

What Manny doesn't know is that the remnants of his prior military tenure to an off-the-books dimension are returning with a vengeance: gunning for both his slipping sanity and his now missing family.

Did I Give You Permission To Run: Terror TV

By Avatar Xeno Marcus

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Avatar Xeno Marcus

*Did I give you
permission to*

RUN?



SHARP

TERROR TV



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1.

Good Vibrations

Since her youth, Millie took to the water as a cloud to the sky. Her body was attuned to the backyard pool as much as the finest swimmers the little-big town of Echo Bay, Hawaii had ever produced. She was a prodigy. Her last lap was her traditional silent contemplation, floating down above the bottom of the pool like a quiet cruise missile before darting up the sides with leopard-seal precision. The mild case of swimmers' ear just wouldn't leave her alone, and the approaching thunderclouds seemed to giggle in mockery at her teenage mopings.

Another headache? she thought.

A louder thunderclap jolted her to attention as she draped the towel around her stark-white swimsuit and shook her water-logged mop of hair like an umbrella before sliding open the glass door to the back of her house. The walnut-glazed interior was feng shui paradise due to her OCD mother and the laid-back charm of her father. Both were absent the abode for the moment and probably wouldn't have approved, but the teapot on the stove seemed to guess what all that wet tiptoeing would lead to and quickly raised alarm.

"Going out again?" said a voice from the back room.

"Yeah, Aunt Babs!" said Millie.

"Bring me back some Sun-Chips. I don't know why your mom buys just one bag at a damn time!"

"Yeah... got it," mused Millie.

"Left that stove burner on in the kitchen. Grab it for me."

“I got it.”

“Thank you, Teapot.”

Millie slung her leg over the bike seat and hauled off in the brisk breeze with shoes untied and hair in a messy glasses-meet-bun combo that could make Jackson Pollack blush. Dedication requires recharging – who better than her neighborhood friend squad to take the angst away, even in darkening skies.

Like three tumbleweeds, they were tucked away on the side of a curb in Sam’s brother’s truck just before a stop sign and the distant ocean view. Sam was at the wheel with his comrade Kyle in the backseat thumbing through CDs, and Sue sleeping in the bed liner.

“Let’s see: Beldam, Wall St. Gang, you don’t get that Water Damage 3 mixtape? That 3’s that monster. Sue... you got that 3? Oh, she’s asleep,” said the always curious Kyle.

“You see those waves coming in from all different directions? That’s how you can tell it’s all just one big body of water,” said the rowdy Sam.

“No, it’s not, Sam,” said Millie matter-of-factly.

“Y’all hearing this man right now?” said Kyle

“Gimme that energy drink. I don’t do root beer,” blurted Sam lazily.

“You’re trying to get more speed to win this race,” said Millie, pretending to rev up her handlebars like a motorcycle.

“Naw, it helps me roll-up better. Don’t be such a freshman.”

“Don’t be such a wannabe junior!” beeped Millie whilst slapping her kickstand back in its keep.

“Hey, where ya goin’?” asked Sam.

“Home; my head’s killin’ me.”

“Ay! The party’s Thursday! Kyle’s mom is comin’ back Friday. You comin’?” screamed Sam.

“Maybe, maybe not! Later!”

“I wanna party...” said a groggy Sue.

Millie zagged through the sunny, velvet darkness with the smooth, tapping click of her bike chain reverberating amidst the manicured lawns and around the saggy palm trees. In the drizzle, she slid to a grinding stop once more at her home door, handlebar cocked against the glass, swinging her legs off her bike.

A big headache, she mused.

“No Sun Chips, no bueno!” hollered Babs. “I don’t smell no bag!”

“It was raining!” hollered Millie.

“I don’t smell no rain!”

“You got an aspirin, Aunt Babs?”

“Yes, ma’am, I surely do!” she yelped before rolling off her bed and looking in the drawer and under the bed. “Somewhere, over here... wheelchair, walker, why can’t they make an all-in-one?” grumbled Babs before noticing the bottle on the floor and diving off the bed whilst chanting in superstitious gibberish. “If we let the dogs in, they’ll bite all the lights!” she sang whilst grasping her charm bracelet.

“We don’t own a dog, Aunt Babs,” said Millie with a casual dismissal.

“Enjoy the tea, Miss Teapot,” slurred Babs.

With a roll of her eyes, Millie sauntered back to the kitchen whilst loosening her bun. The mango-lemon aroma coincided with the pounding storm buckling the roof with a thousand watery slaps per second. It would be a while before the aspirin kicked in – *time to slum it on the couch*, she thought,

“*We’ll be right back to Ain’t It Grand!*” screamed the announcer from the main room. After slinging her mud-slicked shoes across the hardwood floor, she let her pounding head guide her to the coziness of the leather sofa and white carpet. She lay facing the ceiling, slathering her face with her arm, slowly drifting off into clouds and palm trees.

“And that’s why when I need to stay cool in the summer, I know I can count on Millie Rosenwater and her lackluster swimming skills!”

What? she stared at the AC commercial with a seething, puffy-eyed abandon.

“You heard right; I dial 1-800 Millie Rosenwater every time!”

“Coincidence?” she mused. *Nah, it’s just a commercial*, she thought.

She closed her eyes as if declaring the last call on her hotly racing thoughts. However, one commercial merely bled into another before her eyelids could provide any comfort.

“Hello there. You must excuse such urgency, but there’s such little time left,” said a man stooping down next to her sickly

baby brother's hospital bed with slicked-back blue hair and a surgeon's mask. "With your donation, you can help make such a difference in this child's life. Let's see here: little BB Rosenwarter. Oh that's a good little boy," said Pomplamoose as his finger sharpened into a metallic blade and scraped the side of BB's head with giddy abandon.

Millie leaped off the couch with her eyes stapled to every frame and her jaw dangling by her ankles as a thick cloud of terror smothered her ears and summoned a thin film of sweat against her sun-kissed forehead.

"In fact, our kids are so starved for affection, all they need is your gentle touch; just touch the screen with your pledge," said Pomplamoose as he accidentally tripped the power cable to the IV unit, sending BB into a slight convulsion.

"BB!" gasped Millie.

"Whoopsie. It looks like love only keeps the lights on for so long! Come on, touch the screen. Can't you see he's just *jumping* with joy to meet you?" said Pomplamoose whilst using the power cord prong as a makeshift defibrillator against the boy.

Millie scoured her hands over the television like a swarm of roaches, skittering her clammy fingers in and around every socket, every sinew of the frame, trying to make sense of the prank. In her craze, how could she miss the power cord? It lay stark bare on the carpet, clearly out of the wall socket, as the commercial continued blaring its deranged babble. *Unplugged! But how?* she thought. Her hand stuck rapidly to the sensational static on the screen, which was now undulating in a feeding frenzy of malignant sparks. *What... how?* she thought as she wheeled her face directly in front of the screen as tiny block-like polygons pressed through her mouth like a bouquet of bombs, blasting directly into the cyclonic hunger of the screen whilst melting her entire face into a hurricane of pressurized stars. The very walls of the house bent and stretched as if trying to pry free from the gnashing insanity!

A mishmashed figurine of Pomplamoose leaned through the screen like a shark swimming head-first into a sheet of saran wrap and directly next to a still-screaming Millie.

The heap of polygons continued to march themselves over

her entire body before crashing against her molecules like brass cymbals. Her system could not deal with the spastic combustion and sent her into total shock; full-on explosions silently ballooned out of her spine, skull and teeth and were immediately suctioned into the grey-and-white static portal which seemed almost impatient in its hunger to have such a fresh meal. Her screams were inaudible as were the hellish snaps of bone and tendon twisting in chewy symphony as her entire reality was hungrily guzzled away by the television. A small sonic 'pop' went off in the closure of the unnerving display, soon followed by a sensual curtain of infrasound that rippled out amongst the house and into the street. Babs lay awake in the darkness of her room with one eye wide open as if possessed. She was old enough to remember what terrors belied such a process – the sounds, the enveloping sense of foreboding doom. It had been years. Echo Bay was no saint in this; it too had a part to play and secrets to spill.

She clutched her charms and held back the tears in the dim lamplight – too scared to even move. The house had never seemed so hollow and still, and as the walls creaked and groaned from the eventual end of the calamity, Babs quietly concluded that her niece was gone from this world.

Millie awoke to find herself in a haze of an unknown land lost in time, her body strewn in the warm sand like a chrysalis prematurely pried open and left to ooze forth in a sickly, suspended animation. The sun slammed its dazzling beams against her shimmering body, which crackled with the crystalline xylophone 'plunk' of freshly teased polygon particles. Her mind tumbled madly whilst blood and enzymes raced through her veins in a rabid frenzy. Her saliva tasted like sweet, flushed gravel (What does gravel taste like?), and her legs felt like they could split apart at the bone. It was all she could do to merely lay there and withstand the overwhelming cascade of hormones, blood, and all-around organ reset. Even attempting to stand turned her brain into a spinning coin threatening to wobble right out of her ears. The surf slapped her to life once she could get her lungs back on their leash and re-organize her breathing. As she stood, she noticed her hands and feet had a slight vibration to them like standing on the hood of an idling car. She could feel

the sand jiggling between her toes as she swiveled her pounding head around to take in the vista before her. The beauty was an unparalleled symphony of evergreen jungle and deep indigo waters which spanned into other island chains in the distance. Broken architecture laced parts of the island like an airbrushed Atlantis as the magnificent wingspan of pterodactyls flapped lazily in the distance.

Over the horizon, a series of blinding lights took skyward, arcing slowly in her direction. The sleepy trails of long smoke left in the launch-wake floated amongst one another in gossip, as if knowing that those ‘lights’ were of lethal intent. Unbeknownst to Millie, this unoccupied tropical paradise was, in fact, all part of a living design. The beauty betrayed a sinister origin that gave birth to a basket of knives and betrayal. In her mind’s eye, she saw dozens of science labs, classified documents, and what appeared to be militarized space suits in some brand of space war. A name floated between her ears like a ribbon – Mildred X – her grandmother’s name. She could feel an uneasy shifting near her solar plexus. Touching her belly button gave her a literal shock that ran up through her wrists. It felt like a soft-body invasion. Long streams of saliva hit the ground as she ran deeper into the lethal paradise. She fell to her knees, hands splayed in the grass with her drool as long as the waterlogged whiskers of a Chinese dragon and her eyes rolling around in her head like slot machines.

“Oh God... it hurts,” she slurred as a solemn voice suddenly pierced through her skull.

“Because there are two of us now...” spoke Mildred X.

* * *

Manny hunched against the fence in a slouch, grimacing as he rubbed his torn rotator cuff. Coaching today’s baseball game was harder than he thought. He clacked the hook on his prosthetic arm and turned the brim of his hat down in wandering hunger. His wife, Rita, floated around the corner in the hazelnut Jeep SUV, crackling the loose gravel as she came to a lazy stop in front of her slouching husband.

“Don’t just stand there. Get in.”

She readjusted her glasses, took a sip, and reared her head out of the window, ready to begin the daily squabble. Her lone streak of gray flew in the wind in her side mirror reflection, and she couldn't be bothered to care one bit.

"Manny, get in the damn Jeep."

Like a lazy frog, Manny hoisted his misshapen girth into the cabin interior and reclined his chair. He slowly closed his door using the prosthetic hook arm, as nimbly as ever.

"He doesn't have much time."

"You know, that didn't cross my mind until you said something," she sarcastically darted. "God, you're such an asshole," she whispered.

"You're no prize either, Rita," Manny screeched.

"You are the biggest prick, you know that? I should just let your fat ass *walk* to McDonalds," she hammered.

The phone rang suddenly, and Manny dove down to grab it.

"Mr. Manuel? This is Dr. Foley with Children's Hospital. BB has had a mild seizure, and we are doubling the dose. It should stabilize him."

"Manny, put it on speakerphone," said Rita.

"Hello? Mr. Manuel?" asked the doctor.

"Doctor, we'll be there in an hour," said Rita.

"Good, I've got some files to copy first, then I'll be on the lookout for you two," said Dr. Foley.

"Hey Doc, we're stopping by to get something to drink. You a chardonnay guy or a merlot guy?" asked Manny with a grin.

Rita made a disgusted face: "Manny, what kind of question?"

"Merlot. It doesn't have to be chilled. My cabinet has been a cathedral these past few weeks," said the doctor with a mild chuckle.

"Even doctors have doctors, huh, doc?" beamed Manny with a laugh.

"That's right. Doctor's orders! I'll see you two soon," said the doctor with a click of the line.

Manny plopped back in his seat with a smile, nearly bursting to pass along the good cheer, but Rita wasn't having any of it. (Why is he so cheerful here?)

"You don't need a drink, you know that? I'm just saying..." said Rita.

“What? We get the family doctor a gift and you lock onto me like a pit bull. You think I don’t have time put in? *It’s. A. Drink,*” replied Manny with a grimace.

“It’s your *family,*” said Rita.

“Don’t rope me down,” replied Manny.

“Don’t jump off the cliff every time there’s a glass in front of you!” said Rita with a huff.

“Don’t exaggerate! I can’t deal! Jesus, you’re joyless! What are you so scared of? I let my hair down and you pile it on me. I mean jeez, it’s just banter,” he explained.

“We’ve all seen where this ‘banter’ leads to, Manny,” said a dismissive Rita.

“See? There you go boxing me in again! Does it look like I come with a leash?” said Manny, raising his voice in protest.

“How many years does our family have to deal with the fall-out? You just run off in your own world and sulk at the bar or in front of the TV. All. The. Time!” she yelled.

“You don’t know me!”

“When did I?”

And I don’t ‘run off.’ I didn’t abandon you; you smothered me. This is what I was like before the ring. Nowadays, I feel like you’ve got these tweezers and you just keep picking at the scab; it never heals.”

“I’m not putting anything out that people don’t already know, Manny. Oh, things didn’t turn out in show business. We moved on. And trust me, show business has been moved on.”

“You’re low, just so low.”

“I’m just assessing the situation, and you can’t handle it.”

“Again, it’s a toaster in here every time we talk about this. I feel stuffy like I married ‘Captain Assessment’ or something.”

“Again, Manny, that’s not my problem. We have kids, we have bills, we have life.”

“There you go with the jabs again! I put food on the table just like you! What am I, the food and bill kiosk? I was *this* close, and you tear me down because what? I’m too nostalgic? Oh, because I didn’t just ‘*move on*’ like you, doesn’t mean I’m yesterday’s trash. I’m not ‘Mr. Corporate.’”

“I’m dedicated, Manny. I have a big career because I knew

when to throw in the towel and move on. That doesn't make me a robot. There are shades of grey in everything, and I don't need to be around someone who wants to avoid that."

"Gas, honey..." said Manny pointing at the gas station just before the turn.

"Oh, shoot me sideways..." said Rita.

"Mick is gonna kill me; I already owe him a hundred favors," said Manny.

"I'm not letting this go, Manny," she noted.

"You never let it go, that's why I go," said Manny dryly.

Rita rolled her eyes. "You're so immature."

They fought like that, not quite hateful enough for one to leave but desperate enough that they both had to stay, all the way to Mick's gas station where she slammed the truck door and attempted to put their squabble in the back of her mind before walking in. She didn't want them bringing it to Millie. Things were tense enough with her as it was.

"Ah, Rita, what's ol' Mick gonna do without seeing you every now and then?" said Mick, easing his way from behind the counter and slinging his towel over his shoulder. "Gimme a hug! And you two go on and get a soda pop on the house. Martha says thanks for the cookie recipe, by the way."

"Missed you, Mick," said Rita.

"I missed the both of you," he said, handing Rita's gift to her. "Martha wrapped it in her special way. She said it's fancy, but fragile. I don't know how that works, so I'll just hand it to you. Happy belated birthday."

"Thank you, Mick. You can spoil it," Rita noted.

"It's a scrapbook. Last time you spoke with my wife, she said you were thinking about taking the kids and leaving." Manny privately winced before dropping the smile he walked in with. "She's hard of hearing, you know, so I dunno, it could'a been the Bahamas or a cruise vacation you were gonna take them, but off she went to get a scrapbook for when your birthday rolls around. With all these little gadgets and gizmos flying around nowadays, you need it. Days go by too quick!" highlighted Mick.

"Speak of the devil. I love it. I'm gonna go pee right quick," said a jumpy Rita.

Mick turned slowly towards Manny, who was thumbing the greeting card display near the door.

“Manny, you look like you wanna scream. Tough afternoon?”

“Typical. You know how it goes. I’ll take a merlot.”

“Style?”

“Spin the wheel,” said a monotone Manny.

“Before you go, I’ll give you a box of mints, on the house,” said Mick sliding the merlot to Manny.

“Oh no, the bottle’s not for me, it’s for Dr. Foley,”

“Oh, the doc. Little BB actin’ up again?”

“Yep,” said Manny with his eyes trailing towards the ground. “This time, it’s looking serious.”

“It’s been looking real serious lately. I mean with you and Rita. You two alright?”

“Yeah, some fussin’ and fighting. Threatening divorce. Miserable one day, fine the next. What is that... like a D-minus in school terms?”

“I got some Jim Beam feeling real lonely on that top shelf.”

“Nah...”

“You’re right. Here, keep the merlot for the doc, but, you, my friend, could use this. It’s non-alcoholic. My daughter bought two. They’re pretty good once you chill ‘em. Have it, on the house.”

“I feel guilty,” said Manny, slinking into himself.

“Don’t... don’t you do it, Manny. You and Rita and the family do right by me, I do right by you. I still got your old VHS tape with the two of you auditioning for the... Hawaii...”

“Hawaii 5-0.”

“Hawaii 5-0! Yeah and something else. Some dancing Broadway thing,” said Mick stuffing a small pan of lasagna in with the cookies and drinks. “Anyway, take this frozen lasagna, you sit down with Rita and tell her what’s bothering you. Women love food. You feed ‘em while you’re talking to ‘em, they’re all ears. Mick’s family secret.”

“Learned the hard way, huh?”

“Manny, in twelve years we’ve been doing this, you don’t think old Mick’s taught you all the tricks of the trade? I’m insulted. Bring it in.”

By the time Mick waved goodbye to Manny, Rita emerged

from the bathroom feeling like a new woman.

“Rita, sorry about the paper towels in the bathroom; the box is around here somewhere, I...”

“Oh no, you’re okay, Mick,” Rita replied.

“C’mon, you too, bring it in, and don’t forget your soda pops. I bagged ‘em for ya. Tell the kids I said hi for me, ya hear?”

“Thank you both again so much for the gift, Mick,” said a sincere Rita.

Mick picked up the ringing phone just as Rita was out the door. “Goodbye now,” he said warmly.

Rita walked back to the truck, rubbing her temples and attempting to de-stress.

“I’ll take the Sprite. Is that the old tape of us?” piped Manny with a grin. “That sneaky old dog.”

Rita remained silent as she merged back onto the road.

Manny fumbled around in his bag as they pulled up to a red light. “I bought some lasagna.”

“No, you didn’t, he gave it to you,” corrected Rita.

“You got me, officer.”

“It’s just little lies after little lies, Manny,” said Rita.

“Okay, he gave it to me. What’s the big deal?” he asked loudly.

“Okay, whatever you say,” claimed Rita.

“Whatever I say, huh? I heard Mick back at the gas station. Talking the kids... huh... that’s how it is now? Oh, that’s right, no answer because little miss ‘self-help’ decided she can fly solo and not tell her husband. I’m chopped liver when convenient to you, huh? You never think about anyone else but your career.”

“At least I have a *real* career!”

“And what did you think that flying the coop in the middle of the night would do to Millie and BB? So damn selfish! I can’t believe it!”

“Are you done, Manny?”

“Hell no, you started it just like you always do! You wanna go, then go. I’m glad you got exposed; that high horse ain’t working today!”

“I’m going to the hospital to see my son.”

“Our son, Rita. Our. Son. And I tell you what, after that, why don’t you take the day off!”

“You’re a slob.”

“How about to the Bahamas?”

“You kept this marriage on thin ice,” said Rita.

“Oh please, living with you is thin ice. Look up the definition. It’s your picture on it!”

“I’m looking past you, Manny,” said a solemn Rita.

“Go right ahead, tune me out, tune out the kids..”

Rita turned up the radio originally out of spite for Manny, but soon, both were absorbed by the riveting update on the random violence gripping the town.

Breaking news on your Hawaii Drive at 5. Roving bands of teenagers. These teens are deemed to be highly dangerous with warnings from both the sheriff’s office and national guard to stay vigilant. Suspects exhibit erratic behavior, and many remain unidentified. Stalton Street across the trainyard to Flake Street will be blocked off this coming Thursday due to the extreme property damage.

“Stalton?” asked Manny with a furrowed brow. “That’s..”

“The old studio lot!” they shouted simultaneously.

“Should we?” said Manny, looking for a U-Turn in the street.

“I don’t know. We haven’t been there in ages,” said Rita. “It’s spooky. There’s ‘many unidentified’...like from where, though? They had to come from somewhere.”

“Lock the doors and cock the guns!” giggled Manny.

Rita took a hard right. “I need that massage gun.”

“Is it the shoulder blade again? I can massage you.”

“I prefer the *gun*,” said Rita.

* * *

The two continued bickering as they pulled up to their sun-dried bungalow. The sight of what lay before them was enough to cause a psychological whiplash. They both reared back in their seats like a swarm of hornets had crashed through the windshield. The mail truck was awkwardly stationed on the lawn – hood opened as if it had slammed into an invisible tree. A thick trail of blood streaked across the grass, zigzagged up the walkway, and curled itself next to the shoes of a man slumped over on a saloon piano which baked in the sun.

Manny rubbed his eyes in disbelief: “What in God’s name... in broad day?”

A thick toot of soot shot up from the chimney on the top of the piano as the dead man creaked to life, his grayish, rotting head raising like a puppet on a string – followed by his blood-soaked hands, which proceeded to tickle the keys with an insatiable abandon. The man smiled with an alarming zipper-toothed smile that stretched from ear to ear. The SUV engine went dead as the one lone cloud in the afternoon sky draped itself in front of the sun, casting a smooth shadow over the grisly walkway as well as the main of the house.

On the porch, two masked individuals were working a popcorn and ice machine. Both of slim build, the male’s suit was of a black and green design, and the female was wearing a black and gold hostess outfit. They paused upon hearing the crackle of the driveway gravel, and the house door opened slowly to a wide, mascot-sized figure. It was someone dressed in a fuzzy, electric blue mascot costume with a box TV on its head. It stomped onto the porch, and the masked duo immediately sprang to action removing the pompous outfit.

It was a man dressed in a pale baron’s tuxedo spliced with a maroon circus ringmaster’s coat. His staff was of a strange, intertwining zigzag shape which offset the marble tile aesthetic inside his coat. His shoulder pads possessed strange metallic frog heads looking out blankly to the side. His hair was a shocking dark, electric blue, and his painted white face cratered inwards with dark paint around his ardent eyes and ever-grinning mouth. After the masked woman handed him his odd-looking top hat, he plopped it on her head and strode forth onto the grass with a slow and ostentatious strut towards the bewildered couple.

That kinda looks like Vic Vicarious the game show host, thought Rita.

“Well, well, well. Sometimes you feel that life is just one big dead end, am I right? Your alarm won’t quit, your car won’t start, and you wake up one day and think to yourself, you say, ‘Is this all there is?’” said Pomplamoose

“H... how?” stammered Manny with a dizzying puncture of sudden shellshock.

“Perseverance. The show must go on. You and your contingent

could never halt my progress, my greatness. *I was born to explode!*”

Rita looked at her husband with a sudden turn of the neck. “Manny... you know these people?”

“I am the Vicarious Pomplamoose, and I can tell that you know that this is very... very real.” He spoke before taking an exaggerated sip of his lemonade. “Ahh... needs some ice.” Fame, Fortune, ice... if you would be so kind.”

The man in green, Fame, ran out to Pomplamoose with a cube of ice in micro-tongs.

“Only one solitary cube? On a scorcher like today? The humanity...”

The woman in gold, Fortune, cranked the ice machine like a Tommy gun at the windshield of the SUV.

Chunks of ice flew at the SUV like tiny baseballs, smattering into bursts of crushed snow before sliding sideways off the windshield like parades of spilled mascara. Rita seized up against her seat as the compendium of sharp smacks seemed to grow louder and more threatening. The ‘thumps’ were now more vicious, with several cracking the windshield in outright intimidation.

“Fortune, that’s enough ice.”

The ballast of icy grenades ramped up in intensity as Pomplamoose rolled his eyes.

“Fortune...”

She stooped down and pulled the plug out of the wall socket before giving a hapless shrug at both Fame and Pomplamoose.

Rita drilled holes into her husband with her stare: “So, is this some kind of special effects rendezvous with the old team, Manny? This is not funny. I’m done with this; these pranks to get brownie points with me. I take it Babs knows these people too. You’re paying for this windshield, y’know.”

Rita opened the truck door and stuck her foot and head out in a semi-threatening posture.

“I will call the cops if you guys don’t leave; you need to leave *right* now. I’ve had a *very* long day!” she blurted as Pomplamoose strolled towards her smiling and taking a pinch of some of the crushed ice on the headlight and sprinkling it into his drink.

She turned back to her husband. “What *is* all this anyway, Manny? I swear I’m calling—”

Faster than either could react, Pomplamoose rapped his cane against her temple, freezing her in a color-drained black and white and halting her every molecule entirely.

“So *serious* this one!” cackled Pomplamoose. “So, Manny, how have you been? It’s been 30-odd years since we’ve talked.”

“There’s no way you could’ve survived that blast,” whimpered Manny.

“The show must go on. Who else, but *me*? Exactly. No answer. Typical of StarCORPS, typical of your government. Tell me, do you ever tire of typical? We know she does!” he mocked, pointing his cane at a still frozen Rita.

“What do you want?” replied Manny.

“I want to go out with a bang. Your old gang, Star Force 5, I want them to try and kill me again.”

“We don’t—”

“You *don’t*... currently, Manny... but you *will*. I have your daughter. You will get over your timidity and dig deep to come to rescue her. You must learn to finish what you started, soldier; you don’t just leave the people hanging. The show must go on.”

“Where, what did you do with her? She can’t be in the Star-GRID, we—”

“She is.”

Fame leaped over the porch banister with crank-box in hand, cranking the handle and causing the passenger visor screen to lower, providing Manny with a TV where the mirror should be. The vision of a comatose Millie showed on the screen directly in front of Manny.

“The stage is set. You lost a lot of good people back then, Manuel. Ready to lose one more?” said Pomplamoose. “I can make it a group discount if need be. Your wife...”

“Don’t... don’t you touch her,” interjected Manny weakly.

“Your ailing son...” The screen now showed a small candle next to BB’s hospital bed, his pulse dying out as the vital signs continued wavering on the cardiac units. “Y’know it’s vital to live in the moment and give the people a good show. I get the ball rolling, and this is how you repay me?”

Manny stumbled out of the Jeep, the sweat covering him like a blanket, stammering. He could feel his crippled psyche closing

in on him, and he couldn't get away from the Jeep fast enough.

Pomplamoose stared at him with disdain. "*Typical.*" He surveyed the scene before him with an unimpressed look on his face, wondering how he was ever going to get his big finale if *this* was the state of his competition. "Well, time for the benchwarmers!" he uttered whilst strolling around Rita like a varsity coach.

"Ah, Rita... mind if I call you 'Pickaxe?' Now, I know you heard our little pep talk, so if hubby dearest can't muster the courage to save the family, I guess we'll just have to see how the missus can hoof it. All you have to do to save her is touch the TV screen," said Pomplamoose, leaning his cane once more towards her head. "All you have to do... is... *touch!*" he mused, smacking her temple and causing her to fall completely out of the Jeep onto her hands and knees, shaking in an unnerving fashion.

The pianist went to work on the ivories, banging out the *Ain't It Grand* theme song as Fame shot himself out of a cannon like a high-flying circus act, and Fortune released a gang of macaws and toucans into the sky.

"Marriages, am I right?" said Pomplamoose, making a mocking gesture with his cane before letting a bolt of fireflies skywards which promptly exploded in a dazzling shower of black fireworks. He and his acolytes digitally shimmered out of existence just as quickly as they came.

Rita growled to her feet, completely ignorant of the damage to the Jeep or her missing husband.

"Holy Jesus—" she stooped over by the bloodied piano and vomited.

As Rita stormed into the house, Babs slunk out of her room, gray hair obscuring her face like a spider's web, greeting her with a wide-eyed look of guilt.

"Ri-Ri let me explain—"

"Where is my daughter?" she scream-hissed. "I swear to God, I—"

"Ri-Ri, it's not a prank!" said an even louder Babs.

"Bullshit it's not. It's some kind of demonic prank. Manny wants to stoop to these lows? Fine! *Fine.*"

"Ri-Ri, things ain't what they seem. Mom died before she could tell ya. She was part of a deep tour into that place with the

military,” Babs explained whilst gesturing at the TV.

“That *place*, Babs?” said Rita, trying to wrap her brain around it all. “Babs... this TV is glass, and my daughter is gone! Where is anybody that makes any sense?”

“Look at the plug.”

Rita looked down at the plug lying bare on the carpet before shrugging disgustedly.

“The TV can run on batteries. I need a Tylenol. You’re crazy and everyone’s gone insane, y’know that? And Manny pulls this stunt and leaves to laugh. Well, see this wedding photo?” screamed Rita whilst shattering the frame and tearing the picture down the middle. “Is that funny? This is ‘Divorce-land,’ welcome to it! I work too hard to have to—”

“*Mom...*” creaked a near-lifeless Millie.

“Millie?” blurted a now high-alert Rita, staring at the television like a lemur on the edge.

“*Mom, where are you coming from? I can hear you, but I can’t see you!*” cried Millie.

“Baby, mama’s right here. Millie, honey, if you can hear me, touch your earlobes.”

Millie complied in a deep and confused daze.

“*Mom, I feel like dying...*” squeaked Millie as she again fell faint on the grassy sands.

A loud roar grew ever closer to Millie as Rita and Babs made out the shape of the lights in the StarGRID sky. Missiles – headed straight for a collapsed Millie.

Rita scanned the missiles and guessed their trajectory. “Are those headed for—”

“Teapot’s not gon’ make it. This ain’t right, Lord, this ain’t right!” whimpered Babs.

“Millie! Oh my God, no!” she screamed whilst banging her hand against the TV screen. A lithe crackle of digital lightning flashed out of the screen and lashed around the living room like a whip, followed by several more, which curved and kicked in manic unison. Rita’s continued banging only served to heighten the wild display, which caused Babs to slink back behind the corner and into the kitchen, gripping her rosaries like a falcon talon-deep in a bowling ball. “What in heaven?!” screamed Rita as her slapping

hand was reduced to a caved-in block of orange, shimmering polygons and her vision escaped her entirely as she could feel a bouquet of lasers light up her neck and skull like a jack o' lantern. Her screams echoed out like a cacophony of chainsaws, and her body stuck fast to the screen. Her last memory was feeling her spine snap backward as her ankle grazed her ear and she blacked out, carrying only silent screams of thunderous pain in all of the digital turbulence.

Babs shut her eyes like bank vaults as the calamity began an all-too-familiar wind-down. She could hear her sister being taken in spine-splitting chunks and refused to entertain any of it. The droning shudder-wave of infrasound sunk through the walls as easily as her ribs and left in its wake a most uncomfortable eeriness. She could feel it in the air: her sister and niece were gone, and her rosaries would bring her no comfort in her shock. Like a sloth, she slowly telescoped her neck around the corner to greet an empty living room.

"Mama would want us to be strong," whispered Babs whilst inching herself towards the television.

"Don't hurt me, Mr. TV. I just want my sister and my niece." She approached on her tiptoes, shielding herself with a pillow as she reached out to gently poke the screen with the tip of her walker. As soon as she tapped it, she fell backward on the couch screaming. The pet cat gingerly moseyed out from the hallway to witness Babs wildly flailing about on the couch and, as if disappointed in all things human, moseyed on back.

"Candles: check. Holy water: check," rambled a newly composed Babs whilst sliding her walker around the kitchen. "It's not gonna take none mine, no sir! The devil is a liar, and he's comin' out the TV!"

She walked back to the living room, kneeling next to her candle and holy water like a samurai ready to commit seppuku. Dipping her hand in the water and swinging her rosary against the flame was her way of crab-walking towards confrontation. Her last step was plunging her head completely in the bowl before she would try and tiptoe into the television. She leaned in... closer... even closer now – the memory of her family being the only thing keeping her courage afloat.

“I ain’t ready, man...” she mumbled with her face doused like a mermaid stuck in a washing machine. She slowly pressed her face against the screen. No dice. Harder again and faster, then an all-out bison-bash which sent her reeling backwards. Once more she stood to her feet, this time using her robe sash to tie a pillow around her face and attempting one last time. She slapped her right hand against the screen like she saw her sister do and slammed her pillow-head against the TV whilst spilling holy water all over the room.

* * *

Rita awoke on her back in shock, her thoughts as choppy as spinning propellers. The wheres, whens, and whys all took a back seat to her noticing she was choking on her own tongue. As she coughed and spat into the sandy grass, the fine hairs on the back of her neck took no appeal to the semi-warm sun which seemed a bit alien to her almond skin. It took the might of a mountain to stand to her feet with bones that felt like paper and muscles that felt like squeezing drenched towels. But where was Millie? How close did she land to her?

Following the roar of rocket fuel, she craned her head skyward to see that the trio of missiles were like swans. Their beautiful arc, which began half a horizon away, was now barreling upon her vicinity like the shining finger of God. She tried to run but to no avail – her legs gave out like jelly. A couple of paces ahead, she spotted her daughter splayed in the grass and could barely yell out her name.

“M... Mill,” she whispered gravelly, desperate to stand to her feet – if only her body would cooperate. The missiles’ oversized shadow raced across the treetops even closer than before.

“C’mon Millie,” she begged, spitting out hot digital saliva whilst forcing herself into a painful shuffle towards her barely moving daughter.

Millie lifted her head to see a fiery wheeze of rocket exhaust narrowed into a screaming hell-trumpet towering over her like a guillotine about to drop! It fell upon her like an anvil from the clouds beyond, leaving no escape whatsoever.

“Millie! God no!” screamed Rita, standing between her daughter and the blast, at the last second taking the full brunt of the attack. The searing flash of heat and accompanying shockwave felt like a peek into death itself, which strangely subsided just as quickly as it came.

Rita, still alive, opened her eyes to see the remnants of the missile unleashed nothing more than a flash-bang birthing a flock of doves and tropical rain. A small TV connected to a tiny, blue parachute sauntered down to the grass next to her. Millie slowly peeled herself off her mother with a woozy kind of joyous relief. Rita pulled her back closer and hugged her fiercely.

“I thought I’d lost you,” exhaled Rita wearily.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.”

The two knelt in the grass for a spell, trying to figure out exactly where it was they were sent to exactly. Millie explained that a few commercials randomly went haywire before she was pulled into this seeming paradise. Rita continued to look flabbergasted at the whole of everything.

Welcome to Lost Lands. Enjoy your stay! beeped the console.

“Where is the exit?” asked Millie.

You are on the island chain at the southernmost tip of Lost Lands Zone.

“Oh, it’s a GPS, thank God,” said Rita.

Travel north to exit Lost Lands Zone.

“What is Lost Lands?” chirped Millie.

The Lost Lands Zone is a dinosaur-themed adventure park in Star-GRID! There are hundreds of adventures alongside hundreds of secrets! Keep in mind that the danger is very real... but so is the excitement!

“Who would give this... where did you come from?” ordered Rita.

The console returned to the smiling default.

“Can you give us the fastest way out with the least amount of danger?”

Syncing – please hold. A blue line appeared on the screen which coincided with a bluish glow beneath the grass. It raced forward from the feet of both mother and daughter, heading deeper up the valley and off into the jungle which teemed with distant howls and soaring wails.

The two scanned the horizon as if they would never see home again. “It’s totally beautiful...” whispered Millie. “Well, I guess it’s nice to see the sights before we leave... oh, Millie, look at that... the volcano,” uttered Rita as a cabernet of sparks leaped out of the cauldron-like lips of the snowy volcanic rim followed by an uproarious plume of thick smog.

The sightseeing was suddenly cut short by a splash in the distance. Babs had fallen through face-first into a shallow pool of water and had not yet regained the strength to lift her head. The legs of the walker stuck upwards in the air like a giant dead bug.

“Aunt Babs!” cried Millie, who ran out to shore followed in tow by Rita.

“Babs... Jesus! Millie, do you know CPR?” cried a now-exasperated Rita.

“Ma’ I still remember, throw me your jacket!”

A pterodactyl swooped aggressively low to the water, curving its wing over the heads of the trio at the last minute.

“HOLY...” gasped Rita as both she and Millie screamed and flopped over into the water from the surprise.

“Jesus... take the damn wheel!” screamed a waterlogged Babs while clinging to her walker’s legs like a panda to bamboo.

“Aunt Babs!” cried Millie. “You made it! We’re all gonna die, but you made it!”

“Oh, I’m in here, Teapot. The fall done bent my damn walker. They gon’ have to drag my ass out!”

* * *

Still reeling in shock on the side of the house was Manny. His episode was getting the best of him, and it was all he could do to keep some sort of breathing going. His tan skin was a deep, lavish maroon, and his eyes were full of tears. His hands were claspings at his shirt while he punched the dirt. Seeing visions of soldiers being mowed down in front of him caused him heavy heart palpitations, which downed him before he could properly stand. He could hear Pomplamoose taunting him, and all he could do was rock back and forth like someone freshly pulled from a frozen river. Using all the sanity he had left, he held on to the window

rails and guided himself back to the front door. In shambles, he stumbled to the left towards the kitchen and then to the right towards the living room, flooded with doubt.

Where could they all have gone? he thought. It happened so fast; suddenly life gets turned inside out, and now you're expected to just deal? The torn picture on the floor bought him to tears. Questions became a luxury he couldn't afford as the only option was to fall against the couch and simply bask in the despair. An hour had passed before he could come round to his senses. He dialed the phone slowly each number pressed with numb thumbs.

"Sagat... you there, man? Its Manny. It's about Rita and the old crew... and the old mission. Look, I'm a mess right now, to be honest. I'm comin' over there, so just... see you then."

He slumped back into his crater next to the drumline of steady rain against the window, his eyes shut and his mind soaked in the discomfort like a hot sponge. He tried to attempt some sleep, but the cloud of embarrassment and creeping despair was too great to ignore. The static quietly droned on as he buried himself in his hands like a weeping gargoyle.

"He's gonna kill my wife and kids. I've gotta get a move on..." pleaded Manny to himself before collapsing in more despair. "Oh my God. What is he doing back alive, man? Oh, God..."

It took almost an hour for the rain to stop. Only the battering winds remained to whip the trees and shrubs against the window like the whip of smelling salts – anything to knock him out of his misery.

With tear-stained and tired eyes, he lumbered towards the Jeep keys on emotionless autopilot, fighting himself just to open the front door.

"I can't do this... but I have to," he pleaded, remembering the breathing technique taught to him by his psychologist. He pressed his palms against the wall above the light switch and took two deep breaths with his head tilted up. Two tears fell back towards his ears in hot abandon as he cracked a weary smile.

"O... Okay... now... one step at a time. We're just gonna find Rita and Millie and leave. We'll be alright, we got this." He eased himself outside into the belly of the dying windstorm.

The bloody piano from earlier was still there, now lacking its semi-dead occupant.

We'll all be playing piano and forgetting this ever happened in no time, he thought.

Closing the still-open doors of the Jeep and watching the snow fall off of them as they shut seemed to hammer home the severity of what was unfolding. He didn't want to acknowledge the sheer amount of comfort in the panic; the panic that he secretly didn't want to end. The cabin interior was quiet save for the howling gales outside.

The last of the wind tickled the piano into giggling forth a dire melody as the driveway gravel crackled with the Jeeps' slow exit.

About the Author

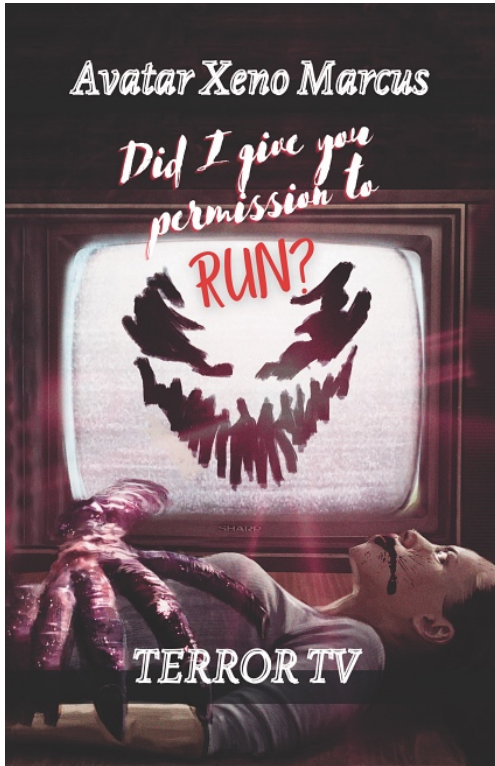
Futurist, artist, philosopher, Taoist, accelerationist Marcus is always seeking to push the limits. Donning the title of Avatar Xeno to represent his excursions into the exopolitical, Marcus seeks to recalibrate the dignity of both on and offworld species for the highest good of all. His greatest achievement for laying the groundwork for this new reality is the discovery of a biological internet, affectionately dubbed the “Bio-Net”.

A natural intuitive, Marcus believes that the remnants of past civilizations and the planet itself are nowhere near the protocol taught to the masses. Since a child he has possessed deep spiritual ties to Antarctica.

In his spare time, Marcus enjoys adventure, psychology, music, martial arts, futurism, debate, alternative history, fitness coaching, writing, sharpening his new ideas and perfecting his old ones.

“Having thick skin and an open mind will take you farther than almost anything! Just go for it!”

— Avatar Xeno Marcus



What Manny doesn't know is that the remnants of his prior military tenure to an off-the-books dimension are returning with a vengeance: gunning for both his slipping sanity and his now missing family.

Did I Give You Permission To Run: Terror TV

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