



WARRIOR'S
SCAR

SHAWN
JONES

BOOK ONE OF *THE WARRIOR CHRONICLES*

Warrior's Scar

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by

Shawn Jones

*Out of every one hundred men,
Ten shouldn't even be there,
Eighty are just targets,
Nine are the real men,
And we are lucky to have them,
For they make the battle.
Ah, but the one!
One is a warrior,
And he will bring the others back.*

-Heraclitus

One

New Mexico

The old man stood at a podium facing a dimly lit room. His voice quavered with age as he spoke. “Cortland Addison was recruited right out of high school with perfect scores on his Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. After boot camp, Addison was immediately promoted to sergeant and assigned to the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion.”

Ninety-two year old David Brinner had worked on *Jumprope* since before the project even had a name. More than sixty years earlier, an object had been found and taken to the lab where Brinner was an intern. Ultimately two more of the objects were found, and now he was standing in small theater addressing a group of scientists, civilians, and military leaders, talking about how to use the last of the devices to bend the laws of the universe.

Even now, after working with the medallion-like disks for over six decades, Brinner got excited at the mere mention of them. After studying the disks, he suspected there was at least one more of them on Earth, but the technology to track them didn't exist. For that matter, the science needed to develop the technology didn't exist. Even now, Brinner and his team only knew how to activate and control the disks. How they worked was still a mystery.

A large drop-down screen hung behind Brinner. There were several images of the same man displayed. Standing well over six feet tall, the man was a mountain of muscle, with close-cropped brown hair and a full beard. The cold eyes and hard features on the screen gave Cortland Addison the look of someone who placed very little value on human life. The men and women in the room with military backgrounds recognized the look of a trained killer. His pale green eyes confirmed that assessment in Brinner's opinion. *Those are clearly the eyes of a man who's taken lives, as well as lost them.* The elderly scientist took a sip of water and leaned against the lectern. Brinner continued to describe the man on the screen. His audience followed along as they looked at the corresponding redacted files on the former Marine.

“Within two years he was placed in a special unit, and ultimately ended up handling problematic clandestine operations for various agencies. Like this project, most of what he has done will never be

public. In reality, I don't know most of it. As you can see, most of his accomplishments have been blacked out from the file. But there are things you can know. Five years ago Cortland Addison eliminated the person responsible for the assassination of President Little. Some years later, there was a hostage situation in a Wal-Mart in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Unfortunately for the perpetrators, Mr. Addison was in the building at the same time, as were his wife and daughter. Every one of the attackers was neutralized."

Brinner took another sip of water and turned a page in his file. Like those of the other people in the room, his file had more lines and pages blacked out than remained readable. He took a deep breath and continued his presentation. "Two years after that incident, he was living with his wife and daughter in Northern California when a man tried to detonate a bomb at a farmer's market. That incident left the scar you see in the more recent pictures."

The elderly man looked around the room at the gathered scientists and military leaders before he returned his attention to his notes. "We have Mr. Addison's medical records and a recent psych eval. He fits the target profile for the *Jumprope* project to ninety-six percent." Brinner paused to let that sink in. "That's higher than any other tested subject by a significant margin. He's the closest thing to perfect that we'll find." Looking up, he asked, "Any questions?"

An Ethiopian scientist from Lawrence Livermore spoke, "After what he's already been through, do you really believe he would willingly participate? He has extracted himself from society completely. He's abandoned humanity."

Brinner saw the skepticism on the scientist's face. The men and women in the room glanced at each other with the same unspoken question in their eyes. He answered it quickly before the doubt could spread. "Yes, we are sure he's the right man for this project." Brinner brightened the lights in the room, and stepped from behind the podium.

Brinner could see the fourteen people in the theater seats, each of them with a lap desk and an open file on the proposed subject, Cortland Addison. There were no computers in front of them, and though every person in the room had high-level security clearance, the files would be collected and destroyed after the meeting. Even these copies of Addison's file had been thoroughly scrubbed before the Department of Defense made them available. Behind Brinner's audience, there was a thick glass wall that separated them from an observatory where several armed guards stood. Brinner faced the scientist. "To answer your question, Doctor Kevellan, that's exactly why we believe he'll take the job," he explained. "This man is still a Marine at his core, but he's checked out mentally. As you can

see on page nine of my report, he exceeds the standards set forth by NASA for prolonged isolation. In addition, his ability to make correct decisions actually improves when his stress level increases. Thanks to the Marine Corps, his performance under pressure is literally off the scale.”

Brinner went back around the lectern where his file on the subject lay, and turned to another page. “His psychological evaluation describes this phenomenon as something akin to tunnel vision. When I is in a high-stress situation, his subconscious mind filters out unnecessary information, and processes relevant input with much greater efficiency.”

The next question came from a rear admiral who sat near the podium. “What about his possessions? Men don’t often give up that kind of wealth or property willingly. Regardless of how they feel about society. It goes against instinct, and for that matter, how did a Marine sergeant amass that kind of wealth?”

Brinner looked at the Secretary of the Treasury and asked, “Mr. Secretary, would you mind addressing those questions?”

The Secretary of the Treasury remained seated, but as he turned on his microphone, all eyes turned to him. “I have an executive order from the President authorizing the Treasury to take control of Mr. Addison’s assets. Real estate, as well as all monies and non-tangible property will be placed into a federal trust. If the United States still exists when this is all over, Mr. Addison will be well compensated and his personal wealth will have grown exponentially. Mr. Addison will be in a position to change the world and we can’t afford to betray him. As for his personal wealth, he operated a very lucrative personal security and investigation firm after he *officially* left the military. Director Natsumo can probably cover that more completely.” The Secretary turned off his mic, making it clear that he was finished speaking, regardless of additional questions anyone might have.

A man of Japanese descent with graying temples stood up. “I’d like to say something,” Benjamin Natsumo declared. “I know this man personally. I’ve been acquainted with him for over fifteen years. I was Addison’s handler when he and I both worked for a different agency.”

“What agency did the two of you work for?” the Admiral asked.

“For all intents and purposes, at that time we were associated with Homeland Security. That is all I’ll say, Admiral. The point is, I know him very well. He won’t turn down the offer. Because some time ago, his daughter and wife were both killed in a car accident. His only other family consists of two

brothers he hasn't had contact with in over five years. He has nothing to tie him to our society. No personal relationships, no family to speak of, and no career. For those reasons, and my knowledge of his personality, I am sure he will jump at this. He will see it as an opportunity to finally leave his pain behind, but I can't be the one to ask him."

Natsumo looked back down at a picture of Cort that was in the file, a picture taken before he had the distinguishing scar that marked the left side of his face. Natsumo actually remembered the day the picture was taken during a time when they were still friends. Addison was standing next to The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. He was in dress blues and there was so much salad on one side of his chest that Ben couldn't believe the medals and ribbons didn't weigh down the shoulder. Cort was standing next to the widow of a fallen comrade and holding the dead man's young daughter in his arms. The memory of that day, and the knowledge that he himself had sent the girl's father to his death, caused Ben to have to look away from the others for a moment and steel himself against the brief glimpse of humanity that threatened to creep through the facade he allowed others to see.

"Why not you, Director Natsumo? I was unaware of your personal connection to Mr. Addison, but as you have an established relationship with the subject you would be the perfect man for the job. You are now the Director of Experimental Sciences, and the request falls to you," Doctor Brinner stated. He adjusted his glasses to get a better look at the younger man, and wondered what he *didn't* know about Ben Natsumo.

Natsumo looked at his security team, who stood behind a soundproof, glass wall. He turned back to the gathered officials and said, "Because of our history. If he saw me get out of a vehicle on his land, he'd kill me without hesitation." Looking back at his detail again, he added, "And all the security in this building and on this base couldn't stop him from doing so. Based on my experience with Cortland Addison, I'd recommend the request be made to him by a Caucasian woman, no taller than five-four, middle-aged, short haired, and slight of build. That'll get him to lower his guard long enough for him to really consider the request." After adjusting his tie, Ben looked down at the file in hands and began searching for another page.

Brinner looked to the other side of the room. "Doctor Williams, the Director of Sciences just described you quite well. Do you think you could handle the initial contact?"

Amy Williams was pissed as soon as Brinner faced her. She had worked too many years to get where she was to be used as Neanderthal bait. As the head of research for Military Sciences at NASA, a job

that didn't officially exist, she was finally above the glass ceiling that men had imposed on intelligent women for centuries. Now those same men wanted to pimp her out. "So what you're saying, Director is that Mr. Addison has a thing for his mother, so I have to hold our guinea pig's hands to get him to participate in what is possibly the single most important event in human history?" Williams's words were scathing. "No thanks. If he doesn't want to do it, fuck him." The scowl on her face caused some of the men in the room to look away, uncomfortable at her vulgar choice of words. Brinner held her gaze, unfazed by her attitude. "I said, fuck him, Doctor Brinner, and fuck you too if you think I am going to be your whore."

Natsumo stood and turned to face Williams. "Doctor Williams, how much money does this administration stipend to you annually?" He glared at her, but didn't wait for an answer. "You're going to lose your attitude and you're going to lather Mr. Addison with honey, or you *will* be unemployed *and* unemployable. You've been a pain in my ass since day one of this project and I have twice had to justify keeping you on to the President, who has long since wanted you terminated from both the project and from NASA. Outside of your lab, very little has been asked of you, but you will do this. Am I clear?" Doctor Williams looked back down at her folder, gathering herself. After a moment she looked directly at Natsumo. If he had expected her to show contrition, he was very disappointed. Where he had hoped for capitulation, there was hate. Her words removed any doubt.

"And fuck you too, Natsumo," she spat.

Rather than back down, Natsumo continued with his own verbal rampage. "For the record, Williams, did not offer up your description because you resemble his mother, or any other woman in his life. I described you because based on what I know of Mr. Addison, a middle-aged nerd is probably the least threatening physical presence we could present him with. You also have the knowledge to introduce him to the project sufficiently. And lastly, you are the ideal candidate because Mr. Addison is *your* type. In fact, if our profile of you is accurate, you will probably be wet within two minutes of having met Mr. Addison. The chemical signals *that* will send him are what we are counting on. Your hormones will be off the scale and on a basal level, Addison will pick up on that, determine you are not a threat to him, and actually listen to you instead of plan your demise."

Brinner saw the shock on the faces of the other men and women in the room. Amy Williams had offended many of them, so while some of the older members of the group were repulsed by Natsumo's language, they also took some pleasure at Williams being put in her place by the director.

Natsumo sighed. "He's wired differently than anyone in this room. When he enters a new

environment, he subconsciously goes through three steps: One, he determines what the threats are. He decides the order in which he will kill every person in that environment if necessary. Two, he determines the best method to make each kill. Three, he determines his potential routes of egress. Think Special Ops, and then think Special Ops with standing orders to kill at his own discretion. And mean that. This man has killed nearly two hundred times outside of combat. Only fourteen of those kills were sanctioned. He will never be required to justify the remainder. Nor will he ever answer for them.” Natsumo allowed the others to absorb his revelation. “That’s who we are dealing with right now. To ensure the full effect, Doctor Williams, you will meet with him in three days during your ovulation to help ensure you don’t subconsciously try to sabotage the project. One other thing I can tell you about Cortland Addison is that we only get one shot at this. If you fail, the second best candidate for the project only scored seventy-six percent for our target profile. That percentage means almost certain failure. So don’t fuck this up. You will approach Mr. Addison in the early afternoon, in a light colored sedan with no tint on its windows. Your driver will be your only security, and she too should be ovulating.”

Doctor Williams was so angry and embarrassed she didn’t even notice the looks of concern from the other people in the room. If Natsumo - who they all thought was a mere scientist - knew Williams’ menstrual cycle, then what did he know about the rest of them? Williams did her best to conceal how self-conscious she was by staring at Addison's dossier without really seeing it.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Brinner said, “Doctor Williams is right: This is the single most important project in human history. The sad part is, no one in this room will know for certain if the project is a success before we die.” After a prolonged coughing fit, Brinner added, “Certainly not me.”

Brinner’s own impending death loomed over him. *I’ve lived a good life, and this project is the culmination of everything I’ve ever worked for. It has to succeed. Even if that means whoring out Williams.* Sometimes Brinner imagined he could feel the cancer inside him growing. Since learning it had spread to his brain, he worked longer hours and redoubled his efforts to see the *Jumprope* project through to completion.

“A tachyon reading will be all we get,” Brinner said. “And that will just mean the jump might have worked. Do you all remember when NASA landed the Curiosity rover on Mars? Our odds of success are less by an order of magnitude than NASA faced for that project. The science is right. The time is right. The equipment is right. Earth’s position in relation to the most stable anchor points is right. Even the Sun’s coronal state is optimal. These conditions won’t exist again for over three centuries. In fact, they won’t be this close to perfect again until the experiment is supposed to end. We’ve failed

twice now. One last shot is all we get. So yes, we have planned this right down to the day that two specific women will be ovulating. If we didn't plan for every contingency, all your work was for nothing." Brinner looked at the still-red cheeks of Doctor Williams, but he couldn't find sympathy for the bitter woman.

"Doctor Williams," Natsumo said. "Like it or not, your ova are as important now as your brain has been throughout this endeavor."

"I'm a physicist," Kevellan said as he thumbed through the pages of the dossier again. "So forgive me if this question seems a bit basic, but what makes Cortland Addison so perfect for this project? If it goes well, all he has to do is press a button."

"Doctor Kevellan," Matt Barr said. "I too am a physicist, but I took the time to actually read his dossier. Yes, Mr. Addison just has to press a button. And it may really be that simple. But we have failed twice and we don't know why. Addison has to press that button under circumstances we can barely theorize. We don't know if he'll be in pain, blind, or even conscious. We simply don't know what he's facing. So I am quite pleased that we have gone to such lengths to ensure we have the right subject."

"But Doctor Barr," Kevellan argued, "If we don't know what to expect, how do we know he is perfect for the experiment?"

Ben Natsumo spoke while he twirled a pen in his fingers, trying to keep from showing his annoyance. While he himself was technically a civilian, he hated dealing with *real* civilians. "Doctor, Cortland Addison is genetically wired to succeed. It's not that he doesn't know how to fail, it's that he lacks the *ability* to fail. In fact, this man is pretty much better at everything than any of us will ever be at *anything*. I don't mean that he is hyper-intelligent, or that he can compute π to thirty digits in his head. I mean his situational awareness is unrivaled, and his instincts are always spot on. He knows how to handle any situation. We don't know what he'll face when he climbs into the chamber. It may just be pressing that button, but when he opens the hatch on the other side, he may also be dealing with an apocalypse. He may step out of that chamber right into a war zone."

Matt nodded in agreement. "We don't even know if he *will* step out of it," he added. "So they shrink and picked someone who is most able to deal with any situation effectively. For all we know, when Addison gets to that point, he could be the only person left on the planet."

“Exactly,” Natsumo said. “We want someone who can deal with any imaginable outcome. That’s why we want Cortland Addison.”

Two

Nevada County, California

Cortland Addison's eyes followed the fly at the end of his line. It glided just a few feet over the lake, casting its shadow over the water. Once enough of the line hovered over the calm surface, he brought his fly rod forward one last time, and watched as the line rolled onto the lake's surface. The caddis fly landed softly in the shadow of a rock, and broke the surface forty feet away. Cort looked past the rock to see Sköll running on the far shore of the lake. The wolf ran along the edge of the water before he changed direction and bounded into the woods. As the massive beast disappeared into the tree line, Cort's phone vibrated and rapidly beeped three times, indicating the motion sensors at the main gate had been tripped.

Cort tapped his smartphone twice, then looked up to watch the cream-colored sedan make its way up his long, open driveway. He put down his fishing pole and swiped the screen on the phone to open a video window. By the time the car approached within one hundred yards of the main structure, Cort armed a motion-activated weapons system and sealed the gates of the property. No one else could enter his world.

Almost before he could see them clearly, Cort smelled the perfume of the women on the wind. A tall blonde woman exited the car on the driver's side, clearly military. Her natural curves did little to hide the bulge of a medium-sized, automatic pistol under her open jacket. Cort noticed her hair was actually more strawberry blonde in the sun. The woman was clearly dangerous, but Cort felt more like taking her to bed than deciding how to take her down. Another woman accompanied the blonde. She was short, intelligent-looking, and also appealing to him, though she was the opposite of the Nordic-looking blonde in every way.

"Mr. Addison?" the mousy one asked.

Cort advanced toward their vehicle, his arms loose at his sides. "And you are?" He asked. Both women's eyes dilated slightly as they watched him approach.

The shorter woman introduced herself. "I'm Doctor Amy Williams with NASA and this is my driver, Amber Hansen. Do you have thirty minutes to spare?" Williams was smart enough to recognize her

response to the man in front of them was visceral, but the knowledge did nothing to abate her disgust. her body was betraying her. *Fuck you, Benjamin Natsumo. I hate you for this.*

“Miss Hansen’s your bodyguard, not your driver,” Cort corrected. “Don’t try to mislead me, Doctor. You have five minutes to talk, and then I will decide if you can leave. Your bodyguard stays with the car while you walk with me to the lake. I need to retrieve my fishing pole.” Addison’s eyes shifted between the two women as he gauged their reactions to his commands. He saw fear on Williams’s face. *Or is it doubt?* But Hansen remained cool. She appeared to be weighing her options. *Smart, Miss Hansen. Pointless, but smart.*

The way he said *then I will decide if you can leave* put Amber Hansen on alert. He would give them permission to leave, which meant they didn’t have permission yet. She looked around and realized she stood in the middle of a killing field. There were no trees within one hundred yards of the cabin, and underbrush was cleared from the edge of the field. In fact, there was nothing more than four feet above the ground except a wooden pole barn. It stood halfway between the cabin and where the road emerged from the surrounding trees. *If this goes in the crapper, we’re both going to die today*, Amber thought.

When Addison and Williams walked away, Amber spotted the nine millimeter Beretta tucked in the small of Cort’s back. She briefly considered drawing her own weapon and following the two anyway, but decided against it. *I can’t shoot him unless he threatens the bitch, and by the time he does that, it’ll be too late. We’re powerless here. Maybe I could shoot her and blame him. I doubt anyone would question me about it. Much, anyway.*

Cort stopped and turned around to look directly into Amber’s eyes as if he could read her thoughts. “This is my world, Miss Hansen. The last three times Ben Natsumo sent people here, they were ordered to kill me.” Cort’s eyes went cold. “They all died.” He pointed at what appeared to be a heater of some sort near the cabin. “Sixteen men and women have been incinerated in that boiler. I used their ashes in my garden and compost bins.”

Neither Amber nor Amy Williams could conceal their shock. Doctor Williams shifted away from Cort, putting as much distance between them as she could without being overly rude. Amber’s first instinct was to reach for her gun. She didn’t move to draw it, knowing it would get her killed, so she remained still.

As Amber and Cort stared at each other, Doctor Williams regained her composure enough to comprehend what Addison said. *Natsumo sent people to kill him? Addison must hate him, too. But*

sixteen people killed, and he cremated their bodies? Why in God's name do we want a sociopath working for us? She wanted answers. "Mr. Addison, why would Doctor Natsumo send sixteen people to kill you?"

Cort's eyes didn't leave Amber's as he said, "Ben actually sent seventeen. The third time, I let one of them live to carry back a message for me. Since then, he and I have left one another alone. I suspect since he moved to his new position that he's decided I'm better forgotten."

"I understand." Williams didn't understand. She didn't get it at all, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

Amber's eyes finally relaxed and looked at Williams. To Cort, it was a clear sign of submission. Satisfied, Cort looked away from Amber to Williams. "Doctor Williams, the man you work for is evil. He wasn't always, but he is now. In fact, at one time he was probably my best friend. He was certainly the best civilian friend I had. I don't really know what happened to him, and I don't know why he didn't want to let me leave the agency, but I finally had to remind him that there are people who are beyond his reach. People who can destroy him, no matter where he hides. I'm one such person. I think that's when he decided to get out of that particular business."

"What business was he in?" Williams dared to ask. *Please tell me it is something I can use against him.*

"Assassination," Cort replied, his eyes locked on hers. "Ben Natsumo used me as a weapon, Doctor. A living, breathing gun to kill the enemies of the U.S Constitution; foreign *and* domestic. I've assassinated world leaders and rescued little girls from slavery." Cort didn't flinch when he added, "And I never missed my target."

Amber was inwardly shocked by his confession, but remained passive. She could see Doctor Williams visibly shaking. The look on the older woman's face was a mixture of fear and abject terror. *Well if she pisses herself that will be something to tell everyone about. But him! Who the hell is this guy?* "So you were an assassin for Ben Natsumo?" Amber asked.

"Not always," Cort shrugged. "Sometimes I rescued hostages. I even stole some lab animals once, though I didn't turn them over to Ben. I saved them from the bastards who had them. Mostly, I killed people."

Doctor Williams slowly moved closer to Amber. She was now closer to her guard than she was to Cort. She didn't feel a bit safer though. Cort spoke casually, almost as if he was giving them a shopping list.

He sighed. "At first it was black and white; right and wrong, but over time it became easier to eliminate a problem than to solve it." Cort's eyes grew distant as he remembered coming home from Corsica. *That was really the beginning of the end, he thought. It was my fault, not Ben's. I shouldn't have told Angela about all the death I dealt. She couldn't live with who I was. She might not have turned to alcohol...or another man. Diane's death was my fault too, then, wasn't it? I'm responsible for Diane's death.*

Amber realized what was happening. Something about what he'd confessed to them had also opened old wounds. He didn't twitch, didn't sob, no tears ran down his cheeks, but somewhere deep in his eyes Amber saw a broken soul. *Maybe he blames Natsumo for the death of his wife and daughter. Did the director kill them? No. This man wouldn't let Natsumo live if that was the case. Did guilt finally catch up to Cort? Maybe PTSD? God knows that's to be expected if half of what he said is true.* She studied the scar on his face and thought about what little she knew of him. The folders they were all given back in New Mexico were nearly two inches thick, but so much of the file had been blacked out that she thought the readable portions totaled less than ten pages. *Yes, it's all true. All those black lines in his file are hiding the man in front of me, and hiding his past. But now he's telling us the rest of the story.*

Amber nodded slightly, the only way that she could convey she understood. For just a moment the man's eyes softened, and then the steel was back. Until the end of her days Amber would never forget that brief glimpse into Cort's soul.

Cort looked back at Williams, who still shook like a leaf and said, "Now that we understand each other, Amy, I'm going to retrieve my fishing pole." Turning just his head to Amber, he said, "I've changed my mind. You can stay here with Amber, and maybe discuss what I just told you. When I get back, we can all sit down and talk."

Cort walked away and Williams turned to Amber. "Why is he telling us this? He's admitting to mass murder!"

Amber watched Cort as she answered the question. "Because he knows it scares you, and it doesn't matter."

“How can it not matter?”

“Because he’s either going to accept our offer, or kill us. There isn’t an in-between.” Amber looked into Williams’ eyes. “So you had better sell him on this.”

Cort got the fly rod and trout basket from the lake and set them both on the porch of his small cabin. He then invited the women to sit on the steps before he went inside the cabin. As he came back out with a pitcher of sweet tea and three unmatched glasses, he said, “I would offer you snacks, but I’ve found that eating isn’t conducive to serious conversations, so tea will have to do.” Cort poured the tea over the ice and said, “You’re the first people I’ve spoken to face-to-face in three years.”

Amber took a glass from Cort. “How do you survive up here alone?” she asked. “What do you do about supplies?”

Cort sipped on his tea. “Most food we need, we hunt or grow. But Amazon will deliver just about anything. I’m sure you saw the metal box at the main gate. Packages are delivered there.”

Williams put her tea down, careful to place it on a coaster. Cort Addison seemed like the kind of man who might lose it on something as simple as a water stain. “Director Natsumo and Doctor Brinner stated that they have recent physical and psych eval on you. How could that be if you haven’t been in contact with anyone in three years?” *He said ‘we.’ There’s nothing in his file about another person. Who does he mean? I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a schizo. Like Natsumo. What do we not know about the two of them?*

“I’ve had contact with the world. Just not in person. Ben has tasked satellites to keep tabs on me in the past, so I wouldn’t doubt that he’s hacked private files to get his information.” *Why the fuck am I telling her all of this?*

“Isn’t that a little paranoid?” Williams asked. “The U.S. government doesn’t re-task satellites to check up on ex-Marines, Mr. Addison.”

“Former Marine,” Cort growled. “It’s an important distinction to us. And I doubt you know what our government does to accomplish its goals. You said you work for NASA, right? How long have you been there?”

Williams' eyes narrowed. "Fifteen years. Why?"

"So you were there when the COMSAT-5 launch was lost, right? For software issues?" Cort stopped looking back and forth between the women and regarded Williams again. He could see barely-gray roots as light caught her hair. There was a nick over one eyebrow that made him self-conscious of the scar dissecting his own face. He glanced quickly at Amber and looked back to Williams. *She might've been pretty once. Too innocent though. No, not innocent, just naive about the government.*

Williams thought back to that launch with bitterness. "I worked for four years on that satellite; I was the lead on the optical array." *If Ben Natsumo had something to do with me losing those four years, I am going to cut his balls off.*

"That launch went perfectly, Amy." Cort raised his tea and took a drink before adding, "I needed a single picture that morning, and it couldn't wait. So the guidance was changed at the last minute and the satellite was re-tasked. Four hours later, the spiritual leader of the Jewish Fundamentalist Warrior was dead. Once I was finished dealing with him, the satellite was destroyed because it was in an orbit that could lead to questions we didn't want to answer."

"Son of bitch! I knew something wasn't right about that." Williams slammed down her tea, spilling it on the porch. "Who the fuck are you, Addison?" *God dammit!* "Wait. Why didn't they just send the satellite back into its nominal orbit?"

"Settle down, Doctor Williams." Cort waited until he was sure she was in control of her temper again. "You would know the 'whys' and 'can'ts' of satellite tasking more than I would. I am just the guy the government turned to when they didn't have anyone else to turn to."

"Why are you telling us this?" Amber asked. "You are ostensibly divulging top-secret information to us." For some reason when Cort smiled at her, it alarmed Amber.

When he spoke, his voice was both gentle and final. "Because, I haven't had a real conversation with a beautiful woman since well before my wife died. And it's safe to do so."

Before Williams could register the compliment, she was filled with fear again. "What do you mean, 'safe to do so'?" she asked.

"The way I see it, ladies, one of three things is going on here. The least likely is that you are here to

finish what Ben started years ago. For you, that attempt would end in the boiler on the side of the house. The next possibility would be that the government wants me back. That's not likely because I'm the guy who killed the Speaker of the House seven years ago when I found out he was part of an international sex trafficking ring. He was a good Christian man, of course." Cort smiled again.

Amber wasn't sure what the source of the smile was, but she also wasn't sure she wanted to know. *Damn your eyes, Amber! He's not that handsome. His eyes, though. Damn, his eyes!*

Cort continued his explanation, oblivious of Amber's reaction. "Which brings us to the most likely reason you're here: Ben sent a NASA scientist to offer something to me. That means something needs explaining. He wouldn't risk a civilian unless he knew I was likely to take the offer. Ben also wouldn't come himself because he knows I'd kill him on sight. I won't lie; NASA being involved makes this idea very intriguing. Do we need to kill someone on the International Space Station?" Cort tried to form a humorous smile, but felt silly doing it in front of Amber. "In any case, telling you some of my secrets is harmless, to me anyway." Cort looked between the two women and settled on Amber again. *She really is beautiful. I've been away from real women too long. Pornwebb will only get you so far, Cort.* "So what is it you want from me, Doc?"

"We want to send you to the future." Williams replied. "We want to bend the laws of physics, and you are apparently the best man for the job."

Amber finally witnessed surprise cross Cort's face. In the space of a moment, she saw shock, disbelief, wonder, and finally interest in his eyes. It reminded her of a child finding a present from Santa Claus on Christmas morning. Then the look was gone, and he spoke as if Williams had offered to take him to lunch.

"Okay, Doctor Williams. You have my attention," Cort said, pouring more tea into everyone's glasses.

An hour later Cort only had one issue. "Sköll goes with me." They'd finished the tea, and Cort had led them inside the cabin. He washed the glasses and put them away while they talked.

Amber watched Cort. "So you are taking the offer? May I ask why?" She was irritated with herself because at some point in the previous two hours he'd somehow gone from a target to something else. She was becoming interested in the project, and becoming interested in Cort. *I wish I knew what was underneath all that black ink in his jacket.*

Cort thought about her question. *Maybe the experiment will fail and this misery will finally end.* Cort paused. *No...if I wanted to die, I'd be dead already. I'm not miserable. I'm just broken. Alone but for Sköll.* "Because," he said. "I have nothing holding me here except Sköll. I've experienced the good

and the bad of this world. You are offering me an opportunity to experience another one, and that's intriguing. But if you want me to go, then Sköll goes with me."

"Who is Sköll?" Williams asked impatiently. *There isn't enough room for anyone else in the chamber.*

"Sköll is a wolf. He and I are a package deal." Cort crossed his arms over his chest, making it clear they didn't have a choice.

"Not possible," Williams said. "The chamber is too small." *A pet wolf? What the hell is wrong with this guy?*

Amber looked around the small cabin while the other two argued. The room was very homey, but small. Perhaps five hundred square feet with low ceilings, probably to retain heat. It had indirect natural lighting, and was very rustic. Only three pictures adorned the room. She recognized Cort's late wife and daughter in one. Another was an old black and white of a bride and groom. Probably his parents. The third picture was of Cort himself, holding the largest salmon she'd ever seen. There was a small desk opposite the bathroom, with a tablet and a laptop. Next to that was a bookshelf. Only one title stood out, more for the shape of the book than anything else. *Back To Basics*, by Reader's Digest. Amber remembered seeing it in her own grandfather's house. She recalled it being a book about how to survive back in the 1800s. *If this works, he'll be able to write a book like that about this century.*

Amber thought the rest of the room was what you'd expect from any hunting cabin in the world: a small kitchen area shared a wall with the bathroom. In the middle of the wall next to it was a large stone hearth. A small table and loveseat were on the same wall as the door to the cabin. The largest thing in his home was a bed that Cort clearly shared with his pet based on all the hair. There was no other sign of the wolf. There were two large duffel bags near the door. *A bug out kit. This is where you would bug out to, not from. Where would he run to from here?* Looking at Cort again, she thought, *No. He doesn't run. Except maybe from himself.*

"It wasn't a request. Sköll goes where I go." Cort's voice was unyielding.

"Why is he so important?" Amber asked.

"He's my best friend, and I've had him since he was a pup. He wasn't even weaned when I found him." Cort remembered that day in the Oregon woods. "I rescued him from a trapper a few years ago. Since then, we've saved each other's lives more than a few times."

Amber smiled at the thought of Cort with a pet wolf. "Really? Can I see him?"

"Yes, really," Cort said. "He's too domesticated to survive in the wild, and there isn't anyone I would trust to take care of him. So he goes with me. You can meet him when we leave, Amber."

"It doesn't matter, Mr. Addison," Doctor Williams said. "He can't go. There isn't enough room."

Cort touched a screen on the wall. "You may leave now. You have four minutes to be off the grounds. Then the security system will identify you as a threat. Goodbye."

"Mr. Addison, there simply isn't enough room in the chamber," Williams protested. "I personally

have no problem with you taking your dog, but it won't fit."

"He, not *it*," Cort said. "*He* is a wolf, not a dog. If Sköll won't fit, then neither will I. Good day, ladies."

Williams pulled out her satellite phone and began to dial. She stopped when she realized it had no signal. "May I make a phone call?" she asked.

Touching the screen on the wall again, he said, "Your phone should work now." As Williams began to walk outside, he held his hand up and said, "No. You stay here. In this room."

Cort looked at his own phone while Williams spoke to someone, presumably Director Natsumo, but Amber didn't think he was as disinterested as he appeared.

After a minute of Williams's one sided conversation, he touched his screen and held his phone to his ear. "Sorry to interrupt, Ben, but I don't think you understand. Doctor Williams is clearly afraid of you. I'm not. If Sköll can't go, I won't, and if you sabotage him going, I *will* kill you. You want me working on this project, and now you have an opportunity to finally get rid of me. I'll go, but so does the wolf. As I told her, it is not negotiable. I'll switch the call back to Doctor Williams now."

Williams looked at her phone as Addison put his down. A minute later, she said, "Your wolf can come, but it will mean that some of the equipment we'd planned on sending with you will have to be removed. How long to pack what you need?"

Cort grabbed the large, yellow Reader's Digest book and opened the door. He whistled and put the book into one of the two duffels Amber had noticed earlier. A minute later they heard the wolf bark and it ran toward them. Amber expected a wolf, but not one like this. It was well over a hundred pounds and didn't pause when it saw Cort, but it put itself on alert between him and the two women. Once Addison spoke the wolf immediately relaxed and approached them.

The final humiliation for Doctor Williams was when the wolf first sniffed Amber's crotch, then her own.

"Mr. Addison, you won't be coming back here. I don't think it's wise to leave the property unattended with all that firepower. How would you like it handled?" Amber asked Cort.

"I have a nephew in... No. Never mind."

Amber shifted her head to see him more clearly in the rear view. She thought his eyes looked suddenly distant again and changed the subject. "By the way, sir, what does your, uh, pet's name mean?"

Addison was thankful for the distraction from thinking about how few connections he had left in this world. "It's Norse. Sköll was the wolf who chased the horses that pulled the Sun Chariot across the sky in mythology. It looks like he's finally going to get to live up to his namesake." Looking at Williams, he continued. "Doctor, I'm going to need you to arrange a property attorney for me." *I'm finally leaving this place behind*, he thought.

Cort remembered his late wife Angela and their daughter Diane. *It would be so different if Wal-Mart*

hadn't happened. When Angela saw who I am, what I am, she couldn't handle it. Is that why she started drinking? Is that why Diane is dead too? Cort reached down and scratched Sköll's ruff. *It doesn't matter now. Stop looking behind you, Cort.*

“Don't worry,” Williams said. “We have that covered, Mr. Addison.”

“I worry about everything, Doctor Williams. It's why I abide when those around me do not.”

Three

White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico

Even at 0800, the heat was unbearable. Cort stepped out of the air-conditioned cabin of the helicopter with Sköll. The wolf was none the worse for wear, but he seemed excited to touch solid ground again. Cort turned to help Amber and Doctor Williams down from the helicopter. Then he pulled his duffels from the aircraft, placed them on the ground, and walked directly to Ben Natsumo. The Director stood waiting between two armed guards. Cort reached out his right hand, and Ben raised his own to shake.

Amber saw Ben's eyes bulge as Cort squeezed the smaller man's fingers. Cort's left fist jabbed into Ben's nose, and the Japanese man fell to the ground. Williams screamed and ran behind the helicopter. She imagined she heard bones break, but knew that was impossible as the rotors of the helicopter slowed down. When the security team started to react, Cort fell on top of Ben, pushed a knee into his chest, and grabbed the nine-millimeter behind his own back. He shoved the pistol into his former friend's mouth and looked at the nearest guard, who now had his own weapon pointed at Cort. Amber drew her sidearm as well, but inexplicably pointed at the second guard. *What the hell am I doing?*

"I don't think you're brave enough to pull that trigger, son. But if you do, your boss dies," Cort warned the guard. "Now put the weapon away, or the wolf will kill you."

The guard looked away from Cort and his eyes found the growling animal just a few feet away. He swept his gun toward the new threat.

"Don't do it, Artis!" Amber yelled. "Stand down!"

Cort looked back down at Ben's bleeding face and said, "I owed you that." Then he pulled the pistol from Ben's mouth and stood up. After wiping the weapon dry, he holstered it and turned to the security guard whose gun was still pointed at Sköll.

"Artis, right?" The guard visibly shook at Cort's words. "Well Artis, if you ever draw on me or my wolf again, I'll kill you." Cort walked back to his duffel bags, picked them up, and asked Amber to show him to a bunk. Looking at Natsumo once more, he said, "Ben, your guards are pussies. You'd better bring in a few more."

Once inside the underground building, Amber showed him the space that would be his quarters for his last few days in the 21st Century. It was a spartan room, with a full-size bed and a small dresser. A false window spread artificial daylight over a desk. In one corner there was a shower and toilet combination. Sköll sniffed around the quarters and Cort dropped his bags near the dresser. He turned to Amber, kicked the door closed, and pushed her body up against it. Their lips pressed together before she could protest. The kiss was long and slow. He finally pulled away and said, "You protected Sköll out there. Thank you. You're the only person I trust. Be here after supper."

A few minutes later, Amber followed Cort and the wolf out of the room, wondering why she didn't

slap him for kissing her. *I'm not going to be in his room tonight, that's for damn sure.* She considered what he said about trusting her. *Well, probably not.*

Back on the surface the trio walked across the tarmac and down another tunnel into a vast underground cavern that was being used for the experiment. Built during the Cold War, the base had several underground bomb testing sites arranged around a housing and command bunker. To protect staff from radiation, there were no connecting tunnels between the various underground structures. Once they were in the main cavern Cort met the lead physicists on the project, Doctors Kevellen and Barr. A hastily recruited veterinarian was adding equipment to the transition chamber for Sköll. Cort walked around the cylindrical chamber and questioned its designer, Barr, about every single module and piece of equipment he saw. After an hour of seemingly incessant questions, Cort asked Barr for a toolkit.

“Why do you need a toolkit?” Matt Barr asked. Cort knew Matt had started the walkthrough with a definite prejudice against him. Understandable if the man had heard about Ben Natsumo’s broken hand and nose. But by the time the former Marine was through, Matt seemed genuinely impressed with Cort’s apparent curiosity and willingness to learn. He was surprised when he found himself walking to his workbench to retrieve the tools before Cort could answer.

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“It’s funny how a layman can sometimes figure out the things we can’t,” Matt commented to the people around him. He’d just finished eating after helping Cort remove dozens of parts and pieces of ‘vital equipment’ from the transition chamber. “Having GPS on board was a stupid idea. It’s already nearly obsolete. So was pretty much every other piece of electronic equipment in the chamber other than life support. We kept the communications gear and the astrophysics package. Basically, all that’s left is a radio set, a laptop and a camera. That gives us a lot more room for rations and the wolf. Although Addison does want an army’s worth of weapons, I can’t say that I’ll argue against his reasoning. Medical also modified the EMT kit and software to include veterinary supplies and data for the animal.”

Originally, Barr’s team had thought of everything from GPS to a television receiver. Cort nixed almost all of it. If things worked out right he wouldn’t need any kind of equipment. If they didn’t work out, his needs would range from food to first aid, weapons, and even heavier weaponry. If things went *really* bad, all he would need would be a way to die, and if the experiment failed he would cease to exist at all. In every possible outcome the telemetry tracking equipment was useless. No one in the 21st Century would ever be able to study it. If there was anyone still alive after the successful completion of the experiment, they would already have the data.

Barr was also pleased that Cort didn’t just say, “Get rid of it.” He rolled up his sleeves and helped them. Every step of the way, he asked questions, and he didn’t remove a single bolt without making sure it was safe to do so.

“They’re both animals, Doctor Barr. Just lab rats. Remember that.” Doctor Kevellen muttered to Matt.

Kevellen’s own experience meeting Cort hadn’t gone well. Cort was underneath the transition chamber holding an antenna in place, while Barr and one of his team were inside disconnecting a wiring harness.

~~“Mr. Addison,” Kevelen had said. “If you can drag yourself away from doing someone else’s job, I would like to go over the experiment with you.”~~

Without even looking out from under the cylindrical chamber, Cort had replied, “I created this work for them, Doctor. So if it’s all the same to you, I’ll help them finish it.”

“It is not *all the same* to me, Mr. Addison. All you need to know is how vital pressing a button is. I won’t risk you jeopardizing the experiment because you want to play scientist.”

“Are you almost done, Matt?” Cort asked, ignoring the older man.

“Yeah, Cort. Just a few more seconds. Two more wires.”

“Doctor Barr, you are finished with him right now,” Kevelen said.

Cort didn’t respond to Kevelen and said instead, “Let me know when, Matt.”

“Okay, Cort. All done,” Matt responded.

Cort had slid out from under the chamber and stood up. He then grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from his face and hands before he turned to the ebony-skinned doctor who looked quite irritated. Cort reached out his hand and waited for the physicist to shake it.

“Mr. Addison,” Kevelen scowled at both Cort and Matt before he added, “In the future, do not make me wait. Please come with me.”

Cort dropped his empty hand and looked at Kevelen in his lab coat. He said, “No, sir. Matt and I are going to have some lunch. I’ve kept him working way past his belly’s endurance. I could hear it growling outside the chamber.”

“That’s impossible!” Kevelen said.

Looking at Matt, Cort asked, “You hungry?”

Matt enjoyed the memory. He couldn’t talk down to Kevelen the way Cort did. Matt could answer a direct question though. “I’m famished,” he’d said.

“Fine. Let’s go eat.” Turning back to Kevelen, Cort said, “I’m not sure you and I are going to get along. It’s a good thing it will only be for a few days. I guess teaching me how important pressing a button is will have to wait, Doc. Talk to you later.”

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That afternoon, Cort met with the property attorney and made arrangements to transfer almost all of his wealth and property to Amber Hansen. The only thing he wasn’t leaving her was two pounds of pure gold and five-hundred carats of various gemstones that he kept in his duffels. He’d decided to give her everything else that morning when he saw her protect Sköll. Once he was sure the attorney was working for him and not the government, Cort asked the man to make sure the transfer of proper

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