

Chapter 11 “The Veteran”



As the morning sun leisurely filtered in through the unshaded windows, Sarantos slowly stretched and looked around the large room of Willow’s Inn. Brad was still sleeping and the fire was peacefully blazing with warmth. Wallis sat in front of it slowly rubbing Mika’s head, while they both stared into the dancing flames. Knowing his friend’s magical essence, their minds could be melded into a far away galaxy gathering vital information on their current situation. The strong smell of the wizard’s pipe tobacco filled his nostrils with a smoky-wooded odor.

He’d slept hard last night. After the long walk to Wallow, he’d eagerly followed Brad to an early rest and never waited to see if the others had

returned.

“Good morning, Wallis and Mika,” he said cheerfully.

Wallis nodded once and continued to contemplate the unknown. The old wizard suddenly reminded him of the always forgotten veterans back home. Like them, Wallis gave everything he had to protect the land and the people in it - people he didn’t know and had never met. He was always loyal to these good people and fought the good fight for them. Sarantos smiled watching the wizard and seeing him from this new perspective.

Wallis had spent his life in the service of humanity, in the service of his world and the strangers who filled it up and made it home. He bled for them, killed for them, and Sarantos knew the old wizard would die for them if it ever came to that,

because his life was always seemingly in danger for others. Most people never knew the storm that existed around them and their land, nor did they know about this small group of heroes who risked their lives to keep them safe and free from the evil intentions of others, so they could sleep in peace at night. All of his friends in this world could be considered veterans in a way, but they were still active and fighting the good fight. The battle was never ending.

He threw the covers off and sat up on the edge of the bed scratching his face; his whiskers were filling in, he hadn't shaved in days.

“Good morning. What’s a veteran?” The big cat had never moved, but entered his mind asking this question.

He didn't want to disturb the wizard's train of thought so he answered her with only his thoughts.

“You are, Mika, as are the elves, Switch, Blayke—all of us that fight to protect the good and risk our lives and our own personal way of life so others can continue on with their daily routine without worrying about someone taking that away from them. We dispel the fear of losing freedom. Veterans are the care keepers of the living world. In my country, it's the same way. We call them veterans, those that fought for our rights to be free and to make our own choices today. Sometimes they go unnoticed. They are definitely taken for granted quite frequently, but without them my world would certainly be a more frightening place to live in.”

“I see your point. I like the idea that I'm similar to your veterans. That's what they called your people who fought in wars against evil, right?”

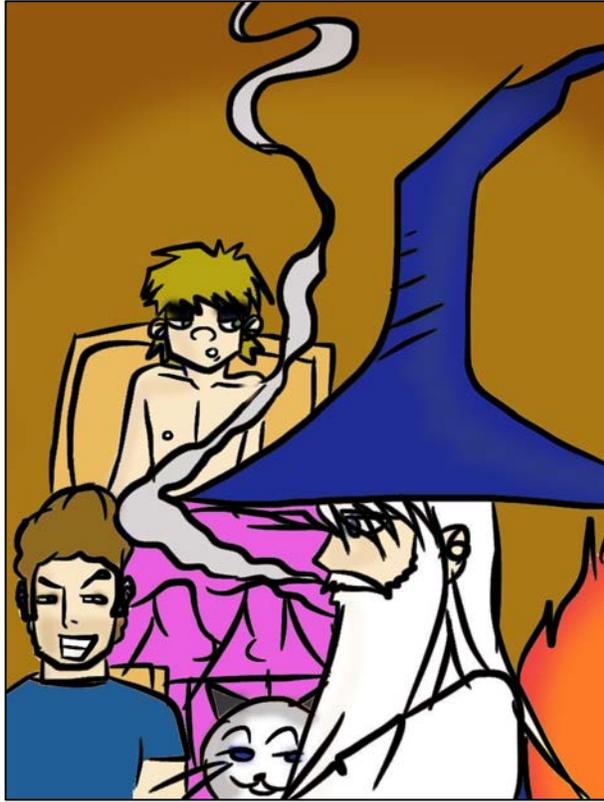
“Yes, although all men who fought in wars are considered veterans, even if you fought against what you might consider evil. All people think their fighters are veterans, no matter what side they're on. History might later show that the side you fought on was the wrong one but you might not necessarily know that at the time.”

“Oh. That's a little strange.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Then I will be a veteran until my wizard decides we can no longer go to war and others will need to take over our position. However, I don't think Wallis would ever stop, not until he could no longer move, my friend.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Mika, but I think even then he’ll be still bossing everyone around and being a stay at home general and leader!”



Mika chuckled. Sarantos let out a loud enough giggle that caused Brad to abruptly open his eyes and ask what was so funny?

The wizard blew on his pipe and said, “The humor is found in my ability to keep going beyond what is usually considered normal by human standards. I, however, am not particularly amused.”

Looking confused and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Brad said, “Okay, thanks. That explains a lot. Not sure why I even ask questions sometimes.”

Brad walked over to the table lethargically joining his friends. As Sarantos patted his friend on his back,

Brad poured some tea into a white china cup.

“It’s lucky you joined us, Brad, because I was working on these fresh orange muffins and would have finished them off shortly. The eggs are great.”

Brad ran his fingers through his messed up hair and tore off a piece of bread before buttering it with a sweet and delicate orange spread.

“I love this bread and spread,” Brad said, while eating small bites slowly, to savor each piece for as long as he could.

Sarantos nodded in agreement and looked at Wallis while sipping on a strong coffee. “Wallis, did everyone get back yet? I’m concerned for their safety.”

“No, Sarantos. I’d ordered your breakfast because we need to stay here for a while. Sergio and Switch joined up with Adele’s group.”

He watched the wizard whose half closed eyes appeared to be far away from the room he sat in. He wondered if Wallis was communicating with someone telepathically. Lifting some eggs to his mouth he asked the wizard what was going on.

“They’ve sealed the perimeter of the city with magic spells that will alert the elves when someone crosses over it. Their sense of direction will allow them to zone in immediately and then they will teleport there and in a flash eliminate the situation.”

“Cool.”

“They’ve checked the city, but people move about regularly and in a city this size it makes it quite difficult to locate all the Metalists as well as deal with them. The elves at least can enter homes and areas undetected because of their nature and that helps in their search. Aurora has skills that are far more creative and useful. I’m not at liberty to discuss them here and now though.” His face darkened and his age surfaced momentarily. Then his complexion softened and he whispered, “I’m leaving to join them. Mika will stay here with you two. Whatever happens, never leave the room. You’re not safe out there! Promise me, if none of us returns within three days you’ll drink your potion and return to Moon’s Inn, gather your friends and seal everyone in the underground city. Do you understand?”

“Yes, we promise, Wallis, and yes, we understand,” said Sarantos filled with apprehension and dismay.

“You will return, you old wizard,” said Brad. “You always do.”

He was always the optimist. That’s why they’d stayed friends so long. He knew better than to ask the wizard too many questions, but his concern out-weighed his caution.

“Wallis, are you okay? Is there something more we should know?”

The wizard stood up and patted both of them on the back. “Yes, I’m fine, Sarantos. Thanks for asking. I’m concerned for our world and the lives of those I love, including you two nuisances.” He rubbed his chin and smiled at them both. “I wonder if the answer would be to go to the Metalists world and repair the damage to their food source. It might send them home.”

“That’s brilliant, Wallis.”

“Yes, I love the idea,” Brad chimed in.

The wizard nodded and sucked on his pipe. “They’re such a violent and stubborn race. They may like the war they’re bringing to the worlds around them though.” He held up his staff and mumbled a few magical words and as smoke swirled around him he said, “Now, do what I say.”



The smoke cleared and the wizard was gone.

“Well, Brad you’ve got to hand it to Wallis. He knows how to make an exit be memorable.”

Brad nodded and shoved another muffin into his mouth. “I love these - so freaking addictive!”

Sarantos was getting nervous and Brad kept pacing around the room and staring out the windows. It was now the evening of the second day. Where was everyone?

“Mika, have you been able to contact anyone, yet?”

“No. Sometimes we are blocked from each other for various reasons, too many to explain, but I can say when that happens it makes me very uncomfortable.”

“I’m sure. Brad, would you stop pacing. Where’s our room service? The sun is almost set and dinner hasn’t arrived. That’s alarming.”

Just then a slight tap could be heard at the door.

“Finally,” Sarantos said and moved to open it. Mika disappeared and he knew she was on guard.



A tall serving woman entered the room and placed their warm food on the table. She was followed by a young man who had clean glasses and set down drinks of various sorts. They put everything on the table and left without saying a word shutting the door behind them.

“Uh...thanks,” said Brad.

The food was delicious and they’d just finished eating when a vapor of purple smoky substance moved chaotically around the room. As it cleared, the wizard stood there brushing off his robes with Switch next to him.

“Where’s dinner? I’m famished.”

“Sorry, Switch we already ate. There’s tea and ale,” said Sarantos with a little chuckle. He so liked the dwarf.

The dwarf pulled out a chair and grabbed the pitcher and poured himself some ale in a dirty mug. He lifted the foamy drink and in his typical style slobbered a quarter of it down his beard while finishing it off. He banged the mug down on the table and burped. “That hit the spot, laddie.”

“Switch, don’t be obnoxious. Adele will be here shortly with food,” said the wizard frowning at the dwarf.

Brad laughed and Wallis turned his frown toward him.

“Well, if I’d been able to eat with everyone downstairs I’d be in a better mood, wouldn’t I?”

“That’s why you weren’t allowed. You have no manners and it would not have been accepted in that elegant dining hall, for goodness sake, dwarf!”

“Are you referring to the arrogant and snooty people of this so called fine establ-”

The wizard interrupted him. “Enough, dwarf.”

The door opened and Adele, Aurora and Blayke came into the room bringing food.

“It’s about time.”

They sat the food down, but before anyone could say hello, the dwarf started eating and Wallis started talking.

“I’ve summoned you here because I’ve made a decision. Some of us are going to



Metal. We have no choice. The only way to fully protect this world is to re-establish their food supply. If we fail then I’m afraid our battle will continue throughout the next century. We must try to stop it now.”

Adele spoke quietly. “You must take me with you.”

The wizard stared into her gentle eyes causing his to soften at once. “No, my love. You are more valuable here. If we fail the rest of you will continue the fight until the end of your lives or the end of time, whichever comes

first.”

A tear ran down her cheek. Sergio materialized in the room behind the wizard. “I’m ready, wizard. I’ve said my good byes to Murielle.”

The wizard stood. “I leave Mika with the rest of you. If I die so will my familiar, my friend, my companion and then you’ll know I’m gone and you’re on your own.”

He hugged the big cat and took Aurora’s hand and moved to stand next to Sergio. He waved his hand and smoke rose around the three of them. “I was never fond of good byes,” the wizard said. Panic rose up inside of Sarantos driving a wedge deep in his gut. He bolted toward the smoke and grabbed the end of the wizard’s robe and held on for dear life.

He felt cold. He shivered and opened his eyes.

“What were you thinking, Sarantos?”

Wallis sounded angry, but he reached out his hand and helped him to his feet. The land was grey and barren.

He looked at the three of them and said, “You couldn’t survive without me. I’m a Metalist now. You need me.” That was all he could say between clinched and frozen teeth.

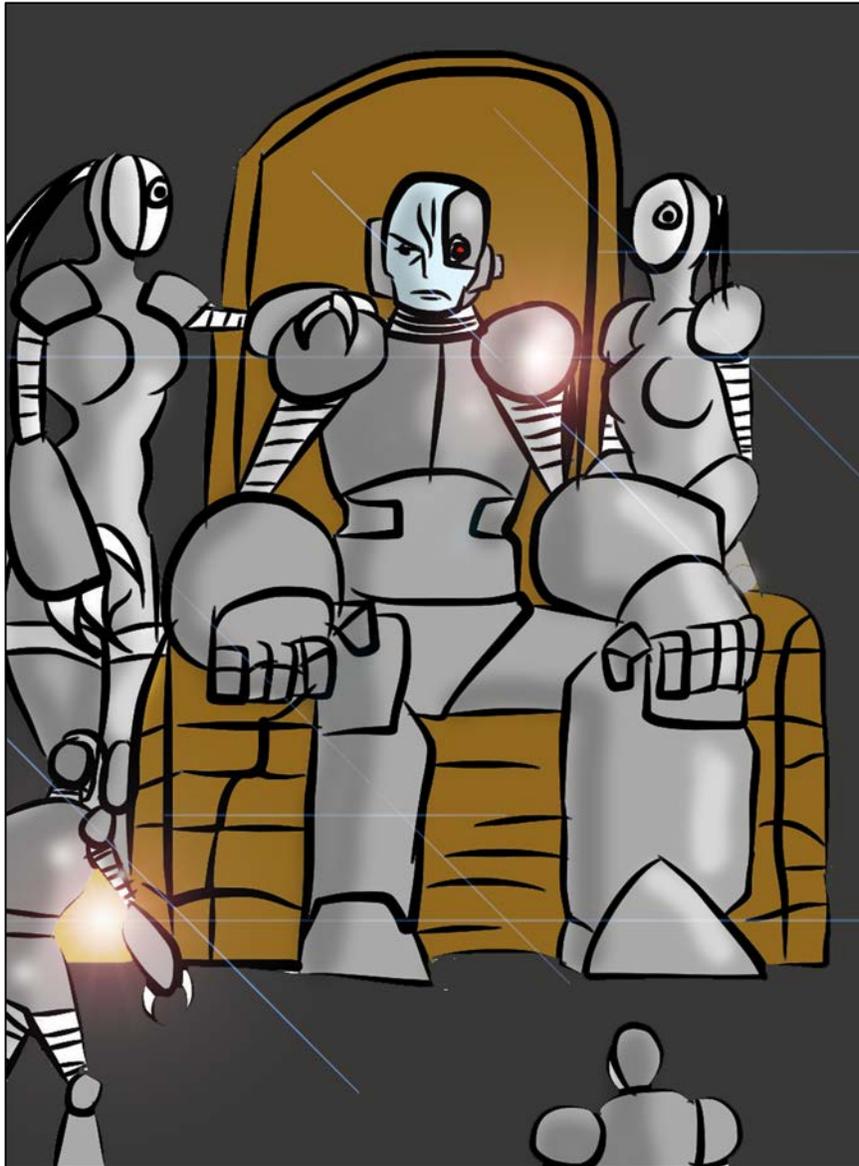
“Good grief. We can’t babysit you, Sarantos. You’re not a real Metalist.”

“I’m not asking you to babysit me. I want to pay forward what your world and all of you have done for me. Leigh needs to be safe and I want to help give her that restful feeling of security.”

Aurora smiled and said, “Come we must hurry. They know we’re here.”

They quickly approached a tall grey building that looked like a modern skyscraper, but with windows at the top. Aurora grabbed all of them and then Sarantos immediately found himself standing with his friends inside a room with grey slate walls. What appeared to be Metalist warriors lined this great hall to either side of a

black carpet that ran down the center of the room separating the highly polished silver floor into two sections. They stood on the unbroken carpet and started walking down it. About two hundred yards off sat a stone throne, not just a throne however, but a massive throne with ebony stones inlaid around the edges of the arms and the base of the royal chair. It threw a little light around the drab room.



What was un-nerving was the giant Metalist who sat on it looking like a modern god, or a Borg out of The Star Trek series. They were heading towards it. Sarantos tried to stay calm and focused on the giant females to either side of the king's chair. They were extremely endowed with defined muscles and oversized bosoms and watched as the group made their way to the king's throne.

His crown was inlaid with white diamonds, bloodstones and onyx stones. He was quite impressive.

There were too many to fight and the warriors to either side

of the group watched their every move. There was no going back. His dream was coming true. They would take him. They would take them all!

No one stopped them as they approached the king. They didn't need to, because everyone there, including Wallis's little group, knew they were already dead.

They arrived in front of the throne and they all bowed. Sarantos followed their lead, because he had no idea what was going on, or what they were really doing there in the midst of this tangible nightmare. He focused on Leigh and his friends that were counting on them and for the first time in his life he felt like his life really mattered. In that small moment, he was more significant than at any other point in his life—he felt what he did now would affect the lives of so many, including the Metalists. The enemy suddenly needed to be saved, as well.

He was no longer just a mere man, but someone past that, someone with the ability to understand how valuable all life was. He felt unselfish. He sensed history in the making well beyond the flesh. Now, he at long last understood Wallis and his group of friends. He looked over each one of them and saw a glow of warmth and compassion combined with no fear and they were all marked with the symbol of a hero. He could see it now - how they were immortal beyond the mere physical world. Their very souls were dressed in a hero's uniform. It was how they always dressed, but today he saw it for the first time and his eyes finally seemed privy to this detail.

The king was different than most of the Metalists. He had a solid leadership quality about him that caused his crown to give off a slight glow. Maybe, it was the gems and Sarantos was deceived, but right now he didn't think so. He was seeing clearer than at any other point in his life. The evil persona that seemed to overwhelm him earlier was the unfounded idea of what the throne meant, what the crown meant, and the room filled with these creatures he simply didn't fully understand. Why? Maybe because they weren't like him and it was a way of life he wasn't used to. That was the illusion. The human history books were filled with it—fear of the unknown. So many mistakes made because of an innate irrational fear of what one did not fully understand, and maybe never quite bothered to try and actually comprehend it!

He calmed his heart, his mind and his breathing. He bowed again, in earnest. The king glanced at him and tilted his head slightly to the left. The women were looking straight ahead and showed no interest. He took a deep breath and that's when it happened. Aurora stepped forward.

What was she doing?



Suddenly, her appearance shifted and she became her goddess-like self. He wondered if her incredible beauty would help their cause, but it blinded him. He rapidly turned his eyes toward the king. The king stood up and watched her and almost appeared amused.

She spoke in their tongue and turned into a Metalist. The room erupted in a strange chatter that was certainly the voice of their race. The king seemed surprised and alarmed until she went back to the beautiful woman she was a moment before. He moved forward and took her hand; raising it to his mouth he kissed it.

She smiled and spoke again. The king answered her, or so it appeared to him. Wallis and Sergio were just standing there tense and waiting for an outcome. Aurora showed no sign in her expression that the conversation was going the way she wanted it to or that they were about to die. He knew very little about her, but according to Wallis her race were demi-gods. She had talents that would undoubtedly show themselves when the situation required unusual handling and this was surely one of those times.

The king's eyes slanted into a smile, or maybe it was a grimace. It was hard to judge what their expressions meant. He gasped when the king suddenly picked up Aurora and sat her at the bottom of his throne. What was happening?

The wizard and Sergio backed up to Sarantos and he received a message to get ready to be attacked. The meeting did not go according to plan. The king was not convinced of our intent to assist them in healing their world and some of the politicians like the chaos of war regardless. I'm sorry, Sarantos, but we have to destroy as many as we can before we fall or escape. We may die. We'll have to fight our way out of here, until Aurora can get close enough to us to take us out of here.

Sarantos knew Sergio could leave at anytime, but the cause kept him by his friends' sides. There was no way he would leave them. The elf would never abandon them. He had a newfound respect for Sergio.

Sarantos pulled his guitar around and watched as the king sat back down on his throne and nodded to his soldiers. He knew what that meant. Sergio hissed.

“No!”

His voice sounded demanding like a general going to war, but deciding at the last minute they'd chosen the wrong front. He wasn't going to let that happen. It was his turn to help his friends and the world he loved so much.



His fingers danced down the guitar and his voice was loud and forceful filling the great hall with the most insane metal head music he'd ever heard. He couldn't believe he was playing this. He had never played this kind of music before.

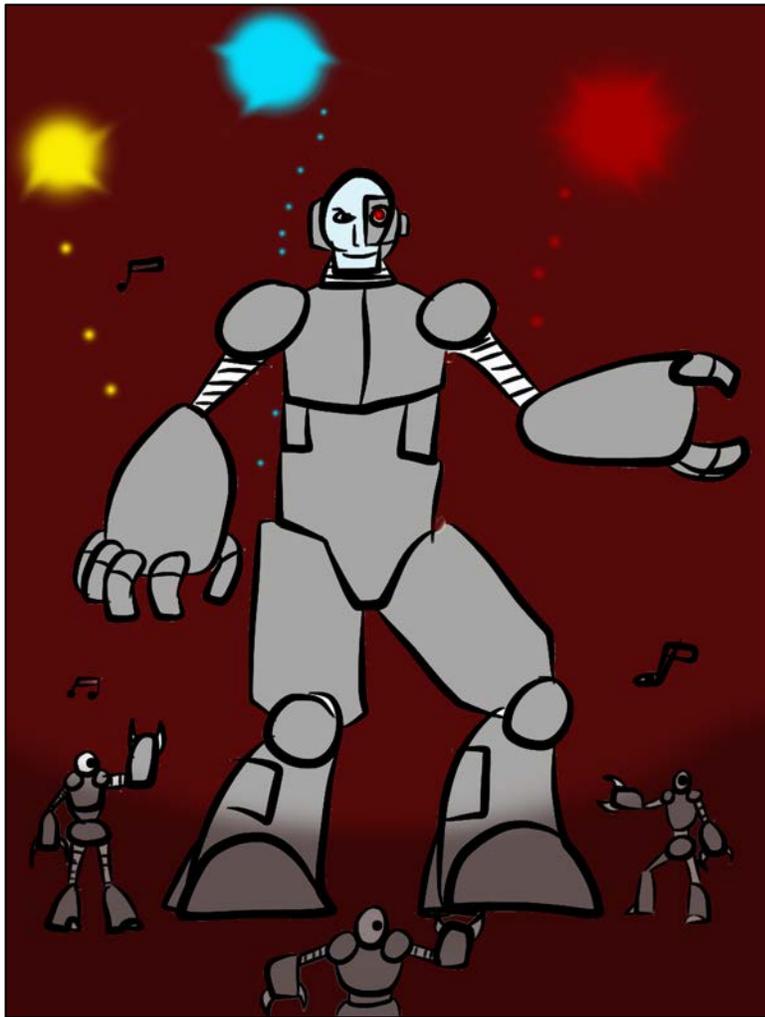
The Metalists that were closest to him stopped in their tracks. The wizard turned towards Sarantos and winked. He winked like they were just doing a routine gig. Then the wizard's loud incanting created a heavier bass and the sound increased in volume that bordered on an

out-of-this-world insanity!

Sarantos remembered his dream when he was on the boat and had finally admitted what he wanted to do with his life ever since he'd been a child. It was this, make music. It didn't matter what kind of music so long as it entertained his audience. He did not want to always play the same type of music or sing in the same style. He was flexible. He adapted. He was always willing to learn, to change his ways, to get better, faster, stronger. To do whatever it took to make his audience happy and content. Each audience was different. He always had this uncanny ability to be able to read the audience, to give them what they wanted. Today he had a hall full of rabid listeners and he was playing for his life and the life of his friends but he felt no pressure whatsoever. He just played. He just sang. He reached inside to an inner part of his soul and did what felt right. There was no thinking. There was a strange tranquillity. There was ease of movement with a purposeful energy.

He felt like a king. He was in control of his destiny right here and now. Sarantos was now a true Metalist!

They all tilted their heads and appeared momentarily confused. They looked to their leader and shifted uncomfortably. Sarantos played on. He would not stop. He could not stop. He was in the moment and the moment took over.



Then the coolest yet most unexpected thing imaginable happened—the king stood up and started moving about in some form of dance. The rest of his kind joined him and soon it looked like a bizzaro Woodstock and he was the only rocker vocalist. Fireworks somehow now lit up the hall. Sarantos started coming back to reality and into this moment. He sensed joy in the room. He looked at the wizard. The wizard was laughing like a little boy at a grand party.

“...So, that’s how Sarantos saved the world.” The wizard finished the story for his friends and leaned back in his chair.

They were all together at Moon’s Inn and he felt Leigh’s arm touch his as she leaned in and snuggled under his chin. He’d missed her so much.

The dwarf asked, “Wizard, why did Aurora show herself as her real self?”

“Well, the Metalists can shape shift and respect a race that has that ability. She can speak any language and was able to communicate with them, as well. When the

king disagreed with the deal, then in the Metalists culture the dealmaker becomes their property. He might have been overly impressed with her and also wanted her. She could have escaped anytime but she stayed as she wanted to assist us in defeating them. Her race is there now restoring their world back to a healthier state. Sarantos cut a deal, as well and will have to do a concert once a month as part of the new treaty.” The wizard grinned from ear to ear.



“Music is a universal language,” Sarantos said.

“You’re a hero,” said Leigh.

“We’re all heroes Leigh and I feel so proud to be a part of a service that protects and defends a beautiful way of life. Keeping those you love safe is part of being a hero and I have an undying respect for all the veterans before me who fought bravely and proved their loyalty to their country and their people. Since the war is now finally over with the Metalists, you could say we’re all part of the magical spirit that being a veteran feels like. However, the reality of the true and undeniable pain that goes

along hand in hand with being a veteran of warfare sadly sometimes goes untold.

I dedicate this victory of ours to every veteran of every war in every world in all of time...