

Chapter 1

“We’re sold out of action figures and plushies,” said Zachary.

“Those items always sell out first,” said Champ.

“We’re sold out of Gorelick’s stupid little storybooks,” said Zachary. “We sold sixteen tank tops, and twenty tees altogether, adult and children’s sizes. I need to inventory the rest.”

“You need to keep better books, son,” said Champ. “Your register comes up short every night.”

“We sold a bunch of pendants,” said Zachary, “pins, magnets, headbands, decals, trading cards. Infant onesies are selling. Sold some backpacks, rain ponchos, sweatpants, shorts, socks.” Zachary looked down at his notepad. “A bunch of ball-caps sold too. And we sold one knit cap.”

Champ wiped his forehead. “Who would wear a knit cap in this heat?”

“The guy who bought it said this place ain’t usually so hot at night.”

Champ adjusted a ladies’ tank top that had slid from its display torso. “Keep things presentable, Zachary. The merch stand looks like a rummage sale.” Champ refolded a stack of tee-shirts. “Every item should be positioned with the KFX logo visible.”

“I’ll do better, Mr. Englander.”

“Call me Champ.”

“I’ll do better, Mr. Champ.”

“It’s just Champ, Zachary. And I wouldn’t have given you the job if I wasn’t sure you could do it.”

“I can do it, Mr. Champ.”

Champ sighed. “How are the fans reacting to the new KFX branding?”

“The fans are loving it, Mr. Champ.”

Champ picked up a ball cap embroidered with the KFX logo. The new logo was just like the old logo, their company name, KFX Wrestling Federation, in blood splatter on a brick wall, but using a new color scheme, the same color scheme found in the propaganda posters encouraging people to move into the cities—the graphic designer told Champ that those colors used in combination were known to evoke excitement. “What we really need is the deluxe branding package,” said Champ. “We need to create a uniform image for the KFX Wrestling Federation brand. But we don’t have the funds at the moment.” He tossed the ball cap to Zachary. “We paid that jabroni graphic designer 400 gold-backs and all we got was this new logo.”

“People really like it, Mr. Champ,” said Zachary.

“What about the mugs?” said Champ.

“We sold one mug.”

Champ pumped his fist. “Our first mug sale. I knew our fans we’re going to appreciate these beautiful mugs.” He carefully lifted a mug from the merch stand and admired it. “This is handcrafted stoneware, made by a woman even older than me, a widow who has lived off-grid longer than anyone I know. She raised six children in the wilderness. What an amazing woman.” Champ turned the mug around. Their company name, KFX Wrestling Federation, was etched tastefully into the side. “You don’t find craftsmanship like this in the world anymore.”

“It’s really good craftsmanship, Mr. Champ.” said Zachary.

“But it’s such a high quality item, does it seem out of place surrounded by our other merchandise?”

Zachary shook his head.

“Who bought the mug?” said Champ.

Zachary leaned forward from the merch stand and pointed into the crowd.

“I’m a little surprised,” said Champ. “This certainly isn’t our usual audience of freedom lovers. I wouldn’t expect that anyone here would appreciate stoneware of this quality.” He tried to follow the direction that Zachary was pointing. “This whole camp is a phosphate mine, a literal hole in the ground. It doesn’t even have a proper name. It’s just named after the corporation that owns it.” Champ surveyed the crowded venue. “We’re technically in a satellite territory of the Tampa Metropolitan Statistical Area. But don’t worry, we’re a comfortable 300 miles from the northern most border of Tampa metro proper.” Champ turned back to Zachary. “Where the hell are you pointing, boy?”

Zachary said nothing and pointed harder.

Again Champ tried to follow the direction that Zachary was pointing. They were in the Centennial Room, a conference hall at the Salt Lands Amenity Inn & Suites, capable of holding 500 seated guests. The venue was filled to capacity plus another 300 standing-room-only tickets had been sold. There was no air-conditioning, just large fans circulating hot air through the hair of 800 despondent mine workers and their families. Obese children jumped and punched and screamed in the aisles between the rows of folding chairs. A banner hung from the ceiling above the ring:

The Salt Lands Natural Asset Corporation

Presents

Bitch-Slapped in the Salt Lands

Real Heroes v. KFX Wrestling Federation

The lights dropped and the music started. A wrestler from the opposing league parted the crowd, approaching the ring from the far end of the venue. He was a large man, head and shoulders over the audience that surrounded him. He strutted his way to the ring and climbed over the ropes. His large hand was clutching a stoneware mug, holding it sidelong, like a rock he was preparing to throw.

“Oh,” said Champ. “That’s too bad.”

The announcer introduced the wrestler. "Weighing in at 290 pounds and standing at a height of six feet and seven inches tall, it's Curb Stomp." And the announcer dragged out 'Stomp' into a deep, rumbling note that lasted for several seconds. It was an excellent introduction. The show had begun.

Champ ran behind the merch stand and into the greenroom, and was startled by the sight of Grace shaving Moose's back with a straight razor. For a moment he forgot why he came running. Boogie reminded him. "Looks like you finally sold a mug," said Boogie. He chuckled.

"That's high-quality, handcrafted stoneware," said Champ. "I will personally stink face that son of a bitch if he smashes that mug."

"Take it easy, Champ," said Boogie. He gestured at the other wrestlers in the greenroom. "You're the one who is always talking about the importance of showmanship."

"You're right," said Champ. "I apologize."

"It's all just part of the show," said Boogie.

"I know it's nothing personal," said Champ. "We all need to remember that."

The sound of the mug shattering, followed by laughter from the audience, echoed into the greenroom.

"He smashed the mug," said Boogie.

Champ rubbed his face.

"These guys are murderers," said Littlefield.

"Murderers?" Champ laughed.

"I don't think we should do this."

"And what would you suggest?" said Champ. "That we slip away into the night like cowards?"

"Yes," said Littlefield.

"They're not murderers," said Champ. "They're professionals, just like us. We're going to do everything by the book. Nothing fancy. And we can expect they'll do the same. We won't have any injuries tonight."

Tracy interrupted. "How's Zackary doing? Is he messing up yet?"

"It's not a good time for this," said Champ.

Tracy grabbed Champ by the arm and pulled him in. "Just remember when he messes things up, it wasn't me who asked you to give him that job."

"I'll remember, Tracy," said Champ, and he pulled away.

"These guys killed a man in the ring," said Grace. "It happened last month at an event in Corpus Christi."

"Stop it with that crap already," said Champ. "That's a bullshit rumor. If they killed a guy, I'd know about it."

"It was a guy from a Mexican league," said Ashlei. "That's how come you don't know about it. And also I heard they raped a lady at that same event."

"They're rapists?" said Grace. "That's just great, Champ. When were you going to tell us that we're going up against a rape gang?"

"Stop it, god damn it," said Champ. "They're not rapists. You're just making that up."

"What do you care if they're rapists?" said Grace. "Ashlei and I are the only women here."

Ashlei laughed. "I ain't afraid of no man raping me. I'd like to see him try."

"Well I'm not wrestling tonight," said Grace.

"If you don't perform, you don't get paid," said Champ.

"I won't let nobody rape you, Grace," said Moose.

"No one is getting raped!" shouted Champ. He could feel himself turning red, but he paused when he noticed a small man in a cheap suit standing behind Moose. "Who's that?"

"Hello," said the man. He smiled meekly. "I'm the Events Manager here at the hotel." He held up his clipboard. "I need your stats for the announcer."

"Everyone line up," said Champ.

The wrestlers tripped over one another to form a line in front of Champ. Moose moved too close to Tracy. "Watch your step, you big dumb animal," said Tracy. The line went from shortest to tallest. The wrestlers sounded off. It was poorly rehearsed.

"Grace Newman. Stage name, Lady Salvo. Five foot and six inches tall. 152 pounds. Age thirty-nine."

"Ashlei Strickland. Stage name, BitchCraft. Six feet and one inch tall. 190 pounds. Age forty-four."

The Events Manager was scribbling furiously on his clipboard.

"Tracy Merchant. Stage name, Sergeant Draco. I'm the villain. I'm also a black man. Write that down."

"Black man," said the Events Manager as he wrote on his clipboard.

"I served 25 years in the military," said Tracy. "Chicago MSA Armed Forces."

"Ex-military," said the Events Manager as he wrote on his clipboard.

"When we last visited my mother, she asked Champ to give my kid brother a job," said Tracy, "so Champ puts him in charge of the merch stand."

"Should I be writing this down?" said the Events Manager.

"I've warned Champ repeatedly that it's a mistake," said Tracy. "Merchandising is a huge part of our income, and that boy is dim-witted. It might be my fault. I dropped him a few times when he was a baby."

"Tracy, you are making me nuts!" said Champ.

Tracy finished. "Six feet and three inches tall. 232 pounds. Age fifty." He pointed to Boogie.

"Boogie Mackey. Stage name, Mace. Six feet and six inches tall. 293 pounds. Age fifty-nine."

"Littlefield Emory. Stage name, BeefCake A.D. I'm the handsome one. Please write that down. Six feet and ten inches tall. 365 pounds. Age forty-two."

After Littlefield came Moose. "Mario Salguero," said Moose. His voice was too deep to be understood. "Stage name, The Moose."

"What did he say?" said the Events Manager. The other wrestlers laughed.

Moose continued. "Also known as Shit Stain."

Again, the other wrestlers laughed.

"No, Mario," said Champ. "We dropped that name." He turned to the Events Manager. "Don't write that down."

Moose continued. "Seven feet and four inches tall. 520 pounds. Age forty-six."

"Okay. Wow. You're big," said the Events Manager. He turned to Champ. "And what about you?"

"Champ Englander. Stage name, Insurrection. Six feet and five inches tall. 225 pounds. Age ninety-one."

"Ninety-one?" said the Events Manager.

"Ninety-one," said Champ.

"You're ninety-one years old?" said the Events Manager.

"I'm ninety-one," said Champ.

The Events Manager wrote on his clipboard. "He's ninety-one." Then he pointed to the couch behind him. "And what about that guy?"

"T. Christopher Gorelick," said Christopher. "My stage name is Sweatpants. Five foot and five inches tall. 135 pounds. I'm 35 years old."

"You can ignore him," said Champ. "He's not a wrestler."

A beep came from a device in the Events Manager's ear. He held his hand to his ear and listened. "They're saying they're almost ready for you." With his clipboard in hand, he hurried from the greenroom. "Break a leg."

Champ followed. He hung from the greenroom exit and called after the Events Manager. "Tell them not to forget our theme song when we enter," said Champ, but the Events Manager was gone.

Champ turned his attention to the show. Curb Stomp had been joined in the ring by two of his fellow wrestlers, Manslaughter and Gooner. Each wore the same black spandex jumpsuit patterned with yellow and red, resembling the Tampa MSA flag. Written across the chest was the Tampa Armed Forces recruitment slogan, "Courage, Honor, Community." And each had a massively exaggerated bulge in their tights at their privates.

"These clowns look ridiculous," said Champ. The others gathered behind him.

"That's a lot of bulge," said Littlefield. He looked down at his own private area and began adjusting his tights. Champ smacked his hands away.

Curb Stomp climbed onto the top rope and pressed the mic to his lips. "Our opponents are cowards," he said. "Global Governance provides their kind with reservation lands, but they're too stupid to understand, too ungrateful to accept, and choose instead to live in hiding, illegally, on lands that don't belong to them. They call themselves sovereigns?" He paused for dramatic effect. "Well I call them cowards." He turned his head and spat. The audience gasped.

Champ looked back at Moose. Moose was shaking with rage. "Easy now, Mario," said Champ. "You're up last, remember?"

"A real hero fights for their community," said Curb Stomp. "A real hero fights to defend the rights of others, the right to military and police protection, income, food, and housing. The right to health care, internet access, public education, and a minimum standard of living for everyone, regardless of their contribution. And service in the Tampa MSA Armed Forces is your path to secure these rights for yourself and your family."

A few in the audience clapped.

"Our opponents live for nothing, and care for no one but themselves," said Curb Stomp. "Everything about them is cowardly. They're stupid and trashy. Their women are whores."

Moose began pushing forward.

"Mario, no!" said Champ. He tried to hold Moose back. "Everyone help me." Boogie and Littlefield locked arms and blocked the exit. Tracy pushed against him but had little effect. Grace wrapped herself around Moose's arm and was lifted off the ground.

"Who wants to live out in the woods with the retards?" said Curb Stomp, and he searched the audience for raised hands. "Who want to sleep in the dirt? Who wants to shit in a creek and wipe their ass with leaves?"

Moose pushed harder. The other wrestlers struggled to restrain him.

"Please, Mario, don't do it," said Champ. He was losing his grip.

"We can't hold him," said Littlefield.

"He's getting away from us," said Tracy.

Champ struggled to hold on to Moose for a moment longer, and then he gave up. "Let him go," said Champ.

Tracy let go and jumped out of the way. "Let him go," said Tracy.

Grace was knocked backwards and landed on her rear.

Moose exploded from the greenroom in the direction of the ring. Champ called after him. "Guard your knees, Mario."

"I hear that our opponents own a giant," said Curb Stomp. "What do you think about that, Manslaughter." Curb Stomp tossed the mic to his fellow wrestler.

Manslaughter laughed. "What do I think?" said Manslaughter. "I think the bigger they are, the harder they..." Manslaughter paused. His eyes widened. He had spotted Moose approaching the ring. Then the audience spotted Moose and the venue exploded with excitement. 800 people cheered and hollered. Fans grabbed at Moose as he passed, but no one blocked his path to the ring.

"Our theme song?" said Champ. "Where the hell is our theme song?"

"Weighing in at 520 pounds," said the announcer. "And standing at a height of seven feet and four inches tall, it's Shit Stain." And the announcer dragged out 'Stain' into a deep, rumbling note that lasted for several seconds.

Champ put his fist in his mouth and bit down on his knuckles.

"Don't tense up, old man," said Boogie.

"Be ready," said Champ. He pointed at Boogie and Ashley. "If he needs help out there, I'm sending you two out first."

Moose rushed headlong toward the ring, and was only steps from the ropes when an usher working for the venue stepped in front of him and handed him a mic. Moose grabbed the mic from the usher. He pointed at Curb Stomp and bellowed into the mic in a voice too deep to be understood.

Champ looked to Grace—Grace had a knack for identifying Moose’s words when others heard only noise. “I think he said something about the size of his package,” said Grace.

“He’d better not have,” said Champ. “This is a family show.”

Moose then threw the mic at the ring, aiming for Curb Stomp. The mic flew over the ring and into the audience on the pother side. In three large steps Moose soared from the base of the platform beneath the ring to standing on the top rope of the ring, and then he jumped from the rope, landing with a thud that shook the venue as his arm connected with Curb Stomp’s throat, slamming Curb Stomp into the mat.

“The Diving Clothesline,” said the announcer. “Curb Stomp just had his ass handed to him. He’s out cold.”

Immediately Manslaughter and Gooner began directing kicks at Moose’s knees in a series of illegal moves.

“Why isn’t the ref stopping this?” said Champ.

“There is no ref,” said Littlefield.

“Boogie, Ashlei, get out there now,” said Champ. “Go! Go! Go!”

Boogie and Ashlei raced from the greenroom toward the ring. “Here comes Mace,” said the announcer. “Look at that hustle, ladies and gentlemen. And he’s followed by BitchCraft. She looks about ready to bitch-slap someone into a coma.” And before the announcer could add their stats, Boogie and Ashlei slid under the bottom rope and into the ring. Boogie stood quickly as Ashlei rolled onto her back and lifted her legs. Boogie folded his arms over Ashlei’s shins and then he fell backwards, leveraging his weight to launch her into the air.

“A classic slingshot maneuver,” said the announcer.

Ashlei landed on Manslaughter’s shoulders, wrapping her legs around his neck and driving him into the mat.

“Followed by the Seated Senton,” said the announcer. “How’d you like to have those monster thighs wrapped around your neck, folks? Like my grandpa use to say about my grandma, she’s not much to look at but she’s built like a mule.”

Three additional Real Heroes spilled into the ring, each wearing the same spandex jumpsuit as the rest of their teammates.

“Beast Slut has entered the ring,” said the announcer. “Hate Crime and AF-Six-Nine have entered the ring.”

“I don’t like the look of that Beast Slut,” said Champ. “You three are up.” Champ pointed at Tracy, Grace, and Littlefield. “You’d better get out there quick.”

“Me first,” said Tracy.

Champ sniffed Tracy’s breath. “Have you been drinking?” said Champ.

Tracy brushed Champ away, and he signaled to Grace and Littlefield to follow at a distance. “Watch and learn,” said Tracy. He jogged from the greenroom to the ring. He shadow boxed. He pushed a child out of his way then gestured threateningly at the audience. The announcer followed his lead.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the announcer. “It’s the legendary villain.” The audience instinctively booed. “Weighing in at 232 pounds and standing at a height of six feet and three inches tall—he’s the kind of guy who will twist the knife in the wound—it’s Sergeant Draco.” Tracy climbed into the ring. He was still hissing at the audience when AF-Six-Nine slammed his elbow and forearm into Tracy’s face. Tracy was unconscious before he hit the mat.

“He’s been drinking all day,” said Grace.

“He’s actually had quite a lot today,” said Littlefield. “Even for him.”

“There’s no time for this,” said Champ. “You two need to get out there now!”

Grace and Littlefield raced from the greenroom. They were in the ring exchanging blows with the opposing team before the announcer could introduce them. The announcer was struggling to keep up, his announcements reduced to shouting wrestler names and wrestling maneuvers. “Leg Drop,” said the announcer. “Mongolian Chop. Beast Slut with a Sleeper Slam. Shit Stain with a Dick Stomp. Catapult. Choke-slam. Brain-buster. Half Nelson.”

Champ and Christopher watched from the greenroom. They were the only two that remained.

“You going out there?” said Christopher.

“Maybe,” said Champ.

“And remind me again why I’m here?”

“To better understand your new audience,” said Champ. “We’re going to be performing in more and more venues like this. You’ll need to adapt your story lines to match a new sensibility.”

“This is a satellite territory of an MSA,” said Christopher. “These people don’t want freedom. They want to move deeper into the grid. They think like slaves. Your usual chatter about freedom will mean nothing to them.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the announcer. “Just when you thought things couldn’t get any crazier...”

Champ and Christopher turned their attention back to the ring. From the far end of the venue, a new wrestler was approaching. His Real Heroes spandex jumpsuit was ripped and filthy. His lips and teeth were caked with lipstick. Tears of mascara stained his checks and disappeared into his grimy beard. He cradled a baby doll with a swastika craved into its forehead.

“Weighing in at 230 pounds,” said the announcer “And standing at a height of six feet and four inches tall—no matter how traumatic, no brain injury can slow him down—it’s Princess.”

The audience cheered.

“Princess must be the crazy one,” said Champ. “That’s my cue. I’d better get out there.”

“You’re wasting your time,” said Christopher. “You’re preaching freedom to slaves.”

“Yeah, fool,” said Champ. “That’s the idea.” He exited the greenroom toward the ring.

Chapter 2

"Thank you for coming, you guys," said the teacher.

"It's our pleasure to be here," said Champ. "It's not just about the wrestling. It's about the values we're imprinting on the younger generations." Champ was visiting the Salt Lands Workforce-Readiness Outcomes School. Boogie, Grace, and Littlefield were with him. They were standing in the hall, waiting for the teacher to admit them to the classroom. Christopher had come too but had wandered off.

"It will just be a little bit longer," said the teacher. "The children are finishing up their morning lessons."

Champ peered through the view-port into the classroom. The children were seated at their desks, each wearing a bulky augmented reality headset, each quietly consuming whatever their headset was feeding them.

"What are they learning?" said Champ.

The teacher shrugged. "Whatever's in their curriculum for today. That's up to the computer."

"And you don't know what they're learning?"

"Not my problem," said the teacher. "My job is to make sure they don't take off their headsets. The computer does the rest." The teacher was a middle-aged woman, bloated and red and covered in a rash. Champ recognized it as the rash that comes with getting drunk on cheap wine every night.

"I spent years in an Outcomes school as a child," said Grace. "It was a worthless education. Memorize fact. Test. Repeat. Garbage in. Garbage out."

"And what do you want me to do about it?" said the teacher. "It's a paycheck."

"How old are these kids?" said Boogie.

"Eight," said the teacher. "No, more like fourteen. Somewhere in there."

Christopher interrupted. He had returned from wandering the halls. "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said the teacher.

"It's a Frederick Douglass quote," said Christopher.

"Who's Frederick Douglass?" said the teacher.

Champ pushed Christopher aside. "We brought you a gift," said Champ. He put a KFX mug in the teacher's hands. The teacher lit up.

"It's just like the one the guy smashed last night," she said. She read aloud the etching on the side of the mug. "KFX Wrestling Federation." She smiled. "Thank you so much. I love it. You guys were so awesome last night. You kicked the shit out of those assholes. I almost pissed my pants laughing."

"That's handcrafted stoneware," said Champ.

The teacher pretended to smash the mug on the floor. "Just like last night." She laughed.

Champ frowned.

"I'm messing with you," said the teacher. "Don't be a pussy." She took a pretend sip from the empty mug. "Delicious."

Champ groaned.

"Did you guys hear about the murders last night?" said the teacher.

"Murders?" said Littlefield. "As in: more than one murder?"

"The announcer from last night's event and his lady friend," said the teacher. "Both murdered. And the woman had been raped."

Littlefield glared at Champ.

"They were full of knife wounds," said the teacher, smiling. "They found their bodies this morning along the service road behind the venue."

"And did they catch the killers?" said Grace.

"They're blaming it on some Mexican transient," said the teacher. "There's been so much excitement around here lately."

There was a commotion in the classroom. The teacher peeked through the view-port. The children were removing their headsets.

"Just give me a moment and I'll wave you in," said the teacher. She entered the classroom.

"The rape gang strikes again," said Grace. She punched Champ in the side.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Champ, grimacing and holding his side.

"Real Heroes murdered that announcer," said Littlefield.

"That's absurd," said Champ.

"They had motive to kill that man," said Boogie.

"Now even you're against me?"

"The announcer was definitely making calls in our favor," said Boogie. "Especially towards the end of the show."

"We're a crowd favorite," said Champ. "He was just doing his job."

"And now he's dead," said Boogie.

"We should get out of here while we still can," said Littlefield.

"We'll be back at the Westland within the hour and then we're gone," said Champ. "So just relax, you big coward."

Boogie peered through the view-port into the classroom. Many of the children were wearing pajamas. "These kids seem a little slow," he said. Near the front of the classroom one child was playing with two KFX action figure, BitchCraft and The Moose. The child was humping the BitchCraft action figure with The Moose action figure. "If Ashlei were here, she'd bitch-slap that kid into a coma."

"And another thing," said Champ. He was pointing at Boogie. "If they had murdered that announcer, which they didn't, it'd be your fault."

"How could it possibly be my fault?" said Boogie.

"Bad sportsmanship," said Champ.

"You're nuts. I saved the day."

"I saw you rub your ass on your opponent's face."

"They earned it."

"And I saw your teammates do the same," said Champ. "The others take their cues from you."

"The Real Heroes weren't pulling their punches," said Boogie. "They were striking to kill, using neuro-overrides. And when we countered, did you see their surprise?"

"You went out of your way to humiliate your unconscious opponents after securing the win," said Champ. "When I'm dead and gone, is that how you intend to lead?"

"Neuro-overrides!" said Boogie. He was shouting now. "They're trained killers."

"It was the wrong move and you know it," said Champ. He was shouting now too.

Boogie spit at Champ's feet. "They were throwing moves that could have crippled us, and you're worried about sportsmanship."

"Guys, please, take it down a notch," said Grace.

Champ put his finger in Boogie's chest. "Our respect for our opponent doesn't hinge on their behavior," he said.

Boogie grabbed Champ and pressed him against the wall. "I have zero respect for any opponent that tries to murder my teammates."

"Stop this right now," said Grace.

Champ dropped and grabbed Boogie by the waist. He maneuvered Boogie into submission on the floor. "You're upsetting the woman," said Champ.

Grace yelled at Littlefield. "You're bigger than both of them. Make them stop."

Littlefield shrugged and backed away.

With all of Champ's weight on him, Boogie stood, lifting Champ into the air. He twisted, maneuvering Champ into a position beneath him, pinning Champ to the floor. "You shouldn't have brought us here," said Boogie.

Champ kicked out of Boogie's pin and rolled until Boogie was face down with Champ on top of him. "It was your idea to come here in the first place," said Champ.

Boogie lifted himself into a seated position, twisted, and rolled until his legs were wrapped around Champ's neck. "And now it's my idea to leave," said Boogie.

Champ countered, then Boogie countered, and this continued until they were locked in a stalemate, tangled and motionless on the cold floor.

"You give up yet, boy?" said Champ.

"I'm not even winded, you old bastard," said Boogie.

Christopher knelt to the floor and inserted his face between them. "Gentlemen," he said. "They're ready for us."

Champ and Boogie stood. The teacher was visible through the view-port, waving for them to enter. For a long moment Champ and Boogie rested, trying to slow their breathing. "Hold still," said Champ, and he picked a mess of cobwebs from Boogie's hair.

"Let's try to remember why we came here," said Boogie.

"Let's," said Champ.

"We're here to plant the seeds of freedom," said Boogie.

"Nice gardening metaphor," said Champ.

The teacher opened the door. "What is the holdup?" she said.

"Apologies," said Champ. He entered the classroom. He was still breathing hard.

The children wriggled with excitement at the sight of Champ.

"The KXM wrestlers," said the teacher.

"KFX," said Champ.

Boogie and Grace entered next. The children cheered. Boogie was still dusting himself off. Grace nudged Boogie and pointed to the Tampa MSA flag hung prominently at the front of the classroom. Beside it was an ad for the Tampa Armed Forces featuring a soldier in full body armor positioned above the words: Courage, Honor, Community. "I'd love to rip that down," said Grace.

Next entered Littlefield, who had to stoop considerably to enter the classroom. The children laughed at him.

Christopher entered last, unnoticed, and all of the children began talking at once.

"Shut up," said the teacher. "One at a time."

The children stopped talking. They all raised their hands.

"Desk eight," said the teacher, and she pointed at a girl wearing pajamas seated in the front.

Christopher nudged Littlefield. "She doesn't even know their names."

The girl directed her question to Grace. "When you was choking out Beast Slut, was it because you was jealous of her boob size?"

Grace looked to Champ. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

Champ motioned for Grace to answer.

Grace paused. She collected herself. "No," she said. "I was honoring the memory of my mother."

Again Grace looked to Champ.

Champ motioned for her to continue.

"My mother was an elegant, sophisticated, intelligent woman," said Grace. "She spent her life fighting for the marginalized as a legal consultant specializing in contract law."

"They don't know what 'marginalized' means," whispered Champ.

Grace continued. "They coerced us off of our land, but they couldn't silence my mother. She was getting the truth out, so the self-styled authorities called in their goons—when I was a girl younger than you are now, I watched them take her away, but it took a

dozen lawmen bigger than Beast Slut to finally detain her. So no, young lady, I didn't choke out Beast Slut because I was jealous of her disgusting, asymmetrical tits. I choked her out because Beast Slut is a cowardly tyrant who hides behind the illegitimate authority granted to her by her masters, and because she has come here to fool all you ridiculous children into following the same wicked path that she's chosen for herself. I'd choke out a million Beast Sluts before I'd let that happen."

The children smiled and moved excitedly at Grace's answer.

"What happened to your mother?" said the girl.

"Indefinite detainment," said Grace. "I never saw her again."

The children fell silent.

One boy held up a card with a strange cartoon character on it and said, "Porn-addicted marsupial becoming sad."

Another girl held up a card with a different cartoon character on it and said, "When you're at a funeral and you're like: Soma? Yes, please."

Champ whispered to Grace. "What is that? What are they doing?"

Grace shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Next question," said the teacher.

Again all the children raised their hands.

"Desk twenty-seven," said the teacher, and she pointed to a boy in pajamas seated to the side.

The boy directed his question to Champ. "Why come The Moose ain't here?"

Champ scowled. "Because The Moose had too much fun after the show last night, and we couldn't wake him. But don't worry, we brought the next best thing." He directed the children to Littlefield. "We brought BeefCake A.D."

The children looked to one another. Their disgust was obvious.

"He's not quite as big as The Moose," said Champ. "But he's a whole lot prettier."

"Prettier?" said the boy at desk twenty-seven. "He looks like a big, fat pig. We want The Moose."

"He be ugly," said a girl with no front teeth and thinning hair.

"Oink, oink, pig man," said an obese boy eating a breakfast sandwich. All the children laughed.

"I'm considered very handsome," said Littlefield.

A girl held up a card with a strange cartoon character on it and said, "Government memes less effective." Again all the children laughed.

Champ whispered to Grace. "What the hell are they doing with those cards?"

Grace shrugged.

"We want The Moose," shouted one child, and then the classroom began chanting. "Shit Stain. Shit Stain. Shit Stain."

The teacher waved her arms for the children to stop, but the chanting continued.

"Shit Stain. Shit Stain. Shit Stain. Shit Stain. Shit Stain."

The teacher ran to her desk and grabbed an air horn. She let the horn blow until all the children were covering their ears. When she stopped, she fell into her chair. "You deal with them," she said to Champ.

"How did the The Moose grow so big?" said a boy seated in the rear. "How can I grow that big?"

"Great question," said Champ. "Fresh air, clean water, and country living is the best way to grow up big and strong, though Mario might not be the best example..." Champ corrected himself. "The Moose might not be the best example. He was eleven when he and his father fled the Los Angeles MSA, and by then The Moose was already over six feet tall. I met his father before he passed. He was a strange little man. He worked as a pharmaceutical wholesaler when The Moose was a boy and I suspect strongly that growth hormone drugs were used."

"Where do I get growth hormone drugs?" said the boy.

Champ shook his head. "You don't want that, son. Wouldn't it be enough to grow as big as..." Champ was about to point to Littlefield, who is 6'10", but the children seemed to hate Littlefield, so he pointed to Boogie instead. "Wouldn't it be enough to grow as big as our friend Boogie?" Champ corrected himself. "I mean Mace."

"I was about your height when I was your age," said Boogie. "And now I'm six feet and six inches tall. How does that sound?"

The boy nodded and smiled.

"And I'm not even sure I'm done growing," said Boogie.

The children laughed.

"Mace grew up on a bona fide backwoods homestead," said Champ. "He's a hunter, an angler, and a trapper. He the most skilled houndsman I've every known. Mace is the ultimate outdoorsman. But more important than all that, Mace understands what it means to live free."

A small boy seated in the front raised his hand.

"The young man in the front," said Champ.

"We're not tough enough to live like savages," said the small boy. His distress was genuine. "We can't sleep in the dirt. We don't want to shit in a creek and wipe our asses with leaves. We want to work in the city core when we grow up."

The other children were nodding in agreement.

"The modern, upwardly-mobile megacity dweller is a myth," said Grace.

"That's not helping," said Boogie. He pushed Grace aside. "You've been mislead, kid. Individuals who choose to live in the wild enjoy a life superior to the vast majority of people living in the cities. I sleep on a mattress filled with wool and cotton. When I'm at home, I do my business in a big, comfortable outhouse. I milk my goats. I enjoy eggs from my own chickens. I hunt and I fish. In the summers, I tend a garden full of medicinal herbs. And Champ and I are part of a community that has built and maintains a food forest."

"Insurrection," whispered Champ.

"Huh?"

"Call me Insurrection," said Champ. "We're using stage names."

Littlefield stepped forward. "My community also maintains a food forest," he said.

“You guys must grow a lot of pie in that forest,” said the obese boy eating a breakfast sandwich.

The children laughed.

Littlefield gnashed his teeth.

“My community maintains a food forest as well,” said Grace. “We enjoy a variety of wild-grown fruits and vegetables all year round, fruit and vegetable species from around the world that few living in Tampa’s city core will every get to enjoy.”

Boogie whispered, “And yet you guys can’t keep a pecan tree alive.”

Grace whispered back, “Because we don’t get enough rainfall for pecans, fool.”

Again the small boy seated in the front raised his hand.

“Speak up, son,” said Champ.

“How do you get your money?” said the boy. “All the best jobs are in the city core.”

“What would we do with city money?” said Champ.

“Buy stuff,” said the boy.

“And what stuff would we buy? Tampa DCs only spend in Tampa. There’s nothing we need in Tampa. And city currencies only work in their city. If I’m in the Atlanta MSA with a trillion Tampa DCs, it does me no good. I can’t spend them, and unless I’m some kind of banker diplomat, I can’t exchange them either. And city currencies expire as fast as you earn them, so you can’t save them. By design there’s no opportunity for people in the cities to build wealth.”

The boy eyed Champ with suspicion.

“And if you fail to comply with the rules,” said Boogie, “your DCs are frozen and your passport rejected. Then you sit in your sad, little city core apartment waiting to die from either starvation, radiation poisoning, or your last government-mandated injection.”

The children were without expression. Some fidgeted. Others looked away.

Boogie banged his fist on the teacher’s desk. “The truth is, children, if you live in the cities, you’re a slave.”

The children gasped. One child held up a card with a cartoon character on it and said, “The word ‘blacklisted’ has been blacklisted.”

“We don’t use that word,” said the teacher.

“Slave?” said Boogie.

Again the children gasped.

“That’s the one,” said the teacher.

Christopher laughed aloud. “Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought,” he said.

The children stared blankly.

“George Orwell,” said Christopher. “1984.”

More blank stares.

“So then what word do you use when discussing slavery?” said Christopher.

“We call it the S-word,” said a girl with dark bruises on her face. “And we don’t use that word because it’s a bad word.”

“Slave. Slavery. Slave,” said Christopher. “Slave. Slave. Slave.”

“Shut your mouth,” said the girl with the bruises.

“You kids are so stupid,” said Christopher.

“You’re stupid,” said the girl with the bruises.

“You’re a slave,” said Christopher. “You’re all slaves.”

The children were silent with shock. The girl with the bruises started crying.

“We’ll kick your ass, little man,” said one boy.

“I’m not scared of you,” said Christopher. “I’ll fight all of you dumb kids at once.”

Champ hid his face in his hands.

“I’m T. Christopher Gorelick,” said Christopher.

The children were silent for a moment. The girl with the bruises stopped crying. “No you’re not,” she said.

“I am,” said Christopher. “Champ, tell them.”

Reluctantly, Champ nodded. “He is.”

There was an explosion of rummaging as the children dug through their packs, each retrieving a book from the KFX Wrestling Federation young adult book series by T. Christopher Gorelick.

“Those are on the contraband list now and you kids know it,” said the teacher. “If you bring them in here again after today, I will take them away for good.”

“What’s the contraband list?” said Christopher. No one answered.

“You wrote BitchCraft Puppy Rescue?” said the girl with the bruises, her manner indicating disbelief.

“Yeah, I wrote BitchCraft Puppy Rescue,” said Christopher.

“You wrote Sergeant Draco Vs The Sasquatch Dance Off Academy?” said another boy.

Christopher chuckled. “Yeah, that’s a good one.”

“But you wrote it?” said the boy.

“If you see the name T. Christopher Gorelick on the front, then I wrote it.”

“You wrote Moose and the Mystery of the Planet Nephilim Prison Riots?” said another.

“Yes!” said Christopher.

“You wrote The Insurrection Handbook of Psychological Manipulation and Psychological Self-Defense for Kids?” said another.

“That’s Champ’s material,” said Christopher. “But I hammered it into a story line. So, yeah, I wrote it.”

Littlefield stepped forward. “BeefCake A.D. doesn’t currently appear as a character in the KFX Wrestling Federation book series because exclusive commercial use of the BeefCake A.D. likeness was sold to The Sitting Bull Lakota Pemmican Company. They make beef jerky. Who likes beef jerky? I’m on the packaging. It’s a big deal. But we’re working to modify that agreement, and soon

BeefCake A.D. will be featured in his own KFX book series: BeefCake A.D. verses something or other, I don't know, a lake monster, or aliens, or whatever."

"No one wants to read that," said the girl with the bruises.

"Go wait in the hall, pig man," said the obese boy eating a breakfast sandwich. "Oink. Oink. Oink."

All the children laughed.

"Maybe it would be best if you waited outside," said Champ.

Littlefield hung his head. Grace gave Littlefield a pat on the back as he slowly exited the classroom. When he was gone, Christopher continued.

"All of my stories are about escaping slavery," said Christopher.

The girl with the bruises scowled at him, so he corrected himself.

"All of my stories are about escaping S-word-ery," said Christopher.

The girl smiled. Her smile revealed a broken front tooth.

"It was hard at first," said Christopher. "I was a clueless teenager when my father and I left the New York MSA. I believed everything I had been taught about the reservation lands, but I later learned that none of it was true. Global Governance didn't allocate lands to savages. The real reservations are the 162 metropolitan statistical areas around the world that more than ninety-nine percent of all living humans have been crowded into. The MSAs are the real reservations, where people live in darkness and ignorance of nature and reality. They live on top of each other, with no privacy. Every move they make is surveilled. And they have no claim to the profits achieved from their own hard work. They have no power, no voice, and they own nothing."

"They own everything," said one boy with extreme acne. "No one can own a thing. Everyone owns everything, collectively."

Christopher looked around the classroom to see if the boy had read that last part from a poster. He had. "Sorry, kid, but you've been lied to," said Christopher. "Private ownership is alive and well in this world. Global Governance is just an elaborate facade for corporate interests that have been working to consolidate wealth for a very long time. They've created a world of masters and S-words. And now they're claiming ownership over all land, sea, and air on the planet, and even people. If you live in an MSA, you don't even make decisions regarding your own body, which means you don't own your body, which means your an S-word."

The children looked horrified.

"But good news, kids," said Christopher. "There's a better way. The power to escape the plantation is within us all. Those who claim ownership over us know that their claims only have as much power as we give them..." He turned to the boy with acne. "Their claims only have as much power as we give them, collectively. That is where all humans needs to come together, not in ownership, but in defending one another's right to self-ownership, in defending one another's right to be individuals and all the freedoms that come with being an individual."

The children were smiling now.

"I live free like I could never have imagined as a child. I fly all over the continent in a chouxnut-powered mid-lift helicopter with a bunch of meatheads. We even flew all the way to Tokyo once. It was awesome. I get paid to write stories. I write about freedom, about a world without masters and S-words,

----- He tossed the book aside. "And I have more wealth than I know what to do with. I'm not getting paid in worthless DCs that only spend at the company store. I have piles of alternative currencies and credits, and gold and silver, and platinum and copper, and all kinds of stuff hidden away that spend everywhere I go in one way or another. That's real wealth, unlike a digital wallet with a few DCs set to expire in a month."

The children were glowing with excitement.

"There's a whole network of parallel societies that have formed outside of the MSAs. They have their own currencies, their own economies, their own decentralized digital infrastructures, their own information networks. The laws of the MSAs are only an echo where I come from. There's music and arts, film, literature, and of course wrestling theater. There are self-sustaining communities that work with nature instead of against it, and everything they do serves to expand freedom. They don't compete for power with the banker criminals that build the MSAs, they ignore them, or work around them where they can't be ignored. There are all different types of people out there, living together in peace, because they share one simple ethic: no masters, no S-words."

The teacher scribbled something on her pad and it appeared on the classroom whiteboard: *NO MASTERS! NO S-WORDS!*

"No masters, no S-words," said one child.

"No masters, no S-words," said another.

"A love of professional wrestling is the only thing the world within the MSAs has in common with the world outside. Wrestling theater is the lowest common denominator of all human cultures. After my father and I left New York, the first group of people we met were salvagers. We needed to trade, we needed information, but we didn't have anything they wanted. They had no use for our credits. They weren't interested in our food rations. The only things we had that they wanted was my WrestleMania 83 tee-shirt. That's when I knew I was going to survive and thrive in this new world. Well... that, and also when I learned that chouxnuts provide free, unlimited, clean energy, and that I would be able to take hot showers again on a regular basis."

"Hot showers are essential," said Grace.

"The point is, it won't be easy at first," said Christopher. "But who cares about easy? The easiest thing in the world is to be an S-word with a master that takes care of all your needs. And once you're completely dependent on master, he'll even decide for you what your needs are."

"No masters," shouted one child.

"No slaves," shouted another.

"You kids are awesome," said Boogie. He pushed back a few desks in the front, children and all, to widen the space around him, then he showcased a series of ridiculous dance moves that required an extreme level of athleticism and included him spinning upside-down with only the top of his head connecting with the floor.

The children stood and cheered.

Grace did a flip, landing in a headstand on the teacher's desk.

The children gasped in awe.

From her headstand, Grace launched herself into another flip, ripping the ad poster for the Tampa Armed Forces from the wall as she landed in a superhero pose. “No masters,” she shouted.

The children jumped and clapped and cheered.

Following her lead, the teacher ripped the Tampa MSA flag from the wall and threw it on the floor. “No slaves,” she shouted.

The children were dancing and punching at the air.

The teacher then lifted from her desk the stoneware mug that Champ had gifted her.

“Let’s not get too crazy,” said Champ. He laughed nervously.

The teacher held the mug over her head, clutching it sidelong, preparing to throw it. Her smile was maniacal.

The children cheered on their teacher. They were insane with laughter.

Champ waved at the teacher and pleaded with his eyes. He folded his hands in prayer and pressed them to his lips.

The teacher smashed the mug on the floor.