

ALBERT

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In the Theatre, the spectacle would soon begin. Crowds swooning at the blood flowing from screaming wounds. Albert would force himself through it for another day. He would feel so brave, enduring someone else's pain and suffering. So brave he could endure any pain except his own. Endure any indignity except his loss of rank. That was all he had left. All that he thought of as his own. But the higher powers could always take it away. Remove his authority with the stroke of a pen. The push of a button. The faint glow of a dying screen.

As the introductions ended and the torturers began their arts, Albert thought; at least it's out of the rain.

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Albert had risen to the position of Offensive Missile Systems Operator (Ordinary Class). His was the physical force which carried out the mental commands of the various Admirals, Captains and Officers. Albert had undergone rigorous training to become an Offensive Missile Systems Operator (Ordinary Grade). It had taken seventeen weeks. The first ten were spent on political dogma and history. The next five were spent on the psychology of war. On the first day of the last two weeks, Albert was shown a console. On it were three buttons, one red, one white and one blue. The instructor shouted a colour and Albert had to push the appropriate button as fast as possible. After two weeks of this, the training was complete.

This was enough to keep Albert assured that no responsibility for his actions lay with himself. He was a cipher for the machinations of others. That, he thought, was the real reason that warriors followed orders. It was far easier than having to shoulder the responsibility.

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The sleek battleship sliced its way through the darkness of space. It's fine lines hiding its cargo of destruction. It took four years to build its massive ten mile long superstructure. Each inch was worked on by craftsmen. Specialists who had dedicated their lives to starship construction.

Silently, the ship approached its destination. Ahead lay four Combine Dreadnoughts. All the ships waited until they were in weapons range. Then all five launched their full compliment of missiles. A million on each side. No ship would survive the next few minutes.

The salvo hit the battleship, and Albert felt the deck buckle beneath him. Desperately, he tried to stay upright and continue his assignment. He pushed the red button again. In the screens the enemy Dreadnoughts loomed up, launching more and more missiles. He could smell the smoke and hear the welds breaking. Albert caved into his fear. In a panic he ran towards the nearest escape-pod. He saw others running. He jumped for the pod, and as he fell inside it, there was a whoosh, and the airlock slammed behind him. A shiver ran through the ship, and Albert knew it was doomed.

Rockets ignited and the escape-pod was launched from it's moorings. Once the initial g-force passed, Albert looked through the view-port. The battleship was

crumbling away to dust behind him. The battle had lasted three minutes, eight seconds.

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Albert's childhood was an ordinary one. Grown in an ex-vitro womb, from computer selected DNA strands. He was born after a five week gestation period. Brought up in a community training centre for five years, where he learnt the basics of citizenship and political doctrine. It was also here that, like the rest of his classmates, he first learnt of the war.

His formal schooling was in the college of military sciences, where he was taught to read and write. This lasted for another five years then he was transferred to a university of cultural assimilation, where he took courses in applied hate, astro-theofany and the compulsory, history of Combine atrocities.

As a special treat during the five long years at the college of military sciences, the children would be taken on field trips to the orbital shipyards. They would be shown the ranks of starships being built. They marvelled at their size and were dwarfed even more by their scale. But there were always those who asked questions. Why are we fighting the Combine? What do they look like? What do they want? Patiently, the teacher would re-state the various positions, set out the ideological differences and, logically, show how the Federate view was superior. The child would always agree the reasons and nod with a new found understanding. Albert knew from this moment that he was deeply stupid. Because, nothing that the teacher had said had any logic to it. None of the reasons, the positions or the ideologies made any sense. Albert hoped that it would become clear to him before he left these schools. It never did. By 14 he was ready to go to war.

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The escape-pod was picked up by a salvage ship, sent to recover the debris of the battle. However, he was not well received by his rescuers. Superficially, the crew of the salvage ship were happy to see him, but he could feel their disapproving stares, and he overheard their harsh comments. It was a reaction he understood.

Albert knew he was a survivor in a world that wanted martyrs. Brave young men and women ready to lay down their lives for a just cause. Ready to inspire others to work hard, produce more, and support the government. To pull together in a sense of unity of purpose. Albert was a glitch. An abnormality. He had a desire to live, and this was dangerous. One man could not be more important than the whole. You had to sacrifice yourself for the benefit of others. This had always been the way. It was what Albert had been taught. The desire for individuality crushes a society under the weight of its conflicting desires.

For this reason Albert assumed that on his return home, he would be shipped out again immediately. However, when he did make it back, he was given a curt welcome, and then sent to a Hotel for a period of extended leave.

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The only thing Albert had cared about when he was a child, was his collection of warrior toys. Among these, his favourite was the Trooper. The Trooper really belonged to a bygone age. No-one fought land battles any more, but the Trooper

figures were still produced. Albert's Trooper would take on the enemy in single combat, or rush a Combine position just in time to turn the battle.

The figure had taken some damage in previous campaigns, it had its fair share of battle scars. It represented, for Albert, all that was noble and pure about the war. He had taken it on his first flight in a Starship, and now it was floating forever in the vast chasm of deep space.

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It was the anniversary of the war. A huge celebration of national unity and a reinvestment in a common sense of purpose. There was a carnival atmosphere and effigies of the combine leaders were burnt along with political prisoners and prisoners of war.

Gifts were exchanged amongst the populace, mostly food coupons, and entertainment rations. The media broadcast service was covering all the major events. Albert watched them from his hotel room.

Word had spread through the city that Combine prisoners had arrived. Reports conflicted on which battle they had been captured at, but it did not matter. They were prisoners of war, and would be treated with the contempt they deserved. It was one thing to survive a battle. There was a shame to that, but at least you could join the fight again, and try to sacrifice yourself there. But to survive and get captured. There was no greater disgrace. The prisoners were to be taken to the theatre, tortured and killed. It would be a morale booster for the populous.

In the streets below him, the parade was in full swing. This was the one time of the year when all social gathering restrictions were lifted, and non approved music was played openly. Albert just sat in his room, and listened.

Albert could not remember hearing a song, or reading a poem or book for that matter, that was not about the war. Whether it was singing the praises of the brave warriors, listing the defects of the Combine, or talking about the stoic resistance of those back home. Every story was about the war. It was in every media station, and the source of all intellectual and scientific debate. Everyone was on the same side, and they were winning. But only as long as their casualty rate exceeded ours. All the war needed was a constant supply of recruits and volunteers. And as long as you came back from a battle, you were volunteered for the next one. Albert appeared to have that unfortunate curse of surviving.

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Over the years there had been great advancements in military hardware. The widespread use of bio-genetic weapons meant that there was little point in fighting planet side battles. However, it was pointed out that there was little point carrying on a war of conquest when all you were getting out of it was a collection of barren planetoids. No, all the major conflicts were carried out in the sterile vacuum of space. Now the fight was between the scientists working on projectile weapons and explosives, and those working on armour and electronic counter measures.

Battles were not fought for territory. It wasn't a war about controlling planets or space routes or about destroying the enemy. It wasn't really about ideology, although even to think that would be treason.

It was about control. Stability and unity were the keys. Keep a group united against a common foe and they will remain stable. Once they have experienced the benefits of

stability, they wish to maintain it. This desire for stability is how you can control the populous. By manipulation of this desire you can get them to do anything you want. It has taken Albert many years to realise this, and he could hardly believe its simplicity.

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A day or two after the anniversary celebrations, Albert decided that he needed to get some fresh air. Across from the Hotel was a small café, with tables set outside for the hardy diner. He stuffed some food coupons in his pocket, and left the room.

Crossing the road was an adventure all its own, as none of the vehicles showed any signs of slowing for him. Only military personnel received vehicle coupons, and if you were on military business you had the right of way. The result of this was that every vehicle had priority, and no one ever drove slower than full speed.

In a rare lull, Albert dashed across the street, and rewarded himself by choosing a table which had a good view of the sidewalk.

Albert enjoyed watching the women walking down the street. He didn't think of them as sexual objects, just as beautiful objects. He didn't actually treat them any differently. He just knew that he got a certain pleasure from looking at beautiful women, which he didn't get when he looked at handsome men. Anyway, it was against the law to have discriminatory thoughts of any kind. Albert didn't quite know how the police would find out if you did have an illegal thought, but he didn't want to risk it anyway. Just because something is beautiful, he thought, doesn't mean you can't respect it.

Albert sat at the Café table, and ordered a drink. As he drank it, a woman came over and sat beside him.

"The Geese are quiet this time of year." She said.

Albert looked at her quizzically.

"What are Geese?" he asked.

"Oops, Sorry." The woman said, and she slinked off into the dark shadows of the alleyways.

Albert would never claim to be the smartest person in the universe, but he was sure that he had just missed something important.

A waiter appeared beside Albert, and placed a drink in a tall glass on the table. Albert drank it, then he ordered another. In a very short space of time, Albert was drunk. Ideas lurching around his head in a haze. His fingers would not obey his commands, and did what they wanted. His mind formed spurious associations and had the audacity to pronounce them as fact. He said things he didn't mean, or understand, but still it was his voice saying them. And at points, he even observed himself as an independent witness would. Objective and remote. How delicate is the mind, he thought in a moment of lucidity, that such a simple molecule could render it insensible.

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Albert's first memory was of singing an Anti-Combine song at school. He had got to the third verse and forgotten the words. Teachers tried to prompt him, but he just burst into tears and ran from the stage.

It took them seven hours to find him, huddled in a computer room. Rolled up in insulating wire to keep warm.

He had gained demerits for not completing the song but he didn't care. He was only one of twenty children who were made to sing, but he was the only one who had been different. He knew that had to be important.

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Early in the morning the door to Albert's room was kicked in. A dozen men in black uniforms stormed in and pulled Albert out of his bed. That night at the Cafe, he thought, when he'd got drunk and started talking to strangers. They'd discovered his traitorous thoughts. He'd said you could win a battle, so why couldn't you win a war? Why did nobody talk about an end to the war? All they wanted was a particular battle to be over and for their sons and daughters to be heroes. Nobody mentioned victory. Nobody talked about what they would do after the war. Albert had said that was because the government didn't want the war to end.

The men dragged Albert to an Interrogation Centre. He had seen the building before, there was one like it every couple of blocks in every city, but he had never been in one before. It seemed to consist of corridors and rooms. No posters or inspirational tracts on the walls. No pictures of brave young warriors ready to give their life for the cause. Just acres of bare grey walls.

The men marched Albert down one of the corridors and through an unmarked door, into a room. It had one chair and a table with a computer on it.

Albert was left alone in the room for several minutes. He knew he was being watched. Everyone was being watched all the time, so he did not move. More time passed. Albert got comfortable in the seat. His eyes grew heavy, and he felt himself drifting off to sleep. Then the interrogator walked into the room.

Albert had once been told, that the best way to resist torture was to act stupid. And so he let his eyes flit around the room and bumbled nonsense quietly to himself. The interrogator was not impressed. He walked over and placed electrodes on Albert's head. As the Inquisitor walked over to a computer panel, Albert fell silent. The Inquisitor started typing at the computer and Albert was sure he could feel a tingling sensation in his frontal lobes. Then as quickly as it had started, the sensation was gone. The Inquisitor stood and walked over to Albert.

"That's all the information we need." he said "You'll be tried tomorrow."

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Albert knew that he had killed people, but he had never seen them. Without being able to witness their deaths he could justify or even ignore them. He had been told that his victims were just members of the Combine, so he could feel pride in ridding the universe of the sub human scum. But this rhetoric had never really convinced him.

He had seen his fellow warriors killed. And he had, of course, been at the torture theatres, but he had never directly caused the suffering of other on these occasions. For him, death was simply a by-product of obeying orders. It was not his responsibility and it was this that allowed him to function. Allowed the process of war to function.

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The trial started, as they always did, with a statement of charges. But as they were being read out by one of the officials the judge stopped him. Then something very odd

happened. The cameras were switched off, and the audience was removed from the courtroom. In fact, everyone except Albert and the judge was removed. This surprised Albert, as it was the audience who actually decided on guilt or innocence.

“Your crimes have brought you to the attention of higher powers” said the Judge, “they have something very special planned for you.”

Then the judge called for a bailiff, and Albert was lead out of the courtroom, and into a transport.

The transport raced along the plant’s surface. Skimming a few feet off the ground. The only people in it were Albert, the Pilot and two guards. Albert had tried staring a conversation with one of the guards, but the only reply he got was silence. After an hour the transport arrived at a spaceport. Albert was bundled into a fast Starhopper and moments later he was back in the cold embrace of space. Now he was truly bewildered. He had been sure that he was being taken to be executed. But he did not expect that they would go to all this expense just to push him out an airlock.

Albert’s room on the Starhopper was cramped and cold, but as he had expected to be in a cell, he was quite happy.

He lay on the solid mattress and let the throb of the stardrive lull him to sleep. His dreams were full of surreal images of two headed dogs chasing their tails in two directions. A giant hand swooping down to pick him out of a crowded theatre and into a chocolate bubble. In the bubble, intelligent cats performed unnatural experiments on his body and disconnected his senses. This dream was suddenly shattered by a claxon. It was a sneak attack by the Combine.

Albert was beginning to think that he attracted bad luck. Moments after the alarm went off, the door to his room slid open. A guard ordered Albert to the escape pod, and then rushed off to do something heroic. Albert knew he was never going to be hero material, so he ran to the pod. As he ran the ship was jolted by several hits. The pod was empty when Albert got there. He didn’t wait, he knew no one else was coming, so he ejected. As the pod blasted off and cleared the combat zone, Albert looked out of the view port. Then he got the shock of his life. It wasn’t the Combine who had attacked the Starhopper. It was the Federate.

Seconds later Albert saw the Starhopper explode in an intense flash. The attacking ship, some sort of Escort Class, swung through the debris and started heading for the escape pod. The pod had no controls, and the rocket engine was only good for escaping the combat zone. The Escort matched the pod’s speed, and launched docking clamps. Albert was slowly dragged into the belly of the beast. He was in a state of confusion. This could not have been an accident. Both ships were clearly marked. Albert heard the door to the pod being opened. There was nowhere for him to hide. In the doorway stood a middle aged man in a tight fitting suit. He looked down at Albert. “Welcome to the silent war” he said.

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In the hotel bookshop, Albert had bought the new booktext by Salmir. It was the latest in his “David Saint: Combat Pilot” series. The stories were always basically the same, but they were cheep, and they held a strange fascination for Albert. He had already survived a space battle, and his experience was nothing like David Saint’s. For Albert, Saint was fighting a different war. In a different time. Saint’s world was filled with heroism, with brave men and women laying down their lives for a just cause. Albert’s war had been about pushing buttons, and following orders. Nobody

had ever asked Albert if the war was just, and Albert wasn't very sure if he was qualified to answer anyway.

Philosophical discussions had never really been part of his upbringing. Like most people, Albert believed that his life was his own. That he made choices without any help from anyone else. But he could not remove himself from the culture he had grown up in. Whether he agreed with its assumptions or not, he could not unlearn them. But he also found it difficult to discover them. He was so busy trying to live his life, that he had never thought about it. This was not unusual. He may have skimmed the surface of his existence occasionally, but when he turned his mind fully to it he felt a weakness come over him. It was bewildering, awesome (in the true, original, sense of the word). It was a feeling that he found it difficult to get rid of.

There was nowhere he could turn to get any answers, other than the Federate itself. Religion had been outlawed long before Albert had been born. The State could not have allowed any independent ideological system to exist. Their view was the only view. Dissenters weren't eradicated, it was far more cost effective to ridicule them. Religion had offered the promise of hope, of a final end to history, and to suffering. But the state needed suffering in order to survive. Some had to be sacrificed for the good of the whole. It was the state which was paramount. Which controlled life and death. The state was sacred. It had always existed and would always continue to exist.

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"Truth is irrelevant." Said the Instructor. Albert wasn't too sure. He always had faith that somewhere there was truth. It was just hiding at the moment. He had been in the "Silent War" Training Camp for several weeks now. Every day was something new. Albert had never experienced this bombardment of his intellect before. In school, teaching was a matter of constant repetition. The words forever locked into the cells of his brain. But here you had to learn to think, not just regurgitate. The Instructor continued with his lecture.

"The manipulation of a concept at a fundamental level can destroy reality itself. But only in a theoretical world of our mind. If we all decide that man can breathe underwater, it does not mean we turn into fish."

After the class had finished, Albert returned to his Domicile-unit and looked out the window. Beyond its transparent security was the wild weather of the Nevol Training Centre. Nevol was a planet distant from the core worlds of the Federate. Its atmosphere, thick with poisonous gasses, prevented escape or intrusion. Occasionally Albert would see amoeba globules caught on the wind, speeding past.

During the day the sky was an orange glow, and during the night it was black. He could not hear the howl of the wind, but he knew that it was there. He had already been here for six months and still his training continued. The Silent War was a complicated business, and apparently, not to be rushed.

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Albert only had a few run-ins with illness during his brief life, and on every occasion he had decided that he did not enjoy the experience. He had known, or at least, heard stories, of warriors who feigned illness in order to escape combat. Of course, none of them ever survived their treatment. For such a treasonous and unpatriotic act, there was only one sentence a civilised society could impose. So it was not becoming ill

that worried Albert. It was the stress that came with trying to prove that he was genuinely ill in the first place.

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Albert was now ready for his first mission. To decode, alter and retransmit a Combine communication package. The packages were sent using high speed gravity wave ships. The Combine ship would be attacked by regular units. Once it was destroyed, Albert had to leave the safety of the spaceship and move through the wreckage to locate the package. He then had to bring it back aboard the spaceship, alter it, and replace it in one of the enemy ships life pods. Albert was to be transported to the battle site in one of the attacking ships, but nobody on board would know anything about his mission.

Everything went according to plan. Except that, after locating the package Albert thought it would be quicker to recode the package while inside one the Combine life pod. Unfortunately, the pod had taken some damage during the battle, and once Albert got inside, its engines burst into life. Albert was now heading towards Combine space.

Needles to say, Albert was panicking. However, thanks to the training he had received, his panic only lasted a few moments.

He had to think logically. He was in a Combine life pod, wearing a Federate space suit and uniform. He would be shot on sight. So he took all his clothes off, and hid them. If rescued by Combine forces then he could claim to have been caught asleep during the attack. He would say he saw an officer carrying the package to the life pod. A salvo hit the ship, and the officer was badly injured. He had been told the package was top secret, and ordered to keep it safe. Not only would this crate of lies save his skin, it might also make the counter intelligence easier to believe. Albert now had a plan. He could sit back and relax.

Albert wasn't relaxed for long. As he was looking at the readouts in the life pod, he saw that a ship was approaching. The systems could not tell him which side it was on. Did he start up the distress beacon or try and play dead? His whole life had come down to a fifty fifty chance. He had always relied on his luck, but there were no coins to toss now. No signs or omens he could read. Just a basic choice. Push the distress button or not. The ship was getting closer. By now it would have spotted that he wasn't a piece of wreckage. Albert would have prayed, if he had been told of the concept. Instead he just hoped, put his faith in the military, and pushed the button.

Nothing appeared to happen. The ship kept coming closer and closer. Albert didn't know if this meant they had received his signal and thought he was friendly, or if it meant that they wanted to get close enough for a clean shot. There was silence in the lifepod. Albert was now too scared even to breathe. The ship now filled his field of view. It's speed had not changed. Albert was transfixed, his mind had gone blank. All that existed in the universe was the starship. It was his future. It held his destiny. It opened it's bay doors and accepted Albert into its heart.

In the landing bay Albert slowly came back to reality, and got scared again.

For a few moments nothing happened. Then Albert saw figures slowly moving towards the escape pod. They stopped every few steps and argued with each other. There were three of them, all dressed in pressure suits and armed with rifles. They kept approaching the pod, then stopping. Then it dawned on Albert that the Combine did not have any procedures set up for the rescue of starship crews. The battles were over too quickly for anyone to survive. The Combine obviously had never heard of Albert's ability to break any rule without even trying. Albert reasoned that the Combine ships only carried lifepods for the same reasons the Federate did. Morale. If

they actually told everyone that as soon as they stepped onto a starship, they wouldn't step off, it might cause some recruitment problems.

Finally the three man team entered the pod and found Albert in his underwear. Albert rushed up to greet them. He told them the story he had concocted, and added that the information he was carrying was vital, and could not afford to be lost. Albert then asked for some clothes and to talk to the ship's commander. He would probably have to face Combine interrogators before soon, but for now, all he had to do was avoid being shot as a spy. A few moments later the commander arrived.

"Welcome aboard" he said "Jolly good to see you." This was not the reception Albert had imagined.

All the years Albert had spent in the Federate he had been taught to hate the Combine. Their ideology was evil, their society corrupt, their diet was unspeakable. But now that he was actually on board one of their ships he started to wonder. The first real surprise had been when the commander walked Albert to his temporary quarters. The layout of the Combine ship was exactly the same as a standard Federate ship. The crew wore similar uniforms, but green instead of orange. The commander had sent food to his quarters, but Albert had resisted it for some time, expecting it to be the cold baby and dog stew he had heard so much about back in the Federate. But it did smell good. And once he had given in to temptation he had to admit that it also tasted good.

After he had eaten, Albert sat looking at the data package he still had with him. Then it dawned on him that he had not yet altered the information it contained. He had started the decryption process while still in life pod, but had not completed it. He carefully opened the case which contained the package, and continued the decryption. After ten more minutes of work, the code matrix was compromised and he could access the message.

It was one word long.

It said "Welcome."

Albert was unsure what this meant. It was supposed to be details of Combine Troop movements. But "Welcome." Was certainly not what he expected. He looked round the room for a moment. There were no cameras, which was odd if this was a true copy of a Federate ship. Then the door to the cabin opened. The instructor from Nevol walked into the room and sat opposite Albert.

"Some explanation is required." He understated. "You're a very special man Albert. You have a knack for surviving. People like you cause us no end of trouble. Everyone else goes off to war and doesn't come back, but not you. You're spoiling it for everyone else. No matter what we do to confuse and kill you, you keep turning up. Well, we have decided to admit defeat. If the most sophisticated and deadly war machines the universe has ever seen can't kill you, then we just have to give up. You played by the rules, and you beat us fair and square. Now get your prize. You do want your prize don't you?"

Albert nodded, slowly.

"Good." Said the instructor. "Come with me and I will tell you the secrets of the universe."

Albert and the instructor walked out of the room and towards the bridge of the starship.

"Albert, do you know why the Combine and the Federate are fighting this war?" Asked the instructor. Albert thought for a while, and then said.

"Now that you ask. No."

“Well, I’ll tell you what it’s not about. It’s not about economics or population control, or territory, or ideology. It’s not about pride or honour, and it’s not about advancing technology or science. It can’t be about religion since we outlawed that long ago. It just kept getting in the way.

“No. This war is about one thing. Fighting. Everyone, every being, needs to fight against something.

“We had advanced so far that we had nothing to fight against. We finally had a true Utopia, everything we needed was there for us. Except the fighting. In a true Utopia there is no place for violence, no place for war or suffering or pain. But we had found that without these things, we humans would atrophy and degenerate. We were directionless, aimless, and dull. We had made Utopia, and it was killing us. So a war started, sides created, weapons reinvented. The war was engineered to last forever, with losses calculated to maintain the status quo. To perpetuate the war. Cover stories were created. The art of propaganda was rediscovered. If everyone knew the truth then they may decide they didn’t want to die, and that would throw the calculations right out.

“The hatred between the Combine and the Federate had to become real. Hate would be the lubricant of the war, allowing the fighting to continue without question. Allowing that all important suffering to be spread amongst all the people.

“By surviving you give people the false hope that they can end the war, end the suffering. Hope that things can change. To combat people like you, survivors are either trained for intelligence work and sent on suicide missions, or used as victims in the Theatres of Blood.

“But if someone survives this, then they have proven that their genetic and psychological makeup is such that nothing we can do will ever be enough to extinguish them. And so, to your prize.”

Albert and the instructor were now on the bridge. Through the viewport Albert could see a small blue green planet.

“You have shown you are not made for suffering, and so we give you pleasure. On this planet you will have everything you could not previously have dreamt of. Every sense will be pleased, stimulated, and cultivated. You will not leave this planet, but you will not want to because it is not a prison. You have survived your time in the prison. It was the life you knew, controlled, regulated, and dictated. But now you will emerge into true freedom. Along with the other survivors, your existence will now be perfection.”

Albert looked at the instructor and said.

“I think I can live with that.”