

The Sacred Band

by Rose LaCroix

Prologue

A date resounded in the minds of the subjects of the Sovereign Christian Republic of the United States of America. A date that signified the end of the secular republic and the beginning of what, it was claimed, was God's kingdom on earth.

August 20th, 2029 was the day of the Great Siege, when the Reverend Michael Lind led an army of private military contractors against the secular government and won. It was the end of nearly seventy years of an escalating culture war.

The secular majority had declared victory after the landslide elections of 2006 that solidified a Democratic majority, and rendered the faith-based politicians of the re-constituted Republican Party frustrated and increasingly fractured. Defection from Christian activist groups was steadily growing, and it seemed that secular government would rule the day after all.

Yet there was a discontent deep in the hearts of some men. The government, it seemed, had failed to secure for them a dream of making the United States of America a Godly nation. Marginalized once more but far from silenced, this group slowly, silently, made their plans.

Back in the old days, they had seen democracy as a force for good; now, disillusioned by the caprices of the 2006 election and several subsequent elections where socially liberal and moderate politicians had won out, and remembering, bitterly, the election of Clinton in 1992 and 1996, they realized that a free, democratic system was not an asset to their cause, but a liability.

Rick Sheldon, a popular televangelist, expressed in a sermon in 2012 what everyone had been thinking when he said that democracy "...relies on the will of the people. People who, if given the chance, will go their own way. But their way is not God's way. We have seen it time and again, the people are in need of a strong, faith-affirmed government that will tend to the needs of their spirits, and the people are in need of liberating from this wretched humanist curse called Democracy. It was invented by Pagans, it was exploited by Satanists and atheists, and it is the biggest obstacle against building God's kingdom in this country."

Yet dismantling the institution of democracy would not be an easy task. It was not as if they were without resources; at their disposal was a large print, radio, and television media network, a strong presence on the World Wide Web, and a large network of independently wealthy donors, each ready and willing to give to the cause... The funding, will, and communications infrastructures were all in place. What they lacked was muscle.

This was not lost on Michael Lind, a student at Liberty University. He had been studying the situation closely, reading news reports of everything that had happened up until that date. It was, in fact, just days before Rick Sheldon had preached his famous sermon against democracy that Lind had realized just how easy dismantling the secular government would be.

He saw how the United States military had used defense contractors to fill critical troop shortages during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was all too convenient, too, that many of these contractors had close ties with powerful names in the neo-conservative movement.

Many of these defense contractors had lost lucrative contracts with the military since the defeat of John McCain in the 2008 presidential elections. Some had been devastated by investigations into their activities, and the once-strong defense contract industry was on the brink of collapse.

However, the U.S. Military was in even more dire straits. The intervening years had left them weak, disorganized, and underfunded. The bureaucratic infrastructure of the armed forces was groaning under the strain of heavy workloads reliant on outdated equipment, and fully a third of the nation's military was kept on unpaid furlough at any given time.

The Christian revolution needed muscle, the defense contractors needed money. The military was in no condition to stop them. The perfect storm the religious right had been seeking for nearly 50 years had at last come.

For years, the Evangelical-led movement built up its war chests, not only from domestically-run programs but with help from the Reverend Jung Hwang-Yee's Eternal Life and Truth Church network in Southeast Asia. Reverend Yee had many friends in the United States government and media, making it easy to silence or ridicule anyone who dared to raise the alarm. In return, Rev. Yee would fulfill the dream he shared with Rev. Lind: to build God's kingdom on earth.

In their own media, the leaders of the movement boasted about how strong and invincible they were; in the public, secular media, they protested loudly that they were the victims of discrimination and persecution for their faith. In all areas of the media they became more venomous and more predatory in finding fault in the secular, left-center government, often letting the facts take a back seat to emotionally-charged, sensational stories of government abuse.

They collaborated heavily with defense contractors, who provided everything from vehicles to personnel to anti-aircraft ordnance, and spoke, quite openly, about their plans to rise up against America's secularist government.

Meanwhile, the government, and the vast majority of the people, felt safe. All this talk of Godly kingdoms and Christian revolutions was chalked up to the ravings of a fringe group of disenfranchised has-beens, washed up statesmen and businessmen who had ceased to be relevant, leading a few hundred thousand willing followers on an absurd crusade that was doomed to overall failure in the long run, just like every other effort toward spreading influence they had tried in decades past.

Even when Rev. Lind proudly announced that his partners at Heywood & Greene, America's largest defense contractor, had developed weapons capable of killing thousands with only a blast of high-pitched sound, few people took notice. Some of the more astute pundits of the day said it was clearly a bad thing, but the people were quick to label them “alarmists.”

Then came July 4th, 2029, the day the city of San Francisco was leveled in a massive surprise air strike. Rev. Lind proudly proclaimed it as a victory over evil, likening the air-burst 2000 lb. bombs that had ripped through Castro Street and Fisherman's Wharf to the fire and brimstone rained down on the city of Sodom. In Seoul, followers of Rev. Yee gathered in droves to celebrate, and a 40-foot model of the Golden Gate bridge, adorned with a banner reading “Free Sex Faggot City,” was burned. People suddenly began to take notice of just how dangerous this movement was, but by then it was too late.

In a location somewhere in the Nevada desert, Rev. Lind and his cohorts went into hiding; the combined arsenals of about sixteen defense contractors were amassed there, on a dry lake bed. It looked for all the world like the great mustering of troops at Armageddon ought to... At least, what Rev. Lind thought it ought to. Troops boarded transports, ground crews readied fighters and bombers, and helicopter gunships were loaded to the hilt. All in all, five thousand planes would fly out, each one bought with donations from leaders in business, industry, and private donors who either wanted God's work to be done, or their name in the hat when it came time to appoint officials for the new regime.

Then the morning of August 20th came. First a large fleet of bombers flew out, each one flying with an escort of 10 fighters. The city's anti-aircraft defenses malfunctioned due to outdated equipment and a gap about 20 miles wide opened in the airspace above the city. The bombers let loose on central Washington D.C., leveling the Capitol, the Supreme Courthouse, and most of the Smithsonian institute in the process, killing most of the house and senate, who were in session that day. They then took the Pentagon and laid waste to nearly half of the massive structure.

The next wave was a flight of several hundred Choctaw helicopters, a gunship designed with input from several of the Christian revolution leaders. Those who had scattered into the streets following the heavy bombing were mowed down mercilessly where they stood by the twin Vulcan cannons, and heavily-armored sedans used by diplomats were torn open like tin cans by light missiles. Within an hour, the beltway was riddled with the burning hulks of cars caught in the panic to escape.

The last wave came just minutes later; 19 heavy transport helicopters filled with troops landed right on the mall, with another 14,000 paratroopers landing scattered around the city. By nightfall, the Christian flag had been raised over the White House.

Things changed quickly after that day. Rev. Lind declared himself president, abolished elections, and declared war against Israel. At first this drew ire from many Christians, but he attempted to mollify the people by saying that because Israel had, despite numerous attempts to convert their nation to Messianic Judaism, rejected the Lord Jesus, they were fit only to be destroyed. He cited, among other passages, Micah chapter 3, and said that the time was right for Jerusalem to be “plowed like a field.” America was the New Zion, and Christians were the heirs to God’s favor because unlike the Jews, they had accepted the dispensation of salvation.

He made good on this; starting at the plains of Megiddo and fanning outward, Rev. Lind’s American army began the Battle for Arabia. Within days, the better part of the Middle East was razed and uninhabitable; from Damascus to Tel Aviv, few people remained alive and even fewer buildings remained standing. The few parts of the region that remained inhabitable were now permanent military installations, poised to strike the Indo-Russian Federation or the Pan-European Alliance at a moment’s notice.

The new leaders were also quick to root out what they saw as evils domestically; pagans, atheists, gays, Democrats, secular media personalities, even Christians whose views were seen as too “worldly” were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. Those lucky- or unlucky enough to be spared the firing squad or gallows were sent to the coal mines; oil had become scarce, and it was determined that God’s kingdom would run on West Virginia anthracite. They were given 10 year sentences; most did not survive to their 5th year.

Then the administration turned on itself. Several of the key figures in Heywood and Greene were orthodox Jews who felt the attack on Israel was an assault on their faith; they were denounced and executed. There were a number of closeted gays within the group; among them, none other than Rick Sheldon; they too were very publicly put to death right on the mall. Rev. Yee died under mysterious circumstances during one of his visits to New York shortly after the revolution. An underaged prostitute was charged but then later died while awaiting trial.

A handful of those involved in the revolution had been members of the old neo-conservative movement, right-wing intellectuals who were in it for profit or power but never actually believed in the scriptures, who were considered to be too “lukewarm” for the new order. These too were put to death very promptly. In all more than 3,000 of the vanguards of the revolution were, themselves, victims of its success.

Years passed. Due to the total lack of checks and balances regulating business, industry, and labor practices, the country fell into disarray and poverty, and the people once again were becoming demoralized. By 2055, it seemed the only solution was another war, this time with what was seen by many as the greatest threat to a godly nation of all: The coalition of secular, left-center republics known as the Pan-European Alliance.

It was the New Rome, Rev. Lind said, and as such, the Alliance would forever be a threat to Christianity everywhere.

It was just as the first missiles were raining down on the prosperous cities of London, Munich, and Warsaw that police arrested 23-year-old Kyle Monroe Adams in the suburbs of Waverly, Iowa on the charge of sodomy. Without so much as a trial, he was scheduled for immediate transport to the Hawkeye State Institute for Faith Offenders.

No one knew it at the time, but with his arrest, the first ripple of change had been started, and it would reach far and wide in the years to come. Yet for young Kyle, things seemed grim, and he quickly gave up hope of ever seeing the sun again. As he was shackled and loaded onto the dilapidated bus, he took a good look at the sky, knowing it may be the last good look he would ever have.

Chapter 1

Kyle half-sat, half leaned in his damp, inhumanly tiny cell. There were many convicts in this center, perhaps half a million all told, both from Iowa and from nearby regions of Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and for each to have their own cell, the cells couldn't be very large. Yet it had been decided long ago that to keep the Wrath of God at bay, each prisoner would be in their own cell to avoid the temptation to commit further acts of sodomy. Thus they each waited, neither fully sitting nor fully standing, until such time as they were either pardoned or, more likely, shot at point-blank through the base of the skull and tipped into a shallow grave.

The resulting size of most of the cells, dictated more by the limitations of space and materials than any consideration of human comfort, was about 3 feet high, by 3 feet wide, by 3 feet deep; one could sit, cross-legged, but neither stand nor lay down, and most prisoners took to doing just as Kyle was at this moment, half-sitting so that their heads were mostly upright, but struggling to do much else.

He wasn't certain how long he had been there. He had counted at first; he could still see the marks he had made in the cinder blocks for the first couple of weeks. It had been easy getting a metal fork to do this with, since plastic was scarce and wood was a luxury item; disposable utensils were now a thing of the distant past, and tin or mild steel forks and spoons were the norm.

There were no lights in the tiny cells, and the single, buzzing fluorescent lamp in the corridor, visible through a tiny slit in the bolted steel door, was on at all hours of the day. One could only judge time by what meal was being served, and even this was hardly reliable, since meals were often rationed to the point where three days without food was normal. When meals came more often, it meant there had been another round of "house cleaning"- executions done for the sake of making space. It was beyond Kyle how he had survived this many rounds of "house cleaning," but at this point his luck had to be running out.

The only real reprieve from the monotony and severe backaches of life in the cells was for the interrogations. They were many and frequent, usually involving electrodes on his testicles or nipples, or dunking in excrement, or similarly nasty treatment while being asked to name his "accomplices." It didn't matter that it was on record that every one of his former lovers had long since been executed; the guards were very enthusiastic about their interrogations, often sporting bulging erections after a particularly brutal session. These were the sort of people that were encouraged to work in the justice system; the science of psychology had been dismissed, and along with it the entire concept of sexual sadism. Instead, such inclinations were now believed to be a blessing in disguise, men whose appetite for justice was visceral and insatiable. They were said to be "born executioners" by the leadership, and those who displayed the most brutal psychopathic tendencies were often forced to work as prison guards... not that they went unwillingly.

Kyle might well have named his neighbors and friends during these interrogations; many others had, and their neighbors would name yet more of their own friends and family, until entire communities often stood lined up against walls before the firing squads. Kyle was wise to this; he knew that if he named anyone, he would be seen as having fulfilled his only useful purpose and quickly killed. Some shred of him held on to hope that if he stayed alive just a little longer, maybe something would come of it. Maybe, maybe....

He heard footsteps down the heavy metal grating of the catwalk along the cell block, leading up to his cell. He unconsciously clenched his entire body... this was either another interrogation, or they had gotten tired of his stubbornness and decided to do away with him anyway. He could hear two men talking; one was a voice he knew, a guard he knew only as Buzz, who had a particular wicked streak; the other was a voice he had not heard before, but clearly not that of another prisoner.

“But I was assured that the prisoners on this block were some of the healthiest sodomites in the camp, sir,” the stranger said. “Heh, that ain’t sayin’ much. These rats got all sorta disease, and not one of ‘em more than half my weight,” Buzz said. The footsteps stopped outside his cell. “Just let me see one of them,” the stranger replied. “I’m under orders from General Hennessy to pick out one hundred of the strongest, most promising sodomites from this camp for transport in one week’s time.” “Look, yer not gonna find much here. These ain’t fightin’ men to start with no way, they’re all soft an’ swishy faggots that prolly couldn’t fire a gun without cryin’. They’s sickly and dyin’, and ‘less ya want our boys in uniform to get AIDS, I think you should look at some of our other inmates, that’s all I’m sayin’,” Buzz replied, clearly annoyed with the stranger. “I’m a U.S. Army surgeon, sir,” the stranger replied. “I know a man who’s fit to fight when I see one. Show me this one.” “You don’t wanna see that one! He’s got some kinda problem with authority! He ain’t cooperated to start!” Now Buzz was really agitated. “Show me the inmate or you’ll be hearing about it from the Department of Defense!” the stranger shouted. “Believe me, we need meatheads like you in the Alps, we’re nearly out of cannon fodder!”

An awkward silence followed, then a rattle of keys and a mumbled string of profanity in a heavy Tennessee accent. The door of the cell opened with a loud clank, and Kyle was staring dumbstruck at a tall, handsome man of about 35 in a lab coat with silver-rimmed glasses. “Let me get a look at you, son,” said the man, gesturing to Kyle to step out of his cell. Buzz stood there, leering as he held the cell door open. Kyle slowly, quietly made his way out the door, giving Buzz a fleeting, fearful glance the way a cat looks at someone when they slink past, trying to escape. He stood upright and walked toward the surgeon, who produced a decades-old stethoscope and pressed it to his bare chest. “Just breathe in for me...” Kyle took a deep breath, refreshed to stand up without being shocked at least once. “...Now breathe out.” This was too good. *I’m gonna get my nuts shocked any minute*, he thought to himself. The surgeon pulled out his scope and inspected Kyle’s eyes, ears, and nose intently, making the occasional note on a small notepad he carried. “What’s your name?” the surgeon said. “K... Kyle Adams,” Kyle struggled to say. He yelped out in pain and collapsed to the floor. The surgeon saw, to his horror, Buzz standing behind Kyle with an electric cattle prod, an insolent grin plastered below his vacant eyes. “Gotta be firm with these fags, they start speakin’ outta turn you gotta give ‘em a good zappin’.” The surgeon bent down to check on Kyle, who lay moaning on the floor, then looked up at the grinning guard. “That won’t be necessary any more. Not with this one. I’m putting him down for transport. Have him ready to go in one week or you’ll be sent to the Alps to draw enemy fire away from our main ranks. And don’t you dare try to make him unusable. Keep him fit for combat or you’ll be filling his boots. That’s an order!”

Kyle could hear Buzz’s teeth audibly grating, and knew that the next week would be hellish for him. Buzz had it in for him from the first day, now it seemed he was losing his favorite hate puppet, and it enraged the brutal guard. Yes, there would be plenty of beatings and savage shocks to come before he was transported to whatever fate awaited him. Whatever it was, it didn’t look good; if they’d send a loyal servant of the Republic like Ezekiel “Buzz” Hawthorne to be cannon fodder, things looked very bleak indeed for a man who was already marked for death. As Kyle returned to his cell and the heavy steel door closed behind him, he couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t really going out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Chapter 2

Ezekiel Purity Hawthorne, dubbed “Buzz” for his weapon of choice, a 10,000 volt cattle prod he used both to goad prisoners into moving and to discourage them from moving any further, hated his charges with a passion. Back home in Tennessee, they said he was “On fire for the Lord,” and he reveled in his new, self-styled role as a wielder of the Almighty’s sword of vengeance and justice.

The truth was somewhat more convoluted; certainly more than Buzz could ever willingly grasp. Buzz had a distinct, burning hatred of all who committed sexual crimes, but reserved his harshest treatment for handsome, younger men. He had felt for most of his life that they were somehow trying to sway him to commit “sins of the flesh.” When he saw their half-naked, sweaty bodies and felt that all-too-familiar sensation of arousal stirring within him, he was filled with a seething rage and lashed out violently. How dare they do this to him? How dare they bring out passions in him that his Lord had forbidden him to explore? For tempting him with whatever subliminal warfare these gorgeous young men waged on his tortured libido, they had to die.

He particularly enjoyed the sorts of torture involving inflicting pain or damage on the prisoners’ genitalia. He had been the first one at Hawkeye State to rig up electrodes to a car battery and use them to shock the testicles and nipples of his prison charges, an idea that quickly caught on with other, similarly-inclined guards. It made him feel he had some power over the sexual feelings they brought out in him if he harmed them this way, giving them pain in the parts of their bodies that had landed them behind bars to begin with.

More than a few times, he even took his obsession to the point of cold-blooded murder. Once the final seal was on the death warrant, it didn’t matter how a prisoner died; that was when Buzz would tell the guard walking them to the execution grounds that he’d take them the rest of the way, then quickly hustled them into a converted broom closet.

The things that went on in that broom closet were some of the most nightmarish, depraved things one human being can do to another. Buzz took tremendous glee in them; he could finally do the things he had fantasized about for so long, to kill these gorgeous men slowly, tearing them limb from limb for turning him on this way, and it was all okay, he told himself, because he was working for God. Everyone in the prison knew what went on, but nobody said a thing; it was understood that God moved in mysterious ways and that Buzz’s passion for justice was all part of that great mystery.

Kyle, being still noticeably young and handsome despite the dismal conditions he’d been kept in, almost certainly would have ended his life on a meat hook and missing a few limbs if not for his sudden change of fortune. That isn’t to say his final week at Hawkeye State was pleasant.

He could not remember, when the week was through, how many horrible beatings, thrashings, forced shaves with cold, straight razors that slashed his face, electric shocks, and dunkings in dog feces he’d had to endure. It was all a frightening, painful blur of one torture after another, and at the end of each day he was at once numb with fright and aflame with physical pain.

No... He just chose not to think of it as he followed five other inmates onto a very sad-looking mini bus a week later. The thing hadn’t had new tires in about 10 years, and they were threadbare to say the least, but it was safer than staying for ten minutes in Hawkeye State.

No, try not to think of how safe the drive will be. You’re out of there now, you’ve lived to see the sky again, he thought to himself. He looked up. The same muddy gray-brown sky he had remembered all his life. Back when he was younger, he didn’t understand why a lot of the old poems spoke of how glorious the sky was, and about it being blue too... It had never been more than maybe a faint bluish colored mist through

the heavy smog. Never mind; it was still the sky, the world outside. He was out of that awful place at last and might actually have a chance.

He recalled some mention of 100 prisoners from the camp being chosen for whatever the military had in mind. Behind this mini bus were another three more, each carrying about 5 of them. They must not have been in too much of a hurry if they were only taking 20 at a time, and Kyle could not help but wonder what this was all about.

As the bus rolled down the interstate along the rolling plains headed toward Chicago, Kyle sat silently in the back of the minibus, on a bench seat on the left side, next to a rather large, grim-looking fellow of about 35, totally bald with a good deal of stubble, and facing three somber-looking young men who couldn't have been much more than 19. Beneath him, a hard metal seat made his rear sore. The handcuffs that still bound his wrists chafed, and his view was partly obstructed by the heavy steel grating that covered the van's windows. The engine labored to keep up with freeway speeds- this was a natural gas-powered model, not coal-to-liquid like most of the larger buses. The muffler was loose, and one could hear the wheezing, sputtering engine protesting loudly against the high speeds. Beneath them, the heavily-pitted road surface would, from time to time, buffet them rather harshly; it wasn't often the states got enough money to repair freeways, so it was usually when something major happened, like a landslide or a bridge collapse, that they actually spent the meager highway budget on any sort of work.

It would be a long drive to Chicago, and no one had explained to any of the van's occupants where they would be going exactly once they got there. Kyle knew that there had been some military operations in that area for a while, but his memory was muddy.

As he thought back, trying to remember, he could only think of the books he had read at his uncle's house as a child. They were illegal volumes these days- books that talked about ideas the Revolution had deemed un-Christian, like the old secular democratic system, the Civil Rights movement, the Bill of Rights, the days when there were these other exotic religions from all over the world, before all faith and thought became the same under the new order.

In a way, the books had always excited him. Had there really been a rebellion at a place called Stonewall where homosexuals had defied police? Was there really a time when the police wouldn't have mowed them down in the streets with automatic weapons? Had blacks and whites really been allowed to live in the same neighborhoods and go to the same schools? Was there really a time when you could say you thought the government was wrong, on live television?

His uncle's stash of books had been discovered years before; the books were burned and his uncle had been beaten within an inch of his life by the Sin Patrols, with a promise to finish the job if he dared lay his hands on any more books deemed Satanic by the Revolution. Kyle recalled with a sigh that Uncle Walter had considered himself lucky... *lucky* that they didn't kill him right then and there.

The world was different than it was before 2029, though. This was his country; all that was old had passed away, and this was the Kingdom of God, and he was in error and a criminal...

Criminal... What an interesting concept. It's criminal to be in love with another man, but not criminal to overthrow a government, kill millions of Americans, and declare war on half the world because they don't follow a Christian ideal.

Kyle shuddered a little. Thinking like that was what got him in trouble in the first place, wasn't it? He shuttered the thought immediately, instead trying to count his blessings and be thankful.

He remained there in the back of that rattling, sputtering van, not saying a word, his mind deep in thought but thoroughly confused, his past a muddled mess and his future a dim uncertainty.

Deep in the depths of the New Pentagon, the vast, towering fortress built on the site of the original Pentagon that had been destroyed in the Revolution, a group of somber-faced generals made their way down the long corridors, their highly-polished boots clicking on the Italian marble floors, every so often having their footmen open another pair of heavy English oak doors as they made their way to the inner chamber where the top brass of the SCRUSA's armed forces met. It was a Level Delta security room, meaning even they had to go through another set of Q-Ray machines and Geiger counters before they could so much as step into the coat room. Each then entered the room with the customary salute, shouting "Praise the Lord!" to the guard at the door.

Today, the discussion was on the recently-initiated Operation Hellenic. All anyone outside this room knew was that about 1200 prisoners, all of them convicted sodomites from 12 of the nation's regional centers for faith offenders, were being selected by the military for some project.

What was not known was how desperate the military currently was for a force of suicide shock troops; it just happened that the sodomites, above all offenders, seemed least likely to turn violently on their commanders, the least likely to have a serious problem with authority that couldn't be dealt with, and the least likely, by far, to have any merit beyond cannon fodder. The consensus was that they would be ideal, in the air and on the ground, to draw enemy fire from the main force, and there were already plans in the works, if this initial vanguard of disposable forces was a success, to enlist upwards of 75,000 more inmates from across the nation.

What was not clear was how to sell the idea of fighting for the SCRUSA to those who were clearly living out of line with what the nation stood for. Even if there was little chance a group so morally weak would have the leadership skills to organize themselves into a credible mutiny, as conventional wisdom said, there was concern that they would not fight as whole-heartedly as they could.

"The difficulty we face is clear," said a clean-shaven 50-something man in civilian clothing. "We can't just say to these people, 'here's a gun, go fight for us or we'll have you for desertion.' they've already stared a death sentence in the face. If a death sentence won't keep them from committing acts of sodomy, I don't think it'll keep them from deserting us and joining the Europeans."

"Your concerns are valid, Secretary Jones," said a man of about the same age in a thoroughly-decorated admiral's uniform. "But these sorts of solutions it takes time to come up with. We can worry about getting our first 1200 together, then we'll hash out details like that."

"No procrastinating! Not one of us is leaving this room until we come up with an effective solution and a plan to put it into action. I have that in writing from Rev. Lind himself, it's an executive order!"

There was a troubled murmuring around the table before silence was called by the thump of a heavy hand on the table. The Secretary of Defense gave each of the assembled officers a hawkish look.

"Forty acres and a mule," said a slightly younger man in an Air Force uniform. "Sherman offered forty acres and a mule to get black muscle on his side. We need to offer them something similar. We don't... necessarily have to keep any sort of promise like that, of course."

"What do you offer a condemned sodomite on a suicide mission?" asked the secretary, the expression on his face one of scrutiny.

"Their freedom," said the admiral. "They don't necessarily have to know it's a suicide mission."

There were nods and murmurs of agreement. "Very well, we'll tell them if they serve us well, they'll be freed and pardoned, but we will have no official policy to do so.

It's highly unlikely any of their ranks will survive anyway. Does anyone have anything to add?" the secretary asked.

There was silence for a moment, then finally, an army general, the oldest officer in the room, spoke up. "I remember something from one of the history books banned from public circulation. Written around 1998, I think... It talks about a band of 100 homosexual male lovers who guarded the city of Thebes. They were admired throughout the ancient world as a force to match any army."

"Aw, that's just old 20th century secularist revisionism! There's nothing to that story!" the Secretary of Defense blurted out. "They don't know that, though... It'll be good for morale to have something ancient and noble to aspire to." There were murmurs of agreement. "We can even name them after this band of warriors."

"Just what was this mythic band of sodomite warriors called?" the air force general asked.

"They were called the Sacred Band of Thebes," the army general replied, pausing on each word of the title for emphasis.

"Very well, then," said the secretary. "Are we all in favor of the proposal of naming the convict division The Sacred Band?"

Everyone mumbled in agreement. The secretary then turned to the army general. "General Michaels, I'm putting you in charge of the initial phase of Project Hellenic to delegate further responsibility as you see fit. Colonel Phillips can go wash the windshields on Choctaw Gunships for all I care, he pisses me off anyway. I expect only your finest work and full cooperation with your colleagues within and outside the army."

"It will be done, sir! Praise the Lord!" General Michaels saluted sharply.

The convoy of mini buses arrived with no fanfare at an unmarked military installation some distance outside of Chicago, just east of LaSalle. The inmates, still in bright orange outfits with blue stripes down the sides of their shirt and pants, were lined up. A man in a gray polo shirt embroidered with a badge and black slacks, with army-issue boots and a .45 pistol prominently displayed on his holster, walked up and down the line, noting the serial numbers on each of the prison jerseys and making a small tick mark beside each number on his checklist.

He handed off the roster to another, taller man, dressed the same but his blond hair cut to less than a quarter inch. He had a mean, bestial quality to his heavy brow, a thick, heavy jaw and a small forehead that one might expect from someone with less mind than muscle. He looked over the clipboard for a moment, then began walking up and down the line, speaking in a hoarse, barking voice like an enraged pit bull.

"First thing's first. You are not under pardon! You are under reprieve, and a very short one too! There's a couple of things you can do to make that longer or shorter, so you'd better pay close attention." With that, he leaned forward in front of a middle-aged fellow toward the far left end of the line, who struggled not to cringe as this formidable man twisted his mouth into a mocking grin. He suddenly turned away, continuing his spiel.

"I am Sargent Elijah Murray, but you can call me Sir, and only Sir, and if you call me anything else but Sir I'll make sure you learn to call me Sir like all these other dirt bags. I can be your best friend or I can be your worst nightmare, but that's your choice to make as a unit. You will speak only when I speak to you, when I tell you to jump you'd better ask how high, and when I plant a foot upside your head for being a dang ol' moron, you'd better say 'thank you sir for showing me what a dang ol' moron I am.' When I ask you to do something, you say 'Yes sir, Praise the Lord!' and you do it. Do I make myself clear?"

“Yes sir! Praise the Lord!” the prisoners shouted, each looking rather uneasy. “Looks like I’ll make a unit of you homos yet,” the Sargent replied. “Now I have some very simple rules that I think even a bunch of weak-minded faggots like you can understand. You will be up for inspection at 0700 hours and you will have your lights out by 2100 hours. You will each be responsible for keeping your bed and foot locker just as clean as it was when we got it out of supply. You will keep yourself clean and presentable at all times. If any one of you fags is caught abusing yourself, you will get 20 lashes. If we catch you again, our surgeon knows exactly which part of you to amputate and I don’t think you want that. And if any of you are caught fornicating, trying to escape, or in an act of mutiny, you will be shot on sight. Now, when you are released from your restraints, you are to report single-file to get your standard issue uniform, mess kit, and hair cut, then you are to report single-file to the personnel residence RQ-7 located right yonder,” he pointed at the cinder block building in the barracks complex with RQ-7 stenciled in large letters on the side. “You will then remain in this building and will not leave until you are told. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir! Praise the Lord!” the prisoners answered. With that, the first man pulled out a set of keys and began unlocking the handcuffs of each of the prisoners. Some stood there for a moment, rubbing their sore wrists, but were soon hustled into the line moving into one of the base’s many cinder block buildings.

Roughly an hour later, the group sat on the edge of their plain, unadorned beds, each wearing dark green fatigues and with almost no hair left, looking at one another, stunned, but not saying a word. Fear was written on each of their faces, so many unanswered questions driving their imaginations, but not one of them daring to ask the other; each of them knew the others were just as clueless as the other.

The waiting was not without benefits; for Kyle in particular, sitting there gave him a moment to finally ease out of the shuffle of anonymity and be one person again. Still, just what life meant at this moment was a question that bothered him greatly, since his likely fate was anyone’s guess. All his thoughts of the events of the day swirled and roiled, distilling into one single sentiment.

So, here I am. Better than prison, I guess.

Chapter 3

The first week was nothing but grueling, impersonal regimen of drilling and cleanliness checks, partly to break in the newest conscripts, and partly to pass the time as the remaining few selected for the program arrived gradually in convoys of minibuses similar to the one the first few had. Camp Caleb, as it was called, would eventually have 1200 conscript trainees, but none of them knew that at the time.

The hours were long, the activity strenuous, and the humiliations the drill sergeants doled out to those who did not perform as well as expected were scathing, but there were hot and cold showers, a military-issue salary card, and three square meals to look forward to.

For the occupants of RQ-7 in particular, this last amenity was a luxury they had not known in some time. In America, it was not unusual for even law-abiding citizens to have to subsist on one meal a day; one every few days if they were especially poor. Three square meals was a luxury that usually only the wealthy could afford, and however wilted the vegetables were, however gritty the gravy was, however gristly and small the portions of meat were, however watered-down the vitamin-laden punch served with the meal was, it was better food than many of these men had ever known.

It has often been said that an army marches on its stomach, and nowhere on the entire base was morale higher than in the mess hall. The usually somber-faced conscripts, the certainty of their death sentence forever etched on their faces the rest of the day, could sometimes crack a smile and discuss their predicament lightly. Yet reminders of the grim realities that lay ahead were many.

It was as the 400 or so inmates who had already arrived at Camp Caleb were taking their breakfast one morning that just such a reminder came screeching out of the heavens. The radar towers had spotted several hostile aircraft of an unknown type coming in low and fast, and the alarm was sounded. Everyone sat dumbfounded, looking up from their breakfast of powdered eggs and baconettes as the distinctive rising and falling wail of an air raid siren split the air. There was a moment where the siren was the only sound, then the sound of jet engines grew louder and louder. There was a series of explosions that shook the ground, the lights in the mess hall sputtered and went out, and the glass in the windows and light fixtures shattered as four European Alliance light bombers screamed overhead at Mach 6 or better, gone before anyone knew what had happened.

Everyone ran out to the direction of the explosions and could see the pillar of smoke rising from the base's power station. Nothing was left of the maze of transformers and emergency generators that had once stood there, only crater ten feet deep by more than three-hundred wide; the splintered remnants of a guard's shack and a twisted shred of chain link fence lay nearby. Further away, smoke billowed from the control house at the base's water treatment facility. Off to the south, the remnants of an air field used by all the armed forces smoldered, hangars and aircraft strewn and blackened, and the runway pockmarked with craters large enough to swallow the small crash tenders that sprayed desperately at the flaming mess.

While the base's permanent crew rushed around, putting out fires and assessing damage, the prisoners of Camp Caleb were unable to do anything, many of them who had gravitated toward the edge of the camp noticing for the first time that the camp was actually separated from the main base by a clever series of fences, deep ditches filled with concertina wire, and checkpoints through which they were clearly not intended to pass.

Among those finally taking stock of the exact nature of their confinement was Kyle. He noted, with a sort of detached and nonchalant manner which surprised him, that one of the bombs had been just a few yards from disrupting an especially cruel-looking electric fence around the compound.

He paused for a moment, marveling at how apathetically he could consider the disappointment of being so close to liberation. Had prison really lowered his expectations of life that much? He thought a moment more. Yes, clearly, expecting to not even be alive within a month really does lower one's expectations for life.

Besides, more bombing raids were likely; the Europeans had better aircraft and weapons, owing partly to the majority of the best and brightest scientists and engineers fleeing America immediately following the Revolution. It was an accepted fact of life, even among civilians, that most European or Asian air forces could strafe and be gone before American ground crews could react. *A breach in the fence may happen yet*, Kyle thought, though really stunning himself with the apathy with which he formed that thought.

Yet in the following weeks, there were no bombers. Prisoners kept coming, and after one minibus overturned on the highway at high speeds, smashing into a second bus in the convoy and killing all passengers and both drivers, ten more inmates from the CalNeva Faith Offender Center (which housed offenders not only from California and Nevada but Arizona and Utah as well) were given an unexpected transfer order. They were dubbed the "lucky ten" because they had not originally been scheduled for transport to Camp Caleb; at least three had originally been set to be executed the next day.

Nearly two months had passed, and all 1200 conscripts had finally arrived. It was the day after the last of the troops arrived that the basic training of the first hundred had completed. That same day, officials from the Pentagon arrived for their first inspection since the program had begun.

The inhabitants of RQ-7 and several other barracks were brought out for review while uniformed admirals and generals talked among themselves, one of them sometimes walking along the ranks, looking at their charges. Lined up in four rows of 25 each, standing to attention, they looked a long way from the sad, pale group of prisoners who had arrived some months before, yet one could still see in each pair of eyes a certain grim acceptance of a life that would soon be cut short.

At last, an army general stepped forward. He was a five-star general, in his 60s with a weathered face and piercing eyes. A well-polished brass nametag proudly displayed the name Michaels upon his chest. He strode forward deliberately, a megaphone in one hand, and raised it to his lips. It seemed all activity on the base stopped and all was silence as his clipped yet confident voice echoed across the tarmac.

"You hundred men have been chosen for a brave experiment. At 700 hours tomorrow you are to be ready for air transport to Lind Field in Nevada, on the apron and ready to roll. You are being transferred for further briefing and training under my command. Until you arrive you are to await any and all further orders before proceeding. That is all, God Bless America. Praise the Lord." The general saluted sharply, then stepped off. The group stood stunned, the General's short, clipped speech leaving far, far more questions than answers about their fate.

Sgt. Murray Strode up to the group, blew his whistle three times, and called out "Deeeeis-MISSED!" The assembled group dissipated immediately.

Kyle walked over to a vending machine near a wall, inserting his military salary card and selecting a Cyclone Cola. It was a generic brand that had become common on military bases and in government installations; incredibly cheap and watery, with a two to one mix of aspartame and sugar due to the rising cost of sugar, but it was the best a lot of people, both inside and outside the military, could get. The brands of cola popular before the Revolution were still available, but they were something of a treat for the rich and powerful; to be able to afford real cola was a very impressive thing indeed, with a pint bottle costing about \$N15 (metric measurements such as the liter had been banned as being too secular and worldly), and average weekly wages for most Americans being about \$N80 since the abolition of minimum wage laws, anyone who could afford classic soft drinks was doing very well for themselves.

This cola, cheap though it was, had cost him a half day's credits; rather than being paid in New Dollars (a re-valued currency created after the old dollar fell to \$100 per Euro in 2049), all military personnel would insert their cards into a pay kiosk every week and receive their share in credit units, usually about 12 credits per day.

Kyle was going to make it a point to savor this cola. He found a picnic table under a lone, scraggly pine next to RQ-7 and sat down, slowly sipping the sweet beverage, the slight bitterness of the aspartame barely noticeable as a cool wind blew past.

He thought of where the past few months were leading him. They had been told, early on, that this was only a reprieve. He then thought with anxiety about the words General Michaels had used. Brave experiment. Transport. These worried him. He had read, years before in his uncle's banned books, the stories of some people about 100 years ago who told their prisoners they were "scheduled for transport." The Nazis, they were called. They did indeed perform "brave experiments;" somehow, being suffocated in a vacuum chamber seemed much less preferable to the bullet through the head he might have faced back in prison.

But America had defeated the Nazis; there was no way the country had become like them after the revolution, was there? All his textbooks in school had said about them was that they were evil, godless people whose rejection of God led to their downfall, like the Soviets after them. How could a Godly nation become like the Nazis?

Ah well... If the months since first being sentenced to death had taught him anything, it was to live in the moment. For now, at least, he was actually living a more comfortable life than he had before prison; the leaky but sturdy barracks were better than the old, 50-year-old house his family shared with three other families, with vinyl siding falling off the rotten plywood, and that familiar itch of pink fiberglass insulation getting everywhere. He had four meals a day, hot and cold running water, a dry, sturdy bed, and clean clothes.

For now, things were fine. He sat late into the afternoon, relishing his cola and that thought. *For now.*

Chapter 4

The old, weary C-17 lurched forward onto the runway, its passengers facing each other, silent in their web seats. The roar of jet engines throttling up filled their ears, then the heavy aircraft began to pick up speed. From the few windows in the plane, those lucky enough to sit near one could see the ground moving faster and faster beneath them, then gradually further and further away. A disorienting sensation hit as the left side of the plane tipped earthward, the right side showing only sky, and the plane continued this way for what seemed like a long time before finally settling into level flight.

For most, who had never flown in all their lives, this was a distressing sensation; the noise, the disorientation, and the uncomfortable web seats made up their minds quickly about the whole concept of air travel; for those few who had been lucky enough to fly on a commercial airliner, on one of the few routes still in service and open to the public, it was still disconcerting as the large cargo plane pulled maneuvers that an airline pilot wouldn't dream of.

Along with them, pallets were loaded down with each soldier's personal effects, issued weapons, and print copies of their records. Three more planes followed in formation, carrying all 100 of the first group.

For maybe an hour, no one said a word. The roar of the engines and the occasional groan of the tired plane negotiating a tight turn were the only sound.

Up in the cockpit, some time later, the crew were busy monitoring the performance and navigation. They were flying perilously close to nearly all of the outside limits of the plane in its current condition, but they had no choice but to follow orders. That seemed to be how things were done these days; about every week, a transport went down after being pushed too far, but for the pilots it was preferable to being shot for insubordination. The atmosphere in the cockpit had been just as severe as that in the rear bay area, when one of the crew heard something.

"An awful lot of noise going on back there. You don't suppose these perverts are in there having some sick orgy, do you?" the navigator said.

"Hah, I'd stake my life on it. Don't ask me why the DOD wanted 100 mincing fags to do a good Christian's job," the flight engineer replied.

The navigator got up from his post for a moment, opening the door and taking a look at the passengers.

Although each was buckled securely in their seat, they were laughing and tossing something between each other, joking and talking. The navigator finally saw that it was a football that someone had somehow managed to get hold of.

He returned to the cockpit, and sat down. "They're throwing a football," he said.

The pilot stifled a schoolboy giggle with an audible snort. "I've never heard it called THAT before!"

He and the flight engineer burst out laughing. The navigator just sighed and began checking their course just to keep himself busy. *These two can be such assholes*, he thought to himself.

At 1500 hours, the plane touched down on an airstrip laid down across a broad, flat plateau. From the air, not a single building near the airstrip could be made out, making the site appear derelict. It was only from the ground that discreet buildings came into view; a control tower cut into a rise in the rocks, hangars painted in mottled desert reds and tans with the odd splotch of green to match the stark Nevada landscape. A compliment of ground crew vehicles in similar paint schemes came to meet them as the heavy plane taxied to a stop.

Without so much as a word, everyone aboard was herded by a lieutenant in desert camouflage fatigues into the back a waiting deuce-and-a-half as pallets were rolled onto another truck. Within minutes, they were being driven off the apron, across the plateau to a narrow access road that wound down the side of the plateau to a valley, partly obscured by quirks of the landscape; the deep bowl shape and peculiar alignment meant that only a small corner of the valley could be seen unless a passing plane was right above it, and what little they could see might look like just another desert town.

It was only as the valley came into view through the many tears in the aging truck's canvas top that it became apparent that this was an important complex. A secondary airstrip ran down the center of the valley, with numerous utility buildings, barracks, base housing, and offices all around it, both down in the valley and clinging midway up the sides of the steep hills. All in all the whole complex must have been some impressive size, yet almost perfectly hidden from view; any of the EA's bombers would have been long past this place by the time they realized it was here.

The truck pulled up in a large forecourt in front of a building built to look like an old Spanish mission. Everyone was ordered out by the same lieutenant, barking a single command. They obeyed, filing out into the forecourt and forming loose ranks, anticipating orders.

Kyle stood in the front row, far to the left. The desert sun was harsh, and he wondered immediately if this would be his fate, to roast in the Southwestern sun. No, they went through too much trouble to bring him and the 99 others here; this was no killing field, this was a top-secret facility, and the powers that be had something special in mind. Not that this eased his worries a great deal more...

A vintage car in olive drab with black wheels sporting chrome center caps pulled up, one of those massive cruisers built long ago in the 1990s. Kyle recognized it from old magazines as a Chevrolet Caprice, a rare vehicle to see in running order. It was in good repair, too, and along its hood were two flag poles, each bearing a red flag with five white stars. The door opened and the driver stepped out, the gentle "Ding! Ding!" of the ignition switch indicator stopping short as the door was closed and the rear passenger door opened.

Out stepped none other than General Michaels, dressed in full regalia, his medals glistening in the sun. Among them was a distinguished conduct medal he had been awarded at the young age of 19 during the troubles in Iraq; this medal was hardly a lone accolade, and he had a second and third set of ribbon bars under the first to accommodate them all. At 67, General Michaels was ready to retire with honors, but not before making a name for himself one last time. He gave the set of 3 by 5 cards he had in his hand a quick glance, then tucked them in his pocket, cleared his throat, and began addressing the men.

"You one hundred men, taken from the depths of prisons, condemned for your sins against God and America, now stand before me as proud warriors, nearly ready to fight. Before you is laid a dangerous mission, one that will require infinite bravery and skill on the battlefield. Before I tell you this mission, let me first present to you, on behalf of our most Godly leader, the Reverend President Michael Lind, our proposal.

This will be a dangerous mission, and few of you will return. The Reverend President Lind has agreed to commune with God himself, that you might be spared the pains of Hell in the next life for your bravery. However, for those of you who do return, the mercy of the Lord shall be yours too. Should you accept this mission, and upon your return agree to be baptized and renounce Sodomy, you will be pardoned by the Sovereign Christian Republic of the United States of America.

More importantly, until such time as you are delivered to God on the field of battle or accept the ways of our Lord upon your return, you will no longer be known simply as Camp Caleb Serialized Sodomite Division RQ-7. You have taken the role as

first-line defenders of our country, the way another group of homosexuals proved themselves on the battlefield long ago, in ancient times.

The people of Thebes called them the Sacred Band, a group of one hundred homosexuals despised by God and thrust out of society. Yet by their valiant deaths, at the hands of the armies of Alexander the Great, they were made righteous and vindicated in their bravery.

You are now no longer Camp Caleb SSD RQ-7. You are the Sacred Band. Praise the Lord!”

“Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” the crowd shouted over and over. Even Kyle, who had been hesitant at first, began to chant with them after a moment.

Just then, General Michaels raised his hand, and the group fell silent instantly. “It is now 1700 hours, in exactly one hour the mess hall will be open. There will be barbecue and chili exclusively for all of you. Meanwhile you are to report immediately to Barracks Block Delta and stow your personal effects. The same rules of conduct apply here as at Camp Caleb, and sodomy or fornication of any type will not be tolerated. You are dismissed. Praise the Lord.”

This was an incredible treat for these men. Barbecue was an expensive meal; the cost of charcoal, meat, and sauce was very high, and a good pork barbecue could sell for \$N49 per pound.

A sergeant standing at the corner began to bark out orders, and the one hundred men picked up their bags and began to file up into a line, marching toward the barracks. Kyle hesitated a moment, casting a glance at General Michaels, then hurried to join at the back of the line.

Who was this General Michaels? What was it about him that radiated something more- far more- than his name or rank or bearing could say? He was an officer, and carried himself like one, but he had some strange charisma that made everyone gravitate toward him. Even Kyle couldn’t help but feel safe under his command.

If this is a suicide mission, maybe it won’t be so bad with General Michaels, he thought as he placed his few changes of clothes into a foot locker at the foot of his bed. This time, each had been given their own separate rooms and beds, with locking doors. He had a sink, a chair for sitting in, and a shower in the far corner. Everything was sparse and antiquated but clean and well-kept.

He looked at his service issue watch, then put his camouflage coat back on and began to move toward the mess hall. He’d had no lunch, why would he turn down something as special as barbecue?

Chapter 5

Inside the mess hall, the gray cinder-block walls were festooned with bright, colorful buntings, and from the pressed gypsum ceiling hung colorful red, white, and blue paper chains. On the wall, a banner proudly displayed the words “Welcome Sacred Band!” and “God Bless our Repentant Warriors!” Beneath it stretched a long table set up as a buffet, behind which cooks busied themselves with the pulled pork and beef, cutting, preparing, and covering the rich chunks in sauce. Tables were set up throughout, and over the loudspeaker, a familiar country-gospel song called “Our Country!” could be heard. The twangy female voice crowed on as a line began to form at the buffet:

*I ain't got much schoolin',
But I reckon I can see,
This country is the gift of God,
And it belongs to you and me.
Whenever Satan's armies,
Come knockin' on our door,
We'll send 'em back to where they come
And even out the score, 'cause this is
Our country!
Our country!
Not the fag or jew!
Our country!
Our country!
God's gift to me and you!
Our country!
Our country!
Frenchie, burn in hell!
We're gonna kick your Euro ass,
And old John Bull's as well!*

It wasn't so much a popular song as one that was heard often. Although the few people in America who could afford recorded music would never have bought a copy, the Ministry of Morale had managed to keep it at the top of the charts for a full 5 years running; every radio station played it at least four times a day, and every government-sponsored public function played it too.

Kyle got in line and piled his plate high with meat, corn, potatoes, and bread. At the end of the line, a fountain dispensed Cyclone Cola freely into generously-sized plastic cups. He'd had a meal like this once, for his younger sister's baptism, but that was a rare celebration. It was customary for everyone in a family's church to donate a week's wages to celebrate the baptism of a child, which made for a long waiting list for baptisms owing to the high birth rates. His sister had been seven before they could raise the money to celebrate her baptism; Kyle could only wonder why someone would bother to spend so much money on the Sacred Band... unless they were treating this as a sort of second baptism for these men.

Kyle sat down between two others, who barely noticed him as they conversed with their comrades. It was then that it occurred to him that all his life, he had been something of a loner. In school, as the teachers went on teaching their lessons about God's plan for the American world and how Rev. Lind was blessed by God with infallibility, he had been so afraid to interact with the other students, so afraid to speak and to raise his voice, that he was thought by most students to be either deaf or dumb. Outside of his family, he never had anyone to call his own.

As he grew older, it didn't change. When he finally got the courage to explore the peculiar longings he had always felt, about touching men in those tantalizingly forbidden ways, he did it on the sly... Not one of his partners knew his name, he was just the random fellow in the back alley to another random fellow in the back alley.

Deep down, he ached to be more for them. They were all nice young men, many of them very attractive; they had jobs, skills, and whole lives ahead of them if they

weren't caught, and a few of them did actually get away with it. But what if they didn't have to run? What if there was a place where he could find a man, not just to have fast, boredom-induced sex with and never speak to again, but to settle down with and love forever?

Most homosexuals in the SCRUSA were arrested as they were caught in the act; Kyle, on the other hand, was brought in alone after being observed going to known homosexual hangouts. The circumstantial evidence the police interrogators laid before him was so great that he admitted, tearfully, to the accusation of sodomy; in the SCRUSA, an admission before a police interrogator was paramount to a guilty plea in court.

Kyle chewed thoughtfully on a tender piece of roasted pork as he thought of the life he had led... and felt something stinging in the corner of his eye. Was that...? No, not another one! He had to fight it back. Pausing for a moment, taking a deep breath, and just thinking about other things, he kept the tears from falling... just like he had so many times before.

Later that evening, as he lay in the barracks, he found it impossible to sleep. Maybe it was the large amount of caffeine in his veins from the six cups of Cyclone Cola, or maybe it was his wandering mind. What was it that had been bothering him in the back of his mind since he had been arrested?

He thought... Was it really so hard to remember? Was it being free? Was it whether or not this war would last very long?

No... He remembered now. He hadn't seen his family since a week before his arrest. It was doubtful they'd ever speak to him again if they knew his crimes; it was customary to shun a known homosexual among families, even one who was somehow granted clemency or declared innocent. No family could risk the stain of that accusation, no matter how false the accusation proved to be; any rumor or innuendo was as good as fact in American society.

He was alone in this world, and probably would be for the rest of his life. *Maybe being on the business end of a European bomb will be a blessing after all*, he thought grimly and rolled onto his side, trying for all he was worth to get even a moment's rest.

Breakfast the next day was more what the men had become accustomed to; powdered eggs, stale toast, orange drink, and Liberty Sausage (pork cut heavily with beans and other fillers). Liberty Sausage hadn't been quite the same since soy products were banned. It was believed that soy products caused feminization, sexual perversion, and mental illness, and although the exact reasons for these conclusions were never revealed, the FDA's conclusions were accepted. No one questioned that soy beans were an unparalleled evil and other substitutes were soon found.

Once again, everyone ate in silence. The grimness of Camp Caleb had not left them, and it did not help that the men of the Sacred Band were forbidden to associate with the other troops for fear of corrupting them. There could be no mistaking, though they were neither shackled nor confined to cells, the men of the Sacred Band were prisoners.

There were still a few hours between inspection and the next exercise, and Kyle was keen on visiting the one place on base where few restrictions existed: the library.

There were the usual restrictions, of course. He couldn't go to the washroom without an officer present (as with all general use washrooms outside the barracks he was housed in), and he couldn't speak directly to any serviceman who wasn't a staff member of the library; to do so would be to risk an accusation of conspiracy to commit sodomy.

This suited him fine; he had been perhaps the quietest man in his barracks anyway. He was a natural loner, though deep down he wished for the sort of company who could understand him.

He sat down with a copy of “Great Expectations” and began to read it. It was tedious and verbose, but somehow it seemed to have some amazing substance to him. It was a hint of a bygone time, a time when the wasteful excesses of the rich could be lampooned, soft though the criticisms were. This was an older copy, and portions of it had been redacted to make it compliant with the new content standards. Ignoring the large portions of the text marked out with ugly black bars, it was still a very good book.

He was only a few pages into the book, oblivious to his surroundings, when two SPs approached him. “Private Kyle Adams?” one of them said. Kyle jumped to his feet. “Yes sir?” “The general has requested a word with you. This way.”

The SPs walked toward the door and stood on either side of it as Kyle stood up and walked out, then filed out behind him. He wasn't sure what to make of this, and it made him nervous. They hadn't bothered to handcuff him, but why would they send SPs to retrieve him for the General's sake?

“This way,” one of them motioned toward a small propane-powered runabout idling just a few feet away. It was painted Air Force blue and had yellow numbering on the fender; it looked like it had been a heavily cut-down civilian model. He sat in the back of the roofless, doorless car as the SPs got in the front and drove off at a very high speed.

They crossed the base to the sector where enlisted men were forbidden to go without direct orders, to the building where officers had their high-security conference rooms. Kyle was escorted into the building and up a flight of stairs, then down a long, narrow hall to a pair of wooden doors. One of the SPs pushed a button, a soft buzzing sound coming from a speaker above it. The doors opened, and Kyle was pushed inside, the SPs closing the doors behind him.

The room was clean and basic but well-appointed. The conference table, though basic, was real oak, and the chairs were the sort usually seen in corporate offices.

At the end of the table sat General Michaels, who motioned toward a chair at the other end of the table. “Have a seat, soldier,” he said. Kyle did as he was asked. General Michaels took out a cigar- another rare item since tobacco had become scarce- and sniffed it, biting the end off with gusto and lighting it with a small keepsake lighter emblazoned with a gold cross. “You seem to be a bit of a loner. What's your deal?” “My deal, sir?” Kyle asked, a bit puzzled. “That was quite a party we had for you boys, you just kind of sat on your own with your face buried in that barbecue. Now I know it ain't just your being in prison that did it, all those boys were in the same predicament, so I'm asking again, what's your deal?”

Kyle nodded, thinking carefully about what he was about to say. “I... suppose I've always been a bit of a loner, sir. It wasn't anything that happened to me.” General Michaels took a long drag off his cigar and nodded. “You need to mix a bit, one day your life and country will depend on your fellow man so you'd better get to know them, do I make myself clear, soldier?” He said this with a calm but firm voice. Kyle nodded. “Yes sir,” he said. “Another thing,” the general continued, “I see you've got a bit of brains to ya. Not everyone reads Dickens on their time off. What with schools as they are hardly anyone reads at all these days.” Kyle nodded. “I hadn't read much since I was arrested, sir,” he said. “But you do know about Stonewall and the old republic, don't you?”

At that very moment, Kyle's blood froze. It was as if the general had gotten inside his mind... could they really have created mind-reading technology by now? No, that was impossible... but how could he know?

As if to answer, the general gave a hearty laugh and blew a smoke ring. “My boy, don't look so scared! We've known about those books for years. It's in your civilian records too, in fact everything that was in those forbidden books your uncle owned is down on paper and in a federal database. My point is, it's come to my attention that you know a little more than the others and I need to decide what to do with you. It'd be

against my morals to just do away with you, and there's nowhere else in the force to send you. You really give me no choice. Until further notice, I'm posting you as my enlisted liaison and assistant. You're not going far without me right there with you until the day you storm some city in Europe with your rifle blazing, is that clear?"

Kyle nodded. "Yes sir." The general smiled. "If you earn it, I may even promote you. Though I'm gonna promote you to a position where I can still keep my eye on you. Remember, to the rest of the Sovereign Christian Republic you're still just another faggot to burn and not to be trusted at all. Even among queers, though, you're a queer one. I kinda like you, though. Remind me of how I was at your age. Just keep your nose clean and we'll get on just fine. And by Jingo, try to be a bit more sociable! Any questions?"

Kyle scratched his head for a moment. "No sir, I don't think..." "And you ain't gonna think either, not on my watch. You are dismissed, soldier!" Kyle saluted politely, then walked out the door. The two SPs were waiting, and jostled him none too gently back to the small runabout, driving him back to the barracks.

Chapter 6

For the next several weeks, when he wasn't in some advanced training or another, Kyle was tending to General Michaels' every wish. When his antique car broke down, Kyle had to help the mechanics work on it. When there was a tarantula or a scorpion in the general's quarters, Kyle was called in to deal with it. When the general just needed someone to scold because it was a slow day, it was Kyle he scolded for whatever tiny reason he could come up with.

Kyle was annoyed, to say the least. It wasn't easy being at someone's beck and call. He knew anything he did now was being monitored scrupulously and he could only hope that it was good enough.

General Michaels, meanwhile, had no intentions of seriously punishing this young man. He was suspiciously smart, and his prison records had indicated he had a problem with authority, but he seemed to be an average soldier and an obedient liaison.

In truth, though, there was something more to the general's fascination with Kyle. At the time, though, even the general wasn't aware of it. All he knew was that he had a certain fondness for the young man, but had to find some way of making life difficult for him or risk being seen as showing favoritism.

So it followed, day in, day out, that Kyle would spend nearly all of his spare time under the auspices of the general, being hounded constantly and worked nearly to death.