

“Wreckage”

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A quick death is usually thought of as a mercy especially if it's a terrible way to die. My death was in the middle of a warzone so it was pretty bad but there are worse ways to die I suppose. After the brief blackness of death fades I look up to see a male rhino with wings who is holding my paw. Looking down I realize the ground is getting farther and farther away as we fly. It takes what feels like days but we pass through the clouds and the first thing I'm hit with is the sound of music.

For a while I just close my eyes before we stop flying and touch solid ground which is strangely red. The moment we set foot on the clouds the questions start flooding my brain: “where am I?” “why is my memory such a blur?” “who is this rhino?” “what's going on?” Before I opened my mouth to ask even one of those questions the rhino speaks in a surprisingly warm tone of voice “welcome to heaven, I'm sure you have plenty of questions allow me to answer some of them.” “Let me start off by saying that unfortunately you are dead and that this is one of the circles of heaven, secondly I've no doubt you noticed you're suffering from memory loss that's normal especially given what you've been through your memory will return soon and then we'll talk more.”

I'm shocked by all the information I just got and I take a step back to look around and process everything that's going on. I immediately notice that there are a bunch of angels consisting of all sorts of different species I guess just standing off in the distance not moving much as well as noticing the stars and other planets all around us. While I'm still soaking everything I take a minute to take a good look at the rhino who escorted me up here. Naturally he's pretty big being a white rhinoceros, about a head bigger than I am and I'm a big guy myself, he has nicely groomed mustache, short black hair, the bright green robe he's wearing and of course his big beautiful angel wings. I notice that the smaller one of his horns is chipped slightly and with that my memories come flooding back both of everything that's happened and of my old friend.

“I don't believe it. Wade is that seriously you?!” I shout not holding back any excitement in my voice. “It's been a long time Keith I'm just sorry it couldn't have been longer. What sparked your memory so soon usually it takes about a few more hours.” “It was the chipped horn I would have recognized it anywhere.” “Do you remember how I broke it?” “How could I forget haha! You were scaling the wall during basic training, you got over it fine but then you slipped up on your way down. I tried catching you but you were too heavy and we both were on the ground in seconds I'm just grateful you broke my fall.”

We laugh for a little while having hands on each others' shoulders. “So you said this was one of the circles of heaven right? Which circle is it, since when has heaven had circles to it, are

we going to see the other circles?" I ask probably quicker than I should have. "Slow down a bit Keith I'll answer your questions just one at a time." "There have always been circles to heaven since heaven is everything beyond earth but that's not something people usually think about, there are ten circles total we're in the circle of Mars which is for warriors of faith, and the only other circle we can visit is the circle of God himself but that's something we can talk about that later." I blink before asking "so we're here because we're holy warriors?" "Yep" Wade responds. "So what makes me a holy warrior exactly? I mean I've always been a believer in God I prayed at night and everything but I would never consider myself a warrior of faith or anything special really when it comes to being a soldier." Wade responds "oh Keith you modest lion you. You're a warrior of faith because despite the hell that is war you did everything you could to follow God's teachings and remained faithful until death. I mean you died trying to rescue a family in the middle of gunfire for goodness sakes."

I remember it clearly now that most of the shock has subsided. I had been deployed with my fellow marines in the combat zone for about seven months and I had been in the Marines for six years already. My deployment was something I had been dreading for a while given that I had finally settled down in a city as opposed to moving every month and was finishing my third year as an undergrad student. I knew about the vicious war that was happening where I was going but that still didn't prepare for the depravity that struck the region we were in. There was a lack of resources due to constant attacks meaning people were dying of thirst, starvation, and disease. On top of that the opposing army was always shifting hiding places and never discriminated on who they hurt going so far as to happily burn hospitals and places of refuge making many civilians just as much targets as we were naturally taking a heavy toll on many people's morale.

Within a few weeks in response to the viciousness of our enemy plenty of our own troops became just as ruthless. They started caring only about killing the enemy and going home sooner rather than later as well as starting to steal some of the resources that were supposed to be going to civilians and victims of the various attacks. While many stuck to being angry, uncaring, and committing theft some went so far as to abuse their power to bully civilians of the area becoming physical and scaring them with gunshots. The worst of everyone was probably Lieutenant Rolands. A black bear with high command she hated everyone especially guys like me who tried to help the civilians, she fought regularly with anyone who tried to comfort or offer aid to the civilians in the area, she also fought with civilians herself in the brief moments of downtime we had injuring several with her claws, she'd shoot up places like bars regularly in raids for any enemy that might be hiding among the people catching maybe three actual soldiers despite dozens of raids, she also hoarded a whole shipment of water more than once leaving everyone badly dehydrated for two days straight. The only reason discharges weren't happening is because of a lack of ready troops and this simply being the horrible norm that no one wanted to think about outside of combat and the occasional drunk conversation.

It seemed the only way to get discharged was to commit murder, undisputable murder which only happened once and that person was discharged without question and without fuss.

Wade must have noticed how deep in thought I was because he comes to shake me back to reality “jeez dude are you alright you look like you were having the mother of all flashbacks” “I’m fine, I was just thinking about the nightmare the warzone was.” “I died in that place bro I know exactly how terrible it was.” “That’s why you’re here too right. All the shit we dealt with together and apart” I ask Wade. Wade simply says “Yeah” with no emotion and we stare at the ground for a while. I think about what we did for once instead of what everyone else did. Me and Wade tried our best to smile despite all the carnage and did everything we could to help people. We brought some of our supplies to the civilians, we tried to be friendly with everyone and show them not all troops were apathetic bullies, visited attack victims, and stayed faithful both to God and the idea that the war would end and things would get better even if almost everyone was dead set on breaking that faith.

I still remember Wade’s death all too well and the destruction it almost brought me too. When those bullets pierced his body and his blood was on the clothes of the teenage boy he was protecting I almost lost faith. I became more content to pity myself then help others but God gave me the strength to get through and I never stopped trying to serve him. When I was dying with all that debris on top of me and the family I rescued screaming for help all I could think was “I shouldn’t have been here.” The music I’ve been hearing since we reached Mars has been helping make things clear so I ask Wade “do you remember why I joined the marines?” “Of course I do! You always reminded me of it when you felt down. You joined because you didn’t have much choice thanks to your parents being five seconds from kicking you out and not having a job, you just wanted to have some sense of purpose in your life.” “Yeah I didn’t want to be a soldier I wanted to be a nurse but God had other plans I guess.”

“So what comes next? Why are we on Mars?... What’s with the music I’ve been hearing since I got here?” I ask. “The music is something that’s just part of Heaven and every sphere has its’ own special tune. We’re on Mars because it’s simply one of the spheres of heaven.” All of a sudden Wade grabs my paw again “as for what’s next, let me show you” we fly and I feel a wind that shouldn’t exist flow through my mane. We’re floating above the surface of Mars now and I notice now that all the angels that have been standing around this whole time are arranged in a pattern “they’re forming a cross?” “that’s right!” Wade happily responds.

“I suppose that makes sense. Are we going to be a part of that?” “I already am and now you will be too.” “How can they be so calm and still? The most I’ve seen them do is blink.” “Remember how I told you that we can also visit God’s circle of heaven?” “Of course I do. Why do you ask?” “Well Keith they may be standing there as part of that cross but as they stand there they are also part of God’s rose residing with God and the other angels in all his glory.”

“I see” I tell Wade as we descend back to Mars. “Just one question before I join that cross” “Sure Keith ask me anything.” “Did that family I tried to save make it okay?” Wade gives me a hard look before saying “they made it out of the building okay and that’s all that matters” “but I saved them right...?” “You did everything you could despite not even wanting to be there, you helped people in God’s name and fought to protect innocents, your work is over, you’re with God

now.” At that I say nothing and simply join the cross ahead of us letting myself gaze into God’s magnificent light.