

involutio{n}

FLETCHER'S SQUAD



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“Involution: Fletcher’s Squad”

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Involution: Fletcher's Squad

written by
Luke Reynolds

I

The world looked just as it should: baby blue skies blanketing a sea of pointy trees. At least this was what Sergeant Irene Fletcher thought. Her world was among the spruce, fir, larch and other conifers spreading from horizon to horizon. Each tree stood tall, sturdy, and proud – saluting the atmosphere like men reporting for duty. They adhered to a strict hierarchy of things, these trees. They were predictable and they were useful and they showed no fear.

Sergeant Fletcher's mind circled around these notions as she sat in the back of one of three reconnaissance vehicles. Each one of these "recon" vehicles was painted in olive drab and armed with a machine gun mount. The small convoy barreled down a dirt road, which had been carved among the hills and valleys of the vast coniferous forest.

"Permission to speak freely?" asked the driver. Sergeant Fletcher was pulled from her thoughts. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply then slowly exhaled.

"Permission granted," she replied.

"You really think they crossed the border?" he asked.

"Who else could it be?" she snapped.

"I don't know," Miller replied. "But it's not like them, not like this."

"New tactics," she offered. "How else could it be explained?"

"Well," Miller started. "Maybe it wasn't anyone. You know, maybe it's some natural event."

"Like what?" she asked, rather cross.

"I don't know," he started. "A sinkhole?"

"Where are the trees?" she replied. "Why is there grass? Sinkholes don't remove trees and replace them with patches of grass."

With the case closed, she settled in to return to her thoughts.

"Yeah," Miller continued, drawing her attention again. "But people don't do that either – not out here, not like this. Maybe it's something else – a phenomenon of sorts."

"What, like aliens?" she laughed. "Why spend time contemplating the unlikely?"

"Yeah but," he started but was cut off.

"Let me share some advice with you, private," Sergeant Fletcher continued, not waiting for a reply. "All of life can be broken down to three things: objectives, hierarchies, and resources. That's it."

"Okay?" he replied.

"You keep that in mind then you can stop worrying about folly concepts," she said.

"What about people?" he chuckled.

"What?" she asked.

"You know, like you and me," he said. "Where do people fit in to life?"

"Resources, Private Miller," she replied.

"Oh?" he laughed.

"That's not a bad thing," she explained. "It's our duty. You're a resource and I'm a resource, too. As long as we're useful and predictable, the hierarchy will be able to achieve successful objectives. The only difference between you and I is that I'm higher up in the—"

"Food chain?" he offered.

"Hierarchy," she corrected.

"Oh," he said with a smile.

"You should respect the hierarchy, Private Miller," lectured Sergeant Fletcher. "It ensures order. It mitigates chaos - a streamlined way to systemize the messiness of communication, relationships, and politics."

"Sarge, we're getting close," interrupted a call over the commlink. "Over."

"Roger that," replied Sergeant Fletcher. "Park as

close to the disturbance as you can. But do so, so we're facing F.O.B. Over."

"Sir. Yes sir," came the response. "Over."

"See, Miller?" said Sergeant Fletcher as she leaned back. "Effective communication all thanks to the hierarchy."

"I suppose," he replied.

Back in her seat, she moved her head almost birdlike as she repositioned to see out a small window. Sergeant Fletcher preferred to be called just that: Sergeant Fletcher but her squad referred to her as "Sarge." While an informal nickname would normally needle at the nonsense strategist, she often confused efficient communication as proof of her efficient leadership and the abbreviated, monosyllabic "sarge" validated her craving for concision.

Once the three vehicles parked, the squad secured the perimeter, rifles hung low and ready.

"Miller, Wilson: in front," Sergeant Fletcher said. "Lewis, Lopez: flank. Chang? You're with me: rear. Spread wide."

As the soldiers moved into position, Sergeant Fletcher used a friendlier voice on the commlink. It was the voice she needed to rehearse as a requirement for the only soft skills course she had ever been enrolled in.

"This may be enemy territory. This may be a trap. Keep your wits about you. Let's move."

With that the squad marched forward, swallowed by the forest. From the road behind them and for miles and miles (in nearly every direction), there was nothing but the trees. Well, in almost every direction. Straight ahead (at about a ten-minute walk), there was a clearing (the "disturbance" as Sergeant Fletcher referred to it). This was not just any clearing, it seemed to contain a haze. Well, not exactly a haze, more like a discoloration – as if someone had put up a photo filter over that part of the forest – only it wasn't a photo, of course. It was difficult to discern what exactly was being perceived when looking at it so, in turn, it was hard to describe. Not one to worry about verbose descriptions, Sergeant Fletcher

coined it as the "disturbance" and that was that.

On the front line, Miller and Wilson were quickly approaching the disturbance – perhaps only 25 more steps? 30? 35? It was hard to gauge while walking. And with each step, a tension seemed to stir. Whatever curiosity Miller had about the sunlit disturbance was incrementally eroded with every impact of boot to earth. Each stomp vexed with further apprehension. The enemy – the North Okeechee (referred to as "Noiks" by the squad) – had been known to set up devious traps. Clearing out a small pocket of trees and burying land mines didn't exactly fit their offensive profile, but that didn't stop Miller from thinking about it. Besides, inventing novel ways of killing each other was always a part of warfare.

As the squad got closer to the disturbance, Miller and Wilson would risk more than a few looks back to Sergeant Fletcher, permitting her plenty of opportunity to offer a new command like "Stop" or "Halt" or "Wait" but she was silent. Miller and Wilson knew "unless told otherwise" to keep moving – and they did just that (of course) but it didn't prevent them from subtly signaling concern. Just before the edge of the forest, as they looked back one last time, Miller and Wilson caught each other's gaze. The moment was brief but before they unlocked eyes, they had signaled to one another that they were "in this together".

However, they weren't necessarily in it together. It was Miller – well, part of Miller (his leg, specifically) – who was the first to cross the threshold. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead as his knee and thigh were exposed to the quirky light. His left boot made contact with the soft grass and loamy dirt beneath. The explosion he had been fearing (the one from the trap the Noiks had placed in this clearing) destroyed most of his body – or at least it would have if it had happened. But it didn't. Not with that step. It was his right boot that next connected with the earth and as it did, the weight of his whole body was pressed into it, applying enough force to trigger the buried device of which was packed with enough explosive compound to throw his painful dying corpse high into the air. But, again, it didn't happen. Each step slowly proved that these devices did not exist.

Perhaps this isn't a trap by the Noiks? As he continued forward, each successful step became less tense than the one before and the sudden surprise he felt at the level of his own relief nearly became euphoric. Never had he been happier that the ground remained just ground.

Wilson was next to cross into the clearing, more curious than afraid, he looked to the sky which was bright and blue. But that's not exactly right – it was blue, sure, but it was not just any blue. It was a magnificent version of it – a hue he was convinced that he'd never seen before. He could hear Miller taking in a deep breath and he did so himself. The air was very different in the clearing; and, like everything else about this place, it wasn't easy to describe why. It was extremely refreshing and perhaps a little sweeter.

By now, every member of the squad had entered the clearing – each of them experiencing the same sensations as Miller and Wilson. Sergeant Fletcher made no new commands so the squad continued forward, up a grassy incline. As she marched, she seemed to eyeball the area with the same amount of strict scrutiny she used when inspecting the barracks for specks of dust: obvious signs of laziness and inefficiency. Her judgment of the clearing was interrupted when Miller spoke into his commlink.

“Sarge, I,I- You gotta see this! This doesn't make any sense!”

“Halt,” said Sergeant Fletcher. “Hold positions.”

Without hesitation, she walked up the 50 yards between her and the front line. Upon reaching the peak, she saw what Miller and Wilson were looking at. The clearing didn't end as expected. It went on for miles and miles and miles – but it wasn't just a grassy hillscape. From here, the path dipped down into a deep valley of crags and jagged rocks, and in the distance (about a 20-minute walk), there was an old stone tower topped with a brilliant emerald flag marked with a perfect black diamond in the center. Beyond the tower lay a vast desert and even further still – close to the horizon - sunlight bounced off snowcapped mountains.

“How is this possible?” asked Sergeant Fletcher.

“Sarge, that's not the weirdest part,” said Wilson. “Look.”

Sergeant Fletcher looked at Wilson who was looking back in the direction they had come. As she turned she could see the other squad members below (on the hill side), the grassy path they had walked up, and then the pine forest from which they came. But it wasn't the same forest! The trees – they were the same suggesting that they were from the same forest – but the forest itself was reduced from a vast sea of pine to a small patch - no bigger than the clearing they walked into. Beyond the forest, were hills and a visible ocean with sailing ships and a port town - none of it matching the terrain as it should. Peculiar still, the round area of forest from which they came had a discoloration to it – as if the forest was now the “disturbance”.

“This - this cannot be the work of the Noiks!” she said. “What is going on here?”

“Uh, we got company!” Miller barked. Wilson and Sergeant Fletcher spun around to see something large near the tower. It was galloping toward the squad, a plume of dust trailing behind. From this distance, it appeared to be a bull - but it had to be as big as a tank and its body seemed shiny – metallic. Even from this distance, the ground vibrated with the heavy pounding from its bulky hooves.

“Fall back! Follow me!” Sergeant Fletcher screamed and they hesitated only enough to let her pass to lead the way. She noticed that the forest, while not terribly far away, seemed smaller than just moments ago. This was odd and perhaps ominous, but since the goal was to get to it as quickly as possible, pondering it didn't much matter. The pressing issue – though still not worth worrying about – was the bull which was faster than they were. Despite the severe incline, the beast was still able to reach the top of the hill before the squad could make it to the forest. The ground shook tremendously now with the metallic creature racing down the hillside, toward them, toward the clearing - which seemed to be just a small patch of trees now.

Sergeant Fletcher was the first to cross the threshold. She was always a star athlete and secretly took pride

in being first. In that moment she would think how it wasn't shameful to outrun her squad - especially since she planned on turning to cover them. She was leading them - showing them the way, exuding bravery and strength. But her thoughts quickly turned to doom as she realized that the vibrations had completely quelled - there were no more monstrous galloping noises. She turned on a dime, arming herself with her rifle as she did, aiming and standing as still as possible - despite her heavy breaths.

But there was nothing. Well, there were trees - but that was the problem - not just the fact that she was alone but that trees stood where the clearing once was. No more clearing. No more stone tower with the emerald flag. No more metallic bull. But also, no more squad. The others were nowhere in sight.

Sergeant Fletcher broke her pose and scanned the area in bewilderment. She called out for her squad members, pausing to listen for responses. "Miller!" "Chang!" "Lopez!"

They were right behind her, weren't they? What happened? This can't be a joke, could it? As infuriating as a joke would be, it certainly would be appreciated to the alternative. But this was too elaborate to be a joke. But this was also physically impossible and couldn't be real. Unless it's a dream. Is this a dream? She was positive it wasn't but she tested her senses to be sure. But ultimately, none of this made sense.

She tried to reach them on her commlink. "Lopez, copy." "Chang? Copy?" "Miller! Where are you! Copy!"

She was only a five-minute walk away from the recon vehicles but she wouldn't go until she was convinced that this situation was real. She continued to call out, pausing only to question the reality of the situation and contemplate the next step. Eventually, Sergeant Fletcher left, taking one of the recon vehicles back to forward operations base to attempt to radio in reinforcements.

II

"Mavisford 5 to Mavisford 6. Do you copy? Send reinforcements immediately."

This was the eighth attempt - it seemed to be of no use. She put the receiver back in its holster and returned her gaze to the road. The recon vehicle was racing toward forward operations base. As Sergeant Fletcher leaned forward, watching the environment with one eye, she wiped a single tear from the other. With no one around to judge her and alone with her thoughts, her inhibition started to wane.

Due to the mountainous terrain, the road was not always level and would descend valleys and climb cliff sides. As the recon vehicle climbed one such cliff side, something caught Sergeant Fletcher's eye. Off to her right, down in the valley - among an ocean of conifers, there was a clearing, round in shape. Another "disturbance!" It was much wider than the one that engulfed her squad but it looked very different. It was darker, much darker - as if she was looking straight through all the world's ground and atmosphere - straight into outer space itself. As she got to the apex of the hill, an object - a spaceship - appeared from the clearing.

At this, Sergeant Fletcher let out a gasp. The road twisted around, down the other side of the hill. She turned her head back quickly for another look at the object, but it was out of view. When she turned her head back to the road, she gasped again.

The road she was bounding down was no longer dirt, but paved - she was somehow driving not down an access road in a coniferous mountain, but down an offramp in a desolate downtown area. Where there were once trees, lining the road, stood skyscrapers and street lights. With the midday sky in her side-view mirror, ahead of her - and above her - it was a cloudy night sky; but the neon lights of the town were bright - bright enough to make certain parts of the environment look like day.

She slammed on the breaks. She had to. Not just because of her desire to get out of what she assumed to be a "disturbance", but also because the curve of the offramp was too severe. The vehicle lurched as the wheels gripped the road, but it was still going too fast. Sergeant Fletcher whipped the steering column to the left and the vehicle responded - but it wasn't quick enough. The broad side of the recon vehicle hit the guard rail, broke

through it, and continued into the air. It flipped as it fell and landed upside-down on the street below, about a ten-foot drop.

Sergeant Fletcher was strapped in by her waist and shoulder. A little slow to understand what had happened, her ears were ringing. She had hit her head against the left interior of the vehicle but luckily, her helmet did its job. She looked down, which was usually up, placed a hand on the ceiling for support and unlatched her belt. She crumpled to the ground, a small amount of blood dripping on to her hand. It came from her nose. Helmets can't protect everything.

She started to assess the situation, specifically the interior of the vehicle. She cursed as she realized she could not flip it back. Then she remembered what was waiting outside – the disturbance. Panic struck as she pictured the shrinking patch of trees. She needed to flee and quick. She grabbed her rifle and a backpack and climbed out of the vehicle.

She didn't take time to look around at the grimy environment – she didn't think she'd have time. She had to sprint for at least a block – maybe two – in order to get onto the offramp – then race up it to get back to the disturbance that would take her back home – back to where she belonged.

So, she didn't have time to look around. But if she did have time, or if she had stopped to take the time to look, she may have seen him standing in the alley across the street - watching her. As she sprinted by him, he stealthily followed, hiding among the shadows. Two swords were strapped to his back and pistols at his hips. Perhaps, if she took a second to scan the environment, she would have seen the neon lights reflecting off the studs of his leather jacket.

Sergeant Fletcher raced down the trash strewn sidewalk, a brick wall to her left supported the offramp as it slowly descended toward her level. On her right, across the street, the buildings were tall, concrete, and derelict. The traffic lights did not work at the first intersection she passed. She continued forward but stole a glance down the street she crossed. The street was long, polluted with dingy offices and apartments for at least a

mile. However, what caught her attention was a small gang of motorcyclists. They had neon lights in the undercarriage – shining the concrete below in green. She returned her focus and maintained her quick pace. She needed to get to the disturbance. There was no way of telling how small it had become at this point. She picked up her pace. It was the only exit to her world and she could not imagine existing without it.

That's when she heard them – engines roaring like jets. She pushed herself even further. There was still another block to go before she could enter the ramp. Two motorcycles passed her with a roar and she thought she may have been done for. But no. Not yet. The riders continued but stopped at the intersection ahead and slowly positioned themselves. A trap? But that was only a minor concern as a third motorcyclist had slowed down enough to ride next to her, keeping pace.

“Hey there, bunny!” called the male rider. There was sinister in his voice. “You a little lost?”

Sergeant Fletcher did not like being called “bunny.” She especially did not like the way that he said it. She assumed that he was a lowlife and she wanted to tell him so. But the fear of a closing clearing was enough to contain her rage. She forced herself to ignore him as she maintained her top speed. She could sense that another motorcyclist was directly behind her. Her ears were red-hot and she felt exposed in her green garb and helmet, sticking out among these freaks and outnumbered at least four-to-one; all of them mounted, to-boot. She wouldn't go down without a fight but the odds were against her. “Just keep running. Get as close as you can,” she thought.

“I said, ‘Hey there, bunny!’” the parallel rider said again. “Hello! Are you deaf, lady?”

As he said that, he veered closer to her, his face near hers. The next intersection was about fifteen or twenty paces away at this point but the forth-coming trap was complete. The motorcyclists ahead had parked, wheel-to-bumper from the corner wall, forming a chain. She'd have to go out into the street to get around them and by then it would be too late, she'd be boxed in. Her plan to “get as close to the disturbance as possible” cost her

valuable breathing room – she needed range. The plan had to be aborted fast but she was already surrounded by a wall and two enemies. She would need to make her own breathing room.

That's when Sergeant Fletcher spun around and started running backwards. As she did, she flipped her rifle off safe and engaged the motorcyclist behind her. Taking several bullets in the chest and head, the rider fell off the bike and laid motionless. As the parallel rider started hollering and engines started roaring, Sergeant Fletcher ran forward, toward the intersection she had passed – where the gang had originated.

Before she could get there, she was being shot at – laser rounds whizzed by her head. She zigged and zagged on her way to the intersection. Once she got to the corner, she would use the building as cover, kneel and engage the enemies as they came. But that didn't happen. Instead, she was pushed to the ground by something heavy against her back. Luckily her pack had absorbed some of the blow but she was winded. As she fell, she could see the assailant as they continued down the road on the motorcycle. He had a club.

She tried to get up but stumbled. She felt pressure on her upper arm. Someone pulled her to her feet. With her free hand she unsheathed the combat knife at her waist and swung toward the enemy's gut. The knife struck flesh. It wasn't as good of a connection as she would have liked, but under these circumstances, it was better than nothing. On the other hand, it turned out that her victim wasn't one of the motorcyclists – it was a stranger with dark skin and silver hair. He had two swords at his back.

The stabbed man, let go of her arm. He winced but his focus was not on her or the wound – he had an arm extended toward the oncoming bikers. This hand appeared metallic and held a laser pistol which he used to blast at one of the two riders but missed. Without hesitation, Sergeant Fletcher followed suit and fired at them with her rifle. Both riders fell from their vehicles.

“Who are you?” Sergeant Fletcher managed.

“Doesn't matter. Go!” said the stranger. He turned to face the clubbed rider that knocked Sergeant Fletcher

to the ground. But the motorcyclist had turned a corner off in the distance and was out of sight. “Go! I'll take out these freaks!”

Sergeant Fletcher did not wait. The clearing may already be closed and then what would happen? Would she be stuck here in this dark place that smelled of motor oil and trash? And then what? The hierarchy was clearly not upheld here. The hierarchy would have kept this place in shape. No. Best not to think of that right now. Best only to run.

But then she heard the engines – not just from one bike, but several – in the distance. She turned to see that a much larger motorcycle gang was entering the street. Their speed would outmatch hers by the time she got up the ramp – if she didn't get shot first. She needed another way, a faster way. She needed speed! She ran to the nearest motorcycle, heart pumping with adrenaline. She lifted it and sat upon it but the technology was unfamiliar – dials and displays had bizarre shapes - and her heart sank. She looked up and saw the stranger – who stood facing the oncoming gang.

“Come on!” Sergeant Fletcher yelled.

He turned toward her, eyes wide.

“Can you drive this thing?” she asked, backing up in the seat.

“Yeah. Yes, I can!” he said, enthusiastically. He gritted his teeth and jogged to her.

“I'll take you to the portal!” he said as he mounted the motorcycle.

Sergeant Fletcher paused at this word, “portal” but was pulled back to reality when he revved the engine. Laser rounds flew past them from the approaching gang.

“Hold on!” said the stranger. Sergeant Fletcher grabbed the man by his waist, feeling him wince as she did. Her hand was soaked in wetness, which turned out to be blood from the stab wound.

“Sorry,” she said though if he responded she did not hear as they sped away from the oncoming enemy. Once they made it to the intersection, Sergeant Fletcher

saw more gang members coming from the right – they were closer and gaining speed. It wouldn't be long before they caught up but the stranger was slowing down. This wasn't good. Could it be? Is it possible that he was with them the whole time? That he was delivering her to them? If so then she'd only have moments to jump off and run. But the stranger had only slowed the motorcycle down to maneuver around the corner of the offramp. Laser rounds whizzed by them as he gunned it up the offramp.

Sergeant Fletcher couldn't see the full disturbance from where she was, though she now realized "portal" was a better word since it would take her home. Even though she couldn't see trees or mountains from where she sat, she could see a small patch of blue sky among the dark clouds. It was a patch of sky she recognized and her heart filled with hope. To her left, on the other side of the wall that separated the ramp from the street, the original motorcycle gang, 20 members strong, was driving the opposite way, to join the additional pursuing motorcyclists who started to enter the offramp.

Sergeant Fletcher looked at the broken guard rail as they sped past by the scene of her accident, riding over her skid marks that curved around the severe bend. They were so close but trees were not visible as the portal was now only as wide as the road itself. In that circular patch was dirt road, but beyond it was more concrete pavement which spread to a desolate highway that had caved in about a quarter mile ahead. From this direction, at this height, she could see that the city went on for miles and miles – a whole world of grime and grit. The motorcyclists were now speeding up the offramp now but it seemed that they'd only be an issue if they weren't able to make it through the portal. And if not? Then what? Would they turn around and fire? Would they jump the chasm? Would they stop and try to climb down on foot? She decided not to worry about that yet and allowed herself to close her eyes and hold on to the stranger tight.

She didn't see it but she felt it. She could smell it. The concrete turned to dirt and the motorcycle handled differently. The air was more breathable. She opened her eyes to sunlight and conifers and dirt. She whipped her

head back – just in time to see the patch of night sky close behind them. The portal had closed. She patted the stranger in the back quickly and he brought the vehicle to a stop.

"The portal closed!" Sergeant Fletcher said.

The stranger walked the vehicle backwards and turned toward the direction they had come. He motioned to get off and he parked the motorcycle. Together they walked to the apex of the hill, weapons drawn – but the only thing on the other side was the dirt road descending a hill.

"Well," he said. "That's that I guess."

"I'm sorry," Sergeant Fletcher replied, though she wasn't sure if she was as sorry about his loss vs. bringing him – this stranger who was outside the hierarchy – into her world.

"I'm not exactly sure you should be," he said. "Unless you mean for stabbing me."

"Ugh," she replied. Now he's on about that? Of course, she stabbed him – it made sense to do so. Best to transition into a different subject. "Yeah. Sorry about that. But your home?"

"Don't worry about that," he said. "That place I left – that home – is a cesspool. You've only seen part of it, right? It doesn't get any better than that."

Sergeant Fletcher could not agree more – it was indeed a cesspool – and if this stranger could see that his world was a mess then maybe he believed in it after all, believed in the hierarchy.

"It's nothing like this place," he said as he looked around at her world. "Where are we, anyway?"

She suddenly felt pride for two things: her world and the hierarchy. If he was a man of structure, then this was a chance to appeal to that – and test him.

"This is Access Road 3 which runs parallel to the northern border of the Mavisford territory," said Sergeant Fletcher, as she stiffened up. The stranger didn't respond at all. She wasn't sure what reaction she would have preferred but felt like he wasn't going to give it. She

loosened up a little bit, cautiously watching him. "We're on the colony planet Ryduel in the L75 star system."

"Oh. Okay. Sounds lovely, um?" the stranger was fishing for her name. There was a hint of slime to it – almost like the words were dipped in whatever it was that made that motor oil and trash smell from his world. Best to respond with hierarchy-speak.

"Sergeant Fletcher, of Mavisford command, Patrol 65," she said as she stiffened again. "My squad and I patrol these parts-"

She meant to say more but stopped suddenly, remembering the metal bull and the clearing – it all seemed so long ago – almost like a dream - but it had only been a few hours and this stranger from an alien world, like the bull, was here as proof that it had indeed not been a dream.

"Well, my name is Tytanis," said the man as he offered his hand for a shake. "Part time mercenary, part time vigilante."

Sergeant Fletcher cringed at the words "mercenary" and "vigilante." This man was clearly not of the hierarchy. How foolish of her to have considered the idea. She looked at his extended hand with disdain, but then she saw past it - at the dark blood from her stabbing. Her face relaxed and she took his hand.

"Thank you for your help back there," she said, meeting his eyes with her own. Perhaps she'll need to dispatch him later but for now, he deserved a thank you.

"Think nothing of it," he said. "You see, that gang is a rival of mine. They're nothing but dregs who terrorize good people. I'm sure if your enemy were harassing someone, you'd come to their aid, too."

She thought of the filthy Noiks and considered them terrorizing this tall dark man before her – with his silver hair and spiked leather jacket. Despite his odd appearance, she affirmed that any enemy of the Noiks would indeed be and ally to her. Perhaps he has his own hierarchy, one that might even parallel hers.

"Besides" Tytanis said. "You helped me, too. Didn't expect you to come back like that. Grateful you did."

Sergeant Fletcher nodded, and straightened up. Perhaps his hierarchy is a product of the world he was in. The man didn't have a choice where he was born, after all. But now here he is, in her world - all because of that portal.

"You called that disturbance a portal," she blurted out. "How did you learn about these things?"

"Oh – yeah. Portals," Tytanis replied. "Well, they started popping up throughout the city, - well, um on my world? I guess? I've seen at least two of those portals before you - uh - fell out of yours."

He chuckled at this. Sergeant Fletcher just stared, non-blinking.

"This is the first time I had gone through one myself. Each of the ones I'd seen been different – different locations in the city and leading to different worlds – one of them opened to reveal what looked like 'webs from hell'. A city block had gone from 'buildings and streets' to 'trees and cobwebs' and these creepy spider people came out and scattered before the portal disappeared. I didn't bother to investigate that one any further."

Sergeant Fletcher looked from Tytanis and down the road to the western horizon.

"My squad is trapped in one of those portals," she said, morose.

"Webs from hell?" he asked.

"No! Not there," she barked, but she was quick to ease up. "It's like this world, kind of. But they are in danger. Do these portals open up again?"

"I haven't seen it happen yet but I suppose it's possible?" he pondered. "They've only just started happening today – at least where I'm from. Maybe they won't ever appear again? Maybe this is the new normal? I don't know."

"Wait!" she snapped. She turned to him and approached. "When you said 'investigate,' I assumed you knew more, that these originated with tech from your world – isn't that how you found me?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to give the wrong idea," he

said. "And I don't think it's right to say I found you. I think no matter which direction I ended up looking, one of them portals was bound to pop up. I just happened upon yours just as you happened upon mine."

They paused for a second and all became quiet. Sergeant Fletcher looked off to the side of the road. What good was this stranger now? He didn't know anything more to help her get her squad back and he was a lousy shot. He was quickly becoming an invalid resource. The silence was broken by a sonic boom. Military aircraft flew overhead from the direction of F.O.B. toward the direction of the clearing.

"What is it?" Tytanis asked.

"M-Dart Fours!" Sergeant Fletcher replied. "Reinforcements!"

She started to jog back to the motorcycle and then remembered the alien technology. As a resource, Tytanis had become important again.

"They got my call!" she yelled. "Come on!"

"Where are we going?" Tytanis replied as he trotted behind her.

"To rescue my squad!" she replied, mounting the back of the motorcycle. She looked up at him expectantly. Tytanis paused about 5 paces from her. He was leaning forward as if he might move, but a look of concern flooded his face. He remained like that, then rocked back on his feet, standing at ease. Sergeant Fletcher stared at him as the world became quiet again. What is he doing?

"What?" Sergeant Fletcher asked.

"It's just. Hmm," Tytanis started. "How do I put this? Let's say I go with you, and we rescue your squad? What happens to me?"

"To you?" Sergeant Fletcher asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Tytanis paused, face now in an awkward grimace. Sergeant Fletcher dismounted the motorcycle. He was probably worried about being exterminated, this stranger from outside the hierarchy. Perhaps that's the

kind of behavior that would be expected in his world?

"Do you think we are going to turn on you?" she asked.

"No," Tytanis laughed. "I mean, maybe? I have no idea what to expect."

This was eating up precious time and who did he think he was anyway? What choice would he really have if she put a gun to his head? He wasn't exactly battle-worthy. He just jumped through a portal and now he's worried about consequences?

"You just callously drove into a portal that led to a completely foreign world," started Sergeant Fletcher, incredulously, "Maybe even a different universe!"

"So?" he replied.

"So now you suddenly care about your future?" she asked.

"Hey - this is all happening a little fast is all," Tytanis replied. "This is the first I've had a moment to breathe. I'm kind of processing things here."

"Now? Why now?" Sergeant Fletcher asked. She threw her arms in the air. There was no response. She thought of the squad and the ease of their followership. She imagined a portal to them was open right now. She needed him to drive her out and she needed to think of something quick. Hierarchy. What would the hierarchy permit?

"How about this?" she said, standing up straight, with an arm bent into the air. "I hereby deem you an 'ally to the cause'. The Mavisford Command officially welcomes a treaty with you."

Tytanis stared at her for a moment then his eyes trailed off to the horizon, hesitant. She waited but it was obvious he was not interested and she loosened up with a sigh. She thought of how she had marched her squad into the clearing, how they obeyed her efficient words - and a surprising chill ran down her spine. Hierarchy wouldn't work on this man. What else? Oh! She could change her tone, referring to the friendlier one she rehearsed in that soft skills training she had once.

She was about to speak but inspiration took hold. There was one other thing that she spontaneously remembered from that same training. Something she had thought she'd never need, something she had thought was trivial at the time but now considered its value. She looked at Tytanis and for the first time, mentally took him in – consciously saw him as a person. Her body slackened and she exhaled.

“Okay, Tytanis. Look. I can't offer you anything more than a partnership – I have your back, you have mine. You're an independent force – an equal,” she paused for a second as he turned to face her. “But I have a mission and I need you right now.”

Tytanis beamed.

“Okay, Ms. Fletcher,” he said, approaching the motorcycle. “You got a deal.”

“Call me Sarge,” she replied, as she mounted the motorcycle. To her, Ms. Fletcher sounded neither efficient nor concise.

“Won't be doing no such thing,” he said as he joined her. She did not appreciate this – especially after a clear and direct request.

“What? Why not?” she snapped. Tytanis revved the engine.

“Equals. Remember?” he barked over the sound. She looked off into the distance, her face fixed like she was solving a riddle. What has she done?

“Hold tight!” he yelled. The motorcycle started to move and as quick as shock could fill her face, she cinched herself around his waist, just in time.

III

The motorcycle handled the dirt road differently than the concrete. While it was quick on some of the straight stretches, it was much slower on curves. There were several times when Sergeant Fletcher, who knew the path very well, would bark at Tytanis to slow down and he'd bark back to hang on. When her verbal commands proved ineffective, she resorted to nudging him

with her leg. He gave no response to this despite how much it infuriated him. There was one particularly hairy incident where the road descended into a curve with a short drop off – a situation very similar to the paved off-ramp that had foiled Sergeant Fletcher into flipping the recon vehicle.

“Too fast! Drop off!” yelled Sergeant Fletcher as she nudged him.

“Stop screaming at me!” Tytanis rebuffed. And to retaliate, he did not slow down right away and Sergeant Fletcher gripped him as if she was trying to slow a horse. The motorcycle - with the weight it was bearing and the low friction it was experiencing - was indeed a poor fit for this circumstance. When Tytanis did eventually slow and lean to maneuver, the vehicle was sluggish in response. He had to apply excessive force, lurching back. The rear wheel started to slide, kicking up dirt and rocks, and veered toward the cliff. Sergeant Fletcher held on tight, closing her eyes, but Tytanis gunned it. The motorcycle had maneuvered into the correct angle and accelerating forward avoided the cliffside, though the loosened earth continued its trajectory into the air and down the steep hill.

Tytanis laughed as they continued down the road.

“You're reckless!” screamed Sergeant Fletcher to which Tytanis laughed louder.

During a less treacherous portion of the road, they took in a wild scene. They were riding on a wide ridge that overlooked a vast valley – the Southern Basin – beyond it the mountain range that had hidden Mavisford's South Base. Normally just a serene landscape of conifers, there was something massive flying in the sky above. It looked like a sailing vessel – a merchant ship made of wood and canvas. The ship was under attack by an equally large flying snake-like creature. The ship launched cannonballs but was no match to the behemoth, which breathed lightning and destroyed the masts. By the time the majestic ship started to go down, Tytanis had stopped the motorcycle and turned off the engine.

“Your world has dragons?” he asked as he stared at the commotion.

“No,” replied Sergeant Fletcher. “And that flying ship isn’t from here, either.”

Suddenly, an attack helicopter soared from the southern mountain range.

“That’s from here!” touted Sergeant Fletcher. “T-Raven 7-7. Military chopper from South Base!”

The dragon roared and flew in for the attack. It let loose another round of lightning but its target outmaneuvered the display. The helicopter had countered with two missiles which effectively took down the scaly beast. Tytanis started the motorcycle up again.

“You sure have a lot of firepower in your world,” he said. Sergeant Fletcher smiled at this as they rode off again.

It had been an hour since they crossed through the portal and they were getting close to the destination. The road was relatively straight and smooth but Tytanis started to slow to a stop. Sergeant Fletcher moved her head around his shoulder to see the cause for this.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Looks like a shootout,” he replied. “Your squad?”

Without hesitation, Sergeant Fletcher dismounted the motorcycle and stood, peering down the road. At first there was nothing. But then there was gunfire, up head about half a mile, hailing from the right side of the road straight across to the left. The right side of the road was the same side the clearing was on, the side the squad would most likely be standing had they found their way back. But another round of gunfire revealed that it wasn’t standard military weaponry. The projectiles were bright – very bright – perhaps as bright as a welder’s spark. Plasma?

“I don’t know who they are but they aren’t using military weapons,” she replied.

“Who are they firing at?” Tytanis asked and as he did, a loud, low bellow brayed throughout the air. A beam of golden light fired back at the plasma wielders.

“I have no idea,” Sergeant Fletcher replied. “We’ll have to go around them or take them out.”

“Or we could go through them,” he replied. More sounds of gunfire in the distance.

“What do you mean?” she snapped.

“It’s a straight road,” Tytanis started. “on a level surface. If we gun it, we can fly right by these chumps!”

“Are you serious?” she exclaimed. “We’ll be caught in the crossfire!”

“Come on,” he said. “Trust me. Have I let you down yet?”

She crossed her arms while the loud low bellow filled the air again. Was he seriously debating her on this? Was this some sort of macho nonsense? Showing off gets you killed here. It was better to approach on foot and take them out.

“It doesn’t make sense,” she said. “We can use their fire exchange as a distraction.”

“Exactly!” he interjected. “They’ll be so busy firing at each other that we can just zip right through.”

“No!” Sergeant Fletcher stamped her foot. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, I’m going to ride through. I’ll see you on the other side,” Tytanis said.

“No!” she barked. “I need you to come with me!”

Tytanis did not hear her though as he revved the engine to drown her out. He smiled at her.

“Come on!” he pleaded. “I got this! I promise.”

She was stuck. If she went it alone, his motorcycle riding would blow her cover and he might get killed in the process or keep on driving all the way to the blasted west coast. Who knows? He’s a reckless fool. She narrowed her eyes and looked through Tytanis with rage. Without saying anything, she mounted the motorcycle.

“Hold tight!” he said. As her own sign of rebellion, she held on only as much as she needed to as they darted toward the gunfight. The motorcycle quickly approached the battle – and they were driving at speeds faster than they had gone before. Sergeant Fletcher

ignored her seething rage long enough to think about the squad. Perhaps when they were together again, she would have them turn on Tytanis after all. She found this thought to be comforting and her mind continued to focus on the squad.

She scanned the trees just in case the combatants were there, a childish type of hope her adult brain knew, but she did it just the same. As they approached, she could see them through the trees and there was no mistaking it: they were not her own. Four large minotaur wearing cowboy hats and bandanas brandished oversized pistols and large shields. They looked so foreign, so menacing, so silly - that she was embarrassed at her wishful thinking. Opposite them, on the other side of the road (just inside the tree line), stood a giant humanoid made of gold. The loud, low bellow it produced was more intense at this distance. A golden beam of light launched from its single, huge eye. The beam hit one of the minotaur who fell over into the road, stiff as a board.

"Hang on!" Tytanis shouted. The beam of the golden cyclops was right in the path of the motorcycle, but Tytanis leaned forward then pulled up as the motorcycle was about to hit the shield of the large prone figure.

Sergeant Fletcher felt as though she was going to fall off the motorcycle as it went airborne. As they soared, a volley of plasma shots was launched by the minotaur - every single one of them missed - except one.

The rear tire hit the ground first, and the chassis came down with a thud. With both wheels on the ground, the vehicle skittered but Tytanis forced it under control.

"Yeah! Ha ha ha!" laughed Tytanis. He didn't realize that something had gone wrong until he felt the weight on the motorcycle shift. He looked back to verify and then without thinking hopped off from the back of the vehicle as it went careening down the road by itself. He fell forward due to the force but was able to tumble and scurry to his feet. He rushed to Sergeant Fletcher, who was rolling on the ground, attempting to put out the flames on her back. The plasma shot had bored into her backpack, ignited, and quickly spread.

Tytanis pulled off his leather coat and threw it on Sergeant Fletcher. He wrapped it around her to smother

the flame.

"Get off of me!" she yelled. The loud, low bellow of the golden cyclops filled the air again.

"We gotta go!" Tytanis yelled, ignoring her. He lifted her to her feet, trying to escort her down the road - toward the abandoned motorcycle.

"Don't touch me!" she rebuffed. She threw him off and the coat fell to the ground. Another golden beam shot across the road and a second minotaur fell like the one they had just used as a ramp.

"I'm - I'm sorry!" Tytanis yelled. "We need to - oh no!"

The loud, low bellow had started again. Tytanis looked up at the golden giant and froze as its large single eye was looking straight at him.

Sergeant Fletcher moved quick, arming herself with her sidearm as she spun. With determination, she fired several shots into the giant's single, vulnerable eye. The creature's deep bellow became a violent screech - as if metal beams twisted against each other. As it thrashed about the trees, Sergeant Fletcher trained her focus on the third and final minotaur who stepped into the road to attack. She was ready for it and engaged it to elimination. She then turned around again to Tytanis who was still stupefied. She marched up to him, firearm aimed at his gut.

"You listen to me, pinhead," she snapped. "I get that you like riding but when I say we need to find a different way to solve something you better listen."

"Yeah," said Tytanis, who put his hands up. "Okay. I get it."

"No! You don't," she retorted. She aimed her gun to the ground and motioned for Tytanis to look from the gun to her face. "You wouldn't listen - you were just going to ride into them without me."

"Yeah, I'm sorry!" Tytanis exclaimed. "I guess I didn't think it through all the way."

"No, no, no!" yelled Sergeant Fletcher. "That's not what you should be sorry for!"

“What? Then what, Huh?” Tytanis yelled. “I’m sorry you got hit and almost burned to death?”

“Wrong but yes, that too!” she yelled back. “Try again!”

“I don’t know!” he conceded.

“You ignored my suggestions, my reasons, my ideas!” Sergeant Fletcher said. “You wouldn’t even consider them!”

“Yes, I did!” he replied. “I considered them. I think.”

“No, you didn’t. You just sat on the bike and refused to discuss it, deciding to just ‘meet me on the other side.’”

“Well I,” he started but was cut off.

“We’re supposed to have each other’s backs!” she exclaimed.

“I do have your back!” he stammered.

“Really?” Sergeant Fletcher rebutted. “Because you were ready to leave me back there! Leave me!”

Tytanis stuttered at this but was immediately cut off.

“I had to – had to - do what you wanted and look – just look how you had my back! Look!”

Sergeant Fletcher holstered her sidearm and turned to show him her back, the cloth was charred, exposing skin in parts. Tytanis shut his mouth, looking away, face awash with shame. Sergeant Fletcher walked up close to him, forcing her face into his, forcing his eyes to look into hers. Her voice had quieted to a fierce grunt.

“Ultimately, you forced me into that position. You robbed me of any choice. And it almost got me killed.”

She broke contact and walked past him, down the middle of the road. Tytanis stood there, facing the leather jacket on the ground, but not really seeing it. Sergeant Fletcher bent down to pick up the rifle she had tossed during the commotion. At this point, it was obvious that Tytanis’s resourcefulness had run its course.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Fletcher!” Tytanis stammered, still standing in the same position. He turned toward her. “You’re right! I see it now. I did dismiss you, ignored

your suggestions. I don’t know why I did it.”

“I don’t know either,” she replied, not looking back at him. She continued down the road, toward the destination. Something about what he said, the way he said it made her reconsider his usefulness, perhaps he was trainable: a diamond in the rough. He’d at least be another target during a firefight, at any rate. “But you better cut that crap out, starting now!”

Tytanis felt a pang of relief. He grabbed his jacket from the ground and then ran up behind Sergeant Fletcher, sheepishly.

“I will!” he said. “I promise. And I get it. I think. I think I get it.”

“Don’t say that unless you actually do,” she retorted.

“No, I see now. I wasn’t treating you like a partner,” he said. “And that’s not fair – especially since I made a big deal about us being equals and all.”

Sergeant Fletcher stopped to face him. Maybe he did get it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. They locked eyes and she nodded at him. Maybe he really was trainable. She broke the gaze and continued down the road. Together, they walked to the motorcycle without saying anything.

It was a long five-minute walk, magnified by tension. The motorcycle was on the road, off to the side, still sputtering. Sergeant Fletcher stood by as Tytanis retrieved it. The steering column had not survived the incident and Tytanis’s face was flush with embarrassment. She started to feel bad for him. He didn’t intend for this to happen and as pathetic as he was being, his sorrow was genuine. The power dynamic had become awkward.

“It’s okay,” Sergeant Fletcher said, flatly. She attempted a gentler tone. “We’ll walk. It’s not that far. Just beyond that pass. 30 minutes, maybe.”

Tytanis moved the vehicle off the side of the road.

“Guess we’re um, even, now,” he said, apprehensively.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

"Wrecked rides," he replied. "We have one each."

She looked at him, mouth agape. She recognized the attempt at levity. It was a way to fix the power dynamic. It was a release in the tension, the pressure. And she gave in with laughter and he snickered. She decided to offer her own flavor of levity.

"I guess setting me on fire also evens out that stab wound to your gut?" she said.

"Hey!" Tytanis whined, half relieved. "I did not set you on fire!"

"You only forced me into the crosshair!" she laughed. "It's okay. I really did mean to stab you, so I guess we're sort of even."

"Works for me, uh-" he said, pausing to find a name. "Partner?"

"That's better than Ms. Fletcher," she replied, though she still didn't like it that much. The tension had been broken, but they quickly became quiet just the same as they hiked the empty road.

IV

It took longer than 30 minutes to reach the destination. In fact, an hour had passed when they finally saw the two recon vehicles that Sergeant Fletcher had left behind. As they approached, she remembered how she had ordered the vehicles to turn around to face F.O.B. That move cost time the squad could have used to escape the portal. And now look at the "getaway cars" just sitting there. Unnecessary. Stupid. But how was she to know?

"I'm glad to see some wheels," Tytanis said.

"Huh?" Sergeant Fletcher snapped as she was pulled back into the present. "Oh. Yeah. Well, they're more like lockers right now."

"How's that?" he asked,

"They're just holding supplies," she replied.

She opened a hatch and pulled out a backpack. She

handed it to Tytanis.

"Side pocket. Canteen. Drink," she said as she pulled out a second backpack. Tytanis did as he was instructed. She wouldn't admit it to herself, but she took pleasure in his unquestioning obedience in that moment. She continued to pretend not to appreciate the exchange as she pulled out supplies. She checked her ammunition.

"You want a rifle?" she asked. "You need any ammo?"

"Nope. I'm good," smiled Tytanis holding up his laser pistol. He pointed at a gauge on the side. Sergeant Fletcher didn't exactly know what that meant but didn't care enough to ask.

"So where are those dart things?" asked Tytanis.

"I don't know," she replied.

"Where is this portal?" he asked. She did not immediately reply to this, just breathed heavily as she secured the vehicle.

"It doesn't look like it's there," she finally said as she put her hands on the front of the vehicle. She hopped up on the hood, stepped up to the top, and pulled out a pair of binoculars. To her frustration, the extra height added little to her visual range. Tytanis climbed the other vehicle, careful to avoid the gun mount, and cupped his hands over his eyes.

"How can you see through all these trees?"

"There are binoculars in your backpack," she replied, not looking at him. Tytanis didn't move, however.

"Woah!" he said and Sergeant Fletcher turned to see. Tytanis was looking in the opposite direction. She could see it - deep in the trees - a clearing - much larger - but with a discoloration, the same discoloration: the disturbance; the portal back to her squad! It wasn't in the same spot but it surely looked like the same flavor as before.

"That's it!" she cried as she hopped down to the hood then to the ground.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, come on!" she shouted.

As Tytanis jumped from the vehicle, Sergeant Fletcher bounded across the road and into the woods. He chased after her though he was clearly not used to navigating the rugged terrain. Despite his normal nimbleness, he was clumsy over roots and around ferns.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Wait up!”

Sergeant Fletcher heard his call. Something in it was annoying and she had to fight the urge to ignore it. What was it, this feeling? It reminded her of her squad members - Wilson and Miller - but why? Why was this so familiar? Surely, they never called out like this. Did they? But it wasn't just the calling out - it was also this place, among the trees of home and the act - of approaching the clearing. Deja-vu? Why? What was it about the clearing? When the squad was approaching the first clearing, Wilson and Miller were visibly nervous. Could that be it? They were obvious in their attempt to signal to stop. She had sensed it but ignored it. Their behavior annoyed her then and this “calling out” annoys her now. But could it be? Could it be that they were calling out to her just as Tytanis is calling out to her now? Had she let them down?

“Thanks,” Tytanis said as Sergeant Fletcher waited. She nodded and as they progressed, stayed behind him. They were about another 40 paces away from the portal.

“You're doing great, Tytanis,” she said. She didn't know why she said it - she certainly didn't believe it, at least not compared to her - but something felt right about doing so.

“Thanks,” Tytanis said and something about that satisfied Sergeant Fletcher. She didn't know why and it sparked a sense of dread in her. But why? The feeling was quickly tamped down as she approached the portal.

It was much bigger than the first one. This clearing was huge - nearly a quarter-mile in diameter. Tytanis was the first to get to the tree line.

“Halt,” said Sergeant Fletcher. Tytanis stopped and looked back with urgency but there was none. He just watched as she slowly approached the tree line.

“Halt?” he asked. “Did you just give me a military

command?”

“Sorry,” she said, flatly. She continued to stare at the clearing, “Just a habit.”

“What are you doing?” he asked. “Why aren't we going in?”

She motioned as if she were to speak but she was focused on the light in the clearing, the soft grass. Tytanis stepped forward and stood next to her. He studied her face and then started to investigate the atmosphere, too. He strained his face to sense what she was detecting and was surprised when she stepped inside the clearing, unannounced. She breathed in the air - refreshing and sweet. She looked up at the sky - a color blue she had only ever seen one other time in her life, which was earlier that day.

“Come on!” she shouted. “This is it! This is the world!”

Tytanis stared at her wondrously.

“But you already told me it was - back at the road,” he argued. “What's gotten into you?”

But she had already started to run and he had no choice but to follow. Luckily, the ground was tame enough that he could keep up but he was somewhat overwhelmed with all the sensations: the brightness, the sweetness in the air, the songs of birds. It was somewhat taxing, despite its beauty.

By the time he had completely caught up, she had stopped.

“No, this isn't right,” Sergeant Fletcher said. Tytanis had looked around, the ground sloped downward into what appeared to be a swamp.

“Well, we came from that way, right?” Tytanis asked as he looked back. Behind them was the patch of pine trees from Sergeant Fletcher's world and beyond that was what appeared to be more conifer trees but of a different variety.

“Yeah, I know,” she replied. “But there wasn't this sort of area here - it's supposed to lead to an ocean with a city. And back that way? There wasn't a forest. Where the recon vehicles would be - that area? It's just all dif-

ferent.”

“Oh,” he said. “So, this isn’t that world?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “The air and sky are identical – no question – and so is this grass. It’s got to be the same grass, right?”

“Maybe? Not much grass where I’m from,” he said. “Seems like regular grass to me.”

She kept walking, westward, up a path that led through some trees. The ground slowly inclined here and there were hills not too far away.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Higher ground,” she replied. “There’s a clear hilltop over here and I want to see the area.”

Sergeant Fletcher marched through the woods, much slower than before, more cautious. Due to this, Tytanis could keep up with her and they traversed the mounds together, ever on the incline.

“You think we’re out too far?” Tytanis asked.

“We haven’t reached the hilltop yet,” she replied, never slowing down.

Tytanis paused to look back. The portal was still visible through the trees, but only barely.

“There’s no trail here,” he said as he caught up to her. “Aren’t you worried about getting lost?”

“Nope,” she replied. “I have a gift for direction.”

They approached a natural clearing where large boulders marked the foot of the destined hill.

“Hurry!” whispered Sergeant Fletcher as she armed herself. The urgency in her voice was unmistakable this time and Tytanis followed her quickly as she made for the boulders.

“What?” he whispered and she motioned him to keep his mouth shut. They hid behind the rocks and silently listened. He heard them – voices – quiet at first but they slowly became audible.

“-find it fascinating that we can all speak the same

language, is all,” came a female voice.

“Yes, I wondered about that,” replied a male voice. “I thought that maybe, and this may sound absurd-”

“After today’s discoveries?” replied the female voice. “No idea is too outlandish.”

“Well,” said the male voice. “What if we actually weren’t speaking the same language but somehow are able to comprehend the intention?”

“My,” said the female voice. “I’d argue that your theory would contradict my experience, especially if we are still able to misinterpret each other. Though I must concede that if my ability to sense experiences was distorted? Perhaps misunderstanding could also be part of the distortion, am I right?”

“Yes!” replied the male voice. “I hadn’t thought it out as well as you, but yes, that would-”

“Keep quiet, you two!” hushed a second female voice. “We’re getting close and I don’t know what’s going to pop out of this thing.”

That’s when Tytanis and Sergeant Fletcher saw them. Walking past their hiding spot were three people, each one more peculiarly dressed than the previous. The woman in front was dressed in what appeared to be a stylish but antiquated leather outfit. Her pale face was wrapped by auburn hair, but pointy ears poked through the strands. A feathered hat topped her head.

Behind her, the other woman had a dark complexion. She wore a fancy dress-shirt and pants, separated by a corset and belts for tools and a complicated-looking gun. Raven black hair billowed from under her bowler hat which was accented by a brass stem that held an equally complicated looking multi-lensed monocle.

A young man with a tan complexion walked next to her. He kept his dark hair short and sported a black dress-shirt which extended down to a robe. His collar was split in the front to reveal a white rectangular inlet. A chain draped around his neck with a talisman.

When all three had past them unnoticed, Sergeant Fletcher stepped out from the hiding spot.

"Freeze!" she called, aiming her rifle at them. Tytanis copied her in motion.

The three turned to face her. The one with the pointy ears brandished a crossbow and pointed it toward Sergeant Fletcher.

"Put your hands where I can see them and no one will get hurt," Sergeant Fletcher continued. The man put his hands up immediately and stood in front of the group.

"Please. Don't hurt us," he calmly pleaded. "We're on a most important mission."

"Get back, Monty," commanded the woman with pointy ears as she muscled her way to the front, her crossbow slung to the side.

"I represent these two," she continued. "What do you want?"

"Are you from this world?" asked Sergeant Fletcher.

"I am," replied the representative. "They are not."

"Who are you?" asked Sergeant Fletcher. "What are you?"

The representative stared from Sergeant Fletcher to Tytanis and back again.

"My name is Nyvorlas," she replied. "Normally I'm a – let's say, uh, merchant by unusual means, eh? But today is no normal day, right? I'm guiding these two toward the gate."

"Gate?" repeated Sergeant Fletcher.

"You mean the portal?" asked Tytanis.

"Yes, that's right," said the man. "I'm Father Montgomery and this is Rachel."

"So, you two are from the same world?" asked Tytanis.

"Oh, no," said Rachel. "My world was full of optimism and advanced technology, and unfortunately, it sounds like Father Montgomery comes from a place full of darkness, of things that could make you go crazy."

"Yes, she's somewhat correct," said Father Montgomery, softly. "Now would you please lower your weapons? We are not a threat, I assure you."

Tytanis lowered his firearm but Sergeant Fletcher did not.

"Do you know of a stone tower?" she asked, ignoring the plea.

"A what?" asked Nyvorlas.

"A stone tower bearing a bright green flag with a black diamond in the center," continued Sergeant Fletcher. Nyvorlas's expression went from confusion, to sass, to curiosity.

"Perhaps guarded by a large metal bull?" Sergeant Fletcher added.

"How could you know about that?" Nyvorlas asked, eyes widened. Sergeant Fletcher marched up to Nyvorlas, gun raised. As she did, the man called Father Montgomery positioned himself between the two, hands outstretched to protect her.

"Where is it?" Sergeant Fletcher demanded.

"Please," started Father Montgomery. "There is no need for violence. I've only met this woman not but two hours ago but despite whatever she has done in her past, she is a good person."

Tytanis stepped forward and placed his hand upon Sergeant Fletcher's shoulder.

"Hey. Partner," he said kindly. Hearing him say that word in front of these strangers made her cringe but she held her composure as he continued. "Easy, huh? They aren't threatening us."

Sergeant Fletcher stared into Father Montgomery's eyes. She took in his fear. She slung her rifle over her shoulder as she slinked away in a huff.

"She lost her squad in one of these portals," Tytanis explained. "Earlier, when this all started."

"Oh child," said Father Montgomery as he approached her to comfort. "I am sorry to hear this."

"I didn't lose them," said Sergeant Fletcher, flatly. She dodged Father Montgomery's advances. "I led them in there and they got stuck when we withdrew."

"Ha. You left them behind?" mocked Nyvorlas. "Pft! Figures."

Tytanis stepped forward to confront her and Father Montgomery quickly got between them, just as he did before.

"What did you say?" demanded Tytanis. Nyvorlas made her eyes as wide as possible and stuck her tongue out.

"It's okay, Tytanis," said Sergeant Fletcher with renewed energy. "She's not wrong. It was my fault. It made sense at the time, but she's right. I aim to find them immediately."

Tytanis backed down and Father Montgomery relaxed.

"Nyvorlas?" called Sergeant Fletcher, as she headed up the hill. "Can you show me which direction we need to go?"

Nyvorlas's face warped with layers of confusion. She glanced at Rachel who nodded her on.

"Uh, you misunderstand, lady," Nyvorlas began. "That tower is somewhere deep in the southern continent."

Sergeant Fletcher stopped walking.

"Well?" asked Tytanis. "Where are we now?"

"Uh, we're in the northern continent of Uberott," Nyvorlas said. "It would take months to travel there by foot - maybe even a year. But you wouldn't survive - especially since you'd have to cross the vast Sayhd Mor-novo desert."

Sergeant Fletcher turned around to stare. Her face was full of disgust but she didn't say anything.

"And even if you did do all of that," Nyvorlas continued. "The tower belongs to Warlo, a powerful sorceress - crazed with cosmic knowledge. I don't know what kind of people you left behind, but if they're anything

like you, then they didn't have a chance against her or her bull."

Sergeant Fletcher returned her stare out to the southern sky. Rifle slung over her shoulder, backpack full, she cradled herself in her arms.

"It's a wonder how you survived," Nyvorlas continued. "I would have called you a filthy liar had you been from this world and the day been like any other. But there's no way you couldn't be you, know what you know, and not be telling the truth."

Silence fell upon them as they waited for a response but Sergeant Fletcher just stood there, facing the southern sky, motionless.

"So," started Rachel after some time. "We're investigating that dimensional gate for study. I don't mean to be hasty, but our goal is lofty and time is precious."

No one responded verbally but bodies began to move. Nyvorlas and Rachel meandered toward the portal. Father Montgomery lingered, watching as Tytanis approached Sergeant Fletcher.

"Monty!" called Nyvorlas. With great reluctance, Father Montgomery retreated to join the two women.

Tytanis got close to Sergeant Fletcher and her body twisted in his direction. He instinctively embraced her and felt her tremble into his chest. She was too upset to maintain composure. Her emotion was too much in this moment. The hierarchy had failed her and she defaulted to a more primitive consolation: she needed to feel the embrace - the embrace of a comforting parent.

"Hey," he said, softly. "It's okay. What does she know? Your squad is fine."

Sergeant Fletcher held Tytanis close, though he was no longer Tytanis in that moment. He was a summoned apparition-turned-tangible; a man made of memories.

"I just," she said as she absent-mindedly teased the hem of his musty undershirt with her fingers. "I just never told them."

"Hey," he replied, nervously. He innately rubbed her upper arms. "It's okay. We'll find them. You can tell

them then.”

“They just never knew,” she said, suddenly withdrawing from him – the illusion broken. Her strength returning. She faced the southern sky. “I was so cold - thought I had to be. How could they know?”

“What if?” asked Tytanis, as he approached her. “What if we go back through the portal and wait by those vehicles? The lockers?”

Sergeant Fletcher did not respond to his approach this time; she was fully regaining her composure and would not permit another embrace. She just stared, her eyes glistening in the late afternoon sun. She was nearly finished mourning her squad.

“If two of these portals appeared around there and led to the same world,” he continued. “Then a third might appear there, too. It might get us closer. Right?”

“Yeah,” she replied, flatly. She wiped her eyes as she turned toward the way they had come and started to walk. Tytanis stood there for a moment, somewhat confused. He watched her as she made her way out of the clearing and into the woods. He didn’t linger long, convinced that she would have left him there otherwise.

V

It didn’t take long for Tytanis to catch up to her. Moments before she was unraveling and now she had turned as hard as steel. He was not sure if he had done something wrong and it was impossible to tell by looking at her.

“So?” he asked. “Uh, you okay?”

“No,” she replied.

“Oh,” he said.

“But I’m on board with your plan,” she added. Then her voice brightened a bit, even became jovial. “You do come up with good ideas.”

She remembered the failed charge through the minotaur battle and sharply added: “Sometimes.”

He started to reply but a loud commotion drained their focus. A high-pitched humming with a low oscillating undertone was growing louder and the wind picked up. The voice of Nyvorlas was heard over the sound – in the distance. She was at the portal, yelling something about getting back.

“Come on!” said Sergeant Fletcher and she ran through the woods, arming herself. Tytanis did the same.

As they approached the tree line, two things were immediately discernable: the portal was significantly smaller than before and a battle was ensuing. The portal was now as wide as a two-lane highway. It was still a quarter mile away; however, and the path to it was blocked by a large vehicle that filled half the distance. The vehicle was a flying ship – but it looked bizarre - like an ornately carved wooden sled with structures on the deck. The structures comprised of a temple and obelisk pillars - neon lights were inlaid in some of the seams.

“Capture them and take ‘em aboard!” came a decrepit shout. “Let’s have a little fun tonight, boys!”

The figure was dressed in a long overcoat and tri-cornered hat and his face and hands were wrapped in ancient gauze. The crew he talked to, about 12 strong, were variations of sailors, bandits, and priests – all of them mummified. They scattered about – each of them out for the hunt.

“The portal is closing,” said Tytanis.

“I know,” replied Sergeant Fletcher. “Not our priority now.”

“No?” he asked.

“Stop these creeps,” she said. “Save the others.”

“You got it,” Tytanis said, with a smile.

“They don’t know we’re here,” she continued. “Let’s use that to our advantage.”

Tytanis withdrew his blades and turned toward the conflict. His loyalty to her command was becoming evident.

“And Tytanis?” she said. He turned to face her.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, “with me.”

“Where else would I be?” he said, with a grin. “Let’s go get ‘em - Sarge.”

And then he was gone – he ran into the open, trailing an unsuspecting group of enemies. As he did, Sergeant Fletcher carefully considered the name he used: “Sarge.” He was sincere when he said it. Despite this, and despite his growing loyalty, he didn’t know its true meaning – the weight it carries in the hierarchy. How could he? She maneuvered her way inside the tree line, meandering toward the front of the ship.

As she made her way through the trees, she sized up a line of enemy skulking along the ship, preparing an assault on the three investigators. Beyond them, she saw the light blue patch of sky among the brilliant azure. That color in that patch of atmosphere looked so dull in comparison – but it was the sky that belonged to her home. The portal was going to close soon and she would need to run fast if she was going to get to it in time. Tytanis: so reckless was he, but brave. He would be fine here on his own. He was a survivor.

Sergeant Fletcher took careful aim at the enemies – these mummified sailors. She was angry now. Angry that they were in her way – blocking her from her home. A rage stormed within her at these creeps for blocking the pathway to the world that-until today–had been the only one she had ever known. But it wasn’t just that – it was their ignorance – their obliviousness to the world in which she was born and for which she was built. It’s a place where she was a “Sergeant,” a title that carried weight to those in that world; a place that honored duty and order. It was a world she longed to live in forever. They didn’t know or care or respect the hierarchy and it fueled an ire in her she had never felt before.

She spread an array of bullets along the line of enemy and they dropped before they even knew what was going on. The disrespecting specters had been vanquished but Sergeant Fletcher raged on – and was in fact even more angered. She proceeded to the portal and thought of Tytanis - who also was ignorant and oblivious to the hierarchy. But this didn’t anger her. Why is that?

He is a warrior and has spirit. He might not have understood what it meant to belong to a world before today but he has morals, structure - a semblance of a hierarchy. He was out there now, sneaking up on fiendish enemies and assassinating them to protect strangers, to protect good people. Swordplay was his specialty and rarely did he get to use it in a world of laser pistols and motorcycles. He would fit in here, better than he would ever know. While two of the ancient mariners had pounced on Father Montgomery, Tytanis stabbed one and decapitated the other. He freed Father Montgomery of his bindings and together, they teamed up to battle others. Tytanis fit in here. He fit into the hierarchy of this place.

But Sergeant Fletcher was not for this world, not like Tytanis. No! The idea infuriated her. She was from a world of strict order; one that rewarded people based on skill – a pure meritocracy. She was the most athletic, the best shot, a master of self-discipline. It was a world that properly promoted those who proved their battle worthiness. A world that rewarded her for her flawless execution of the rules; rules she knew how to follow. It was a world where a “rank” meant something real and concrete. A logical order where higher ranks equated to superior mastery of abilities and lower ranks demanded a need for authority; a world that respected the hierarchy.

But here? There was just chaos. Even now, as Sergeant Fletcher ran toward the portal, a large brutish figure wrapped in poorly-aged bandages and sporting a peg leg knocked Tytanis on his rear and was going in for the kill. But Father Montgomery – a seemingly timid and harmless clergyman - was reciting a speech from a book, projecting beams of light from his outstretched hand. The beams burned holes right through the hulking enemy. This was unexpected. This was chaos. This was not how the hierarchy worked. It is not how labels work. This was illogical. The injustice of it all was frustrating. It was maddening.

Sergeant Fletcher reflected upon this as she jogged closer to the portal. That patch of dull blue sky at its height represented a world where enemies had profiles and territories had borders and the good guys always

wore your colors. The enemies had names like Noiks and terms made sense in that world: people were units, tasks had objectives, communication was concise. The order of things provided a slick structure of knowledge of who and what you were dealing with. The portal was closing to a world where all chaos had been systemized; broken down into precise protocols, efficient commands, and strictly defined terminology. Everything Sergeant Fletcher had ever believed in was in that world and the portal to it was slipping away – but not completely gone - not if she sprinted at full speed. And that is what she did. And still her rage burned red hot.

Contrarily, Tytanis was out there, riding the chaos. He and Father Montgomery caught up to support Nyvorlas and Rachel. Rachel, the odd woman with the complicated monocle, who fired her equally complicated looking pistol. The shots that it produced zoomed and whirled around corners to find her enemies: two mummified bandits loading a net into a cannon. Her bullets impacted the enemies, dispersing a cloud around them. They fell over, heavily sedated, and Nyvorlas ran up to them to finish the job with a decorative dagger.

Sergeant Fletcher shot two of her own enemies: deceased swashbucklers on the hunt. They were also the last obstacle between she and the portal and it looked like, yes – she would make it. She would actually make it! Praise the hierarchy! The portal to the world that was hers – a world of perfect order. But the rage inside her intensified. When she would step through, she would know. She even knew it now – that the world couldn't be the same since these portals broke the hierarchy.

But that wasn't the entire truth. No. It wasn't at all. Now that she saw that she could make it to the portal, she started to question it all and for the first time in a long time, her anger started to wane.

The thing she realized as she approached the ever-shrinking patch of familiar pine trees was that the world of controlled chaos she so dearly loved never even existed. She realized now that this need for efficiency and labeling was part of who she was at her core. Her whole identity had been wrapped up in the hierarchy but the hierarchy was only part of her identity; she imparted her structure upon the world but was blind to the asyn-

chrony of it. But no longer. For the first time, she considered that her success may not have been based on her merits but on her understanding of how the merit process worked. A man-made structure that only worked among those who upheld such a structure. And if this is true than what would happen to her without the hierarchy? How can she exist outside it? Then she thought of Tytanis – he had a hierarchy about him. And it hit her. It hit her harder than a club to the back. Had she been so wrong about everything? That hierarchies are not objective?

She stood there at the edge – the portal was as wide as a doorway and merely a single footstep away. She made it. She would hop across the threshold into her world and she'd never look back. She would just enter her world. It was just right there – a single step.

But she couldn't shake the idea of subjective hierarchies. Or perhaps "mobile" hierarchies? Tytanis would have a better word for it. But she couldn't have known what happened to him now. Three pirate priests summoned a great skeletal serpent – about 20 feet long. Blades were ineffective against it, as Tytanis discovered, and it ended up knocking him off his feet. He did not land gracefully at all, his body remained motionless. The complicated pistol proved to be just as useless so Rachel did what she could do to distract the creature while avoiding harm. She did so to give Father Montgomery time to preach his eldritch sermon. Nyvorlas also knew a little magic and was casting her own attacks but they were unaware of hidden summoners who started to launch spells of their own.

Oblivious to all of this, Sergeant Fletcher was instead watching the sky. Her heart was racing as the final patch of dull blue atmosphere fizzled out, leaving the brilliant azure sky blemish-free. And she exhaled as it happened, not realizing her breath had been held. It was done. The portal had closed without her inside. And she still breathed. And she still felt. And she still was. She was! She was her and she belonged to 'her hierarchy.' She would bring it with her and she would own it – not the other way around! The place that closed off before her was only her birth world – and sure - it may not have been a cesspool, as Tytanis called his - but she now

knew how it could feel for him to shrug it off. It was liberating, absolutely freeing; independence pure and prime. But she also felt an extreme sense of connection; one she never felt in all the world – in all the universe – in all the dimensions – as she did to Tytanis in that moment. Her whole being seemed to beam with the feeling of oneness.

No longer a sergeant, Irene Fletcher turned on her heels. She jogged toward the ship. Would it be too late? Urgency, more potent than ever, filled her being. This was it. She chose this path and if her detour to the portal brought peril to Tytanis – or any of the allies – she would not live it down. Run! She dropped her backpack. She sprinted hard. She saw three enemies – pirate priests crouching around the corner of the leg of the ship. They were exchanging fire with someone out of view.

She unloaded her rifle and the mystic corpses fell, dropping their ancient staffs. She rounded the corner wide, to see what was going on. But, apparently it was over. Just like that. With the summoners perished, the giant serpent was no match for Father Montgomery and Nyvorlas's magic. The enemies had been vanquished – even the one with the long coat and tricornered hat was slumped over two other corpses – body full of crossbow bolts.

She scanned the area and saw Nyvorlas, Rachel and Father Montgomery, but she couldn't see him. Father Montgomery and Rachel ran to a body on the ground. But surely it wasn't –? But it was. Tytanis was laying, motionless. She rushed to them.

"Nice of you to show up," said Nyvorlas. She was picking through the bodies, looking for valuables.

"Is he alive?" asked Irene.

"No," said Father Montgomery and Irene's heart trembled. Father Montgomery placed his hands on Tytanis's chest.

"But he will be," he said. "In time."

"How?" she asked. "When?"

His hands produced a bright light which seeped into Tytanis's body.

"I'll explain later," said Father Montgomery, "but he's nearly there now."

Tytanis opened his eyes.

"We get 'em?" he asked.

"Indeed, we prevailed," replied Father Montgomery with a smile. "Someone is eager to see you."

Tytanis looked up at Irene.

"Sarge!" he said, as Father Montgomery helped him to his feet. "We did it! We saved them, just like you ordered."

She stared at him, overwhelmed with emotions – a frantic mix of relief and guilt and fear and joy. But, above all, she had composure. Her recent liberation – her ownership of her hierarchy gave her uncanny strength.

"You did most of the saving," she replied.

"We just brought you back from the dead," said Nyvorlas, not stopping her scavenging. "So, let's watch the who-saved-whom talk."

"The dimensional gate has closed!" cried Rachel.

Irene felt a wave of guilt wash over her for this was news not new to her.

"I'm sorry," Tytanis said to her. "About the portal."

"I'm not sure you should be," she said and smiled. She would eventually tell him how she tried to go there alone and he would forgive her. But she would not do it here. "It's okay, really."

"But your friends?" asked Father Montgomery. Irene looked at him but didn't say anything. Should she feel guilty for not pursuing the squad she had just mourned?

"What I mean to say is," started Father Montgomery, embarrassed. "Is thank you for your help in saving us. I know how important your friends were to you and-

"Don't worry about it," replied Irene. "I know what you meant."

"Well child," replied Father Montgomery. "You're welcome to join us in our pursuit, if you'd have us."

“What?” protested Nyvorlas. Irene and Tytanis looked at each other, Tytanis smiled.

“Yeah,” Irene replied. “Consider us as part of the team.”

“Welcome aboard!” said Rachel, who was eyeing up the ship.

“I don’t believe this!” said Nyvorlas, now fully at attention.

“You can’t deny that they were useful,” said Father Montgomery.

“If you say so,” said Nyvorlas as she went back to her treasure hunting.

“First order of business?” asked Irene.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Father Montgomery. “It took us a couple hours just to get to this gate.”

“What about this ship?” asked Irene. “It flies, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yeah,” said Rachel.

“You say that with confidence,” said Irene. “Is it from your world?”

“No,” started Rachel. “But I’m sure I can figure out.”

“Is that so?” asked Irene. “Are you some sort of genius?”

“No,” Rachel replied. “It’s a flying vessel that uses the same crystal-to-steam system as the ones I work on at home.”

She patted the instruments in her tool belt as she spoke.

“And you can fly it?” asked Father Montgomery.

“I’m more of a builder and tinkerer,” said Rachel.

“I bet Tytanis here can fly it,” said Irene. Tytanis was marveling at the symbols embedded in the side of the ship.

“I can drive anything!” he replied with gusto - though his tone quickly changed to hesitation. “If I know how

it works.”

“I can teach you!” said Rachel. “I mean, as long as it’s okay with Father Montgomery.”

“Well,” said Father Montgomery. “A vehicle of this nature would make travel much easier.”

“Tytanis, will you go up with her?” asked Irene. “Cover each other in case there’s any trouble?”

“You got it, Sarge,” he said.

“Please,” she replied. “Call me Irene.”

“Won’t be doing no such thing,” he said, and winked at her. Before Irene could stop him, he turned and walked up to Rachel, extending his metallic hand for a shake.

“Rachel, is it?” he asked. “My name is Tytanis.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said, taking his hand for inspection. They started to board the ship. “I have so many questions about you.”

“My child,” beckoned Father Montgomery to Irene. “May I ask you a direct question?”

“I prefer that you only ask me direct questions,” she replied.

“Are you?” he started. “Are you planning on going to that tower?”

“Ha!” replied Nyvorlas who was pretending not to listen.

“I wasn’t,” replied Irene. “But I would like to, eventually. On my own, of course.”

“I think we should all go there,” replied Father Montgomery.

“Monty!” said Nyvorlas. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“But Nyvorlas,” protested Father Montgomery, “You said it yourself - this sorceress has been empowered with knowledge of the cosmos.”

“She’s also an insane killer,” Nyvorlas said. “With

powerful hunting forces.”

“I’ve encountered great evil before,” said Father Montgomery. “Sometimes facing evil is the only way to prevent it.”

“So, you’re okay with going there?” asked Irene.

“As long as we study dimensional gates on the way,” he said.

“Agreed,” said Irene.

“And you?” he asked Irene. “Is there anything you’re concerned about, my child?”

“Yes – that,” snapped Irene, then she caught herself and toned it down. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me child.”

“Of course, Sergeant Fletcher,” he said, and he turned to board the ship.

Irene paused at those words coming from his mouth but was interrupted before she could follow up.

“Well, well, well, Monty,” said Nyvorlas. “Looks like you have all the help you’ll need; so, I guess if you pay me now I’ll be on my way.”

“There’s still a need for you,” pleaded Father Montgomery. “Please join us.”

“I don’t see how - you already have your silver haired protector and your bossy leader,” she replied, perhaps with more bite than intended.

“Well,” said Irene. “There is something else we need.”

“Hmph,” replied Nyvorlas. “And what would you possibly need from me?”

“Well, you’ve lived here your whole life - you know this world,” started Irene. “And it sounds like you know the pitfalls, too. Who better to navigate us than you?”

“A navigator?” mocked Nyvorlas. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

Irene drew a breath and then looked deeply at Nyvorlas, in the way that she learned in that soft skills class, so long ago.

“An advisor then?” chimed in Father Montgomery. “An advisor to me and the crew?”

“Nice try,” said Nyvorlas. “That’s better than ‘uck’ navigator, but no dice.”

“Ah,” said Irene, with dramatic flair. “Ambassador Nyvorlas, would you please join us on this excursion? Your insight into this world would be most valuable.”

Nyvorlas laughed.

“Now you’re talking my language!” she said and repeated the title, “Ambassador Nyvorlas- Yes, a girl of my taste could get used to that.”

Irene and Father Montgomery shared a smile.

“But I’m not calling you Sergeant or whatever,” replied Nyvorlas.

“Fine. Call me Irene,” Irene replied. Nyvorlas considered it but then a funny look came over her face.

“Eh, on second thought,” she started. “Ambassadors of my caliber only associate with people of title.”

“As you wish,” said Irene. “I trust we will be able to accommodate your tastes.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Nyvorlas replied, as she started to board the ship. Then she looked back at Irene. “And I trust that we will get along famously.”

And they would – in good time.

But for now, they all worked to explore and learn the ship. Night fell on them as they finally lifted off the ground. They would soar great distances: over land and water at first, and eventually through dimensional gates and beyond. Irene Fletcher - referred to as Sergeant Fletcher by some, and as Sarge by others - found her squad at last, despite it not being the one she had originally lost. But she also found something more – she found her world – a way to navigate the chaos. Wherever the adventures steered them, no matter which dimension they’d enter – Irene was with them, leading her squad, and never second guessing her ability to own her hierarchy.

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