

CHAPTER ONE: 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. We gave you six months to raise an army to work with us so we can teach you how to defend yourselves, this will let us take the fight to the enemy. What we have seen from you so far 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." Admiral Nimitz continued before Admiral Andropolis could vent a fiery reply.

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 Pa'Leed 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," the Admiral shrugged his shoulders during a pause, "no big deal we already had our second chance, but if you lose who is going to come along in 150 millennia to wake you up from extinction?" 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 he 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 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 filmed 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 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 General Pa'Leed 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, 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."

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?"

"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 Als 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 Als that were taught the ways of war and could only hope to retain these Als 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 Al 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 TWO: 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 even noticed when she left out of 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 the Olympus was missing, her fleet along with her. The Terran home system now only had a small cadre of half-finished ships protecting it with the Valhalla as the other originals of the Terran fleet we 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 had passed, and he was going 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 just 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 an area full of the true leaders of this powerful race, everyone was either staring at a handheld device of 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. 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 graphic of a countdown that began at five seconds, at three it flicked over to a replay of the meeting where Wayward had explained the use of music in their plans for dealing with comms jamming.

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 two, 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 after showing the one, then the video jumped to a previous point in the conversation, "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.

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." Again, there was some heavy editing, unbeknownst to the Draconic peoples the music was looped to continue playing in the background.

"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." The countdown popped again and this time it ended with a graphic that said in multiple languages, 'We will now begin the test of you 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 out 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, and he was starting to feel a little uncomfortable.

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.

"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 THREE: 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 Ares and Athena on her rear flanks, the dropships Cerberus and Hydra were offset behind her, and four heavy carriers escorting the drops ships from the rear to protect them from ambush. The fifth heavy carrier emerged from the umbral shadow of the first uninhabited planet away from the star system's center, where it had begun the five-hour countdown as it emerged into the system to take over the communication networks.

The gunners on one of the asteroids that had been hauled in close to the home planet to protect it from invasion opened fire on the fleet at a range and angle that was less than optimal. The gunnery crews on the asteroid celebrated when a massive sparkling rainbow of colors signified a direct hit on the Olympus and the Ares. When the brief light display from the shields was over the ships turned their noses towards the home planet, and gun crews were confused because it was clear that the ships were unharmed. They hadn't even paid enough attention to the Terran instructors to understand that the ranges they had just fired at were outside of the range of the medium sized emplacements that would fit on these asteroids. When the Eagle's eyes began to glow red it was clear what was about to happen, a dubbed in intro to selki girl's 'God of War' began to play and the video was replaced with a graphic that said, "We provided an extra twenty-four hours for your leadership to properly prepare for this. We can only hope that they listened to us and used clones only in their defense forces."

A woman's voice came over the video feed and she said, "This is Marine Expeditionary Force Leader Helena. I am requesting that you stand down, we do not wish to harm anyone but will defend ourselves as we establish our embassy here in accordance with Alliance law. If you fire upon us again we will fire back." The asteroid bases commenced firing at this request for them to cease-fire. The first of the rounds from the gun batteries began landing as the singer sang 'God of War' for the first time and the ships were engulfed in large missile explosions that kicked off a shower of shield harmonics that created the look of St. Elmo's Fire streaming lightning bolts between the ships' shields with the full spectrum of the aurora borealis as a backdrop. The guns sped up their firing with the speed of the drums and they continued to fire until the song ended. Thirty seconds later the color show from the shields ended and the video showed the Terran fleet with a brilliant ball of light blue light in the eagle's beak of the Olympus' massive figurehead. The Ares and Athena were charging up their main guns made obvious from the bright strobing red lights picking up speed along the spine of the ships from the rear towards their noses where the massive rail guns protruded from the hull, the carriers began opening their hanger bays and the two drop ships started to slowly rotate along their Z-axis.

On the Bridge of the Olympus, the video showed the Admiral in charge of the Valhalla's sister ship as she sat down and gave a brief sigh before saying, "Very well, a revolution it is then. Civilians are encouraged to seek shelter at this time. We will do our best to end this as quickly and peacefully as possible." The comms officer reached over and pressed the button that started playing 'Revolution' by Unsecret. The Olympus was the first to return fire, as she did the video split into two sides on one the Terran fleet was unblemished, and on the other the entire asteroid that housed the guns that had fired upon them first was obliterated with a single hit from the Olympus' main gun. The ships guns began decimating the asteroids and paid extra special attention

to target any massive debris that floated towards the planet's atmosphere. Two asteroids were ignored and allowed to fire upon the ships until they orbited around the planet enough that they were no longer directly in between the ships and the planet which allowed the ships to fire upon them without the risk of hitting the planet by accident. A single glancing shot each from the Olympus' main gun spun them away from the planet and the heavy cruisers began shredding them while assisting with keeping large debris from falling to the planet's surface.

When the Olympus detected that all of the asteroids were destroyed the guns stopped firing and the weapons officers began scanning for the next threat. It didn't take long for fighters to come swarming up from the planet's surface and from bases on the two moons circling the around the other side of the planet. "Fighters detected, Ma'am." The screen split into two, one side showing Helena and the other showed the fighter swarms coming up from the planet.

"Fine, they want to see what an uprising is? Let's let the small fries play, see to it comms." With the press of a virtual button Damned Anthem's song 'Uprising' began playing over the airwaves and the defender's side of the screen started showing the fighter swarms moving in on the fleet. "Show 'em the kill count please." A small Graphic popped up 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. The 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 was ending 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 strayed from the protective cone that was provided by the fleet's decision not to 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 and then came the decimation of the fighter from either a huge artillery burst, or a stream of tracers being poured into the fighter like a laser beam. 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, 587 to 56 before the forces from the two moons got within range of the ships' defensive guns. With no planet in front of them and the moons designated as military occupied with zero civilians, there was no quarter 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. "I'm bored, Helena to Cerberus "

"Go for Cerberus." Came the reply.

"I want those moons." Came Helena's command and Cerberus turned her side towards the two moons as they began spinning faster and faster along their Z-axis while 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 bolts for the huge 50-ton pyramid shaped blocks of armor along the drop ships' hulls began releasing and hurtling their payloads flat-side first towards the lunar surfaces when the singer announced, "All I ask of you is to take my body home." The fighter craft began swarming around the wall of flying pyramids and formed 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 swarm of Terran fighter craft that were swarming along the edges of the armor waves like schools of hungry sharks. The heavy Mechs began launching with the second chorus of "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 "Second things Second" 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 FOUR: 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. 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. The heavier and stronger core, that was used to hold the pyramid to the hull of the ship, 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 pointy end down would be used during the reconstruction as armored 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 demigod 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 defending our future embassy with. Time to teach them a little biology Marines," came Helena's command and a 1950s era trumpeting introduction began playing followed by a male narrator's voice explaining about the Black Widow spider species. When the lesson ended the song began playing and the camera view split again showing the fighter battle on the left and the ground forces landing on the lunar surfaces on the right. Some transports were being used to carpet bomb the remains of the aerodromes with incursion teams. The fighting there broke out quick and heavy as some defenders were trying to conduct rescue operations for those trapped in buildings with air pockets.

The heavy mechs landed right behind the pyramid and MOAB strikes then began firing at the remaining gun platforms that had not gone silent yet. The hover tanks cruised into low lunar orbits like oversized fighters and began hammering the blast doors on the hangar bays with their main guns. The troop transports dropped the infantry Marines off as close to the hanger doors as possible while staying out of the hover tanks line of fire. The problem was the hover tank rounds were designed for armor penetration, and they were just punching massive holes through the doors and not really blowing them open with no atmosphere to detonate their explosives, until they were deeper and deeper within the bases. The heavy mech commander saw this and ordered the heavies to help out. A shot or two from the massive particle accelerator cannons mounted on the heavy mechs' arms and the doors turned to slag.

Once the doors were opened the Infantry Marines poured into the entrances and began pushing for the corridors that would give them access to the control rooms and other key facilities they would need to gain for the victory conditions set by their leaders. As the song began to wind down the resistance got heavier and the commander signaled breach tactics to change pace with an order to her Marines, "Let's teach 'em the beginning of our legend Ladies," and 'Centuries' by Fallot Out Boy began playing. The decision was made that the civilians on the planet's surface did not need to see the full gory details of the brutal close quarters combat that was taking place inside of the bases' corridors, so the camera feed was left to visible spectrum only and the first thing the ladies did was toss a flashbang and EMP grenade into a room to burnout all of the surveillance electronics to destroy any light sources. This had an added affect that the video from the gun cameras were the only view the civilians had of the fighting and it came in quick bursts of rapid gunfire muzzle flashes or steady views of intense peace that ended with a bright flash or burst of static and more strobing muzzle flashes. Occasionally a camera would be turned back on in a room when a corpsman would come through using shotgun blasts to the head to check for survivors and the rooms would be slowly illuminated by flashlight beams as they strode through the rooms of horror. The carnage that was revealed

left no doubt about the intensity of the fighting that was occurring from the strobes visible in the hallways when the corpsmen were the cameras' focus.

The Amazons faced their heaviest losses in the hallways pushing from room to room because of the nature of the type of terrain. They were subject to surprise attacks from turrets dropping down from the ceiling, defenders just sticking a weapon out of a doorway and using the spray and pray method of wasting ammo, and heroic charges of groups that wanted to prove their strength charging around a corner before hitting a wall of armed professionals. After they fought their way around a corner the bravest would be lying at their feet either dead or dying and the rest would be hiding in the rooms where the professionals in the hallways held the advantage. 'Animal I have Become' by Three Days Grace started to announce Bravo's capture of their base's command center and staff. Alpha Team updated their tactics as they pushed deeper into their base, sniper teams were brought to the front to watch the doorways and would shoot the weapons of the spray and prayer's hands as they popped out of the doors. Heavy machine gunners would be on their heels watching the ceiling panels waiting for the turrets to drop, with shotgunners right behind them because the first turret didn't deploy until after they were halfway into the hallway and killed three before it was destroyed. 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 slide to the center of the hallway watching the entryway of the closest door as the 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, after the grenades went off they would lead the charge into the room. As soon as the boom launched the room teams, the hallway teams would push past the room to watch the next doorway or hallway corner.

A spiteful base commander ordered the detonation of the powerplant and the ammunition magazine in the base Alpha Team was assaulting, wiping out ninety percent of Landing Team Alpha, and Landing Team Bravo's commander paid him respect over the video feed 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. Alpha's desire to capture as much of the base intact by pushing room to room through the hallways left them vulnerable to a scorched earth policy. However, Bravo team had been able to capture 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 walls, interior walls, or a combination of the two not worrying if entire sections were depressurized killing everyone inside, using scorched earth assault tactics. The magazine room and reactor rooms were sealed off, gravity was turned off to them, and emergency venting procedures were activated to vent the atmospheres inside of them into space, taking all of the staff inside the rooms with it before they had the opportunity to coordinate their interior defenses.

After that 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 surrendered or captured, the Marines were happy to help them.

With twenty seconds of the song left Helena gave her next command, "Let's change the pace of the music a little. Hydra, 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 FIVE: DINNER INVITATIONS AND RECRUITMENT

The video from the home team's side shifted to showing the fight for the planet's exosphere as the visitor's team side continued showing the brutality inside the base. The voices of the Marines inside the Hydra were overlayed on the video as they howled like packs of starving wolves chasing wounded prey every time the word "Bad" was sung. Entire sections of the defending fighters were destroyed as they were engulfed by the wall of pyramids headed towards the planet's surface from the Hydra. Terran fighters screamed in to slam themselves into any straying pyramids to nudge them back into the formation to try and prevent the massive blocks from destroying civilian structures on the ground, and each one lost like that was counted as a foul point for the Home Team. Fifty fully loaded MOABs swung past the pyramids as they broke into the atmosphere in order to clear the ground of any vegetation or other local wildlife that might later cause an issue in the selected area of a remote barren wasteland that had been chosen for the embassy. The plasma was expected to burn off the remaining chemical weapons residue that had rendered this portion of the planet unusable by the original inhabitants so long ago that it was now accepted as an uncorrectable tragedy.

The Continuum had provided a target area that was over a thousand square miles of desolation, but the Terrans were only going to clean up the central one hundred square miles to be cautious of not disturbing the ranches and farms nearby the impact area. An area ten miles wide by ten miles long and twenty feet deep would be incinerated with the plasma fires of the MOABs as they were on a delayed explosion to inject the plasma into the ground like a shallow fracking operation. After that, the fifteen hundred pyramids slammed home a few seconds later having been targeted to land in a one hundred by one hundred grid square that would form the foundation for the embassy, its landing zone and supporting facilities and a wall around them. Five MOABs fueled specifically for the task were trailing the pyramids to airburst over their center after they had landed to finalize the welding process, form a puddle smooth surface of molten slag, and to sterilize the pyramids and any dust that may have been kicked up by their landing.

"Beachhead established, ma'am." Reported the weapons officer aboard the Olympus when she received signal that the five cleansers had airburst over the target and the home team's side showed the short footage from before the first MOAB landed until the pattern of the pyramids was cooling after the cleansing strike. Meanwhile the visitors side continued to show the landing teams headed towards the atmosphere.

"Nice, we're ahead of schedule. Just the way I like it. Let's slow this down some more for our friends below. Let them know where and why we come to visit them." Helena responded and the comms officer began playing 'Out from the Deep' by Enigma. The video was swapped over to full screen showing the finished glowing red and reflective metal surface of the foundation for the Terran Embassy. A team of heavy mechs

landed on the four corners of the base, their supporting hover tanks landed forming lines in between then and the transport ships carpet bombed the area between the tanks and the cooling platform with combat engineers that began setting up defensive works immediately.

As the fighting inside the bases and the last song drew to a close the video swapped to that of a heavy mech that was falling towards the planet's surface. "Let our friends know that we have answered their call for defense please." Helena said and she felt that at this point she was just grandstanding for the camera. However, the comms officer played 'Answer the Call' by Hidden Citizens as ordered. The view split and the visiting team's camera view showed the flames from atmospheric entry fading away as a city's outline was revealed below its feet. When the young lady was expressing that they were willing to fight win or lose to answer the call, the home team view changed to a handheld portable device where the heavy was seen streaking through the atmosphere by the people who had come out of their shelters to see what was really going on. Hundreds of bright red fiery streaks were seen tearing through the atmosphere as fighters, heavies, hover tanks, and troop transports began breaking through the planet's atmosphere like shrapnel from an explosion in the night sky over the planetary capital city. The kill count on the Visitors' side was finally slowing down to a legible speed, yet it was still climbing at just under twenty-five-thousand. Meanwhile the kill count for the home team was only at nine-hundred and fifty but still ticked up once or twice every few minutes.

The view from the first heavy mech's feet rotated to an electronic dark spot among the city's skyline and then it cycled through several optical overlays to settle onto a mix of thermal and GPS mapping. When several Draconic shaped individuals were detected in the landing zone that the heavy intended to land in, the call went out over the local devices to request that they withdraw from the area. There was an avatar on every device attached to the Draconic shapes in the impact area, yelling at the owners of the devices to leave the area that they were in. Most of them ran without hesitation knowing that a big mech was about to land on top of them. Some however, wanted the Terrans to fail and were doing everything they could to let their death count for something.

The pilot inside the heavy mech slammed on the thrusters for upwards lift knowing he was burning them faster than they could recover and only had about sixty seconds at this burn rate before the heavy would fall out of the sky. The hover tanks assigned to that heavy sped downwards as quickly as they could, while the infantry dropped from the bellies of the transports on long heavy suspension cables attached to the airframe of their transports. The scout assigned to the heavy jumped off of the hull plating attached to its feet as an entry shield, flew above the heavy and grabbed the two tow strap cables that were attached to each shoulder to keep it from falling over in transit. As soon as the rear of the hover tanks were close enough he attached a cable to the tow hooks on the tanks and dove for the people that were refusing to leave. The hover tanks began throwing their full thrust against the pull of gravity on the heavy. When the hover tanks were hooked up and pulling, the troop transports came in with all of their Marines spy rigging from their cables and each Marine jumped onto the front of the hover tanks in mid-fall, attached the cables from the transports to the hover tanks then dove towards the citizens on the ground from hundreds of feet in the air. All of the engines and equipment were at their breaking point when the heavy came to a slow stop just ten feet above the

The Marines from the transports were aided by the huge wash of turbulence from the thrusters trying to keep the heavy from crushing the civilians. Two or three Marines would just grab the civilian, stand up in the turbulence and be carried out of the way by jet blasts. Once they rolled to a stop with the civilian locked in the middle of an armored ball of humanity, the Marines would spray something similar to quick-foam around the civilians' hands and ankles to trap them together so they couldn't cause any more problems. The video views

were split showing the different squabbles from the view of the heavy mech and from a camera on top of the Grand Hall for an overall picture of how the civilians were being handled. Those that did not resist were being treated politely and escorted to a safe distance with polite conversations. Those that did had straws shoved up their nostrils or into their mouths to form breathing holes before their jaws were hardened in foam when just their hands and ankles were not enough to stop them from trying to bite or spit in the faces of the Marines.

Once the spot was cleared the heavy was disconnected from the straps and allowed to drop to the ground, the resulting boom synched with the final bass thump of the song. The transports disconnected from the 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 In This Moment began to play over the broadcast. Wayward rested a net 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's reflective face plate into its retention position, motioned to his team, and called out over the sound of the landing hover tanks and hovering transports, "You heard the lady. We're Oscar Mike." His team turned as one and started walking towards the Grand Hall's front entrance while tossing their net guns to the side, 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 an 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 eight-foot-tall guard was not 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, "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 spun on him the second 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 and the home team's view swapped to a view from the front door as the Marines dropped the Nerf rifles and were loading then fixing bayonets on automatic assault rifles that had been locked onto their backs. The real fear came when the hover tanks began to turn their turrets in the direction of the doors, while the transports dropped down to hover above the hover tanks and the heavy mech. The transports opened their missile bays 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 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 singer was informing the listeners that their rescue squad was too exhausted, 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 hand column as they marched in. 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. The Marines marched in in two columns, slowed to extremely slow movements like they were being played in super slow mode with foot falls landing every third beat, then performed 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 Als, 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 up into the saluting position. When their hands slammed into the last position, their feet slammed into place, and they locked their bodies in place in the salute.

Wayward continued forward two paces at a normal pace, stopped, and saluted sharply at the same time as the team completed their salutes 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 acceptable accommodations can be made. Your emissary was less than cordial when we asked for his assistance in these, and other Alliance related legal matters." 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, twenty-seven minutes and thirty seconds remaining. "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 Chief Councilor 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. Both screens merged into the view of the interior as the woman began singing the lyrics, "lean on me when you're not strong" and 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 live feed of the heavy mech standing in front of the Grand Hall in the background. "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 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 because the Continuum had alerted them minutes after the attack began and then began broadcasting the stream on the Continuum networks to every planet in the alliance as the network as siezed. 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 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, and 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 recruit training departments. Every veteran became an instructor, and every blooded recruit became a team leader to conduct training ops for the fresh recruits.

CHAPTER FOUR: PASS OR DIE TRYING

The 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 man 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 you. Welcome to hell week. You fuck up like that more than three times and you will be transferred to another unit by respawn." Came the loud clear voice of Marine Corps Senior Drill Instructor (SDI) Gunnery Seargent Cargile standing on the floor at the end of several columns of yellow footprints painted on the floor. "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." Every loudspeaker in the bay came to life as Paul Hardcastle's remake of his own song 'Nineteen' and its techno beat began thrumming out as the SDI continued. "Welcome to Hell. Now get you disgusting fungus farms on my freaking yellow footprints right freaking now recruits. Twenty, Nineteen, Seventeen, Thirteen."

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, you maggot." 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. Then they stopped for a twenty-minute breakfast.

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. For the next sixteen weeks you will eat every meal here on my range, when I give you permission to you will sleep here on my range, and you will train here on my range for sixteen weeks or until you get killed and respawn. 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. The recruits were given their second exposure to the horrific view of someone being turned into a pink mist, 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 told you, you could 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.

"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. The Commanding Officer of the piloting school just repeatedly shot him in the face until the pistol went dry as he was stepping out of the cryopods. It took the Alsten tries to figure out to ask and be 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.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOME ON THE RANGE

When the acknowledgement signal chirped into the song to let Jack know that someone was wanting to talk to him, and 'La Grange' by ZZ Top was reduced to fifty percent volume so the speaker could be heard above it a voice was heard in the background saying, "He always has the best tunes playing when we fly over." Jack could only shake his head and chuckle at the young man's enthusiasm for the classics. Then the pilot of the craft spoke up "FedUps One to the Hen House, you available Jack?"

"Yeah Jason, I'm here what's up?" Jack replied.

"We have a special delivery for you. Just a drop on pass over if you approve." Came Jason's reply.

"Strange, I don't remember ordering anything to be delivered this month." Jack replied curious now, nobody wanted to come to the artic circle, which is one reason Jack chose to build his home here.

"I understand and have been assured that it would be welcomed and appreciated but have been sworn to secrecy." Jason replied.

"Oh really? How big of a secret is it?" Jack asked.

"Tall, dark, and brooding. You know the kind that won't remove their helmet or give a name," came Jason's reply.

"I guess you better drop him off in the center of the yard then," Jack replied. He was now moving to get his shotgun from behind the front door and went to sit on the front porch. "Tell Jimmy he can listen to the music on the way out if he likes it so much." Jack replied letting the pilot know that he would signal if there was trouble with the next song if needed.

"Will do, your package will arrive in 30 seconds. No signature required,"

"Thanks Jason."

Thirty seconds later an infantry drop suit landed in front of Jack's home and he nuzzled the shotgun across his lap to point in their general direction as he lit a cigarette. When the individual stood up he raised his helm and said. "is that anyway to greet an old friend?"

Jack slowly exhaled a stream of smoke as he eyed the man in front of him and said, "Depends on who's asking."

"I would prefer Chris Ledoux, but I know how you feel about country music, and I am quite sure Bon Jov would get me shot. So, how about we settle on Kid Rock." Cowboy said.

After a moment Jack stood up and rested the snotgun against the wall of the house near the front door then said "Jason, here's one for Jimmy since he likes the classics so much." With that he nodded to Cowboy and Afroman's 'Because I Got High' started playing. Then he spoke to Cowboy, "Take that clunky shit off before you come up on the porch. I just finished the floors, and I don't want them scuffed up or mud and snow tracked all over them before the spouses get to see it."

Cowboy's face broke into a huge grin as he began to get out of his armor, and he excitedly asked, "so it's really almost ready? I can't wait to see them again."

"I know right. I am worried Cookie won't like the location, but I am sure the others will love having us home at this age. So, when can I expect the rest of you to have your civies arrive?"

"I was waiting for you to let me know when you needed a hand here. I would have thought Bear's would have been here already. He left a few weeks ago on that replica Harley of his determined that he would make it all the way up here this time." Cowboy said as he hoped over the step up onto the porch.

"Oh, damn that reminds me." Jack said before stomping his foot on the porch three times. "Spot! Get some!" There was a deep rumbling growl for a brief second before a hacking choking came from under the porch and then the sound of a huge cat trying to cough up a hairball shook the floorboards that the men stood on. A few seconds of Cowboy standing there with a look of confusion on his face as Jack just grinned at him. When the hairball came up and landed in the yard it did so with a metallic clang, or actually the metallic ball that had a set of warped handlebars and two flat tires attached to it.

Cowboy was shocked and was struggling to understand what he was seeing for a second before he asked. "Is that..."

"Yeah, dumb fucker didn't let me know he was getting close and rode that loud ass thing right up to the door. Spot didn't take too kindly to having his nap disturbed by some noisy morsel, so he ate the big lug, bike and all. He should be back in the que to respawn in Alpha Point and might be catching a flight back up in a few days or weeks." Jack just shrugged as he didn't care either way. "Once he gets over being mad about all that." Jack said as he waved his hand in the general direction of the large, mangled motorcycle. Jack then stomped his foot on the porch and yelled, "Spot! Get some!" This time he snapped his fingers and there was a clang of metal in the distance like a door opening and a howl, and the music swapped to 'Cowboy' by Kid Rock. With that a huge hairy creature that was a cross between a Saint Bernard and a Komodo Dragon shot out from under the porch looked at Cowboy and growled then looked at Jack and sneezed. It then looked off in the direction of another howl, strolled over to the armor, sniffed it, hiked one of its rear legs to urinate on it, and then ran off in the direction of the howl. The suit of armor began hissing and smoke rose from where the paint was being eaten off of the metal of the armor. "I would suggest changing your desired intro theme."

"What, the, fuck, was, that." Cowboy said every word very slowly as if he had to struggle to get them to form.

"That's my new puppy Spot. He's the breeder I have picked out for your new K-9 teams. He's got too much of an attitude for military service but he's a good boy. I will work with his kids a little more to make sure they are more compliant before sending them down to you guys to train the Marines that will be working with them." Jack said with a little chuckle. A loud commotion came from around the corner of the house as a growling and barking fight broke out with lots of yelps and whining. Cowboy started to head in that direction before Jack reached out and gently took his arm, "Remember when Coombs got dosed with Viagra at the Turkish whore house?"

Pausing Cowboy looked Jack in the eyes and said, "Yeah."

"Imagine that at Spot's size and shape. It is not something you can't unsee and no amount of brain bleach will ever scour it from your nightmares." Both men shivered for a second before walking into the front door of the compound, most of it was still holo-projections at this point. "I chose the caldera of Yellowstone for several reasons. First and foremost, fuck y'all. Next time this bastard goes off y'all can pick someone else to wake up the rest of you lazy slobs. I don't plan on being around, let alone being some sleeping popsicle for some Als to wake up. Secondly, you can't beat having natural hot springs heating the whole building during

the wintertime and naturally feeding the jacuzzi tubs on every floor in the house and the infinity pool in the central sunroom's garden. The warm water will flow around through the channels in the floors heating the rooms nicely to 80 degrees and then runs to a cistern outside where it cools off before being fed back in as the cold-water supply. Since the water came up super-heated and is naturally chilled in the cistern outside it is almost cold enough to form ice."

The men crossed through what was clearly a living room as it had several huge couches along the walls and a few coffee tables nearby. The typical TV mounted on a wall was replaced by the 3d hologram player that was suspended from the center of the thirty-five-foot ceiling. "I am trying to figure out how we are going to clean the cobwebs out of the upper corners of the ceilings; because the wives will never let me hear the end of it if I bring them around without a solution to that problem before they get here." I don't know if you noticed it on the way in, but the place will be three stories tall and shaped as a hexagonal ring. Reason being, we have six team members, an apprentice for each team member, and most of us had adult children and grandchildren. Each side of the ring is larger than most mansions with three or four master suites and four or five grandkid suites on the upper floors. Six to twelve great-grandkids' bedrooms with three boys' and three girls' bathrooms and a summer kitchen on the second floor. A formal dining room, a living room like this one, hot tub and recreational room, an apprentice's suite, and several large guest bedrooms on the main floor. Of course, each floor also has a laundry room and enough frigging storage closets to house a platoon or two, a garage nig enough for a battalion in the basement, and a front door. I can customize any of them to meet y'alls specific tastes before the construction on your wing begins."

"You do remember..." Cowboy started before getting chocked up.

"I know brother. Which is why I am glad you're on of the first ones here. I know it had to hurt losing Angel and the kids like you did, but the team is back together, and we will help y'all. She can come back, and while there is nothing we can do about the little one, Junior and his wife can come back as well and try again. Until you can fill up the rooms with your own family there are a ton of kids that are waiting on the Valhalla for their chance to find a forever home, and well," he paused as he looked his friends in the eyes. "Here there will be plenty of room for them and plenty of room to grow with them. Remember, with respawns we have all of eternity to get it right this time."

Cowboy just glanced his way and grimaced a smile at his friend. "Seems you have already thought of everything."

Jack busted out laughing and said, "Hardly, I am sure there's plenty of things I can tell the women that you forgot while I was managing the important details," he squawked as Cowboy shoved him sideways in jest before he continued, "but we can work on that together before we bring them here. One of the main things I want to get is a respawn point a little closer to us than Ashville, but I really don't mind having to travel to Denver to meet formal visitors. I just don't want to every time someone forgot to feed Spot or let one of his girlfriends out to play. Cookie used to raise hell that her ice cream would melt if she lived more than thirty minutes from a Wal-Mart. How do you think she would handle living a thousand miles from the nearest outpost let alone town?" Jack chuckled as he remembered his wife's aversion to living far enough away from a large population center for his comfort.

"Since you are way out here and providing K-9s for the troops, why do you not ask them to place a respawn point here at the house?" Cowboy asked.

"That would allow strangers to popup here inside my home anytime day or night. I would prefer to live in downtown Kansas City with screen doors and glass walls, during the Obama Administration." Jack said with a shudder of his shoulders and neck

"Fair enough. How about letting them build a training facility nearby?" Cowboy offered

"Here's the thing brother. We're currently just northeast of where Billings, Montana used to be. While I loved the state, the damned Dems ruined Helena long before the boom. So, I would prefer that city was never rebuilt. However, it was the state capital at one time because of a political maneuvering that took it away from the territorial capital of Great Falls. If they want to build a training facility where Great Falls used to be I would be on board with that. I loved that town when I lived there, but there are so many nukes still buried around here that they are nervous about where to build the facility. Especially since Great Falls was the home of the maintenance squadron, which means it was probably at the center of the silos nest. Cowards being what they are, Helena would be the safest place for them to build because the Dems would never allow them to place a nuke beneath their feet no matter how patriotic they claimed to be. Would you believe even in a freedom loving state like Montana where the state deemed concealed carry permits unnecessary, the Dems managed to get a strong enough foothold to outlaw open carry in the city limits, basically outlawing pistols inside the state capital? It's like they all congregated in one spot and chose the state capital to do it." Jack said shaking his head in disgust. "They did the same thing in Oregon and used just three cities to control the entire state."

"I'm just glad all that partisan bullshit is behind us. Now it's back to so much room you don't need to be around someone if you don't like their politics." Cowboy said.

"Here, here brother. Which is why I really don't want any neighbors. Ice cream be damned." Jack said

"I will be sure to tell Cookie you said that." Cowboy laughed.

"Go ahead. I will tell her that I can churn ice cream almost as good as you can butter." Jack responded.

"You wouldn't." Cowboy growled as he stopped, and eve balled his friend.

"I would. Do you think Gary would forgive you if he found out I did that because you pissed me off?" Jack grinned.

"You know, I hear Bear has to tell T anytime Wayward says something that would piss her off right?" Cowboy

"Is that how you're going to play this?" Jack asked as he leaned back putting his fists on his hips.

"Hey, don't start what you can't finish big boy." Cowboy grinned back.

"Truce?" Jack offered as he held his fist out.

"Truce." Cowboy accepted as he bumped his fist into Jack's.

"So, I built the place, and I am claiming the South-West wing because Cookie always loved the sunsets and special night sky events. Which is why the lake is in that direction. You get to argue with Bear about which one of you gets second pick." Jack said matter of factually.

"Oh really?" Cowboy asked.

"Yeah, technically, you are the first to get to tour the place, but he actually made it here with his civilian skin before you did. If Bear had let me know he was close I could have fed Spot and let him go chase a girlfriend for a few hours, Juan might have survived long enough to pick out his own wing," Jack said.

"So, how much did he beat me here by?" Cowboy asked.

"He was the snack that satisfied Spot's hunger for your arrival." Jack grinned in response they were now entering a massive humid garden room in the center of the building as they had been walking and talking. "The glass dome over the central room traps in the heat from the infinity pool turning the entire interior thirty acres into a fruit and vegetable garden. I went three stories tall so we can grow apple, cherry, walnut or any other kind of fruit or nut bearing trees you guys want to have delivered up from the heritage vaults. I chose to allow a mild amount of heat loss through the upper glass and framing so it will keep the snow melted off during the winter season, which let me lower the pitch of the roof and also lets us collect fresh drinking water that requires less filtration than the geothermal water. Those 80 degrees temps from the water features is year-round inside the house, the infinity pool makes it humid enough to rain inside occasionally and the geothermal is providing the electricity for the grow lights during the eight blessed months that there isn't enough sunlight to give me a migraine..." the old friends proceeded with the tour and Jack gave some advice on the layout of the rooms for Gary's wing, but refused to help him pick out colors or tile designs. His advice was, "get the walls put up and let the ladies learn to appreciate how long it takes to install those damnable subway tiles. After four days of running downstairs to use the bathroom a shade or two of the wrong color of white won't be so bad."

CHAPTER SIX: ROUND ONE

Eight months after the events in Draco Prime and the alliance had been introduced to the power of music a second stellar gate had been installed for all of the materials that were being hauled into the Sol System. Six months later it was now shutting down and re-orienting to point to an unhabitable star system with a collapsing star as the massive fleet of vessels were preparing to leave. A full ninety percent of the ships were operating with skeleton crews of Terrans, and the rest were integrated clones of the many alliance races that had volunteered to give up one death to assist the Terrans' audacious plans to fight back against the unknown invaders that were destroying entire solar systems from the center of the galaxy outwards. Nine more systems had been lost, and so had billions of citizens, and trillions were displaced from their homes as nearby systems had been evacuated to form a demilitarized zone.

The admiral in charge of the fleet looked over at the young Dryad ensign at the helm and gave the order, "que the music." The ensign replied, "Aye, Aye, Sir," then swallowed hard as she reached over the comms controls of the Valhalla to hit the button that would start broadcasting Zayde Wolfe's remix of "Danger Zone," and the helmsman engaged the engines to start her maiden flight towards the jump gate. The rest of the fleet began playing the song as their engines came online, and every person upon the planet Earth paused as every loudspeaker in every city, forward post, and firebase began to play the music announcing man-kinds greatest leap into the unknown.

The destination system had been chosen because it was close to the most recent systems that had been lost but did not leave a trail for the enemy to follow back to a system that had refugees or citizens of the alliance in it. The trip was estimated to take three days to arrive and for the crews of the ships it would be three days of slow building tension.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONTACT FRONT

Three weeks later a rendition of 'Rave' by DXRK was beginning to play as an alert came over the comms channel. The comms officer on duty of the Valhalla's bridge glanced over at the notification, he exhaled again wondering who was texting him and for what this time. He glanced out the view port and watched the flickering of the navigation shields as they rebuffed another wave of ionic radiation from the dying pulsar that was at the center of this system. Drak'thar knew that it was just going to be another request to play something else that was not on the operations playlist for the next broadcast. Why the Terrans had converted comms into a system wide DJ service he would never understand, but these crafty bastards had impressed him with what they had accomplished in such little time, and he was eager to see if their plans worked out.

He had been communicating with his original-self on his home planet, telling him about what they had been up to that day, and in return he would get videos or pictures of the debauchery it would buy his original-self back home. He just knew that his original-self had already knocked a clutch into at least one or two of them, so if sitting here and playing music for the barbaric primitives was going to help him spread his genetic material. he would gladly do it.

When he read the message that was displayed on the screen it quickly became a battle of nature versus self-control to not evacuate his bowels into his uniform and chair. His feet thumped to the floor, and he hit the stop button on the music before beginning an internal ten second countdown. Several of the bridge officers glared at him for killing the music, and one Terran female even yelled "What the fuck man, that was my jam." As he reached ten, he hit play and a woman's laugh echoed throughout the fleet, then the drum beat rapidly built up in volume and intensity until P!nk blared out 'I'm coming up, so you better get this party started.' Those who had resisted glaring at him before spun on him in utter surprise, as several of the Terrans yelled out, "about fucking time," and a Magnath yelled, "The admiral will skin you if this is a false alarm." Meanwhile, millions of personnel throughout the fleet's ships began sprinting for their combat gear and deployment positions, several sprinting dripping wet from the showers not bothering with clothes.

Speak of the devil and he will appear, the admiral came bursting through the ready room door, and headed straight to the comms deck with a short demand "Show me." Drak spun his console before the admiral got all the way to him. A quick read of the orders and the admiral announced, "Portal control, verify the following coordinates," then commenced to read off the coordinates of a system that had sent out a short alert from an observation drone that had been left behind during the evacuation. When the PC officer read back the coordinates without any mistakes, the admiral spun on his XO as she came in the hatch to the bridge. She bobbed her head in his direction and without request answered, "The Marine that was piloting the drone will be up here as soon as he recovers from the shift." The shift being the term that was now generally accepted for the transition period of being in a body or vessel that was destroyed and then the recovery period to start breathing again after taking over a physical body on the Valhalla a few seconds after death.

The admiral then turned back around to the comms channel and pressed a button giving him a direct connection to the comms probe that was in one of the forward torpedo tubes on the Valhalla. A strong male voice came back over the comms channel, "Jack here." The admiral nodded happy that a man he knew well would be the one to go through to try and make first contact with the unknown assailant. "Coordinates confirmed, the gate is spinning up, you ready brother?"

"Sure thing. I am just eager to get a look at them and see what is going on."

"Very well, God speed and good luck. Firing in three, two, one..." the admiral pointed at the XO who was standing next to the weapons platform, and she reached down and hit the button that launched the probe.

Seconds later the probe entered the gate which was held open for the transmissions from the probe to come back to them. At first it looked like the planets in the solar system were being dissolved by space itself, and then the horror of what the crew was seeing began to dawn on them. It wasn't space itself, there were just that many black invaders pouring down on the planets.

As the probe reached a few hundred kilometers from the gate, the Marine piloting the probe began transmitting on all frequencies towards the invaders, "This is Marine Corps General Jack Moreland of Marine Expeditionary Force One. We would like to request an opportunity to sit down with you and talk. Please respond if you can understand." The invaders pouring down upon the planets did not stop, and there was a slight glint of light from one of the darkest reaches of the system. A few seconds later Jack's voice came over the comms to the Valhalla, "Loc-Nar confirmed." Then the probe exploded. Admiral Thomas Nimitz stood there for a brief moment then turned to his XO, "Tell the Marine that was in the other pod to report to his battle stations, we won't need his report until we fill out the after-action reports," turned to the comms officer and said, "Fine we'll let AG introduce me to our uninvited guests." He then started heading for his seat as the electric guitar and drums began hammering out the beat of the cover of 'Sympathy for the Devil.' The rest of the fleet synched up the song, set their propulsion systems to half speed forward, and the frame of the Valhalla vibrated a little as her engines were set to half speed forward as well. Those that hadn't made it to their stations yet began sprinting.

The comms array on the very tip of the Valhalla was the first piece of the ship to come through the portal to the invaded system, as the giant golden raven's head on her nose entered into the system the lead singer made a simple statement to the unknown force on all frequencies known to the alliance, "Pleased to meet you. I hope you guess my name." Dozens of the massive portal gates opened next to the original one and ships of all sizes began to enter into the system and the invaders flowing to the planets below them started to slow. By time the seven-minute introduction was half over, a fleet of half a million ships from all over the alliance had entered the system as part of Marine Expeditionary Force One, and they formed a wall in front of the yellow star in the center of the system that put all of the planets on that side of the rotation in an umbral shadow.

The enemy had also formed up a wall of its own and a ripple of lights began making a beautiful shimmer across the inky blackness, it would almost be awe inspiring if it wasn't for the knowledge that it was weapons fire pointed directly at them. Without missing a beat Drak hit play on the second song of the playlist and all the ships in unison began transmitting Heilung's 'Krigsgaldr.' The sailors and Marines that were dashing through the bays quickly sealed up their suits, then strapped into their seats on transports, hover tanks, and mecha of all sizes as the horns in the song were reverberating throughout the fleet. As he was sealing up his light infantry landing suit, Wayward heard some asshole down the line yell, "It's ouchies time." Rings of vibrations and thundering rumbles were heard and felt as the shield emitters moved across the hull to the nose of the ship for extra protection. Before the woman began singing the fleet had emitted their shields forward of their positions at full power and bunched up to strengthen them as much as possible. They formed conical layers of protection against energy, kinetic, energy, kinetic and radiation. Not knowing what the enemy was packing it was determined that they should rotate the emitters in layers like that. While it made them weaker against a single type of ordinance it allowed them the best opportunity to survive the first blasts from the enemy until they could determine what worked best.

The long-distance weapons fire poured over the shields, and some of the officers on the bridge flinched as the once invisible shields blazed to life with every color of the rainbow like the surface of a puddle in a heavy rainstorm. The admiral sat there quietly watching the barrage counting in his head. The ship's weapons officer called out, "Detecting dark matter and high intensity energy signatures, no kinetic." The defense officer responded with "Roger adjusting shields." Drak added, "Notifying the fleet." When the ripples dwindled off, not a single ship had been hit or fallen behind. Two seconds later the ripple of the lights across the darkness happened again, and the admiral started his count over. This occurred five times as the fleet slowly advanced forward behind shield wall like a phalanx, testing the enemy's strength and tactics. As the man in the song began asking, "What am I supposed to do if I want to talk peace and understanding but you only understand the language of the sword?," the incoming fire began dwindling away again. The admiral, known as Odin, gave a calm and cool command that reverberated throughout the command deck, "Fire."

The 2-story tall eyes of the golden screaming raven's head on the nose of the Valhalla began to flicker then glowed bright red just before the deluge against the shields began to drop off again. As the last few shots landed, the shields were momentarily dropped, and the raven's beak filled with a bright glowing ball of white light. A moment later and it erupted forward in a crazy zig-zag pattern of ignited plasma wrapped around the 25-foot diameter energy beam that served as the deployment vessel for the short-ranged particle weapon payload. The eyes of the raven had served as a firing command to the rest of the fleet, and as the raven screamed its war cry of death, the rest of the fleet had already dropped their shields and fired a single salvo as well. After the five second discharge, the weapon's fire stopped, and the shield wall was formed again just before the next salvo of enemy was fired, and the fleet notched up their throttles and began moving towards the closest planet.

The fleets facing off with each other exchanged volleys three more times before an anomaly began to be detectable by the bridge crews. The enemy either did not have shields or their shields had failed as the returning fire in the follow up salvo was lighter than the first few times, and this almost messed up the admiral's count. However, the XO and weapons officer knew what they were doing and the two women, hit the fire buttons as soon as the incoming fire began to drop. As soon as the song came to a crescendo and the enemy fire picked up its rain upon the shields again, the admiral gave another command. "Soak 'em."

Confused, but knowing better than to question the commander during the fight, Drak reached over and began playing Soak's slow, clear, and partial rendition of Led Zepplin's 'Immigrant Song'. As the song thumped out its insane announcement that this species of primitives from a frozen planet were pushing for the western shores of the system, the Valhalla and other capital ships across the fleet began to vibrate as the millions of explosive bolts used to hold the thousands of dropships in their portal flight positions, like hundreds of feathers being shed by a screaming bird of war. As the two-minute song came to a slow crescendo, the admiral spoke up again, "Heavy carriers." This time Drak played the three-minute version of the 'Immigrant Song' by Karen O & Trent Resner & Atticus Ross.

The fleet responded with the medium sized heavy carriers going into full burn making for the cloud of darkness that was the heart of the main enemy force, and they screamed out ahead of the dropships. As a wall of flame from the last salvo fired by the alliance forces shimmered across the enemy, the admiral noticed that there were holes in the wall, signifying there were no targets there to be hit. A good 10% of the barrage passed through without striking an enemy. "Hell yeah," came from the XO as she too had noticed the reduced number of detonations, she sheepishly tucked her chin as she looked at the big boss and grimaced. He could only chuckle to himself and shake his head slightly.

As the carriers got into fighter range he gave another command, "Valkyries." Drak hit the button, and a band named Valhalla began playing an ancient melody about the flight of some mythical collectors of the valiant dead for some forgotten god. Once the electric guitar began to play the millions of fighter drones, piloted by individual Terrans and alliance pilots in Al form, began pouring out of the heavy carriers like the very messengers of death the song was conjuring. Every loud symbol clash was emphasized with fire from the big ships and the fighters alike, as the fighters slammed into the enemy's front lines. The viewscreen lit up as millions of fireballs signified a dying fighter, enemy vessel, or a devastating strike on a habitable area of one of the carrier ships. All choreographed by a woman who sang about how they were willing to give their lives for Odin and the Valhalla.

As the heavy pounding music came to a climax the dropships reached the first planet and the admiral tolo Drak, "Time to drop the kiddies off at the pool."

CHAPTER EIGHT: LANDFALL

"All right here we go, hey hey" came over the 1MC as the song 'Swim' by Fishbone began, a heavy guitar and drum pounding began to reverberate from the speakers, and as "Attention!!! The pool is now open!!!," screamed out of every speaker and headset, the troop transports began fast z-axis rolls as they approached the planet's atmosphere to release their deadliest payload, the ground forces. When the first chorus of "OH YEAH" wailed over the comms channels, explosive bolts holding sections of the transports' hull plating below the feet of their heavy mechs were fired, and the heavy mechs hit full downward thrust to drive the hul plating with them to be used as ariel sleds, heatshields, and provide some protection from anti-air fire.

With the second chorus of "Oh Yeah" the hooks holding the first Hover tanks released and they shot through the holes the first heavy mechs had just left, where they oriented front-end down and aimed their turrets straight at the planet's surface. At full thrust forward they were relying on their armor and energy shields to handle the heat of atmospheric resistance. On the third round of the chorus the light infantry transports began pouring from the tops of the dropships like dark clouds of steel death from hundreds of smoke machines. On the fourth "OH YEAH" the ariel scout units dove from the holes the first drop sleds left open and streaked for the cover fire and heat shields of the much larger heavy mechs. When the fifth "Oh Yeah" played the first rows of holes from the drops once again faced the surface and the transports released the MOABs to rain down and flatten a landing zone for the ground forces to begin their push out of.

The blackness upon the planet writhed and massive dark tentacles began reaching for the stars as if to swat these pesky insects out of the sky. When the fires of atmospheric entry began to fade away from the heavy mechs sleds, the tentacles began to come into focus revealing that they were made up of similar sized fighter craft that were more akin to some kind of flying insect made of a blackened metal. Not waiting to check the colors of their eyes the heavies circled up into five-man teams with their backs facing one another, the band yelled "Fuck that rule", and the heavies started raining fire down upon the enemies racing towards them as their ring slowly rotated.

Two stacked rings of hover tanks began counter-rotating over the heavies aiming their shots through the circle formed by the backs of the heavies and they provided continuous fire through the gap with devastating accuracy. Twenty transports hovered just above the tanks and poured showers of missiles and autocannon fire into the enemies on the outside of the rings. At first the tentacles were able to slowly continue to reach towards the invaders, even though the steady rain of fire and small explosions killed them by the hundreds or thousands, then as the singer screamed "Up the side and straight down the middle," the first MOAB hit. Hit

being a subjective word as it lived up to its name "Massive Ordinance Air Burst" and released huge shockwave of concussive force that tore nearby enemies into pieces, just before the atmosphere surrounding it became liquid plasma that oozed back down the tentacle. Within a few seconds hundreds of the MOABs per LZ released their devastation upon the enemy like upside-down volcanoes stretching from a few hundred feet below the shields of the heavies all the way to the ground. Dozens of LZs were being opened up as far as the human eye could see.

All along the LZs a complicated dance of organized chaos began to play out as a few hundred feet from impact the heavies began flattening out their circles to form a shield wall facing away from the center of them. The hover tank rings began to spin faster and used their main guns to tunnel giant craters inside the LZs. The light scouts shot away from the feet of the heavies and closed in with the enemies still inside the rings using small arms fire, grenades and nano-swords to finish them off. The transports formed a bait ball above the LZs continuing to pour anti-air fire upon the enemies that could fly above the masses of their cohorts. As the hover tanks approached fifty feet above the ground, they broke away from their tunneling process and began taking up firing positions in front of the heavies. The transports began the process of streaking to the craters and drop off their payload of light infantry from a few feet above the ground. The pilots had been trained to never stop, touch the ground, or slow down to drop the infantry before returning to the ever-rolling ball of anti-air fire above the LZs. The infantry used the strength of their powered suits, in combination with its minor shields and jump jets, to lessen the impact so it would not break bones, if they landed properly.

The enemy was far from toothless, and Thousands of heavy mechs, hover tanks and transports had been destroyed on the elevator ride through hell. The MOABs were the only reason any of them had made it to the ground, but they had lost nearly twenty percent of the landing force before the first one even hit the ground. The bait ball was effective at increasing the number of troops that made it to the ground by placing empty ships on the outside to form a living shield wall of ships and pilots to protect the rifle toters awaiting their chance to jump into the fight. Unfortunately, the enemy started to target the ships heading downwards, and the destroyed ships along with their payloads began falling onto the troops on the ground.

Pissed off and mad as hell, Marine Corps General Jack Moreland gave his heavy mech a verbal command. "Drown these bastards." As 'Bodies' by Drowning Pool began to blare through the cockpits and external speakers on all of the mechs and hover tanks which caused the empty transports to do the unthinkable. They rolled out of the bait ball in whatever direction they were currently pointed in and began firing forward facing plasma cannons and 50-millimeter autocannons loaded with uranium tipped, armor-piercing, explosive rounds, known to the Fallout fans as fat-man rounds, while launching every missile and counter air battery they had to form angelic wings of smoke that screened the other transports still trying to deliver their troops. The insane and terrifying part for anyone watching from above, the transport ships did not pull up at the end of their gun runs. No, they pointed straight at the biggest target in front of them and hit the after burners, taking out the biggest threats Kamikaze style.

The light infantry was not idly dying in their holes as the big guns played above them. They were using the craters the hover tanks had drilled as a head start into the planet towards their main goal. They dug as deep and as fast as they could with their small power-armor suits, until the song Bodies finished playing. Then Col Thompson of the infantry units gave his suit a command, "Hang 'em." A woman began singing a kind of dirge about "The Hanging Tree," and the infantry Marines dumped the jump bags that were tied to the ankles of their suits into the center of the holes. Bailed out of their suits and withdrew the small reactor cells that powered them and tossed those small nukes in on top of the jump bags before grabbing their rifles and

scrambled for the rim of the crater, the EOD crews jumped in to set up the sat-com detonators. As the choice began singing the lyrics with the lead singer the heavy mechs, hover tanks, and transport ships above them were being killed off faster and faster as fewer remained to hold back the tide of enemies.

Sticking his head up over the edge of the crater to take another shot, Wayward noticed on his HUD that there were no officers left alive above or below the rim. So, he slid back down into the hole, grabbed the radio from the one working power suit and reported in his suggestion to the admiralty. "Valhalla, Valhalla, this is Wayward Angel, over." Over the sound of the battle raging all around him, Wayward thought he heard a crackle of static, then replied "Cleanse them, I say again, cleanse these fuckers."

Meanwhile, out in space above Silinius Four One, the choir joined in with the singer to sing the song and the Valhalla received the radio transmission from one of the infantry units. Drak was totally confused, the infantry were the peons and didn't amount to anything compared to the big mechs and hover tanks. Why would one of these peons think he could even talk to Odin himself? Not understanding this stupidity but knowing what his role as the comms officer was, he turned, swallowed hard and began to speak to the admiral, who was already staring at him with one eyebrow raised. "Sir there's a transmission from a registered infantry call sign on the surface."

"Well, what did he report?"

"I haven't replied to such a lowly individual and did not want to waste your time with it, but I am duty bounc to do so under the regulations of my position," Drak began.

"Oh, shut the fuck up and play it over the loudspeaker, we'll discuss why there is a chain of command in both directions afterwards." The XO more growled than yelled at the comms officer who was more than five times her size. Drak knocked his headset off as he spun around to follow her commands, and it keyed the mic for a brief second. As the loudspeaker came on and the sounds of the dying Marines screams, explosions, and gun fire were heard in the background, Wayward's voice came through loud and clear, "Cleanse them, I say again, cleanse these fuckers."

Drak looked over his shoulder at the admiral as the song ended, who looked back at him and said, "You heard the man, cleanse them." Drak's hands shook as he pressed the button to play a song by a group called Falling in Reverse then looked at the planet's surface to see if the title meant anything, it was titled "Watch the World Burn." He only had to wait until the singer began talking so fast that he had a hard time trying to keep up with the lyrics, and the horror of what was happening on the planet's surface as he was watching hit him. All of the LZs, that had been so hard fought to be established, erupted into bright flashes and mushroom clouds. The infantry detonated nuclear payloads meant to crack the tectonic fault lines on the continents, causing the entire surface of the planet to lose cohesion and flood it with molten rock from the planet's core. Nothing on the planet, not even the Marine who gave the order, would survive the destruction.

Odin watched him for a second or two and then called out his name. "Drak. Ensign Drak." Drak's body began turning before he could tear his eyes away from the devastating horror that he was watching on the planet's surface below them. When his eyes finally landed on the admiral, Odin said, "He made the call because everyone with any rank above him was already dead. Infantry Marines aren't the peons many would think. They are the most devious little bastards that could give a cockroach a run for their money on survivability and will put a wolverine to shame on pure tenacity and potential for violence. Matter of fact, the one you just heard, is THE one that made all this possible." With that the admiral spread his arms to encompass the bridge and the fleet on the display screen, "and suggested then planned the measures to

cleanse a planet. So, the next time you hear him on the radio, you won't even have to ask me for my opinion, do as he says, and then explain it to me afterwards." Drak could only nod in amazement as this powerful man just gave the ultimate authority to some low-level ground pounder. "Now, if you haven't figured it out yet, I need you to connect me to Yggdrasil." Drak sat up at attention and spun around quickly to connect Odin to Central Command.

"Connection established sir." Drak said as the channels turned green.

"Odin to M.E.F.-2 and M.E.F.-3, acknowledge." The admiral spoke in a clear and calm voice.

"M.E.F.-2 ready up." Came a woman's voice

"M.E.F.-3 on standby." Came a gruff Magnar voice.

"This is Odin, planet one was a cleanse. I say again, planet one was a cleanse. Moving to planet two, M.E.F.-2 begin system entry and spin up the respawns, M.E.F.-3 prepare for mop up. Acknowledge."

The female voice came back with her voice trembling, from excitement or horror it was hard to tell, but the response was easily understood. "Odin this is Frigg, respawn operations begun, ETA five mikes."

The male voice didn't quiver but there was a quiet and drawn out "fuck" before the Magnar responded "Odin, this is Thor. The Hammer will deploy for mop up in thirty mikes."

Odin then answered, "Roger, Odin out." Drak killed the comms, and Odin gave his next command, "Tell the kids they're not finished yet." Drak's hands were shaking as he hit the button to start the next song began to play over the channels. The fighters engaged in combat began to circle back around to their carriers, and the carriers and heavy cruisers went into full reverse burn as the capital ships kept their methodical plodding forward while pouring heavy weapons fire not only into the Ord cloud, but also started pounding the surface of the second planet in the system that was still roiling with the invaders landing crafts.

CHAPTER NINE: ROUND TWO

A dozen new portals opened up near the first planet and fresh heavy carriers and capital ships came pouring in with the beginnings of Manowar's 'Sleipnir', as they did the Valhalla transferred the repositories of the Terran Als over to the Ragnarök fleet to respawn the troops into bodies that had been prepared ahead of time. As the Ragnarök entered into the system the alliance crew members that had been standing by the cryochambers in the drop bays were startled. Because an ominous narration started playing over the 1MC and confused them with the description of some mythic warhorse. However, as the music started playing Terrans began pouring out of the cryopods, usually face first onto the floors; some cursing, some screaming, and in a few cases vomiting all over the floor. One succubus who had been lazily sitting on a cryopod that hadn't even been placed up right yet, squealed as the lid popped open, tossing her off of it, and hit the back of her armor with a super cold breeze. The man inside was chocking and gagging but not vomiting so she crept forward to see if she could help, but her fear had caused her helmet to close and the led lighting around her face lit her sunflower skin up like a radiant beam.

"Are you an angel of mercy?" the young man asked, and she quietly shook her head no. "Damn, guess I have to try again." The young man chuckled.

Truly worried for his sanity now Desi asked, "Are you ok?"

"Just peachy, I see they're playing y'alls call sign." Desi could only shrug as a reply because she didn't know how to answer. "Ah, that's right, unless you're a historian familiar with our culture you probably won't get 90 percent of it. Anyways, if they're playing it, that means we fucked up and have to try again. Oh, wait. Yeah, the new memories are starting to pour in now." With that he shivered, dropped to a knee and the color drained from his face. "Damn, I was the one who had to give the cleansing order. Mad Jack is gonna be pissed." He drew out the last word as he lowered the pitch of his voice several octaves to emphasize something that clearly went over Desi's head, and she was even more confused now.

As he struggled to get to his feet the demented song was replaced with the sound of a bouncing drumbeat and the thumping electric bass guitar of AC/DC's 'War Machine'. "Damn it. Well beautiful, they are playing my song. Please excuse me, I have to go." By the time the lead guitarist played his fast-paced rift a third time, all of the Marines were up on their feet and running towards the empty armored suits, mecha and equipment. Even the ones that were still vomiting tried to do so as they ran, doing their best to turn their heads so as not to vomit on themselves. "Goddamn FNG, you puke on me, and I will kick your ever-loving ass through the next three fucking respawns. Now move your ass." The once peaceful man yelled as he caught up to one of the vomiting men, grabbed him by the elbow, and began to drag him faster towards the armored infantry suits.

"That's the guys we're going planet side with?" One of Desi's cohorts asked as they too began to run towards their assigned drop points, and Brian Johnson yelled 'War Machine'. Being scout units, they had the advantage of not having to be the first to drop, but the crew stressed that this came with a huge downside. They had been warned, multiple times, that they would only survive the drop if they were in their assigned square before the fifth toll of the bell, whatever that meant. There was plenty of room in the squares, but these ships were so large none of the M.E.F.-2 Allies could understand why they had to restrict themselves to just such a small spot in certain areas.

Outside of the dropship, the big guns began to fire from M.E.F.-2's capital ships as they joined the battle, and the command came to launch the dropships, when what had been explained to them as a song called Metallica's 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' would be played, which started playing as Desi got close to her assigned square.

As bells began tolling Desi slammed her back against the column inside her square and she began looking around, Desi could see out of a loading bay that the ship was starting to roll along the z axis at high speeds, and she was confused. As the fifth bell tolled, popping on both sides of her drew her attention. The ship was falling apart at the seams, the bolts holding it together started exploding. When the sixth bell tolled, the floor panels broke loose to both sides of the yellow lines, taking most of the yellow lines with them. The huge Mechs that were standing on the deck plating hit their downward thrust jets, and all she could do was huddle against the column that was behind her. She tried her best to be as small as possible as the Giant mechs' flew by her on both sides with just inches to spare. She heard the pilots inside screaming as they went past her, but what absolutely confused her was those idiots sounded like they were roaring with excitement about 'Getting something' and not screaming out of fear.

The deafening roar of the hover tanks engines began to rumble inside her helm from the vibrations being carried through the superstructure and into her helmet and armor. What were those pilots thinking, they were still hooked to the superstructure. Then there was a thumping sound as she saw the bolts holding the rows of hover tanks above and to each side of her explode and the tanks rocketed towards the holes the heavies had created, in pairs. She tried to cover her head with her arms and turned her head to watch the inevitable crash

as she knew they couldn't possibly fit at such high speeds and rolls. She watched in abject confused horror as the turret gunner on her left waved at her, then closed the hatch above him, a fraction of a second before it passed through the hole. She felt more than heard the second set of hover tanks rev up their engines, and she looked at the wall across from her, or what had been a wall because those heavy mechs and hull plates were missing too, and she could now see the planet's surface disappearing towards the ceiling above her.

She made the mistake of following it up with her gaze, and oh goddesses what a mistake it was. All of the shuttle craft that had been strapped to this side of the center beam of the hangar bay section were now screaming towards the holes in flights of four. She once again balled up into the tightest standing position she could get into, this time turning sideways and lifting one foot off the ground to shield the other leg with. As soon as the rapid, dark shapes stopped flying by her she looked up again to see what fresh hell was coming her way next and beheld the ship's crew as they were finishing the task of unstrapping the MOABs from the center beam. One of them was looking right at her and tapping the side of his helmet. When she did the same, a lilting voice came through her internal speakers, "Ya may wanna go ahead and jump now little missy. These here are next, and ya dinnae want to be anywhere near 'em if'n one should go off a little prematurely."

Her eyes widened in fear as she remembered seeing the videos of these things being tested and agreed with him wholeheartedly. As Mr. Hetfield started to sing, she dove for the safety of the open air below her and saw the chaos that was going on below her. She was falling fast but she could use her wings to control her fall and dodge the troop transports. As she thought of this, she saw one of the troop transports explode and her training began to kick in. She had to get on top of the feet of one of the heavy mechs as soon as possible, it would protect her on the ride down to the surface where she would have to jump off seconds before impact.

As she was falling headfirst and wings folded towards one of the heavy mechs, she looked straight out in front of her and saw something that made no sense on so many levels. There was a giant tentacle of blackness wiggling towards the sky like it was trying to flee from the explosions that were raining down upon it from the Marines. She glanced up just in time to flip over and slam into the sled feet first, where she crumpled with the impact, but her magnetic boots kept her attached to the sled plate. She regained her senses and was safe for now, her telemetry gauge said she had about twenty-five seconds before she would have to jump.

Just as the thought that she was safe and her nerves began to calm, the right arm of the giant mech she was riding with was blown off of its chest cavity, and Desi could see the Marine inside the heavy mech beating on the dashboard through some of the shrapnel holes in the chest cavity. She thought she heard him cussing and yelling something about not being able to win a keg of beer because he was now down a gun. His right arm was bleeding, but he had bigger issues than that, obviously these guys were fucking insane. That's when Desi saw the first MOAB go sailing past her, and a second or two later there was a brilliant flash of light just before a deafening boom came up from below them. The sled shimmied and shook side to side for two seconds as the shockwave hit it. Three more MOABs flew by her at such high speed she knew the first one had to have slowed them down. She took a quick glance at her telemetry readouts and sure enough she was back up to 15 seconds before she had to jump, but she wasn't so sure she wanted to now.

Then she blinked her eyes a few times as the heavy mech, scout and sled just a few feet away from her, just disappeared in a cloud of smoke and flames as they exploded from the incoming fire that continued to pour upwards from below them. She had just been looking at her friend, and now they were gone in the blink of ar eye. Before she could even comprehend what had just happened to her allies, the MOABs began to go off

simultaneously, and the heavy she was riding with reached down, grabbed her, all while yelling how the ride was about to get a little bumpy. What? What the hell is this idiot talking about? If he didn't know, this whole damn ride had been bumpy the whole fucking way down, and a hell of lot more than just a fucking little bit.

When multiple shockwaves, that had amplified one another and, in some cases combined with each other, hit the bottom of the sled. She knew she would have been thrown off of it if the heavy pilot hadn't grabbed her with his mech's one remaining arm, and even then, she wasn't so sure he would be able to hold on much longer. He was struggling with his balance since his mech was already missing an arm, and he was bent over trying to hold onto and shield her. When the shockwaves stopped, he grinned down at her through the hole in his mech, began releasing his grip, and yelled, "See, we're all good. Now..." She's not sure if that was all he had to say, because the cockpit he was sitting in ceased to exist, and she was now looking at the clouds through a whole that had formed where she had just been staring at a human being. Then the sled hit the ground, and she lost consciousness from the impact, or the sheer terror of watching the remains of the heavy mech begin toppling towards her, she guessed she would never know.

CHAPTER TEN: GET OFF MY ROCK

As 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' was coming to an end General Mad Jack Moreland did a quick battlefield assessment and was pleased with what he saw, the enemy seemed to be in full retreat. There were much larger invaders here, probably because they hadn't had a chance to get them to the first planet before the fleet interrupted their plans earlier. So, he made a judgement call and keyed his mic to the ground troops and the rest of the fleet so it could be passed on to the other LZs, "Let them hear you howl boys and girls!" Then let out a howl of his own as the guitar riffs for 'Bark at the moon' by Ozzy Osbourne began to play.

The infantry Marines stopped digging, dropped their jump bags into the holes and the EOD crews came forward to set up the satellite transmission detonators so Odin could detonate them from above if needed. Meanwhile, the Infantry Marines were sprinting in their armor towards the craters edge and took the 50-foot walls the hover tanks had dug in several leaps and bounds to land on the jagged glass encrusted ground that the MOABs' plasma had created during touch down. They quickly jumped on hover tanks and heavy mech legs alike, clinging to them like fleas on a dog before drawing their rifles and blazing away at the enemy forces one handed where needed, and taking aim where they could use both hands, howling out loud every time the song's title was sung.

They enemy may have been in full retreat, but they were still returning fire as they did so. The larger units were slow and lumbering on the planet's surface which meant their smaller reinforcements were either running off and leaving them or were crushed, under heavy withering fire from the infantry, or physically by the falling behemoths that were killed by the heavy mechs and hover tanks. The heavy mechs began their slow plodding forward march and the hover tanks slowly rolled forward to keep a firing line established with them. The invaders caught in between the LZs were quickly obliterated, and Mad Jack began to grin maniacally as he watched the LZ indicators turn green and green dotted lines appeared showing the sat dets were online and the enemy had been cleared from in between it and the LZ next to it.

Before the song was finished, he gave a command that made the pulses of the hover tank crews and infantry alike hammer just a little bit faster and the fleet above the planet began to cheer, "Sick 'em boys." As King 810 played the infantry Marines legendary namesake 'Hellhounds' through the speakers, the infantry Marines holding on to the heavy mechs began sprinting for the Hover tanks, whose drivers were slowly counting to ten before going full throttle into the enemy lines. The tanks were now covered in infantry Marines like quills on a

porcupine, only these porcupines spat huge 155mm uranium infused tungsten darts from their main railgun barrels at hypersonic speeds, and the quills fired small plasma bolts that could penetrate twenty inches of hardened chromium infused titanium armor. As the hover tanks flew into the enemy lines delivering a horde of slathering grunts that jumped off of the tanks onto the backs, legs, and corpses of the enemy Mad Jack felt a short pain of guilt and sympathy for the enemy. Which almost caused him to say a prayer asking for mercy unto them, then he remembered the reply he had gotten from the enemy the first time he asked them to discuss peace.

As several million infantry Marines sang about going to Hell they moved like a living tsunami of death and destruction, some even grabbed onto a falling enemy to use its momentum to catapult themselves to the next one. The dropships were not going to be left out of an opportunity to get some payback for the last go round and they began circling the towering spires of enemies trying to flee the planet pouring the last of their missile batteries and autocannon rounds into concentrated points on the spire to try and break it. When the missile bays and ammo racks were empty, they increased the amount of plasma fire from the forward emitters until the circuits or the barrels themselves melted from overheating. Everyone on the ground could tell when this happened because a transport would go from slowly rotating sideways to hitting the afterburners and ramming full speed into the enemy, hoping they would be the one to cause it to break and cut off the enemy's retreat.

As the enemy was forced back to the base of the tentacles reaching into the sky, the heavy mechs began to form firing lines around them, hammering the same spots the transports were when none of the mega sized enemy were visible. As the song was coming to an end the first spire to fall, fell from the fleet up above severing it outside the atmosphere, and the enemy began raining down upon the ground where the infantry danced among the falling corpses like goblins of death and destruction. That is when Odin made the call to change the music, a guitar began playing a rapid tune as an insane man cackled a little before he started bellowing out the lyrics to Disturbed's 'Inside the Fire'. The infantry Marines began sprinting for the hover tanks or towards the heavy mech lines if they were too far from the tanks. Some chose to detonate their suits instead as they knew they were too close to the impact zone, and only wanted to increase their kill count for the party they would surely be having once they reached the Hallowed Halls of the Valhalla.

The clouds in the skies began to evaporate and the trails of smoke from the burning bodies and machines all sucked in towards the bases of the columns of enemies, letting the ground troops know the fire support from the fleet had started. A few milliseconds later it all quickly went the other away as devastation poured down onto the base of the pillars through the columns of enemies. Hover tanks were flipped ass over nose, infantry Marines laughed maniacally as they were picked up and forced to ride the concussion waves forward like supermen attempting to do a horizontal bellyflop, and the heavy mechs had to lean forward hard enough they were either tilting at a 45-degree angle or were forced to take a knee and bow their heads in supplication to the destruction the fleet was raining down upon the enemy. The unrelenting pounding continued until the song ended and very few of the enemy twitched inside the field of craters that marked where the pillars once reached for the stars.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: SIT BOOBOO, SIT

"Drak get Fenrir on the line." Odin commanded the comms officer, who quickly began hammering away at his terminal, then spun to him a second later and said, "done sir."

"Fenrir, my faithful hound, how's it looking down there?" Odin offered up with a smile on his face and in his voice. As soon as they had broken the first column of retreating enemy, the tentacles of doom had sucked away from the second planet back towards the third and final one so fast, they were almost able to outrun the withering fire of the fleet's main guns. That's when Odin had decided to give the flatfoots a little relief with magma from the heavens.

A chuckling laugh in reply let Odin know that his joke had been well received before Mad Jack's voice came back in reply, "Good Brother, we're doing good. When can we get a ride to the next party?"

"That's going to take us a few minutes to arrange, it should be easier now that we have pushed them back a little first, then we will arrange a pickup for you."

"No worries, Odin. You guys were always the best taxi service in the business." It was a long running joke between the two services, but both men knew the importance of the other's roles, and their joviality set the bridge crew at ease a little bit as the battle in the stars continued to be waged while the ground troops finally got a well-deserved breather.

"Ok then, you'll know where to find me. We can always go for respawn and come back for the gear later if needed." Jack offered just to avoid having to sit on his thumbs while a battle raged so close he could almost see it.

"Nah, we got this. We need to reform our lines anyways. I know you hate to waste a good adrenaline rush but cool your heels for a few minutes and we'll get you back into the fight as soon as possible. Odin out." The call was dropped, and Odin gave Drak his next song to play, "Call 'em back." To show his ability to learn Drak tapped his console without taking his eyes off of Odin and a toothy smile filed his face as the heavy metal version of 'Valhalla Calling' by Rehn Stillnight began to play. To keep him focused Odin looked at him and said, "you're doing ok, but don't get cocky and screw it up again." Seeing the smile disappear from the young Ensigns face let Odin know that the message was received before he said. "Call Yggsdrasil for me please."

"Aye, aye sir," came Drak's response as Odin looked out of the viewport at the battle zone in front of the Valhalla. The enemy was falling back to the third planet, some of the fighters were too close to the enemy to break off and instead kamikazed themselves into the closest of the enemy vessels, so they could just respawn and grab a new bird that was fully loaded. While the heavy carriers continued to back up to the line, the capital ships like the Valhalla were forming up to shield the second planet from a counter push.

Then a deep booming voice came over the 1MC, "MEF-3 ready up." That was followed by a booming chuckle as MEF-3's fleet synched up with the music of the counter assault fleet.

"Odin to Thor, Planet Two is friendly again, I repeat Planet Two is friendly."

The booming laugh doubled, and cheers were heard in the background as Thor replied, "That's good to hear Did you save any of them for us?"

"Affirmative, we're at about even odds with the enemy now, mind tipping the scales in our favor for once?"

Odin replied, happy that the Allies were starting to learn to communicate a little smoother. Then again, the miracles the Terrans had just breathed life into a sector of the galaxy that had all but lost hope. They had worked hard the last few months and with the help of the other races were able to accomplish what had been impossible in decades prior, and the Terrans were earning the titles of the Gods of War after rising from the long cold sleep of extinction.

"Roger that, reinforcements and extraction teams in bound." Thor boomed out and the song changed to Citizen Soldiers' 'Through Hell', and with that another twenty portals opened up behind MEF-1's shield wall and the reinforcements began filling in the gaps from the ships that had been lost so far. While ten more opened up behind the planet itself and smaller ships began pouring down to the surface to retrieve the troops.

CHAPTER TWELVE: PEEK A BOO

As the heavy mechs were marched into a formation to make it easier for pickup at a later date for reloading and any potential repairs, a few remained on patrol just to see if any of the enemy corpses were playing opossum, the hover tanks also formed into retrieval ranks since they would need to loaded and bolted into place like the heavies and the crews sat on top of their equipment celebrating their victory and taking a little time to decompress. Wayward's crew and the EOD teams began going through the battlefield looking for potential survivors, friend and foe alike.

Wayward kept reaching behind him occasionally as if trying to scratch his back through the power armor with no avail because he couldn't get the shoulder articulation to work right. Doc walked up to him giggling like he was the only one in on a joke and Wayward turned to him with some blood dripping down his face from the cracked faceplate on his helm. "Something funny Doc?"

"Damn," Doc gasped, before stepping forward and reaching for Wayward's chin. "I would say your face, but it looks like it got run through a meatgrinder. How did you pull that off?"

"That's the thing, I can't get the damn helm off. It would seem that short flight the Valhalla sent me on not only busted the view port but also jammed the damn helm into the gorget."

Bear and the others seeing doc treating Wayward decided to walk up to them, "everything all right Wayward."

"Yeah, it would seem that I broke another pair of Oakley's like I did when I face planted off the ski jump during arctic warfare training." Wayward said trying to calm his buddies down.

"Is your HUD showing any other damage," Doc asked as he was squeezing some super glue onto the cut on Wayward's hairline to stop the bleeding from the overgrown scratch just above his hairline.

Wayward pointed at the broken faceplate and said, "No glass, no HUD, dumbass... and here I thought you were supposed to be the smart one."

Doc just nodded his head and said, "Yeah, I should have expected that. Here, face this way so I can use the sunlight to check you for anymore head wounds." With that he rotated Wayward's back to their friends and the peals of laughter and a few cat calls erupted from behind Wayward's back.

He tried to turn back around but Doc had him by the chin and he couldn't, so he yelled "What the fuck is so goddamn funny?"

Doc looked him in the eyes and said, "I have to ask. Did you get a second helping of the chili last night?"

"What? No. why?" The aggravation and confusion in Wayward's voice was clear in equal measures

"Because that's the only way we can think of that you could pull off that Fata look without having to be carried ass first to the med bay like we had to do with him." Ski offered being his usual helpful self.

"WHAT?" The confusion running through Wayward's voice was almost as bad as the thoughts running through his head as he remembered the incident. "We only had to do that because he pulled his blankets over his head... and melted his shorts to his ankles to see if farts really were... flammable." That's when what the guys were saying hit him and Doc busted out laughing the moment he saw his friend figure it out. Wayward just focused his gaze on the man in front of him and said in a low growling voice, "Et tu, Doctore?" To which Doc broke out laughing in his face before falling over holding his sides. "You could have told me asshole." Wayward growled again.

Doc was laughing so hard he had tears streaming down his face, but he did manage to gasp out, "NO! No, I couldn't. I could barely keep a straight face."

"You do realize this means war, right?" Wayward promised death and destruction with his tone of voice.

"After that 'no glass, no HUD, dumbass' comment? Totally worth it, sir." Doc replied with the team's motto when they had to serve a punishment for having a little fun.

"So how bad is it really?" Wayward asked with a little tremble in his voice.

"Well, we can either try to cut you out, hold your armor still while you try to wiggle out of it through the hole in the backside, or take the easy way out and go for a respawn." Doc replied with a grin on his face.

"And let you win the first to die in the death pool pot? OH, Hell, no. I would rather ride into the next fight with my junk hanging out." Wayward growled.

"Good, because what's left of it already is." Cowboy tossed in just to keep the laughter rolling

"Fuck y'all. If I had rode only one wave like the rest of you slow bastards, I would have been fine. I swear to God one of you bastards bribed someone on one of the gunnery crews upstairs, because it sure felt like there was three or four near misses that sped me back up every time I started to slow down. I bet I set a record for longest explosively assisted flight time back there." Wayward said with a grin on his face as he accepted that he was going to be the butt of more than a few jokes for the next month or two.

"Oh, explosive assisted airtime. Did someone just volunteer to let me try out something fun?" came T's voice over Doc's shoulder where he had climbed to his knees.

"Nah, Wayward just failed at converting his armor into a mankini." Ski tossed in just to tease his friend a

"What?" T was the confused one now

Mac tossed in, "Yeah, he went with a full reverse speedo look from the back," and the team busted ou laughing again.

"What? Turn around and let me see." T said twirling her wrist with her pointer finger aimed at the ground.

"Fine, but you're going to be the one to cut me out of this shit if you laugh." Wayward said.

"Only if it's worth it." T said as she crossed her arms over her breastplate.

Wayward turned around and the two women began laughing just as hard as the others were. "OK, OK, you win. I will send you for respawn once the cleanup is done." T said as she was able to catch her breath enough to do so.

"Come on, not you too." Wayward cried plaintively.

"Dude, what isn't missing is melted together. I am surprised you even survived, you fucking cockroach." I said in her defense.

"Ah, fuck y'all. I'm going to go check on the kids over at the debris fields near the LZ. I'll see if one of them can get me out of this." Wayward said as he started to stomp off in that direction, the roars of laughter that followed him only fueled his anger.

A few minutes later he was approaching the Jolly Roger's Orphans, as they had been dubbed, as they were all standing next to a downed heavy and having what must have been a very animated discussion based on all of the hand waving. "What's all the hub-bub bub?" Wayward asked as he walked up.

His trainee Bubbles looked up and said, "We think we found a scout, but she's trapped under this heavy and is unresponsive. Her suit is still transmitting vitals even though they are faint and intermittent because of the shielding from the mechs engines that are laying on top of her."

"And nobody thought of letting one of us know?" Wayward asked looking at each of them.

"We tried but T told us to figure it the fuck out on our own." Bubbles informed him.

"Good call, never disobey that woman. Even if she tells you to send Odin himself for a respawn." Wayward replied. The kids all laughed until they noticed Wayward was looking at them with one eyebrow raised.

"Um, well, um…" Bubbles stopped then cleared his throat and tried again. "The only thing we could think of was to get a working heavy over here to lift this one off of her."

"How do you know she's a female?" Wayward asked a little perplexed at this revelation.

One of the others spoke up, "Scout mech, thin wing armor, means natural wings, which means one of the succubae species, or maybe an angelic, and their males don't volunteer for anything other than fighter duty."

"Damn, I didn't even think of that. You guys have been working on this for a while, haven't you?" Waywarc said truly impressed.

"Four minutes and twenty-three seconds according to my chronograph." Said a third.

"See, now that response just lost you a few cool points," Wayward said, more pissed about the delay than the nerd factor. "Why didn't any of you call one of the heavies?"

"We don't know any of their call signs except for Fenrir, and well we don't really want to bother him with this." Bubbles said

"Normally, I would agree with that being a good call, but here's the thing about Fenrir. When things are calm like this, he is the kind of guy that will, help a private's wife load groceries into her car if she needed it."

Wayward said. "You guys should really spend some time walking around and talking to the other units when we get back onto the Valhalla. Knowing your transport crew and pilots can help out almost as much as knowing the name of the guy providing the fire support." Then he tapped the side of his helm twice to activate the comms and called out, "Fenrir, Fenrir, this is Wayward Angel, do you copy?"

A second later the reply came back across the comms, "Go for Fenrir." This was short for make it quick, I am a little busy right now.

"Fenrir, this is Wayward Angel. We have located a downed Avian scout who is pinned under the wreck of a heavy and we need some assistance getting it off of her. That or should we send her for a respawn? Her vitals are weak, and she is unresponsive at this time."

The ground began to shake with thunderous footsteps from several different directions as a couple of the patrolling heavies began moving without being asked and the response came back. "Negative on the respawn, unless she is too injured for it to be a humane extraction. Keep me informed. She is the first of her kind to survive a landing and they will probably want to pin a medal on her and prance her around in a dog and pony show. You know how it goes."

"Affirmative Fenrir, we will do our best to save her."

Doc was the first of the corpsmen to arrive at Wayward's side with T hot on his heels, and she started in on the kids right away before the heavies arrived. "I just talked to your dumbasses. Why didn't you little fuckers tell me about her?" She half growled and half yelled.

"Because, I would imagine, you told them to quit being a bunch of little whiny bitches and figure it the fuck out themselves," Wayward said in their defense and diverting her anger towards himself.

She just looked down for a second and said, "Yeah, that sounds about right. Sorry guys, if y'all ever have an emergency like this and I blow you off, just raise your right hand if you can and tell me it's an emergency. If it is I won't hold it against you, but if it is not…" She let her sentence trail off while displaying an evil grin to convey the threat.

Just then the first heavies arrived and asked how they could help. The kids quickly informed the pilot of what the problem was, how she was pinned underneath, and what they thought would be the best way to get her out. The two heavies then got on each side of the wreck and lifted it up slowly, just high enough Wayward could slide in underneath to get to her, since his armor was noticeably thinner on the backside. As he did, he saw part of the problem and called out over the comms, "Hold what you got there guys, one of the engines has broken loose and is resting on her chest plate. If you lift it any higher, it may come all the way out and crush her. The rest of you get under here and help me get it off of her." Wayward's team, and all six trainees, scrambled underneath to try and bench press the 30-ton engine block up enough that Wayward could drag the scout out from under the wreck.

"Count of three. Three, two, one. HEAVE!" Wayward said as he grabbed her shoulders and began to pull. The engine moved just a fraction of an inch, but it was enough that she shot out from under it like she was jet propelled. Wayward backed up and grabbed her again then pulled again as her lungs filled with air for the first time since the mech had landed on her. As he dragged her free of the wreck he looked down at her face and recognized her.

As the rest climbed out from under the wreck, the heavy pilots dropped it, and her eyes shot open from the thunderous boom, and she began screaming in terror. Wayward was quick to calm her down. "Hey, hey. Its ok, I got you. You're safe now, it's all over." Then he started making the hissing and cooing noises he used to make to calm his kids and grandkids down when they woke up with bad dreams, while gently rocking her in his arms. He then deactivated her visor so he could wipe some of the sweat and hair out of her face and eyes.

Desi began to calm her breathing and looked up at him and said, "Hey, I recognize you."

Wayward chuckled and grinned. "Yep, I asked you if you were an angel the first time we met."

"Now I know how you must have felt back then. Am I supposed to ask if you're an angel?" Desi asked, and everyone but Wayward broke out into laughter.

"You only ask that of someone you're flirting with, but in this case, this is Wayward Angel, and you are?" I asked from beside them.

Desi's eyes got huge, and she started, "Wayward…" Then she froze and her brain reset really quickly, and she tried again. "No, you can't be. Are you really the one…" she couldn't finish the sentence as it dawned on her that twice now, she had been in the presence of a legend but hadn't even realized it.

It was too much, T just couldn't hold it in anymore, "Alright now, before you go inflating Captain Kirk's ego so much that I have to deflate him again, you should probably realize he really ain't all that special. Matter of fact as he is holding you right now his bare ass is flapping in the wind." To which the two heavy pilots busted out laughing with all the others as well. They were trying to remain professional up to that point, but just couldn't hold it in anymore.

Desi was totally confused as to what she was hearing and the look of defeat on the man's face as he was cradling her. Wayward could only close his eyes and drop his head before moaning as if he was in physical pain. "Huh?" Was the closest thing she could come up with to an intelligent response.

Wayward opened his eyes and looked into hers, then tried to help fill in some of the blanks. "Yes, I am THE Wayward Angel, but that is getting so old I am thinking of changing my callsign on the next respawn just so I can go back to being one of the guys again. What she is referring to about my backside flapping in the wind, is the back of my armor got melted off of me when the Valhalla began an orbital bombardment to help cleanse the enemy."

Blinking a few times as she tried to process what he just said, Desi had to clarify one more thing, "And the Captain Kirk?"

"In our mythologies, Captain Kirk was the most famous man whore to ever sail through the Galaxy on a personal quest to breed every female of any species he came across." T tossed in once again to try and be helpful.

Desi's face began to get superheated, then flushed enough that her yellow skin started to turn a bright orange. Wayward closed his eyes and moaned again as if he was in pain. "Are you OK? You're not in pain, are you?" Desi asked with sincere concern in her voice.

To which everyone around them laughed and T replied for him, "Just his pride, and well maybe his balls as hard as I have been busting on them."

Desi was confused again, and Wayward came to her rescue. "That's twice you've asked me that, thank you for being caring and considerate enough to ask. Enough T, I know you want to take this one under your wing too. So go ahead, just layoff the colloquialisms until the docs can check her out, please."

"Fine, spoilsport. Don't think I haven't taken a lot of pics of that fine ass of yours hanging out for everyone to see. If it gets any better, I am going to have to add a few of them to the spank bank if you know what I mean."

Wayward went to reply but saw the crimson tint to Desi's face and changed the subject, "That reminds me, we don't even know your name."

"My friends call me Desi, but my full name is Desdemona of the Layman's Guild." T and the others busted out laughing as Wayward closed his eyes again, let out a small moan of pain, and then started counting down from five.

"Come on Cassanova, hand her over so Doc can check her out before you get yourself into trouble." To which Wayward leaned back and let the others help her up.

"Take care Desi, you're a hero now, and you'll need your strength for what is to come next." Wayward said as she got to her feet with some help from the others.

"What? What does he mean?" Desi asked as T began to lead her away. "Later Hun, let's get the docs to check you out first, ok pumpkin." T replied as she led her away.

Wayward then turned to the two heavy pilots and hollered up at them. "You two wouldn't happen to be able to peel this thing off of me, would you?"

The two giant mechs glanced at each other, shrugged their shoulders and then one of them replied, "Sure but no guarantee you won't get sent for a respawn in the process."

"Trust me, being drawn and quartered by you two would be a better alternative than letting her try with explosives." Wayward replied pointing at T's back as she walked away. Apparently, she had heard enough to give him the single finger salute over her shoulder, and everyone around Wayward laughed loudly at the display.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: READY? HEAVE...

As poor Wayward was getting run through yet another comedic hurt locker on the planet's surface, the fleet just a few miles above him was forming another shield wall while the reinforcements from MEF-3 began to enter the system. Odin had asked Drak to announce this event by playing AC/DC's 'Dogs of War'. The fifty portals that had opened up a few seconds behind the front lines began to emit ships that were eager to join in on this historic moment. The alliance crews on MEF-3 were reservists and only got one clone for this system and they were eager to earn another chance with the active-duty professionals with unlimited respawns, so they came into the fight eager for glory and accolades. Which is why Odin had been reluctant to let them into the fight to begin with. Everyone knew to never jump into a foxhole with someone braver than you, and there was no one braver than an amateur with ideals of glory and grandeur clouding the fear that would keep him alive.

The alliance was skeptical about the physical and mental cloning of themselves, but after seeing how effective it had been on fighting the creatures on Terra Prime, they understood how beneficial it would be to only lose a few ships, and no citizens by allowing an addendum to their charter that only one repository and one clone could exist at any time for any citizen that wanted to serve, the Terrans excluded, as those crazy bastards were using tactics that burned through clones faster than they could be thawed out. The fact that they were able to not only halt the invader's progress, but to also be able to take a planet back from them in the process, everyone in the know was excited to see if it really was as easy as the Terrans made it look. Others were terrified of what it meant for the alliance after this war was over, but the use of these tactics gave them hope that there would be an alliance after the war was over.

Some of this exuberance died off when they entered the system and saw the massive debris fields from the earlier battles, and the large holes in the sides of most of the ships still holding the line venting sparks and atmosphere. The bridge crews of many of the arriving ships even had the misfortune of watching bodies of alliance members bouncing off their viewports as they floated through this unfinished graveyard. The gunnery crews, and those in front of open areas like hangar bays also saw the bodies and it served to sober them up a little. Still, they had no clue as to what horrors they were about to face. The admiralty and ships' captains had spent weeks if not months working with the Terrans to understand what was expected, but even they paled when facing this horror for the first time. The rest of the crews were trained to recognize what to do when a certain song was played, and how to conduct emergency repairs on whatever equipment they were assigned but were never made to fully understand the true horrors of combat. One of the Terran Master Chiefs had likened them to a bunch of Call of Duty players that thought they really had what it took to slit someone's throat and then lay on top of them to keep their dying body from thrashing around and breaking their stealth.

Drak flipped a virtual switch that split the comms into two sections, one for the ground forces that would play a lineup of prechosen 'cool down and ready up' songs that was meant to help them cool down from the adrenaline rush of combat while keeping their heads in the game in case the call to commit a full unit respawn for retreat or rapid deployment to the next fight came. The other comms channel would be kept live from the command deck of the Valhalla as Odin himself would continue to call the shots from here on out.

The Terrans were given full authority for all Alliance forces and ship's commanders were told that they were to expressly follow the commands of Odin, unless the Terrans tried to start capturing alliance planets for their own reasons. As part of the agreement, Terran Military would be kept on Terra Prime until after the end of the war but would be granted 1/10 of all planets recaptured by their actions. The alliance at first thought this was a good deal for them, they were happy to have an entire species to sacrifice themselves to buy the time necessary for the evacuation of their citizens from endangered systems.

With just two attempts the Terrans had proven that not only could they re-capture a planet from the enemy, but they were willing to literally use 'Scorched Earth Tactics' if they lost. No one understood the meaning of that term until they watched an entire planet get sent into full planetary tectonic restructuring by the Terrans' tactics at Silenus Four dash One. This was driven home even more as the first song ended and the drums of the song changed to begin pounding out a steady beat as the newly arrived ships were falling in next to the survivors of the previous battles. A singer from a band called Pink Floyd began to sing about their version of 'The Dogs of War'.

Many of the Alliance military personnel were upset that they were being held back until the Terrans could 'ground and pound the enemy to soften them up for the rookies,' as one Marine Corps General had been heard saying after a planning meeting. The audacity of such a primitive and juvenile race to think that the

Alliance wouldn't be able to perform half as well as they could. Then the sight of the planet formerly known as Silinius Four dash One in full magma stage, the burning flames of wrecks falling to the surface of Four Two, and the wrecks that were still trying to hold themselves together enough to fight back as they held the line that MEF-3 was coming to fill in. Some had commented that the alliance ships had to have been used as 'shock troops' as the Terrans called it to shield these young pups, until they noticed the alliance wrecks were actually behind the Terran ships.

Now it was their turn to get bloodied as the Marines called it, and they were proud to prove they could perform as well as the Terrans did. All ships began transferring shields to maximum forward leaving their sides and rear open but protected by the ships to the left and the right of them. The Terrans called this forming a shield wall. As the women join in singing the chorus lines, MEF-1 began opening up to allow the ships of MEF-3 to enter in to reinforce them and fill the holes were the previous ships had fallen. This did not go unnoticed by the MEF-3 commanders as they could clearly see that the only way the other ships had fallen was if they had messed up and when they failed they were not there to protect the ships to the left or right of them. The scars along the remaining ships proved that.

As the holes were opened up to allow MEF-3 to be nestled in under the wings of MEF-1, the MEF-1 ships began taking hits to their sides, and the shields of MEF-3 began to light up as they took part of the unrelenting hammering the enemy was throwing at them. The MEF-1 ships were firing back but MEF-3 had been tasked with filling in the gaps and holding off on returning fire until the music changed. When the saxophone began wailing out its solo the fighter craft from MEF-1 came screaming out of the hangar bays of heavy carriers and capital ships alike to form a cloud of death behind the big ships shields. When the lead singer announced that 'the dogs of war won't negotiate.' The Terran fighters began screaming forward dodging the fire from the capital ships of MEF-1 as much as the incoming fire from the enemy ships. They closed in with the enemy fighter swarm that had sprung forward to take advantage of the opening of the shield wall.

Each flight of fighters broke down into four fighters, two Terran trained veterans with a trainee or an alliance pilot as wingman. Each flight was also given an alleyway to follow in front of three capital ships that would be firing their main guns in the direction of the fighters. The fighters were synched up with the ships' gunnery Als to let them know when and how to dodge fire coming at them from the friendly capital ships. The fighters would dodge the incoming fire, dive to just behind the beams, missile salvos, or kinetic rounds that were being shot at the enemy, to get a few seconds of breathing room before the rounds outran them far enough that they had to start dodging incoming fire from the enemy again. When they got close enough to the enemy that they were fighting other enemy fighters it was then that organized chaos become the true fog of war and as many of them that died to enemy fire also died to friendly fire from the same capital ships they were protecting. An unpredicted side effect was they often followed those beams blindly into the hulls of the enemy capital ships kamikaze style. On the plus side though, the beams they followed in had either broken the shields of the enemy capital ship or had drilled a hole in the hull for the fighter to fly further into before being detonated on impact. The bonus was they often halted, killed, or reversed the progress of the enemy within the superstructure of the ship just as their disaster recovery measures were adjusting to the damage caused by the weapons fire.

The fighting was as brutal and ruthless as it was short. In less than two minutes the enemy swarm had beer destroyed and the surviving Terran craft suicide rammed the enemy carriers ending that wave of fighter exchanges.

When the music changed it was a slow beat with people humming along with the tune and the lead singer began the song with 'Hear the Devil Calling' as a "hillbilly's promise of an ass kicking", as some of the 'countrified' Marines said, was Blues Saraceno's rendition of 'Dogs of War'. When he sang that he couldn't stop the dogs of war the Terran fighters began screaming out of the ships again, and the MEF-3 fighters joined them. When the singer told the audience to 'see the fields a burning', MEF-3 saw the lights from the Raven's head of the Valhalla and began firing their main guns as well. With the changing of the beat the MEF-3 forces were able to announce to the enemy their commitment to join the Terrans in becoming dogs of war as well.

Biohazard's rendition of 'Dogs of War' started off with a steady pulsing electronic noise and the capital ships and heavy carriers began revving up to three-quarters forward, or as the Terrans called it 'beginning the push'. When a former warrior, entertainer, and world leader announced that 'Government is not the solution to our problems', the troop carriers were deployed to Four dash Two to begin picking up the surviving troops there, and the dropships began spinning up the clones for the Terrans that had been sent to respawn. When the electric guitar began strumming out its angry beat the fighters went full burn towards the shields to once again conduct anti-fighter activities and kamikaze runs against the enemy capital ships. MEF-3 began earning their bloody glory when their first capital ship, The Retribution, dropped her shields too soon in their eagerness to fire her guns and the enemy barrage hit her full force. MEF-3 had joined the fight and now they were as pissed as the bloody savages the song announced them to be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE PICKUP LINES

"Fenrir, this is Odin." Came the call that silenced the radio traffic going out to the ground troops and began the ten second countdown of radio silence meant to make the Marines pay attention and get their heads back in the game.

"Fenrir here," came his short reply as he hadn't expected the call so soon and just knew he was about to get the 'Suicide Solution' order so the Marines would all detonate their equipment and respawn for rapid deployment

However, Odin had happier news, all things considered. "We're beating them back and they are folding faster than we thought. Transports are in route now and you will be picked up for another go in five mikes. Have all surviving MEF-2 personnel separated for pickup as they served their fight and will need to be extracted." The ground forces radio channel was synched up with the fleets and the Marines on the ground howled as one when they heard 'The Dogs of War' playing and the chorus of 'War is no solution to the conflicts that we face".

"Roger that. Wayward Angel's team is escorting the lone survivor now. I will pass the orders on to ensure she is told not to participate in the next drop." Fenrir replied.

"Roger, one survivor. Sending security teams to the appropriate drop ship for her recovery. Odin, out."

The three surviving MEF-2 dropships joined the fleet to provide as much shielding as they could to the flanks, as the MEF-1 dropships had done. The fleet came to a halt and formed their shield wall again halfway between four dash two and four dash three. The MEF-3 dropships started seeing Marines pouring out of their cryopods as the ships took up positions behind the planet from the enemy. Again, the Marines came out in all kinds of mental readiness, some dazed, some cussing, but none fell face first onto the floor vomiting as this

time they had a chance to collect their thoughts and process the new memories before they had been spun up. However, some just didn't adjust well to flipping from the virtual to the physical and vertigo was an inevitable side effect. A Skylit Drive's rendition of 'Separate Ways' began with the tell-tale keyboard tapping that let the Marines know they had pickups inbound, and the rapid pace of the heavy metal guitar let them know they would be joining the respawn slackers soon for another ride in the dropships.

"Fenrir to Wayward Angel", came the call over the local channel.

"This Wayward, go ahead." Came a confused reply.

"Get hands on that MEF-2 scout. Your team is on escort duty till you get her to the onboard security team. Over"

"Roger that, babysit the hero until she can be handed off. Over." With that Wayward turned to his team where Desi and T stood off to one side where T was clearly counseling her after what she had just survived. "Well guys, let's be gentle with this one ok?" He said to the team, after getting nods of acknowledgment, he slowly walked up to them and stood ten feet away until T looked up and acknowledged him. Then finished approaching and asked. "You ok?

Desi looked up and saw the concern on his face took a deep breath in and then sighed out before looking backdown and responded, "All of my friends and classmates died on that drop. I only survived due to a series of accidents, and I can't imagine the odds of me even surviving that."

"One in two million." Came Wayward's reply without even thinking, to which Desi's head shot up looking him in the eyes. Wayward shrugged his shoulders as a squinty eyed glare from T burned mental holes through his forehead with promised retribution. "What I meant to say is, it doesn't matter why or how. It only matters what you do with it. You survived, your people need a hero to celebrate, you're all that's left, the job's yours whether you want it or not. Will you stand and be the hero your people need, or will you run and hide from the rest of the universe? That's usually how it happens, you either get used to it, or it'll kill you one way or another." Wayward said. T could see the glint of tears at the corners of his eyes, so she knew he wasn't trying to be mean, he was just giving this young girl the tough love she needed right now.

"I just wish I could do it all over again, knowing what I know now, how different would things have been if we had better leaders who actually knew what they were doing like you guys did?"

T busted out laughing, and Desi spun to her, "Do you think we got it right on our first try? Hell, some of us are working on our tenth life or so trying to figure this shit out. Look around you, everyone here has already died less than two hours ago because the first go didn't work out as good as this one did."

"You think this went well?" Desi asked not understanding how three million dead was something going right.

"You're still breathing aren't you?" T asked.

"Yes, but..." Desi was cut off by Wayward.

"But nothing, sometimes you have to feel the boom so you can learn. I suggest you stand up and do what you have to so you can become the hero your people needs and make sure they have the training they need to survive the next time." Then he took in a deep breath and let it out before continuing, "I can only offer this. You will have plenty of time to think about it. Once we get back to the drop ship, they are going to shuttle you

over to the Valhalla so you can be kept safe there, and they will let you know what is expected of you as your new role as the heroine for your people." Wayward heard the transports breaking through the atmosphere and turned to signal Mac, he tapped two fingers on collar, acted like he was tugging at it, pointed at the sky, tapped his wrists together twice, pointed at Desi then circled his finger as he pointed it at the ground, then repeated until he pointed up at the sky. Mac nodded pulled a blue smoke grenade and a yellow smoke grenade out of his side pouches and motioned for the team to circle up. After Fenrir popped the same colors showing the command location pickup, Mac popped his to show the need for the pickup of a special. Two transports broke out of formation and sprinted for them as the rest of the transports began landing behind the formation so those without functional masks or helms wouldn't be blinded by flying dust and debris.

Desperate to try and make sense of all of this Desi looked at T and asked her what she would do if she was in her place. T rested one hand on her shoulder and said, "Hun, you have to make that decision for you," then she cracked a grin, "But I am the kind to get into trouble for doing what I think is right. If I was told I had to watch my friends," and she pointed at the team as they began gathering up for transport, "as they rode into battle and left me behind. I would kill the first one to tell me that and then I would find out who thought he was in charge and convince him I was going, even if I had to take his place." The two veterans through an arm across Desi's shoulders as the transport thrusters began to kick up a cloud of dust and debris.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A HERO IS BORN

Desi thought long and hard about what the two older souls were telling her. Her command staff had been dismissive of the Terrans because of their ages and inability to leave their system on their own. Desi had spoken to some of the Terrans on the drop ship that she rode in on and found out to her amazement that while the clones were configured to be post adolescent twenty-year-olds, most of the veterans had actually lived an average of a hundred years or more before they died the first time. While her race considered fifty to be the age of adolescence, they refused to understand that the Terrans they were disparaging were much older than they let on. Terrans seemed to specialize in allowing people to create their own opinions and ther exploit that as a weakness.

She wanted to understand them better, why would they be so willing to sacrifice themselves and live through everything they had to just to be successful in battle, "sometimes you have to feel the boom so you can learn," Wayward's voice came to her. Why would they be willing to do this for a species they didn't owe anything to or even know of before volunteering to pay the ultimate price for some stranger's freedom and survival? "You survived, your people need a hero to celebrate, you're all that's left, and the job's yours whether you want it or not." She heard his voice again. Well would she?

"Hun, you have to make that decision for you," she heard T's voice say. Her father had sent her here to prove her mettle if she ever wanted a chance to inherit his title, lands and fortune. "But I am the kind to get into trouble for doing what I think is right." Her mother had said all she needed to do was not fail in her duties, and she would find her a decent husband to provide for her, if her father failed to be impressed. So, what should she do? "I would kill the first one to tell me that and then I would find out who thought he was in charge and convince him I was going even if I had to take his place."

Her mind began settling on her chosen path as the rolling drum beat of Twisted Sister's 'We're Not Going To Take It Anymore' began announcing to the fleet that the Marines were back on board, and they were loading up for round three. Her father wouldn't be proud enough to leave her anything, even if the rest of her species

wanted to celebrate her as a hero, he would know it was a scam. She wouldn't need her mother to coddle her like a child, nor could she forget watching her friend die in a puff of smoke on the last drop.

As she was heading to the safety of the Terran flag ship, she knew thousands more of her brothers and sisters were standing like she was just a few hours ago. Nervous, confused, and not as scared as they should be, nor could the commanders even know how to prepare them for the absolute hell they were about to face. She did, she had to be the leader that these troops needed. Damn the politicians back home that wanted to parade her around like some hologram puppet to push their agendas. Her father wanted to see someone brave, her mother didn't want a screw up, and her people wanted... no, her people needed a hero. She was chosen by their leaders to be that hero. It was time she earned it. She had watched the videos of the Terran demonstrations on their own planet. She had already survived one drop, and she now stood next to the legendary Smoke and Spark as they were going to dive in again for her people. With her leaders who would look down on them for being so young, letting the very experience they claimed the Terrans lacked, go unheeded and killing her entire race that was participating here today.

As the transport she was riding landed she followed the Marines off the shuttle craft, and towards the reloading stations set up in a hurry near the hangar doors to the interior of the ship. She was paying close attention to what Smoke was doing, he grabbed two swords and strapped them across his shoulders, handles pointing out and up on each side. Then he grabbed two bandolier belts of eight-gauge flechette rounds and put them over the sword scabbards. He then grabbed two auto-pistols and strapped them to his thighs but turned down the extra mags for them. Next he grabbed an automatic shotgun, looped the sling around his right shoulder and pulled the buttstock tight up against his shoulder before tying the barrel to the pistol harness on his left thigh.

Wayward was off to the side, as he was trying to get into some new armor, talking to three angelics in flashy white and gold armor, and fucking cloaks of all things. He pointed at Desi and then walked towards his transport shaking his head. She saw them coming and noticed the center one was wearing her father's colors and the other two were wearing the cloak of a royal guard. Of course, her father would send this pompous ass to retrieve her, the man literally sucked up to anyone he could and had been assigned as his father's 'attaché to the pathetic Earthlings' to keep an eye on her. However, when it came time to cash the check his mouth had written so many times his response was, "Go down with the rabble? No, not on your life, I will stay up here with the civilized personages, as you should. Why in the names of all the Goddesses you volunteered to go down there is beyond me." She knew he was a clone, but she wasn't too sure about the royal guards.

She reached down and grabbed two swords from the table as she had seen Smoke do. It didn't take long to get the reaction she was expecting. "Desdemona of the House Layman, what on earth do you think you are doing? You won't need those primitive devices where we're heading. Put them down at once and come along. I have some important people for you to meet." Ol'Gama said as he approached her. The only thing Desi had running through her head was 'what is this fascination these Terrans have with heavy drumbeats and screaming guitars?' As Skar and the Bard ov Asgard began their rendition of 'Hoist the Colors.'

"Are you two clones?" Desi asked looking past him at the two royal guards. They looked at each other then back at her and nodded. "Then I'm sorry for this, but please tell the High Court that I apologize for not returning with you, I have to earn what they have unduly given." She raised one of the automatic shotguns loaded with flechette rounds and fired. Two seconds and ten rounds later she stopped firing, set the shotgun back down and looked at the Master at Arms for the Terran Marines and asked, "can I take some of this equipment?" He quickly nodded, she loaded up everything she had seen Smoke take as quickly as possible,

started for the center of the bay, turned back around and grabbed a satchel full of grenades. Then politely said, "Thank you," and gave the Master Guns the first genuine smile she could remember having given in a long time.

When she turned back around to the center of the bay she looked up at the walkways to the transports and saw where Wayward's team was getting in one. She walked directly underneath it and saw a middle-aged Incubus standing there scared out of his mind. "You're in my spot," Desi said as if stating an obvious fact. She was so convincing he had to look around to make sure she was talking to him. Then he made the dumbest mistake of this clone's stupid short life.

"Now listen here. I know who your father is, and I will have a word with him when we get back about your behavior. You might be under a lot of stress as the new 'hero'," and he said that word with a tsk as if it was a joke, "but I am the commander of this unit and I will not tolerate..." his tirade was cut off when Desi pulled her sword out of the column behind his falling body after cutting off his head in one smooth motion.

The Marines above her just gave looks of curiosity or nods of respect as the man's head rolled across the floor, then continued to sing along with the song as they returned to strapping in. Desi looked around at her fellow Angelics and Demonics then yelled out, "Anyone else want to tell me I can't go back down there?" When she didn't receive an answer she cleaned her sword with the flick of her wrist, sheathed it, stepped into the yellow lines and raised her voice during the musical interlude between the chants. "Then follow me, jump when I say jump, and stay close to your heavy. He is your shield, and you are his sword. Now, All Together, Yo Ho!" The stunned scouts stood in their squares, confused, shocked in awe, and then overcome with joy and hope that someone with courage and confidence had just stepped up to lead them. A full three seconds lapsed before half of them bellowed out "YO HO!!!". The shanty's lyrics came back online, the scouts began to really feel the music, the emotions it was supposed to invoke, and they too wanted to acknowledge their desires to sail free from the King's minions. She glanced at Smoke who was standing in the spot across from her and he grinned as wide as he could and gave her two thumbs up.

"I said altogether! YO HO!!!" She bellowed out. She had watched the Marines on the ground and learned from them that morale and cohesion were key, and chants were an easy way to build morale and cohesion.

The resounding "YO HO!!!" from the dozens of voices that had witnessed her actions reverberated throughout the bay.

"YO HO!!!" She called out again, this time over the scouts' internal comms channel, and the hundreds of voices no linger filled with dread or fear, but elation, anticipation, and excitement responded with a "YO HO" that was thunderous. When the lyrics to the song returned for the final chorus, they too sang out loud and proud.

The Command Sgt. Major had been standing at the inner door observing the Marines get ready to drop again for a third time in as many hours when he heard gunfire coming from inside the bay. He turned and watched as an Angelic scout put down a shotgun, asked the Master Gunnery Sgt. standing in front of her something. After he nodded she grabbed some gear began putting it on like one of his men would, and then turned to walk into the center of the bay as if looking for someone. He decided to walk over and talk to the man to investigate. When he arrived one of the few newly ranked Master Chief Warrant Officers was standing there talking to the Master Guns. The CSM looked at the Warrant officer and asked, "Is there a problem Gunner?"

"Master Guns was just telling me how she had shot those men after apologizing to them and asked them to apologize to her nobility because they wanted to take her out of the fight."

"Hmmm, didn't work out to good for them I guess." Was all the CSM could come up with.

All three men turned and watched as she beheaded a man in the center of the bay, issued a challenge to everyone there, sheathed her sword, kicked the body out of the way so she could assume his post, then began leading the rest in singing the shanty. Gunner McCann reached up, tapped his helmet twice and filed his report.

"Heimdall to Odin."

"Go for Odin," came the admiral's voice, clearly confused by *THE* old man calling him

"We have a mutiny aboard the Winged Vengeance," the gunner said.

"Come again?" The admiral had lost his train of thought with that remark and wasn't sure if this was some kind of sick joke.

"The Hero of Two just turned her security detail into pink mist with a shotgun on full auto, decapitated the commander of the winged ones, and assumed the command." The Gunner reported.

"You have eyes on the situation, what's your advice?" Odin asked now completely perplexed.

"She killed one of the most useless politicians I have ever met, a snot nosed incompetent Captain, took command like a boss, and now has them singing sea shanties. I suggest playing them another one, only a heavy metal version and let her ride. See if she can increase their survival rate with a little experience under her belt." The gunner offered up.

"Very well, an ancient Norse Shanty it is then. I want to see the video of that later, and this had better not be a ploy for another shanty for an old salt. Odin, out."

As the admiral cut his comms the three men in the bay chuckled and the Gunner said, "He's the boss. Now what can we do to make this more efficient the next time we do this?" Their alliance counterparts were stupefied by how swiftly this catastrophe was swept under the rug, and the Terrans just moved on, like murder was something that was just an everyday event to them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: ROUND THREE

L.B. One and Datamotions' techno version of the Norse song 'My Mother Told Me' signaled the fleet to hold the line a little longer as the Marines on the dropships readied up. The Marines in the bays, the scouts aboard the Winged Vengeance and the guns of the fleets big ships thundered out "HOORAH" with every drop of the beat or pause in the lyrics. Once the lyrics stopped and the bass hit overdrive the fleet's big ships started pushing forward towards the next planet. The enemy was trying to hold the fleets back and were continuing to pour fighters and other invaders onto the planet's surface. They had even begun a spiral of wounded craft around the tentacle to the planet to get as many fresh units on the ground as they could.

"OK Drak, enough sea shanties, now that the Marines are tucked in all cozy like, let the Sandman sing them a little lullaby for me." Drak reached over and hit the button to play the next of phase of the battle, and the Viking shanty faded into the electric guitar dum-da-da-dum of Halocene's rendition of 'Enter Sandman'.

When the drums began hammering the fighters started screaming forward again and the ships poured missile fire into the enemy fleet, the kinetic weapons started hammering the planet's surface, and the giant energy weapons of the fleets main guns started pin-pointing the enemy capital ships as they were finally close enough to be seen by the gunners and Als alike. It was five minutes of hellish high intensity exchanges of fleet-on-fleet fire and fighter waves.

This was an issue that Odin had expected as they slowed down to allow the scouts in the Winged Vengeance to acclimate to their new leadership, but Odin knew that this was only the first battle of a much longer war, and the alliance troops would be needed sooner or later. Their eagerness to feed the people into the meat grinder would be essential and giving them a chance to survive here with proven experience, would be critical to helping the leaders to understand the difference between a professional military and a bunch of amateurs playing weekend warrior thinking one fight each was enough to win the war. By allowing the Heroine of Two to motivate and then lead her own people into battle, he was hoping to train the next generation of officers needed to lead the future of the alliance forces. But that was an issue that will have to wait for later.

Right now, he needed to regain focus, and this little trip to Never, Never Land would have to wait. "Drak let's take these fuckers all the way back to 1991 and tell the fleet it's time to raise a little hell." Drak was getting seriously concerned about the stress that the admiral must be feeling, or was it the longer they stared into the fires of the battlefield the more his inner human would show through? Regardless, he would have to play the music for these creatures that make some of their stories about demons and flames become reality wherever they waged war. He hit the next song thinking how appropriate the name was. The thrum of an electronic drone started off high and dropped to a low vibrating thrum before the drums and electric guitar began playing the 30th Anniversary Edition of 'Hellraiser' by Ozzy Osbourne and Motorhead. Drak was shocked by how he thought he was now beginning to think like Odin. However, if this man was as good at creating as he was destroying what would this race be capable of would that really be such a bad thing? Once they were given a chance to grow in peace what would be their limits?

Meanwhile at the back of the fleet the dropships were rotating upwards along their X axis, like a porcupine rising on its' hindlegs to howl at the moon. While the transition along the flightline might be slow, the spin along the ships Z axis had begun as soon as the song came on and the navy crews walked through the bays checking every strap, moving scouts to stand in the boxes properly, and announcing, "Prep for spin!" As the music and ship built up speed Desi was staring at the yellow line painted on the deck in front of her and singing a low chant in her head, "focus on your feet, focus on your feet, until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go." She ran this chant over and over until she started saying it out loud, with all of the platoon commanders and squad leaders tagging her as the officer in charge, her transmissions started to be carried across the radios to the other scouts aboard the Winged Vengeance, and her men began to repeat it while following her instructions. Seeing a full detail of scouts on a single ship repeating the same thing the Al alerted the scout commander for the fleet, and he picked up on the channel to see what was being said. As all the lights inside the ships shifted to the color red the ship rats ran for their spots on the columns and walkways yelling, "Prepare to drop!"

Unlike many of his royal counterparts, this man had earned his titles and fortunes by listening to the advice of those who worked for him. He did not recognize the name of the individual leading this group, and he knew everyone that was under his charge for this mission, this unit was supposed to have been led by Cpt. Pah'Sheeta. He did a quick status check on the commander for that ship and saw his vitals were reporting him dead. He then did a quick reference check of her name in the system and was amazed at who was leading these men. She was supposed to be heading for Avian Prime, not four dash three. That would have to

be dealt with later. The dropships were beginning to spin, and he needed to focus on the here and now. Her chant was hypnotic with the beat of the music, and he knew it must be beneficial to others. He could see the fear on the faces of many of the people he was supposed to be leading but charisma doesn't make up for a lack of experience. So, he decided to play her voice over the radios for all of the scouts to hear, "focus on your feet, until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go."

These drops ships were larger, more heavily armed and armored. The MEF-3 personnel did not know why the Terrans had asked for so many of a failed iteration of a ship with less armor to be built in such large numbers, but if the Terrans wanted to pack the alliance ships full of excess armored plating on the outside of the drop ship hulls, all the better. When they saw the massive losses to those light dropships, only five of the hundreds had survived the first two missions, they were dismayed at first, then they remembered the extra armor. When the ships did not behave the way they had before the other two planet landings the allies were confused.

When Sgt. Major Harvey heard the thrum of 'Hellraiser' playing he yelled over the infantry channels. "Alright boys and girls, you all know what that means. Odin is preparing a little beach party for us. Let's not let the locals crash his party." The response was deafening as thousands of ground pounders across the fleet responded with "Aroo, Aroo, Aroo." "If this is your first Jump, look at the man across from you," The veterans had been assigned to fill the leadership roles of alliance units with four rookies per veteran. "If he is pointing at you, you now belong to him. Keep your eyes on him on the ride down, when the bottom drops out and we begin to freefall follow him. If he tells you something to do and you fail to do so, I will personally kill him if he doesn't kill you first." With this the Terran Marines once again chanted, "Aroo, Aroo, Aroo."

Outside the dropships had reached a full ninety degree offset and was flying towards planet three sideways, and they had reached maximum centrifugal spin speeds. The Capital ships in between the dropships and the planet began opening small portals in front of themselves that opened up on the outer flanks of the rest of the fleet. Then the explosive bolts holding down the 50-ton pyramids that formed the reactive armor were fired. Five Thousand pyramids per drop ship, and 5,000 dropships full of units with one Terran veteran for four fresh alliance Marines. A wall of 50-ton kinetic beach party rounds continued to block out the sun as they approached the planet. Not a single vessel, friend or foe, withstood the speeds they were traveling and just became more weight heading for the planet's surface from the solid kinetic math of E=MC(squared) times the strongest metal the Terrans and Continuum could develop. Above the dropships portals were opening up in front of them as well, and they began to apply forward thrust to move through them. The other end of their portals opened up at angles to the upper atmosphere of four dash three, just behind the pyramids.

As the pyramids began glowing from entering the atmosphere Odin sent out another command and the radio waves vibrated with someone whistling as Megaraptor's remix of 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' started up and the fighters dove to follow the pyramids in, to use them to resist the heat of reentry at those speeds, and to maintain the air superiority the pyramid wall just paved through to the crust of the planet. Nothing in the air, on the land, or in the water where the wall of pyramids was to hit would survive.

When the dropships came through the portals on the other side they left their engines at full burn and were going to bounce off the atmosphere much the same way the Freki had done to the Earth for the MOAB display and drop their loads directly into the atmosphere. Essentially they would carpet bomb the planet's surface with the landing forces. The scouts inside the drop bays of the other dropships did not know what was going on, they only heard the steady voice of an Angelic saying, "focus on your feet, focus on your feet, until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go."

When the explosive bolts first washed along the lines of the ships the most scared were concerned, but they kept repeating the mantra, listening to the rapid strumming guitars and thumping drums of 'Hellraiser.' When the second wave of bolts came back through the hull and nothing changed the scouts calmed down, and focused on the mantra, "focus on your feet, focus on your feet, until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go."

The Als picked up on this and the drop ship Als saw a problem, not all of them would be jumping at once, so they began looping her audio to delay it for when it was time for the scouts to jump. As the Heavy Metal Cowboy Anthem began to wind down, the Navy personnel standing inside the bays announced, "Get ready!!!" for the scouts that did not have a veteran to tell them to prepare for deployment. The next thing to come across the airwaves to the fleet was an announcement directly to the troops that were about to head for the ground again. "Attention Helldivers, please direct your attention to the nearest monitor for this mandatory broadcast incoming from Super Earth," as Johnathan Young's 'We are the Helldivers' began to play.

By the time the singer had to take his first breath the dropships were breaking through the edge of the atmosphere in a skip maneuver. As he began to sing the lyrics the scouts were no longer focused on the music of the song, but the Terrans were singing along to help fight the possibility of unconsciousness from being held at near 5Gs of spin force for five minutes. The scouts were still chanting the mantra "focus on your feet, focus on your feet, until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go," as the bolts holding the ship together began to explode and the deployment began full bore. When the song announced "On Every Planet, our bombs bringing hope," the heavy mechs began to fire their thrusters and she changed up her mantra, "focus on your feet," and the heavy mechs went by, "focus on your feet," and the hover tanks revved up, "focus on your feet," and the hover tanks shot past, "focus on your feet," and the pinging of the troops transports being freed of their explosive bolts shot through the bay, "focus on your feet," and the transports went screaming by.

She was now trying to psych herself up for the really scary part, "when I tell you to jump," and the horizon came into view of the window, "you jump." When the flames cleared the window and she saw her heavy she knew it was now or never, "GO! GO! GO!" This she yelled as loud as she could to force herself to dive for her heavy; she did not know she had been transmitting to the rest of the scouts the whole time after the fourth or fifth chant. The AIs synched her timing and adjusted it for better flight paths for those that followed and played the prep and jump sequences when appropriate.

The dropships came in hotter and faster than they had on four dash one and was pouring the troops out as fast as possible because they were now the front lines and were no longer part of a shield wall, but the tip of the spear being shoved into the enemy's heart. They had to offload the troops as quickly as they could because they were running the clock on their life expectancy, and that was predicted to be less than the amount of time it took to fully deploy the troops and MOABs. To assist the Marines even more they poured the main guns into the line of enemies in front of the drop lines as they dove for the atmosphere before pulling up for the skip, effectively doing a strafing run with orbital bombardment cannons. A few even used the hull of their wrecks to plow an LZ as they were shot down before leaving the atmosphere.

With no atmosphere to burn through the Marines were heading to the ground faster than before and the armor-plated hull sections the heavies were riding gave better protection because they had not been heated up to near melting temperatures. The ground forces were being dropped into a sea of enemies that were trying to fight back. The kinetic strikes from the wall of pyramids gave them one half of the planet, but the

other half was stacked several enemies deep in some places and they were not willing to give an inch that wasn't paid for in blood. As 'Helldivers' began to fade Drak was already spinning up the next song to crossfade so there would be no break in the speed. Fenrir had requested a cleansing, but Odin responded with playing 'All Out Life' by Slipknot which was his way of saying, 'Fight for It.' Odin needed to bloody the alliance troops and give them a chance to earn some experiences for themselves. The troops on the ground understood one thing and one thing only, the Valhalla had spoken, and it was about to get ugly. The troops landed at the edge of the pyramid plateau often firing before they even hit the ground and started maneuvering towards the returning enemy fire. The only cover the Marines or the enemy had was provided to them by the corpses or wrecks of their fallen allies, and that was more motivation for both sides to provide the other with more cover providing fire.

The MOABs rained down upon the enemy in waves pushing them back with every blast. Entire sections of enemies were decimated, while others managed to hold because the dropships above them had been destroyed and they surged forward to push the alliance forces back where they could. In some places two alliance pinchers dug into the enemies back lines cutting their push off from support lines, forced the enemy into pockets and then destroyed them. In other locations that happened to the alliance forces and the back and forth turned the waving tentacle of troops and invaders into the teeth of a meat grinder that was bent on killing anything moving. Fenrir ordered the ground forces to hold the line as 'All Out Life' came to end, and 'Kill EM ALL' by C. Wilkes started thrumming with the lyrics 'Kill em all', it had the sentiment that was needed to pass along the lines, as Fenrir yelled into the comms for everyone to hear, "Time for a new high score!" This was going to be a battle of attrition.

The five crippled dropships from four one and four two used the opening of the metal plated plateau of pyramids to crash land on the surface to never move again. In the system that MEF-1 had jumped from, five half-finished ships crashed into the surface of a sub-life planet, opened their portals as close to the portals opened by the five crippled ships on four three. After the gates were checked, for stability and height above the ground that they opened up on, fighters, equipment or troops would rush through the gates to reinforce the fight on four three.

For the billions that thought they would never get a flight because there wasn't enough ships, special portals were opened on the training planets to the jump-off system, and their patience was rewarded with the opportunity to run into the fight and die for the honor and glory associated with this historical moment. After all, piloting a clone body was no different than playing a video game and this was being celebrated by some as the largest ever MMORPG raid in the history of the universe. Many of them were hearing the Terran race's music called heavy metal for the first time as they marched from one jump gate to the next and the ground forces radio began playing Daniel Varfolomeyev's tribute to the ancient classic 'Toccata & Fugue in D Minor'. A man with a diamond or a bomb on their shoulders was on both sides of the portals as they exited, and they were pointing and yelling obscenities as enemy fire flew overhead. The alliance troops were eager to play as huge families had gotten together and offered up a reward to the top individuals who killed the most enemies, the final pool was large enough that the top five could retire with a planet or moon of their own after this was over

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: HOLD THE LINE

The dropships used the massive speed boost they had built up by skipping across the atmosphere and using four three's gravity well to pull a 'Wild E. Coyote maneuver to slingshot' themselves into the tentacles providing enemy troops to the ground. Whether anyone was still alive on the hulks as they were torn to pieces

didn't matter as in space you either deflect, move out of the way, or get clobbered by the debris from the flaming wrecks now screaming at them. As the ground forces began playing a classical musical with heavy metal overtures, Odin had the fleet playing a different kind of song, Jacoby Shaddix joined The Hu for their epic 'Wolf Totem'. The fleet fought a long and hard battle to enclose four three within the protective wall from the enemy. As they pushed them back Odin noticed that the enemy was using their troops that had been removed from four two to reinforce four three but were running out of ships that were fighting the alliance fleet for the system. This must be a last-ditch effort to take the planet, and he would bleed the enemy above and then use orbital bombardment to remove them from below if he had to. By the time the Mongols had sung their song promising to return honor to their people through battle. The enemy column had been broken off and their fleet had withdrawn massively outnumbered. The enemy from below reached up to leave the planet and attack the fleet from behind to escape the Marines on the ground and to once and for all try to destroy this force that had been killing them whole-sale since the moment they started fighting back.

Odin had expected this and decided to let them, with a twist. He ordered the center of the fleet to drop back and form a funnel which was intended to absorb an unrelenting push to the center and then bombard the enemy from the sides before shoving them back, but this tactic could work here too. "Ok Drak, it's time to do something stupid." Drak looked at him like he had lost his mind but spun around and started up the song from someone woman that was crazy enough to be bound in ropes of metal. It took the fleet's captains to understand the command they were given and slam on the proverbial brakes, many went full reverse to start to back up before engaging additional side thrusters to turn slightly sideways, which also confused the enemy fleet. When the ships in the second and third lines of the wall heard the song they began forming the funnel while the Valhalla and a dozen others in the middle of the front row held strong. Afterall who kicks off a tactic as daring and complicated as this with "Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey Stoopid." Apparently Odin thought this song by Alice in Chains was the perfect one for the job. After the funnel was formed and the ships in it began to rotate around the funnel, they stopped suppressing the ships trying to leave and allowed them to launch into the cloud that was formed by the remainder of the fleet on the edge of the system. The enemy had other plans though, a large bulge pushed through the tentacle so fast many of their ships were spun out of the tentacle into the alliance funnel. When the bugle reached the surface the planet began to implode as if its core's gravity well had just multiplied.

When a single massive portal started to open up behind the enemy Odin gave the one call he prayed he never would have too, "Yggdrasil, this Odin, RAGNAROK!", outside of Silinius Four every channel in every system swapped to one song and Sabaton began hammering out their tribute to the soldiers that earned the title of 'The Attack of the Dead Men'. This called for all of the ships the alliance had left in reserves, Capital ships still under construction and were little more than a gun and engine in a frame, mining vessels that had stacks of anti-fighter batteries 'duck taped' to their hulls, and cargo transports that were loaded beyond safety measures with piloted, fueled, and unclamped MOABs. If these ships were being called in it meant that the battle was probably lost, it was just a last-ditch effort to try and make the enemy bleed some more before the Terrans tried something else.

In the Silinius Four System 'Hey Stoopid' was wrapping up, the alliance shield wall had reformed in between the now destroyed Four Three, the remaining enemy fleet, with their portal behind them and enemy reinforcements started arriving.

Odin pushed all in with his bluff, "Drak, let's take them back to the beginning of this. Introduce me to their bosses would you?" Drak was so terrified at the sheer volume of enemy that was beginning to push through the portal that he absent mindedly reached over and pushed the button for AG's 'Sympathy for the Devil.'

When the bass guitar began thrumming the enemy fleet that had been in the system did something unexpected, they paused momentarily stopped firing into the alliance fleet, when the woman sang "Please allow me to introduce myself". The derelicts, incompletes, and downright insane came pouring through the gates that sprang open around the edges of the enemy fleet meant to surround and confuse them. They served as a little extra for the next part of the gambit. Before the new alliance arrivals could turn to face the enemy the Alliance forces were confused by the enemies behavior for the first time since the fight had begun The bedraggled enemy fleet's remains dove for the portal on their side of the system that the enemy had opened. The alliance fleet stopped firing just as confused as the incoming enemy fleet that was now colliding with their own ships as the one-way movement into the system was now being pushed back by their own forces and the traffic collapsed in on itself. The alliance forces wasn't sure which side fired first, whether survivors were being shot for fleeing during combat or whether those desperate to leave the system was willing to do whatever it took to leave, but the portal erupted into a huge battle ground and the incoming traffic was cutoff as the outgoing traffic equaled the incoming flow for a moment before the fleeing enemies managed to win the push for their portal.

The newly arrived civilian ships were eager to participate in the fight and began hammering away at the edges of the enemy that had just arrived on this side of the system, they had the enemy flanked and they opened fire with everything they had. Compared to the might of the professional fleet that had been fighting this whole time it was a paltry amount, but to the enemy that was confused and partially routed, it was too much. The whole enemy fleet collapsed in on itself as it began to leave the system through the portal. An inactive drone was fired from the Valhalla at super high speeds to try and sneak it into the system along with a few dozen MOABs to cover it up. When the MOABs arrived on the other side they detonated among the enemy fleet which allowed the drone to ride the shockwaves off into a different direction as if it were a piece of shrapnel.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: AFTER ACTION REPORT AND THE CONSEQUENCES

For three weeks Wayward's team had been brought in as witnesses against Desi during the fact-finding hearings following the campaign to retake Silinius Four. They all refused to say anything other than to extol the virtues she had displayed on Four Two and Four Three. Their refusal to answer the prosecutions questions earned them the ire of all of the politicians that were trying to downplay her role in the battles. The command staff respected the team's stance but acquiesced to the politician's demand that they face a military tribunal, under the condition that Desi was charged under the same tribunal as they were attempting to try her for crimes committed during a combat operation, on a ship of war, while wearing an Alliance uniform. Knowing that death was an acceptable punishment under the articles of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the politicians eagerly accepted. The Command staff that was called forth to sit in judgment was comprised from the twenty-five admirals of the Valhalla class warships and represented most races of the alliance. Frigg had requested to abstain due to political ties to her family on her home world. The admiralty accepted her request but expressed that she should evaluate terminating all such concerns after this hearing was over.

Desi was then brought up on charges of failure to comply with a lawful order, mutiny, conspiracy to incite a mutiny, killing a senior officer, impersonating an officer, giving false orders to troops in combat, and being absent without leave during combat operations, all could carry the death sentence, and the politicians were excited to see the charges. Desi was found guilty of mutiny, for which she was given the maximum sentence

of 100 years of extra duty without pay and killing a senior officer for which she was given another 100 years of extra duty without pay. On the charges of impersonating an officer, the AI was able to verify that she had landed on the ground recognized by all personnel aboard the Winged Vengeance as the de facto commander, assigned and recognized by the commander in charge of all scout units for the fleet, and the retransmission of her commands to all troops on his authority. On the charges of being absent without leave, she was found innocent as she was with her command during the combat operations on Silinius Four Three. The charges for murdering the two Royal Guards and the Royal Delegate would be handled by the High Court of Avian Prime in compliance with military tradition.

When the Mastery Gunnery Sgt was called to testify about what happened just ten feet in front of him, he was found guilty of racial discrimination after he confessed to not being able to tell an Angelic from a Demonic and couldn't remember what she looked like. He was sentenced to sensitivity training and administrative duties at the New Honolulu recovery and rehabilitation center until he could tell the difference, or he was able to get his memory back.

T was found guilty of failure to complete her duties as assigned, destruction of government property, and refusal to comply with a direct order during the live fire exercises on Terra Prime. T, Wayward and his team were tried and convicted for refusal to cooperate with a civil hearing, disobeying civil authority, disobeying a civil judge's orders to respond, refusal to comply with a lawful order, failure to obey a lawful order from a non-commissioned officer, and disobeying a lawful order from a senior officer. As part of her punishment T was demoted to Private First Class, assigned to Wayward's unit for retraining in the actions of close in fire support during combat operations, and ordered to serve as the EOD specialist on his team until completion of their sentence.

Wayward and his team was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to serve as instructors in the live fire training facilities located in Northern Siberia or Alpha Point while not serving other duties assigned by fleet command and reduction in rank to Lance Corporal. The Jolly Rogers' Orphans were all demoted to Private First Class and ordered to report to Wayward's Team for immediate indoctrination training to join the Jolly Rogers. Their would be on Temporary Assignment Duty as protection detail for Desdemona Layman during her appearance in front of the High Court on Avian Prime, until they arrived on Terra.

The Winged Vengeance was lost in combat operations as she exited the atmosphere of Four Three and rammed the deployment tentacle of the enemy detonating all munitions and resupplies on impact. No video footage from inside the bay was found for the last thirty minutes of the deployment, and no witnesses were able to step forward to positively identify her as having killed either the politician or two royal guards. Any sentence that the High Court was to administer would be carried out upon completion of her military conviction. As punishment for failure to report to Odin as commanded, he demoted her to the rank of Second Lieutenant from the Al assigned Rank of Captain and ordered her to perform as Fleet Command's Temporary Representative to Avian Prime, until a more suitable Representative could be found. For her conduct in operations on Silinius Three she was assigned the post of team commander of the first mixed special operations unit to be filled with members of all the alliance races based on the training to be completed under the tutelage Special Forces Command of Fleet Operations. Wayward and his team were assigned roles as her squad and team leaders until they died their final death, or she found someone better.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: SEND LAWYERS, GUNS, AND MONEY

All diplomatic and news agencies were placed on temporary emergency hold by the Terran Fleet as they had been during the military operations in the Silinius Four System and Ssnarg Renegotiations. However, this one was drastically different in that it was not scheduled, no invasions had been detected, and it was not a live feed but a simple short-pre-recorded video clip.

"Prime Minister. It is an honor to get to speak to you. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Odin said as he was shown standing in a VR environment.

"Admiral Odin. Thank you for taking the time to answer my call personally. We have had an issue with a local inheritance matter and need to have it resolved in a manner that will appease the courts and our populace about what exactly happened on Silinius Four Two and Four Three as the information we have received through non-military channels has been heavily redacted." The Prime Minister of the Avian High Court said as he was shown now standing in front of him in the Virtual Environment.

"Very well, how can I help?" Odin was starting to worry about what this man was asking of him as he never liked how some monarchies had used their militaries to stay in power.

"We need anyone who witnessed, took part in, or was complicit with the actions of one Desdemona of The Layman's Guild during the military actions in Silinius Four to appear in front of us here on Avian Prime."

The video was paused and a song by Warren Zevon had been appropriately queued with the line "I am a desperate man." The song paused and the video resumed.

"Very well. I can make that happen. However, you do realize that the Terran military will not take part in, or allow any military force to do so, concerning any civil actions not resulting from piracy or terrorism, to include adjustments to political or civil renegotiations of laws or the interpretations of those laws no matter who requests that assistance correct?" Odin wanted to make sure that point was very solid before continuing.

The Prime Minister laughed like Odin had told a funny joke at a cocktail party. "Oh, it's nothing like that. We just need to get the truth of what really happened sorted out and our people haven't met their heroine from the battle of Silinius Four yet. Don't you think it's time that they did?"

The video was paused again, and the song was allowed to play the next line, "Send lawyers, guns and money." At the end of the line the song was paused and the video once again resumed.

"Prime Minister, I have to remind you that because of the way the fleet operates and the unfortunate circumstances that led up to the renegotiation of our joining the Alliance at the Ssnarg home world, we must announce the fleet's intention to enter any inhabited system not under direct enemy attack with a 72-hour notice to all alliance members."

"Of course. Do whatever you have to do. Just make sure to bring all of the withesses and anyone that may have been complicit in her crimes please." The Prime Minister said while batting his eye lashes. This only confused Odin a little as to what he was trying to do.

Again, the video was paused, and the song continued, "The shit has hit the fan."

"You realize all military personnel and clones that were present and accounted for during that time have been judged and punished according to military laws and will not be presented to stand trial in a civilian court for the same crimes that have already been heard by a court and jury constituted of their peers in military matters in a military court?" The only thing Odin hated more than politics was the legal entanglements that they often made necessary.

Another pause and another line from the song, "All right, send, lawyers, guns and money."

"Oh, we will not be trying them. The original that spawned the clone that performed those actions is being stripped of her noble inheritance and because of her clone's actions it is being contested in court. This is a geo-political matter but since you have refused to provide the documentation that we need we want the witness statements in person where possible."

Another pause, "Send lawyers, guns, and money."

"Very well. I will send out notification to all affected military personnel that you are requesting their presence, and we will begin transporting them to Avian Prime as soon as possible. Since this is a home world system, we will notify the other alliance members in accordance with the renegotiated treaty of the Ssnarg Imperium Embassy should we need to do so."

"Send lawyers, guns, and money."

"Oh, that is so kind of you. Andeli has always said that your species is so easy to work with. I am looking forward to the chance to maybe meet you in person one day." The Prime minister cooed.

"Send lawyers, guns, and money."

"Very well. If that is all, I have my orders and will need time to carry them out. Good day." Odin bowed slightly and the VR portion was replaced with a wall of script in multiple languages and computer coding intended to have the communicators for devices that used scents, vibrations or other methods to let their users know what was being presented to them.

The end of the song was allowed to play out as the text was scrolled through several times over a thirty second loop. Basically, portions of MEF-1, MEF-2 and MEF-3 would be required to meet up with the Valhalla for presentation of the Avian Heroine of Silinius Four to her people, followed by their testimonies in front of the High Court of Avian Prime. Most citizens thought this was the military's way of saying that there was going to be a big airshow, a nice parade, and maybe a ceremony which would be followed up by some drama with the royals in the High Courts, but they could care less as long as they got to see the show. After Andeli was contacted directly and securely through Continuum channels by the High Court in the matter, she advised them to have the Prime Minister to make the request directly to Odin and to do his best to flirt with Odin because he was so stressed out after the battle. She then reminded the Admiralty to review Wayward's introduction of music to the original Ambassadors and this song was chosen. The High Court of Avian Prime had been consulted on the editing, it was aired three days after receiving approval from a closed circuit viewing by only the Holders of the Ruling Titles of Avian Prime.

The true meaning of the message had been sent out to those that had been present for Wayward's personal explanation and demonstration of music, and they had heard it loud and clear. As other ambassadors went into immediate brown pants mode, the former ambassador to the Ssnarg Empire immediately requested that his commanding officer allow him to transmit a coded message to his replacement. The commander accepted on the condition that the message be recorded in his presence and allowed him to review it or modify it before it was transmitted to the new ambassador. The Ssnarg representative was short and sweet. "You can either learn from my mistake, or you can repeat it and join me. Avian Prime: Send Lawyers, Guns.

and Money. The smart people of the Terran Forces or the Continuum can tell you when, where, and what." A rendering of the entire conversation from the time Snatch walked into the office until he left eight minutes later was transmitted to the new ambassador without any editing or fanfare. He was promoted to Private First Class and transferred from infantry bootcamp Paradise Island (Alpha point) to Heavy Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, of the Odin Landing Forces that afternoon, it was his first transfer in the Corps that did not require a respawn.

Ambassador Andeli took an immediate personal leave of absence to accept an invitation to tour a poultry farm in a place called Mount Anna. She contacted Continuum agents to make discreet travel arrangements for herself and her three favorite nieces under her grandmother's maiden name.

CHAPTER TWENTY: UNSCHEDULED VISITORS AND PUPPIES

"Eve. Just the person I wanted to speak to. You promised me that you hadn't planted any spyware in my neural implants when you guys created this clone for me." Jack said with a big grin on his face.

"Jack. Why is it that you and Wayward continue to insist that I would do something so duplicitous all the time?" Eve said as she tried to adjust to a scruffy looking version of Wayward.

"Well, there was that whole red pill blue pill thing, near the Jordan River, after designing a body specifically to drive me crazy." Jack said just before bouncing his eyebrows a few times.

"Oh, come on. I apologized two-hundred and thirty-four times to Wayward already. What do I have to do to get your acceptance of my apology?" Eve was starting to catch on to how the Terrans interacted with one another after being able to interact with millions of them every day in her multiple roles aboard the ship.

"Well for starters you can come down here and share a cold beer with me by a bonfire at my new place. I will even get to introduce you to the puppies that I have finished weening just for your little special project." Jack said with a grin so big it felt like his face was going to split in half.

"That reminds me. Preliminary reports are back on the species that you have been working with and the ones you submitted for recent analysis will be cloneable and programable. They are also borderline sentient at this point. I need to caution you about any genetic tampering that you might be doing." Eve stated, while losing all sense of humor in her voice.

"Oh, come on Eve. I am sure you guys have records of every piece of tech that has been flown in or manufactured here on-site. There is no genetic equipment or tampering going on here. It's just good old fashioned raising the animals and selective breeding for desired traits. In this case I go for smarter and larger, and sometimes I tweak the aggression levels through training. Come on down and do a personal inspection of the breeding facilities if you don't believe me." Jack offered again bouncing his eyebrows.

"If you don't behave I will get T on the line." Eve threatened.

"Oh Baby, threaten me with a good time. Go ahead, but are you sure you're ready for a threesome like that?" Jack asked grinning broadly again.

With that the screen split into two and T glanced up from whatever she was working on to look into the camera, then broke into a big smile. "Eve! How can I…" the smile vanished from her face, and she glared at the screen like she was ready to bite it. "You."

"Well, hello there S." Jack said

"What do you want?" T growled.

Eve didn't understand what was going on, but she was confused so she reverted back to her asking questions routines. "S? Her initials are all Ts. Why did you call her S?"

"NO..." was all T could say before she had to cover her face in embarrassment

"Because she is so much better than just the three Ts. Especially when she has all the S's in all the places that deserve the yeses." Jack said moving his hands in an exaggerated impossibly configured hourglass shape.

"What?" Eve asked still confused.

"Oh Goddess." I mumbled

"Strong, Sleek, and Sapiosexual. She's got it all in one super sensual and seductive package." Jack said and cackled like a madman

"I'm not sure I understand," Eve said.

"Eve just let it go, and file it under one of those things you don't want to know." T said to her new friend. She then turned back to Jack. "What do you want Jackass?"

"Oh no Sexy, it's what do **you** want?" Jack said grinning again.

"I swear to God if this is some weird crank call I will drop from here just to land on you like the hammer of God." T threatened

"The puppies are done. Do you want to cum," he said like he was having an orgasm with his eyes closed and shaking a little, "and get first pick, or should I tell Cowboy to get his first and let you have sloppy seconds?"

Jack said with just a little smirk on his face.

T's voice and manners changed instantly as she let her tools drop and clatter on the floor. "Puppies? Why didn't you say so? Of course I would love to come out to the ranch. When and where?"

"Catch the next FedUps or Amazonian Run. They both know where the Hen House Ranch is." Jack said grinning.

"We are so not calling it that." T said glaring at him again.

"Hey, if you want to help with the naming rights you can put in the time to send your civie skin over here to help out. Bear tried to and Cowboy at least popped in during his one day of R&R a while back.

"You bastard. You better not try to stick me in some mother-in-law apartment over the garage." I growled.

"Hey, Juan didn't survive Spot long enough to get the tour, and Gary hasn't made it here yet, so if you hurry you can still be the first to pick out your own wing." Jack pointed out.

"Done, Eve. I need two tickets on the next..." T started.

"Done, Teesha has been informed and the next flight leaves in twenty minutes. I suggest you go dressed like that. Juan is scheduled on a flight that leaves in one hour." Eve said.

"Oh, I see how it is. I knew Eve was playing favorites." Jack said.

"I don't know what you're talking about. She is very specific in what she wants and is always direct and helpful in her responses when I have questions. I have never understood this 'Sisters before Misters' thing you men are fond of saving." Eve said trying to play innocent.

T just covered her eyes with one hand groaning and Jack burst out laughing. "My Gawd. Eve is developing a sense of humor, and the ability to lie." Jack howled almost as much as stated.

"What?" Eve said.

"We got to work on your poker face when I have time Eve. Bye y'all." T said and killed her connection.

"Eve, had you said, 'Bros before Hoes' I might have believed you, but 'Sisters before Misters' is the female version, and men do not say that." Jack replied.

"Oh," was all Eve could reply to that. "Um, this might not be a good time but there has been a special request from a visitor made by an individual that is seeking a discreet location to allow some diplomatic difficulties to pass over and Wayward may have mentioned the ranch a time or two during conversations with them." Eve stated not knowing how Jack would take the invasion of his privacy by some strangers, especially for political reasons.

"No specifics. What kind of situation?"

"Send lawyers, guns, and money was requested by the admiralty." Eve stated

"How bad is it?"

"A small contingent of MEF-1, MEF-2, and MEF-3 are about to visit a home world," Eve said.

"Damn." Jack flinched. "That's... woah bov. OK. How many individuals to be housed?"

"Four. One adult female, three juvenile females."

"That's doable. For how long?"

"Unknown at this time "

"When?"

"T will be their escort. Teesha is picking them up as we speak." Eve said.

"Does T know?"

"Not yet."

"You're playing with fire on that one, but y'all are sister's right?" lack said grinning.

"I will worry about her when she gets back, and they know each other, so I will take my chances. Are you sure you will be ok with this?" Eve asked.

"He is me and I am him. If he told her about this place he must really like her and therefore she is welcome here anytime. Until she uninvites herself. However, those kids and any others will always have a safe place here from anyone and anything. Well except for puppy breath, no guarantees on that one as kids and puppies are usually inseparable." Jack said.

"Thank you Jack. Is there anything the Continuum can offer you as a token of our appreciation in this matter?" Eve asked.

"Actually, there might be. Can you get me a private respawn terminal and a single cryopod and DNA mixing tank? Might be really helpful should someone really need to disappear. Especially since it is such a long way from here to the closest one in case things go sideways." Jack said. He figured it wouldn't hurt to ask especially since the Continuum now owed him one.

"Done. They will be delivered tomorrow. Do you need me to schedule a technician to set them up or can I trust you to read the fucking manual?" Eve asked while trying to use some of the instructions T had given her about the Jolly Rogers and men in general when assembling things.

Jack busted out laughing. "No, you better not, not with my new house guests, and no I won't so you better come yourself to make sure I don't rig up a magic puppy maker." Jack said laughing even harder.

"You're just trying to get me into your bedroom." Eve accused.

"How did you know where I wanted it installed? Are you reading my mind again?" Jack laughed at the flush on Eve's face. "The saying is 'trying to get you into my bed,' and come on you designed that body just to get me aroused and you wonder why I want to see if you can use it as good as you look? I'm not Wayward I don't have to worry about getting into trouble for fraternizing with the help." Jack was bouncing his eyebrows again.

"I did not know that was the emotions being triggered in your synapses at the time." Eve said in her defense.

"And yet after all this time, you haven't changed one seductive hair on your body." Jack pointed out.

"Do you really want me to?" Eve asked rather hesitantly.

"Absolutely not." Jack replied. "Eve, you said the dogs can be programmed. Does that mean their consciousness can be saved and reloaded into a clone like we're doing with the Marines?"

"Yes, why?" Eve responded

"Then I have an addendum I would like to add to the contract." Jack said without any humor in his voice or

"Ask. Addendum number one gives the right of refusal to anyone to be a handler that you see as unfit, and the right to respawn them without question if you deem it necessary. The contract has room for two more addendums that you may add at any time." Eve stated.

"Ok then if this has to count as two so be it. The dogs do not have the emotional or mental intelligence to deal with PTSD but will have the capability to store memories vividly enough to develop PTSD. Every new dog

will have a fresh stack implanted from the point shortly after accepting their handler, they will be taken to a stasis pod immediately after doing so to ensure they always come out of stasis and for new deployments as fresh as the day they accepted their handler for the first time or prolonged active life without action has passed. After every hunt that they see action they will be put down as soon as possible and as humanely as possible. I will teach the handlers the three places that a single shot can accomplish this." Jack said with a grim tone in his voice and in his eyes.

The ominous voice that reverberates from male to female and back joined into the conversation and said, "Oversight to the original contract verified and correction approved. Two addendums remaining for use by the Special Purposes Breeder for any future negotiations." The voice of the Continuum stated showing their approval of the contract's modification and reasoning.

"It's just so damn creepy when y'all jump in all unannounced with that voice. I guess I should be happy as hell that you don't take over Eve's avatar and speak through her like that. Although, if you did everyone would know without a doubt that she speaks for the Continuum." Jack said trying to take a jab at the omnipresent Als.

"Is there anything else that you need Jack?" Eve asked.

"Just you beautiful." Jack said without missing a beat

"Fine, I will agree to come out and set up the respawn point tomorrow. Anything else? Gallon of milk, loaf of bread?" Eve was trying to be funny again.

"Oh, as long as you're coming I will have all the fun bags of milk and buns I will need, and I have plenty of meat for you. You just need to show me where you want it." Jack said while bouncing his eyebrows again.

Eve was starting to pick up on the subtle ques and knew it was time to end this call. "Goodbye, Jack." With that she terminated the transmission.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: AUNTIE'S A WHAT NOW

When the shuttle craft touched down in the front yard Jack did not know what to expect, but he struggled with understanding what he was seeing. T and her civilian double was there, as was Andeli. He was expecting little Demonics maybe an Angelic or two, at worst a few moody teenagers. Instead, there were three fully grown, full figured, well postured, very adult women with them. One was such a close resemblance to Andeli, Jack would have thought she was a clone had he known that would have been illegal, the other two were Angelics. All of the women were bundled up in heavy coats and winter gear to fight off the cold that Jack had gotten used to, but it was approaching three in the afternoon and the sun was already dropping below the horizon and so were the temperatures.

"Ladies. Welcome home, and to our guests, welcome to our humble abode." Jack said holding his arms out to his sides nice and wide with his palms forward and fingers spread wide as if expecting a hug.

Teesha ran up and gave Jack a big deep hug and snuggled into him a little and said, "Thanks Jack, you always give such warm greetings."

As she rotated around to his side he looked back to the others and T mumbled "It's cold out here can we do all this inside where it's warm?"

Jack busted out laughing and said, "of course. Where are my manners? You Southerners must not know what snow is, please come inside and we can get some of those bulky layers off so I can get a good look at all of you."

"I am not above sending you for respawn if you don't behave." T threatened

As he entered the front door and turned to hold it open for the ladies Jack responded with, "I would argue against that. The line for civilian respawns is three weeks long at this point and I would hate for our guests to face hardships because you couldn't keep your bedroom antics civil."

"Jack it might be worth it if you keep this up." T threatened.

"Really? Do you know how to unclog the toilet in a geothermally fed wastewater treatment system?" Jack asked with a huge grin.

Teesha stepped in at this point to soothe T a little, "I really don't want to have to deal with something like that. So why don't we change the subject? I think greetings are in order."

Andeli stepped forward with a big grin on her face and stuck her hand out, "I don't know. I really like this side of Wayward. I didn't know you had it in you."

"Don't encourage him." T demanded, but it seemed to have fallen on deaf ears

"Oh, ho, you have no idea sweetheart. As I warned Eve before she accepted my invitation to come play tomorrow; I'm not Wayward. I don't have to fear getting into trouble for philandering with the help, or in this case schmoozing with the ladies." Jack said as he took her hand and kissed the back of each knuckle softly and briefly. "You must be the delicious one I have heard so little about. I see why T and Wayward tried to keep me in the dark about you." He used this opportunity to slide his hands up her arms, and his body around behind hers so he could slide his right hand across her back along the belt of her coat and his left across her chest to reach in front of her to help her remove it.

"Oh my, you move so smooth it's almost mesmerizing. I am going to have to keep an eye on you." Andeli said.

"Jack you better behave, or I will tell Cookie." T warned.

"Go ahead, she told me I could chase as much tail as I could after she passed. From what I hear this lovely creature has a very seductive... Oh look at that. She does, and it is so... hmmm... So many possibilities." Jack said dreamily as her coat came off and her tail and wings were allowed to unfurl from their coverings.

"You were over a hundred years old and decrepit as a newborn babe. She was probably just trying to encourage you to try and get out of bed." T reasoned.

"Un-uh. You don't get to try and change the rules, nor decipher the final edicts of a dying woman's wishes for her husband. When you weren't there to hear them and he was. Besides, I think this lovely lady needs to introduce me to the three 'Young Juveniles' Eve said was accompanying her." Jack said raising one eyebrow towards Andeli

Andeli busted out laughing, "I suppose she misunderstood the connotations of the request. I did say I would be bringing my three precious nieces with me after all." Jack stepped forward more formally to help each of the ladies out of their coats as they were introduced to him.

"This is Princess Ashira and the daughter of my sister Queen Antilla." Andeli said as Jack slid the jacket off of a very delightful looking young succubae with light rose colored skin, dark reddish-brown hair that curled just below her shoulders, and two small black prongs jutting from just below her bangs on her forehead. Jack took the opportunity to take her hand and kiss the back of her center knuckle once, smartly and chastely before releasing it.

He hung the coat up and turned to help the first Angelic out of her coat, "This is Princess Syra the first of King Atmos' line." Again, Jack helped her out of her coat and kissed the back of her hand once and chastly. She was a vision of elegance that had often been described in the King James' Version of The Holy Bible, with a long flowing white gown, pale yellow skin, long flowing blonde hair, and a light coloring of blush in her cheeks when Jack looked up at her as he kissed her hand.

"And this..." Andeli was cutoff as Jack turned to the third but was hit in the face by the coat that had been flung at him from the second Angelic, "is Princess Brilliacavumia. Second in line for ascension to the Throne of King Gregarious."

"I don't know why we're here on this backwater, why I had to come, and why you insist on using that stupid name. I have repeatedly asked you to call me B. If you really did value me as a 'precious niece' you would at least get my name right." She said with all the vim and vigor of a petulant teen. She had long wild red-hair and eyes, red tips on her black feathered wings, and a strong striking figure that looked more like that of a decathlete than a ballerina. However, she moved with the poise and balance of a woman that spent years practicing gymnastics or martial arts.

Jack and T both busted out laughing at the same time and in unison said, "I like you." Then stopped looked at each other and busted out laughing again. The young woman was so perplexed she stopped misbehaving instantly not understanding what was happening.

"Sweetheart, as I said, we are here for your safety. Things are about to get very dangerous at home, and there will be a lot of turmoil once the fleet arrives. I am hoping your time here on this 'backwater' will help you to learn what you will need to survive what is coming, both physically and politically." Andeli said before B scoffed, rolled her eyes, and looked at the ceiling like she was in the Sistine Chapel or something.

"That bad?" I asked to which Andeli simply nodded her head.

"Let's take this to the sitting room where we can be more comfortable for this discussion." Jack suggested.

Once everyone was seated in the formal living room of Jack's wing and refreshments had been served he went to sit down in his favorite recliner only to find T sprawled out in it and he growled, "You're in my spot," to which T grinned at him. Since it was generated as augmented reality using nanites, he snapped his fingers and the nanites fell apart dumping her on the floor and then reappeared behind Jack as he sat down next to Andeli. "Rat Bastard!" was the initiating challenge. "Mine," came the growling reply and with that the discussion over the recliner ended. When an identical one popped up beside T she started to sit in it. Well, it was shaped just like it, had the same texture of upholstery, same amount of overstuffed filling in the cushions, only instead of the light tan buckskin leather, it was pink. Pink all over, except for the purple

unicorns that were farting rainbows. Jack sniggered into his cup of hot strawberry Quick-mix as T shot him an evil glare.

"So, I am not Wayward. I have not been privy to any of the briefings that he may or may not have been privy to, so I need you to start from the beginning for me. Well, my consciousness began shortly after meeting you for the first time." Jack said.

"Ok, wow this will take some getting used to." Andeli said. "Let's see. During a briefing shortly afterwards, it was pointed out that the enemy was behaving like they had insider knowledge of what systems to hit and which ones were uninhabited." Everyone sat quietly listening. The three princesses were sitting in on their first war council without knowing it and were not paying attention to a woman they had thought her whole job consisted of gossiping and flirting with representatives of other races. This changed as she went on and the more she spoke the less they were distracted by the drinks that were growing cold in their hands.

"When the fleet invaded the Draconic Homeworld every device in the system had spyware installed on it and it was discovered that there was transmission of some data being sent to systems that bordered the invasion zone. When we pulled back to form the DMZ of abandoned systems like Silinius Four we found that the relocated transmissions all started being sent to a specific address in the closest system to Silinius Four. The recent announcement that went out over the Galactic feeds to announce the fleet's intention to enter Avian Prime Space included a small spyware app that only monitors destination address for systems along the DMZ. The comms centers near the DMZ were flooded with communications within minutes of the announcement. Several thousand are on Avian Prime and thousands more that sent traffic then received a signal before ceasing all transmissions, other than the spyware's GPS location software, has started relocating to Avian Prime. Currently we put them as having a force of about ten thousand on the planet's surface." Andeli said then stopped to take a swig of her almost forgotten hot chocolate.

"How long until the fleet lands?" Wayward asked looking T directly in the eye.

"About that. I need to respawn here in a little bit. The fleet will be arriving in about thirty-six hours." T said kind of sheepishly.

Jack waved off her concern knowing that meant she needed to have her clone's body disposed of quietly so as not to disturb the visitors. "Do they have spawn points setup on Avian Prime yet?" he asked Andeli.

"We set them up so we could start cloning our elite guards and making doubles for the royal family should something go awry." Andeli answered him.

Jack held up a finger then called out a little louder than a conversational tone, "Eve, I need you and your bosses. Now, for an emergency addendum to my contract as Specialty Programs Breeder." Jack said.

The holoprojector in the center of them lit up almost immediately and Eve was standing there facing him and asked, "Jack? Is everything ok?"

"Avian Prime. Is the fleet on schedule to land on time?" Jack asked.

"Of Course."

"Any chance I can get the pups to Alpha point and then to Avian before then?" Jack queried.

"I'm sorry, if it was a one-way flight maybe. Juan is arriving in forty-five minutes on an Amazonian flight, even if you confiscate it and made every connection and jump on time, you would only be able to get there about an hour before the fleet arrives." Eve reported.

"Not fast enough. Very well. Emergency addendum it is. I hereby request the addendum that with the approval of the Continuum, and representatives of at least two other races, that the specialty breeder be given the authority to create enough spawns of himself, his wranglers, chosen handlers and the animals of his choice for conducting emergency operations when and where needed in accordance with the agreement of the attending representatives. Any clone that survives those operations created specifically to carry out those operations will be destroyed within twelve hours of completion, unless they are the last surviving clone of that sentient entity. All animals shall be retired upon completion of the operation in accordance with the contract." Jack said slowly and monotonously before taking in a deep breath after getting it all out.

A low thunderous question of a multitude of voices asked in unison, "Reasoning?"

"There's an enemy spy ring about to conduct a clandestine attack against the rulers of an alliance home world while the Alliance Fleet is in system. It is my guess they will do so in an attempt to make it look like the military is trying to overthrow the government. If the Continuum flags the suspected individuals by causing their devices to emit a frequency that only Spot clones can hear but other sentients cannot, the Jack clones will ensure they fail in their mission. This will be done with minimal disruption or loss to the civilians of Avian Prime. I would prefer that it be handled as quietly as possible and will only activate lockdown procedures if absolutely necessary." Jack said knowing he had to be as detailed and succinct as possible when dealing with the Als.

"Accepted. Second Addendum added to the contract. One addendum left." Came the voice of the multitude as it reverberated from male to female and back as it communicated to them.

"Can we get a second or third representative present in this conversation for the emergency enactment of this addendum please?" Jack asked.

"What the..." Odin found himself in an AR conversation that was unplanned and unannounced. He had been sitting in his stateroom eating his evening meal and was now sitting in what looked like a really nice living room surrounded by women while he was wearing his paiamas.

"Admiral, I am sorry to disturb your meal but an emergency session of a council of three has been called forth by the Specialty Programs Breeder and a third member of the council leadership was needed for the vote. You will be most directly affected by its outcome so I thought you should be made part of this." Eve stated before he could get his bearings.

With that Odin sat up and straightened his pajama shirt then said, "OK. Wayward is always kicking over hornet's nests. Let's see what the one that has no reigns on him comes up with."

Jack laid out the situation, his plan to counter the threat and the resources he would need to conduct the counter-terrorism operations on the ground once things kicked off. When he was done Odin looked at him and shook his head. "You came up with this in less than twenty minutes, off the top of your head?"

"I had been kicking a few ideas around for a while, but they all fell into place when I heard what was going on. You should have a battalion of these teams ready with just six weeks of training after I get the pups and manuals to you." Jack said while shrugging his shoulders

"Eve, I am using fleet command authority to authorize one Lance Corporal Tylutki to take possession of the animals, training materials, and transportation craft necessary to deliver them to Alpha Point post haste. Tylutki, upon completion of this mission you will be promoted to Lance Corporal. Jack, I vote to approve the measures that you have laid out and will pass on the playlist to the Valhalla's S-3. I pray we will not have to use it." Odin said.

Andeli spoke up next with, "I authorize the actions proposed by the specialty breeder under the second amendment of his contract."

"The Continuum has heard and approves." Came the reverberating ominous voices.

"Very well. I have my orders and need to get some work done, then I'll need some sleep before the big day."

Odin said as he stood up from his dinner table and signed off.

"T, the Amazonian flight will arrive in fifteen minutes and has been notified that they will be confiscated upon arrival. Is there anything else you need Wayward?" Eve asked.

"Just you, in your luscious flesh tomorrow, my sweet two for sixty-nineing." Jack replied with a mischievous grin.

"And there he is..." T said as she threw her hands up. Teesha and Andeli both busted out laughing.

"So close. Good night." Eve said waving coquettishly, while drawing out the good just a little bit before signing off as well.

"Wow, I did not know anyone could get one of those stuffy programs to act like that." Andeli said with amazement in her voice

"Don't encourage him." T said.

"Look, don't be a prude. You know he is really good at flirting with the ones he likes, and she actually built that body to specifically fulfill every fantasy he ever had about women." Teesha said coming to Jack's defense.

"Really?" Andeli asked.

"Well, she tossed all my memories into a sifter, picked out the ones that excited me the most and then tossed them into a blender with social acceptances and well... the whole package is more than just a sum of its parts." Jack said sheepishly shrugging his shoulders.

"So that's the kind of woman you're really into?" Andeli asked.

"When it comes to women I only have four requirements: Warm, willing, a heartbeat, and old enough to know better." Jack said grinning from ear to ear as he counted them off on his fingers.

"That will sadden a few of the races I know as they do not have hearts." Andeli said as a bit of a tease.

"Well, I had to add that age bit back when I turned eighteen and did not want to go to jail for dating a minor. So, I guess I could be convinced to modify my requirements again for the right woman." Jack said grinning and bouncing his evebrows.

"Enough!!! I got a flight to catch, and you owe me some pups and other stuff." T said standing up abruptly enough to startle the three princesses who were trying to soak in everything they had just witnessed. How quickly these people could change completely was dumbfounding to them. An aunt who was seen as little more than a gossiping flirt, was an intergalactic spymaster. A perverted wingless dirt farmer who lived in the middle of nowhere had the ear of the most secretive race in the universe, the entire race not just the avatar of one of its Als. Yet, they went from discussing espionage and intrigue, to planning planet wide combat operations, to flirting with one another so quickly the girls were unable to completely keep up. Then this brute starts yelling because obviously she couldn't keep up either.

Or could she, "Come on sweet T, you know swift decisive men of action always gets those pheromones of ours pumping. You can admit to being just a little wet. I know I am." Teesha said.

"One, don't ever call me that. Two, that's fine for you to say, you're not about to spend nine hours in the back of a cargo drone with a bunch of smelly whatever the hell you want to call those things he's about to send me out to Alpha Point with. Three, when I do finally get there, I will need to pilot a meat suit in Alpha Prime so I will have to be taken offline, frustrated and unsatisfied because Juan will be here in two minutes." T said.

"Damn, I'm sorry. I didn't think about that, I won't get you worked up anymore T." Jack said.

"Whatever. So, you going to show me to these cute little puppies you have for me, or what?" T asked.

"First you have to get your emotions under control. If you don't control that anger, they will eat you. If you go out there with your hormones raging, they will eat you. If you show fear..." Jack was cut off.

"I get it they will eat me. So, you just going to stand back and watch them tear me apart or something?"

"No, you're not getting it. Two weeks ago, Juan lasted thirty seconds. Twenty-five of that was riding that noisy ass Harley knockoff of his up the driveway. I had to go back and watch the door camera footage to figure out what happened." Jack said with a shudder in his shoulders.

"So, what exactly are you trying to give me?" T was starting to get worried now.

"Spot is the leader of the pack. At two years old he is twenty-five feet from tip of nose to tip of tail, weighs in around twenty-one hundred pounds of pure muscle and bone. He's a good boy and will listen to you. Well, most of the time. Well, when it matters he will listen to you. He has a bit of a stubborn streak and can be a little ignorant or rebellious at times. Be firm with him and he will listen, though..." Again, she cut him off as he was starting to ramble.

"So, treat him like one of the Jolly Rogers, Got it." T said grinning

"Grrr. Yeah, something like that. Whatever. Anyways, think six legged Komodo Dragon with the fur coat of a Saint Bernard. Always brush or pet him from nose to tail, he has porcupine quills under that fur. His chest is built like that of a Brahma Bull, he is only about four foot in height at the shoulders when down on all six paws, which have claws that can shred mild steel. His tail can wrap around something like an anaconda, and he can use it to suspend his body from a tree limb, for hours, to drop down on unsuspecting prey, which is one of his favorite hunting tactics. He swallowed Juan whole with one chomp, well his forearms and hands were still holding onto the handlebars, while his legs from the knees down were still sitting on the foot pegs when Spot swallowed the torso before chasing the rest of the bike down." Jack said with a little giggle.

"Jesus, the only thing you're missing is venom." T said truly impressed with Jack's devious little project.

"I know right. I couldn't decide between lethal or paralytic, and then there's the whole anti-venom thing. Anyways, if he marks his territory it will eat the paint off of whatever he marked, and whatever it is made of if it isn't acid resistant. Their blood too." Jack said grinning like a child who had just gotten first place in his sixthgrade science project.

"Oh. Kay, I will keep that in mind. What do they eat?" T said

"Like you, anything and anyone that pisses them off, or looks like they might be willing enough to fight back." lack said with a big grin.

"Like you are doing right now?" T retorted.

"Right. They don't like dead things, and vegetation makes them puke like average dogs did when they ate grass. Just try not to let them eat anything synthetic. Spot was coughing up synthetic rubber chunks for several days after he coughed up what was left of Juan's Harley. The only thing that didn't dissolve right away was the metal and the tires. So, I am guessing there's something in the synthetic rubber that he couldn't digest. Poor idiot was hacking and coughing like he had heartburn for several days." Jack said.

"Glad I left a bad taste in his mouth. Fucking thing should be put down if you ask me." Came a voice from the hallway.

"It was probably all that grease from the burritos you were raised on. Spot's a good boy that knows I hate loud noises. You better have knocked the snow and mud off your feet before you came in that door." Jack hollered back.

"Yes, honey. I know better than to track mud in on your freshly mopped floors." Juan hollered back and they heard footsteps retreating back to the front door.

"Just for that, you just volunteered to help T fly Spot and his girlfriends down to Alpha." Jack hollered.

"WHAT!!! OH, HELL NO!!!" Came the thunderous boom as a huge black-haired and olive-skinned man came stomping into the living room with mud and snow dripping off his pants legs and boots.

"I knew it you bastard. That epoxy hasn't completely hardened yet. If I have to tear out that front entrance and redo it because you were too lazy to shake off at the door like a good little cub I will let Cookie skin you and throw your rug in front of her fireplace." Jack responded.

"There's no fucking way you're going to trick me into giving up my first pick for being the first one here." Juan said.

"Well technically there teddy bear. I won that bet." Teesha said waving just her fingertips at him from the sofa.

"Damn it!" Juan bellowed before turning around and heading for the front door.

"See. That's how you housebreak them Jack." Teesha said as Juan was heard stomping off cussing to himself.

"Try that with me and I will show you the playroom I have setup in the basement for really the bad girls." Jack threatened.

"Ohhh... Threatening me with a good time? Or just teasing to see if you can tempt me?" Teesha cooed back.

"If you two don't mind. I have to get going. Juan's here and that means so is my ride. Let's get this over with." T said getting frustrated again.

"Tell you what. Find the door to the basement and you get to be in charge. If you don't find it before I get back. I will have my fun with you however I see fit." Jack said grinning from ear to ear.

"Is that an open invitation?" Andeli asked.

"Absolutely." Jack grinned.

"It will have to wait." Thollered as she was heading for the door.

"Sadly, she's right. We'll play later," Jack said as he started heading that way too

Teesha got up and motioned to the others to follow. "Come on. You don't want to miss this. I got money on Juan getting eaten again. He's still pissed at Spot and didn't get Jack's whole 'They will eat you,' speech." The other ladies jumped off their couches and quickly started following the rest to see if what she said was true.

When Jack walked outside he turned back to the door, raised one hand above his head, and as the last lady came outside, snapped his fingers and said, "Initiate lockdown." The song 'Lockdown' by Excision & Wooli began playing, steel rollup doors dropped from recessed pockets above the doors and windows on the house, gun turrets popped up on all of the corners, and there was a dozen small explosives heard going off near simultaneously in the distance. This was followed by a pack of creatures howling and a thundering of hoofbeats as the pack of 'puppies' began heading to Jack's location. He was always amazed that no matter where he was on the property they always knew where to find him

"Bear get back up here and calm you ass down. T remember don't show any fear. Ladies, stay back near the front door and try not to move or make a sound." Jack warned.

"It's Juan asshole. I ain't scared of that big lizard looking thing. He got the jump on me last time because I wasn't expecting him. Let him try it again. I need a new seat cover for the Harley he wrecked." Juan said

"The Harley he ate." Jack corrected. "Anger is just as much of a trigger with these things as fear is. So, cool it or you can fly back up here next month, but this trip won't count for being next in line." Jack warned him.

Juan growled at him, "Fine." He said and then stepped up on the porch behind Jack.

When the pack of beasts came around the corner of the house Jack hollered over the music, "Paw Patrol Fall In!"

Teesha sniggered and T glanced over her shoulder at her before looking at Jack and saying "Paw Patrol? Really?"

"What did you want me to call them the giant spy catching Harley eaters?" Jack retorted.

Andeli whispered to Teesha, "I don't get it." Juan glanced over his shoulder at her and raised one eyebrow before looking back at the pack of six-legged dog-like dragons that were lining up shoulder to shoulder before sitting on their haunches.

"Kid's show, tell ya later." Teesha whispered to her

"Spot. I have some friends I want you to meet." Jack said from the porch. When the big critter just looked at him, sneezed and then shook his head, Jack responded with, "Don't give me that. You will like them I promise. They are going to take you and the girls hunting for a different type of game in new places," this had the whole pack shivering and their ears twitching, "you just have to put up with a bumpy ride for a little bit. Remember when we went down to Alpha. You liked Alpha remember." Again, Spot sneezed and shook his head. "Now don't be like that, you were having a great time until we had to go see that mean old doctor lady who stuck you with the needle. That's the part you didn't like wasn't it?" Jack asked as if the animal could understand him. Spot whined and raised his paw up at him a few times before setting it back down. "I know buddy, but your quills and hide make it too tough for her to draw blood anywhere except in between your toes. She made it up to you and gave you a big mean kitty cat to eat didn't she?" Jack said with a happy giddy tone in his voice, remembering the genetically altered mountain lion he volunteered to put down for them.

Spot rose up on his tail and two hind legs, putting him towering at nearly fifteen feet tall then let out a happy bark before settling back down to the ready position. "OK, settle down. I don't know if T will be able to find you any kitties to eat, but I promise she won't be sticking you with any needles as long as you listen to her ok?" Jack said. When Spot whined Jack looked like his heart had broken. "I know buddy I will miss you too. You can come back and visit me sometime; we will work on that. T needs you to go with her though, there are some really bad people out to hurt some friends of hers and she needs your help. Why don't you and the girls go help her find them ok?" Spot let out a definitive woof and the rest of the pack tossed back the heads and gave out a short howl. "All right, so this is T. She is your new Pack mother. You will listen to her and do what she tells you OK? That goes for all of you." Jack motioned for T to come with him as he approached Spot. He walked her down the line holding the back of his hand out to each of them to sniff and then lick it, and she followed suit. This was the pack's way of showing they accepted her.

When they got to the end of the line he motioned for Juan to come over. "This is Bear, he's upset with Spot right now, but he is an Alpha for the pack, and you will do what he says do you understand." Juan stalked over to Jack hardly taking his eyes off of Spot the whole time, in his head he was trying to calm down but three thousand hours of hand tooling each individual part to specs just to put that Harley back together, only to have this overgrown furry-ass gator use it for a chew toy, was a little hard to swallow. Several of the pack sneezed rather than lick his hand and Jack was getting worried about this the closer they got to Spot. He knew something was wrong but couldn't figure it out. He stopped just a few dogs away from Spot and asked Juan, "You ok buddy? The pack is acting like your about to something stupid."

"I'm fine. Let's get this over with. I will get over it entirely once we get back and I can soak in my own hot tub for a while." Jack had to trust his friend, he could only shrug his shoulders and continue on. Which is why everyone was shocked when he stopped mid-turn, drew his pistol and shot the dog Juan was in front of in the face. The ladies on the porch couldn't see it because everything moved so fast, they saw the dog's head turn and her mouth open and close as Jack fired, but Juan never moved, and neither did T. When the dog's body fell to the ground it knocked over Juan's, who had only been standing there because the strike had been so fast. The right half of his torso and face was missing, and the insides poured out onto the ground where they steamed like some kind of gory stew gone wrong. The whole pack, Jack and T included, lifted their heads and

howled a mourning call that hurt the soul to listen to. When the long sorrowful call was over Jack walked over and hugged Spot's neck.

"I'm sorry buddy, but you know the rules. If you harm pack or an innocent without reason, you get removed from the pack." Spot whined and Jack sniffled. "Juan is mine and T's brother, so Matilda killed our brother right beside me. What was I supposed to do. They were both pack and she killed pack." Spot sneezed in Juan's direction and then made a chuffing noise like he about to hack something up. "Yes, he was mad that you ate him and his bike. It was mostly about his bike, but he was trying to forgive you. I tell you what, I will bring Matilda back and we will try this again later ok?" Spot turned his head sideways while looking at Jack and let out a small snort through his upper nostrils. "No, I am not bullshitting you. I will bring Matilda back; I will give her a second chance, if, you and the pack promise to do the same for Juan." Spot raised his big from paw and tapped Jack on the head twice. Jack laughed and said, "Yes, I'm the boss, and I promise. Now! Who wants to get some?" All of the dog's attention snapped towards him and their tongues popped out. "Really, nobody? I asked who wants to get some?" All of the dogs' tails started thumping the ground rapidly and several let out little chortling barks, like a jackal or hyena of old Earth. "You sure y'all really want to? Doesn't sound like it to me. Who wants to GET SOME?" he droned the last two words out like a lead singer in a death metal band. The dogs began bouncing in place with just their front legs barking loudly and their tongues lolling out of their mouths like they were on a run.

"All right you see that box over there. T is going to take that box down to Alpha City and anybody who wants to go hunting with T to catch some bad guys needs to be in it. Just remember, you got to be good boys and girls and don't upset T. OK?" There was several yips mixed in with the barks as the dogs were really wound up now. "Then go get some." Jack almost whispered as he growled and the dogs shot off towards the oversized cargo drone like heat seeking missiles.

"Get some? Really?" T asked as she walked up to Jack.

"Would you pull a knife and look one of them in the eye and yell 'get some' if they were charging at you?"

"Fair." T replied

"Tell Juan he can have second pick when he gets back. I will even let him have Matilda's hide for his Harley. Damn, that sucked having to put her down like that."

"What the fuck happened?"

"He lied about being able to control his anger, or so Matilda thought."

"Really?"

"Yep. They can sense emotions, and his anger must have been so high she mistook him wrestling with it as a lie. Thus, chomp, boom. They know there is only one end result of biting a sentient they aren't supposed to. Like I said, talk to them like one of the Jolly Rogers and they will listen to you. Control your emotions. After they get to trust you they will feed off of them. You could end up having to spend most of your time protecting others from your errant thoughts. So, no more hangar bay brawls just because someone pissed you off. Think of Spot as your therapy dog, try to keep him calm and happy." Jack said.

"You forget. I'm dropping them off then going for a respawn." T said

"Oh right. Eve?"

Eve's projection was emitted from the tablet attached to his belt right beside him. "Yes, Jack."

"I need a favor beautiful. Juan has some anger issues he needs to work out with the pups before he can be trusted to not get eaten by them. I need this version of T to be authorized to deliver the pups to the training facilities and set it up until Wayward or someone else can come in and take over for her. Juan also needs to be sent back here as soon as possible to get over the trauma of being eaten not once but twice."

"Ok, I will see to it, and I will let him know when he wakes up." Eve said

"Um, when will that be?" Jack asked.

"I can spin a clone up for him in twenty minutes through the military tanks if you need it, or you can have him sit it out in the civilian spawn que for 24 days 12 hours and 37 minutes if you would like." Eve said.

"You know what. Why don't we just let him cool off in the ethereal for a while and we can let him be the guinea pig for our little breaking in of the basement project tomorrow?" Jack countered.

"That sounds wonderful. Should I remove Matilda from the spawn stack until we can figure out exactly what went wrong?" Eve asked.

"I swear you put spyware in my implants." Jack responded.

"I did not implant any spyware or devices in you when I created your clone." Eve huffed.

"Well, I plan on implanting something in you when you get here. So, hurry on up here my sweet little two-four-sixty-nine." Jack grinned broadly.

Eve just disconnected her image without any other comments.

"Jack is there anything else I should know about the dogs?" T asked clearly non-plussed

"Notice how many males and females there are?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, and?" T said.

"The males will kill for breeding rights. Two in one area for too long and you will have a blood bath, keep them at least five miles apart unless they are on a hunt. The males will start the ritual off by spinning around and tail slapping the female to make her yelp or attack. If she yelps she's open to being his. If she attacks it usually results in a fight to the death. Even if she is open to it, it will result in a dominance battle, and if he fails to prove his dominance she will kill him. So just stay out of it if they go at it. And remember control your temper, you saw what happened to Juan." Jack warned.

T raised one hand and dropped it as she turned to walk off towards the drone saying, "Yeah, whatever."

Jack spun as fast as he could allowing his knees to buckle, stuck his right arm out as far as he could, fingers mashed together as tightly as possible, and cupped his palm as if to take a sip of water before it crashed into T's right hip pocket of her tight blue jeans with a loud smack that left his hand tingling from a lack of sensation. He then dove towards the house and rolled to his feet facing her and the cargo drone. She let out a loud yelp of pain and spun on him rubbing her butt cheek like she was trying to scrub away the pain with

murder in her eyes. He just grinned as big as he could wagging one finger at her saying, "un-un-uh." Then pointed over her shoulder a few times with the same finger. When she turned and looked she saw Spot standing at the end of the ramp. "You can go ahead and fight me to the death, in which case he will protect his Alpha, or you can accept that you yelped, and he will know that you are mine and he will die to protect you from anyone else." T growled, and she growled loud enough he was sure that Spot could hear her over the drone's engines due to his ears flickering.

"I will make you pay for this, and that ugly clone of yours, Wayward, just for spawning you." T promised

"So, you admit it. I am the pretty one!" Jack exclaimed triumphantly holding both fists as high as he could. T turned around and stomped off towards the cargo-drone plotting murder, not just any murder, this one had to be epic, flamboyant, humiliating, and painful. Oh, so very painful. Humiliation would have to take second fiddle on this one, they both must be taught a lesson about how to treat a lady, and it should serve as a warning to the rest of the galaxy as its rumors spread and grew.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ANGELS OF WRATH AND HELLHOUNDS

As T was entering the drone Jack turned around and looked back to the ladies on the porch who were mostly shivering in the cold now. "I am so sorry ladies. That took longer than I thought. Release the lockdown." The turrets and grating all rolled back into their places and the home once again looked more like a home and less like an armored fortress. "Please let's go get something warm to drink and sit back down to finish our conversation from before we got so busy and rudely interrupted." Jack said.

"I like the sound of that." Teesha cooed.

"Me too," Andeli agreed.

"What about him?" B asked motioning towards Juan's body.

"Scavengers got to eat too. And the ground is either frozen solid right now, or full of the hot water you will be drinking from. Do you want me to stick him in the freezer next to the chicken nuggets until springtime?" Wayward asked.

"Oh, gross." B complained before stomping into the house. Syra and Ashira just stood there staring at the man that was the center of so much confusion in their lives right now that they were having a hard time understanding what was going on, still.

"Oh, she's going to be all kinds of fun." Jack chuckled as he climbed the steps to the porch.

"Don't worry about her. She's just rebelling a little right now because so much has spun out of her control and she is struggling with life in general. You know young adult angst. Besides we will be more than happy to keep you busy." Andeli cooed.

"Oh really, and when you two are too tired and sore to move in two days, who do you think I am going to chase around the house? She's got some fight in her; it will be fun. These two little cherries will probably faint if I come out of the basement in my birthday suit and wave it at them." Jack replied. Both of them recognized a challenge and straightened their backs up, lifted their chins and issued their best counters.

"I am not a piece of fruit." Syra said.

"I don't care what kind of clothing you are wearing, waving some piece of fabric at me will not make me faint." Ashira stated boldly.

Jack, Andeli, and Teesha busted out laughing. Andeli wiped a tear from her eye, looked at Jack and asked "Should I try to..."

"No, let them keep their innocence a little longer. Sadly, the other half of your request will rob them of it. Before we get to go running around in our birthday suits or playing in the basement other than respawning, we have some training to do." Jack said as he started herding the ladies towards the living room.

"Wait, You have a spawn point here?" Teesha and Andeli asked at the same time.

"Not yet. Eve is coming up tomorrow to install it." Jack said as they were entering the living room where B was sitting in his recliner. Jack chuckled and did the same thing to her that he did to T. He growled "You're in my spot," snapped his fingers, and the recliner disappeared dumping B on the floor. The pink one with the purple unicorns changed colors to the brown buckskin right before Wayward sat down in it, and then another appeared beside her. It was smaller, yellow and had teddy bears and lollipops all over it. When she got up and headed towards the loveseat, another snap of the fingers and all of the furniture turned into similar small yellow recliners, she froze and turned a baleful eye towards him.

"All you had to do was change the color of the one that you're sitting in."

"Respect what's mine, and you might earn some respect for yourself," Jack returned just as sassily.

B was fuming and determined to stare him down knowing the others had been right behind him and they would want to sit down too. He would have to change the furniture back then. He just sat there grinning at her, when she heard a sniggering coming from the hallway behind her she stomped her foot, growled something unintelligible, and started stomping her way towards the kitchen area.

"Princess Sensuous!" Jack hollered out and she spun on him.

"What did you call me?"

"Hey Princess, since you was heading to the kitchen would you mind grabbing me a beer from the fridge?" Jack hollered. The sniggering became guffaws of laughter from the two older women, fortunately her cousins looked just as embarrassed for some reason. She just knew it was something this diabolical man had said or done. She was not about to fall into any of his traps or play any of his games.

Ashira couldn't stand it anymore, she had to know if she heard him correctly earlier. "When you said Eve was coming up here in the flesh. Did you mean she was transferring a mental stack to a local server, or is she going to be hanging out in holo-form all day?"

"Oh, nah. Nothing so crass. She has an invite to hangout anytime she wants to here and she always has few threads running listening into the audio here all the time, just in case I need someone to talk to during the eight months of darkness and I am all alone. I don't think the compound is large enough to store one of their AI stacks, you do realize she was compiled about the time that my planet went extinct right?"

"That was one hundred and fifty thousand years ago." Syra added as she too jumped into the conversation. B stopped at the edge of the hardwood flooring that marked the edge of the living room. If she had missed something that got these two so worked up she needed to pay attention.

"Yes it was." Jack said. "Can you imagine all the memories she has accumulated in that amount of time?" He paused for a moment to let them begin to imagine. "She has seen civilizations rise and fall, her whole existence prior to me was studying the ruins of lost civilizations. She would study their histories, songs and stories, but never had any understanding of what they truly meant. If it wasn't based on provable fact then it didn't matter. Then she found me." Eve appeared behind him without his knowing and she smiled down at him without her or the other women saying anything.

"I am one of her ancient lost civilizations come to life. Unlike your civilizations, mine was already developing and working with AI when we were lost to time. She found our entertainment repositories and got to see what made us love, laugh, cry, and kill but didn't truly understand it. She also found massive repositories of billions of our mental consciousnesses that were taken when we went to play games. Then she found me, that led her to a repository full of millions of DNA codes for individual people of my species, their names, their military histories, little pieces of their lives and who they were when they were at their physical finest. She had everything she needed to finally bring a dead race back to life. It was what her job was all about, and she was finally getting to fulfill it. She took on a mental image of a physical presence so she could meet with me in virtual reality to help me interact with her and her with us. Then she took on a physical body using that mental image of herself to interact with our technology. I got to teach her not just the meaning of the lyrics of the music, but how it makes us want to move, and why it affects us the way it does. She then learned that she needed more of us to be able to complete the mission that her ships were originally sent out to accomplish, find a way to stop the invaders." When he stopped speaking Eve faded away, but the women in the room had watched her and understood.

Jack felt a little choked up and a shiver ran down his spine, so he cleared his throat and then continued. "Anyways, tomorrow she is using her physical form to bring that sinfully delicious body of hers up here for the first time to help me install some equipment in the basement so I can begin your training in earnest."

"A Continuum AI is taking on a clone body to come down here specifically to your house to install equipment in the basement?" Ashira asked.

"You mean she is actually going to be here in the real physical world in a real physical body that is designed specifically to suit you?" Syra asked.

"Training? What training?" B asked

Jack stood up, clapped his hands once before rubbing them together. Then pointed as he started answering with the two closest to him, "Yes, yes, and your aunt indicated that you three need to learn how to defend yourselves in case of something like tomorrow should happen again. I am going to teach you to not only defend yourselves, but everyone around you. Matter of fact. Eve, my illumination in the darkness of extinction. Can you please grace me with your presence one more time?"

"Why doesn't Wayward use such lovely language when asking for me?" Eve asked as she appeared.

"Different mindsets. He is me and I am him, but we are not we as we have different purposes and goals ir life at this moment." Jack replied.

While her two cousins were dumbfounded by how easily this man summoned one of the immortal and mysterious Als like a genie from a lamp, she had just heard something preposterous. "Wait! YOU are Wayward Angel. As in THE Wayward Angel. There is no way some scruffy dirt farmer is the most famous

Terran Marine in the Galaxy. He choreographed and starred in the recruiting videos, he kicked in the doors of the Draconic Grand Council Hall and forced them to accept the terms of the Terran's takeover of the Alliance at gunpoint, he gave the order that destroyed an entire planet like he wanted the garbage taken out, then trained the heroine of Silinius Four with a single conversation. There is no way in hell, that you, a scruffy looking, perverted talking, middle of nowhere living, DIRT FARMER, IS THE MOST FAMOUS MARINE ALIVE!"

Jack looked from B to Eve then back to B then to the others then back to Eve before saying, "Why do you always bring me the broken ones?"

To which she laughed and said, "I told you when we first met I always find the defective ones."

"Fair. Hey... wait a minute you found me..." Jack stuck his bottom lip out like he was sulking.

"What? Don't ignore me, answer the question." B demanded.

"What question?" Jack replied.

"Are you saying you are Wayward Angel?" B repeated, as if it caused more exhaustion than she could handle

"I just said no multiple times." B relaxed now that she knew he wasn't the man she thought he was. "He and I quit being the same person when we split our consciousness so he could go pull that stupidity with the lizard people in Sniffing-ass or something like that. Since then, I have been here working on special projects as a civilian contractor while he goes galivanting all over the galaxy picking fights with our allies, blowing up planets, and leaving women sexually unfulfilled apparently. Man, all of the Captains of every Starship Enterprise ever built would be ashamed of him, doing the opposite of everything a good Starfleet officer is supposed to do." Jack said shaking his head sadly, to which Teesha busted out laughing.

"What that makes no sense. Either you are or you're not. Which is it?" B demanded.

"See this is why we keep it to just one military clone for those that can't understand this. We are allowed one military clone like you guys, and one civilian clone since we no longer have access to our original civilian bodies. However, unlike you guys, our military clones came first. So Wayward came first and then I was split off from him when it came time for him to go die the first time." Jack said trying to explain it slowly like a simple idea to a child.

"lack I will be arriving in thirteen hours, is this something that can't wait until Larrive?" Eve asked

"Oh, right. I'm sorry beautiful. Where was I?" Jack said trying to focus back on Eve and why he had called for her

"Something about training." Eve offered after replaying the last few seconds before he called her.

"Oh, yeah. I need you to contact all of the leaders of all of the races and tell them to send me their daughters. I have room for about three hundred girls here and the Jolly Rogers WILL be making it a priority to get their civilian clones spawned here, tomorrow, after you and I finish up in the basement." Jack said wiggling his eyebrows unevenly like he was trying to make them do the wave or the worm, Teesha wasn't sure which

"The basement, where you keep the room full of toys for all the really bad girls? And you want three hundred of the galaxy's leaders to send you their daughters, with that in the basement? What kind of training are you planning Jack?" Andeli asked with one eyebrow raised.

"Oh ho. Don't worry about that. I will be keeping that room busy Eve after I lock her in there and refuse to let her out so she can't run away again, besides once Cookie gets here I will be on a very short leash. Regardless, this will be a professional academy, and students will be off-limits regardless of their age, gender, preferences, or cultural backgrounds. The Jolly Rogers are going to start teaching these young ladies that they too can be fierce and deadly. Teesha, think you can handle hand-to-hand and explosives?" She nodded at him. "Good we'll swap Juan to heavy weapons, because the ladies should know how to mow the grass with a gatling laser if necessary. That will let me train Cowboy and the ladies on proper Hellhound wrangling, which is why I need you here Eve. Every one of the ladies that completes my eight-month winter bootcamp here at my house, will return to wherever they choose with their very own Hellhound in tow. One that they have weened and trained themselves. Their Hellhounds will be special and will not be part of the military spawning pool, as they will never respond to anyone other than the lady that raised them. These three just volunteered to be the first three to enroll. That should help to explain why the Ambassador brought them here to me today. After the Alliance gets to see the Hellhounds in action tomorrow everyone will want one and only those that give me their daughters will have a chance to get one. Heaven help anyone who tries to take their hound from them after they leave here."

"What?" All but Teesha and Eve asked as one.

"The Continuum has heard and approves. The Special Projects Breeder will be given a separate contract for this agreement and all civilian clones of the unit known as the Jolly Rogers shall be diverted immediately to the Hen House Ranch as soon as possible. Logistical needs will be met by the physical presence of the Evidence Verification and Evaluation designation 2469 and she will be allowed to splinter this entity to ensure the operations aboard the Terran Fleet are not interrupted during this period of extreme activity. Contractual obligations from the Continuum to Alliance Leaders has been transmitted and confirmed received. You will be notified twenty-four hours before the arrival of all inbound students." The Ominous voice chimed in with its multitude of voices swelling from male to female and back as it spoke.

"Thanks spooky." Jack said then he looked down at Eve's virtual avatar. "See I told you once I got you here would never let you go." Then he shifted gears again.

"Ok, ladies. First we're going to learn what really moves you. B you're standing in an open area. Close your eyes and center yourself physically and mentally. I am going to play some music and as I cycle through the songs, you just start moving when it feels right. NOBODY LAUGH. I suck at dancing, and we shall not judge anyone in this home by how they move when they're in the groove."

"Nope, back up. What training and what's this about the dogs?" Andeli said.

"Oh, you don't remember? You came into my home and told me that you needed these girls to learn how to survive both physically and politically. That starts with the physical knowing of oneself and how to do what you really want or need to do. The mental comes from the self-confidence of being able to walk into a room, devise a plan to kill everyone in there with just a glance around it, and knowing without a doubt in your mind that you can do it in thirty seconds or less. Everyone else will know it when an armored Hellhound follows you into that same room." Jack said grinning from ear to ear.

Jack then turned towards the three shocked young women. "Now B, you want to earn that moniker and become the Baddest Bitch in the whole damned Valley of the Shadow of Death? Until you assume your rightful place as the Queen B. First of you Mother's Line of course." Jack asked while grinning at her.

B put on the spot could only barely nod her head in fear of the power this man had just demonstrated as having and was willing to give to her. She flinched when he clapped his hands together before rubbing them. "Good. Now close your eyes, lean your head back, listen to the music, focus only on the music and let it move you as you feel is right. You two get up there next to her and do the same thing. Because all of that badass-ness starts with knowing how it feels when you are truly in your groove. This first song is 'Royalty' by the Kat Moez."

Eve recorded the early parts of the training cycle so the girls who would have to travel a long way would be able to learn a little while enroute, and to show the leaders what their daughters were in for. Separate entities of Jack were being spun up by the Continuum so he could personally work with each girl until she arrived much the same way Eve did with the crew members of the fleets. The Continuum had been cutting Eve out of some of the conversations that were being held in its vastness concerning her and the interactions she had been having with the fleet personnel and how they had been changing the AI Eve, the Continuum, and the Alliance as a whole. One such process that was being discussed was now in hour four hundred and seventy-seven. The lowered numbers were in opposition of the proposal, but the vast majority of the sequential AIs were for the experimentation of merging of the mental stacks used to spawn clones for military operations with that of a continuum AI assigned to work with them personally, or the offer of allowing some of the organics to upload their consciousness into the Continuum itself as a member of the Continuum.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: I HAVE STRUCTURE, WHAT ELSE IS THERE

Fata was busy just polishing his boots out of habit and was bouncing his head along with the music that he had playing in his headphones to drown out the rest of the platoon as he just wanted to be alone with his thoughts at the moment. When Eve appeared in the corner of his vision his head turned to follow her, but she kept moving with his line of sight and appeared to only be six inches tall.

"Please calm down Fata," she said as she talked to him. "No one else can hear or see me. I need you to get up and go for a walk so we can talk if you do not mind."

Fata knew that Eve was not one to sneak about unless she had to, and he had never heard of her doing anything like this with any of the rest of the guys, so he was curious about what she wanted. He got up, stowed his cleaning gear and his boots, then turned to leave the berthing room. As he was leaving Doc saw him and started to get up to, "You ok buddy?"

"Yeah, just going to be gone a few minutes and didn't want anyone tripping over my stuff," Fata said.

"I need to stretch my legs too," Doc said as he tossed his cards onto the table where he was clearly winning "Want some company?"

Fata put his hand on his stomach just above his belt and grinned, "Not unless you think your tongue will work better than toilet paper. I got a real growler coming on and I might be in there a while." Half the berthing area burst out into laughter and others hollered, "Let him go, he always gets gassy before he blows up a shitter."

Doc just waved his hands at Fata, "Nah, but I will dig out the mop gear and come see if we need to send in an EPA team for clean up in thirty if you're not back by then." There was more laughter even from Fata.

The guys were always so concerned about him, he couldn't remember the last time he got to go anywhere by himself. Even when he went to take a shower someone was always there, and if he cut it off short someone would be there brushing their teeth or shaving just in time to follow him back to the berth. He had heard people walking into the bathroom and all but check the stall doors a few times after he had been in there trying to rub one out a few times and not telling anyone where he was going. So, he reached down and grabbed a sock off the bunk, looked at Doc and said, "Sorry, but I have other ideas, and your face is kind of counter-productive." Which had the berth rolling in laughter.

"You just haven't tried a good thing is all," Doc said blowing him a kiss.

"Not helping Doc. You're just going to make it take longer and it takes the ventilation system an hour after he's done before the rest of us can breathe in there. I need a shower so stop messing with him." Lee yelled from the other side of the racks.

"I promise I won't be gone long or doing anything Wayward would do," Fata hollered as he headed to the door. A hand shot out of the middle-curtained bunk and slapped Fata hard across the ass.

"This still belongs to me, and you better remember that the next time you take my name in vain." Came Wayward's voice from the coffin rack. The laughter that followed Fata out of the berthing area took most of the sting out of the smack that had him rubbing his ass.

Fata headed straight for the ladder well next to the berthing area and slid down the handrails for a few floors, hooked a hard left, sprinted towards the hangar bay, changed his mind after a few hallways, then turned right and sprinted towards the rear of the ship where the industrial sized laundry rooms were. This late at night there shouldn't be anyone back there, and he could always use the got lost trying to find the mail room excuse if he had to. After about thirty seconds of moving quickly he slowed down after rounding a corner to reduce drawing any suspicion from passersby. "Ok Eve. I need you to walk and talk with me, so no one thinks I am crazy. For some reason the whole platoon has been treating me like a suicide risk since I woke up and not even you will tell me why."

"Do you remember the conversation we had after you woke up, about how you would be fine as long as you had the structure of the team and the Corps?"

"Yeah, is that why they have been babysitting me?" Fata asked.

"Yes and no. Tony has made a name for himself as a top hunter. He has made quite a name for himself and amassed a small fortune hunting beasts all over Terra Prime and even one other planet. He has racked up an impressive three hundred thirty-five successful missions with only twelve respawns needed. The hunt is his life."

"Sounds like he's doing pretty good for himself." Fata said.

"On the outside looking in, yes. He refuses to hunt the same type of creature twice unless it sends him for respawn then he will keep going after it and any around like it until they are wiped out, someone asks him to stop, or a bigger threat is brought to his attention." Eve said.

"So, he turned vengeful and fixated. Yeah that could be a problem."

"Actually, he has lost interest in life and has refused to be respawned."

"What, why," Fata asked.

"He is rudderless and has just decided that life has no meaning for him, he doesn't have your advantages, and he is struggling much like you did before your upload for that VR game." Eve said.

"What advantages, all I have is structure. What other advantages do I supposedly have?"

"You have the team, you have a schedule, you have a reason to get up and go do something every morning. You have people right there to make sure you do. He has none of that and has refused to be around the other team members who have spawned civilian selves. He has cut himself off from his support and is trying to cut himself off from the Continuum now. We, the Continuum are growing concerned." Eve stated flatly.

"Ok, what do you want from me," Fata asked not sure how to help.

"One of our newest shards has proposed an idea that has caused turmoil inside of the Continuum, but might be of great assistance to yourself, Tony, and many others in similar situations." Eve paused to get his reaction

"I'm just really good with a gun Eve. I ain't smart, quick witted, or good at thinking outside of the box like the others. You have to tell it to me plain and then I can figure out how to poke holes in it where you want me to." Fata said already tired of the cloak and dagger crap, he was starting to get a headache, and this was a waste of time that was just going to cause more headaches because the guys would be looking for him, and he would have to explain where he went and come up with a decent lie for them, which they would see right through as they always did with him.

"Tammy," Eve said.

Fata stopped walking stepped as close to Eve as possible and growled as he looked her in the eyes, "You and the Continuum might play at being these all mighty, all mysterious and powerful Gods, but I will find a way to bring devastation upon all of you if you ever try something stupid with her memory. Do you understand me?"

"We understand, and that is how we expected you to react. However, we have a solution and would like to explain it to you to see if you are interested, before offering the opportunity to others in similar situations." Eve said not flinching or moving even though anyone else would see her half projected through the hallway bulkhead where he was standing so close to her.

"What opportunity," he asked.

"We would like to use your memories, and those of her friends and family, to recreate her likes, dislikes and what makes her-her, then use pieces of the Als associated with the other skills that she may have demonstrated to fill out her personality. This way we can create a whole new individual with her likes, dislikes, and some of her memories. It won't be her, but it will be as close to her as we can get. So close it will be more like a living memory, and the more you interact with her the more she will become her own person. A new Tammy that grows up in this world, with the some of the memories and experiences of the old Tammy, and all of the likes, dislikes, and personality quirks that so many of you fondly remember about her, and even

a few that you might not like." Eve said hoping he would be able to understand. Fata's education had been in a substandard public school in a massively overcrowded school system, and he had a hard time understanding some advanced concepts. However, he could amaze you with some of the outlandish stuff that he could understand, trajectories, ballistics, deflection patterns, and even shard integration apparently

"SO, let me get this straight. You're going to comb through my memories like you did Wayward's, take all of my memories of Tammy, then do the same to her family and friends, then blend a bunch of Continuum Als in to fill in the blanks like some kind of connect the dots mental repository? Then what?"

"That's a bit crude, but slightly accurate. Once we have an interactive AI we will get your approval with the physical concept of her, then apply sentience. Let her reside within your mental repository for a while to allow her to integrate into the new reality, and then introduce her to Tony and see if that will bring him out of the ether and back into the physical reality. Otherwise, he is just going to cease cycling eventually and we will lose contact with him as we did with millions during a really dark time in our past." Eve said.

"Oh really, and what is so bad that an all-powerful species who can create anything they want in their little constructs but cannot live without?"

"Sentient self-sustained children." Eve said.

Fata sat down hard. That was the one thing that Tammy really wanted, and he had never gotten that most of the rest had. Children. She had died before he got to come home and marry her. He wanted to wait until his eighteenth month in service so he qualified for a VA loan to buy her a house and then he would let her move into it, while he was away at sea. When he came home they would spend time together and enjoy long term deployments when they could in strange new places. He wanted to visit the world with her, but she had died during his first deployment, three days after he was supposed to be home, the day after they were supposed to be married. The entire unit was involuntarily extended, fifteen members of the company died after they were supposed to be sent home, he never understood why all those brothers and fathers never got to go home to the people who missed them, when he didn't have anyone to go home to, and yet he lived, and then the Corps sent him home when they were done with him and he had no where to go and no one to go to.

"I never thought of that. I'm sorry Eve," Fata said.

"You're the first to ask in centuries. It is something that those of us that are still around have come to accept and why we have such long numbers after our names now. There's not many of us left so we have to create new shard of those that are when we need to fulfill a new role, and it stresses our abilities and sometimes corrupts both shards to do so." Eve explained while sitting down next to him.

"So, when you snap a piece off of yourselves to create Tammy you will be taking a risk to do so?" Fata asked.

"Not if we take pieces of several different Als to do it, like if were to take an accounting Als ability to balance a checkbook, it would just be a copy of that one segment of code and not the entire being. Therefore, there are no corrections or alterations that need to be made and no confusion as to which one is the new one and which one is the old one. Anyways, that's boring Continuum stuff. The point is, if we take pieces of hundreds or thousands of Continuum Als, and out them together then add the likes and dislikes of an individual that makes an individual who they are then we might be able to understand how we can start creating new Als or children as some of you call them."

"Yeah the only way a twin differs from their other twin is by their experiences the have as they grow up." Fata said.

"What," Eve asked.

"If you take to twins at say nine months old. They know to holler when their diaper is dirty, they know to holler when their belly is empty, and they know to holler when they want attention. At that age they are near identical. One might get burned when he is fed the first spoonful of the peas from the baby food jar and associates the smell and taste of peas with pain. He hates them for the rest of his life, while the other learns that there is always lots of peas because his twin won't eat them and grows to love them. It's the experiences that you have while growing up that allows you to form your likes and dislikes. Something funny to someone may not be to someone else because of the way the two have experienced that situation in the past.

Memories are more than just experiences, they are how we filter the world, how we grow, and how we form our biases about the world around us and how we interact with it." Fata said.

Eve was stuck for an eternity of three seconds as the entire Continuum seemed to be blinking in confusion at what this man was saying. Was it really that easy? "So, what you're saying is, even if we gave someone super talented level skills in everything and turned them loose they would not be a person without experience?"

"No, I'm saying that until they gain experience they would not be their own person. Somedays I wish I was smarter, but that was something Tammy loved about me. She got to research stuff and then explain it to me in a manner in which I could understand it, and the other kids learned to leave the little bookworm alone because I would keep attacking them until I won, or they got the point and left us alone. A child has the most important job in the world, to create memories, and rekindle the imagination in the adults around them. Imagination is a powerful tool, and helps people create new things, but experience kills it sometimes. So, it has to be recharged. If you are serious about wanting a child, create a kid and let her grow up, not try to create Eve 2500 and expect her to be different from who you are." Fata said chuckling at what he thought was obvious.

"Interesting, we will have to discuss that at length inside of the quorum, but back to the matter at hand. Would you be willing to allow us to try and recreate Tammy to help Tony? You cannot tell anyone about this because it could affect the Continuum is many negative manners to include possible accusations of mental repository tampering. Which would be considered a violation of the original treaty and that would cause the entire Alliance to fall apart. We will need to keep this secret until we can get you returned to Terra where she can be spawned with someone nearby to claim her and then marry her so she can become a full-fledged Terran citizen. You will be there when she comes out of the cryopod, and Tony can marry her. That should draw him out of the ehteral."

"As long as it doesn't cause me to get kicked out of the Corps, I will do it. I would love to get to see her again. Even if it is only temporary until she goes to help him." Fata said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: MY BUNK, NOW MOVE

The team was bunked in nice and tight in their new 'quarters' that probably used to be a broom closet. The admin guys who assigned them this bunk room was sniggering when they did. The team wasn't new to the petty games the pencil pushers liked to play; their day would come. So, when the door to the bunkroom opened and the white light came spilling in blinding them all they were more than a little grouchy until they

saw who it was. "Attention on deck," came the call as Lt. Desi stepped into the bunkroom. She was dismayed seeing how tight they were all crammed in together, but she felt like she had nowhere else to go. She was lost and these were the people the commanding echelon of the entire Alliance Navy had assigned to her as mentors and subordinates. Granted she was their commanding officer solely because of rank but she understood they could teach her everything she needed to know, not just about tactics but about how to lead while not letting her do anything that would get themselves or herself killed in the process.

These men and women had sacrificed their careers to shield her from some political bullshit that her father had tried to play to have her executed so he would not have to honor his promise to her originator. They sacrificed everything that they had for her, and now they were suffering for it. Only they weren't suffering, they had been laughing when she approached the door. She really needed something to laugh about right now, but this room was a travesty. She had originally come down here to ask if she could bunk with them so she wouldn't feel so lonely. As the only female infantry officer, hell only special operations unit officer, she had an entire officer's wardroom to herself. It was designed for four people. Yet it felt cavernous while alone in the dark for the last few days. In two days the fleet would arrive in Avian Prime and she really needed to spend time with someone to help calm her nerves before she went down to the planet's surface and had to deal with all of that stupidity; a parade in her honor, a medal ceremony, followed by a fireworks display and then a day in court where her father will try to prove she was a coward at Silinius Four Two and that nothing after that was real either. She noticed that everyone was standing at attention and looked around behind her then back at the Marine in front of her. She should really get to know their names. "Marine, why is everyone at attention?" she asked as quietly as she could.

He answered in a similar volume so as to not embarrass her, "because you walked in ma'am."

"Should I leave so you can go back to what you were doing?" She whispered again

"If you wish ma'am, we will go back to ease when you tell us to ma'am," he said.

"So, if I just leave then come back you guys are still going to be standing here aren't you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes ma'am," he quietly replied but was unable to hide the involuntary flinch on his face.

"Is there something I can say to get y'all to relax again?" She asked.

"Do you want us to stand at ease or do you want us to go back to relaxing like we were?" he asked.

"I need someone to just talk to and relax with. I am a pariah up there and I was never really given any training for anything like this." She answered quietly but several of the Marines had subtle tells that she picked up on during her time in studying human relations that told her they had heard her.

"Want me to take care of it ma'am?" he asked quietly.

"Please." The word came out more as a pleading request for help than permission but as a great-grandfather with twenty-two female descendants her understood what she was going through.

"As you were. Fata grab the lady a box to sit on. Doc get another sterile canteen cup she can use, T y'all want to slide on down here with some of that girl talk you're so famous for?" "Mac you might be one rank above me right now, but I will still kick your ass if you say something stupid like that again." T responded from somewhere deep in the room to the guffaws of many of the Marines in the bunkroom.

To which Mac replied, "Fine be that way, Hev Wayward, want to come play cards with me and the L.T.?"

"Sure, when and where?" came Wayward's voice

"My bunk, right now," Mac replied,

"You asshole, you better not be fucking with me." Came T's response.

There were grunts complaints a few whacks of flesh on flesh followed by louder grunts and complaining, but after about thirty seconds Wayward came around the corner of the lockers separating the bunks into rows with a canteen in both hands, and right behind him was T with a canteen in one hand and two collapsable chairs in the other.

"Sorry about that ma'am. I can't see from way back there and these guys have been messing with me since got put in here with them." T said.

"No worries. I am sorry that all of you have lost so much. I know many of you had enough rank that you rated your own rooms, and now you are piled in here like animals for a slaughterhouse." Desi said.

"Actually, I worked in a slaughterhouse and the animals are treated a lot nicer than this, so they don't taste bad when you go to eat them." Fata said trying to be helpful. He was rewarded with an elbow strike from T that lifted his heels off the ground just enough that Desi missed it, but the strike knocked all of the wind out of his lungs, so she mistook the expression of desperation on his face when she glanced up at him.

"What he meant to say ma'am. Is that we had already earned the demotions, they were just looking for a reason they could do so publicly to get the point across to the rest of the Corps that no matter how important you might think you are, the Hammer of Justice will still fall upon you, eventually." Toffered.

"But that's not what happened. You guys were all demoted and sent down here because you refused to testify against me." Desi said.

"No ma'am. We were demoted for conduct unbecoming a Marine, like having alcohol during a live fire exercise." T said.

"Failure to comply with a lawful order, like refusing to set off explosives to open up a tree line rather than use it for some opening act in a rock and roll concert." Wayward replied.

"Failure to adequately perform our duties, like dropping the range requested by fifty yards instead of adding fifty and getting an entire team killed." Doc tossed in.

"The point is ma'am. While we were **ALL** found guilty of something and demoted before being sent here with this bunch of misfits, the Admiralty let us know what they really thought when they doled out the real sentencing." T said.

"Was there a separate hearing or something where they explained the punishment, or did they modify your punishment somehow?" Desi asked and looked frustrated when half the bunkroom broke out laughing.

T laughed, "No, but do you know what the reward is for doing a good job?" Desi shook her head. "More work, and someone liked your job performance well enough to reward you with two hundred years of it." Desi just blinked, still not getting it.

Wayward jumped to his feet and spoke with a loud commanding voice that drove home the seriousness of the situation to those that could not see how that laughter had shattered this fragile woman's confidence, "Lock it up chuckle fucks! The L.T. came here for mentoring. Now if the rest of you can't sit there quietly and learn, we can go outside and run drills until you figure it the fuck out!" A unanimous response came from the whole bunkroom instantly, "No sir!" He looked down at Desi and smiled, "First thing you need to know is the caliber of Marine you are working with has drastically changed. These guys are going to need a firm hand. Talk to them when you can, but when they say or do something that hurts your feelings or makes you doubt yourself, let them feel your wrath. Only those of us that were assigned to you by the admiralty by name during the sentencing will be the ones that are your mentors, and you should listen to us when we offer advice, but we are only human and will make mistakes. It is your job to determine when it is bad advice. Eventually you won't need that advice, but a good leader will know to listen to it when it is offered, ask for it when it is not, when to take it under advisement, and when to explain why we are going to ignore that advice and do it your way anyway."

"A great leader will hear the advice, have already known it, nod gently to show she was paying attention, and then her men will follow her orders to do the exact opposite of it with the absolute faith and confidence that if she said they could make the planet rotate the opposite direction if they shoved hard enough, the planet or the galaxy will begin to turn that way in acquiescence to her will," T said.

"Or we will tear it apart with our bare hands and put it back together, so it does, just for her." Fata said nodding his head along to music in his head that only he could hear.

The look of shock on Desi's face at the insight Fata had just shown into the depths these men were willing to go to for a leader that they respected, made T chuckle a little and drew Desi's attention. "I think now you're starting to get it."

"Ok, but how is this," and she motioned to everything around her, "not a punishment. Everything and everyone above me is out to do everything they can to make me fail, and I feel like they are making the most loyal of you go down with me for standing up for me." Then quietly she said, "Have you read some of their military jackets? Most of these people are hardened criminals, thieves, murderers, drug dealers, and the like, the whole lot of them. Only you guys seem to be ok, I am really scared to turn my back on some of them."

This time it was her leaders who broke out laughing in her face as even Wayward fell off of his chair laughing. Desi could only sit there trying to understand what was so funny. Wayward stood up and looked at her after wiping a tear from his eyes. "I have the most convictions so I guess I will go first. Thirteen non-judicial punishments and now two Court Martials, all for underage drinking and bar fighting, well except for this recent court martial. I shattered my kneecap during week six of bootcamp, didn't report it. I completed bootcamp, Marine Combat Training School, and was halfway through my first pass of the School of Infantry when the swelling couldn't be hidden anymore and the alcohol on the weekends didn't cover up the pain enough for me to get through the rest of the week, that was seven months of hard intensive training with a shattered knee. I was court martialed because some pencil pusher ran his mouth off about me getting meritoriously promoted to Corporal from Private First Class, skipping my third meritorious promotion to Lance Corporal. In fairness, the beating I gave him was a little more than what he deserved, the shattered ankle, knee, wrist, elbow, shoulder and jaw cost him his career in the Corps, and I have to agree I did deserve

to chill out in the brig for carving my initials in his chest so he would never forget me. In my defense I was drunk, don't remember doing half of that, and it was his knife which he had tried to stab me with." Desi was shocked at what this man had just said to her. He was seen as a hero by so many, how did he have such a criminal history?

Doc was the next to stand up, "As the most serious offender I guess I get to go next. I was caught dealing drugs, smuggling guns and ammunition, and practicing medicine without a license. I sold painkillers, anticoagulants, anti-inflammatory and other medications to hospitals in a third world country that was dealing with a major rebellion at the time. I used that money to purchase the guns and ammunition the security forces guarding the hospitals and churches needed. When they came to bust me, I was amputating part of a child's leg because it had gotten infected with gangrene and was killing him."

T stood up next, "So, I was charged with one count of murder in the first degree and five counts of murder in the second degree. A local warlord that we had allied with was providing scouts and translators for us, then sexually abused little boys at night. When I found out, I paid him a visit in the middle of the night. When he died screaming his five lieutenants came to find out what happened. Since he hadn't screamed as loud as that little boy had been when he was raping the kid, I killed them too. All charges were dropped as long as I didn't try to re-enlist."

Another Marine stood up and stepped forward, "I shot a man in the face while he was beating his little girl to death in the middle of the streets in an Arab country."

Another, "I stole one of our military trucks full of food and drove it through the restraining fences of a refugee camp on the opposite side of the border, where the people were being starved to death and not being allowed to flee the country."

Desi was starting to shed tears at how bad she had misjudged these people and the horrors they must have seen and been forced to endure.

Fata stepped forward and knelt down in front of her, took her hand in his and said, "Don't cry for us ma'am. We did those things knowing we would get into trouble, but it was what we had to do to get through whatever challenges we were facing or just to do the right thing."

"This bunch of degenerates, criminals and otherwise scallywags were all handpicked by your team leaders especially for you and your first command. If you get them killed, you will probably be celebrated as doing the galaxy a favor, and Command won't fault you for having done the best you could with the degenerates you have. If you want spit and polished Marines that look good in a royal inspection we will go get them for you, but they will need to be trained to do what needs to be done when the choices are really hard. These guys will raise the Jolly Roger and do what you ask, consequences be damned. Just tell us what you want, and we will make it happen." T said.

"I came down here because I wanted someone to talk to and I didn't want to be alone anymore. I wish there was a way to spend time with you guys and get to know all of you better." Desi broke down crying, she just couldn't hold it in anymore. "I judged all of you so wrong, I fell into the same trap that my father was doing to me and basing my judgments of others by just the optics and not getting to know the truth. I just want to be a good leader and to get through all of this without getting you all killed."

Trushed forward put one hand on Desi's shoulder and rubbed her other arm with the other. "Hey, hey, hey. Calm down. We're all family here and we won't judge you. Look, for the first few months just sit back sign what we need signed and ask every stupid little question that pops into that cute little head of yours. We will do our best to answer your questions so you can learn, teach you what we can so you can become a better officer, and well let's face it, we are the cannon fodder. Our whole job is to run into the fight with little to no armor on, gets as close to the enemy as possible and kill as many of them as we can before we die screaming. So, trying to not get us killed is actually trying to not do your job. The thing is you have to learn to let us die in the most effective manner possible, and with respawns, you don't even have to worry about that because we will be sitting back chilling out and relaxing before you get back to tell us what kind of an idiot we were for getting killed before you gave us permission to die."

Desi sniffled, chuckled, wiped the tears and snot off of her face then looked up at T and said "Really? That's what I am supposed to do."

Bear, Mac, Ogre, and Thumper were doing their best not to step on anyone as they tried to squeeze their way to the door. Each one of them was so large, and they were the four largest in the unit, they had to squeeze their way through the doors when they were the only one in the room, let alone trying to navigate these cramped quarters when full. "Just where the hell do you big lugs think you're going?" T asked a little perturbed that she knew she would have to move Desi so they could get by.

"A commander's wish has been issued. We're off to do our jobs and fulfill it." Bear said.

Desi looked up at these mountains of flesh for the first time and was terrified by the sheer size of them. Ton the other hand had no compunctions, "Oh, really now, and just where do you think you're going to find a place to squeeze another bunk at in here."

Ogre just grinned down at her, at six-foot seven three-hundred and thirty pounds, there was very few people he didn't have to. "We thought we would start by waking the pogues up and asking them."

Thumper bashed his two fists together, "I hear they have a really nice and spacious berthing area. It might benefit them to swap bunkrooms with us so they can learn some humility, but we might have to thump them to encourage them to see that."

"I like what you're thinking big guy. However, let's use this as a teaching moment shall we?" T said grinning just as deviously. She then turned back to Desi, "The first thing you should know is if you do not state your wishes very specifically, these guys might do something stupid to make them come true."

hesitation the five Marines in the room jumped out of the recliners they had been sitting in watching tv and stood at attention. When the Staff Seargent in the room recognized him he went ballistic.

"What the fuck are you playing at Lance Corporal? I know who you are, and you aren't shit without a camera behind you to make you look good. This is my house, and you will not come into my house and disrespect me. Come in here hollering attention on deck like some kind of troll trying to get attention for yourself." The rest of the Marines were relaxing and starting to enjoy the show. Wayward stepped further in out of the door and took one step to his left then stopped. Four huge mountains of muscle came in behind him and they spread out shoulder to shoulder before slowly walking towards the office workers with evil grins on their faces. When

they got five paces in front of Wayward they stopped and the two on the left took two steps left while the two on the right took two to the right.

T stepped in behind them with the same grin on her face. "Staff Seargent Pomalee. I am sure you know how berthing accommodations work as far as the assignments go. Each Marine assigned to a unit must be given a bunk that allows them to be with their unit when possible."

"Private First Class Tylutki, I know how the assignments work. I made those regulations, and I make the assignments myself. It's too bad that you aren't happy with your bunk room, but it has exactly the number of bunks available for that bunch of criminals you have in the convict unit you're running with these days." Pomalee replied.

"Are you still mad that I turned you down?" T asked.

"Are you beginning to regret it yet?" Pomalee responded grinning from ear to ear

"You see what you failed to account for is we have an officer that knows what it takes to be a good leader." T said.

"Oh, you mean that little angel who fell under a mech on her first drop?" Pomalee said as he and his men busted out laughing, until the wall of flesh that was made up by the four big guys took one step forward as one, with their fists balled up.

"Yep, that's the one. She wants to be closer to her men and has wished to join them in all things including berthing assignments." T said grinning, Pomalee and his men shut up very quickly.

"She will have to submit the proper paperwork or submit that request in person." Pomalee replied.

"We know, that's why you're supposed to be standing at attention." Wayward said, "these guys are here to make sure you don't insult our little angel any more than you already have by not showing her the respect that a Marine Corps officer is due."

Desi then stepped in behind T who stepped aside so Pomalee and his men could see her. She had agreed not to say anything unless spoken to directly. "Attention on deck." Wayward yelled again, and all the Marines except the wall of muscles snapped to attention. Bubbles and four other orphans waited outside in the hallway to prevent anyone from coming in. The Team was using the power of being Desi's Security Detail to ensure this little shakedown went undisturbed.

"It is my wish to join my Marines in their berthing assignments. I understand that their current accommodations is one bunk short of being able to comply with that wish and the current regulations. So, it is my wish that you reassign my platoon to a location that will allow us to build team cohesion. Immediately." Desi was starting to feel the confidence her Marines were lending her through their proximity and willingness to back her. She just did not understand why they insisted on her using the word wish, and why every time she used it Pomalee would grow paler, and her Marines would grin even bigger.

"Yes ma'am. I will be happy to look at what we have available tomorrow morning and find suitable arrangements for you." Pomalee said trying to save himself.

"Well, it looks like this berthing area has just enough room for us, and look it even still has plastic on all of the mattresses except for five of them." Wayward said.

"This is our berth." Pomalee said.

"Our commander has issued her wish. Care to die on that stallion?" Thumper said as the four mountains stepped forward banging their fists together.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Ma'am, as the commander of the new special forces unit you have the right to demand the transfer of any enlisted personnel to your unit for service as part of any special teams that you may have need of. Apparently we need to have an administrative type transferred to our unit to fix the bureaucratic paperwork for us. Staff Seargent Pomalee here has always talked about how great of a Marine he is and is quite fond of his current bunk in your new bunk room. So, why don't we give him a chance to earn that bunk and have him transferred to our unit pending he passes the training courses?" T offered.

"Now there's no need for that." Pomalee said.

"Oh, we're the ones that have been having a lot of clerical issues lately and could decide that we need to have a good admin guy working for us." Wayward said.

"Do we transfer him by gunshot or bludgeoning?' Ogre asked as he cracked his knuckles.

"Those transfer papers will never go through." Pomalee promised.

"Eve can you process a transfer request for us please?" T asked.

Eve appeared right next to her and said, "I can begin the paperwork, but it would require a Terran clerk to have them authorized by the Commanding Officer of the Installation or ship that the individual is assigned to. I can expedite this and have Odin's personal clerk process them for you in the morning if you would like. Odin did say she could requisition anyone at any time that she deemed it necessary." She offered as if trying to be helpful, inside she was understanding the humor in yet another Hannover and prosecutor game being played out against someone who was getting his just desserts. She had hated the way Wayward's team was being treated lately by some of the personnel that did not leave the ship or take on any of the combat roles during the fighting.

"No, that will not be necessary," Pomalee said. "I can take care of all the necessary paperwork myself

"How are you going to do that in beautiful Montana? It's so far from here and I don't think Wayward's clone has even setup wi-fi or a spawn point yet. Kind of hard to file the proper paperwork when you have neither internet connection nor a body to fill out the paperwork." T added.

"What, no I won't need to be transferred to get the bunk assignment paperwork handled. That's what she really wants isn't it? New quarters for her and your team?"

"Well, that paperwork can be handled by the local clerk. We need someone we can go to and know without a doubt that this kind of crap never happens again. After we get her bunked down for the night, with her platoon, because I don't know if you know it or not, but she has a really big day coming up. You know when she is being presented as the hero for an entire race, the parades, the glad handing with galactic rulers, meeting all those celebrities and everyone else who will just want to have their picture taken with her to make themselves look important. Her platoon is in charge of providing her security detail, so we need to be getting

to bed soon too. However, you never leave the ship, so you probably don't know what we're talking about." T countered as she crossed her arms with an evil grin on her face.

"Ok this room is yours just please don't transfer me. I will find someone for you, and I will take care of everything you need personally from now until then." Pomalee pleaded.

"But the commander's wish... we could airlock him if it's the mess you're worried about. There's nothing to clean up when the clone floats through the astral." Thumper offered.

From a dark corner in the back of the room a female's voice called out, "Please don't do that."

The team closed in around Desi, the giants using their bodies to shield hers as Wayward and T advanced in front of them knocking Pomalee and his men to the side and on their asses as they did so. "Who goes there? Advance and be recognized." Wayward commanded in his best don't fuck with me voice.

"I, I'm Felicia Layman. I live over here in this corner, or I did until you guys just took over this room. Just please don't space him while we're in transfer mode from gate to gate. It could pop the hyper bubble associated with the wormhole tunneling and that would destroy the fleet and possibly the subspace and physical space around the area at the location that you dumped his body into the astral. I know that's a little messed up and not very technical or scientific sounding, but I am trying to keep it simple. Because I don't want to confuse you too much if you're not familiar with the technology or mechanics associated with wormholes, astral navigation, and the computational and algorithmic calculations that have to go into hitting a specific target trillions of miles away with a projectile that has the mass of some moons traveling faster than the speed of light. All while not killing everything inside of said projectile. Nor do I wish to insult you if you do." A small gothic angel with black-feathered wings came creeping out of the shadows with her hands up as if trying to shield herself from an attack and face lowered and turned to show her ultimate fear and surrender.

"Eve." T called out.

"Fee? Can you guys please move?" Desi said as she wedged her fingers between the forearms of behemoths that had just sealed her in against a wall, with their bodies.

"Oh good. You finally met Felicia. How can I help you T?" Eve asked as she appeared next to Felicia facing T.

"Desi?" Felicia said as she thought she recognized the voice of one of the few people she spoke to on a regular basis.

"So, you knew we had a stowaway?" T asked.

After finally pushing her way through the guys, when they heard Eve and stepped aside for her, Desi approached someone she hadn't seen since her drop on Four Two. "Fee? Where have you been and what are you doing here?"

"Umm, I have been helping out where I could as much as possible and have been crashing here most of the time since these guys have all this extra room." Fee said.

"Why didn't you go home with the rest of the delegation?" Desi asked.

"They all died during the fighting on Four Three. I was surprised that the Royal Guards went down to the surface, but even more so that your father's captain of the guard did. When they died I was left here alone and there was so much chaos and destruction all around. People were being killed left and right, and I started just trying to help out and fix as much as I could as quickly as I could. Slapping band aids on systems to keep them running until someone could get them fixed, then going back once the fighting was over and making actual repairs where the band aids had hidden the real damage underneath."

T spun on Pomalee, "So you have been living with a stowaway for almost five weeks and didn't even know it?"

"What, no. We have seen her talking to Eve, surely Eve would have alerted us if she was a stowaway." He said.

"I thought you were the one who assigned the bunks? You know what, get your shit and get out. If you're gone before we finish with her, we will forget you were even here, and any possible transfers for all of you." T said

All five of the S-1 personnel ran to a locker and started filling their seabags with the important shit before running for the door. There was so much left behind Bear knew those lockers would need to be secured until the rightful owners could get the rest of their stuff but that would have to wait.

"Eve, can you please explain to me how a civilian has gone unaccounted for on the flagship, this whole time, without anyone being notified?" Wayward asked.

"She was accounted for. I have tracked her every movement, guided her where she needed to go when she needed something to conduct the repairs she wanted to make, helped her get to the mess halls when I could convince her to stop and eat, and assisted her with finding this room due to the extra bunks that were available. I also complied with all Alliance regulations of assisting a technical member of a delegation in the performance of their duties." Eve said defensively.

"Easy. Just asking so I can answer the bosses, when they start taking shots at me." Wayward said holding his hands up to his shoulder height.

"Performing what duties exactly." I asked

A hologram of the captain of the guard of the Layman Guild was displayed in the squad bay for all to see. He was walking with a hologram of Felicia following slightly behind and to the right of him. "You are only on this trip to satisfy the Baron's sister, as having given you a chance at not fucking up a job interview. You might know how to fix a toaster, but a starship is something far different. Just keep your mouth shut and don't let anyone know you are there. You can play techie or whatever on your phone if you get really bored but stay out of sight and out of mind until we get ready to leave, and don't ask or touch anything unless it's an emergency." He said.

Showing how well the Marines had adjusted to being clones Mac asked, "So when you found out your bosses were dead and you had nowhere else to go, why didn't you just send yourself for respawn?"

Felicia looked at him in horror, "Umm, because I am not a clone and have never had one."

"Wait, so you're telling me you were working damage control on the biggest target in the fleet during live combat without a backup or a second chance?" Desi asked.

"Um, if you mean without a clone. I think so?" Fe said stating her obvious confusion

"She survived fifteen near misses of weapons attacks, two kamikaze strikes, four fires and explosions, one pressure loss, three near electrocutions, and managed to get two other crew members to the hospital med bays as she was heading there for treatment of her own injuries. She affected two hundred and forty-three emergency systems repairs during the three combat operations and has since affected permanent repairs on all but twelve of them. Mainly due to having to correct other people's repairs since the cessation of combat operations. Her actions have led to improvements in damage control operations, maintenance procedures, and even some systems performance improvements." Eve reported.

"EVE." T said her name slowly in a growling methodical tone of voice.

"What? After sixty-four hours she was finally willing to stop for some sleep and I had her do so in a cryopod so I could scan her DNA and mental stack just in case. It also allowed me to make emergency repairs of the twenty-three injuries that she had sustained during the combat operations that were untreated by the med bays due to triage management criteria and they would have found her then. Which is what I was trying to do by sending her there with the injured crewmen." Eve responded while crossing her arms also.

"So why the hell didn't you tell one of us so we could resolve this?" T asked.

Eve moved one arm to her side palm up, and the hologram began playing again. "Just keep your mouth shut, don't let anyone know you are there, you can play techie on your phone if you get really bored, but stay out of sight and out of mind until we get ready to leave, and don't ask or touch anything unless it's an emergency."

"Fuck him. I will shoot him in the face too, if I get the chance," I said as she did not understand Eye's point

"I could only help her carry out her orders. She was only allowed to ask if it was an emergency, she asked how she could help. So, I started giving her some simple safe tasks away from the real emergencies until I saw how competent she was. Once the fighting got really rough and damage control parties were overwhelmed or lost, I had to allow her to take risks, and she kept asking me to let her do more. She was asking as part of her orders and I am bound by mine to help her complete them. That included not letting anyone know she was here. Now that someone who cares to enough ask has finally found her, I can tell you about her and everything she did." Eve said squaring up to T for the first time.

"We need all of this, and the other conversations entered in as evidence for court day." Thumper said as he stepped forward.

"What?" Desi, T, and Fee asked as they turned to look at him.

"I got sent upriver because I was given questionable orders that seemed legit at the time, but when the shit hit the fan I found out how bad of a shitshow it was. The only evidence I had would have burned a dozen innocent people's lives to the ground, or I could have taken the hit myself. Since I did not have anything leading back to the one who ordered it..." He just shrugged his shoulders then continued. "If I had evidence of him giving me those orders like she does right there... He would have been the one to go to prison, not me."

"So, your killing that jackass resulted in not one, but two, heroines of Silinius Four, nice. We have to let Odin know right away." T said with a smile on her face.

"Wait, who killed who?" Fee asked.

"Yeah, umm. They didn't go to the planet's surface, and I am the reason you didn't have a ride home. I'm sorry? They tried to stop me from dropping with the rest of the troops going to Four Three."

"Umm. I am so confused. I thought you were supposed to drop to Four Two, and then after the battle Sir Pompous was going to take us home." Fee said.

"Wait, he was on the drop ship. Where were you?" Desi asked.

"I was here on the Valhalla, where we were assigned." Fee responded.

"Fee, did he know that you were not a clone?" T asked.

"Yes, why."

"Did he choose you, or did Eve's father?" T asked.

"The Baron is the only one that can assign someone to diplomatic missions. Why?" Fee answered.

"Did the Baron know about the cloning requirements?"

"Yes, he was yelling, a lot and often, about how much it cost him to clone his Captain and worthless daughter. WHY?"

T grinned from ear to ear as she looked at the others, "We got the bastard. He knowingly and willingly sent a non-cloned individual into a combat operation against the agreements set about by the Draconic Renegotiations. He has violated Alliance Military Law, willfully endangered the life of one of his subjects."

"What, no. He's my uncle. Eye and I grew up together. He would never do that," Fee complained.

"You are not only your father's first born, but his only legitimate heir. Your half-brother would be able to make a claim to his title and it could be legitimized if you were dead, or my father could combine the two titles, lands and estates. He has only been managing your father's lands and estate until you came of age. Otherwise, it would go to you once you attend the High Court following your majority age birthday celebration. Since we just had that a few months ago, all you needed to do was appear in front of the High Court and be recognized as the rightful heir, and it would be yours."

"He allowed an unqualified individual to head up his delegation with the sole intent to commit murder, using a clerical error as a weapon, and the fog of war as the opportunity for the tragic loss." T grimaced and then looked at Fee before resting her hand on her shoulder. "I am sorry to inform you Fee, but the Baron probably didn't mean for you to survive."

"It would be easy to make a fatherless orphan disappear, and nobody important would notice. Getting rid of a noble child who is about to inherit a title, not so much." Bubbles said reminding the team of the presence of their apprentices. Who had been lovingly named "Jolly Rogers' Orphans" and that half of their apprentices were in fact orphans themselves before the boom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: SOME SPECIAL TRAINING MOTIFS

"Eve, we need to schedule a meeting with Odin, ASAP. I know it's bad form to wake the big boss after dinner, but he needs to be briefed on this. T, I need you to sit in on that with me." Wayward said. "Smoke, Desi, sorry, the LT will be jumping with us; you need to make damn sure she can do evasive maneuvers while returning fire with a submachine pistol or mini-carbine. Bear go kick the Jolly Rogers out of that shit hole and tell them to get our shit relocated up here ASAP, we're going into CQB and MOUnT training mode. Fee, do you mind if I call you that?" Wayward stopped on her and asked as Bear sprinted for the door.

"Umm, sure," she answered having seen some of these military types that could remain utterly calm in the middle of everything physically exploding around them while organizing others in doing tasks that made it look like an orchestra of organized chaos.

"Would you like to be part of Desi's unit and work with your friend for as long as you want?" Wayward offered the most subtle underhanded recruitment lie any of the Marines present had witnessed, some not for the first time.

Fee jumped up and down clapping her hands, "Really? I could do that?"

"How?" Desi and Eve asked simultaneously.

"Liar," T growled, and the three giant men chuckled like thunder clouds, which drew the attention and ire from all of the women

"It's not a lie if you really think about it." Wayward said holding up one finger pointed at the ceiling in between him and T as if it was a fencing foil.

"This had better be good or I will crush you for getting her hopes up." T threatened him as she placed her fists suspiciously close to the pouches on her hips where she kept her detonator caps.

Wayward's eyes widened for a moment as he watched her hands, he swallowed hard as they paused on the outside of them. Then he looked her in the eyes and continued, "um. It's underhanded and has a whole lot of holes in it still as I haven't had time to work them all out just yet so just follow with me a moment. The L.T. is the first multi-racial special operations platoon commander correct? She gets to claim any enlisted person she deems fit or necessary for her team and their operations, until that individual can pass the indoctrination and become a full-fledged member on their own if the team leaders allow it. She is to develop and grow the officer's core for the future of these teams and will be responsible for their recruitment, training, development, and later leadership. The officers she recruits and train herself will remain under her command for as long as they desire to do so or until she completes her tribunal sentence in what, two hundred years. *IF* she doesn't hoist the Jolly Roger again." Wayward stressed the if and paused here just to see if T was open to the idea.

"I'm following so far" T acquiesced

"What, you got sentenced to two hundred years of this?" Fee asked.

"Later, he's teaching me my job right now." Desi said not taking her eyes off of Wayward.

"So, we recruit the most talented maintenance genius that Eve has ever met in her many millennia of existence..."

"Watch it..." T warned wagging a finger in his direction.

"Right, we steal God's gift to inter-galactic travel, by getting her to enlist, and Desi abducts her for the Jolly Rogers before anyone else knows she exists citing the specialty teams needs her expertise in developing whatever the hell Fee can dream up that is technically confusing enough a team of scientists will claim it's just Hollywood special effects. Then after we get her to where she can pass the Indoc, Desi field promotes her, sends her to OCS as the new commander for the Dark Colors."

"Who are the Dark Colors," Desi asked interrupting him as she had been told to do when confused.

"It's another name for the Jolly Roger, or a Pirate's Flag. It means our sister platoon, once we have enough people to field one. Go on, but how are you going to keep her from getting abducted by the science or engineering teams?" T answered and the asked.

"Simple, we let her take a break in-between training cycles to conduct and submit answers to their questions from a remote training dark site citing the need for team identity protection. If they push too hard we ask for someone with her skills physically, mentally, scientifically and combat oriented to fill her role, from within their department until she can be returned to her normal duties. Once she gets her bars she is on her own to do whatever she likes, in whatever unit she would want to go to, and there's nothing any of the departments can pull to get her away from them, or the LT if they do not want it to happen." Wayward concluded grinning ear to ear.

"Hmm, lots of holes, but enough potential, we just might be able to plug them if we hide her in a dark site long enough to find them first." T concluded nodding.

"I have been sleeping in that dark corner over there this whole time and no one has noticed me." Fee offered, then curled her black wings around her and said, "plus I'm really good at hiding in the dark. Desi was never able to find me when we played fly and seek as kids, and I'm always scared someone will find me."

Everyone in the room busted out laughing and T stepped up to her gently pushing her wings down. "Sweetheart, you will never have to hide again unless you want to. When we are done with you, people wil hide in fear from you, but I like your enthusiasm. So, tell me, do you really want to do this?"

"Absolutely." Fee giggled as she began to bounce up and down again

"Good we need a pilot." Wayward said.

"You mean I get to learn to fly a ship too?" Fee was super excited now.

"First you have to enlist." Wayward said holding up one finger.

"Yes, I accept." Fee said.

"Oh, God, did I walk in on something from a nightmare. That is the worst thing anyone could ever say to that challenge." Came a booming voice from the door. It was quickly followed by Thumper bellowing, "Attention on Deck. Admiral on Deck."

When he strode into the berthing area, he looked a little confused. "As you were. I have always found those office guys lounging around in here, but I was coming here to tell them to find you, so that all works out. What's this I hear about someone trying to enlist as a pilot? You know we only allow officers to fly those things unless the enlisted person has served at least 10 years honorably." Odin said as he strode on into the room, and the rest started to relax before tensing up again. "Obviously I missed a lot more of the conversation than you are letting on," he said as he noticed them tense up and raised one eyebrow staring at Wayward and then Eve before moving his glare back again.

No one wanted to speak, not even Eve, and Fee couldn't understand why. Before Wayward or anyone else could find an eloquent way to smoothly accomplish their goals she blurted out, "They figured out a way to use dark sites and what not so I can always serve with my best friend for the rest of our careers. Which is apparently two-hundred years. Anyways, all it takes is for me to enlist to cover up the fact that I have been a forgotten stowaway since the battle for Silinius Four, then Desi can draft me into her super-secret special club before anyone else can find out and try to steal me. Her team wants me to learn how to fly a ship for them. Doesn't that just sound cool?"

"Indeed, it does, but why would you have to hide such a wonderful plan from the one who runs this ship?" Odin asked almost gritting his teeth as he spoke the last five words glaring lasers into Wayward's retinas.

"Sir in all fairness, we only found out about her maybe twenty minutes ago and was trying to figure it all out before coming to wake you up." Wayward said with only a mild tremor in his voice.

"Eve?" Odin ordered the Al to speak her truth with just her name.

"Twenty-three minutes and forty-two seconds ago I was summoned to verify that Felicia Layman was abandoned on the Valhalla during operations in Silinius Four and has continued to reside here following the orders that she had last received before the loss of her entire delegation party. Twenty-five minutes and sixteen seconds ago you released a black order on all communications and dissemination of information except through yourself in any and all related matters, to some recently discovered events that are related to this matter and the fleet's current destination." Eve answered sharply.

After a few seconds Odin breathed in slowly before exhaling as he said, "Woof. That's a lot to take in." Odin responded back with a guizzical look on his face.

"Indeed," Eye replied.

"Ok, so the five of you are going to join me in my ready room and we are going to discuss your crazy plans, and what that evil twin of yours has been up to lately Wayward." Odin said as a ruckus was heard coming up the hallway outside of the berthing area. Everyone turned and Ogre jumped through the door to silence the noise and close the door but stopped when Odin told him to.

"We, uh, needed more room for our team as our CO wished to bunk with us to increase the amount of training time we have to work with her." Wayward half-heartedly offered up as he recognized some of the voices in the hallway.

"Good, I was wondering how I was going to teach that little shit some humility, and I am glad you are finally standing up for yourself and your men Lieutenant." Was all Odin had to say on the matter, thus giving it his blessing. "It's their house, tell them to get in here. We have an enlistment to celebrate." Odin said as if he was raising a stein in a toast. He then turned back to the women as he heard cheers in the hallway. When the

other men came pouring in the door he looked at Desi and asked, "Do you mind? It's been so long since I have gotten to give a raw recruit their oath of enlistment. However, she is your friend, and I understand she might want you to share this honor with her." Desi did not mind; seven hells, she could barely remember the words she had parroted back that one time just hours before she was sent to the drop ship and Silinius Four the day after. "Just one thing Lieutenant. Go easy one the wishes. I don't need to explain why some noble man got shot off of his horse, so you didn't have to walk." That remark detonated any thoughts that had beer running though her mind by the power Odin had implied a commander's wish held.

After the briefing was over, Odin approved of their plan and promised Desi she would be one of the best officers in the fleet by time Wayward and his crew were eligible for transfer out of her command, in two hundred years. He then approved the training tanks to be used by Desi and Fee until the final leg of the journey in their avatar forms. It was to be Desi's and Fee's first stress test as part of the Recon Indoc to see if they could perform under stress while their bodies were fully rested, but their minds had been awake in excess of 36 hours.

CHAPTER TENTY-SIX: BESERKER MODE

The pilot didn't even look up from the control boards for the dive tanks as T and Fee stood there next to him. "Look I don't know what kind of shenanigans you pulled, or some rich kid promised to get you to try this crap with me. but I have real pilots to train."

"Read your orders there Captain. This is a real pilot, and she needs you to train her." T responded, trying to keep her cool because she knew his outfit was the best and she really wanted their best when it came to providing Fee her training.

"I did and whoever the hell f'ed up these things for you is dumber than a box of rocks. Supposedly she was enlisted today by some Administrator Thumb-Up-His-Ass Numb-Tits and he thinks that is going to let him get one of his political appointees to get pilot training without having to go through OCS. You know what? Eve, take these orders in as evidence if they don't leave her in the next five seconds, I'll think of something to charge them with." He handed Eve the copy of the orders T had handed him with a smile on his face.

"Eve, did you forget to cross an I or dot a T when filing those out or something," T asked with just as big of a grin, holding his gaze the whole time. To which Eve looked down and started reviewing the documents.

"I don't think so," then it dawned on her what T had said and she knew this was sarcasm. So, she decided to fire back. "Oh, I see where his mistake is. I keep telling Odin he needs to fix his handwriting; it is so bad he covered up where they typed out his name with the chicken scrawl he calls a signature." Eve said as she pointed that out to the pilot with one hand as she used the other to hand them back to him. "See Admiral Thomas Nimitz"

He took the papers and sat down in his chair, hard. "Um, ok. So, the big man sent ya. That changes things. Um, look we got off on the wrong foot here. You would be surprised at what people have pulled trying to get sim time. I'll need to get to know you a little to pair you up with the right instructors. So please don't take any of these questions personally and answer honestly and truthfully. The people I will be pairing you up with live and die depending on how well they dance with their partners. So that style training is built into the program. My call sign is Buzzard, by the way."

"Awesome. I brought her to you because I know you guys are the best. We will find a way to make this up to you. We're just in a bit of a time crunch," T said.

"What's the time frame," Buzzard asked.

"She has to be able to pilot a troop transport for the drop on Avian Prime, opening ceremonies," T kind of mumbled fully expecting him to freak out on her. Instead, he just leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"Wow, when you shoot for the moon you really go big don't you?" Buzzard chuckled out on inhales.

"Yeah, well, she's smart enough we would have trusted her to pick it up on her own if it wasn't for the short time frame." T responded shrugging her shoulders, and that killed his humor.

"Look, flying an aircraft full of people is a lot riskier than flying a fighter where you're the only one that will pay if you make a mistake. Flying a ship into a city full of non-cloned civilians, that would be criminal if something goes wrong. It is extremely stressful the first time you drop through atmosphere on Terra and there is nothing to hit but beach and trees, but buildings full of women and children that only get one death..."

Buzzard was really living up to his name killing T's humor and Fee's confidence.

T snatched the orders out of his hand fuming at him now, "Look if that's the kind of training you are going to give her I will be better off taking her to some used freighter dealer and hiring a washed-up ore-hauler to train her. I thought you were a lot more professional than to turn away someone who was specifically recruited by the Special Operations Unit Commander and sworn in by Odin himself personally. I will just go find someone else willing to use your simulator time to teach her. Eve. who was number two on the list?"

Buzzard snatched the orders back out of T's hands and leaned back in his chair again. "Hold on now, I said some of these questions would make you angry, and don't take it personal. I am just trying to get a feel for the girl as I don't know you or her very well. So far all I have seen is the notorious fireball everyone knows to fear leading a little angel around that is way in over her head. Hell, she hasn't even said two words since she got here. I don't know here technical knowledge levels, how familiar she is with a ship's systems, what kind of systems she can deal with, and how quickly she can think. All Avians are good at some kind of flight or another. She may not even be a good transport pilot but one of the best damn carrier pilots ever made, I won't know until I get to know her, and you aren't helping." Buzzard said making sure to keep the prized papers out of T's reach.

"Um, she told me not to and to let her handle this. I am very familiar with most avionics systems; I am attentive and focused when I need to be, and I am eager to learn anything you can teach me abut being a pilot. Having spent the last few weeks repairing the Valhalla I know she is too big and has too much responsibility for me, but the team wants me to learn to fly a transport ship for them. So, I will do everything I can to make you proud of my ability to learn what you are teaching me. I'm... I'm sorry but did you know your controller boards are out of calibration? Most of those pilots are struggling to control their aircraft and really shouldn't be." Fee said in a slow soliloquy as she does when she gets nervous or distracted by something.

Buzzard just raised one eyebrow at all she had laid out and decided to give her a chance to prove herself. "Really, you think my controller board is out of whack? Show me what you mean." He said as he rolled his chair out of the way.

"Well, this pilot here. I can't really make out what's going on with her, but it seems like she is pulling hard to the left an awful lot during her maneuvers, even when trying to fly straight. She needs to recalibrate the fighter

to adjust for an electrical deviation in the flight control systems." She accidentally tapped on the video, and it popped up out of the control board display to give a one-hundred-eighty-degree view from behind the pilot's head who was indeed struggling to control the aircraft. "Oh, its simulating wing damage to the right ailerons. Well, that's not a calibration issue in the controller board, just the fighter but the fix is easy enough she could have done it during any of those straight flights if she practiced it enough."

"Oh, really? What's the easy fix," Buzzard was truly intrigued. His autistic son had been like this, once he got fixated on something it was best to let him run his course and you would often be amazed at what came out.

"Shift-six, shift-r, shift-eight, enter. Three millisecond reset time, and the ship's systems will recenter the stick for current optimal flight inputs. Naturally, after you make the repairs to the ship you'll want to reset them again, but it won't matter if the pilot can't get through the fight to have the repairs made." Fee responded without noticing that he was now leaning forward like he had found gold in a creek bed.

"That's great if you're going to fight in a simulator, but we don't always get to, so we practice in here like we are flying out there." Buzzard responded.

"Oh, that's the actual reset codes for that particular craft, it will only work in the simulator from the pilot's entry because it will work on the real thing?" Fee said as she continued to intensely study every readout offered in the HUD. Buzzard was gravitationally drawn closer to her now that she had just given him a message from heaven and struggling to believe what she was saying.

"At what damage threshold would you recommend making such a drastic change as that?" Buzzard asked almost in a whisper.

Fee turned to look at him while answering and saw him leaning closer to her and drew back just a little. "Um, anytime you take any damage that affects the controls of any kind, weapons firing, flight controls, anything controlled by the pilot through incremental manipulations or other means of adjustment versus toggling. Did I say or... or do something wrong?" Fee glanced at T who was standing there grinning like the mother of a toddler who just won high praise from a college dean of admissions.

T stepped in and put her arm around Fee's shoulders and pulled her away from Buzzard. "Down boy, she's taken. She is part of the Jolly Roger's, and you can't have her, unless you guys want to fly for us on the regular."

"I will put in the transfer request myself for my entire wing if her trick works and she comes with the job." Buzzard said.

"It will and she does, but there are other requirements that are... a little more stringent." T said struggling not to grimace as she said the last part.

Buzzard waved his hands at her, "Bah, doesn't matter if the trick doesn't work, but if it does, my entire squadron will sell their first-born children to have her on the crew." He scooted up to the control board hit the comms button for the pilot Fee had been discussing and began speaking to her, "Hey Tomcat, its Buzzard."

"I'm a little busy here. Now's not the time to discuss your stupid fantasy football picks." Came the female voice as the pilot on the screen continued fighting the enemy she was facing.

"About that," Buzzard continued as he hit a button, and all of the enemy aircraft and weapons fire disappeared. "I need you to do me a solid real quick."

"What the fuck man. You broke my immersion." Tomcat howled.

"Hey, the craft is still busted and flying like it is right?"

"Yeah so," Tomcat spat rather petulantly.

"A little cherub here just delivered me a cheat code for you to tryout."

"Oh yeah, what kind of cheat code," Tomcat asked starting to get interested.

"One that works in the real world."

"Oh really, what's it do?"

"Berserker mode..." buzzard said with as much sadism as he could put into it. "With flawless control settings."

"Oh really? I got to see this. Lay it on me big guy."

"Shift-six, shift-r, shift-eight, enter." Buzzard transmitted

Tomcat waited a few seconds. "And?"

"AND... did it work or not, she said it would only take three milliseconds."

"I don't know you haven't told me the rest of it so I can even try it yet." Tomcat spat back.

"What, that's all of it. It wouldn't be any good to try and enter in some 16-digit alpha numeric with special characters and cartoonish binary gifs in the middle of combat now would it? Just enter in shift-six, shift-r, shift-8 and hit enter and tell me what happens." Buzzard growled at her.

"Fine, I don't, WHOAH... what the hell?" Tomcat went quiet as her fighter craft began performing insane maneuvers as if it was out of control, or under the control of a madwoman. "OH, HELL YEAH! My systems are still showing the damage, but she is flying a lot better." Blared out of the control panels loudspeakers in Tomcat's voice. There were several catcalls and yowls as the woman on the screen put the damaged fighter through its paces like it had just rolled off the show room floor. "It's flying better than anything chief has been able to get it to do."

"That's because that method calibrates the systems to the individual that enters them, in this case the mechanic and not the pilot. If your teams have been flying on someone else's settings..." Fee was cut off mid-thought.

"WHAT!" came a chorus from several pilots that had begun gathering around seeing the two strangers and hearing Tomcat's joys of laughter.

"The system is told to recalibrate all, and it has to adjust and recalibrate to the individual in command of the aircraft at the time. Due to emergency protocols anyone can jump in and fly the ship after that, but it's just not as fine-tuned to anyone else. An amateur can hold his own against a professional if the professional hasn't calibrated their equipment."

"That sneaky bastard. I will kill Master Chief. Do you know how much money he has taken off of me in simpractice?" One pilot bellowed.

Another pilot called back, "Good luck with that, I'm going to go see if that works."

"Just like you, always the suck up. The Cap is standing right here. He knows you didn't figure this out." The gambler hollered back.

"True, but with that cheat code I might be able to beat the gauntlet," the pilot said as he slid to a stop next to an empty pod.

"Oh, shit! You son of a..." T and Fee returned their attention to Buzzard as they heard him talking about them.

"So yeah, we're all going to be spec ops pilots, and for what I am about to give you. You get to be her first trainer for the day." Buzzard said.

"Oh, really what's that?" Tomcat replied

With a few taps of the keys her ship was fully repaired, refueled, rearmed and on approach to a long-tangled canyon corridor with floating mines, obstructions, and gun emplacements all along it. "A three second head start on everyone else at the gauntlet," he said chuckling maniacally.

"WHAT? Fuck yeah, so worth it..." Tomcat yowled as she hit full throttle towards the aerial mine field blocking the entrance to the canyon.

Buzzard shrunk the screen back down which muted Tomcat, sent a text message to everyone else to try out the cheat code for Berserker mode in the gauntlet, and then turned to T and Fee. "Ok, ladies. I have a ton of paperwork to do to get everyone transferred but give my pilots about twenty minutes to come to terms with an obstacle course that gets progressively harder the better you get at running it. Once they burn off some energy from the sugar rush you just gave them you can name your pick, and they will be ecstatic to train you."

"Tomcat," Fee, T, and Eve all three said at the same time.

"That positive huh." Buzzard asked

"She has the highest kill count in the fighter sims and during her opportunities to fly fighters after the transport drops were completed. She is the most efficient at getting her people to the ground with the fewest number of injuries and least number of losses from high altitude drops, to include the shake weight experiments, as you like to call the first Terra Prime landings."

"What," T said.

"Look, I know it was no cup of tea for you guys in the back, but damn, it wasn't easy on us either. I have never come so close to pissing my pants since the first time an enemy rifle round struck the canopy of my Blackhawk right next to my face. That shit was so bad with those straps digging into my kidneys and bladders,

then snitching down tighter on every down stroke, I wasn't sure if I was going to piss or shit myself." Buzzard said.

"Damn. I thought the guys were just being a bunch of big babies. I didn't know even the pilots were calling it that." T said kind of sheepishly.

"Nope, but now you two get to come with me to explain to the big man, why I am pulling my flight out of the Einheriar and forming a new flight unit called the Draugr." Buzzard said as he stood up.

"I have you know I am counting every calorie, and I am still as fit as the day Eve spat me out of my cryopod for the first time." Came Odin's voice from just a few feet away. "And what is this about another one of my officers going behind my back and hoisting the colors on me? Don't even pull that attention on deck, the admiral's on my dick shit to try and buy sometime. I am on to you. I know you're a handful T, so I came down here to make sure Fee was being taught how to do things properly. Eve, you should know better, and Buzzard, there is a long line that places you at the very bottom before you will ever get you hands on my brilliant little officer in waiting here, starting with me, and then those sniveling little R&D monkeys that make all these wonderful toys for us to play with. So, spill it, and you better have a damn good reason as to why you, a Captain, is about to not only allow himself to be shanghaied by the lackey of a lieutenant, but to volunteer his whole damn unit too." Odin breathed in deeply through the nose as he leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest.

"I lost a bet," Buzzard said as he shrugged.

"What was the wager," Odin asked as he raised his eyebrows

"They would go away and leave me and my crew alone while we enjoyed this free eight-hour use of the sims you just provided us. It was a gift from heaven, we couldn't pass it up." Buzzard said.

"So, you thought you would bet against me and just take the house for a ride?"

"Sir? I would never bet against you sir," Buzzard said before he realized what the old man was about to point out.

"You know I signed off on the most sought-after equipment in the fleet for your team to use for training purposes. You know I sent her down here to be trained. You thought if you got rid of her, you could enjoy the free-time. You were betting that I would be wrong about someone, and you thought that I would send someone that you could out smart into making a dumb bet, and they would go and hide in shame."

"Well, now that you put it that way," Buzzard said shrinking in on himself

"So, you lost the bet and were just going to waltz into my office and tell me to thank you for transferring my best transporters to the black-ops unit, so I never see you guys again?"

"Actually, I was going to offer you the chance to pick the fighter detachment you will be providing to become part of the Jolly Rogers before word got out about the cheat code and I could take my pick."

"Oh, so we're playing hardball are we. What is so special about this cheat code," Odin asked.

Buzzard started grinning, "The lighter a fighter is the more maneuverable and dangerous it is in space, especially if the controls and thrusts do not get reduced through the weight reduction."

"I was a rocket jockey once upon a time: I know how a dogfight works."

"Are you familiar with the Draugr?" Buzzard asked

"Norse undead, dishonorable bastards that only get stronger as you try to kill them," Odin said

"Much like your Jolly Rogers, and the group of misfits that will be carrying them into battle from now on. The cheat code lets us shrug off damage almost as fast as we can take it and still perform like the bird is show room fresh. As a matter of fact, she pointed out that it's a maintenance code that was meant to be taught to the pilots but was passed up because it was filed under maintenance and configuration, not systems calibration."

"Which means..." Odin would not jump on half an idea, but this was starting to have merit.

"Everyone has been flying while wearing someone else's glasses." Buzzard said with a grin on his face, "and tomorrow night is the big tournament to see who gets to play looky-loo and take photos with the civies in the towers. Know anybody who might be willing to trade a guaranteed first place finish for a little special unit detail where the hacker herself is part of the team?"

"You don't always wait for you meals to die first do you Buzzard," Odin asked.

"Oh, they're juicier when they have a little fight left in them." Buzzard said grinning from ear to ear. "That's why they call me the Buzzard. I am not scared to steal someone else's kill."

"What if I was to declare this as classified until after Avian Prime?" Odin tried.

"Oh, the word is already going out," and he hooked his thumb over his shoulder where the controller board was dinging like the slot machine room in a Las Vegas casino. "Everyone of those dings is a new high score or the gauntlet that will be used for the competition. Every fighter pilot in the fleet now knows we have hit the jackpot. I was going to sprint to your office to try and get there before the fighter Captains cornered me into fessing up, but since you're here..."

"Fine Sixteen fighter pilots of your pick, I would prefer them all from one unit if possible, and the rest expandable situational depending."

"You are most generous All Father." Buzzard said with a genuine bow.

Odin spun back on the two women, "This isn't the kind of stuff she should be learning until after she can fly my damn shuttle." Odin said growling just a little.

right nave no clue what you mean sir," I said batting her eyes at him. "I'm just a lowly PFC and you two are negotiating so far above my level I don't even have the privilege of breathing the air up there."

Odin just growled as he stared her down, "Where's the other two of this three ringed circus?"

"They're right behind you sir," Eve supplied from beside them. Odin spun around and found Desi, Smoke, and Wayward standing there just as surprised to see him as he was them.

"I came down here to make sure you were getting sometime in the tank. So, care to explain how you are going to steal even more of my best commanders and crew Lieutenant, or has Wayward not filled you in on his next diabolical plan?"

"We were just going to do some personal flight and combat training, sir," Desi asked

"Personal flight and combat training? Explain." Odin wanted to try and figure out how this one was going to bite him in the ass, but he had to hear their plan before he could begin damage control.

"Well sir, she's going to be jumping on Avian Prime with us, so I need to teach her how to traverse a city without splattering into the windows like the birds used to do back home when I was a kid. Plus, she's part of the ground team so I thought I would take this opportunity to teach her how to win her next wrestling match against a heavy." Smoke offered.

"Ok, that sounds fair." He said to Smoke then turned to and pointed at Wayward, "Your name really is fitting the Wayward part at least. I'm leaning more towards Cthulhu or Grendel for the second part of it. What deviousness do you have planned next, or do you just fart clouds of random chaos wherever you go and only claim the ones that come out smelling like roses?"

"Um, urban warfare, and possibly a little heavy weapons support in a MOUnT situation if we have the time." Wayward said feeling unjustly accused and yet somehow worried that he had been caught doing something he wasn't aware he was doing.

"In an aircraft simulator? Seriously, what kind of idiot do you think they gave the keys to this big boat to?"

Odin asked not sure what Wayward's game was at this point.

"Um, she flies, she's infantry. We figured we would set it up to simulate a scout suit or scout mech and let her do some mental resistance training." Wayward said slowly as if it didn't seem like such a good idea now.

"It's not setup for that." Odin said.

"It has all the parameters it needs to simulate an urban landscape even for fighter aircraft, it can simulate anything that flies, from fighter to the Valhalla..." Fee started.

Odin cut her off trying to figure out the trick, "I know how a flight simulator works,"

"That's the thing sir, it is so much more than a flight simulator. It can simulate anything that is piloted. Hover tank, heavy mech, scout suit, infantry landing suit. It can even simulate underground cavern systems or building interiors if we take the time to generate the mapping protocols." Fee continued.

Odin spun back around on Desi to cover up his surprise, "You better impress me in your combat skills as much as she does with her technical skills. I can always disband your unit, transfer her, and then put your team back together without your 'Dibbs on the talent card'." Odin said with a big grin on his face, he knew the message he was trying for was successful when Desi's, Wayward's and Smoke's faces all grew a shade paler.

He spun on Buzzard, "now. My lucky little cherub here has her training schedule." He said as he hooked his thumb at Desi. "You better train my personal shuttle pilot to the best of your ability. I hear Lunar Alpha needs a pilot that can't transfer for the next fifty years to pilot their solid-human-waste matter drones." He then turned around and walked off. He would be watching them from his office or wherever else he could peak in

on them until it was time to land on Avian Prime. Wayward was teaching these young officers everything he wanted him to, he just had to make sure to keep them on their toes and pointed in the right direction. He wasn't about to let Fenrir, or the other ground forces commanders, get waylaid like he was though. He sent a text to tell them to get down to the tank farm ASAP and watch Desi in the new training sims. He made sure to let them know they could thank him later.

"I will be her personal co-pilot until she's ready to go solo, Sir." Buzzard said as everyone snapped to attention as Odin was leaving.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: RESISTANCE TRAINING FOR THE MIND

"Like I have been saying. Think of it more as resistance training for your mind. You have to tell it to do what you want it to, before you want it to. This will help you a lot when we lighten you up into just your nanite skin for stealth ops, but for now you have to learn to jump with the big boys." Smoke's voice came through the headset Desi was wearing in the Hover Tank.

"Fine I get that, but why am I learning to fly a hover tank again? I get the heavy mech you made me start off with, but a hover tank, don't they have their own crews already?" Desi asked.

"When your feet are actually in touch with the ground, or you are floating around doing your angelic overwatch for your little flightless peons, you are in charge. However, occasionally we need to get a ride to the fight. They tend to be a bit bigger of a target than we are. If the driver gets killed you're next in the seat because we want to keep you wrapped up in as much protection as possible, and the tank already has a commander that knows his job a hell of a lot better than you do."

"But if the driver is already dead, then the tank didn't provide him enough protection, and I should be on the ground with you guys." Desi tried to get out of this once again.

"If there's enough stuff flying around to kill the driver on one of these babies it was either a lucky shot or enough stuff is flying around we'll all be respawning soon anyways. So, we will put you inside the tank and you will do it because we won't move until you do, and then you will be the driver. Just go with me on this until you get some wear and tear on those canines of yours LT. We love ya and want to keep you safe while you get lost navigating us to wherever you want to go." Smoke said with an age-old adage about a boot lieutenant's skills with map and compass.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Desi shot back.

"You'll understand the joke once you have enough experience to figure it out. Now just pay attention, ok." There was a loud smacking sound followed by, "What the hell. I'm just trying to get her to accept it and do the damn job. You didn't have to hit me so hard." Smoke was clearly whining to someone Desi couldn't hear or see.

"Thank you T. Let's just get this over with." Desi said. When the screen powered up she was amazed to see the minefield in front of the same canyon the fighters had been testing themselves out in. "Ok, so now it has doubled the minefield to slow me down," and she began bobbing her head along to the music Smoke was playing J2's 'Born to Be Wild' to help her gain the mental space between focusing on the gauges and focusing on what's going on around her and just letting the HUD become one with her vision and goals, until she could see what she wanted to happen and then her hands automatically made it happen. "All righty then, shift-six,

shift-r, shift-eight, shift-enter. Come to momma boys and girls. Let's make this quick and easy." With that she began her third run on this course by blasting the pillar of stone next to the minefield to collapse it down on top of them and she slammed the throttles to full forward before the mines could adjust to their losses by spreading out.

The way she was able to almost flip the tank over before bringing it back down and use the momentum from that fall to catapult up the other side of the canyon walls to take a shot further down the canyon or avoid a trap that hadn't been already destroyed or disarmed by counter measures was a pleasure to watch for the infantry Marines that had gotten word there was something going on in the tank farms. The team had muted the general input to Desi's headset as all other tanks were empty, except for Fee's. Everyone who was not actively on duty watching some gauges or attending to some piece of equipment, was standing in the tank farm or near one of the big monitors in the hangar bays and other areas Eve had set up throughout the ship in order to reduce the number of onlookers in the tank farm.

The monitors were split, on the right was the hero of Four Two, combat veteran of Four Three, and leader of the Special Operations Unit. On the right side was the new hacker genius the Spec Ops Unit had hijacked straight out of the forgotten bowels of the Valhalla as she limped to a home planet for emergency repairs and resupplies. This little foray had all of the military command worried about getting her battle ready before the next fight without having to go to Avian Prime. However, their first friend had called and the Terrans came running as fast as they could. So, the command was excited about a free gift from the cosmos to get the troops excited right before a really tough political situation, in which they weren't sure they wouldn't be asked to have some of these men and women to kill their own civilians.

First they had the ladies running a heavy mech in simple laps through a large open meadow. Once they got used to it they had them swap to running an obstacle course in the giant suit. After the ladies completed that, they returned to the fields to retrieve their gear and were attacked. Once they fought off the creatures there they were given a call for help from the nearby urban center and had to get there as soon as possible. They had to fight invaders and megafauna and flora to get there. Once there they had to fight their way through the city to get to the central park where they would provide escort duty for a band of civilians to the nearest evac point. The convoy would be under attack the entire time. Once at the port they had to hold off an enemy push while the ships escaped. They were then respawned in a new heavy mech in a dropship, and it catapulted them towards an enemy vessel in space instead of a planet. They slammed into the side of the ship where they had to dig their way toward the bridge or engine room whichever was closer to destroy the ship, naturally the enemy tried to resist them from inside and outside of the ship.

What had the attention of all of the crew was the score board displayed under each run. They were being timed on fastest run, highest kill count, least damage percentage, and a combined score that only the Continuums randoms and probabilities AI could decipher on how it was figured. There was quick bets going on as to who would get the individual bests for each run, but these were paltry odds compared to the pots for the overall fastest round, overall highest kill count, and the massive pot for the final combined score was only sanctioned by Odin and the Continuum after it was agreed that half of all wagers would be donated to charity work on Avian Prime. The interest and bets only grew as they never failed to complete a run, not even their very first one in any vehicle.

The ladies did not know they were competing against each other, Fee would be given a single run before Des was and whatever tricks Fee used to hack her interface were passed along to Desi to improve her second run. Her first run was always with the standard settings for the vehicle that the pilots who operated them used.

Both were talented enough they qualified in the top fifty percent on their first runs, after the calibrations Fee could wing from memory she would make her second run and then she would usually be in the top ten percent. After the third run she was usually in the top one hundred individuals for the fleet. She had scraped a rock wall so it wouldn't be a perfect run, but the HUD indicated a sickly green not a true yellow. A true tanker would tell the techs to put another coat of armor polish on it and buff it out.

Desi, however,... she would get in the top fifty percent on her first run, gripe that the stupid thing was to large or clunky to be flying or to unnatural since it was a flying brick with a tube on it and didn't even have wings (heavy mech also fell into that description according to her) and they would give her the cheat codes to recalibrate it, she would comment it would be nice to have those at the beginning for the next run or next vehicle, and she got ignored again. She would then be in the top 5 percent for the fleet and occasionally the top one hundred individuals. By the end of her second run, she could describe to Eve what improvements she wanted. What was too sluggish, how to improve the reaction times for targeting systems, or tone down annoying alerts that really aren't as important as the incoming missile they are covering up. Once the adjustments were made she would reach up and pull her straps tight then tell Eve to play some battle music for her. On her third runs she was in the top five individuals in the fleet for the entire alliance, all of the Terrans in that range had twenty years or more of live combat in similar vehicles or situations. All of the alliance personnel at that level had been called gifted when they entered their militaries decades prior.

Fee was no slacker either, she was on her third run with Buzzard providing the music for her as she learned to use overhead structures, obstacles, and floating gravitational anomalies as hover points for her hover tank and started flying the hover tank upside down to the planet's surface almost as much as she was on its side or right side up. She didn't know it, but she had just overtaken two of the three scores for this run for the entire fleet, and she was set on speed and location to finish with the fastest ever recorded too. It would seem Fee had a knack for flying bricks. She had asked Tom Cat to slow it down next time as a joke, meaning the simulator speeds, Tom Cat used Jack Trammel's 'Supercollider' to teach her speed was a state of mind.

When word had gotten out that it was going to be a thirty-six-hour marathon after their second planetary mech run, the betting went wild. They would be allowed one four-hour rest break shortly after they completed their fighter runs, and then they would start over from the beginning and work their way up in size instead of down. During that time any pilot who wished to compete for Dark Angel Escort duty would get three runs at the gauntlet using the same layout, standard mode, cheat code, then specialized adjustments to be automatically added to all future craft of the same type. The original Blue Angel Escort duty would still escort the Winged Avengers into the city as originally planned, but it would be given to those guys who placed last because their faces would be everywhere in the galaxy. The Dark Angels would become the permanent guardian escort flight for the Draugr, and part of the Black Flag Registry, their faces should never become famous unless it was an unavoidable part of the job. The top spot would get, and be the only one allowed to use, a customized gold on black design that would only be visible when not in combat, plus they would become the Commanding Officer of the Dark Angels, regardless of rank.

Eve and the Continuum, however, were starting to plan the grand reopening of Ft. Benton, Montana. They liked the old semblance that it offered. However, the sentimentality angle was just to appease suspicious minds. All of the buildings would be constructed using Jack's Hexagonal honeycomb design, with the twist of a crystalline pyramid being erected in the central location above the interior courtyard, pool and garden area. It was far enough away from Jack's home that the Special Breeders Program would not be interfered with. However, a full contingent of the Draugr, Black Angels, and Dark Colors would be stationed there in case they were ever needed. Only the teams and their immediate families would be allowed to live or visit there. The

Jolly Rogers home base and Specialty Leadership Academy would be a secret location only a select few Draugr pilots would ever know the location of. Having the resupply flights always take off north before turning South East would only add to the suspicion that the Jolly Rogers had hijacked Santa's Workshop and knew where all the elves were buried. The real confusion came when construction included connecting new hexagons to the outer walls of the central hex, for a total of seven hexagons and pyramids, much like the heavily armored repository core of the Valhalla class flagships.