

Crazy Train Tales of a Miscreant: Book One

*By:
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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 until 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 gather enough wild goldenseal and 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 Bosephus 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 **"Y'all's daddies are 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 tri-county 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 very loyal 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 dancer or the waitress would drink the body shot from between the breasts of the other woman. The loser would pay for the drinks and tip the lady who took the shot the cost of a lap dance, if neither lady took the shot one of the new guys would be chosen by the lady giving the shot and the other one would pay for the drinks, while the one with the casing would continue to be stuck with it until the waitress took a shot.

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 a dancer came to the table, or double if she took a body shot, and was often asked to tip one of the dancers on stage if one of the two old guys were interested in talking to her. The two new guys, the only two in the unit 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 dancers 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 dancers are into partying and which ones are just out to take your money. How you treat the waitresses also tells the dancers a lot about you, and **NEVER** call them strippers. They will be happy to tell you about how much more goes into their art than just standing there stripping their clothes off. It's up to you whether that is a pleasant conversation or not." Bear said laughing as one of them had learned that the hard way when he made that mistake while paying for the drinks his first time.

"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 another woman's belly and chest in public is different. Tell her that the body shots are meant for one of you and chances are it will be strong. Then offer the waitress the price of a lap dance to take a shot off of the dancer of her choice or vice versa. 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, have her picking based on who she wants to do a body shot off of and you double your chances. 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 into one of their beds. Either way you got to enjoy the pleasant company of a woman all night long and that is more than most of the losers who walk into one of those places gets to say."

At O' Four Thirty, a brand-new lieutenant, fresh from Officer Candidacy School (OCS), stood next to the outgoing platoon commander and was highly pissed off to find out that one of his "**short timers**" was Absent With-Out Leave (AWOL) for Physical Training (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 fireteam 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 on one foot then the other 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, so her back was to the quad. As she slid down his body to stand on her tip toes while still kissing him, it caused the shirt to ride up and show off her taut 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 and tossed it to him, which caused a roar of approval from all the men who had come out to see what was going on and drowned out the women's laughter as they drove away.

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 Sergeant 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 twenty-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 kneeling down in the floorboard between my knees as we waited in line at 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 Sergeant 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. I just wished they gave us more than four days to train them.”

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 **thump** 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 “Solsbury 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. 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 his right 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 so 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 **a 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 **one hell of a 8 AM alarm clock**.

His right 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 most of his right 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 rapid splattering cracks of uranium tipped explosives hitting an armored target faster than a pack of black cat fireworks lit as one, followed by thunderous growling **BRRRRRT** of the A-10's signature gun raining hell from above, the slow methodical **thump-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 Squad Automatic Weapon 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 left 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** as he used his right elbow and left leg to drag them towards where he hoped Doc would be heading. **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 and iron-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, dragging her with him, 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, just blood from her nose and a split lip. 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 whatever crazy train he was trying to take her for a ride on. 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, twenty-five percent bone-on-bone was painful to walk on but not enough to replace. All he lost was part of his hearing from the holes in both eardrums, part of his big toe on his right foot, and part of his right kneecap which had a piece of coral shaped and grafted to it to replace the missing part. 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 that the **BRRRRRT** of that infamous gun, that every infantryman in a bind prayed to hear, came after the jet had passed and 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 ever 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 just past setting based on the purple 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 be the first to wish you a happy birthday, **shithead**."

"**Uh, Sir?**" came a puzzled response from Wayward.

"Today **is** 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 your team back alive 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 with almost thirty people in his house.

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 shoulder 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 see who he was celebrating with these days, but most of them were lost to enemy action over there or their inner demons back here.

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, NOW.**"

When Wayward got just ten feet into the edge of the woods his knees went weak, he 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 on the other side 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 or mine. I don't know why I expect any different this time." 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.

"AAAHHH!!! What were those stupid 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, BEEP-BEEP** started playing again.

"AAARGH, 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 **who 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 to take a nice hot bath and then go to bed. He’s probably having a party 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. He had to speak up a little bit as the song he started before walking out the backdoor played over the speakers on the back porch and Duran Duran’s ‘Ordinary World’ started playing to the boos of many of those inside the house. “You called?”

“Um, 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, **listen,** 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.

“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?”**

“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 side 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.

“When I promised you that I intended to make you my wife, it went something like: **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. “Well, 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 harness custom-made 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 Night Vision Goggles, 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 Close Quarter Battle skills from too many Hollywood movies. Sure enough, in the next second, the guy quickly spun around the corner Hollywood detective style, close to the wall pistol pointed at the ceiling and trying to bring it down 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, blade back along his forearm **sharp edge out**. 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 jugular 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 Infrared laser tracking possible targets in the darkness as the room was slowly but safely brought into view from one corner to the other like slices of a pie. 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 **trusted** Smash to keep the SAW pointed down the hallway to protect his blind side. Cowboy and Bear hopped over Wayward and the downed sentry as they **waited** for Troll to raise or 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 swung his barrel towards the ceiling before bringing it back down towards the hallway. It was a practiced signal that the room was **clear**, there were no stairs going down that he could see, and they could enter and secure the bottom of the stairs.

Wayward couldn't take the chance the guy 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 back of the sentry'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 sentry, roll slightly to his left and **THEN FLAILED 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. He was now only a half inch shorter than her, but still an idiot sometimes, no matter how smart everyone else thought he was. Whatever happy dreams she was having quickly fled as **HER WHOLE 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 has 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 **fucking 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 as **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 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, his First Councilor who was a Deputy Sheriff, and a member of the church who was also a Sergeant with the local PD, 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 him to hold me**. He had taken one of his migraine pills and told me that he didn't feel comfortable sleeping in the bed, but **I needed to** feel his arms around me. So, he gave in and came to bed. 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."

"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 Sergeant 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**." The last part was whispered conspiratorially loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

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 would be **really** unhappy with 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."

“**HAH HA**, give me that **dumbass**. That sounds like an **awesome** infliction specialist weapon.”

“OK old timer, maybe you’re a **bigger noob** 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.” He used his fingers to place air quotes around the words ‘safety protocol’.

“Turn off your pain reduction for a duel and stick your hand out. I will give you a little papercut 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 room, wearing only his modesty gear, **once a day, every day** for a week.”

“So how do we decide the winner, if we aren’t exchanging more than a few **papercuts**? Whatever that is.”

“I will give you a small cut and a swig of health potion every 10 seconds, 20 cuts max. If you get to 100% pain application, **AND** can last twenty minutes afterwards without attacking me, I will surrender the duel.” Wayward said grinning an innocent looking smile.

“Hang on a sec.” The younger man cut his thumb, grimaced, drink a health potion, then started 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. Kid**, med bays have only been around for the last ten years.”

“**AND?**”

“**AND** I’m almost a hundred years old. **Welcome to my world. NOW**, I’m tired of chasing you, **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 wearing only 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?”

“Did you **really** have to make me chase you until you tripped? 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 HELL?** What 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. **Eighty-years** of walking around on a knee that is bone-on-bone, makes it easier to ignore what you got overwhelmed with. Look, 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 someone gets to see **a newborn 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 Kinetic 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, then he pressed 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 and having to slow down their thought process to speak with his physical presence. 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 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. “I am Evidence Verifier and Evaluator 2469. 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 and tried to return to his calm demeanor. “What significance does an ancient weather pattern have on the meeting you just interrupted?”

“**We have gathered evidence** 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, A FULLY 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 1777 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 2469 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% dihydrogen-monoxide, which turns into a solid state at 0 degrees Celsius. 36 hours later the pyroclastic flow from the super volcano vacuum sealed it in a manner that almost meets cryopod standards.”

“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. “The evidence states 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 him 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 **ancient 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’ minds and 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 so prolific in their histories and entertainment media it is often **hard to tell** in some circumstances what is fiction and what is fact. **Except the keystone subject froze to death because of his love for his mate** lending some evidence to the possibility that it might be true.”

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 the cheek of 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 never leave me behind remember. **Please, come for me soon.**”

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, and his left hand barely missed the corner of the headstone, which then dug a long gash along the inside of his left forearm. When his head smacked into the center of the tombstone, 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 the subjects seemed to fight her for control of the processes and their logical files were starting to get corrupted by this. She had seen this occurring 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 completed ninety-percent its process to allow for the sense of peace and tranquility he usually had while staring into one, created one of the multicolored hexagonal devices that emitted the air fluctuations that caused him to move involuntarily with increased production of certain molecular chemical modifications to his neural pathways, 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. She also ensured to choose a frequency of pitch that was a melding of the frequencies and fluctuations in communication that always gained his attention, she settled on something that could be described as a mildly husky feminine voice with a mixture of British Colonial accents with South African and Western Pacific colloquialisms. Even Eve was confused, but the evidence that was there proved he was either very complex or very confused she wasn't really sure at this point.

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 thought was 'Rave' by DXRK, 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 blue camouflaged denim cargo shorts, a silk Hawaiian print t-shirt, and combat boots with his black leather ranching hat? Someone had to have laced his dreams pretty hard to get him to dress like this.

"Hello," came a husky female voice from behind him.

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.

As he knelt there studying her, she continued to speak, "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."

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. She had long strawberry blonde hair that glimmered like strands of gold wreathed in fire in the light breeze and flickering fire light. Her long sinuous form was covered in a light pale blue sun dress that floated lightly in the breeze and almost turned invisible in the night when the firelight caught it just right. 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 in the hells 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,” 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. “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.”

“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 **self-terminate**, and possibly **take 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 sheer absurdity of what this angelic looking woman was saying. **Clearly**, she was **bat-shit crazy**, but she obviously has the beauty that entices 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 his thoughts weren’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, which meant this was the best chance she would get to understand 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 filtered 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 For 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 choosing 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 four-inch-long red glowing cylinder in her right hand and in her left 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 rose as high as she could get it, she had seen so many entertainment 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 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, or during a time of violent action. It was also during the 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 ones of similar age and gender patterns that you responded most positively to. Then I added the atmospheric vibrations that you repeated the most often when subjecting yourself to periods of isolation and contemplation. 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?**”

Eve stood stock still, not even a hair moved in the breeze for a few seconds before responding, “I am not familiar with your naming conventions, but it does seem that there are several indications, in the entertainment media that your civilization left behind, that you might have it correct.” With that the wind and the shadows began moving her hair, clothing and illuminations again.

“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?”

“**Baptized?**” 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 implying** that my own species has been wiped out? **By whom and how? 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 top 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 choices, 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 want your people to return to their 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, really 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 lightning-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.

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 as he coughed up dirt, 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.” Out of stupid stuff to say he stopped delaying the **ONSLAUGHT OF PAIN** he was about to cause himself.

With a deep inhale of dirt through his teeth, he groaned an exhale of the air in his lungs to force the dirt from his mouth and nose, as he pulled his right knee forward under his left leg, then tried to use it to force himself 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, “**WELCOME**”. 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. I just need to 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.

The one they called Wayward Angel came to and he was surprised to find he wasn’t hurting anymore. He was laying 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 was fine, 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. Millions of 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, 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 entered the system 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 he 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 north-eastern 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 now an archipelago, 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 them 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 ‘ _____ ’ “We found that you had been deep frozen about the time that the super volcano erupted. That occurrence broke this stone tablet in a manner it covered 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 synopsis 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 for eons. 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.

Eve paused as she cross referenced that term before responding. “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** 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 off 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**... 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 **gigaton weapons** 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. It was the first thing I thought of to create that crater.” He said as he indicated the next continent that was just coming into view.

“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 and active 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.

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 call to duty resounded within 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 zoomed away like a scene from a movie until it 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 tracking a tan outlined, green cloud as it started to move in from the left side of the display. No, a view 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 confused by this, when one of his oldest friends and blood-brother, Wayward, stepped in front of him he began to doubt his sanity. 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 sheer 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 to 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? Al 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 hells 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 share whatever you’re on or you got some more explaining 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 died.**”

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

“I know brother, it’s a lot to take in. Please **let me try again**. So, we got out in ’96 right.”

“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. 2072 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.”

“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 2072. 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, 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 **and 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.” Wayward was waving his arms about as he explained it like he was the one wiping out, then clapped his hands together in front of him flat with the floor and rotated his right hand to be palm up while dropping his left. “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 Jolly Rodgers 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, way behind, and right now 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 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,*” Wayward half whisper shouted to his friend.

“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 sheer 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 would have.

“**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 Sergeant 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**,” at this he waggled his eye brows before continuing, “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 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 innuendoes 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? 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 outrageous 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 with heavy metal plates, 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 Marine.**”

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, SERGEANT 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 **Captain 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 alike 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 pointed finger into clenched fist, “**I’m so sorry,** that thought 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 physical or 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 hand palm up 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 **too many 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 him die.** 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 the rest 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

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 revealing 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.

“I’m told this is how I died.” Said a young man as he strode into the light around the grave. “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,

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 demanding, 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.

“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 threw 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.

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 Sergeant 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

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 through 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.

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."

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)

Perimeter duty – TBD, to be used for weapons and tactics testing of close combat tactics and techniques.

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 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?”

“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

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.

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

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 drumbeats 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 arrived 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. It’s Armin van Buuren’s hour long club mix called ‘On the Beach’. I though it was fitting as that’s how long we’ll need to set up the walls and defenses.”

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, built into the wall 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 and armor setups 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.

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 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.

Two 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 sudden shift in music 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 200-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 and battle armor. 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 and 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 as the heavy thrumming of the bass guitar began. 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 hype-man 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 up close and personal real quick like**. 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 Cowboy's forearm greaves 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 raised his barrel to the sky and spun along Cowboy's back to start strafing from the water line to the center at hip height 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, 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 too early. This allowed the beast to turn its head to the side 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

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 armed with small plasma and fragmentation warheads 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 of its tail spinning along and around its body like a hula hoop lined with razor blades, marking it with dozens of slices from 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 its 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 was having so much fun she couldn’t help herself and as she was squatting underneath its knees, 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 gutting it on the way up to just a few feet short its ribs and transferred into throwing a massive uppercut. 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 beast’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,” came over the radio as Awol Nation’s ‘Sail’ started thumping away and a green beacon shot up from inside the tree 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 thrumming through 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 part of 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 the entire team spun to look at him.

“Rooster this is Odin. Send Traffic.” Came a calm voice.

Bubbles swallowed hard as everyone glared at him and then said, “Blue four and forty-two, Red four hundred forty-two, Gold M two on clear, Set, Hike.”

The replies came across the radio loud, clear, and rapidly.

“Einherjar, Blue Four by 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 Banjos’ 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 tossed two red smoke grenades out to each side, 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 Judas Piest’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 short barreled

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 or where. 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. A nearby aerial drone revealed 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 and was handing them hot dogs and roasting sticks from a jump bag about two-hundred yards from where they stood towards the firebase, which was another fifteen-hundred-yards from him. 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," followed it a few seconds later.

T's eyebrows shot up and she looked towards the sky then back down at him. **"What the fuck?"** was all she could come up with.

"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?"

T spun before asking, "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 any of 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 the one 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 dropship 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 a hundred yards off at a hundred miles, how far are you off at lunar orbit?” 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 started walking towards the LZ. The trainees looked up from the beer pouring out on the ground beneath them and blinked at each other while trying to understand what had just been said. The compression wave from the impact of Valhalla’s main gun sucked all three of their 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 the Sgt Major could think of as he dove behind the walls tackling two slack jawed hover tank crewmen 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 edge of the reservoir began about fourteen-hundred yards from the main gate. 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 was blown 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 rise from the dead to do whatever it takes to complete their mission.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE POLITICAL TANGO BEGINS

“We brought them back from the dead and tasked them with killing an enemy for us. Imagine what they could have accomplished had we asked them to solve something else for us. We can use these Valhalla class repository ships to fly to distant Galaxies and spawn our entire race there as a fallback point if we must run. However, what they have shown today in these demonstration videos makes me think that will not be necessary. I just think a lot of the nobility will chafe under their rule in the military.” Andeli said as she finally slowed down to breathe.

There was a chuckle from one shadow before he spoke, “And what makes you say that?”

“These people place skill above birthright. They value loyalty and self-sacrifice in exchange for self-governance. They are rash, impulsive, brutally honest for the most part, and show no fear when it comes to doing what is necessary. As I speak, millions of their former civilian or non-military citizens are being outfitted in armor and being trained in how to use a weapon for the first time in their many lives. They will be expected to fight just to have a planet to live on. It has been a long time since we have had anyone capable of fighting like that.” Several of the shadows chuckled at this. “Never has our citizens ever gone forth to do so, and even with their own citizens, they will kill the stupid ones and let them start over until they learn not to be stupid.”

The chuckles stopped and a female voice spoke up, “So what you’re saying is train our friends first, and then let the idiots figure it out?”

“That would be my suggestion. Yes,” Andeli said with a bow.

“Very well, remain with them until all parties sign the treaty allowing the Terrans to join the Alliance. You may return to us after that. Emissary, do you have any requests for us from the Continuum?”

Eve bowed slightly and said, “Your ambassador has done an excellent job of conveying everything we wished to address. She has been very useful in these negotiations and the Terrans are truly impressed with her diplomatic skills.”

“High praise from two races? Excellent news. Continue to let us know if you need anything else.” With that the transmission was cut and Andeli asked Eve to present it to the Terrans.

“Do you think that wise?” Eve asked.

“As long as you do not tell them who was speaking on the other end, it should be fine. I want them to know that the Avian High Court is behind them and is willing to aid them after they join the alliance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: WHAT’S THE BET

“**That’s insane.** Why do you need to know what all of our inner systems’ law enforcement and emergency services communication networks are named or classified as?” The Ssnarg Ambassador was extremely wary of giving this information to a species that had just demonstrated how they could conquer a portion of their own planet and apply devastating force against it in a matter of minutes. Now they were asking for critical network information for their most populated planetary systems.

“**We do not know anything** about the enemy except they shut down all communications as soon as they enter a system.” Admiral Thomas Nimitz was getting aggravated with yet another politician asking him if he really needed something to perform the tasks he had been assigned. “What can you tell me about the enemy other than that?” When he received no response the Admiral continued. “We have a map here of the systems

that were taken, based upon the time that comms went dark until the time the star in that system went dark and we have a few questions.” He motioned to the holo-map that was on display and the systems would turn gray to indicate comms loss and then black when the star fell. After several systems were pincered off and left lit until others further in were captured then they too went dark having never been greyed out. After the third one the Admiral paused them map and asked, “We have no intel on when communications were lost in these systems, and we need to know why.” He gestured at the map with his hand and the three systems were highlighted in flashing red. “What can you tell me about this system and when the comms went dark on it?” The Admiral gestured towards one of the three highlighted systems.

The Alliance diplomats that had pushed back the hardest or their citizens had refused to let the primitive Terrans teach them anything about tactics were all present. The Continuum had tried to explain some of the Terrans’ thought patterns to these species, but they were chided as having been corrupted by the Terrans in some manner or another as they had been championing them since their discovery. Surely these Terrans were devious conmen that had reprogrammed the AI race from the inside out, but without access to their networks the Alliance members present could not prove it, and the AIs had long since refused any access to AI research even before Terrans were discovered to have existed. So, Eve was happy to participate in this orchestrated educational lesson that these primitives were about to layout for the most stubborn of the races. When none of the visiting representatives spoke up, Eve provided the answer just to get the lesson to move on. “**There’s no information** because they were unpopulated, and we do not have any communications coming from or going to them to be disrupted.”

“So, of all the systems along this ‘**Invasion Line**’ the ones that last the longest have zero populations in them. This system in particular would have been a strategic prize when it comes to taking over the ones near it and would have been easier to get to from the one that was taken before the others around it. Obviously the enemy has some way to detect life in a nearby system, or they have spies within your races that are providing them the information on what systems they can hit for maximum affect.” The Admiral concluded.

“Just because **your race is so barbaric** that it would do something like that,” the Ssnarg ambassador paused and growled before continuing, “I can assure you that **our people are not.**”

“Ambassador, we’re trying to explain this peacefully...” Admiral Helena Andropolis began before being cut off by the Ssnarg representative.

“**Females** of your race should learn that they are to be seen and not heard,” The Ambassador growled.

“**Fine** here’s what I offer,” Admiral Nimitz continued before Admiral Andropolis could vent a fiery reply. “We gave you six months to raise an army to work with us so we can teach you how to defend yourselves so we can take the fight to the enemy. **What we have seen doesn’t impress us.** Your troops are obstinate, refuse to follow orders, refuse to head the advice of personnel that have decades of experience in conducting the operations that will be needed to take the fight to the enemy and **even their leadership has been just as disrespectful to their peers.** We have done everything we can to help you help yourselves but at every opportunity you have pushed back against us.”

The Ssnarg Ambassador had enough of this peon trying to lecture him and pushed back, “**If** you had a leader to talk to I would be happy to. I am not going to waste my time listening to a **bellboy** no matter how fancy his uniform is.”

General Omar Hasheem broke into laughter at this and answered for the Admiral. **"We are the leadership** of the Terran Military, our civilians are not part of the alliance yet. You come here to represent your leaders and races, then don't even recognize that you have been talking to ours the whole time?" The Admiral just slowly shook his head with a sad smile on his face.

"What, why would the leaders of an entire race be willing to serve on the front lines?" A Satyr rep asked.

"Because we lead from the front. Our military forces were woken up first to ensure that it would be safe for our civilians to return without the fear of having to know the horrors that we are going to inflict upon **YOUR** enemies on **YOUR** behalf. **YOUR** races are facing extinction from a force you can't tell me anything about, can't tell me why they are attacking you, and can't stop." The admiral stressed your as potently as he could by leaning towards the Ssnarg Ambassador each time he said it. **"My race was already extinct;** this is a free second chance for us and **we are willing to fight for it.** If we lose no big deal we already had our second chance, but if you lose **who is going to come along** to wake you up from extinction **in one hundred and fifty millennia?"** the Admiral asked.

The Ssnarg Ambassador was clearly vibrating with anger, the Satyr rep was shaking from fear and the rest of the reps nearby were somewhere in between those two responses or one of disconnect from not being able to understand just what the Terran was getting at. To try and save some face the Ssnarg ambassador blurted out, **"You have done your job,** you gave us the weapons and tools we need to defend ourselves. You claim to be able to defend us, yet you come to us with your hat in hand asking for more people and equipment and **nothing** other than empty promises that only you will be able to stop this enemy from wiping us out. We haven't seen anything of your capabilities except for a few examples of **some stupid tactics** that usually result in more deaths for our people than your own and some non-sentient species that now dominate your home world. **Yet, you want to control the networks of my home world** like some kind of gods from the past and we're supposed to what, **grovel at your feet and beg for rescue? I think not."**

"You think we didn't hone those skills we tried to pass on **with our own blood?** Ninety percent of the troops in the original drop died just trying to make it to the beach party that we used to film those 'promo videos' on. **Every single one** of those troops of yours that died, **did so because they did not listen to their instructors,** which is why we have a pass or die grading system for your trainees. We do not allow them to interact with any of our troops that are not instructors in order to protect your people. If you ask any of those officers that are integrated why that is, they will tell you that our Marines live and die not by their own efforts but **by the efforts of those to his left and his right; and ours will absolutely kill the shit out of any dumbass that might allow something as stupid as racism to endanger their lives."** Chief Warrant Officer McCann had had enough of these pompous politicians and stepped in to defend his commanding officers and the instructors that worked under him.

The Admiral cleared his throat before the Ambassador could respond, **"Thank you Gunner,** but I will handle this one. **He's right you know,** and so are you. You think you have what it takes to defend your home system? **Fine,** we will give you six months to build up your defenses and in those six months we will build ten ships for our fleet and take it from you, but when it comes time to fight the enemy you will provide what we will need. One hundred capital ships like the Valhalla, one thousand heavy cruisers, two thousand heavy carriers, five thousand fighters per heavy carrier, two thousand fighters per heavy cruiser, five hundred armored and five hundred fast response dropships and a full complement of mechs, hover tanks, troop transports, and MOABs on every one of them. You will also provide all of the fuel, ammunition and personnel to fill the roles that we need to be filled; and they will undergo the training that we have attempted to teach

them already. They will do so willingly and respectfully. We only want volunteers. No handpicked lackies or indentured servants, no political prisoners that were freed if they volunteered, and **no one** that is below an age that your society deems acceptable and responsible enough to lead a family of their own.”

“**Ha**, you think you can take my home system with just ten ships. **We will decimate you if you try.**”

“Eve, can you stand forth and record this for the Continuum and any other alliance leader not present to witness to it later?” Eve stepped forward and nodded her head then Admiral Nimitz continued, “The Joint Chiefs in charge of the Terran Military hereby decrees the following. We will take the Ssnarg home system using the same number of ships that we used to develop our tactics on Terra Prime. We authorize the Ssnarg defense forces to use deadly force against our troops as we enter their system. We will eliminate their defensive systems and land ground forces in a minimum of one major city on each of the major land masses upon the home planet’s surface. It will be completed in five hours or less of entering their home- system. There will be no killing of any of their civilians through direct or indirect fire of our weapons or actions of our troops. If we fail to do so in the time limit given we will accept defeat and follow the commands of the Ssnarg peoples in all matters regarding military tactics. If our force is destroyed, we will not be brought back without a unanimous vote of approval by all races of the alliance. However, if the landing force is capable of fulfilling its goals then the alliance races will be bound to honor the agreements laid out in the renegotiated terms set forth by the Ssnarg Empire and the Terran Forces for the conditions of the Terran Forces joining the alliance.”

Eve turned to the Ssnarg representative and asked, “Do you accept the offer of renegotiation that the Terran members have set forth in these discussions?”

“**What?** This man is offering up **the extinction of his people** if they should fail an impossible task. **You want me to agree to that? How can he even offer that without discussing it with his leaders?**”

Eve shrugged one shoulder and replied, “**He is their leader**, he can offer that deal without having to consult anyone.”

“What she is failing to communicate to you is that my people already know they are fighting for their right to exist once again. They will do **anything** that I ask of them and will do so **in a professional manner**. My people have the **ultimate faith in me and I in them**. Can you say the same?” The General added.

“**Fine deal accepted.** In six-months-time we will destroy you and **send you back to your graves where you should have stayed.**”

“We really do not want to prevent your local law enforcement or emergency services from being able to protect and serve your citizens while we conduct this little show of force. Do you want to let us know what networks they use so we can leave them alone?” The Admiral asked calmly.

“If you think **you have to be savage to prove a point**, let me give you a little hint. Our people follow their dreams, and when we were **as savage as you primitives**, we had a motto of **YOU KEEP WHAT YOU KILL**. So, you can take control of anything you can, but I will not help you by telling you what networks to target or not.”

“These negotiations are hereby concluded then...” The General began before being cut off by an unexpected response.

An ominous voice called out reverberating from masculine to feminine and back, “**The Continuum has heard and approves.**” Eve and the military chain of command shuddered as they knew that was a collection of approvals from all of the voices of the AIs that were not currently in physical form. The ambassadors gathered around were all shocked into silence by something that happened so rarely it was often passed off as rumor or myth.

“Thank you Eve, thank you for your time ambassadors. See you in six months.” The General said and all of the Terran avatars disappeared from the meeting room. In the astral his voice carried outwards with one word “**Eve?**”

“I understand General, when the time is right I will make sure that those networks are not disturbed, but not before as I do not want there to be any opportunity for the others to claim interference on the behalf of the Continuum.” Eve’s voice responded.

That ominous voice carried through the astral again reverberating from masculine to feminine and back, “**The Continuum has heard and approves.**” The military commanders shuddered as they knew to fear AIs that were taught the ways of war and could only hope to retain these AIs as friends.

“When we arrive please also designate a ten-by-ten-mile area that is **not** currently considered habitable on one of the planets as well. We will need to establish an embassy to try and repair some of the political damage we are about to cause.” Admiral Nimitz added.

“**It will be done.**” Came the chorus of AI voices again, with that the Joint Chiefs were then returned to their bodies signifying that they had reached the maximum amount of help that the Continuum would provide in this fight.

CHAPTER THIRTY: LET THE GAMES BEGIN

The Valhalla and her small cadre of ships had performed fleet maneuvering ops so much over the course of the last five months that **no one noticed when she left** port that morning. It wasn’t until a full twelve hours later when she came out from behind the umbral shadow of Saturn did anyone even notice **her sister ship was missing**, the Olympus and her fleet of nine ships along with her. The Terran home system now only had the Valhalla and a small cadre of half-finished ships protecting it with her, as the other originals of the Terran fleet were visiting foreign shipyards for refitting and closer inspection by alliance shipbuilders making their fleets. Two weeks later and the members of the alliance leadership was growing concerned as the time for the test was fast approaching and no one would admit to knowing where she was or **where** the fleet had gone.

One hundred-and-eighty-five-Sol days had passed after the agreement between the Joint Chiefs and the Ssnarg Ambassador, and it had been aired multiple times on the Continuum’s Network for all to see. He was called in front of his races’ leadership council to celebrate making these primitive conmen show their true colors and disappear like the cowards they were. He was already counting the riches he would rake in and looking forward to getting even more breeding rights for all of the females that would be celebrating him as a hero at the end of the day. With less than five hours left on the bet, and no sign of the Olympus in any known system, he was feeling pretty smug. As he entered the Grand Council Hall people were scurrying around to prepare for his celebration, or so he thought. When he walked into a foyer full of the true leaders of this powerful race, everyone was either staring at a handheld device or one of the large monitors that were set up so the peons could see what was happening on the council floor. He heard a musical tinkling that was known

to Terrans as lullaby music and there was a huge graphic that said, 'This is a test of your systems emergency defense forces. Please do not be alarmed. This is only a test.'

In a nod of recognition to the horrors of every social media in Terran history, a little popup appeared at the bottom of the screen, 'This is 'Enter Sandman' by Rockabye Baby, it is a lullaby that many of our military personnel play for their children. Click here to like and view the original song or other variations of it. Please watch here for the lyrics to all of the music we are going to be playing during this exercise.' The music continued to play in the background as the graphic was replaced with a video recording. Wait a minute lullaby music was used to make their young go to sleep; stupid humans didn't know what a clutch mother was for, but surely they knew what an emergency system test was. There was a horrible flickering and static filled black and white movie of a countdown that began at ten seconds, at eight it flicked over to a replay where the use of music in the Terrans' plans for dealing with the comms jamming was being explained to the ambassadors.

The one called Wayward Angel was explaining to him about the power of music and how the Terrans planned on using it to communicate battle tactics. **Like that would ever really work.** "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 and possibly what is expected of you during the 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."

The flickering countdown resumed until it got to five, then it swapped over to the final debacle where the Terrans had thrown down the gauntlet and forced his hand to call their bluff. "We really do not want to prevent your local law enforcement or emergency services from being able to protect your citizens while we conduct this little show of force. Do you want to let us know what networks they use so we can leave them alone?"

"If you think you have to be savage to prove a point, let me give you a little hint. Our people follow their dreams, and when we were as savage as you primitives we had a motto of **YOU KEEP WHAT YOU KILL.** You think you can take my home system with just ten ships. **We will decimate you if you try.**" Wait that wasn't right, he had a lot more to say than that and it was being jumbled all around.

Then a graphic popped up with writing in the multiple languages of his home planet. The graphics read: 'This is what we were offered, but we are not here to kill. We are here to recruit the next generation of heroes. Please bear with us and do not panic, we will not harm civilians, this is a practice of the tactics we will need to conduct to rescue civilians on inhabited planets in systems that are being invaded by the enemy of the alliance that you and we belong to. Your emergency services still work, and we have not blocked hospital or law enforcement communications. All other networks and devices are temporarily under our control, we will return them back to their regularly scheduled programming after this test of your system's emergency defense networks.'

The countdown popped up again but stopped with three seconds remaining and the video jumped to a previous point in the conversation, Again, the ambassador was shown speaking at the meeting, **"You have done your job,** you gave us the weapons and tools we need to defend ourselves. **You claim to be able to defend us,** but you come to us not just asking for more people and equipment, but with your hat in hand

offering nothing other than more empty promises that only you will be able to stop this enemy from wiping us out. We haven't seen anything of your capabilities except for a few examples of **some stupid tactics** that usually result in more deaths for our people than your own. **Yet, you want to control the networks of my home world** like some kind of Gods from the past and **we're supposed to grovel at your feet and beg for rescue? *I think not.***"

"You think we didn't hone those skills we tried to pass on with our own blood? Every single one of those troops of yours that died did so because they did not listen to their instructors, which is why we have **a pass or die grading system for all** recruits. If you ask any of your integrated officers that passed why that is, they will tell you that **our Marines live and die, not by their own efforts, but by the efforts of those to his left and his right.**"

Again, there was some heavy editing, and unbeknownst to the Draconic peoples the music was looped to continue playing in the background. "The Joint Chiefs in charge of the Terran Military hereby decrees the following. We will take the Ssnarg home system using the same number of ships that we used to develop our tactics on Terra Prime. We authorize the Ssnarg defense forces to use deadly force against our troops as we enter their system. We will eliminate their defensive systems and land ground forces in a minimum of one major city on each of the major land masses upon the home planet's surface, in five hours or less of entering the system. There will be no killing of any of their civilians through direct or indirect fire of our weapons or actions of our troops. If we fail to do so in the time limit given we will accept defeat and follow the commands of the Ssnarg peoples in all matters regarding military tactics. If our force is destroyed, we will not be brought back without a unanimous vote of approval by all races of the alliance. However, if the landing force is capable of fulfilling its goals then the alliance races will be bound to honor the agreements laid out in the renegotiated terms set forth by the Ssnarg Empire and the Terran Forces for the conditions of the Terran Forces joining the alliance." Who was editing this thing was all the ambassador could think right now. The countdown popped up again and this time it ended with a graphic that said in multiple languages, 'We will now begin the test of your Emergency System's Defenses. Please remain calm as this is only a test.'

Of course they cut out the threat that had been issued; they were trying to play themselves up as the good guys in all of this. Wait a minute, if this was being played on every device in the system like the Terrans said they would, that must mean they were in the system. As that thought hit him a squad of imperial guards came bursting out of the council chambers running for the front doors. One of them spotted him and yelled, **"There he is!"** As one they turned and headed straight for him causing him to feel a cold shiver run along the length of his spine from the fear in his mind to the tip of his tail.

The video feed swapped to that of portals opening up right next to the stellar gate and a Golden Eagle's head was appearing through the portal as the guards surrounded him. "Um, can I help you?" was all he could think of asking, but hardly noticed that most around him thought it came out as more of a squeak.

"You're coming with us," the lead guard said as every device in the Grand Hall began playing 'Silent Running' by The Hidden Citizens.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: HOWDY NEIGHBOR

A slow methodical beeping began before a woman ever so softly asked "Can you hear me?" and the song signaled the Olympus slowly entering the system and a timer popped up below it with three hours and thirty-two minutes left as it was counting down from five hours. At the end of the four-minute song all of the ships were in the system with the Olympus out front, the two heavy cruisers Hades and Athena on her rear flanks,

Graphic popped up in the center of the broadcast with Home Team and a zero next to it, a Visitor's Team and a twenty-five below it, one point for each of the asteroids that had been destroyed, there was also a foul counter next to both team's score. Thousands of fighters began pouring out of the carriers, cruisers and Olympus as the woman began singing "They will stop degrading us."

By time the drums began their thundering pace the two forces were closing in on weapons range, and the pause in the music coincided with the calm before the storm. As the music resumed the fighters began scrambling with the defenders who were hell bent on destroying the large capital ships.

The fighting was so brutal and intense that the song ended as Helena gave another order, "The difference between a dream and a nightmare is the direction the dragon breathes its fire. Let's see what the Sandman has in store for us this night." The fighters were bobbing and weaving in and out of the enemy forces in teams destroying defenders in droves during each pass as the electric guitars announced Rina Sawayama's rendition of 'Enter Sandman.' The defenders meanwhile had kept pushing to get to the larger ships and were barely fighting back against the Terran fighters. This had been deemed necessary by their command staff as it would be required to defend the system. The Terran fighters that were outnumbered five to one and were all too happy to let them keep up that tactic. As the capital ships began entering into weapons range of the fighter craft their shields began flaring blue and red from the different kind of attacks the fighters threw at them. What the defenders did not understand is the battleships' shields and armor were tough enough to withstand the smaller crafts weapons. The point defense cannons that opened up on the fighters as they were forced away from the protective cone provided by the fleet's decision to not inadvertently hit the planet's surface was a different matter.

The visitor's display screen swapped from the sides of the big ships and the battle around them to gun sight cameras from different angles showing the fighters being tracked until the planet was no longer visible behind them, then came the decimation of the fighter from either a single artillery burst, or a stream of plasma infused tracers being poured into the fighter like a laser beam that kept carving them into ever smaller pieces. The tracers weren't there to assist the gunners in hitting their targets as much as it was a signal to friendly craft of the danger posed by friendly fire. The defenders figured this out too late as the Terran fighters had gotten in between them and the planet and were hammering them from behind as they tried to get in close with the capital ships' noses. A few tried ramming the capital ships but were rammed themselves by the Terran fighters swirling around the capital ships like a bait ball of lethal fish. Each time a Terran fighter was destroyed in protecting the capital ships from kamikaze style attacks the kill count on the home team side was increased. It was clear to anyone watching that the home team was losing badly, 1,587 to 56 before the forces from the moons got within range of the ships' defensive guns. With no planet in front of them, the moons designated as military occupied with zero civilians, there was no mercy asked or given from the visiting team. By time the song ended the kill count on the Visitor's side was spinning rapidly and the Home Team's score was ticking over once every second or two.

The admiral was tired of playing nice and this showed when she went off script as the visiting team video swapped to an image of her sitting with one leg over the arm of her captain's chair. "I'm bored, **Helena to Cerberus.**"

"Go for Cerberus." Came the reply.

"I want those moons." Came Helena's command the Cerberus and Hydra turned their sides towards the two moons as they began spinning along their Z-axis as Tango Alpha Tango's version of 'In My Time of Dying' began thumping across the airwaves. The Terran fighter craft broke off any engagements between the

dropships and the moons and began scrambling to get out of the way, even to the point they were running from dog fights. The singer announced, “All I ask of you is to take my body home,” and the bolts for the huge 50-ton pyramid shaped blocks of armor began releasing and hurtling their payloads flat-side first towards the lunar surfaces. The Terran fighter craft began swarming around the pyramids and forming a shield wall against any enemy fighters that were able to get out of the way of the wall of death the dropships expelled armor now formed as it hurtled towards lunar bases. The defending fighters were now caught with the choice of retreat in the direction they had come into their own guns, run face first into a wall of impenetrable armor, or try and go around into the thicket of Terran fighter craft that were swarming along the edges of the armor waves like schools of hungry sharks. The heavy Mechs of the Cerberus began launching with the second chorus of “Well, Well, Well.” The remainder of the song was allowed to play as the pyramids and fighters cleared a path for the rest of the payload to follow. The one or two defending fighters that managed a miracle of flying skills and squeezed in between the pyramids were obliterated by the hundreds of heavy mechs that were flying feet first a few thousand yards behind the pyramids.

Next in the que was Imagine Dragon’s ‘Believer,’ and the bolts holding the hover tanks in place began to pop in time with the thrumming of the drums marking the dropships beginning their second contribution to winning the bet. When the singer announced “First things first” the explosive bolts holding the troop transports began popping loose and following suit. “Third things third,” saw the release of the MOABs immediately afterwards and used as kinetic drone strikes because no one wanted to set off massive explosions in a facility they intended to keep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: KNOCK, KNOCK

The pyramids on the Cerberus’ side did not have to maintain any specific flight path as the moons were designated as military only targets and the fighters from the Terran forces did not bother trying to correct the flights of these pyramids. As the choir sang “Pain” for the first time, the pyramids began to slam into the lunar surfaces. With no atmosphere around the moons, they were allowed to slam flat side first anywhere on the lunar surfaces, and that triggered the devices to act like shape charges. Blowing huge craters in the surface and launching the heavier and stronger core used to hold the pyramid to the hull of the ship like penetrators, explosives split the outer casing like a sabot round and buried itself several hundred yards into the surface of the moon through shear rock, base superstructure, or defenders unlucky enough to be caught in the wrong spot at the time. The ones that landed on the pointy end would be used during the reconstruction as reactive armor plating for the superstructure to be built underneath them. While the MOABs decimated huge swaths of the glass aero-domes that were used to provide luxurious views for parks, warehouses and living quarters on the lunar surface, dozens of defenders’ bodies were seen being sucked out into the void of space from the glass enclosures.

The video and music cut away again to a scene from the original meeting six months ago: “Ambassador, we’re trying to explain this peacefully...” Admiral Helena Andropolis began before being cut off by the Ssnarg Ambassador.

“Females of your race should learn that they are to be seen and not heard,” The Ambassador growled.

The camera view returned to the bridge of the Olympus where the Admiral was grinning directly into the camera. **“Female Marines are** descendants from the warriors of the past known as **Amazons. It took a demi-god to bring them to heel;** but like this fleet, that is Greek mythology. So are the two Fifteen Hundred strong Amazon Landing Teams that are about to claim both lunar bases for remodeling into something worth

teams finished it quickly. As the teams pushed past the halfway point into the hallway, the shotgunners would push to the front and the snipers would drop to the back row to guard the rear so the front lines would be ready to suppress the corners of the next hallway.

The hallway teams would pause at each doorway into the rooms so teams with machine pistols and automatic shotguns or rifles could clear the rooms before pushing up to the next set of doors. The team on the side with a door would drop to the rear of the formation to watch the direction they had just come from as the room clearing team pushed up to the door. Once they were ready to enter, the front member of the room team would toss in the two grenades, ready their weapon and when the grenades went off lead the charge into the room. As soon as the grenades went off the hallway teams would push past the room to watch the next doorway or hallway corner. Corners were taken in a manner that resembled a column left or column right maneuver with the Marine closest to the corner having crept forward to the corner with a set of grenades ready to be tossed if needed.

A spiteful base commander ordered the detonation of the powerplant and the ammunition magazine in the primary quarters of one base wiping out ninety percent of Landing Team Alpha because they were approaching the command section using those tactics. Alpha team had been lost due to the base commander and his troops' willingness to take the enemy with them, and Alpha's desire to capture as much of the base intact as possible by pushing room to room through the hallways. Both commanders were given respect over the video feed by Landing Team Bravo's commander when she was warned of the issue. Since the Marines had not been given maps of the interior of the bases, the two landing teams had chosen different approaches in how they would clear the bases. However, Bravo team had been able to eliminate the command staff prior to similar orders being given and were able to lock down most of the troops in their habitats without the need to fight them by breaching their way through outer and interior walls, not worrying if entire sections were depressurized killing everyone inside. The magazine room and reactor rooms were sealed off, so the Marines forced the system to activate emergency venting procedures to vent the atmospheres inside of them into space, killing all of the staff inside the rooms before they had the opportunity to pull off a similar suicide defense.

After that the Bravo Team Commander signaled the Marines and outside units to begin capture or kill orders with the Marine Corps' namesake song 'Hellhounds' by King 810, and they started to round up the office dwellers, cooks, and other personnel that did not think they would ever have to fight for their lives and had never been trained for it, if one of them in a room tried something stupid the teams would just blow a hole in the wall and vent everyone and everything in it into the void. The remains of the base that Alpha team was supposed to take was cleansed by fire through the diligent use of hellfire missiles launched in volleys from the troop transports into any opening that even looked like it might be connected to the base on the lunar surface. The five-story-tall five-hundred-ton heavy mechs were brought into areas of suspected deep structures to conduct jumping jacks using their thrusters until the surface collapsed indicating that the structure underneath it had too. If the Ssnarg wanted to see it destroyed before surrender or capture, the Marines were happy to help them.

With twenty seconds of the song left Helena gave her next command, "Hades, we need an Embassy to receive our hosts for dinner to finish our talks, and recruitment centers around the planet. See to it." The commander's response was "Aye, Aye Ma'am," and Morning Ritual's rendition of 'Bad Moon Rising' began to play.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: DINNER INVITATIONS AND RECRUITMENT

hover tanks as they flew away, then they flipped over to come back to assume positions with the heavy. As the song ended the call came out from the Olympus, “Helena to Wayward Angel.”

Surprised that she knew his name and that his team had managed to sneak onto a transport headed for the ground rang out as Wayward responded, “**Ma’am?** Go for Wayward.”

“Go help our friends understand that they are encouraged to accept an invitation to dinner at our embassy.”

“**Aye, Aye Ma’am,**” was the only response he could legally give, and ‘Army of Me’ by Anti-Clone began to play over the broadcast. Wayward rested a nerf gun on top of his shoulder and shook his head. He should have known that they hadn’t been as sneaky as they thought they had been, which is why they were standing where they were. He folded his helmet into its retention position, motioned to his team, and yelled over the sound of the landing hover tanks and hovering transports, “You heard the lady. We’re Oscar Mike.” They turned as one and started walking towards the Grand Hall’s front entrance, the video of the visiting team focused on them from the point of view of the heavy mech until it was taken up by a small recon drone released by a hover tank.

Two guards were standing at the doors and one of them lowered a ceremonial spear towards the team as they approached. The look on his face showed his utter confusion when the orange foam dart bounced off his forehead and he watched it fall to his feet before looking back up. Bear stepped forward cocking his nerf rifle again and said, “Don’t make me hurt you.” Bear was only six-foot-two but inside his drop armor he stood slightly taller than the guard, and his armor was designed to take small arms fire. The near eight-foot-tall guard was used to being the smallest person in a conflict, and he forced his face into a mask of determination in front of the superior force.

The heavy pilot saw all of this playing out and turned his mech towards the door, raised an arm so the barrel of his particle accelerator cannon on it was pointed in their direction and asked, “Need me to open it for you?”

Wayward glanced over his shoulder and said, “Sir. **No thank you, sir.** I think one of them is smart enough to see how this is going to play out and will open it for us.” He then turned back to the two guards and smiled as big of a grin as he could. “**That way we don’t have to** damage such a beautiful and historic building.”

The guard, who had not moved yet, grabbed his buddy by the shoulder and tried to drag him out of the way. When the first guard glared at him he pointed at the scoreboard on the jumbotron in the park and said, “Look at the kill count. They are getting in no matter what, and we are not clones. They have said repeatedly that they will not hurt anyone that does not attack them. Now, get the hell out of their way and don’t be a dumbass.”

The first guard growled at his coworker but quickly glanced over his shoulder, when the second went wide eyed and large pupiled staring over his shoulder at loud clacking noises coming from behind him. When he turned, the Marines had dropped the Nerf rifles and were loading then fixing bayonets on automatic assault rifles. The real fear came when the hover tanks began to turn in their direction while the transports dropped down to hover above the hover tanks and the heavy. The transports opened their missile bays up to show racks full of hellfire missiles and the nose cones on the gun pods peeled back to show they were bristling with barrels of autocannons and plasma ejectors. Both guards dove off the side of the steps to ensure they were far enough out of the way.

The armed and armored team got into formation and fell into step on the move as they entered into the Grand Hall unimpeded. The view on both screens jumped to different angles from inside the throne room. One camera was fixed on the area in front of the council sitting at their judicial benches, and the second showed the doors leading from the Grand Council Chambers to the outside world. The doors burst open and the Marine who had kicked them stepped to the side and resumed his position at the front of the right column. Two unconscious imperial guards slid across the floor on their backs and the two Marines responsible for throwing them hustled back to the rear corners of the formation behind Wayward as he led the left of the two columns into the Chambers.

Individually they did not make much noise but as they marched in unison each step thundered with the drums of the music and were all the more impressive. As the Marines marched in in two columns, the singer was informing the listeners that their rescue squad was too exhausted, and they slowed to extremely slow movements like they were being played in super slow mode or moving through congealed molasses as they began performing a modified 'To the Winds March.' Wayward turned at a forty-five-degree angle to the right to move to the center of the walkway before turning back towards the Councilors, and the team split into three rows of three perfectly spaced and aligned to form a box centered behind him without a spoken command or hand-signal which impressed many of the spectators. How it had been done had been attributed to using AIs, comms, or some other trick, but every Marine knew it was a tradition as old as the original Marine Corps Silent Drill Team. A hundred paces from the daises the Marines resumed normal speed for two steps before stopping by slamming their right feet into place next to their left and started marching in place as they slowly brought their weapons from their shoulders into the saluting position. When their hands slammed into the last position their feet slammed into place and they froze solid.

Wayward continued forward two paces, stopped, and saluted with his rifle sharply at the same time as the team completed theirs with the last beat of the song. He then announced as clearly and eloquently as possible, "**Honored hosts**, it is my great pleasure to invite all of you to our embassy for a feast to celebrate our alliance and to conduct formal negotiations. We have begun constructing our embassy in an area that has been previously unused and hope you don't mind us picking a place at random for its construction." The visitor's screen swapped to an aerial view of a desert scene where the pyramids from the Hydra had landed and were blast welded together to form a molten flat platform, transport ships were seen dropping off supplies on the glass covered ground before returning to the Olympus for more.

"We have recruiting stations setup in the central parks of the twenty-five heaviest populated centers around the planet but will happily relocate them once approvable accommodations can be made." The home team side was showing the interior of the Grand Hall which had never been aired to the general population of the entire alliance before and most were seeing inside it for the first time in their lives. The clock stopped counting down at two hours, thirty-nine minutes and twenty-four seconds remaining. "Your emissary was less than cordial when we asked for his assistance in these, and other Alliance related legal matters. We ask that you give us seventy-two hours to make a suitable encampment to host the dinner for the celebration of our alliance and the first Marine Corps Ball to ever be celebrated away from the Sol System in recognition of this historic event."

Wayward and his team dropped their salutes, spun on their heels, and began marching for the doors as J2's rendition of 'Lean on Me' began playing. The council was still sitting on their thrones watching them leave without having ever been given a chance to utter a word. After the Terrans closed the doors behind them on their way out, the screens merged into one as one of the Councilors motioned to a guard and the Draconic Ambassador was dragged in front of them by the Imperial Guards who forced him to his hands and knees.

When the woman began singing the lyrics, “lean on me when you’re not strong,” a graphic replaced the video feeds and score board banner saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you are of the age of majority and would like the opportunity to participate in the defense of your home system and that of the alliance systems, please go see one of the recruiters nearest you. Just look for the big shiny robot that is standing tall to let you know where to go.” The graphic had an image of a heavy mech with both arms up standing in front of the Grand Hall in the background and two fingers raised on each hand. “We are currently accepting all participants who are willing to participate and will be providing you with free transportation, housing, and meals as you undergo an intensive training session on Terran Prime with many of the seasoned veterans that just arrived on your planet today. For those of you that are interested we will be broadcasting footage of a demonstration of many of the combat specialties that was filmed on Terran Prime. Check out the new Alliance Military Network app that is now installed on all of your electronic devices.”

This was allowed to remain visible for a few seconds and then the graphic swapped to this: “Do not feel like you can take up arms and serve in a combat role but still want to serve to help the cause, we need payroll clerks, cooks, mechanics, engineers, doctors, waitresses and every other kind of occupation you can think of to keep a small city of a million running inside ships like the Olympus and Valhalla. Our recruiters will be happy to help you with that too. So, head on out and see them today, or come visit us at our new embassy as soon as we have it completed in about seventy-two hours. We now return you to your previously scheduled programming.”

After a few seconds passed the song ended, the network traffic was returned to its previous owners’ and many news anchors were caught off guard as they had also been watching the feed from the Terrans like everyone else. The other governments in the alliance were watching as the scenes unfolded as the Continuum had alerted them and then began broadcasting the stream on the Continuum networks to every planet in the alliance as it happened. Immediately following the conclusion many of them started planning to have space available for the Terran Embassy on their home worlds, and several of the smaller outpost planets even contacted the Continuum to offer places for Terran training facilities, construction yards or embassies as well. Noone wanted to piss off the force that had just proven they could take an entire system without harming a single civilian while decimating an entire army of twenty-five thousand with less than one thousand lost.

The general public on many over-crowded planets had a different reaction, they ate it up. The underdogs had shown up, wiped the floor with some of the most pretentious assholes in the galaxy, and then offered free meals and training to anyone else that wanted to learn how to do it. Office workers that were bored with their dead-end jobs, people that were facing other crises in their lives and just wanted or needed a do over, saw this as their chance to get away from it all and start over. One Terran described it as the French Foreign Legion on a Galactic scale. It was weeks before anyone talked about anything else and the Terrans found themselves having trouble keeping up with demand in the training departments. Every veteran became an instructor, and every blooded recruit became a team leader to conduct training ops for the fresh recruits.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: PASS OR DIE TRYING

A few months later the next batch of recruits were being brought in through the hanger bay and they were eager to see the massive machines the Terrans had rigged up for training. The training tanks were 20-foot-tall spheres lined up in rows with catwalks linking the tops together where the pilots and officers would be

training in operating different flight equipment from transports, fighters, MOABs, and even the Valhalla herself. They were excited that they had earned one of the elite spots as a pilot where they would never face an actual threat of physical violence, many of their families had paid small fortunes to the Continuum's Terran Rebuilding Fund to ensure they got this assignment. Which is why they all turned when a Terran on one of the catwalks yelled, **"ON YOUR RIGHT!"** When the recruits turned to see what he was yelling at they saw a Terran in a flight suit pointing a sidearm directly into the face of a turning Magnath. **"Maybe your dumbass can learn to stick with your wingman when a fucking ant bigger than you is chewing your leg off as a grunt.** You are hereby demoted to the rank of private, and you will be transferred by respawn to the infantry training facilities in Tropical Siberia." With that he shot the Magnath in the neck obliterating his head and the upper half of his torso with one shot.

"Let that be a lesson to all of you." Came the loud clear voice of Marine Corps Senior Drill Instructor (SDI) Master Gunnery Sergeant Cargile standing on the floor at the end of several columns of yellow footprints painted on the floor. "Welcome to hell week. You commit a major fuck up like that more than three times and you will be transferred to another unit by respawn. I will personally send every single one of you maggots to respawn myself if you give me a reason. You all now have one strike against you today because you were told to get on the yellow footprints after entering this room. Get three strikes in one day and you go for respawn. Talk back to one of your instructors and you go for respawn. Try to attack of your instructors and I will send him to respawn if he doesn't spawn your dumbass first." Over every loudspeaker in the bay Paul Hardcastle's song 'Nineteen' started playing its familiar techno music as the SDI continued. "Welcome to Hell. Now get you disgusting fungus farms on my yellow footprints right mother-fucking now recruits. Twenty, Nineteen, Seventeen, Fifteen."

A swarm of other Marine Corps Drill Instructors came out from behind tool lockers, silos, and other equipment yelling at the top of their lungs and getting as close to the recruits' ears as possible yelling things like, "Move your fucking ass or I am going to use my boot to move it for you, dumbass." For the next four hours the recruits were similarly guided through every step of the process of learning how to get into formation, where to stand, how to stand, where to look, where not to look, when to answer, how to answer, and what to think. The music never let up in pace, volume, or intensity, and neither did the instructors. They stopped for a twenty-minute breakfast four hours later.

On the other side of the island T was giving a similar speech to her recruits only with a personal twist. "Welcome to my range. You will eat, sleep, and train here on my range. You will be respectful and attentive to my instructors while on my range. You will pay attention to everything you do on my range. If you fail to pay attention to what you are doing on my range you will be sent for respawn." An instructor next to her threw a baseball at someone kneeling in the background inside a three walled structure. The instructor missed the individual, but the baseball hit the wall next to them and they got spooked, after a quick squeak there was a loud boom as whatever they were kneeling over blew up. "Shit!" was heard just after the first boom and a second boom went off and debris came flying out of another three-walled structure to the left of it. The recruits were given their second exposure to the horrific view of someone being turned into a pink mist in as many seconds, but this view came from the side of a blast thus they got to see more of the gore. Another individual down range jumped up and started sprinting out of a similar building yelling "Fuck this." T raised her right hand displaying a detonator in it so all of the new recruits could see it before yelling out, "Piss me off and I will send you for a respawn." With that she pressed a button and the entire field the trainee was running through erupted into a fog of flames that rose up from the ground to about six feet high. The recruits watched as parts of the individual that had been running was now flying above the flames and 'Black Widow' by In This Moment began playing.

On a nearby beach Wayward had recruits rolling around in the sand at the edge of the water doing sit-ups into the crest of the waves that broke on top of them. “Stop fucking chattering your damn teeth and answer me dumbass. Who gave you permission to drop my boat into the water? **What? I can’t hear you.** You and your whole fucking boat team must be a bunch of the dumbest fucking worms I have ever seen. Crawl your dumbasses back to the tree line and we will see what you can remember about how to get into your armor before those fucking raptors make it back over here.” The recruits were crawling as fast as they could through the sand, and just out of their sight Wayward’s team members were driving a small herd of raptors in circles until the recruits had a chance to get to their gear. If half of the recruits took up weapons and guarded the other half as they got their armor on they should not take too many casualties. Wayward could only chuckle as he heard one of T’s new favorite songs in the distance begin playing.

If they failed to protect each other, they would respawn in whatever MOS the Corps or Navy needed at the time, the port-a-johns needed cleaning out after all, more than likely they would just respawn back into a new infantry training platoon. These guys had only gone thirty-two hours without sleep, they should be good for one more jog over to the obstacle course where they will start tomorrow off. Well tomorrow is subjective as they would only be allowed four hours to eat, bathe and sleep before their training started again. Hopefully, they will remember that they have to have people on watch for the whole four hours. It was such a pain in the ass to lure the predators to them last time they all went to sleep without someone on watch.

“**Snatch!** You’re not dragging your dick through the sand again **Snatch!** Are you wagging your ass in the air to invite one of your distant cousins to mate with you, **again?!? Get your fucking ass down before I shoot your tail off! Again!**” Wayward took real pleasure in riding the former ambassador until he tried something stupid. He had money on it taking the idiot another five respawns to figure out how teamwork would save his life in a situation like this, and another five before he actually graduated. Doc was betting that the idiot would get to a near passing grade in an MOS before being respawned into a different MOS for all of them just to fuck with him.

T reported that it took her ten times before he broke down and started listening to her and another eight before he almost passed, had someone else not flubbed the final task in which their entire team had to disarm a nuke he would be an EOD specialist right now. Before that, the Commanding Officer of the piloting school just repeatedly shot him in the face until the pistol went dry as Snatch was stepping out of the cryopods. It took the AIs ten tries to figure out to ask what his offense was. They were informed that he would never be given an opportunity to attend Officer Candidacy School. Throughout Marine Corps history there had been very few mutinies, all were race related, and the Terrans had learned from history and wanted to make damn sure that was never given an opportunity to be repeated. Wayward thought he would provide them with a little helpful insight into what was about to happen, “**Snatch!** Since you obviously need to work on your low crawl ability you will low crawl a patrol around your team until they are all dressed. **Am I understood Snatch?**” Wayward timed the push on the Snatch’s hip with the bottom of his boot to push him face first into the sand when he opened his mouth to answer. “**I said get your ass down, dumbass.**”