

## Chapter 1

The Citadel hung above the city, a cuboctahedrons-shaped building suspended from the sky. It was as much a message as a grandiose feat of engineering. Look up and behold the might of the Fleet protecting the city.

From the 58th floor of the Green Crystal residential Unit, Captain Zula Maung watched as the artificial strip of sun dimmed and the night lights of the city shone from below. Some might feel odd that the sun was a curving strip instead of a sphere or that the city was flanked by two flat walls, but for Zula, this was home.

A burnt smell made Zula look down. The tofu pieces and green beans were starting to turn black. Zula turned off the heat and stirred them around the small pan. She grabbed a pair chopsticks from the side and tried out a piece of green bean and tofu. She then added a sprinkle of salt and tasted them again. Something still tasted wrong. It was edible, but Zula felt like she had screwed up somehow. The tofu was just a bit too bland. The green beans were too soggy. The textures were all wrong as well. *Mom always made it seemed so easy*, Zula thought. She exhaled a long sigh and poured the stir-fry to the plate. She set it in the middle of the table along with two bowls of seaweed soup and two bowls of rice.

“Ahmed. Dinner!” Zula called out. The room was three meters away and separated only by a plastic door, but no reply came. Zula let out another sigh and walked up to the door. “Ahmed, I said...” she said as she pushed the door open. The boy that was her brother was sitting on his bed, his face halfway between nervous and scared. Between his hands was a gun, the Multi Armament Pistol. Zula distinctly remembered placing the gun inside the safe beside her bed.

“I told you to only take it during emergency,” Zula said.

“I took out the power cell first, I swear!” Ahmed quickly said.

Zula stepped up to the bed and knelt down. On the blanket was the power cell and the upper enclosure of the gun. “You’re trying to take it apart,” she concluded. “Why?”

“It’s...” Ahmed glanced away briefly. “I heard taking a MAP apart and reassembling it is part of the academy’s curriculum.”

Zula let out a gentle chuckle. “Mastering a lesson before you go to the school actually defeats the purpose of the school you know.”

“I don’t want to just master it. I want to be the best in it.” Ahmed looked up to her. “I want to be like you.”

“Well, You should know that I’m not good with guns.” Zula took the MAP from him and reattached the upper enclosure. “I’m an intelligence officer, Ahmed. If I have to use a gun, things have gone horribly wrong.” Zula grabbed the power cell as well.

Ahmed looked down, hiding his face, but Zula could still sense his disappointment.

“Cheer up, little brother.” Zula nudged his chin up. “You’ll have a lifetime to learn how to fight. Now you just need to be a child.”

“If you say so,” Ahmed said.

Zula stood up and went for the door. “I’ve prepared dinner, so let’s eat.” Zula stopped halfway through the door. An alert had popped up in the corner of her vision. She mentally instructed her implant to open it. It was about a new post that had just appeared in an online forum. It was a lengthy five-page essay talking about a review of a book. To most people, the post was just another incoherent rant. Zula, however, saw a message. She shook her head. As much as she didn’t want to work today, she couldn’t ignore the message.

“On second thought, let’s eat out today,” Zula said, turning toward Ahmed.

“What for?” Ahmed asked.

“One, my cooking isn’t that good today, and two, you’re leaving in a month. We should make the most of your time here,” Zula said with a smile before stepping out.

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On the surface, Unity was a serene collection of gleaming domes and majestic skyscrapers. Trees and flowers filled the space between the buildings, broken only by lines of white pathways. Unlike the cities of Old Earth, there were no bustling sounds of industry or vehicles. One could sit down in a bench and hear nothing but the breeze and distant murmurs. Everything about the city had been curated to make it as aesthetically pleasing as possible.

Underground, the city was something completely different. Twelve dome-shaped caverns were spread out all over the city, each connected to each other via underground passages. The passages were brightly lit with not a single greenery in sight. Exposed power lines and plumbing filled the ceiling space. Every few minutes, the entire structure would shake slightly as transport trams passed through above.

When people stepped into one of the caverns, they would be greeted by an assortment of sounds. The laughter of the children as they ran around between the residential buildings. The swearing from the old men in sweatshirts as they shouted for the children to be careful. The constant murmurs from a hundred different conversations as people chatted in the common area. Then there was the smell. The place was filled with so many restaurants and stalls that the atmospheric filter was barely able to keep the smell at bay. To Zula and most people, this was the real city of Unity, not the curated beauty of above ground.

They stopped in front of a restaurant called Neko. Peeking inside, the restaurant was packed with customers, mostly Fleet personnel who had just come off shift. Zula saw a free table beside the kitchen entrance.

“You go ahead inside. Order me a fried rice,” Zula said.

“Where are you going?” Ahmed asked.

“I need to take a call.” Zula tapped the side of her head before leaving him.

Zula walked toward the open common area. Even from one hundred meters away, she could already see him. Considering this was supposed to be a secret meeting, this fact was very alarming. Her years of experience screamed at her to walk away, but she couldn't. There would be no other opportunity after today. Zula let out a silent grunt before walking forward.

The young man had tried to blend with the crowd, except that he was a loner in a crowd of families. Worse still, he was wearing a thick hooded winter jacket inside the most environmentally controlled habitat that humanity ever lived in. Zula wouldn't be surprised if some of the families were already reporting him to the local security.

Zula walked up to him. The man looked up, a flash of recognition and relief on his face. “Marcus, lose the jacket and walk with me,” Zula said. She turned around and started walking. Marcus frantically took off his jacket and walked up beside her.

“I'm sorry to call you so last minute, but—“

“Not yet,” Zula said. She looked at the thick jacket hung around his arms. It wasn't that better than before. Zula let out an exasperated breath as she reached into her pocket. She took out a tube-shaped device and activated it. A privacy

screen of white noise and jamming surrounded both of them. The various sounds of the underground dropped to an eerie silence.

“Ma’am, I—“

“Are you burned?” Zula interrupted.

“What?”

“Are you in anyway compromised? Is Internal Security questioning you?” Zula asked, her tone accusing and hostile.

“No but—“

“Are you hurt then? Are you physically unable to do the mission?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then I can only assume you’re either crazy or stupid to contact me ten hours before the mission.” Zula felt Marcus staring at her. She kept her gaze straight.

“I’m scared, ma’am,” Marcus said. Zula abruptly stopped and turned to him. “I imagined doing the mission hundreds of times in my head, but now that it’s almost time, I... my hands can’t stop shaking.” He held his right hand forward, his fingers trembling.

Zula leaned toward him and gently grabbed him by the shoulders. “I know what we’re asking you to do is not easy, but it is necessary for the greater good. There are a lot of people who agree with our cause, Marcus, but most are too afraid to do anything about it. You will be the spark to spur them to action.”

“I know that, ma’am,” Marcus said, looking down at his feet. Zula recalled his personnel file. He was only eighteen years old, barely out of the academy. His personality had been repeatedly described by his superior officer as blandly average. That wasn’t a bad thing though. After all, the Fleet wasn’t ran by the few mavericks who were prone to bouts of bravery and brilliance but also recklessness and insubordination. They depended more on people like Marcus. People who would keep their heads down and do their duty. If Marcus had continued as he was, he would most likely have a solid career in the Fleet. It was just unfortunate that he happened to rightly fit the psychological profile needed for this mission.

“You have family on Wayward, right?” Zula pulled away her hands. She smiled just wide enough to show sympathy.

“Yeah, my sister. She just got married last week,” Marcus looked up. The memory of his sister stretched into a longing smile.

“Wayward is only twenty-two light-years from Ionia. If the Ionians attack us, it will be one of the first to fall. If we’re lucky, they’ll only occupy it. If we’re not... well, I think you know how easy it is to kill a planet.”

The smile vanished from his face, replaced by a fearful frown. “They can’t do

that!”

“They won’t as long as they stay under our control, but if the Republic is established, there will be nothing stopping them.” Zula reached down and grabbed his right hand. She gently placed it upon his chest. “Brace your heart, Marcus. Your sacrifice tomorrow will save your sister and her family. She’ll live to see her grandchildren.”

Marcus grew silent. The frown faded and so did the fear. His hands tightened into fists.

“I understand. I will not fail them.”

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Zula entered the restaurant and made her way to the end. There was barely enough room to walk between the crowd. Ahmed was sitting on the wall side of the table, his arms crossed on his chest. In front of him was a plate of fried noodle and a plate of fried rice.

“That smells good,” Zula said. She sat down and grabbed the plastic spoon.

“I know you met with someone,” Ahmed said.

Zula scooped up a portion of the brown rice mixed with silk tofu pieces. “It’s just a bit of work,” she said before eating it. Zula had tried to cook the same fried rice back home. She even sourced the same silk tofu and garlic, yet it didn’t taste as good.

“I’m not stupid, you know.” Ahmed leaned forward on the table. “I know you are planning a coup.”

Zula put the spoon down so roughly that some of the rice splattered all over. “You should really warn me if you’re going say something that dangerous.” Zula took out the privacy screen and activated it. “Can’t be too careful.”

“Let me join you. I want to fight too.”

“You’re not even trained,” Zula pointed out.

“You can train me,” Ahmed pointed back. “It’s not like I can escape it. Sooner or later, I will have to fight too.”

“You’re still a child, Ahmed. It’s not your time to fight. Enjoy your childhood while it lasts.”

“I don’t care about my childhood.” Ahmed stared down at his clasped hands.

“Take it from someone who had lost it,” Zula said. “You’ll regret growing up too soon.”

“Why are you trying so hard to keep me from fighting? It’s not fair!” Ahmed slammed his right fist on the table.

Zula stared at him. She still remembered when they landed on the Mars refugee camp. He had refused to let go of her hand then. Every time Zula needed to go out to collect their rations, he would cry. Zula had thought he would stay that same scared boy forever. Unfortunately, that was not how reality work.

“The academy is not worth anything strategically, at least in the short term. When we make our move, you will be safe there,” Zula said.

“That doesn’t matter. We’re going to win anyway. I want to be a part of that,” Ahmed said.

“That’s the thing, Ahmed. Our victory is not guaranteed.”

“What do you mean?” Ahmed’s head slightly tilted to the right.

Zula rubbed her forehead with her thumbs briefly. “You called it a coup earlier, but the truth is it’s not. Fleet Admiral Sterling and Zhukov are not stupid. They expected people to fight back after their announcement and had prepared accordingly. Internal Security has been keeping watch over Sol so tightly that even after a year, I’m the only effective operator the movement has here. No, Ahmed. It’s not going to be a quick bloodless coup. It’s going to be a rebellion. A civil war that can last for years.”

“That’s more reason for me to join the fight now!” Ahmed said.

Zula smiled at him. It took everything she had to keep her voice coherent. “I’m asking you not to. Me personally, because I can’t fight effectively if I don’t know you are safe. You’re my only family left in this universe. I can’t lose you too.”

“I…” Ahmed stammered, his face getting flustered. He glanced down. “Why are you fighting then?”

Zula reached forward and grabbed his hands. “So that what happened to our parents won’t happen to anyone else again. Let me do my job so that you’ll have a good future.”

“I didn’t ask for it,” Ahmed said, his voice so low and soft that Zula barely heard it.

“Yet I’m giving it to you regardless.” She grabbed her spoon once again. “Now let’s have our dinner and talk of more cheerful things.”

## Chapter 2

As Zula walked through the city that morning, she could feel something was different. It was the little things. People who used to say hello to each other every morning now walked in silence. The street stall that always sold waffle in a cup was missing. It was worse when she reached the Citadel. In the tram station, she saw two Internal Security soldiers alertly scanning the crowd with their hands on their holsters. In the tram ride up, the people around her were guarded and did not dare look at each other. Then in the Citadel, people were speaking in hushed whispers and completely shut up when the Silver Guards passed by. Today, in the heart of the Fleet, people were acting as if they were inside enemy territory.

“Captain Maung, please wait,” an artificial female voice said when Zula approached the double steel door. Floating above a small dais beside the door was a hologram of a young woman with a ponytail. After a minute, the hologram spoke again, “Fleet Admiral Sterling will see you now”

The door slid open and Zula walked in. The admiral was sitting behind his ornate wooden desk on the far side of the office. Behind him, the light of the city glimmered. Zula walked up to him and snapped a sharp salute. He nodded at her and she took her seat.

Fleet Admiral Sterling was sitting straight with his hands clasped on the desk. His face was one of sternness and duty. He looked very much like he was ready to command the most powerful military in human history, yet Zula knew it was only a mask, and it was slipping. His face might be stern, but his eyes were filled with exhaustion. His dark blue uniform was without a crease, but there were stains on his collar. She didn't need a lab test to know what it was. She could smell the alcohol in the air.

“I have the security brief for today, sir,” Zula reported.

“All right,” Sterling said.

Zula swiveled the chair to face the screen on the right wall. Sterling turned his chair to face the screen as well. A three-dimensional schematic of Earth Dome appeared on it. Under the crystal-like glass roof was a three-layer concentric platform with a raised circular stage in the middle. Surrounding the entire setup was row after row of seats.

“We've augmented the security arrangement with additional Silver Guards and

drones,” Zula said. The screen panned around and highlighted the various Silver Guards and drones’ flight pattern. In total, five hundred Silver Guards and three hundred drones had been deployed inside and around the dome.

“Non-lethal?”

“Yes, sir. They only have non-lethal weapons, as you’ve requested,” Zula confirmed.

“Good. If something happens, the last thing we need is for our automatons to start killing people,” Sterling said. “What about the screening?”

“All the entrances have been outfitted with body scanners, but they’re not completely fool-proof. Ceramic knives. Poisons. There are at least a dozen weapons that can be sneaked through it.”

“We use threat assessment then? Single out potential threat before they act?”

“It’ll still be tricky. The fact that we’re allowing whoever first to come in means that we have to run background checks on the spot. At full capacity, that’s 80,000 people, sir. I can’t guarantee we can screen them all in time,” Zula explained.

Sterling nodded emphatically. “I understand it’s hard, but we must do what we can. We can’t curate the audience. It’d be against why we’re having the trial down there instead of here. In order for the Republic to start fresh, we need to be as open as possible.”

“I understand, sir.” Zula highlighted the open area around the dome. “Internal Security is estimating at least 150,000 people coming to see the trial. At least half of that will be protesting against the trial.”

Sterling leaned back and pondered for a second. “How about our intel regarding the anti-republican movement?”

“We’re keeping watch on the agitators; those who are speaking the loudest, but it is clear by now that they are not coordinating with each other. It seems like the anti-republican movement is staying quiet for now.”

“Do you think that’s because the movement has fizzled out or gone underground?” Admiral Sterling asked.

“My guess is the latter, sir,” Zula said, taking a moment to compose her thoughts before continuing. “Right now, their greatest asset is their secrecy, and they will lose that the moment they take any significant action. If I were them, I would preserve the secrecy for one big action. One decisive battle.”

“I see.” Admiral Sterling leaned forward again and started tapping his fingers on the wooden desk. “It seems they are more patient than we thought.”

“They will slip up sooner or later, and when they do, we’ll be there to catch

them,” Zula said.

“Indeed.” Sterling grinned. “Where will you be?”

“I’ll be escorting Fleet Admiral Xin myself to the dome. Then I will be in the security command post.”

“I’m depending on you, Zula. With me in the court, I can’t coordinate anything,” Sterling said.

“I won’t let you down sir,” Zula quickly said.

“You never do.”

Zula stood up and snapped a salute before leaving.

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Once, the woman standing in front of her had been one of the most powerful people in human space. She was in command of hundreds of ships and half a million soldiers. She had been one step away from becoming Grand Admiral; from ruling humanity. Now she was in a plain white jumpsuit, in command of no other but herself and possessed no freedom other than the confine of her cell.

“That won’t be necessary,” Zula said and the marine stopped.

“Yes, ma’am.” The marine put the cuff back on his belt and stepped back.

Zula looked around. The room was more like a hotel room than a prison cell. The bed in the corner was queen size with clean blue sheets. The desk on the other side had shelves of books and a small tablet. Even the wall was filled with high fidelity screens that was simulating a park from Old Earth.

“Cozy, isn’t it?” Fleet Admiral Xin said. “I built this for Jason Shen and now it’s my prison. There’s an irony there somewhere.”

“Once we hand you over to the public court, there’s a chance that you will be put inside a regular prison,” Zula said.

“I’m fine with that,” Xin said. There was no contempt or resistance from her, only resignation.

“You will follow me, Fleet Admiral,” Zula said.

“You don’t need to call me that,” Xin went to the hanger and put on her brown jacket.

“Yes, I do, ma’am. You haven’t been discharged from the Fleet, and until the official verdict of the court, you’re still innocent,” Zula pointed out.

“I’m not contesting the charge, Captain. I confessed.” Xin let out a chuckle.

They went out of the cell.

The corridors between the cell and the tram station had been cleared of all personnel except for the marines. In armors and lined up every ten meter, they were like honor guards. They soon reached the tram station.

“I’ll take it from here,” Zula said to the two armored marines.

“Ma’am, our order is to accompany the prisoner to the base station,” one of them said.

“I can handle her.” Zula grabbed the handle of her holstered MAP. “Let’s give her some dignity.”

The lead marine stared at Zula and then at Xin. “Yes ma’am,” he said.

They entered the tram car. Xin sat on one side while Zula sat opposite of her.

“I can feel you wanting to ask, so ask,” Xin said as the tram car left the Citadel and started going down. “This might be your only chance.”

Zula thought for a moment. “Why did you give up?” Zula asked.

“You’re an intelligence officer, right?” Xin asked back. “Sterling must have asked you to write a dossier on me.”

“Yes. I even had two of my colleagues separately make one as well. We all agreed that you will fight to the bitter end for the succession. Considering the resources you have, I predicted you could do more damage than Zhukov in an open conflict. So I advised Fleet Admiral Sterling to cooperate with you. With the two Fleets combined, you could have pressured Zhukov to submission. Yet, you gave that up. I can’t understand why.”

Xin shifted to the right and looked out the window. The skyscrapers were getting closer now. “When I got back from the frontier sector, I didn’t see the point of fighting anymore. At that point, I’ve destroyed *Thunderer* and its battlegroup, but I failed to take out Zhukov. My people are turning on me left and right. I could fight on to retain whatever left of my power, but that would definitely require killing more of my own people. I just don’t have the heart for it anymore.” Xin looked back at Zula. For half a second, Zula froze as she saw something she never thought she would see from her, tears. “I’m also tired of pushing my conscience away. I’ve broken so many things. I can’t fix them all, but at least this way, I can start the mending.”

“You’re... You’re actually sincere,” Zula said, her various thoughts clashing incoherently. She had expected Xin to be someone who was beaten; who was forced by Sterling and Zhukov to be the scapegoat. She never thought that Xin

would willingly become one. *To open herself to all this hatred and anger alone. How can someone do that?*

“Yeah, that surprised me too,” Xin said. She wiped away her tears.

A jolt and the tram car came to a stop inside the base station. Zula stood up first, followed by Xin. The door opened. Zula quickly stepped in front of it. The base station, like the Citadel, had been vacated with the exception of Internal Security. There were two of them waiting on the platform. One of them was Marcus, his right hand already gripping his MAP. He looked at her with an inquiring stare. For the briefest moment, Zula considered staying put. A subtle shake of her head would be enough to call the whole thing off. *No, I've gone too far to turn back now*, Zula told herself. She stepped to the side.

A muffled ping and blood spattered all over as Xin's face burst open. Zula knew she should have closed her eyes, but she didn't. She felt she had the responsibility to watch. She wasn't the one who pulled the trigger, but she was the one that killed Xin regardless.

Even before Xin's body touched the ground, Marcus turned to his comrade and fired another shot. His comrade was hit in the chest, throwing him back. His uniform had automatically hardened to protect him against the shot, but at that close of a distance, the shot still broke several of his ribs.

Marcus then turned the gun to his head. One look at his eyes and Zula knew. In the face of death, his resolve was wavering. Zula drew her own MAP and shot him in the head.

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Fleet Admiral Sterling looked at the two bodies sprawled on the platform and winced like he had been stabbed.

“Did you really have to shoot him in the head?” Sterling said. He waved at the two Internal Security. They quickly put both of them into the black body bags.

“Sorry, sir. I saw the gun and I wasn't thinking straight at that point,” Zula said. Her first lie, one of many she suspected she would need to say in this conversation.

“How the hell does this happen?” Sterling said, his voice almost shouting. “I

thought we screened everyone serving in Unity already.” The two Internal Security carried the bodies away on a pair of gurneys.

“We did, sir. Specialist Marcus Dirk was screened right out of the academy.” That one, at least, was the truth.

“How about his psych eval?” Sterling asked.

Zula pretended the motion of accessing the file through her implant. “The evaluator reported all clean with him.” The evaluator was one of them. He had marked Marcus for recruitment the moment he left the session.

“We assigned him here straight from the academy because he’s clean. And just to make sure, we’ve also kept surveillance on him for his first week here. He had no contact with anyone we flagged and he showed no deviant tendency.” Zula had approached him on his first night in Unity. It took only half a bottle before he started ranting about Xin’s speech. *The Thraxos was the enemy. How can it be wrong to kill them?* he had said.

“And all this time, he showed no indication that he had been turned?”

“No, sir. He was assigned to guarding the Ionian enclave and even Xin’s cell for a day. He showed no aggression nor frustration on the job.” Zula specifically assigned him there to test him and by the end of the week, he could barely stand it. When Zula revealed herself and the task she had in mind for him, he couldn’t say yes any faster.

“This is bad, Zula.” Sterling shook his head. “All of our security precautions and one still fell through the cracks.”

“I’ve already revised our screening process. I intend to start screening everyone again, starting from the most essential personnel.” The test would find nothing, as Zula was the only member of the movement currently in Unity.

“I appreciate your initiative, but you will have to hand over that responsibility to Admiral Yi,” Sterling said.

“Sir, I know I failed but—“

“You’re not being punished, Zula,” Sterling quickly interrupted. “As much as I want to deal with the anti-republican movement personally, we have a more pressing matter to attend to. Ionia.”

“I thought they already agreed to participate in the Grand Assembly?” Zula asked.

“The Ionian in the cities, yes, but not the insurgent,” Admiral Sterling said.

Zula let out a rough scoff. “They are worth-nothing brigands and bandits.”

“That may be so, but they are still Ionians. Regardless of our feelings, Jax has managed to get them to agree to a ceasefire. Over the next month, he will talk to

them about sending a delegation to the GA. For that to succeed, Jax needs someone who can make fleet-wide decisions nearby. Zhukov was supposed to handle it, but the coalition suddenly invited us for a summit and he was the closest. So that leaves me,” Admiral Sterling explained.

“And I go wherever you go. When are we leaving?” Zula asked.

“In two weeks. We need to prepare the ten battlegroups to replace those that Zhukov will be taking with him.”

“He’s bringing ten battlegroups into Coalition territory?”

“A compromise. The Coalition’s leaderships don’t want to leave the safety of their cities, but Zhukov also don’t want to leave himself at their mercy,” Admiral Sterling explained. “This way, if they try anything, Zhukov can either escape in force or hurt them badly. This is a good thing, Zula. This is the first time since our exile that they’re willing to talk to us. If we can at least establish a non-aggression pact, it’ll make all of our lives a lot easier.”

Zula thought about Ahmed. He would be leaving in a month. These two weeks would be the last time Zula would see him in a long while. She quickly hardened her aching heart. The movement would need her on Ionia.

“Then I better pack up.”

## Chapter 3

The city was in an uproar. Even from the 58th floor, Ahmed could hear the shouting and screaming below. The news of Fleet Admiral Xin's death had spread like wildfire throughout the city. Inside Earth Dome, heated words soon turned into brawls. The Silver Guards and drones tried to stop them, but all they did was shift the brawl to the streets where more people joined them. From what Ahmed could hear and glean from the news, there wasn't even a clear one side against another. Some were calling Xin's death a hoax and that SolCom was hiding her. Some celebrated Xin's death, calling her a traitor to humanity. Then there were the people who wanted the trial to continue regardless. The city was quickly descending to chaos.

A loud roar cracked throughout the city. Ahmed looked up and saw dozens of shuttles flying all over. Marines and Silver Guards were being dropped to the street. The crowds tried to fight them, but with no weapons, they were quickly dispersed by combination of tear gas and stunner. There was some stubborn resistance though. They hid in the alleys or on the rooftop of some of the shorter buildings. When the marines or Silver Guards passed by, they would throw Molotov cocktails, stones, and any other improvised weapons. They were trying to wage a guerrilla warfare in an enclosed controlled environment against heavily armed soldiers. The result was predictably messy.

Deciding he had seen enough, Ahmed retreated from the balcony. He was in the middle of opening the fridge when the doorbell rang. He closed the fridge and wondered who could it possibly be? All the tenants on this floor were Fleet personnel with no family. They should all be currently empty. Ahmed cautiously walked up to the intercom and activated it. Standing before the front door were a pair of men in dark blue uniforms. The one on the right wore a cap with the rank insignia of a captain on his shoulders, a gold circle with gold triangle inside. The one on the left had a buzz-cut hair with the silver triangle of a lieutenant on his shoulders.

"Yes?" Ahmed hesitantly asked through the intercom.

"Good morning," the captain said, tipping his hat. "My name is Captain Alfonso and this is Lieutenant Liu. We're from Internal Security. May we come in?"

"My sister is not here right now," Ahmed said.

"We're aware. We're here to talk to you," Captain Alfonso said.

Ahmed reached for the open button but stopped at the last moment. A thought in the back of his head nagged at him. “Which division are you from?” he asked.

The two men glanced at each other. “We’re from the Black Division,” Captain Alfonso said.

Ahmed ran to his sister’s room. He dropped and slid toward the safe. *Black Division is basically internal affairs. They investigate crimes involving Fleet personnel*, he remembered his sister explaining. For them to be here so soon after Xin’s death, there was only one possibility. His sister had been caught. Ahmed took out the MAP and loaded the power cell. The light on the top of the grip blinked from red to green. Ahmed ran back to the living room. He kicked the stainless-steel dining table down and turned it toward the door. He then perched on it, his MAP aimed straight at the door.

“I think he’s not opening the door, sir,” the lieutenant’s voice said from the intercom.

“Let’s override the lock.”

The door slid open. The captain stepped in, his eyes immediately widened in a horrified realization.

“Wait!” he shouted, both of his hands extending forward. Ahmed pulled the trigger.

A muffled ping, followed by a loud thump. Captain Alfonso went down. Lieutenant Liu grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back. Ahmed took another shot, but they managed to get out of the way. He quickly realized the lack of blood. *The uniform hardened. Aim for the head next time*, Ahmed told himself.

“Ahmed, we just want to talk!” Captain Alfonso shouted with a strained voice.

“Is my sister still alive?” Ahmed asked.

“What? Of course she is!” Captain Alfonso said.

“So you’ve arrested her!” Ahmed fired twice, hitting the wall on the corridor.

“Ahmed, this is a misunderstanding. We’re...” Ahmed was no longer listening.

He ran out to the balcony and turned right. He climbed up the railing and made the mistake of looking down. Her stomach lurched as he imagined falling all the way down. Even in half-gravity, it would be lethal. He gritted his teeth and leaped off. The gap between the units’ balconies was only a meter, but Ahmed felt like he lingered in the air for a few seconds before landing hard on his left shoulder. He

felt a sharp pain and something coming loose, but the adrenaline soon numbed it. He pushed up and forward.

Ahmed didn't scan around as he went into the residential unit. He already knew that the unit was empty. He instead went straight for the front door, pressing the open button without stopping. Ahmed ran out and turned to the left, his MAP already aiming up. Captain Alfonso was on the ground clutching his chest. Lieutenant Liu was facing the front door with his MAP in his right hand. Ahmed let himself smile and took an extra half a second to aim for his head. The lieutenant suddenly whipped around so fast that Ahmed could only see a blur of motion. He pulled the trigger, but the bolt only hit the ceiling above. He was already falling back.

It was only when he was on the ground that his body registered what had happened. Despite facing away from him, Lieutenant Liu had managed to shoot first, hitting him in the chest. The lack of blood suggested that he had used non-lethal power level, but it still hurt like he had been stabbed with a knife.

"Sorry about that," Captain Alfonso said as he walked up to him. He extended a helping hand. "Let me properly introduce myself. "I'm Admiral Chavez."

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Ahmed sat down on the sofa and immediately gripped his left shoulder. The pain was getting worse by the minute.

"You dislocated your shoulder. Here," Lieutenant Liu walked up to him and leaned forward. Ahmed instinctively recoiled back and closed his arms together. "It'll be more painful if you don't relax." Ahmed nodded, mostly because he realized that any resistance would be futile at this point.

Lieutenant Liu grabbed him by the left arm and shoulder. He made the smallest of motion, and Ahmed heard a pop from his shoulder, followed by an aching pulsing pain.

"ARGGH," he let out a strained grunt.

"It'll heal nicely." Lieutenant Liu gently tapped him in the shoulder. Now that he was up close, Ahmed could see how muscled and lean his body was. *It's too perfect. It must be engineered,* Ahmed concluded.

"We're called the Shadow corps," Lieutenant Liu said with a grin. "We're the

finesse to the Alpha Force's brute force. Tell your friends that."

"You want me to advertise the existence of a secret supersoldier unit?" Ahmed asked skeptically.

Lieutenant Liu shrugged. "It's not technically a secret. Plus, it's annoying that Alpha Force get all the attention." He walked to the wall beside the front door and leaned his back against it.

The man who had reintroduced himself as Admiral Chavez walked out from the bathroom.

"Sorry about that," he said as he sat down opposite of Ahmed. "It's been a while since I was last shot. It still sucks."

"I thought you were going to arrest me," Ahmed said.

"Obviously, but what about now?" Admiral Chavez asked.

"It doesn't make sense for Internal Security to send an admiral to arrest me. You must be..." Ahmed stopped himself.

Admiral Chavez smiled at him. "You're right to be hesitant to say it out loud, but yes, you are right."

"How do I know you're genuine?"

Lieutenant Liu let out a laugh. "If we're not, then you're utterly screwed."

Ahmed thought about it for a moment. "Zula said that she's the only operator in Unity," Ahmed said.

"She is. I'm traveling incognito right now." Admiral Chavez tapped at his rank insignia. "As far as everyone is concerned, I'm still in the frontier sector commanding our QRF."

"Are you here because of my sister?" Ahmed asked.

"No. We're here for you. We weren't lying about that." Admiral Chavez took a breath and straightened his chest. "We had intended to test whether you have what it takes to join us. Now, well..."

"He's a bit too aggressive," Lieutenant Liu chimed in. "But I like it. Better to be too aggressive than too timid."

"Indeed. Aggression can be tampered, but you can't teach someone the courage to act," Admiral Chavez said.

Ahmed perked up, but the excitement was brief. He remembered what his sister had said last night. "Zula won't allow me to join you."

"Let me worry about your sister," Admiral Chavez said. "The important thing now is whether you want to fight or not."

Ahmed clasped his hands and raised them to his lips. "What are you asking me

to do?”

Admiral Chavez reached into his pocket and pulled out a computer tablet. “I will only show you once and there can be no note of this.”

“I understand.”

“We want you to spy on someone in the academy.” Admiral Chavez placed the tablet on the table and flipped it around. The screen showed a personnel file of a young girl. She had short black hair with green eyes. “This is your target. Her name is Yui Yamata.”

“She is just a second-year cadet?” Ahmed said as he read the rest of her personnel file. “Damn, she got perfect scores in all the classes and exercises. Why aren’t you recruiting her?”

“As much as we would like that, we think she is already working for the other side,” Admiral Chavez said. “To be honest, we don’t know much about her. According to the record, she just showed up in the academy a year ago. One of our contacts in admission said that her file triggered an alarm for a lack of tracked history. It was immediately squashed from higher up. A day later, someone amended her personnel file to list Admiral Xin as her parent.”

“She is her child?” Ahmed asked.

Admiral Chavez shook his head. “We think it’s unlikely. She probably put her name there to ward off any future scrutiny. That alone already merits a closer investigation, but then there’s the matter of her involvement in Xin’s attempted coup. The incident record is sealed to Fleet Admiral eyes only, so we don’t know much, only that she was with Xin and Zhukov when they returned to Unity that day.”

“So you want me to get close to her and find out who she is then,” Ahmed concluded.

“Correct.”

“That sounds simple enough. I’ll do it,” Ahmed said.

“He got the spirit, all right.” Admiral Chavez looked back at Lieutenant Liu.

“With some training—“ Lieutenant Liu stopped when the door opened.

Zula stopped and swept her eyes across the room. “What the hell is this?”

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An admiral and a supersoldier augment were standing before her. One of them could probably kill her in a second flat. Zula still wanted to charge ahead to punch them.

“Ahmed. Go to your room,” she said. Her voice was calm with barely restrained anger underneath.

“But—“

“Go to your room!” Zula repeated slightly louder. Ahmed hesitantly stood up and walked to his room. When the door closed, Zula walked up to the admiral. “I told you he’s not ready!”

Admiral Chavez regarded her with incredulous eyes. “Yes you did on multiple occasions, but then again, a sister isn’t exactly the right person to make an objective judgment.”

“I won’t allow this!”

“I understand your reservation, Zula.” Admiral Chavez stood up. “Letting your loved one fight is never easy. I wish there’s another way, but all of our operators have failed to approach her. Your brother represents our best chance to find out who she is; what she is to the Fleet Admirals. The cause needs him.”

“He’s not ready,” Zula said softly.

“No one is ever ready, Zula, but the fight rarely waits for us. We just need to do our best.” Admiral Chavez grabbed his hat and put it on. “Your brother is determined to fight in this war. Can you really stop him?”

Admiral Chavez and Lieutenant Liu left, leaving Zula alone in the living room. Zula fell to the sofa behind her. She leaned on her knees, her hands rubbing the sides of her head. She had killed a man today and told the biggest lie of her life, yet none of them compared to the fear she was feeling right now. It was even pointless to be angry. Chavez was right. She could delay, but she could never stop him.

“Zula?” Ahmed slowly stuck out his head from his room.

Zula looked over. He still looked like the little boy who often cried whenever she left. “Come and sit with me, Ahmed.”

Ahmed nodded and walked over cautiously like he was approaching a ledge. “I’m ready sis,” he said once he sat down. “I might not have the skills yet, but I’m willing to try; to learn.”

“It’s not just that, Ahmed. You will be taking a lot of risks. One mistake might mean death or worse, being put into sensory deprivation,” Zula said.

“You’re taking that risk every day. If you can do it, so can I,” Ahmed said, so sure in his voice that Zula could almost believe it. She just didn’t want to.

“What if you are asked to kill the target?”

Ahmed frowned and glanced down at his hands. “They said that the mission is

only to watch her.”

“At the start, but depending on the situation, it can change. That’s the nature of war,” Zula said.

Ahmed looked up. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t,” Zula said with a faint smile. “You will think you do, but you’re not. Taking a life will change you, Ahmed. It will change you in a way that you will never be ready for.”

His face grew into a contemplative trance. “I know it won’t be easy, but I’m willing to do it. I won’t hesitate when the moment comes. I won’t let what happened to our parents happen to anyone else.”

Zula stared into his eyes and she was forced to accept the inevitable truth. His little brother had grown up. He was no longer that little boy who only wanted to hide behind her. He was now a growing man trying to make his mark in the universe, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“All right.” Zula forced up a smile despite her aching heart. “Make some coffee for us.”

“Coffee? It’s 6 pm,” Ahmed pointed out.

“I’m leaving in two weeks, Ahmed, but I won’t let you go until you at least know the basic of intelligence work. We will spend every spare hour training you. So grab a coffee pot and order some pizzas. We won’t be sleeping much for the next two weeks.”

Ahmed quickly stood up. “Thank you, sis,” he said before running to the kitchen.