

Dire Multiverse Episode 1: Ohmega's Call for Help
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QUICK CHARACTER OVERVIEW

Ohmega is gung-ho about figuring out what happened at MetaGalactiCon. (Angel Leigh McCoy)

EPISODE INTRO

The Dire Multiverse Audio Drama, Season 1, **Episode 1: "Ohmega's Call for Help"**. Brought to you by Games Omniverse and Wily Writers.

RATING

The following audio drama is rated PG for Parental Guidance.

Ohmega Monologue

Hi, guys. It's Ohmega. I have the mystery of all mysteries to share with you. If the Puzzler Guzzlers can't help me out, then no one can. So, grab your tea, coffee, Red Bull, or whatever fuel you need, and get ready to exercise your brain.

This is all pretty weird, so bear with me. Some of you were there, so feel free to add your own perspectives, if you're comfortable talking about it. I think we owe it to the world to tell what happened. Hell, until the Men in Black show up to wipe our memories, I think we owe it to ourselves to put it all down for posterity.

So, me and some of the PGs were at MetaGalactiCon. It was cool to be part of the first one ever, and I want

to thank Wick for hosting it. Fan conventions can be either great, or they can be a steaming swamp of humanity in Trekkie uniforms and elf ears. This one was the former. I loved meeting you guys in person after so many years spent online together. The zombie game... well, I'll get to that in a minute.

It was me, LimeCello, KittyKat, Wick, and Sammitch. We hooked up at lunch on Friday and hung out all day. Yeah, it was kinda awkward at first, introvert that I am. But I got over that. I was having fun.

Friday night, the five of us teamed up for the zombie LARP. My dystopian freak flag was flying high, lemme tell you. I was dressed for zombie hunting in an outfit I'd made myself. I had an old army jacket that I'd riveted bottle-caps to. I found some old rubber and made it into a corset, with chain for strings. It turned out a little tight, but... Hm. Sorry. I digress. Let's just say, it was my post-apocalyptic armor.

We'd already taken down six zombies and were out in the woods behind the campground lodge, looking for more. Not having much luck. It was dinner time, so I was starting to think the zombies had all gone to the cafeteria.

As the scout, I was ahead of everyone else, but the sun was setting, so I turned back, cutting through the trees to the dirt road that goes into the campground.

That's when I came across the body, just lying there by the side of the road. At first, I thought it was a zombie or one of the hunters who'd had his brains eaten. Part of the game, you know?

And there was another guy there too. He was crouching down beside the body. He had on a vest covered with patches. Very apocalyptic biker style. His dark hair was in a long braid down his back, and he was old...ish: receding hairline old. Tanned skin, kinda wrinkled.

I saw a motorcycle parked down the road a ways, and I figured he belonged to it. That should've been my first clue that something was off. Anyone playing the game wouldn't be out on a bike.

"Brains or bullets?" I shouted. It's the usual greeting we use to tell whether a player is a zombie or a hunter. Zombies have to say, "Braaaains..." and then come after me.

This guy looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Stay back. The cops are on the way."

The cops. That was my second clue. And I still wasn't quite getting it. I did stay back, though. My early alarm bells were just starting to go off.

Then the guy stood up. He was tall and big. That's when it hit me that maybe I was somewhere I shouldn't be.

I heard Wick call my name from somewhere in the woods, and I was so glad the rest of the team was catching up with me. I shouted back to let them know where I was without taking my eyes off the biker guy.

The group came up behind me and stopped.

"Brains or bullets?" Wick asked me. Like me, he wasn't sure whether the scene was staged or not.

"Neither," I said. "Wait here, guys."

I moved closer to the body so I could see it better. The man on the ground definitely wasn't breathing. He had a slit that ran from his chest to his belly. His organs—the ones that were supposed to be inside—were spilling out as if someone had dug around in there looking for their keys. His blood was everywhere. And that's when it hit me.

I said, "Oh my god! Is he dead?" Yeah, those are the exact words that came out of my mouth.

The biker dude actually rolled his eyes at me. "Kinda," he said. "He was like this when I got here."

From behind me, I heard LimeCello mutter automatically, "That's what they all say."

Sammitch cussed—something like, "Holy shit." They'd moved closer, so they could now see it too.

My dad started reading murder mysteries to me before I was old enough to hold a book, and I never stopped, so my mind kicked into Sherlock gear. I started noticing important details, like how the biker had no blood on him. Like how he had no weapon in his hands, and how he looked anywhere but at the body. So... he wasn't the one responsible.

I asked what happened.

The biker just shrugged and said again that the cops were on the way.

I didn't get any closer; I could see enough from where I was. Somebody had done an awful thing to this man's body, cut him open, right down the middle, right through his coat and clothes. The skin at the back of my neck crawled, and a shiver jerked my shoulders.

Even now, talking about it days later, here in my safe little apartment, I feel like someone's watching me, like I sense the touch of someone's eyes on the back of my head. I haven't been able to shake it.

I took a step back from the body. Two steps. It was too disgusting. I went back to eyeballing the biker. He kept looking at his cellphone, as if waiting for a text or checking the time.

That's when Sammitch asked, "Hey, where's Kitty? She was right behind me."

I turned in place. No Kitty in sight. That wasn't good.

"Why does this suddenly feel like we're in Camp Crystal Lake?" LimeCello asked. It was a rhetorical question.

I said, sarcastic as ever, "Thanks, Lime. I needed that in my head."

I wasn't sure if it was okay to leave the scene of a death or not, but I figured we were just innocent bystanders, so we wouldn't get in trouble--probably. I told the biker guy that we had to go look for our friend.

He said, "Don't hurry back on my account."

Wick said, "No splitting up. That's Rule #3 in the 'How to Survive a Serial Killer' handbook."

We headed back toward the woods, retracing our steps, calling Kitty's name. It was starting to get dark, so we used our phones for light--except for Sammitch, who had an actual flashlight on him, because...of course he

did. He carries a video-game inventory of stuff in his pockets and backpack, just in case. Sammitch, I love ya, but you're paranoid.

We left the road.

I was glad to be away from that horrific scene and to have something else to do. I didn't relish the idea of having to walk past the dead guy to get back to the campground.

Going was rougher in the forest. It wasn't so treacherous, if you could see, but once it started getting dark, the pine and fir trees became your enemies. They didn't have many branches near the bottom of their trunks, but they did have pointy bits that stuck out, and if you weren't careful, you could easily scratch or stick yourself on one of 'em.

After fifteen minutes, we were cold, we were hungry, and we still hadn't found Kitty. I had this sick feeling in my stomach.

Wick suggested we check the campground to see if she made it back there.

By that time, the sun had gone down completely. I kept hearing "Ow!" and a few more colorful words from the others. I said it myself, a couple times, when a tree limb or bush attacked me. It was time to head back.

That's when we heard the scream. A blood-curdling, terrified scream that made my heart skip a beat.

We all froze, and everybody was silent, listening.

Another scream.

Wick took off first, in the direction of the sound. I was close behind him. The others were right behind me, crashing through the underbrush.

We came out in a clearing at the edge of a cliff overlooking the Puget Sound and stopped. Sammitch's flashlight lit the scene, but it took me a minute to parse what I was seeing.

Kitty was there, lying on the ground on her back, gasping for breath, hyperventilating. And there was a stranger, with his back to us. He was crouched down beside Kitty, his hands on her torso. I didn't think it was anybody I knew, but I couldn't see his face. He had on a khaki safari jacket and a bright orange scarf.

He was beside her, doing something. It looked like he was massaging her, but not gently.

Finally, a new wave of adrenaline hit me. I ran toward Kitty with Wick on my heels.

I think I shouted, "Get away from her!" I don't know what I thought I was going to do, but I knew I needed to get him off her. The words "serial killer" came to me after I had charged, too late to save me but soon enough to double that adrenaline.

Who was it said there's a fine line between bravery and stupidity?

I was about halfway across the clearing when the man reared back and raised his hands over his head. He had hold of a large roly-polly bug. (And when I say large, I mean it was as big as a full-grown German Shephard.) He had it by its carapace, and it had dozens of legs, all wriggling in mid-air.

I tried to stop. My feet quit moving, but my upper body didn't get the message, and I started to go down. Wick managed to side-step me, but he tripped up too, and before I could even cry out, we were both on the ground.

LimeCello screamed for me. Or maybe it was Sammitch. They had stayed near the trees, I guess.

From where I was, on the ground, I lifted my head to see. Kitty hadn't moved. But the man—and the giant bug—were struggling. The bug twisted around, trying to get free. It rolled up into a ball, then whipped its tail. Yeah, it had a tail, long and thin, that it used to slash a cut across the man's cheek.

The man cursed. He shouted, "I can't hold it!"

I didn't know who he was talking to, but I got up on my feet. Wick did too.

Then I just stood there. In shock, I suppose.

The man stumbled toward the edge of the cliff, and for a second, I thought he was going to jump. But, instead, he lurched just as the bug jerked free. The man dropped to his knees at the edge, and the bug went flying out into the open, angrily twisting in an effort to grab hold of anything. But there wasn't anything to grab onto. It fell.

Just before it fell out of sight, Sammitch's flashlight spotlighted it, and I saw it curl into a ball, its carapace like nested plates. Its legs and tail tucked inside.

My feet began moving before my conscious mind could catch up, and the next thing I knew, I was kneeling

beside Kitty. She looked pale and beautiful, her long dark hair spread out around her head and half-covering her face, like a ghost. I shook her arm, calling her name. When she didn't respond, I checked her pulse. (Thank you, Red Cross first-aid training.) She had one. (Thank you, benevolent Universe.) And she was breathing.

I looked her over for injuries and found a small cut in the center of her chest, running in a line parallel to her spine. It was bleeding, but not too badly, not too deep. I pulled the handkerchief off my wrist (part of my zombie-hunter costume) and applied pressure.

Wick had gone over to the man and was helping him to his feet. He said, "You okay, man?"

The man stood and brushed off his knees. He said, "Hell, yeah," like he fought giant bugs every day. He leaned over the edge of the cliff, and Wick looked too.

Wick asked, "What was that thing?" He held up his phone, and the light hit the other dude square in the face. I got a good look at him. He was probably in his fifties, as rugged as an experienced mountaineer. His beard and hair were trimmed short, neat, almost well-groomed. He had plenty of gray, but also some lingering ginger. His eyes had squint lines at the corners. The phone's light glinted off gray-green irises, sharp and clear, as intense as everything else about him. Blood beaded on the cut across his cheek. One of them had overflowed and was running slowly down toward his jaw.

The man said, "That, my friend, was a Pacific Northwest armadillo." He wiped his hands on his pants legs.

Wick said, "A what?"

I said, "It was huge!" I'd never heard of armadillos on the islands.

The man nodded like it was normal. He said, "They can grow quite big and be aggressive if they feel threatened. Their claws are sharp as ice in the dead of winter."

Kitty made a noise, and I looked down to see her looking back at me. I was so happy.

She asked, "What happened?"

The man said, "Your friend'll be fine. Get her up off the cold ground. You should get her someplace warm. C'mon. I'll show you the way out. You staying at the campground, yeah?" He didn't even wait for an answer, but started walking toward the woods.

LimeCello and Sammitch moved out of his way, staying huddled together like a pair of armor-clad teddy bears.

I helped Kitty to her feet. She seemed okay, but I stayed beside her as we followed the man. Sammitch, Lime, and Wick fell in behind Kitty and me, close behind us.

I asked the man who he was, but he ignored me. He was walking fast, almost too fast to keep up with. We had to focus on avoiding tree branches and roots, so I didn't press at the time. Before long, we started seeing flashing lights, red and blue, reflecting off the trees.

The man stopped where he was and waved us on. He said, "Follow the lights. You'll be okay now."

We started to walk by, but Kitty stopped by him and said, "I think you saved me."

The man looked down at her with a serious expression, and all he said was, "I'm glad you're okay." I watched the corner of his mouth turn up, more like a half smile than a smirk. He said, "It's best if you guys stay out of the forest this weekend. Keep to the campground."

Made sense to me. I asked him again, "Who are you?"

He looked at me. The half-smile was gone, and he seemed to study me. It was turning out to be kinda his thing. Thinking before speaking, I mean. Evaluating before answering. I think he was an old soul. He had that wise and steady look you sometimes see in elders, like he knows the secrets of the universe.

He must have decided I was okay, because he said, "Name's Grady."

Kitty held out her hand for a handshake. She said, "Thank you, Grady. I'm Katsumi." They shook. Grady's hand was grizzled and big, especially compared to Kitty's small, smooth one. They shook once, then he pulled free and turned to go back the way he came.

We headed in the opposite direction, for the road and the lights.

It was a sheriff's car that was flashing. Down the road a ways from where we came out of the forest, we could see a deputy standing with the biker, near the body—*yeah, I'd almost forgotten about the body.*

The car's headlights and a spotlight shone on them. I was glad to see they'd covered the body with a red-and-white-plaid picnic blanket. Seeing it again brought it

all back, and for the first time, I made the connection between the Pacific Northwest armadillo and the dead guy.

That's what killed him. And that's what the armadillo was going to do to Kitty. Oh my god. If that Grady guy hadn't come along.

Of course, Kitty was seeing this for the first time, and we had to explain what was going on. Wick did most of the talking. Thanks, Wick.

I was just grateful for the open, relatively flat, dirt road. It was much easier to walk there. I don't think I was feeling very strong in my legs right then.

The sheriff's deputy put her hand on her walkie-talkie and turned her mouth toward it. She asked, "Martha, you got an E.T.A. on that bus?" She had her back to us.

Martha replied, sounding tinny and distant, "Tamlyn's coming, Maggie. She was already in bed, but she's on the move. Shouldn't be more'n fifteen."

The deputy turned to the biker and said, "I don't see any reason for you to stick around, George. I got your statement. I'll call ya if we need anything else."

The biker, George, pointed at us. "There's those people I was telling you about."

The deputy turned so quickly, hand on her gun, that we froze in our tracks. I almost put my hands up, but then Wick said, "We're here for MetaGalactiCon."

The deputy's eyes narrowed like my dad's sometimes do when he's suspicious.

Okay, I have to stop for second and describe this deputy to you, 'cause she was beautiful, in a kickass sort of way. Short black afro, round face, and full lips. So graceful, all strength and balance, like a yogini or dancer. She had on a San Juan County deputy's uniform which didn't do much for her figure, but I mean... who doesn't love a woman in uniform? Okay. Done. Moving on.

Wick explained about it being a gaming convention at the campground, and the deputy said, "Right. I remember now. What are you doing out here in the dark?"

LimeCello answered, "It wasn't dark when we came out."

I told the deputy about how Kitty got separated, and how we found her. I told her about Grady and the Pacific Northwest armadillo.

The deputy gave me a weird look and said, "Armadillo?"

Sammitch answered, "Huge one."

We may as well have had a spotlight turned on us, the way the deputy examined us all, her attention lingering the longest on Kitty. Finally, she asked, "Are you injured?"

Kitty said, "Just a little. It's just a cut. I'm okay."

The deputy took a notebook and pen out of her pocket. She said, "I'm going to need statements from you all. Why don't you sit in my car while we wait for the coroner. Warm you guys up a bit." She started toward her car, but didn't make it all the way.

A crashing sound came from the woods nearby, the sound of something running, straight toward the road.

The deputy turned to face the noise, hand going to her gun, and we were all in the perfect positions to see the armadillo come charging out of the forest.

After that, I remember everything like a stuttering film reel. Slow motion, with gaps here and there. The armadillo was coming straight for us. It was all I could see. I heard screams. I heard several people shout and scream. I heard myself say, "Armadillo!" I may have cringed and covered my eyes.

Then, the armadillo was stopped. I saw Grady standing over it with an axe, hacking at it again and again... and again and again... until its tail stopped waving. It rolled onto its back, and its feet curled up tight and angular against its exposed belly. The axe didn't cut through the carapace so much as it crushed it into pieces. The armadillo's blood began to ooze out.

Grady had a terrifying look on his face, so intent on killing the thing, so...violent that he almost scared me as much as the armadillo did.

"Freeze!" shouted the deputy. "Put down the axe!" She had her gun drawn and her body was set in a shooting stance.

Grady hit the armadillo one more time, aiming for what I think was its head.

"Drop the axe!" she shouted again, voice commanding. If I'd had an axe, I'd have dropped it immediately.

It took Grady a second or two, then he stepped back and did what she said, eyes on the armadillo the whole time.

The armadillo wasn't twitching anymore, but it had started to glow. The light coming out between its armored plates was a sickly green and getting stronger.

"Run!" Grady shouted, dropping into a ready stance.

But it was too late. The glow became a blast, shooting out from the armadillo in all directions.

And that's all I remember...

...until I woke up on the ground. At first, I was only aware of a noise, like. *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!*

I opened my eyes, but my vision was swimming with white dots. I blinked a bunch and rubbed them until I could see again.

Grady was hacking away at the armadillo with his axe. I sat up.

Everyone else was unconscious, including the biker named George, the deputy, and all my friends. I could see them breathing, their breath puffing warm into the cold night air. That strange man, Grady, had removed the picnic blanket from the dead body and was putting pieces of the armadillo onto it. As I crouched there, stunned, he folded it all up inside the blanket, tied the bundle onto the axe, and hefted it over his shoulder like an apocalyptic Santa Claus.

Grady took one last look around and spotted me watching him. He frowned, and then he just turned and walked away, into the woods.

I didn't trust my legs, but I stood cautiously, and the others started to wake up too.

As Grady disappeared into the darkness, I heard a raven somewhere overhead. It didn't say "Nevermore" or anything, but it was a bad omen, for sure. It reminded me of that line from Othello, the one that goes something like, "O, it comes o'er my memory; as doth the raven o'er the infectious house: boding to all—"

Sigh. I'm going to bed now. I'll talk to you guys tomorrow.

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