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**So, you may have been wondering what all this business about “Helping my novel save the world” is and why I have decided to let the public read my work for free.**

**I wrote this novel with the intention of encouraging readers to help the people who suffer in Uganda, Africa. It is my goal to make readers feel a desire to donate to the World Vision Organization while being entertained by my work along the way even though the plot has nothing to do with the country itself. If you would please, donations can be made via the World Vision Website, [www.worldvision.org/](http://www.worldvision.org/)**

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Only after escaping his nightmares was he able to wake up. Nolt slowly opened up his eyes and then examined the infirmary room around him. Despite regaining his consciousness, something still felt fantastical about everything surrounding him.

Where the hell am I? he wondered. He had no idea how or why he was waking up in an unfamiliar bed. He tried to sit up, but then a surge of evil nerve impulses shot down his abdomen. His body painfully dropped back into the feathery mattress.

"What happened to me?"

He looked at his chest and saw that it had been tightly wrapped with white bandages. Suddenly, Nolt remembered what he had been doing before he had fallen into his strange darkness. He had been combat training with Claybourne and Silveira.

"I must have been shot..."

His comrades, Claybourne and Silveira were a lot more adept on the battlefield than he was and one of them must have taken him out. Claybourne with his jocular pride and pie faced smile wielded with his guns as though he were playing a video game with cheat codes. He could run faster, jump higher, and do seemingly everything better than Nolt ever could. Claybourne also had more courage and a stronger name. Hunter Claybourne sounded more like a soldier's name than did Nolt Valentine. In fact, Nolt's comrades often joked about his

last name.

"Why don't you go give the enemy a bit of chocolate after we're through with them?"

Claybourne had once suggested.

"Chocolate?" Silveira had added in. "Nah, go give them some pink and red cards and then call it a deal. And if you want Nolt, if you really like them, go make out with 'em!"

Nolt had laughed along with them as if he had not cared about their stupid and ill humor, but on the inside, Nolt had taken the words to heart. Nolt knew that he lacked confidence in himself, but he had went ahead and joined the army anyways. Now that he regretted his rash decision, there was no way out; once you were within the military's grasp, there was no leaving it. Since even an honorable discharge would be a knife to his esteem, Nolt kept at his job the best that he could. Sometimes however, Nolt would try to weigh the little self-confidence he had left versus what being in the military nowadays would bring him.

It will be an adventure, he had told himself countless times, but he occasionally wondered if they always ended happily ever after.

"I don't think they do," he whispered to the empty room around him. "I've already been shot after all."

Nolt hoped that he was not on his death bed, but knew that there was every possibility that he was. That was what war was all about; shooting the enemy and killing them. Nolt was just on the worst side of the reality and if he failed to die then there would be worse consequences than death.

He guessed that he would receive his dreaded honorable discharge on account of his wounds. If not, the leaders would figure out some other way to kick him out of the military. Nolt was not the right kind of person to be a soldier. His thick glasses, flabby stomach, and weak lungs were black marks on his likelihood to remain in the service. In all reality, he was no more than a common nerd. Adding his stupid last name into the mix reminded him of

giving girls above his status flowers on that horrible day in February. Everyone could tell that he was a nerd and that most women would not date him even though he was rich. The only exception to his horrible, horrible luck was Luna.

She was his one and only girlfriend and like him, she was an outcast. Luna had naturally white colored hair and an even stranger personality. Nolt did not know why he continued to be with her; she was way too weird for him. She was a few years younger than he was and still in high school, but they didn't care about the age gap; the point was that they were prolonging their already dead relationship.

Luna doesn't even please me anymore, he reflected. Being with her is no different than being with an old best friend who you've lost touch with and no longer have anything in common. We've shriveled up...

Maybe there was no point in trying to prolong their almost dead relationship. Maybe there was no point in doing anything at all other than bringing himself some comfort from a foreign stimulus. Luna would not be able to give it to him even if she wanted to, so Nolt would have to venture out and obtain it on his own. From his bed, he looked out of his window and watched some lonely clouds drift aimlessly by. He tried falling back asleep, but was soon interrupted by the opening of his hospital room door.

"Huh, who's that?" a delusional Nolt asked the blurry figures in front of him.

"Vee, you idiot." Someone kicked his bed. "You walked right into the line of fire."

"What?" Nolt muttered. He focused his eyes onto the figure and realized that it was Claybourne.

"You heard me," the soldier said. "Felix didn't even have to aim at you. You got so metaled up that your body armor fractured your ribs."

That makes a lot of sense actually, Nolt thought. Suddenly, the memories were starting to come back to him. He had been trying to sneak up on Felix Vyse, one of the best soldiers

in the military, but he had been outdone. Felix must have positioned himself in a good area on the training field and then taken advantage of Nolt's slow reflexes.

"Really?" Nolt asked, trying to downplay the fact that he had been defeated so badly. "Did you see me? How bad was it?"

"Actually," the other blurry figure said. "Neither of us actually saw it happen. We were hiding behind some of the barriers, but we heard it happen though. Felix laughed at you after you went down."

That's Silveira for you, Nolt thought. Always bringing up the technicalities.

"So, how long have I been out for?" he asked. "What do the docs say? Am I clear to get back into the combat training?"

Defeating the legendary soldier, Felix Vyse in combat training was one of Nolt's all time goals. But in all reality, Felix was truly no less than a killing machine. Whenever he came upon his prey, he would always shoot without even a fraction of a second's hesitation. In addition, Felix also had the current record for the number of head shots in the virtual battlefield. Nolt envied him but at the same time, wanted to out do him. Nolt knew that if he could just nail Felix once, just once, that he could surpass the combat ace.

Claybourne muttered something that Nolt did not understand.

"How long?" Nolt asked. "Just say it. It doesn't matter that much."

"Well," Silveira said. "We aren't completely sure what the official amount of time is, but we overheard the General saying something like a week or so."

"That's not so bad," Nolt replied. "Once I get back into training, I'll try to get Felix again."

Claybourne shook his head. "No. You aren't going to get a chance."

Nolt's eyes looked up to meet his. Was he going to be discharged?

Silveira continued from where Claybourne had left off. "You see Nolt, we heard some

other rumors as well. You aren't going to get to train with Felix for a long time. He and the rest of his squad are going to be shipped out into combat. Our squad, squad D, is probably not going to be going with Squads A,B, and C."

"Where are they going?" Nolt asked.

"Remember how the terrorists attacked that spaceship storage warehouse not too long ago?" Claybourne asked. "The men at top have ordered for troops to be sent into outer space in order to capture them. Felix is going and probably won't be back for a long time."

Suddenly, a third person entered Nolt's hospital room. As soon as she entered, Silveira and Claybourne went silent and, despite his blurry vision, Nolt knew who it was. Her name was General Zero Se7en and she was one of the most terrifying people who Nolt had ever met. Of course, her name was not actually Zero Se7en; what the military knew her by was her codename and her real background was hidden from the rest of her comrades. Something was very special about her and those higher up in the military rankings kept it a secret from the underling soldiers of the Squads. Why she was coming to visit Nolt when he was hospitalized, he did not know, but he was certain that it was not to comfort him.

"Leave," she harshly whispered with a tone of voice that containing pure evil. Claybourne and Silveira obeyed her command without any objection. They did not even dare to bid Nolt farewell.

"Shut the door behind you as well..."

The door quickly slammed shut behind them and then the General walked back over to it and locked it behind them. Nolt did not attempt to communicate with her; such an action would have endangered his life.

Zero Se7en took the liberty of talking first. "You're still alive."

Nolt could not determine if she was waiting for a reply or not, so he weighed the effect of giving her one. Since it was better not to create small talk with a higher ranked officer,

especially with the officer who was in his presence, Nolt stayed silent.

"Feel lucky that your body armor nearly caused your ribs to puncture your lungs, but didn't?"

Nolt took a moment of silence in order to be certain that she was not going to say anything else. "Yeah, I guess so. I'm very fortunate to have survived Felix Vyse's attack."

Zero Se7en frowned. "No. You are wrong. So very, very wrong. Let me put your situation into simple man's context for you so that maybe you can grasp a simple understanding of how incorrect you really are. How about an analogy? Would that make things clearer for you?"

"Sure," Nolt said, not sure of what she was talking about.

The General walked back over to his bedside and stood over him. "Let's say that we are at a race track; a horse racing track. And let's just say that a somewhat decent horse is in the middle of a race and then trips. It falls to the ground, breaks a leg, and thus loses its race for glory. What do you think that the owner of that horse does afterwards?"

Nolt took a moment to consider an answer. What answer would please the General?

"I suppose that the owner would pull the horse off of the track, take it back to it's stable, and then let it rest for awhile. You know, to let it recover for it's next race."

"You are wrong," Zero Se7en replied coldly. "What you have described to me never happens in the real world. You have been living in a world of fantasies and optimism when you are actually in a world of brutal realities and industry. What happens is that the owner will shoot the horse because it is no longer useful to him. They kill the broken horse."

"Wait," Nolt exclaimed, catching on to her message. "Are you saying that you are going to kill me because I'm hurt?"

Zero Se7en shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps. That was the result within the analogy, but whether you will live or die depends on whether you can prove that you are still of use to

me."

"What can I do then?"

"I have heard that you are the lowest ranked in your squad as far as combat goes. Now that you are injured, it is even more likely that you will be killed on the battlefield if we sent you in there. You must find another way to show me that you are worth keeping alive. You have thirty seconds."

"What?" Nolt yelled. He tried to think as quickly as he could, but the pressure from the General caused him to jumble up his thoughts and to lose all sense of logic. He came up with no ideas that would save him.

"Nothing?" Zero Se7en asked. "Not even the slightest reason as to why I should save you?"

Nolt considered mentioning Luna, but there was little chance that she truly loved him and even less of a chance that the General would believe that he had a girlfriend. He was trapped.

Zero Se7en drew a pistol from within her military uniform and before Nolt could react, she had already positioned the barrel directly in front of his nose.

"Say a word," Zero Se7en said, "and you will die brutally. Scream or resist me and I will leave nothing of you for anyone to collect for your funeral. What will you do?"

Nolt trembled in fear as sweat dripped down his face. Were all soldiers sentenced to death if they were injured in training? What did the General have against him? Nolt knew that he had to do something, so he foolishly kicked his leg upward into her stomach.

"Nice try," Zero Se7en taunted, completely unharmed by his act of desperation. "Your leg is too weak though. Your muscles are puny, your will is weak, and your ability to survive in combat is futile. What else will you do, Nolt Valentine?"

Nolt did not respond. She was walking him into a trap where he would talk and she

would shoot him.

"Good, good," she said. "You did not respond. At least you have good judgment or so I have heard. Rumor has it that you are a fairly decent chess player."

Nolt nodded. He often played in his spare time and had beat nearly everyone who had played him in his squad, but when put up against the minds of people like Claybourne and Silveira, it was hard not to win.

"Play me," Zero Se7en challenged. "I would like to see if your skills are nearly as perfected as people say that they are. If you can beat me, then I will spare your life. You may speak freely now."

Nolt was uncertain of what to say now that he had been granted his freedom of speech, so he said what was most natural. "Where's the chess board?"

"There is no chess board."

"Then how will we play?"

"On a different board."

"What kind?"

"Of life and sudden death."

Nolt was confused by her strange manner and suspected that he had not been challenged to a normal game of chess. His intuition told him that he had walked into a trap and was about to die anyways.

"Are you ready?"

Nolt knew that he was condemning himself, but he knew that it was better to do it himself than to give her the privilege. "Yes."

The General brought her gun out again and then set it onto the bed between them. "When one of us gets checkmated, the other will take it and shoot the other. So in the end, one of us may die at the conclusion of this game."

"I still don't understand," Nolt said. "I get what happens when the game is over, but I don't see what the actual game is."

"You're already playing it," Zero Se7en replied. "I'm ahead right now, but you might be able to catch up if you have beginners luck."

She's crazy, Nolt thought. She's either psychotic or she is talking about something deeper than what I can detect or interpret. So how do I put her into checkmate and kill her before she can kill me?

"Is this really a game of life and death?"

"Do you want to find out? I'm in a better position than you are right now. You're on the track to me checkmating you."

A chessboard game without a chessboard, how interesting, Nolt pondered. If that is the only difference from a normal game besides the fact that we have no pieces to control, then the playing is reduced to nothing but a battle of wits...

"So, am I going to lose this game if I just sit here thinking and stop talking?" Nolt inquired.

"Perhaps," the General responded. "It depends on when I decide that I am going to put you into checkmate."

Suddenly, Nolt understood how the game worked. Zero Se7en had given him a clue! In order to put a person into checkmate, the player had to consciously *decide* to put their opponent into that position.

All that I have to do is take the gun? Nolt said. Is the game really that simple?

It seemed as though figuring out the procedures of the game was the game in itself. But was Nolt correct? Was his quick jump to a conclusion the right one or would he end up looking like a fool?

Can I even take the gun? he wondered. When she sees me reaching for the gun, will

she reach for it as well? If she pulls out a second weapon, then I will be the one who dies.

Either way, I guess that I'm a dead man anyways, so I guess I'd better...

His hand shot out to the weapon resting between them. A second later, the tip was pointing in Zero Se7en's direction.

"Checkmate?" Nolt reluctantly questioned.

"Perhaps."

The next event in their duel was unexpected and made Nolt question his own sight and hearing. Zero Se7en literally disappeared into thin air. In a silent pop, she was gone from the room and Nolt was left by himself with a gun aimed at the empty wall in front of him.

"What?" Nolt exclaimed. "You turned invisible!"

He reached out into the eerie emptiness around him, trying to feel for his General's body, but was unable to find even the slightest trace of her.

At first, he could find no proof that she had even entered his room except for the weapon in his hands, but he then began to notice some unexplainable aspects about everything around him. Some of his bed sheet had a hole in it that had not been there before and the ground where she had been standing had a small dent. It almost appeared as though a small bomb had gone off and destroyed all of the mass around it. Whatever had happened, Nolt could not explain it.

"General?" he questioned. "Are you there?"

There was no reply. Zero Se7en was completely gone.

He got himself out of bed and felt around the room for her, but she had obviously taken advantage of his confusion and slipped out of the open window.

There's nothing else that I can do now, but go back to bed, Nolt thought. I'd better hide the gun underneath the bed so that nobody asks what happened in here.

He put himself underneath the covers and let his wounds continue to heal. As he

drifted into a deep sleep, he thought that he saw a figure appear by his bedside, but by the time noticed it, his body had already sunken into the realm of unconsciousness.