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Thunder Soul

By

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Chapter One

Walking the wall had always felt a little stupid to Private Parsons. The sensor system was better at telling if there was anything trying to go over it, under it, or even through it. He guessed it was supposed to make sure that they didn't fall asleep at the switch or something. It was bullshit duty as far as he was concerned, dangerous and not really needed. The thing was five meters tall, three meters across at the top, and had waist high parapets on *both* sides of the rampart. Parsons watched the traffic shoot by on one side as he walked back to the tower. There was more danger from the side that flanked the Interstate than the darkened ghetto on the other. People, mostly young men his age, thought it was cool to see if they could throw, launch, or fire things up here from moving vehicles.

There were no fire-bombs or bullets this time, it was kind of late after all. Or maybe early, it depended on how you looked at it. He thumbed the pad and pulled on the door while the old lock hesitated. The tower wasn't much, just a three meter square with thick polycarbonate windows and a reinforced roof. There wasn't much to do in these things, which was probably why Sergeant Kaniko had taken two of the cheap folding chairs and put his feet up on one so he could watch his personal vid in comfort. He wasn't supposed to smuggle the thing in here, but nobody really seemed too tight about regs on this job.

“Hey, Sarge. Where's Skunky?”

Kaniko pointed at the hatch in the floor without glancing away from whatever he was watching. “He had to use the can.”

“Oh.” Parsons picked up the Multi-Optic Viewer. It was really just a high tech set of binoculars, but it was easier to get people to pay for stuff when it sounded expensive. He scanned around the area inside the wall, wondering if he'd see anything interesting. Most of the people in there kept out of sight at night. They weren't officially there, but once you got assigned here, you found out they were pretty real, and they weren't without

weapons. There were a few spots on the windows that could attest to that, but nothing seemed to be up tonight.

He turned and scanned the tree line across the highway just in case there were any kids with a rifle or some crap. Nobody had brought anything that could even pierce the windows in years, but it still made him jump when stuff slammed into them. He spotted something on the far side of the road. It looked like some sort of vehicle in the ditch.

“Hey Sarge, what's that?” He lowered the viewer and pointed.

“What's what, you pleeb?”

Parsons tapped the viewer against Kaniko's shoulder and kept pointing. The Sergeant looked up from his show and took the device without upsetting the vid box. “Stop pointing, you moron.” He looked at the magnified image for a few seconds. “Hmm. It looks like an old VBL M11.”

“Is it ours?”

“Nah. The French made 'em. Somebody probably bought it surplus out of North Africa. It'd be pretty hard to get one stuck in anything that shallow though. I suppose we'd better call it in just in case there's – SHIT!” He rolled off the chairs and grabbed Parsons legs to knock him down about the same time something slammed into the tower with enough force to deform the road side window, and spall large chunks off the inside of the concrete wall. The lights flickered several times and went out before the launcher across the road fired again. This time it took out the vehicle the troopers had parked at the base of their tower where the third member of their team had been taking a nap. There were towers two clicks to either side, but by the time they could get here the damage would be done.

The tower to the north looked like a fireworks display as HEDP grenades from a forty millimeter belt fed launcher started slamming home in short bursts. It wasn't quite as devastating as the SMAW had been, but the troops were out of action just the same. A panel truck pulled to a halt on the shoulder about

halfway between the damaged towers as a handful of people appeared atop the wall. Ropes dropped just ahead of the people sliding down them. Once on the ground they ran for the truck, leaving the ropes behind. The plain looking vehicle pulled back onto the pavement as the door was closing.

The armored car across the road pulled up out of the ditch away from the pavement and turned carefully between the trees, disappearing into the darkness. Up the road, another armored vehicle was doing the same. The Guard scrambled trucks, troops, APCs, and a helicopter, as fast as they could, but the escapees and their rescuers had vanished into the night. The police would spend the next several days canvassing the neighborhoods in the area, but people there either hadn't seen, or didn't want to see, anything useful. There was something different on the summer wind.

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The building used to be some kind of manufacturing facility, but had been abandoned ever since the Indonesians had figured out a cheaper, quicker way to make whatever it had produced. The place was devoid of squatters or debris, possibly due to the fact that somebody had removed the large doors from both ends, making it something of a wind tunnel. It wasn't close enough to Lake Michigan to get any of the lake-effect warming in the winter, and winters could be harsh here.

It was a warm evening in early summer now, and the building may have been vulnerable to intrusion, but it was a good place to avoid observation. There were two armored vehicles parked inside and two men standing between them having a quiet conversation. The smaller of the two was by no means a little man. He looked like he could have played in the backfield of any pro football team, though he wasn't quite big enough to make the line. The other man was easily that big and then some. He was a full decimeter taller than his dark skinned friend and almost twice his mass. He crossed his muscular, heavily tattooed arms and planted his feet firmly under his shoulders.

The smaller of the two large men stood in a relaxed stance

as if he hadn't a care in the world. "You know this isn't going to get you what you want, right?"

"You have a better plan?"

"No. But I've seen these ground pounders in action. They aren't just going home 'cause you pop a few of them. And you can't get everybody out this way, they'll just come in with more troops, more guns, and pour more concrete."

The larger man's brow lowered even more. "There has to be a way."

"Yeah? Good luck with that. You want me to help you blow up some more stuff, I'm in. I just don't think it's gonna work long term, that's all. They have an army. We don't. Not that we couldn't take every one of them off the wall in one night, but you can't get everybody out that fast, and the troopers will just keep coming. Besides, do you want to convince the big boys in the leather chairs that the whole thing is too big a risk? Maybe they just flatten the whole thing, huh?"

The bigger man uncrossed his arms. "There's a way to do this. I'll find it. Promise." He held a huge hand up between the two of them. "Thanks, Torch."

The darker man held his hand up but didn't grasp the other yet. "That's not funny, you know?" He moved his hand against the other and steeled himself for the pain. He'd seen Choo break bricks with those hands. This time his grasp was solid, but not crushing.

"I meant it. Thanks."

"No problem, man. Anytime."

Without any other words, they both got into their vehicles and left by different ends of the building. Torch wasn't sure about there being a way to do what Choo wanted, but he was sure that if anybody had the tenacity to find one, he was the guy.

Chapter Two

Silver sat with her feet up on the steel coffee table watching the norms dance around, trying not to rub at her arm. Skitch had probably noticed her agitation, but she wasn't the kind of person who'd say anything. It felt like something had gotten down inside the spike sheath last time she'd retracted it, but her tools were out in the car. Usually when this happened, she'd take the spike out, clean it off, and set it aside. Then it was in with the brush until she was absolutely sure there wasn't anything in there. There never was, but by the time she was done scrubbing and had it back together, it felt right again. This wasn't the time or the place for that kind of thing, so she'd just have to live with it. She'd lived with worse.

She glanced at Skitch and spotted the slightest narrowing of her eyes. She was probably using optical magnification to observe the front door, so Silver decided to watch and see what was up. There was some norm guy making an ass of himself in front of the entrance, looked like he was trying to impress some drunk girls. Nothing interesting about that, not until he shot two meters into the club and landed in a tangled heap with some other people. The reason for his projectile behavior was immediately obvious, it wasn't like anyone could ignore the immense man entering the club. Silver watched him walk the suddenly empty strip of floor between the front door and the conversation pit. She'd forgotten all about her arm.

Skitch shifted slightly in her seat. "Somebody's not happy tonight."

The two women waited while Choo approached his usual seat on the end, turned, surveyed the crowd, and sat down with the smooth precision of a hydraulic lift. He didn't put his feet up, he never did. He always sat that same way, hands on thighs like some kind of statue in one of those big stone chairs.

Silver gave him a feather weight little punch on his massive bicep. "You're gonna get yourself kicked out of here if you keep

playing toss-ball with the norms.”

He didn't turn his head or move his eyes from their focus on the far wall. “Not likely.”

“What's with you tonight? Lighten up amante.” She stared at the side of his head for a while. His dark mood was spreading out around him, she could feel it seeping into her chest. Fine.

“What was that crap you pulled, before? It made the news.”

“Did it?”

“Yeah. What were you trying to prove? You're just gonna make things worse with shit like that. Don't you think about other people before you do stuff like that?”

“Yeah. I do. Somebody's got to do something.”

She looked at the heat patterns on his skin, the set of his jaw, and the spread of his strong fingers on his big thighs. She knew him about as well as anyone and he wasn't so much angry as frustrated and even a little bit sad. She pulled her feet off the table and slid her knees onto the sofa so she was turned to face him. She put her hand gently on his forearm to soften her words. “What did you think that was supposed to do?”

“If you're doing something and you find out it's a waste of time, you stop doing it, right? I thought maybe they were smart enough to see that. Maybe I was wrong.”

“I don't think it had the effect that you wanted. Sorry.”

His big head turned to look down at her. His face was expressionless, but his grey eyes weren't. “What will?”

“I don't know.” She looked at him while she tried to figure out the right thing to say. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah.”

“What if you're the only one that thinks that way? What if everybody else in it wishes you'd leave it alone?”

“When I was a kid, there was this dog in our neighborhood. Nobody was quite hungry enough to eat the thing, so we kind of

watched out for it. Fed it stuff when we could. One day it shows up lame. Mi Abeula, she says, leave it alone. The old man from a couple doors down, he comes out to help. The more we back it into a corner, the more it snaps and snarls. But we get it held down and the old guy sets the leg and ties some sticks to it with wire so he can't chew them off. It healed up okay and the dog lived for years. We did the right thing.”

“These are people, not dogs.”

“Exactly.”

“Who put you in charge?”

“Nobody.” His big shoulders twitched slightly upwards, his version of a shrug. “Everybody.”

“What's wrong with you? Don't you know when to quit?” She could tell she'd gotten to him with that one as soon as his tattoos started shifting shapes and positions. “Okay, I should talk. Sorry. But you know what I mean. When is it enough?”

“When it's not wrong anymore.”

“Let me guess. This little attack was Torch's idea of a good plan, right?”

“No. He didn't think much more of it than you. But he didn't have any better ideas either. What about you?”

Silver turned forward and put her feet back on the table, crossing her arms. “This isn't my idea. You're not going to quit until we all get dragged into it, are you?” The answer was another shrug. She directed the next question to Skitch. “What about you?”

“I'm not sure if his approach is good, but the goal seems worth while.”

Silver pushed back into the cushion with a snort. “I thought the norms were crazy. You can both just let me know if you live through it, okay?”

She tried to conceal how much it bothered her that he was more interested in the welfare of strangers than he was in her.

She realized after a few moments that wasn't fair, he *was* interested in her, and had always been there whenever she'd asked him. If that wasn't the problem, what was? It crept into her mind that maybe she'd started to be interested in *him* and he was taking a road that could get them both into a really bad place. She didn't want to start taking chances on anyone just to have it all crushed. Wondering if she could get him to change his mind one of these nights in bed, she quickly realized the odds of that happening were about as good as her sprouting wings.

She squeezed her arms a little tighter. "Fuck."

Air came through Choo's nose in his version of a sigh. "I know."

Chapter Three

Lt. Colonel Stuart Maxim stood atop the concrete wall surveying the damage to the structure. He was already intensely aware of the damage to his troops. It was a fact that sometimes military lives got cut short and he could accept that, but he didn't have to like it. He turned his head a few degrees to indicate he was addressing the man just off his elbow.

“Are we having a problem out here Captain? The General called me this morning. He wants my report three hours from now. What can you tell me?”

“Sir. This was a completely unprovoked and unanticipated attack.”

The Colonel turned to face Captain Landers. “One. It was not unprovoked. Anytime you keep thinking, intelligent creatures in a cage they try to get out. Expect it. Two. How the hell was this unanticipated? Why do you think this wall is here man? You have some of the most sophisticated vision and detection gear available, so I can only assume it wasn't being utilized to it's full potential. Would that be your assessment of the situation?”

Landers started to shrug, started to frown, and finally nodded.

“See to it that it doesn't happen again.”

Landers didn't salute, but looked like he wanted to. “Sir. Yes, Sir.”

The Colonel made his way to the temporary ladder on the outside of the wall. He knew Landers's troops were going to get an earful and a workout, and they were going to blame the old man. “Machinegun” Maxim, they called him, but never to his face. It was a stupid nickname. He didn't care what they called him or what they thought of him as long as they got off their asses and kept themselves alive.

Chapter Four

Professor John Alvarez closed his office door and headed home. Hardly anybody was in the department this time of year, but he was putting in a little extra effort trying to get tenure. He really felt this was his year. He walked the short distance from the building to his personal parking space, entered the code on his sedate but expensive electric car, got in, and drove calmly home. It was dusk by the time he pulled into his driveway. It would have been cheaper to live in a condo, but it was sort of expected that you had to get a house to set yourself apart from the common man. He used the key to open the back door, the neighborhood was quiet enough that no one really needed to get better, newer biometric locks.

He set his briefcase on the kitchen table on the way through to the dining room. Something caught his attention, there was a large dark stain on the walls in the corner. As he reached for the lights, it moved forward one step. Alvarez backed away as his mind tried to grasp what was happening. The dark shape was a man with his arms crossed, and he was huge. Glancing around for some kind of weapon, he found himself near the gas fireplace. The tools were really just there for show, but the poker was solid and felt good in his hands. He held it up much like he would a softball bat. The intruding giant took in a deep breath, slowly let it out, and stood his ground.

Alvarez took a threatening step forward. The man's lack of reaction spoke of an arrogance that sent the professor into a momentary rage. He took the remaining two steps and swung. The iron rod bounced off the side of the man's head before it left his grasp. The big guy held it with both hands by the ends and gave it a twist. He reversed one grip and twisted it further into a sort of helix before he tossed it away backhanded hard enough to embed it in the far wall.

"That hurt." He re-crossed his arms. "Don't do it again." His voice sounded like it came out of a metal drum. There was a

trickle of blood down the side of his face, but he seemed unconcerned.

Alvarez's first impulse was to run as fast as he could, but his brain overrode his feet. This guy may be big, but he was anything but slow. He glanced over at the impaled wall and back.

“Who *are* you? What do you want?”

“I'm not here to hurt you. I thought you were smart.”

“Well, excuse me, but you broke into my home. How would you feel?”

The big man snorted. “Where I grew up? How much do you know about 'Undertown'?”

“Oh, shit.” He took a moment. “That would explain some things.” He could feel his curiosity swamping his anger. “Not as much as you do, I'd wager. That's not what you call it, is it?”

“The Zone. It's a Q-zone. You don't even hear the word 'Undertown' until you get outside.”

“Q-zone? What does that mean?”

“Quarantine.”

“Of what? Some kind of outbreak? Killer flu? Plague?”

“There was a train wreck. Something leaked.”

“I always knew that riot story was a cover up for something. Wait a minute. I want to record this.” The big man's head tipped slightly to one side. “Notes. Can I take some notes?”

A single nod was the only answer. Alvarez grabbed a pad and pen from the kitchen and sat at the dining room table, already scribbling notes. He gestured for his guest to take a seat. The big man stepped forward, plucked the nearest antique hardwood chair from the floor one handed as if it were a child's toy. He put one of the legs against his other hand, flexed it a little, and set it back on the floor shaking his head.

The professor couldn't contain his enthusiasm. “So tell me more about this place, this quarantine zone.”

“I want to tear the wall down.”

“Well.....that's certainly an ambitious goal. Why don't you start by telling me a little something about what it's like inside. How do people make a living? How do they acquire their food? Is there anyway I could gain access to them? Perhaps administer a survey?”

“Help me tear it down and you can talk to all of them. Where should I start?”

“You were born in there? What was it like growing up there?”

“The wall. Where should I start with that?”

“Oh, well, the Mayor is probably the most central figure in determining policy about Undertown and its associated issues. He might be a bit hard to reach, and even harder to convince. Politicians are often resistant to position changes unless they can see some clear benefit to it, or some clear negative to the alternative. Why are you so motivated about tearing it down?”

“It's wrong.”

“Well, if you're going to get an audience with the Mayor's office, you'll need an overwhelming amount of evidence to support your case. Perhaps you should start at the beginning, and find out more about why it was built in the first place, who made those early decisions and why. If you can show that the circumstances that existed then are no longer in evidence, you might be able to get someone to look into financing an impact study. I'd like to be a part of that, if it happens.”

“I'll keep you in mind.”

“I'd still like to ask you some questions if you have the time. This is a fascinating subject, and I might be able to stir up some interest for you.”

The big man glanced at the fireplace poker stuck in the wall. “I'm not playing games. I'll be back if I need more advice.” He left through the kitchen door making only as much noise as someone half his size should.

Alvarez sat in the dim room, thinking about the possibilities that had just been presented to him. He had a place to start, with the trains. Maybe he could leverage this into more than just a tenured position, visions of book deals and speaking tours played out in his head until his stomach reminded him how late it was.

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Long, elegant fingers tipped with carefully manicured nails flicked through the hangers and ran across the fabrics in a pricey downtown store as Vertical looked for just the right dress. She had to catch the eye of a particular company vice president by the end of the week. She wasn't worried, he'd likely tell her anything she wanted to know even without any chemical encouragement. She'd gotten very good at seducing people over the years.

She finally decided the man she was after would respond best to the dark silk with the lace hemline and plucked it from the rack as she turned towards the lingerie. She never saw the need for underwear but some people, mostly the men, seemed to get excited over it so she gave it some consideration. She only spent a few minutes to pick a bra and pantie set that went with the dress and wasn't too risqué.

As she approached the counter, the clerk had a frightened expression on her face. Vertical set her items down while forming words in her head designed to put the girl at ease with the least amount of conversation when it all became clear. A muscular arm slid past her head to give the clerk a generic, pre-loaded smart card. Vertical knew there were geometrical tattoos under that sleeve, and whose arm it was without turning her head, but she did it anyway. The clerk slotted the card and her eyes widened a little when she saw how much was on it.

Vertical took Choo's arm without hesitation. "What did I do to earn the pleasure of your company?"

"I need a favor."

"I always knew you'd come to me eventually. Have you gotten tired of scary girls?"

“Not that kind of favor.” He accepted his card back and picked up the bag. Vertical waited until they were outside to resume the conversation.

“What's the situation, big man?”

“I may need to have a talk with the mayor in a while. Can you start looking into his people and see how hard that is?”

“Location? Time of day?”

“Doesn't matter to me. Least amount of damage would be nice. I may want his cooperation on a thing.”

“Would that be a forty kilometer kind of thing?” He nodded. “Do you really think you can move it?” He shrugged. She tugged his arm at the corner towards the nearest of her trendy apartments. He stopped at the building door and handed her the package.

“Are you sure you don't want to come in?” She squeezed his arm. He smiled and shook his head. “I had to ask, you know? You'll keep Silver off my back about it?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll see you at the club later?”

“I imagine. Let me know if you need anything for this?”

“Of course.” She stood up on her toes as he leaned down and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Good luck. With all of it.”

He nodded and walked calmly away. She still marveled at his combination of grace and power as she watched him go.