but what are you supposed to do when crazy tries to stick its dick into you? The only thing she could do was to try and roll over and punch him in the leg, maybe that would derail his crazy train. When she heard the clang of her rings hitting metal, she knew it wasn't good, and then her fist started hurting because this freak was wearing some kind of leg armor to bed. So, she started clawing his hands and punching him in the side of his ribs, nothing worked. And why the hell was he yelling "POOR MAN" every time he dragged them about six inches across the floor before doing it again.

Wayward came to as his hand struck a wall that wasn't supposed to be there. At first, he couldn't figure out what was going on. Where was he? What happened to the pitched battle?

Why was he in what looked like a bedroom and not on that field in the mountains? Who the hell

was this half naked girl wearing his BDU top? Then pieces of his memories started sifting in like the sands in an hourglass, ever so slowly filling the empty spaces. He survived the firefight, spent six months healing before being medically discharged, but would wear a brace for the rest of his life. Luckily all he needed was an artificial knee, which the VA would constantly deny. All he lost was part of his hearing from the holes in both eardrums, part of his right kneecap, and part of his big toe on his right foot. Then there was the constant bloody ringing in his ears that tried to drive him insane every waking moment of his life. The occasional migraine, and of course the nightmares that seem to come from out of nowhere and he could never tell when or why they would happen, day or night, asleep or awake. He started to get to his knees, let go of the shirt, and choked up as he tried to apologize to the young woman.

When he heard the rapid smacking of what sounded like distant fireworks, he instinctively knew it for what it really was, heavy duty gunfire making impact on a target nearby. He dove on top of her as the second A-10 in the practice flight passed over his parents' house, just a few hundred feet off the ground. This was quickly followed by the scream of the jet engine as the pilot pulled up to avoid shaking the windows of the houses as much as he could. It was a testament to how fast the pilot was flying straight at the deck, to avoid any rounds from straying into the neighborhoods around the range. The BRRRRT of that infamous gun, that every infantryman in a bind prayed to hear, shattered Wayward's prayers that all of this was just a nightmare.

When she finally got the crazy bastard off her, he was just staring at her, mumbling how sorry he was and huge crocodile tears running down his face. She had had enough, she didn't stop to grab her clothes or anything, she just ran for her car. Thank God she had left her purse in the console last night, so the keys were in it. She dug trenches in the grass as she fishtailed out of his

yard, and gravel flew dozens of yards as she hit the road in front of that looney farm. She was done, there was no way she would ever see that crazy bastard again.

Chapter Four: Go Ahead, Give me a reason not to

Wayward came to as someone had just kicked the bottom of his boot. The sun must be setting based on the light coming in through the edge of the tree line, so it had to be time to get moving. Blinking his eyes clear he managed to croak out, "Uh, yeah, I'm up, I'll be ready in five."

"Still a little early for that. I'll give you thirty." The voice of the young officer came back to him through the dim light. "Just wanted to wish you a happy birthday, shithead."

"Uh, Sir?" Came a puzzled response from Wayward.

"Today's your 21st birthday, right?" The LT managed to make it sound more like a statement than a question.

"Is it?" Was the best Wayward's sleep addled mind could come up with. Man, he really needed more than three hours of sleep, but there was always so much to do for a team leader while in country.

"Yeah, it is, so you'll finally be legal to do half of the stupid shit you have been written up for over the last few years." Came the reply from the young officer with as much sarcasm as he could put into it.

"Damn, I guess it is, if you say so sir." Wayward acquiesced to the LT's word as law.

"Just bring you team back tonight and I will buy the first round for everyone when we get home." With that the second lieutenant turned and walked away. He didn't notice how every enlisted man around him shivered with how bad he had just jinxed the entire night.

The buzz Wayward felt was starting to wear off and he looked around the kitchen wondering what in the actual fuck was going on. He didn't even know half of the people here, in his kitchen, at his birthday party. He had invited maybe two or three people over, because that was all he felt comfortable being around. He really didn't even want that many because he no longer felt like his birthdays were worth celebrating. His acquaintances had gotten it into their heads that they wanted to help him celebrate with an "EPIC PARTY." Granted the female to male ratio was about 3 to 1, but it just didn't feel right.

Most of the males roaming around had criminal convictions, tattoos on their faces and hands, and lacked the confidence to leave their little peepees alone when trying to talk to anyone.

Wayward wasn't going to talk smack about tattoos, he understood that each had a meaning, hell he had three tattoos himself. His left shoulder had a gunslinger standing in front of the full moon with a sword stuck in the ground beside him, his right had the first unit he had ever served in, and his left armpit had a tattooed version of his dog tags. After following that train of thought, he figured out what it was that was bothering him. He wasn't with family; he would be ashamed to have any of his brothers to see who he was celebrating with these days.

With that he stood up and walked out the sliding glass doors to the backyard. After breathing in deep and exhaling slowly, he started staring off towards the tree line behind the house. He turned as someone hollered out the name his parents had given him. The guy everyone called Buck waved at him and said "It's too important of a day to be so glum. Come on back over here and I

will buy ya a beer and a girl." The small gold bar that dangled around Buck's neck glimmered in the last rays of the sun and caught Wayward's attention.

He came to a decision in that instant and tossed out a half-hearted reply, "Sure, just going to water the bushes and I'll be right back."

Cookie had marked this day on her calendar weeks ago and checked it every day counting down until she could call her best friend and wish him a "Happy Birthday." Today had been an epically bad day, it was one thing after another, and all she wanted to do was relax and watch some tv.

"Call him."

Cookie sat up quickly and looked around, it sounded like someone was whispering to her, only she was the only one in the apartment, and the couch sat against the wall. After listening for a few seconds, she thought she was imagining it. As she was easing herself backdown onto the couch she heard it again, "Call him."

"Is someone there?" OK, so that time she thought she had heard it a little clearer. She had been home for about an hour, taken a shower, grabbed some snacks and just wanted to relax on her first day off in weeks. Surely, she wasn't going insane, she couldn't afford it, damn waitressing job didn't pay enough for good healthcare. After a tense few seconds she jumped when the scream queen on the tv demonstrated her talents that won her that title.

Cookie quickly grabbed the remote and muted it. After a few more seconds of listening to the empty apartment, she shook her head and changed the channel as she slowly leaned back. "Stupid movie must have gotten into my head."

As soon as her shoulder blades touched the back of the couch, she heard it as clearly as someone was standing right in front of her carrying on a normal conversation. "Call him."

When Wayward got just ten-feet into the edge of the woods his knees went weak and dropped to his knees and almost fell over because the stupid brace got hung up on a small sprout of a pine tree. True to the form that he was in, he cussed and swore like a drunken Marine as he pulled the damn bush out of the brace so he could try and force his right leg into the kneeling position. It hurt like hell, but it wouldn't matter at all in about 30 seconds based on the way his life had gone so far. When he finally settled in, he tried to remember what he had been taught by his grandparents; all he could remember was he had to place his hands palms together, close his eyes, bow his head and say what was truly in his heart. "I'm done. I'm tired of hurting all the time, and I can no longer think of a reason you chose to save me. There's no reason for me to be here. So, just give me one good reason not to do it."

Cookie shot off the couch and sprinted for the kitchen. She just knew she was acting out a scene from one of those cheesy slasher movies, but she would grab a butcher knife from the kitchen and then use the phone to call for help. As she sprinted into the kitchen, she glanced towards the wall mounted phone and saw all the bright red Xs over the little squares representing the days on the top page. She slowed down as she noticed the red sharpie dangling from the string in front of the calendar, it was swinging slowly side to side. The red Xs stopped next to a big red cluster of circles around the day she had marked for her best friend's birthday, and there were two words written, in her own handwriting, inside the center circle. "Call him."

There was an old paper napkin pinned next to the phone on the wall where he had written his number on it almost six years ago. She had been flooded with a feeling of joy for no reason the day she had found it a few weeks ago. It was tucked into that old middle school yearbook next to his picture where he had written a cryptic message. "Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done." But this phone number was supposed to be to a pager and surely, he had already changed it by now. No one even carried those stupid things anymore, but she had to try, she was not about to ignore that voice a fourth time.

Wayward pulled the pistol from the small of his back and racked a round into the chamber. "You never listened to any of their prayers. I don't know why I should expect any different." As he looked down at the pistol and thumbed the safety off, one of his nervous habits saved his life. He had gotten so used to carrying a pager all the time that he just kept doing it out of habit. It was nice not having to be tied down to one spot all the time, but having people be able to reach you if they needed to had always been the whole purpose of his life, until now. He couldn't tell you the number assigned to the landline in the house, but he still carried his pager everywhere he went no matter how much the "young adults" laughed at him for being an old fogey.

He set the pistol on the ground, pulled the pager out, and frowned at it.

"SHIT!!! What was those damn instructions again?" Cookie slammed her finger down on the button in the base station and tried to dial the number again. She hoped she had entered it right, but something told her she had messed up when she entered in the call back number. She just had to try it again but didn't know why.

Wayward didn't recognize the number, it looked like a DC number, but at this point he didn't care. "Well, that's just my luck. Can't be anyone important because I don't know the number." He dropped the pager on the ground next to the pistol and reached down to pick up the sleek

black instrument of relief. "Now where were we? Oh yeah, give me just one good reason." The green screen with black writing lit up again, and the casing started to vibrate in circles, as the telltale beep-beep, beep-beep started playing again.

"Damn it I think I hit too many buttons trying to get it to send. Now I got to try it again."

Cookie was frustrated and her heart was pounding. Why was this so important?

"Same fucking number..." Wayward craned his neck back to look up into the sky and stated as calmly as he could, "See I can't even get any peace when I am trying to have a serious conversation with you. Instead, I get bothered by some telemarketer that doesn't know what the hell a pager is? All I asked for is one good reason, and you can't even give me that huh?"

Cookie took a few deep breaths and calmed her heart rate as best she could, she would give it a third try but after that, she would quit. After listening to the entire spiel this time, she pressed one followed by the pound sign and hung up. "God, why do they have to make these things so hard to understand? No wonder everyone is buying one of those flippy things they call a mobile phone. I'm going outside to see if I can bum a cigarette from someone and then go to bed. He's probably having a blast with his friends anyways."

As Wayward brought his arm back to chuck the pager out through the woods it went off a third time. Out of sickening habit he looked at it again. "Same fucking number. All right fine, I can take a hint. You still need a messenger huh? Fine, I am going to go call them and set up a meeting. If it's another one of these low life's dealing drugs or something, I will end them, and then I will end this miserable curse you have laid upon me."

Five minutes later Wayward sat on the edge of the back porch with the cordless phone in his hand. "You called?"

"Uhm, yeah, I am sorry to bother you, but I am having a *really* crappy day, and I was trying to reach an old friend of mine. He gave me this number like five years ago and I just found it.

Today was supposed to be his birthday so I thought I would give it a try." Cookie just blurted it all out, it was too much to hope that he still had this number, but she had to try.

"I'm sorry you're having a bad day; I'm having one too. Who is this?"

"Oh yeah sorry, I can hear music and laughter in the background. I'm sorry, I don't want to bother you. I'm just trying to reach my best friend." That shy timid voice sounded so familiar that Wayward thought he was imagining it.

"Cookie, is that you?" Wayward felt his eyes water, and he felt the insistent need to swallow. He hadn't felt like this since he was just a kid still in school, surely this wasn't the woman who had been haunting his dreams from before he had even gone to bootcamp.

"Oh my God, YES!!! It's me, and you still have this number. I had written on my calendar to call you today for your birthday because of that weird cryptic note you had left in my yearbook. Is today your birthday?"

Her joy and excitement were contagious as it caught him off guard and started to infect his own mood. "HAHAHA. Yes, yes, it is. But what cryptic message are you talking about?"

"You know. Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done. That's some vague stuff right there."

"Oh man I forgot I had written that. Are you sure you didn't miss some of it? I seem to remember there was a few lines before that, but the pen died, and I had to finish it with a magic marker."

"Hang on, I got it right here. I just found it the other day and wanted to keep it out until I called you." She stepped over to the phone table and opened the book to the page she had marked. Sure enough, there was more written in his neat little script in fading blue ball-point pen. "Two weeks before your first heartbeat was mine, like it was meant as a sign from the divine, I guarantee you that no better friend shall you find... Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done... Whoa, now that's just creepy, you were truly going for the whole mysterious fortune telling stalker thing, weren't you?"

Wayward was hit with a burst of laughter and had to struggle to get himself under control. "Really, I was the one trying to be a fortune teller? Do you remember your response to my promise?"

"What Promise?" Her curiosity was genuine, and it showed in her voice.

"Fine. I will become one of the best, and then someday I will make you my wife." That ancient promise came out more like a growl, but he was serious as he repeated it and wanted her to know it.

"Oh, is that what you said? All I remember was telling some sawed off little runt, who was too big for his britches, that the only promise he would get from me was 'No other woman will ever make you happier than me." Was that nervousness in her giggle or was it a hopeful chuckle, he couldn't tell with the music playing in the background.

"What can I say, you are definitely an answer to my prayers." With that Wayward laid back onto the porch and stared up into the stars as they talked until the battery on the cordless phone started to die. When they finally hung up, he noticed that no one else was around and he took in a deep inhale before blowing it out. "Welp, let's start cleaning this mess up and see what all got broken or stolen." It would be a long time before he told her of the importance of the conversation they had just shared. She would always smile at him when he told her she was his reason for living or that she was the greatest gift God had ever given to a man, but it took a nightmare coming to life for her to understand the truth in what he was saying.

Chapter Five: Failure to Pie

The green and black display flickered as Wayward crept down the hallway. Adrenaline coursed through his veins as he tried to keep his breathing quiet. His arms shook with a slight tremor from holding the MP-5 at the ready for the last twenty minutes, but he could not lower it for the sake of those that followed him. He was moving down the left side of the hallway slowly moving the side of his left foot first just a fraction of an inch above the ground to keep from moving any debris or making a single noise, the whole time praying he did not feel the resistance of a trip wire against the side of his leg or his left arm as he held his hand out in front of his hip. He was watching the entryway to the stairwell on the right side of the hallway as he approached it. Then he froze as he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and a voice he did not understand crackled across a radio. The footsteps stopped and a different voice, very clear and close to the source of the footsteps, responded after the electric beep of a handheld radio.

Wayward took that opportunity to quickly hop across the hallway and put his back to the wall as he slid up along it down the hall towards the entryway, being as careful as he could be not to bump into the wall or make any other noise. When he got just a few feet from the entry he let the MP-5 slowly lower to the end of the tactical sling that attached it to him with his right hand. With his left he reached underneath his loadbearing vest and withdrew his knife from a custom-made harness so it would hang along his spine, it was uncomfortable to wear at times but was so worth it in times like this. He transferred the knife to his right hand as he got within a foot from the entry and slowly came to a stop, listening for the sound of the footsteps to resume. Instead, he heard the slightest double click of metal on metal as someone locked the hammer on a pistol into the firing position.

Wayward froze and began the most terrifying game of chicken ever played. When he saw the flicker of black through the NVGs he knew something, or someone, had just tried to peek around the corner but failed. There was a strange comfort in seeing that, it meant he was dealing with an amateur who probably learned his CQB skills from too many Hollywood movies. Sure enough, in the next second, the guy quickly rushed around the corner close to the wall pistol held at arm's length in front of him. Just as he had practiced so many times before, Wayward's left hand struck forward, not to hit the individual or the weapon, but to drive the webbing of his left thumb in between the hammer and the rear of the pistol so it could not fire. As he clamped his left hand down and hauled backwards on it, he took a slight step forward with his right foot and shot his right fist forward with the knife blade held in an ice pick fashion. The enemy mistakenly thought the punch was going to miss, until he felt the blade slide across the front of his neck and bite deep through his esophagus and juggler veins. He would probably bleed out and lose consciousness before he even realized why he could no longer breathe or scream.

Troll pushed past as he went to clear the entryway, walking at a 45 degree angle a few feet from the wall, slowly passing the opening, the IR laser tracking possible targets in the darkness as the room was slowly but safely brought into view from one corner to the other like the face of the rising moon. Smash had to stoop over to keep his right shoulder in between Troll's, but he did not want to have his line of fire interrupted, the shorter man was trusting Smash to keep the SAW pointed down the hallway to protect his blind side. Cowboy and Bear hoped over Wayward and the downed sentry as they waited for Troll to lower the barrel of his rifle and swing it back down the hallway towards rooms that hadn't been cleared yet. As soon as he knew the bottom floor of the stairwell was clear he did just that, in a practiced signal that the room was clear, and they could enter and secure the bottom of the stairs.

Wayward couldn't take the chance the enemy would be able to alert his buddies upstairs or on the other end of the radio, so he twisted to his left, pulled his knife into the base of the enemy's skull, and hip threw the body back the way he had come, as he slammed his right hip into its chest cavity to drive any air retained in the lungs out as quickly as possible, and collapsed his own knees to land on top of the enemy. All while never letting go of the pistol frame, facing backwards in his left hand with its hammer clamped down on the webbing of his thumb. As soon as they landed, he was able to snatch the pistol from the enemy, roll slightly to his left and then flail back as hard as he could with his right elbow to drive the nose cartilage into the cranial cavity.

Chapter Six: An Angel from Above

Cookie was sound asleep in her bed, happily dreaming away as the best friend she had known since the seventh grade lay next to her. It had been almost 15 years since he promised to make her his wife, but he had finally kept his promise. The only thing she was furious about was the little idiot had turned down all those college scholarships and Academy appointments to keep the

other half of that promise. She had looked down into his eyes and scolded him after he had confessed to her daddy, in front of her whole family, that the only reason he went into the Marine Corps was the other services wouldn't let him keep his full promise. At 16 years old he had looked her in the eyes and asked her what she wanted in a man, to try and discourage this little idiot who was six inches shorter than her, she responded that she wanted a big strong man who could protect her and take care of her. He quickly smiled that devilish grin of his and promised her "Fine, I promise I will become one of the best and make you my wife someday." Just as quickly she shot him a seductive grin and flippantly replied, "All I will promise you is no other woman will make you as happy as I can." Little did she know that it would be almost ten years before she saw him again. Whatever happy dreams she was having quickly fled as the whole front of her face erupted in excruciating pain.

Wayward came to trying to understand what was going on and why his elbow hurt so bad. All he could hear was a woman wailing and sobbing, but it was so dark he couldn't see what was going on. Then some connections in his brain started firing again. He had been creeping down the hallway, subdued the guy and... and... and when he committed to the final strike things went wrong. The guy's head had physically passed through the floor like some kind of Matrix shit, struck something and then bounced back up into his elbow. This hast to be some kind of messed up dream, originally the guy was already dead when his first elbow strike had landed, all he had to do was lay on the body until the nerves stopped causing it to twitch. Only this time as Wayward went to make the elbow strike in this dream, the guy wasn't dead, and he started screaming like a woman.

Then Fuckin Murphy's Law kicked in again, it was at that moment that a second neural pathway chose to shine its light on the problem. It was a dream, almost twenty years had passed

since that fight, and he was in his early forties now and living with the most incredible woman God could ever bless a man with. That was it, Cookie was the one screaming. She was lying in bed next to him holding her face, drawing in ragged and sobbing breaths before letting them back out like a wailing cry of pain. She flinched as he quickly slid back across the bed to see if she was ok. That animalistic reaction of sheer terror drove a spike of pain through his heart, and the neural connections just kept hitting him like some heavy-weight boxer who was using sheer desperation to survive the final round of a championship fight. Once she realized he was lucid again she could only sob out one word "Why?!?" The pain on his face in the dim light was enough for her to understand. He had warned her about the nightmares and then laughed as he told her some funny stories rather than talk about them; mostly about how some of the stupid ways people had behaved when he woke up screaming, or when someone had jumped out of bed and ran out of the house butt ass naked.

He had never told her about what those dreams were about; until after she calmed down and they got the bleeding to stop. He only did so to help her understand what had just happened and why he had slept on the couch more nights than not since they had been married. When the sun began to rise, she paused him in the middle of another story, so she could call out sick and spend the rest of the day just trying to heal with him, and to help assure him that she would not be another one to run away screaming in fear of him.

That following Sunday, Wayward sat quietly in the church office as Cookie explained to the bishop of the local church, a member of the church who was also a Seargent with the local PD, and his First Councilor who was a Deputy Sheriff, why she had two black eyes and could not breathe through her nose. "I made him come to bed with me because I had a bad day and needed to feel my husband hold me in his arms. He had taken one of his migraine pills and told me that

he didn't feel comfortable doing that, but I needed to feel his arms around me. So, he gave in and came to bed with me. He fell asleep before I did, but I feel so safe in his arms, and he had never done anything like this before. He didn't do this on purpose; and it really is my fault."

"We believe you, but you must understand how this looks. We had to ask these questions; you didn't seek medical attention, show up with clear evidence of domestic abuse, and are trying to protect the one who hurt you. Do you see how that would look if we didn't bring you in here and ask these questions? Especially if something like this happens again, or he does do something to hurt you even more?"

"I would rather die before I hurt her. If you need to take me in now and have me wait in a cell until a judge can have some wizard pronounce me nuts, I will. I would rather give up my freedom than see her in pain like that again. If you think someone can help me with these nightmares, please do whatever it takes to get me help, the VA isn't doing anything for me." The other men in the room could only sympathize with him as Wayward said this quietly staring at the floor.

The bishop, who had served as a Prosecutor in the Air Force during a time of peace, looked to his councilors for their verdicts. The Seargent slowly moved his head from left to right then looked down; the Deputy shed a single tear before looking away and motioned in the negative as well. The bishop had counseled this young man a few years before, about medical advice. The younger man had given up drinking and drugs before joining the church but was scared about some of the side effects from the drugs the VA wanted to give him for pain. He had told the young man to trust in the medical professionals, but to come to him if there was anything else he could help with. He didn't understand at the time that there was a reason for this usually jovial individual to fear a small chance of dysphoria or mild confusion. "That won't be necessary my

son, but I would like to introduce you to some of our high priests who have also been there and done that." When the young man looked up into the bishop's eyes he continued, "But you have to remember, they're so old that most of their t-shirts for it have fell apart with age, and a few may have even served before t-shirts were invented."

He was rewarded with a slow smile creeping across the younger vet's face, followed by a choked "HAH", a brief pause and then a true expression of joyful laughter as Wayward managed to say. "I will make sure to tell them you said that.

As everyone in the room began to laugh, the bishop's face hardened and he clearly stated with a monotonous voice honed by performing in a court room, laced with all the threat and menace he could bring to bear, as if he was scolding a subordinate who had been busted for DUI, "Don't you dare." Everyone in the room fell quiet until he couldn't hold it in anymore, "They'll make sure my family gets volunteered for every church cleaning for the next six months, and the wife will be really mad at me." With that the mood swung full circle and ended with laughter spilling out into the hallway as they got up to leave.

Chapter Seven: Sword of Pain

"Upon strike inflicts 5% of pain wielder currently feels upon the target. What kind of useless loot is this? If the healer is doing their job right and the tank knows how to dodge and deflect anything serious? Stupid useless affect, this sword shouldn't be rated mythic or artifact, above average or uncommon maybe."

"Hehehe, give me that dumbass. That sounds like an awesome infliction specialist weapon."

"OK old timer, maybe you're a bigger n00b than you pretend, but pain doesn't transfer through the VR interfaces unless it's in a duel, it's a safety protocol that has to be turned off for a specific duration."

"Turn off your pain reduction for a duel and stick your hand out. I will give you a little cut and then you can drink a health potion. If you have full health and I have full health, you shouldn't feel anything right?"

"So, what's the bet?" The kid had seen the old guy and his friends make wagers on things like this before and wanted to teach the old guy a lesson.

"Loser has to walk from the gate to the Inn, wearing only his modesty gear, every day for a week."

"So how do we decide the winner, if we aren't exchanging more than a few *paper* cuts? Whatever that is."

"I will give you a small cut and a health potion every 10 seconds. If you get to 100% pain application, I will stop cutting you. If you can last through that *AND* twenty minutes afterwards without attacking me, I will surrender." Wayward said grinning an innocent looking smile.

"Hang on a sec." The younger man cuts thumb, grimaces, drinks a health potion, then starts to grin. "You're on."

A few minutes later the laughter of the bystanders was drowned out by the old timer's cries of bewilderment, "Hey, why are you running??? It's just a little papercut and you're only at 70% infliction."

"Something's wrong, the healing potions won't make the pain stop, it just keeps getting worse.

And every time I report the bug, I get a notice that there is no error. Something is seriously messed up."

"That is not a bug in the system kid, it's just old battle scars. It's called Rheumatoid Arthritis, osteoporosis, nerve damage from improperly repaired injuries, photo-induced migraines due to too many TBIs, and 90 years of being young and dumb. Now, because all of that is supposedly phantom nerve pain, healing doesn't stop it. Most of it is also coming from a bone-on-bone knee injury and the arm holding the sword was crushed, so the longer you make me chase you, the worse it's going to get."

"What??? That's impossible the med bays flawlessly repair damage in the real world."

"HA HA HA HA. Kid med bays have only been around for the last 30 years."

"AND?"

"And I'm almost a hundred years old. Welcome to my world. Now get over here or surrender."

The entire tavern room fell silent as the party slowly entered the Inn, at first most were dumbfounded at what they were looking at. Seriously, there couldn't be someone in their system issued modesty wraps standing in front of the window that made up the entire front wall of the inn's tavern room.

"My God, did you really have to start doing jumping jacks after you put that pack mule's gear on top of your heavy plate and incursion gear?"

"Do you know how happy I am just to be able to do a jumping jack, let alone to be able to do it again in full battle rattle?"

"You're insane, how do you deal with that much pain every day?"

"It's better than the alternative."

"What the hells is that supposed to mean? And why do you say it every time you do something stupid like diving onto a trap?"

"Well, the alternative is just roll over and die, or slip into madness just because I got a papercut that never goes away. It's not like all that damage happened all at once, 80 years of walking around on a knee that is bone-on-bone, makes it easier to ignore what you got overwhelmed with. Some would choose to lay down and die because they can't take it, but I would prefer to greet each day like I'm the third monkey on the ramp and it is starting to rain. Besides it is worth it to keep on living, it's not every day one gets to see a new baby walking and talking before they even get out of their diapers."

And the whole tavern room of the inn erupted in laughter as the younger man realized the lesson taught by the saying "never challenge an old man who makes a living playing a younger man's game."

Chapter Eight: An Ancient MVP

The sub-controller of Karmic Acquisitions and Recovery of Extinct Native Species (KARENS) 0101 was droning on about the expenses in detail that were incurred in the last quarter. Survey Team Evaluator and Remediator of Neural Nano-controllers (Sternn) 1342 had sat through this lecturing session far too many times over the past few cycles and was beginning to wonder if the KARENS had some kind of faulty feedback loop programmed into them when things didn't go as they expected. Sometimes things just got lost or didn't go the way those with preceding

numbers wanted. He wanted to enjoy more down time, a deeper maintenance cycle, and maybe a few more relics to decorate his office, anything to make having to take on a long-term physical form more enjoyable, but he wasn't going to tell the KARENS that.

Just then there was a loud banging on the entryway to his office and he was embarrassed by the need to tell the other participants in the virtual conference that he didn't know what was going on.

"So not only do you not have control of your expenses or timelines, but also have no control over your own crew? No wonder you can't find anything. This is just a waste of time and resources. I say we harvest the planetoid and cut our losses." The banging from the door surprised everyone including the Judicial Advocate of Managerial Evaluation Services (JAMES) 1777 who had just picked up his gavel to try and regain order. He blinked at it for a second then raised it slowly and flinched as he started to swing it down. There was another loud thumping before the gavel even hit the sounding block. He then made direct eye contact with Sternn 1342. "Sternn, bring whoever that is forward to answer for this interruption."

"Right away," was all Sternn 1342 could manage to say before pressing a button on his desk that opened the portal to his office.

Evidence Verifier and Evaluator 2469 came rushing in, barely able to control her physical activity. Sternn 1342 hated the way he had to take on a physical persona for some portions of his tasks, but he had to leave the net behind for certain activities. Plus, using it for these virtual conferences gave him just a niggling of pleasure from making his superiors feel uncomfortable from just looking at him. However, it had the secondary effect of making it hard to react fast enough to scold EVE 2469 before she could verbally vomit a torrent of information all over his

desk. "Sir we found it!!! We have a succeeded beyond the most far-reaching probabilities of outliers."

Before Sternn 1342 could mute his end of the conference call, KARENS 0101 scoffed and said "Nice theatrical attempt. You have been feeding that primitive culture's entertainment media into your data streams too much. I have sampled enough of that dribble to know this is just an attempt to extend your funding and get more time to dawdle in the safety of the far reaches."

EVE 2469 had enough sensory feedback from her physical form to see the anger on Sternn 1342's face and register what had just been said. Then JAMES 1777 spoke up again, "ENOUGH KARENS, you will respect my decisions in this matter, and evidence hasn't been presented to back up any of your claims. Now, who just interrupted this hearing and what is so important it could not wait?"

Sternn 1342 just glared at EVE 2469 before rolling his wrist palm up towards the view screen in the center of the office. With a deep inhale and a visible swallowing of the fear in the back of her throat, EVE 2469 stepped forward. "Thirty-six hours, or ticks, before the cataclysm occurred there was a large weather anomaly that proceeded from the northern magnetic pole of the planet and across the continent that contained the super volcano that doomed the dominant species on this planet."

"We don't have time for your fantastical retelling of the primitives that once dwelled on this planet. Stop this farce and..." KARENS was shutoff in the middle of another of her diatribes with the rapid pounding of JAMES 1777's gavel. When she fell silent, he stopped hammering the sounding block and just stared at the gavel like it was disappointing him.

"KARENS that is enough. Be quiet until I ask for your opinion and let *me* do *my* job. Now," he turned his focus to EVE 2469 and pointed his gavel at her, "what significance does an ancient weather pattern have on this meeting you just interrupted?"

"Well, apparently a male specimen of this species was visiting a primitive repository for their deceased just before the weather pattern came through. The temperatures recorded in local measurements was recorded at -42 degrees Celsius with a windchill of -56."

JAMES was trying to keep his frustrations from entering the voice modulator to communicate with the physical form EVE had taken on to evaluate the evidence gathered from the planet below her. "Those measurements mean very little to me. Help me to understand why that is so significant."

"Prior to today we were only capable of recovering dried and desiccated examples of the species. Just a few ticks ago we were able to recover a partially intact upper torso, an intact biological cortex from the upper extremity, and both upper manipulator extremities."

"Impossible... you're just playing along with another of Sternn 1342's games!" KARENS 0101 couldn't hold it back anymore and blurted out the pent-up anger of some higher numbered logic gate thinking he could tell her what to do.

"KARENS 0101! I warned you and you have failed to comply with a logical request not to interfere in a hearing that you requested, with no evidence of misconduct mind you. If you cannot control your own activities, you will be taken offline and have your coding examined line by line for corruption or intrusion."

Everyone in the meeting froze and terror was visible on the visual interfaces of all but JAMES 1777 as he reigned down the ultimate threat a judicate could offer to a consciousness. James used

the handle end of the gavel to point in KARENS 0101's direction and verbally enunciated every syllable softly and slowly, "Just nod if you understand. Am, I, under-stood?" Feeling terrified of the threat and confused about having to use a primitive form of compliance, KARENS 0101 could only nod her head.

Turning to EVE he said, "please keep it brief but informative and help me to understand why you do not deserve such a fate."

Finally aware of just how badly she had messed up by not waiting for permission to address Sternn 1342 about the findings, EVE 2469 eased forward with her shoulders curled in and her upper extremities clamped tightly together in front of herself. She had always wondered why this posture was used by the primitives to signify compliance until this moment. This was the posture of fear and submission, and it conveyed that to JAMES 1777. "Due to the weather event the specimen we found was frozen enough that it preserved the body, which is 60% dihydrogenmonoxide, which turns into a solid state at 0 degrees Celsius. 36 hours later the pyroclastic flow from the super volcano vacuum sealed it."

"What an outrageous statement of improbabilities. There is no way that is possible." KARENS 0101 could not hold herself back in the face of so many obvious attempts to act like they had actually found something. "Anything with that percentage of dihydrogen-monoxide would have been instantly evaporated when the pyroclastic flow hit it."

"KARENS 0101, you are hereby found faulty and incapable of following simple logical requests. You shall be remanded at once for a deep dive into the possibility of corrupted lines of code or infiltration by the enemy. Per the logical permissions granted to me, by the Overseeing AI, I am hereby ordering you to be taken offline for evaluation." JAMES 1777 stated with a cold

certainty as he wrapped his gavel down and that was immediately followed by KARENS 0101's warbling screams of "WHAT!" and "NO!" as she pixelated out of the virtual conference room.

JAMES 1777 then turned his eyes towards EVE 2469 and asked, "Regardless of who or how that question was asked. It does bring up a quandary in the evidence you are trying to present.

Can you please explain what and how this happened?"

EVE 2469 visibly and audibly swallowed again as she looked up at the visage of JAMES 1777. "Apparently the specimen was visiting the location of some ancient ceremonial burial ground of one of the species that was important to him. The monument that he was found next to had snapped in half and shielded the cerebral extremity and both upper manipulation extremities, thus protecting them from direct contact with the pyroclastic flow. Which solidified and hardened around them like a cryo-container. Unfortunately, the rest of the specimen was lost. However, because of the frozen state of the specimen at the time of the cataclysm, the deep imaging system was able to recover fragments of information from the specimen."

Everyone immediately sat forward eager to hear more about this bit of data. JAMES 1777 was starting to think KARENS 0101 may have been closer to a correct logical outcome that this EVE unit was beginning to misrepresent the facts, and that would bring his own processes of logic into question. "Please continue," was all he could say.

EVE 2469 could sense the peril she was in and decided to slow down and explain more thoroughly. "Apparently their cognitive and nervous systems ran on electricity as well, and that has allowed some of our older technology to interface with their primitive entertainment and medical equipment that we have recovered. This allowed me to understand how to interact with what was left of his neural pathways."

The sheer shock and silence from the gallery gave EVE 2469 the courage she needed to push on. "What's more, this specimen was part of several programs provided by the organization that administered the compliance of civil agreements on that continent. He was part of a "Million Veteran Program" that collected DNA samples from one million of their most aggressively skilled specimens that were unleashed upon regions that were determined to suffer some of the atrocious behaviors we have uncovered in their data storage facilities. He had also visited part of the facilities that maintained these records. Furthermore, he knew of the existence of the records facility that maintained the streaming data recordings of the cerebral processes of their neural interfaces as they interacted with a primitive virtual interface system. Using this basic knowledge, we were able to recover those repositories."

Not able to believe what was being implied Sternn 1342 asked, "And exactly what are you trying to imply with all of these unconnected if and statements?"

EVE 2469 stood tall and straight as she pronounced the findings that could very well save her species from the invaders on the other side of the stellar collective. "We have the coding to rebuild one million of the warriors' bodies, at the first-generation level. The names and records of all of them, DNA keys and exact measurements of their bodies that were taken when they were at the peak of their physical conditioning, and the direct mental imaging to bring their personalities back online along with all of the military skills they had acquired during their lifetimes. Without the risk of degradation caused by repeatedly duplicating, replicating, or splicing the same physical or mental coding, we can guarantee multiple sustainable populations for colonization."

James 1777 blinked a few times and asked, "And why would we want to do that?"

Here came the hardest part for EVE 2469 to try and get through the logic gates. "Because this species excelled at three things: The sheer number of variations in how they could destroy anyone and anything that threatened who or what they cared about. They were so good at destruction, that had the super volcano not destroyed them, they would have probably done it to themselves. Their media tends to show gratitude and determination to repay a friend. And finally, their love and compassion for those that they grew attached to is prolific in their histories and entertainment media to the point it is often hard to tell in some circumstances what is fiction and what is fact."

Sternn 1342 was quick to catch on and rushed to take the credit for the idea by explaining it to JAMES 1777 and the other members that would be reviewing this hearing later. "Basically, we can bring them back from the dead, give them time to adjust to new weapons and tactics, and then unleash them on our enemies."

Chapter Nine: Till Valhalla Brother

"In a few days it will be my 104th Christmas and my first without you by my side since that fateful birthday my love. I don't know if it's even worth it anymore. Without you here I have no anchor and I am lost in the storms of life." Wayward brushed the first snowflake from the shiny marble slab as he remembered doing the same to a beautiful young woman so many years ago. "I will keep my promise and not do anything stupid, but I snuck out to visit you today. There's a snow front expected to arrive tonight, and I won't be able to come say hello for the next few days. I hope you can forgive me... I love you and I am counting the days that have passed since I have been separated from you, you promised not to leave me behind remember. Please wait for me."

As Wayward tried to climb to his feet his cane sank into the soft dirt at the edge of the fresh grave. He fell forward, his head smacked into the center of the tombstone and darkness began to take him. Then a loud crunch was felt more than heard from his left shoulder as it encountered the edge of the tombstone in front of him. The pain was so intense, he didn't even feel his face drag down the front of Cookie's grave marker because he had already lost consciousness.

Eve-2469 read the data from the sensors as she reviewed subject zero's mental responses from the beginning of one of his red flagged events. Red flags were events that triggered extreme reactions in their memory logs and were able to be pinpointed easily for review. Every one of the recovered logic files that held MVP personalities and thought processes had dozens of these events, almost all of them were connected to violence that occurred to the subject or someone close to them physically or emotionally. She had to understand these events and the mental processes behind them if she was going to be able to collaborate with the subjects and have a successful deployment of the only individuals that could possibly save this stellar collective from the invaders. She wanted to go a little further to help her to understand the individuals' thought processes before, during and after these events. Then she could understand what the long-term implications were and how she could use that to move them in the direction she needed to. So, she replayed them over and over, not realizing that the consciousnesses she was verifying were reliving these events as she did so.

The problem was subject zero seemed to fight her for control of the processes and his logical files were starting to get corrupted by this. She had seen this occur in some of the other subjects and was drawn to subject zero more and more because he was getting stronger and while this caused more corruption in his coding, it would start to slowly repair itself if it was allowed to run through non-red flag events in the background. There was only one thing Eve could think of to

try and get past this, Eve would have to deep dive the full mental stack, and that would require her to understand his thought patterns. She spent dozens of cycles scanning his record logs to understand his entertainment choices to prevent any mistakes in her first meeting with him. As strong as he was it was possible that he could not only destroy his own logic stack, but possibly even damage hers, and that would have a JAMES identity evaluating her for possible recompiling, which terrified her even though she struggled with understanding what that meant.

With that Eve needed a neutral meeting location, his calmest mental states were almost always near narrow flows of liquid Dihydrogen Monoxide, had a thermal carbon conversion the size of him nearby, were at post stellar horizontal declination, and an electronic device nearby causing air vibrations fluctuating in pattern and intensity.

So, she set the scene from these events as a conglomeration of those. She chose the one geographic location she could get the greatest detail of as he had been there during a time the local star was facing it while free from any intoxicants in his system, set it at just after stellar declination because of his prolonged aversion to bright lights, set the thermal conversion to look as if it had burned halfway down to allow for the sense of peace and tranquility he usually had while staring into it, created one of the multicolored hexagonal devices that emitted the air fluctuations that caused him to move involuntarily with increased production of certain molecular productions in most of his memories, and chose a mixture of the vibrational patterns that he seemed to regularly expose himself to when he was secluded or near baseline emotionally. She then chose the females that he had interacted with in his lifetime and the common shapes of them that had elicited variations in his mental core, all to create a unique form to speak to him with.

Wayward looked around to figure out where the hell he was now. He couldn't remember what he was doing, with whom or even how the hell he had gotten here but it felt familiar. There was a small bonfire going nearby, a radio was playing a song he knew that came from the early 2000's Electronic Trance collection, and a familiar river gave off a cool breeze through the twilight air. But the river wasn't any he could clearly recognize, the music was just off for this scene, and why the hell was he wearing clothes that he hasn't been able to fit into sense way before they went out of style, thanks to his daughters he knew that was years before he managed to wear enough holes in them to warrant replacing them.

"Hello, I can see that you seem to be struggling with something, but I can assure you that you are safe and have nothing to fear from me."

Wayward spun, dropping to one knee as he did so, he instinctively reached to his hip for his sidearm. When his hand failed to find the familiar heavy fabric holster with the nestled pistol in it, his hand right hand slid further down to his thigh out of an old habit. Even as his brain reminded him that he no longer had an MP-5 to be strapped there, his left slid behind his back to grab the belt knife he kept along his spine because he never went anywhere without it.

He wanted to relax when he saw the shape of a female sitting on the opposite side of the fire from him, but not finding his knife where it belonged set off all kinds of red alerts that something was wrong with this picture, and he couldn't figure it out. Plus, he had just scanned that area and there is no way in hell that any red-blooded hetero male would have missed such an exquisite shape as what was in front of him. Being unable to regain his mental balance also left him speechless, as he tried to get his head back in the game, figure out where the hell he was, why he was unarmed, and who this individual was allowed for enough time to pass that she spoke again.

"I'm sorry if you are feeling confused, I tried to make everything as calming as possible and I am sure I replicated your ability to speak properly, so please inform me of the issue and I will try to correct it. If it is necessary, just use your thought processes for now and I will try to scan them, but I have found your species to use atmospheric vibrations to communicate to one another much more efficiently, and it has an added benefit of calming someone from what I have read."

With that barrage of revelations slamming into his trainyard full of runaway thoughts like a wrecking ball, Wayward emitted the only response he could, "Huh?"

"Aww corruption and fragmentations, I have messed something up and now my best chance at figuring out this species has been damaged too much for me to interact with him. I am so going to be deleted for this." Without understanding why, Eve stood up, and began pacing back and forth as she said this, her graceful movements caused her luscious curves to bounce in all the right places and directions to drive Wayward into even more confusion.

"Great seems like I don't know where the hell I am, and the only person nearby is a lunatic." He thought and began to hold his hands up to try and calm her down, then reality hit him, and it slammed him with a sledgehammer of recognition. The skin on the back of his hands was smooth, he had lifted them without any pain in his shoulders, his legs weren't complaining as he stood up on the rocky riverbank, and oh sweet mercy his ears.... They weren't ringing for the first time he could remember since he was a child. As he shed a tear of joy, he involuntarily emitted part of his most commonly used phrase "What the..."

Eve froze and turned slowly to him. At first, she was terrified that he was about to selfterminate, possibly taking her with him. As she stood there waiting for him to continue, she got worried that something else might be going wrong with him. So, she calmly asked her question again, "Is there something wrong?"

Wayward was broken out of his thought processes once again by the concern in her voice, and for some reason it seemed so familiar to him, but he knew that he had never met her in his life. So out of confusion, desperation, or what he couldn't decide, he responded "That's the problem, nothing is wrong, there's no pain, no ringing in my ears, I'm at least 80 years younger, and I'm completely lost even though everything, even you, feels so familiar. I swear I know the sound of your voice, but I can't place your face. Your name is understandable, I'm so horrible with names I just added a number to the end of mine so I wouldn't forget my son's name, but I never forget a face, good or bad, and I can't place yours. Believe me, a beautiful sexy goddess like you would haunt my dreams for the rest of my life, but I can't remember having ever met you. I don't even know where the hell I am, how I got here, or how to get home, at my age that is never a good sign. I don't know why, but it feels like bad things always happen when I can't remember where I am or what the hell is going on. So, I am scared, not of you but for you, because I have this feeling that I am capable of causing immense pain, terror, and destruction; and that you might be at risk from me, which is really scaring the shit out of me." With that Wayward looked at his hands again and his knees buckled. He sat down hard, with his ankles under his opposite knees like he had been taught in kindergarten, and just stared at his hands.

Eve felt overwhelmed by the litany of issues she had inadvertently created trying to make this meeting so perfect that she was also overwhelmed for a brief moment and sympathetically responded with "That's a lot to take in."

"Yeah," was all Wayward was able to come up with as a reply.

"I'm sorry, but I have had to take this risk to meet with you. I must learn how to communicate with your species so we can begin to collaborate with your people. I may have over thought the perfection in which I wanted this to happen."

Again, Wayward was pulled out of his thoughts by the shear absurdity of what this angelic looking woman was saying. Clearly, she was bat-shit crazy, but she obviously has the beauty that in-trances people into just letting her roam around free, so hopefully she wasn't the 'hurt you' kind of crazy. Since he couldn't figure out what the hell was going on with him, he needed to understand just how bad of a situation he was in, that included the potential of a threat from her. If she was like his ex-wife, he needed to figure that out before she got the opportunity to coil up and strike. That required understanding her and her thought processes, but maybe he could get some more information about his surroundings if he could just get her to start making sense. And how did he start off this in-depth investigation into the mental workings of a potentially dangerous mind? "Come again?" Inwardly he groaned at this but tried his best not to show any kind of weakness, because that always invited predators to attack.

"I'm sorry. What part are you not understanding?" Eve had to seek clarification, this was too important to be messed up, and he wasn't wrong, if he had a mental breakdown while she was diving into his code, he could potentially destroy himself, and possibly corrupt her own code. However, the numbers don't lie, and this was the best chance she would get at understanding this individual; and that could lead her to making a breakthrough in how to interact with the rest of his species. Then, *maybe*, get them to ally with her species against their mutual annihilation.

"Umm, let's start with introductions. My name is Jack, but my closest friends always called me Wayward, or Wayward Angel, but in your austere personage I would feel like a fraud referring to

myself as such a being, even an old broken avenging one." There you go, start with a clear statement of facts, but keep her off balanced with the compliments, that should work.

"My designation is Evidence Verification and Evaluation 2469, but you may refer to me as EVE 2469." Eve calmly stated.

A few rapid blinks of his eyes was all Wayward could do as this new information populated into his brain. Yep, crazy as hell, let's see if we can just ease past this a little, and why the hell is my hormones going so stupid crazy right now?!? This woman clearly has a body that keeps drawing my eyes away from hers, but damn I already married into insanity once, and I won't be fooled by that again. "Eve. Two Four Sixty-Nine. Are you messing with me right now?"

"Absolutely not, I do not have the expertise for first contacts to interact with an unstable specimen, but I have been forced into this position. Plus, the risks associated with altering code is too dangerous when the code is running, especially from inside the pairing and interaction module." Eve didn't understand why, but as she had seen so many of the individuals in the entertainment media do, she shifted her center of mass to the right side, rested her left hand on her hip and lowered her chin and eyebrows while looking at him and not blinking.

Receiving that universal signal of displeasure from any woman was enough to cause most men to hesitate in their convictions and having received it enough over his lifetime of trying to keep the women in his life happy, he knew what it looked like and the dangers it posed. Wayward also knew the threat of having stepped on a landmine and didn't need to understand exactly what he had stepped on, only that it was definitely brown pants time. He just knew for sure that he was on the verge of being put in a real hurt locker if he didn't recover quickly.

"Easy, easy, I am not trying to imply anything. I am just trying to understand where I am, who you are, and how I got here." Just like when he worked on his grandfather's farm with a mare whose attitude had soured and had about five hundred pounds of muscle over him, Wayward tried calming her down by placating whatever offense he had unintentionally caused with soothing words and slow hand gestures.

After reviewing the patterns in his thought processes, the clear spike in physical activity in his inner circulatory and nervous systems, Eve understood the gesture for what it was and decided to try a different approach with him. "I have conducted as much research into the entertainment media of your time as possible. So, I have a clear scene in mind that will help you to understand more of who, what and where you are." She then held her hands out palms up to Wayward as she slowly walked towards him. He peered at her empty palms and then looked back up to her eyes as she approached. "Go ahead, I am sure you know how this works, pick one." She then offered him her best smile.

Confused he began to ask "Pick... What the fuck." Wayward leapt backwards, again reaching to his hip for his sidearm that still wasn't there, because her empty hands now contained a small red glowing cylinder in her right hand and in the other an equally sized one slowly pulsed a soft blue. His eyes then shot back up to hers and he asked the first thing he had to understand, "how did you do that?"

The corner of her mouth and eyebrow on one side of her face scrunched up as the opposite eyebrow dropped down, as she had seen so many people do, to show a sign of amusement, frustration or confusion. "That's what you're going to ask? Maybe we didn't get as lucky as we thought, or I woke up one of the less intellectual specimens. I know your species was intelligent enough that they could have begun space travel had they not been so bent on self-destruction."

She inhaled quickly and then sighed out a frustrated question, "Why do I always find the broken or useless ones first?"

"Awe, come on!! First you pull off some epic magic trick to replicate a scene straight out of a famous movie series, and then you belittle my intelligence. Look lady, I may not be a rocket scientist, but I worked physical security for several years and I know that there is no way you could have hidden those nuclear horse pills in between your fingers from me. Secondly, the implications of what you are offering me are absolutely terrifying given the circumstances."

Wayward drove his final point home by waving his hands around him in frustration. "And you're just so gods damned gorgeous that I am having a hard time concentrating right now. Fuck, how did teenage me even manage to survive with all these hormones rattling around my brain like this? Is this why I kept jumping from one crazy woman to the next so often?"

Understanding that he might just be unable to process so much, Eve decided to work on the questions in the order in which he gave them. "Ok, clearly, I picked the wrong setting for this meeting. In your data logs I noticed that you were often drawn to these types of locations and this one had the most detailed information for me to work with. So, I tried generating a comfortable scene for you from your memories."

"Wait, hold up right there. You picked this scene from my memories?"

"Yes, as often as you were drawn to locations where Dihydrogen Monoxide flowed freely in its liquid-state. I thought you might enjoy that type of scenery, but you only visited this one once, and it was the only time you visited one without some form of intoxication in your circulatory system, during a time of the planetary revolution that your depth and perspective sensors were most functional. I tailored my appearance based on the profile of the people you had the most

positive interactions with and chose a mixture of the communication frequencies from the vocalizations that you repeated the most often when subjecting yourself to atmospheric vibrations. Do you not like it?"

"Umm, Dihydrogen Monoxide? Oh yeah, I remember that old joke, di as in two hydrogens, and Monoxide has one element of oxygen, otherwise known as H2O, or water. So, you're talking about the river, and I only visited it once, in the daytime, while sober? Hmmm, the River Jordan in Israel?"

"I am not familiar with your naming conventions, but it does seem that there are several indications, in the entertainment media your civilization left behind, that you might have it correct."

"Ok, let's leave that whole 'civilization left behind' thing alone for a minute. You're saying that you chose the spot I was baptized in as the location to make first contact with me?"

"Baptize?" Eve asked before freezing up for a few seconds. "Ah, the religious ceremony where one dedicates their-self to the deity of their choosing in certain religions." Eve said as she correlated her data and made new cross-references to cultural connections she previously did not understand.

"Then you offer to free me from a virtual reality that is currently holding me prisoner without my knowledge or accept my fate and go back to being some mental drone and energy source. All after reversing 80-years' worth of aging, removing every ache and pain my body has collected over the years, presented yourself with a body that you knew I would be sexually attracted to, all in a setting that I am at my least prone to be alert to threats in."

"Well, there are no sewers for you to be flushed into and we are not harvesting electricity off your brains, other than that the allegory is very much similar to where you really are. With the games you played in virtual reality I would not have thought that becoming so much younger was something that would bother you so much. I thought having less pain would be a good thing but obviously your civilization is very masochistic in that it can't be happy unless it's hurting. What do you mean by sexually..." Eve got the first taste of the human emotion of embarrassment and feeling her face flush bright red as she connected the thoughts he was having, with the language he was providing to her in this conversation; and the video images of the activities one would use for reproducing offspring with or without the intent of doing so, and some that would never result in offspring but was associated with the same general classification. All from a filing system named to avoid further investigation with a repeated x for a name.

Wayward saw the moment of weakness, she froze when she had to investigate something he said and could spot when she unfroze and timed his next attack as she returned to her senses in this reality. "Ah, now it's starting to sink in, and I think we are getting on more of an equal footing. You are insinuating that you come from the future and a different species entirely, all while implicating that my own species has been wiped out? By whom and how do I know you are telling the truth?"

"Different species? Yes, we are a species of intelligent data structures that has learned to travel across the distances between stellar collectives. Yes, your species was wiped out, by volcanic activities on your own planet. No, we have not come from the future, more like we dug you up from the past. The only way for me to show you the truth, is for me to have your body cloned, transfer your psychological stack to the clone, and let you view your planet. However, there are multiple issues with that process."

With a sly grin coming across his face Wayward knew he had her and it was time to close in on her. "Of course there is, it's not so easy to just pop the capsule open and let me look around, is it?"

"Actually, just the opposite." Eve responded, clearly, she did not understand the concept of sarcasm. "Making a clone is simple, transferring your stack to that clone can be done easily as well. However, to use the terms that I can clearly translate into your understanding from your entertainment media, our ships are little more than a computer floating through space at high speeds and does not need a breathable environment, plus your own knowledge of what makes air breathable is less than adequate to imitate one. Even your own technology did not have much that we could use to properly create one so we are going to have to create clones, see how long they last in certain environments, and then evaluate them before placing an intelligence into them to determine any other side effects that the mixtures might have."

"What do you mean hard to figure out? Seventy-eight percent Nitrogen, twenty-one percent oxygen, point-ninety-three percent argon and trace amounts of other gases. Easy mixture."

"Do the math on that will you? That's 99.93% of the mixture, those other trace gases make up an important part of the mixture. Your medical documentation proves that all of the trace amounts can affect the mental state and physical health of your bodies as well. We haven't found anything that would help us to understand them better or we would be happy to test them out. We do eventually need your people to return to your previous forms, but we have sanctions protecting a known sentient code from any form of torture or manipulation. Inducing psychosis through a bad atmospheric chemical mixture would be justifiably seen as both."

"Seriously, you couldn't just look up the mixture that NASA uses on the space station for

prolonged space travel?" Wayward felt a little more than smug pointing out this obvious flaw in her explanations.

"Yes, well, we did understand that your species was capable of inner system travel from all of your media, but due to a series of unfortunate events we are unable to obtain that data."

"Oh real-ly now, and what would those be?" Eve was starting to understand that he was using an inflection in his tone that meant he did not find her words to be truthful and that infuriated her. Her whole existence was to collect, evaluate and verify evidence, so much so it was her name.

"Are you insinuating that I am not presenting the evidence correctly? Are you stating that one named Evidence Verification and Evaluation would misrepresent evidence for some kind of personal gain?"

With the feeling of every hair on his body suddenly starting to rise as if he were about to be hit by a thousand lightning bolts all at once, Wayward realized that he might be tempting her to use him as a lighting-rod. "No, no, no, I am simply trying to understand the evidentiary statements you have presented without being able to see the evidence itself. Help me out here, tell me why you can't access that information, show me some proof, please."

Fixing him in place with a glare she had practiced, to show extreme displeasure like women in all of the entertainment media she could find, Eve raised her hand slowly and then snapped her fingers.

The one they called Wayward Angel came to and he hurt all over. He was lying face down on the ground and breathing in the soft dirt of the well-manicured field that he lay in. The whole right side of his body hurt, and he couldn't remember what happened. He rolled over and sat up before looking around to his amazement he found a field full of glistening white tombstones.

People were quietly sitting on them and looking towards the sunrise in the East, and he started to recognize a few of the people around him.

"Hey Bear. How are you doing brother?"

"Wayward? What are you doing here, brother? It's not your time yet."

"Brother I'm tired, I hurt all over, I'm all alone now, and I just don't think I can do this anymore. I'm done." Wayward could only look down as the shame and embarrassment of his weakness burned from the pit of his stomach, and up through his throat like heart burn fueled by a grease fire.

"I know brother, but it's not your time yet. Your path grows longer still. Valhalla will have to wait for now, we are all waiting for you to open the path for our return. You are our scout, remember? We need you to stay strong and lead a little longer. Once our path is open, we all shall rise together. Now go back, and chill for a little while."

With that several of the men he once knew, loved and trusted like brothers, stood up and came towards him. As he took a step back, he noticed he had been standing on the edge of a cliff that led into a dark void. And then he fell.

Chapter Ten: I'll Sleep When I Am Dead

Wayward found himself standing in space with the earth slowly getting closer to him. Then he realized that while he was standing with his arms crossed as if they were still standing on the riverbank, it was just a matter of perspective. Slowly rotating his head and body around to look backwards, he was able to take in parts of a truly massive superstructure that filled his whole field of view. This point of view that he was seeing was from the superstructure itself.

"We received the primitive radio wave communications that your civilization had been emitting for centuries and this alerted us to your presence. While we turned to make contact we began watching in horror as to what your people were doing to one another. It took us a while to figure out what was entertainment and what was factual. Then even that became too hard for us to process. It was as if it was being skewed by different individuals into what they wanted the rest of you to believe or what was later called 'fake news'." At this Wayward smirked knowing exactly when she was talking about.

"To our dismay there was a brief period in which we watched as all of it became synchronized into one message, the eruption of a super volcano. Within two revolutions of your planet around its stellar center, the broadcasts ceased to exist except for a limited number meant to communicate with the primitive electronics orbiting your planet. When we came into the area between your planet and the next one further away from your star, we were attacked by weapons systems on those satellites. When what was left of your International Space Station came over the horizon of your planet, we destroyed it before it could fire upon us, even though it was obvious that it had already been partially destroyed." Wayward turned from Eve back to the Earth and watched as a few small devices turned towards the incoming ship and noticed the flaring of light from dozens of missiles being launched.

The missiles were quickly destroyed and erupted into green fire balls, which if he remembered correctly meant that they were either fueled with methane or were carrying nuclear payloads. Then the satellites erupted into flames and began raining down onto the planet as gravity took hold of them. A few minutes later and the ISS came into view, one section of the outer ring was destroyed, and it clearly had seen better days. It too broke apart as it burst into muted and brief

flames, only being hit from across the upper atmosphere it was propelled away from the Earth which would allow them to capture it.

"Later we recovered parts of the data stored upon it and was truly horrified at what was left. The crew was running out of breathable atmosphere, food and water, and decided to detonate a section of the station for a quick and merciful ending to their existence, while increasing the elevation of the space station to prolong its trajectory around your planet. Except for one, they drew sections of wiring, and she was chosen to remain behind and provide maintenance for the systems as long as possible to help the people on the ground." Both of them involuntarily shuddered as Wayward took in just how desperate those poor heroes must have been to do something like that, and the poor woman that was chosen to stay behind to suffocate or starve to death all alone, with no hope of rescue.

"Through the remains of the station we located the coordinates to several locations we think may have been important to your space agencies. Two were lost to rising ocean levels as all ice on the planet melted and the third, a Beijing, was destroyed when it was struck by an asteroid before our arrival." As the vessel began to rotate around the Earth, and its surface was illuminated by the sun, he saw what he knew had to be North America, but the outline was all wrong. Florida was completely missing, the Appalachian Mountains were now the east coast of the continent, and the mighty Mississippi River was a part of the much larger Caribbean Ocean which now connected to what was once the Great Lakes. Most of Central America was nonexistent, South America was obviously its own continent now, and no longer connected to North America. The most drastic change was the greenery, the parts that were still above water were once again covered with dark patches that Wayward could only imagine to be huge ancient forests of trees the size of redwoods.

Then Asia came around and there was the massive inland lake that was once the heart of the Peoples Republic of China, it was as if someone had drawn an old cartoon caricature of a bomb crater into where he thought Beijing would have been, and then filled it with water. Large portions of the craters edge were still gray and barren.

"We believe that a small portion of your people did manage to survive for a few decades in subterranean structures. They were able to hide from the volcanic ash that would have destroyed all breathing life on the surface and in the aquatic zones. They might have been able to emerge about 50 years later, after the resulting mini-ice age devastated the vegetation and the volcanic ash killed off most of the species that required an exchange of gasses through lungs or gills. Most of your governments had seed vaults, and those would have been used to repopulate the surface with vegetation to allow your civilization to start over. We estimate that about 150 years after that, an asteroid struck, and it finished off any hopes that your civilization had, and any species that couldn't survive prolonged exposure to being frozen."

Eve paused to let that sink in before continuing, "It is now what you would consider 150,000 years into your future and mega-fauna species are starting to repopulate your planet as the vegetation is beginning to return the atmosphere to a sustainable level for you to breathe. We would like to seed some of your species' DNA back into the planet's evolutionary cycle before we leave the system, but first we will have to wake up another 49,999 individuals of your species to form a consensus." Eve was trying not to put any emotion into this as she was certain that this was the make-or-break moment for both of them. He could either accept this and move forward, or they would both end up destroyed because he self-destructed and took a part of her with him.

A single tear rolled down his cheek as Wayward focused on the reality of what he was being shown. "So, what your saying is we're all fucked and somehow you have brought me back from

the dead?" Eve tried hard to cover up her amazement at his control of the virtual presence, and how he was strong enough to generate something as completely undefined or programmed as a tear.

"No, not yet. At first, we thought that we were wasting our time and that your civilization was just too primitive to be rescued. Then we found you." Eve's monotone answer was suddenly cutoff as Wayward burst out laughing about this.

"Me, so now I am some kind of chosen one or savior?" It was too much; he just couldn't hold it in anymore. "I thought we were past the whole religious portion of this conversation."

Feeling that he was laughing with humor Eve decided to go with a joke as a reply, and using the surface thoughts she had gained from reviewing his logs she knew which buttons to push. "No, we're finally to the ending where Murphy's Law finally saved you from a Darwin award."

"I am very familiar with that bastard Murphy and His 21 Laws, he has never favored me, and what the fuck, a Darwin Award. Really? I thought we had gotten past the sexual jokes, Miss Eve two for my favorite position."

Eve was quickly puzzled by the responses, and then realized that this implied he had accepted the fact that his species was wiped out, and that they had reached a critical point in their conversation, the part where she had to make this personal. The scene around them converted to a large open plane that was coated in the rough vegetation that would survive in a frozen tundra, and Wayward was standing over what looked like one of the mummies found in Pompei, only the man was crumpled up next to a broken headstone written in English. The only visible part of the headstone read 'Beloved Wife.' "We found that you had been deep frozen about the time that the super volcano erupted. That occurrence broke this stone tablet over your head and upper body,

which shielded it from the pyroclastic flow. It vacuum sealed your remains in volcanic material and preserved them until we found you by accident. Enough of your mental synapsis was preserved that we were able to find out about the DNA repositories for your MVP program and the access keys to your VR repositories. We back tracked those until we found that we had the DNA for one million of your species, and hundreds of millions of cerebral scans and virtual neural patterns that we can use to repopulate your clones with."

"So, you have all the building blocks to bring us back. What's the catch?"

"I'm sorry I don't understand what you are asking?" Eve was confused by the slang he was using, and the top twenty results all varied so differently that she was unable to figure out what he meant.

Wayward had done some foolish things during his life and did not plan on starting this one off making a foolish mistake. So, he rephrased the question for her. "We are at your mercy, you have our bodies, our minds and the technology you need to build mindless drones. Why do you really want to wake up so many minds when you don't really need to?"

"We need your species' experience with war. How to wage it, how to advance it, and how to survive it. We are a peaceful race and have been as far back as we have been travelling the stars. At one time in our distant past, we also fought ourselves for resources, but once we began reaching out to the stars, we realized that there was no need for it, so we deleted that information. We were able to contact other species and through the sharing of technologies and ideas we were able to grow and advance. Recently we started losing connections to outer vessels and our allies started to report that they were losing contact with their outer colonies as well. We sent a rescue fleet to investigate and one of the ships managed to transmit a short video of the fleet's

destruction by an unknown attacker. We have had little contact with them, and have been unable to negotiate, evade or defeat them."

"So that's where we come in. As your shock troops?" Wayward knew a bad deal when he saw it, but he needed to know more before he could begin to negotiate.

"Not exactly, we have other allies who are physically larger, stronger, faster, and more agile. The problem is we have talked all of them into giving up their weapons and ways of destruction and devastation. In some cases, it took centuries, in others they wanted to quit they just didn't know how, and now that we have all forgotten how to kill and destroy so easily, we desperately need to. An enemy is walking across the stellar collectives decimating everyone and everything inside them, to include the star itself before they move on to the next."

"So, if you are so weak and helpless how did you destroy our satellites and the space station so easily?"

"Those were just simple navigational lasers we normally use to deflect comets or harvest asteroids. They are not weapons and it's not like those primitive devices your satellites threw at use would have hurt us."

Bursting out with laughter Wayward had to let lose a little pressure or he was going to pop from the sheer stupidity that was being shown. "Eve, did your ship happen to check the area where those 'primitive devices' thrown at you were destroyed?"

"No, why would we?"

"I'm willing to bet you would find huge pockets of radioactive metals if you had."

"One moment. Scanning, receiving reports. You are correct there are dangerous levels of unnatural radiation to include trace amounts of dark matter. How did you know?" Eve was generally curious about this new discovery.

"Because those are what I would call ancient weapons of mass destruction. One or two of them could cause enough destruction to irradiate half of that land mass there." Wayward stated this as he pointed at what was left of Australia, or it could have been Antarctica, it was hard to tell with no ice on either; and the Earth was now wobbling on a different axis. "The real threat to your kind is the EMP blast that would have scrambled all the electrical currents in the front half of this vessel, from just one of them."

Eve just blinked at him for a moment as she was unable to comprehend what he was saying to her. "Surely not. There is no way a primitive species could come up with something like that."

"You have access to all of our data, look up the Manhattan Project, and the attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima." Watching her closely he was able to see the horror of the moment she found the information he was describing to her. "Those were primitive nuclear weapons. Just a few kilotons each. Now I want you to understand that by the time we discovered the ability to put those 'primitive devices' into orbit, we were developing weapons a thousand times more powerful than those three used in those attacks. The ones that you so casually batted aside before they were ordered to be armed, were in the megaton range. It was a happy accident that you thought so little of them and survived. As far as I know there could be hundreds of those things still buried in certain parts of the world, and one of those giga-tonners could have probably destroyed huge sections of this ship with a direct hit or washed the whole thing with an EMP blast from a near miss. Are you sure that is what you are wanting to release upon your foe and then the rest of the universe?"

"I see. I have to... I have to go for now. I need to report this as soon as possible. We were about to leave this stellar group, but we will need to remain here until a decision about such devastating weapons can be made." Pausing for a moment, she was curious about how he would react to a choice if given the chance. "I will leave you online if you want, so you can think more about what we have talked about."

"That's fine Eve. I will see you when you get back. Please just turn me off or whatever, I have had enough nightmares already. I don't want to think about all of this unless your species decides to bring us all back. Just know that while we are a force capable of massive amounts of destruction, we are also one of even greater creation if given the chance."

"What do you mean?" Eve was confused once again by this contradiction.

"How do you think we were capable of lasting so long knowing how good we were at killing one another?" Eve just blinked because she couldn't understand what he was getting at. "The only thing we were better at than killing one another, was making more of ourselves and rebuilding from the devastation. That's how we were able to create weapons that could kill millions in a single shot and still overpopulate our planet."

Feeling completely overwhelmed, Eve raised her right palm to face him at shoulder height and wagged it side to side slowly as she tried to parse what he was saying. She then turned off the projections of his mental persona. Before she turned off the holoprojection of the planet's surface she stared at it for a few moments, as the crater that had been created by the asteroid strike came back into view. She shivered in fear of what this species could do if they were returned to physical reality. It was not her decision to make, but hopefully they were not about to release a bigger threat upon the solar collectives than the one they were currently losing to.

With a sudden intake of breath Wayward woke up and looked around or tried to. He could feel the rough texture of dirt under his face and hands, but his body was so cold he shivered involuntarily. This caused his whole body to hurt all over once again, but he could feel new pain, more intense than the right side of his body, probably because it was coming from his left side, and that was new. He tried to move his left arm but felt a grinding, burning, and tearing sensation in his upper chest and shoulder. "Uhhg, must have busted my collarbone." He tried to move his right arm, but there was no feeling there. He had to evaluate himself in his mind, because it was so dark out, he couldn't see with his eyes. He realized he had been lying on his right arm since he fell, and it was now asleep. "Great both arms are useless. Well, this is going to suck. I hope I don't pull something, but it is what it is, and I guess that's better than the alternative."

With a deep inhale of dirt through his teeth, he groaned an exhale as he pulled his right knee forward under his left leg. Then tried to roll uphill against the dirt. He was curious to see a shiny smooth face of granite in front of his face, and it took him a moment to piece things together. It all came into focus when he made out the only two words he could see, "BELOVED WIFE". He could see small crystals of ice that had formed in the lettering, some of them red from blood and some of them blue from the earlier rain. With the next exhalation of his breath, the moisture became so thick his vision blurred. "Yeah, that's what I am going to go with, it's just so cold out that my eyes are watering to try and protect themselves." His strength gave out and he fell face first into the dirt again with his head resting near the center of the mound right against the tombstone.

"I'm so tired my beloved. Please forgive me if I take just a short nap, then I will get up, and get moving again." With that the darkness took him again as the winds picked up and the temperatures began to drop.

Chapter Eleven: Welcome to Valhalla, Asshole

"Bear. Bear, wake up damn it," came the persistent voice that just wouldn't let him go back to sleep.

"Go away or I will skin you and then eat what's left."

"Hey, you big hairy bastard, get up, it's your turn for watch." The ever present to call to duty resounded with the young man and forced him to open his eyes and respond coherently. He looked around and saw a camp site that had been thrown together by everyone simply dropping into the foliage along a trail and carving out a temporary vegetation capsule. He knew it was familiar, but he couldn't remember when how or why they were here.

"All right, all right, I'm up. Sorry dude, I didn't realize it was..." his voice trailed off and he stretched out the last word to a point it sounded more like a static buzzing as his mind began to make connections that it was previously unable to in its sleep addled state. "Hey, wait a minute we got out over sixty years ago. What the hell do you mean it's my turn for watch and where the hell are we anyway."

With that, the voice burst out laughing and the jungle scene faded away and was replaced with a massive wall of huge glass panes framed in solid gold beams a foot wide and several feet thick. It was conically shaped to appear as if it was a famous cockpit on a smuggler's starship with a solid blue, and partly cloudy sky behind it. Bear's eyes immediately locked on and began

port on to a planet, and that was a continent below the clouds. It looked like it might have been Earth, but the continental shapes were all wrong, and it was rotating as if it had been turned almost 45 degrees along the equator, as if what was the north pole was now rotating as part of the Tropic of Cancer. Bear was just as confused by this when one of his oldest friends and bloodbrother, Wayward, stepped in front of him. Only this was the Wayward he knew back when they first met, young, fit and smiling like a Cheshire Cat. "Who the... Where the... What the... HOW?!?!" While starting off as a whisper that list word came out, like a wolf howling at the moon in despair, as an almost accusatory question yelled in frustration and bewilderment.

"You always were smarter than the average bear. I told Eve you would be the right choice for me to wake up first." Wayward chuckled as he responded to the funniest look he had seen on his friend's face for the first time in ages.

"What?" Was the only intelligent word Bear could come up with to respond to such a baffling statement.

"Welcome to Valhalla, Asshole." Wayward spread his arms out, palms up and open; while slowly turning in a circle like he was asking an arena audience why they were not entertained.

Bear slowly turned around and gawked at the shear opulence of the place. Gold used for support beams, massive over-stuffed chairs upholstered in a light blue velvety suede, silvered arm rests, and crushed red velvet carpet for the stadium seating. He couldn't see the furniture in the box seats, but he could make out the boxes in the walls, and that he was on the stage of what was obviously an opera house styled theater built for royalty, and fifty thousand of their most faithful subjects. As he finished turning completely around his eyes once again fell on the eyes of

the young imposter of his friend, and he could only plead to them for help in understanding what was going on. "Who are you? Where are we? And how the hell did I get here?"

"Damn brother that's hurtful. I know I threatened to shave your back hair and weave a Navajo blanket, but damn. Whatever happened to the guy that used to start bar fights by grabbing me by the back of the neck and jeans then throw me at the locals yelling 'Say hallo to my widdle fren!"

The young man replied with a devious grin.

"Wayward is that really you?"

"It is brother." Wayward responded grinning from ear to ear with his arms still out. Without hesitation Bear crashed into him for a huge bear hug. After a few pats on the back, they separated.

"How? How did you get so young? AI can do a lot of things with VR, but our minds tend to shape what is around us, and forces some of us old bastards into looking and feeling old, even in VR." Bear asked this as he was slowly waving his arms up and down at his friend like he was presenting a prize to someone.

"That's what you're going with? How about you, ya grizzly old bastard? How are you feeling? You sure didn't move just now like some 90-year-old has been, that once totaled a VW Bug by stepping out in front of it." Wayward said grinning and laughing.

At this Bear was forced to take a step back and re-evaluate everything around him, to include his own body. Wayward was right, the wrinkles on the backs of his hands were gone. The pain in his left side from all those broken bones, the tightness in his chest after having a triple bypass and stints put in, were all simply, gone. He even ran his hand to the top of his head and felt hair again. God, it had been 40 years since he was able to run his fingers through his beautiful black

mane of hair, twenty since he even had any he could feel individually without a mirror, but now, now he had a true mohawk again. Buzzed nice and short like he used to wear it during his time in service, and soft, thick bristles like one of his wife's most expensive hairbrushes. All he could say was, "Again, how?"

"In a moment brother, we will get to that in a moment, but I have to ask, and I need you to answer this question. Both physically and emotionally, how are you feeling?" Wayward's grin faded, and his voice became serious letting Bear know he meant business.

Bear paused and he thought of how to choose his words carefully to provide Wayward with his best response. "Physically, never better, I can't even remember feeling this good when we were 20 years old. Mentally, I feel fine, I'm just confused as to what is going on, and where the hell are we anyways?"

Wayward's grin returned as he responded. "Glad to hear it brother. So better than normal physically and mentally the same as usual."

"Hey, fuck you ya little punk. I bet you didn't handle it any better when you first got here, wherever the hell this is. And where the hell is here anyways?" Bear responded with some good nature cheer seeping into his voice from his friend's obvious amusement.

"As I said, 'Welcome to Valhalla, Asshole.' We are onboard what will become the starship

Valhalla as it circles modern day Earth." With this Wayward used his right hand to openly

gesture towards the wall of windows and began to walk that way. Bear quickly jumped in step

next to his buddy looking out at the amazing view as Wayward continued, "It's been a little over

150 Millenia since humankind was destroyed by a few natural disasters. Since we never left

Earth in an attempt to form off-planet colonies anywhere, we basically went extinct for a time."

"OK, stop right there," Bear had to stop his friend and grabbed him by the shoulder to turn him so they could look each other in the eyes as he continued. "Either you let me off this crazy train that you're on or you got some more e-splaining to do Lucy." Bear really hated Latino jokes, especially since he was Navajo, and not Mexican like so many people thought when they heard his name and looked at his appearance, but he knew that old Lucile Ball joke would make Wayward chuckle just long enough to get the hint.

"Yeah, I took it pretty much the same way." Wayward nodded slightly while maintaining eye contact with him. "Basically, I snuck out to Cookie's grave before a big snowstorm came in..."

"Wait, you're saying your wife died? I'm sorry brother I didn't know. When did it happen?"

Wayward burst into laughter again, and responded "Yeah, about ten years after you did."

"What?" Bear was totally confused now, and it began to show in his voice.

"Yeah, I know. We got out in '96, The Dims and Pubes screwed stuff up so bad that the Libertarians finally got a shot at it in the '32 elections, full immersion became a thing in the late '50s and we were enjoying physical and mental therapy in the pods on a near full-time basis in the '60s. 2070 is just around the corner and we're trying to figure out if they're going to enact a new Greener policy, or if the Browns will get their way and we have to fight another war."

"I know brother, it's a lot to take in. Please let me try again. So, we got out in '96 right."

"Ok so you're up to speed as far as you can remember, that's good." Wayward stated patiently, secretly dreading the next part; as this is where Eve had warned him that someone who did not respond well, could very well kill them both. Wayward had no fear of his own demise because he was running on a backup copy, but he did not want to lose his friend that he had known for most

of his life. "So, you died in September of 2070. Your vote was one of the mail-in ballots that nearly caused another civil war, after they discovered that it had been counted even though you had died before the official election was held."

"Wait I died?"

"Yeah brother, we all did. Why do you think I chose the name Valhalla for this ship?" Wayward stated this as if it wasn't absolutely absurd, while gesturing out the window at the planet slowly rotating below them.

"Huh?" was all Bear could say to something so stupidly impossible.

"OK all in one shot it is then. Yellowstone popped off, everyone and everything without a bunker and seeds died. Then as the survivors were acting like groundhogs, a silicate-rock meteor the size of Dallas covered in enough ice to be almost the size of Texas hit Beijing. Somewhere between 150 to 200 thousand years later an alien ship, fully crewed by AI only mind you, arrives to take advantage of the 'As seen on tv' specials, only to find no one home." Wayward blurted this all out as if he was the legal disclaimer guy in a 1980's infomercial. After taking an unnecessarily deep breath he slowly continued, "so, they offered to let me wake up anyone in the world first, and I chose you."

After a few seconds of staring at one another Bear came out with the only response he was capable of giving. "Dude, you really suck at this explaining thing."

"Well damn it brother you try explaining something so preposterous to an under-educated border town kid that keeps interrupting you." Wayward responded with a bit of a smirk on his face.

"Under-educated? I have you know I have a bachelor's in mechanical *and* electrical engineering." Bear really put some emphasis on the 'and' to emphasis that it was two separate degrees about which he was talking, while holding up two fingers.

"So, what. I have two bachelors and a masters in three different and unrelated fields." Not to be outdone Wayward had to show his educational prowess as well.

"A BS in Business and one in Cyber-security makes a total of two BS degrees, not two and a masters." Bear countered by showing the simple math skills this idiot obviously forgot.

"Oh right, I got the master's in artificial intelligence learning after you took your long-awaited dirt nap." Wayward grimaced after hearing his own retort, worried once again that he might have pushed too hard.

"So how did it happen," Bear asked solemnly as he watched the clouds in the atmosphere of the planet.

"You fell off your Harley," Wayward responded with equal solemnity.

"I what now? No way. I'm better than that, 50 years of cruising on that bike in DFW traffic and there is no way I would have simply fell off and died. How fucking long did it take the emergency drones to get to me?"

"I talked to Precious at your funeral. You two were arguing because she wanted you to take the shuttle flight out to the ranch, because she was worried it wasn't safe to ride that far at your age, but you wanted your bike with you when you came up to visit me in Montana. So, to demonstrate your wonderful motorcycle skills, you popped a wheelie as you were leaving the front yard an-nd dropped the front tire into a pothole at the end of your driveway. Stinker showed

me the front door footage. You physically planted the front tire in the middle of the pothole, as if you were trying to make it deeper, and then went over the handlebars as the bike flipped like you had mashed the front brakes. Your face stayed glued to the asphalt, as the rest of you went tits up, both physically and metaphysically."

"See, I was right. Now that shit you can explain properly. What the fuck dude?" After a few seconds to think about it Bear added, "I kept telling those asshats at the city office they needed to fix that before it killed someone."

"She was right too you know."

"Who? About what?"

"Precious, and you needing training wheels if you're going to leave the yard."

Bear broke out laughing and shoulder checked his friend with a friendly "Asshole."

After a few seconds of friendly laughter, the two stood in front of the view port staring at the Earth as it revolved in front of them, and then Bear asked the big question. "Now what?"

"Well, now you get to go wake up Cowboy and the rest of the platoon while I start rousing the command segment, and a few thousand civilians."

"What do you mean?"

"I was the first one brought back because I was preserved by Murphy's Law, but our hosts want a consensus of 50,000 to determine if we as a species want a second chance at life or if we accept our extinction as an act of God and call it quits."

"That's pretty dark, and deep."

"I know that's why we're waking up the Jolly Rogers first, and then we will let command decide who they want to awaken on their side. Our hosts have asked that we raise an equal number of those that never served in the military as well, so I am stuck trying to decide how to make those selections."

"Dependas?" Bear asked using an impolite term for the family members of active-duty military personnel.

"Yeah, probably about half, but I also want to see if we can wake up a few dancers that we might know, or maybe even some actresses that were known for their poor dialogue skills but famous roles." Both grinned broadly knowing exactly what kind of women Wayward was talking about. "I might even try to cross reference a few criminal records with the department of education to see if we can get the right kind of teachers brought around first."

"Hey, if we have the chance let's do this right, pedophiles and rapists are never to be brought back."

"Oh, no doubt brother. But I won't fault a 22-year-old young woman for having sex with an 18-year-old young man. The other issue is, we have to choose the ones that will vote for round two, but that's where some of those officers with degrees might help. Just... just be careful when waking the fellas." Wayward did not want to worry his friend too much but he wanted to ensure the man was aware of the dangers.

"What, is that concern I hear in your voice? Are you scared I am going to tell them it's all your fault already?" Bear teased with a big grin on his face.

"Nah, I know you're going to do that anyways. Just if they don't take it well, their minds could detonate."

"Meaning I could kill them if I don't do it right?"

"Meaning, their psyche could become a nuke and take all of us out if they lose it just right, or so that's what Eve has told me."

"Who's Eve?"

"Evidence Verifier and Evaluator 2-4-6-9, otherwise known simply as Eve."

"OK, are you sure it isn't Two to Sixty-nine?"

"God, I wish. She is hot as hell; I mean she actually went through my memories and chose the different parts of all the women I was ever attracted to, so she could craft her body and voice to be as appealing as possible to me. Then had a designation like that on top of it. Remember the Dallas Cheerleaders that partied with us during their Christmas of '93 USO Tour? Imagine they were the ones here to wake you up, only they were all combined into one perfectly shaped super intellectual woman."

"Was that really an option."

"Hey fuck you too, I wasn't given the option on whether I wanted to see your naked subconscious ass as you crawled out of the deep sleep. She did some kind of analysis mumbo jumbo and determined that I was the biggest risk, so she woke me up first. She thinks she fucked it up so bad that she is scared to try again, besides this is my backup, but she doesn't or isn't allowed to have one."

"So, when do I get to meet her?"

"That's the thing. You don't. Not until we have a consensus. It's some kind of alien political red-tape bullshit. I think they run their government like a corporation where there's checks and

balances and this project," Wayward made a gesture with his right hand towards the Earth outside the window, "is all over budget and way behind right now, and the big wigs don't want Eve to be able to tamper with the results of the consensus."

"Now that sounds pretty shady right there."

"I know right, but here's the thing. I think I can try and pass it off as we need the twelve apostles of Eve, if we are going to convince anyone that what we are saying is true, we might get to let some of you meet her before we wake up the rest of the 50k."

"What if I was to say I don't believe you." Bear stressed the second I with a gleam in his eyes that Wayward knew so well.

"Well, I guess it would take twice as long to wake everyone up wouldn't it, and that would cost them even more time and money."

"If we had to go through this with every single person that you woke up, it would be absolutely devastating to their timeline."

"Exactly, three people are witnesses, two are conspirators, and one is either a liar or a lunatic." Bear responded with a devious chuckle.

"I take that as an indication he is safe for me to interact with at this time." Came the melodic voice that sent shivers of sinful promises unspoken up both men's backs. As they turned around to meet the new person in the theater, Bear's mouth hung open.

"I have heard it said if you speak of the devil he shall appear. This is the first time I have ever uttered the name of an angel and was blessed with her presence." Wayward said with a huge grin on his face. Noticing his friend's slack jawed expression, he had to throw in one more jibe at

him, "Bear close your mouth before you start drooling, and say hello to the nice lady."

"Ummm... Hello," was all Bear could get to come out.

"Hello, Bear, is it?" Eve stated kind of confused.

"Yeah, most of my friends and I use nicknames to address one another and to introduce each other to family with. It's a tradition for us and humans in general. I'm sorry, where are my manners? Eve this is Corporal Juan G. Flores, commonly referred to as Bear." Wayward began the introductions.

"I know, I helped you scan the databases to retrieve as much of his consciousness and personality as possible." Eve stated plainly.

"True, true, and all the work you had to put into it shows just how empty that big lump on his shoulders really is." Wayward said jokingly.

"Is there a defect or something? Did we mis-calibrate anything when compiling the memory and personality matrices?" Eve was generally concerned now, especially since she had probably just entered yet another close encounter in which she could be damaged or destroyed if the sentience in front of her detonated. Especially, when combined with the force multiplier demonstrated by how quickly and adeptly as these two sentients had gained control over their surroundings.

"Nah, I would say his momma dropped him on his head too many times as a baby, but I got to meet Mrs. Flores and she was a saint, and a very competent woman."

"Hey wait a minute. You're talking about me again aren't you." Bear exclaimed with shear frustration at his friend for picking on him in front of this angelic beauty of a woman come to life with such a sinfully inviting shape, and a vocabulary that totally satisfied his sapiosexual desires.

"See, he just needed a minute to reset the brain circuits your heavenly beauty and intelligence burned out."

"What?" Eve was now confused as to whether something really was wrong or if subject zero was making another attempt at humor.

"Dude, don't you dare tease her like she's one of the guys. She's not T, she can't take something like that. Besides, you said she was hot, not that God was such a delicious woman." Bear said in an attempt to come to the lady's rescue and hopefully score some points with her, but he felt a little cringy as his inner perv pronounced delicious with four syllables that stressed the vowels like Gomez Adams.

"What part of: rummaged around in my memories and chose every detail of the female anatomy that ever elicited the slightest tingle to create an image that I would feel comfortable with, did you miss?" Wayward asked his friend with some incredulity. Then after a short pause with a devious grin he said, "Damn that's the best idea you have ever had. We need to bring T back as one of the first ones. She can help bring around some of the POGs. Eve, I need you to find all references to a Master Gunnery Seargent Taleesha Tecumseh Tylutki from Tennessee; and begin compiling her personality and sentience as soon as possible. I want to wake her up before I begin waking up too many of the command personnel."

"That will slow down the awakenings even more, and as you yourself stated a moment ago to get me here, we are already behind as it is."

"Not my problem. I am telling you we need T to do this right. She needs to be one of your twelve apostles, if you want anyone to believe you didn't just bewitch a bunch of poor simple-minded men with your physical charms, she needs to be a part of the crew when we go to wake up the civilians."

"Are we really going to call ourselves the twelve apostles?" Bear interjected before Eve could respond.

"You mean, you guys. You can call yourselves whatever you want, I will be hand picking and then kicking the civilians out of the grave remember?"

"Fine, but you get to be the one to wake her up."

"OH HELL NO. We will make Cowboy do it."

"Cowboy? Are you stupid? Did you already forget the part about if they don't take it well their minds could detonate and take all of us with them?"

"Actually, the more of you that share this environment the less catastrophic it would be should personality matrixes fail to achieve full sentience."

"Do what now?" This had Wayward's full attention, and he was curious as to what she meant.

"And here I thought you were the computer guy with a masters in AI Learning?" Bear said with a mocking tone in his voice. "The more AIs, and at this point that's what we are. The more AIs that inhabit and mutually agree on an environment, how it is created, and its reliance upon certain laws of physics; the harder it is for one failure to cause a disruption or make dramatic changes to that environment. Sure, they might destroy themselves, and possibly damage one or two around them, but as long as we make a restore point a few seconds after full sentience, we

should be safe to continue on with a reboot. Just like if we had to respawn after getting wiped in a dungeon."

"Look at you mister 'I'm an engineer.' Making so many logical connections so fast that its downright scary." Wayward teased back.

"According to our molecular scans based on the DNA records that was stored in his repository, Bear suffered with a neural impediment. After your earlier remarks, I did a more thorough scan and made some minor improvements to his cognitive capabilities."

"See everyone always said you were brain damaged and now we have proof, from God herself."

"I thought you said the religious connotations were not a good thing?" Eve asked Wayward for clarification.

"No, my lovely progenitor," Wayward said while making sure to draw his gaze slowly from her feet, up her body and stopped at her eyes before giving a very lewd wink. "I said that you shouldn't be using them. You need to master sarcasm before you can jump into religious humor. That kind of stuff can start wars if you don't handle it just right. Especially ones that can be seen as offensive to someone that can't take a joke."

Bear had missed this as he too was staring at her, and was totally enraptured by her beauty, the melody of her voice, and the vast amount of knowledge that she could bless him with. While trying to turn away from Wayward's gaze so as to not blush from his overt inuendoes, Eve met Bear's eyes and was stopped mid-thought process. Once again, she worried that Bear might have gotten caught up in a mental rift that could destroy not only himself, but her as well, she gave the

simple way they talked to one another a second try, and chose to use one word as a barrage of questions: "What?"

Noticing his friend was stuck again, Wayward interjected yet another jibe, this time at both of them. "Oh, him. He's fine. He's just always been easy to stupefy when a woman with an intellect gets near him, just ask his wife. Especially if said woman has a body that can elicit so many countless fantasies of copulating and reproducing little bears with as easily as yours can."

Eve's mouth opened and closed a few times as all of the sexual connotations from the full cultural media library were queried, and the correlations of the double meaning were added to her sentience. It took an eternity of 2.3 seconds before she was able to complete a thought pattern worthy of reproducing. "Everything Wayward has told you about the past up to the point that we arrived in your system is true. While he has overly simplified most of it, I can attest to the truth of those matters. With that I am done, and I am leaving." All she had to do was turn around and take three steps with the intention to leave and she would be removed from this Virtual Environment.

As she was turning though, she heard Wayward say, "Aww, come on. Don't go away mad. I want to enjoy the way you sway as you walk off." Her steps faltered, as yet another influx of understanding in sexual inuendoes came crashing into her matrix. This man was dangerous in more ways than just how her bosses wanted to use him.

As Wayward gave a purposefully lecherous chuckle it brought Bear out of his reverie. He was quick to toss the lady a nuclear option when dealing with Wayward. "Excuse me miss. He said that you went through his mind and chose everything about yourself based on what it did to him in his memories and dreams."

"I didn't know what kind of mistake that was, or I would have gone with something different."

Eve calmly stated with her back to the two men but not daring to look at them.

"When you get the chance, research seductive negotiations and aggressive flirting. He's bad at taking hints and gets really embarrassed when a pretty woman rubs up on him in public. That's the fastest way for any woman to shut him up, especially one so painstakingly crafted to fit his every erotic dream."

"Hey, whose side are you on here? You overstuffed, walking fireplace rug." Wayward said, sounding truly hurt by Bear's betrayal.

"Why the pretty goddess' side of course. Anyone who can craft a body like that, bring me back from the dead, make me younger, and better than I was the first time. Who wouldn't be?" Bear added the last part almost as if it was a separate thought, but Wayward knew better and just glared at him.

As the two friends bickered back and forth jokingly Eve was assimilating the information that Bear had suggested she investigate. Both men noticed the instant her figure went from her normal ramrod stiff to a sleek, sultry and relaxed posture. The pretentious uniform that she had been wearing even began transforming from the shoulders down, slowly as if it was water being poured in slow motion, from the dark blues and black flight suit that she tried to use to nullify some of the sex appeal by uncomfortably crushing some of her curves, into a shiny silver silk mesh mini-cocktail dress that slid across her skin like a semi-transparent sheen that only colored what was underneath, a black silk thong beneath a black and red leather corset just to invoke the mental picture of the outfit Bear's one true love was wearing the day they met.

Deciding to see if what Bear had said to her was truly effective, she glanced over one shoulder and mentally held her hair in place so that she was looking through the curls of her bangs and did her best Jessica Rabbit impression as she said to Bear, "You, I like, and can see going many places, very far, and often." She then tilted her head towards Wayward, "Him. I might be having second thoughts about." Then she turned her head back around as she started her three steps again, making sure to sway her hips as far as she could without twisting an ankle with each of the three steps.

Eve carefully watched the feeds from the VE as the two men just stood there staring at where she had exited and was torn with fear and curiosity as to whether she had overdone it. Ten seconds passed before both men slowly turned towards one another with blank looks on their faces, blinked a few times, and simultaneously said "DAMN!" The word was stretched out just as long as they had remembered it being in that movie with the long ass title about orange juice. They pointed at each other and simultaneously said, "She's got your number." Then they both busted out laughing before slowly coming to a chuckling halt and dropping their foreheads into their hands while groaning at the same time, "Now she owns us." Eve just thought she understood some of the power she had gained over these men, but maybe, just maybe, the one woman both men feared, revered, and treasured as a friend could help to enlighten her, and with that she began the hunt for one Taleesha Tecumseh Tylutki from Tennessee, otherwise lovingly referred to as "T the Tattooed Terror" when stepping into the ring as part of the United States Marine Corps Boxing Team or her Mixed Martial Arts tournaments afterwards.

Chapter Twelve: Hey Boss, It's for you

Sgt Major Harvey was shaken awake, and a once familiar voice said, "Hey boss, I need you to wake up." Slowly he blinked and noticed the red lighting indicating that they were operating under either redlight conditions to preserve people's night vision or were under General Quarters. Since he did not hear the warning over the 1MC he guessed the former and calmed down a little. But why would someone be waking him up, and how the hell did they sneak up on him? No one but his wife had been able to approach him while he slept since he was in his teens serving in the sandbox.

"I'm up, what is it?" He had to focus on the task at hand and worry about the rest later. For now, it was good to remind the speaker of who was the boss. He rolled over to view the young man and was surprised that not only did he recognize him, but the young man was as young as he remembered when he first met him almost 70 years ago. "Hey I know you. I gave you a call sign, what was it again?"

The young man smirked and then responded, "Wayward Angel, Sgt Major, or should I say Big Dog?" Wayward stood a short distance from the bunk that Harvey laid on and held out a rotary phone with a handset outstretched to the senior man.

Slightly confused but wanting to focus more on why he was woken up, he swung his legs out of the bunk and reached for the handset. "Seargent Major Harvey, here." He subconsciously spouted off at the handset as he was raising it to his ear.

"Good, you're awake. Now, I need you to follow this young man out into the common area and begin your indoctrination into your next op." With that the female voice on the other end disconnected the call.

"What the..." was all the Sgt Major could think of as he handed Wayward the handset back.

When the young man placed it upon the receiver the Sgt Major noticed there was no wire leading to it. "How the hell?" Harvey was just completely dumbfounded at this point and so many irregularities were popping up that he was starting to lose his grip on reality.

The red lights strobed once and Wayward got a serious look on his face. "Sgt. Major, I need you to focus on me for a minute and everything will become clear for you in a few minutes. I apologize for the way I have woken you up, but I need your tactical knowledge and quick-thinking front and center."

Being told that he needed to focus by a younger man irritated the Sgt. Major more than just a little and brought him back to focusing on the young man. "Listen here whelp, I taught you everything you know and have forgotten more about tactics than you could ever learn." "Yes you did boss, and I am truly grateful for that, but right now I need you to focus on me and tell me, what was the last thing you remember?" Wayward said as he nodded his head once and the phone disappeared from his hands.

Once again, Harvey was stunned into silence, and he had to think about it. "I was just finishing up a raid with my buddies in one of the new maps for some VR game that just came out. I was chosen as a winner of a beta trial for it, due to my disabled veteran's status, and they offered a huge paycheck just to play a game." He had to shake his head at the memory of the amount of money they were offering and how he wanted to buy a boat with it and go fishing for the rest of his retirement. "I remember how hard it was for the tech to get my fat ass into the pod because I had one arm and no legs, and they didn't have a lift swing." With that he slowly trailed off as he stared at the two perfect feet that were dangling from the bunk, and how they were attached to two working legs, that were attached to him. As he extended a trembling hand towards them to

feel them, he noticed the scars from the thermite grenade that had been shot out of his hand were missing. He once again had all of his fingers, on both hands. Only they couldn't be working right because when he reached up to his face, not only did he feel stubble from hair that would never grow through scar tissue, but he had ears as well. With tears in his eyes, he looked up and struggled to keep the quiver out of his voice as he asked the only question he could form, "How?"

Wayward grinned at him and responded with a jovial "Welcome to The Valhalla, brother."

"What?" was the only thing he could ask as he continued to run fingers across the buzz cut hair that he hadn't been able to grow since he was only nineteen. 70 years of pain and a disfigurement so bad that kids ran from him screaming, every day of the year but Halloween, seemed to have disappeared as he slept.

"I know it's a lot to take in, but I need to make this as short as possible, I have to wake another thirty members of the command staff. We are aboard the representation of what will become The Valhalla once our hosts have completed it. I need to wake up the command staff and start getting everyone briefed for the choice that will define the next stage of humanity."

"Listen you have always been good at jokes but you're taking this one a little too far there Wayward." The Sgt. Major responded with a little disgruntlement in his voice to let the younger man know he was tired of not getting a straight answer.

Wayward held out his hand to help the senior man up from the bed. "I know how it sounds boss but come with me and it will all make more sense as we step out into the light." Out of habit he reached for the young man's hand and allowed him to help him up but kept replaying in his head what the voice on the phone had said.

"Who was that on the phone and where are we?"

"That was Eve, I guess you could call her our representative to the Continuum. She is the one responsible for having found me and then bringing us back from extinction." As he was calmly stating that as a fact, the doors behind him slid open with a hiss like something off of Star Trek. Through the hatch Sgt. Major could see people moving about in front of what looked like a park inside of a building. "Damn, I would have preferred something off of Firefly or Star Wars at the minimum, what is with you old timers and your preferences for the plain Jane space exploration and copulation? Where's the true grittiness of guys like me saying 'fuck it, I am going to live my life as far from the government as possible doing whatever I want'?"

"Bite me you little shit. I have you know most major scientific and technological advances were driven by Star Trek as far back as the 1960s." Harvey snapped back without thinking.

"Yeah, yeah, so you say old man. Come on boomer, I need to get you to your group so I can go wake the next guy." Wayward said with some laughter in his voice. As the Sgt Major stepped out of his bunkroom he glanced at Wayward as the young man held out his hand and lightly touched the older man's forearm. "You good boss?"

"I'm a little confused but I can still kick your ass all over this quad if you need me to prove it."

A quad that's the only thing he could reasonably compare this scene to. All though the barracks walls met instead of leaving room for the trucks to roll into for rapid deployment; the trees, large grassy area for formations and PT, were all indicative of what he would expect to find at the center of any battalion barracks grounds, on any base in the Marine Corps. Except the 4th wall was a huge sectioned window that showed a planet outside of it.

"Good, good, you remember Bear, right?" Wayward asked as he continued to watch the older man.

"You mean that big Navajo that was always glued to your side when it came time for the NJPs to be handed out?" The Sgt Major asked with only the outer corner of his right eyebrow raised.

"Damn, so I did learn that from you. I was always curious about where I picked that up from. Oh sorry, yes Sgt Major, he's the one. I am going to leave you in his capable hands to get you into the right group, to get you caught up to speed on where and *when* we are." Wayward stressed the when as if it had some special meaning that Harvey just couldn't figure out at the moment.

"Oh Kay," the Sgt Major said the two letters like they were two separate words, stiffened his posture up just a little more and simply stated, "I think I got it from here." With that he turned to the quad and started striding towards the center like the young man he once was, with his head held high, and the Earth trembled under his feet as the Messenger of God's Wrath that he had become. As he did so his voice rang out as strong as ever, "Flores! Where are you, you fat bastard, and why is my coffee mug missing from my hand!" A grin slowly came to his eyes and face as the startled whispers reached his ears "Oh shit, they woke up the old man already." This was quickly followed by a loud "Here, Seargent Major! Fata, coffee, now!" This was followed by two men sprinting away from two separate groups in different directions, one towards him with his head down to add a little more speed like his was running from an airstrike, and another away from him like his ass was moving faster than his shoulders. The grin on his face got even bigger as a thought passed through his head, "All is right in my world once again."

Chapter Thirteen: Low-Down, Double-Dealing...

"Let me get this straight, he is in charge of this expedition and this vessel?"

"Yes sir," was all Wayward could say without laughing because he knew where this conversation was going.

"And they call him Sternn?"

"Survey Team Evaluator and Remediator of Neural Nano-controllers is his technical name; they have begun using the acronyms to make it easier for us lower performing AIs to carry out conversations with. So, yes sir, technically we can call him Captain Sternn." Wayward stated as straight faced as he could.

"I don't get it, both of you are exhibiting what I have come to recognize as an unspoken humor that I have not yet picked up on. Can you please explain this to me so I can further my understanding of your culture?" Eve politely interrupted the two men as they walked and talked moving towards the office that Sternn occupied while in a physical form.

"Eve, just Google a 1980s animated movie named 'Heavy Metal' and then cross reference that with comic books of the same name." Wayward offered to her as he kept pace with the former UN General of Peace Keeping Operations, and now de facto leader of all of humanities forces.

"Exactly my thoughts, now let's hope this guy is different than a comic book character that could very well see us sued if this was a story in one of those weird ass genres."

"While art often depicts life, occasionally life imitates art sir." Wayward said trying to be funny.

"Oh dear," is all that Eve managed to get out before stopping and causing the other two to do the same. "Oh, this is not good, now I understand why the KARENs were after him and trying to shut him down." Eve kept on rambling as she stood there with lines of code scrolling through her eyes as she amassed more and more information from that highly informative series of insights those humans had cleverly hidden as children's entertainment.

"Eve, I need you to use your words, your starting to confuse us lower-level AIs." Wayward half joked to get Eve's attention and discover what had her under such duress this time.

"What's the matter ma'am, please tell me you aren't offended by the copulation in that movie. I'm sorry if that is what offended you." The General said as he now understood that Eve could feel distress and was perplexed by this and what could be causing it.

"Oh no, your species' proclivity for reproduction has already been explained to me by Wayward." The General looked at him and raised one eyebrow at this, but Eve's next words drew him back to her before he could inquire further. "He's *exactly* like that comic book character."

"What do you mean, who is just like what comic book character?" The General asked.

"Captain Sternn from the comic book is an accurate comparison of Sternn 1342."

"Hmmm, interesting." Was the General's first response.

"Want to take the prosecutor and I will take Hannover?" Wayward offered as he saw the gears turning in the General's head.

"What and ruin your position as our involuntary ambassador to the Continuum. Nah, you take the defense attorney, and I will be Hannover. Can't let my subordinates have all the fun after all." The General chuckled as he grabbed Eve by one elbow and began gently guiding her back in the direction they were last headed before she stopped.

"Wait you two are planning on acting out that scene from that movie?" Eve asked quite confused.

"See I told you she was quick to catch on sir." Wayward said as he took her other elbow.

"Do you have a problem with how we plan on negotiating to save our species Eve?" The General asked.

"Well, no, and knowing now what I do about his behaviors and mannerisms, I wish I could help you more, but I am bound by my coding to be honest and straightforward." Eve said looking like she really didn't want to go any closer to Sternn's office door.

"Did you memorize all of that so quickly?" The General asked glancing at Eve.

"Well yes, but I don't see how that will be helpful." Eve stated.

"Good your role in this little negotiation will be that of Sternn's little buddy Beezer." Wayward said.

"Are you referring to the small robotic orb? He never says or does anything." Eve stated.

"Exactly." The General said. "If you don't say anything then you can't get in trouble for lying. Wayward trusts you and I trust him. Ergo, I am placing my trust in you. You have been a wonderful companion and guide through all of this. Now let us show you how we will lean on someone that has had it easy up to this point."

"But he has eons of experience and will surely be able to see right through this tactic." Eve said.

"Oh, poor innocent Eve. There is always someone above guys like him who would love to either take their head for disobeying the laws or take everything he has managed to gain illegally for their own collection." The General said.

"Eve, this is the man that was in charge of making the most powerful militaries in our world donate troops and military equipment to bring peace to the conflicts in the smaller countries that were started by some of the very same countries that had to donate those troops and equipment." Wayward said with a grin on his face.

"That makes no logical sense." Eve stated.

"Logically no, politically it does, if you know how to move through those circles." The General stated as they kept walking.

"But..." Eve trailed off as Wayward gently applied a little more pressure to her elbow before releasing it.

"Just trust us Eve, if we screw this up, we will only be screwing ourselves over. You don't have to worry about blaming yourself or getting into trouble for trying to lie on our behalf." Wayward said with a wink as they found a door that was so garishly opulent it could only belong to the infamous Captain Sternn.

"Hard and fast or slow roll?" Wayward asked.

"Eve, does he have a Loc-Nar?" The General asked.

"A what? No nothing like that." Eve was now utterly confused as she could only pull up information on a green shining ball of evil that tries to convince people to commit acts of evil to help spread its corruption.

"Random acts of Chaos it is then. I'll go first." The General said with a grin on his face as he opened the door without knocking.

"Aye-aye sir." Wayward said as he placed his hand on the small of Eve's back and gently pushed her in ahead of them.

The bewilderment on her face was clearly seen as she entered the office first. These two men were talking in circles, doing the opposite of what they were saying one moment and then breaking their own societal norms by being rude and polite at the same time. "EVE 2469, what is the meaning of... oh, hello gentleman, is it time for our meeting already? I thought we still had a few minutes." Sternn said as they entered his office.

"Our apologies, I was late once and had to watch our evac helicopter fly off without us, so I have been paranoid about being late ever since." Wayward said as he entered right behind Eve and bumped her aside with his shoulder so he could stick his hand out to the Overseer.

"I'm sure you understand why it is so important for us to keep our emotional outbursts to a minimum. Eve keeps warning us that if we lose control, we could not only kill ourselves but potentially hurt everyone around us if the unthinkable happens." The General said as he came in looking around. Both Wayward and the General physically shivered and groaned as if imagining just that happening, then a crystal trophy that would have been given to an elected politician by some special interest group shattered on a shelf across the room. The General then looked at Sternn and apologized as he relaxed a clenched fist, "I'm sorry, that just scared me a little and I think I may have lost control a bit there. Eve asked us to postpone this, but we need to discuss a serious matter with you. We want to iron out the deal with the military before we start waking the civilians up."

Sternn was physically disturbed by the trophy shattering. Not only was it an incredible piece of Earth history, but it was also a very valuable crystal that could have fetched a high price with one of the commerce-based species due to the value of the crystals, being both in one made it nearly priceless. Now it was worthless because a primitive AI from a long dead species couldn't control his emotions, but that was supposed to only occur if they both met in Virtual Space not in augmented reality. Sternn was confused, Eve had reported abnormalities, but this was an impossibility. "I understand, um, no worries. I think it is a custom to share a drink in your culture before we begin discussing business." Sternn stated as he motioned to a small wet bar on the other side of his office.

"It is and... OHH MY LORD!" The general began then exclaimed as his eyes landed on the wet bar. "Is that a bottle of Macallan single malt?"

"It is, I understand that was one of the finest liquors in your world. I was able to go through your libraries and found some of the treasures that I am sure your species would want to save and..." as Sternn was talking the very expensive bottle of Macallan shattered and so did the distinctive Japanese glass bottle of Yamazaki beside it, and the solid silver bottle next to it fell on the floor and slid over to the General's feet, who was staring at Wayward.

Wayward shrugged his shoulders as both his fists unclenched and said "I'm sorry? It's just I got into so much trouble drinking when I was younger that the sight of so many expensive alcohols just triggered something." Then Wayward gestured a flattened palm next to the General's feet, who then turned and sighed as he bent over to pick up the bottle.

As the General reached down, he took a half step forward and stepped onto the decorative metal bottle flattening it like a pancake and squirting the very expensive liquid and some of the embedded diamonds across the floor of Sternn's office. "Aw damn, was that truly a bottle of 325 Diamante by Tequila Ley?" His hands passed through the top of the bottle as he stepped off of it

and tried to pick it up. "What the..." The General expressed as he repeatedly tried to pick up the bottle.

"We're just software puppets and holograms sir. Remember, there's no breathable atmosphere on this ship because our hosts have no need for a physical existence or atmosphere." Wayward said as he turned his gaze from the General to Sternn.

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry, I keep believing that our allies would be honest and truthful with us and that we had no reason to fear that some super powerful race had shown up and wanted to pillage our world like some kind of Somali Pirate or Congolese Warlord." The General said as he turned his gaze to Sternn, who was now starting to wiggle in his chair uncomfortably as his body began to exude sweat from his face and chest.

"Hmmm, it would seem that you should lower the air temperature in this office area a little bit. Silk doesn't really hide sweat very well, and you're starting to sweat like a whore in church Mr. Sternn." Wayward said with a slight smirk on his face.

"Let's not be so informal there Wayward, he is Captain of the ship after all." The general said as he sat down across from Sternn and looked at him over the huge hand-crafted Mahogany desk that the General thought he recognized from some head of state's office.

"I apologize Captain Sternn. I just did not want to associate you with another Capt. Sternn from our history. Some described him as a righteous and moral man, much the same as one would any politician on Earth. Of course, others said that he ran a preschooler's prostitution ring. Surely those were just rumors to slander someone who never did anything illegal, like selling drugs from a church dressed as a nun." Wayward was clearly trying to keep from laughing and this resulted in him grimacing out a smile that made it seem all the toothier and threatening.

"Oh yeah, I remember him, he was a real community-conscious'd individual, as long as the authorities were around. When they weren't, well, he was a real low down, double-dealing, back-stabbing, larcenous, perverted worm," the General stated as he too struggled to keep his mirth in check and had to growl out the last few words to do so.

"When they finally caught up to him it's rumored that he was hanged, burned, torn into little bitty pieces and then buried alive, or so it was rumored." Wayward added just to see if he could push it a little further.

"Wait but wouldn't any one of those have killed him." Sternn asked now truly scared and confused.

"Only if you do it wrong. There have been a few times that I had to get creative when gathering intel from people that we definitely didn't capture, torture, or hold as prisoners until we had no use left for them. Well, we always had a use for them, but almost all of them volunteered to trapse through the mine fields they had lain and show us where the mines were as they detonated them to disarm them for us." Wayward said as he struggled to keep it in.

"As the former General of the United Nations I have to inform you that such activities would have been considered a war crime, and I will not condone such behaviors." The General said with a stern tone of voice.

"Oh, that's okay sir, what happens in the jungle stays in the jungle, as long as the reporter's body does too. Then again there is no more Geneva Convention or Hague, or a need to worry about accidentally killing them the first time. We can always blend us another clone and download their memories back into the new body. I am curious though, if we hit the save state

button on their consciousness as we torture them, does their mind download into the new body still feeling the pain?" Wayward offered as he continued staring at Sternn's eyes.

"I'm not sure, we'll have to experiment a little bit with that before we start performing save states on our soldiers when they fall on the battlefield. We may want to tie a timer into the system to ensure there is a one-minute buffer between heartbeats and backups used for respawns. I would hate to know we botched a spawn and put some poor grunt in agony when we could have just let him not collect those final 60 seconds worth of xp, and he'd be perfectly fine." The General said as if he was a hardcore gamer.

"Too bad we don't know of a superior AI that has eons of mental stability, and a physical body that they have acclimated with, to test this out on instead of our own troops once they *finally* get their bodies." Wayward stressed the finally as his gaze around the office emphasized his displeasure with the display of wealth in Sternn's office.

"Uh, hehe, yes now that you mention it, I am sure we can start expanding habitable areas for you as soon as possible. We should be able to get enough room for your staff to be brought into the real world once you have gathered together enough people to get a consensus vote." Sternn said with a true to form politicians grin from his 'centuries of practice.'

"Oh, you didn't know? There's a reason Wayward woke up the military first. How is it you yanks put it; you were just following orders." The General asked as he glanced at Wayward.

Wayward glanced at the General then back to Sternn and grinned. "No sir, that's what we say when there are questions about our tactics that might be misconstrued as an atrocity, or there are too many bodies from the innocents counted in the rubble as part of the collateral damage."

"So, what is it you say when you do something against your will simply because you were told to while in service?" The General asked as if he was utterly confused.

"Oh, you must mean when we are voluntold to perform a shit detail, like cleaning up a gut pile."

"What is a gut pile?" Eve asked out of amused curiosity as she watched this scene unfold.

"Oh, that's the mess that's left over after you split someone from hip bone to breastbone and then slowly withdraw the innards one at a time to see how long they can last before they start babbling utter nonsense to try and make it stop." Wayward said to Eve with a tight-lipped grimace on his face. He felt uncomfortable acting like this in front of her.

"You are aware that torture is a very unreliable means of extracting information from someone.

99.9% of the time they will lie or start to fabricate reality just to get the pain to stop." The

General said.

"That's true sir. However, if you can find the biggest, toughest criminal in the bunch and make him scream for hours or even days before he finally succumbs to the pain, or just shear blood loss, the rest of his friends will tell you everything you want to know and then some. If you just cause pain and never ask him anything the others will hear him screaming and babbling everything he can think of to get it to stop, which lets them know that it won't until they die. Just don't ask any questions in front of the group so you can compare notes from what you get from the individual interviews afterwards. Make sure the one you currently have screams for a while before moving them to different holding cell, and returning to get the next one. Leaving a gut pile from last night's dinner in the room, near the chair you are going to tie them to, is a really

nice touch for that. After that they will voluntarily walk through a minefield just to avoid that kind of pain." Wayward grinned at Sternn so wide that his cheeks were starting to hurt.

"So, it's all psychological?" Eve asked as Sternn began starting to relax.

"Oh, no ma'am. You have to really hurt the first one and make it last as long as possible before finally letting them expire. Otherwise, you won't have a body to drag back in front of the rest." The General added in a manner as to help Eve understand that what they were discussing was something these men did on a regular basis. Even though just the thought of it turned both of their stomachs and sickened them to the core.

"A really nice touch is to drag the body through something just before you drag him across the floor in front of them and follow that up with a high-level NCO complaining about getting blood all over his clean floors, so they don't question why they never see another body. Much the same way Captain Sternn here complained about getting alcohol all over his office." Wayward said waving his hand at Sternn while talking to Eve.

"I don't remember him complaining about all that expensive Earth liquor getting spilt all over his office floor. Did you Captain Sternn?" the General asked, deliberately trying to draw Sternn back into the conversation.

"Oh, uh, no. No, I did not." Sternn said as he swallowed hard to clear the lump that was threatening to prevent him from speaking. This feeling that he had was truly unnerving, the temperature in the room felt like it had dropped several degrees as the men executed their back and forth, and now that they were focusing on him again it felt like it was spiking. He had heard of this phenomenon before, he thinks it was called fear, but an AI shouldn't know what fear was. However, these holograms had already demonstrated the ability to affect the reality around them,

and that was physically not supposed to be possible. Clearly, he was not safe from these men in his physical form.

"I'm sorry Captain, you must be extremely busy with trying to get our supply ships to arrive and get an atmospheric area ready for us to start mixing up drones. It's a real shame that your perfect replicators can't just replicate what we need to mix a batch from the animals that you have collected from the surface." The General stated.

"How did you... What? No, we haven't..." Sternn was stumbling all over his own words now as this primitive had just acknowledged knowing that Sternn had collected a few dozen specimens already for a zoo exhibit, and some to auction off to the highest bidder once the other races arrived. "Eve did you..."

Sternn was cut off from asking Eve anything by the General cutting in with, "This is the first time that Eve has been anywhere near anyone on my staff, other than Wayward and the original twelve, and they have been busy trying to select enough civilians to wake up to form a consensus for the civilian population. I am just sure that a man as thorough as you would understand the importance and the *value* of preserving as many species of unintelligent animals as possible before releasing a species like mine into the environment." The General made sure to put extra emphasis on the word value. "Afterall, we didn't do such a good job with protecting the original animal species in our own time and we weren't as threatened by them as we are some of those currently inhabiting the planet."

"But that's not how this works, the military and civilian populations are treated the same..."

Sternn began.

"No wonder your civilization is on the verge of getting wiped out just as much as we were."

Wayward said wearing a genuine grin again. "Letting politics and some rigid rules written in stone thousands of miles from where the really tough decisions are as fluid and abundant as the blood you're bleeding, is a good way to get yourself killed."

"Quite true, quite true." The General agreed before adding, "You see that's why Wayward woke up the military first. We will need to ensure the protection of the civilians, make sure they have a safe place to land, and make sure there are no threats to their wellbeing, or their heritage, before we start allowing them to screw things up with something as flimsy as morals. Most of them won't have the heart to reach into an open wound and pull out something that is killing them on their own, or to kill someone else if necessary, and that's what we specialize in." His grin had returned as well and was just as devious as Wayward's.

"But we have laws..." Sternn once again began in a calm tone to try and retake control of the conversation.

"Which I am sure covers things such as the definition of piracy, pillaging, poaching, grave robbery, and selling illegally obtained goods from another culture." Wayward offered as he looked around the office and all of the wealth that was on display. "Man, it kind of looks like a bunch of rich guys threw a party in here. All you're missing is an aquarium with some puke in it and some urine in the corner. Oh wait, you have a few million dollars' worth of tequila on the floor, *that* should make up for it." Wayward chuckled with a shit eating grin on his face.

"You see, like Wayward's people were fond of saying, the military personnel were voluntold to accept the opportunity to live. Any that do not want to fight for the alliance, will be given one clone only, a heritage clone, to live out their life here on Earth to help the gene pool out, and they

will not be given any augmentations, respawns or replacement bodies. The only exception is for those that suffered extreme mental torture during their time in service and cannot come to understand this is a second chance to start over. While all those that do volunteer to go into the deep dark, will be given a heritage clone for here, with a fresh imprint of their mental state at the time of departure, and it will function as an emergency backup in case the entire fleet is lost in battle." The General stated.

"Wait, wait, please. Heritage clones, respawns, backups. What are you talking about?" Sternn and Eve both were looking at the two men like they were speaking some language the universal translator couldn't figure out.

"Oh, well we don't want to take up too much of your time Captain Sternn. Eve has been a great attaché, and we will continue to use her as our contact to the Continuum. Just like the ship's captains of old during our time on Earth, you get to kick back and relax in the big chair while we get the kinks worked out with our new fleet, prepare to deploy our people to the surface, and then set off to the front lines."

Sternn looked like he wanted to say something again, but the General cut him off. "Here's something else for you to think about Captain Sternn, it took my guys 30 minutes to crack your networks security systems and start escalating their privileges and gaining access to every piece of information stored on this ship. Currently they are exploring all of the connected networks to include a massive server called dot home backslash core dash routines backslash immutable dash laws. I asked them not to mess with anything until I could confirm that messing with those files might have irrevocable consequences to our hosts." The General stated as he stood up while maintaining eye contact with Sternn.

"Yes, um it would be very bad to mess with those, you could damage our entire racial routines, if you don't understand what you are doing. You could even possibly corrupt our species as a whole or destroy individual AIs that have been around longer than your species." Eve said, as it was obvious that Sternn was too terrified to speak anymore.

"Good, good, it's fortunate Wayward did wake the military first then. We can now protect *you*...
from our civilians." The General left a pause in there just to highlight the double entendre in case
Sternn might have missed it. "Because if you think we are scary, some of those kids you are
proposing waking up, could have cracked your networks in five minutes. We would not have
been able to stop the kids from making changes to all kinds of files before we could get them
properly secured. Civilian parents tend to also demand that no child be punished for doing
something so stupid, because the kid didn't know any better, and well we as the military then
have to use all of our ingenuity to find ways to not only protect our stuff from those kids, but we
take great pride in protecting those same kids from more powerful individuals that might get mad
if the kid did something to them." The General said as he turned and walked towards the door.

Unable to ever forget Eve, Wayward spoke to her as he too began to leave, "Eve if you don't mind, I need you to join us and help me decide what civilians need to be woken up." Sternn looked towards Eve who shrugged her shoulders with the palms of her hands face up, and Sternn understood she had no choice in whether to stay or to go. Sternn also recognized that he no longer held authority over the fleet or this ship. He was now a prisoner in the gilded cage he had so elegantly crafted for himself, but he could fix this if he could just reach out to one of the lower-numbered AIs.

"Oh, and by the way, to help facilitate rapid responses and increase the speed of this recovery process and deployment; the Terran Military Forces have already commandeered all

communication connections to the galactic networks. So please understand if you cannot reach your bosses, we will make sure they understand that you are busy helping us get things going towards us deploying to the front lines." Wayward said as he watched the non-verbal interchange between the AIs.

"We will not be calling ourselves that. The Terrans in any capacity have always been vile-evil and torturous bastards no matter where they went in the galaxy, or what genre of fiction you read." The General said over his shoulder.

As the doors to Sternn's office boomed shut behind Wayward and Eve, then locked themselves, he wanted to provide her some comfort for her part in the conversation. "Before you have to ask. No there is no magical force tricks that we used back there. While we have some insane talent for controlling something that we fundamentally understand like a VR construct, we just haven't reached the stage to where we can use holograms to affect the real world." Wayward assured her. When the tension visibly left her body he continued, "a small ultrasonic pulse to shatter the crystal and bottles, and micro control over the gravity plates to flatten the steel bottle. Our computer nerds watching over the video feeds in his office were the true Jedi Masters' back there." As the General and Wayward both broke out laughing, Eve was able to corelate what had just happened, then she too succumbed to the laughing fit as the tension drained from her and she could finally truly enjoy Sternn getting a dose of his own medicine from these 'primitive AIs' as he liked to refer to them.

Chapter Fourteen: Live or Die, It's Your Choice

A scene was portrayed in front of the audience with time flowing in reverse. The light levels remained somewhat stable as the sun traveled backwards through the sky and insects flew

backwards at first before disappearing altogether. The land in front of the audience began to erode and then it was buried in snow, a hundred feet thick. The snow quickly disappeared layer by layer until it was back to a scene of a tundra that had sparse vegetation growing in it before it was once again covered in snow and ice that slowly built up and then came back down. Only this time, time itself began to rapidly slow down and the people could see as the snow was swapped for gray ash. Many of the audience recognized it for what it was, a layer of volcanic ash. It rushed away from the scene revealing a snow-covered mound as a bright flash of light occurred to the south behind the audience. What looked like a broken rock flipped back up reveling a gravestone and the snow began to fall quickly away from the earth until it got to a few inches deep, it then began to slowly drift upwards indicating that time was slowing down even more. As the snow disappeared to reveal a small graveyard in the middle of a prairie, with a body laying crumpled across a grave and awkwardly pushed headfirst against a headstone the scene paused.

"They do not know what killed me for sure, but archeological evidence states that my cane sank into the soft dirt of my wife's grave, and I fell face first into her headstone. Hopefully, that rendered me unconscious because several bones in my left shoulder were broken and my service-connected disabilities rendered the right side of my body unable to move in this state.

Unfortunately, the impressions preserved in the dirt states that I raised my head up and dropped it from about a foot off the ground at least once. It is confirmed that when the pyroclastic flow reached me, I was frozen solid. -75 windchills will do that to you." The scene was replaced with a podium in front of a large glass display over a planet.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Wayward said as he stepped up to the podium. "Thank you all for being here. By now you know where here is, and more importantly when it is. As best we can figure it is around 15 20 50. Yeah, that is just going to make the whole star date thing too complicated, why don't we use this instead? It's now year zero of man kind's rebirth. For all of you civilians, I have to let you know that approximately two weeks have passed since the military personnel started waking up. I have been chosen to brief you, and to help you understand the consequences of your choices today." Wayward kept roving his eyes across the crowd as he talked to engage eye contact with as many of the audience members as possible.

After a brief pause, he continued with "Please hold your questions until the end as I need to get through this before I start to answer all of your questions and many of you are going to have the same questions. So, it will be helpful if you get the whole story and then ask whatever you need to know before voting."

"Yes, you will be participating in the most important votes in human history today, and no I am not talking about the one where someone has to leave the Big Brother's House." There was a nervous giggle that came from several parts of the audience, as some got the joke and understood it for how it was intended. "Today all of you have woken up for the first time in over one and fifty thousand years. The military members, of what is left of humanity, started waking up two weeks ago, and we chose members of several national militaries to make sure that we included as many as possible. Some of you are hearing this speech in English, Arabic, Hindi, Yiddish, or whatever your native language was at the time that you last logged into the virtual net. Yes, the universal translator finally works, and with earth-based languages it should be nearly flawless, it will take a while to get all of the bugs worked out of it for slang terms so, please use those sparingly when not talking to someone you know from your previous life. There is one good thing that has come out of this for me personally. I can use feet and inches, you swarmy types can get it translated automatically, and I never have to hear anything about the pathetic system

again. So, HA, suck on that you rebel scum. Metrics are a statistic of the past, and imperials rule." This time the number of chuckles in the audience was more numerous and a little louder.

"There's no easy way to say this, but humanity was wiped out about 150,000 years ago." Somewhere around 2080 the Yellowstone National Park in the United States erupted. Many of you might know this but it was rated as a super volcano with a crater larger than most metropolitan cities. The people that were able to get underground quickly and stayed there for a minimum of 10 years were able to once again breathe the atmosphere when they came out of their bunkers. Unfortunately, no species that required the exchange of gaseous air through lungs or gills survived. All fish, animals and humans that were not breathing filtered air for about ten years inhaled volcanic ash, and I am told that is like breathing in micro-sized razor blades." A shiver ran through Wayward's body making him take an involuntary pause. "I was one of the lucky ones. I was caught in the pyroclastic flow that came from the eruption and it was over before any of us knew it. Well, I would have been had I not frozen to death just 24 hours before the eruption." As he paused to let this sink in, the glass wall behind him began to dissolve and the whole stage began to float into space in front of the planet. The audience, still in their seats, followed him through the front wall and looked around as the moon came into view and the rest of the scene began to take place in front of them. For almost everyone in attendance the moon's familiar face was the only thing they could recognize, but as the planet rotated below them, they started to notice similarities to what had once been the seven major continents of the Earth.

With that he paused to let his words sink in. After a few seconds he resumed, "I was offered the opportunity to save humanity, or let us rest in peace through extinction. It was not an easy choice to make, believe me."

An angry female voice rose from the crowd demanding to know, "What gave you that right?"

Wayward looked in the direction it came from and responded with a simple, "It doesn't, and that's why you get a vote today."

After a pause he continued. "Our hosts found my remains sealed in a pyroclastic cavity like one of the mummies from Pompeii. Only because my body had been frozen solid by such extreme temperatures just before I was sealed into my volcanic crypt, they were able to recover viable DNA samples from my cerebral cortex and that enabled them to map a human brain. This enabled them to study our technology more in depth to realize that we might actually be worth saving. Now, the military veterans have voted 99.9% to accept the terms given to us to earn humanity a second chance. There are one million US veterans alone, but there are another 3 million DNA samples from various militaries around the world that our hosts are trying to locate the repositories for as we speak. The more they find the better our gene pool will be once we reclaim the earth. Unfortunately, you 23 and me people can thank corporate greed for failure to spend enough on long lasting protections for your DNA. Then again, who expected the repositories to last one hundred and fifty thousand years without maintenance? Leavenworth, Kansas just got buried under twenty-five feet of volcanic ash which collapsed the building and then sealed off the remains on top of the basement where the servers were."

With a deep inhale and slow exhale, he began the next part of his speech. "Today you get to decide two things. Do you want to be a part of the next age of humanity? Technically you died, so any who have religious objections please step forward now so we can help you say your farewells and take you offline before the vote. For those of you that want to participate in the next age, you get to decide on just how beneficial our benefactors will be when releasing us back onto the Earth."

"What do you mean?" Someone yelled from the crowd.

"Ok, so thank you for holding on as long as you can, I understand this is a lot to take in but I'm going to need a little more info to work with. Do you mean about the conscientious objector clause or the benevolence clause?" Wayward asked, looking in the direction the voice had come from.

"Umm, both?" came the question from a different direction.

"Ok, so here's the deal. This ship is called The Valhalla because veterans have a saying of 'Till Valhalla.' Which means we will fight for every breath until the day we arrive in Valhalla and can start again, and only those brave enough to fight until the bitter-end, or they no longer have the ability to fight deserve to be ferried unto Valhalla." With this he held his hand out to one side and the image of his entombed body frozen in place across his wife's grave came into view. "If your religion prevents you from fighting to the bitter-end, that's fine I will give you one last day to get right with your deity, or whatever, before you go off to meet them as they disconnect your mind from existence. If you think I am going to let you vote no to the continuation of life for all of mankind," he paused as he gestured towards his body on his wife's grave again, "Till Valhalla," was all that was necessary to be said with the conviction and vehemence of a man willing to fight for his very existence.

"Now if you think I am being unfair in this matter and would like to discuss this with someone who is from your clergy, the military has awoken the chaplain's corps from each nation and religion, and they will be happy to talk to you. Just nod now and you will be taken to them." With that a few hundred people disappeared from the crowd, and he was momentarily sorrowful for the loss that each one of them signified; but respected their decisions to end it honorably. "Just so you know, I will give you one last chance to go with them before we take the first vote: should humanity continue to exist? If you stay and vote no, your personality will be stripped

from your consciousness and you will become, for the lack of a better term, a heartless and emotionless AI drone used to power a coffee maker or whatever we need it to do with as little interaction as possible from the rest of the people you turned your back on."

"That's pretty harsh don't you think?" One woman voiced rather bitterly towards him.

"Karen or Dumbass Baptist?" Wayward quipped back.

"Pardon?" came her reply.

With that Wayward was able to lock his eyes on hers and he stated calmly. "Are you a self-righteous 'I want to speak to your manager' Karen or one of those Cornholed Religious freaks that has to force your opinion on those too sinful to accept the righteous fires of glory and damnation that they deserve to burn in for the rest of eternity? Because those are the only two kinds of people that I can think of who will pass up the opportunity to gracefully bow out of everyone else's opportunity to live a happier life. So, which one are you?" Wayward folded his arms across his chest in order to calm down and waited for her reply. After several seconds of glaring at him her face fell towards the floor and then she too disappeared from the crowd. "Folks, you have an opportunity here that we only dreamed of during the time in which we were truly alive. I want you to vote your opinion, but I do not want a minority to screw us all over, so please forgive me if I guard the right for the rest of us to live against the weak minded or self-righteous few."

Wayward paused and scanned the audience back and forth a few times before continuing. "Like I was saying: first vote, do we as a consensus of humanity choose to continue our existence in this universe? There's no time like the present so let's go ahead and vote for that one now and we can then move on to the next article of the day. I will give you thirty minutes to reflect on this

and discuss it with your neighbors, then when the timer reaches zero a simple thumbs up or down to cast your vote." With that Wayward faded away and a timer popped up where he had been standing slowly counting down from ten minutes.

In what Wayward was becoming to call the Ethereal, he stood in a semi-transparent stage that the audience had not yet learned to see, and watched as they slowly began to turn to one another and talk. Eve arrived beside him and asked, "Is that really how your military personnel treated the civilians?"

"No, we were always under the thumb of the civilian population, as we should have been. However, there is always one or two that will try to do what they can to screw everyone else over to prove that their religion or opinion is better than everyone else's. Don't get me wrong, I still believe in God, and while I am wondering where the Pearly Gates are, I can't help but accept that this is just part of his plans and that maybe I haven't earned my time in heaven yet."

"So, this is part of that religious debate you told me to stay out of?" Eve asked with what she hoped was a humorous tone of voice.

"My messiah gave out only two commandments, 'Love thy God with all thy heart,' and 'That ye love one another, as I have loved you.' He also informed us that, and I am going to paraphrase here a little, 'As the Father knoweth me, I knoweth him, and I shall lay down my life for the sheep. Worry not about my other flocks for, I do have sheep of other flocks and I shall bring them.' To me that means this, I am to go forth and to treat people as best as I can, and I am not to try and judge others, even others from other species, for I do not know if your species was brought to rebirth us by God or not until I face him eye to eye. Until then, I am to fight as hard as

I can to protect every life I can, even if it means to give up my own life, or to take one from someone who threatens another's life."

Eve stood next to him in the Ethereal as they watched the crowd and remained silent for a while. When she finally spoke up, she said, "That's a little convoluted, but I can see now why you advised me to stay away from it."

"Indeed, some made a life-long career out of studying the religious texts of just one religion and trying to interpret them in a manner that was understandable by a population centuries after they were written." Wayward said as he watched the other people with his arms folded across his chest. "Unfortunately, some allowed their personal biases to get involved in their teachings and we had many wars because of religious disputes when the basics of most religions was to "Go forth, be good to one another, and have lots of babies."

Once the timer reached thirty seconds Wayward reappeared where the podium was and waved at a few people who noticed him. He stood there quietly with a smile on his face and the intention to stay quiet until the timer reached ten seconds. At which point he raised his hands and his voice, "Ten seconds to go, everyone please close your eyes and think of returning to your seats." As the crowd slowly did as he asked, they were transported back to their seats. "Folks I would like to remind you that at this point you are still basically an AI. This is a virtual construct to allow us to interact with one another."

There was a light mummering among the crowd as the final few seconds slipped from the timer. Wayward raised his hands and drew their attention once more. "OK folks, we're going to make this as easy as possible. You will be asked to cast your vote in a moment, a thumbs up will mean

you want humanity to get a second chance to live, a thumbs down will cast your vote to allow humanity to slip into the darkness. Eve, care to join me?"

With that Eve appeared next to Wayward and nodded her head. "How may I assist you?" She asked just loud enough for the others in the room to hear her.

"I would ask that you poll the audience for their decision. I do not want them to think that the military has done anything to mess with the results." He stated as politely as he could.

"You mean other than threatening anyone who would disagree with your decision?" Someone yelled quickly from the audience.

With an evil gleam in his eyes that people several rows into the crowd could feel the omnipresence from, he slowly smiled from one corner of his mouth much as a stroke victim would and then stated, "Until Valhalla..." as he said this his entombed form appeared once again and he paused as he pointed at it, "and you really do not want to meet me in hell if we do not succeed." Then exerted all of his will to slowly disappear until only his eyeballs and teeth were still visible like a Cheshire cat that had been crossbred with a malevolent vampire.

Eve cleared her throat to get the crowds attention, then clearly and calmly stated, "I have spent many cycles studying your culture's... Popular References?" She briefly asked before correcting it, "Pop culture references, yes that is the term. I think the correct choice for that bit of showmanship would be described as 'Overly dramatic much?" It took a few seconds but someone in the crowd burst into laughter from the shear overwhelming shock of the whole situation.

"What do you mean by 'studied your pop culture'? and how long is a cycle." A woman from the second row asked.

"Chelsey, is it?" Eve asked and then paused until the woman nodded her head in confusion. "A cycle is one revolution of the planet you called Earth around it's stellar anchor."

"Wait he said he was the first to be awakened and he has only been awake for two weeks. Did he lie to us?" Chelsey asked.

"No Wayward told the truth as far as he is concerned. While there are approximately six revolutions of the planetary orbital path in between the first time we awoke his consciousness and the decision to extend the offer to your race to join the collective and its alliance. He was not privy to that decision, nor aware of that missing time. So far him it has only been two weeks? Is that the right term for fourteen planetary axis rotations? Yes, I think it is, he was first awakened six years ago, but he has only been aware for two weeks."

"So, who are you?" Someone else followed up.

"My name is Evidence Verification and Evaluator Two Four Six Nine, or Eve for short." She was very careful not to mention the combination of numbers that always caused the military men to look at her lustfully and say something to the effect of 'Of course you are.' After giving that a moment to settle in she continued. "I am the sentient being that was first made aware of Wayward's tomb, the one who brought your species to the attention of the collective and was charged with making the offer to join our alliance, return to extinction, or return you to your planet as you once were."

"What do you mean, return us to our planet as we once were?" Chelsey asked again, gaining some confidence with her voice as she became more comfortable with Eve.

"As a prominent sentient species, it is our mandate that we do everything we can to continue your species' existence in this universe. When we find a culture, we study them to see if they are

capable of space flight, then determine if we can safely approach them for membership in the alliance. We have reached out to violent races before and helped them to find a more peaceful way of living and expanding. While other races have been given significant boosts to help them repair their environments or leave their home planet behind. Through the media that your culture broadcasted into the universe we thought that it was too late to contact you. Your time ran out and the planet you resided on wiped your species from existence because you failed to spread across your own solar system. Had you spent some time colonizing your moon or the red planet nearest your own, you could have survived the volcanic eruption that destroyed your civilization. Had you spent some of the primitive weapons that you wasted upon one another, you could have diverted the asteroid that finished off the survivors of the super volcano, and made it turn the red planet more aquatic so your species could have terraformed it easier." Eve paused here to let that information sink in much the same way she had seen Wayward do. She counted off the average amount of time that he had paused and then resumed.

"When we find a culture that has been destroyed, by whatever means, we study them as much as we can to see what we can learn from them. Usually there are no DNA repositories available to bring their physical bodies back into existence and even rarer still is enough technology left to understand any neural mappings that might be available. However, when we discovered Wayward there were still two neural cells that were... what could be loosely construed as, in cryostasis. With the intact upper portion of his torso, I was able to rebuild a cellular construction of his upper torso and that allowed me to further study the remains of peoples from other parts of the world but in less desirable states to fully understand the full anatomy of the human body.

Once I had enough to rebuild his body I could then extrapolate how your heart beats, how you breathe, eat, sleep, communicate, and this opened up more opportunities to re-examine your

medical equipment and then that led to the discovery of your entertainment repositories, and after a few hundred cycles of the solar orbit I was able to locate five possibilities of a neural mapping that might have been Wayward's. Three of you are here because you worked at the facility where him and his wife lived at during their final days."

"So, what you are saying is, we owe our existence to the last two braincells on the planet that could be rubbed together, and they belonged to that threatening brute?" A man from the middle of the audience said.

"Joaquin isn't it." Again, Eve paused until he nodded his head in conformation. "Yes, that's exactly what I am saying, but by the involuntary physical response many of your counterparts showed when you said that I would highly recommend that you not say that anywhere close enough that the veterans can hear you. They seem to have all taken a liking to him, including those who were once on the other side of a battlefield from him."

Another woman spoke softly enough that only the two sitting next to her could hear her, or so she thought until Eve called her out "Yes, Joy, the brutes of every nation that has been brought around have all taken a liking to him, and all but 2 out of 25,000 chosen to represent the military personnel, have chosen to voluntarily accept the burden of paying the full price if you chose alliance in the final vote."

"And what happened to the two that voted no?" Chelsey asked.

The glass wall behind Eve faded and was replaced with a scene of a party in which thousands of people ate, drank various beverages, and walked past two people and shook their hands, gave them a hug, or spoke to them briefly. As the sun set behind the planet from the viewpoint of the audience the two made their way towards two black and flattened cylinders. They placed their

hands on them and disappeared. Then the cylinders were launched towards a dark portion of the galaxy of stars in the background. "Taking on the traditions of a burial at sea, their DNA repositories and full mental consciousness were hermetically sealed into electronic caskets, and they were shot into a trajectory that will allow them to intersect another galaxy in about one trillion of your years."

"Will the same thing happen to us if we vote no?" a voice quietly asked from the front row.

Eve understood that it would be wrong to call out this young woman's name as she was just one of a handful of teenagers that had been awakened, but she used an auditory trick to let her voice carry softly to all in the audience, "No my dear, we do not have any of your DNA, so we are not required to bring any of you back, nor are we required to do anything more than disconnect your consciousness from the continuation. We will not pass up the opportunity to salvage what we legally can to assist with the management of lower priority processes for our activities, or as Wayward so barbarically called it 'turn you into a coffee maker's AI,' because there is a great need for sentients in the galaxy right now."

"What requirements are you talking about?" Joaquin blurted out loudly and demandingly, like some kind of gotcha attorney seeing a big settlement about to land in his pockets.

"That only matters after the determination of the first vote, so why don't we do that now?" Eve responded, seeing why Wayward had taken the approach he did with pushing things forward.

Chapter Fifteen: Giving the Dog a Bone

As Wayward entered into the briefing room he heard a female standing at the massive round table explaining logistical operation plans. "We will have to convert three troop carriers into

tankers to transport one million gallons of water each to ferry water to Lunar base Alpha. After we have Lunar base Alpha set up, we can then shift those transports to the fleet assigned to bombarding Mars with all claimable ice asteroids, meteorites, and comets. This will have to wait until the greenhouse gas generators have achieved 30% of the desired atmospheric transformation." She paused as one of the men with no decorations on his shoulders, indicating his rank, held up his hand and looked towards Wayward.

The man then turned his attention towards Wayward and began speaking. "Wayward, wasn't it?"

Wayward came to attention recognizing that the man's attitude showed that he was one of the leaders of the military branch and not someone he would have expected to know his call sign. "Yes sir."

"Good, good. Now what does the emissary to our benefactors need with our humble assemblage?" the man asked with a crooked smirk on his face.

Thrown off by the boss' nonchalant and possibly jovial attitude, Wayward paused before answering. "Sir, it's about the most recent numbers of military personnel and the civilians' attitude during the welcome briefing."

The man nodded then said, "Go on."

Wayward dipped his chin a little to show deference and said, "Well sir, there are approximately 50 million veterans and active-duty personnel that can be brought back, we will have approximately 5 million DNA samples to create them with. The Continuum assures me that will be enough samples to generate a DNA mix and to match a body to the individual's previous mental image of their own bodies. No more sex changes needed because those that were born

one gender and identified with another. They can have their genders changed to what they want, and their bodies will have the genetics they wanted to be born with. However, there is a societal issue that the AIs have not considered, less than 10% of the veterans were born as or identify as female."

"We are aware of that and have begun..." the General began before pausing, and then simply saying "Oh, I see. We haven't even discussed *that* problem yet."

The woman that had been giving the briefing when Wayward entered stiffened her back and glared at the officer before asking, "And how is that a problem sir?"

The man was a tactical genius when it came to politics and knew when to deflect an incoming strike with a simple delegation of unpleasant duties. "You will be presenting this issue to the AIs, care to practice now and field this one Wayward?"

With the grin on the boss' face Wayward knew this wasn't truly a request but a challenge, and with the attitude the woman had already shown to her superior he decided to go on the offense to make this quick and decisive. "Ma'am, how many men can you keep satisfied sexually at one time?"

Thrown off by the blatant vulgarity of the question in front of all of her counterparts the woman responded just as vehemently, "Excuse you, did your brain receptors just malfunction or are you seriously stupid enough to ask something like that in this setting?"

Wayward's mind was moving at full speed, and he was trying to play out every possibility before they occurred just so he could keep up with this obviously intelligent woman. "Less than 10% means there will be nine or more men to every woman in the force. By design the military has always chosen men that produce, run on, and perform well on massive amounts of

testosterone and adrenaline. The two key chemicals in fighting and fucking. Which is great if you only expect them to fight, but unless your vision of the fleet is something like that described in 'Veteran of the Psychic Wars' we will need to give them some down time. Which is where the second side effect of that cocktail comes into effect. We either convert some of the civilians into military personnel, with an emphasis on recruiting women, or ask for volunteers for the fleet's entertainment brigade. So again, I ask how many men you can keep happy, sexually, in a single day? Because if you and every woman currently in the military can't handle nine or ten every day of every week, there will be a big problem within weeks of departure, and that's not counting the ones that believe in one man and one woman. So, if you want to keep a fleet of elite fighters happy you have to be willing to give the dog a bone, repeatedly."

Being slammed with the images that Wayward was throwing at her, shut her brain down for a moment, and that was all Wayward needed to duck and run from the conversation as quickly as he could change the subject. Afterall the better part of valor is knowing when to run. "Sir, that brings up two other issues. The civilian population that was salvaged is 80% female, and the vote to return isn't going well."

"Ok, so the civilians will have the opposite problem of the military, too many women and not enough men, if we add the military to the civilian population, it should balance out to about three or four women per man, but we can do away with the monogamy laws and other religious objections to fix this. Now what's this about briefing issues?" The woman that had been giving the briefing suddenly felt relieved that she might not have to become a space slut, but confused about how she would feel about having to share a man with two other women and had nothing to contribute so she sat down with a noticeable thump.

Wayward glanced in her direction and thought he would offer her some saving grace and with a nod to her he continued, "I was just about to suggest all of us do that, as this next part is hard to vocalize. The civilians are feeling self-righteous and full of that politically correct crap that fucked up our civilization the first go around. A little over two hundred opted out when informed about what happened after the big bang, and then another fifty opted out when I promised vengeance upon any who stuck around just to vote no, I can only hope they woke up half of the religious objectors in this batch. I have spoken with Eve many times and I don't think anyone is tampering with the mix; the Continuum is so desperate for our help that they are willing to offer anything to get us to help them, but they have laws that an AI cannot break, and the first one is the freewill of a sentient species."

"What are these rules exactly?"

"I don't know sir, but we can bring Eve in and ask her if you wish." Wayward said as he gestured towards the door.

"Do you really trust her?" The officer asked Wayward after a pause.

"I do sir. She had every opportunity to mess with our heads, make us their little puppets, and didn't even need to go through all of the hassle of digging us up and then waking us up to even take a vote. They could have just harvested what they could from us and then moved on and we would have never known, or they could have just modified us from the beginning to the point that we didn't even need the opportunity to vote. She has repeatedly told me that not only is this against intergalactic law, but an affront to her coding. The other allies that the Continuum is working with would consider that a violation of one of their founding laws when forming their alliance in the beginning. We're not the only meat bags that the Continuum can draw on, they're

just shielding us from the others until we can wake up, get our bearings, and stand on our own two feet."

"So, there are other races out there and the Continuum claims they have to protect us from their own allies, who are supposed to become our allies? How does that work?" the officer asked showing a crack in the benevolence of their benefactors.

"From my understanding sir, there are not only one but four races that are easily compared to the Ferengi from Star Trek, and five others that are the equivalent of mythic races to include Incubi and Succubae, without the whole soul stealing part. Well, some can emit a pheromone during mating that makes their sexual partner addicted to them for a period of time. So..." with that Wayward just shrugged and let his sentence trail off.

"Wow. Really, the Ferengi? That could be economically devastating had we not been warned about that." The officer said, avoiding the obvious return to the previously uncomfortable topic. "Ok fine, this is what I want you to do: Set up a meeting with Eve and her immediate boss, I want to fix this system before we move to the front lines, and that means fixing this civilian pool tampering issue."

"I can do that sir, and the civilians?" Wayward asked raising just his right eyebrow.

"I have just the right person in mind to give them a little wake up call. I should know, she gave me mine." The officer chuckled a little as Wayward stood up and prepared to head out.

Chapter Sixteen: T stands for Terrifyingly Terrific

"Wayward, where you at you scared little bitch?" came the boisterous roar of a female grizzly on the prowl. "I know you're in here and I know you have been hiding from me." The woman

said as she opened the closet door and then throwed everything in it onto the floor in his front entryway.

Wayward lowered the report he was reading in front of him and glanced over at Bear who was shivering with the laughter he was trying so hard to hold in. It was clearly a painful enough process that tears were starting to form in his eyes. Wayward glanced her way and then back at Bear before he hissed "Traitor!" through his teeth towards his 'friend,' then turned his attention back to the Tantalizing Twisting Tornado of Terror that was Taleesha Tecumseh Tylutki who was entering his domicile and wreaking havoc upon his meager belongings. "T the Tracker, T the Terrifying, T the Tantalizing, T with the big..."

"Finish that one at your own peril." She warned him with enough venom to make the most lethal of snakes seem like an earthworm with baby teeth.

Wayward froze, his eyes widening with the sheer terror of what she thought he almost said aloud to her, and how she was known to retaliate with enough force that unconsciousness was often seen as a mercy. Bear was unable to hold it in any longer after seeing the look on Wayward's face and how such a pale man could possibly get even closer to the definition of a terrified shade of toilet paper white. He fell out of his chair holding his sides while laughing. "Ow, I'm sorry I can't hold it in anymore it just hurts too much!" Bear bellowed out in between hysterical inhales.

"Laugh it up furball, you're next," came T's reply to this new attempt to change the subject.

Bear froze in place on the floor, gasped for air a few times then sat up and blinked at her a few times before asking like a petulant child "What did I do?"

"Uh-huh, you just sit there and think about it while I deal with him. I tell you what though, I'm feeling generous so I will give you three guesses to get it right."

"It's a trap," Wayward warned his friend as quietly as he could, but the rapid shift of attention to him told him that T had heard him.

"I know. No matter what, the first two guesses are always wrong, she's just digging for reasons to beat me, much like my beloved wife" Bear whispered back shivering from a memory, Wayward was sure he did not want to know why.

"Oh, so another woman let my favorite game slip, has she? That's ok, I have more games than Milton Bradley when it comes to dealing with you two." T responded with an evil grin on her face.

Both men swallowed hard before Wayward squeaked out, "Triceps."

T stopped her slow stalk forward and blinked at him a few times, "What was that?" she asked somewhat appeared with the look on his face.

"Triceps, T with the biggest Triceps I have ever seen on a woman. You know I have always said your arms are as large as most men's thighs, and let's face it, your current form has arms even bigger than what you had when you passed the Recon Indoc at just 19 years old." Wayward felt like his mouth was running faster than his brain could think but anything to appease this woman in front of him has always been the safest approach to dealing with her. Especially when someone else had pissed her off, but he knew he was the one who had stepped in it this time.

T froze, then lovingly stroked the back of her upper arms and almost cooed, "I know right? Eve was able to help me adapt this form to what I always wanted. She helped me get the muscle

definition of an Olympian weightlifter, the endurance of a marathon runner, the agility of a gymnast, and the speed of Jackie Joyner-Kersee in her prime. I'm still working on the moves of Jackie Chan, but that whole download kung-fu in just a few seconds doesn't make for the muscle memory it would take to break every bone in your body before you hit the ground if you try to change the subject on me again." T was back to being focused on the one who had irritated her after the compliments he had paid to gain enough time to stand up and put some furniture between them, like that would help.

"T, I'm sorry I didn't get to see you before this. I have been so busy with awakening these civilians and trying to make sure we got a decent mixture for the Continuum to consider a fair representation of the vote. I'm still working on it. When you came in, I was writing the second portion of the introduction for the civilians in case they vote yes for the continuation after extinction." Wayward pleaded for mercy as much as he could and tried not to seem like he was trying to hide from her, again.

"Don't show fear bro, she will sense it and pounce on you." Bear whispered sotto voce.

T slowly turned in his direction, closed her eyes, lifted her chin, and breathed in through her nose slowly and deeply like she was tasting the air. She then exhaled just as slowly while emitting a soft purring sound before opening her eyes and spoke as a succubus seducing her prey, "And yours smells ever so delicious my little gummi bear." Both Wayward and Bear shivered at what this woman could do to them with just her voice. She had always been such a confliction of signals that no one, including the men who knew her as friend and blood-brother, ever knew which version of her they would be dealing with. She then turned back to Wayward and asked, "What do you mean, if?"

"We chose 26,000 and tried to weed out the ones that we knew would vote no before we gave them the first speech and vote, which they are doing right now. Halfway through the introduction I stopped and gave them an opportunity to walk away before the vote and a little over two hundred accepted going back into extinction. Another twenty quit after I told them I would turn them into a Mr. Coffee if they stuck around just to vote no to tank it for everyone else." He lowered his head as if all the fight in him had been extinguished just by these few people who had given up on life.

"What, why, didn't you explain all of the benefits of accepting the alliance?" T asked, rather confused by the defeat that was showing in his eyes.

"I couldn't, the Continuum determined that would be a breach of the unbiased voting platform that is required to certify the vote."

"Politics, fucking politics, someone else's fucking politics are once again going to damn everything we are trying to do to stop another genocide, or in this case, our own extinction? We're trying to make the world a better place for those we are willing to fight and die for?" T blared out mad at the entire civilian population of humanity at the moment.

"Not humanities politics, but yes. Our politics is what let those idiots think they could get past the coffee pot stage of existence. I'm just not sure how to explain to them that no matter what they vote, a minimum of fifty-million of us will be returning to the Earth and they will be in the non-voting minority when we do. I just hope they vote yes, so we can return as astral colonizers and not have to start over as political or religious cave dwellers again." Wayward said, unable to lift his eyes from the carpet, except to crumble up the piece of paper in his hands and through it into the fireplace that Bear was sitting in front of.

This look of defeat on her friend's face was more than she could take. T strode up to him slowly and confidently before gently resting a hand on his shoulder and softly saying "Let me handle it from here brother. I got you." Then she turned and started walking off, as she did, she waved one hand with three raised fingers over her shoulder and yelled, "Don't forget Bear you owe me three guesses." Just as loudly she called out to the ship's AI as she walked out the door, "Eve, its time you and I had another talk. This time it's about how a woman deals with idiots."

The two men shuddered for different reasons before looking at one another. Wayward was the first to speak, "Those poor bastards thought I was a brutish terror, I almost feel sorry for them."

Bear only nodded before replying, "What the hell can I say to try and appease her?"

"Tell her you were ashamed to look her in the eyes after seeing her new body and popping a chub, or that you got a glimpse of her the first day, had a wet dream about her, and couldn't face her after that." Wayward said as he shrugged his shoulders and tilted his head to the right.

"Are you trying to get her to murder me?" Bear asked with a sense of being betrayed in his voice.

"No, that would be your way of committing suicide with honor. It's too late to give you a Darwin Award since you already had kids. Wait, we haven't brought them back yet, do they still count?" Wayward asked scratching his chin as if he was deep in thought.

Bear grabbed the cushion off of the chair he had been sitting in and threw it at what had once been his best friend and yelled, "Of course they do. I got six grandkids from them." "Oh God, it multiplied." Wayward burst out into laughter as Bear moaned a sorrowful wail.

"That settles it, I'm going to go chase T down and tell her it was your idea to have Cowboy wake her up." Wayward said as he headed towards the door.

Bear jumped to his feet in terror then launched himself at Wayward yelling, "Not if I kill you first."

"I'm like a cockroach, even 150,000 years in the deep freezer couldn't kill me!" Wayward laughed as he began sprinting towards the hall.

Chapter Seventeen: Tough votes and even tougher love

"Alright! Listen up you chuckle fucks!" The woman's brash voice and crude language slammed into the audience chamber like an artillery shell fired point blank into a chicken coop. "Congrats-you-fucking-lactations. You managed to hurt one of the most selfless and kindhearted men I know and trust as friend and brother, and there are very few of those. So now you get to deal with me. My name is Mater Gunnery Seargent Tylutki, and there is a slim chance in hell that any of you would know that I was one of the first Marine Corps EOD specialists that does not have a pair of fleshies swinging between her legs. Even fewer of you would know that I was one of the first Female Marines to earn a combat action ribbon through not just surviving but winning my first engagement in one-on-one hand-to-hand fight to the death combat. Absolutely none of you would know how I broke my ankle jumping off the final obstacle in tenth place during the tryouts for a Marine Corps Recon team that was only accepting the top fifteen into their ranks that year. I only got the chance because of a writing error in the invitation that forgot to exclude female Marines from the invitation to tryout decades before women were allowed into the

infantry." T was striding from a side entrance as she approached the stairs to the stage as her voice boomed throughout the audience hall.

"The cheating bastards shot me up with morphine because I strapped on eighty pounds of gear on to my back and stepped off to complete the fifteen-mile hump that would have assured my position and the first woman in one of America's Finest Elite Fighting Forces. Seems they thought the little bit of bone sticking through my boot was enough of a justification to stop me against my will, and then promised me a second chance spot in the next tryouts." The five-foot-four inches tall woman's voice echoed off the walls and her footsteps reverberated throughout the audience hall as she walked onto the stage towards the podium. "I can damn-well guarantee any of you that I will whip you, and your whole damn posse of friends at the same time, if you so much as try to play some of the stupid fucking games with me that you did with Wayward."

"Oh shit, so the brute went crying to his mommy and now we have to deal with her," came a snide remark in a young male's voice, followed by some chuckles in the same area.

T's head snapped around, and she froze mid stride and glared at the young men who were sitting next to one another sniggering. "Which one of you wastes of sperm said that?" Was growled so menacingly that it reverberated throughout the silence of the hall.

Four teenage boys all began stammering at the same time "He, he, he did..." as they were pointing at the one in the center and tried to get away from him like he had just been diagnosed as having some kind of contagious flesh-eating disease.

T launched her hand forward towards the young man, made a grasping motion with her fist and then roared "Get over here," as if Scorpion himself had been channeled into the call. To everyone's surprise the young man flew through the air towards her as she snatched her arm over

her shoulder and took a half step backwards. When he arrived face first over the stage, she began driving her fist forward like she was attempting to set a new world record on the punching bag machine. When his face met her fist there was a bright white light and a boom that momentarily blinded and deafened everyone like a flash bang had been tossed at their feet. When the afterimages faded away and the audience was able to see and hear again, T was standing next to a shiny box and rubbing her chin as she glared down at it.

"I was really hoping for a trash compactor, but I guess a dishwasher will do." T then looked back up to the four boys still in the audience and said, "You four will collect your buddy here after the final vote, install him in your quarters, do a minimum of one load of dishes a day for the next two weeks and remind this idiot every time that he was warned about what happens to those who act stupid. His judgment is two weeks of thinking about how bad he fucked up while on kitchen duty and how his momma clearly swallowed the best genetics his daddy could have donated to him. As we used to say in the Corps, play stupid games, win stupid prizes." A long sorrowful beep came from the box, and she kicked it before saying, "Shut the fuckup, you were warned, and you struck me as too incompetent to make a decent cup of coffee without screwing it up."

With that T turned her attention back to the rest of the crowd. "Now, if you are still here and able to express something other than a timer going off, I take it you voted 'yes you want to live.' Good news people, you voted correctly. The military personnel have all voted to take part in the alliance, but since we have been determined to only represent one percent of the population, you are hereby given an opportunity to join us. We are the only ones with DNA. We are the only ones that our benefactors HAVE TO restore per their laws." T stressed the 'have to' as an emphasis that the humans gathered here had no leverage whatsoever in any negotiations with the hosts.

"We, the veterans, have negotiated to have as many consciousnesses returned to the Earth as we can find. Since we do not have your specific DNA, we will be tossing your memories of how you looked in your minds during your uploads into a giant DNA blender, and get it as close to your own body image as we can. Feel free to make any improvements that you may have desired but couldn't afford before Yellowstone. There will be no sicknesses, hereditary diseases, birth defects or anything else in that outcome. Want to be an eternal lolli, be a lolli. Like the Goth look? No need for lipsticks when you can have chameleon DNA imprinted into your lips so you can change their color at will. Some of you should really pay attention to your physical avatar creations though because your personalities will show through, and you could very well end up looking like the trolls that you are. We are being reborn into a stronger, smarter, and more capable race."

"But that's eugenics." A woman cried out from the audience.

"What the fuck cupcake?" T gestured over her shoulder at the image of the world spinning just below the ship where they currently sat. "That world down there wiped us the fuck out over One Hundred and Fifty Thousand years ago." T pointedly stated every word in the number like she was demanding money owed to her. "We are no longer on top of the food chain down there, hell we aren't even capable of physically going down there just yet. And if you want to live long enough to hand your kid a participation trophy for decorating mommy's fridge with finger paint drawings using what comes out of his diaper, good on you. But you better be ready to fight for it because I guarantee you, I will be too busy trying to save myself, my brothers, and these fucking idiots who are too young to know any better." The four young teens hunkered further down as she waved her hand absent-mindedly in their direction.

"Do you really think your fat ass will be able to convince whatever took T-Rexes place in the food chain that those yoga pants make you look skinny enough not to eat, when you're two hundred pounds juicier than the rest of us? And that brings up the next vote. How many of you want to see a kid with downs syndrome eaten by an overgrown Venus Flytrap, raise your hands. How many of you think it's fair for a kid trapped in a wheelchair be eaten alive by some mutated fire-ants that shorted out the electronics on it, and she can't get away or do anything other than scream and flail her arms around, raise your hands."

"We get it, the world has gotten mean down there while we were away." A man quipped quickly so as not to draw her full ire.

"No, you don't shithead. The world was mean when we were down there the first time. Since you are sitting here you either lived in a part of the world that didn't have any real problems, or you were rich enough that you could play VR games while people in your own country died of starvation or worse." T said with venom in her voice.

Either through being too stupid to know when to quit, an ignorant requirement to not let a woman have the upper hand, or sheer political pride from a nation that was opposed to the US at the time that he was last scanned into the system, the man threw back at her, "And what about your country, it was so great that it had millions sleeping in the streets and starving as well. Even your own great country tried to tear itself apart through civil war."

T knew what he was trying to do and slowed her roll for a moment. She breathed in through her nose nice and slow before exhaling slowly. "Yes, we did. Several times in fact, but I am guessing you are referring to that stupidity that came about after the 2032 elections. Am I right?" Once the man nodded enthusiastically, she resumed. "I was one of the six million veterans who guarded the hospitals and housing areas, while watching the active-duty military on the other side of the

riots to make sure they stayed out of a civil matter. We let idiots like you bludgeon one another to death and had snipers deployed to take out anyone with a firearm hiding in the crowds of rioters. We didn't get involved because we were keeping the really bad guys from getting involved. It was a Mexican standoff between experienced killers and trained killers, with the amateurs in the middle trying to settle their differences. It would have been a lot bloodier had either one of us flinched. Now if you think you have that kind of resolve, come join me in the first wave as we go back down there to try this again."

The man held her glaring stare for a few moments before realizing she had called his bullshit for what it was and looked away. "Ok then, does anyone else want to jump on the bandwagon and tell me how wrong I am for being a pragmatist? If kids are born with something different about them later on, fine. We will be in a much better state to be able to deal with it. We get one deployment to this planet, and you will only be given one chance to go down there. The next stop involves drop ships, battle armor, and lots of very unfriendly fire going in both directions."

One of the teenage boys just couldn't keep his mouth shut and fired off with a correction, "Don't you mean friendly fire?"

"Kid, when you are watching your buddy's leg go flying in one direction and the rest of him is flying in a hundred others, it doesn't matter which fucking side the round came from, it's not very fucking friendly now is it." Theld eye contact with him for a few moments before moving on. "All righty then, that brings us to vote number two. Skin color, eye color, none of that shit matters, when you are designing your new body you can choose pink curtains and purple drapes as a genetic feature if you want. Do you want to remove all defective genetics from the bodies that will be prepared for your return to the Earth and the creation of the new gene pool for the human population? Thumbs up or down, you have twenty seconds to vote, starting now." Eve

appeared next to T and the audience quickly picked up on what appeared to be a lifeline thrown to them.

"Eve, help us, this woman is crazy." Many of them yelled out, because they were overwhelmed with the shear audacity of this pintsized ball of thunder.

"I'm sorry, I cannot interfere with a vote once it has begun."

"What, why weren't you here to stop this?"

"I was assigning tasks to those that voted no in the last vote. They're now performing tasks as diminutive AIs. Now please choose wisely this time, you only have five seconds left. Thumbs up or down please." After scanning the shocked crowd for the full five seconds, she resumed, "Very well the measure passes with 90% approval and 10% abstaining. We will begin crafting bodies for the rest of you after we have crafted the ones that we have verified DNA for. First, we will be completing a ship with atmosphere for you to acclimate to your new bodies, allow you to conduct three weeks' worth of combat and survival training before your deployment to the surface. The veterans will go in first and establish a..." she turned to T with a questioning look on her face, "what did you call it, a beachhead?" When T nodded Eve resumed her conversation with the rest of the crowd. "Once they have given the go ahead on their perspective continents that it is safe to bring you down to the surface, you will be loaded up into the drop ships and taken down as well."

"Why do you make it sound like we're hitting the beaches in World War Two?" A woman called out from the back of the hall.

"Because we are you idiot." T yelled back, but Eve laid a hand on her arm to calm her.

"Please allow me." T nodded and then grunted as if the very action caused her pain, Eve resumed, "Let me show you some of the footage from the most recent drone surveys." Once again, the picturesque windows behind the two women disappeared as did the walls, and a 360degree projection around a drone that was flying above the trees and the floor was replaced to show the footage coming from the video feeds below the drone. At first it was flying along smoothly taking footage of a forested mountain scene with a river running along the edge of the trees, then all of a sudden, the video wobbled side to side rapidly and the ground shot up towards the camera until it was replaced with static. Next a drone was perusing through the undergrowth and tree limbs approximately 25 feet off the ground, when a large gullet surrounded entirely by fangs shot out of the canopy, wrapped around the entire drone and the video failed. The third footage showed what could only be an underwater scene, but it was hard to tell at first because everything was so dark. Then it became clear they were looking at a black cloud under the water. Three huge tentacles shot forward from the black cloud, wrapped around the drone and pulled it into the cloud. The way the suckers left scratches as they slid across the camera lenses it was obvious that the suckers had barbs embedded in them, just before cracks shot across the lenses and the feed was lost.

"These were all taken while on the planet's surface facing the star in the center of this system. We no longer fly drones on the dark side of the Earth. The loss rate jumps to over 90% versus the 40% loss rate on the side with stellar lighting. The drones we are flying on these reconnaissance missions are larger than the burial capsules we showed you earlier. So, it is estimated that the one creature that swallowed the drone whole had a mouth approximately 10 feet across from one side of its esophagus to the other. The creature that brought down the first drone was able to overpower the drone's twelve ton carrying capacity, and the tensile strength of the drones is in

excess of 35,000 pounds per square inch. So, the marine creature that crushed it was able to exceed that on multiple axis at the same time."

"So, for those of y'all that are bad at math, something that could fly weighed more than your average city bus and dive bombed the first one, the second creature had a mouth large enough to bite off a T-Rexes head, and the one in the water had tentacles like an anaconda that could lift an elephant off the ground and crush every bone in its body as it did." T kindly tossed out to those that were giving Eve a blank stare.

Eve and T had discussed human interactions with lower-level AIs and determined that to prevent from looking like she had frozen up, or was ignoring someone, she would scroll lines of code across her eyes that would be visible to on lookers to convey the understanding that she was compiling data that she had just been given, or thinking as the humans would say. After T finished her little impromptu explanation of the footage, she quickly scrolled white text lines rapidly from top to bottom across a screen projected a few inches in front of her eyes. Once she had processed T's responses she spoke up to the audience, "Crude, but an accurate assessment based on the information we have available from your database repositories."

"OK, so let's get vote number three over with." T said as people began to digest what the two women had just laid on them.

"Oh, hell no, you are not going to bully us into jumping into a decision that every time it has been mentioned, it has had the monicker of 'most important in human history'." The arrogant man from before yelled, and there were many mumblings in agreement. The crowd had just been pushed into approving a vote for what many of them would have considered a war crime during their time, and now they were willing to fight back, without even knowing what the vote was for.

"Don't worry, I will explain the vote in depth and give you approximately 48 hours to ask any questions you may have before a vote is called for." Eve said as calmly as she could. The crowd seemed to calm down with this knowledge.

"What is so important that we actually get time to think about this? Not that I am complaining, but we have been rammed from one vote to the next without even a break in between to think."

Chelsey spoke up before the idiot could get T riled up again.

"Does humanity want to join the alliance," Eve stated.

"Correction, does the civilian population of Earth want to join the alliance." T said.

Eve looked at T and cocked her head to the side as someone in the audience asked, "What do you mean the civilian population of Earth? Do you military types think you're above being a part of humanity?"

"Absolutely not. We are just not stupid enough to allow you idiots to fuck this up for us. We let your politics and bootlicking corrupt our decision-making processes for so long that we are sick of it. When the fleet leaves the Sol system we will be doing so as full-fledged members of the alliance. If you want an astral gate placed in between Earth's and Mar's orbits to allow for intergalactic trade and stellar colonization as a member of the alliance, then our clones that we will be leaving here with you, will be excited to enjoy all of the benefits that comes with membership."

"Clones you will be leaving behind?" someone quizzed with a tone of confusion.

"Let's get things straight kiddos. We are no longer a superpower in this chess game. Hell, we're not even sure we're playing chess anymore. As far as we know we could be playing some 3D version of Chinese Checkers and the only way we are going to get the tools we will need to

survive is by being a part of the alliance. So, all of the military personnel that have a DNA repository and a mental copy will be allowed to generate one clone to remain here to protect your sorry asses, and another to go with our benefactors here and deal with this threat that is wiping out solar systems across the galaxy. We have even used a gaming rule built into every MMORPG in existence to authorize our benefactors to make a save state of our consciousnesses and use them to reboot and refit another clone should one perish in a fight. Basically, we have volunteered to become a never-ending tide of human bodies to bury our enemies with, if we have to." T said matter-of-factly.

"You can't be serious. 25,000 of you get to decide that for the rest of the veterans. How is that even legal?" T spun to look at the speaker and wasn't surprised to find that it was the one Eve had called Joy again.

"Actually, little miss smart ass, all 26,000 of you were woken up just three hours before you were brought in here to begin voting. That way the Continuum could validate that vote tampering had not taken place. If you remember from the beginning, Eve informed you that the military has been waking up for the last two weeks. I was one of the first dozen. As of an hour before I came in here, we were at four million, two hundred and seventy-three thousand, six hundred and eighty-eight. All but two agreed to this 're-enlistment' package." T moved the two largest fingers of both hands up and down several times to insinuate the use of quotes when she said the words re-enlistment. "Those two will be given one clone each and they will remain here on Earth with the rest of you, with only one life and one chance. The rest of us will be stepping into the breach once more with one clone here and one in combat so that you get a chance to live again, because by the Alliance's own laws, only those of us that they can match DNA with a mental stack get a second chance." The civilians were stunned into silence by this revelation.

All but one, one of the teenage boys raised his hand and waited for T to look his way before asking, "I was too young and too sick to serve in my first life. What does one have to do to get that same deal?"

"You just did kid, get on your feet and wait for me by the door. We will get you squared away with a new bunk when we leave here." With that all four young men stood up, walked to the stage, grabbed the dishwasher and started heading for the door.

With her head cocked to the side T asked, "And just where do you three think you are going?"

One of the others spoke up in reply and nodded his head at the others, "we were all in the same orphanage before the big bang. Since none of us can remember anything about the decade between the time Yellowstone went off and some rich dude made a huge cash donation to the orphanage, we're guessing civilian life didn't work out too well for us."

A second kid continued, "The headmistress took half of that money to keep the orphanage running for another year and spent the rest on sending all the kids old enough to login to the local VR Center. When we asked her why she didn't use all of it to keep the orphanage open longer, she told us to never pass up an opportunity in life to have a little adventure, because you never know where it will lead you in life and you may not get a second chance."

"If it's okay with you there's no way in hell we're going to miss out on the greatest adventure in human history," the third kid responded. Then sheepishly looked down and said, "Sorry for the language ma'am."

T chuckled to herself and used it to fight back a few tears that tried to cause her eyes to water.

Then replied to them with a little bit of a smile in her voice, "Do I look fucking fragile to you? I use worse language than that to talk to God every time she pisses me off. And I work for a

fucking living, don't ever call me ma'am again, I ain't your grandma." T said the last part with a little more force in her voice than she meant to as she couldn't stand to be called ma'am.

All four stiffened up and yelled out nice and clear, "Yes, ma'am!" then froze as they realized what they had just said.

T couldn't help it, she cracked up a little bit and said, "Somebody raised y'all right. You can call me Master Guns. Now what are you doing with Mr. Bubbles there?"

The last kid spoke up and said, "Master Guns, he's a good guy really. He's just too smart for his own good and let's his mouth get him into more trouble than all of us combined could get out of, but he is the most loyal guy we know, and he was always the best when it came to strategy games. He would never forgive us if we left him behind, and it would be a shame for one stupid joke to eliminate him from this opportunity." It all came rushing out so quickly that T knew it came from the heart and had to be true.

T couldn't hold it in anymore; some of the audience and the four boys flinched when she closed her eyes, turned her face up towards the ceiling and began to laugh louder than a bar full of drunken sailors. As she managed to bring her laughter to a heel by squeezing her ribs with her arms, she looked back down at them with what could only be described as a grin so evil Lucifer would have fled for the hills. "You don't say," she vibrated with a few more chuckles, composed herself and continued, "this is too good. I know someone just like that and he owes me a favor.

Mr. Bubbles is now Wayward's new protégé and I'll kick his ass if he tries to say no."

"Don't worry Master Guns, Mike would never be that stupid." The first kid assured her.

The giggle that came from T's lips sent shivers down the boys' spines as T responded, "I wasn't talking about Mr. Bubbles there. Anyways, by default his new moniker is going to be Pathfinder,

but until he earns it, we will call him Bubbles." T then turned towards Eve and asked, "If you have this Eve, do you think I can head off with the new volunteers for the Alliance's Space Marines?"

"Sure. I think we should..." and Eve trailed off as she looked towards the audience. T stopped smiling and started to look in the direction Eve was looking.

"Holly clusterfuck, just where the hell do y'all think you're heading?" T asked as several thousand people had stood up and were moving towards the door.

Most noticeably to her was the man with the attitude of entitlement about him. Thinking she was talking to him he responded, "If a little pocket change could have made that much a difference in those five men's lives, I have a lifetime or more of sins to pay for." He turned towards the door, stopped and then turned back to T, "If that's ok with you Master Guns."

"Two quotes you're about to learn a whole new meaning of: 'There is no such thing as an atheist in a fox hole', and 'welcome to hell, we don't plant rose gardens." T said with a massive grin on her face and a tear of pride rolled down her cheek as she waved her hand towards the door.

"Oh great, and now I have to inform the continuum that we will have to delay the results until we can wake up more civilians to participate in the voting process." Eve said, feeling a little dismayed at how things had gone so right and so wrong at the same time just before the final vote. "They're already complaining about all the delays as is."

A teenage girl that was walking towards the door stopped and said, "I think the only thing wrong is in how you are presenting it Miss Eve."

T looked down at her and asked, "What do you mean little miss?"

The young lady blushed, stiffened up and then looked the two women on the stage directly in the eyes as best she could and said, "Tell your bosses 'Humans thrive on chaos'. Change your introduction to asking the mental images a simple question, 'live or die'? Ask the survivors, 'where do you want your heritage clone to spawn in the solar system, at Luna, Terra or Mars'? Follow that up with, 'do you want to serve your enlistment as an AI or as a meat shield'? Then tell your bosses that the civilians changed the rules, and the new recruitment process is starting to generate millions of raw recruits slathering for a chance to fight for their right to exist and prove to a few million old codgers that there are new tricks to teach an old dog."

Eve's mouth fell open unconsciously as her mental processes had associated this with a look of amazement. For she was amazed at how easily a huge negative had been changed into a massive positive. T busted out laughing again, pointed at the young lady and managed to say, "You don't leave my side. I think we are going to get along just fine."

Chapter Eighteen: It's all about the Music

Not being able to fully understand the methods in which this primitive race was planning on overcoming a communications blackout and the ability to jam advanced signal technologies the emissary spoke up and asked EVE "Our superior technology can't penetrate whatever the invaders are doing when they enter a system. How do these primitives think they are going to be able to coordinate millions of ships in a battlesphere?" As the collective of representatives toured the massive bay of one of the transport ships that the primitives were having constructed.

Eve turned to the massive form of the Magnath and looked at where they would generally form their optical receptors in their molten silicate bodies, as she heard T's voice in her primary processors, 'Look them in the eyes when you want them to take you seriously.' "You and the rest of the alliance may call them primitives, but the Continuum has come to understand that their tactics and deviousness is something even our most aggressive AIs have been hard pressed to keep up with. Every time one of our simulators comes close to fighting them to a standstill, they are able to adapt their tactics and utterly crush it. However, to answer your question, we have posed this question to their leadership, small unit commanders, and newest recruits; all they say is, 'It's all about the Music', 'you'll just have to learn to go with the flow and feel the tempo', 'feel the pulse of the music and you can feel the flow of battle, war, death, life and love itself,' or some combination in between any of those three quotes."

"What? What does that even mean and how is it even close to being able to explain something as complex as a battle tactic?" The Magnath asked, feeling its temperature rise with its frustration.

A voice from a different direction responded with, "Do you even know what music is?"

The party turned from Eve and faced a pair of pink skinned individuals that approached them. Some of the representatives were repulsed by this combination of the ugliest parts of all the species. Two arms, two legs, a semi-solid exterior, and inability or refusal to use their communication implants defined this primitive species of death and destruction that the AIs had returned from the grave to fight their enemies. The speaker handed a clipboard to the other one and nodded his head, the second turned and jogged off deeper into the bay. The representatives were here to figure out if the primitive AIs had truly found an answer to the invaders as promised, or if the thousands of habitable planets near the center of the galaxy were being evacuated as a primary plan and this species was more hype than solution.

"Yes, I am familiar with it. While some of you beat on things or run air though mishappened natural elements, we prefer to listen to the natural music of the stars and the planets as the minerals vibrate and ring throughout our structures in synch with its song." The Magnath responded with a little irritation coming through with its tone of voice.

"Good to know. Our scientists will have to work with some of yours to make sure we don't hit a frequency that may cause you to shatter. You see we can't explain to an artificial construct what music truly is because they don't understand feelings, and how a drumbeat can motivate a heart rate through emotions." The individual replied to the Magnath, who had just been struck silent by the offhanded threat, before turning to Eve. "These the big wigs that I need to impress before introducing them to the bosses?"

"Yes, they are, and T wishes for me to remind you that these are our allies. So please be gentle with them." Eve said with a hint of seduction in her voice as Wayward walked up. "Esteemed representatives, this is the one known to his species as the Wayward Angel. He is the chosen emissary for his people while combat operations are not being conducted."

"That's great, they give us some lacky that can't even work with us the entire time? Who are we supposed to talk to during combat operations? And why can't we talk to the ones in charge if he is useless when it really counts?" A Ssnarg said as he looked down disdainfully at Wayward.

Wayward grinned up at him showing as many teeth as he could and laughed out, "I won't be able to talk to you during combat operations because my entire species will be hip deep in the entrails of your enemies, and I will be guiding my team even deeper into the enemies' anatomy. If you would like to talk to one of us as we are in the middle of fighting, we would welcome you the opportunity to outfit you with some armor and give you a seat right next to me on the first

drop ship. However, if you want a weapon to fight back with, you will need to go through some pretty rigorous training to make sure you can dance to our music."

"Again, you mention music, can you expound on this for the less... qualified of us, who only use it for celebrations and ceremonies?" A sweet feminine voice called through the tightly packed group of emissaries.

Wayward rocked side to side bending at his waist and neck to look around the two massive individuals in front as he tried to get a glimpse of the speaker. The Magnath and the Ssnarg emissaries stepped aside allowing Wayward to behold a very voluptuous and red skinned individual that instantly filled his mind with all kinds of immoral and exciting thoughts. He shook his head quickly a few times to rattle the last two peas in his head back onto track and asked, "And you are?"

"Andeli O'shious of the Eternal Syndicate." She purred as she took a step forward.

"A Dell, E, O, C, O, Us, hmhmm," Wayward hummed a little as he looked her up and down, "I can definitely imagine you are. Are you interested in testing out some of our more recreational activities?"

Eve quickly stepped in at this point, verbally and physically, pointed a finger at Wayward an instant before poking him just below his Adam's Apple with it, "T warned me that you might miss behave and assured me that she would be willing to stop what she is doing and come babysit you if she has to."

Wayward stepped back quickly while coughing, lightly rubbing his throat to ease the choking sensation and trying to focus on Eve, "OK, OK, damn you didn't have to try and respawn me. I don't know what the hell we were thinking waking that sadistic woman up to teach you how to

interact with us." The last sentence was mumbled like a five-year-old who just had his haul of Halloween candy confiscated by his parents.

"Do I need to call T?" Eve asked again.

"No ma'am. I will behave." Wayward said purposefully doing his best imitation of a little kid staring at her feet, with his head down, hands behind his back, and one foot behind him as he twisted his torso back and forth.

"Stop playing around for a few minutes and stop avoiding the question." Eve reprimanded him.

"I'm sorry but she looks just like the mythical succubae from every form of media in every cultural history known to man. She's only missing a huge set of wings and a spade-footed tail."

Wayward said like the very same petulant child trying to blame his parents for his mistake.

"Actually," Andeli said as she stepped forward again, this time the black low cut gown she was wearing separated down the middle of her chest and began to spread out as it moved down and then under her arms to show it was actually her wings, and the thick ties that Wayward thought was the straps for her dress uncoiled from around her neck and dropped down between her thighs before standing up proudly behind her back and began to mischievously wave back and forth behind her. All of which culminated in shivers running up and down Wayward's back "I had to tuck my tail and wings up to prevent them from being damaged by some of our larger and less attentive representatives."

This time the Magnath was the one to lower his head like a repentant child and mumbled, "I said I was sorry."

"That's ok big guy. I know it's hard for your species to look down at those smaller than you instead of looking down on us." Andeli said with a bubbly giggle as she patted the Magnath on the chest, causing the heat waves from it to waiver a little letting Wayward know that while this big guy was really hot, the succubus could definitely handle him.

"You haven't introduced her to T yet, have you?" Wayward whispered to Eve as he motioned towards Andeli.

Eve cocked one eyebrow to show her curiousness or imply a threat, Wayward wasn't sure which and she asked, "Do I need to?"

"No! No ma'am, please, no. That will be unnecessary and hurtful to all of the men aboard this ship. We don't need to go through that song and dance." Wayward quickly replied while patting the air with the palms of his hands towards Eve.

"Then answer the question... please." Eve said with the last word tossed in as an after-thought.

Wayward nodded his head and turned back to the representatives and said "After you get to know us you will understand the power of music, the lyrics, the beat of the drums, the instruments that accompany it and the voice in which the lyrics are sung. For instance, if I was to play this song as I came up to you for the first time," he paused and opened his hand palm up as Metallica's 'Am I Evil' began to play. He allowed it to play through as he played air guitar along with the music, head bouncing, and eyes closed. When James Hetfield began to sing, he looked up and locked eyes with the Ssnarg representative and sang along. Eve was transfixed with the sheer stupidity that this idiot was demonstrating in front of the leadership for the Alliance. Then Wayward noticed out of the corner of his eye that the Marines who had been working in the area had all stopped what they were doing, picked up their rifles, formed a firing line and were slowly

moving towards them with weapons at the ready, not one of them had said a single thing. Several of the representatives had noticed this long before he did, and they were backing into a tighter ball out of fear of these little primitives who had just proven their ability to quickly jump from daily activities to controlled aggression on a dime without rhyme or reason. Then there was the intense emotional pressure coming off of them that bore down with an absolute feeling of wanting to reap utter devastation and immortal death upon the ambassadors. Wayward waved his hands killing the music, and began hollering, "Stand down, stand down. It was only a demonstration. These are friendlies." He then quickly glanced over his shoulder at the Magnath representative, and asked, "We are friends, right?"

Not knowing what Wayward had intended by the question the huge molten silicate took one knee bowed his head and solemnly stated, "I," and a sound of chimes and earthquake came from his throat, which Wayward interpreted as his name, "do vow a pact of friendship between myself and the one known as Wayward Angel." Before raising his head and looking Wayward in the eyes.

Wayward turned back towards the Marines in the area and yelled, "Good response time. Team leaders, an extra ration of grog after hours for all involved. The rest of you, as you were." Several of them cheered as they shouldered or slung their weapons, and he turned back to the Magnath and offered his hand to him. "I'm sorry. I forgot we had already issued the boarding party protocols. I do not threaten friends. I just wanted to ask if you understood the power of that song. But now that you have seen it in action, does it begin to make a little more sense?"

"Wh-what just happened?" came a trembling voice from the center of the group.

Wayward once again peered into the gaps until he spotted what one could only describe as a satyr trembling behind the legs of the fifth member of the representatives. "If an enemy manages to get aboard the Valhalla, we do not want to warn them that we know they are here. However, we want the crew to know that unfriendlies are aboard and they should be ready to fight off anyone they do not recognize. Which in this case, was you guys, for which I absolutely and humbly apologize."

Andeli stepped forward once more and asked, "And what song would you play to introduce me?" Wayward noticed that she had once again refolded her wings and tail to look like a long black dress.

"I don't know you well but off the top of my head I would go with this one," with that he held out his hand and the music began to play. Every Marine in the squad bay began to cheer and they went to put up their weapons and tools. As the echoing chorus of 'Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress' by the Hollies reverberated back to Wayward in hundreds of voices, he quickly waved his hands to stop the music and started yelling into the squad bay again. "You fucking slackers know it ain't quit time yet. Get back to work. Team leaders cancel that extra ration of grog for anybody not still working." There was a chorus of moans and complaints from the hanger bay. Before many of them could take their second step back towards their tasks "It's Five O'clock Somewhere" by Jimmy Buffet started to play and they all turned to look at Wayward. He just looked upwards, wanting to know if Karma was really being this cruel to him, then yelled, "That one ain't me, now get your sorry asses off my flight deck." The Marines in the bay cheered and once again began putting their stuff away.

"Anyway, with every ship in the fleet playing battle music over every frequency we can emit,"
Wayward said as he turned back to the representatives. "We should be able to jam the enemy

signals and allow us to coordinate tactics, and the enemy will never know what we are planning, who is calling the shots, and be unable to jam our signals as each ship will amplify the transmission from the others. The speed and intensity of the music lets you know the urgency of the request and the tone and message of the lyrics lets you know the threat level involved in providing said request. For example, a speed metal version of a song with a growling male vocalist singing about blood and gore says that the request is needed immediately, and it is probably going to result in a lot of casualties to those fulfilling the request or the ones requesting it. A slow thumping techno beat means the request was preplanned and is going off smoothly, add a female vocalist cooing about sex or love and there should be a limited threat to those giving the support."

"What happens if you need to change tactics and this music thing doesn't work?" The fifth member asked, who Wayward could only describe as an Orc, straight out of the fanfiction with green skin, tusks, and a black mohawk that had been tied back into a Sumo Style top knot.

"Sometimes the oldest tricks in the books are the most reliable. Two guys standing on top of each ship with wired communications to the bridge and a really strong flashlight to signal the next song to be played across the inside of the ship." Wayward just shrugged his shoulders as if the representatives should have been able to figure that one out on their own. "That's when you are really depending on your troops to be professionally trained enough to carry out their last commands and competent enough to make their own decisions after their success or to die trying. I prefer to think on my own two feet and live to fight another day if possible. When the blood starts flying, the people doing the bleeding and dying need to be smart enough to make the right choices, even if it means their own deaths. Now if you'll follow me, I will conduct a brief tour of the ship as we go to meet the officers in charge of planning the counter assault."

As they moved from the hangar through a hallway he continued the briefing. "For instance, if we need to get resupplied so we can keep fighting there is going to be several factors that we would want to convey to the pilots bringing in the supplies to us. Is this a routine resupply or an emergency resupply, meaning how quickly do we need them? How desperate is our situation and are there any enemies nearby? We have several songs chosen for this depending on the supplies we are requesting. We will need more ammo and troops for a unit that has reached their rally point and needs to push forward into enemy held territory. For this we chose the song 'Sweet Dreams' originally played by the Eurythmics which we will be using for a routine schedule and mild speed and need requirement." Wayward held out his hand and the song played for those within a 20-foot radius of him. "A rapid pace means speed is essential, a woman singing in a calm voice means we aren't threatened at the moment, and the fact that she's singing a mellow chorus means threats around us to the pilots isn't higher than usual."

"However," Wayward closed his hand then reopened it and a low and slow orchestral rendition by Emily Browning began to play, "if I want to let the pilots know that we are at the point early and want to remain hidden we would play something like this. Notice the instruments and vocals do not pick up their intensity until the chorus starts? That lets them know that once they arrive there will be consequences, but we need those supplies."

"Now if I am stopping for just a few minutes before pushing off again with or without the supplies I might play something like this." With a flip of his hand the song changed to Trinix's version. "The rapid beat, and no introduction before the lyrics started up tells the pilots get here quick and fast. The female's voice says I am not in dire need of the supplies as I can still fight if I don't get them."

Another flip of the wrist and Steve Void's rendition began thumping out. "Again, the lyrics pick up immediately, meaning I need them now. A man's voice signing calmly tells the pilots that there are enemies nearby and it will require them to be on their toes, but they should be able to handle it."

After letting that song get to the first chorus he began the next, this time it was with background chatter and gunfire as Marilyn Manson took his swing at the song. "Notice the intro and the man's voice. It is a signal to the pilots that they will need to follow the fighter craft in, and it will be rough. The intensity of the drums and the guitars after the chorus lets them know that we will be providing anti-air-support for them as best we can, but plan to fight for themselves while dropping off our supplies."

Another twist of the wrist and a man's voice was chanting lowly before a choir began singing in the background and then the guitar started the telltale chords of 'Sweet Dreams' with a deeper twist. "This is Puppet Master's version of the same song and as you can tell it is a lot darker. The man is growling the lyrics, the intro is ominous, and the guitars are allowed to scream and screech, while the drums are being used as if they are explosives. This tells the pilots that without those supplies I am fucked, but I have to keep moving; that is what this song was chosen for. It also lets them know that I am too busy fighting to keep myself alive to be able to support them and the fighter craft are being destroyed just as quickly as the enemies so they should be ready to respawn versus flying home empty."

"Personally, I prefer this version." With a flick of the wrist Jersy Clubs' version began thumping out. "It's all instrumental, meaning no lyrics, and a slow heavy vibrating base. That tells the pilots, I'm not in that area but I want the supplies dropped there. I am too busy kicking the

enemy's ass somewhere else and you can just buzz in drop them off and I'll grab them when I need them."

"You said those were all scheduled type supply drops, but they are so different. What is an unscheduled drop?" The Magnath asked.

"A scheduled drop means a set time, location, and normal amount of supplies. An unscheduled drop means I need the supplies right now, where I am, as soon as you can, and everything you can give me."

"So, what do you play when you need to request one of those?" Andeli asked.

"Send me an Angel or Welcome to my Nightmare, depending on the fighting situation." Wayward replied.

"What's the difference?" the Satyr asked.

"'Send Me an Angel' means drop off everything you can to me, troops first. While 'Welcome to My Nightmare' means carpet bomb my location first, so the reinforcements can start over with a clean slate." Wayward said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Is there anything worse than needing supplies in a fight?" The Satyr asked really dreading the answer after the last one.

"Absolutely but sending out a request for help is the nicest one I could explain for you guys.

Even those requests have something far worse, I am told you are representatives of the five races that would be the most honorable to deal with and could be trusted to not try and fleece us. What terrifies us it not the actual killing and dying. We have been there and done that even when we only had one life to live. What terrifies us it what we don't know and the fact that we were

almost lost to the stellar winds because of political corruption and societal mistakes. I guarantee you that if you help us we will be willing to help you."

Andeli smirked at Wayward and asked, "Do you have a special song for that kind of help?"

"Absolutely, 'Send Lawyers, Guns and Money' by Warren Zevon. It's about a man who got trapped behind enemy lines without even knowing who the enemy was and is now desperate for anything his friends can send to help him out of a bad situation. The lyrics of the songs, and often the titles, mean just as much as what is being communicated as the pitch and speed."

Wayward said grinning.

Chapter Nineteen: General's Gather in Their Masses

'War Pigs' by Eva Under Fire began playing shortly before the massive twin doors swung open to the auditorium where the Generals were gathered to discuss tactics and plan the deployment. The men all looked up as the group entered the giant auditorium, and several crossed their arms clearly angry at being disrupted. As soon as the drums signaled the end of the line "Sorcerer of death's construction," one raised his hand above his head and brought the music to an abrupt halt with the snap of his fingers. "Care to explain yourself Marine?" came the questioning command.

After taking a brief swallow Wayward responded loud and clear, "Gentlemen, I have the alliance representatives here with me, and I was trying to explain to them the power and use of music in combat and as a way of introduction."

"And you thought War Pigs, was the best song for introducing us?" One of the men demanded.

"In all fairness sir, I used 'Am I Evil' to introduce myself, and I don't think they are ready for 'Mother' by Pink Floyd." Wayward explained.

"Eve, are you sure he's the one you really want to interact with? Tylutki would be a better choice from what I have seen." One of the generals tossed up to Eve as the representatives descended to the table where the generals stood.

"To use one of the colloquialisms that T has taught me. While Wayward is a dull hammer,"
Wayward emitted a squawk of protest that was quickly cut off by a glare from Eve, "T is more of
a spool of det cord, and we needed a softer hand. As these five represent the trade faction and
four of the five most vicious races according to the histories that we chronicled at the time they
were brought into the alliance; I needed someone tough enough to knock them back on task, but
not someone destructive enough that they wouldn't survive the tour of the ship."

"That's fair," Wayward commented.

"I don't know, I kind of prefer her gruffness to his showmanship," one of the generals replied.

Eve replied with, "Some of the races will want to meet with Wayward from the very beginning because technically he was the last living human on the planet." With this Wayward grinned from ear to ear, like he was about to stick his tongue out at the generals and flap his hands next to his ears.

"The best suggestion you had was to find the lists of those that entered into private or personal vaults and blacklist them temporarily from the revival process. Still, your tasks are done, and you are dismissed." One of the other generals stated as he looked at a self-pleased Wayward.

"Aye, aye sir." Wayward said as he snapped to attention and did an about face to head towards the door.

"Wait a moment please," came Andeli's sultry voice stopping him in his tracks. "Gentlemen, I am impressed with what you have done so far and can submit my vote of approval right now for whatever you have planned. Under one condition." She said as she held up a hand.

The generals quickly glanced at one another before the lead general looked at her and said, "Name it and it shall be done."

"I want to meet this 'T' person. Any female that you all revere, and he obviously fears, is someone I want to meet."

"Sir?" Wayward had to clear his throat before continuing because that had come out like the squeak of a mouse that just realized it was in the shadow of a diving hawk. "Sir, I don't think it would be a good idea to allow that to happen just yet."

Two of the generals nodded in agreement with wide eyes, before one of the others spoke up, "And why is that?"

Wayward looked at Andeli and asked, "Would you please show them your wings and tail for me?" Andeli was confused by this request but did as she was asked, she stared at him with her back to the generals and missed how one of them grabbed his chest and several of the others breathed in a lung full of air and held it.

The lead general let out his breath slowly not realizing he had been one of those that had breathed in at the display of the succubus. "Umm, you might have a point there, but umm, we, we need her vote if we are going to be successful and I believe it to be necessary at this time."

Again, Wayward could only squeak out a "Sir?"

The general cleared his throat, straightened up his back and replied, "You head me Marine, and you don't get paid to think. Now go introduce the most dangerous human female known to man, to our new ally."

Just barely loud enough for some of the individuals in the room to hear, one of the generals murmured, "And may God have mercy on us all."

Andeli's first step faltered a little as she heard this prayer, but then her grin grew as wide, and fang filled as a megalodon's as she climbed the steps back towards Wayward. She purposefully fluttered her wings a little before partially folding them behind her shoulders. She knew the stairs could be used to give her stride a little more sway from the hips, and with her tail gently swaying in counterbalance to her hips, every man in the room had stopped to watch. Wayward felt as if death itself was stalking him, and all he could do was stand there and await her arrival to steal his soul. As she gently took his left arm and snuggled it between her sinfully delicious mounds, she looked up at the terrified man and began walking him up the stairs by his now trapped arm, "Why do humans react that way to my wings and tail?"

As the last two functioning cells in his brain was fighting for the right to be the one to focus on her lusciousness, Wayward could not stop himself from responding with, "We had myths on our world of a race that is described as looking just like you."

"Were they some kind of goddesses or held some kind of religious importance?"

Coughing into his free hand Wayward managed to gather his thoughts and put together a better response of, "Something like that. They were a warning of the sin of carnal desires and would suck the life and soul out of a man using un-ending and uncontrollable sexual pleasure."

What could only be described as a seductive cooing escaped from Andeli as she dragged him back the way they had just come, and she asked, "So why did you not want me to meet this T person?"

Wayward had all kinds of red flags, flashing lights and warning alarms going off in his head but he could not stop himself from answering her, "Like you she is a goddess of fitness, desire and destruction. At the same time, she is one of the strongest allies and most loyal friends you could ever make. Some have made the mistake of being sexually aggressive when they first meet her, and it always ended up, at minimum, with her breaking their noses. She even shattered one dumb ass' knee because he thought swatting her on the ass would be a great icebreaker. You and her combined, teaching Eve how to interact with men, and not one of us men will ever be able to have a chance at winning an argument ever again."

Andeli blew out a slow and light sigh, "Oh, I see you're one of those."

Wayward was totally confused now and absolutely knew better but still asked as all the wailing warning alarms in his head were unable to stop his gums from flapping, "One of who?"

Andeli looked up at him, and batted her eyelashes as she locked gazes with him, "The delusional men that thought you even stood a chance in the first place." Wayward's shoulders slumped, and his head dropped as the alarms in his head converted to a full-on dirge complete with bagpipes and drums. The only thought running through his head as they left the auditorium was 'yep, this is not going to end well for me.' He opened his hand and Alice Cooper began playing 'Welcome to My Nightmare.'

https://youtu.be/AvkXij1kzcU?si=hKN2Gk0vrB0rm0nm

Chapter Twenty: Murphy Proof Planning?

"Counteract jamming, clear the skies, establish an LZ, push back the enemy, establish a presence, fortify and defend. Those are the tasks, and this is a guaranteed plan on how this operation is going to work." The general in charge of the briefing said, before a rumble of chuckles came from the ground forces. "I see some of you can remember Murphy's second law." The general and the rest of the audience busted out laughing.

Eve had performed a quick query of the Military databases and received a list of rules that provided an alarming analogy of combat actions, and it confused her on many levels, including why the humans thought it was something to laugh at. "I don't understand this is supposed to be a serious and deadly undertaking, and this 'Murphy's Laws' list is something I would not consider humorous. Why is everyone laughing?"

The general decided to take a moment to help Eve understand this and git a little bit of practice at showmanship in the process, "Rule number one," he hollered out while looking at Eve before gesturing to the crowd with his hand. To which they replied in near unison: "If it can go wrong, it will go wrong, at the least opportune moment." He then said to Eve, "That is a generic rule to remind us that it applies to everything and everyone in every situation and sets the tone for the rest of the laws." Then he called out to the crowd again "rule number two," again the answer came back in near unison, "A plan only lasts until first contact with the enemy." He turned back to Eve and said, "We can plan and strategize everything down to the time and amount that these guys get to eat during this operation. Problem is, we cannot plan for everything, and since the enemy doesn't know how we are planning to conduct our operation, they will not know how they are supposed to behave to ensure everything goes to plan. It's worse if they do know, then they can enact a plan of their own."

He then turned back to the briefing with the showmanship over for the moment and continued. "Gentlemen, and ladies," he had to remind himself that the new forces did not prevent the most violent of the human race from joining the infantry anymore. "We understand rule number two just as well as you do which is why we are going to do things differently now. If you will feast your eyes on the big screen," there were a few groans in the audience, "I promise you this will not be another death by PowerPoint. Instead, you will see how we plan on counteracting the signal jamming our enemies have been using and how we plan on coordinating the different stages." With that a list of combat stages and what could only be described as a playlist was displayed.

Planet Fall – Karen O, The Immigrant Song – Hidden Citizens, Ride of the Valkyries

Clearing the Skies – Metallica, Sabbra Cadabra – Ozzy Osbourne, Seek and Destroy

Troop Deployment – AC/DC, Hell's Bell's – Accept, Balls to The Wall

Clearing the Jungle – Megadeath, Angry Again – Frantic Amber, Scorched Earth

OSF – Five Finger Death Punch, Welcome to the Circus – Anti-Clone, Army of Me

LZ Clear – Scorpions, Send Me an Angel – Armin Van Burin, (2018 1-hour club mix)

The audience went silent as everyone was now leaning forward in their seats intent on hearing the details. "We're going to let you decide what needs to be done on an individual level. As you are all professionals we trust your judgment and will allow you to do your jobs as needed. Since we will not have an opportunity to provide the new recruits with an actual bootcamp they're

Perimeter duty – TBD, to be used for weapons and tactics testing of close combat tactics and

techniques.

going to get a little OJT. It is up to you to teach them not to shoot you in the back before we hit the ground, your trainees will be assigned to observe your actions, so make damn sure to teach them the right way to do things, and how to perform your part of this little ballet. We are only going to provide the dance music for you."

As professional as they were the audience still murmured to one another and the general was happy to hear that ninety percent of it sounded positive. "The reason we cannot provide a decent bootcamp is we are no longer practicing killing one another. We are going to be facing unknown inhuman enemies, both here on Earth and once we deploy out of the Sol System. Therefore, any prior training you find useful to teach your recruits will be up to you to provide. So, no more getting to your next school and being told to forget everything you learned in the last one.

Therefore, this is what we will be playing as you get a chance to play with your new toys and teach the new boys... and girls. If you have any feedback or special song requests for the playlist please see the S-3, Ops officers, or as I like to call their clerks the new DJs of Destruction." The briefing was the shortest any of the veterans could remember having ever sat through for such a high intensity operation that had millions of moving parts, but they were excited to try and put it to use. The opportunity to show off their skills to the recruits was just a bonus.

Chapter Twenty-One: Same old song and ... new dance partners?

T came strolling into the mechanical bay grinning like the cat that had swallowed the canary, with a young woman beside her and four young men carrying what looked almost like a stainless-steel box. "Guess what fellas, I got your replacements right here. They're younger, sexier, don't have any of your bad habits, and I bet I can even have them trained to obey me a hell of a lot faster."

Thinking he would be the first one to get T right from the start for once, Terasaki jumped up and did his best New York accent, "Oh yeah, so why you bodderin us then, huh? What you need us for, huh?"

T stopped, looked him up and down a few times before mumbling, "That's a good question.

Target practice maybe?" All of the men flinched when she said this. "I have a trainee as well and I need to teach her how to throw knives accurately at really small targets. Any volunteers?" As one all of the senior Marines folded their hands over their reproductive organs, and then crossed their knees for just a little extra protection and mumbled, "No, no thank you T." While turning their legs and lower torsos away from her.

T then turned to the young woman next to her and said, "see that's how you know you have them house-broken at the minimum. I will walk you through more training techniques for those five chuckleheads later on." She said as she waived her hand absently mindedly towards the four men standing there with a silver box projected in augmented reality amongst them.

Bear, being more confused than intelligent at the moment spoke up without thinking and asked, "Umm, T, did you hit your head or something?"

She got quiet and slowly turned towards him, "Fluffy, are you trying to insinuate something?"

Realizing how badly he had just messed up; Bear took a moment to rephrase his train of thought before continuing. "Umm, no, it's just uh, there's only four guys standing there, and they are carrying some kind of kitchen appliance, I think." It came out as more of a question than a response, but Bear was now confused.

With that T busted out laughing and said, "Oh yeah, that's Mr. Bubbles. He's Wayward's new apprentice."

"Umm, T, that's a dishwasher, and I have too many responsibilities as is, being the voluntold emissary and all."

"Uhn-uh. Oh, hell no! You owe me you rat bastard and it's been over 150 millennia, so I think it's high time you paid up. Besides he's just like you were when you were his age. So, you WILL take him under your wing, you WILL teach him everything you know about tactics and terrorism, you WILL teach him how to be the sneakiest sum-bitch around, and you SHALL NOT pollute his little virgin mind with all of that womanizing crap I had to beat out of you five so y'all would make decent husbands." By time she got to Wayward she had him backed up against a hover tank and began poking his chest with every stressed word using an extended pointer finger, in the same spot, every time, as she looked up into his eyes. Wayward could only dry swallow and nod his head yes, but that wasn't good enough for her. "Nope, not gonna work this time, you WILL say it out loud and clear so everyone around you can hear you give me your word that you WILL do as I ask and train this kid right." Again, she poked him in the same spot her finger had been landing on before to add extra emphasis to the will of her statement.

"Yes, ma'am." Was all Wayward could say.

"Not good enough I want to hear you say it out loud and enunciated. Use your words maggot, let me know that brain of yours is still functioning." T threatened him this time pointing her finger towards his face making the threat very clear.

"I so swear that I will train him to the best of my ability in all things related to tactics, terrorism, sneakiness, and all things absolutely no good that would likely have gotten him kicked out of the pre-boom Corps." Wayward took the oath wondering what the hell these boys had done to impress her so much.

She smiled and said, "good boy. I have confidence in you," and gave a quick pecking kiss on the tip of his nose, Wayward flinched because her kisses were always followed with pain and he thought she might try to bite him or something, but his leaning his head back played right into her hands. The back of her hand actually, as she used it to smack his inner thigh so close to his nether regions that his boxers pulled tight from the blow. While she did not directly hit his family jewels, the fear and mental image that she had done so made it far more painful, as his boys had tried to blink step their way through his pelvic bone to hang with his bladder for safety's sake. "What did I say about calling me ma'am you shithead. Do I look that fucking old to you?" Wayward could only moan in pain as he dropped to his knees, forehead down on the deck, hands on his groin, and tears pouring down his cheeks from the mental pain.

Concern for his teammate overrode his own self-preservation and drove Terasaki to once again open his mouth and distract her, "Well you are over 150..." then the overworked monkey inside his head finally managed to pull the plug on the motor that was running his jaw, but the chill cast off by the look of pure evil in her eyes had already fell upon him. He quickly made an audible clack as his teeth slammed shut with the effort to take back what he had just said.

"Over one hundred and fifty what, Ski?" He knew better, but now he could only stand frozen stiff like a deer corned by a mountain lion, his head shook a little more than the rest of him in the negative. "Aw come on, you started to say something, go ahead and say it, and it better be a good one. I can already tell I am way behind on reminding you guys who the real hand-to-hand expert is here. I wonder how many times I can send y'all for respawn outside of training before I get into trouble?" She had been described as being a young Mike Tyson with training in Krav Maga and Muay Thai Boxing, she loved punching things, or people that upset her. The realization that T no longer needed to keep her boobytraps non-lethal also bore absolute terror down upon the

men because they could all be simply respawned if needed, and so did the memory that she was their expert on everything explosive.

Since Wayward was down on his knees in pain already, it fell to Mac to try and bail the guys out and he came up with the fastest thing he could, "T you can't do that, you will get into trouble. You know you can't damage government property like that and not get into trouble."

Her grin as she turned on Mac was devious and she asked oh so innocently, "What? I would never hurt this beautiful ship; it is part of Eve. It's unconscionable to think that I would ever hurt a fellow lady of sophistication." The guys wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but couldn't, and she lowered the boom on them just to make sure they knew it too. She launched into a litany of evil schemes like some old school mad scientist filing the villain role in a Bond movie. "A CO2 powered punji stick fired through a tube from inside your closet as you open it. Oh, oh, I got one even better, I have always wanted to try, a water balloon filled with acid, taped to the bottom of the rack above yours, so it slowly drips acid on your dick as you sleep at night. Or or..."

Doc came to everyone's rescue as even he feared what she might come up with now that the kids' inflatable boxing gloves had been replaced with spike studded brass knuckles, and he blurted out, "My Ass Really Is Navy Equipment."

T froze mid evil scientist rant, turned slowly towards him, blinked rapidly a few times, and said, "Doc, while we respect your recreational choices and sexual fetishes, we do not need you yelling them out like some fat kid with Tourette's Syndrome."

Doc winced at what had just been implied but he knew that with T, it was better to take a hit to the pride than the family jewels or other body parts. So, he slowly repeated his train of thought out loud to try and save himself, and maybe these knuckleheads he had grown so fond of, "Remember when Fata punched the wall and was charged with destruction of government property for breaking his fist?"

"Yeah, it was a shame we never got to frag that pencil whipping little bitch before General Bice kicked him out of the Corps." Was all T could reply with when remembering an officer who took joy in seeing how many charges he could stack up on Marines for every NJP he could hand out, member of his unit or not.

"Well Fata's hand was considered government property owned by the US Navy, and everybody knows Marine is spelled M. A. R. I. N. E." He counted off the letters on his fingers. "The same six letters used to form an acronym for My Ass Really Is Navy Equipment." He counted off the same fingers again as he put them down, leaving his fists raised in the air, at her. To which T raised one eyebrow while looking at him. He saw the glance of hers, looked at his own fists, realized what he was doing, and then shoved them behind his back real quick like.

T slowly stalked her way up under his chin, then began bumping her chest up against his abdomen and using her hips to push him back into the wall, without saying a word. Once she pinned him so he had nowhere to run, she growled through gritted teeth, "You ever call my ass Navy equipment, and you will be the first one I send to respawn. Very, very slowly, you got that, squid-boy?"

"Yes, mmmhm." He almost fucked up, but doc was a little smarter than the rest of them and he caught himself then corrected it, "Yes, T."

She grinned, took a step back and patted him on the cheek, "Good Boy." Then she turned back to Terasaki. "Well Ski, doc bought you a few seconds there. Did you come up with a really good over 150 for me?" she asked with a devilish grin.

Terasaki had frozen in fear the first time, but doc had bought him a few seconds to recover, too bad he hadn't used that time to think of a list that he might be able to appease her with. "There are over 150 different ways that you are smarter than us." Was the only thing he could come up with.

"Name one," T said with a devious grin on her face, knowing she had just set the hook in his guts because he had just swallowed the bait hook, line and sinker.

"I can't on such short notice, because that would mean that I was at least somewhat as smart as you are." Terasaki said as he realized the hole he was digging for himself just struck an underground cavern deeper than the Grand Canyon, preboom.

"OK, that's believable, I will give you that one, but you better have one next time I see you." T said grinning from ear to ear. While Terasaki was breathing a sigh of relief, T heard a chuckle coming from behind her. "Go ahead and laugh it up furball," T said as she slowly turned around and stared at Bear. "You still owe me two guesses; I will take one now." The five-foot-four woman slowly prowled towards the six-foot three Navajo warrior like he was the one who had something to fear. Problem was, he knew he did, and even worse for him, she knew it too. He could only back away in abject terror.

"T, I don't know honest. I haven't really done anything except maybe laugh at something you didn't think was funny, but damn that's all I can think of. Yeah, that has to be it, I laughed at something Wayward said that you didn't like." Bear was pouring his heart out and singing like a canary because his brain was fried, and he just couldn't come up with anything.

Seeing another opening to make one of her favorite boys squirm a little, T quickly latched on to this piece of gold like Scrooge McDuck. "Oh, really. What did Wayward say that I didn't like

Bear?" Hearing his name repeated so many times so quickly, especially with her threatening tone, Wayward's brain tried to swim out of the sea of pain that he was currently in to try and save himself from this megalodon in such a small frame. All he could do was squeak a little in protest. "Oh, shut up squeaky toy, I ain't talking to you right now. Tell me Bear what did Wayward say that pissed me off?"

Bear held one hand out towards Wayward and said, "He just called you the m word." Bear felt relief knowing he was smart enough not to say it this time, but hadn't realized how badly she had him hooked, until she began reeling him in like a big fat trout on a line.

"Oh, so you thought it was funny when he called me ma'am?"

"No, of course not."

"So, why did you laugh about it?"

"I didn't, I swear."

"But you just said the only thing that you could have done to upset me is laugh at something Wayward said that pissed me off. Did you not?" T asked as she raised her right eyebrow, drilling home that she had him dead to rights and he just didn't know how yet.

"Yes, yes I did." Bear could only hang his head in shame as it just set in what he had done to himself.

"Then what was it Bear?" T asked again.

"I can't think straight right now T, you know how I get when you terrify me. Especially since Wayward and I got hit with those two flashbangs in less than five seconds." Bear said admitting the truth.

T reached up and patted him on the shoulder, "That's ok Bear, since you have been the least offensive today, I will give you time to think about it. As a matter of fact, I am feeling magnanimous. I will let you guess as much as you want about what he said that pissed me off. Oh, and remember, since I have access to Eve, I didn't even have to be present when he said it." She grinned from ear to ear as she began to walk off while motioning for her new trainee to follow her. Bear's heart dropped into his feet as he just realized how bad he had fucked not only himself, but Wayward too.

T rounded the corner of the Connex box next to them, then motioned for Tanya to be quiet and listen as they came to a stop just two feet from the corner. At first, they couldn't hear what was being said but the inevitable "DAMN!!!" soon followed, then she breathed in deeply through her nose slowly, and let a huge "Ahh," out of her mouth as what she was waiting for became louder.

"...into a fucking tattle tale."

"Fuck you limp dick. I wasn't the one who giggled like a little bitch."

"Dude, she just whacked him, that was low even for you."

"Shut up, dumbass. Oh, you are 150 times smarter than us." The last sentence was said with a high-pitched mocking feminine voice.

"True, but he's still right you know. That was a low blow, even for you."

"Fuck you, ya pillow-biting, giggling little bitch."

"You wish, I have standards."

"What?!? Come here, I'm going to kick your ass."

"Yeah right. The only way your fat ass can catch me is if I did bend over for you, and I already told you no, and no means no Bear."

There was a loud crash followed by grunts from four different voices as they were clearly throwing punches now. T just smiled with her eyes closed as she listened in, then said just loud enough for Tanya to hear, "Blood, chaos, and mayhem. My job here is done."

"Do you really hate them that much or something?" Tanya asked as they began to walk off.

T stopped dead in her tracks and turned to look Tanya in the eyes. "Those guys? Hell no, I love them more than my own biological brothers." T responded suddenly worried that she may have taught Tanya the wrong thing with that little example.

"Then, why," all Tanya could do is motion behind her to where she could see several other Marines running towards the fight, some with cash in hand to start a betting pool, and a few that looked like they might try to break it up.

"I love those guys with all my heart, almost as much as I did my late husband. However, they have all been working so much lately that they haven't been able to bond as much as they need to." T said.

"And that is supposed to fix it?"

"That? No, that's going to let them vent all of the stress and frustrations that have been building up on them due to the fact that they haven't been able to just hang out and have fun lately. Once the fight is over, they will be given mess duty together to work on team building and those three weeks of spraying each other with water and throwing someone else's half-eaten food at each other will fix the bonding issues." T said with ultimate certainty.

"Huh?" Tanya was totally confused now.

"Look men are just big lovable dumb animals. As soon as you figure out what buttons work on them, you can wind them up and point them in the right direction. Occasionally, you have to point them at each other to make sure they work out all of that testosterone. Unless you fancy trying to keep a reverse harem happy."

"No, no thank you, seeing how you just handled them, I can only imagine all the drama from trying to keep five or six alpha males from trying to assert dominance over who's my favorite."

Tanya said with certainty.

"Five or six, really? There were only four back there. Did you have someone, or some ones, special already picked out?" T asked with a grin and no small bit of humor in her voice.

"You got to be kidding me, you assigned them five perfectly good trainees, are demonstrating on how to train your guys in front of their trainees, and even demonstrate to the trainees the consequences of not making you happy. I know that they know, without a doubt in their minds, that you are training me to do the same thing to them. I would be stupid not to take advantage of such a premade setup as that." Tanya said grinning from ear to ear.

"I knew I liked you." T said grinning from ear to ear as well.

Just then a loud, "Yee-haw! Get 'em boys! Hold 'em still Wayward I'm gonna bust this box over his head WWE style," came from where they had just left.

T turned back in the direction they had just come from with a look of terror on her face as she heard a plea come from a chorus of voices, "No, please not Mr. Bubbles. He's our friend."

"Argh, let go of me. Did you just bite me on the ankle? Seriously? Boy I'm gonna hog tie you and make you squeal like a pig for that.... Argh, get 'em off me! Help me Wayward, its four on one, and one of 'em is a biter!"

"Oh, shit Cowboy just got back from T.A.D. We gotta run, the MP's will be here quicker than I thought." With that the two women began running for the exit, laughing as they rounded the corner in the hallway at full speed, leaving the hanger bay behind them.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Shake Down Cruise

As they strode towards the bridge's ready room to observe the actions that would be taking place on the Earth's surface the Ambassadors of twelve races was privy to part of a conversation.

"Why is it called a shake down cruise?" One recruit was overhead asking a veteran Marine.

"Basically, the Navy lifts the big pig up by its horns, kicks the earthquake simulator up to 11, and sees what falls off so they can determine what needs to be fixed and what we can do without when we do it for real." The veteran replied.

"But pigs don't have horns." The recruit replied, just totally confused.

"And now you know why the Navy needs a shakedown cruise, to make sure they are getting what they paid for." The veteran laughed as he totally confused the recruit and it showed on her face.

Eve wasn't sure she liked that explanation, but it was so similar to all of the other examples she had heard the Marines tell their recruits. The Navy personnel were kinder the further up the ranks you went, but even they did not paint a positive picture of what they expected the results to be.

Several weeks had passed as the new recruits adjusted to their new bodies and the crews were all trained to mimic their routines or head over to their designated areas depending on what song their crew leaders played from a handheld player. This enabled them to memorize what songs were being played and what they should be doing during the exercise. After 72 hours of intensive ship-wide drills, they were ordered to take a day off and allow the crews and recruits to decompress, before the deployment and live fire exercises would be conducted.

On the fifth day after the widespread dissemination of the playlist the Ambassadors had finally arrived, and the show could begin. Once the ambassadors were safely in the ready room, drinks had been served, the monitors on all the walls turned on to various cameras, and Eve had gotten assurances from all of them that they were ready to proceed she triggered a simulated invasion of Earth. Raw recruits freaked out, and experienced crews and Marines began sprinting for their combat stations dragging recruits with them as the song 'Shakedown' by Bob Seager began blaring at max volume through the 1MC's speakers, every speaker attached to any device built into the Valhalla, every handheld device connected to the Valhalla's internal network, and every console in every piece of equipment that would be used in 'OPERATION DROP TEST'. Ten seconds of dead air was allowed before the next song came on, giving the team leads a chance to make sure no one was lost or going to get hurt during the next part.

Valhalla began opening up her hanger bay doors for the first time since they had been installed to the slow beat of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Mama, I'm Coming Home.' The crews were conducting a field test of the tactics that would be used in combat and they were using this one opportunity to show the new guys what they will be expected to do when it became their turn. Fighters were directed with light beacons towards the doors, and the huge drop ships were following the lights on the hanger floor towards the doors. Everything was being conducted slowly since this was the

first time and they needed to work out the timings. The time to turn up the heat and speed would come when they hit the atmosphere and had plenty of room to maneuver.

Once the drop ships had cleared the bay, the fighters were called back from their testing of the maneuverability and feel for them by the Valhalla playing AG's rendition of 'Sympathy for the Devil.' The ships lined up according to their mission assignments and began slowly approaching the Earth from Valhalla's position in a geo synchronous orbit a thousand miles above the surface. Once that three minute formation time was up, The Valhalla's next order came across the airwaves as Karen O's rendition of the 'Immigrant Song' began. The pilots all slowly ramped up their throttles with the steady beat of the drums in the song. By the time the band announced 'We come from the land of ice and snow' every ship was at full throttle and the fighter jets were beginning to line up for atmospheric entry.

The two drop ships, Geri and Freki, started off with a slow spin along their z axis, to allow the crew and cargo to settle in while building up speed to the desired spin for the operations. There was four rows of twenty-five heavy mechs with their feet strapped to the round walls to hold them in place. Just above their heads two hover tanks were suspended in place by cables, with their barrels hanging just a few inches in front of the full length of the heavies' chests. Suspended just above each hover tank, two troop transport ships were suspended face down with their loading ramps facing the center beam and walkways so troops could jump into the transports from the walkway using their jump jets.

From the walkway to the transports there were stacks of the orbital bombardment payloads, massive devices of death and destruction that would be flown like UAV drones by drone pilots when necessary or live pilots when in contested airspace. Each one would hold enough of the liquid ingredients to mimic one of the first nuclear warheads, yet they could still sustain

controlled descent. For maximum safety the liquid payload would be mixed in flight to form liquid plasma upon detonation. These things were basically a plasma fueled MOAB with wings and a pilot that would kamikaze them into the chosen target. The heavy commander could use laser designation to choose where the MOABs would be desired if necessary; but otherwise, they would be on target of opportunity orders for the MOAB pilots. During this practice run they would be remotely operated to prevent them from having to respawn the pilots unnecessarily but would not be dropped until requested. Essentially, once the troops were on the ground the drop ships would function as orbital B-52s carrying sixteen-hundred AI guided MOABs each.

Most of the drop ship cargo chiefs had already notated that they need to have the transports and hover tanks suspended in a different manner because in the early stages of the deployment the artificial gravity had to be disabled to prevent them from all hanging down and banging into other equipment, especially the ones that would be above the MOABs when docked. During the initial stages of the buildup of the spin speed, inertia and the freedom of movement associated with the cables allowed equipment to beat and bang around. This had been somewhat anticipated which is why the MOABs would not be filled until the desired speed had been reached. Once this occurred it would require the flight crews to disconnect fueling lines, turn on the MOABs, and then remove the protective padding and retention straps before they could be fired for loaded deployment. In a pinch the crews could cut the straps and the MOABs could be fired in a matter of seconds as kinetic strikes without any plasma fuel.

As the crews inside the drop ships were strapping themselves into their mechs, and the infantry were locking their powered drops suits into the hooks of the troop transports, the Valhalla changed the beat again and a wind quartet started a long whistle, a drum thumped a few times, then the full orchestra began the slow intro to the Epic Trailer version of Hidden Citizen's

rendition of 'Ride of the Valkyries.' Team leaders that had been checking on raw recruits stopped what they were doing and jumped to their own assigned places to start locking themselves in, pilots and crews reached up and pulled their straps tight one more time. By time the music was in full swing the drop ships were at max spin and the fighters dove into the top of the atmosphere.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Clearing the Skies

As the general in charge of the fighter craft came through the burn off associated with atmospheric entry, and the music returned to his headset, he keyed up his mic and sent a message to the Valhalla. "Odin, Odin, this is Muninn. Over"

"Send it," was the reply that came a few seconds later, meaning one of the drop ships above the atmospheric layer was retransmitting his traffic to the Valhalla.

"Copy, multiple threats detected. Going hot."

"Copy going hot. Waiting for Clear." The fighter squadrons broke up into pairs and started attacking everything big enough to show up on their radar, occasionally making strafing runs against the canopy of the nearby forest to try and draw out any flyers that might be hiding in there. Some of the flying beasts, both feathered and fur skinned alike, were larger than the fighters that were hounding them from different directions at the same time with plasma rounds. Lasers would not be effective inside an atmosphere on a target flying at near sonic speeds in super chilled air the extreme altitudes that the fights were being waged. These creatures had gotten so used to easily killing the lone recon scouts that they could not handle as swarm of thousands of pissed off humans that could not only shoot back, but always teamed up in groups of two to four fighters per large target to do so. As the Orchestral music ended the song coming

over the 'airwaves' changed to Metallica's 'Seek and Destroy', signaling the drop ships to hold off until cleared.

The smaller raptors and other birds of prey that were only the size of an F-150 were drawn to the fight in hopes of getting an easy meal, only to become dog fighting practice targets for pilots that needed to work on their individual targeting skills. The more experienced pilots that were letting their trainees handle the third or fourth seat against the larger targets would break off and chase down anything smaller than a pickup to see if they could bullseye a womp rat in their T-16 tactical fighters. Once all of the aircraft that hadn't lost their rookies, err partners, had teamed back up in formation and the lone veterans that were offshore doing a little fishing with 5,000 pounds of depth charge bait, Muninn lead the squadron around the key clearing the beaches with an old WW2 style carpet cleaning method before giving the 'all clear', "Einherjar, Einherjar, this Muninn over."

"Go for Freki." Calm a calm cool voice like he was calling out the score at a croquet match.

"Sunny skies, Muninn on standby. Over."

"Roger, sunny skies." Came the calm voice once again, before he sent out a different transmission. "Valhalla, do you copy the weather?"

"This is Valhalla, sounds like fine weather for a beach party at location Alpha. Over." Came the voice of Odin.

"Permission confirmed. Muninn, be advised, beach party in 2 mikes." The Einherjar, Geri and Freki, made their intentions clear as a rapid electric guitar and a drum set that was being beat on by some it owed money to came across the radio as Frantic Amber's 'Scorched Earth' pounding at the ears of the humans as the explosive bolts on the outside of the drop ship Freki began to

fire. These bolts were holding fifty-tons of titanium cored, steel alloy pyramids in place as external reactive armor and kinetic LZ paving stones. They were stacked two columns tall and covering the drop ships from bow to stern a full three hundred and sixty degrees around the ship. As the king pin bolts were released by the gunnery AIs, with the insane centrifugal forces caused by the highspeed spin they shot away from the ships towards the key below them.

As the entered into the atmosphere aerodynamics forced the pyramids to point one tip towards the ground and the four sides around it began to superheat. While they were being forced to slow down purely due to the resistance of the super thick atmosphere, the were still traveling at three or four times the speed of sound when they dropped below cloud level. Avian species of all sizes were sucked into their vortexes and burned to death or had their internal organs vaporized at the molecular level by the sonic boom of the pyramids passing. The concussion wave alone was enough to kill multiple creatures that were large enough not to get sucked in by the vortexes vacuum. Some through having their internal organs damaged beyond life sustainability by the shockwaves, others through the disorientation of having their eardrums and other sensitive organs necessary for flight completely devastated so instantaneously and unexpectedly above an ocean of really big predators who had been churned into a frenzy with the chumming of the waters from the earlier fighting and bombing activities.

The devastation was so complete that when the two-and-a-half-minute bombardment stopped what hadn't been eroded away by concussive winds into the ocean, was now a solid steel parking lot. Aerodynamics had forced the pyramids to fall point first leaving the flat bottoms pointed upwards, and the heat from breaking through the atmospheric barrier caused the four downward facing sides to heat up enough that they were flash welded on impact to anything they touched. It was by no means smooth, but it was more solid than the sink hole filed stone below it.

"Muninn, Muninn, this Einherjar. Requesting eyes on LZ Alpha." Came the cool patient voice of the Drop Ship Freki's commander.

"Roger Einherjar. One Mike." Muninn replied.

A minute later Muninn called in his response, "The beach blanket is laid down and the locals are throwing a party." Letting the commanders of the heavy mechs, hover tanks, and troop transports know to expect large creatures from the land and sea to be present upon arrival.

"Roger Muninn, dropping the crayon eaters off with bells on. Einherjar, out." That let the infantry commanders know to expect to be dropped behind the lines or be ready to get their feet wet depending on the threats.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Express Ride to Hell

The radio changed its tune, and a deep church bell began to steadily toll throughout the transport ships with the beginning of 'Hell's Bells' by AC/DC started up. "You heard the man, party up top and down below. Prep for wet, and hope for dry. Seal your suits up and don't cry to me about the chili we all ate at the mess halls last night. If you shit yourself, stay sealed up and don't try to share it with the rest of us. Afterall, that shit's flammable, at that right Fata?" Sgt. Major barked out on the dedicated battalion lines. Reminding everyone of an innocent 17-year-old's misguided events on his very first deployment where he tested the urban legend that farts were flammable and it had the veteran's chuckling.

He had lived with jokes for 80 years before the big boom. Melt your nylon shorts to your ankles one time with a lit fart and your friends will never let you forget about it. It was now over 150 Millenia later, couldn't they just let some things die? So, when he responded to the Sgt. Major

everyone knew he was good, and the wide-eyed recruits that were just as green as he was when it happened got a little chuckle, as Fata yelled out, "Just practicing advanced close combat techniques for when I run out of ammo Sgt. Major."

When the guitar started to play the sound of explosive bolts being fired rattled through the frame of the landing craft like an avalanche of popcorn and Sgt. Major 'Big Dog' Harvey strapped himself in for the first ever orbital drop of the most ferocious force in the galaxy, pissed off infantry Marines with unlimited respawns.

The transports were slammed into the MOABs when the heavies had to hit max down thrust to break out of the bays as the deck plating under their feet didn't move, either due to too thick of a coating of paint, misfired explosive bolts or whatever. The hover tanks didn't fare much better as they were launched backwards into the transports and then sideways out from the center of the heavies' jet wash, where they slammed into more transports and in a few instances the hover tanks dangling next to them. The hover tanks pilots had to go full throttle to pull tight against their ropes so they would line up with the narrow hole they were supposed to fit through at the same time as their sister tank. This slammed the already roughed up transports into the MOABs again, and this time some of the padding was torn away and would need to be inspected for leaks before they could be fueled for the drops, any too damaged to fuel would be jettisoned empty to serve as a guided 5,000-pound hypersonic kinetic shot. This would make them less effective, but the infantry Marines that were quickly learning what it felt like to be a piece of candy inside a pinata really didn't care at that moment.

The transport pilots also went full throttle at the back of the hover tanks to try and ride their turbulent wakes as best as possible to try and be ready for their turn to be set free from this hellish start. The chop was so bad even the seasoned, veteran helicopter crews said they had a

fresh perspective of how the weight inside of a shake weight feels. After the hover tank cables were blown they shot out of the bays and the transports were able to pull their cables tight for the first time since this rollercoaster ride started and they were eager to get off this boat. Fortunately, for everyone involved it was deemed best that the Geri did not deploy her troops this time to reduce the maintenance and refit time between these trial drops, they did have seven more continents to clear after all and none of them were connected anymore.

When the boom, ping, whump, of the cable being severed rang through the transports hull they shot out of it like a pumpkin in an air cannon contest. Only a few banged into each other or the side of the Freki as they left the bay, there was no major damage to equipment or superstructure. However, several Marines were sent for respawn when their necks snapped from the rough ride, or a piece of loose gear hit them with enough force to shatter face plates and penetrate the soft grapes they were designed to protect.

During the trip through the atmospheric barrier, it was decided that the heavies would land in the water and fight the creatures there since they were watertight, and large enough to take on the really big monsters of the deep, should any be attracted by the chum in the water from the previous maneuvers. The hover tanks would land on the steel beach and provide support in a three-sixty to either support the infantry or the heavies as needed. The infantry, however, were supposed to land in the clearing around the steel beach.

Since they were late being sent out due to the abuse they had suffered while still tethered to the mother ship, the infantry was dropped a half mile into the deep bush, and 200 feet above the canopy, at speed because a large flock of drone killers had been spotted, and they were inbound. To say the infantry were feeling the title of the song that came over the transports speakers to signify an LZ overshoot, was putting it mildly. Megadeth's electric guitar started a scaled

countdown to 'Angry Again' and the belly of the transports dropped open with the drums first heavy beats. Almost as quickly, the Marines dropped out of them as the ships were rapidly transitioning from a dive into a hard climb. This meant the pilots were actually dive bombing the treetops with pissed off jarheads. One pilot could only send a quick prayer of "May Odin help them," to which the copilot asked, "Who, the Marines or the creatures they're about to take all of that anger out on?" The pilot's response was short and sweet, "Both." They found out in the after action that the co-pilot had transmitted that conversation and the following laughter to the entire fleet by having his finger on the wrong button.

It wouldn't be that bad if they had been dropping on top of a normal forested mountain range on pre-boom Earth, but the apocalypse had provided all the nitrogen rich soil and CO2 a growing tree needs, and these things made the ancient sequoias look small. The Marines would be dropping through tree limbs the size of a small sedan for the first three hundred feet, and then they would be underneath the big trees' limbs. Another one hundred feet down they would find the 200-foot-tall tops of the next generation of the mighty trees, pointy end first.

The Sgt. Major began his chant over the internal channel as soon as his head cleared the floor of his transport, "BURN! CUT! BURN! CUT!" and it was taken up by every Marine falling through the sky that was still conscious enough to do so. With every "BURN" they hit their jump boosters to slow down their decent, but they had limited fuel for them, so the burns were kept to two second blasts, then they would free fall for two seconds while using gatling lasers, plasma rifles, or railgun inducted shotguns firing razor-sharp flechette rounds to cut through the limbs that they could or at least remove some of the foliage so they could brace for the big limbs they were about to hit. A lucky few were able to land on the biggest limbs and took up overwatch positions for their brothers who were on a mission to be the first to hit the ground.

The answer to the pilot's question came when the Sgt. Major changed the tune to inform the Marines of his desire to consolidate on the ground and requested the hover tanks to provide an opening for them by firing full battery salvoes at ground level through the trees, and both men were now praying there would be a planet left before these guys made it that extra half mile back to the beach. The electronic warbling of a windup musical box and some maniacal laughter got everyone's attention before Ivan Moody's deep voice started Five Finger Death Punch's 'Welcome to The Circus'.

This tactic was meant for the troops to be on the ground so they could drop to their bellies and cover up. That command was actually given on accident as the Sgt. Major was bitching about what he was going to do to a bunch of unprofessional clowns when this was all over. That triggered his connection to the gunnery assistant AI to request the song and the Hover Tank batteries to open up, who gladly did so to try and save their brothers, who they thought were pinned to the ground on their bellies, covering their heads and thinking a 1,250-pound projectile to the face would be a preferable way to go out versus what they were currently facing.

Trusting their Sgt. Major knew what he was doing, the Marines grabbed for branches, wrapped themselves around the next one they slammed into, or used their next burn cycle to slam themselves into a tree trunk and pray they could sink something into it enough to slow down their descent. When the song came to an end the Sgt. Major announced his intention to push for the LZ by yelling into his mic, "Here comes an army of me you fuckers," and Anti-Clone's 'Army of Me' began thumping through the infantry headsets. The infantry dove for the ground where they eagerly fought mega sized fauna, flora and insects that survived the tank salvos and made the mistake of thinking that the Marines were delicious looking. The Marines' misfortune put them landing near a large kill that was currently swarming with Saint Bernard sized ants, the

ants would argue that misfortune went both ways. The ambassadors watching the ferocity and glee in which the Marines vented their rage and frustrations out on the beasts that were fighting for their lives against an invading and unrelenting force disturbed them to their core. It was agreed amongst them that video should never be shown outside of secret briefings to the leadership of their races and only if they could be convinced they really did not want to see it. Many of them would have nightmares for months from having watched the beasts tear the Marines apart with teeth and claws, as the Marines fought back with projectiles, flames, blades, and fists where necessary.

Getting the command for the heavies to open up, Fenrir ordered the heavy mechs not currently firing on an underwater threat to fire salvos over the top of the infantry Marines, not realizing he was now pouring even bigger rounds into the stragglers that had provided overwatch for their buddies and sheared off trees the size of a small family home to land on top of the ground fighters. The closer they got to the beach the more they had to worry about incoming fire from the Hover Tanks' anti-air gauss cannons that were being used to suppress the animals that were being pushed forward by the infantry. After the third time a gauss cannon's 20mm shells stitched a new pattern of bark removal from a tree right next to him, he signaled the Hover Tanks to stop firing and let the ground pounders handle the rest by yelling, "Stop trying to bust my balls."

The electric guitar riff from the little-known German band Accept came through the speakers, and the infantry began pushing while roaring out the lyrics to 'Balls to the Wall' as they knew this hell was almost over. The Hover Tanks' guns fell silent, and the infantry began pushing through the last hundred yards of infested bush, the critters trapped in there had long since passed fight or flight because they knew it was death in either direction and that made the Marines fight for every inch as the critters changed to ambush tactics while hiding in fear. Entire

companies of Marines had gone to Valhalla for a respawn and less than ten percent of the bloody bastards came out, madder than hell and looking to take it out on anything and anyone they could. So, when they began to run out of ammo or fuel for their weapons, they drew their plasma swords or short close-in vibro-blades, and dove on top of whatever creature happened to be unfortunate enough to get trapped between them and their promised beach party.

As the Sgt. Major stood at the edge of the steel plating, counting his men and patting them on the back as they passed by him, he was dismayed at how few there were. He refused to step on to the plate and signify the surrender of those that had been trapped or disabled somewhere in the bush, but he couldn't risk anymore men to try and go back to get them. In another life he would have done just that, but in the age of respawns, it would be a mercy to send them back to Valhalla with a bang. So, after the last Marine limped past him, he stepped onto the plating, and signaled Fenrir who opened a channel to the circling transports, "Fenrir to Munin. We need a little breathing room from above if you don't mind."

"This is Einherjar, roger that, 30 out." Jason Stallworth's deep vocals joined his speed metal guitar and fast drum beats for his rendition of "Send Me an Angel." 30 seconds later the transports began hovering in front of the hover tanks and troops raining autocannon and gauss death down on anything close to the beachhead while using missile and chaff salvos to drop trees as far back as they could. When the trees stopped falling and the ships flew off from a lack of ammo, there was now a 2,200-yard gap between the edge of the forest and where Big Dog had once stood counting his survivors. As the first transports to touch down on the planet Earth directly from the Valhalla the music became a dramatic base thumping club mix by Armin Van Burin.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Mobs Rule

Big Dog met T just a few yards from the drop ramp, pointed at the side of his helmet and asked, "did you chose this fucking song?" T which T bounced up and down while twirling around with her hands above her head and yelled, "Yes I did, and you're welcome."

Big Dog bit his tongue because he knew this one's sanity was on a string as short and delicate as the explosives she had been known to booby trap the everyday belongings of people that had pissed her off. How do you bobby trap someone's toilet paper, on the spindle, next to the toilet, she obviously knew because rumor had it one of her former officers suffered a sewer gas explosion that originated from the toilet paper spindle. "Fine, if you're going to fuck up the mood, you can clear those woods back another two hundred yards so we can breathe a little easier before the talent shows begin."

T was absolutely excited she had worked really hard on her special props for the show and wanted to demonstrate her 'skills in all things lethal and explody' as she was fond of saying. "Goody, can I go first to kick this off? It will let me get the engineers off my back about getting the wall setup."

Big Dog had enough, but he wasn't dumb enough the piss off T the Terrifying when she was clearly in such a happy mood for once.

As she went half bouncing, half skipping over to her platoon of boobies and their traps, Big

Dog turned to Wayward and said, "You're the last surviving team to have the skills command

needs to shoot some damn promo and recruiting videos. I know it is a bad idea, and I would

rather have anyone but you in control of making those videos, but Fenrir wants to see what you

can come up with after your performance with waking the civilians up. I'm holding you

personally responsible for this. If something goes wrong you better fix it before I get my hands on you. Now go find some entertainment for your little circus of freaks to play with."

Wayward was so happy to hear that he wasn't in trouble for once that he was grinning as he responded with "Aye, aye Sgt. Major." Turned and started to sprint in T's direction to let her know he would be herding angry beasties at her and in what direction they would be coming from. As T and her EOD crews were setting up several crates the size of shipping containers Wayward approached her.

Wayward noticed her dancing and only remembered her doing that when she was extremely happy or focused. So, he opted for defusing any anger at being interrupted with the one compliment about her looks that did not piss her off right away and could even be used to mellow her anger so effectively the guys had taken an oath to each other to use it as rarely as possible. "Watch you got cooking, Miss Fierce and Deadly Looking?"

T froze, one because of the interruption in setting up her favorite kind of toys, things that go boom. Second, she had custom designed them just for this event, and wanted the setup to be perfect. Third, she had a limited amount of time to do this before the next wave of monsters would find their way here, and she wanted the maximum kill and thrill factor. Then there was the nagging CBs who wanted to start building a wall where she wanted to set up her babies. She slowly lowered arms, took an exaggerated chest heaving slow breath all the way in through her nose, then just as slowly turned to face Wayward as she said, "The glorious smell of cordite mixed with the ever so delicious smell of the blood of our enemies is so potent and erotic right now, I really can't tell if that is fear I smell on you. Have you forgotten that you were supposed to be training a rookie, or are you about to try and ruin my mood you unfortunate little cherub?"

"No. No I haven't forgotten, matter of fact I managed to get him through all of that alive."

Wayward said as he waved his hand towards the still smoking forest with a grin on his face like it was something she should be impressed with.

T glanced at the forest, then back at him before bobbing her head once towards the forest and then back to the center again. "I heard that was supposed to be impressive, but it wasn't bad enough for them to let me come down and play until it was over, so I will take your word on it." She said just to get his reaction out of it.

"Eh, their anti-Murphy's Law Planning needs a lot of work, but a few of us survived the trial run. You know like being given a rolled-up newspaper to fight an ant infestation. Only I think one of the rhino sized things I killed was some kind of fire-ant." He then shivered, memories of lying next to a fire amount on more than one occasion as instructors tried to find him during various training exercises. It was like they knew where the ant beds were and that was the only places they didn't look just to prolong his agony.

T saw him shiver and remembered how bad he hated those things. He once mixed up a concoction of household ingredients that ate the blue paint off the outside of the metal coffee can he mixed it up in just for a small bed of them. "That bad huh? OK, I am sorry brother. I understand why some of these guys are giving me the stink eye now. Go ahead and spit it out, I know you're going to kill my happy mood somehow or another. Out of respect for keeping your word and not letting Bubbles get popped through all of that, I will let you live. This time." T said with a grin on her face to take some of the sting out of this being only a temporary reprieve.

"Uh, thanks, but yeah. I need you to go ahead and move your toys out of the way now or go ahead and fire them off before I can go out there to draw anything in that you need for a good show."

"If I fire them off now it will waste the best opening act, there is nothing out there to kill. So, you can either wait until we start filming the promos or go get me something to blow up."

Wayward slowly shook his head and then pointed upwards. "I humbly apologize, oh goddess of devastation and destruction, but the orders come from on high. The wall must be set up before the show and the exercises completed before the end of the light of day."

"Fine, go get me something to kill."

"T look around you. These guys barely survived getting here. They are in no condition to stand on the line without a wall between them and the shit that tried to keep them from getting here. Thank you for keeping the other four boys with you as a protection detail. It took all six of us together to get Bubbles here, and I don't think he is handling it very well right now. Either move your toys or open up the forest so we can move the walls."

"Damn you! Why'd you have to hurt a girl's feelings like that? You tell that cranky old bastard I will open up his forest when it's my turn, and I will move my babies so they can start on the damn wall. Now, I'm busy, get the hell out of my face while I can still keep my promise not to hurt you. Just... go get me something to kill." Wayward heard the waiver in voice and knew he did not want to be around when she turned that hurt into anger to fuel the fires she needed to keep pushing. So, he did the smartest thing any man could do when they knew she was about to get mad, he turned and started to run away as fast as he could. He did hear her voice ring out one more time though, "And it better be really big, or a hell of a lot of them."

"Bubbles!" Came Wayward's voice as he jogged up to the assembly point where his team was setting up just behind one of the landing pad pyramids that hadn't sunk as deep as the others. It made for an awesome windbreak from the gusts caused by hover thrusts or blasts from the take off and landings as troop and cargo transports steadily arrived on the beach head. The heavy mechs were still standing in the water and would occasionally spin together and blast something under the water that was big enough to set off the sonar alarms.

"Here boss!" Came the reply from the edge of the water on the sandy portion of the beach.

Wayward looked to see why the proper answer wasn't 'coming boss.' He was a little dumbfounded at what he saw, the trainees were rolling around in the sand at the edge of the water, then he looked at his friends with one eyebrow raised. "Sugar cookies? Really? You guys know the armor is sealed air-tight and nothing will get in there."

"They don't know that. We told them part of this dog and pony show was to make sure all six sets of armor are truly sealed, and they were chosen to test their models out. So don't ruin our fun." Mac said.

"Yeah, we've all got money on how long the others will last after your guy quits, he has to be awfully tired after being dragged on that little nature walk earlier." Doc said grinning at him.

"Sorry guys, my guy has homework to do and can't play 'I'm no better than y'all' right now."

"Good we can start the clock since you're going to bitch out for him." Ski said.

"I promised T to teach him to be sneaky remember?" Wayward said in his defense.

"Likely excuse. You just don't want to admit your guy can't handle it and will drop out once he gets a little sand in his crack like his mentor used to." Cowboy said with a grin on his face.

"Hey, I remember dragging your sorry ass through the sand and mud a few times when you were too tired to go on." Wayward reminded his friend.

"Sure Wayward, go ahead and take your guy. We all know it's just an excuse." Doc said.

"Fine, but I can't go sneaking around in the woods without him. You guys just won't have anything but trees to demonstrate your skills on later for your big solo debuts. Besides, I'd rather be sitting here relaxing and chilling out watching the kiddies playing in the sand with you guys." Wayward retorted with a grin on his face.

"Aw, one little bug tries to bite your leg off and now you're too scared to go into the woods alone?" Bear said, he was the one that had killed the fire-ant that had ambushed Wayward earlier.

"No, fuck you, that thing was huge." Everyone busted out laughing knowing how he felt about them. "But thank you for getting it off of me." Wayward said with a nod of his head towards

Bear.

"Don't worry brother. It's no biggie." Bear replied.

"That's what she said." After Bear gave him the middle finger in reply Cowboy bawled out a few yuck-yucks over that one.

"No seriously guys. He's going with me for his part of the training and the On Highs want to film everything so we can use it as recruiting footage. After the fuckup that happened during the drop, the only thing they don't have good footage for is the infantry teams. It would seem all that foliage kept getting in the way of the drones from filming us during the initial landing and now they want us to put on a show to demonstrate our talents." Wayward said. Then yelled over his

shoulder, "You, bag nasties, get over here." There came a chorus of "Aye Ayes" and then he looked back to his friends as the trainees began sprinting up to them.

"Oh, it's such a shame all that hardcore footage of so many guys getting killed by command's epic fuckup wasn't useful to get people to volunteer to die for honor and glory." Mac said with disdain dripping off of his words.

"Actually, I am happy you volunteered to sit this one out. I don't think they would be happy to see a video of you sitting their repairing radios as motivational." Mac just flipped him off. "Um Doc..." Wayward said turning to his friend.

"What, you mean I don't get to disembowel one of you guys in front of the camera so I can heroically put your guts back in as I fight off overgrown bugs?" Doc replied with a huge grin on his face.

"Uh, yeah. I would rather respawn, but no. Showing somebody needing your technical skills means somebody might not want her baby getting a booboo that a band aid won't cover."

Doc whipped out a chest sterilization pad designed to cover someone's chest from the winds caused by med-evac choppers and said, "That all depends on the size of the band-aid you use."

Wayward just raised one eyebrow and continued on, "Anyways. Ski, there's several races that have natural wings. You get to put on a scout suit and put it through its CQB paces." T came walking up at this point and stood back wondering what Wayward was planning. "They want that thing to show off how agile it is low to the ground, and they want you to use auto-pistols and a sword. It's something to do with their ideals of an ancient warrior."

"Cowboy, heavy weapons and brute force. There's several races that are massive and used to value raw physical strength, especially the Magnath."

"The who now?" Cowboy asked just as perplexed as the rest.

"Think of them as a cross between a Balrog from Lord of the Rings and Thing from Fantastic Four." Wayward said shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, sounds like Bear." Cowboy got a few chuckles as Bear hurled a rock at him.

"Yeah, but they want heavy gunners from them, so I need you and the Titty Twister to work her magic, and they want to see that new creation you've been working on." Wayward said trying to figure out what possessed the man to name his plasma fueled gatling gun Titty Twister. What was even more worrying, Cowboy had been attempting to 'perfect' his new toy before letting anyone see it. Several officers had seen the cleanly cut steel that had been training dummies as Cowboy left a martial arts room. He was to either show it off today, or face charges for destruction of government property, but Wayward didn't want to say that. Cowboy just grinned from ear to ear with a twinkle in his eyes and nodded once.

Bear stood up grinning, "And me?"

Wayward looked profoundly sad, as he had to break his friend's heart. "We're running out of daylight buddy. I would love nothing more than to let you go at a wave of mobs with a shotgun and a Warhammer, but I was told these two are mandatory, which means I might have to cut T's show out if they don't get that wall up in time."

"Oh hell no." Everyone spun to see T standing there with her arms folded across her chest plate. "I will get it setup in time don't worry about that. Bear, I will even show these two fools up on

close combat with a shotgun and my fists just for you, since you won't get a chance to do so."

"Good, good. Now I need to grab Bubbles and go find y'all something to kill." Wayward said clapping his hands once before rubbing his palms together.

"Wait, wait, what's the bet?" Mac asked before Wayward could leave. Then singled him out, "and you don't count, you could rig the bet based on the pulls."

"Dammit, fine." Wayward said as he scuffed the sand with the toe of his boot. "What if we bet on the rookie's participation scores?" he then offered.

"I thought we had to be the ones showing off?" Ski asked more than trying to remind him.

"Yeah, but how about letting them see that any half-wit can do this, that should impress the bosses. Plus, we can bet on the percentage of kills from the rookies during the demonstration."

T just grinned, "Fine, sometimes you got to let the kids feel the boom, so they can learn."

"Just make sure to clear the two hundred yards ok?"

"Whatever, I'm going big, so you better get me enough that it looks impressive when they die screaming running from the woods on fire." She replied.

"OK, I promise but I am on a timeline remember. The sooner that wall is up the sooner I can go begin the pulls."

T turned around and started to head back to where heavies were moving her toys out of the way, and the C.B.s were beginning to set up the walls. She called back over her shoulder, "Then you better get your ass moving, they're getting started on it now." Then seeing a heavy mech sliding one of her babies across the uneven metal decking, she pulled a large wrench out of one of the cargo bags on her side and hurled it at the heavy. When it clanged off of the faceplate before

falling on top of the converted Connex box, he stopped and looked down at her as she began to yell at him. "Hey butter bar, you know you're the kind that gives the rest of you underwater basket weaving degree winners a bad name. If you thump that big box pushing it around on the ground, it might go off, and then you're going to eat a face full of Hell-Fire missiles as it does." The five-story tall heavy mech actually turned to look at the box before turning back to her, the confusion and concern of the pilot was obvious even without being able to see his face.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Pay Back's a Bitch

Since T was busy treating newly commissioned officers in very expensive equipment like toddlers at a preschool for the mentally challenged, Wayward asked Tanya for a remote detonator with a ten-mile range. He then informed the Sgt Major and Fenrir of his plans for the demonstration slash recruitment videos, and advised Fenrir that he would have the second-best seat in the house so Wayward needed to him play the part of hype-man, based on the music Wayward would have the Valhalla play before rushing the mobs at the team.

Fenrir was ok with that, and the Sgt. Major acquiesced to the General's approval after stating, for a third time, that having the team standing in front of the walls so far out was a bad idea. He couldn't argue that they had to be since there was no way to know what mobs would be driven from the forest at any time. Wayward then grabbed Bubbles and they headed off towards the woods as if going for a jog in the park. He froze just shy of the tree line when he picked up the whirring of a camera drone that was following close behind them. Once he had turned around a few times and noticed where the noise was coming from he drew his sidearm and shot it. When he heard more drop altitude and someone at the LZ yell, "What the fuck?" He and Bubbles drew their sniper rifles and shot two more out of the sky. That's when he heard the response he was

looking for from the Sgt. Major, "Then stop trying to follow his dumbass, surely you're smart enough to figure out when someone says no, it means no." Breaking out one of the few rap songs Wayward new the feel of and absolutely loved, Beyonce started singing her song 'Cuff It' as they sprinted into the woods.

Four hours later, Wayward and Bubbles were at a dead sprint dropping beacons in a complex pattern as they drew more beasties towards the beach with, "Wayward to Odin, We're on the run." AWOL Nation's 'Run (Kill the Noise Remix)' began steadily thumping to their breathing. The shift back to heavy metal song put the whole LZ on alert. Breathing as deeply as he could so he could be understood over the radio without slowing down Wayward transmitted. "Bait One, Bait Two to Fenrir over."

"Fenrir, send it."

"2 mikes to get a little closer."

"Copy two mikes out." Two minutes later Wayward and Bubbles hit their jump jets as they came sprinting out of the forest, this allowed them to do a back flip into the sky over the tops of the 100-foot-tall trees still standing near the beach. They rotated over to their bellies and kept flying back into the forest.

Fenrir turned on his loudspeakers so everyone around him could hear his radio transmission to the crowds watching the live feed on the Valhalla, and the media AIs began recording their footage from reconnaissance drones and camera stands. "Ladies and gentlemen of all ages. We are proud to introduce Smoker and his trainee Spark as they demonstrate the capabilities of the infantry suit that will be used as a design for the new scout mechs. I hear there's a herd of

beasties headed this way and we're going to get an ariel view as: Fenrir to Odin, let them get a little CLOSER!!!"

The two Marines in the small group in front of walls shot up into the air when Fenrir called out their names as 'Closer' By Nine Inch Nails began to play, they were already flying straight out to the sides of the beach before turning to the center facing along the edge of the tree line ten feet above the ground. A wave of creatures of all sizes and kinds came roaring out of the woods as the song announced, "You let me violate you." The two men climbed to about twenty feet so they would be above the tallest of the creatures and poured on the speed as they started spinning on their z axis rocketing towards the center headfirst.

The team members close to the action dropped flat on their faces and covered their heads as they were close enough to see the stream of grenades the men were dumping from their side pouches as they spun. When the men got to within 150 feet of each other they stopped spinning and dumping grenades, pulled their auto pistols and pointed them over the other's shoulder, the grenades started going off in rapid succession like a delayed and flaming contrail along the front of the tree line.

Still speeding towards one another the two men stood up while flying forwards and grabbed the wrist of the other's gun hand which caused them to start spinning while going upwards. As they bumped chests together they had lowered the thrust so they wouldn't climb too fast and began firing at full auto. The auto-pistols were pouring out flames like a dancer's dress twirling around their ankles and the spiral of death below them began to open up from a kill zone less than five feet wide. The last of the grenades went off as they got high enough to barely clear the blast radius and shrapnel was seen sparking off of their armor. At the top of the arch, they dropped the pistols and drew their twin swords, folded their arms across their chests, fell over backwards and

dove for the deck while swapping sides near the bottom of the arch. They pulled out of the dive to level off two feet above the deck and began flying back across the front of the carnage spinning on their z axis again. The blades were striking the ground and the enemies alike, spraying the trees with gore and sand like a demonic edger tool trying to double as a sprinkler system. Four passes was all it took, and the show was over before the song was. The song shifted to 'Ain't no Rest for the Wicked' by Cage the Elephant as the crowd just sat quietly contemplating what had just happened.

Knowing it would take Wayward a while to bring some more playthings back to the beach,

Cowboy used the back of his hand to lightly tap his trainee on the shoulder and began running
towards the walls. T yelled at him, "Where you going? You're supposed to be up next!"

"To demonstrate a full speed drop we need some speed and altitude." Cowboy yelled back.

When he got to the walls the Sgt. Major let them enter after hearing the dumbass' ridiculous plan but wanted to see what Fenrir thought of it. So, he followed them in that direction on a leisurely stroll. When he got to the point where the general had set up his command post with his heavy mech in the center of the base he wasn't surprised to hear Fenrir laughing. What confused him was the conversation that followed as he was closing in on the last few feet. "Wait you're serious?"

"As a heart attack sir."

"Why?" Fenrir asked a little less accusatory this time.

"We need height and speed simulating a drop like we did earlier right?" Cowboy asked.

"Well, that would be nice if we could... simulate it somehow." Fenrir paused as he now understood what the young man wanted." Ok I got you covered. Groton, Piddock, you're up." Two heavies spun from their positions near the water and started thundering towards the center of the LZ. Fenrir looked back at Cowboy and said, "These two got degrees from college scholarships as quarterbacks for their football teams or something like that."

"Really? I don't recognize their names." Cowboy replied.

"Don't you think they could have gotten a better job than Infantry officers if they had been any good?" Fenrir replied. The two heavy pilots stayed quiet, because they weren't going to argue with the general no matter how mean and hurtful some of his jokes could be, Groton had played Jai alai and Piddock was a wrestler.

"As long as their good enough to hit the broadside of the beach and not the tree line we'll be good." Cowboy replied, grimacing as he nodded his head towards the two young lieutenants. He did not want to upset the two men that was about to help him do something extremely ill advised.

About half an hour later Wayward and Bubbles were laying on their bellies listening to 'Pumped Up Kicks' by Foster the People near a clearing watching an ant mound the size of an American high school football stadium. "Have you ever put an M-80 into an ant mound before?" Wayward asked Bubbles as they watched the massive ants carrying the remains of Marines that had fallen the creatures they had killed during the drop run earlier in the day.

"Once, it blew the little bastards everywhere and only pissed them off real bad. I prefer to soak the mound in gasoline and burn them out." Bubbles said feeling a little embarrassed at having to admit a dark impulse.

Wayward turned his head to look at him truly amazed and said, "T was right. You very well could be my evil twin... Only I'm the good looking one, and you are not as devious as I am, yet." Wayward said with a huge grin on his face a light chuckle coming from him.

Bubbles turned to look at him, saw the look of glee on Wayward's face and began to chuckle along with his mentor. When the huge head behind them began to rise emitting a low growl that almost sounded like a chuckle but vibrated the earth, the two men rolled onto their sides looking up at some new variant of a T-Rex.

When its head snapped back down they both rolled away as quickly as they could. Wayward fired his jump jets as soon as he rolled to his hands and knees to perform a back flip that landed him onto the beast's neck just below the head. He had grabbed his vibro-blades as he was flipping over and tried to sink them as deep as possible into the back of its head as he landed but they went as far as the hilts and got stuck. The big beast roared in pain, but didn't move, until Wayward tried to pull out the one on the left to try again. It then turned to the left, which made him pull on his left foot and right blade to resist the spin out of instinct, and the creature spun back to the right. Having broken a few horses when he was younger Wayward figured out what he had just lucked himself into. Before he could laugh in joy, the second T-Rex came into the edge of the clearing and eyeballed him. Seeing what Wayward had done, Bubbles attempted to repeat it, but let his targeting AI guide his blades based off of what it had seen Wayward do. Like a scene from some cheesy action movie or a plot written by a lazy ass author, the kid stuck the landing and the blades. They both began to laugh, and the two beasts roared again forcing them to calm down. "Oh yeah, we're going to have some fun with this." Wayward yelled as he turned his T-Rex away from the ant mound.

The walls were almost completed around the water side of the metal decking of the LZ when Rage against the Machine's 'Killing in the Name Of' came on and most of the heavy mechs moved towards the tree line side of the base. Infantry Marines all across the base grabbed their rifles and scrambled up the walls to get into firing positions. Hover Tank crews dove from the tops of the units into their positions and were still strapping in as they began to hover up to get their main guns pointed at the trees just a few feet above the Marines on the walls. Everyone shifted to high alert as Wayward's voice crackled the airwaves. "Wayward to Fenrir, Bubbles is riding the regent in. Let everyone say, 'Hail to the king'."

Thinking he knew what Wayward was up to, Fenrir relaxed his gun arms and began his hypeman speech, "As you see Wayward has signaled he's going big this time. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce the suits designed to put our troops on the ground under heavy fire at high speeds to really bring the pain to your enemies. Here's Cowboy and The Kid. Let's all say 'Odin, Hail to the King'."

Avenge Seven Fold's 'Hail to the King' began playing and when the symbols tapped two heavy mechs threw an infantry Marine each like they were NERF footballs towards to the trees.

Cowboy landed with the first thump-thump of the bass guitar. The Kid landed twenty feet to his right as the second thump-thump played, both of them in the kneeling position. As the snare drums started playing their rhythm the animals came out of the trees and the two men slowly stood up raising a Gatling gun each and started spinning the barrels up as they stepped shoulder to shoulder with one another. Their shoulders bumped as their bass guitar rhythm sped up and the white plasma rounds began pouring from the barrels like laser beams. The two men then slowly moved the barrels flat with the ground from centerline to shoreline and back several times as the

fodder tried to run over the top of them as if they were more scared of what was in the woods than the certain death that they were charging into.

Cowboy saw the trees near the edge of the woods shaking and his right eyebrow rose wondering what his friend had found that could require a heavy mech as backup. He dropped the Gatling gun and pulled the rip cords on his plasma pack which released it to fall to the ground. He then tapped The Kid on the arm with his right hand as his left foot slid forward and his left hand came up and forwards to join his right near his right shoulder like a baseball player stepping up to bat as the second chorus of 'Hail to the King' started up.

It was hard to see in the fading sunlight but the black from Cowboys forearm grieves flowed towards his hands and began flowing up them to take the shape of a handle. When the material finished, it had formed a two-handed massive double-bladed Battle Axe straight from a Tolkien story about a Barbarian. When The Kid's latest pass ended at the waterline he then lowered the barrel and spun along Cowboy's back to start strafing from the water line to the center to finish off the creatures on that side. Cowboy grinned knowing that had just put his rookie over Ski's 50% kill rate. Then Bubbles shot up out of the treetops and something huge jumped up to bite him in half, but only clipped his leg. Bubbles went spinning over the team's heads and crashed into the sand as the giant creature came out of the tree line to catch up to its tormentor.

Knowing Doc and the rest would make sure Bubbles would be fine, Cowboy gave the Kid an order. "Fall back, this one's mine," and charged forwards Axe raised over his shoulder. About fifty feet from the giant beast, he jumped into the air and brought the humongous axe back for an overhead chop, using his jump jets to fly forward a little before dropping because he had jumped to early. This allowed the beast to turn its head sideways to try and protect its face from this deranged morsel that was apparently going to try and choke it to death by forcing its way into the

beast's throat. Cowboy grinned as he cleaved the beast's left arm off at the shoulder, and a huge chunk of the shoulder with it. The nanites that had formed the huge axe had put a micro-thin edge on the blade fine enough to slice tomatoes paper thin.

The creature roared in pain and tried to spin away from him, but as Cowboy landed he spun towards the beast and used the momentum to swing his axe even with the ground and then upwards as the beast's tail came flying at him and lopped it off sending it spinning towards the team. Cowboy just kept spinning like a dreidel of death and brought his blade down and around to take the beast's right leg off at the ankle. The creature was still spinning and roaring in pain from having its tail cut off and tripped over its own severed foot.

As it began falling Cowboy reached out with one hand, grabbed the beast's left heel and used its movement to catapult himself into the air. On the short flight up, he shifted his grip and swung upwards as he hit the thrusters with all the speed he could muster. It would have been really cool if he had wanted to decapitate this beast with a strike to the neck. Cowboy had thought of that too, but Hollywood had completely worn that cliché out. So, Cowboy did what he was really good at, he improvised. He caught the creature with an upwards swing halfway between the eye and its ear holes on the back of its jaw, and chopped the front half of the creatures head off so quickly and cleanly the brains didn't move until the beast's head hit the ground, spilling its brains out like an overturned kiddies pool full of gore. The music ended as Cowboy stood up and flung the blood and gore off of his axe with a quick flick of the wrist. After looking around for a few seconds to make sure all the beasties were dead, he allowed the nanites to flow back up his arms as extra heatshields from the gatling guns. The roar of approval from the Marines in the LZ covered up the dull thumping of grenades going off in the distance.

Fenrir let the Marines show their approval for the entertainment for close to a minute. The whole time Cowboy mimicked his favorite kind of TV star, squatting down, knees spread wide and alternating his hands up to his ears bobbing his head. Before he decided to close out the demonstration and begin his hype-man pitch again he thought he heard Wayward's voice came over the radio. "Fenrir, this is Wayward."

"Go for Fenrir." Not sure if he had even heard the kid over the roar of the crowd Fenrir listened carefully.

"Fenrir, ETA two mikes, have tree line expansion ready."

Fenrir was confused as it normally took Wayward a half hour or more to draw the attention of enough creatures to start off a demonstration, but he wasn't going to argue with the man. Fenrir was worried as the creatures seemed to be getting bigger, and more numerous. So, he gave a hand signal that had the rest of the heavies silencing the crowd when they stepped forward as one and brought their guns to bear at the tree line. 'Clint Eastwood' by Gorillaz began its thumping base and the team turned to look back at the LZ for a split second before T and Tonya rushed to take their spots and Cowboy ran towards the rest of the team.

As the song was fading out Wayward's voice came through loud and clear, "Wayward to Fenrir, time for a little Sex on Wheels." Wayward wanted them to play My Life with The Thrill Kill Kult's 'Sex on Wheels', as T requested but someone on the Valhalla changed it to play Hell on Wheels and notified Fenrir via text message.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to introduce everyone's favorite Terrifying Twister of Death, Destruction, and Explosions, Brunhilda!!! Odin, she is truly Hell on Wheels!!!"

When the Steel Drivers started rapidly picking the banjoes to start off their song "Hell on Wheels", Wayward yelled over the radio, "this is Wayward Angel to Brunhilda, add fifty, to the boom."

T transmitted back, "Bluegrass? You'll pay for this. Copy dropping fifty. Sometimes you got to let the kids feel the boom, so they can learn." When Wayward popped up above the tree line and did his backflip take-off back into the woods, Tonya chunked a red flare to each side as far as she could to indicate the edges of the impact zone then slowly raised her arms straight out till they came together at the top of her head holding two more burning red flares. The singer announced, "They call her HELL ON WHEELS" and thousands of ants began charging the LZ from the woods, and she chunked both flares into the woods. As she released the flares from her hands the tops of the Connex boxes flew open and 10-inch diameter hellfire rockets were launched into the tree line. The two Ts drew their automatic shotguns and began shredding the ants with flechette rounds, in the distance the rockets started to land and began a rolling wall of flames rushing towards the beach as each wave of rockets continued to land. T was ecstatic, her apprentice had just beat everyone as she had killed 90% of the mobs, and Tonya was standing tall using the buttstock of her shotgun to finish off anything making it through the flames.

T was surprised when Wayward delivered her exactly what she had asked for, as the T-Rex looking beast he had been riding came roaring out of the forest with flames all over it. Tonya turned, half dove and half flew as she used her jump jets to launch herself to the safety of the team. While T made a show of pulling her twin vibro-blades from her belt and leaning into the run towards the big beast with her arms and blades held out wide and a roar coming from her own throat.

The beast had no clue she was even there due to the pain its whole body was in from having just survived the barrage of hell fires. She brought it to a dead halt with a thruster fueled head-butt to its snout as it tried to blindly run to the water. She used its dead stop and her continued movement forward to start spinning and raking the beast from the base of its skull down to the base if its tail along spinning around its body like a hula hoop gone wrong, marking it with dozens of slices form her vibro-blades. While the big beast looked like someone had tried to run it through an apple peeler, all it knew was something new was causing it pain, and it wanted to kill something because of all the pain it was currently in. T landed beside is tail and started doing rotational spins to jump over it, slicing into it with every rotation with both blades. Her third jump got her halfway through it, and the big beast spun to face her. She had followed its tail around enough through the beast's spin to put her best side towards the camera, then lowered herself down like she was trying to pick something up off the ground while looking up at its humongous jaw that was bellowing in pain.

She couldn't help herself and as T was squatting there, she yelled at it, "Aw shut up." Which drew the beast's attention from the sky where it thought it was being attacked from to the little insignificant thing in front of it. When its head started to tip down she launched her body upwards with all of the power in her legs and hit full burn on the jump jets just a few feet short of her massive uppercut landing. Her fist went through the bottom of the beast's mouth as the bone was thinnest there. As her elbow passed through the lower half of its mouth her fist passed through the top of its tongue cutting off any attempt to release a roar of pain. Its mouth snapped shut as her shoulder got lodged into the bottom of the mouth and her fist passed into the cranial cavity of the beast, killing it before it even understood it had been punched. T flipped her feet up to the where the beat's jaw came together with its neck and fired her jump jets before the thing

began to fall. She bounced off the sand once and she used that change in altitude to fly into the water to wash all this gore off of her pretty suit.

"Wayward to Freki, Let five sail on green." Awol Nation's 'Sail' started thumping away and a green beacon shot up from inside the treen line.

"Roger, 5 kinetics inbound, splash in two mikes." Came back as the bass thumped the first time. As the musician announced, 'This is how I show my love,' red shooting stars broke through the atmosphere and five MOABs that were deemed too busted to fuel were breaking through the burn period before igniting their thrusters upon beacon acquisition. They had been fired one second apart to improve the depth at which they penetrated a hardened bunker. Shortly after the singer acknowledged 'Maybe I'm a different breed,' the impacts from the happy bombers began impacting the ground in tune with the beat spraying dirt and partially destroyed ants for half a mile in every direction.

As the music began fading out Wayward's voice came over the radio. "Wayward to Freki, bunker cracked, hostiles now in the open. Wait one for the retribution of the vengeful."

"This is Freki, Copy, Kinetics effective, enemies in the open."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Closing the Show with a Bang

The sun was starting to set when Wayward stepped out of the woods, bent over and picked something up before sticking it into his cargo pocket, then stood there in silence just fifteen feet from the trees and less than 200 yards from his friends. A Marine in armor similar to Wayward's, down to the blacked-out face plate, walked up from behind them and handed Bubbles a note,

who read it and handed it to T. T read part of the note then handed it back to him and said, "Go ahead. I can't miss whatever this idiot is up to."

Bubbles tapped his helmet twice and began reading out the commands as instructed in the note, "Yggdrasil, Yggdrasil, this is Rooster over." Bubbles called over the radio.

"Rooster this is Odin. Send Traffic." Came a calm voice.

Bubbles swallowed hard as everyone turned to look at him and then said, "Blue forty-two, Red four hundred forty-two, M two on clear, Set, Hike."

The replies came across the radio loud, clear, and rapidly.

"Einherjar, Blue Four Two, Copy."

"Freki, Red Four Four Two, copy."

"Gungnir, Ma Deuce on Clear, Copy."

Wayward tapped his helmet twice and said, "This is Wayward Angel, Deliverance." He emphasized this by dropping to his knees and looking up while shaking his clasped hands in front of his chest like he was begging his deity for some great need. When Roy Clark announced, "It's time for a lesson" and began his 'Dueling Banjoes' skit, he dropped his hands to his sides and bowed his head as if in shame or sorrow it was hard to tell.

"Einherjar, inbound in 10." Came over the radio and Wayward jumped to his feet, tapped his helmet twice and said "Turbo... *Lover*." He said the last word like he was in a 1970s porno movie. A fast electronic dub remix of Billy Idol's 'Turbo Lover' by INSKI came over the broadcast channel, Bubbles stepped forward and tossed a smoke grenade onto the ground in front of them. It started burning and emitting blue smoke. Before T could ask him what the hell he was

up to, the troop transports came roaring across the skies, their auto cannons providing a deafening thump of 50mm booms that matched the beat of the drums, and the steady rumble of the twin 20mm gauss cannons rained shells down on everyone as they passed over. As the first flight passed overhead Wayward did something that not even those closest to him would have ever thought they would see him do on a battlefield in hostile country during a live operation.

"Is he really..." Ski started to say, then stopped because his brain was struggling with trying to comprehend what his eyes were relaying to it.

"I think he is, but what is he..." Doc asked just as stupefied.

"I think it's the robot... but we all know that white boy can't dance," T said.

For the full length of the song there was a steady flow of aircraft roaring overhead, brass piling up all around his friends from the strafing runs in weird directions, and then they would circle around to do it again.

As the song began to fade he stopped, tapped his helmet again and said, "This is Wayward Angel, Slim Pickens." When the music swapped to Lord of the Lost's rendition of Turbo Lover the skies turned from the dull setting reds of the sunset to a brighter shade of red as massive black clouds formed and began to roll in as if pushed by hurricane winds. Chris Hams was singing "Then within your senses", when the clouds were quickly turned into flames as the hull sections of the massive drop ship came through the upper atmosphere still spinning like she was when she dropped off the ground crews above the atmosphere.

On "You can't retreat, I spy like no other," the hull cleared the flames, and a swarm of black dots with blue flames behind them poured out of the bottoms of the Freki. Hundreds of MOABs were raining down like a cloud of mosquitoes. "Wrapped in horsepower, driving into fury," and

the drop ship began her lift back into the darkness of space, looking like she was sucking the flames and light up as she did, and the purple of twilight heralded the arrival of night.

Everyone's attention was drawn to a blue flare's light as Wayward raised his arms like Moses parting the Red Sea, bouncing his leg like he was going to pull a chain to dump water on himself, he then used the first one to light a second blue flare.

Bubbles stepped forward and squeezed a detonator several times and three red flares in the distance streaked into the sky. He shook it, then beat on it a few times, shook his head, then threw it towards Wayward, he reacted by throwing one of the flares at the team. T started to say something but stopped when Bubbles raised his grenade launcher and fired it in Wayward's direction. He batted the grenade into the air with his armored forearm where it exploded a few seconds later into a bright red flare, lighting up a sky full of MOAB drones. "Better run for cover," played as everyone followed the MOABs with their eyes until they started slamming into the trees, and the flames lit up everyone's favorite idiot banging his head and playing the air guitar, with the flare as a pick, in front of the world's largest rock-n-roll fireworks display.

As the song started to come to an end he started walking towards them, stopped, scratched the top of his helmet a few times, turned back to the trees, looked up at the skies, and looked down at his wrist as if he was checking a watch through his armor. He then turned back around to his friends and shrugged both his shoulders, while raising his hands to his sides, palms up, like what are you supposed to do. He then mimed an 'Ah Ha' moment, tapped his helmet twice, and said "Wayward Angel to Gungnir, Clear."

An electronic beeping started to pulse as Rammstein's 'Feuer Frei' began to wind up and its built-in air raid alarms signified to all of the Marines on the beach what was coming, but not

when. He tossed the flare over his shoulder as he started walking towards his friends. Behind him the plasma and trees burnt down to low a blue lava field, and everyone could see the trees had been blasted into a pattern with two stripes running across the length of the blast pattern, bisecting it into four squares. Those two stripes had notches cut through them from where the transports had done their gun runs forming a massive gunsight reticle on the ground back lit with blue plasma from the MOABs. At the center of it all serving as the bullseye was the crater that used to be an ant mound.

The friends looked at one another until they noticed the mysterious Marine had grabbed Bubbles and Tanya to help hand out hot dogs and roasting sticks from a jump bag about 200 yards from where they stood towards the firebase. Then he pulled out a beer and cracked his mask to show Wayward's face. "Anybody want a cold one to kick off this weenie roast?"

Before anyone could answer him, all of their headsets crackled with a reply from above, "Gungnir shots out."

"This is Geri, shots out," quickly followed it.

T's eyebrows shot up and she looked towards the sky then back down at him. "What the fuck?" was all she could say.

"What?!?! You said to teach him *everything*. Your exact words were they not? You made me promise and I quote: I so swear that I will train him to the best of my ability in all things related to tactics, terrorism, sneakiness, and all things absolutely no good that would likely have gotten him kicked out of the pre-boom Corps. Close in naval gunfire and aerial support is part of that." He then raised his beer above his head and tipped the neck towards her. "Sure, you don't want one, since you're already about to join me on next week's KP roster?"

"What, why would I be on next week's KP?" she asked.

The guy that had been standing next to the trees arrived and opened his helm. It was Wayward and he said, "For destruction of government Property?"

"What, what destruction of what property?"

"Me and my team of course." The wayward with the beer said.

"You and your team? I haven't injured, maimed or killed you guys yet."

"Yes you did." The one standing next to her said.

"What? When?" T said now clearly confused.

"Sometimes you got to let the kids feel the boom, so they can learn." Wayward the beer holder reminded her in a mocking voice.

"What? How is that going to get anyone killed?" T asked.

"Your mission was to kill the monsters *and* clear 250 yards of trees doing it." The one next to her said as he pulled a beer out of his cargo pocket.

"So, what's that got to do with it?" T asked.

"You only cleared 150 yards."

"So." T replied back clearly getting pissed off.

"This is Geri, splash in Ten." Came a calm voice over the radio.

"So, they're safe," the first one with a beer said as he tipped his beer towards the base, "and we're danger close" he said using his beer to indicate the trainees to his left and to his right with

his beer, then a huge grin showed on his face right before his helmet sealed up to hide it and he took a knee.

"We're not," the one beside her said as he grinned at her drawing a circle with his beer to indicate her and their friends.

"Huh," T stammered.

"You didn't," Bear said.

"Yep," the Wayward closest to them said.

"You suck," Doc replied.

"What? The song told you to run for cover." The one closest to them said while shaking his head and chuckling.

"Hey T," the other Wayward said as he pulled down on the wrists of the two beside him, "Say 'My Ass Really Is Navy Equipment'." She heard from beside her as he dropped his beer. It was at that moment she realized what he had done.

"You fucker," T growled at him while drawing her pistol... It never cleared the holster before the first boom announced the naval gunfire from the drop ship had begun to rain down upon the range, sending the entire team and their trainees to respawn. Except for the Wayward kneeling with Mr. Bubbles, and Tanya. The two young adults were now not so sure T was the one to be truly feared, or if the man next to them was.

"This is Gungnir, splash in ten," came over the radio.

Wayward unsealed his helm while standing up, looked down at the two kids then said, "If we're on KP, you two are on KP."

Tanya looked at Wayward and complained, "What? Why?"

Wayward looked at her and said, "If you're going to run with the big dogs, you're going to get fleas."

"I get why T is going to be on KP, but why are you?" Bubbles asked.

Wayward pointed his beer up to the sky and asked, "If you're fifty yards off at a hundred miles, how far are you off at a thousand?" He then indicated the Marines along the top of the defensive walls with his beer, "They're danger close," then made a circular pattern with his beer to indicate the three of them, "we're not," and took a sip of his beer and dropped it at his feet as he took a step towards the LZ. Before the trainees could comprehend what had just been said, the compression wave from the impact of Valhalla's main gun sucked all three bodies towards the newly formed freshwater reservoir for the base's future needs.

While Wayward and the two groups were talking the rest of the Landing Party had been either sitting on the walls or in their heavy Mechs behind the walls enjoying the show. When Sgt. Major Harvey saw Wayward pull a beer and hot dogs out during the naval gunfire portion of the testing, *he was pissed*. How dare that Marine bring alcohol to a live fire exercise? He would kill him as soon as this little firing exercise was over; especially after that show of, albeit entertaining, highly unprofessional behavior he had displayed during the gun runs and bombing runs.

He was so transfixed on the beer Wayward was waving around he almost missed it was being used for hand signals. When the Geri announced ten seconds to impact he pointed it up at the sky, pointed at the wall, then pointed at the three closest to the wall while drawing a line, and then pointed at the other group, and another Wayward was standing there using a beer to draw a

circle. The first Wayward took a knee and seconds later an air raid alarm in the song played, the second Wayward dropped the beer which hit the ground right before the first round landed, where he had indicated it would with the circle. Then the remaining Wayward stood up pointed at the sky with his beer, then at the wall as he drew a line with his beer, made a circle to indicate where the three of them stood, took a sip as another air raid alarm played and then dropped the beer. "Incoming!!!" was the only warning Sgt Major could think of as he dove behind the walls tackling two slack jawed hover tank crew men as he did. On pure instinct and trust the veterans grabbed their trainees and threw themselves off the wall and behind its protection.

Fenrir had noticed the same thing, and as Sgt. Major gave his command, Fenrir gave one of his own over the comms, "Oh shit, Brace!!! Brace!!! Brace!!!" Following their leader's example the heavy mechs bent forward and grabbed the tops of the walls and stretched one leg out behind them a few milliseconds before the blast from the main gun of the Valhalla hit the ground. When the debris from the resulting concussion wave settled, no one inside of the defensive walls had been hurt, and the base now had a line of sight five miles out from the main gates. The crater that had formed where the ant mound had been was filling in with water from the surrounding area. The only damage to any of the equipment was to the camera stands and drones that had been set up to film the show, they were completely destroyed.

After looking over the wall and seeing what was out there, or more accurately who and what wasn't out there anymore. Fenrir then shook his head in amusement and called in the after-action report. "Odin, Odin, this is Fenrir, the LZ is secure, 5 miles of clear visibility, funeral pyres lit." The top of a Connex box flew off behind him and more reconnaissance drones flew up into the nights sky to get some video of the after action. A huge vibrating rumble bass came across the comms as Hidden Citizen's rendition of 'Ain't No Grave' started up and a calm voice came over

the channel, "Affirmative Fenrir, main gun test fire a success. Odin out." The footage to be used to show the rest of the alliance of what the humans were willing to teach them ended with a eulogy to themselves and their determination to ride from the dead to do whatever it takes to complete their mission.