

Chapter 22



Manny.

Rolling Fuck was as bright, shiny and chaotic as it had been when he'd left. But Manny could see a real change among the citizens themselves. Gone were the lounging crowds of half-naked people. Instead of the perpetual party, a war camp spread out around the great superstructure of the city.

Hundreds of men and women were busy donning armor, applying war paint and checking over stacks of weaponry. Manny saw crates of guided mortars, piles of rocket launchers, boxes of high-velocity ammunition and enough firearms to equip every citizen a dozen times over. There was no discernible Rolling Fuck 'uniform' that Manny could see. Some of the city's warriors wore powered body armor, painted in garish colors and bedecked with various quotations. 'Fuck yer day' seemed particularly popular. Many of them wore pieces of pop-culture costumery mixed in with their gear. Manny recognized Darth Vader's helmet, Hellboy's Red Right Hand, and a surprisingly number of people with Mickey Mouse's face spraypainted on their chest armor.

An equal number of Fuckians wore no armor at all. Some of them were dressed in their normal flowing lounge garments. The weapons they wore were the only signs that they had plans beyond debauchery. Others were naked, or mostly so. He saw one man wearing the helmet of a Greek Hoplite and carrying two viking axes on his back. He saw a woman with a Dragunov rifle on her back, an old German Stahlhelm on her head and Ottoman mirror armor on her chest. She waved at at them, excited. It took Manny a second to recognize Topaz's face under the helmet.

"They're here! They're-"

She stopped. Tule had stopped too. She cast her face down. Manny could see the shimmer of tears on her cheeks. A crowd gathered around them. In a few seconds, they were encircled by dozens of heavily armed post-humans in a dizzying array of war costumes. Skullfucker Mike pushed his way to the front and ran up to embrace Tule. Manny was surprised when she started to sob. The big man held her tight but looked to Roland.

"What happened?"

Roland gave him a look that said, 'You know damn well what happened'. But then he spoke anyway.

"Your friend didn't make it."

Skullfucker Mike's jaw went tight. His eyes bulged and he held onto Tule a little tighter. Manny thought back to the night they'd spent in Brainbreakers, and the things he'd said about Marigold. Manny hadn't really known the woman at all, but he could tell Mike had cared deeply for her. He looked around at the crowd closing in on them, the dozens of half-human god-monsters with helpless rage carved onto their faces.

"What. Happened." Mike demanded.

Roland opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and ran a hand over his bald head. He opened his mouth again, managed to squeeze out an "I..." before he slumped his shoulders and hung his head.

"I wasn't fast enough," he said, finally. "They had better gear, newer suits than I'd expected."

Skullfucker Mike stared at him. Behind him, Topaz slid down to the ground and buried her head in her knees. Murmurs swept the crowd. And then Sasha spoke up.

"Your friend saved my life."

Mike looked over and seemed to notice her for the first time.

"And who are you?" His voice was not unfriendly. It wasn't exactly warm, either.

"My name is Sasha," she said, her voice clearly on the edge of a sob. She looked from Mike, to Tule, to Topaz, to the crowd, and then back to Manny. He saw panic in her eyes, barely held in check by a cage of steely resolve.

"I...made a mistake. I left my home for the Kingdom. I thought it was the right thing to do. I met Marigold while I was there and she helped me see how wrong I'd been." She pointed to Roland. "I tried to help him free your people. We all tried. But they were ready for us. They shot him," she gestured to Roland, "...they shot him a lot. They had us all dead to rights. And then Marigold, I don't know how, but she got a gun. She shot two of them. And then they shot her. She died saving us."

The silence that followed was louder than any artillery barrage Manny had ever sat through. Finally, Skullfucker Mike nodded at her. There were tears in his eyes and, Manny soon realized, tears on every face in the crowd. Some people fell to their knees. Others embraced and held their friends. One voice, hoarse and heavy with pain, howled out in anguish. It was met by another voice, and then another and then another as Fuckian after Fuckian tilted their head back and roared their grief out to the empty blue of the Texas sky.

Rolling Fuck preferred to mourn through activity. The wailing and gnashing of teeth over Marigold didn't stop the city's medics from taking Rick and Tule to whatever building served as their equivalent of a clinic. Topaz stayed behind with the gathering crowd of mourners while Skullfucker Mike gathered up Manny, Sasha and Roland.

"There'll be time to process later," he'd said as much to himself as to them. "There's a war council soon, and they'll be wanting to debrief you."

"Fine," Roland said, "but I'm stopping at the bar first. I need some opium and some goddamn tequila."

Manny expected Skullfucker Mike to be angered by that, given the circumstances. But the other chromed man just nodded and said, "I could use a drink or nine myself."

They headed for the lift underneath the Main Roller. Manny started to prepare himself for the meeting with this 'war council', whatever that term meant in a place like this. *Whatever happens, it's bound to be weird.* They reached the lift. Skullfucker Mike opened the door and gestured for everyone to enter.

And so, less than an hour after arriving back in the City of Wheels, Manny, Sasha and Roland found themselves seated around the same redwood table where they'd first met Nana Yazzie and Donald Farris. The room was more crowded this time around, with two new people he didn't recognize. One was a shirtless man with writhing snake tattoos across his chest and a pair of chaps that did nothing at all to cover up his junk. It didn't help that the man's legs were spread as wide as possible. He seemed to be deliberately showing off.

Manny looked away and found himself staring at a very tall, very muscular young-seeming woman with a mohawk made from thick chrome spikes. She had light brown skin, and her cheeks were covered in several long, thick, diagonal scars. The woman's eyes had no pupils. They looked grey at first, until Manny realized that they were actually just filled with static. When Manny finally pulled his gaze away from her he was met with the biggest surprise of the day.

Deshawn Clark was seated two chairs down from Nana Yazzie.

"Major Clark!"

"Manny," the Major's lips cracked open into a wide-mouthed grin. The left side of his face was still covered in hemostatic gauze, and the edges of the skin around the gauze looked black and burnt. His right hand was a smooth, angry pink color, a sure sign it had been severed and regrown in the recent past. Major Clark was bloodied, but unbowed.

"It's damn good to see you, Manny. I can't tell you how proud I was to hear you'd volunteered for this mission."

"Mr. Peron..." Manny started to say, but Major Clark put up his hand.

"I know," he said.

Donald Farris 'ahem'd', which Manny took as a gentle reminder that now was not the time for personal business. The old Brit gestured first to the man with the writhing snake tattoos.

"This is Jim Shannon," he said, "he heads up a small mercenary outfit."

"I'm the guy who roped Roland into helping," Jim said with a wink.

"And this cheery lass," Donald pointed to the woman with the chromehawk, "is Kishori. She's been the city's elected War Leader for the last three years."

"And who might this young lady be?" Nana Yazzie asked, nodding at Sasha. The old woman stood and stepped forward to greet Sasha with a hug. Sasha tensed up. She looked scared to return the embrace. So Nana Yazzie backed off and favored the girl with a warm smile.

"I'm sorry, child. I didn't mean to pressure you. I'm just happy you're here with us."

Sasha relaxed at that, but she still didn't step forward.

"Her name's Sasha," said Roland, "she used to be with the Kingdom. Now she's not." He paused a second, considered his words and added, "She beat one of them to death with a helmet."

"Oh my. Oh dear..." Nana Yazzie tsked and shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Sasha. That must have been a terrible experience for you."

"She enjoyed it!" Jim said with a harsh bark of a laugh. "I'm sure Roland smells it too. Isn't that right, hon? You loved killing whoever-the-fuck you killed, and you feel shitty about that. Well let me s-"

"You'll stop right now or you'll leave this room."

Nana Yazzie's voice was firm, but devoid of any anger or heat. To Manny's shock, Jim stopped. The post-human nodded and said, "I apologize, Sasha. That was a real dick move." And then he lowered his eyes, just a little, in contrition.

Nana Yazzie offered Sasha a seat and then busied herself in the corner making Sasha a cup of tea. Once that was done, and they were all settled in, Nana sat back down and looked to Manny.

"What happened?" is all she asked.

Manny started talking. He told her, and by extension the whole table, everything that had happened since he and Roland left Rolling Fuck. He told them about their trouble with the checkpoints on the way into town. He walked them through the intake process, his and Roland's few days as Martyrs-in-training and what he'd seen in the few sections of Plano he'd been allowed to haunt during his time there. The woman with the chromehawk was particularly interested in what he and Roland had to say about the Kingdom's preferred assault tactics.

“They’re not gonna be kicking in doors and fighting house-to-house,” Roland explained, “they’ll just start shelling at the first sign of resistance. They don’t care about civilian casualties.”

When Manny explained what the Kingdom had been doing at the old Tesla factory, almost everyone looked horrified. Donald Farris spat at the ground. Most of the others cursed, or at least shook their heads. Nana Yazziee teared up. Jim, though, seemed almost enthusiastic about the revelation.

“Fascinating,” he muttered just loud enough for Manny to hear.

Once everyone was caught up, the table fired off a few questions at him and more towards Roland. They seemed mostly curious as to what they’d been able to glean about the number of recruits in the Heavenly Kingdom. Manny didn’t have much useful there. So he shut up, leaned back and let Roland give the answers. An awkward silence descended on the table after a few minutes.

“Well,” Donald Farris said, finally, “I suppose we were fools to hope for much more than what you got. As it stands we’re left grappling to try and account for the sheer number of men the Kingdom has deployed to assault Austin.”

“Twenty thousand martyrs,” Jim spoke up, “Give or take a grand.”

Manny’s blood went cold. The SDF, at its height, hadn’t been more than six thousand fighters. And those were spread out across the serried battlegrounds of North Texas. The whole Free City of Austin didn’t have more than five thousand people in its full-time Defense Corps. Twenty thousand men was...

“Impossible,” he said. “That’s fucking impossible.”

“I’d be inclined to agree with you, kid,” said Jim, “if my own men hadn’t double-confirmed the count for us. The Kingdom has already marshalled half of that force on the outskirts of DFW, near Lancaster. They’ll be in Waco tomorrow if no one stops them. Hell, they could be pounding Austin with artillery by dark.”

Donald Farris nodded. “Mr. Shannon here,” he gestured to Jim, “...has agreed to lend a hand, along with several dozen of his mercenaries. Add that to the warriors of Rolling Fuck, and we’ve got seven-hundredish post-humans. It’s large enough force to hold Waco. And badly bloody their nose.”

“But,” Kishori spoke for the first time. She had a deep, gravelly voice that sounded like she’d been eating cigarettes for the last ten years. “Rolling Fuck is not in the business of volunteering for our own Vietnams. My people aren’t signing up for a war.”

“I can guarantee our presence on the battlefield for up to forty-eight hours, enough time for vengeance.” She continued, “After that, you’re herding cats.”

“Is that a problem?” Manny asked. “I mean, I saw Roland lay waste to half a city. Six-hundred of him...”

“There’s only one of him,” Kishori said. Jim nodded in agreement and fixed Manny with his uncomfortable grey eyes.

“See kid,” he said, “me or any one of Rolling Fuck’s warriors is good for a few dozen normal troops in a straight fight. More if we’re talking half-trained partisans. But nobody’s like Roland.”

Manny looked over to Roland. The big man seemed distinctly uncomfortable with all the attention. He stared down at his hands, which seemed to be occupied with tearing up a paper drink coaster.

“The Martyrs have a lot of half-trained partisans, but they’ve also got tanks, artillery, suits- the resources of a nation state. Or close enough. Rolling Fuck can hold that off for a while, but without Roland the best they can do is delay the inevitable.”

“Now WITH Roland,” Jim continued, “this is a two-hour fight, tops. We set up our troops in some little chunk of the city and start dropping mortars and rockets on their vanguard. They pull up, encircle us and start deploying their artillery to bomb us to Kingdom Come. Then, when they’re good and packed together, we drop Roland on their asses.”

Kishori nodded. “Yes,” she said, “he’ll hit them and disrupt their whole order of battle while our cavalry rolls around to their flanks and charges. That should be enough to make them panic. Then we chase them down until they lose cohesion.”

Roland’s head stayed down. He didn’t speak. Manny looked from him, to Jim, to Nana Yazzie and Donald Farris.

“So what’s the problem?” Manny asked. “If Roland and Rolling Fuck are all-in, this should be a walk in the park.”

“Roland,” Nana Yazzie said, “prefers not to fight.”

“But I just saw him...”

“You just saw me break a long streak of not killing people.” Roland’s voice sounded odd, hollow and dry and utterly without any of the mirth or mischief Manny had come to expect from the chromed man.

“I did that to get my memories back, Manny,” he shrugged. “And I did it for you, because you’re my buddy. But I got no stake in Austin.”

“But you know what the Heavenly Kingdom will do if they take the city!” Manny protested. “You’ve seen what they did to Plano. They’ll do that to millions of decent people if they can. You have the power to stop that. You’re telling me you won’t?”

Roland met his eyes and just said, “Yes.”

“You son of a bitch,” Manny felt the anger well up inside him. It merged with his grief over Major Peron’s death, Oscar’s death, and his rage at the Heavenly Kingdom, the Martyrs and every other group of assholes who’d helped turn his young life into a parade of nightmares.

“You absolute son of a bitch. You fucking coward!”

Manny didn’t think. Couldn’t think. He pulled back his fist and swung as hard as he could for Roland’s face. The chromed man didn’t move, didn’t even blink. Manny hit him right on the nose. He was softer than Manny would have guessed. It didn’t feel any different from punching a normal human. Manny swung again and again, until he felt something crack in his knuckles. He cried out from the pain and pulled back to nurse his wounded hand.

For a few seconds Manny forgot about the rest of the room. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts dissolve into an ocean of physical pain. The agony of his broken hand was almost soothing. It was better than thinking about Mr. Peron. It was better than thinking about Alejandro, or Oscar. It was better than thinking about his soon-to-be-shattered home.

Manny felt a hand on his shoulder. The sensation pulled him out of his spiralling thoughts. He looked up and saw Nana Yazzie. She smiled her sad smile and said, “Manny, everyone here understands your pain.”

“Not me,” said Jim, “I’ve never been a big fan of Austin. Too damn-”

Roland threw his empty pint glass at the other post-human’s face. It shattered on impact, embedding shards deep into Jim’s cheeks and forehead. His head snapped back, and he blinked in shock a few times.

“Sorry,” he said, “I deserved that.”

“And I deserved that,” Roland said to Manny. “No hard feelings. I get why you’re pissed. But kid, you’ve got to understand something. Austin’s home to you. To me it’s just another city, held by just another side. Half my remaining memories are of one cause or another asking me to go murder in their name. I’m fuckin’ done with it.”

Manny looked to Major Clark. The SDF officer’s eyes were lit by a familiar cold fire. He spoke in a tone of barely controlled anger.

“That is your right, of course. You can choose to leave, just as I will choose to fight and die. I wonder, what will Manny choose?”

Manny hadn’t really settled on that himself. Before he could stumble through his response, Sasha spoke.

“I’ll fight,” she said. “I don’t know much about guns. But I’ll do my best.”

Roland slumped back in his chair and tossed his arms up in a dramatic show of frustration.

“Et tu, Jesus Girl?”

"I'll fight," Manny said to Major Clark, doing his best to talk over Roland, "I'll choose to fight too."

"This isn't going to work, you know." Roland said. "I'm not going to be shamed into fighting again. It's just not going to fucking happen."

Jim leaned in. He fixed Roland with a look that seemed almost hungry.

"I think it will happen. I think the peculiar arc of your moral compass won't let you leave these kids to die." He seemed surprised by the revelation. "Huh! Fascinating."

"Enough of that," Donald Farris sounded angry. "I won't stand to see this man badgered and pressured into fighting against his will. We might as well dissolve the council for now and reconvene without Roland."

"Good!" Roland stood up and stomped over to the exit. "If that's all you people need from me, I'm going to get good and pissed and start my walk back to Arizona." He flipped his middle finger out at the room and slammed the door behind him as he left.

All eyes turned to Manny.

"I should...probably go talk to him."

"Don't do anything you're not comfortable doing, Emmanuel." Donald said.

"Fuck that," Jim said, "The bastard is on the ropes. Shame him! Shame him good."

As he headed for the exit Manny looked to Major Clark. The old soldier's one good eye was narrow and focused.

"Manny," he said, "if he didn't want to talk he wouldn't have gone up to the bar. He'd have just left. There's no honor lost in another conversation. Another try."

Roland was three beers in by the time Manny reached him. And knowing Rolling Fuck that could mean he'd already ingested enough acid to kill a large octopus. The chromed mercenary was already wavering in his seat by the time Manny pulled up a seat.

"Hey," Manny said.

"Heeeeeey buddy," Roland replied in a voice that was just... super stoned. "Sorry about getting angry back there." The post-human spun his empty pint-glass around on the bar table. It was a strange sight to see. Manny had gotten so used to seeing Roland as something akin to a Greek God. He certainly wasn't omniscient, or omnipotent, but he was unspeakably powerful and just as irresponsible to leave out around humans.

And yet here he was, fiddling with an empty pint glass like a nervous College freshman standing at the back wall of some house party. Manny felt a surge of sympathy.

"It's O.K., man. I actually think I get it," he said. "Like, I've had plenty of chances to join either the SDF or the Austin Defense Forces. I never did. Maybe some of that's because I'm scared. Hell, up until like...a few days ago, my plan was to get the fuck off this continent as soon as I could afford it."

Manny paused and bit his lip. It was an instinctive gesture, his gut's reaction to a sudden burst of self-awareness. Manny hadn't thought about any of this before.

"I dunno," he said. "This shit's been going on basically all my life. I can't remember a time when I wasn't scared of something like this happening. I didn't understand any of it as a kid. But I can remember being seven or eight years old and just being so angry at the soldiers. Even our soldiers. I thought, if all you assholes would just refuse to be led into battle, none of this could happen."

"But you know that's not how it works, right?" Roland asked, as he turned away from Manny and waved at the bartender.

"We love this war shit. At least some of us do, those of us who are- oh!" The bartender arrived. Roland ordered "a mai-tai mixed with a margarita and one of those, whaddya goddamn call 'em, oh yeah a fuckin' MO-HI-TO."

"Roland," Manny's voice was gentle but firm, "How many beers did you drink before I got here?"

"Not beers," Roland said in a casual voice, "Mushroom rum. Sweet, but not bad." He licked his lips while he watched the bartender work through the Herculean task of crafting his requested beverage.

"Roland." Manny said. And the chromed man turned back to him.

"Ah, sorry. It's been too long a stretch of sober for me. I got excited. What the fuck was I saying?"

"That war is fun."

"Oh, yeah. As long as you don't think *you'll* die. That's why all throughout history you had so many generals and politicians kickin' off conflicts. Because they felt safe, and when you're pretty sure you'll live war is an absolute hoot. That's the problem with me and fighting."

"The problem is you like it too much?"

Roland grabbed his hand. The chromed man moved so fast Manny didn't even see the motion blur. Roland's hand was just wrapped around his wrist, immovable. He squeezed, hard enough that it hurt. Roland's eyes bulged out and stared into Manny with a manic intensity that was frightening.

"I. Fuckin'. Love. It. It's like sex on heroin and bungee jumping and getting rammed in the ass and that first shot of liquor you sneak when you're fourteen, all at once and mixed with the best actual battle drugs the most bloated military budget in history could buy."

He loosened his grip and turned half away from Manny.

"That's why I shouldn't do it. Because I'll get carried away, like I got carried away in Dallas. Maybe this time I won't be able to stop when it's time to stop."

Manny kept his eyes on Roland's. The big man turned a little further to the left, but he didn't look away.

"How do you know that your intervention won't make things better?" Manny asked. "Maybe if we can kill enough of the Martyrs their power will be broken forever. Maybe your intervention will be the first step towards making this a more liveable part of the globe."

Roland laughed. It started as a low chuckle that then cascaded into a series of rolling, rib-cracking howls. Manny didn't get the joke and couldn't find any humor in his words. So he sat tight until Roland's mirth subsided and the chromed man had recovered enough to explain himself.

"Sorry, sorry," he said between chuckles, "It's just- ah shit, kid, you're too young to know how funny that is." Roland straightened up and wiped a tear from his eye. "See, you're talking about me the exact same way people talked about the U.S. Military back when I was a kid."

The bartender came by and sat down Roland's drink, an enormous jug filled with a multi-hued mix of alcoholic beverages. The post-human took a deep pull from his maitaigarito. Manny took the chance to ask a question.

"I thought you didn't remember anything further back than a few years ago?"

"I don't remember anything clearly," Roland said. "But I do remember bits and pieces. And I remember being a young man and watching the news break in an off-base bar. Some election had gone bad in Bolivia. The President announced he was sending in soldiers to help keep the peace."

"Did it work?" Manny asked.

"I dunno, kid. What'd your school teach you about Bolivia?"

"That there was a genocide in- oh." Manny said as Roland's point sunk in. "Right."

"Ayep," Roland grunted and took another, deeper gulp from his ridiculous beverage.

They were quiet for a while. Manny took the opportunity to take a long look at Roland. His face held only a few lines around his eyes and lips. And yet he still looked old, positively ancient. There appeared to be a tremendous weight to the man's eyes, accentuated by the deep wrinkles underneath them. It looked as if the chromed man's face was sagging underneath the weight of what he had seen.

“Roland,” Manny asked, “do you have any idea where you came from?”

“I think I was born around Mississippi, b-”

“No,” Manny interrupted, “Not like, where you were born. But how you became what you are today. You said you’ve been disconnected from the Internet for the last ten years. I’ve got to guess your implants are even older than that. But the way everyone here talks about you you’re still King Shit.”

“Oh,” Roland said. “Yeah. That. I got no real idea what happened there. I know I was in the Army. I’m pretty sure that’s when the tinkering started.”

“Sure,” said Manny, “But didn’t a lot of the Road People start as ex-special forces who went rogue? Why are you special?”

“I got no clear answer to that question, buddy.” He smiled as if he’d just remembered something good. “I guess I’ve got that surgery coming up. Once I get my memories back, I’ll let you know what I find out.”

Manny laughed too, but his was cold and bitter. “Sure. I’ll probably be in a refugee camp at that point. Or dead.”

“Damn kid,” Roland said.

“Yeah,” Manny said, “I’m really not trying to manipulate you here. It’s just-”

“No, I get it,” Roland waved him off. “It’s fair. You’ve got every right to be pissed. I just can’t...” He trailed off. Manny put a hand on Roland’s shoulder. He didn’t understand how the post-human felt; how could he? Manny couldn’t even conceive of having that kind of power. But he could see why it was a difficult choice.

There was a part of Manny, a dark manipulative chunk of his soul, that knew he was on his way to changing Roland’s mind. This was essentially the same strategy he used on the job. You built empathy with people through a combination of shared experiences and regular engagement. That empathy paid dividends when you needed some Lieutenant’s approval to cross through a checkpoint. It would pay dividends here if he was careful and consistent.

That’s fucked up man, he thought. You’re manipulating your friend into killing a bunch of people.

“You know what,” Manny said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

Roland drained the rest of his mug, belched and looked over at Manny. He looked unsteady, half-conscious. The chromed man put his left hand over Manny’s hand while it rested on his shoulder. He fixed Manny with his half-focused eyes and nodded.

“Fuck it,” Roland said, “I’ll fuckin’ help you. I’d be a dick if I didn’t.”

“Thank you,” Manny said with a nod. “I know-”

“Don’t say anything else, kid. I really don’t want to think about what I just promised to do.”

Manny found Sasha sitting around a firepit, outside the city proper, deep in conversation with Donald Farris. She sat on the ground, legs splayed out wide with her butt in the grass. Donald sat in a folding chair. It wasn’t cold outside, precisely, but it had cooled off a great deal from the heat of the day. The air held just the barest hint of winter. It was shaping up to be one of those odd September days where Texas seemed on the verge of an actual seasonal shift.

One look at Sasha’s face told him she was at least as unsettled as Roland. He didn’t want to crowd her so he squatted down on the other side of Donald.

“Emmanuel,” the old man’s voice was as smooth and rich as Manny remembered from the narration of his documentary. “It’s good to see you. Sasha’s been telling me her story. She actually just turned to the subject of You.”

“Yeah?” Manny asked.

“Yes, she was telling me how she met you and Marigold, and how you both helped her find her way free of the Kingdom.”

“Oh,” he said, and looked to Sasha. “I never really met Marigold. I didn’t realize you knew her well.”

Sasha shook her head. “I only knew her a little while. I was just supposed to be administering tests to her. But I couldn’t stop her from talking and...she made sense. She made more sense than what was going on out in the Kingdom every day.”

Sasha stared down into the fading embers of the fire.

“I feel stupid for ever believing in that place.”

“And what do you believe in now?” Donald asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It seems arrogant to decide that God doesn’t exist just because I let myself get taken in by a cult.”

“Mmm,” the old man nodded. “The good news is, you’re young. You’ve got plenty of time to figure things out again.” His cheeks turned up into a smile and his face blossomed with wrinkles.

“Now,” he looked up at Manny, “what have you been up to, my dear boy?”

“Talking to Roland,” Manny said, “he agreed to help, by the way. He’s going to fight.”

Donald Farris’s smile turned into a frown. Manny hadn’t been expecting that.

'How did you do it?' He asked in a somber, grave voice.

"We just talked for a while," Manny said, "He explained why he didn't want to fight. It sounded very reasonable..." Manny paused, and then made the choice to lie just a little. "I wasn't trying to change his mind. I didn't ask him to help." That last part was true, at least. "I do feel bad, though. I'm sure he changed his mind because of me."

"Is it really on you if he chooses to fight?" Sasha asked. "I killed two men. Both of those deaths are on me. But you didn't order Roland to do anything."

"No," Donald Farris agreed, "But I doubt Roland would've made the decision to intervene if Manny hadn't pressed."

"That's probably true," Manny admitted.

Donald looked from Manny to Sasha.

"There's a war ritual, peculiar to the men and women and whatever of this community. I think you'd benefit from seeing it."

"A ritual?" Sasha asked.

"Not a religious one, I assure you. But yes. They call it their war ritual." He extended a hand out to the field around Rolling Fuck. Manny looked out at it for the first time since coming out here and realized that people seemed to be packing up.

"Right now," Donald said, "The citizens are packing up their tents and their RVs and preparing the city for departure. It's moving out with their army. They'll drive that thing," He jerked a thumb in the direction of the City of Wheels, "right up to the damn battlefield. It'll be behind them the whole time they're fighting. I think they stole the idea from the ancient Celts."

"Anyway," he said. "Once the city is in position, they'll open up these little boxes that look quite a lot like bee hives and they'll let out a swarm of about a thousand little drones. Those're mostly just facial-recognition cameras attached to wings and a wee engine. They'll record everything and send data on the faces of every enemy fighter to a central computer in the city."

"What good does that do?" Manny asked.

"It gives us a chance to identify those men, or women, so we can scrape their social media profiles and display pictures and videos from their lives, once they die. The whole city, everyone who isn't fighting, turns out to watch that."

"That sounds fucking terrible," Manny said. "What do we gain from watching the home movies of dead men?"

"A memorial."

Manny didn't understand, but he could see that Donald Farris was revving himself up for an involved explanation. He let the old man talk.

"I was a small child when my country invaded Iraq, along with the United States and a few other nations. The war was news, yes. But that's all it was. Even our own soldiers were more numbers than real people. I'd hear that two Royal Marines had died in a roadside bombing, and it meant less to me than when my neighbor broke his leg slipping down the stairs."

"War isn't like that for us," Manny said, "I don't know anyone in Austin who hasn't lost a friend, or family, to the fighting. It affects us all."

"So it does, my boy. So it does. And if any of our warriors die today, you can bet it'll effect everyone in this social experiment we call a city. But you didn't let me finish. The thing that was truly toxic about my childhood knowledge of war, is that it erased the other side. Our boys didn't do bodycounts. So there were seldom reports on how many civilians we killed, how many enemy fighters died. That information was out there, but you had to look hard. Most people never did."

Donald Farris shrugged, and then winced from the motion.

"It's easy to get people to care about their own soldiers. But if you want to stop wars, or at least make them less common, you've got to get people to give a shit about the soldiers on the other side. That, my young friend, is where your people are even worse than my own. You're close enough to the war to not just feel indifferent about these Martyrs marching off to die. You actively want them to die. That's understandable. But it's also poisonous. When you dehumanize others, you become less human yourself."

Manny nodded, not sure of what to say.

"In my youth," Donald Farris continued, "the country that occupied this continent was the most powerful nation on earth. They held the keys to the deadliest military machine ever constructed. It was easy to get Americans to support involvement in a thousand little conflicts, because each only required a small fraction of the nation's military power. It only risked a few American lives. But millions of people around the world died. Women and children and old men and dumb, young boys from Yemen to Turkey to Guatemala. To justify those murders Americans had to make those people less than human. And once they'd done that, it wasn't such a great jump to do it to their neighbors."

He stared up at the setting sun, and Manny saw tears in his eyes.

"What you're going to see tomorrow is the best attempt I've seen, so far, to bridge the empathy gap between a people and their foes."