**RYAN**

Ryan stepped in a pile of shit, the third one today. The stench reached his nostrils, and puke raced up his throat. He managed to swallow it again. He couldn’t understand who would be leaving excrements all over the construction site, but then he remembered he was in Roverville. Here, piles of shit were part of the norm. No wonder they called it the “rectal end of the universe.”  
 “I’ll show you!”   
 Ryan looked up. He saw a welder and a truck driver engaged in a fight. He hadn’t caught how it started, but that didn’t matter, as it had already turned physical. The welder punched the truck driver straight in the face, sending him crashing into the hard, solid ground with a loud thud that drew everyone’s attention. Ryan marched to intervene, but after just a few steps, Brother Tyrone had beaten him to the punch. He had gotten between the fighters before they could do any real harm. Red with anger, he had managed to turn both of them into frightened children with his appearance alone. Tyrone had that effect. He was the leader of the worksite, and he ran his operation with great authority.

For some reason, the fight made Ryan think back to the Great Liberation. He was just a boy when that seed was sown. He remembered watching a man dressed in a brown suit and navy blue tie on TV, speaking angrily and with deep passion about politics. Ryan didn’t understand what the man was saying at the time, but he remembered him using words like “legislature”, “liberty” and a phrase he found to be particularly funny, “the ignorance of the sheep.” Ryan must have been a full fifteen years old before he realized that the man wasn’t really talking about sheep. Once in language class, the teacher had been talking about metaphors, something Ryan quite couldn’t grasp the meaning of, so he had asked for an example to help him understand it, and the teacher had used that term. She said the man used the term “sheep” to describe people who blindly did what they were told. To that man, this was everyone who subscribed to the idea of laws as a necessity in society.  
 Ryan hadn’t heard much after that. He wasn’t a particularly bright boy, nor did he have much interest in politics, but this intrigued him. At first, the idea seemed abominable. That was a word his old man had used when Ryan had asked him about it after school, anyway. His father said that in any society, having legislature was an absolute necessity. He’d look Ryan straight into his eyes and tell him, “There are people out there who are absolute scum. Killers, rapists, thieves and what-have-you-not. To have them freely scouring the streets looking for their next victim is an affront to those of us who get up in the morning and make an honest living for ourselves. Without laws, that’s exactly what we would be getting. This guy on the telly, he ain’t nuthin’ but a nut job! Saying the things he says, it shouldn’t be legal.” That made sense to Ryan. The man was bad, and that was it. End of story.   
 *Or maybe not.* Some years later, when Ryan was in military school on Centuria, he had seen the man on TV again. There was a debate. Some of the other recruits were watching, and Ryan, tired after having jerked off four times that day, sat down to enjoy the show. He noticed the man’s name: Fitzpatrick Felderman. Felderman was talking about the same things he did so many years ago, but this time, he seemed more confident. The audience seemed to enjoy him too, clapping and cheering heavily every time he spoke up.   
 “He’s got all that momentum because of the financial crisis. People are looking for an alternative, and he’s providing one,” said one of the other recruits. His name was Meridian, and he was a big political geek. It was a role he enjoyed so much, he’d even wear glasses to augment it, despite the fact that his vision was fine. Every evening before bedtime, he’d take them off and rub his eyes because they were such a pain in the ass to wear. Ryan couldn’t help but wonder why someone would put themselves through that. He always thought politics made people act oddly.  
 “Who gives one man the authority to tell another was to do and what to say?” Felderman asked on the screen. “Why do I deserve the right to tell you what you cannot do? No amount of money, no name, no purpose is valid enough to justify that. Laws are, at their core, intrinsically evil!”  
 “The fuck does ‘intrinsically’ mean?” one of the recruits asked.   
 “Shut the fuck up! I’m listening!” Meridian retorted. The recruit seemed annoyed by that, but Meridian ignored him.  
 “But surely some laws are necessary?” the show host asked. “What is the point of freedom for the people if they do not have a state to protect them and keep them safe?”   
 This was obviously meant to throw Felderman off balance, but it didn’t work. He was still standing, and he responded without hesitation. “Asking if some laws are necessary is like asking if maybe some whip lashes are necessary. Freedom and security go hand in hand. When you create laws to secure people, you take away their freedom, and eventually security follows. I will fight for the rest of my life to abolish all laws, that I can promise you. You see, I desire my freedom! For breakfast, dinner and supper we are spoon-fed the lie that we need to be constrained; to be bound and shackled like rabid beasts! We have lost so much faith in ourselves that we practically chain ourselves. We put the cuffs around our hands to halt us from acting on our desires. We put the gag in our mouths to silence us from speaking about anything besides what the majority dictates is worth speaking about. I believe in mankind. I believe we were made for great things! But for every law that is shoved down our throat, our ambitions and our talents are suffocated. Eventually, we become a shadow of ourselves!” There was roaring applause. The man had hit a nerve.  
 Later that year, Feldman was elected sector president. As he had promised, he began deconstructing the state. One by one, laws were repealed. Prisoners were freed. The prisons themselves were shut down. *The Great Liberation.* Ryan remembered watching policemen being interviewed about how they felt about losing their jobs. Soon enough, the military was disbanded as well. With taxation abolished, there was no way to fund it. So Ryan, who had managed to become a recruit before that, traveled home to Amina, where he was hired by a private mercenary company called Yojimbo. It was a newly started operative, and yet it was professional to the core. Ryan quickly rose through the ranks until he finally ended up as a lieutenant.   
 That was when he met Brother Tyrone. Tyrone was a senior engineer on a digging project up in the Raven Hills on Centuria. It was a dangerous place; lawless long before Feldman ushered in. Theft was widespread. Wild gangs rivaled for a position of power. People were killed for taking the wrong side, which could be either one, depending on who held the gun to their throats. And now Tyrone, a small group of junior engineers, a large group of miners and Yojimbo were headed up there. Ryan was the military leader, which meant he was in charge of ensuring the safety of the miners, who dug day and night under the hot sun, looking for urolian minerals. It didn’t take long before they found what they were looking for, and surely enough, just as Tyrone had predicted, the roaming gangs came looking for their share. But their old, worn-out guns were of no match to Ryan and his men, who blasted every last one of the marauders.  
 They didn’t clean up the bodies. It would take too much time, Tyrone had said. Although Ryan agreed, he still carried the memory of seeing myriads of dead men stretched out in front of the local neighborhood houses, which was where the skirmish had taken place. He could see the faces of the scared families who had been left with the litter. He vividly remembered a pair of young boys who had been tasked to drag the corpses out into the forest to burn them. One of them was so young he could barely get a firm grip. Insects orbited his head. Some of them landed on his shoulder. How odd, Ryan had thought, that the kid didn’t do anything about it. None of this felt very liberating to him. But then again, the Raven Hills had always been like this. “Nothing can save them”; that was how the saying went.   
 Ryan had proposed to Tyrone that maybe they should pay the people cleaning out the corpses.  
 “You’re a good soldier, lieutenant,” Tyrone had answered. “But I think you better leave the business end of things to me. These people are on their own. We have no obligation to pay ‘em.”  
 Being the soldier he was, Ryan didn’t protest. But that didn’t mean he didn’t dislike it.  
 Some years later, Brother Tyrone offered Ryan a job in his new construction company, San Dholos Construction. Although initially reluctant, Ryan eventually agreed to the offer. However, when he started the position, he was surprised to learn that he didn’t get to keep his rank. While he didn’t consider himself to be so shallow as to care about a title just like that, he couldn’t help but feel a slight annoyance. And yet, he didn’t protest. *A soldier always obeys, without question.*   
 Tyrone’s reasoning was that Yojimbo, not him, had assigned Ryan’s previous stripes, and if he wanted to get them back, he would have to earn that privilege. So he became a sergeant. It was at this time he met Jakob Henderson, who, at the time, shared the same rank. Tyrone had warned Ryan about Henderson, frequently referring to him as an “embarrassment on two feet.” When Ryan asked Tyrone why he kept him on his payroll, he’d only get a vague answer: “Because I have to.” Though admittedly curious, Ryan realized there was no point in digging deeper; the surface was too thick and too hard. Still, even to this day, he couldn’t help but wonder.  
 One day, Tyrone and Henderson had come back from a trip with a contract in hand. It was signed by Caine Saunders, the chief executive officer of Geraldus, which was the biggest mining company in the second sector. The contract was for construction work on the Geraldus fortress on Taurus. “We’re moving up in the world, kid! Reaching for the stars!” Tyrone had said. Of course the contract had no real value, because private property didn’t exist anymore. But some habits die hard, and a piece of paper still held some power, even if it only was the power of suggestion.  
 When they arrived on Taurus, they began working right away. It had been Henderson who had dubbed the site Roverville. Ryan remembered walking around the camp for the first time, looking up and marveling at the sight of “Bessie”, a drill fifty feet tall that could tear right through a large rock and reach deep into its surface. He was impressed. Although he was by no means a greedy man, he couldn’t help but imagine what he would do with all the money he’d earn from this venture.  
 However, what had looked like a promising prospect soon revealed itself to be a colossal disappointment. The pay offered by Geraldus eventually grew miniscule; the official word being that it was a necessity caused by an increasingly limited budget. But everyone – every worker and soldier in Roverville – knew that this was a lie. It was standard Geraldus business practice, and there was no laws to stop them. Most of their clients accepted it because they knew they wouldn’t get better conditions elsewhere. “Elsewhere” meant slave labor, something Geraldus was less than reluctant to employ. Ryan had seen that much himself. When driving to the Black Khan, the great ship that would bring the company from Amina to Taurus, they had gone past one of the Geraldus dig sites, and had gotten a clear view of what their alternative had been. Ryan shuddered as he thought back to the slave laborers, all sweating under the sun for many hours on end, looking for urolian minerals with hammer and pickaxes. He had counted himself lucky for not being among them.

On Roverville, things were only scarcely better. Soon after Geraldus announced that the paychecks would be cut, supplies began to run out, and everyone had to start rationing. This wasn’t popular with the young workers, who had come here for great fortunes, not out-of-date cereal, warm milk, old juice and stale beer. Some of them began stealing what little food was left. Many of those who didn’t starved to death. Fights broke out, and a kid no more than fourteen years old was killed when his head was hit by a sledgehammer, swung by a man so desperate for food that he could barely recognize he had struck his own nephew. Even after it had happened, he couldn’t see it. The incident made the thieves realize what they had done to their comrades, and things stabilized. But even so, fights were still common. People were on the breaking point, and the smallest of annoyances could set them off.  
 “Captain Ryan, sir”, someone said, and Ryan returned to the present. It was Volon, one of the welders from the fortress sub-level. “We have a problem down below. One of the large pipes fell down, and we can’t get it up alone. We need some help.”  
 Ryan sighed. “I suppose I got nothing better to do,” he said, and the two of them strolled off.   
 This wasn’t a captain’s job, or even a soldier’s, but Tyrone had been forced to cut so many positions already, so now everyone’s duties had expanded beyond their salaries. Ryan wasn’t just a captain anymore. He was also a foot soldier, an inspector and now, it seemed, a janitor.  
 On the way to the sub-level entrance Ryan saw two recruits, Jean Francis and Rhett Dunbar, standing idly by a parked truck, looking at a female welder. She was bent forward with her rear sticking out, and the two soldiers were giggling at the sight like two teenagers. Of course, in Dunbar’s defense, he was a teenager. He couldn’t have been more than seventeen, whilst Francis had just turned twenty. Both had signed up as soldiers to the project with an eagerness that most likely stemmed from their life-long wish to leave the San Dholos ghetto. Right now they looked like they were in some sort of trance. Ryan didn’t blame them, because a good-looking female usually had that effect on young male minds. He had been no different himself. But young males need to become adults, and so Ryan figured it was best for Dunbar and Francis to come with him, lest they become victims of some sort of arrested development. So he walked up to them, hoping to catch their attention. When they failed to notice him, he put his hand on Dunbar’s shoulder and said, “What if I was an enemy now?”   
 The both of them jumped and turned around, their guns aimed straight at Ryan.  
 “Easy now, fellas,” Ryan continued.  
 “Sorry, sir,” the two boys uttered in unison, and lowered their guns.  
 “That’s all right. Just don’t do it again.” Normally, Ryan would have chosen a harsher tone for such an order, but now was not the time. A good leader must always know when to be critical, and when to be understanding. He must know his subordinates, and yet always keep a distance. In the end, all it came down to was balance. “Come on,” he continued. “We’re needed down below.”  
 On the way to the sub-level, they met sergeant Henderson. Ryan saluted him, but he didn’t seem to notice. It wasn’t the first time, as Henderson had a habit of staying inside his own head, often oblivious to the rest of the world. He was not a very great soldier, but he was a good sergeant. In Ryan’s opinion, he knew how to command, even if Tyrone never agreed to that. The two of them had a long-running, tumultuous relationship. They often argued loudly, either because Henderson had done something Tyrone deemed irresponsible, or because Henderson, against his better judgment, disagreed openly with Tyrone. Ryan always knew better than to get in the middle.  
 Thick titanium doors guarded the sub-level entrance, which in turn was guarded by one of the corporals, Janus Ora. Janus gave Ryan a salute, and Ryan returned the courtesy with a nod. Volon typed the password, and the doors opened to reveal the elevator. They stepped inside, and began the descent. Through the windows of the elevator, Ryan could see the still unfinished sub-level. It was humongous. Decked out in iron, it seemed like some sort of hangar. He didn’t know what Geraldus was planning to house inside it, but it had to be something large. Once he had asked Tyrone if he knew what intentions Geraldus had with the fortress, but Tyrone didn’t know. Although he had been given a sketch of the site, it was rough and incomplete. Whenever he asked for more detailed information, he was always told that it was classified. Geraldus was nothing if not shrouded in mystery.  
 Ryan sighed. “Your safety’s on, recruit,” he told Dunbar.

Dunbar glanced down and saw his error. “Shit! Fuck! Sorry, sir!” he said, though Ryan couldn’t tell if he was apologizing for his mistake or for cursing in front of his commander. Knowing Dunbar, he figured it wasn’t likely to be the latter.  
 “Dumb-ass motherfucker,” Francis said, and laughed.

Dunbar looked annoyed. “I’d watch my words if I were you. Your fly is open,” he said, but he was not met with the response he had hoped for.  
 “No, it’s not,” Francis said, with fake confidence.  
 “Actually, it is,” Volon said, and Francis looked down.   
 Now it was Dunbar’s turn to laugh. “Can’t believe he fell for that,” he said, and high-fived Volon.   
 Ryan couldn’t believe these were his men. When he had worked for Yojimbo, he had served alongside some of the finest soldiers in the whole second sector. Why he had given up on that, he didn’t know, but it was too late to think about that now. He wasn’t one to quit or give up. If he ever decided to hand in his resignation to Tyrone, it could only be after the fortress stood finished. He had made a promise, and he was going to keep it. Anything else was unacceptable.   
 Before the Great Liberation, soldier crews did not usually assist construction companies. But these days, every man was for himself. There was no shortage of news channels reporting on ambushed expeditions and random acts of violence. If people were more secure now than they were before, it was only because they took so many safety measures. Private citizens stocked up guns, and a new industry was born when private companies began offering security services to the highest bidder, which could be anyone from a natural gas tycoon to a mining cartel. It was said that about a third of the jobs in the sector were military-related these days. Tyrone often complained what a waste of resources this was. Being a soldier, Ryan didn’t necessarily agree, but he did so in silence.  
 The elevator eventually reached the bottom floor, and Ryan and his companions stepped out of the elevator. Volon showed them the way. Francis and Dunbar seemed to be competing over who could walk the fastest, as if there was some kind of prize to whomever reached their goal first. Ryan concentrated on not paying them any sort of attention. It was difficult.  
 When they reached their destination, Ryan realized why Volon had asked him for help. The pipe was huge, and the five workers who were there already did not have the combined strength to get it back up again.   
 “All right, we are going to try something new,” Ryan ordered. “Do you have a strong rope or chain down here?” he asked.  
 “Yes, we do,” one of the workers said, and ran to get some rope. He gave it to Ryan.  
 “We are going to tie this rope around the pipe, throw it over that arch up there, and lift the pipe up by pulling the rope down.”  
 The workers looked at Ryan like he was some sort of god, which annoyed him. It was a solution so simple they should have thought of it themselves. That they hadn’t done that said plenty about their competence. Ryan had never figured himself as much of an intellectual, but he did at least have common sense.  
 Soon enough, the pipe was back up. Volon climbed up a ladder and welded it back on. “What would we do without you, captain?” he asked, and climbed down.  
 “I’m just glad the pipe didn’t hit any of you,” Ryan answered.  
 “It was close, though,” one of the welders said. “I was standing just a mere feet away when it loosened. Nearly pissed my pants.”  
 Ryan thought he could hear a soft giggle coming from Dunbar.  
 “Sometimes you’re just lucky,” Volon said. He leaned against the wall, and just as he did, a peculiar sound was heard. It had sounded like a crack, and Ryan’s eyes immediately shot back to the pipe. But the sound had not come from above. It was the wall, Ryan realized.   
 Everyone looked at it with the same curious stare. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the lower part of the wall lifted, revealing itself as a door.   
 Volon’s mouth was wide open “What the hell?” he asked no one.  
 “You didn’t know about this?” Ryan asked.  
 Volon shook his head. “I’ve been down here ever since we started, and I have never seen this. Must have remained from the previous company.”  
 Ryan stared in disbelief at what was before him. It seemed to be some sort of tunnel, dressed with titanium walls and leading into an unknown darkness. At that moment, he was as curious as a child, intent to find out where it lead.  
 “Should we check it out, sir?” Francis asked.  
 “We shouldn’t,” Ryan said, and stepped into the tunnel. “But we will.” He turned his flashlight on. The rest of his men followed, albeit with some hesitation. Curiosity and fright often went hand in hand. That much he had learned by now.  
 They must have walked for at least two minutes before they reached the end of the tunnel. It had led them to a large hall. Just as Ryan took the first step in, automated lights turned themselves on, and they could see everything. In the middle of the hall was a set of tubes, all filled with water. Each tube was large enough to fit a grown man. The tubes were arranged in groups of four, with each one positioned as a corner to a square. Ryan counted at least five of these groups as they stretched across the hall. He walked over to one of them and noticed it was attached to a monitor screen, no doubt designed to configure the tubes in some way. But before he could turn the monitor on, the hall was draped in darkness, and curious silence gave way to panicked screams.  
 “What the hell happened?” Ryan asked, but there was no answer. “Hello?” he called, but still, there was only silence. He turned his flashlight on and aimed it in every direction possible, trying desperately to find anyone, but there was no one there. No one, except a man standing in the distance of the hall, his back turned against Ryan. “Who are you?” Ryan asked, but there was no response. He slowly began walking towards the man’s location.  
 Suddenly, Ryan heard a sound to his right. It sounded like some sort of electrical buzz. He turned his flashlight in its direction, but saw nothing. Then he quickly turned back to the man. He was gone.  
 “Welcome, captain Ryan,” he heard a voice say in his head. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Quarinius.”