

Warp War 2019: Part One: Prelude

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"Everybody off!" Coach Anders barked as he stepped off the bus. "Don't doddle!"

"How could we 'doddle'?" Eleven-year-old Alex Berman asked the kid seated beside him. His unkempt mass of black hair bounced in union with his shrug. "The bus just parked! We haven't had time to 'doddle'!" The class hadn't even gotten into the museum yet and he already felt like he was doing something wrong.

Jake scoffed. "Well, he is the Gym teacher. Which pretty much means he's being paid to be an asshole."

"That's enough, Mr. Haas." Came a voice from behind. Mr. Kadner from Art Class. "Only warning." Neither boy said anything else as they joined the line of students funneling out of the vehicle. But they did share a laugh. And Jake checked his hair was still in place. It was brown, swept back at the top and short on the sides, and typically flawless.

Alex and his friend disembarked to see the Middleton Museum Of Culture looking back at them. Tall and grey and silver. A semi-orderly line of fifth-graders on their way in, chaperoned by numerous teachers and volunteer parents (none of them Alex's, fortunately). Donnie was lingering at the front to the bus, waiting for them. Buzzing with excitement from his cropped blonde hair to his fading sneakers. "This place is so cool!" he grinned, siding up next to Jake. "My family goes to all the displays they put on. Last's year, they had a showing of all these costumes and props from sci-fi movies! I never knew the classic *StarQuest* uniforms were so detailed!"

"How did people ever live without HDTV?" Jake's hazel eyes rolled. "Come to think of it, one of my shows drops this weekend. Maybe I'll skip school on Monday. Binge the whole season in one go."

"TV can wait," Alex snuffed. "I just want this field trip to be over so we can go to Brett's place and set up some Warp War matches. I've got some new units painted up that I want to try out." He hefted up his backpack. Which was loaded not so much with books but rather 300-some points with of a Vel'Adrini assault force. He knew without being told that his companions had their own armies waiting in their own packs. Ready to battle the moment they were free of school for the weekend.

"You're here to learn," chided Anders from the front of the line of children. "Not play with your toys."

Inside the MMOC, past a number of animated posters for upcoming displays -- half of which Donnie was already proudly set on going to -- They came to the entry proper. A large banner above double doors declaring the theme of this season's display. The reason the kids were all here.

THE WORLD IN MINIATURE: WORLD'S FAIRS FROM 1819 TO 2019 IN DIORAMA FORM

A nearby standee explained the theme for the exhibit:

Founded as a series of Industrial Expositions, the World's Fair went on to become a regular gathering of the world's brightest minds and sharpest wits. Each one, through practical

displays of technology and wild feats of fancy, inspired every person who visited to push the bounds of what is possible.

The Middleton Museum Of Culture and its patrons would like to share that inspiration with you. Here, you will find a number of the most notable Worlds Fairs recreated with a variety of crafts old and new. From intricately detailed hand-carving to high-resolution 3D printing.

Each Fair is placed within the wider context of their respective host cities, each one recreated to stand as three-dimensional postcard of urban landscapes that were. While the Fairs themselves detail the dreams of countless artists, engineers, scientists and commercial innovators. Dreams of futures that as unique and vibrant as those who imagined them.

The next standee over listed a series of list of names and photographs of artists at work designing, crafting, and painting the scaled cities. The model crafters responsible for the exhibits they were about to view. All having worked under the art direction of one Antony Bellwether.

Jake puffed up his chest and spoke in a stuffy baritone. "Remember, Class, playing with toys is a childish waste of time. Unless you're these guys. These guys get their toys put in a museum." He said it loud enough that the Coach had to hear.

"Beats a refrigerator," Alex joked back, blue eyes shining with glee.

"You were warned." For an Art teacher, Mr. Kadner could sound very strict when he wanted to. Alex turned to see him pointing at Jake. "You. Next to me, and stay there. Mr. Berman, you just volunteered to take his place in Coach's group. Mr. Breckenridge, weren't you part of Mrs. Irving's group?"

Donnie gave the man a sheepish 'what did I do?' look, but got moving all the same. Past a sign stating that high heels were not allowed in the gallery proper for the duration of the exhibit. So too did Alex, once he was clear of the ticket counter. The Coach's deep and always-commanding voice was easy enough to follow, but he wasn't in any particular hurry to catch up. His presence would be a surprise -- one not of his own making -- and Gym teachers loved to punish innocent kids for what other kids did or didn't do.

Maybe he was too focused on his worries to really notice where he was going. Or perhaps part of him was resisting getting near a riled teacher. Whichever way it happened, he took a wrong turn and ended up in the wrong room. Or maybe it was a partition? The walls didn't quite go all the way up to the lattice of overhead lights, and the jumbled sounds of other people's voices easily crossed the gaps. Blending in with the conversations and eager gasping of a few dozen folk milling about inside. None of whom were his classmates or teachers.

These 'walls,' four in total including the one he'd entered through, were covered in artifacts of a bygone time. Newspaper clippings about the Nazis, film frames of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, comic book covers featuring 'heroes' in absurdly garish costumes, movie posters of people he didn't know, cars and fancy buildings. Framed art featuring complimentary curves and geometric shapes was suspended from strong wires that were set into the partition walls.

On a richly-stained table to one corner, an old-timey radio played big-band music. It was a big, brown, brick next to a collection of things out of an antique shop. Unlike the radio, these were kept safely behind glass. Sculptures of stylized women cast in dark bronze wearing elaborate draperies of leafed in gold. Packets of old gum. Ugly, faded dolls that looked nothing at all like the cartoon characters they were meant to represent.

But the main sight that dominated the space was the floor. Or rather, was on display underneath it. Visible below wide tiles of glass or plexiglass (he couldn't say which), three-feet across or more, all held aloft via a grid work of transparent beams. Combining to form an obtuse triangle hemming an extraordinarily detailed scale model of an entire city.

NEW YORK CITY, 1939-1940 (FLUSHING MEADOWS, QUEENS), declared a placard mounted on a nearby standee. Typed in a font that was a taller than it was wide, golden white against a sheer black backdrop.

"It has to be a hundred feet across, at least." Alex whistled at the display. Stepping closer, he noticed a flash of light near the center of one side. Stepping around one patron excusing himself to another two, he followed the spark. Losing it more than once, as it would suddenly disappear in the middle of one step and then come back when he'd take a few more. When he reached it, he found not a light, but two concentric rings etched into the clear tile. Designed to catch the light from the ceiling above without obstructing the view of the item below: The Empire State Building. No larger than a foot and a half tall from the wide base to the needle-tipped spire, it would have been easy to spot without the assist. For it was far and away the tallest model of the lot. In detail, the model was a marvel of pale tan and red-brown lines. Those colors seasoned by the black and white of countless windows. The apex was an utterly gorgeous collection of curves and angles.

Kneeling down for a closer look, the boy was delighted to find someone had placed a tiny gorilla atop the toy structure. It was quite unmistakable, as were the clearly defined shape of the recessed windows and finely sculpted spire upon which the gorilla raged.

It inspired him to go looking for more Easter eggs. Moving this way and that among the people also milling the exhibit. Paying no heed to the more orderly movements of everyone else in the room, who were taking in the sights one at a time. While he didn't find anymore jokes, he did discover more of those 'pay attention to me' rings, and a thin line that drew the eye from one of these landmark markers to the next.

Many 'generic' sections of the little New York were obscured by trivia cards, delaying information on places such as the Cotton Club or Fort Wadsworth. Or cut out to make room for the thin support beams that kept the floor from caving in. But the boy could see no effort had been spared in even the less famous sections of space. It even had people! Countless, impossibly small, people! Populating the streets, sitting in cars, riding motorbikes, poking their heads out of tenement windows! And anything else one might expect a person to be doing in a busy metropolis.

And nowhere were there more 'people' on display than the site of the World's Fair. Located in Queens, the site was split into two halves. The southern half was an amusement park set against a body of rippled blue translucency labeled Fountain Lake. The north side was where all the weird stuff was. 'Weird' being Alex's term for the parts of the annual Middleton County Fair that held little interest for him personally. The farm equipment demos, the car lots, the booths selling one crazy gizmo or another. Dozens of buildings dedicated to this sort of fare seemed to be spreading out from a central plaza.

At one end of the plaza, a pond-sized oval of clear blue plastic spat up multiple streams of frozen plastic water. At the other, following a line of reflecting pools and a statue of George Washington, lay what must have been the park's star attraction. If their vast size compared to everything else could be any indicator of their popularity. A two-inch-round sphere of enamel white connected by a thin line to a seven-inch-high obelisk. This second item connected to a long line that swept around half the ball before reaching the ground level. Both of these lines were

absolutely covered in the little plastic people. A small white sign, located almost a foot away on the opposite side of a railway line identified them as the Perisphere and Trylon.

Taken by curiosity, Alex walked a quarter-circle to better read the information slip on the large structures, only to become distracted by a persistent pulse of color coming from one of them. The Perisphere was blinking a steady gold. "Huh?" A good two feet separated the surface he was standing upon and the sphere's base. He crouched lower to see if there was anything else going on with this model, the only one so far to show any sign of animation.

"Alex Berman!" The kid shuddered to hear his name called by an unknown voice. A woman in a dark grey shirt and black slacks. Museum staff. "Excuse me, I'm looking for an Alex Berman?"

"That's me ma'am," He waved sheepishly. "Before you haul me away... do you know if this thing is supposed to be-"

Golden light flooded his vision, erasing everything else. Shrieking in pain, he threw his head up over his eyes. When it passed, he could hear movement around him before he could see it. There were people moving this way and that! Had a fire alarm been pulled? *Was the museum on fire?* "Oh, n-" He shut his mouth, remembering Ms. Taylor's lesson on fire safety. *'Don't filter your breath through your hand. Stay low. Smoke will rise.'* Resolving to keep his eyes safely closed, he kept a hand over this mouth and crawled three-limbed the way he thought he'd come.

His shoulders hit something. His surprised eyes bolted wide open, seeing no fire. Only a long, white bolt of fabric. No... pants! Unsure who he was about to see, he nervously looked up to face the wearer.

The man had a strong jawline, and was dressed in a white business suit, with a blue tie its main diversion of color. That, and the blue fedora, worn at an angle. His short grey hair bore silver highlights. His good-natured cheer appeared genuine. But something about him looked off, enough to set the back of Alex's neck shivering. His eyes were a little too green, and a little too large. He reached out a hand towards Alex, and smiled with teeth the color of skin.

"Gah!" Alex screamed, stumbling backwards. Losing his balance, he started to fall towards of the bridges support struts.

Unfettered, the man clasped Alex's hand, and helped him to his feet. Then patted him on the head. "There ya' go, sport! You be careful now." The man gave him a wink and, without further comment, began walking again. With half the bridge's occupants towards a great, round silvery and white sphere.

"Uh, thanks...?" the boy muttered, heart in his throat. Trying to get his bearings, he turned to follow the progress of the other half of the crowd. Who were moving to a pointed spire that loomed well taller than its sister structure. All of them wearing clothes that the boy considered old fashioned. Every man wearing a hat. Fedoras, mostly, with the occasional flat-rimmed number of woven straw or newsboy cap. Every woman and girl wearing a dress or skirt, no exception. Where he could find a boy near his own age among the crowd, he saw them uniformly wearing short hair. Alex's own being the longest on any male he could see, and it barely reached his shoulders!

Turning back the way his unknown assistant had gone, he realized he was standing between the Trylon and Perisphere. The very thing he'd just seen flashing.

"Welcome to the world of tomorrow!" chimed a voice over a loudspeaker. "Welcome one and all to the star attraction of the Fair, the Theme Centerpiece. Take the world's longest escalator into the Perisphere and witness for yourself the promise of things to come! Democracy! A metropolis in miniature! A city of the future, bright and clean and shining and full of A union of man's ingenuity and good will!"

At the mention of an escalator, Alex's eye caught the rising line of people. The 'man' in the blue fedora was indeed rising up an escalator into the wide-open belly of the big ball.

He knew only one thing for certain. "I do *not* want to go that way!" No, he would not end up confined into a strange place within this... strange place. He wanted open air so he could think. "I gotta get off this thing! Gotta get out!"

And there was a lot of 'out.' Below the spot where he was standing, a crowd swarmed about a circular courtyard. Beyond that, a long reflecting pool lay before statue of George Washington. He was standing on a high pedestal, framed by towering jets of frozen water spouting from even further away. Spreading out from either side of these things, building upon building upon building. Signage for AT&T, Heinz, Bordens, and many names he didn't recognize at all. All of them outdated in style and signage. People upon people upon people moved about from one to the next.

The announcement began again in French as he pushed his way into opposing traffic, desperate to see the view from the other side of the bridge. There he found even larger structures dedicated to Chrysler, Ford, General Motors, Firestone and Goodrich. And to the far right, the very railroad station he'd seen when walking the model version of this world; L-shaped, with a soft curve where a right angle should be. A tall and circular rotunda was nuzzled in this same intersection.

"Just like the model..." Alex dared to look upward. To see two faint rings hovering in the sky. Above them there was no sun. Rather, a latticework of enormous ceiling lights. His trembling face paled. The sound of a thousand footfalls was stamped by his own pulse.

Someone stopped beside him. Too big and too dark eyes blinking at him. "Are you alright, little fellow?" she asked through brown teeth.

Alex ran. Right for the only exit he knew. The one through the obelisk. The people ahead of him being "Too slow, too slow!" Hefting his backpack, he bullied his way into the center of traffic. Where he had (occasionally) the option of sprinting. Finding a blockage with the Trylon as people oohed and awed at sights within that he couldn't care less about. "Excuse me! Off! Pardon me! Sorry! Excuse me! Outta the way!" The invitation to go the other way was into its Spanish rendition by the time he was free of the structure. That much closer to ground level.

Only a long, sloping walkway to go. One which curved around the half of the Centerpiece's circumference.

"Oh, come on!" Alex did what he could to press through the long, long lines between himself and the end of the ramp. Occasionally resigning himself to slow going. And twice turning his head at the sight of a firework flashing in the sky.

When he finally, finally put his feet to the pavement, he realized he had no other plan other than 'leave.' But how? Even if he turned around and went for the railroad station he'd seen, where would it take him? Would it take him at all? Reaching into the pocket of his very 2019 jeans, he found coins that were all minted well after 1939.

He fell against a handrail overlooking the sitting area he'd seen from above. To wallow in his confusion and fear, and notice that the adults around him seemed perfectly content to let an eleven-year old sort this problem on his own.

"I guess I have to find some police -- MAP!" The memory of his family trip to a theme park a few years back slapped him in the face. His parents drilling into him and his big sister to never lose the little brochure-shaped fold-out that told them where all the various Lands were, in addition to several points (which their father circled) where everyone could meet up in the event of separation. Some of these specifically labelled as security stations.

Eyes to the ground he scoured every square foot of it for people's castaways. He even resorted to garbage bin diving. Which drew no shortage of commentary from the odd-people who noticed. He was still on the hunt when he heard the screech of a police siren. Odd-people cleared out ahead of it and in their wake passed a number of mounted policemen, at least twenty men in combat fatigues or navy blue marching double-time, and a quartet of small tanks taking up the rear.

"Hey! Wait up!" he cried, chasing after them. If anyone could help him out, it was them. But they showed no sign of slowing up, or even noticing his frantic calls. Still, they left a hole in the crowd behind them, which Alex filled before the spectators could. He followed it -- followed them -- right along the first reflecting pool he'd seen from the bridge, on the right side of it. Then the first President, the pools behind, and even all the way around the lagoon. It was here that his small legs started to give out. Forcing him to slow to a jog and hope he didn't lose the military group entirely behind the rush of pedestrians.

Ahead of him, the unit Alex had been following rounded a curved path. Taking it around the unmoving lagoon, walled on the other side by a rounded building with numerous cylindrical indents. Each one housing a flagpole. This building's far end was a more standard section of right angles, and bracketed at the base by decorative shrubbery. The whole complex was mirrored by a building to the other side of the lagoon. Into the wide gap between the horses and men and tanks turned, disappearing from view behind the Pavilion before Alex had even gotten to it.

When the boy finally caught up to the Pavilion's apex, he stopped to catch his breath before, still panting, he took the steps needed to get to the wall and peek past the flagpole. He immediately jerked backwards from what he saw, and craned only his head out to examine the rest.

The tanks were coming to rest at the far end of a wide-open courtyard, long as the lagoon was wide. Framed on either side by a pair of buildings bearing multiple flags. The blocky, white edifice with Roman columns before its many doors flew only Americas'. A unit of broad-shouldered soldiers stood at attention in the yard itself; row upon row of them. At their head, a man in identical dress was shouting at a thin man with a rectangular face and a pencil-thin black mustache.

Sensing he was intruding on something he was not allowed near, Alex pressed himself into the wall of the Foreign Pavilion building. He strained to hear the two men against the roar of the constantly moving mass of people behind.

'Moustache' was yelling right back. "I will remind you, Colonel, that America is neutral in Europe's troubles! I will not have you turning this place of unity into a war zone!"

The other stepped closer to his adversary. "I am not *asking* you, Mister Whalen! I am *informing* you that these fairgrounds are now under martial law and the direct authority of myself as ranking officer of the 16th Infantry Honor Guard!"

"Why?" Whalen demanded. "I must insist you give me something I can take to our financial backers!"

"Ridiculous? Do you have any idea what's happening in Manhattan right now?"

"Yes, I own a radio, thank you!" Whalen scoffed. "Rocket men from Mars tearing up Penn Station? BAH!" He straightened his bowtie. "I didn't fall for Orson Welles' tricks last year, and I'm not falling for them now!"

Alex barely heard the words, "I don't have time for this." The next words were quite clear. "Captain, arrest this man!"

The show Whalen put on trying to resist was cut short by the sight of a man in combat fatigues, helmet and all, racing his way to his commanding officer. Weighed down by half an enormous backpack, from which dangled a ridiculously sized phone.

"Colonel! We have incoming!"

The moment those words left the soldier's lips, Alex could hear it. Turning back the way he came, he saw a flare of light in the sky, arcing low. Coming from the direction of the automobile exhibits and becoming clearer every second. Red in the center, trailing purple and blue. A ball of pure energy, racing closer. Heading right towards the opposite side of very courtyard he'd just been looking at!

Alex was frozen in fear. But others had started running by the time it crossed the Perisphere. Their screams getting louder as more people joined in the panic. People closer to the lagoon fled to either side of it. The soldiers were moving too; some marching to better cover, others running towards the target zone in order to evacuate it. But Alex just stood there, terrified, unable to take his eyes off the strange ball of fire. Until at last, it fell to the ground, colliding almost perfectly into the first of the two buildings on the courtyard opposite himself.

The sound of the explosion alone knocked the boy off his feet. The rumble of the ground soon followed, trembling his back with reverberating energy. The heat came next, slapping his face as he struggled to rise to his knees, and the hand that he rose as a shield to cover his eyes. Making his skin feel tighter, and all too dry. Next came a great cloud of dust, white and hard and bringing with it countless shards of debris. Forcing the child to scramble for cover within the bushes. He buried his head in the soil, arms curled over his head for all the protection they could give.

Blinded and short of breath, all Alex could do was endure and listen to what came next.

Bullet-like *p'tings* punctuated the shouts of fleeing people, the sounds of their frantic footfalls. Babies wailed, children screamed, whistles were blown.

K'KRUNK! WH'WHUMP! CRISHSH! Debris fell, glass shattered, something toppled and broke to pieces.

B'BR'BRUFF! Something hit pavement far away, and rolled and rolled and rolled.

BU'BU'BU'UH'UFF! A woman cried out for a child. A man for his wife.

SH'CRACK! Something hit the pavement hard enough to send the child bouncing upwards and smacking back down into the dirt. "Yeeeeeaaarrgh!" he half-cried, half blubbering, unable to contain his terror a moment longer.

Quickly as it had started, the explosion was played through. Leaving the sound of crying people, and the ringing in his ears. He dragged himself from the greenery, topped in white. Then rubbed his eyes, feeling them too caked in grit to open. Pulling up his shirt, which was relatively clean up front, he licked the hem. But he wasn't nearly deaf enough to miss the horrified gasps of what people remained nearby. Nor the *FWOOSH!* of a second volley. His eyes were functional just in time to see another magenta fireball careening overhead. It flew all the way over the large courtyard, headed to somewhere behind the large American building.

Alex didn't wait to see it land. He turned and ran. Ploughing right into a wall of dusted navy blue.

"That's far enough, little man!" The sailor reached out for him. His voice stern and focused, not one that was going to accept 'no' for an answer. Still half-blinded by debris, Alex was easy prey. Scooped up into a pair of alien arms. "Let's get you to safety!"

"Lemme go! Lemme go!" Alex swung and kicked and bucked until he felt himself freed.

"You want to walk on your own, fine!" The sailor roughly turned the boy to face the mirror of the Pavilion structure he'd been following. "See that? On the other side of it is the British Empire Building. That's the designated evacuation point for this section of the park. Go there and-"

"But- " Terrified as Alex was, he didn't like not having a say in things. Especially things no one had bothered to explain to him. "I don't even know what's attacking."

"That's an order!" the sailor barked, too-blue eyes blazing. "Now move!" The man swatted his back to get him moving, and then he was off in the direction the tanks had gone. "And tell everyone to stay away from the U.S. Building! That's command central for the counter-attack!" He soon disappeared behind the corner of the building. His visage replaced by jeeps that were racing down towards the great fountain. Bearing medical personnel and soldiers armed with rifles.

"Counter attack against *what?*" he asked himself without stopping. Though not moving quickly at all. Not between the debris on the ground, his own exhaustion from the run, and the crash of adrenaline spent during the explosion. He didn't get far along the large oval walkway before one of the jeeps reached him.

"Are you wounded?" asked someone in the back, with a white armband. His skin-tone teeth were somewhat less terrifying than giant fireballs. The moment Alex shook his head, the medic slapped the driver's arm and the vehicle was off.

The third of which chose that moment to fly overhead. This one looking to go even further away over the U.S. Building than the last. Whatever was happening, it was getting closer.

Renewed terror added speed to his legs. He cleared the distance to the opposing Pavilion in time that would have made Coach Anders stand up and applaud.

That was when the rumbling started.

First, it was just barely audible over the din of the military. Then it became louder. And louder, and louder. Until he could feel the sound in his feet and see it vibrating the plastic dust that surrounded them. It drowned out the screams coming from the far end of the park even before it could be seen. A vast, dark shape, ill-defined, speeding closer. Preceded by plumes of dust and debris; half the automobile exhibits shattering under enormous wheels.

The monster screeched to a halt just to the left of Washington's visage, and yet it was so huge its back end extended past the Perisphere. Presenting four wheels in a row to the boy's vantage, each one nearly as tall as the big sphere, with treads deep enough to be seen from where Alex was standing. In front of them, a viciously spiked 'cow bar' of steel, painted in messy splotches of red. Atop them, a ramshackle box made of scrap, tall as the wheels and mostly red with bursts of yellow and rusted-brown. Bearing two holes, ripped out for the drivers to look through, and shaped like sneering eyes. Covered in pipes and tubes that spat dark black soot.

And atop that cacophonous mass, a missile-shaped turret pointed backwards. The hairy black back of the creature ricocheting back and forth as the gun it fired unloaded bolt after bolt of sizzling green energy back the way it had come. A being that had to be half as tall as the great globe itself. Sitting atop a jeep/tank hybrid that dwarfed the Perisphere and came up two-thirds of the Trylon's height at least. It's engine still roared, a furnace of noise.

Far away as he was, Alex could see it all clearly for the sheer size of it. And he knew what it was. "No... It can't be..."

The name of these barbaric beings, which he knew, hadn't yet escaped his lips when the gunner's rate of fire increased. Pivoting upward and leftward as he shot, crashing through the Trylon and tearing the top third away like it was paper. Its target came into view high above the world, and at a distance beyond the bounds of the fair. A great, blue and white skimmerbike, long as the jeep was wide. Casting an immense silhouette against the artificial suns as it turned inward to get a shot at its foe,

The Urkon jeep hit its target first. Sending the gravity-defying vehicle to ground. Where it erupted into flame and debris obscured by too much distance and too many buildings for Alex to visualize. But he could hear the screech of mangled railway lines and the echo of dying people.

Many dying people!

The gigantic rider's momentum sent it flying over Washington to crash into the buildings left of Alex. It rolled through at least three more (by the sound of it) before rising up from a plume of dust and ash. The boy, the soldiers, the survivors -- everyone -- had no trouble seeing it from the knees up, even with untouched edifices in the way. For it had to be near one-hundred feet tall. Ten stories tall!

The sight of it, which sent others, even the soldiers, screaming in mystified dread instead filled Alex with the horror of true understanding. A long, lean body topped with an elongated head fully encased in an environment helmet that came to a hard edge which curved up and forward like a scorpion's tail ready to strike. The face of which was invisible behind a glowing lavender viewmask. He wore form-fitting armor of a sort that combined segmented plates with a mesh bodysuit. And large, regal shoulder pads from which billowed a tattered blue cape.

A Vel'Adrini warrior. And one colored in *Alex's own custom color-scheme*. From the pale blue accents on the edges of each segment of armor, meant to evoke the electrical charge that produced a personal forcefield. To the three blue glyphs that adorned his skull-white helm. Which he lifted from a screenshot of an old cartoon he liked. Symbols which he'd co-opted as part of a secret language meant to be indecipherable to members of the Vel'Adrini Sleeper Ships.

The impossible being was wearing artifacts of Alex's own imagination!

As the giant staggered to his feet, he reached for a sidearm. A long, thin hand-blaster with four barrels. With an unsteady hand, he aimed at the gunner. Who struggled to land a hit so close and relatively small a target. They traded several poor shots -- The Vel's going high and wide, the Urkon's devastating vast swaths of the amusement park behind -- before the skimmerscout vanished in a burst of green fire. The gunner burst out of his seat to jump and hoot in victory, and confirmed what he already knew.

The gunner's hirsute body was downright furry along his shoulders and down his back. Black and oily. His skin was an ugly brownish green. What chest armor it had consisted of crisscrossed bandoliers bristling with grenades, thick metal boots, and spiked bracers. Its gleeful shouts were something between a drunken chimpanzee and a downing elephant. It was an Urkon, alright. One of the Vel'Adrini's oldest and most hated foes. "But it's just a game!"

The army behind Alex wasn't playing a game, though, and wasted no further time attacking. Volley upon volley of shells blasted forth from the human tanks towards the Urkon vehicle. Exploding against its shell to do what Alex could expect was minuscule damage, if that.

The jeek revved its murderous engines, and the 'eyes' of the driver's box seemed to glare with evil joy. For all the good it would do, Alex started running again. This time utterly alone. To get the Pavilion between himself and the lethal charge of an unstoppable force.

This being his third or fourth adrenaline rush of the past few minutes, left him utterly drained by the time he was underneath the Pavilion's shadow. Sitting down with his knees up to his chest, breathing hard and trembling harder. There was absolutely nothing he could do to escape the carnage, and part of him knew it. The human tanks had been moving too, and were now even with him, crossing the courtyard's flag pole and firing all the time. All he could do was try to be ignored and hope the Urkon's let them get further away before obliterating them.

And maybe, just maybe, satisfy his curiosity about that skimmerscout... Alex swung his backpack down onto the ground so he could forage for their most precious contents. He found the carrying case and hurriedly pulled it out. The Warp War 5000 logo, proudly displayed at the top, quickly vanished from view when Alex swung the case open to examine the contents.

The case was empty.

KRA-BWOOM!

Once again, Alex was sent flying onto his back, and hiding from debris. With nothing else to shelter under, his open figure case became a shield. And a poor one at that-- Hot grit and plastic

scrap smacked into the exposed skin of his arm, leaving dozens of red welts. His ears took longer to recover from the ringing shock this time. They were still refusing to hear anything but an endless, high-pitched note by the time he'd wiped enough dust from his face to see what fresh hell had been unleashed.

The U.S. Building was gone. So too were any soldiers that had been occupying the back half of the courtyard. To speak of the ruined building there was at least a twisted pile of twisted and molten support beams, still being roasted by roaring flames. Of the soldiers, there was nothing at all. Only the furious shouts, barely receivable, of those who still lived to follow the tanks into war.

Trumba Trumba Alex felt the footsteps better than he could hear them. Coming from the jeek. Coming closer. He rushed to shove the case back into the bag and withdraw his smartphone from the front pocket. How had he forgotten he had this?!?!

Trumba Trumba! Three tanks fired their big guns in unison. A wordless roar ripped through the interference in the boy's ears. He dropped the phone, covering his ears. A bolt of green light roasted one of the tanks.

Trumba Trumba! Alex picked up the phone, struggled to swipe his way to to his parent's number. His fingers stiff and twitchy. Another bolt roasted the tank closest to Alex. He could feel the heat of men dying.

Trumba Trumba! [INVALID NUMBER] spat the hand-sized screen. "Dammit!" Another flash of green. Just one tank remained intact.

Trumba Trumba! A booted foot the size of the tank or larger kicked it clean into the flaming wreckage of the U.S. Building or beyond. The Urkon it belonged to was not the same as from the turret; he had a bald head covered in scars and still-healing wounds bound in what could be duct tape. But he was laughing the same whale-bear laugh. He had to be ninety feet tall or even more, the grown Army and Navy men rushing to their doom barely tall enough to meet the forward-facing spikes jutting from his toes. Their rifles and pistols apparently useless against his hairy hide.

The tanks, though, had done some damage to one of his legs. Alex could see two red lines saying as much. Not that that had stopped his run. Or stopped the Urkon bending his knees in preparation of a great leap. A leap which, when it landed, crushed dozens of men into red paste, blew a hundred or more soldiers onto their backs, and sent the rest scattering that they might not be destroyed in so great a number the next time.

"Waaaaagaaaaa!" the blood-mad Urkon bellowed to the sky, the remaining grenades on his bandoliers jangling ominously. He was quickly joined by another, who slapped him on the back before running forward into what remained of the ground forces.

Alex snapped a photo. What else could he do? He was going to die, and he knew it.

Die just like the wailing, fleeing soldiers who had given up on firing at the monsters and were fleeing for their lives in all direction. Men they started plucking from the ground, the human soldiers smaller than it's the Urkon's thumbs. When one had a squirming handful, he raised his fist up over his head and let them fall one by one into his wide mouth. Each man screaming all the way down. Lower tusks juttet out from the Urkon's jawline and up as it chewed and swallowed.

Alex looked on in horrified fascination. Unable to move beyond the uncontrollable shaking of his entire form. The thing was standing where the flagpole had been before it burned away. If it wanted to see him then all it had to do was turn to its left and look down and it might see him there on the ground. And look his way the Urkon did, a big goofy grin on his face like a toddler who had just sneaked some cookies.

And still Alex couldn't move. There was nothing left in him but fear.

Krik K'Krik Krik! Lighting jetted through the sky... and froze there. The giants noticed too. Looking upward, one traced the jagged white line back the way it had come. The direction Alex had been running, towards the railway and beyond. From which way another crack formed. And a third. If it kept up like this the whole lot was coming down!

Some part of Alex --the part that wanted to live, dammit! -- took use of his left arm, formed a fist, and started pounding life into his legs. He kept doing it until he was back on his feet. By then an odd hum had formed in the air, which became louder and louder until – *VuhvuhvuhvuKAKK!* -- The plastic, or glass, or whatever it was, shattered into an infinity of shards, and fell all at once to the earth. In reality, they had two feet to tumble down. To Alex, it was more like half a mile. And it did so as an instant blizzard of white flakes piled far deeper than that of any previous explosion. If Alex hadn't had risen, he'd have surely been buried alive.

Sputtering, the boy poked his head up. A chill ran up his spine as a deep shadow eclipsed the entire pavilion.

One that the Urkons, -- the big gunner not far off --was firing madly into the sky.

Alex's terror bore into his stomach as the gigantic thing overhead grew both larger and clearer. It was a colossal dual-toed foot, each digit given its own contour within a lightly treaded boot. Which quickly became larger in his vision than even the humongous Perisphere. Far, far larger. It had to be miles up by the miniaturized boy's reckoning. So far away in fact that its thickly treaded length looked to him to be as flat and painting-like as the mountains in the distance past his grandfather's rest home. The monolithic figure it was attached to landed directly upon a collection of small buildings not far past the railway.

There was a muffled *crunch* followed by a gust of wind as the entire district was crushed flat. The figure was so unfathomably huge that the slight haziness of their features near the knees was made more manifest nearer her elongated helm.

"You have got to be kidding me!"

This fresh terror was another Vel'Adrini. This one a female, wearing armor of a similar type to the skimmerscout, form fitting enough to make plain the physical contours not hidden under lines of fabric draping from the fronts of her elongated shoulder armor.

She was monolithically vast in both scale and stature. A soaring giantess who would have likely dwarfed any of Alex's teachers almost twice over, and who now loomed almost two full miles above the street level from Alex's perspective.

The female Vel'Adrini was not painted in the colors Alex had given his miniatures. Rather, her armor was gunmetal grey and silver of make, her cape and its fore-drapes were pure white and covered in golden runes. Her helmet was sparking silver and covered in oval-shaped gems, her vid-plate golden yellow. A trail of false black hair, fashioned as a top knot, trailed over her left breast. From her back sprouted two gun-metal limbs. From these, the translucent wings of a personal flight pack. She held in her hands a bladed staff whose head was a glowing golden crystal.

The weapon, the runes, the gilded helm, all identified the figure as one of noble blood in the *Warp War 5000* lore books. Someone to whom human life --- Alex's life! -- was as of even less significance than it was to the Urkon who had just laid the entire area to waste.

Head cocked high and haughty, the woman whose name was starting to crawl its way into his memory looked his way. He froze, breathless, a hundred different agonies stabbing through his fearful mind. With a loud collection of clicks, the Vel'Adrini's helm partly retracted itself away from her cheeks, the visor withdrawing over her forehead.

A pale-face with high sharp cheekbones was revealed. Thin, purple-painted lips. Hardly any nose to speak of, more a raised mound with a couple gill-like slits for nostrils that flexed when

she breathed. Her upturned eyes were solid black. The jagged brow above furrowed warily as she scrutinized the area near him.

No, ahead of him! She was looking at the pair of Urkons who were defiantly firing their pistols at her and shouting all manner of incomprehensible obscenities. The nearby dust glowed green with every new shot of plasma. The shots that connected dissipated around and along her armor, rendered harmless by a deflection screen.

The Vel'Adrini strode forwards, her step bringing her left foot down on top of two buildings he could see -- one flying the colors of Italy's and one that looked like France's flag turned sideways -- and a third he could not... The one he was pretty sure was the British pavilion he'd been told to run for. With a not too distant rumble and a chorus of very humans screams she flattened them all, and removing the last of the thing shielding Alex from the woman's view. He cautiously burrowed himself deeper into the false snow, tossing more of the stuff up over his hair to hide its darkness. Shoved his phone in his pocket, to keep its glow from lighting up the space around him. Hoping against reason that her next step would simply pass over him. Half a Pavilion stood between him and the Vel'Adrini woman's colossal toe.

Still bearing that superior expression, the woman reached down. Four (proportionately) lithe fingers, each tipped with long manicured nails not unlike claws, passed over Alex. The boy escaped her notice as she plucked one of her 'attackers' up. Seen so close, her skin was not smooth; rather a seamless collection of (relatively) tiny, jagged scales. Her claws were black, half-a-finger-long, and sharp as a rapier. The pathetic figure trapped between her gigantic forefinger and thumb was about half the size of her claw. Smaller in size in her hand as one of the humans caught in this freakshow would have been in his.

The Urkon's jabbering protests were utterly useless as she lifted him far, far, into the sky. Alex couldn't be sure, but from the hunching of the 'little' Urkon's back, he thought it was trying to bite her on the way up. She twisted it side to side between forefinger and thumb, as if examining it. First with the naked eye, then coupled with the smooth whoosh of her closing faceplate with the aid of her visor.

Then she simply let him drop. He came down right where the first red plasma ball had. The 'snow' atop the ground, thick as it was, was not enough to cushion his spine from a horrific snap. Nor stop the other one from plodding back towards the jeek, which laid down cover fire as its engines revved up once more. Now it had her complete attention.

Her monstrous hand withdrawing to her hip, the Vel'Adrini's right knee moved upward. And so did Alex. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!" He ran towards the vast leg, best as he could in waist deep dust. The spot she already was definitely not the spot she was moving towards. Her left foot passed over him easily, and he didn't bother looking back at where it was headed.

The fleeing Urkon never made it back into his vehicle. He spent his last moment shooting at the treaded sole which came hurtling down upon him, killing all light from above.

The sound of a jeek's big gun and fusion reserve exploding was nothing compared to the sound of countless tons of woman bringing her full weight down upon a diorama floor. Where there had been a sphere and a slap-dash vehicle and a statue of George Washington and a central thoroughfare and two dozen exhibits besides, now there was only a crater. The energy of this obliteration spread out in all directions, flattening nearly all of what was left standing in the wake of her footfall. The clear plastic fountain cracked and fell away. The Pavilions encircling half of it did the same. And an eleven-year-old child was sent flying up into the air. Past the metal-enchased behemoth. Beyond the ruined buildings of the courtyard. Out past the confines of the New York World's Fair altogether. Along with a plume of white speckles that followed him like an angry storm cloud out to do him in once and for all.

There was no stopping the scream that he made from the start of his deathly arc to its end.

He hit the ground rolling and bouncing. Once, twice four times at least, before finally coming to a stop. Within an open space covered in the textures and greens of a manicured field. The white snow fell upon him again as he patted himself off. Amazed beyond through that he was completely unharmed. "That should have killed me..." he muttered, unheard by ears dazzlingly far, far above his meager mouth.

Without saying a word herself, the giantess brought her left foot over to her right and turned. Sharp and quick on one set of toes, towards the direction the skimmerbike had come from. With a nearly-soundless leap, she flew away. And as she did, he caught among the rippling folds of her cape the final clue to her identity. The linework woven amid the many embroidered runes, forming an image likening to a twin-tailed scorpion. As unique to one particular and individual Vel'Adrini of noble blood as were the burning and ruined flags surrounding him to the nations of his world.

"Lady Zeramere," he whispered. More accurately, Zeramere Ainlessar Kryiel Oasuhn Irrodilor. Listed in the lore as Head and Battle- Mistress of House Oasuhn, one of the High Families of the Vel'Adrinos Primacy. Breaker of the Chartalian Blockade. Conqueror of worlds. Single-handed killer of entire armies.

For a moment, there was quiet, save for the boy's own stuttering breaths.

If the Vel'Adrini were real, and *that one* was really here in the Middleton Museum Of Culture, then his whole planet was in very real danger.