

# Valkyre - 10 years, 2 months, 3 weeks, and 4 days later.

---

The air around the Valkyre Military Academy smelled like summer. The early morning pollen shower struck fear into all the allergic students. Pollen wasn't the same stuff anymore. Thanks to multi-billion dollar pesticide corporations it was more like napalm. Hunter, a long haired Asian teen pulled his blanket over his head as the alarm clock went off. Nathaniel was already up. He sat Indian style on top of his already made bed with his head buried in a thick combat methods book. The room was decidedly grayscale, all function no form. Nathaniel had one picture of his sister who he had to raise alone after his mother ran off after some younger man. After ten seconds of his roommate making no attempts to come to his rescue, Hunter's hand poked out from under the blanket and began blindly probing for the snooze button which seemed like it was able to move to avoid being pressed. Or maybe it was only his sleepy fingers groping as if the dreadful device had a bra strap. Finding nothing but the drawer knob, he sat up. "Why don't you go back to sleep? You don't have class for another five minutes. Not to mention you could really use the extra beauty sleep," Nathaniel said, eyes never leaving the page. "Question. Why is it that I'm the one just waking up and yet you're the one with the morning breath?" said Hunter. "It's like an amorphous cloud of noxious gas trying to strangle me." He pressed a button on the alarm clock, putting an end to its shrieking. Nathaniel cracked a weak smile as he stopped to turn the page. "Huh?" Nathaniel hadn't heard him. It wasn't as if he was talking under his breath. He just wasn't paying attention. "Never mind," said Hunter. "You got a test this morning or something?" "Nah," Nathaniel said softly. Whatever, he thought. He didn't have time for early morning conversation anyway.

After a minute of admiring his own face in the mirror he went to work on getting ready for class. As soon as the automated door lock clicked he remembered he wasn't carrying any books. As soon as the door opened again, several objects hurled through the air almost hitting him in the face. It was a close call but he caught them all in time; his books. His roommate had the memory of an elephant and even though he wasn't paying attention he knew Hunter's behavior patterns enough to know that he had left unprepared. After all, he was a creature of habit. "I don't know whether to thank you or throw these back," said Hunter. "It's a thin line between love and hate, or so they say." It was more than that. Nate knew Hunter could catch them and liked doing things to test his cat-like reflexes.

Hunter arrived in front of the door of his first class. Some of the kids called it church because of its effective ability to induce sleep better than a pill. It was an early morning history class and the instructor looked older than half of the men he taught about. He was one of the few civilian instructors at the academy. Much of what went on was strictly classified so few civilians were allowed to work here. Hunter turned the knob slowly using the stealth techniques he had learned from his ninjutsu training. He was the only one who had mastered the class yet the ninjutsu instructor had no knowledge of who he was. It was the same thing with all of his combat training. He was the only student on campus who had knowledge directly downloaded into his brain. As the door inched opened Hunter's eye's met those of everyone else in class. Alderin Thompson, the fifty-seven year old instructor, pulled the door open the rest of the way which almost made Hunter fall over the threshold. "Where's your pass, Mr. Hunter?" Mr. Thompson said. Hunter knew how much he hated to be interrupted in the middle of one of his stories. Hunter pulled a slip of paper from his history book. It came from a pouch in the back cover that usually held an interactive disk. Crystal matrices were better at data storage but discs were still the best when the medium had to be two dimensional. "Got it right here." "You don't have a bunch of those in there, do you?" Hunter closed the book just as Mr. Thompson leaned in a little to get a better view. "Never mind. This is signed and dated anyway so have a seat. I was just in the middle of telling the class how I led my hyper dodge ball team to the final four." Hunter didn't know what was worse, going to history without his usual caffeine rush or hearing a story he had already heard twice before. As the story was told, Hunter's mind wandered until suddenly he was laying face up on a table with shadows hovering over him. He felt something cold all throughout his body. It felt like inside of his body was any icy indoor pool and he could feel something swimming there. He couldn't even blink his eyes but he heard and felt everything that was going on.

"Core module is green for insertion. All five processors are running synchronously with his biological systems." "You are positive there is little chance for infection? We cannot afford any complications." "Yes I know. Everything is fine. I tested the assembly code on each and every subsystem myself. I am going to suggest; however, that we upgrade his RNA RAM by another twenty terabytes to handle the extra instruction sets." "Dr. Simmons, are you saying that you can give individual instructions to each of the nanomachines now?" "Yes. We are sending the data in binary burst packets routing the data streams through the nervous system." "Wouldn't commanding a legion of nanoscopic machines slow his brain down?" "What we are going to do is build neural pathways that will shorten the amount of thought that will be required to execute a command. The command will be sent to the module for processing where it will be broken down and tasks assigned to the nanomachines based on their proximity to the target location within the body." "What do the other investors think about this?" "They think in terms of money which is completely based on results and earnings speculation. They are too anxious for its completion." "So doctors, this is the production model? I was expecting something else. I'm sorry. I heard some rumors which is part of my reason for being here today. Isn't there another model?" "Well actually the prototype was lost by Cybertronics. There was a minor

mishap. The prototype had no control module. He had direct access to his nanomachine units. His brain malfunctioned under the extreme output. There was nothing we could do. By the time we got there, it had flat lined." "It?" "It was more machine than man, you see. Please excuse me. It's easier for us to work if we don't think of our products as human beings." "I see." "This one has a central processing control module with a two-way pipeline from the module to the brain so his senses are enhanced by sensors. We refer to him as the advanced model." Those last words echoed in his mind; advanced model. The light pouring through the windows began to reawaken his mind to the outside world where once again he was the center of attention. "So? Are you even listening to me? I was asking you a question. I don't think the lady in front of you has the answer written on her bottom." "Maybe not to your question, sir." The class laughed as the girl turned around frowning and blushing all at the same time. She was embarrassed but pleased by the feeling that the shallow attentions of her classmates would, at least briefly, regard her as a sexual object. However in fifteen years she would learn to dispise men for the same thing. The bell rang as the laughter immediately turned into motion. "Can I see you after class, Michael?" asked the teacher. He nodded. He hated hearing his first name. It was enough he had to write it on all his papers. As far as he was concerned he hated the man he was named after and wanted no part of him; not even his name. It belonged to his father. He was a devoted catholic but an abusive husband and an almost non-existent father. Everyone else left while Hunter stayed in his seat. "Today is registration so I won't keep you long. I have specific instructions from your doctors to excuse your tardiness, your absences, and I'm even supposed to excuse you from over fifty percent of the homework I assign. I have no instructions; however, to tolerate bad behavior from you. You are an amazing student. You score higher than any kid I have ever taught, but I can't allow you to disrupt other students who don't have your learning ability. If I was your legal guardian I'd drug you up with behavior mods. You're free to go, but I don't want to have to talk to you about this anymore." "I got it, Mr. Thompson. For what it's worth, I'm sorry." "Alright, just don't make a habit of it." His head doctor wanted to see him. She was a beautiful woman with long red hair. She was the best looking nerd he ever thought he would see. The academy was a smaller version of the Shadow Ridge base. All the buildings were arranged in a multi-layered circle around the courtyard with the outer buildings taller than the inner. It was arranged that way to protect the inner-most buildings which included the administration building, the medical facility, the control center, and the barracks. The sideways arches made the archetecture especially tough. Several kids were playing in the courtyard's fountain. Their parents were here to register their older siblings. Many of them were glad to get away from home, but most of them were upset they couldn't go to public school like 'normal' kids. Hunter out-ranked them and most of the other students as well. The whole military ranking system was used to motivate students through healthy competition. It worked to some degree, but there were always students who didn't care about rank and made fun of the students who did. Maria was sitting on the rail, waiting outside of the medical building. She motioned for Hunter to come with her finger. Hunter searched the crowd as he walked over to his head doctor. "We have a meeting to go to this morning. You could have another surgical procedure this afternoon." "Why?" "I told you to stop

asking that. These things must be done," she said as she got off the rail and started towards the administration building. Hunter followed closely behind. Today, something in her voice reminded him of his mother which could only mean one thing. Something was bothering her greatly but she couldn't talk about it. That made him uneasy. She hadn't said what this meeting was about so it probably had something to do with whatever was bothering her. He jogged in front of her for a second to open the door for her. "Thank you," she said with a weak smile. She glanced at her watch as she walked inside the lobby. It was crowded. The new students stared as they walked past. This was the first time in a very long time Hunter had felt out of place in his uniform. It was worn so often, it was never thought of as odd or irregular. Military academies like this one that went from grades one to twenty meant that they would be on top of the list for all post grad scouts and top paying careers. Their training was highly sought after but it wasn't just that. Every college and every business received a rating based on their performance and patriotism. This rating system was started by Dr. Charles Bonai and it bore his name as the Bonai rating. The higher the rating was for a business or institution the easier it was for them to do business. The top 10 companies on the Bonai scale were also the top grossing companies in the world. The administrative building looked nothing like the others. From thousand credit paintings and sculptures to the chandeliers overlooking the glossy marble floors and embroidered carpet, it looked more like a high-priced hotel than a military installation. The elevator door opened and a couple officers greeted Maria whose real name was Kora and Hunter whose real name was first just a label on a test tube. "Maria Dellar?" "Yes." Maria pulled Hunter into the elevator. One of the officers pushed the button for the fifth floor. Hunter looked at their reflections on the elevator doors in front of them as they closed, not saying a word. The doors opened again and the two officers walked out in front. There were two guards posted outside of the conference room. They grabbed one handle each and pulled the doors wide open revealing a large smoky room filled with people. Of those in attendance were General Titus, Admiral Reginald Duke, the once retired Maxwell Stone, an ambassador to the Black Pyramid Zenaga Dorant, Shadow Ridge executives William Chin and Erica Knight. Standing recipients of the second hand smoke were mostly doctors from the academy and Shadow Ridge: Anthony Biggs, Erin Starkov, John Lewis, Steven Ho, Samuel Chang, Stewart Mitchell, and chief surgeon Jean Paul DeMarco. There were two free seats at the table. As Maria Dellar and Michael Hunter took the two seats, the doors shut and the room grew quiet. "It's good to finally meet you, Michael. Do you know who I am?" "General Titus, I presume; evident by the rank on your uniform, sir." "Yes, and I am here with some friends of mine who wanted to see you." "What we want is to prepare you," said Admiral Duke. "Prepare me for what exactly, sir?" General Titus answered for the admiral. "I wasn't going to get into that yet. What I'd like to do first is just see how you are doing. You are a big investment. Some of these people here have contributed small fortunes to making you into the most dangerous weapon in our arsenal." "Excuse me?" "General, we told him it was to cure his disease," coughed a doctor. "What?! Look here son, this project may have started as a means to save your life but now it's much more than that as you are about to find out. Admiral Duke?" The Admiral turned slightly in his chair. "Since your biological enhancements are working so well with

your body the government has decided that those enhancements will be modified and enhanced to serve your country. This will be payment for all the hardware that's been keeping you alive. Two point three trillion credits in research and development is no laughing matter. The government wants to see its investment pay off and that's what we are going to do. All of us here were involved with either the design and development, or the financing of this project and everything that went into it." "The government decided?" Hunter questioned. "I never wanted to say this to any one, son, but you are officially property of the United World government. All you need now is a U.W. mint stamp on your ass." "What is this, Dr. Dellar?" asked Hunter. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to find out like this." "Was I ever even sick?" "Don't be ridiculous," remarked Titus. "Of course you are. You may have been lied to in the past but it was for your protection. I'm sure of it. Now I'm not going to yank you any further. Show him the video," said General Titus. "There is only one job you will have to do. You will be trained and given more combat offensive components and upgrades. Your training will be supervised by that man there, Maxwell Stone. He was a war hero and highly qualified. He'll be taking over as the President of this institution." "Excuse me, sir, but what is the job?" asked Hunter. "Naturally. Roll the clip." Admiral Duke cleared his throat. "This is raw footage of a war unlike anything you have ever seen before. This war was very quiet and left little evidence. A hundred and fifty bodies were recovered, killed by one man. All the coroners say the cause of death of all was the same thing. They all had large lacerations or severed limbs as result of at least two different types of unknown metal, very dense but possibly lighter than air since they can't comprehend how any man could be that strong based on the forensics." "That's impossible." "It should have been impossible but as you can see, one hundred fifty men lost their lives at the hand of one lone swordsman. We want you to kill this man. You kill this man and you are free to do whatever you want for the rest of your life. Back in the first official year of the new millennium over a thousand people died in a single attack. Terrorism became the threat of the new millennium. It was a war that we didn't know how to fight. That was the beginning of the surveillance society. They were hidden and we were exposed so we instituted the Anti-terror Guardian Agency, the A.G.A. The A.G.A acted as a central intelligence command unit that controlled and operated commando units that went after the terrorist cells. Congress voted that this wasn't enough after more disasters happened. That's how we ended up with the global satellite sweeps and bio-chips. We have computers linked to every surveillance camera in the world. We have files on everybody: who they are, where they go, what they do, and even what shade of yellow their piss is. That's how you fight terrorism, boy. Face recognition stops them before they can even buy food. Believe me, my father didn't vote for these changes without a lot of thought and consideration. He didn't want to take freedom away from everyone in order to find less than one percent of the world's population. But then hackers came along and changed the game once again. Every time we evolve the military to solve a threat a new one appears, more sophisticated than the last, causing us to evolve just to keep up. I don't know if we're trying to keep up with them or if it's them simply trying to keep up with us. Suddenly, a two man team could disrupt and entire economy. Your target is possibly the smartest, craftiest, skilled terrorist we have ever seen. He's believed to be aided by a first class elite

hacker. He's an expert martial artist and samurai swordsman. We have obtained battle data that when loaded into you will allow you to fight like him." "Maneuvers which are grossly superior to our own. He's either undergone years of elite training or he's like you," said Titus. "Hunter, you are the only one that can stop him." "Why can't you just shoot him?" asked Hunter. "Zenaga?" "For centuries, mankind has relied on guns to kill and protect. This man has been trained to kill with a weapon that will never jam, never run out of ammo, never make more than a whisper, and never miss. He's a hunter that only comes out at night. He can vanish into a shadow. He can stalk his prey like a sniper. He hears a shot and he's gone. He has no reason to fight our defense forces so we have no way to draw him out into the open or mobilize troops. You play by his rules or you don't play at all. Of course there were times when our men were able to get clean shots off but even with computer assisted targeting no one has been able to hit him. We've closed in with fully automatic weapons only to have them shooting at phantom images until he could get close enough to decapitate them. "He sounds like some kind of ninja," said Hunter, thinking out loud more than anything else. "What did Asia Command have to say?" "They claim he's not one of theirs. The Triad doesn't know. The Mafia doesn't know. No one's saying anything except to point fingers at someone else." "My people studied his movements and have determined that he can only be killed by someone powerful like himself; like you."

"His powers are inhuman. He fights as if possessed by a demon," said Zenaga. "Maybe he is," said Stone. "You can't be serious." Hunter looked at Maria but she looked away. "We've got Cooper, one of our top intelligence agents, working in the area you see here right now. We believe some Xtians are in league with the devil and practice all kinds of black magic and that voodoo witchcraft stuff. Demon possession has always been a theory when an Xtian manages to take down seasoned troops. We only truly know what we've seen, which isn't much." "One question," said Hunter. "Do I get a light saber?" "It's time to get serious, son. This is a real threat." "I'm sorry, sir. So let me get this straight. You want me to kill a man who looked like he was flying vertically in his video clip and who you don't think can be killed by a regular human being. Do you even know his name?" "Yes. He's calling himself Zealot X."

1 Week later. A cold frosty night under a blanket of stars. The city of NeoEden was also called the city of dancing lights because of the movement of all of its holographic displays. There was even a ceiling necessitated by intense solar radiation. You couldn't walk out from under it without instantly getting skin cancer. Fortunately the ceiling stretched far and wide and was being added to daily. As the ceiling spread, with its built in UV protection, grass, trees, and animals were able to spread out as well. And every now and then everyone looked up because some mega corporation had managed to purchase an advertisement to display on the ceiling so that everyone could see it. Populated by 15.5 million people, absolutely the most technologically advanced city on the planet was home to the largest industries: electro-mag vehicles, electro-mag weapons, microbial robots, nanobots, ... Entire buildings were remotely operated over the internet just to have a presence here. NeoEden got its name because of the huge "forest" of vertical farms powered by the Raey Laser Tower. In each tower a column contained a

highly controlled pillar of dirt. Roots grew around a porous mesh webbing that delivered water, vitamins, and minerals to the soil. The tops of the buildings allowed water to come in and filtered out any undesirable pollutants. Each of these towering buildings had greenery growing out of its sides as the construction made no attempt to halt growth, but the 'petals' of the buildings were solar petals used to catch sunlight while the Raey Lazer tower received microwave energy from a solar power generation station in space. After converting it into tightly compacted and aimed microwaves for fast transmission to the planet surface, The Raey then distributed the energy into the the utility Layer where all the 'wires' were hidden. Most of these wires were simply thick tunnels with 'energy pushers' creating segments. This was born out of a new field of science called Smart Energy. In Smart Energy, power and data were combined so that power was sent in burst packets with a data header that told the energy pushers, the circular walls of receptors and emitters, where the power had come from, and where it was going. When someone's home was running out of power, the large battery array sent an electronic request for power. As soon as the request was received the account was debited and a burst of energy was instantly delivered, charging up the home battery which wouldn't run out for about 13 days.

The Raey started as a power lazer array that was used to absorb and intensify solar rays and use them as a planetary defense weapon. The lazer had an intensity rating so high that it was believed that if a person tried to touch the lazer their finger would vanish and be 3 galaxies away before they realized the slighted heat. Finding work was always based on what program you chose in school. Degrees were abandoned for a new system of specializations. Each science had its own specializations and those unfortunates who had none had no choice but to service the bots and machines that did most of the labor and take jobs that required interpersonal relationships. Whatever novelty there was in having android receptionists and customer caregivers quickly wore off and the waste management system flooded with the bodies of over a hundred thousand slaved androids meant to take the place of a human. Humans absolutely hated talking to a simulated version of themselves. It was totally inauthentic and a waste of time to explain to a machine what they meant when they said things their personality chips didn't recognize. The best ones were made by only a handful of companies that claimed to be able to synthetically produce real emotions. They combined these different personality trait chips together like computer enthusiasts would build their own computers out of parts. Most of the best chips weren't even compatible and it would cause the droid to constantly shut down while a blue error screen complained false warnings about memory leakage or contamination. Most people here had high paying jobs as they exported their technology to the rest of the world. Those who didn't were left behind and often turned to criminal activity in order to make enough money to buy a regular car with rubber wheels that was four to five times the price of a magCar that was made to run only on magnetic streets and auto-stack garages.

Competition between the haves and have nots was rough. But the rich competed so furiously with each other for ultimate supremacy that they made special jobs that poor people regularly trained. Hacking was the hardest to do, but the most attempted because it had the biggest payoff. Rich people were too afraid to get caught hacking so they always paid others to do it for them. In some places it was much more organized and bosses were paid in order to control handlers who were the ones who actually contacted hackers. This also was structured in order to protect the rich from the hackers they employed. When things went south they called NetHunter, the most brutal but legitimate company, at least on paper. They provided security, not hacking, at least on paper. Even though the ceo was rumored to be a Legendary Hacker that was mostly just to scare hackers into believing they were outmatched. His real reputation as "Vader" was made by what he did when he caught hackers. Hackers weren't supposed to exist. Their job was highly illegal since it breached international security laws even if you were just hacking free donuts. So there was no system that gave hackers any protection. And thus, when they were apprehended by NetHunter, the company simply had no record of ever killing anybody by the hacker alias whatever because that person didn't really exist. They were just a false name created by some gamer trying to impress girls. Every war attempted by hackers against NetHunter always ended in a trail of dead bodies. NetHunter always won ...at least on paper.

```
X:> console.exe?login=master weaksecurity = sector(this).security.subsystems;
weaksecurity.satelitescan = rescheduled(#NOW+1.5 hr); weaksecurity.speedlimit = 333MPH;
weaksecurity.audio.microphones(all).off(3); weaksecurity.audio.microphone(1273x340).on(save to:
#trashfile) >> (conv mode) activate on voice: female, stop recording, reset;
weaksecurity.audio.remotemanager.disabled; weaksecurity.video.cameras(all).delete(all,
#NOW+1.5hr); logout();
```

"Yeah, what do you want?" lips moving; a black device in his ear. She walked up slow, looking over her left shoulder as she approached. No one knew her name, but her call sign was Angel. She wasn't a hacker, but like other hardware tech's she too had been caught up in the war. In her case, her company was bought out by NetHunter. They made virtual reality interface equipment, thought projection equipment worn on the head, interactive holographic control kits, etc. But eight months after the buyout in which Vader somehow managed to buy up all 100% of the company's stock, she was somehow engaged to his son, the fearsome HellWalker. What other name could the son of Vader have? They were an odd pair but Angel had more than a little edge to her personality. Angel was an almost ironic moniker. "Red Dawn. What do you know of it?" she wore dark glasses more for their functionality than for their style. She was monitoring his heart rate and heat signature in the right lense. "The same thing that every other hacker knows. There was an incident. It happened at a military academy called Order. They were doing some kind of experiment, using the most high level research, believed to be government funded but rumored by some legendary hacker to have been conducted by the Church. Some red gas escaped, killed a bunch of people but was rumored to have acted as an

extreme psychotropic hallucinogen, probably to aid in a coverup since whatever the survivors saw no one could believe with any degree of certainty. Everyone has their own story about what happened, how and why. The rest is fairy tale used to scare hackers. They... these scientists... accidentally opened Pandora's box and saw the source code. And they all ended up dead. Except one." "Except two." "It's a legend. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the source is forbidden fruit, protected by daemons." "I didn't know you were of the faith," she said in jest. He wasn't in the mood for it though and gave a disinterested look. "I'm not. There's just no better words to describe what happened." "But you called it a fairytale." "It is. And you can tell your client that too. And that he or she shouldn't waste their time chasing fanciful stories." "My client is the kind that likes stories. Here's a few hundred credits. For your time." "What's this for? I didn't tell you anything." "Oh, didn't I mention that I was followed? Black magCar. Very expensive by the look of it." "No, but it would have been nice if you had. My boss likes things tidy... neat. He's the kind that likes his business clean; no dirty laundry, no paper trails. And he doesn't like stories. If I have to tell him a story about how you were followed he won't like that." "No, I suspect not." "Then who's in the magcar. I'm sure you know who it is. You're always so careful." "It's someone who thinks you're telling me everything you know." "But why would I do that?" "Because I told him that I knew your secret." "You wouldn't." He looked her over, studying her face; the subtle contours that told him she was serious. "Fine. Tell your client to meet me at the reggae party tonight at the Island, downtown. It's in club district 12." "I know where it is. I'll send the coordinates right over. I'm sure he will be pleased to meet you. He called you an important puzzle piece." "Whatever. Just make sure he comes alone."