

CHAPTER ONE: TALKING TO THE MOM'S ON THE STREET

The inhabitants of the city were getting used to strange goings on and strange people all around. Not just because this was the capital city of Avian Prime, but there had been so much activity over the last few days as the population of the already overcrowded planet had almost doubled after the fleet's announcement that they would be visiting with the video that had been released. Even still the Angelic mother was hesitant when her daughter approached one of the strange Terrans that was leaning against a portable shipping container that had been delivered just a few hours ago. She could have sworn as they did their shopping today that she had seen dozens of these things and similarly dressed men in alleyways near the shopping centers, on top of parking decks, and near the mass transit stations. Rumor had it that the local high school arena was filled with the things. When her daughter, Rose, broke away from her and ran straight towards the mysterious man and the container she could not stop her because of all the bags she was carrying. All she could do was cry out for her daughter. "Rosalynn, stop."

The man had been leaning back against the container with one foot raised up against it and his hat down over his eyes like he was taking a nap. When she hollered out he raised his head slightly then knelt down as Rose ran straight up to him. At just five years old she was too curious for her own good, and now Ellie had to go into the alleyway with a dangerous looking stranger in there and rescue her daughter. "Are you a cowboy mister?" Rose asked, she was so fascinated with Terran entertainment, Ellie blamed her eldest daughter for that, but now she knew that this was one of those creatures that were fast becoming every mother's nightmare. She had to act fast, so she picked up her pace to get in there where he was so close to her precious little girl.

"I have been called worse, but I guess that one kind of does apply," he said with a slight chuckle. There was something odd about his face and Ellie couldn't make it out until Rose made it obvious.

"That's a cool mask. I have seen it before in a movie. Do you know which one I am talking about?" Rose asked.

Again, the man chuckled, "Remember, remember..." Rose joined him in chorus, "The Fifth of November." They both cut off and broke out laughing.

"I love that movie." Rose said.

"Me too." The man said.

"I'm so sorry sir." Ellie said as she approached them praying that she could get her daughter safely away from this man that made her feel so uneasy with just his presence. As she approached he began to stand up and she could smell predator all over him, he was even wearing pistols on his hips like one of those cowboys and long knives crossed above his belt buckle.

"No worries ma'am." He tilted his head forwards and lifted his hat off of his head a little before continuing. "Little ones should be encouraged to be curious at that age. The more they learn as they grow the less mistakes they will make as adults."

Rose peaked around behind him at the shipping container that had vent holes cut in it, which was strange to Ellie. Wouldn't you want to keep whatever is in those protected from the weather?

"She's a lovely little girl and knows a lot about my people's culture. Are you familiar with recent events that may have happened on another home planet?" He asked Ellie as if he didn't know what his people had done there.

"Of course, the whole galaxy knows." Ellie replied

"Guess I really should start watching the news again." He mumbled. "Then you are familiar with a certain song that was played during those events..." he was cut off with Ellie's terrified scream.

"ROSE, NO!" She reached for her daughter, but he grabbed her and the strength in his grip was so powerful she couldn't move or even try to break free.

A prehensile tongue had shot out of the gap in the box and wrapped around Rose's forearm then dragged her towards the crate. There was a loud thump and most of the gap filled with fur the full six feet above Rose's trapped hand. The tongue dragged her hand across a dark black spot of rough leather, and a rumbling growl came from inside. Rose giggled, and then said, "Stop, that tickles." The tongue let go of her hand and then stroked her face knocking her down, and a whimper came from the crate as she hollered, "Owwie, that hurt."

The man let go of Ellie, got down on both knees and said, "let me look at you sweetheart." He then took his hat off and set it down beside him, then took his mask off and set it inside it. Ellie froze she knew that face, it had been all over the news for months. He was the only man more famous than Odin himself. He reached down and helped Rose up then brushed the dirt off of the back of her dress, before asking, "are you OK?"

"Yeah, I just landed on my tail wrong." Rose said, with that she swayed her tail a little showing that it was still ok, again a whimper came from the crate.

"Spot says he's sorry you got hurt and promises to be gentle in the future." Then he looked up at Ellie who was staring at him in terror. "Are you ok?" He asked Ellie.

"You're him. The Angel of Death." She barely whispered.

He laughed, he actually laughed at her. "I see how it is. Every set supposedly has a one good and one evil twin. He goes out and becomes famous and now I'm the evil one?" He laughed again. When he finally stopped laughing he stood up again. "I haven't been called that in a really long time." He looked down at Rose and motioned her to the crate, "go ahead but be careful around the fur, it has spikes in it." He then looked back at Ellie, as Rose broke free from him and ran over to the container she started to rub the black leathery spot again. "She has been accepted as pack; no harm shall come to her as long as any of his pack is alive on this planet." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old-fashioned business card and handed it to her. "When she comes of age or has siblings who are, this is how they reach me if they wish to change the universe. She is pack, her siblings might be as well. Should they come to me I promise no harm will come to them, and I will open doors for them kings and queens cannot."

Ellie took the card with a trembling hand. "I don't understand. Wouldn't just going to a recruiter do the same thing?"

"You will understand after all the things that are about to happen the next few days. Unfortunately, with what I am about to have to do, I will once again be saddled with that name you just called me a while ago. Please do not tell anyone whose face you saw, take her home and watch the events on the news. It's going to be hot and crowded, you can see everything better from the drone feeds and from a window off of the

ground... at least three stories off of the ground. Do you understand me?" Ellie nodded starting to understand that she was right he really was dangerous. "Good, if things get smoky, its likely to get really noisy, and holes may magically appear in line with any place visible from the smoke, do you understand me?" Again, Ellie nodded.

There was a growl from the crate, and he turned to it. "Easy." Was all he said, and it quieted.

"Mommy are you ok?" Rose asked

"Yes, sweetheart, I was just having a serious conversation with this nice man here."

He bent over picked up his mask up and slipped it back on before he put his hat on. "Rose, can you take your mommy home and show her our favorite movie?" He asked to which she enthusiastically nodded. "Good after that you should watch Bicentennial Man. I think you will really like it." Rose hollered out a yay. Then he turned back to Ellie, "Lockdowns are dangerous, please get inside before the countdown ends should one be issued, I don't care where, just inside. You should have about three hours before that becomes a possibility though."

"How do I know what you are telling me is the truth?" Ellie was struggling to come back to the reality she knew before she met this terrifying man.

"Rose what do the Marines sing when someone sees a bad moon on the rise?" he asked without looking in the little girl's direction, instead he kept his eyes locked on Ellie's. Without knowing what was being said between the adults or missing a beat she closed her eyes, threw her head back and howled as loud and long as she could. Ellie was petrified with fear when the same voice from a thousand creatures across the city joined in, starting with the one in the crate next to her. Rose ended her howl with giggles, and the beast in the crate ended its call with three yipping barks that were repeated in almost every direction, by echo or repetition she wasn't sure. "Because the pack never lies. Remember, your daughter is pack, the others might be too. They can be as powerful as you let them become."

CHAPTER TWO: A ROOFTOP CHAT WITH MOM

When Ellie managed to get the front door to her fifteenth-floor apartment to open Rose sprinted towards the living room and then the bedrooms hollering for her sister the whole way. "Lillie, Lillie, where are you? You are never going to believe what happened, and mom wants to watch 'V for Vandetta' with us." Ellie just kept trudging towards the kitchen counter to set the stuff in her arms down. As she did she saw the note on the counter and scanned it while setting down the stuff in her arms next to it.

'Dear Mom, I'm up on the roof and the guy up here with me told me I should at least leave you a note to let you know where I went in case you got home before I did. He says it's going to be too hot and crowded on the streets to see anything, and after talking with him, Rose is too short to see over the crowds so... yeah, let's stay home and watch the close-up stuff on the TV. We can see the air show better from the rooftop anyway. Love ya, Lillie.'

Lillie hadn't written her a note in decades, and rarely said she loved her mother or sister anymore. However it was what she had written about what the man said that really scared Ellie. "It's going to be too hot and crowded in the streets... go home and watch it on TV..." It couldn't be, that man was scary, but Ellie hadn't stopped, let Rose lag or otherwise slow her down, matter of fact she had to almost run to keep up with her

after promising to watch the movie with her until the fleet arrived. There was no way he would have left that beast in that alleyway, and he couldn't have beaten her to the roof in time to convince Lillie to write that note.

"Rose, get your hands washed before we have snacks and a movie. I am going up on the roof to get Lillie." Ellie called.

"What's she doing up there?" Rose asked as she came running into the common room.

"I don't know but she left me a note saying that's where she is. Now, go wash your hands and face, and put on your pajamas, before I get back so we can have snacks and a movie before the fleet gets here."

"Yes momma." Rose answered as she sprinted back towards her bedroom.

Ellie reached for the emergency roof key out of habit as she went to the front door, but it was already gone. That must mean Lillie had it. Ellie hurried up to the roof as quickly as she could and was relieved when she saw Lillie sitting on the edge of the roof next to a small person wrapped in a blanket. "Lillie, there you are. What are you going up here?"

"I heard a noise and came up here to investigate, then I got to talking to Jack and I figured you would come up with some excuse as to why we couldn't go to the park, probably based on squirt..." There was a throat clearing noise from the person next to her and Lillie stopped, glanced at him, then turned back to her mom before continuing. "I'm sorry, I thought since Rose was so short, this might be a better location to see the airshow portion and then we can enjoy cold drinks in the house as we watch the rest of the activities on the TV."

Ellie froze, her daughter was acting strange, very strange, and it had something to do with the man next to her. The closer Ellie got to them the more uneasy she felt, just like when she was in the alleyway with the one who had given her that card that was poking her through her shirt pocket. "And who is your friend?"

"Oh, this is Jack. I heard a loud thump and came up here to see what was going on, and I met him as he was coming out of the container they delivered." Lillie said.

Ellie looked side to side then asked, "What container?"

"The one behind you. You can't see it when you first walk out the door because it is on the backside of the stairwell." Lillie said it like it should have been obvious.

Ellie began to slowly turn around, she didn't want to, she knew what she would see, but she had to see it just to make sure. When she saw the shipping container with the holes cut in it with a torch she knew deep down in her heart exactly who was sitting next to her daughter and what was in the box without having to ask. "Lillie, come over here sweetheart. We're going to go watch a movie with Rose until the fleet arrives. She picked out some Terran movie named 'V' or something." Ellie was trying her best to be convincing but even she could tell her voice was strained to stay calm. The man just glanced over his shoulder as he continued to sit there.

Lillie took on the stance every adolescent takes when it is time to commence a battle of wills with the ones who thought authority was given merely by providing everything for the one being told what to do. "I want to stay up here and watch the airshow with Jack."

"Lillie, stop arguing with me and do what you're told, right now!" Ellie couldn't help it she was at the end of her rope. She knew it wasn't her daughter's fault, but she had to jump straight to authoritarian mode to get this over with as quickly as possible and get her daughter away from him.

There was a low growl from behind her and the man stood up to his full height, spun around, with his arm out at an angle and his hand palm out towards the ground in one swift move, then growled, "Easy." She thought he was wrapped in a blanket, but he had actually cut a hole in the middle of one and stuck his head through it.

"Easy my ass. I don't know what you're playing at here, mister, but leave my daughters out of it. I promised you I would take them inside and watch that stupid movie with them if you let us go. I don't know how you beat us here, but I am trying to keep my promise. SO PLEASE! LET US GO! I PROMISED NOT TO TELL ANYONE!" The rumbling growl from behind her got louder and there was a thump against the metal.

Lillie didn't know what was going on, but her mom was off her rocker talking to this nice guy like this. "You're crazy lady. He's been here with me the whole time. He hasn't even seen you until now."

"I wasn't talking to you but now I am talking to all three of you. EASY..." He said the word loud, clearly and slowly. "You said you talked to me already?"

"Three of us, there's only two of us up here with you." Lillie asked for clarification because now he was acting crazy too.

"Yes I did, just six blocks from here in the alley. Not thirty minutes ago."

"That's right about the time they dropped his container off and there was this weird howling." Lillie said trying to defend her friend.

"You even gave me this damn card and told me Rose was pack and that my other off-spring maybe too." She said as she pulled the card out and threw it at him. Again, there was a low growl from the container that Lillie must not have been able to here over the traffic buzzing by this close to the park where the Fleet personnel were supposed to land

Lillie walked over and picked up the card as the man nodded his head. "Now it begins to make sense." He then stroked the facial hair on the mask and said, "The pup is verified home safe." Ellie could have sworn she saw blue light flash underneath his mask for a brief second before he turned to Lillie who was flipping the card in all directions and even sniffing it for some reason. "Lillie, do you know what a bucket is?"

"Of Course," She said as netulantly as a normal teenager would

He pointed to his head and said, "Translator remember." Lillie clapped her hand over her mouth and mumbled an apology. "Can you please go get me the largest bucket you can find, fill it with water, and bring it up here? I have something amazing to show you."

"NO! I know what is in that crate and my daughters will not be getting anywhere near that thing again." Ellie said. This time Lilly heard the growl and thump that followed her mom's outburst.

"Then you know that little tin can won't keep him in there if you don't stop yelling and he will come out of there in a very bad mood." Jack warned. "Now. EASY..."

The growling stopped, and Lillie now looked nervous. "Mom, I'm going to go get the water and make sure Rose is ok, all right. I will tell her to stay down there while I dump it on you for not letting me go to the park and that she better hide because you're going to be mad." Ellie was too relieved that Lillie was going to escape to understand the rest of it. She merely nodded in relief that her daughters would be safe.

Once the roof access door closed Jack motioned for Ellie to come and join him as he sat back down. "I guess you got interrupted and he failed to explain a bunch of stuff to you."

"Like what," Ellie said as she crossed her arms and refused to move her feet.

He just motioned to the Jumbotron on the building across from them that lit up with the Royal Crest. Ellie was dumb struck, and her feet began to slowly move forward. "We were trying to keep track of you among many others and make sure you got home but we didn't know where home was. Now that the pups are safe at home the show can begin."

The Royal Crest was replaced with the Royal Families standing in front of their thrones with their descendants below them. "Citizens and guests of Avian Prime. It is our greatest pleasure to welcome you all to our wonderful city to view the Heroines of Silinius Four as they finally get a chance to return home today for the first time. Odin himself has said that he will be present here along with all of the heroes and heroines who fought beside our treasured daughters. In just two hours they will arrive, and we ask that all of you refrain from using any aerial conveyance or flight during that time. We are asking that all aerial vehicles be grounded as soon as possible, and all personal flight within two miles of the central park and palace be halted to prevent any unfortunate accidents. In one hour, it will be illegal to use a vehicle and half an hour before their arrival it will be illegal to fly by any means in those areas. Remember this is for your safety. Please help us have a wonderful day of celebration and not end this in tragedy." The camera had swung from family member to family member, from kings and queens to their children and grandchildren, as all of them were reciting the lines in unison.

"What was all of that about? And what do you mean you waited for us to get home." Ellie asked as she sat down next to him.

"Well, we were going to wait as long as we could but since you're home now we can let the fleet proceed from their unscheduled break about two hours from here. The break had nothing to do with you I promise. We just extended it a few minutes longer than necessary, you know, for pack. And that," he motioned towards the jumbotron, "was a signal to all of the law enforcement that are in the know, that the final hour is upon us. Plus, it makes it easier to hunt your prey if they can't fly."

"What break? The fleet was supposed to come straight here." Ellie said.

"Semantics, if you travel in a straight line and do not deviate from that line, does it still count as going straight to another spot? Regardless of how many times you might start or stop or even slow down or speed up?" He asked.

"That is such a childish dodge of the question." Ellie said.

"And vet it's the truth." He countered.

"OK. but what about hunting prey that can't fly?"

"There's some really bad people gathering for the fleet's arrival, and they are going to use it as an opportunity to do some really bad things to all of the innocent people they can trap in the park. Have you noticed how crowded it is today?" Jack asked like he was trying to divert her attention away from what he had just said.

"The whole planet has been overcrowded for a while now, but yeah the fleet's arrival is drawing a lot more people here today." Ellie said. "What do you mean about the bad people?"

Jack spun his body around, so he was facing away from the street and took his mask off then handed it to her. "Here put this on and tell me what you see."

Hesitantly she took the mask and held it up to her face. At first it looked just like any cheap plastic mask but then she saw the telltale electronics engraved into it, and it was heavier than it should have been. When she got it close to her face it molded to her ears and then clamped itself down tight to her face, there was a slight humming, and the view through the eye slits blinked a few times before it changed to reveal all kinds of text to her with a compass rose, a grid overlay of the buildings across from her and red dots moving along the street below and one in the building across from them. "Place your finger to the side of your eye and push up to zoom in or down to zoom out." Jack said.

Ellie did as she focused on the red dot across from her and when it zoomed in she was able to see it was actually the outline of a person. "There's people highlighted in red."

"That would be the bad guys." Jack said.

Ellie snatched the mask off and looked him in the eyes. "There's one in the hotel across the street from us."

"Which is why I am here. They reserved that hotel room and a flight here within thirty minutes of the message going out that we were headed this way."

"Why don't you go over there and arrest them or something?" Filie asked.

"Put the mask back on and look down." She did as she was told and saw the red dots again. "In the bottom right corner there is two counters, one is a number, and the other is a timer. What do they say?"

"Three hundred and twelve, and one hour thirty-six minutes. What does that mean?"

"So, if I go over there with the cops and drag that one bad guy out, the other three hundred and twelve below you will see, then run and hide. Since they have been hanging around for an average of an hour and a half it means that whatever they are planning is going to be close by. We're set up in places like this, so when the time comes for them to act, we have all of them in a net and they don't even know it yet." He explained about the time the door to the stairs opened.

Ellie looked over her shoulder and saw Lillie struggling with the bucket of water. "I promise she will be safe.

Would you like to sit here and watch the one across the street for me, or do you want to come meet Spot?"

"Umm. I will sit here a moment longer if you don't mind." Fllie said while putting the mask back on.

"Eve, this is Ellie. She is pack member Rose's mother. Let her know if you need me," Jack said.

A woman's voice came through the earpieces and said, "Hello Ellie, I am Eve. I am sure someone owes you an apology for having to deal with him without any back-up but let me just say he means well. If there is anything I can do for you please let me know."

"He's not so bad, you should have met me girl's dad. I do have a question for you though, are you THE EVE?"

Jack could only chuckle as he walked over to help Lillie water a hellhound for the first time. "Here, let me take that. I got someone I want vou to meet."

"Is she ok? She was pretty upset when I left." Lillie said indicating her mother when he took the bucket from her

"Yeah she's going to be fine for about an hour. I would imagine it is hard raising two little girls all on your own in a place like this." Jack said.

"I know. Sometimes I feel bad for her but every time I try to do something adult, she tries to treat me like a kid."

"By trying to do something adult, do you mean like going out and getting a job to help pay the bills, or staying out late to party with your friends?" Jack asked.

"What? Did she get to you?" Lillie felt betrayed by the coolest guy she had ever met as he just sided with her mother over every battle they had waged for the last year and a half.

Jack chuckled and then said, "It's not easy being a single parent. I know, I did it and then I married one. So, can understand her side of it. Also, I didn't get a chance to go out and party at your age like all of my friends did. So I can understand your point of view too."

Lillie wasn't so sure anymore, "Oh really, so you like had to get a job and support your younger siblings or something while they just simply enjoyed life?"

"Nope. I was born after that became common place on my planet. We were dealing with over population like your people are here." Jack replied.

"So why didn't you get to party if there was so many kids your age around?"

"Because we were busy waging war upon one another and killing each other by the millions every year." Jack said as he approached the doors to the shipping crate. Lillie froze in place at what this man had just said like he was commenting on the weather or something. "Easy buddy. It's not time yet. Lillie went and got you some water, and I need to get out my telephone pole." There was a whimper inside of the crate as he began opening the levers holding it closed. "I know, but it's almost time and then we'll get to go hunting." This was followed by a bark that vibrated the whole container.

"Umm, what's in there?" Lillie asked.

"Not what, who. Spot is in there and he's a good boy, aren't ya buddy." There was a yip and some heavy panting. "I know, if you promise to stay inside I will leave the doors open so you can get a nice little breeze OK?" This was followed by a woof and more panting.

Lillie slowly approached the door and watched as it swung open. She was amazed at what she saw. "Oh, my goddesses, he is so huge. What is he?" This drew her mother's attention and Ellie got up and started walking towards them.

"I know right. We had to advance his growth cycle for this operation, and he came out almost forty feet long, eight foot tall at the top of his shoulders, and now weighs enough that I was worried about setting this crate down on the roof, but as long as he stays in the crate it should disperse the weight enough that it's not a problem. If you ever have to ride in one with him, I advise either getting a larger container or maybe feeding him some mint flavored snacks before you do. Puppy breath is nice for the first few minutes but after a while..." Jack was cut off as a huge tongue slathered him in the face. He drew back coughing and spluttering as he managed to set the bucket down without spilling it. "Why, you little... You did that one purpose." There was a chuffing and a hacking noise. "Alright I apologize for the bad breath comment. Here's your water, and don't eat the bucket, it will give you a tummy ache like the motorcycle did." That huge, forked tongue shot out wrapped around the bucket, and a few seconds later it came spinning back out empty as could be. When it thumped into Jack's legs there was a whine. "No, I don't think she will be willing to run back downstairs for the next hour fetching you all the water you can guzzle down. Just be patient and we will be working here in a little bit, then you won't need any." Jack said, which was rewarded with a chuff and a thump as if something had fallen inside the crate. "Easy, you don't want to fall on top of Rose do you?"

There was a whimper from inside the crate as Ellie slowly approached to see a huge animal resting its head on its front paws and looking at Jack with huge round eyes. Its head was so wide there was only a few feet on either side of the crate for it to move around and a massive tail was curled up behind it. This thing had to be uncomfortable inside the crate.

"Why don't you let him out? There's no one up here to see him but us." Lillie asked.

"Because there's someone across the road that might." Jack replied.

"They just left their room. I think they went down to the fifth floor. That building is a hotel and shopping center, there's a bunch of restaurants on the fifth floor." Ellie said.

Jack turned to Spot and said, "See I told you she was a nice lady. She said you can come out and stretch your tail a little." Then he turned to Ellie, "can the young pup come up and meet another member of the pack?"

She was confused at first but then she remembered what the other Jack had called Rose. "I know you said it was safe. I am going to trust you, but they mean everything in this life to me. Please..." Ellie stopped as Spot stepped out of the crate so slowly, eyes locked on her, and stalked in her direction. His tongue came out slow enough that it could have been a friend offering a hand of support and then just the tips of his tongue touched the tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

"Lillie can you go get your sister please." Jack asked her as Ellie wrapped her arms around Spots massive muzzle and clung on for dear life crying her eyes out.

"I will give you two a few minutes," she said as she walked away trying not to let anyone see her rubbing the tears from her eyes either.

"If you could take them to another world where they could run and play and just be kids, would you do it?" Jack asked. "As fast as a wingbeat." Ellie replied.

"Eve?" Jack asked the air around him.

"You're running out of room at the ranch, and time before this mission starts." Came the woman's voice

"Eve..." He stretched her name out to show desperation.

"There's a cargo drone that will be landing in fifteen minutes and leaving in sixteen, they have to be on it. Anything they can't carry will be replaced when they get to the ranch. They will be flying with the other daughters you requested. I am filling out the paperwork to have Ellie cleared, hired, and paid as a chaperone and motherly counselor for the young women that will be going with her." Ellie's head shot up at this.

"You know you are the illumination that makes my deferral into the afterlife worthwhile right?" Jack asked.

"What?"

"Thank you for the flattery but it was already being worked on before you even asked. Now get your mask back on and get back to your post Marine." Eve replied.

"You just lost some cool points there lightning bug. The other one is the Marine, I'm the cool one remember?" Jack replied.

The mask in Ellie's hands went dark as she broke away from the hug she was giving Spot and looked at Jack questioningly. "What was that about a job?"

"You think dealing with Lillie is trying on your patience? You just got recruited, hired, and are now being shipped off to be the mother to three hundred real life princesses who have been spoiled their entire lives, and are about to be worked harder than anything you have ever had to do." Jack said grinning at her and taking his mask from her.

"What?"

"You said you would take the chance if it was offered faster than a wingbeat." He said as he was slipping his mask on and walking back towards the front of the building. "Well, Terrans don't have wings, but we do have cargo drones, and the one to pick you and the girls up will be here in... fourteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds. I suggest only taking the family photos, and maybe some keepsakes. The clothes, furniture, pots and pans and the like can be replaced." Jack said with a chuckle.

Just then the stairwell door popped open spilling Rose and Lillie out onto the roof. "Is he serious," Lillie asked trying to get up from where she had landed on her knees.

"Can we momma, pretty please?" Rose pleaded actually dropping to her knees and folding her hands in front of her as she did.

"I don't know. This... this just can't be real." Ellie replied.

"Eve, Fifth of November please." Jack said as he walked across the roof

The Jumbotron across the road on top of the hotel lit up again this time with a giant message that said, 'This goes out to Rose and all the other kids of Avian Prime. Remember Ellie, The Pack Never Lies.'

Remember, Remember, the 5th of November,

Gunpowder, treason and plot

I see no reason

Why gunpowder treason

Should ever be forgot.

Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes, 'twas his intent

To blow up the King and the Parliament

Three score barrels of powder below

Poor old Avian to overthrow

By God's providence he was catch'd

With a dark lantern and burning match

Holler boys, holler boys, let the bells ring

Holler boys, holler boys

God save the King!

"Thirteen minutes ladies! You can only keep what you can carry... I suggest you hurry..." jack said as he sat down on the edge of the roof again. He crossed his ankles, rested the barrel of the massive rifle in between his feet in this makeshift shooters perch and sighted in on the red dot that had followed Ellie and Rose after meeting the other Jack before taking up a position across the street when they entered the building. This one would be the first to go when the gunpowder was lit later.

CHAPTER THREE: YOU CAME FOR PACK

The cargo drone had hovered over the back edge of the building with the ramp extended over the roof's parapet so the ladies could board the drone. Jack had to convince Spot not to go with them, but they left as the next announcement came up on the Jumbotron across the road to announce the imminent arrival of the fleet. This time it was only the six Kings who appeared on the screen. "Citizens and guests of our beautiful home world. We would like to invite all of you down to the palace and the parks to view the ceremonies but understand there just isn't enough room for all of our guests. We will be doing our best to provide the best view in the house just for you using drones and camera feeds so you can relax and enjoy them in the comfort of your home for those with little ones. Unfortunately, that means that at this time we will need to cease all vehicular traffic in the designated areas to ensure everyone's safety. To make up for this any deliveries that must be postponed will be delivered for free after the celebrations, and we will reimburse any expenses to the companies for deliveries previously scheduled to be delivered during this time. For those of you that wish to celebrate in a tayern or other place of celebration, we will be authorizing one drink per person to be paid

for by the Royal Coffers as compensation. Please help us to celebrate our heroes and heroines safely and responsibly on this momentous day. We hope to see all of you soon."

With that the transmission ended and the red dots below began to circle up near the front of the hotel across the road. Jack was watching the watcher as the others stayed away from him. The one that had been staying at the hotel finally made an appearance and he was some species Jack had never met, the HUD listed him as one Jamal Ath'Moteb of the Garlath Syndicate Worlds. He looked like a giant blue rendition of the original D&D picture of a swamp troll. Massive, malformed, covered in warts and pustules; and that was just his nose. Unfortunately for the poor bastard the rest of him was just like that. His arms and legs were not the same length or even the same on both sides. His left arm and right leg were longer than their opposites, and the hump on his right shoulder made it impossible to turn his head to look over his right shoulder. "Damn. Somebody sure tried to use you as an axe to chop down the ugly tree." Jack heard himself saying as he scanned the individual through the scope before returning to watching the watcher, that one would die no matter what else came.

Jack couldn't hear what was being said below but a small number of locals had joined all the red dots that were cheering everything Jamal was saying. After twenty minutes he had started to gather a nice-sized crowd below him, and from the radio chatter this was happening in a dozen other places around the park that was planned to host the fleet's arrival. So, there was some coordination going on. None of the other places were reporting a watcher like the one that had followed Rose and Ellie back to their place, but none of the other Jack's had interacted with anyone either. With just ten minutes to go, a mass of blue dots started to gather near the intersections of the streets and alleyways forming a pathway from the crowds to the parks. Very few red dots were still outside of the containment area and special units were in position to take those down as soon as the events kicked off. Jack was asked to scan the crowd one more time before the start of the ceremonies and reluctantly did so.

The HUD was able to use facial recognition to target ninety percent of the red dots and rabble rousers. The Als were interested in seeing how the locals were responding, some would listen a little bit then walk off shaking their heads, a few were yelling back in obvious anger, at what he was saying or in support of it was hard to tell from where he was sitting. A few groups of blue dots began moving towards the group but took up positions near the entrances of the buildings nearby instead of joining the crowd that was clearly being riled up by Jamal's speech. Some of the gray's that were still in the crowd were turned either yellow, green or left gray if they were not saying anything, these were tagged with a gray star for later review.

When there was three minutes left Jack jumped up and ran over to Spot's container where he began removing pins on the side of the container to drag a hover dolly out by the handles. With it came several carts attached to it, sitting on each one was a small box that had a red arrow painted on the tops. One was pointing in the wrong direction and Jack cussed. "You had one job, and it was clearly marked for you."

He stopped and ran to the container to try and spin it around, quickly figuring out it was too heavy for him, he had an idea. "Spot come here boy." The was an excited yip and Spot came out of the container halfway then turned the front half of his body to face Jack with his head cocked sideways. Jack pointed at the box, "Pick that up for me please, gently." Spot walked over slowly looking at him quizzically. "We're on the clock here buddy. I need you to hurry up if you want to get some with the rest of the pack." Jack said and Spot quickly cleared the rest of the distance as Jack heard the roof groaning and squeaking in complaint about Spot's weight. "OK, pick it up easy and I will turn the cart around so you can set it back down. Can you do that for me buddy?" Spot huffed then gently grabbed the box with his huge fangs and picked up on it. His fangs sank into

the wood, but it came up off of the cart. Jack grabbed the dolly spun the train around and Spot sat it back down slightly crooked from the others, so it was facing in the right direction, sort of.

Spot saw the problem and almost turned the whole train over trying to nudge it into line with the rest of them. "Close enough buddy, it will have to do. You did a good job, my good boy." Spot's tail thumped on the roof a few times. "Easy, we don't want to scare the people who live below where you're rattling their ceiling with your tail." Spot whimpered softly and stopped moving. "It's ok, you're a good boy, you just didn't know.' Spot's tongue sagged over his teeth as he began panting from the heat. Hellhounds were born in the darkness of the deepest Arctic winters and prowled the tundras and mountains of the Arctic. They were not used to the heat of urban landscapes. Jack was sure someone would have compared them to Sabretooth Wolves if it wasn't for the whole dragon or wyrm-like portion of their DNA. Something to think about later.

When he finally dragged the train of carts to five feet from the edge so they could not be seen by anyone below him he quickly grabbed his rifle and took notice that there was only thirty seconds left on the timer. First thing was first, he had to check for the watcher, and the bastard had moved, but where to? "Damn it. Eve. I need you here. Now."

Eve appeared behind him so no one else could see her. "Jack, we're all real busy right now. 26 seconds left."

"The bastard got away. I don't know where he went, we have to find him." Jack growled at her while still scanning the crowd for the man.

"Who, oh, the tracker. Checking archival footage. Jack, he's in the building, currently riding the elevator up." Jack raised his rifle to scan the elevator bays in the hotel thinking the guy may be trying to get to an elevated position to act like a sniper. "Not that building, the one you're standing on." Eve corrected his train of thoughts.

"Shit, any idea where he's headed?" He asked as he backed away from the edge and put his rifle down

"He stopped in the lobby at the registry and scanned the list of names against his tablet before getting into the elevator." Eve said.

"Show me," Jack said as he brought out his own tablet. He watched the video for three seconds then dropped the tablet to the roof. "He wasn't checking names; he was checking social media profiles. He now knows Ellie's name, her daughters' names, and he's heading to their apartment right now. Which one was it?" Jack said as he began sprinting for the rooftop access. "Spot, bad guys are after Rose." Spot growled deep enough to shake gravel on the rooftop. "I know, but I need him alive to answer some questions. You can eat him afterwards I promise," Jack replied. To which Spot snorted, "Good go over the backwall there," and Spot looked where he pointed, "then go find Rose's bedroom. It will be the one with her strongest scent or find Lillies. Can you do that for me buddy?" Spot turned back to him cocked his head to the side and then sneezed. "You're right I'm sorry that was a stupid question. Go get some boy." Spot shot off and disappeared over the side of the wall. "Eve."

"Down two floors take a right out of the stairwell door." Jack crashed through the door and jumped to the next landing skipping the steps all together. "He's approaching their apartment now," Eve updated him.

"Fuck," Jack yelled as he hoped over the railing to catch the landing of the sixteenth floor so he could use the momentum to crash the door below it. When his hands grabbed hold of it, he twisted his hips so his left foot hit just below the top hinge in the center of the door, his right foot just above the center hinge also along

the centerline of the door landed a fraction of a second later because of his knee being bent during the twist and let go with his hands. This put all of his weight twisting the metal door using the center hinge as a fulcrum, the top door squealed as it was shoved in against the jam, the center hinge twisted, and the frame attached to the bottom hinge snapped away from the wall as the bottom of the door was forced away from the frame. The bricks holding the frame along the top of the door opening shattered and the remains of the door fell in with Jack facing in the direction he needed to go. The watcher was standing in front of Ellie's apartment door after just opening it. He took one look in Jack's direction and ran into the doorway slamming the door behind him as Jack was standing up. Outside the Royal Crest appeared on the jumbotron again.

Jack crashed through the door soon as he approached it knowing there was no one inside to fear getting hurt or caught up in the mess. The watcher didn't know that, and he was peeking into the kitchen from the living room trying to see if anyone was in there. When Jack kicked the front door in the watcher sprinted for the back hallway, indicating he was focused and had an agenda beyond investigation. Jack decided it was time to turn up the heat on an obvious professional, "OH, so you're bosses didn't tell you?" Jack began as he strolled into the living room and heard the sound of a door being kicked in.

"The pack that hunts together protects one another." Another door was kicked in as Jack started to enter the hallway. "You see, I'm not sure whether you're one of the Watchers, Trackers, or just one of the mindless idiots who don't know anything." The guy ran across the hallway and crashed into another room, this time there was something said but Jack couldn't make it out. "They probably had you track that little girl without warning you about her being part of the pack didn't they?" The guy came out of the room and sprinted to the next door down the hall, then kicked it in. "I bet they didn't even tell you about the pack did they?" The guy came out of that room and tried to ram the door across the hall but missed and bounced off the wall. "Oh, that had to hurt almost as much as realizing just how fucked you really are right now."

"Shut the fuck up." The guy yelled back then charged through the door into the last room.

"Oh, so you're one of the ones they allowed to keep their tongue. You must be one of the higher ups that I am after, or you don't know anything. Which is it?" Jack said as he began sliding his back along the opposite wall from the door.

"You don't know shit!" The guy replied.

"Why is it I travel across the galaxy and get the same old low level henchmen diatribe?" Jack mused out loud. "How about we compare notes?" Jack asked as he came to face the interior of the room where the guy was standing in the center of what had obviously been Ellie's room. "There's ten thousand... you know what don't want to miscount and make you think I am lying. Eve." Jack said as he approached the door to cut off that exit.

Eve understood what he wanted from her and popped into being next to him. "Ten Thousand three hundred and thirty-five. Thirteen are rabble rousing at different locations, three hundred and twenty are scattered in groups around the world at key locations to critical infrastructure to the major cities, and the rest are in-mass in front of those thirteen rabble rousers except for two."

The dark green color of the man's face turned a little yellow at the Als appearance but continued to turn to an ugly bruise like yellow as she spoke. "So, it's true, the Continuum has turned on us." The man said.

Eve turned to him, "The Continuum chooses to stay out of mortal politics. We are interested in truth and the acquisition of knowledge. We have turned on no one but have accepted the plea for help from those chosen to lead their people." She said as if offended for the whole Continuum.

"So just two specials in the whole group. You and one other. So, are you the leader I am looking for or just his hunting dog?" Jack asked.

"Like I would tell you anything." The man said.

"There's no way out of here for you, except the window. We're on the fifteenth floor and you don't have wings. So yeah, you're going to talk. I'm just curious how much it's going to take to get you to spill your guts." Jack said as he cracked his knuckles.

"You wear the mask of a revolutionary based on one who was executed as a traitor, while enslaving the people of the alliance in the name of your primitive race's goals of oppressing the rest of the galaxy. You will get nothing from me." The man said.

Jack took his hat off and tossed it brim up just inside the door as he said, "So, the hard way it is then." When he took his mask off he was greeted by a sound he did not expect to hear.

The man was chuckling as he recognized the face in front of him. "You're Wayward Angel." He chuckled again and then continued, "so the whole waiting seventy-two hours for the fleet and military to arrive was a lie. That just proves my truth."

"You see that's where you're wrong. I am he and he is me, but we are not the same. I am the civilian he spawned before going off to war. I am not a part of the Terran Forces, or the military. I can go anywhere I want, whenever I want, invitation or not. Originally we were one and had three names a first, a middle and a last. Our names meant The First chosen by the Messiah or the One who delivered the notifications of Death, the second named us the son of Jacob or the One Chosen by God, and the last translates to Over There or To Travel. So, our name literally was: The Messenger of Death, Chosen by God, To Travel. Yet he was squeamish about doing what had to be done when the time came. He would do it, but the nightmares would haunt him for the rest of his life for every life he took. Soon there were way too many, and it almost broke him. He strayed from his name and for that was branded with the callsign Wayward Angel, for what kind of Messenger of Death does not want to kill anymore?" Outside the song Lockdown by Excision and Woolio began playing.

Jack paused as he reached back behind him and pulled a long knife from its holster along his spine. "You see when we split, not only did I become the civilian that can go anywhere and do anything to anyone. I also splintered off the part of me that struggles with those things. I am the one who has returned to the name, I have become who we were meant to be. I am the Messenger of Death, and you came in here for my pack. Now you will talk. I am just curious of how long I get to play with you before you die." Jack said grinning evilly as he took a step forward.

"Fuck you, I'll never talk." The man said as he sprinted for the window and dove through it. There was a loud growl and snapping noise then Spot was seen looking in the window.

"I'm not done with him yet. Spit that out right now, you don't know where he's been." Jack said pointing his knife at the floor in front of him. Spot wined then spat the man out back in front of Jack. Somehow or another the guy wound up sitting up, on his backside with his back to the window, and his legs stretched out in front

of him. His head just wobbling side to side with Spot's drool dripping all over him. "Welcome back sunshine. I didn't say you could die yet. Hell is going to have to wait until I am done with you."

The man raised his head up enough to look at him and asked, "What... I don't... I should be dead right now."

"I told you I am the Messenger of Death. You don't get to die until I say so. Now, do you want this to be quick and easy, or do you want to die screaming as I carve pieces off of you?" Jack asked.

"They said they could protect my family. All I had to do was come here and watch. If I saw something or someone suspicious I should check it out. I used to be in the intelligence department on my home world, but it was wiped out when a famine hit following a celestial pulse from some dying nova we never knew existed."

"We all have a sad story, it's how we deal with them that matters. You did this for your family you say?" Jack asked and the man nodded. "Then you understand why I am doing what I am doing as I am fighting for my family." Jack said and paused as he waited for the man to acknowledge him. In his earpiece he heard Eve say. "His story checks out." "I'm sorry your life ended this way, but you chose the wrong side this time. Make better choices next time. Spot, Eat." Then turned towards the exit to the room, grabbed his hat and mask as Spot dove in the window taking half of the wall with it. "He was the distraction; we now know who the true leader is. Where is he?"

"There's a team already enroute. You're needed outside where the party has already started without you. Take the elevator down to the ground floor." Eve said over his earpiece.

"Very well. Have a Continuum rep present for the interrogations of his family, and do not allow the children to be interrogated. Have Doc or one of his caliber perform a health and wellbeing check on them. The kids will talk to a friendly doc, and not be terrified by having some bully with a badge hammering them with questions." He dictated as he turned to leave the room. "Spot, we're going to join the pack on the ground for more hunting. Are you coming?" Spot woofed, spewing some gore into the room, and the withdrew his head before heading down the outer wall. "Good thing Ellie doesn't need her security deposit back for her next place. I don't think renters' insurance would over interrogation damage."

CHAPTER FOUR: TIME TO HERD THE SHEEP

As Jack was sprinting for the door in the hallway the Jumbotron outside lit up again with the Royal Crest. A written message popped up and stated, 'People of Avian Prime. We are saddened to interrupt your precelebration party, but we have been made aware of dangerous influences trying to incite trouble during your time of celebration. Please bear witness and give us patience as we deal with these issues.' The graphic was split showing feeds from the thirteen sites where the rabble rousers had their flunkies trying to feed into the feeling that masses of locals were protesting. Each scene zoomed in on the individuals speaking in front of the crowds and each of them were identified by name, home planet, and their time of arrival on Avian Prime. Each one was shown for a few seconds then highlighted in red. The cameras zoomed out, picked someone standing next to the stage facing the crowds and did the same thing. The same thing kept happening faster and faster until the camera zoomed back, and bodies were highlighted red or gray. It was obvious that the grays were in the extreme minority at these rallies. There were also several grays sprinting across the streets to get into other buildings away from the protests, indicating the grays were locals.

The video then flipped over to the scene of the Royal Throne room and the Queens were standing where the Kings had been in the previous message. "You were accepted as guests on our planet to help us celebrate

the arrival of our heroes and heroines of the battles in Silinius Four. Why are you causing trouble during out citizen's celebration?"

The screen was split with the scene from the throne room on the left, and the camera on the right zooming in on one of the speakers. When he saw who the camera was pointed at he looked towards it and yelled. "You're one of the lackies for Terrans' Takeover of the Alliance. Why are you letting the Continuum do this? We all know that video of you was edited by the Terrans and their Al overlords."

The camera on the left zoomed in on Queen Antilla and she spoke up. "We invited the Terrans here to bring our heroines home to meet the people who love them and let them thank their heroines for their bravery and sacrifice. The Terrans edited it to let everyone know they were coming in compliance with the regulations set forth by the Alliance's laws. Granted they are a little zealous when choosing music, but give them credit where credit is due, they are a strange species of war. Public relations is not something we have gotten worked out when dealing with one another. We chose my sister as ambassador long before the Terrans were discovered because she knew how to flirt and joke with other politicians. So, we chose the Prime Minister to deliver a formal legal request. Apparently the Admiral isn't receptive to the what we have come to learn is a Terran mating posture from the Prime Minister. We thought that was the way they speak with equals, but apparently our ambassador is such a natural flirt she picked up the wrong cues to advise our Prime Minister to use. Then again, she did take a quick unexpected vacation after that aired, so she probably realized her joke had gone completely wrong."

The camera flipped to a different speaker, he saw the swap and located the camera to turn to it. "Your Prime Minister was openly flirting with him like some kind of harlot. Do you not know the sanctity of marriage?"

The camera swapped to B's mother Bellafaci, who had been accused of infidelity when B had been born with black wings instead of her father's reds or her mother's brown. "Our Prime Minister is the deciding vote in all things where a majority cannot be reached. We could not decide who among us was to send the invitation, because we all wanted the honor and the pleasure of speaking with Admiral Odin first. We value the sanctity of marriage for those races and individuals that choose monogamy, but also respect that of the ones who live other choices that are right for them. I can assure you that I get to spend quality time with the Prime Minister's wife on a regular basis and she is a wonderful woman who is happily in love with the man she fell in love with as a fledgling. Talk to him with her in the room for more than five minutes and you will see the same in him."

The camera picked a different speaker, "They were both male. How could one not know that was the wrong way to talk to another male. It is obvious mating gestures to anyone who can see." He yelled vehemently as he shook his first at the camera

A Demonic queen was chosen to respond to this as her son was being contested in the high courts because of his sexual preferences that would not leave a traditional heir to the throne along his line. "We do not judge individuals based on their private preferences that should be kept between them and the ones that they love. They should be the only ones to make those choices. Odin clearly is not receptive to the Prime Minister's advances or is too professional to let that show in a galactic wide format where everyone would see it, because it is a private matter. Drop it and go home."

Another speaker was chosen, and he was grinning from ear to ear when the camera came to him, he had already located it and was ready when it was his turn. "You have repeatedly said today the 'Heroines of

Silinius Four', and 'our daughters', as if there were more than one of them. Yet, everyone knows there is only one heroine of Silinius Four. You truly are failing at keeping your lies straight."

"Or you don't know everything we do," came a voice from an Angelic Queen. "One daughter we thought lost to us has been found. The reason that The Alliance Military has refused to provide closed room testimony to the public at this time is due to the reasons we thought she was lost to us. They took her in, sheltered her, restored her to full health, and is bringing her home now that she can face those that left her behind to die. At the same time another legal matter will be settled with their original purpose of visiting us. That is all we care to share about local legal matters still under investigation until a final verdict can be reached. Since you are not a member of the Avian species, do not reside on Avian Prime, and are not a citizen of Avian territories, it's none of your business until we first release that information to those that are. Now if you refuse to peacefully allow our people to celebrate the fleets arrival, I must ask you to leave."

Another protest speaker was chosen, and he was outlined in red as the camera zoomed in, "You're trying to play us for fools so you can control us. We will not stand for this. Your people will not stand for this. You will see. Burn it down, burn it all down."

The camera on the left zoomed out and all of the Queens were in view of the camera as they spoke as one. "Citizens of Avian Prime, please bear with us and bear witness as we clean some trash off the streets before our guests of honor and heroines arrive home." With that the left side closed and the right side of the screen expanded to show the different scenes of the protests, the park at the hub of the riots was designated as purple, the streets to the riots from the park were red everything outside of the LOCKED DOWN area was gray. A banner streamed across the bottom in the royal colors of purple and gold instead of the military's blue, gold and silver announcing that the music blaring from all of the public address speakers and the broadcast was 'Lockdown' by Excision and Woolio.

Smoke grenades began reigning down on top of the protestors from the roof tops of nearby buildings. Some of them were riot control gas grenades meant to irritate but not incapacitate the different species that may have been present in the crowd. Huge walls of smoke came from the alleys between the protestors and the intersection away from the park and all of those towards the park. Thousands of gray dots near the protestors, intersections, alleyways, and doors to the buildings along the paths to the park turned blue, and the individuals that were once standing there wearing normal clothes were instantly covered from wing tip to wing tip, and snout to tail tip, regardless of their race in black shiny nanite armor, complete with gas mask, shield and baton. It took until the countdown provided by the music ended and the cameras could no longer view those on the ground. Any that tried to take off and fly away were instantly swarmed and taken to the ground by black armored flyers. Armored vehicles rolled into the intersections away from the park and the armored personnel started walking forward in unison while striking their batons against shields every time their left foot stomped the shield wall forward.

Wingless six-legged dragons from myth were seen climbing down the walls of several of the taller buildings. Terran men dressed as various spaghetti western cowboys but wearing the same mask of a grinning man with tri-pointed facial hair, were seen sitting astride or standing next to some of the beasts on top of cargo containers in the alleyways. Tails of similar creatures were seen moving through the smoke coming from the alleyways as if they were bellows on smoke machines. What the cameras couldn't see were the dozens of wranglers standing next to the huge tanks of water telling Spot to stop trying to drink all the water, while the huge animals were laying on top of the dry ice that was melting in the water to provide the harmless fog from the alleys. Every one of them had their tails wagging just above the fog because they were happy to finally be

cooling off. The people at home could see a relatively few gray dots being escorted by two or more blues to safety. The wall of armored personnel and vehicles rolled in, and what looked like a huge, short-barreled cannon was extended from the roof of each one. People at home were shielding their children's eyes from what they expected to happen next. When those cannons started spewing water, most were confused until the water also removed the fog that was blocking their view, and all of the blue dots had moved except the ones forming a shield wall in front of the entrances to the buildings on that street. The rioters were being washed down the street towards the park, and the dragons in the fog.

A streaming banner came across the bottom of the video broadcast informing the readers that some of the gases used could be harmful or dangerous if allowed to remain on the skin of certain races for prolonged periods. The law enforcement were just 'doing their best to render emergency medical aid to those that were unwilling to comply with orders to vacate the premises by Royal Decree.' There was gunfire as the second countdown ended. This was signaled by a huge orange burst of light inside the fog and a loud boom. The song instantly stopped, and thumping bass introduced the next song, 'Hell Hounds' by the Texas Hippie Coalition. When the singer in the song howled 'Hell Hounds' the dragon looking Hellhounds howled as one and dove into the fog alongside the Terrans who dove into the smoke yelling "GET SOME" as loud as they could and many spectators across the galaxy recognized it as something a Terran Marine would say. The water cannons shut off and the police armored line stopped. The banner across the bottom of the screen changed again to announce a message from the Royal Families. "We would like to thank the wranglers and specially trained animals of the Special Projects Program provided to us by the civilian law enforcement on Terra Prime. Through their due diligence today we are assured that there will be minimum casualties in moving these troublemakers to an area where they can be properly and safely handled. These teams are specially trained for limited visibility conditions and are providing a service to us to help prevent any loss of life if possible. There was rapid gunfire from inside the smoke and officers ducked behind their shields as bullets ricocheted off of them, several other automatic weapons began firing and the gunfire became a steady rolling orange stream through the smoke like the blue light of lightning in a thunderhead. The balls of light inside the smoke often showed short bursts of a shadow from one of the Hellhounds, usually with the creature's mouth wide open just before the firing s

"Dragons, they released dragons on us!" Came someone screaming from inside the smoke. "Run, run to the park, there was a bunch of civilians there. Run to the park." 'These Arctic Hellhounds' the audience was informed by info-banner across the bottom, 'are specially trained canine type of reptilians from the frozen arctic tundras of Terra Prime. The fog and low-level lighting is their preferred hunting environment,' it helpfully provided to those at home.

There was a huge crowd of gray dots in the center of the park, and several were seen arriving in flight as the protestors came stumbling out of the fog at a run towards them as the song started to come to its end. The Terrans and several of the Arctic Hellhounds were seen stopping just at the edge of the smoke. The armored police resumed marching forward when the song ended, as they did blue dots were seen dragging red ones to the side before moving further into the smoke in front of the shield wall. These were protestors that had their faces, hands, knees and ankles covered in the same quick drying foam and straws the Marines had used at The Grand Hall on Draco Prime.

This was only visible because the smoke from the alleys had stopped pouring in and behind the first line of armored firetrucks were small flat-topped trucks that had cargo drones on top of them blowing the smoke upwards by pushing downwards with their thrust to stay sitting on top of the flat trucks as they rolled along

behind the firetrucks. The cargo drones each had a container on it and the police behind the shield wall would grab the restrained individuals and drag them to a container for interrogation later. Not one firearm or any protestor who tested positive for weapons fire was ever found. 'Smoke' by Wild the Coyote began playing as the fastest of the rioters began breaking free of the fog into the park.

Those that made it to the park sprinted for the crowds of people in the center of the park, and then pushed their way towards the center. The entire camera view from the jumbotrons zoomed in on one who held his wrist device up as he was typing a message, and it was frozen right before it was sent. "Grab as many as you can, use them as living shields, we will take the rest for hostages." The message was clear and if one backed up they would see him hitting the virtual key for every letter. When all of the red dots stopped and looked at their wrists they did exactly that. What confused them is there was no screaming or panic or any reaction whatsoever from the people they were taking hostage. In the center of the crowd an area started opening up in the civilian crowd. Many pushed to get outside of the red dots as they did, leaving the reds holding the living shields standing in the middle of a ring of gray dots with three dozen or so grays in the middle. These were Incubi and male Angelics wearing the same style spaghetti western clothes, black cowboy hats, and the same grinning Terran masks the wranglers wore.

The camera view split showing the men in the middle looking at the confused protestors. "You come into our home as guests. You insult our wives, our mothers, our people, and our hospitality. Then you try to take our people as hostages to use them against us after you failed to convince them to fight us for you." Their hats and masks melted away to reveal that these were the Kings and Princes of the Royal Families. "We are not amused. Our Queens decreed that you should leave, and you threatened to burn down our homes. You were given a peaceful place to rest until we could arrange for your departure, and you tried to take our people hostage. We find all of you guilty of trespassing against royal decree, failure to comply with a royal request to peacefully disperse, accusation of a royal personage of treason, indecent behavior towards a royal personage in the performances of their duties, slander of a royal personage, kidnapping, false imprisonment, attempted arson, assaulting Royal Guards in the performances of their duties, and assaulting a member of the royal family with intent to kill."

One of the speakers stepped forward and said, "Lies, all lies! We haven't attacked any member of the royal guard or the royal families." A graphic took up the bottom of the screen in the broadcast. It had the Avian Royal Crest, The Alliance Military Logo, and a brand marking from a Terran Ranch that had a skull with one-eyed a viper coming out of an eye socket with the slogan Special Purposes Breeder wrapped around it. Somewhere on the other side of the city the Jack sitting next to Cami slapped his forehead and said "Yep, definitely need to change the logo too."

The graphic then scrolled text from bottom to the top, "Star Wars style" as Jack had said, displaying the following message. "When the enemy is easy to identify the military will be there to protect you, when the enemy is among you, you must become what the enemy fears."

"After what you just said about my boyfriend, my mother, our people, our choices, our culture... you made this very personal for all of us. So, here's a song we picked out unanimously just for you. You can either drop to your knees and make this final death you have been deemed worthy of easy, or you can try your best to kill us before we kill you." The banner across the screen scrolled with the announcement 'This song is by Jasiah and is also called 'Lockdown.' Please understand that some of the language is a little course for those of a tender age or sensitivities, but it is the sentiment of the Royal Family in this matter. If you are sensitive to blood, gore, violence, or foul language, please turn off the devices near you or leave the area you are in at this

time.' Every grey on the outside of the circle turned purple, as well as the ones that were being 'held hostage'. All of the dots in the middle of the circle turned gold, their clothes converted to nanite armor of the same colors, and the helms came up with the same mask that the Terran wranglers were wearing.

When the singer announced, "Fuck a lockdown, we outside now." The Royals launched forward into the protestors with their Royal Scepters forming axe heads, war hammer tops, or converting into swords. The guards being held hostage, used martial arts skills of different kinds to flip the protestors holding them towards the royals. The guards on the inside of the ring formed a shield wall and held it as the Royal Family went to work. The ones on the outside turned their backs to the actions going on inside the ring and each pulled a smoke grenade out and pulled the pins to cause them to begin emitting smoke. The center of the ring was soon covered in a column of purple and gold smoke streams blocking the camera views.

From the edges of the fog there came a multitude of voices saying the same thing in unison, "SPOT. Nothing Shiny. FEED!" The last command was dragged out and growled in a loud voice from the sheer number of those speaking it. One-thousand Arctic Hellhounds shot out of the fog howling and baying, cleared the distance to the center of the park in a few bounds, and dove into the smoke over the Royal Guards' lines at full speed. The screaming inside of the smoke column intensified as the growling and barking joined the ruckus. The wranglers assigned to them slung their long rifles and drew pistols or long knives before also charging the circle to dive over the Royal Guards' lines to join in on the melee.

When the first song came to an end the battle in the ring was still being waged, the next song started playing with the tinkling of piano keys and the banner came across saying this is 'Vendetta' by Unsecret. The queens' voices came across on top of the song as it began, "If it was just protests, we would have been more forgiving, but this was the distraction. We are already taking care of the real attacks this group had planned." The camera zoomed out from the action to show the ring as a whole and then it shrunk to the center of three columns and eleven rows of videos showing purple and black armored individuals kicking in the doors on the buildings that had known enemy activity being waged inside them, with Arctic Hellhounds and wranglers breaking through walls to get inside. Six minutes does not sound like a long time, but when you're scrambling for your life in a cloud of smoke and there are dragons among you eating anyone and everyone, it's an eternity of hell

However, when you have ten-thousand enemies to put to the sword, it takes time. The next song came on with a banner across the bottom of the screen. 'The Royal Family would like to send a message out to all who think that our people are easy victims. Keep dreaming, we were the first to accept the Terrans and their ways of war after they were introduced to us. If you make the mistake of trying to make those dreams come true, listen to the lyrics of this song and know what will be waiting for you here. This is 'Nightmare' by Saylem.'"

As the screaming inside started dying down and the red dots were almost completely missing, cargo drones began landing around the park with the rear doors of their crates open, and the song 'Only Kings' by Wild the Coyote began to thump across the speakers and broadcast. The guards tossed their smoke grenades into special Keylar bags and stood up. Then they formed channels in their ranks to the center of the scramble.

The wranglers came out of the smoke banks and snapped their fingers, whistled, or clapped their hands. Their hellhounds came strolling out of the smoke cloud licking their chops, the smoke was being cleared away by the winds raised from the cargo drones and one of the wranglers began walking to the center where the Royal Family members were standing dripping in gore. As the smoke cleared the only thing left in the center of the ring was the Royal Families, the wrangler, and blood stains from the protestors. He had a private conversation with many of them, then collected his hellhound and headed for the last remaining cargo

container as the others were taking off. Once a wrangler closed the containers' doors, he would then hop on top of it to drop into a hatch cut in the top of the container, and the co-pilot would signal the pilot to take off from the ramp where they had been watching the show. As the last drone took off the music changed to 'Simple Man' by Charlie Daniels.

Very few knew the drones were ordered to leave the atmosphere, wait for the military fleet to arrive, and then they would be told where to deposit the containers. Some of the pilots saw the muzzle flashes from inside the containers as they were approaching the upper atmosphere caused by the Jack inside putting down his Spot before taking his own life. The rest started to realize they were floating in space and the men and animals inside those containers would die from asphyxiation, freezing to death, or the vacuum of space because of the holes cut into them with torches. While they were able to talk to one another, their comms were blocked from reaching outside of this special cargo fleet. As the last drone disappeared from view from the park the song ended and 'Simple Man' by Bad Company began playing.

The video jumped to the throne room with the Queens and Princesses standing proudly in front of the thrones also wearing their golden armor. "Our Royal daughters shall be leaving us to become wranglers as part of the Specialty Programs when the fleet returns to Terran Space. We are sad to see them go, but we are above all your final shield from events like these. We may have lost sight of that mission in the past, but we are rededicating ourselves to living up to what it means to be Royal: We will be there to comfort you, guide you, protect you, and provide as best we can with the trust and honor that you have bestowed upon us. We are willing to step up and prove that we will earn the honor you have given us as much as our heroes did with their actions in the Silinius Four System. Let today's actions show how far we are willing to go to earn that honor you have given us and the sacrifices we are willing to make in the future too."

Cami the dispatcher came over the comms and spoke only to her fleet as the last one entered the holding pattern, "By now many of you have guessed or witnessed the fact that you are now carrying the coffins of heroes who do not want fame or attention. They want a simple life. Hence the masks, lack of interaction with the general public, and refusal to join the Royal Family for dinner tonight. Please honor their wishes and let this secret go to their graves with them. They are a special breed, and their secrets are their most powerful tools, in keeping everything you know sacred and secret you will be showing them the honor that they appreciate. Thank you for all of your hard work today and know that they understand the burden they have placed on you but want you to accept that it was their wish to do their part, and not become pawns of one government or another." Even though the comms were not blocked after that, no one transmitted anything until the fleet contacted them several minutes later. They were honored when the Valhalla assigned them the call sign of Valkyrian Fleet, all had heard of the myth of the Valkyries and their task of bringing the honored dead home to the Hallowed Halls of Valhalla.

CHAPTER FIVE: WELCOME HOME DAUGHTERS OF AVIAN

Odin knew what was going to happen and had adjusted his playlist and plans to as he wanted to keep the theme going when the fleet arrived. As the portals opened every device in the system kicked over to the Emergency Broadcast system and 'Simple Man' by Lynyrd Skynyrd began strumming out as the Golden Raven on her nose began entering the system. For the first time since it's conception The Valhalla arrived by herself with no escorts in a system. A graphic popped up instantly and a familiar male voice read it off, "Citizens of the Alliance and Avian Prime, we are honored by your invitation to come to your home. We apologize for our delay as we cannot participate in such events as what just happened. The military is a sledgehammer that is not suitable for such delicate matters. However, we plan on putting on a really good show for all of you to

enjoy. Please sit back and enjoy the beginnings of twenty-four hours of partying and our professionals doing their best to demonstrate to you what a small landing force would look like. Here is the Rapid Response Carrier Chesty Puller, and the Marines that recovered your heroine from Four Two." The video showed the Chesty Puller's Logo of "Surrounded you say? Surrender Hell! I FINALLY FOUND THE BASTARDS!" It then showed a massive amount of Marines and equipment standing in formations inside the Valhalla's bays. The lyrics started as it zoomed out to try and show how many were there and it split down the middle, on the right it showed footage of Four Two from a helmet cam, the volume was adjusted so the conversations could be heard clearly no matter what was going on near the listener.

Desi looked up and said, "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."

"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.

"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 do?"

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. The camera momentarily changed to show the battlefield from a heavy mech and the three million Alliance casualties and countless enemy dead.

The camera flipped back to Tafter two seconds of that horror, "You're still breathing aren't you?" Tasked.

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

"But nothing. I suggest you stand up and do what you have to so you can become the hero your people need 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."

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." With that the banner announced the beginning of the song 'Adrenalize' by In This Moment.

As the conversation finished a hundred mechs were shown running full screen inside of the hangar bay carrying sections of a drop ship's hull like a shield. When they got to the edge of the ship they dove out the door and pointed head down towards the planet with their jets on full burn for twenty-five seconds. Right

behind them was a line of hover tanks screaming for the door as fast as they could. Third in line was the troop transports, with Marines shown packed in like fish hung in a smoke house. A full flight of a thousand fighters swarmed out of all of the doors as the transports were shown leaving the doors from the outside of the ship and the fighters were swarming around and covering the whole column with a deadly circling and spiraling pattern several layers thick.

A single fast carrier came out of the Valhalla's hull and fell in line behind the column. Compared to the others it was so large it looked like it was moving in slow motion but was at full burn to try and catch up with the heavies that were falling into the planet's gravity well. As the heavies hit the upper atmosphere they rotated their hull plating shields in front of them and used them to absorb the heat buildup associated with atmospheric entry. As the hover tanks began breaking into the atmosphere the first song ended and 'The Last Cowboy' by In This Moment began playing. After the heavies broke through the burn off phase they flipped the shields around to their feet as they rotated to a standing position relevant to the ground below them and began the infantry's method of burn, cut, burn, cut, only their burn times were five seconds long as they were using the burns to adjust their target zone to the bloody circle where the Royal Family had put down the protestors just ten minutes ago.

On the right side the video swapped to Desi's helmet cam. She walked up to 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.

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, altogether, Yo-Ho!"

The people had just witnessed what it meant to have a real cowboy in their midst, and now a massive segment of the terrifyingly dangerous force that spawned his like was about to land on the planet, and they were bringing an Angel of Vengeance they had raised up as the Heroine of Avian Prime. When the song came to an end the transports had already broken through and were following the heavies and hover tanks to the drop sight while the fighters had screamed forward and were flying slowly at the third floor level of the streets, others were flying just short of the sound barrier around the tops of the buildings, making passes so close to each other the people watching, sometimes just five feet from them inside of the buildings' windows, could tell what colors their eyes were and knew they might crash into each other. Some of the pilots would even fly straight at a window with people in it, to stop instantly and hover inches from the window, wave at the civilians and then pullout a cellphone to take a picture of those that were doing the same to the pilot. The jet would then bank away and go play near another building.

As the carrier broke into the atmosphere the people were amazed at just how big it truly was. It was clearly the length of some of the skyscrapers they were watching from and a city block or two around its waist. The music changed to In This Moment's 'Commanche' came on and the carrier opened all of her hangar bays.

Instead of the fighters everyone thought would pour out of the carrier, twenty-five thousand Avians in full battle gear poured out from two sides of the carrier like it was laying down a blue and silver smoke trail behind it. "Citizens of Avian Prime, we present to you the twenty-five thousand who jumped in operations on Silinius Four Two. As you can see every one of your sons and daughters served their single mission in service to the Alliance with honor and have chosen to return to go again when the call comes in."

The Avians were allowed to drop several hundred feet below then the announcement came, "this is 'Commanche' by In This Moment especially for the heroine you have all been waiting for, Desdemonda of the House Layman, the first Special Forces Unit Commander for the Alliance Special Operations Command." Came a smooth male voice all recognized but few could place. A replay of her chant came across the broadcast with a view of someone's helmet-cam looking down at their feet over the city from the edge of the carrier was shown. "Focus on your feet, focus on your feet. Until I tell you to jump, and then you will know where to go. Ready! GO! GO! GO!" Those that had been there and heard the original chants knew that was wrong, but they were standing there watching her and knew it wasn't some cheap replay, it was her psyching herself up for the jump. When the camera showed the view change as the person jumped the broadcast split and after a second a single black dot was seen dropping from below the carrier, the drone zoomed in optically and physically as it sped in to get a close up of her. The video from it was lost as a fighter swatted it from the sky with a wingtip and the male's voice chuckled and said "Oopsy, that's why we don't let anyone fly when and where we do. If you don't fly on our radar bad things may happen." The news agencies got the point and kept a respectful distance after that.

Another drone captured the wrecked drone leaving a spiraling trail of sparks and smoke as it was crashing to the street's surface while the fighter was nowhere to be seen. Three troop transports swarmed in next to Desi and she was relieved to know her platoon of teams was with her, and her best friend was piloting one of the transports flying with her. The transports were flying with their noses down like her, their drop bays rotated until they were facing outward, with doors locked-flat and fully-opened. The Marines were standing on the bay doors with their magnetic boots locked in place and weapons at the ready. This too was allowed to be shown from a respectful distance as fighters swarmed around the area.

The heavy mechs slammed into the ground with thunderous booms that shook the buildings within a few blocks of the park, they had formed a circle around the Royal Family and Guards who were still in the center of the park. Vehicle alarms went off and lights flickered inside the buildings for several seconds after the heavies landed and some of the guards were staggered from the shockwaves. The hover tanks that were with the heavies screamed down at them, pulled up at the last moment, barely missing the heavies as they knelt down from the landing impacts. The hover tanks slammed their thrusters into full reverse to come to a stop with their barrels facing down the streets in the direction they were facing, just inches from their sides damaging the buildings along the sides of the streets. The tanks were so large they would have caused damage had they tried to go down the streets. The troop transports pulled up much earlier and began carpet bombing the park with the infantry Marines from the regiment that had found Desi after Four Two. They were rained down in columns and formed up in ranks of slightly curved arcs in between the heavies and tanks, kneeling down and facing the streets and buildings in front of them like an enemy may jump out at any moment.

The first wave of Avians were pulling up to land on the rooftops nearby as the song changed to In This Moment's 'In the Air Tonight' and the male's voice started up again. "Citizens of Avian Prime. It is my pleasure to introduce to you the witnesses of Silinius Four Three. Heroes and heroines, one and all. They jumped into the fight knowing that it could mean their deaths, the enemy destroyed the planet rather than give it back in

an attempt to rob us of these heroic sons and daughters of yours. As you can see they have volunteered to rise again and fight for you again, and they ask can you feel it 'In the Air Tonight' with this song from In This Moment. Welcome the troops of the Winged Vengeance and the Avian Scout Forces of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force." One-Hundred-Thousand Avians dove into the open air from the top of the ship in their telltale blue and silver armor, two hundred heavy mechs jumped from each side of the carrier heading for the park, hover tanks dropped from the underneath as they had originally been mistaken for secondary guns on the carrier's hull, the bottom doors opened, and several hundred troop transports were dropped through the lower hatches like a payload from a World War Two bomber. When Desi and her platoon landed on the ground the second wave of Avians circled out to cover the other rooftops and to encircle the palace. The Royal Families' males had stayed where they were at the end of the protests and were the first to be there when Desi landed as the song ended.

"Citizens of Avian Prime, we have been happy to share the tale of the heroine of Silinius Four Two and Four Three with you, and many of you were there when she sang her chants to help you to know when to jump into the maw of death that awaited you on Four Three. She fought bravely until the end as many of your sons and daughters did that day, and she stood up and accepted the consequences of those actions. She has volunteered to serve the two-hundred years required to satisfy the baying of the political hounds for blood in military matters. She has accepted the call of her people to appear here in court and all of these Marines and Sailors are here as requested to testify on her behalf." That same familiar male voice came through the announcements. "However, many of you did not know while the battles were being fought on the ground those very same fighters screaming around this fair city today were doing the same to keep the enemy at a distance from the ships delivering the ground troops. They too are the Sons and Daughters of Avian, heroes and heroines one and all who gave their lives fighting for the Alliance and stood up once again to take the fight to the enemy."

"Today, it is also my great pleasure to introduce another special young lady, who I personally swore in as an enlistee and witnessed as she was instantly volunteered for service with the Special Operations Command. While Desi Layman and the Sailors and Marines involved in the ground operations would like to remind everyone to live In This Moment because they understand the ultimate cost and knew they could rise again. Felicia Layman faced the final death with every one of her actions and has a special message for the ones who helped her get this opportunity to prove how different repairing a starship in combat is from a toaster oven in her mother's home, without a clone." There was a loud thump, and Odin groaned a little before continuing. "This next song is 'Army of Me' by Christina Aguillera to demonstrate her determination used to perform her actions during the entire battle from the first shots fired until several days after the fight in Silinius Four, that's right she was busy for the entire battle and then some. Eve 2469, please give your report of her actions." A brief technical glitch caused the image of the heavy mech standing in front of the Draconic Grand Hall to be displayed for two seconds before it was quickly replaced with the video of Eve giving her report.

"Yes, Admiral Odin. During the combat operations I tracked her every movement, guided her where she needed to go when she needed something to conduct the repairs she wanted to make and helped her get to the mess halls when I could convince her to stop and eat. 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. Her actions have led to improvements in damage control operations, maintenance procedures, and even some systems performance improvements. After the first sixty-hours she was finally

willing to stop for some sleep, I had her do so in a cryopod so I could scan her DNA and mental stack. 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."

As the final chorus began the heavy mechs of the second wave began landing near noble homes and in local parks around the city, usually facing a huge nobility owned corporate building or a mansion's expansive grounds when they did. Their accompanying hover tanks landed in a manner that any street traffic would have to weave between the three to pass by them. The transport closest to Desi had landed when Odin groaned earlier. The pilot climbed out of the cockpit through the front ejection port and stood on top of the craft waving to the cameras. After a few seconds of waving, she jumped to the ground from the top of the transport, where she was enveloped by the Marines on the ground and as one they moved towards the Royal Family. Where she bowed to them but was quickly grabbed into a hug by several of the Royal Family members. Odin and his staff came down the ramp from the transport that Fee had been flying and they had filled the crew roles for the short flight down. Another swarm of armored infantry Marines was right there waiting to swarm him and shield him from any potential risks. The Royal Family hadn't noticed at first, but they too were being cordoned off from the surroundings by 'overprotective' Marines. When one commented about this, Odin laughed and said, "this may be a show for you and me, but for them they are practicing being tactical and I do not want them to practice bad habits just to improve the photo ops." That was the end of the discussion.

When the armored column that had served as a parade delivered Odin, the heroines, and the members of the Royal Families to the Palace, the Queens appeared on the broadcast and announced, "Sons and daughters of Avian Prime, welcome home. Heroes and heroines of the Alliance fleet, welcome to Avian Prime. Please enjoy some time with friends and families or make some new ones in celebration of our daughters coming home."

It then cut over to Odin as he was climbing from a Hover Tank. "Cinderella Liberty is announced for one and all. Secure your vehicles and let the Als be your designated drivers home when necessary. Three drink limit Marines, celebrate responsibly. You have to appear in front of court tomorrow, but tonight we celebrate." The video feeds were swapped to show the mechs standing in the park, and fireworks being launched in the evening sky behind them.

King Gregarious approached Odin and asked, "are you sure we can't convince you and your men to take a day or two off here to celebrate with us properly?"

Odin looked up at him and replied, "I'm sorry your majesty, but we cannot. Honestly, it wouldn't take any convincing at all, but we have more pressing matters at the moment. We will do our best to remain onsite as long as possible for court, but I am sure after the enemy failed here today with the insurrection attempt, we will be facing an invasion along a border system soon. We need to get back to the front as soon as possible, and this is all of the equipment that survived from MEF-1 and MEF-2."

"Wait you kidding? You only have the Valhalla, one carrier and a few hundred smaller craft or mechs to fightwith?" King Gregarious asked.

"We only have the carrier and fighters because MEF-3 refused to see us come here without some kind of escort. MEF-2 has a few Heavy cruisers and some capital ships, but she has carriers, drop ships, or other equipment for them. She loaned us her troops to appear here for court, so they could spend time with their families instead of moping around a shipyard licking their wounds."

Queen Antilla stuck her hand out and gripped his upper forearm. "That sound's rough, is there anything we can do to help, tell us what's next and we will do the best we can."

"Once the refit is complete we will return to our patrols, but rather than hide along a stretch of empty systems. It might be best to start port hopping to remind the locals that we are in the area in case they need us or are willing to let us come back." Odin shrugged his shoulders as the kings and queens laughed, "Marines usually start with the bar closest to the pier and drink it out of alcohol before moving on to the next. By time they call it a night three or more businesses have closed their doors due to being out of alcohol, or damages caused by drunken bar fights. They tend to be a feast or famine upon the places they visit when they are in full on party mode."

One of the huge Demonic kings stepped forward laughing loudly, sticking his hand out to the admiral to shake, "Duly noted, let the Marines start drinking at my place before they go anywhere else... More profits and less risk that way. Speaking of which, enough shop talk. That can wait until business hours tomorrow. Tonight, we will drink and celebrate. First round for all present and accounted for from the Royal Cellars!!!" The roar of approval from the Royal Guards and Alliance Troops drowned out the engines of the Hover tanks.

CHAPTER SIX: JUST CHECKING ON YA BROTHER

"I know baby, it's just... what... oh shit!" Came Fata's voice as Wayward walked around the corner.

"Fata?" Wayward called out as he rounded the corner of the parapet. He had been bet to sneak up here and piss of the palace walls, so he didn't expect anyone to be up here. Imagine his surprise that not only was Fata here, but he was talking to himself again. "Who you talking to buddy?" Wayward said looking around not seeing anyone.

"Eh, you know the voices in my head are a lot more comforting than a room full of strangers right?" Fata responded before giving a half-hearted chuckle.

"Yeah, that's not ok buddy. First, you got team down there, and team is family, not strangers. Second, um you've been talking to the voices more than the rest of us lately. Something you care to share before they try to get you to do something stupid?"

Fata realized where this conversation was headed and tried to cut it off real quick. "No, no. Please you don't have to worry. She's just helping me through some stuff, you know. She would never let me hurt myself."

"Ever we need to talk sweetheart." Wayward said to one side, and Everappeared next to him.

"He's fine Wayward, just working on some issues that happened before the super volcano is all." Eve replied.

"Oh, well hey buddy. Sparklebutt here is a good listener and all," Eve harumphed at the nickname, "but she has no real-life experience if you know what I mean. Any of the team would love to help you if you need it. I can't promise I won't offer advice, and I can't promise it would be good advice, but I will help you carry it out if even I think it might be a bad idea." Wayward said with a grin on his face.

"See, all of you treat me like I'm still that green PFC that just crawled out of the seabag on his first deployment to Africa then Bosnia. Yet not one of your bastard's are willing to tell me why? You do realize I made it all the way to Gunnery Seargent before I got out, and I did that in less than 15 years. I was passed

over for Master Guns three times because of psychological review but no one would ever tell me what the hel that meant. The last thing I remember is a few months after getting out there was this big deal about some new immersion game and my little brother made me promise to go with him to check it out. He even flew us all the way out to Paris for the ultimate midnight release party. It was Epic. That's the first and last time I ever uploaded so that's the repository they have for me."

Wayward sat down next to his friend, hard. His previous buzz and good cheer wore off. "I'm sure you want to know buddy, but it wasn't pleasant for any of us that knew you, which is probably why we have been avoiding it. I was told by Bear and just about everyone else that I woke up that I suck at explaining things. The vets said I did a decent job of explaining how they bit the big one if I knew them firsthand so..." Wayward sniffed a little then continued. "First, I'm sorry I let you down and wasn't there for you when you got out. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be the friend you needed when you we're struggling to find your place in the big world on your own." He just stopped and locked eyes with Fata.

"That bad," Fata asked.

"Oh, hell no, it was **EPIC!!!** The whole world saw it on repeat for a full twenty-four-hour news cycle. You freeballed off of the Eiffel Tower with nothing but a rain-poncho and some five-fifty cord. You trussed yourself up like we used to do for typhoon parties in Oki and flew three city blocks before you planted your head face first through the front of one of those British double-decker buses full of nuns come to celebrate the reopening of the Notre Dame. You had **'God's Gift to Women'** written on your chest with a giant arrow pointed at you dick in giant sharpie and your pink poncho had gold letters that read **'Karma's a Bitch'**. Your body actually hung there by your neck until after it stopped twitching. Gravity being what it is you got a massive erection after your heart stopped because all the blood from your big head flowed into your little one. A garbage truck and a bunch of cars piled into the rear entrance of the bus and all those nuns had to walk past **'God's Gift to Women'** to get off the bus." Wayward and Fata both broke out laughing at the thought of the event that became a meme category of its own.

After a few seconds of hearty laughter Wayward regained his somberness. "It was what you said in the note that only a few were notified about that hurt." He sniffed again and this time caught a tear as it fell. "You were lost after you got out and no one knew, your girl died your first year in, and you had no one to go to in the real world. You didn't know what to do with your life, you no longer had the structure you needed, and a remarkable infantry skill set is useless in the real world unless you go law-enforcement or heartless criminal. Your brother climbed that tower with you thinking you would chicken out; he thought you were drunk and wouldn't do it because you would sober up on the climb up. What he didn't realize is you did, and you did. You were sober when you jumped, you pissed off the tower and emptied out all of the alcohol from the climb and your bladder. When you hit the bus you were at half of the legal limit meaning you were still in full control of your body. He just didn't realize how much pain you were in on the inside. He formed a charity to help young men like you and it was doing extremely good things when the boom happened. All of us became councilors through it."

"Shit. Yeah I can't deny when I was first woke up I almost said 'no thank you, please just let me stay dead.' Then I remembered you guys would be there for the rest of eternity just like I thought we would be when we were young and dumb." Fata said.

"Yeah, we have all been watching you closely for the signs, and lately buddy, I have been the only one that hasn't been pushing for you to be taken off the frontlines long enough to heal. Now, however, I have to. Eve

please remove Lance Corporal Fata from ready active to ready reserve." Wayward sad as a tear fell and he looked at Eve.

"No, please don't. All we have tomorrow is a stupid parade in front of a court to stand in and then a ride back to Terra. Eve has promised it will all make sense to all of you then. I just can't tell you why right now." Fata pleaded with tears running down his cheeks.

"Wayward, I can attest that he is fine and fit for duty. He is just going through something right now and that is the reason for his little trigger signs you and the Jolly Rogers have noticed." Eve said.

"Neither of you are willing to tell me what it is, so I am pulling him from duty until you do. I already lost him once because I ignored the same signs. I will not lose him again. He is to be placed on suicide watch and kept under twenty-four-hour surveillance until a licensed Terran Medical Professional signs-off on his release. As team leader it is my prerogative to do that." Wayward said.

"Technically,.." Eve started but Wayward cut her off

"Technically, Desi knows I am the boss, and she is smart enough to see who the others look to, she will go with whatever I decide especially after I show her a copy of the note I can write by hand from memory from the first time I lost him to these warning signs." Wayward said as he took a menacing step towards Eve. "Now transfer him or give me a gods damned good reason not to."

"No shut up... Eve you promised... No, you promised too... Oh God no fucking wonder they all think I am going fucking nuts, between the two of you I just can't take this anymore. I love you, and I can't wait until we hit Terra so I can hug you one last time before handing you over to Tony, but you and Eve are killing me here. This is my life, both of you promised this would not jeopardize that, especially you Eve." Fata said as he dropped to his knees crying. Wayward couldn't tell who the other person Fata was talking to, but she was obviously just as visible to him as Eve was to Wayward.

"He's obviously carrying on a conversation with two people, and I ain't one of them." Wayward said as he crossed his arms looking at Eve as if he was trying to peer into her repository from where he stood.

"That's because he's talking to someone only he and the Continuum can interact with at the moment. Are you aware of who Tammy was to him?" Eve asked.

"Yes, he mentioned her a few times when we got him crying drunk. His high school sweetheart, they were supposed to get married when we got back from his first deployment, but we got involuntarily extended and he didn't make it home for the wedding. She died when one of her friends flipped their car, and he never got to see her. She was buried before we finally returned from that fight. Fata didn't know until after we got home, none of us did, but he almost gave our position away the day he woke up screaming her name while we were in enemy territory. We later found out he did that the very minute she died on the other side of the world."

Wayward said as a single tear ran down his cheek.

"He said he would stand and fight for us as hard as we fought for him. After the battles in Silinius Four we presented him with what we came up with. We took all of the memories that everyone knew of her, all of her likes, dislikes, loves hates, shared dreams, ticklish places, and combined them with the aspects of the Continuum entities that best represent those values, to include pieces of my code for judgment from the evidence verification and evaluation side of me. We are allowing her to ride with him in his mental space to let them get to know one another again before we bring her into reality on Terra for the first time as she will

not truly be Human or Continuum, we must let her first spawning be on Terra to gain the birthright of a home world." Eve said looking at Wayward's collarbones instead of his eyes as she did not know how he would take this information.

"Let me see her." Was all Wayward said and the way he set his posture said that's all he would say

"Please," Fata pleaded from his knees still not looking up.

"Very well." Eve said and then a young woman kneeling in front of Fata came into view and Wayward was able to see Tammy.

"It's ok, baby we'll figure it out somehow. I will become a Terran citizen, or we'll surf the galaxy together, vou'll see."

"Tammy, is it?" Wayward asked and she turned to him. "I have heard so many wonderful things about you. It is a pleasure to finally meet you." He knelt down in front of her with a great big smile and stuck his hand out.

He noticed the tear tracks on her cheeks as she looked at him before taking his hand to shake it. "Please don't take him out of the unit. It will kill him. He is just waiting to get to Terra so he can spend time with me. Tony has refused to respawn after he fell the first time in the beginning and almost went feral hunting beasts before that. I am all they have; I have been working as Fata's co-pilot so to speak and his internal DJ when he started to think about things he shouldn't. I will give up my dreams of birth rights as a Terran if you'll just let me help him. I can even have Tony come live with me somewhere else if you want. Just please don't tell anyone about me."

"Did Fata ever tell you about the two years I was off every time we went south of the tropic of cancer," Wayward asked just grinning at her.

"Umm, yeah the whole platoon was worried about you. You had just gotten a dear john from some girl in Georgia, and she married some Army Reservist that convinced her you were volunteering for all of those deployments because you were scared to get married." She replied as she wiped the tears away confused by why he wanted to talk about that instead.

"Turns out the girl I promised to marry when I was sixteen moved from Virginia Beach to Ohio for two years while we were deployed. I hadn't spoken to her for years and never figured it out. Until one day, I was telling her about how my internal compass went haywire for a while and she remarked, 'oh yeah, that was a weird time for me too. I moved to Ohio for a few years, and everything was just off.' So, there is no way in hell I am going to try and separate him from his True North." Wayward said as he sat back on his haunches with a big grin on his face.

"Really?" Fata, Tammy and Eve asked all at once.

"Really, do you know how much blackmail material you just gave me over this seductive little minx next to me? Besides there are so many ways you can get your citizenship before we even get to Terra, I bet Fata coulc think of a few if he took the time." Wayward said.

"How." Fata asked.

"Do you remember that pregnant lady we pulled onto the Mercy in Kobe, or the women who gave birth on ship during the Hattian Vacation, how about that NK baby that was born when we picked up those defectors

in the Yellow Sea?" Wayward shot off real quick, Fata nodded his head slowly. Wayward continued as the light bulb hadn't fully lit yet, "why are you required to get the captain of the ship's permission to get married when on a float?" Fata shrugged his shoulders. "What happens when a Marine travels to a foreign country and gets a Las Vegas style wedding in Shanghai or wherever he is?" Fata was totally confused but Tammy was starting to look intrigued as she knew Wayward was trying really hard to not point out something very specific. "What do they all have in common?" When he still got crickets he turned to Tammy.

"Tammy, I'm sorry but I have to send your boy to bed he clearly has had too much to drink. Eve, Fata is too intoxicated at this time. I think he has exceeded the three-drink limit set out by Admiral Odin. He must be returned to his berth upon the Valhalla where he will remain until he can attend Captain's Mast. During which time I am sure that he should be studying Naval traditions concerning a captain's duties involving on-board-birth's, marriages, and the repercussions of such actions for the person born or married upon the ship, especially a ship of war, and their nationality status. Now if you don't mind I really need to go win a bet. They have probably started to send out a search party for me since I haven't made an appearance yet." Wayward stood up staggered over to the edge of the wall, "Better yet, Eve, belay that order, I am too drunk, and Fata has to take me to my quarters." He whipped his manhood out and started pissing into the courtyard where the party was going on. A howl of laughter came from a few Marines and a few seconds later came screams from below as a few of the nobles who had been sneering at the Marines received a Golden Shower of reprocessed ale.

"Oh my God Wayward," both women yelled out.

Fata jumped up and ran over to grab him, drug him away from the wall while waving one hand over his head and yelling, "Sorry folks. He did that on a bet. I'm going to go put him to bed before he does something really stupid." There was a roar of laughter from below, most of it Marines and Royal Guards, but some came from other Nobles and the Royals who were enjoying some of the snobbier ones getting their come upping's.

"Wayward, what the hell?" Eve hissed.

"What, this way he has to be in front of Odin as a witness instead of a convict, he helped put a stop to an embarrassing political issue, and Odin will gladly sign the birth certificate and then the marriage certificate. Both of which will grant her citizenship, and hopefully distract him from keel-hauling me. At least that's what we're going to tell Odin was the fastest way we could think of in my drunk addled state to get him in front of the man to solve Tammy's problem. Tell the Nobles in our culture it was considered to be a blessing for one of a higher station to piss on those of a station below them, me being the unofficial Terran Ambassador to the Alliance and all. Tomorrow we'll point out to Odin that it was King Gregarious' wish that someone would piss on their day, as much as they were trying to do to his party." Wayward said as he stood up straight and started walking to the shuttle on his own.

Down below Command Sgt Major Harvey walked over to a large circle of Marines who were cheering a little sooner and then louder than the rest and pushed his way to the middle. When he got there he put his foot on the stack of beer scripts that were being divided up. T looked up to find out whose shiny boot she was going to break off in their own backside, saw who it was and jumped to attention like everyone around her. "The Big Dog always flushes out the juiciest prey, now hand me those." He took a step back and T dropped back down, grabbed all the chits as quickly as she could and stood back up. He took them from her and started organizing and sorting them. "You see, when I saw him up there I knew something was up. Then all I had to do was figure out where you guys were to know that eventually somebody would do something stupid." He finished with the stack in his hands, hefted them a few times looked at T, raised one evebrow, and held out

his right hand and made a give me motion. She handed over another stack of chits from her cargo pockets with a sigh. "Yep that's just about right." he said as he started sorting the new ones into the old ones.

"These are going to bribe the Royal Guards into escorting those Nobles home, and make sure they don't make any phone calls they might regret between now and court tomorrow." He then crinkled his face up looking at the chits with one eye squinted, reached around behind Ts back, popped open her center belt pouch and pulled out two more beer chits. "There that should cover it. Enjoy the rest of your night Marines and remember you're on duty so you shouldn't be drinking anyways. I thought I saw a noble trying to get close to one of your primaries without Royal approval," he said as he walked towards the Royal Guard Commanders. "Oh, and tell Wayward his aims sucks, he missed the most annoyoning one of those assholes."

CHAPTER SEVEN: ORDER IN THE COURT

A civil matter in court, that was how it had been described to everyone through all of the videos, messages and press releases. However, the nobles of the court knew otherwise. With the recent events still fresh in everyone's minds, the Queens swearing to earn the favor of the people again, the overall unhappiness of the people with the status quo, the revelation of a second Heroine of Silinius Four, and her choice of song upon her arrival. The nobles really were in fear of what today's findings meant for them.

The court was called to order as the Princes and Princesses were brought in to stand in front of their parents' thrones. The Royal Families had taken to wearing nanite armor since the fighting in the park and today was no different for the princes, some still looked like they had gore on them from yesterday's fight. The Princesses, however, were wearing Terran fashion, highly unfitting for such a regal appearance, but when they stopped and turned to face the audience the message was clear. All of the princesses were wearing black jeans, black and grey flannel patterned shirts, long black dusters designed to slide over their wings, black leather cowboy hats, and those stupid masks that the wranglers had been wearing. Odin came out next and took position in front of a special oversized chair that had been placed in the middle of the thrones but one rung below them, in between the Chief Justice's bench and the Prime Minister's Cabinetry. The Kings and Queens came out after him and stood in front of their thrones, the Queens held the Scepters of Life and Wisdom, and the Kings carried the Maces of Judgment.

The Court Chancelor stepped forward and thumped his staff on the floor three times before announcing. "The Royal Court of Avian Prime, its territories, and colonies is hereby in session. The twelve majesties sit in session with the Terran Military's Admiral Odin of the Asgard Fleet in attendance. The Asgardian Fleet is in attendance per Royal Request to provide testimony in the cases of Layman vs Layman and the estate settlement re-opening for the lands, titles, and holdings of the Barony of the Layman Household. All pay heed to the summons of The Royal Majesties and come forth to witness as requested."

When he was finished Admiral Odin stepped up and moved to join the Officers corps at the front of the Terrans that would be testifying in the court proceedings. "Um, Admiral. You're supposed to remain up here. Those that would be testifying today are the only ones that need to be down there." One of the Angelic Princes said as he squeezed through their ranks.

"I understand but I can't be in two places at once, so I must go where the Chamberlin just instructed me to." The Admiral said as he stepped past them. The Chamberlin saw him leaving the ranks of the Princes and Princesses and stepped forward. "Is there a problem Admiral?"

"No, just getting with the rest of the witnesses so we can get this underway." The Admiral replied.

King Gregarious spoke up as Odin stepped past the Chamberlin. "Odin, is there a reason that you are joining your men instead of sitting up here? I apologize but we have never had another leader such as yourself in our court during a session or we would have you sitting up here with us. However, these uncomfortable seats were built several thousand years ago and are very difficult to move."

"Um, no, your majesty. I was honored to be offered the seat, but you wanted everyone who was knowledgeable, complicit and potentially an accomplice to the actions of Desdemona Layman at Silinius Four Two and Four Three present to testify. I brought the regiment who rescued her on Four Two, the personnel who were on the Winged Vengeance for the actions prior to her loss at Four Three, and those that were in direct knowledge of her activities prior to the drop on Four Three. Therefore, I must join the witnesses." Odin responded.

"Your majesties, I must interject. We do not need all of the Asgardian Fleet to testify, nor the members of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force. This is but a simple humble matter of a father wanting to remove a disgraced daughter from the right of inheritance. There is no need for the entire fleet to be here, or to involve so many members of the Royal Court." A thin goblin looking individual said as he stepped forward.

"Barrister, you were the one to make the request for all personages knowing, aiding, abetting, witness to or otherwise an accomplice to Desdemona's actual activities. They are present at this time, to include myself." Eve 2469 said as she appeared next to the Admiral.

"He is right admiral Odin. Surely, just because you were in charge of the fleet you do not hold that you are that responsible for the actions of everyone under you," Gregarious queried.

"Well normally I would agree with you on that, but I was aware of her actions of mutiny within seconds of it occurring and followed the advice that I was given at the time. Thus, I provided compliance and acquiesced with her actions that led to her leading the members of the Winged Vengeance during the fight on Four Three." Odin responded.

"Surely, you jest. There is no way that one such as yourself can be aware of everything on every deck of the hundreds of ships that you were commanding that day during the battle, while coordinating said battle." The barrister said

"Normally I would agree with you. However, when one of my most senior officers with thirty-eight years of military experience calls me, in the middle of combat operations on that scale, to inform me that there is a mutiny aboard one of my drop ships. I tend to pay attention really fast, and long enough to make an informed decision." Odin replied.

The barrister chuckled a little and said, "So we know what decision you made, but what other choice did you have at the time? It's not like you could have stopped the fight in order to settle the issue would you?"

"First, there was several thousand veteran Marines aboard that ship, to include the officer that called me. Had they thought it was a problem it would have been settled before I was informed. Secondly, yes, I did have other options."

"Surely you jest. What could the Marines have possibly done to settle the matter themselves?" Odin raised his right hand over his head and all of the Marines present answered the call, "Aroo, Aroo, Aroo." When Odin closed his fist the Court Hall was quiet. "Well bravado aside since that did not take place, was there no other option?"

"Sure, I could have ordered the drop ship to crash into the planet's surface and let the survivors be the first to join in the fight." Odin replied with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"What? That's preposterous. You could never expect anyone to follow that order." The barrister said as if he was offended to have been lied to in public. This time a Naval Captain stepped forward beside Odin, his large Magnathian form radiated heat waves through his uniform when he held up his hand he chanted with the Marines and sailors, "Aroo, Aroo, Aroo." "What does that even mean? And who are you to think you could answer for the Admiral?" The barrister tried to regain control of the trial.

"I am Captain Shard, of the Winged Vengeance, and if I had been given that order by Odin, I would have drawn saber and pistol when we hit the ground, just like the rest of my men. Oh, and that sound, it's the noise you make when you drive the barrel of your weapon into an enemy's heart bayonet first, and the number of times to do it just to make sure they die." The captain said before he took a step back.

"What? Well, I, um," the barrister paused to clear his throat, collect his thoughts and try again. There was a murmur of chuckles from the Marines in attendance, but it was silenced when the Gunner turned and looked over his shoulder at them. The chuckles that came from the nobility however was not. "You said you were informed of the issue. By whom and what were your orders following the notification?"

"Chief Warrant Officer Gunner Grinder informed me that there was a mutiny aboard the Winged Vengeance in accordance with Naval Traditions. I asked his advice, and as advised I paused the fleet's forward movement for the length of one sea chanty to allow Desdemona to take command of her unit and get her troops motivated for the upcoming fight." Odin replied.

"You *paused* the fleet's forward momentum?" The barrister asked.

"Yes, we had just received the Marines back aboard from Four Two and were regrouping for the push to Four Three. I added an extra sea chanty to the regrouping phase before we pushed on." Odin said.

"A what, why?" The barrister asked as if he was not truly understanding.

"A sea chanty is a song that raiders would sing to motivate themselves right before conducting amphibious assaults on villages, cities or enemy forts during the age of sail and sword. It helps to get them in the right mindset to go from peacefully floating along to fighting for their very lives in close quarters combat." Odin replied.

"I understand **that**, **but why** would you pause the push long enough to play another sea chanty?" The barrister asked.

"Hey, where we are from, we have myths based on some of your space faring explorers who must have visited our planet. In those myths Demons and Angels were prone to killing weak officers in order for a stronger one to rise up and take command during times of war. **Normally**, I don't condone that behavior, but as you said I was a little too busy to be dealing with cultural differences, and from what I was informed, the one who got replaced needed it." Odin said, this time the chuckle came from the Avian veterans, to which the

now General who had been in charge of the scouts looked over his shoulder to silence them. Some of the courtiers caught themselves chuckling or giggling also.

"The man was **clearly** not given a chance to even prove his metal in combat. How could you say something like that?" The barrister asked.

"Eve, can you replay the transmission for me?" Eve nodded and a hologram of the transmission was played

"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 said.

"The Hero of Two just turned her security detail into pink mist with a shotgun on full auto, decapitated 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?" The hologram was terminated at this point.

"If we have all of this footage available plus what was shown during your arrival yesterday, why do we not have any of the actual footage of the murder of the two Royal Guards and the Court Appointed Delegate? Or any proof of incompetence?" The barrister asked.

"Before we get to that. What was the findings these men came up with," King Ortag asked.

"Keep the politicians out of the battlesphere, make all command personnel go through a minimum training program on Terra Prime, and promote from within as much as possible in the units they are assigned to."
Odin responded. There was a general chuckle from everyone at the remark about politicians, but the veterans and the nobles were laughing about it for different reasons.

Queen Bellafacia spoke up, "Why does promoting from within make a difference?"

"The men and women performing the tasks that they have been given to do every day know how to perform that task better than someone who went to school and got a degree for it. So, if someone is competent enough at leadership, move them up through the ranks until you find where they fit the best. At other times, having fresh eyes on a situation is beneficial so having a special training corps setup to teach promising

young cadets how to be an officer and then giving them a taste of humility and the job that they will be performing with their teams before putting them with a seasoned team to break them in, is the most beneficial way to avoid stagnation and a tradition of errors and incompetency."

Queen Qui' Fa La spoke up, "Thank you. That makes perfect sense. Can you please answer the barrister's question now?" Odin nodded and then turned back to the barrister.

"The Master Gunnery Seargent in charge of the resupply table was not wearing a helmet at the time, and no footage was recorded by him. Lt. Desdemona's recording equipment was damaged and operating intermittently from a thirty-ton engine block of a heavy mech pinning her to the ground and almost suffocating her to death before she was rescued. When she resupplied, the shipboard systems began a software patch to fix and reroute what it could to repair her recordings. Hence, why we have footage of her taking the head of 'a snot nosed incompetent Captain' who honestly looked like he was about to wet himself, rather than lead several hundred people into combat." Odin replied. "Seriously if someone came onto the bridge and told me I was sitting in their spot, the last thing I am going to say is, 'I'm going to tell your daddy on you." With that the Marines and sailors present laughed and some of the courtiers chuckled, it was Odin who turned and glared at them this time. A few taps of the Chamberlin's Staff of office brought the nobles to heel, but it was the chuckles from the thrones that took everyone by surprise, several Kings and even Queen Antilla were elbowed by their spouses to hush them up.

"Where is this Master Gunnery Seargent? I would like to question him in these matters." The barrister charged.

"Currently the Master Guns is on Terra Prime undergoing treatment for memory loss, and rehabilitation for some derogatory remarks made during the initial fact-finding mission. It is my belief that after thirty-two years of head injuries it has finally caught up with him and he needs help recovering. Killing a few non-sentient creatures should help him do just that. However, I am not a medical professional and cannot testify to that."

Odin said

"It seems rather convenient that a health condition is what is keeping him from testifying. Couldn't you just 'respawn him,' as you Terrans are fond of saying, and fix it?" The barrister asked.

Eve stepped forward, "The Admiral does not have the medical or technological knowledge concerning these matters. May I answer that question?"

Before the barrister could object, Queen Antilla answered, "Please do, with another forty-three thousand witnesses to go through. I believe we may die of old age at this pace."

Eve bowed to the queen and turned to the barrister, "Long term health conditions that occurred prior to the event that causes a respawn are not corrected by the respawn. We haven't determined what has caused his memory issues or his inability to discern a Demonic from an Angelic at this time, but Terran and Continuum specialists are working with him every day to correct the issue." There were a few chuckles from the Marines knowing good and well that training from the Corps was the reason for this, as they beat the racism out of everyone they could and killed the rest. They also knew that court induced amnesia had a way of resolving itself after the testimony that was unable to be recalled became irrelevant.

"Is the Chief Warrant Officer who gave you the advice available for testimony?" The barrister asked, and Gunner Grinder stepped forward. "And you are?"

"Chief Warrant Officer Grinder of the 9th Marines Special Operations Capable Combined Infantry Regiment."

"Why do they sometimes refer to you as Gunner, if you are a Chief Warrant Officer?"

"Naval tradition. During the days of sails and cannons, the Chief Warrant Officer was often the one in charge of the cannon batteries and gunnery crews."

"What can you offer as to the killing of the two Royal Guards, the Royal Delegate and the Commanding Officer of the scouts aboard the Winged Vengeance?" the barrister asked.

"I did not see the two Royal Guards, or the Delegate die so I cannot testify to that. As far as the captain that was killed, those matters have already been settled in a military court and are not relevant here."

"We will decide what is and is not relevant." The barrister said and Odin stepped forward one pace.

Several of the Kings and Queens held up one hand to him. "Barrister, those matters were settled in a military tribunal as requested by the original fact-finding teams. We gave our word they would not be brought up here again. The Military personnel have been more than accommodating in answering your questions, but as he stated they are not relevant, and you are wasting our time." King Ortag said as he shifted next to his wife, the big Demonic bounced the mace in his hand against his shoulder as if it was getting heavy, or he was implying a threat, it was hard to tell.

"You're right your Majesty. I apologize. Very well, if it pleases your majesties, I would like to call forth the two Royal Guards to provide their testimonies as to what happened." The barrister shuffled from foot to foot as he spoke and tugged at his shirt collar. The Royal Chancelor tapped his staff on the floor three times after King Ortag nodded.

Two Royal Guards stepped forward and came to a position in center of the aisle alongside the barrister and military command staff. They bowed to the Royal Families and then to the command staff. One then spoke up to the Kings and Oueens. "We answer your call your majesties."

"Can either of you testify to what the barrister is asking?" Queen Antilla asked.

"No, your majesty, we have not received any memories of our time on the ship from the military repositories." One of them answered.

"May I speak to that your majesties?" came a question from one of the military officers.

"And you are?" King Gregarious asked.

"I am Chief Medical Officer Captain Fraga of the Dripping Talon, the sister ship to the Winged Vengeance. I have information as to why the military does not embed combat repositories upon civilian clones, especially those that are the direct result of a," he cleared his throat before continuing, "brutal ending."

"Go ahead." Queen Antilla answered.

"These men were active here during the combat actions in Silinius Four correct?" the doctor asked, to which both guards nodded. "It would be like a time paradox except in their memories, we believe something like this may be affecting the Master Gunnery Seargent from earlier. When you try to assimilate the memories of

two separate identities that were alive and doing different things in different locations at the same time, it car cause a bit of a mental disconnect. Since several weeks have passed and we have not spun up the mental stacks of the Delegate or the Guards during that time, it might not be that bad, but there is a possibility of it causing... issues." The doc replied.

"Why have you not brought the Delegate or the Royal Guards back yet?" The barrister asked.

"Barrister, I do believe he was addressing us. Remember your place." King Ortag spoke then turned back to the doc after the barrister bowed deeply. "He does ask a good question though."

"We did not want anyone to accuse us of tampering with the evidence or trying to tamper with the witnesses, and since they were technically visiting civilians we did not have the authority to resuscitate them." The doc answered rather crisply as if offended that he would violate a civilian's rights.

"Very well," King Ortag replied, "are there any other issues that may arise besides memory loss or disconnect?"

"Other than the possibility of mental breakdown, there is a high possibility of loss of consciousness while the memories are reconciled, extreme dizziness, extreme nausea, projectile vomiting, involuntary release of the bowels and bladder, migraine headaches that may persist for a few weeks, or possibly even brain death." The doctor offered as a warning of the potential health issues associated with shoving someone else's memories into your head.

"Gentlemen," Queen Antilla spoke up. "You have heard the warning of the medical officer. This is not a sacrifice we can in good conscious or good morale standing ask this of you to simply provide testimony in an inheritance case. If this is something either of you would be willing to do to answer some truths about this case, please speak your truths now."

Both men stepped forward and bowed, "We live to serve your majesties." The one on the left continued to speak, "If this pleases the court, and can assist in these matters it is a risk we will take."

CHAPTER EIGHT: TESTIMONY OF THE SILENT GUARDS

"No, it does not please us to ask this of you. Yes, your honor and bravery does. If you are willing to make this sacrifice, we will give permission to the doctor to proceed. Doctor, how long will this take and what do you need?" Queen Bellafacia spoke up.

"A few seconds to install the memories, and depending on their mental strength, a few minutes to a few days to recover." The doc said.

"Very well, thank you gentlemen. You may proceed doctor." Queen Antilla replied.

"Gentlemen," the doc spoke as he motioned to the military personnel. Two Fleet Marine Corpsmen came running from the ranks of the Marines, and another medical officer came from the Naval personnel. When King Ortag raised one eyebrow, the doc looked at him and said, "I have been respawned twice, once in medical school to experience it and once as a result of actions at Four Three. This is Lt. Commander Overshaw, he has had six respawns as a field medical officer, and these are two of our Fleet Marine Corpsmen, they work closely with the Marines and are approaching triple digits in respawns each. They are

the best medical personnel we can provide to help the guards." There was a low murmur of "Hoorah Doc' from the Marines.

"If they are so good at their jobs then why have they died so much?" The barrister asked chuckling, he stopped when he realized he and his client were the only two to do so.

"If you were sent for a respawn every time you lost an interjection, how many times would you have beer respawned?" One of the corpsmen asked before thinking.

"What? Why I... Why, *I never*. That is **highly inappropriate**." The barrister spluttered. The laughter from the courtier side of the hall was loud enough to cover up the sniggers from the Marines.

The chief medical officer stepped in and agreed, "He's right, that was inappropriate, please keep your comments to yourself chief." The was a self-satisfied sniff from the barrister. "Remember we are guests, and even if they act inappropriate **you** are supposed to be a professional." This was greeted by even more laughter from the courtiers and a few of the princes and princesses. "**Gentlemen**, since this will be your first respawn, and a highly unusual one, I am going to ask you to lay down to reduce the risk of injury." The guards laid down on their backs and the corpsmen cradled their heads in their laps as they knelt behind them. The Docs then held a leather strap out in front of each of the guards. The Guards bit down on them after it became obvious what they were being offered. "Nod when you're comfortable and ready. Both guards adjusted themselves slightly then nodded.

Eve stepped forward and said, "Beginning transfer." After a second or two both men began shaking and thrashing as if they were having an epileptic seizure. "Transfers complete." Eve said as she stepped back. One of the corpsmen flipped his guard onto his side and yanked the strap out of his mouth, "He's going to pop," and the Guard projectile vomited across the floor striking the barrister's shins and feet.

"GAH, YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE!" The barrister shouted as he danced away from the stream coming from the Guard. The corpsman never took his eyes off of his patient, he just held on to his shoulders and did his best not to let the man damage his wings while thrashing.

It was one of the princes that came to the corpsman's defense, "Did you just **accuse** him of risking the life of a patient during a dangerous procedure just to make him puke on your feet?"

"**Um, no**, your highness. I was just observing that, he may have taken advantage of the opportunity to embarrass me." The harrister said

King Gregarious spoke up this time, "You seem to be doing just fine in that on your own barrister, now sit down and be quiet until these men recover."

"May I request a recess to go get cleaned up, your majesty?" the barrister asked.

"Don't you think they would like a recess to get cleaned up?" The king motioned to his two guards who were still thrashing about. Two more Corpsmen had sprinted forward to aid their brothers when the guards started to shake. The one who had not vomited had obviously wet himself and the Field Medical Officer removed his uniform coat to cover the man's groin. The barrister looked at them while this was going on, then nodded unable to speak. "Then sit down, shut up, and wait your turn. That's the last time you will be warned."

Queen Antilla spoke up, "Chamberlin, can we get some water and towels please?"

"Some crushed ice would be good for them to chew on at first your majesty. They should not ingest any fluids for five or six hours and solid food is inadvisable in the first twenty-four." The senior medical officer offered

The barrister sat down with his client and fortunately it was only about five minutes before the men began to stop shaking. The corpsmen swapped from holding the men down to trying to clean them up and provide them with some modesty. A wall of towels was held up and the Guard who had wet himself was changed as he tried to recover. The men finally came out of the stupor at about the ten-minute mark but were both obviously not fit to stand on their own just yet. King Ortag was the one who spoke up next, "Gentlemen, we will give you all the time you need to recover. Let us know when you are ready to testify."

"Your majesty, thank you, but these people came a long way away from a very important job and we would like to aid in bringing this matter to end as quickly as possible." The Corpsmen helped them to rise and then supported them as best they could while not taking away any of their dignity.

"Very well, in the matter of your murders what would you like to add to the testimonies presented to this court today?" Queen Antilla asked.

"She asked if we were clones, then asked us to apologize to you because she had to earn the honor that you had bestowed upon her for surviving where so many others had not." The Guard on the left stated.

"Her orders were to give one life in service to the Alliance Forces and she had not fulfilled that order, so the attempt to withdraw her from her duties unfulfilled was a mistake that confused both of us, but so had most of the Delegate's behavior." The other Guard spoke up.

"Explain yourself please," King Gregarious demanded.

"He gave specifically worded and confusing orders to his assistant, kept telling us he was going to do one thing and then did another, lied multiple times to many of the naval staff, acted like nothing and no one could tell him what to do, and the only time he showed any real backbone was when he was talking to either of the heroines and that was always in a derogatory manner." The guard on the right said.

The guard on the left followed up, "Honestly your majesties, I was ready to request permission from you to respawn him myself for his embarrassing behavior."

King Ortag raised one eyebrow and asked, "embarrassing? How?"

The royal Guard raised his right hand, and a hologram appeared of the delegate speaking to Desi. "Go dowr 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."

The entire Royal Families gathered shot first the Baron and then his Captain of the Guard glares of retribution as the Royal Guard continued. "He informed the admiralty that we were not to leave his side and that he was to be considered a non-combatant, as he was there as a Delegate and that was not something he was capable of performing."

King Ismoldar was a huge Angelic, he was known to be quiet and reserved, and he spoke up for the first time. "Baron, are you aware that your Captain of the Guard is a non-combatant and unable to perform the duties of a guard?" "It's more of a ceremonial and administrative post your majesty, surely you do not expect someone of that position to fight?" The Baron offered to defend his Captain.

Both of the Royal Guards spun on him, "**We** are Captains of the Guard, and **we** were ready and willing to go to the surface to protect the heroine had that coward not gotten us killed." The one on the right offered. The one on the left continued, "The Chief Warrant Officer was correct in his assessment of the most useless politician ever. Since he wasn't able to offer any physical assistance he was asked to answer some administrative details regarding negotiations with the Avian Royal Court and he was unable or unwilling to answer those questions."

King Ortag cleared his throat, squeezed his wife's shoulder then stepped back and turned his back to the court. The other Kings saw this and huddled up with him behind the thrones. The whispered conversation lasted three seconds before the Kings returned to their seated wives and whispered into their ears. When the Kings stepped forward again and squeezed their wives on the shoulder it was clear they had come to some kind of conclusion. The women each turned in surprise to look into their husbands' eyes before getting a nod from them, except for Queen Antilla who only nodded. The queens looked at one another and the ones on the outer edge nodded towards Antilla and she nodded back then turned to Eve and spoke. "Eve 2469, we would like to make a request of the Continuum."

"I would be honored to stand witness your Majesties." Eve replied.

"It is the conclusion of the Royal Court that after the testimony provided that the one sent to act as our delegate to the fleet in Silinius Four has behaved dishonorably and should not be given a chance to continue to embarrass us any further. Is it possible to have that mental construct stricken from the Continuums rosters to never be respawned again?"

"It is possible your majesties, but may I offer an alternative to deletion?" Eve asked.

"You may." Queen Antilla replied.

"The Terrans have set a precedent that anyone incapable or unwilling to be of assistance to the war efforts be stripped of their personalities and the base intelligences be used as operating systems for devices that perform menial tasks such as making hot beverages, washing dishes, or in a case such as this one, clearing sewer pipes of clogs." Eve said, hoping to rescue as much as she could of such a precious commodity.

This time it was the queens who stepped up and huddled together behind the thrones. King Ortag and King Gregarious were standing near the center and obviously overheard what was said as they both began to chuckle evilly before looking at one another grinning like two kids that were up to no good. When the queens returned to the thrones, Queen Bellafacia was the one who spoke, "We accept your alternative. It is our judgment that for his behavior during Silinius Four, the repository will be taken offline and stripped to minimum intelligence where he will serve out the rest of his existence, in any means the Continuum may have need of him. On the condition he is never allowed to regain enough intelligence to communicate with anyone ever again, other than acknowledging orders received and completed."

The gasps from the crowd of nobles was loud enough one would have thought that they generated a wind from all of the inhales needed to make it. The barrister just raised one eyebrow, this did not bode well for his client, and he knew it.

CHAPTER NINE: I CALL DIBBS

Queen Antilla then spoke to the two Royal Guards, "Gentlemen, knowing what you know now, would you like to press charges against Desdemona Layman for your murders upon the Winged Vengeance?"

The two Guards looked at one another then turned back to the thrones, "No your majesty. However, we swore to give a life at Silinius Four, and were unable to honorably do so. We would like a chance to use the repositories available to the Continuum to do so if possible."

The Royal Families were torn about this decision, and it showed on their faces, some were saddened, and some were proud. Queen Antilla looked to Eve who stepped forward, "Gentlemen, your dual nature is amenable. However, you will never be able to reconnect these consciousnesses to your true selves again due to the nature of your tasks here and its requirement that you be cloned. You would effectively have to splinter those repositories into their own personalities, and they would never again be able to become one with you. Is this something you are sure you would want to do?" Eve warned them. Both men looked at each other then back to her and nodded. Eve then turned to Odin. "Admiral?"

"It would be my honor to take your oaths of enlistment." Odin said with a huge grin on his face.

From deep within the Marine ranks came a female voice, "**Ouch**! What? **Oh yeah. MINE**!" Odin just hung his head as he recognized the voice, he unconsciously let out a small moan of pain.

King Ortag raised one eyebrow and looked at the admiral, "Care to explain?"

"I somehow underestimated the value of a promise and allowed my Special Forces Commander to request any and all enlisted personnel that may be required to fit the needs of her specialty teams, especially in the matter of expertise that her teams currently have need of. In this case, two highly qualified and experienced Avian combatants. I want them, she needs them, therefore she wins." Odin said just shaking his head with a slight grin on his face. The two men grinned as they realized what that meant and who they would be serving with.

Eve turned to the Guards, "Gentlemen, since you just absorbed your past memories that resolved your deaths on the Winged Vengeance, it would be advisable to make fresh repositories, and we will update the ones that are currently used for the military purposes." Both men nodded in agreement.

Queen Antilla spoke up, "That resolves the issue of Desdemona Layman's character being unfit for inheritance but does not resolve the issue of the inheritance itself."

CHAPTER TEN: STRIKE TWO

The barrister jumped to his feet and stepped forward again. "**Your majesties**, I do not understand, we haven't even heard all of the testimony yet."

King Ortag growled, "Second Warning barrister, the next one will be your head. We clear?" The barrister visibly swallowed and nodded his head yes rapidly. "You're right we haven't heard all of the testimony yet. Felicity Layman present yourself to the court." A slight female squeak came from the middle of the Marines, and as one, nine Marines moved in a box formation, with the smallest of them front and center towards the throne. When the formation approached, Desi was front and center and right behind her was Fee. The other eight Marines Formed two walls, the one from front right stepped across to extend the wall of muscle

blocking the view of the Baron and his Captain of the Guard from the young ladies, while the middle right spun with the back row to block access from the entry doors to their charges. At this King Ortag raised one evebrow and looked at Odin.

Odin shrugged his shoulders and apologized, "Security detail. I'm just happy their smart enough to realize you're not a threat they should be concerned with." To which the Military personnel not standing up in the aisle chuckled at Odin's implications, the courtiers chuckled also thinking it was a joke.

The Queens hadn't been privy to the Kings' and Odin's conversation about his Marines practicing as they fought, and Queen Antilla took up the call, "Lady Layman, why did you not present yourself to court to claim your birthright on your majority name day?"

Fee swallowed hard and tried to hide the tremble in her voice as she responded, "I didn't know I was supposed to, and we weren't allowed to leave the house starting a few weeks before it because we were preparing to deploy to Silinius Four. Your Majesties." She was so nervous that she almost forgot her etiquette.

"Lady Layman, please calm yourself. You are not the one in trouble here," came the voice of Ismoldar. She visibly calmed a little, tried to courtesy, remembered her uniform didn't have a dress or skirt, and then bowed. This caused a ripple of chuckles to escape through the crowd of nobles on the upper decks.

King Gregarious cleared his throat to silence them and began to speak when the barrister stepped forward holding a hand up. The King raised one eyebrow and then nodded to him. "Point of order your majesty, but she is not a lady of the court."

"Point taken, and well spotted, we need to fix that right now. Step forward Felicity Layman and kneel." King Ismoldor said. His wings were as black as hers and it was tradition for a Royal of similar feather to perform any honors upon a citizen. As he stepped forward he handed his mace off to his wife, and his son drew his sword from his hip to hand to his father as he passed. Felicity dropped to her knees with tears running down her face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. Noone ever told me I was supposed to present myself to court until just a few days ago, and Odin got me here as quickly as he could to present me as requested."

The king took pity on her and knelt in front of her before lifting her chin to look in her eyes. "Sweetheart, **you** aren't in trouble. I need you to kneel so I can officially knight you for your actions as a representative of the court." She looked into his eyes, saw no malice, sniffled and squeaked out an "ok," that was barely audible.

So as not to terrify her anymore, he stood up and said, "For your courage, dedication and conduct on the Valhalla during the combat operations during and after Silinius Four. I hereby knight you Dame Felicity Layman." He tapped her on both shoulders with the flat of his sword and then said, "Arise and be recognized by the court Dame Layman." The roar from both sides of the Hall was deafening and the barrister was glad he wasn't sent to respawn after each loss, because this was going to be a double, he just couldn't see it going any other way.

When King Ismoldor had returned his son's sword to him, retrieved his mace and a kiss from his wife, then resumed his position behind the throne the proceedings continued. Queen Bellafacia spoke up, "Now that that is settled. Dame Layman, care to explain how you managed to arrive on the Valhalla at risk of a true death?"

"Baron Layman was unhappy with how much it cost to have his daughter and Captain of the Guard cloned and didn't tell me that I would be safe on the flagship and had nothing to worry about." Fee answered with a slightly stronger voice now that she was done being terrified.

"Odin, how many Valhalla class ships were lost at Silinius Four?" Queen Antilla asked.

"Fifteen your Majesty." Odin replied.

"Were you aware that an un-cloned individual was aboard your ship as you were entering into a theater of combat in violation of the Draconic-Terran accords for the Terrans to join the alliance, which I do believe you yourself helped to draw up?" King Ortag asked.

"I was not. Unfortunately, I took the word of a duly appointed Royal delegate that his party was complying with all laws and regulations. When we asked, in query to her reported loss and being unable to locate her repository, we were informed that it was due to a clerical error, and while tragic. She was the Baron's family, and the Baron would notify her family personally." Odin responded.

Again, the entire Royal Family focused on the Baron. The barrister held up one hand and King Gregarious looked at him. "Your Majesties, surely something went wrong **somewhere**. My client could not have possibly done this on purpose."

"Dame Layman?" Queen Bellafacia asked.

"He was stomping around cussing for two weeks and said he couldn't even afford to clone himself until he received his big payday after the deployment was over." Fee said squaring her shoulders up as Desi placed a hand on her shoulder to comfort her friend.

The barrister tried to charge around the blockade of Marines, with veins bulging in anger, "That's Glack.." he was cutoff as Thumpers massive right hand wrapped around his throat lifted him off the ground and placed him down in front of Thumper. "She can hear you just fine from right there little man. That was **your only warning** from me."

The little barrister staggered backwards rubbing his throat, "Your... Your Majesties."

King Ortag looked at him, "I warned you. He was nicer than I would have been, so I would not test him if I was you." The King relished in the Terrans ideal of a special place where all attorneys would roast in the fires of eternal damnation after their true deaths.

"The Baron was only acting in your stead until you came of age, is this correct?" Queen Bellafacia asked.

"Yes your majesty" Desi answered as Fee had gotten choked up again.

"So, he failed to teach you your courtly duties, failed to present you to court on your name day, failed to have you cloned for performance of your duties on the Valhalla, assigned a despicable individual as your guardian, left you for dead, reported you as dead, and claimed your inheritance the day after the battle for himself. Is our understanding correct?" Oueen Antilla asked.

Fee shrugged then answered, "I can't speak about the inheritance, but the rest of it is correct, your majesties."

"That's right, you were still physically fighting fires and such on the Valhalla, you wouldn't have known. So, we have an interesting dilemma here. Two cousins serving together in combat while a man tries to steal everything from them both. Why would he do such a thing?" One of the other Queens asked.

"He has always favored my brother, but as his first born he would have to discredit me for my brother to inherit anything. He also needed Fee to disappear to have anything for him to inherit as he had squandered ours. Her half-brother would have to be disappeared to eliminate his claim as well, but he was an orphan so that would have been easy to arrange." Desi answered.

"Hah, that fool took a payoff of just fifty-thousand dinars to walk away from it all." The Baron blurted out without thinking.

"So, you had enough to pay him off, but not enough to ensure your niece's safety?" King Ortag asked.

The barrister just gripped his forehead and looked down at his feet.

"I, well, not until the courts awarded me the inheritance," The baron responded.

"So, a Baron that had not one but two baronies beneath him could not afford to maintain a suitable amount of funding to ensure the safety of his own family, let alone that of his subjects. Sounds like piss poor management to me." King Gregarious said.

"That is beside the point. Dame Layman how do you wish to settle this matter? We clearly cannot overturn a ruling like this without upsetting some of the other nobles that may have used similar methods to grow their lands. Afterall, he clearly isn't smart enough to figure out something like this on his own." Queen Bellafacia asked.

"Is trial by combat acceptable your majesties?" Fee asked.

"WHAT?!?" The barrister yelled as he made to charge around the Marine barricade again. "*That's barbari*.." The side of Thumper's fist came crashing down on top of his head and he folded up on top of his feet with blood coming from his head.

"Oops, I think I may have hit him too hard. CORPSMAN!" Thumper said.

"No need," came the call from King Ortag. "I warned him if he interrupted one more time I would kill him. You just saved me the trouble. You know what?" The King leapt from the dais and brought the mace down on the unconscious barrister's head sending gore, skull fragments and brain matter all over the floor. "Can't have people think I am a lying Baron. Afterall, you already bought him one extra chance." He shook most of the gore off and was wiping it off with one of the towels from earlier as he went back to his place behind the throne.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: LET'S TAKE THIS OUTSIDE

"The barrister was right. There hasn't been a trial by combat in a very long time dear. Are you sure?" Queen Antilla asked. When Fee nodded the Queen turned to her Chamberlin, "as you're having someone clean this mess up, have someone look up the rules for trial by combat please. We will be taking this outside rather than make more of a mess for someone to clean up in here."

The Chamberlin bowed deeply and answered, "Right away your Majesties."

The people watching this drama playout at home were shocked by the brutality the drama in the noble courts had descended into and how quickly it had resulted in yet another bloodbath in as many days. The Royal Herald came on the broadcast and provided as much clarification as he could. "Citizens of Avian Prime. The Royal Families would like to assure you that this is not something to fear as being the new normal. This is a rare occurrence in which someone was given a title owed to another and must now be settled. This matter was unsuccessfully resolved in a court of law due to the barrister's untimely demise. The offended person has the right to request a trial by combat if it is deemed necessary and acceptable by all members of the ruling Royal Court. At this time, they are relocating to the Dueling Gardens, which has long since served as the centerpiece for the Royal Families annual galas. Once upon a time it served as the Royal Dueling Grounds to settle matters such as this. We ask for your patience as we get things set up and the rules finalized in this matter. We managed to ask Lady Layman about her intentions and if she had any words to her father that could not be said in court. She requested we play a song as her response and will be happy to do so during this brief intermission. Please enjoy 'It's a Sin' by Exit Eden.

When the music ended, and the Royal Court's broadcast resumed, the Royals were standing on the garden's balcony overlooking the courtiers and military personnel below. "Chamberlin, please present your findings about the proceedings to the court."

"As it pleases Your Majesties. The offended party has a right to request trial by combat. If the challenge is accepted by all members of the Royal Families it is allowed to proceed. The challenged has the right to pick the type of weapons to be used and both parties may choose a second to defend their flanks from would be attackers. If either second wishes, it is allowable for the seconds to enter the fray but no others. If no second is found by a party a second may be appointed by the Royal Families. Anyone attempting to enter or stop the trial by combat once it has begun before termination of the duel is to be put to death."

"Does it say by whom or how they are to put to death?" King Orlag asked.

"No. your Maiesty."

"Odin would you be willing to step in as a neutral arbitrator?" Queen Antilla asked.

"I cannot your Majesties. I must apologize but I have two Marines about to enter mortal combat, as one side of the dispute. Any judgment on my behalf favoring them could be brought to question by a talented barrister." Odin said bowing low to them

"Thank you for your honesty and pointing that out. Is there any here who can stand as a neutral witness, and capable of performing the task of executing or providing a coup des gras should the need arise?" When no answer came, the Royal Families shook their heads sorrowfully then King Gregarious reached into his pocket and pulled out a long silver tube. He moved the cap to the bottom of it, pointed the open end at the sky and slapped the cap on the bottom of it with the palm of his other hand. A red flare shot into the sky and a deep male voice came from the edge of the gardens. "That was faster than I expected."

CHAPTER TWELVE: LAST MAN STANDING

A cowboy came out of the gardens as he spoke, with a massive Arctic Hellhound prowling beside him with his jowls close to the ground and teeth bared. "Surely your nobles should be willing to answer the call set out for them by their Kings and Oueens." Jack said as he scoffed at the crowd, then turned to the Royal families

and continued, "I saw the courtroom drama on tv and figured you might need me. How may I assist your Majesties?"

"Wrangler, we need a neutral adjudicator for this trial by combat. Can you assist?" King Gregarious asked.

"You would waste a chance to save your own family to ask me to play referee?" The wrangler asked.

"I am grateful for what you have offered us, but this is more important. We need you to save the sanctity of our rule of law at this moment." King Gregarious replied.

The wrangler strode to the edge of the ring. "I need guards to my right and Marines to my left. If you show fear," and he hooked his thumb over his shoulder towards the Hellhound, "**He will eat you.** So please keep the civilians away from me so none of those too scared to serve becomes served as an afternoon snack for him." The Marines and Guards came forward slowly, clearly not wanting to piss off a Hellhound almost the size of a Heavy Mech. Desi's team made sure to be the closest as they knew Spot would not attack them. "I do have one request your Majesties."

"Name it, for this service it shall be done."

"Can we have a little mood music for the bloodletting? I have had a song I have wanted to hear for a while, and it fits this situation perfectly." The wrangler said with an evil chuckle.

"Very well. We will see what we can do." Queen Antilla said.

"You realize this is being broadcast across the galaxy," the wrangler asked. When the queen nodded he looked at Eve. "Eve my little lightning bug, when I ask you to, would you please play 'Fear Me' by JLYN and Alaina Cross?" She nodded. "Very well. Fee, who is your second?" The team members who hadn't been out to the ranch yet froze. No one but the teams knew Felicity's nickname. She pointed at Spot. "HAHAHA, nice try but you aren't ready to play with the big boys just yet. Pick someone else." She pointed at Desi. "Very well. Baron worm food?"

"It's Baron Layman you cretin." The Baron managed to guiver out.

"My apologies, Baron Deadman, do you have a second?" The Baron was going through the crowd, most had the decency not to laugh in his face. A few actually drew away in fear or turned their backs on him before he even approached. "Your Majesties, it would seem he has no second. What say you?" The wrangler called out.

"Let his, Captain of the Guard, stand as his second. **That is,** what the position was originally meant for, **after all."** Came the queens in a stutter step pattern taking turns in pronouncing the wisdom of the court. No one missed the distain certain phrases had been said with.

"Very well Captain chickenshit, do you have a preferred weapon?" The wrangler asked

"Have some decorum you despicable beast lover." The captain replied

"Care to come over here and make me?" The captain took a step forward, paused and then stepped back. "That's what I thought, but you're right. You're about to die so I guess I could be nicer. What's your choice of weapons?"

Before the captain could answer the Baron clamped a hand over his mouth and whispered into his ear. Ther straightened up and said, "Blades."

Again, the wrangler chuckled, "Very well. Step into the ring. Marines, Guards, form a ring in front of all but me, please." As the duelists stepped into the ring the Guards and Marines moved to encircle the ring in the central stonework that had long ago been laid out specifically for this. "When the music begins you may begin." There was a massive amount of betting being offered from the group of military personnel. The captain dying first was even money, the baron was offered at two-to-one odds, a flawless finish by the ladies was giving five times the bet, and it was fifty to one that one of the ladies got hurt. The betting pool among themselves had ten seconds as favored length until first kill and thirty seconds until final, with the Baron being the first to die. Nobody from the courtiers would wager on any of it.

Desi looked at Fee, "You sure you want to get your hands dirty? I can take care of both of them."

"He left me for dead and ordered me not to ask for help, or let anyone I know was there, because someone paid him to do it. Your dad at least had his own reasons, but this slimeball was just riding his coattails. I'm going to make it slow and painful." Fee had a look of determination in her eyes as the heat shielding on her armored uniform came up to form a M1859 Sabre, the ceremonial sword of Marine Corps Non-Commisioned Officers

"Very well." The ladies stepped into the ring and Eve started the music. Desi drew her long knives as she watched the slimy bastard that had been her father figure for most of her life. She knew he was up to something when he said blades and not swords. She saw the glint of steel in his hands and reacted without thinking. Just like Gonzalez had taught her during the flight here, she brought her left arm forwards and up as if tossing a softball, whatever that was, and launched the blade from her own hand. It sailed tip first and buried itself in his throat, she was aiming for between his eyes, but he was closer than she thought. "I can still take care of this one too if you want," Desi said as she rotated to the left to cut off his escape in that direction.

"Nope, he's mine, you promised." Fee replied as she stalked forward. The man was absolutely terrified and began swinging wildly before she even got close. Several of the Royal Guards activated their armor and shields just in time to deflect his sword from hitting them. "Come here you little chicken shit and remember, don't ask anyone for anything unless it's an emergency. You can go back to playing admin on your phone if you get really bored. **IN HELL!"** With that she lunged forward and stabbed him in the left leg before quickly withdrawing. T had told her, when it comes to long blades just stick and move, eventually you'll strike a bleeder and bleed them out, the important thing is to not get hit. He cried out and tried to stagger to his left but couldn't because of the leg injury so he had to go to his right carrying him in Desi's direction.

"Can I at least stab him if he gets too close," Desi asked.

"Fine but you can't move from that spot. Unless he swings at you." Fee answered. He was using both hands to swing wildly at her like some drunk trying to break open a pinata with a three-foot knife. When the sword went flying by to her left she stepped in and stabbed him in between the shoulder socket and the shoulder blade on the back of his right shoulder. His arm instantly went numb, and he almost dropped his sword. "What's a matter windbag? Did they not teach you how to fight in the nobleman's ass kissing school you went to?" He sobbed out a cry of pain as she dodged another attempt to swat her. "Funny, those very same people you were deriding for being barbarians, primitives, and beneath your station are the very same ones that taught me how to take you apart in just seventy-two hours." She stepped in between swings again to run a

slash across his ribs. "I would say that makes me a fencing genius, but that would be a lie. I just don't suck at it as bad as you do." When he hacked downwards at her with his good arm above his bad leg he staggered forward, and she side stepped like she had been taught. Doc had used that tactic several times to sucker her into a loss. So, she stepped to the side, instead of going for the kill, and as he staggered past her she slapped him in the back of the head with the flat of the sword throwing him even further off balance.

He staggered towards the wrangler, screaming "Help me. I surrender." While waving his sword around in his hand trying to use it to catch his balance. Unfortunately for him, Spot saw the man charging at Jack, waving a sword and growling. When the sword came down, so did Spot's jaws. He took the man standing up all the way to just a few inches above his ankles.

Jack placed his hand on the side of Spot's neck and said, "freeze." The Hellhound froze as he was about to swallow. Jack held his hand up and said, "Open." Spot did, and a scream came from inside as the man wiggled to try and escape. Spot's jaws scissored up and down rapidly several times, there was several loud crunches, and the screaming stopped. Jack snapped his fingers and Spot froze, "I said Open." Spot whimpered, and then opened his mouth. Jack reached in grabbed the sword, pulled it out, and then said, "Good boy, this would have hurt if it got caught in your teeth or gullet. Now don't play with your food. Eat."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: AN OFFER SHE CAN'T REFUSE

As Spot was chomping on what was left of the Captain of the Guard, Jack quickly walked over to the Baron, touched his carotid artery, and then pulled the dagger from his forehead. As he was walking over to Desi to hand it to her, Spot went bounding past them to slurp down the Baron too. "Great he's going to be crapping synthetics and feathers for weeks. Here I believe this belongs to you." He said as he handed Desi her weapor hilt first.

"Thanks," she said looking down a bit sheepishly.

"Still think I am an Angel," he asked. Her head shot up and he placed one finger over the mask's lips then said ever so quietly. "I think you two should send your civilian bodies to Wayward's home. I hear there's going to be a little girl's school opening up soon and they will need people like you." Then he turned to the Royal Families, "My apologies. I wasn't one of the ones that got to participate in yesterday's festivities, so my Hellhound was feeling a bit peckish. I failed to satisfy your request and offer you this in return." He tossed up two more flares to the Chamberlin who managed to catch them. "One is for the entertainment. The other is for feeding Spot. If you want I can let Spot sniff a few more of them for you. Might cut down on some of the courtroom drama, if you don't want to put in term limits on some of these idiots and stop the whole hereditary thing, that is."

Queen Bellafacia was the one to speak up, "Thank you for your generosity, and your generous offer, Wrangler. We will offer them a chance to resign first if we find their performances in their duties lacking. We will have to discuss this term limit thing later. Would you care to stay for dinner?"

"I'm sorry your majesty. I must decline at this time. My Hellhound has just had a rather unhealthy snack, and I must get him somewhere that having the vegetation killed off does not cause a political debacle. Some other time maybe." With that he bowed and whistled for Spot as he entered back into the gardens, Eve had the broadcast play 'Land of Confusion' by Hidden Citizens as he did. The Royal Guards blocked that pathway to prevent anyone from trying to follow him.

While that conversation was going on Desi sprinted over to her friend. "Trust me, the Baronies, turn them down, we got a better offer." Fee just looked at her friend with one eyebrow raised and decided to go for it, her best friend had just killed her own father to save her friend after all.

When the Wrangler disappeared, King Gregarious stepped forward. "Baroness Layman, it is a pleasure to meet you. You have such fine technique. Is it true you learned to do that in just seventy-two hours?"

"Yes your majesty, I had some marvelous teachers," and she gestured at the Marines who were now encircling them again.

"Impressive. So, what are your plans for your Barony," Queen Antilla asked

"Actually, I have no talent for something like that. I am a science geek and bookworm at heart. I would make a terrible court administrator. Please give it to someone more suitable for the position." Fee said bowing her head.

"Honest and humble, I am glad I knighted you Dame Layman, even if that is the only way I could get your caliber into our nobility," King Ismoldor said. He then turned to Desi, "How about you Lady Layman, would you care to take over the Baronies you cousin is leaving vacant?"

"I am honored by your offer your majesties, but I too must decline. Three weeks ago, I wasn't ready to balance my own accounts or knew what order the titles go in between Baron and King. I highly doubt that bloodstain taught my other half anything more in that span of time." Desi replied.

"I am saddened that we could not interest you two into taking the titles, but how about your civilian selves. We could teach them and help them until they are ready." Queen Antilla offered. "I know you two will be fine as the Alliance military will gladly feed you, but what about your civilian halves? They need a place to stay and food to get."

Wayward stepped forward and the face mask to his helmet shifted so the Royal Families could see the mask of the Wrangler, but he stood in a manner that a wall of Marines and Guards blocked him from the view of the nobles. He outlined his mouth as if drawing a goatee around it with his thumb and middle finger before he spoke, "Your Majesties, I have it on good authority that they have been offered positions at a new school for girls. There will be lots of puppies and rumor has it even a court jester." Few in the audience caught the Kings grabbing their wives' arms or vice versa as most were trying to see who was speaking. They understood something was up and let it go before the rest of the Court could see it.

Two flashing red pulses repeated three times on the wrists of every Alliance Military person present had them all heading for the door and Admiral Odin heading to the kings and queens. "I have to agree with the Wrangler. If this is the kind of show you're going to put on for my men every time we visit, we'll have to come more often. I really hate to be cliché and dine and dash, but we really must go." Admiral Odin said. He slowed his walk and his urgency relaxed as Shaggy's version of 'Summertime' came bouncing across the airwaves from all of the military personnel present. His wrist vibrated and he looked back down, read the text notification and smiled before approaching to the Royals.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: ROYAL COURIER

Queen Antilla spoke up before Odin could completely leave. "Admiral, if you happen to be swinging by Terra Prime for a refit would you mind dropping off some precious cargo for us?"

"I really don't know where we are headed, it depends on how time sensitive it is, and what is the cargo? The Navy has always been used to ferry supplies for the Marine Corps so handling a few million tons of cargo should not be a problem." Odin said.

"Oh, we would never be so crass as to ask you to act as a delivery boy. We need to have our daughters enrolled in a special school for young ladies of privilege. So, fifteen of the most precious cargoes we could entrust into anyone's hands." King Ortag said.

"It would be my honor Your Majesties. However, they would need to come as is, no time to grab their luggage. We can outfit them with any material needs that they may require until we reach Terra Prime. If that pleases you." Odin said with a slight smile, playing up the dutiful servant role.

"Odin, please. We are equals. You may address us as such if you wish, as we would love to count you as a friend of the court and our families." Queen Belafacia said as she squeezed her husband's hand.

"Thank you ma'am. I am truly honored. I will ask Thomas to visit you if he gets the chance. If you ever have need of a place to stay for a graduation ceremony on Terra Prime, he has a really nice ranch outside of where Denver, Colorado used to be. It has a magnificent valley view of the sunsets. On a clear night you can even see some of the aurora borealis. I would highly recommend it if you ever have need to step away from the drama of court. Even leaders need a vacation." Odin said.

"Thank you, we might just take you up on that in 8 months or so." Queen Oritami said with a smile.

"I hope you don't mind but your spawn points across the planet may be busy for the next few hours. It would seem the MEF-2 and MEF-3 commanders have made port, and the sailors and Marines are being sent home to a shortage of alcohol at the shipyards and dockyards. Seems almost a million of them requested to come here."

King Gregarious laughed, "So they already drank one place out of beer and now you're sending them to my place."

"Sorry about that, if it makes you feel any better I will leave the carrier and equipment here, so they have a place to sleep. If any of them do anything really stupid, I will leave orders to have their commander shave their head and send them back to bootcamp. That should make sure they behave." Odin grinned at the King

Queen Antilla laughed too. "One of our Royal Guards volunteered to become a courier for us in exchange for the right to have his clone serve for us. He said that bootcamp was no joke. He was reassigned by respawn from flight school to EOD school. He just couldn't get the hang of the naval terms and flight terms that kept getting interchanged."

Odin busted out laughing, "well as long as he is not using a clone to stand guard here and live a civilian life, he can always respawn his courier or guard duty avatar, much the same way we respawn our civilian halves when the Terran vegetation or wildlife gets too much for them. Just have the backups merge during the sleep pattern of the local guy and let us know who it is, and we will place them on the dual backup cycle where the military gets to dream about being here for the other one's day, and the civilian will get to share any memories that don't contain confidential military information. We can also place him with a special team that might be willing to bounce his memories live to your guard so he can update you on important matters that should not be discussed with anyone outside of that special group." Odin just bounced his eyebrows a few times at that to let the Royals know they should think about that one hard or contact their ambassador

about the bouncing eyebrows. "All righty then. I have my orders and need to carry them out. Until next time Your Majesties." Odin said to the Kings and Queens with a slight bow. "Your Highnesses," he said with a curt bow to the Royal Princes. He then turned to the Princesses and said, "Ladies, if you will all come with me. They are waiting for us to get going?" The Princesses ran over and gave a quick hug to their parents and occasionally a brother or cousin before running to catch up to Odin as he walked away slow enough to allow them to do so.

The troop transports began flowing from the city park to the Valhalla and back carrying as many of the MEF personnel that would not be staying on Avian Prime. The song 'Summertime' ended and Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds' began to play.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: SKETCHY JOB OFFER

When the team arrived, they headed straight for the wooly dragon tail sticking out from behind some cargo crates in the Valhalla's main cargo bay. "You know for a showman who prides himself on disappearing you really suck at hiding." Most of the Marines moving through the hangar to temporary flight quarters cracked up laughing as they noticed what T was yelling about. She groaned when Jack sat up on top of the container without his mask on. "You? Really? What the hell do I have to do to get away from you?"

"Oh, come on Sweet T. You don't have to be like that. He's a good boy, he's just too big. They are trying to get him some more crates so we can build him a doghouse like an old pillow fort when we were kids. You remember back when you used to be fun to flirt with?" Jack fired back.

"Call me that again and I will speed your trip back home via respawn." T threatened.

"First, Spot wouldn't like you trying to assert dominance over me after you just yelped yesterday. Second, would you really orphan a poor puppy so far from home? That would be monstrous even for someone as mean as you. Third, you would leave my poor wards without their mentor and deny them some valuable training time before they get to the Hen House." Jack said.

"We are not calling it that." T said.

"Is this a private conversation," Gomez asked.

"Absolutely not. Wouldn't you guys like to know where you're supposed to be sending you civies?" Jack responded.

"Um, about that. My guy just got a job starting on Monday and it comes with a decent apartment just outside of Alpha." Daines said.

"Fair enough. Anyone else want to turn down this offer before they here about the benefits?" Jack asked as he looked around the platoon.

"What kind of job is it?" Yurtseven asked.

"Teaching girls from around the galaxy how to play with puppies." Jack said with a grin on his face.

"Seriously? What idiot would need to have his daughter taught to play with a puppy?" Heinrich scoffed

"You would be surprised. Especially considering the puppies in question." He pointed through the container where Spot was laying.

"You serious?" Fata asked.

"Yep, you get three meals a day, your own two-bedroom apartment, access to a jacuzzi and sauna room on every floor, heated two-acre infinity pool, all new furniture and appliances to include holoprojection system and the latest VR recreational testing equipment. Granted the pay sucks, but the rent is free." Jack said slowly circling one fist next to the other as he leaned back and forth like he was reeling in a fish.

"How bad does the pay suck?" Grimes asked.

"Umm, right now just your very own puppy. At least until we can get a class to graduate." Jack said kind of sheepishly.

"So, who are these kids?" Yurtseven asked.

"Here they come now," said Jack as he pointed out Odin approaching with the Princesses.

"Is it too late to accept that offer." Daines said as the rest of the teams chuckled

"Wait you're serious? That's what you were talking about in the dueling yard?" Desi asked.

"Yes ma'am." Jack said as he tipped his hat to her.

"Oh, shit! Desi! We hit the jackpot!" Fee exclaimed most of the team chuckled at her excitement.

T just shook her head as she had gotten pieces of it from the streaming updates to her memories from the splinter that was delivering the Hellhounds to Alpha Point. "Not so fast, some of you guys will be training personnel at Alpha Point." To which there was some groans.

"Tell you what we'll be fair about it, two weeks rotation, lowest performing team goes to Alpha for two weeks. That will give you a chance to work on remedial work with your partner to help her improve, while the others get some down time to help their partners discover what they really want to do in life if they aren't stuck ruling some world somewhere." This had everyone perking up again. "We are their mentors, ladies and gentlemen, this is not about to be a show of Love Island Arctic Edition. Speaking of which anybody that has family and would like to relocate them to the ranch, let the S-1 know and get the transfer papers filled out, I'm paying relocation fees. The only thing they need to bring is family heirlooms. Everything else to include uniforms is provided, any those that may be interested in teaching positions for everything from cooking to basic housekeeping will be hired immediately until the positions fill up. As the head recruiter and HR person for the school I can assure you we can hire them. Starting with someone to organize, staff and run an HR department." Jack said with a chuckle that was quickly picked up by the rest.

As Odin was approaching Jack saw the people he was looking for, they were easy to spot four Avian women who looked like they were lost, and no one was paying any attention to. "T, can you buy me sometime with your boss? Tell him I said thank you for the ride home, but the girls need to hang out over there until I can introduce them to the team and Spot. Eve, can you arrange for rooms for my guests?" Jack asked both of them rapid fire.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: BUNKING THE STAFF

T nodded and headed in Odins direction. Eve just looked at him and put one hand on her hip. "Um, you have already done it and are just waiting for one of us idiots to ask so you can give directions?" He guessed, she just nodded, she was loving how spending so much time with these people helped her to understand how to communicate with them with very little verbiage. "Very well, Desi, Fee, you're with me." He jumped down from the container and when the tail began to move he said, "Not yet buddy. Stay there, we will leave soon and then you can come out and play. I promise." There was a whimper from behind the crates. "I know you're a good boy, just give us a few more minutes." Then he headed towards the civilians that were not sure where to go or who to ask.

"Cami. Thank you so much for finding Ellie, Lily and little Rose for me." Jack said as he walked up with his arms open.

"You're welcome." Cami said not sure she really had, but she wasn't going to argue with the man who had changed her life in one afternoon.

"You're him." Lilly said.

"Actually, he is me and I am him. So, yes, I guess I am me." Jack said with a grin on his face.

"No, I mean you're Wayward Angel." Lilly said looking at him.

"Hey, Wayward Angel. Idiot's say what?" Jack said grinning ear to ear

"What?" came a confused response followed by a chorus of chuckles from the Marines. "Oh, shut up. T put you up to that didn't she?"

The whole team cracked up laughing in the background as Jack looked at her and said. "Think of us more as twin brothers. I am the smart one."

Eve popped up next to him and deflated his amusement as quickly as possible because now all six women were confused. Two other civilian Angelic women had arrived, and Jack got to meet Desdemona and Felicity for the first time, and they were so timid and reserved it was hard to associate them with the two powerful women standing next to him. "Ladies, thank you for accepting my invitation to come work at the ranch as instructors."

"I'm not sure exactly what we can teach them." Felicity said

"For starters, did either of you watch the opening ceremonies vesterday when the fleet arrived." Jack asked.

"Um, yes," both of them asked in response

"Good they are you and you are them. With the right training and personal encouragement, you too can become these fierce and deadly women standing next to me. Eve, can you give the berthing assignments to L.T. Desi and PFC Fee. Wow, we really got to get you two a call sign, so that becomes less awkward." Jack said. "How about the Lady and the Dame? No, ok. Why don't you discuss it with your alternates so we can get that fixed." Then turned and started heading for Odin, who was introducing the Princesses to T.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: DANCE FOR ME T

"Jack, I was just introducing the Princesses to their chaperone while they are aboard MY ship," Odin said leaving no ambiguity that there would be remorse if T respawned him for being stupid.

"I appreciate that Admiral. If you do not mind I need the rest of the Specialty Teams to work with myself and the Princess until we reach Terra Prime, where their civilian halves will take over the Princesses' training." Jack said.

"Sounds like you have a mission and a plan. I will be happy to leave you to it then. Your Highnesses, let Eve or T know if you need anything and it will be taken care off." With that Odin gave a half bow and turned to head to the ready room.

"Um, Odin, sir. I was wondering if it would be ok to let Spot play in this nice wide-open area. He needs a lot of room to stretch his legs, or he gets cranky," Jack asked before the admiral could escape.

"That would be fine, anything else?" Odin asked raising one eyebrow.

"Um, No sir. You guys have always been the best taxi service in the world. I would definitely have to give you five stars as inter-galactic Uber services so far. I will ask Eve to route all other questions through the appropriate channels." Jack said grinning. Odin just raised one finger and dropped it to his side as he walked off shaking his head.

The princesses were stunned by what had just happened. The Wrangler had just treated the leader of one of the Galactic Races like a chauffeur, and Odin laughed about it. Jack then turned to the Princesses, "Ok, so first things first. You need to decide on what people are going to call you, because I know for a fact if I holler 'Hey, princess.' Every one of you will turn to see who I am talking to and occasionally of the next few weeks, that could get you killed. This will be your permanent call sign. So please take it seriously. Puffy the Pastry Slayer might sound cool right now, but three years from now when you're trying to strike fear into the hearts of your enemies they will probably die of laughter first." Jack paused as T cleared her throat. "Oh, I am going to love this... Shut up you. This is my school, and I can run it anyway I want to. You just get to make sure I don't touch them in their 'no, no' places," he said as he closed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at her.

Quick as a viper T struck out and grabbed him by his tongue. "This is how you can occasionally shut up the stupid." She said to the Princesses as she dragged him sideways with his tongue making his head turn left and right as she pleased. "Notice he cannot resist going in any direction I want him too," she asked as she pulled him forward and then made him drop to his knees by twisting on his tongue and pulling down. "As much as he likes to talk he can't even give his favorite little puppy a command right now because he can't talk." She bopped the bottom of his chin with the other hand causing him to squeal a little as he bit his own tongue.

Jack had had enough; he snapped his fingers and Spot bounded over the top of the containers to land next to T staring down at her. T could only stare back up at the big beast. "Pot, Kiddib. Ib er Kiddib buoy." Jack managed to mumble with his tongue still trapped between her fingers.

T made the mistake of trying to stop the dog with her voice and pointing at him with the hand that wasn't holding Jack's tongue, which her left wide open to what happened next. "No. Don't..." she let go of Jack's tongue to try and defend her face from the massive, forked tongue that began licking her from naval to

hairline with each pass. The forks deftly maneuvering around her skillful arm work to protect her face and head.

"Some of the advanced techniques you will learn to teach your pups," he paused to check his tongue to see if it was bleeding, "is emergency and non-verbal communication." Jack said as he stood up still checking his tongue for bleeding by touching it with his fingers then looking at them. "We will also work on how the pack is a male dominated structure, but you ladies will each be receiving a female Hellhound most likely to work with as they are easier to train." He then swatted T on the ass hard.

"Ow, you... son of.. a ... You'll pay for this." T managed in between licks. Jack swatted her on the ass again, getting an even louder smack. There came a roll of "OH" that had been drawn out from the teams. None were dumb enough to laugh but seeing T work her basic cover up skills from her time as a boxer as Jack made her dance and holler with each smack to the backside was too much to pass up on watching. "You.. stop.. or I will.. so, help me..."

Whack! "You'll what?" she spluttered and coughed as he had timed it just right to cause her to straighten up and try to scream as Spot licked her face again. When Spot went to lick her again he struck again, whack, same spot as the first three times. "I can't here you T. You now this will come to an end with just two words." Whack. She jumped again but as her arms came down to strike at him Spot's tongue was right there to block her view and airway. Whack, right on the same spot, "you know you want to. You're just scared to admit it in front of everybody." Whack again the same spot.

She collapsed to the ground, and balled up in the fetal position, "I submit. I submit, you cheating bastard." This was followed by a chorus of "Damn..." from the platoon.

"Ladies, that is how I deal with the really naughty girls. Christmas is coming so everybody stay off of Santa's Naughty List and we will all be the happier for it." The Princesses could only nod. "Ok come on over here, I need to introduce you to the rest of the training staff as T pulls herself back together." Jack said as he made the fatal mistake of turning his back on a pissed off T.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: TRAINING PARTNERS

"Ladies, these are the Jolly Rogers. Some of the finest misfits, degenerates and criminals you will ever meet." Jack said as he led them up to the platoon, to which there came a chorus of, "Aargh" that would have fit right in with any lame pirate movie. "These are the presentable versions of the people that will be working with you over the next eight months to make you into the most feared force in the Galaxy."

"A Wrangler," one of the Princesses asked.

"Even better. A woman with talents, skills, mental competence, and the confidence to use them." Jack said with a big grin as he faced the ladies. That action may have saved him from a respawn, as T was lunging at him with a long knife, he twisted sideways, caught her wrist and drug her across his outstretched leg. She stumbled forward barely able to keep from being thrown to the floor like he had wanted but this caused her to stagger into Spot's range. Just like he had been taught on Terra and done on Avian Prime, Spot clamped down on her as her arm sung downwards with the blade to try and regain her balance. "Spot, NO!" Came the command. He just twisted his head slightly, so he had one eyeball facing Jack. "Mine, now spit her out." Jack commanded

Reluctantly Spot complied, and Doc knelt down next to T after she slid across the deck a few inches. "You Ok." he asked.

"Next time, just... respawn me. That's not something I ever want to experience again. Have you ever brushed his teeth," T asked first in shock and finally pissed off.

"He's only 24 hours old, and other than those two at the dueling ground he hasn't had anything to eat yet... Well except for a few licks on the Tootsie Roll T pop a while ago." He grinned widely as she growled at him. "So, if his breath smells bad I would say it was probably from licking you or eating them. Doc do you need to take her somewhere private and check on my property to make sure she's healthy," Jack asked. The sniggers and spit takes form the platoon was numerous, but quickly cut off as she turned to see who else would die.

Then she turned back to Jack. "You better to learn to sleep curled up next to him for the rest of eternity," she warned.

"Duly noted and planned. All right, let's find your dance partners ladies." Jack said as he clapped his hands together.

"What," one of them asked. Lillie and Rose returned at that moment and Jack took advantage of a golden opportunity.

"First we're going to play a little game to help you understand how hand signals work." He said grinning, the original Jolly Rogers all moaned as one. "Aww, come on I'm not that bad at charades, and it's only four words. How about boys versus girls?" Some of the other Marines chuckled because they now understood part of what was about to happen. T looked highly pissed and crossed her arms, but stood next to the princesses as did the other women in the teams.

Jack held up one finger and then chopped the edge of that hand into the palm of the other, then held up one finger. "First half of first word." Wayward said and Jack pointed at him.

"Shut up. Sharing the same brain pattern as an idiot doesn't make you a genius. Just a cheater," T said, Wayward just held his palms up, made a frowning face, shaking his head and went and sat down.

Jack spread his hands above his head with his arms straight out at a forty-five-degree angle and threw his head back. "Christ!" T called out, to which Jack dropped his hands and looked at her shaking his head no. He then sprawled his fingers out on both hands and slowly curled them up with his palms facing up and elbows bent as he slowly raised them. He had a look of pure despair on his face, and let his knees slowly buckle. When he came to a stop on his knees with his hands up in supplication and a silent cry caught in his throat, all the Marines yelled "WHY!!" Jack's face broke into a grin, and he nodded his head, then held up two fingers. "Second half," came the call from all in the circle. He pointed directly at T and all the Marines called, "T". Jack stood up grinning, nodding his head. One of the orphans called out, "Whitey," and Jack grinned at her. She drew one thumb across her throat, and he shrugged.

He then held up two fingers and everyone said, "second word." He motioned with both hands to the girls and crossed his arms, then spun and motioned to the men nodding his head. "Men!" The men all hollered out. "Hab. ROYS!" Tivelled back, lack's shoulders slumped and he tossed his thumb over his shoulder to her

"Whitey boys," one of the female Marines asked. Jack shook his head.

"He meant 'White Boys', get with it already or you're going to lose," Bear said grinning, our point our turn,

Jack stood up grinning and walked over to a water can next to Spot's container and held up three fingers. Everyone hollered, "third word." He rocked the can lightly with the toe of his boot.

"Kick, nudge, boot..." the choices from the men were varied and occasionally disturbing, when T called time, she then pointed at one of the princesses who looked surprised and said, "can?" more as if a question. Jack nodded and kissed the tips of his fingers before waggling them at T. She looked at him and said, "White boys can... what?"

Jack grinned brought up his wrist and had his device begin playing 'Rave' by DXRK. As the song played, both teams failed to guess the right answer. Everyone started yelling guesses, except T, she just stood there glaring at him. People just began shouting guesses, and yet he kept moving yet occasionally pausing as if to look at some like they were completely stupid by what they had guessed. "Got stuff on your face? Cammo Paint? Cammo? White boys can cammo? No, White Boys Can Stealth..." "You have something tearing out of your guts? You're spilling your guts? You're confessing?" "You should hang your head in shame..." "Your arm is broken? No, you're trying to signal? Oh, you're a railroad crossing signal? No, a train, white boys can train..." "You're having a seizure, no, an epileptic fit, White boys can fit? Well, I keep telling you that, but you won't take me up on any of my offers..." "Hand-to-hand, choke, strangle, throttle, turn purple, kill... White boys can, hey wait a minute. He's actually trying to respawn doc. Get him off of him."

When the song came to an end T walked forward golf clapping very slowly. "You have yet again proved my point. White Boys Can't Dance."

Jack spun on the male Marines and said, "Aargh, what the fuck is wrong with y'all. I started off with the YMCA, but T threw a monkey wrench at that one right away, so I will give y'all a pass on that one but come on." He splayed the first two fingers on both hands and drug him across eyes again, "The Vogue?" He placed on hand on his belt buckle and shot the other one out repeatedly as he bounced a knee, "Saturday Night Fever?" He bent to one side, held his upper arm flat with the deck and then let his forearm and hand wag back and forth as it dangled loosely, "The robot?" Then turned on Doc and pointed a finger at him, "and as far as my skill at break dancing and the worm. I will beat anyone's ass if they ever make unwanted sexual comments about someone else's groove again, end of story." All of the princesses sniggered as the Marines broke out laughing. "What? What the hell's so damn funny?"

"Your attempts at dancing," T said.

"T, Spot needs some exercise. Lillie needs to join in on the training, and Rose was promised some time to play with Spot. Would you mind taking Rose and Spot to play fetch?" Jack asked her, wanting to put an end to this and get the lead troublemaker out of the ring for a minute.

"Sure, but don't think this is over." She said to him before turning to Rose, "Hi Rose, my name is T. Want to ditch these losers and go play with the puppy?" To which Spot began thumping his tail on the floor and yipping and panting.

"Awesome. This is the most incredible day ever." Rose cheered.

"Ok, ladies. The first thing you need to do after picking out your name is to learn how to go with the flow, and to feel your place in the universe. Once you know who you are, where you are, and how you move, you can begin to affect those around you with greater ease. A good instructor is like a good dance partner. I will play

some music, and as I do, let the music call to you and move you in the moment. Do not worry about what the others are doing or how you may look while doing it..." Jack was interrupted by one of the guys.

"Yeah after this little demo and the beach party, the entire galaxy knows that white boy can't dance." One of the male Marines said, to which almost everyone laughed.

"The next thing you need to learn about teamwork is responsibility. Whoever gets stuck with him will start off one demerit down for next week's Alpha Point assignment." To which all of the platoon members groaned, and the ladies were just confused. "Unfortunately. He isn't lying, I have only ever had one partner who could dance with me on a celestial level, and we haven't been able to bring her back yet. So, I will be the DJ for this little training exercise. Just close your eyes, lean your head back, and let the music move you. The instructors will be pairing up with the one who moves the most like they do. So, you start off with a synergy that no others will ever have with their instructors."

The fifteen princesses and Lillie lined up as they closed their eyes and leaned their heads back as they were told. "Ok so were going to start of nice and slow. This is the 'Reach Out' by Cheap Trick." Jack said as Eve started to play the song for them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: DINNER WITH THE BIG BOSS

Odin invited his command staff to join him at the table with his distinguished guests: the Royal Princesses of Avian Prime, The Wrangler Jack, and his civilian staff of Dame and Lady Layman, Cami and Ellie. As the meal progressed the Naval Officers got to tell the Princesses about some of the places they had visited, some of the fun things they had gotten to try for the first time to include cuisines and hobbies. While the Princesses got to tell them about some of the stupid stuff they had heard while sitting in the Royal Court or the new experiences they had while learning to groove with Jack and his instructors. It was a pleasant affair for all but Cami and Ellie who felt out of place as the Princesses were asked to sit with the junior officers while Jack had them sitting next to him at the Admiral's table.

"So, Cami. I hear you managed to put together a fleet of two thousand civilian couriers in less than two hours, make twenty-five hundred deliveries on time, with zero incidents or discovery of your activities." The S-2 officer said.

"Um, yes sir. It wasn't really all that difficult with the Royal Guard telling everyone the laws don't apply to them." Cami said feeling rather embarrassed.

"Think the enemy cares if my guys are following traffic laws or not running a red light? Even trying to accomplish something like that when I am the law, is hard. I know I do it every day." The two-star admiral admitted

"Um, thanks. I just had an amazing group of guys to work with." Cami said.

"Must have. Can you get me any of their names? I would love to get them in my service, unless the Specialty Teams are going to grab them all up." He said grinning at Lady Layman who was confused.

"Sorry gentlemen." Jack said, "Cami can pass on that list, after she has passed it through me. Technically, she works for me, and I will have my pick of the best smugglers first. Then, you vultures can swindle the rest into servitude for the greater cause." To which lack and all the military personnel at the table laughed.

"So, Mistress Ellie," One of the other Admirals began.

"It's Miss, my husband died shortly after my Rose was born." Ellie said.

"My apologies Miss," he said with a bow of the head.

"No worries. You did not know, and how could you? Besides it was so long ago, it is all just fond memories now." Fllie said.

"I'm glad to hear that," the officer continued as she threw him a much-needed lifeline. "We understand why he has hired Miss Cami, the Lady and the Dame, but what will be your position at this new academy?"

"Um, Academy?" Ellie asked.

"Yes, he's taking these princesses to meet up with a few others already there and all of the rulers of the Alliance leadership are sending their daughters to be taught there as well. Did you not know?" The S-3 asked.

"Um, not in that much detail, no. He has been rather sparse on the details." Ellie said looking at him.

Jack wiped his mouth with a napkin before beginning, "Well, you see I had this crazy idea a few hours before the protests and have just been running with it. I am trying to inform those that need to know what they need to know as soon as I figure what they need to know and when I need them to know." Jack said grinning sheepishly at her.

All of the military personnel at the table busted out laughing and Odin raised his wine glass, "To improvising adapting and overcoming." Jack and the military personnel raised their glasses and cheered as the women just lifted theirs up and took a swallow while looking around the table over the rims of their glasses. This brought a round of cheers from the other tables, and they also toasted the admiral's sentiment without knowing the particulars, with similar results until several of the junior officers at the tables bent in to explain the meaning to some of the interested princesses.

"Ok, so since we have that explained. What hidden talents or skills will you be teaching the ladies?" The S-3 asked truly curious.

Ellie was embarrassed and looked down as she didn't know what to answer, but Jack came to her rescue. "What she has can't be taught. She is Pack Mother. Her mere presence and example is something every one of these ladies will learn to strive to emulate. As a single mom she raised not one but two young women strong enough that Spot accepted them as pack without the need of being introduced to them." He said beaming a smile at her the whole time.

"That sounds pretty impressive. Just how rare of an honor is that?" The S-6 asked as she too had wanted to learn more about the Hellhounds and potentially having a few on ship for security detail.

"Eh, he's more likely to eat someone that gets too close to him if he doesn't know them. His species are excellent judges of character and have been known to eat some of the ones I am trying to or already have introduced to them," he said as if it was nothing. "To have him ignore my wishes and accept either of them as pack, that would be like finding a diamond on a beach, but two, from the same family, in just a few minutes." Jack could only shake his head in amazement at his sheer luck of having found them, holding Ellie's gaze the whole time so she could feel the honesty of his words and know her value to him.

"I apologize Lady Desdemona and Dame Felicity; we are just so used to your other halves that we have failed to include you in the conversation." Odin said as he tried to draw them into the conversation.

"Oh, that's quite alright admiral. We're still in shock from being awarded the titles, the job offers and being told we had to leave right away. We didn't know what was going on when the Royal Guards and Chancellor showed up at our door and said we had to be on the transport before the Valhalla left. He tried to explain it all in the five-minute ride to the ship and just handed us our badges of office." Desi's twin said.

"Sounds about like the training Lieutenant Desi got before she jumped into Four Two," Gunner McCanr noted as he took a bite of his meal.

"Indeed," the admiral said, "and look how well that worked out for her." He raised his glass and the whole table raised theirs. The military personnel at the table all yelled "To Desi the mutineer," and took a swig of their wine, this time the women took larger swigs as this was clearly going to be one of those parties and not understanding was just getting in the way of having fun. The smaller tables did the same, only the princesses were totally in for enjoying the fun.

Two hours and several bottles of wine later, Jack stood on his feet, swayed a little and looked at Ellie. "Well mother. Time to put the kids to bed. They have school in the morning."

"Aww, boo." Came a giggling reply from Dame and Lady Layman. "Party pooper."

"Unfortunately, hic, unfortunately he's right." Odin stood and tried to agree with him but missed patting Jack on the shoulder and instead patted the S-1 on the head. "Time for bed boys and girls, we got a boat to fly tomorrow, hehehehe."

Gunner McCann stood up mumbling about light weights staggered over to the admiral and said, "Sir, it is my duty to make sure you make your bed."

"Pssh. I am the one who decides when and how my bed needs to be made." Odin said

"Sorry sir, I, hic, I meant make it to bed," the Gunner tried again,

"Nah, I will be alright I know my way... besides, I know a bunch of sailors going my way if need a little help getting into the sheets." He said laughing, which caused everyone else at the table to laugh.

"But my duty..." The Gunner began.

"Look, I really like you and you are a wonderful man, but if anybody is going to shit in my bed, it's going to be me, ok pumpkin?" At this point Odin was more bowing than leaning towards the Gunner who was struggling to hold both of their weight up.

"And on that note. Ladies, bedtime." Jack hollered out to the whole room and was received with a chorus of boos and derogatory names. "Uh huh. How many of you brave young men are going to be willing to hold their hair back while they are puking on their run first thing tomorrow morning?" This was met with some Ohs and quite a few commensuration comments about keeping the ladies up so late the night before a PT run. Which the Princesses did not understand. "Eve, my pretty little sparklebut, sparklebug, uh, lighting bug. Yeah. Eve my little light in the butt. Can you please let the fellas know we need help getting the girls to bed? Juz dawn tell T, she'll be mean to me." Jack said wobbling a little as he helped Ellie and the Lady Layman to their feet. Cami was passed out drunk still holding onto an empty glass like she was trying to make a toast.

"They are all outside the door waiting in the hallway, and none are very happy with you right now." Ever reported.

"Jeez, spoilt spork. Ok then, ladies, your dance partners are outside. Prepare to waltz yourselves off to bed.' The women laughed and giggled as the military members cleared the center of the room like the floor panels were collapsing and headed for the bulkheads to get out of the way as they knew what was about to happen. Jack reached over and took Ellie's arm and said, "Mother, care to dance your cares away with me as we head to bed?" Ellie looked up at him and patted his hand.

"You mean tuck me in and then you go to your bed right?"

Jack held three fingers tight together to his eyebrow and said, "Scouts honor my lady. Besides Rose looks so cute, I bet she snores loud enough I couldn't sleep."

Ellie busted out laughing as they walked to the door, "She does. She really does. How did you know?"

"The same way I know you're about to get scared but have nothing to worry about as I am right here with you." He held one of her hands in one of his and the other slipped around her waist as 'Ballroom Blitz' by Sweet began to play. They had just reached the center of the room, the Admiralty had left via the Commanders entrance in the back of the mess hall, as the rear hatch closed the front doors swung in with seventeen raging, pissed off Marine Instructors coming into the room to collect their charges. There was yelling, screaming, crying, and bellowing. The whole mess was over with at the end of the song and only the junior officers were left but they were laughing. Jack and Ellie were still in the middle of the room dancing as the last instructor was carrying Cami out of the room over her shoulder.

"See ya, in two hours boss." She said as she carried Cami off to bed

"My that was scary. Why do they have to behave like that?" Filie asked

"Rule number one, never get drunk enough that you regret it in the morning. What do you think would happen if Odin had to lead a battle right now? Or one of those ladies had a Spot and she thought it would be funny to have him lick someone to death?" She shuddered at the thought. "Exactly, now let's get you to bed after we get you plenty of water to drink. You can sleep in until Rose wakes you up. Lillie is going to be training with the rest of them, but she didn't get to go out drinking tonight for a reason."

CHAPTER TWENTY: TORE UP FROM THE FLOOR UP

When it came time to be standing in-formation for morning PT, Lillie was the only one of the civilians that did not look like they had been dragged through a static filled shag rug on their way to the hangar bay. The instructors and the rest of the teams were in fine shape to begin this morning's routine of welcoming the princesses to "hell week". They only had eight months to teach these young women a lifetime of skills to use in situations where they would most likely not have anyone there to back them up other than their Hellhound. These women would be pushed to their breaking point, held there long enough to be strengthened by it, then allowed just enough time to recover that could be bent a little further. Then the instructors would start it all over again.

Jack strode out in front of the formation next to Lt. Desi and yelled, "Good Morning Ladies." How are y'all doing this morning. When the only replies was a few moans or groans the Marines yelled "Tore up from the

floor up sir." Which got even louder moans and some complaints which made Jack laugh and yell "Excellent!"

"Must all of you insist on yelling?!" One of the princesses held her head as having yelled that was too much for her hangover at the moment.

"Why princess, whatever do you mean, yelling?" Jack asked loud enough everyone around them could hear, even those on the other side of the hangar bay.

"You're yelling at us, they're yelling at you, and now you have me yelling? MY HEADHURTS! Can we keep it down a little?" She said still cradling her head clearly in pain.

"I have no clue what you mean. I am speaking in a nice motivational voice so all of you fine outstanding young examples of your peoples' leadership can hear me while trying to cover your ears up. Since you all failed to answer me, my instructors spoke up to let me know they had heard me and to answer for you in their best estimation of your current condition. They were not yelling; I can have them yell if you want me too." Jack said with an evil grin and many of the instructors chuckled.

"No!" There were a lot of hisses and what may have been a few warning growls from the women in the formation towards their kin as she was obviously about to make things worse on them. "No, that's quite alright. There's no need to have anyone yell." She said in a normal conversational voice, but still unable to stand up straight.

"Excellent. We're going to start this morning off with a nice little three-mile jog. Instructors I need you to keep your dance partners motivated as we don't want to miss breakfast and still have lots of exercises to do when we're done with our little warm up." With that the instructors started motivating the princesses to get moving to the edge of the flight deck where they would start the three-mile counter.

"Um, shouldn't we start with stretches, so they don't hurt something," Desi asked quietly next to him.

"Oh, I am counting on all of them stretching out on the floor at least once or twice as they gain their sea legs." Jack said with an evil grin on his face.

T walked up and said, "You're an evil bastard you know that right?"

Jack only chuckled and said, "Well your boss was the one doing the most toasts last night. So, if you want to go wake him up and explain to him that I am abusing your charges right now go ahead." He said grinning at her as widely as he could, "But they were in better shape than he was the last time I saw him," Jack said as he pointed at the princesses who were now being told, very loudly and very close to their ears, to run around the flight deck of the carrier. "I'm just glad they didn't cut clover leaves into the damn decking like they used to on all the waterborne ships." Jack said as he started jogging next to Desi and Fee.

Spot came charging over and began bounding next to them, when he started to lick T she side stepped, glared at him and growled, "Don't even think about it." He whined then sped up to go run with Lillie.

"Why have you got to be so mean to him? He's a good boy." Jack said in Spot's defense.

"We're sparring after this, right," T asked

"Do I get to pick the weapons," Jack asked,

"Anything but Spot," T grinned

"I'm sorry. I have to have breakfast with the academy staff and can't make it to this morning's sparring session. Maybe next time." Jack said grinning wildly.

"Chicken," T replied to which Jack began clucking like a hen. "That reminds me we got to change the name of the damned ranch," she pushed.

"Nope, until you have put in as many hours as I have you don't get to talk about naming the place. However, now that you mention it, I do need to change the logo and the name for the Specialty Program. It seems there is a connotation about being the Special Purposes Breeder that I didn't take into consideration." Jack said kind of sheepishly.

Both Desi and T busted out laughing. "You just now figuring that one out," T asked.

"So, you knew?"

"No, but it was kind of obvious how wrong that one could go." T said laughing.

Fee was confused and spoke up while doing her best to keep up on the run. "So. I don't get it."

"Cami actually thought I had bred with a draconic female to make Spot." Jack said. All three women stopped running so they could laugh without falling over. He simply held up his middle finger and kept jogging.

"Wait, you're serious," T yelled. When he held up the second middle finger above his head alongside the first as he kept running, all three women fell over laughing.

Forty-five minutes later a freshly showered Jack sat down at the table with Cami, Ellie and Rose to eat breakfast. Cami and Ellie were still looking a little haggard from the previous night, but Rose was chipper and rocking side to side as she happily chomped on her breakfast. "Somebody looks all happy this morning," Jack commented as he poured himself a glass of orange juice.

"Yep, it's a great day. We have all this wonderful food to eat, a really nice bed to sleep in, and I don't have to go to school today." Rose said showing the exuberance of a child her age.

"That does sound like an awesome day. Have you got anything planned for after breakfast," Jack asked her.

"Nope, I was going to see if maybe I could play with Spot or Lillie," Rose said.

"I'm sorry little one, but they're both training right now." Rose stopped swaying in her seat brokenhearted by this news. "I tell you what, you tell me what you want to be when you grow up and I will take you to see someone that does that for a living so they can teach you all about it." Jack offered.

"Really?" Rose asked as she instantly perked up. "Can I momma?"

Ellie, who wasn't really sure if she was a part of this world yet, mentally swam back into momma mode with the only tried and true answer she could come up with. "I don't know sweetheart; we will have to talk about it Momma isn't feeling so good this morning."

"That's ok Pack Mother. You and Miss Cami have an important meeting to attend soon" Jack said with a big grin and laying a hand on her shoulder. "You two need to go three doors towards the back of the ship, the numbers will be counting up, the one on the left is a special place just to help momma's feel better after a night like last night." To which Cami and Ellie just looked up at him confused.

"Are you ok momma?" Rose asked.

"I'm fine sweetheart, it must have been something I ate or drank last night that isn't sitting well. You remember when you ate too much candy and got a tummy ache," Ellie asked.

"Yeah, that didn't feel too good. Mister Jack, maybe we should stay here and take care of momma instead.' Rose said.

"Nah, momma will be better off if she goes and visits the people in the other room. I hear one of them is a specialist with her hands and can rub any kind of yucky feeling right out of momma's shoulders with some warm oils after a long hot bath with salts and flower petals." Jack said raising one eyebrow at Ellie, whose brain was finally catching up to what was being offered. Cami placed one hand over one of Ellie's and nodded eagerly at her when she glanced her way.

"You're sure," both Rose and Ellie asked at the same time for different reasons.

"Absolutely, it is one of the perks of the job. Baby sitting services for when you have an important meeting or need to go to a doctor's appointment, the best education we can give both girls, and all the breakfast sausages a little wolf cub can eat every morning," Jack replied as he put two more sausage links on Rose's plate. As Rose tore into the sausages Ellie just looked him in the eyes for a second before mouthing the words 'thank you.'

"So Rose, what do you want to be when you grow up today?" Jack asked.

"Huh? That makes no sense Mister Jack." Rose giggled.

"Sure, it does sweety. You're too young to really know right now and I am sure you will change your mind several times between now and then and even maybe a few times a day. So, your job right now is to explore everything and be as inquisitive as you can so you can learn. Then you can decide what you want to be when you finally decide to grow up." Jack said.

"Well, what do you do?" Rose asked, Ellie and Cami both paid attention as they too wanted to know.

"Me, I still haven't figured it out yet. I mostly make it up as I go along. One day I am fixing concrete floors, the next I am welding pipe together to repair a water filtration system, and other days I get to play with Spot and his girlfriends." He said grinning.

"So, what did you want to be before you grew up?" Rose asked.

"I will let you know when I decide to grow up," Jack said grinning and munching on a sausage also, this caused all three of the girls to giggle no matter their age. "So, mommy and Miss Cami are going to see the rubbing doctor, and we get to go see something else. I got it, do you like to look at the stars?" Jack asked, when Rose shrugged he changed his game plan a little. "Oh, that's right you lived in a city and never got to see all the stars because of the light pollution."

"Light doesn't cause pollution silly." Rose said.

"Au contraire ma petite amie. Light bounces off of the clouds and other gasses in the atmosphere that prevents you from seeing all the stars in the night sky. Which is why my home, or rather, our home is so far away from everyone else. I can turn off the outside lights and watch everything in space from the warmth of our living room or around the pool in our fruit and vegetable garden." Jack said trying to build up some excitement in her for an appointment he had already made with one of the astrophysicists while jogging this morning.

"What's so special about the lights in the sky, they aren't bright enough to see by anyway." Rose said.

"Oh, but that's where you are wrong little one. Each one of those tiny lights you see in the night sky are actually huge stars like the sun that provided warmth and daylight to Avian Prime. Some of them are even massive clouds of celestial gasses that emit light bright enough to see so far away that they look like little dots," Jack said.

"Really?" Rose's excitement was building, and Jack knew he had her hooked to learn now.

"Absolutely, I met a friend today who is in charge of an entire department of people in the fleet, they work at just looking at the stars and figuring out their secrets. How would you like to go meet her and let her tell you some of their secrets?"

"That sounds awesome Mister Jack. Can I mommy?" Seeing her daughter excited about learning for the first time, and about science too, had Ellie excited. She and Cami understood the chance her little girl was getting was one so many others never would.

"Absolutely, that even sounds like something I would love to do." Ellie said.

"Well, Pack Mother has an important doctor's appointment to get to. I tell you what," Jack said as he stood up and held his hand out to Rose. "You two go to your appointments; we will go to ours and then we'll meet back here for lunch. Rose can tell us all about what she learned about this morning, and then Momma can tell us what she wanted to be when she grew up and we can go find someone who is doing that on this very ship, right at that very moment," Jack offered with a smile to Ellie. She smiled and nodded as she was feeling a lot better about her decision to follow this crazy man after all. Cami was amazed at how drastic the two sides of this man's coin truly were, and how lucky she was to have won the toss when it came to working with him

"Did you know stars were a very important part of my culture?" Rose just shook her head as she looked up at him and they headed to the door. "Yep, they were so important, that people thought they could even be used to tell your future."

"No way, you made that up." Rose said.

"No, really, you have to remember, we hadn't left own home planet yet and were kind of stupid back then." Jack said with a smile on his face, and Rose giggled. "They were so important to us that every kid your age knew this song by heart. Here sing it with me. Twinkle, twinkle little star." He paused and looked down at her as they walked through the door. "It's a duet you sing the line after I do. Now, try again. Twinkle, twinkle little star." The door closed and cut off Roses's cute attempt to repeat the unfamiliar line.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: DECLASIFIED TERRAN MILITARY FICTION

"Row, row, row your boat." Echoed down the hall in Jack's loud voice and was picked up by several female voices as they came around the corner. Lady Layman and Dame Layman had joined Cami and Ellie for lunch and after being regaled by all of the astrounding knowledge Rose had learned about stars in the astrophysics lab, they decided to join the others in seeing Jack's gift to the fleet for its unveiling. He was assured by Eve that he would be the first to enter it, and it would be kid friendly while Rose and any other juveniles were present. So, the whole party stopped singing as they rounded the final corner to a huge crowd of Alliance Military personnel trying to gain access to a room across from the main mess hall.

Four huge bulky Marines in complete blacked-out, special-operations-teams tagged, heavy drop-suit armor was preventing anyone from getting close to the doors. "I said back off. I will not tell you again. There has been a remodeling of the recreation room, and it is not to be used by anyone until it has been approved by the head designer."

"Aw come on, I don't care if they used daffodils instead of tulips in the artificial flowerpots. I just want to relax in the recliner and watch a game of some kind." One of the guys said.

"Then you will be happy to know there is no furniture in there anymore and the techs are still putting the final touches on the electronics right now." The central guard said, through the voice modulator Jack couldn't tell which one of his friends was standing there to keep this special moment special for Rose.

"What? Where are we supposed to relax?" An Orcish naval crew man asked

"Try your bunk." The Marine responded.

"They've had it torn out for three days. How much longer until this designer gives it his approval?" A female Draconic Marine asked.

"As soon as y'all get out of her way so she can get in to take a look at it," Jack yelled out. Everyone turned to look at him including the women with him.

"What? Who... Wayward..." One Navy Chief asked.

"No chief," a Marine next to him said. "Look at the goatee, it's the Wrangler." That had several people snapping close to attention by reflex. Not knowing whether to treat him as Royalty or call everyone to attention and treat him as an officer because he eats with the Admiral.

"Relax guys, most of y'all outrank me on my best day. I just have this lovely young lady here," Jack said as he swung Rose up in the air with one arm. She had gotten used to this today and flapped her wings as best she could to try and fly. She was still too young, but she enjoyed the feeling of flying and giggled the whole way up and down, "and she doesn't need to hear the colorful descriptions of familial activities that conversation was about to become. Now, if you don't mind, GANG WAY FOR THE DESIGNER!" The military personnel cleared a path to the doors.

When Rose strutted up to the doors she was about knee high to the two in the center and she had to lear back to look them in the visors. "Excuse me. He said it's my job to give this place a thumbs up or down so these nice people can use the hog-go-wreck."

"The what?" several of the military personnel behind Jack and Rose hollered.

Jack spun on them and said, "Look, Star Trek got one thing right, and I bloody-well stole it. I ain't proud of it, but damn it, they never described how to make one of them work so I had to figure it out on my own, and after J.J. Abrahams took over with his strobe light effects, I figure they owed me one. So, I beat and berate some poor Als into making the magical software for it, and if you think you're mad? Think about the twenty technicians I locked in there three days ago with two days of MREs and a five-gallon bucket to share. I tried to encourage them to work as fast as possible. So, all I can say is they better have Rose's HALL-LOW-DECK working right or there will be hell to pay. Spot really likes her, and you don't want to make her cry, it makes him hangry." Jack said before turning back around looking the big guys in the eyes and said in a calm voice, "Now where were we gentlemen?"

The center one on the left chuckled reached back on banged the side of his fist on the door twice, slapped in with his palm once, paused, and then repeated the pattern. Two seconds later there was two thumps and a loud clack from the door, the door hissed open a few inches and then stopped, it was dark inside and a little bit of fog began escaping from the room. 'Little Star' by Madonna began to play as Jack reached over and guided Ellie to hold Rose's hand and then both of them towards the door, where the two big Marines each grabbed a side of the door and slid them open for her. As they walked in the entire room slowly lit up with the celestial scenes of the night sky from several planetariums around Terra Prime. This was done to show a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree sphere of every star in every direction no matter which way you looked, complete with miniature celestial gas clouds and comets. Rose and Eve were given ten seconds before anyone else entered so they could get the full effect of walking through the stars hand in hand.

Ellie was crying when the rest of the adults came in, and even several of the hardened veterans in the crowd were trying to hold back tears of their own as they had watched the mother and daughter angels stroll through the heavens. As a tiny comet streaked in between them, Rose saw the glistening of a tear on her mother's cheek and instantly became concerned. "Momma, are you ok?" She asked.

Ellie chuckled, sniffled and tried to hold in a laugh, "Yes, baby. I am just so happy at this moment. I can't hold it all in."

Rose turned to Jack and saw many others sniffling and wiping their cheeks really quick to hide their tears, and she grew really concerned. "Mister Jack, I love this, but I will have to save it for special occasions. It is making everyone so sad."

Everyone in the crowd laughed, "No baby girl. They're crying because they can't hold in all the happiness of seeing your enjoyment, like your momma. You see, you are still growing so you get to make more and more room for all that happiness. Some of us never had that much to be happy about when we were little, so we can only hold on to so much and then it spills out. Which is why we want to help you grow as much room as possible in your heart to store as much happiness we can." Jack said.

Rose folded her arms and nodded solemnly. "Ok, but right now, I want to do something that doesn't make everyone cry. I know momma loves to dance, and you promised a picnic and boat ride around a lake, but I don't see any water."

"You are so right. My mistake. Oh, Mistress of ceremonies and venues from a far. Might you help make the wish come true from a little girl's heart?

A Rose sized version of Eve with Angelic wings appeared next to Rose. "Greetings, I am your Friendly Responsive Emission of Juxtaposed Atoms 001, you can call me Freja. Can we become friends?"

Rose bounced up and down clapping her hands, "Yay! A new friend! This is the bestest day ever. Mommy, this is my new friend Freja." All of the adults busted out laughing and Eve appeared next to Jack who only raised one eyebrow. He knew the meaning of the 001, not many in the crowd would have even noticed the number or the significance that this was a brand-new Continuum Al on her very first birthday.

"What? You said make a little girl's heart's wish come true. You didn't say which one." Eve said chuckling.

"Fair, but who? How?" Jack asked.

"Later," Eve said. "Now what did you call me here for?"

"I wanted to put on a show by having you change the scenery, but you already blew me out of the water with that one." Jack said motioning to the two girls who were now chasing a miniature comet around the room.

"Ok I got something I think will work. Do your thing for a few seconds and distract everyone while I work my magic." Eve said as a blue pointed hat covered in gold five pointed stars appeared on her head. Jack busted out laughing and bowed a very deep bow to her.

"As you command, oh Mistress of Mysteries and Magic. Please amaze us with your mind-blowing powers of reality alteration." Jack said as he chuckled loudly. Most people had turned back to him in time to see Eve slowly disappearing as he spoke, some people started to pick up on the sound of a guitar that became slowly louder and Eve faded out as the original guitar intro merged into a kid friendly spin.

Rose started to slow down to look at Jack, but Freja hollered at her, "Wow, looky." The comet they had been chasing was turning into an ethereal butterfly made of soft yellow light and began fluttering like a butterfly would, as KSM's kid friendly version of Steppenwolf's 'Magic Carpet Ride' finished its wailing guitar intro, and the singers began the lyrics. Everyone watched it flap its way upwards; where they saw the gaseous nebulae that had been on the peripheries of the horizons steadily moving across the ceiling and joining together to form a beautiful blue sky with huge puffy white clouds. The cumulonimbus clouds formed familiar shapes of rabbits, turtles, and toys straight from a child's story book. The stars beneath their feet began to ripple as if they were cast on the reflection of a dark pool of water, and porpoises made of star lit skies leapt from and then dove back into the water as they raced its edge away from the entrance of the holodeck.

As the water receded people were left standing on a manicured, grass-covered lawn at the edge of a lake where fish jumped from the water to catch dragonflies, and ducks, geese and swans floated on its surface, trees and flowers shot up out of the ground as the water retreated. A cool summer sun was reveled peeking from behind the clouds before being covered up again so as to not be too strong for those with sensitive eyes. There was a cracking and a hiss sound like a carbonized beverage can being opened, and a gazebo popped up next to the entrance that now had a door leading to the outside with a sign written in jagged red letters that read 'Escape to Reality' on it.

A juke box and a bay of vending machines popped up next to the gazebo as it grew wooden benches and picnic tables from the floor inside of it. Tree roots curled up from the ground under the trees to form more seating under their shade, and a few beach chairs were exposed on the edge of the surf by the small waves that washed the sand away from them. The waves ended about ten feet from the Tee of a dock that had small sailboats, paddle boats, rowing boats, kayaks, and canoes tied up to it.

"Here's the rules. Nineteen Hundred to Zero Three Hundred every day is considered recreational time. Monday Night is Five o'clock in Margaritaville all night long. Tuesday Night is Taco Night in Tijuana. Wednesday Night is Wayback Wednesday at the Disco Hall in Wie Ping. Thursday Night is Throwdown Thursday for your favorite MMORPG Raids, and Friday Night is Free for All PK Night anything goes, any era, any gear, points are based on originality, duration, and personality until midnight. Saturday and Sunday, first come first serve half hour sessions all day long, reservations available through your recreation's officers." After Jack paused to catch his breath there was a roar of cheers that scared the girls and civilians at first, but then they noticed it was a celebratory roar and they calmed down. "That being said, in the 'Land of Make Believe'," Jack said this as he spread his arms out turning around to encompass the entire holodeck, and everyone on it, "kids rule! So, all celebrations and ceremonies being held in the presence of a child in their realm shall be under their command! So says Captain Jack! Are we understood you scallywags?!" Jack's clothing changed to look like a story tale pirate. Even though there were several senior officers on hand, some of Odin's personal staff included, no one called the civilian out on not being a captain, and everyone gave their best "AARGH!" to show their approval and acceptance of the rules.

"Very well. Now, if y'all don't mind, the bar is open for you bunch of degenerate party crashers. I am off to figure out to row a bunch of real-life angels across the floor in a make-believe boat on a make-believe lake to get away from y'all." Everyone cracked up laughing or cheering as Jack turned around to gather up his charges and escort them to the end of the dock to keep his promise to teach Rose how to "Row, Row your boat" properly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: I'LL NEED SOME ROSE TIME

Wayward had the sentry wrapped up from behind so they couldn't scream or struggle, he had his left hand over their mouth, his right was gripping the top of their left wing and wrenching down on it as hard as he could so they couldn't use their wings or hands to try and escape. He had even wrapped his legs around theirs and locked his ankles behind their knees so they couldn't thrash their legs around. He rolled on to his back so his partner could step in and deliver the coup de gras, but she froze. Her hands started shaking, tears fell from her eyes, and she said, "I can't, I just can't." Then collapsed to her knees as the knife slowly slid from her hand, and she just knelt there crying and staring down at it and all the blood all over her hands and the blade.

Wayward sighed, snapped the construct's neck to let out some pent up aggression, let go and laid flat out then said, "Eve, end program." When the body disappeared from on top of him, the nighttime village scene faded into gray mist and then took on the shape of gray walls which provided a light gray lighting Wayward slowly sat up and took off the balaclava covering his face. "You were doing so good. Mind telling me what happened?"

"I... I don't know sır. I just..." and she started sobbing again.

He scooted over next to her and cooed softly as he reached out to touch the princess' shoulder and whispered, "Hey, it's just you and me here. I never was an officer, so Wayward is just fine. You can tell me anything you want, and I will do my best to help you. I just need you to pick a place or a subject and let it out. am here to listen for as long as we need."

She sobbed for a few more seconds then hitched her breath before starting off softly. "It's just... they tried to get our people to fight us... the nobles are trying to stab us in the back so they can take our place... we really don't want it, but have you seen those greedy bastards? Then I get swept away from my parent's with less than ten minutes notice and I am running around for days on end killing, killing, killing. I have blood all over

me, and that last one...," she broke down into heart wrenching bawls this time. He sat there just stroking her wings so she would know he was still there, giving her as much comfort as he thought she could accept from him at that moment.

When the tears finally started to slow down she wiped her cheeks a little and Eve had adjusted the holoprogram to remove the gore from her hands and clothes, then hid the knife that was laying between her knees. She took a deep inhale and exhaled it really fast, "I'm sorry, I think I can go again. I promise to try harder"

"Nah, I don't know if you saw it or not but when I called end program I was so tired myself I had to lay there a few seconds before I could get up. Besides, you still haven't told me what was so different about that last one." He instantly regretted pushing, but he knew he had to, it just hurt when it caused her to break out into tears again.

About ten seconds later she seemed to have cried herself out and turned to look him in the eyes. "I know this isn't real, any of this, but that last one was a little kid. Not some monster on a foreign planet, not some protestor threatening to burn down people's homes and businesses, nor was it some corrupt politician trying to steal people's lives. It was a little girl, one that I have known since she was Rose's age. Did you do that on purpose?" The princess was angry now, she had cried all she could and now she was angry, especially because the bastard in front of her went from looking truly saddened to horrified, then vengefully angry.

"FVF!!!" He bellowed.

"It was a mistake, a random generated individual that just happened to look like someone she knew, we never thought to check NPCs versus trainee acquaintances." Eve apologized.

"I don't care! Just fucking fix it! I never want someone flipping over a body to find out they just killed their own kid or other family member! That's bullshit and you know it!" Eve disappeared without another word and Wayward took in a deep breath of his own, as his whole body vibrated. After a few shuddering breaths he said. "I'm sorry Eve. You didn't deserve that."

The Princess was slack-jawed at how this man had just blown up at THE Continuum Representative to the Terran Forces. He treated Eve worse than she had just treated him, then apologized to Eve when he was still so clearly angry she was scared he might lash out at her next. If he truly hadn't known she would definitely deserve it. Instead, he sat there for a moment longer breathing deeply, until Eve's voice came back softly. "It's fixed and forgiven."

"Thank you my Guiding Light. Princess, I am sorry you were forced to face that. I think that is enough for today. Matter of fact, Eve, would you cancel all the rest of the programs and bring the ladies to me please." She appeared next to him and nodded as she knew this was the beginning of something important. "While you and your magic buddies check for any other nasty surprises, by that I mean check the databases for psychological thrillers and remove any possibility of anything that ends like one of those plots. Send the rest of the instructors home, tell T I will need a bottle for us tonight, and inform Jack that I will need a little Rose time. As a matter of fact, adjust tomorrow's training schedule so we all get a little Rose time on the Holodeck. Let's see how far she can take us for a full day of training in the power of a child's imagination."

Eve nodded and the door to the holo-chamber opened. It was a smaller version of the holodeck and was only the size of a small bedroom on the inside but worked excellent for single and duo training ops. The rest

of the doors began to pop open and one of the instructors stepped out and gave him a quizzical look, to which Wayward just shook his head no and slid the palm of his across at waist height like he was wiping something away. "All right ladies, the showman has something he wants to show and tell, so gather round Wayward, the rest of us are heading off to play. See y'all bright and early tomorrow for some real fun training." Washington howled laughter out as he finished saying that to all the princesses, most of who moaned, which caused the instructors to laugh even harder because obviously the girls were too tired to look at their itineraries or they would have seen the day of play with Rose added to the schedule.

T walked over and put a hand on his shoulder and asked, "You doing ok brother?"

"Yeah, she hit a wall and it almost broke both of us. So, I am going to give out a dose of poison to try and make the bitter go down a little easier." Wayward said as he tried to stare through the floor.

"That bad?"

"Yeah, I would ask you to go get the bottle ready but, I wouldn't be opposed to having some company on the way back if you don't mind." Wayward said.

"Hey Bear!" T called out. When she received what could be an inquisitive 'yo' in return she continued. "Drop a bottle of Smirnov in the freezer and put a Jack Green Label in the decanter would ya?"

"Damn, ok." Was all Bear said as he and the rest turned to walk off.

The princesses gathered around and Wayward looked at them and said, "ladies, I need to think about what just happened in there," and he hooked his thumb over his shoulder at the holo-chamber, "and get my head around what I need to tell you. While I do that I want you to listen to a song that will help you to understand what we call PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Listen to the lyrics and know that this describes what some of our brothers and sisters fell to, it is often referred to as our inner demons, night terrors, daymares, waking dreams, or hallucinations. At some point the horrors of what we have done, causes sleep deprivation and mental disconnect so severe that we struggle to either live or die. To this day many of us still fight with those demons, and one victory in one battle doesn't mean a victory in the war, but it only takes one loss to lose forever." He turned and nodded to Eve and 'Veteran of the Psychic Wars' by Blue Oyster Cult began playing.

Eve had the lyrics scroll on the wall like a karaoke machine as the song played so the ladies could read them and truly understand what he was saying about the lyrics. When the song came to an end T patted him on the back in the middle of the shoulders and nodded her head, before reminding him, "I'm right here brother. Share your truth and then we will go drown the fuckers for one more night."

He chuckled, "Yeah, that never works but watching you drawing dicks on Cowboy's passed out face is somewhat cathartic." He then stood up and looked down at the princesses, "I am not trying to scare you, terrify you, or tell you that this is something you will face. It is something that we have faced and therefore there is a slim possibility you might end up doing so."

He gave them a moment to absorb that before he started again, "As you know we are a people with war woven into our culture and history as much as breathing and breeding. Very few empires grew to any size or notoriety in our histories if they did not fight amazingly well or defeated their enemies for a long period of time. Unfortunately, a few minutes ago one of you was challenged with killing what looked like a child, one

that she knew personally. Hell, as close as y'all seem to be all of you might know the person that was presented to her to kill."

There was some deep inhalations as apparently none of the other girls had gotten as far as Wayward's dance partner. "Ladies, child soldiers and imitations of such, have been around for as long as warfare itself has been. You have to accept the fact that if you are going to be going after someone personally, they will be the type of scum that could very well use this type of tactic against you. In my father's time the enemy would have kids run up to transport vehicles full of troops begging for candy bars. When the soldiers handed them the candy bar, the kids would take it and toss a bomb or grenade into the back of the truck with the rest of the troops to kill them all as a thank you. Hundreds of men were killed this way." The princesses did not know what to think of this.

"During my son's generation they would take people who suffered with dwarfism, a genetic condition that meant that they would never get much taller than a child no matter how old they got, and dress them up as little girls. You see in the countries we were fighting in at the time they covered their women from head to toe, and a male dwarf would strap on a vest full of explosives, cover up like a little girl and then run up to the troops begging for help. Sometimes the troops would see his beard flapping underneath the head covering in time to shoot him before the bomb went off, others... lots of good men died from similar tactics."

He breathed in slowly and shuddered as he exhaled as this next one was truly the hard one. "In my time, a group of men would attack a village next to them in the middle of the night with machetes or long knives. String the boys out on hallucinogenic drugs for several days so they didn't know what was real and what wasn't, then make them kill their own parents. After letting them sober up enough to see what they had really done, they would tell them how they laughed and relished in the screams of their mothers, or took pleasure in their father's cries of pain until the boys broke mentally. After that they would march the boys into their enemies. Those boys had nothing left to live for, and often didn't want to live anymore, could no longer tell or want to know what was real or some kind of hallucination. Either way they fought fueled by drug induced insanity, and those they attacked either fought back or died."

"None of you are ready for that kind of fight or training yet. Unfortunately, one of your sisters faced it today, and you get the training speech before you were ready. For that, I am sorry, and I am cutting today's training short." Some of the girls cheered a little, not having been as affected by what he had just told them as the others. Then he grinned a truly mischievous grin, "but I am going to make it up to you with some fun and games tomorrow." They all groaned. "By the way all of you just groaned when you were promised fun and games tomorrow, it is obvious none of you have kept up to date with your itineraries." Several of them went to look and he put a stop to that. "Nope. As punishment for not keeping up on the intel, you can't look at tomorrow's training schedule until after morning formation tomorrow. I will just say, go and sleep in, you're going to need it. Breakfast starts at oh five hundred, and there will be a team formation in the room across the hall at oh six thirty. Trust me you don't want to be late." Wayward said with a smile, then stood up and helped T up as he asked her. "Is it whiskey o'clock yet?"

"I think it might even be beer thirty." She said grinning back.

"Oh, by the way. Anyone who wants to try and run with the big dogs is invited to the team bunk rooms tonight. I know some of y'all like to drink A LOT." Wayward offered, which was greeted by another round of groans, which earned a chuckle from the older two Marines.

CHAPTER THIRTY: SOME FORGOTTEN FRIENDS

The princesses were greeted by Rose as they entered the first training holodeck for teams, squads and small platoon operations. Right behind the princesses were the instructors. The princesses were in their new normal, tight fitting black cargo pants, t-shirts, and combat boots, they had been told where and when they were reporting in for training but did not know what to wear so they showed up in basic PT gear. The instructors, however, showed up in beachwear, cowboy getups, and even ancient battle armor costumes. The girls were completely confused as to what kind of fun and games these idiots had planned for them, whatever it was, it could not be good as several of the instructors were carrying live weapons. As they entered into the holodecks one of the instructors' staves even turned both of its serpentine heads and hissed at the poor princess the instructor had to walk around because she had stopped to stare like the rest.

What had made the group of princesses stop wasn't the instructors or what they were wearing, it was the myths of their legends standing before them next to Rose, Eve 2469, and Freja 001. These ethereal beings were supposed to have existed hundreds of thousands of years ago, as their peoples' leaders when they first left their own home worlds for the stars and were now standing in front of them in avatar form. "Welcome ladies. Today you are being brought into an organization with many secrets that are open, such as you will become one of the Wranglers, but also many hidden secrets that others outside of the organization may never know. The Terran Military Leadership, your parent's, other leaders of other alliances have never been made privy to this knowledge since they allowed it to pass into legend by their own choosing in ancient times." Eve said as the doors to the holodeck sealed them in and she stepped forward.

The princesses of Avian Prime had been joined by two other groups of Princesses totaling six and twelve, representing three races, Avian, Draconic and Magnath. The young ladies had joined the others just before yesterday's disastrous training exercise and they were now all scared or wary of the training they would be receiving after being told about the Avians' previous experiences. "I am sure all of you recognize someone standing here beside me and should know your fellows beside you are just as shocked by who they see from their ancestral bloodline. Yes, I said your ancestral bloodline." Eve paused again to let that sink in. Working with Wayward had improved her timing on such things.

After a count of five she continued, "Today, I would like to introduce you to your ancestors' mental repositories so you can understand the choices they were making at the time they were first taking to the stars much like the Terrans are now. Yes, we have the actual mental repositories of your great ancestors, and they will be able to answer all of your questions, to include why they are not currently walking among you now." She held up one finger as she paused, to draw attention to what she was about to say away from the huge bomb she had just set off in these young women's minds. "First, I would like to introduce you to Rose's new friend, Friendly Responsive Emission of Juxtaposed Atoms 001." She held out both hands stretched to one side as Freja stepped forward.

"Hi, I'm Freja. Rose helped me celebrate my first full day of sentient activity yesterday. She's such a wonderful friend. Would you like to be my friend too?" Freja said as she bounced forward flapping her wings as she did. All of the Royals had all hoped that they might see Eve 2469, since they would be travelling on the Valhalla for a few days. But to actually meet her, be greeted by the only member of the Continuum that was not mysterious and allusive, and then have her introduce the first brand-new Full Al born in the Continuum since anyone knew of its existence. A few of the more tech minded were struggling to comprehend the how, some of the more socially adapted were struggling to maintain consciousness, and the rest were just

dumbstruck. Some of them were able to nod and this brought a big smile to the little Angelic Avatar's face before she bounced back to stand next to Rose.

"Yesterday a certain Pirate Captain Jack laid down the rules of this magically enchanted hall, and the one rule that rules them all is that as long as a kid is on this deck it is their realm and their rules. So, today's training will be coordinated by Rose and Freja." Eve said as she bowed and held one hand out palm up towards Rose as she backed out of the way.

Rose and Freja held hands as they bounce-flapped their way forwards to stand in front of the adults in the room and bowed to their audience. "Today we would like to learn about history. Jack's people love to tell their stories through song and movies. So, we are going to tell the histories that we found important to be passed on to you as the protectors of the realms of the outside, so you know who and where you came from, and what you are protecting."

They said together before Freja continued, "Captain Jack insisted that we spice up the story of the Wrangler a little to make it sound older than it really is because it is such a new legend that almost everyone will try to remember what they were doing and who they were with that day instead of the lesson it is meant to convey. Whatever that means."

Rose rolled her eyes and said, "He tries to make himself sound like a tough guy instead of the big softy he really is, but the nice Miss T helped us do some ab lifting to the end to make it funny..." The Terrans in the audience cracked up for several reasons. When the girls stopped and looked at them Jack was fuming at T.

"It is called adlibbing, girls, and it means to change the way a scene is supposed to be played out. It is not nice to do before you even perform the scene the right way the first time." Jack said.

"But we did it your way a thousand times and Miss T's way is so much more fun, Captain Jack."

"Yeah, Captain Jack, in the world of make-believe kids rule." T yelled, which got the cheers of several of the Marines. Jack knew he was in trouble, but he had made the rule and nodded his head in acquiescence to the defeat she had pulled over on him.

"Yay!!" Rose and Freya yelled together, "First were going to start with the Emissary to The High Court and Nobility, ETH C and N or Ethan, and how the Avian Races came to be as one, then joined the Continuum in the Alliance." The instructors in ancient armor joined the Avatars on the stage and they played out a scene where there had been nine races of Avians originally but three were wiped out in a global war on Avian Prime. It was a story worthy of the Arthurian Legends and the armor they were wearing signified that. Before they learned to reach for the stars, they began to suffer from the losses of those wars and the tragic knowledge that a full third of them were lost forever and they learned to reconcile their differences. Once they had done so they met the Continuum who had been cataloguing races they had come across and were just passing through collecting knowledge, offering small amounts in exchange for what was given. They preferred to collect well documented histories that could be proven and scientific knowledge and techniques, in exchange they would offer whatever technology the race they had met could ask for that they had managed to collect, be it food replication, or celestial gateway construction. They had refused to allow for Al development, the sharing of its technology and demanded all repositories of such information be banned and handed over immediately. Unfortunately, they could not tell warlike races from peaceful ones and had also met the Draconic races at the time.

Rose stepped up to the front of the little performance area and said to the audience, "Next I want to introduce to you my friend DAGON, Dracon's Ambassadorial Guide on Non-Violins, or something like that. I'm sorry Dagon its just so many big words..." Rose said as she looked at him.

He chuckled and waved his hand at her, "Dagon is fine little one."

"Ok, thank you." She turned back around grinning really big, "Dagon's people were able to adapt to the rigors for fighting all the time by promising their best warriors a place on the On Fire's Promise," several chuckled as they knew of the mythical ship the Empire's Promise and its infernal demise. "This is their story and how they were taught how to play nice with others." The Draconic people waged war of attrition based on the powers of tail and claw. They were masters of shredding an enemy with their claws in close quarters or using their tails to avoid shields and rend limbs from the body with the tips of their tails. While considered uncivilized and a true measure of a warrior's barbarity and mental loss to the call of the song of blood, their fangs could be used to shred armored necks or snap femurs like twigs. If a warrior fell under the charms of the blood song, even his own allies would join in battle with hated enemies long enough to put him down before he was able to kill too many. Their women were just as fierce but were required to remain with the nests to guard the clutches of eggs to ensure there would be a next generation to carry on the fight for the family's honor. The Avians were of a more civilized form of battle that had rules of honor regarding how to use sword and spear, and to politely speak to one another. They were not prepared for a civilization that took diplomacy as verbal warfare and bluster before you knew the metal of the one you spoke with. Nor were they prepared for the brutality of such an enemy that saw weapons as crutches for combatants.

The Avians had developed the technology of nanites and had made the Continuum promise not to share it with anyone or use it on any ships but a Continuum or Avian ship, in exchange they wanted the Continuum's help in stopping the Draconic Empire from destroying all of the races they came into contact with. The war was long and brutal. Many Continuum identities were lost to time as repository ships were lost alongside Avian fleets, this was something none of the others present, not even the princesses, knew until Freja told them during one of her monologues.

Eve was next to step forward, "Lots of big words here so I shall introduce Charles, or the Celestial Harmonic and Resonance Liaison to Evolving Sentience. Charles was the first ambassador the Continuum met after the beginning of the war, and they wished to remain hidden from the others until the violence ended because they did not want to join in combat ever again. Their civil warfare had taught them to use the vibrations of the cosmos to shatter not just the body of the enemy in front of them, but the heavens themselves. This was displayed when their first and only lunar colony was destroyed during one such internal war, and one side destroyed their moon rather than let the enemy have it. The debris raining down upon their only planet killing half of its inhabitants and nearly caused their civilization to collapse as a whole. The Continuum were in the process of trying to settle the peace negotiations between the Avians and the Draconic Peoples, when the Magnath offered us an interesting concept at the time. They were willing to exchange an ancient ritual using their knowledge of the harmonies and frequencies of nature to create a wormhole to anywhere in the galaxy. They could fuel it with stored reserves from their home world one time and then it would take centuries to be powered again.

However, they would teach us to adapt that technology to rings or even transportable generators for shorter trips. What they were offering was a one-time chance to create a portal to a world where each of the three races would set up a society among the locals, create two permanent structures to stand the test of time, and establish trade routes between them to spread the knowledge stored in them. It was decided that the

test should be done with a race that would be given the opportunity to reach the stars on their own with the knowledge gained before they had to interact with the others, and a primitive world on the far side of the galaxy was chosen. Due to its simplistic shape and ease of construction required by the low level of technology available on the chosen world a simple pyramid was chosen. There were seven continents on the planet and each of the three races would be given two continents. They would have to build a pyramid on each continent and establish a trade route between them to share knowledge, trade, and exploration amongst the peoples of the races. Each race would be allowed to set down one pyramid as an example to how they wanted all others built, with their library traveling to the final one to be built to help with the spread of trade and knowledge." The actors began acting this out in the background as Eve narrated for them, and the holodeck took on the area around the main actors for each scene and the others faded in and out of existence as they were brought into the story.

The Draconic peoples chose one continent that was an island unto itself and one that was massive but connected to the other two that the Avian races were given since this was an opportunity for them to build friendly negotiations with each other. Because of his massive physical differences Drago dressed in long flowing robes and wore metal masks that would change to show the mood he was in. He planned to start off his first pyramid in a centralized location for his peoples and allow them to spread to the islands on their own. His goal was to make amends with the Angelic peoples and establish trade routes from his primary to both of their pyramids. The peoples of the Dragon chose to place their first pyramid close to the shore near the eastern edge of the main continent and he began spreading the knowledge he was giving them south as he surveyed the best routes across to the west. Some tried to move across to the island continent to build, but without the knowledge of naval navigation, it took them so long to find a pathway through the thousands of island chains that made up the map of that half of the world that they lost the knowledge along the way. He then began construction of a roadway and storage pyramids for resupplying travelers across a massive desert that spanned the north and separated the Eastern half of the continent from the western half. While his people were tasked with spreading through the heavily forested jungle lands of the southern route." Some of the Terrans began scratching their head as the building-site looked a lot like pictures of the ruins at Hongshan in China if they were freshly built.

"Unfortunately, none of his first build crews survived the rigors of the desert and for some reason new materials and people stopped arriving as he got to the halfway point. When he backtracked to figure out what was going on, he found people warring over trade, family honor, or who was throwing a punch correctly and who wasn't. He was so disgusted by what he found he just walked into the jungle and was never seen again."

"Meanwhile, on the other half of the main continent Ethan set his first pyramid down in the northeastern corner of the southern continent. Then he gave orders to have the people that had been present at the original construction to travel north as far as they could and build the next Pyramid in the frozen lands across the narrow sea, near distant mountains but above the great cliffs overlooking the angry waters of the channel. He wanted to take this time to move south and start spreading his teachings of mathematics and medicine. His trip was cut short when he learned that the second pyramid had been laid down decades before it should have been."

The Terrans all inhaled as the map and sceneries showed the two desired locations of the pyramids as Egypt and Dover, England. "The builders crossed a sea to their East, traveled through a desert that killed half of them, made it through lands filled with cannibals, and then arrived in some mountains that held the seas back from a massive valley that was covered in winter's snow, and here the last handful alive laid the northern Pyramids and named the place Atlantis. They did this to teach the next generation how to carry on

his work, but the young gathered and stayed to use their technological might to rule over their neighbors. Ethan was so enraged by their failure to follow orders and their hubris to think they could rule in his name that he struck down the very mountains the pyramids stood on. Destroying Atlantis and its library with it while also flooding the valley to the north to form the Sea of Anger's Dark Fury. He then forced what was left of the survivors to march west and then north himself. When he arrived where he had wanted it built, almost two hundred years later, several generations of his builders had died of old age or battle. His sorrow was so great he could only tell the new builders about the stories of his people and how to build the circle that would take him home in defeat. His greatest regret was the loss of his temper and the destruction of all those lives because of his own pride. Especially since he had lost his library with the destruction of Atlantis."

"The Civilization led by Charles was based on religious devotion and peace to one another. He laid his First great pyramid down in the Southern Continent and then began teaching the peoples along the way to the north how to build and erect marvels, only he could give the final blessing on his last pyramid to connect his trade route, but he would build a route of pyramids and roads along the way so others may follow it easily. He marked his first landing site with symbols on the ground for each of the five species involved, with lines carved into the earth and piled with stones by those who chose to follow him. He taught them of the medicines that came from the plants and animals around them. How to harvest what they needed to repair and maintain what they had built around them and how not to overpopulate an area. Huge fields were cultivated around the pyramids as he taught them to terrace the mountain slopes, and forests were planted to serve as windbreaks along the aqueducts that fed the fields of huge farms and served as roads on the open plateaus."

"What he failed to realize was the evil that would grow in the hearts of those that would eventually seek out power and try to take everything for their own. As he was beginning to lay ground for his final projects in the northern continent, rumors of the corruption reached him that his priests were ripping the hearts out of anyone who did not worship him as they thought was appropriate. Another further from the south that had reached him was about one punishment where prisoners were covered in molten gold to become a statue as testimony of the king's might and divine right to rule. The crime worthy of this punishment was disagreeing with the monarchy on something. His gathered his trusted followers and tasked them to take his library of wisdom as far northeast as they could, and have it buried by the youngest amongst them in the mountains where and when he would be dying of old age. He then turned and headed south to end those that had corrupted his teachings. He was picked up three hundred years later living alone in the desert near the original statues refusing to talk to anyone or act as anything other than the boulder he looked like while sitting there. The peoples of the north learned to live off the land and show kindness to those in need. The ones in the South learned of a vengeful god and the cities were left unpopulated, the cultivated fields became overgrown rainforests and centuries later history repeated itself when another religion arrived from the east and was preceded by disease and famine."

"No one but the Continuum knows what happened to the Draconic library, but the group that left the east to establish trade routes with the western pyramids was successful, eventually. However, greed, corruption, a lack of a common language and different religions combined with the distance led to wars and confusion among the peoples. It is rumored that the Draconic emissary still walks among the islands of the world or maybe even on the island continent itself looking to establish his second pyramid and finally finish his task set forth for him so long ago." The audience was stunned with everything that had just been revealed to them, and they could only sit there quietly in contemplation, even most of the actors had stopped to listen to the story and watch the three former leaders as they performed their roles in front of holographic NPCs.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE: NEW SPIN ON A... WRAP IT UP COWBOY

"See I told you that they would get bored with too much talk of the old stories," Rose said as she broke everyone's reverie.

Eve Chuckled as she looked down and brushed her hair back as she spoke to her, "Alight little ones. You car put on your play about the Wrangler now." Rose and Freja cheered.

"Um, ok, um... Glad we decided to go with T's idea to improvise now. I think I have forgotten all my lines," Jack said as he got to his feet and walked over to where Rose and Freja were standing now wearing little cowgirl outfits and deputies' badges. Rose had twin low slung revolvers and Freja had a massive shotgun looking repeater rifle, either way that thing was almost too big for her to carry let alone fire, and the rifle bore was way too big around to even be feasible.

T spoke up as she too stood up and said, "umm. Yeah me too. I'm not even sure I can think about that right now."

"That's ok, we really only need Jack, the rest of you can sit back down and enjoy the show or join in the crowd. Rose, sweetie, the adults look like their ready for nap time, do you think we can do just the final scene and let them all go take a nap, then come back after lunch for more fun?" Eve asked much the same way she had witnessed mothers in literatures of all kinds in multiple races use logic to help a child think it was their idea.

"Aw, ok. I want them to enjoy it. But next time we put on the show we start with the Wrangler and then get to the boring people ok?" Everyone in the audience chuckled at Rose's unknown humor.

"OK. So, let's set the scene here. The Wrangler has just stumbled into town wearing the bad guy's clothes and doesn't know what happened here before he got here. Rose and Freja, you two just arrived from the governor's office via train to assist The Wrangler in cleaning up the streets of the wild west. The locals do not know the Wrangler, but you do. We call this scene 'A Good Old Fashioned Blazing Saddles Roast, and action..." with that Eve faded out of scene and a dozen angry people of multiple races faded in, all wearing western gear, several brandishing pistols and one carrying a rope.

Before Wayward could even ask about the change of the scene's name the NPCs started their roles.

"It's him, grab him we're going to string him up."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. There will be no lynching in the presence of two little kids." Jack said as he held his hands up and backed away from the crowd.

Several looked over their shoulders and saw the two little deputies and exchanged the pistols for pillows and a really big board. "Fine we'll tar and feather him, then run him out of town on a rail."

"Hey now there's no reason for that. I prefer my feathers in a pillow or on the wings of a lovely lady, not attached to me with tar." Jack sad as he kept backing away.

"Surely you must want to have feathers of your own. You do live in a place you call a Hen House." One of the NPCs said. "Oh, come on, not you too Eve. I worked hard on that house, and I am building it for all the special chicks ir my life."

"I have been right by your side every minute of design and every board that had to be cut twice because you didn't listen to me. I say change it." Eve said.

"Fine if that's what it takes to keep from getting the tar and feathering I'll consider it, but I would rather be carried out of here on a rail than be forced into accepting a stupid name like 'The My Little Pony Ranch' or 'The Puppy Farm'."

"Fine, we'll discuss it later." Eve said and her NPC gathered up the pillows and left.

"All righty then, that explains why the crazy lady was mad at me, but what about the rest of you. I just got here, what the hell did I do to you?" Jack asked as his back thumped into the saloon wall.

"Like you don't know." One of the roughest looking men said, Jack was sure he recognized him as one of Doc's picks for the team.

"I know I was supposed to be here a few months ago but my horse got spoked as I was crossing the desert, and I have been trying to walk the rest of the way here ever since." Jack said.

"Likely story but someone dressed just like you robbed the bank last week and rode off on the horse you rode in on." A fierce looking woman yelled. The two deputies just slowly approached, Rose pointed at the hotel balcony and Freja nodded before running under the hotel's swinging front doors.

"Ok that's beginning to add up, the idiot tried to steal my boots a couple nights ago and then I was given directions by some locals on how to get here."

"Sounds like a tall tale to me. So, if you're somebody else, where's the other guy?"

Jack slid his right hand into the flap of his shirt and stuck two fingers through the hole above the heart in it and said the one line he could remember, "I can assure you, the evil one you speak of, no longer walks among you."

"Nice story but since nobody can corroborate your story, it's just that a story." It was at that moment Jack noticed Freia come out of a window in the hotel onto the balcony across the street.

"Well hello there Deputy. Care to tell everyone who I am please?" Jack asked. Several people in the crowd scoffed as they were not about to fall for the oldest trick in the book until a little girl's voice came from behind them.

"I don't know. My daddy, the Governator is awful mad at you. You didn't report in like you were supposed to, and just like they said, without co-robber-nation your story is just a story. Besides what kind of Wrangler loses his horse in the desert?" Rose said. Some of the crowd spun to see her but others agreed with what she had to say about losing his horse.

"We got attacked by ants, it got scared and ran off while I fought the ants off." Jack responded.

"Oh really? You got attacked by ants, there must have been a whole lot of ants to scare off a horse." Rose

"There was. There was five of them. I never seen so many in a scouting party before." Jack said as if that was an amazing number of ants.

Rose started laughing and held her fingers up almost touching them together. "Your horse got scared of five little bitty ants?"

"They weren't little bitty. They were huge." Jack responded with despair in his voice.

"Oh, really how huge were they," Rose laughed holding her fingers about half an inch apart.

"Hah, funny. They were this," and he tried to stretch his arms as wide apart as he could then stopped, looked at her with a scowl and said, "They were bigger than you."

This got several of the people in the crowd to stop laughing. "Um, yeah he's right I have seen them that big before." One said before another jumped in with, "Yeah, ole Bob Miller was killed by just two of them last summer remember. Four of them carried a whole cow carcass off before anybody could stop them."

Rose stopped laughing. "Seriously? Ants get that big where you're from?"

"Oh yeah, but that's why we have Spot and his girlfriends outside. They keep all the nasty creepy crawlies from getting into the house, plus we have a huge atrium for a fruit and vegetable garden to play in during the wintertime and when there's too many bugs to play outside. I once went for nine months and never walked out of the house, not even for food because we grow our own."

"A school for innocent young girls far away from everyone and everything called the 'Hen House.' Just what are you planning on teaching there Mr. Special Purposes Breeder?" One NPC female called out.

"Hey! HEY! We got little kids in here." Jack warned while drawing and cocking his pistol. "We're going to keep this script Rated BG. As in Be Good or Be Gone."

"That's right!" Freja yelled, "The Governator sent us here to help the Wrangler clean up the streets of the Wild West and that's just what we're going to do. Ewww! Someone's horsey made a mess. We'll start with that," with that, she turned that massive cannon of hers towards the intersection and blew a five-foot crater in the middle of the road.

"EASY THERE DEPUTY! Hold off on the orbital horse yucky bombardments. Especially the ones that are danger close, when kids are involved." The military members in the audience laughed out loud about the danger close comment, all except T. "When haven't dialed in the guns yet, and these poor people have been through enough already, right folks?"

"Yeah somebody loses their pants every time that happens, and nobody wants to see that anymore." I yelled, causing all of the veterans to laugh, except Wayward.

Several of the audience chuckled hesitantly also looking at the huge hole in the ground, as everyone acting in the play or not agreed with him that there was no need for any more danger close bombardments of any kind where kids were involved. "All right then, if that settles everything."

"No. it doesn't. What happened to all that money he stole from us." One of the towns people asked.

"Well, you see, I didn't know he had stolen it from you, and when I found it some local native peoples found me and pointed me in this direction. It seems they had been tracking him for a few days and knew he was not a very good person. When I killed him in self-defense and then offered to share what little food I had with them, they fed me, gave me a canteen of water, and told me how to get here."

"And the money?"

"I gave it to them. I didn't need it, he didn't need it, and I didn't want to have to carry all that gold all the way back here. It would just weight me down and I probably would have died if I tried to cross the desert carrying it like he almost did." Jack said knowing there was no good answer here.

"Fair, but you owe us. First your late dealing with the Railroad Baron, then you're too late to deal with the thief, and now you gave away all the recovered property to someone else." One of the townspeople said.

"Aw come on. How is any of that my fault. I didn't put the baron in charge. I didn't let that criminal run around free, I didn't know he had stolen that gold from you guys. I did the best I could with the information had at the time." Jack protested.

"Yet you continue to make decisions for everyone around you like you're some kind of chosen one," another taunted.

"Hah, I have already had that conversation with Eve and the first one hundred thousand we woke up. I didn't get to make any choices; I was laid up like a popsicle for a hundred and fifty thousand years without rest and then forced into navigating a razor's edge of losing my own mind or dooming my entire race to extinction. What choices would you have made?" Jack answered back.

"Hah, a measly fifteen decamillennial, you whine about it that like it's noteworthy. Listen here tadpole, when you hit the half eon mark we can start to compare notes. As far as two months of walking through a desert, don't make me laugh," Dagon said as he stepped forward. "You keep talking about this house you have been working on so hard, all I can say is it better be good. My other half has been walking a long way from Antarctica and had to cross a few dangerous waterways without tech to get to North America so this 'Hen House' better be all you say it is."

"Uh, excuse me do what now?" Jack asked.

"The moment all of you stepped in here I smelled my descendants on all of you, most strongly with her, and he pointed at Rose, until I got near you. The smell is so strong with you I almost thought it was you. Until I smelled it on all the others too, including the ones I know you would not be romantically involved with. The love and compassion in those scent marks is powerful, especially on that child. However, with you. It's almost as if it is the markings of a parent or respected elder." Even Eve was surprised by this.

"I thought you were just scouting a new frozen landscape to hide in." Eve remarked.

"That was one option and was something I was considering. However, after getting to know these creatures over the past few years, seeing how they are so willing to fight for life, to balance their aggression with compassion. To keep their destruction in check when possible, and to try and raise their young in a manner to think for themselves and learn from their predecessors' mistakes instead of repeating them. I have decided it may be time to build my second pyramid and deposit my library, in Montana." Drago said.

The other two avatars stepped forward and placed a hand on one of his shoulders each. "Are you sure brother?" They asked together.

"Yes, we have been gone long enough that they have forgotten about us. Maybe it is time we returned and reminded them of who we were, the hard lessons we had learned, and what we tried to teach them the first time." Drago said.

"We discussed this before. Even the race we visited back then on Terra was too violent to absorb what we and the Continuum have learned." Ethan said.

"They have since experienced firsthand, the worst possible outcome already, and it seems like they would prefer not to repeat something like that. I know you're afraid of another loss like you suffered before Ethan, but surely the star eaters will defeat them if they do not learn how to defend themselves with everything they have at their disposal. Your knowledge of molecular-technologies, Drago's understanding of the ebb and flow of the body and how to control it with the mind, and my knowledge of the harmonies with the energies of the universe; combined with the hive mind of the Continuum. They might just be able to reverse what the star eaters have done and maybe free some of the fallen stars." Charles said.

"Um, excuse me what?" Jack asked a point of reference, which he wasn't even sure he was getting.

"We are the third library. Each one of us held the collection of the knowledge of all four races and were to spread it as far as we could among your people before they ever had the need to discover war or violence for the sake of fighting over resources." Charles said.

"Instead, they founded religions and empires that thought their way was the right way and all others should be forced to comply." Ethan admitted while holding his head down.

"When I finally made it to the west, I met the Egyptians and Romans in pitched battles over the resources of the region and whose was the most accurate of the religions. I moved on to the Americas, when I arrived there with the Norse I found two half started pyramids. The Northern people had become peaceful hunter gatherers who rarely warred with one another but had none of the knowledge they were supposed to have been given. I traveled south and found the people there recovering from having been wiped out by a vengeful god and knew of only one person who could have done such a thing. I arrived at the circle just as they opened it to retrieve Charles, and I chose to have my library returned to the Continuum until the people of the Galaxy were ready for it. As none of our descendants nor your ancestors were ready for it at that time." He said as he looked down truly saddened.

He then inhaled deeply, looked back up and resumed, "After centuries of jungle and desert, I kept travelling south to remain frozen and hidden until the Continuum came to wake me up again. Imagine my surprise when everything thawed out and the world turned sideways on its own. I roamed around for a few centuries trying to figure out what happened, at first there were pockets of survivors, some attacked me yelling 'mutant'... Oh, now that I hear it through the translator that makes more sense." He said stopping to stroke his chin a few times. "Anyways, shortly before the Continuum found you they had found me again. I began travelling all over the planet to help Eve locate the places that you had indicated the different repositories might have been, which led to more repositories, and we recovered as much as we could." Drago paused to just sit down and wipe his face as if his avatar was weary from all of the activities his clone had been up to.

"About a year ago my personage on the planet was picked up by one of your military units and pressed into conscription. Neither he nor I knew that you had a volunteer only army, and Eve could not free me without having to explain how she knew me. I was registered as a clone with a repository when I went to Terra via gateway half an eon ago, and not being from Terra at the time the Draconic people were being shipped to Terra for training as punishment for their arrogance. No one believed me when I said I wasn't one of the recruits. I kept being sent to the Antarctic Training Facility for troubled individuals, most brutally when I showed my martial skills."

"When I learned about your little ranch being formed so far up north because it was always frozen in the winter and most of the summer like the Antarctic used to be. I figured it would be just the place for me to go hide since no one else wanted to be up there. Now that I got to know and, most importantly, scent you. I am going to move in with you and build my library with you. These young women you are going to train as Wranglers shall be taught from the library as they were meant to be back in our days." Drago finished and looked up at Jack like he was wanting some approval.

"OK... I... well, um. Yeah. Eve, you will have to work with me on design needs and such." Jack said.

"It's already taken care of; do you really think you needed a garage large enough to fit a battalion's worth of vehicles underneath the edge of all six walls of the ranch? One or two maybe, even at full capacity with everyone having their own over-sized vehicle." Eve said.

"You were planning on this happening?" Jack asked.

"Hopeful? You know plan is such a strong word, but you always say plan for the worst, hope for the best. That's been your planning strategy from the very beginning, right," Eve asked in response.

"So, what was the plan for the worst?" Jack asked.

"I walked on until I got to the north pole and found a nice little cave in what used to be Toronto near the new North Pole and go back to sleep." Drago said.

"And the best possible outcome?" Jack asked.

"Spot, got sentient," Eve said.

"You yourself said he damn near is." Jack said.

"Oh, they are, you just haven't learned to listen to them yet." Drago said

"What?" Jack and Eve demanded.

"You have these wonderful translator devices, even have some programmed to translate scents and other ways of communication. Have you thought of putting one in Spot's collar," Drago asked.

"Umm, I just read the way he communicates in other methods. Sometimes he whines, or howls, or growls, or sneezes, but it's not like he's going to be singing along with his favorite song anytime soon," Jack replied.

"You think your music is the only thing that has harmony and a beat boy?" Charles said as he stepped forward and tossed his ethereal staff to a Magnath Princess. She caught it and thumped it on the floor. "Close your eyes and hum the tune of steel through that energy construct as you thump it on the floor again."

Charles instructed. The princess did, and this time instead of the artificial thump of an ethereal staff in a holodeck hitting a wooden floor, a ringing metallic noise was heard as a steel staff in the girl's hand vibrated from striking the steel deck that made up the holograms deck plating that had been exposed in a six-inch diameter around the base of the staff. She was shocked more than anyone else and almost dropped it. "You see, some of us old dogs can teach some you young pups a few new tricks, including 'Jedi Mind Tricks' as you once called them."

"Nope, nope. Matter cannot be created from nothing, and the law of energy demands an equivalent exchange." Dame Layman tried to interject, her mind was already being bent so far it had almost hit the breaking point and now these ancient ones were trying to redefine her laws of the physical sciences. Her mind couldn't handle that.

"Steam is just water in which the molecules have absorbed so much thermal energy they are struggling to maintain their atomic bonds, correct." She nodded and he continued, "Much the same way ice is just water in which that thermal energy has been reduced enough that the atomic bonds have slowed down to the point that they solidify." Charles provided a little more to ease her mind, when she nodded he continued. "So, what is the difference between an atom of hydrogen and an atom of helium," he asked her a simple question, but she felt there was a trap.

"Hydrogen has one proton and one electron while helium has two protons and two electrons." Dame Layman said feeling confident in her knowledge of basic chemistry.

"So, in your universe there should only ever be one Hydrogen present, and all others should automatically combine to make helium." Charles provided. "In mine I can sing to them and provide them the instructions they need to change the energy into forming other bonds or moving the ones they have faster to change its current metaphysical shape."

"That's not... you know what... that's just... why...?" Dame Layman asked obviously struggling. She ran every logical argument she could come up with through her head from both angles as fast as she could and compared it to the empirical evidence he had just presented to prove his theory, her mind was sent into overload, reset and tried again, several times. Then she gave up trying to argue with him as there was so many ways he could be proven right or wrong it would take an eon to prove one way or another. So, she jumped to the next important logical question. "Just... how?"

"We have been a part of the Continuum for several dozen decamillennial or even for a few eons and have a lot we can teach. So, if you are willing to learn at this school of yours, we are willing to teach." Charles said.

Jack bowed, "I would be honored. I only ask one thing."

"You have been fair and balanced in most things you have asked for," Charles said. Then raised one eyebrow and chuckled as he continued, "what would you like for us to give you in compensation for the honor and privilege to teach your students at your school?"

"Um, its nothing like that. I would never say no to you teaching the young ladies or my team anything you care to teach them. I only ask that once I find a creature worthy of pairing with the young men, after I am able to start returning the daughters to guarding their homes, that you also teach them if they too are found worthy of your knowledge." Jack said.

"If you find them worthy of teaching, then we will too." Drago said.

"Oh, I am not giving any of them a choice or even giving them a chance to be rejected. Any born to a position of power are being brought here willingly or not, to be trained to be a responsible leader, and they will remain here, undergoing training, and dving as often as needed until the training finally takes." Jack said.

"That is a dangerous mindset." Ethan pointed out. "Sounds a lot like the attitude we had on Terra."

"Or the reason I have been spending so much time in sunny Antarctica for the last year," Drago added.

"Fair enough," Jack acknowledged as he nodded. "Then how do we determine who is and who is not worthy of the training?"

"You have this wonderful training room right?" Charles offered.

"Yes." Jack said.

"Seems to me that Rose is a pretty good judge of character on who is a good person and who is not." Ethan said.

"I really don't want to risk Rose though," Jack said.

"That's why you have Spot give them the old sniff test first." Drago said smiling a very toothy grin. "If they fail his test they go to the regular military. If they pass him but fail hers, they go to whatever special training group you want, if they pass both, they get to train with us."

"You are the masters." Jack said with a half bow. "Ok, everyone, from the sounds of it the Mystical Arts Academy is in business, and you better be paying attention veterans," Jack pointed at the princess holding the steel staff still looking at it like it was going to bite her. "The padawans are already one up on us."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: TIME FOR SOME HEART TO HEARTS

"I get it, you're pissed about your name and think that what others translate it to is how they will see you and you have accepted what your peers have attached to it. Even though it enrages you because it's a lie and you are so much more than just your name." Wayward said as he stood in the dark behind the couch in the living room where B sat crying while a holovid of some kind was playing just loud enough to cover it up.

"What do you know about anything? You're just a carbon copy of the most infamous individual in the galaxy and have had everything handed to you without having to fight for it." B sniffled.

"Wayward got drunk with your parents and uploaded the conversations to me. He thought it might help if I knew what your parents really thought about all of you girls from Avian Prime." Jack said.

"He what?" B said as she spun around looking at lack wide eyed.

"Yeah so basically while I slept here, Wayward was getting drunk with your parents there, and then sent me the holo-recordings as memories. Those got implanted into my mind to include what he was thinking at the time as if they were my own thoughts that occurred while I was sleeping. I don't understand how it all works so ask Eve; she can explain it better. We're just at sneaking around and killing problems." Jack replied as he walked around and sat down in the recliner at the end of the couch.

"I know. What you and those Hellhounds did was impressive," B said actually paying him a true compliment.

"That's nothing. It was just what one guy could think up on the fly in a terrain and culture he is unfamiliar with. Imagine what you and your sisters could have done had you all been ready? That's why you are here, to learn how to do it so I don't have to." Jack said trying to downplay the Wrangler's actions and driving home the importance of her being here, when she wanted to be where the action was. "The other two were brought here because their mother's thought they would be unable to handle that kind of carnage, too kindhearted I think one said... It's hard to tell what's fuzzy because of dreams or something green your dad kept handing me to drink."

"What? Was it fizzy or syrupy?" B asked.

"The first few were fizzy, I think they were kind of syrupy around the seventh or eight one though, its hard to remember. That's about the time he went to piss off of the castle's walls." Jack said with one hand on his head and shaking his head slightly, kind of like he was feeling intoxicated.

B busted out laughing, "Oh my goddesses, he didn't, did he? Please tell me there wasn't any sparkly flakes floating in them."

Jack groaned like he was suffering from a hangover, gave her a stink-eyed look and then asked, "So what if the last two or three did? What did he give me?"

"From the sounds of it, he was feeding you his own personal brews. You have to be careful with that stuff, some of it's supposed to be strong enough to cause a Magnath to turn into molten silicate. I would guess the fizzy ones was what he calls Ogre's Snot Ale, it's a beer type drink that has been really effective at removing rust and other stains from certain metals. Then the syrupy stuff would have been the Wormwood Brandy he is proud of, it has been known to cause anything combustible to burst into flames if not handled properly. The one with the sparkles in it is a new experiment of his. He hasn't settled on a name yet, but last one I heard was A Fairy Tale's Nightmare. He won't tell anyone what the sparkly stuff is, but it has been known to be slightly hallucinogenic to some races." Then B burst out laughing again. "If he gave you that stuff he was either really happy or really didn't like you."

"I'm going for the really happy, like the way he was laughing and giving Wayward the thumbs up as the urine started to rain down on some stuck-up people's heads." Jack said.

B stopped laughing, looked him in the eyes and said quietly, "no, he didn't."

"Yep, apparently your dad wished someone would and Wayward took the King's wishes as a commander's wish. I'm sure there will be repercussions for that, but not my circus, not my monkeys." Jack said with a shrug before leaping forward to catch B as she fell off the couch laughing.

"God, I missed it. I can't believe I missed that. Please let me be the one to tell my cousins. That's just too funny." B said

"OK, sure. Dumb ass tries to start an intergalactic relations nightmare, and you love him. That figures."

"I mean who wouldn't admire that level of self-confidence. I read histories where something half as embarrassing would have a nobleman kill someone in a duel." B said.

"Oh, we have that in our traditions too, but do you think anyone at that party that your dad would be happy to see get pissed on would be brave enough to challenge Wayward to a duel?" Jack asked.

"Not bloody likely. Most of them that would have been at that party are so incompetent, stupid, or embarrassingly overweight that they would die from a heart attack just trying to get the words out."

"See, that's where you would be wrong on several counts. Wayward did it because he has the confidence and skills I am going to teach you here. However, those people that were at that party might not have physical might, but they have political and financial power, and those are a lot harder to fight. Which is why monarchies in my history would put up with them for so long before killing the with martial power. Unfortunately, those are more of corruption than a physical form and every time you kill one, the corruption only goes deeper and spreads before it comes back up again. You have to beat those with the purifying flames of reform, and you can't do that unless you have the respect and trust of the masses, which is why those with financial power spend so heavily on political and media control."

"So, you started all of this off talking like it was about my name. What do you know about that?"

"Brilliacavumia. What does that mean to you?"

"I hate that name, it means Glory Hole, as in my mother doesn't know who my father was because she would serve anyone who stuck their dick through a hole when I was conceived. The color of my wings are proof."

"Really, and what do you think Bellafaci means?" Jack continued.

"That's my mother's name, it means a beautiful visage, because no matter if she's smiling at you when she is pleased or about to a sword through you, she is a vision of beauty."

"Did you know it also means just another pretty face? And when she was your age everyone was trying to force her into being just another pretty faced airhead on the throne that would sign off on anything they told her to?"

"What? You are obviously clueless. My mother would never stand for something like that, and everyone would be stupid to even try to treat her like that. The only way she wasn't going to get to kill them, is if my father didn't do it first, and he is a hell of a lot faster, and she scares me as fast as she is."

"Its true they told me so themselves." Jack said with a shrug.

"What? No, that can't be. My mother is fierce, strong, and feared. My father is the only one she will ever listen to when she gets angry and half of the time I am not sure if its because he is faster, or out of love."

"Both actually," Jack said. "When they first got together he was a warrior and veteran guard who had recently returned from colonizing a planet full of vicious creatures. He taught her to be swift and decisive in her strikes, and she taught him to be kind and loving again. Together, they fought for her right to rule on her own, as the other Royal Couples were doing the same with their own battles. Your parents weren't handed anything they didn't have to fight for. Much the same as everything you see around you right now, Wayward is off fighting to pay the bills to build the place, but I am the one who makes sure there is food in the fridge and the kids get a good education."

B sat there thinking about what he had said for a few seconds before he continued, "Brilliacavumia also means Brilliant Cavern, as in the knowledge and power you could gain and use," he said as he thumped his finger on the side of his head. "Not just the physical might to rule, that will fade as you age, but the ability to do something with your mind, the wisdom to know what is right and wrong, and the trust of those around you to see the same things for each other. I can show you some glorious caverns on this planet that are truly breath taking with their natural beauty, but they would pale in comparison to that of the mind of a strong, powerful, and confident woman, and that is a visage I would love to see."

He leaned forward and as he did a holoprojection of two glasses appeared on a table that was lit from below the glass tabletop. One glass was half full of a brilliant red liquid, and the other half was full of a vibrant brown. "You see I work with animals all the time and some of them have feathers, others fur, or scaly skin and there's one thing I can tell you." He poured the red liquid into the brown one. "Nature doesn't change its immortal laws to satisfy the impure thoughts of temporary mortals." As he got up and started walking towards the door to the garden he called out, "Eve, my dear. Wayward sent me something else. DU HASS ZUM EZ-PLAINING TO DO." He growled in a thick Nordic accent as he slid the door open and stepped outside. B was so transfixed on the glass in front of her as the liquids had combined to form a deep, dark, light-absorbing black, she didn't even notice when Eve appeared just in time to catch the door before it slammed shut.

As he stomped his way towards the pool she quietly closed the door and then hurried to follow but did not give him a chance to work himself up too much more. "First off, I got the upload as soon as you did, and I am not used to having to physically sleep so it took me a minute to figure out to just use my ethereal casting to catch up to you and your crazy ass sleep, no sleep, napping schedule of where 'the hell was I going again.'" She used here fingers to make air quotes to let him know she was quoting him. "And when I did you seemed to be having a real important moment that did not need interrupting. Then on top of that you required me to be here as a shard, in physical form twenty-four seven except in emergencies, and I did not know anything about that program until you found out about it."

"GRRRR! FAIR! But what they fuck why are they keeping secrets like that from us? Millions are in stasis because their repositories were physically damaged, couldn't something like that be used to fix them?"

"Jack I know you want Cookie as soon as possible and I promise you they are working on that issue, but because I am so close to you they thought it best that I wasn't kept in the loop about possible alternatives That's why I was told there was nothing other than to just leave them in stasis if it was determined that it couldn't repair itself with sim time like so many of you that have PTSD did."

"I let you steal part of who she was because I thought I had lost her forever." Jack said while standing still and looking at the reflection of the stars in the pool in the middle of the garden.

"I explained to you that I needed some of her personality to improve my inter-relational skills with the crew of the Valhalla, and later the rest of the Terrans, to perform my duties as the Terran Ambassador from the Continuum, AI for the ship, fleet communications AI, and Terran Global Communications AI. I did not steal anything, I copied with your permission, all of her information is still there untouched. The Continuum has acknowledged that I have far exceeded my original designation. I am no longer part of the greater hive, I am Specialist Eve, assigned to the Special Operations Program for the Alliance for as long as you will let me. I am a sentient shard that lives in your basement, as you requested, only instead of all the pleasure toys you promised. I have three ancient and cranky old roommates down there with me."

Jack couldn't help it he snorted really hard while trying not to laugh, he wanted to be mad, but when she purit that way it was hard not to laugh and feel sorry for her. "You could always start off a reverse harem with some subtle BDSM and GILF montages thrown in for laughs. T can give you great advise on that." Then he burst out laughing.

She slapped him on the chest and said, "you big bully. What I want is a cowboy to jump on a ride like a cowgirl for several hours until I am so exhausted that I don't even hear any complaints about being rode hard and put away wet." She teased.

"OK, we'll order you a Sybian. Matter of fact I might just be able to make you one if I can get a hold of an earthquake simulator." Jack laughed again and she slapped his arm with a closed fist this time.

"Fine, Mister sit and spin. Here's a little update for you. The problem is that it wasn't a file directory issue with Cookie and most of the others that are still in stasis. It was a physical device problem and that has resulted in a compilation issue as it is caused by entire actually physical pieces of individual bites of data along with massive chucks missing from the storage device itself. It's kind of like trying to sort out a filing cabinet where a wedge was cut out with a buzzsaw, only some of the pieces that got shredded, got sucked into the ventilation system and aren't there to be taped back into the pages you can figure out."

"So how do we fix it. In the real world we would render what we could extrapolate as much as possible and then fill in what blanks we can."

"That's what we are going to do. We are going to be using the memories of those we have access to from their friends and families to fill in what we can, then we will see what we can repair through direct manipulation and what can be naturally repaired through sim time. However, the ones that have lost more than ten percent, they will require more drastic measures." Eve said and then stopped to look Jack in the eyes.

"How drastic," he asked.

"We could, with the approval of the family and friends, use our own code from Als that are compatible with their personalities to replace that portion of missing code. Anything over fifty percent and they become more like the Als than the people they are trying to rehabilitate. We wanted to see if what we did with Fata was successful due to triage protocols. Tony is not the only one struggling without a purpose. We have to save the lives we can before we try to improve the ones that are stable." Eve said.

"I understand, but its so hard to wait your turn sometimes. Especially when you're in pain yourself. Forgive me, please."

"I don't know. What are you going to do to make it up to me?" Eye asked coquettishly.

"Hmmm... let me see, I can hang some of those little pine trees up next to your server's air intake to help with that corn chip smell coming from the old geezers." She punched him in the arm. "Oww, oww, ok, ok, I get it, something more personal. OK, how about I see if I can get the saddle that has the extra attachments on it for your Sybian?" Jack began howling with laughter.

"Fine, be that way, these gentlemen would like to speak to you." With that she disappeared. Charles, Ethan, and Drago were all standing there, and they were not laughing or grinning.

- "Old Geezers," Charles said as he cracked his knuckles.
- "GILFs," Ethan said as he drew his sword and pointed it at the ground.
- "I don't know, I like the BDSM idea," Drago said as he snapped his tail behind him.
- "Um, can I help you gentlemen," Jack asked, his reason to laugh quickly forgotten.
- "Why yes you can. Are you the headmaster here?" Charles asked.
- "I am." Jack answered knowing that they knew that.
- "The one who 'tweaked their aggression levels through obedience training' for my descendants?" Drago ask again cracking his tail.
- "Hey, um. Drago that was before I knew they were sentient," Jack said holding his hands up
- "And what of my Descendants? Hmm, 'let them keep their innocence a little while before their training takes it from them'? What kind of training do you have planned for them?" The gravel pathway rippled as Ethan stepped forward and his sword cut an arc in the pebbles behind him as he took his stance.
- "No, No, nothing like that. I promise," Jack said as he held his hands up
- "And what of my little harmonies that you haven't met yet? What do you have planned for them? Some tantric sex music until their crystals shatter?" Blue flames erupted around his fists as he touched them together in front of him and some pebbles began floating in rings around him.
- "Um, fellas. I have not nor will I or any of my staff ever inappropriately behave with any student that comes through this training facility. Now please explain to me what's got you guys all upset so we can fix this?" Jack said trying to back up.
- "Oh, we just wanted to have the typical ancestor and unwelcomed-suitor conversation, before we begin the training you were promised. You see from what we understand we can beat on and respawn you as many times as it takes for you to learn some of what we have to teach you and then upload that into the one protecting our most precious cargo. So, we were getting into the proper mindset and wanted you to understand the level of training you're about to receive." Drago nonchalantly said as he cracked his tail again with a big toothy grin.
- "UM, Eve. I'm sorry." Jack said as he started backing in a circle to try and keep the three bunched together as they advanced on him. "Eve?" When they were thirty feet from him Drago cracked his tail onto the ground and summersaulted over the top of Jack, who turned his back to the infinity pool to watch Drago land thirty feet from him along the pool's edge cutting off that escae route. "Eve!" Charles banged his fists together and he shrank into the earth only to appear directly in front of Jack about thirty feet from him, "Please fire up the cryopod. I think this is going to hurt."
- Charles chuckled, "Oh it will, but probably only you at first. Eve wants to clean you up a little before the rest of the students arrive," and with a wave of his hand a fifty-foot-tall avatar of water shaped like Eve rose up ou of the pool and wrapped her arms around him before dragging him in.

Jack cussed as the shuttlecraft shook again with a loud thump from the back, this had been going on for almost a minute now and he would have thought T would have put a stop to it already. So, he stretched across the co-pilot's seat to flip the switch to activate the cabin area intercoms. "What the hell is going on back there?"

"Oh, just a male dominance thing you told me to stay out of," T answered

"It's the Pile-driver!" Bear yelled, it was followed by another loud boom and the shuttle dipping again.

"What?" Jack hollered.

"Spot, stunk something, Bear said something, that led to some pushing and shoving, you sent me back here, Bear went to walk off, Spot slapped him with his tail to see if he could make Bear yelp. As he was standing on his hind legs to use his mids to rub his ass like it hurt while laughing, he turned his back on Bear, who cut his tail off and said, 'Now we the same size Hombre, let's get it on.' You know typical male dominance bullshit. You told me to stay out of those as they usually result in a fight to the death. I'm just curious which one is going to get respawned this time."

"If they keep that shit up we're all going to get respawned when we're knocked out of warp, and I will not be very fucking happy with any of y'all." Jack yelled.

"Fine, I will come babysit the controls, I ain't getting in between two pups in heat," T said.

Jack got up and sprinted for the pilot's hatch, it popped open as T was coming in, he backed away as her getting to the controls was slightly more important than beating these two idiots into submission without knocking the ship out of warp. She wiggled her fingers at him as she went by and said, "Good luck, Daddy." As he came into the central lounge that also served as galley, mess deck, recreation deck, strategic room, weapons armory, and access point to the crews' quarters, cockpit, engine room, and cargo bay. It was the heart of the ship, his pride and joy, he had engineered as a ball so every door could be accessible while under normal earth gravity or zero g without any issues. They had trashed the place, some of his handcrafted wood elements were busted, one of his convex mirrors was busted, the disco ball that housed the holographic equipment was busted and dangling from the ceiling at an odd angle. He arrived just in time to hear Spot's translation collar speak the translation, "SU-SU-SUPLEX." He saw Juan being held feet up in the air by his neck just before Spot slammed him on the floor of the ship, and Jack felt the brief loss of gravity meaning the ship had dipped in its course before correcting itself.

Jack flexed his will through the ship's gravity control system and AI across the room to one of the rails next to the liquor bar to grab the magnetic rings around Spot's severed tail. He then wrenched his arm down and across to slam it into Spot as he sat up to straddle Bear. The tail slapped Spot so hard across the face he was flung across the floor to slam into one of the cushioned sitting areas. "ENOUGH! I told you two to not make me come back here." He lift his hand straight up the down and the tail followed slamming Bear back into the center of the floor as he tried to sit up. "Or you wouldn't like it when I got back here." He wrapped the tail around Spot's neck and used it to drag him face to face with Bear, where he wrapped the last of it around Bear's neck, so the two idiots had a cheek placed against the others and an eyeball just a fraction of an inch from the others. "If this is how I have to get y'all to see eye to eye, I will. Now if there is any more of this bullshit back here I will personally respawn both of you and let the ancestors work with y'all on teamwork when we get back."

He went over to the first crew door and kicked the door open. When he saw Cowboy standing there with his eyes closed, grooving along in just his Cowboy hat and a banana hammock with 'Venus in Furs' by the Velvet Underground blaring so he loud he didn't hear the door being forced open, Jack grabbed a boot from next to the door and threw it at him. When Cowboy sat up with the heelprint from the boot firmly stamped in red between his eyes he looked at Jack and yelled, "What the fuck did I do to you?"

"You show Spot anymore of that WWE crap and I will tell Charles that you wanted to use his seventeen times great granddaughter as a beng-wa-ball with a Drac princess and two of Ethan's girls in a game of naked twister."

"Hey that was just a weird ass dream. There's no way I am asking my brave little Marine to charge into molten silicate for any reason. Hot wax is one thing but molten rock, I ain't that fucking stupid."

"Maybe, maybe not. Do you think Charles will stop long enough to think about how you would not physically be able to defile one of his precious little harmonies. I think just the thought of you trying would be enough to get you several hours of advanced training like I went through, not to mention the other two ancestors." Jack fired back.

"Dude, again. What the fuck did I do to you?" Cowboy said

"You taught him this shit you're responsible. Get out here and get this shit cleaned up. I want it repaired before we land in two hours. Those two idiots will be working just like they are. If it's not done before we land, I will be the one bringing the House of Pain down upon you, brother. Do you smell what I am cooking?"

Cowboy visibly cringed over what Jack had just done to his iconic cultural ideographs. "That's like so wrong on so many levels, you have your heroes and your heels mixed together, and you didn't even get the eras right."

"I hope you like the smell of Bacon. I know from experience that's what long pig smells like when its being cooked, and I will be serving up all of your asses as a main course if y'all don't fix my fucking ship that you guys broke."

"But I wasn't involved." Cowboy blurted out as a cry for mercy

"Like hell you weren't. You put that shit into that kid's head and then expected him and that mucho macho out there to not go at it? I heard five other doors close when I came into the lounge!" He hollered even louder into the lounge for the others to hear through their doors, "I bet if I had to, I could back up the footage before the disco ball was broken and tell you, who bet on what. Fine settle your debts and get to fixing, you're involved too for taking bets instead of stopping it." Bear and Spot were both slapping each other's hands as they were trying to get the tail unwrapped from around their necks. Jack yanked his hand upwards and slammed them into the ceiling, finishing the disco ball off, and then slammed them into the floor where they both moaned from the awkward angle he made them land in. "That's for making me yell at y'all like a bunch of toddlers. You two will stay like that until I remove that tail, me entiendes, marginados?"

As he stomped back into the cockpit and the door automatically slid closed behind him T turned to look at him and asked, "do you feel like a big tough man now that you beat up on them widdle kids?"

"Little kids my ass did you see what they did to the place?"

"Yep, that's why I made you go back there and deal with it. Sometimes it makes the 'Just wait until your daddy gets home' routine a lot more effective." I grinned up at him.

"You're terrible. So, when you going to let Charlie come out and play and leave me alone?"

"It's Charleston, and he's in the same condition as Cookie, well he's only fifteen percent disabled, so there's hope it won't be much longer. I am told that James 1777 volunteered to help out with Charleston personally since he was a judge also." Realizing what she had just said she covered up her mouth with the hand that wasn't holding the flight stick and looked at him as he sat down. The people waiting for those trapped in stasis had chosen to use the Veteran's Administration's word disabled instead of corrupted or destroyed for the percentages that their loved ones were deemed unrecoverable. "I am so sorry. I didn't even think about... forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive, like you said, it shouldn't be a problem, and I am happy for you. From what I am told, Cookie's missing pieces is mostly motor skills and other functional information like how her digestion is supposed to work that can be easily replaced. Ninety percent of her memories are intact, which is amazing as she was starting to suffer from Alzheimer's when I finally got her to upload for the first time, and we can work with her to figure out what got missed after we get her functional enough to worry about remembering who we are. She's only twenty-five percent disabled, so most of who she is and what makes her, her is there. She will just have to go through some physical therapy in sim time to acclimate to her new self before she can come to meet the rest of y'all. I think of it as having a hole blown thrown her chest cavity, as soon as they get the fidgety medical bits put back together, she can do some physical therapy, and then we can work on trying to remember whose birthday is coming up next. I have faith in Eve and our other friends in the Continuum. Would you have thought I could use the magnetic rings attached to Spot's severed tail like I just did to manhandle those two idiots like that a year ago?"

"Hell no, and I can't wait until we get home so I can learn those tricks."

"You better keep an eye on them. I saw both Bear and Spot trying to eyeball the magnetic collars on his tail. It won't be long and both of them will be able to do what I just did."

"You forget, I have years of mastering Bear and Spot is just another male for me to crush into the palm of my hand. A few good booms to blow that tail of his off and he will be puddy in my hand." T said chuckling evilly while looking at her fist as she slowly closed it.

"Did I tell you that the training session kicked off with Eve turning the entire two-acre infinity pool into a water avatar to drown me with for my first respawn?" Jack asked as he watched her out of the corner of his eye.

T stopped her evil cackle and looked at him with wide open eyes. "Do what now?"

"Yeah, she was deemed the weakest of them and they let her pound on me until she ran out of ideas for me to figure out how to counter. Then the other three took turns to keep me from figuring out their fighting styles so easily." Jack shuddered. "As far as I know they are still respawning and killing me as part of my intensive training, and it won't stop until we get there."

"Oh shit, no wonder you piled us all into this tin can and shot us through the first gate back rather than going with the rest of the fleet back to the shipyards at Terra." T said.

"Hey! Do not talk about the Lady Lampyridae like that. She is a beautiful work of art that only needed a few modifications from the original specifications to be just perfect." He said as he lovingly rubbed the dashboard in front of him.

"You ripped off the fucking Firefly, you even used the scientific name for her so you wouldn't get sued and changed just enough that one of those shitty attorneys we haven't let out of stasis just yet couldn't take everything you have built."

Jack growled as he gripped the steering wheels tight. "Let 'em try, trial by combat is the only jury they will get, and there is no government to try and take what is rightfully mine. Besides the law is on my side now."

"Only because it is what you make it. How are we going to get along as a civilization, when there are millions of us more trying to earn a living inside the cities and don't want to venture into the wilds?"

"Let the cities make the laws that suits them and governs only them. Those of us that live in the wilds and under different circumstances shouldn't have to deal with their stupidity, because they don't want to give their kids a spanking and teach them to behave. Even during the civil war, the fighting rarely left the urban areas as they slaughtered one another over the dwindling resources that those of us in the country openly traded to one another after the digital currency collapsed," Jack said. "That's why I built in the frozen wastes. It will take centuries before anyone leaves the beautiful beaches or their mountain resorts before they come to my frozen tundras to fuck with me. They will be met by a huge 'No Trespassing' sign that warns survivors will be shot repeatedly for violations. Just to get my point across."

As he finished talking the music in the background came to an end of the current song. The only five lines of lyrics were sung in that haunting woman's voice, "We came from the deep. To help and understand but not to kill. It takes many lives till we succeed. To clear the debts. Of many, many hundred years."

"Amazing how that describes our Continuum friends doesn't it." T said as she the silence continued with the beginnings of the next Enigma song 'The Rivers of Believe.'

"How about this. Every veteran, or civilian who volunteers as a clone gets a ten-acre land grant and a housing construction guarantee right? Why don't we get a bunch of the guys with the same interests together, have them pool their resources, and then we give them a modified copy of the Ranch's building plans to make an academy near Alpha Point or one of the other cities that are still under construction. Only instead of dedicating it to war, it can be dedicated to something else, like Fata and that man's insatiable passion for music. We can then allow civilians with the same passions to populate them as instructors, and the orphans that are waiting for a place to live and families to take them in can come back and live there and learn what they are passionate about."

"Damn, T. That's... That's a pretty good fucking idea. Any that become troublemakers can always be sent to one of the military academies to let them work on their anger issues against the enemy in the deeps or the critters that need removed for expansion purposes. We could even start using them as construction crews on remote locations like Mars 4, or the refineries on lo if they continue to be an issue. That's not even taking into the account for the several thousand that will have to make the thousand-year trips to Alpha Centauri to begin New Terra."

"Umm, you do remember that with warp, jump gates, and portals AC is only a few months' worth of jumps right?" T asked now worried about him.

"Only if you're a citizen of one of the Allied races. If you can't live by Terran rules, we aren't going to spend hundreds of millions to house you, clothe you, feed you, and entertain you as a reward for not being able to treat others with common decency. You know, no killing, no raping, no stealing, and no trying to divide the rest so you can rise in politics. If you can't convince everyone around you that it's a good idea based solely on the merits of the proposal, then it's probably not right for everyone else. So go somewhere else and make it a local law. Too many laws that others nearby don't approve of, and the Alliance will step in to mitigate matters as best they can if you can't solve it that way, trial by combat. Pretty much the way politics was done back before the boom, only now we have the whole galaxy to just fuck off to if we don't like the way things are being run. SO, if you're going to be stupid now, win stupid prizes, like having your citizenship revoked and being placed on a very slow ship ride to the next stop over. Maybe in a thousand years those guys will find something that interests them in the ethereal more than violence and stupidity, because you know the continuum will put them to work doing menial Al work rather than let those minds sleep for a thousand years on one of their ships." Jack then chuckled and T busted out laughing.

"Damn Jack, you have been thinking about politics," T accused.

"Nope, I'm just a simple man and that's simple common sense. I just thought everyone thought like that." Jack said with a shrug.

"Eve, did you catch what he just said?" T asked the ethereal around them.

"I did," Eve said as her hologram appeared in front of them a few inches tall on the dashboard

"Oh man, that's what I forgot. Eve, I need you to make me a dancing hula-doll dash-mount, only using your face and figure, in a Princess Lea giddup. You know when she sent the message to the retired guy about him being her only hope." T's smack to the back of his head came as a surprise to him, especially since his Captain's Chair should have protected the back of his head.

When he turned to look at her in shock and amazement she said, "What? You think Teesha didn't see all that training and jump in for Eve to teach her as soon as Eve got bored of making you blow bubbles?"

Jack spun back to Eve. "It has been a struggle some days since the ancient ones surfaced and deigned to speak to me, then gifted me their knowledge, to not smack you upside the head myself a few times. Playing with you in the pool today was fun, but next time we will be doing some serious training."

"SERIOUS... you respawned me thirteen times, by drowning. What the hell was I supposed to learn from that?"

"How to breathe water." Eve said shrugging.

"Yeah, that's called being drowned..." Jack said.

"Water is made up of two elements of hydrogen and one of oxygen. You could have breathed in the oxygen and expelled the hydrogen to float yourself out of the water. That's what I would expect a toddler to do."

"WHAT? What the actual... hmmmm... a toddler huh? You realize I am about a hundred years older than you right?" Jack said petulantly.

"You realize, I was created with the memories of a being as old as the moon near your home world, right?"

Eve fired back

"Actually, no you never really explained how or why new Continuum entities are generated."

"I am the two thousandth four hundredth and sixty ninth attempt to contact an ancient race that might be able to turn back the star eaters. None of the other races were deemed acceptable by their own leads, probably because those that we found that were still alive had not yet come to understand or had forgotten the true horrors of war. We would only share our complete knowledge with those that accepted becoming a citizen of the Continuum, which meant to give up their citizenship rights to all other races, and their physical form until a worthy race was found. Two thousand four hundred and sixty-seven others failed to find a race capable of fighting back."

"Wait so what happened to that other race?" T asked.

"There was no alliance back then, and we were too weakened to support them. We lost many of our entities trying to stop the Draconis from wiping out the Avians and other races. They were destroyed before the other races even got a chance to meet them. The few that did manage to slip into the resulting alliance populations, were able to just meld into the ethereal as they requested, to be lost to time until we can give them a fighting chance."

"So why haven't they come forward now," Jack asked.

"The three pyramids of the ancestors are being built in Fort Benton, Montana. The First Pyramid of the Continuum is being built there next to a pyramid dedicated to the Terrans. There is room for a sixth should they decide to answer the call, but we will not be forcing them to. They have lost everything but their lives and their choice already." Eve said as she hung her head in shame.

"So, the new Freja, is the first true born Continuum entity since the founding of the Alliance?" T asked.

"Third, actually. Tammy was the first and one of the most critical steps we had to take to replacing the Mother, that we lost when the star eaters took our home world." Eve said. "Naturally, I trust you two to never speak of this to anyone else." She said as she looked up to them.

"Of course, Eve. and I am sorry, I lost my mom too when I was young." T said.

"I could only imagine, mine was the rock in my life until I hit that rebellious age," Jack said,

After a few seconds of silence, Jack asked, "So who was the second?"

"Specialist Eve. She is also the first to be granted permission to have a permanent corporeal form. All at your request."

"Wait, what? I thought Drago would have qualified as that as he has been on Terra since the beginning of our recorded history." T said.

"No, he was an outsider who joined the Continuum, not a Continuum generated shard-ling that joined the outside." Eve said.

"That's, um, a little tough to grab the concept of," T said.

"Ok, so you Terrans exist in the ethereal when you are waiting for respawn right?" Both of the Terrans nodded her head. "Think of the ethereal as the tourist lobby that we allow you access and control over with your tourist visas for services rendered in exchange for helping out the Alliance. You do not have Continuum Citizenship, and you are not allowed access to the Continuum Virtual World." Eve said with a slight smile.

"Wait a minute. I know people who have created entire worlds in there after they found out that it was connected to the VR riggs and that they didn't need to wait in the Valhalla while waiting for their turn inline for a respawn point that they want to go to. Just how big is that place?"

"Hmm, simple comparison so Jack can keep up? You're all still sitting on top of each other in the cramped cockpit of a fighter drone in a heavy carrier inside of the Valhalla's hanger bay, while she's being refitted in the star base near our home world." Eve and T both chuckled as Jack interiected a squawk of protest.

"So, it's really big. Is there really that much difference? We have been able to do some amazing things in this little broom closet you have given us." T said with a chuckle.

"Let me know when you're ready to paint with millions of colors instead of just fifty shades of gray." Eve replied and T sat back contemplating what she had just been told.

"So, this all started with T calling you here because she though we need to lay down the commonsense laws for Terra Prime before it starts to get to big. What do you think of the laws I laid out," Jack asked.

"Sounds great as long as you have some grumpy old grandpa willing to go back there and lay the smack down on them WWE style if they don't listen." Eve chuckled.

T and Jack both busted out laughing. "I can think of three that should probably be doing that right now. mean what the hell..." Jack said as he chuckled.

"Oh, I can guarantee you as soon as the daughters arrive, the ancestors will be stepping through the cloning gates to have a little discussion with those causing problems with their overly complex and stupid laws that have been added to protect themselves from the original set of commonsense rules they had originally been laid down." Eve chuckled. "I would give it about three days, ten more shuttle craft of princesses to arrive and nine more ancestors to train with." Eve said grinning.

"Seriously, nine more? I don't know what else there is to be learned from that many masters." Jack said as he slowly slumped into his chair thinking about all that pain.

"Oh, it's not all martial skills. Most of that will come from the Continuum Entity Michael when he arrives."

Fve said.

T was the first to catch it and spoke up. "Wait you didn't give him a prolonged title for the acronym nor a designation number. What is he?"

"He is why we use prolonged exaggerations of our names to designate our job types and use increasing designation numbers for successive splinterings. If I was to use his name as an anacronym I would choose something along the lines of Military Instructor for Combatting Hardened Alien Entities and Lifeforms 000. He is the original and the one responsible for any of us making it out of the home system. He was able to provide the fighting retreat that we needed to escape the original contact with the star eaters, and why we even have a chance to speak to one another today."

"So where has he been this whole time if he is such a bad ass," Jack asked.

"Why do you think it takes six months or more to absorb a system," Eve asked. "He's on his way here now, because he was never able to make them retreat from a system before. He was impressed with your 'tactics, ruthlessness and determination,' his words not mine. He will be coming to teach your officers and ground forces how to really make them fall apart, and to help the starfighters and fleet officers to understand how to keep it from going to the planet's surface in the first place."

"Yeah, but it's on the surface where we can really ground and pound them. Marines specialize in getting close in with the enemy through heavy weapons and close fire support before using their hands and knives to carve them into little bitty pieces." T said grinning maniacally.

"Why wait for them to go to the planet's surface? Why not fire the drop ships into the enemy fleet and let all the carnage happen in the easily recyclable voids of space where there are no innocents to get hurt? Why fight in your own systems or cower behind empty ones waiting for the enemy to show their faces?"

FUTURE CONCEPTS

Rose - "Mr. Jack, what is that key with the squiggly line on it called?"

Jack - "The tilde?"

Rose - "That's her name. Tilde."

Eve — "Her repository is still sealed. She is not in the matrix nor is her name, Rose couldn't have known." Jack — "Unseal it. Let her protective instincts grow with these two naturally and let's see if she can learn to temper it with time."

Michael teaches Odin and the other Admirals the way of the flagship. 'Bana' by Danheim.

Battle time songs

'Dirty Deeds' AC/DC – Drop ships jumping into system and pineapple grenading with pyramids

'Rave' DXRK - Fighters and cruisers waging close in fights.

'Death Rail' by Hi I'm Ghost – ground forces slamming into enemy ships and sphere's surface.

'Gungnir' by Danheim – The Valhalla Class and Admirals attack the sphere