

OF LIONS AND LAMBS

by

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Chapter 1

Countdown to Apocalypse: 5 minutes and counting-

"Earth is a strange planet to do time on," Atti "the Hun" Nichololias thought as she lit up her third pack of smokes on what would be a five pack night. "Remember the rules," she muttered under her breath as she buzzed through her joke cards for the last time.

"Rule one-know your audience," she recalled to herself in a silent voice drowned by the groans and moans of a crowd already past the fourth beer, whiskey and/or vodka. *"Maybe I should have taken the first spot, before their poor, tired souls were drowned with cheap, no-name booze. But no one in this kind of crowd is brave enough to loosen up without some pharmacological help. Maybe no one in ANY crowd is brave enough to be loose without being hammered."*

Four minutes to lift-off, blow-up or both.

Atti did a final mirror check. She adjusted the cleavage buttons on her black denim blouse, hoping that it would be open just enough, then checked the seam on her skin-tight regulation-rebel biker leather pants, hoping it would stay closed. Both wrapped a figure most whores half her age would kill for, thanks to Atti's faithful weight-controlling mentors Desperation and Restlessness. They had been riding point and rear with her ever since she took to the outlaw comedy trail on the dick joke circuit, ten years and so many lifetimes ago. Packed in Atti's saddlebags as weapons against the Dull-Out Dragon were conscience, intelligence and passion. The fire of that demon had already burnt out her joy of life and was working on her will to endure it.

"Come back victorious behind your shield or dead over it," Atti remembered. It was the advice her father gave her when she walked out of the university doors just two credits shy of getting her Ph.D. degree in organic chemistry at the unprecedented age of twenty-five. *"You are a bright girl. Smart enough to not stay in science to please your mother, or me. And you are also smart enough to know that if it is not your passion, you will kill yourself, and then so many others. Give people what they need. Anyone can give them what they want. Except for special souls, like you."*

Atti's eye caught a glimpse of a birthday card from an ex-biker, now tuned citizen. "Snake", now Norman Brady, had warned Atti about being an aging rebel.

"Assimilate or separate," he reminded her, yet one more time in a handwritten plea that out-sincered the factory-customized New Age poem in flowery Roman-Gaelic Italic print. "You can't change anyONE, or anyTHING in this or any other town. The only ones who profit off revolution are the actors who get royalties for playing them in the movies. You MIGHT get honorable mention put on your gravestone. But you'll be eaten by the earthworms long before the flick gets premiered."

The crow's feet around Atti's battle weary 38-year-old eyes couldn't be smoothed out by the discount-sale make-up. *"Maybe they'll connect to the fire in my eyes before they see the wrinkles around them," she thought. "Who the fuck knows? Maybe someone out there will feel what's on the other side of these fireballs inside my eye-sockets and not be scared of what's on the other side."*

Three minutes and counting. Proceed to launch.

The yellow light flashed. Time for a change of the guard. The stripper-juggler ran out of polyester underwear and bad TV imitations. Besides, his anatomy wasn't very interesting to look at. All the crowd wanted was to see him humiliate himself. *Get naked in front of them with no defense except his own courage, or stupidity.*

Time for the Bernie Bernstein to warm up the crowd. He embellished his seasonal Christmas Shtick this time with Santa hat and beard that did little to hide his bald spot. It was acquired from a lifetime of worry, complimented by a ton of golden Jewish medallions around his fat, sweaty neck. It was retained as an anchor to a culture which, for him, was about linking up to a religion, since he couldn't believe in God anymore.

"Welcome to Bernie's Comedy Central, in the middle of downtown Vancouver. Don't worry about the rain outside, or the rivers in the streets. They're getting it fixed now," Santa Bernie bellowed out in a Yiddish baritone pronouncement. "The head of BC highways had to tell the Haitian construction workers that sewers are supposed to put the water UNDER the streets."

"Mild laugh," Atti observed. "Maybe this crowd does think. Fuck them if they don't. Kiss their toe jam if they do."

Bernie continued. "Of course, the Haitian construction workers understood the order when it was explained in their own language—crayon cartoons. And they all got a free bag lunch for working overtime." Big laugh as Bernie pulled out baggies of oregano and basil, and proceeded to toss them out to the crowd. No black faces in this room, at least on the people who were on the paying end of thinks. And some of them might even try smoking the magical weed out of Santa Bernie's bag.

One minute.

"Bernie's doing better tonight than he did last night," Atti observed. "He'll

go for another joke. He's got an ego, just like everybody else. And, besides, he's the guy who signs my paycheck. Who knows? He may even be the real boss here."

Bernie gave out a few more trinkets from his bag to buy off the crowd, including some airline sample booze mini bottles, condoms and any other assorted junk from the back room.

"Give out garbage to garbage," Atti thought as her mind recalled the next rule. "No one gives a shit about you. Your job is to be stupid, weird, ballsy, and, yes, insane. If you go mad, you're done your job. Those emotional cowards in the audience need you, and are never going to really thank you. Even when they're laughing. But you need them as bad as they need you. Remember last night when you bombed? You don't have the right to live until you've atoned for that, and the only way you'll be able to go on living in ANY kind of tomorrow is if you kill this crowd TONIGHT."

Thirty-seconds.

The green light flashed. A mock drum roll from a pre-recorded deck followed.

"Fuck, that's hokey," Atti muttered loud enough for Luna, the bombshell 22 year-old neoHippie waitress, to hear. Bernie had acquired her as a perk for converting an Irish sports bar into Comedy central Vancouver. "This isn't the Borsht Belt, no matter how many Pastrami on rye sandwiches he tries to sell to blonde, blue-eyed Yuppid Nazi's with Canadian MasterCard Golds."

"Huh?" Luna responded with a mouth held in mid air, and eyes stuck in a land full of mild, honey and granola.

"Where's the off button of this fucking machine?!!!" Atti bolted through gritted teeth and an angry smile, trying to neutralize the 'intro machine', which pumped out an even louder drum roll each time she tried to bang it into silence.

"Over there?" Luna replied, pointing to a vintage 1981 tape deck.

Atti pulled the tape out of the resting and retired unit, then inserted her own--the blasting thunder of Wagner's Flight of the Valkyries. Terror turned into tenacity as the old tape deck over ruled the CD playing drum roll. Fear forged itself into fire.

"I know that music," Luna commented regarding the Wagnerian theme music .

"Yeah?" Maybe Atti did have a soul mate here, after all.

"Bugs Bunny."

"Huh."

"Yeah. Like, Elmer Fudd. On those oldie cartoons. 'Kill the rabbit, Kill the rabbit, kill the rabbit'."

Atti felt her legs chopped off. Then something unexpected supported her sinking spirit. Bugs Bunny had survived. Maybe she would, too. And, most importantly, maybe what she would do on the stage in less than a minute's time would last for an eternity. A statement of affirmation from humans who must die against death. Our bodies die. Our souls, so the "good" books say, get reprocessed by a sadistic old bastard up in the sky. But what we DO lasts forever. What we say finds its way to other people's ears, up into the sky to some E.T. who has a high intelligence level and most certainly a healthier and more vibrant sense of humor than us pathetic earth people. Every artist's act of defiance from the heart is an eternally standing defiance against death that ALWAYS wins.

Thirty seconds left-maybe.

The thoughts raced through Atti's mind as she tried to hold on to the credos of what makes a joke work.

"Opinion and attitude. Everything else is nuts and bolts. Set up, then punch line. Two straight lines then joke, rule of threes. And when in doubt, go with the magic rule of seven-It's HARD to be a whatever, you know what BUGS me about whatever, what's WEIRD, STUPID, UP WITH whatever. And there's a seventh one. A nuts and bolts detail. I'll remember it, don't worry. It's just a small detail. And what's the 'whatever?' Politically correct whores? Elevator music? Amway salesman? Self-Sabotage??!!! FUCK, I'M SCREWED!!!"
And Bernie really is pissed off at the musical intro change. But he's smart enough fake it. Everyone will lose if he gives away the game. But the Wagnerian trick worked, even though no one in the audience recognizes the music as Wagner's. The crowd is startled, maybe even awake. But as for keeping them that way....

"Fuck, no one could win over this crowd. It's the worst kind. Six figure incomes, two digit IQs and American Express Card Gold. As long as they kept ordering drinks, the comic, which is me, gets paid," Atti told herself with the voice in her spinning head. "And as long as they don't think, maybe they can LOOK like they are. They look Alive, and I stay alive, made so by being paid in complimentary booze, free dope and sometimes even more money. Chain-office rules never spoken, always hated, but always applied."

Green light off. Engines ignited.
Prepare for lift off.

Bernie grabbed the microphone even tighter, squeezing its handle like it was

the throat of his worst enemy, who at that moment was his next comic.

"We can't promise that the rain is gonna stop, or that everyone is going home with who they came with, but we can promise you, all the way from Richmond, BC, a woman whose reputation is well documented in the Sun, Times and men's room stalls across the country-Atti the Hun Nichololias."

The lights went off. The cajoled, impersonal noise of the applause deafened Atti's ears, then merged into total silence as she started off into the blinding light.

"Fuck, you moron," she said to herself, her mind taken to another place, time and dimension, yet again. "Why are you staring into that goddamn light? The mother ship is not coming down to rescue you, and you're stuck here on planet earth. There's NOTHING but planet earth, ugly and disgusting as it is. That's all there is. That's all there ever was. Unless-."

Bernie handed her the mic with a warm Jewish Santa smile and muttered to her in a soft, fatherly voice. "Don't get political. Just make them laugh, Atti."

"Sure," Atti replied with down-turned eyes.

"If the crowd leaves, then you do, Atti."

"I'll do my homeless routine, Bernie. It'll kill this crowd." Atti put up the wall behind her bigger than life blue eyes. There was no way she would let anyone see the vulnerability behind those portholes. Not Bernie, who was so good at milking her for her comedic services. Not the drunks in the first row, who were so pathetically bad at getting a piece of comedienne hot ass. Not the blue-blood slumlord in the back row, who demanded four-month's back rent on his desk by tomorrow AM, or Atti's fourth-hand furniture on the sidewalk by noon. Not the stranger lurking behind every shadow, who knew all her secrets.

That all too familiar stranger knew about her real biological origins, never revealed to her, even by her father. He knew about the child she abandoned during the year lost to bad dope and worse boyfriends. He knew that underneath all the fiery irreverence she was dead wood inside.

That stranger who would be her ultimate executioner was out there somewhere. She could feel him breathing down her neck as the noose pulled one notch tighter.