

## Prologue

The soldier flew toward the green planet in a blissful sleep.

His armor's thruster fired every few seconds, slowing him down and pushing him out of the way of the defense satellites. When it reached a predetermined point, the armor started the resuscitation process. Jason woke up with a desperate gasp for air. He calmed his panicking mind and focused on the planet.

The inhabitants of this gem among the stars had a long poetic name for it that told the life story of a revered ancient explorer of the stars. To Jason and the rest of humanity, this world was Dawnlight.

A low thrumming alarm sounded. Jason immediately silenced it. Even before the alert's text unfolded, he already knew what it was. Three battleships and twelve cruisers had entered orbit and engaged the defenders. Within seconds, the entire space above the planet became a light show of particle beams, missile flares, and explosions. The defenders were outnumbered three to one, but they still stood their ground. *Brave bastards*, Jason gave them a nod of respect before he rotated toward the planet.

He hit the atmosphere, and fire enveloped him. "Trust the heat shield" was the mantra drilled into everyone who qualified for orbital insertion. Trusting that as long as Jason stayed still, the thick and medieval-looking armor would keep him safe. The fire soon cleared. The armor's outer plates released with a pop, the charred remains dropped separately to the planet below. Jason deployed his parachute. His body jolted upward, and he slowed to a glide.

The confirmation signals began to stream in, each one making an audible ping as they appeared highlighted in his vision. Out of the ten groups that launched with him, one was missing. It could still be drifting up in orbit or had burned up as its heat shield failed. It did not matter. Jason still had enough to complete the mission.

Jason swept his gaze over the surface. Lust green and brown forest stretched all around the land, broken only by the boundary of ocean, rivers, and the telltale lights of civilization. One on the tip of a peninsula shone the brightest, the capital

of the planet. Using it as a reference, Jason traced a line south to find his target, Mount Kakarot or specifically, the sprawling complex of a planetary defense center on its side.

Jason methodically scanned the base, tagging any threat he could find; tanks, aircraft, and missile launchers. Once he was done, he sent the targeting profile up to orbit. Almost immediately, a cruiser dropped below the battle in a fiery entry. For a brief second, the night turned to day.

“Fire mission received. Firing for effect,” a cold toneless voice spoke.

Multiple particle lances rained down on the base, hitting each target with pinpoint precision. Five minutes of carnage later, the bombardment ceased.

“Mission kill confirmed. Friendlies entering ops area,” Jason reported.

“Roger that. We got you on our scope. Happy hunting.”

Jason began his assault on the base.

The assault pods reached the ground first. Their thrusters fired to slow them down, but their landings still resulted in small craters. Like a blooming flower, each pod burst open and ten Silver Guards stepped out. They were two meters tall, clad in thick titanium armor, and carried both a battle rifle and a grenade launcher pod on their right shoulder. They were one of the fiercest of humanity’s ground combatants, and when paired with Jason’s neural implant, a dozen Silver Guards could match against an entire army. Ninety had landed on Kakarot base.

The Silver Guards formed up into squads of five and engaged the enemy. They were over three meters tall with hard scale-like skin and red-slit eyes. When humanity first encountered them in combat, the Thraxos were like monsters from their worst nightmare. They were not only bigger and stronger, but their skin could shrug off dozens of conventional bullets as well. The Silver Guards, however, felt no fear and were able to match them strength to strength. Their Coilgun rifle could alternate armor-piercing and explosive bolt bullets with each burst shot. If that wasn’t enough, the Silver Guard still had the grenade launcher. With their heavy weapons already destroyed, the Thraxos had no chance.

By the time Jason landed, the battle was over. He lost only twenty-nine Silver

Guards while the Thraxos lost over three hundred soldiers. Jason rallied four squads on him as he made his way toward the bunker's entrance. It was a massive 100-ton concrete gate. The Thraxos had smartly smashed its electric motor when they realized they could not defend against his attack. Fortunately, Jason had factored this possibility into his plan. Ten Silver Guards stepped in front of the gate. On their shoulders, instead of grenade launchers, were grappling hooks. They all shot in unison toward the gate. The projectiles drilled into the concrete and the claws expanded, gripping them in place. Once all the hooks were attached, twenty Silver Guards pulled the gate off its hinges.

Jason assigned two squads to follow him inside and ordered the others to set up a defensive perimeter around the base.

The orbital scan had indicated the underground complex spanned the entire mountain. Jason, not wanting to painstakingly explore it room by room, ordered his squads to launch their scouts. Dozens of small disk-shaped drones flew forward and spread throughout every corner. Within twenty minutes, Jason had found his target.

Surrounded by his ten Silver Guards, Jason ran down the corridors. Three times, the Thraxos defenders tried to ambush him. Each time, Jason sent one of his Silver Guards forward first. It would charge at the defenders, and when it eventually fell under the intense fire, the grenades on its back ammo box would explode. Jason and the rest of the Silver Guards would then step forward to mop up the survivors.

Eventually, he reached the end of the complex and the metaphorical throne room. The Silver Guards fanned out, securing every side. The room functioned as the command center for the planet's defense force, but at the moment, all of its computer stations were vacant. Only one Thraxos remained in the center of the room.

"You are the War Chief of this planet, are you not?" Jason asked as he slowly walked up toward the alien. His scales were whiter than the average Thraxos. He was also covered in scars, some almost faded. Even without reading his intel file, Jason knew the Thraxos was an old respected soldier.

"I am," the Thraxos said with an artificial voice coming out of the translator attached to his neck. "I am ready to offer you the surrender of my soldiers and the

planet. I can send the order to stand down within the minute.”

“No, War Chief. I cannot accept your surrender,” Jason said, keeping his tone as respectful as he could.

“Then take me to whoever commands your war fleet.”

“You misunderstand me,” Jason said, the words tasted bitter as they left his mouth. “We are not accepting any surrender.”

The Thraxos’ stare intensified. Even across the barrier of species, Jason could see the gears clicking inside his head.

“I understand now,” the Thraxos said. “Why did you attack my base? You could have destroyed it from orbit.”

“To ensure you don’t escape. On the last planet we invaded, your peer had hidden a spaceship in their fortress and got away before we could establish a proper blockade.”

“I am not a coward!” the Thraxos shouted. “If my people are to die, then I will die with them.”

“Very well.” Jason pulled out his combat knife. “I can give you a warrior’s death if you like.”

“It does not matter to me,” the Thraxos muttered. He glanced up with a sad sense of longing. “I do have one request.”

“If it is within my power, I will grant it,” Jason said.

“I wish to die where I can see the stars,” the Thraxos said. Jason checked with the Silver Guards outside. The base was secured, and there was no sign of any potential counterattack. He nodded and gestured for the Thraxos to follow him.

Once on the surface, they climbed up the damaged comm building. The top was half wrecked and half melted, but there was just enough flat clearance for them to stand. The Thraxos dropped to his knee and gazed up to the sky. With no more light from the base or the nearby cities, the ocean of stars became so crystal clear that even Jason found himself staring at them as well. *Was it always this beautiful?* he asked himself.

His memory answered. He was alone on the balcony, clutching the glass of Lagavulin in one hand and the letter of acceptance in another. He looked up as the light of the city twinkled out. From the horizon, the ship launched. A beam of orange light pierced the night sky. It joined the twinkling stars and began its burn toward Luna. Soon it would be his turn to go up. He wondered whether the stars

would look prettier up there. It seemed like divine luck that he was born in a time when the stars were finally within reach; when all mankind united in hope for a new golden age. *Things were so much brighter then*, Jason solemnly recalled.

The moment of serenity ended as a bright blue beam flew down from the night sky. The particle lance reached the city in the distance and the sound of an explosion followed afterward.

“A hundred and fifty million lives, all extinguished,” the Thraxos muttered. “Is it too late to ask for forgiveness?”

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with your God,” Jason said.

“I’m not talking about forgiveness from a divine deity. I am asking forgiveness from you as a human,” the Thraxos snapped back.

Jason took a deep breath as another particle lance hit in the distance. They were coming down like rain now, constant and unrelenting. “We are destroying your civilization, War Chief. Why are you asking for my forgiveness?” Jason asked.

The Thraxos peered toward the horizon; toward the burning cities.

“I know what my people did to your world. I wish I can say that I have no part in it; that I oppose the conquest, but the truth is I did not. We are all guilty, even if it’s only by inaction. For the longest time, your world was just an afterthought. Another world among five that we were subjugating. Then the news came.

“When the image of the aftermath reached our homeworld, it shook our society to the core. Such destruction... Whatever we were trying to achieve by conquering your world, it is not worth that high of a cost. One protest leads to another. Eventually, the warmongers inside our government were purged and replaced. Our warships and soldiers were recalled back, but we were too late. Your people wanted vengeance, and now we will die.”

The rain of particle lances had stopped, but the city burned still.

They had found the War Chief who ordered the bombardment in Earth’s orbit. He was barely alive in his escape pod. They did their best to save him, so he could be tried and executed a month later. His body was then condemned to phase space, to be forever lost in that unnatural dimension.

“I wish I could offer your people mercy, War Chief, but that is not within my

power. If it means something to you, then I forgive you.”

“Thank you, human,” the Thraxos said. He closed his eyes. “I am ready.”

Jason pulled out his combat knife. The black blade shimmered from the light of the distant fire. He gently slipped it between the scales. With one quick and powerful stroke, he thrust into the Thraxos’ abdomen, right where his heart was. The Thraxos jolted violently for a second. Jason carefully laid him on his back.

Accessing the targeting feed of the warships above, he could see the result of their bombardment. The collection of lights he saw from the sky was no more. In their place were craters of ruins and body parts. One survivor limped out of a ruined building, only to be hit by another particle lance that leveled the entire area.

The sight horrified him to his core. He stared up at the burning sky, and his soul screamed.

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The red sun slowly rose, revealing the towers of black smoke all over the horizon. Thousands of drones were already descending from the sky, dousing the fires, clearing the rubble, and disposing the bodies. Soon mobile terraforming towers would be dropped, subtly altering the atmosphere’s composition. By the time the first colonist landed, the planet would be pristine, as if the Thraxos had never been here. A cleansing, some had called it.

The sound of footsteps broke his reverie. He looked back. Flanked by two armed marines in silver armor, was an older man with a scar running through the right side of his bald head. He wore a crisp long-sleeved dark blue uniform that looked rather out of place in a battlefield.

“Grand Admiral,” Jason greeted with an unenthusiastic salute.

“Give us some space,” Grand Admiral Zhang ordered. The two armored marines spread out. He then turned toward Jason. “You did a good job rooting out the War Chief.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jason said, his gaze turning to the towers of smoke again.

“What’s going on, son? It’s not like you to not answer your comm?” Admiral

Zhang asked.

“I’m just not ready to go back yet,” Jason said. His hands slowly clenched tight on his thighs. “I can’t.”

“What’s on your mind, soldier?” Admiral Zhang asked again, slowly walking up beside him.

“Sir, do you ever think what we are doing is evil?” Jason asked.

“If you are talking about the killing, that is simply our duty as soldiers,” Admiral Zhang pointed out.

“There a difference between killing enemy soldiers in a battle and this...” Jason gestured to the towering black smoke. “We are massacring those people, Admiral. We are killing not only soldiers but civilians too. People who can’t even fight back!”

“Soldiers or not, it makes no difference on who they are,” Admiral Zhang said, his face stern and resolute. “They are the invaders, Jason. Have you forgotten how many they killed on Earth?”

“And that somehow justified an even greater genocide?” Jason asked. When Admiral Zhang did not answer, Jason continued, “What measure is a human, sir? Is it our capacity to think? To create art? To build machines? Thraxos has all those as well. We can try to make ourselves feel better by claiming they are not human, but the simple truth is that it does not make a difference. Life is life. Every one we snuff out is a lifetime of potential lost. What we did is evil, sir. It must be.”

“So what, Jason? I would bear the entire evil of the galaxy if it will secure humanity’s future,” Admiral Zhang snapped back ferociously.

“They are in the middle of dismantling their own empire! They’re not a threat to humanity anymore!” Jason said. When he saw the Admiral’s unchanging expression, something clicked inside his head. “You knew... and you still decided to kill them.”

“There wasn’t enough evidence to point that their regime change would last,” Admiral Zhang slowly said.

“We can’t know that for sure!” Jason countered. “We could have talked to them. There are dozens of ways to make sure they are genuine, yet we choose the easy way.”

“It’s not easy, Jason. Simple, yes, but never easy. Trust me, son. I have debated our course of action for days and nights. This is the only certain way to keep us safe.”

“It’s the wrong way. It has to be,” Jason pleaded, his voice growing more broken

with each word. A wave of intense anger flashed through the Admiral's face. It soon melted into a sympathetic expression. He reached out and held Jason by the shoulders.

"If that is the case, then let me bear the evil. You just need to follow orders."

"When we meet the devil in hell, we can't say we were just following orders. On Old Earth, we would have been condemned as war criminals," Jason said. The Admiral pulled away.

"Perhaps it's a mistake deploying you so soon after Earth," Admiral Zhang said. "I'll arrange for you to be sent back to Unity on the next supply ship. All you need is some time back home, and you will be thinking straight again."

Jason looked up to the now black clouded sky. The Admiral was treating him like he was only tired, but the truth was that he felt more like he had been broken into a thousand pieces. A year or a thousand, no respite will ever calm this storm inside him. Now that he knew what he was doing was evil, there was only one thing he could do. He faced the Admiral as he climbed up the ramp of the shuttle. As he had trained a thousand times before, he drew his sidearm and aimed. The marines instantly raised their rifles, but Jason knew they were a second too late. He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 1

In what could have been a choreographed parade, the five white glimmering shuttles emerged out of the crevice and into the hangar. They hovered over the landing pads, swiveled around, and landed. The ramp dropped, and the occupants hurried out. They waited exactly five minutes before lifting off. Another five shuttles took their places. Five minutes later, they lifted off and another five took their place.

There were one thousand of them streaming out into the hangar, each no older than fifteen. They all wore loose gray uniform and had the same buzz-cut hairstyle. Some stumbled as they stepped off the ramp. Most were struggling to carry their green rucksack. All had the look of fear and nervousness, except for one. She stood a head taller than the others and seemed to fit perfectly into her gray uniform. Her hair was long and tied into a perfect bun. She stepped off the shuttle with confidence and carried the rucksack with uncaring ease. While everyone else still had the look of innocence, she already had a hardened face. While others were still thinking of themselves as children, she had no such misconception. The moment they stepped into this place, they had become soldiers.

Yui stepped off the shuttle and joined the line of cadets. The line, sloppy and uneven, snaked up the path that eventually took them to the surface.

Yui held her right hand up and felt the sunlight on her skin. The Engineering Corps had tried their best to imitate the metropolis of Old Earth, but they were betrayed by the very nature of the structure. The artificial sunlight felt real, but it emanated from a curved strip instead of a sphere. The open vast space of greeneries, pathways, and buildings tapered off to a flat wall on either side. There was no horizon, only an upward curving surface that would loop back on the other end. The ring structure was an impressive feat of engineering, but it was still a poor imitation of a real planet.

“Cadets, you will form up to five wide and ten deep!” a voice boomed when they reached an open field. Six older cadets, their status denoted by their gold collars, helped the arriving cadets into the formation. When they all lined up, a man in a dark blue uniform stepped up to a dais in front of them. On his collar was the bronze star of a Commodore.

“My name is Commodore Vincent Ajani. Welcome to Okamoto Fleet Academy,” the man introduced himself, his patronizing eyes sweeping through the cadets. “As a welcoming gift, I will do all of you a favor and tell you the truth. The truth of what you can expect, and what is expected of you in this place.

“Twenty-two years ago, humanity was living its darkest moment. Our home was conquered, and we were exiled to a distant part of the galaxy. By all means, we should have lost. We have nothing but a collection of old battered ships and barely 100,000 soldiers. By all logical reasons, we should have admitted defeat and tried to find a new home, but Admiral Okamoto refused to go any farther than the frontier sector.

“In the face of devastating loss, he refused to concede. In the face of impossible odds, he pressed on. And now here you are. Earth might be broken, but you are now living in the very liberty denied to us mere twenty-two years ago. Billions died for this liberty, including Admiral Okamoto himself.

“Now it is your turn to serve; to protect this very liberty. We are living in a hostile galaxy. The next war will come soon enough. Wherever you will end up, either on a warship or as a fighter on the ground, you are expected to defend this liberty with the same sense of sacrifice and dedication. The moment you step into this place, your life is no longer your own. You are now cadets of the Sol Federal Navy. The first and last line of defense for humanity.” The Commodore let his words hang in the air. Yui glanced over to the side. Most of them barely understood what the Commodore had said. *And that will make the next step much more painful*, Yui thought.

A pair of older cadets walked up to the pathway.

“First years, you will line up behind us and follow our pace!” In unison, they went into a jogging run. Though hesitant at first, the first year cadets followed them.

Fifty meters into the run, one of the cadets abruptly stopped. The cadet behind him crashed headfirst into his back. Like hitting a metal pole, he bounced off, stumbled to the side, and crashed into the second line. One shove led to another. The commotion spread. The older cadets tried to intervene, but their voices were drowned by all the shouting. As the chaos unfolded, Yui saw the first cadet get up and walked into the grass. She followed him.

“Stop,” Yui said. The boy kept on walking in an oblivious trance. Above, she could hear a soft whirring noise growing closer. She surged ahead and grabbed his

left shoulder and wrist. She pulled him back and threw him to the ground.

“What the hell?” the boy shouted as he rolled onto his back.

Yui stood over him. She knew he must be fifteen years old like the others, but his small body made him seem younger. “Look over my left shoulder,” she said.

The boy squinted his eyes. They were typically very hard to see, especially when silhouetted against the artificial sun, but Yui knew one had descended. “A drone?” he asked.

“A patrol drone,” Yui confirmed. “If you have taken another step, it would have shot you with a stunner. The nerve paralyzing shock is... Well, let’s just say it won’t be a pleasant experience.”

“I can’t stay here,” the boy said.

“This is a space station in the middle of nowhere,” Yui said. “The nearest habitable planet is light-years away. You can’t escape.”

The boy’s eyes turned poignant. He slowly stood up. “Have you ever been to a veteran hospital?”

“No, but those—“

“Then you have not seen what it really means to be a soldier. You’ve never seen a man twice our size crying every night. You’ve never seen a woman so scared of the outside that she never left her room in over two years. You’ve never seen....” His fingers gripped his clothes tightly. “A father drinking himself to death. I don’t want to end up like them. I can’t.”

“The war is over,” Yui said softly.

“Then why are we here if they don’t expect us to fight?” the boy asked. Yui could not answer. She could read off security reports on how war was unlikely for the next ten years, but it would mean nothing to the boy.

“I’m sorry,” was all she could say.

“It’s all right, cadet,” an older man said as he came up behind her. On his collar was a hollow silver triangle of a First Lieutenant. He took one look at the boy. “There’s always going to be one in every batch. Go back to the line. I’ll handle this.”

Yui opened her mouth. *Let him go home. He’s clearly not made to be a soldier,* she wanted to say, but she knew the truth better than anyone. *None of us here is free.* She went back to the path and joined the line of cadets.

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The first year cadets crossed the threshold of the gate and started to collapse.

Yui did not fault them. Although the older cadets kept the pace to a slow jog, they still had run fifteen kilometers to the other side of the ring. For the first years who most likely had never exercised before, it was simply too much. Some retched their stomach's contents to the side of the road and a few passed out outright. A group of ten older cadets with red cross armbands checked everyone. Out of one thousand, thirty had to be carried off to the medical center. *Three percent casualty. That's just slightly below the five percent yearly average*, Yui mused to herself.

While the others were still recovering, Yui moved forward to the registration desk. There was no instruction, but Yui knew this was a test for initiative. The first to register would get the best room. To her surprise, another first year was already there. She was slightly shorter than Yui and unlike the others, Yui could see the outline of trained muscle under her uniform. She was drenched in sweat and still seemed like she was ready for another fifteen kilometer run. *An overachiever, huh.*

"That will make both of you roommates then. Clean up and get settled. You can go anywhere within the building, but you are not to venture out. Tomorrow your training will officially begin," the older cadet said, handing Yui a key card. She stepped to the side with the girl.

"Hello there," the girl greeted Yui with a smile.

"Hello," Yui greeted back.

"My name is Elizabeth Miller. You can call me Elly." She extended her hand forward. Yui eyed the hand curiously before shaking it.

"I'm Yui Ya...." Yui started but stopped herself. "Just Yui." *I'm not going to use a name that isn't mine*, Yui thought.

"Okay," Elly hesitantly said. She gestured at the dormitory. "Shall we?" Yui nodded. They started walking toward the building.

A man stepped in front of them and blocked their way.

He was broad-shouldered, muscular, and tall. His face was of stony duty. Over his dark blue uniform was a brown leather jacket. On his right chest was a faded

circular patch of two battle rifles diagonally crossing each other in front of a red and white rocket ship. Underneath was the tag line: Earth First Space Marine. His name was Captain Alex Baum. Yui suppressed her disappointment. She had hoped she was free of him here.

“Yui, surely you don’t think that you can slack off here.” He slowly walked toward her. Behind them, the older cadets looked on curiously.

“We were told to rest until tomorrow,” Yui said.

“They were told. Not you,” Baum clarified. “Did you forget? You are not to hold yourself to the standard of others. You are better than that.”

Yui gritted her teeth and took a slow step forward. The only thing that kept her from attacking was the certainty of defeat. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

“The central course.” Baum gestured toward it. “Run it three times.”

Yui stared at him, part disbelief and part anger. The course ran all around the ring. Three laps meant ninety kilometers. Not even the fourth year cadets were required to run that far in one go.

Yui turned around and started running.

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On the fifth hour, Yui crossed the threshold of the dormitory gate and fell to her knee. She let go of her focus and winched as hours of muscle ache and exhaustion hit her all at once. She felt like her legs had been pricked by a million needles. She fell on her back.

Numbing her nerves had been the last resort. It allowed her to continue running, but pain existed for a reason. It was the body’s stern warning to slow down or risk injury. Yui hated that this wasn’t the first time she was forced to do this.

“Are you okay?” Elly leaned down and asked. Her face was one of exhaustion and concern. Even as the other cadets retreated inside, she alone stayed out.

“Well, I can’t really walk right now so....”

“I can carry you to the hospital,” Elly suggested.

Yui smiled at her. “It’s okay. I just need half an hour of not moving for my body to do its thing.”

“Can I at least sit you up so you can drink?” Elly showed the thermos she had

been carrying and pointed at the bench ten meters away.

“That would be nice,” Yui said. Elly put down the thermos. She slipped her hands under Yui’s arms and lifted her. She could only lift her halfway. Seeing her alarmed look, Yui added, “Yeah, I’m heavier than I look.”

“New plan then.” Elly put her down. She sat down behind her, putting Yui’s sweat-drenched back against hers. Yui took the thermos and unscrewed the cap. “It’s Barley tea and honey,” Elly explained.

“Thanks.” Yui upended half the content into her mouth. The cold and sweet tea flowed down her throat smoothly.

“There’s morning PT in five hours,” Elly said.

“Yeah.” Yui put down the thermos. “It’s why I increased my pace. It should be enough time for my body to rest.”

“This isn’t right. We should report this.”

“That man... do you know he is?” Yui asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you know that he wouldn’t be here if this isn’t approved at the highest level,” Yui said before she drank the rest of the tea.

“But it isn’t fair.”

“It’s not, but it is what it is.” Yui let out a resigned breath.

“How are you so okay with this?” Elly snapped, the anger finally bubbling to the surface.

Yui stared at her in amazement. She never knew it was possible to be angry for someone. “Elly, I’m built differently from you or the others. My body has been genetically modified so much that I might not scientifically qualify to be human anymore. Captain Baum gave me this task because this is the only way to push my limit.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that the point of training? To constantly push our limit so we can improve.”

“Well duh, but not what I meant.” Elly let out a sigh. “I meant why you? I’m familiar with the augment program, Yui. I know that out of a thousand applicants, they only accept one or two and never a cadet. What makes you so different?”

Yui opened her mouth, but the words were stuck in her throat. *No, telling her the truth will just put her in danger.* “Let’s just say that they have a high expectation of me.”

“Fuck, that isn’t cryptic at all,” Elly quipped. Yui let out a chuckle.

“Sorry, I can’t really tell you.” Using her arms to push herself up, she slowly stood. She felt out her legs. There was still some pain, but at least it felt like they could move now.

“Are you sure you can walk?” Elly asked.

“Yes.” Yui forced herself to smile. “Besides, we should get back. You need rest as well.”

Elly nodded. They went to their room on the third floor. It was a five by five meter room with a square window. On the left side were two plastic desks and chairs. On the right was a bunk bed with thin mattresses.

“If this is the best room, I don’t want to see the worst one,” Elly said.

“I think it’s half this size and has no window,” Yui said, grunting as she collapsed into the bottom bed and turned to the side. As she watched Elly climb to the top bunk, Yui thought, *It might not be so bad here after all.*

## Chapter 2

The artificial strip of sun grew from dim to almost blindingly bright. If that didn't wake the first years, then the high-pitched trumpet sound would.

"You have ten minutes to change to PT gear and line up!" The older cadet stopped and looked over Yui and Elly curiously. Both of them had already changed to their PT gear. They had even finished making their bed.

"We're ready now," Elly reported.

"I can see that," the older cadet said, his commanding voice turned to soft exasperation. When they walked passed him, he grabbed Yui in the arm. In a cautious whisper, he said, "For all it's worth, we've tried to stop him, but he threatened us with expulsion." Yui could only nod as he let her go. They both rushed down the stairs and out.

Around a hundred came down late. They were segregated to the side to do punishment. The rest were ordered to run out to the five kilometer mark and back. The older cadet also told them that the mess had a cutoff time of 8 am. They all started running with a determination that could only come from hunger. Normally, Yui could have run that distance in twenty minutes, but this was far from normal. The pain in her legs had subsided, but there was still stiff resistance as she moved them. Another stern warning from her body. *Slow down or get more pain.* Yui ignored it.

"Elly, you don't need to slow down for me," Yui said. A yellow alert icon appeared in the corner of her vision. She opened it. A display of text filled the center of her vision, startling her and causing her to stumble. Elly caught her before she could fall.

"Apparently I do."

Yui steadied herself. She read the message.

*To Cadet Yui: You are to report to the Battleground building at 8 AM.*

The message was officially from the faculty, though Yui knew who actually sent it. Cadets weren't supposed to use the Battleground until their second year. Yui dismissed the message and faced Elly. "The road was uneven."

"Sure it was." Elly grinned as a group of cadets passed them.

Yui looked down. "Why are you doing this?"

“What do you mean?”

“This.” Yui gestured at her. “Why are you trying so hard to help me? You just met me.”

“Well, the socially acceptable reason is because you need the help, but the real reason is because I think that man is an ass. If helping you screws with his plan, then good.”

“I think that’s socially acceptable in some circles.” Yui let out a brief laugh. She looked up at the artificial sun and felt the gentle warmth on her skin. “This is not too bad, all things considered. Before this, I was at Hades. The surface is all half molten rock and the gravity is an unpleasant 1.5 G. If I survived my training there, I can survive here.”

Elly stared at her. Her expression flickered between fascination and pity. “I have to ask, Yui. How old were you when they augmented you?”

Yui turned slightly to the left. “I was twelve, but they’ve been training me since I was ten. It’s—”

“That’s not right, Yui. Not right at all,” Elly said with a frown.

“It’s no different than what you guys are doing here. On Old Earth, you would still be considered a child soldier,” Yui pointed out.

“But it is different. Those five years... You’ve lost your childhood too soon.”

“Childhood is not that important,” Yui said resolutely, though a part of her heart betrayed her with an aching tug.

Elly cast a poignant smile that faded the next moment. “Look, I came from a family of soldiers. My parents were in the Fleet when it was still called the Earth Defense Force. If you look back far enough, you can find my ancestors fighting in the old World Wars. So my parents knew full well what the life of a soldier meant, and when the universal conscription was announced, they sought to prepare me. Not only physically but emotionally as well. You don’t—“

“One of my augmentations is an implant that monitors my brainwave,” Yui interrupted.

“That’s not what I mean,” Elly said. The pity on her face grew. “My parents didn’t treat me like a soldier, Yui. They still treated me like any other child. They took me to the movies. They kept reading me bedtime stories. They even brought me to tour the colonies once. We laid on grass so green that it could have been Earth. We saw creatures so exotic that they could have come from the realm of the faeries. I cherished those memories. They are my anchor, a reminder of who I am so I won’t lose my way here. You don’t have that, do you, Yui? Why do you want to fight?”

“I...” Even as the words flowed out, she knew Elly was right. “It was what I’m told to do.”

“You’ve never made your own choice, haven’t you?” Elly asked.

“Does that make me a freak?” Yui glanced down.

“No, Yui. It means that those who put you through this are assholes of the highest degree.” Elly leaned closer and gripped her by the shoulders. “It’s not too late to find your reason to fight.”

“Thank you.” Yui smiled.

Elly nodded and pulled away. She scanned around. “Well, we just fell to last place. Let’s pick up our pace.” They both started running. In the end, they had only ten minutes of breakfast before they were told to run to the gun range three kilometers away.

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The first year cadets, out of breath and barely able to hold their stomach’s contents, lined up before the old grizzled instructor.

“Now listen you numbnuts. I am instructor Daniel. One thing you should know about me is that I have the authority to send you to latrine duty for the night,” the tall burly man said from the top of the metal box.

The instructor held the gun up as if it was a divine relic. The weapon had a black finish with a dot patterned grip. It resembled the old pistols of Earth, except that the grip contained no magazine and the barrel was larger by half.

“This is MAP-B. The MAP stands for Multi Armament Pistol and the B indicates it as the second of the series,” the instructor explained. He paused as his eyes swept over the cadets. Having been born during the war, the cadets were no stranger to guns, but they were still captivated by the MAP. Compared to the old gunpowder guns they used to see, the MAP was like a weapon from the far future.

The instructor continued, “The MAP is a coilgun that can shoot self-propelled ammo of various kinds, including armor-piercing and explosive bolts, but for now, you are only trusted with the standard ammo. Note that proficiency with the MAP is required for graduation.” The instructor began to explain how to fire the gun, its inner mechanism, and the best practice for maintenance. After he was done, he instructed the cadets to step into the firing range.

As Yui and Elly stepped into the firing booth, she noticed the scared boy from the day before, standing in the corner with the lieutenant. He was listening intently with a grim expression.

“This is your last chance, Cadet Rudy. Everyone is required to serve, but the academy is not the only place to do so. It is simply the... nicer option. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Rudy answered. His voice was muffled by the soundproof booth.

“Damn, this is hefty,” Elly said as she picked the MAP from the box. She opened one of the ammunition boxes and took out a narrow box-shaped magazine. She slotted it into the opening in front of the MAP’s trigger. The status light on the back blinked from red to green, signaling it now had both power and ammunition. “Anyway, why is this a required course? Most of us are going to end up in ship operation anyway. Even if we are boarded, we have the Silver Guards to fight for us.”

“So you can at least offer token resistance before you are ripped apart by whatever can tear through the half-ton automatons,” Yui said.

“Huh, that’s a grim thought. Thank you for that.” Elly shook her head. She felt out the MAP before aiming downrange. The Thraxos-shaped target rose. Yui looked back at Rudy. He was alone in the firing booth opposite of them. He stared at the MAP in his hand as if he was trying to will it into something else.

A muffled ping, followed by a quick whoosh before a pang in the distance.

“Hey, I hit it!” Elly turned to Yui with a gleeful smile.

“I’ll be back.” Yui walked out of the booth and toward Rudy. She didn’t know what exactly to say, but she knew she had to say something. She recalled last night and the morning run. How Elly had given her tea and kept her company. *Sometimes the knowledge you are not alone is enough to bring light*, Yui thought.

“Yui.” Baum stepped right in front of her. “You ignored the message.”

“I did,” Yui admitted. Behind her, she could hear a rustling of footsteps. “There is something I must do. Ten minutes. That’s all I’m asking.”

“No, Yui. I told you before. Your training is of the utmost importance. People are depending on you. Surely you don’t want to disappoint them?” Baum asked.

Yui looked back at Elly. *You can save them all*, she could hear the Admiral’s words. It had been easy to ignore those words then. “All right. I’ll go with you.”

“I’ll come with you!” Elly shouted.

“You are out of line, cadet!” Baum bellowed.

“It’s all right, Elly,” Yui said, putting up her bravest smile. Judging from Elly’s still concerned face, it did not work.

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Yui stepped into the deployment zone, and the nine older cadets stared at her as if she was a Thraxos soldier.

“This is bull,” one of them said.

“Why are we saddled by a first year? It’s not—” another protested.

“Oi, shut it!” a tall and stern-faced cadet shouted. The other eight instantly fell silent. The lead cadet looked her over and let out a sigh. “Give me some space.” The others glanced at each other with unsure looks. The lead cadet gave them a fiery glare, and they all scurried to the other side of the room.

“I assume you are the lead?” Yui asked.

“Yes.” The older cadet walked toward her. “I’m Cadet John Khun.” When Yui looked at him, she didn’t feel like she was looking at a cadet. There was a sureness in the way he moved. A sense of confidence that was distinctly lacking from the others. It was as if he was already an officer in the Fleet rather than a cadet.

“I’m—“

“Cadet Yui.” John knelt and checked the padding of her training armor. “They even had your size ready.” John let out another sigh.

“I’m not dead weight. I can handle myself.”

He leaned down and tightened Yui’s ankle strap. “Make sure your joints are protected. The padding will protect your vitals well enough, but a bad shot on any of the joints and you’ll be out of commission for weeks.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Yui checked the straps on her arms. One could be tightened further, so she did.

“I tend not to believe anyone’s self-evaluation.” John stood up. “But I saw you yesterday. I think you broke the record on the running course, both endurance and speed. That is only possible if you are an augment.”

“Yes,” Yui said and John gently shook his head. “You disapprove?”

“Not at you. I’m just disappointed by the people that let this happen.” John glanced at the camera in the corner and back at her. “Look, Yui. I’ll be frank with you. You are being set up to fail. We are currently the attacker in a capture the flag scenario. Now usually the attacker is given more numbers to compensate for

the defender's inherent advantage, but for this game, we got only one squad while the defender has three."

Yui let out a booming laugh that echoed around the room. John raised an eyebrow, and the others stared at her. "I'm not being set up to fail, John. Three squads against one is rather generous of Captain Baum."

"Yui—"

"There are multiple avenues of approach." Yui raised her left wrist and projected the map from her comm bracelet. The arena had been built to simulate an aft section of a battleship. A labyrinth of corridors surrounded an engineering bay. There were three assault corridors, each labeled Alpha, Beta, and Charlie. "I will assault Alpha on my own while you take the others to assault Charlie."

"No matter what augmentation you have, you can't get through them alone," John said.

"No, but I can cause enough ruckus that they will have to divert defenders from the other corridors. If you timed it right, your assault will break through. You can grab their flag before they can even react."

"It's a stupid plan. You—"

"Your other option is a slow encroaching siege. According to the manual, that will take what, six hours to implement?" Yui said, hoping her projection of confidence held.

John crossed his arms on his chest. Through his eyes, Yui could see the different thoughts clashing with each other. After three long seconds, he finally nodded. "All right. We'll go with your plan. It's just a training scenario anyway." John gestured for the others to join them.

Yui stared at the camera in the corner. John was right. This was just a training scenario. There was no stake other than pride, and even the most self-absorbed idiot could see they were being set up to fail. But for Yui, there was a stake. A life on the line. *I will finish this fast*, she hardened her resolve.

## Chapter 3

Yui sprinted forward, leaving the rest of the fourth years and becoming a blur as she moved around the turn of the corridor.

She reached corridor Alpha just as the defenders were setting up a barricade. The two cadets reached for their sidearms. Yui surged forward.

Yui saw the flash of the self-propelled bolt igniting. She leaped up. Both cadets' eyes widened in shock as Yui flipped in the air and landed feet first in the ceiling, specifically on the slight bump of the lighting enclosure. She pushed off it in a diagonal dive. They fired again. One missed to her right while the other hit her in the left shoulder. The Kevlar padding absorbed the hit directly, but it still felt like a hard punch. Yui landed between them. She swept the legs of the left cadet and tackled the right into the wall. She gripped the cadet's neck with her left hand while her right swung back and shot the other cadet in the chest just as he was getting up. He collapsed again. The MAP swung back.

"I yield!" the pinned cadet shouted. Yui let him go and turned toward the other cadet. He was crawling for his MAP. Yui shot him one more in the back. He went limp.

"Get him to the medic," Yui said and continued forward.

Four turns and twenty meters later, Yui encountered the next defensive point. There were two of them behind the half-finished barricade. Their MAPs were already pointing at her. Yui skidded to a stop as they fired. Yui jumped back, flipping in the air as she turned around.

"Peter, wait!" Yui heard a shout and the sound of rapid footsteps behind her. Yui smiled. It had been a small gambit on her side, but as she suspected, the third year cadets had not fully grasped the nuance of tactical warfare.

Yui turned the corner, stopped, and turned around. The cadet named Peter had only a second to lament his idiotic decision before Yui slammed her left fist into his face. Peter staggered back, stumbled, and fell face first. Yui rushed around the corner, her MAP aiming forward. The other cadet had just leaped over the barricade. Clashing muffled pings echoed back and forth. Yui's shot was faster by a second. The cadet was hit in the chest and thrown back. His shot grazed Yui in the shoulder. Without missing a beat, Yui turned around and aimed her MAP at

Peter. He had just stood up. Specks of blood littered the inside of his visor.

“Who the hell are you?” Peter shouted. Yui shot him in the chest. Technically, Peter and his slightly wiser friend had not yielded and therefore were still in the fight, but at this distance, the MAP’s shots would have broken a rib or two. Yui doubted any of them would continue fighting.

When Yui reloaded her MAP, she felt something off with her movement. She didn’t need to bring up the biosensor feed to know that she had multiple sprains. She continued forward still.

When the next barricade was in sight, Yui pushed forward and leaped over it. It was empty. A spare magazine dropped on the ground indicated the defender had left in a hurry. If Yui had to guess, the defender’s lead had ordered the defensive line to collapse. It seemed that the lead had no idea what was attacking her barricades, so she chose the safer option. Yui’s response was to increase her speed. She didn’t bother slowing down to check each corner. It took her only three minutes to reach the engineering bay. She caught a single cadet as he was stepping through the hatch. Yui shot him in the back, lunged forward, and shoved him aside.

All of the defenders froze in a look of shock and fear. They could not believe that a single cadet had breached their defensive line.

“Take her down!” one of them—Yui assumed the lead,—shouted. She shot her in the head. The cadet went down.

MAPs started firing, and Yui dove behind a cover. Sparks exploded as dozens of bolts hit the dummy console. Yui took a moment to curse whoever designed the props. Real consoles definitely did not make sparks when they were shot at. Yui had checked. Seeing Baum’s furious face almost made the one week of latrine duty worth it.

The mock engineering bay was a two-deck tall circular room with a large cylindrical structure in the middle. The red flag was hung five meters up. The defenders were all near the central cylindrical, forming firing positions that were anchored on each of the eight support pillars. Only half of them had a direct line of sight, but that was still ten MAPs worth of firepower firing at her. She stayed huddled down.

Yui grabbed a stunner grenade off her vest and released the safety cover with a pop. When there was a break in the assault, Yui threw it over the console. A second later, it detonated in two distinct waves. The first was a high pitch sizzle of the short-range electric shock. One defender was caught in the three meter range and went down. Then came the bang of a blinding flash and thunderous clap. The smarter defenders dove back to cover and waited for their eyesight to recover. The others continued shooting wildly.

Yui stood up and cursed as an unlucky shot hit her center mass. She had to plant her foot firmly to avoid being thrown back. She snapped two shots, hitting the shooter in the chest. The others started shooting again, but Yui was already running to the side. She had only caught a glimpse of their positions. That was enough for her to visualize them in her mind. Without looking, she snapped a shot to the side and heard a pained groan. She snapped another and heard another pained groan. On the third shot, she heard only the pang of the bolt hitting a wall. The defender had changed their position. That also meant that for this brief moment, they were not aiming at her. Yui pivoted to the right and increased her speed, aiming at a cadet that was running to a pillar for cover. Yui slammed his head into the pillar.

A shot impacted her back. She recoiled forward. Pushing off the falling cadet, she flipped around and took a shot. It missed the shooter. Yui fired again, hitting her in the head.

Yui dashed around the pillar. Now inside their defensive line, Yui went from one defender to another. The first was emerging from the side of the pillar. Yui put two shots in his back. The second was behind her. Yui turned and shot him in the stomach. A shot hit her chest. This time, the weakened Kevlar was unable to absorb the full hit. Just as she was falling, Yui threw her now empty MAP. It hit the third one in the head. Landing on her arms, she instantly pushed up while her feet pushed forward. She tackled the fourth one and slammed him into the dummy reactor core. Another shot hit her back. She turned and charged at the fifth. She only managed a meter forward before falling to her knee. She tried to stand, but another bolt hit her in the chest. She fell on her back.

“Yield!” someone shouted.

The defenders stared at her in disbelief as she stood back up. Every muscle felt wrong as they moved. Her vision was starting to blur. Her thoughts became fuzzy. Still, she refused to let herself fall.

“I said yie—“ Multiple stunner grenades suddenly detonated on the other side of the room. Yui fell to her knee. Now certain of her victory, she let go of her focus. The onset of sharp pain and cramps dropped her to the ground. She closed her eyes. The grunts and pings of the MAPs became muffled. Three minutes later, it was all over.

“Fucking hell, John. What the hell is that tactic? You could have—”

“I’ll talk to you later, Ava.” The sound of footsteps approached her and stopped. Yui opened her eyes. John was standing over him with a conflicted face. “You are crazy.”

“Is that a thank you?” Yui said. Two cadets came over and pulled her up by the shoulders. She gently nudged them away and stood on her own. Her right hand clutched her chest tight.

“I’m not going to thank you, Yui.” John glanced at the others. Those who were still standing were helping those on the ground. Some were so injured that they had to be carried out on stretchers. “No training is worth this.”

“I’m sorry.” Yui glanced down, her guilt attacking her resolve. “But I needed to end this fast.”

“So I assume you don’t want the medic then?” John asked. Yui nodded. He let out a sigh. “Then you are dismissed. Whatever it is that you are trying to achieve, I hope it is worth it.” John joined the still furious defender’s lead.

Yui limped away.

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The artificial sun had dimmed by the time Yui returned to the dormitory. As Yui slowly and silently went up the stairs, she thought about the conversation ahead.

*I know these past two days have been hard for you. I wish I can say there is a way out of this place, but there is none. We are unfortunately born into a time where we can’t choose our own future.*

Yui stopped on the second floor, winching as her left side ached. She took a

moment of rest before continuing up.

*Our roles in society have been decided, but it doesn't need to be fighting. For every officer or specialist serving aboard a ship or fighting on the ground, there are a dozen support personnel. Those whose duties involved logistics, administration, industry, and research instead of fighting.*

She reached the fourth floor and turned to the right. The row of doors seemed endless.

*I know what you are considering doing. I had considered doing that same thing too. All I ask is that you give me a chance to help you find your place here.*

She reached room D-454. The door opened. It was Elly.

“Yui?” Elly said with a smile. It vanished fast and changed to shock. “What the hell happened to you?”

“What are you doing here?” Yui frowned. She peeked over Elly’s shoulder and saw Rudy’s roommate putting a duffel bag into a black cardboard box.

“I uhm...” Elly glanced back. “I volunteered to pack up his things.”

“Did he get an exemption?”

Elly gave her a pained look. “Oh no, you didn’t know...”

“Tell me!” Yui said, her tone unexpectedly harsh.

Elly gulped as she forced the word out. “Cadet Rudy shot himself.”

The hall closed in on her. She felt like all the air had been sucked out.

*I'm too late. Something inside her broke.*

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Yui stared out of the window with a solemn face, feeling the ache of the grief slowly growing. She didn’t know him, not truly, yet Yui felt like he was a kindred spirit. Once, years ago, she too felt so desperate that she considered the most horrible form of escape. She still remembered the nervous steps into the airlock. She remembered the fear that ran through her as her hands gripped the release handle. She was so close to ending it all.

“Hey,” Elly said. She walked up beside her, two steaming mugs in hand. She handed one to Yui. “It’s jasmine tea.”

“Thanks,” Yui said. She took in the floral scent before taking a sip. For a brief moment, she could feel her heart warming.

“They said it was an accident. He was trying to get his gun working when his finger slipped. It could have been—”

“That’s not true!” Yui said, her voice harsh and accusing. With a softer tone, she added, “He killed himself, Elly. They forced him to be a soldier, and it broke him.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do. I have access to the classified report of the incident. The forensics is very clear. He had pressed the barrel of the MAP against his chin.”

Elly gave her a curious look. “How did you get access to that report?”

Yui tapped the side of her head. “I already have a neural implant and a Mythrill access code. It allows me... No, it doesn’t matter how.” Yui shook her head.

“I guess not.” Elly let out a long sigh. “I think they don’t want to say suicide out of respect.”

“No, it’s not that...” Yui said, her voice trailing off. She forced the words out. “Do you know that they have an official average for the suicide? One out of ten,” Yui said.

“One out of ten, huh. That’s not too bad. It is an unfortunate fact that not everyone has what it takes to be a soldier,” Elly said.

“There are one thousand of us that arrived yesterday. That’s one hundred cadets. One hundred Rudys that will die by the end of the year,” Yui pointed out.

Elly grew quiet as shame crept up her face.

“Are they...” her voice faltered. “Are they not doing anything about it?”

“Memos are sent up the chain, but as long as the academy produced enough quality graduates, the Fleet Admirals are content to let things be.”

A pause as they both took a sip of their tea. The bitterness felt more pronounced this time.

“That’s not right at all,” Elly said.

“I knew this was going to happen. I should have done more to stop it,” Yui said, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“Yui, I don’t think anyone could have stopped him.”

“I could have convinced him to live,” Yui said. “If only I was faster...” Yui held

the mug in her hand tighter and tighter until the heat singed.

“Yui, is this something they told you to do?” Elly asked.

“No! This is my own decision.” Yui exhaled a heavy breath. “And I failed. I shouldn’t have tried in the first place.”

“No. You were right to try to help him, Yui. You can’t help Rudy, but there will be others. We can help them,” Elly said.

“Yeah right,” Yui said. “I can’t even save one cadet.”

“It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try.” Elly leaned closer. There was a shine of resolve in her eyes. “And in time, we will help everyone by changing the system.”

“We can’t change the system, Elly,” Yui said with a saddened look. “The higher ups won’t allow it. They are too stubborn to even consider that they can be wrong.”

“But they won’t reign forever,” Elly said. “And we won’t always be cadets. We will be ensigns, lieutenant, captains, and eventually, admirals.”

“You do know that we need to do two years of being specialist before we can be considered for the command line,” Yui pointed out.

“I was simplifying,” Elly said. “What I’m saying is that sooner or later, the old men and women will fade away, and it will be our turn to rule; to make changes. When that happens, we can build a better future.”

“And if people resist the change?”

“Then we’ll beat them to submission,” Elly said.

Yui let out a soft laugh. “You are rather decisive, aren’t you?”

“There may be things in the universe that are gray, but some things are still black and white. There are right and wrong. I am one hundred percent sure that a system that pushes children to suicide is wrong. We can’t stop it now, but we can for the next generation,” Elly said. She held up her mug in the air. “Imagine us fighting together. We will be an unstoppable force of change.”

“Together,” Yui said with a smile. They touched their mugs together before taking a sip. This time, the warm lingered a bit longer.

After the tea, Elly helped her to the bed. Amidst the pain, fever, and sweat, she drifted off.

## Chapter 4

Yui was fourteen years old, and she was crying like she had never cried before.

The hits would not stop coming. She felt the blood dripping from a dozen wounds. She heard her hardened bones creak and break with each kick. In the depth of such pain, she could only muster one thought. *Hold fast.*

The hits finally stopped and she fell on the red-stained mat. Something flipped her over. A hand reached down and gripped around her neck tight. A menacing face stared at her. It was Baum's. He did not enjoy the violence, but he did not regret it either. There was nothing in his face but duty. No sympathy. No emotion.

"Please stop," she cried out.

"That is your mistake, child. You think that by refusing to fight, I will stop. You think that by being passive, the Admiral will eventually let you go. That will never happen." The menacing face leaned closer. She tried to flinch away, but the hand kept her head still and straight. "You need to understand. Your life is not your own. It is ours to use as we see fit."

"It hurts... please," Yui cried out, frantically trying to pry his grip open. It was too tight and she was too weak.

"Everyone can see I am hurting you." Baum glanced up to the camera in the corner and made sure Yui saw it too. "Yet there is no alarm and no one is rushing to help you. This is the reality of your life. Cooperate or not, it doesn't change a thing. You will always be ours..." Something erupted inside her. A brief surge of intense emotion that overcame the pain. Yui swung her right fist. It hit the side of his face with a soft thump. Baum absorbed the hit with only a slight tilt to the side. She pulled her fist back and tried to swing it again. She missed. Her muscles refused to move again.

"It's a start."

Baum let her go.

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Yui slowly drifted out of the dream. It had been a year, but the anger persisted still.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Elly said, looking back from the desk. “How are you feeling?”

Yui felt the movement of her arms and legs. There was still some stiff resistance, but the pain was numbed now. “Still like crap, but a bit better.” She gently stood up.

“Here, I brought breakfast for you.” Elly handed her a plastic wrap of a ham and cheese sandwich, or at least substitute ham and cheese.

“Thanks.” Yui unwrapped it and ate it all before the minute was up.

“You can’t continue like this, Yui,” Elly said as Yui finished chewing.

“Huh? Right, I’ll eat slower next time.” Yui tossed the wrapper across the room and into the bin.

“No that, Yui. What the instructors are doing to you... augment or not, it is too much.”

“But the augment part does make a difference. They gave me this kind of training because they know I can endure it.”

“That’s crap, Yui. Even an Alpha Force’s trainee isn’t asked to take on three squads at once,” Elly said.

“Where did you hear about that?” Yui asked curiously.

“Cadet John came by to check up on you. I told him to let you sleep,” Elly said.

Yui let out a sigh. “I chose the most aggressive strategy because I thought I could reach Rudy in time. It won’t happen again.”

“I hope so. If we are to change the Fleet, you need to survive until we become admirals,” Elly said.

“Yeah.” Yui smiled at her.

A high-pitched trumpet sounded. “Time for our morning run,” Elly said. They quickly changed into their PT gear.

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After the morning run and breakfast, the first year cadets were introduced to hand-to-hand combat, though it would be more apt to call it a practical demonstration. After being divided into ten groups, they were gathered around a circular ring. One by one, their name was called. They would then step into the ring and faced off one of the older cadets in a sparring match.

Studying the fights carefully, Yui came to a rather succinct conclusion. The first year cadets had no chance. They were utterly clueless. They fumbled and swung their limbs wildly. The older cadets, however, were not much better. They had the benefit of knowing the proper technique but not much else. Their movement was still clumsy and slow.

One by one, the first year cadets were soundly beaten. Then it was Elly's turn. She gave Yui a wink as she stepped into the arena.

Elly went into a sloppy fighting stance, with both arms evenly out and her feet close together. Her opponent, a third year by the name of Iris West scoffed at the sight. The bell rang. She charged forward while Elly switched to a more solid stance. Her feet widened and her fists pulled back to her chest. Iris swung her right fist forward. Elly easily ducked underneath and leaned forward. She landed a close jab in Iris' stomach, staggering her back. Iris gritted her teeth and moved forward once again. She threw a series of jabs, but Elly was dancing on her feet, weaving in and out as she landed quick punches. Iris grew more and more frustrated. In the heat of the moment, she made a fatal mistake. On one of her attacks, she stepped too far forward. Elly lunged and landed a right straight on her head. Iris stumbled back, blood flickering off her mouth. Elly followed up with a kick that threw Iris out of the arena.

"Easy win." Elly stepped off the arena with a wide grin.

"Nice one," Yui said, tapping her on the shoulder as she went up the ring. She was the last to go up. She did not think that was a coincidence, especially with Baum watching closely on the other side. She just had to endure whatever nasty scheme he had in mind for her.

Her opponent was a third year by the name of Randall Clarke. He was one of the better-trained seniors, having solid footwork and technique. He had one glaring flaw, however. He used the same opening move in every one of his matches. That extremely predictable pattern should have been beaten out of him before his second year, though Yui was more than happy enough to do so for him.

They stood five meters apart in the ring and bowed to signal respect. Then the bell sounded.

Randall charged forward with his arms open and low. Most of the first year

cadets couldn't even react as Randall tackled them to the ground where he would wrestle them into a submission lock. Some tried to dodge, but Randall would pivot to follow them. Others tried to brace against it. Randall would just grab their ankles and flipped them over. Yui did neither. She waited until Randall was two meters away and counter charged him. It wasn't a tackle, however, but more of a lunge forward and upward with her right knee in front. Randall tried to back away as he realized the coming hit. Her knee hit his head hard. By the time Yui landed over him, he was already knocked out cold on the ground.

A sharp pain went up to her right leg. She dropped to her knee.

The entire atrium was dead silent as no one was quite sure what had happened. Yui turned toward Baum. He kept his arms crossed on his chest and looked unimpressed. He pointed at one of the seniors.

"Your turn."

"She's won, sir." John approached him from the adjacent ring. "She's clearly hurt. There's no need for more demonstration."

"It's all right, John," Yui said. She willed herself to stand up. The pain was still there, but it numbed as Yui focused. "I can take it."

The senior cadet looked at John. After a second, he reluctantly nodded. The senior cadet stepped into the arena. She was an older girl, smaller than Randall but more muscular with her slender frame.

"I am Jane," she said, slightly bowing. She pointed at Randall. A pair of cadets rushed forward to carry him off the ring.

"Are you going to be more of a challenge?" Yui asked.

"I will not be an easy opponent," Jane said, going into a fighting stance with her left fist and left leg forward. Yui nodded and took a mirroring stance.

The bell rang. This time, Yui made the first move. She rushed forward and threw a series of punches. Like she had been taught, she kept her movement short and quick, providing only the briefest window for her opponent to block or dodge. To her surprise, Jane was enduring her attacks. Every one of her punches was either blocked or deflected with a fluidity that indicated her mastery in this field of combat. Yui sped up her attack by a notch and started including some kicks as well. Jane's defense became more frantic. Just as Yui thought she finally had her,

Jane closed the distance and used her left shoulder to tackle Yui in the chest. The force behind it was weak, but it was enough to stagger Yui a step back. Jane pounced at the opportunity like a seasoned predator. She half spun her body to the side, her left leg extending out into a powerful kick aimed at Yui's chest. Jane grinned as Yui was thrown two meters back, her feet skidding to a stop at the edge of the ring.

Yui's heart pounded harder and faster as she recovered her fighting stance. She stared at Baum behind Jane. He had the same stoic expression. The painful memory came rushing to the fore. The iron taste of blood in her mouth. The sound of bone cracking as she tried to get up. The anger flowed through every fiber of her being. A new vigor surged through her. She lunged forward, disappearing into a blur of motion.

She landed beside Jane with such force that it made an audible thump. Her left fist was already flying forward. Jane pulled her body back and managed to deflect the punch down with the back of her left arm. That move, made out of desperation, left her wide open. Yui followed up with a right jab, landing a hit in her abdomen. She stepped back, and Yui surged forward. With her fingers forming a point, she jabbed forward and up, hitting Jane in the neck. Her eyes widened in horror as she could no longer breathe. She fell to her knee. She could no longer fight, yet Yui was still not done. She swung her left leg low and wide, aiming for her head.

The crowd gasped as a loud thump echoed through the room. Yui's kick did not connect, however. Someone had grabbed her ankle and stopped its motion a mere centimeter from Jane's head. It was Elly, but in Yui's enraged mind, she was another hostile. Her right hand flashed out and grabbed Elly by the neck. Elly gripped her wrist with both hands and tried to pry it off. Yui's fingers dug deep into flesh and blood.

"Yui... You're hurting me," she muttered weakly. Her voice was soft and barely audible, but it hit her like a meteor hitting a barren moon. Yui let her go and stepped back. She stared at her hands, then at Jane gasping for breath on the floor, and finally at Elly. It was only when John and the medic came that Yui fully realized what she had done. That one jab to the neck was already enough to end the fight, yet she still pressed on. That last kick, if it had connected, would have killed Jane. Elly had stopped her, and she almost killed her as well. Yui did not

understand how it could have happened, only that it felt right at the moment. A sense of regret and shame twisted violently inside her.

“I’m...I’m sorry. I...” Yui stammered out. She reached for her and Elly flinched away, frantically covering her neck with her arms. When Yui looked into her eyes, she saw fear and pain. Yui turned away as something else broke inside of her.

She ran.

## Chapter 5

One by one, the fallen soldiers flickered to life, forming a line of honor guards as Yui walked through the memorial hall. In uniform and standing at attention, they were a facsimile of the highest fidelity. There was only one imperfection. They were smiling. It did not matter whether they died in the pained grimace of high g acceleration, or that they died in the pool of their own tears and blood, or that they died so fast, their mind did not even register it. They were all portrayed smiling. In life, they were just dutiful soldiers doing their job. In death, they became heroes.

The hall tapered off to a circular end. Extending up and curving into the ceiling was a giant glass window, giving a view to the opposite of the ring and the training squadron moored in the central dock. When Yui stepped into the circle, the window flickered. A ghostly visage of Earth appeared in the sky. It rotated serenely, showing off the lustful green of the forest, the bright blue of the ocean, and the glimmering light of the cities. One by one, the cities exploded. Circles of smoke and ash spread all over. The blue planet turned ashy gray and then snowy white.

Yui looked down.

Around the marble circular platform was the wall of names, constantly scrolling through the four billion names of those who had died fighting in space and those who had died when the invaders turned the guns of their battleships on the planet. In the center was a statue of the Admiral. It was five meters tall and made out of white marble. He stood on the dais with his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes gazing down the hall. There might be Fleet Admirals or even a Grand Admiral now, but to most, only Takashi Okamoto was the Admiral. The one who had led the Fleet into exile and returned to liberate Earth. The savior of humanity.

“Pa, is this the future you envisioned?” Yui asked, but the Admiral stayed silent. Yui let out a resigned sigh. She sat down in front of the statue, waiting for an answer that would never come.

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The artificial sun dimmed. Yui lethargically walked toward the dormitory. She imagined the red uniforms of Internal Security waiting for her beyond the gate. She had to assume that by now, the report of the violent spar had reached them. She had almost killed a fellow cadet. They should be arresting her, but no one was waiting for her. *She is just being what she is meant to be*, Yui imagined Baum saying. A new anger erupted inside her.

“Yui!” Elly ran out of the dormitory building toward her. There was no trace of fear on her face. “I was worried where you’ve—” She tried to grab her hands, but Yui pulled away.

“After what I did... Why aren’t you afraid of me?” Yui asked.

Elly gently touched her neck. “It did scare me, but after thinking about it for a bit, I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. We are still friends, Yui. What happened then doesn’t change that,” Elly explained.

“It should,” Yui said. She momentarily looked away. “Now that you know I’m a monster.”

“No, Yui.” Elly surged forward, her head shaking. “You are rough on the edges, yes, but you are not a monster.”

“Then how do you explain what happened? I almost killed you!” Yui snapped, louder than she intended.

“Look, clearly you have some emotional issues. That is not surprising considering your upbringing. You just need to work on it.”

“How can you say that so easily?” A tear trickled down her cheek. “How do you know I can be fixed?”

“Because of the way you are right now. If you are truly a monster, you wouldn’t be regretting your actions like this,” Elly said. She reached out and wiped the tear off her cheek. “This tear proved that there is good in you.”

Yui glanced down, trying to endure the surfacing shame. “Elly...” she stammered off, the words stuck in her throat. “I did mess up, didn’t I?”

“You did, yeah,” Elly said, emphatically nodding.

“That girl. Is she....”

“She’s still alive. They brought her to the hospital,” Elly said.

“I hurt her bad. How do you come back from that?” Yui asked. She started fidgeting with her fingers.

“My parents always said that if you did wrong to someone, the first thing you should do is apologize.”

Yui accessed the academy network. It only took her a second to connect to the

hospital's network portal. Yui expanded the patient search function.

Cadet Jane Foster  
3rd Year  
Room H-202

She turned around toward the gate. Elly followed closely beside her.

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Yui gawked at the entrance of the hospital and felt her courage slowly sapping away with every passing second. The hospital was a 100-meter tall cylindrical building. It was the second largest building in the ring station and one of the best equipped in human space. Here of all places. Yui did not like what it implied.

"Wait," Yui said as they reached the entrance. She connected to the hospital network again.

"Huh?"

"She's not alone. There's no camera in the room, but the log said someone is with her," Yui said.

"So?" Elly asked with a slightly confused face.

"I need to trigger the fire alarm. No, that will get the patients evacuated as well. I'll forge a message from the instructor. Yes, that will work..."

Elly gripped her shoulders and forcefully turned Yui toward her. "Yui, we are not infiltrating a hostile territory. It's just a freaking hospital."

"Right..." Yui said with a frown. She hesitantly followed up, "So what are you suggesting?"

"At least start with talking before we resort to causing mass hysteria," Elly said, rolling her eyes. She grabbed her hand and dragged her inside.

One floor up, they knocked on the hatch of room H-202. For two long seconds, Yui resisted the greatest urge to run away. The hatch opened, revealing a scorned face. One that seemed to say, *What the hell do you want?* It instantly faded into a look of recognition.

"Yui," John said. He looked at Elly behind her. "I would have appreciated a heads-up." Elly nervously shrugged.

"I want.... I want to apologize," Yui said.

John briefly glanced back. "All right. Go ahead."

Yui stepped inside. She froze briefly when John stepped out and closed the hatch behind him. With a gulp, she continued deeper into the room. She had expected the worst. Jane was in bed and hooked up to a dozen horrible-looking machines. The truth couldn't be more different. She wasn't even in bed. She was already standing and taking the bandage off her neck.

"Oh, hey there," Jane said. Yui stared at her with a mix of concern and fear.

"Don't worry about this," Jane said, gesturing at her purple bruised neck. "The doctor said that in a week, there won't even be a bruise."

"I don't think you are supposed to leave yet," Yui sheepishly said.

"God, you sounded like him. Everyone is a doctor today for some reason." Jane rolled her eyes. She took off the hospital gown and changed into her gold collared uniform. "Anyway, I can't be tied to a bed, not this close to the Hell Loop."

"That's three months away."

"Oh, you know about the Hell Loop already?" Jane turned to her with a perked-up smile. "I bet you can't wait for it. I still remember my first experience. It's both excruciating and exhilarating. It's the first time I feel like... well, like an astronaut. I swore then that I will come back as one of the ship's captains. So you see, I don't have time to be cooped up in the hospital. Since Mr. Perfect John is in my batch, there are only eleven captain slots left, and I'll kill someone if I'm not one of them."

Jane grabbed her computer tablet and gave it a cursory read before pocketing it.

"Aren't you angry at me?" Yui asked.

Jane stopped and turned to her with a slight frown. "Why would I be? Oh..." She walked up to her. "Sweetie, I'm not angry. It's only a sparring match. I once even broke a rib in the ring, so this is nothing."

"But I almost killed you."

"Ah, but I almost got you as well," Jane said with a pointing finger. "You're an augment right?"

"Yeah." Yui slowly nodded.

"Called it right." Jane pulled away and made a pumping motion with her right fist. "To think I almost won a match against an augment... Can't wait to see what I can do when it's my turn."

“You... want to be augmented?” Yui asked.

“Of course!” Jane said excitedly.

“Why?”

Jane looked at her as if she had asked a stupid question. “Being chosen for the program means that you are acknowledged as the best. It means the Fleet is trusting you with the most important responsibility. There’s no greater honor.”

“Do you ever think of not being a soldier?” Yui said. Only a moment later realized that she blurted her thoughts out loud.

“What other life is there?” Jane asked her. She grabbed her by the shoulders. “Anyway, I’m not angry at you, and it seems that the faculty is not escalating this, so let’s put this behind us. Though for my honor, you must accept my request for a rematch on an unspecified date. After I level up my CQB skill of course.”

“Sure,” Yui muttered hesitantly. Jane smiled at her.

“Got to go.” She grabbed her bag and left the room. A minute later, John walked in alone. Yui was deep in a trance.

“Not what you expected?” John asked.

“She... she wasn’t angry. She didn’t even see anything wrong with what I did,” Yui said softly.

“Nor do the cadets you beat yesterday. For them, it is just part of the process. Does it bother you?”

“How can it not bother you?” Yui snapped back. She recoiled slightly as John turned a saddened face.

“It does, Yui. I hate that this place works so well to desensitize us to violence. I hate how it went against the hard-built peace we achieved on Old Earth.” John took a step forward, his face growing into bitter rage. “And I hate you, Yui.”

“Me?” Yui took a nervous step back.

“Yes, for what you represent. For you to be able to do what you did... you must have been trained and augmented years ago.”

Yui nodded.

“I don’t quite understand why they are putting you through this... charade, but I don’t want you to succeed.” John took a deep breath as he walked to the window and leaned on it with both hands. “I’m afraid, Yui. I’m afraid of what kind of precedent you will set. If they start drafting ten-year-old recruits...”

“They won’t. I’m a special case,” Yui quickly said.

John turned to her, his eyes squinting skeptically. “The Ghosts were special once, and now we have the Alpha Force that numbers in the thousands. Do not

underestimate how far they will go. Even the most horrible thing can be justified by a good cause.”

Yui opened her mouth but stopped herself. He was right. She had read the reports on the Thraxos campaign after all.

“Yui?” Elly called from the half-opened hatch. “Are you okay?”

“Go back to the dormitory. The patrol drones are coming down soon,” John said. He continued staring out the window. His grip was so tight that the window’s frame had started to bent. Yui thought back about the day before. He had been the lead for the attacker, but even the defender looked up to him. When anger was flaring up, he alone calmed them down and focused their effort on helping the wounded. He was the perfect recruit. *How can he hate this life so much yet be so good at it?*

## Chapter 6

The days passed by, and Yui grew more accustomed to the rhythm of academy life. Along with the physical training, they started to have classes as well, ranging from something as general as math to as specific as orbital mechanics. Even Baum's training, though always unwelcome and harsh, was almost tolerable now. As long as Yui paced herself and never charged recklessly, she managed to avoid most of the injuries.

For once in a very long while, life was enjoyable.

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The two of them sat by the window, steaming mugs of Oolong tea in their hands. The warmth of the tea and gentle breeze mixed in perfect serenity.

"Tell me that story again," Yui said.

"What story?"

"That story. The Christmas miracle."

"Yui, you can just read it from the historical archive. It is bound to be more accurate than mine. To be honest, I don't think my grandfather remembered everything correctly. He was ninety years old after all," Elly explained.

"Still, I like that version of the story."

Elly took a slow sip of the tea. "All right." She put down the mug and stared out the window. Yui listened intently, imagining fourteen-year-old Elly sitting opposite her grandfather. The gentle campfire swayed back and forth between them.

*It was the night of the 24th December 2094, and the world was on the brink of war. Most of us could scarcely believe it then. Just three days ago, we were reservists living our lives in the city. Now we were digging trenches in a forest. You know what's funny, El? I couldn't fucking remember what caused the damn thing. I think it was someone doing something stupid in the middle east again or was it the Balkan? I guess in the end, the reason did not matter. A million men were sent to war, and the other side did the same thing.*

*It was an odd feeling. Being on the front line. During training, you talked with*

*your buddies about what brave and heroic acts you would do in this kind of scenario, but when the real thing came, you realized how utterly unprepared you are. You can be the bravest soldier during training, but it means nothing when you are face to face with the real prospect of dying. So, we did what scared people often do. We hoped for a better day.*

*That night, we gathered around the projected screen. The Chairman was going to make an announcement. We all imagined him declaring that a diplomatic solution had been reached; that we were going home soon. His speech was everything but that. He said that the time of our nation being bullied was at an end. He cited a dozen incidents, some so old that they happened before I was even born. He said that our soldiers would fight for the pride and dignity of their nation. Our deaths would ensure the nation's supremacy for the decades to come. As he closed his grandiose speech, all hope of peace died.*

*The morning of the 25th came. I looked up from our hastily dug trench. I remembered vividly staring out to the open field, realizing that soon, the serene green will give way to ash and blood. I was perfectly aware of the deaths that will come, but I did nothing. I couldn't even claim cowardice, for the thought didn't even occur to me then. I was just following orders. I was just doing my duty. Then I saw her.*

*She was so young that she could have been my daughter. She climbed out of the trench and walked toward the enemy line. I shouted for her to stop, but she continued walking. She finally stopped at the halfway point and waved toward the enemy. I called for a squad to get her back. No one moved. I repeated my order, but it was no use. No one was going to risk their lives for an idiot who clearly had no regard for hers.*

*A shout made me turn toward the private. She was no longer alone. A young boy from the other side had climbed out the trench and met her. They had no guns between them, only a handshake that soon turned into a warm embrace. It was as if they were a pair of old friends. I could only stare at this impossible sight. I felt the sense of who I was melting. I realized then that it didn't matter that the people back home chose war. It was our choice that mattered. We who were in the front line. We could choose war or we could choose peace. I chose peace. I dropped my pistol and climbed out of the trench. One by one, the others joined me. Two armies*

*of opposing sides met and embraced each other, not as soldiers but as fellow humans.*

*Generals on both sides barked orders for us to return, but the dam had been broken. News spread through the communication network. Silos disarmed their missiles. Fighter planes retreated. Submarines surfaced and made for home. They called it the second Christmas miracle. Once long ago in the meadow of France, the first miracle had happened, and it showed a glimpse of peace in the middle of a war. The second had achieved peace when war seemed inevitable, and though unspoken, it sent a clear message. Humanity had no more appetite for war. At least not with each other.*

Elly took a sip of her now cooled tea. “The rest is well, history. Humanity united for the first time. Focused on space and then... The invasion.”

“If we were in that situation... Do you think we would have the same courage?” Yui asked.

“I like to think so,” Elly said. She turned her gaze out the window. “Our parents fought so hard for this peace. We must preserve it.” Elly took a sip and pushed the mug away. “Ugh. Room-temperature tea is just the worst. I’ll freshen up a pot. Be right back.”

Yui found herself smiling at Elly’s back. She thought about her father; about what he had sacrificed. *Here she is, Pa. A more worthy torchbearer of your legacy than those who called themselves admirals.*

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*The flame started to fizzle out. A toss of firewood and it blazed brighter.*

*“Why are you telling me this, Grandpa?” Elly asked.*

*The tired but hopeful eyes stared into the fire. “I am the last of my generation. This story will be our light flung to the future. You, its messenger.”*

*“A message?”*

*“Your parents... the government won’t tell this story in the history book. It sends the wrong message, they will say. They are wrong. This story is as important to tell as the War.” Her grandfather longingly looked up to the stars. “Soon you will go to the academy. In four years, you will start serving aboard*

*ships, and in a decade, you will be in command. You and the others will start making decisions that affect all humanity. When that time comes, I want you to remember this story. Remember that war is not the only legacy you inherit. In your shared humanity, is not only the spirit of a great warrior but also a peacemaker.”*

*“I will, Grandpa. I will tell this story to everyone that will listen. Your legacy will not be forgotten,” Elly said.*

*“Thank you.” Her grandfather turned to her with a prideful smile. He tucked his jacket a bit tighter. “I’m cold.”*

*“I’ll get more firewood.” Elly quickly stood up.*

*His eyes followed Elly as she ran out to the trees, darting from one spot to another with the vigor of youth. What he would give to see her grow up. He could feel the flame of his life dimming inside him. There was always a reason to hold on. To wait for the end of the war. To wait for her to grow old enough to understand his story. To see the stars once again. His will had kept his body alive. No more.*

*When she got back, his eyes were already closed. She dropped the wood and went around the fire. She knelt down and gently grabbed his wrists. No pulse, only a fading warmth.*

*“Rest well, grandpa.” Elly pressed her forehead into his. “I won’t let you be forgotten.”*

## Chapter 7

The artificial sun dimmed. The sea of lights twinkled to life throughout the ring. The cadets were still out and about, but no patrol drones came down to intervene, for tonight was special. For this single night, the central course of the academy was transformed into a night market filled with food stalls and entertainments. Tonight was the Liberty Festival.

The Festival was a nationwide celebration of the day Earth was liberated. At Unity and the colonies, the festival lasted for a week with parades, concerts, and fireworks. At the academy, it was only a single night. The cadets made up for it with vigor and creativity.

It was well understood that tonight, the faculty would be laxer in their enforcement of the rules. This wasn't exactly official, so it was up to the cadets to test the limit of it. For example, having a stall that sold watermelon ice cream secretly spiked with vodka was fine, but building an escape room that had plasma torches and a guillotine was not. The trailblazer for this year was a roller coaster that was built out of scrap metal, ceramo-plastic, and the occasional duct tape. It only operated for an hour before the instructor put a stop to it. One of the passengers had been thrown off and flipped over an astonishing five times in the air before hitting the ground

"Ouch...." Elly rubbed the back of her head. "I felt like I grew two centimeters taller."

Yui peeked behind her head. "Wrong direction. Your head is just slightly deeper now."

"Hehhh." Elly let out a disappointed breath. "Anyway, they didn't need to tear it down. It's just a faulty strap."

"That strap was held to the seat by a super glue they mixed from basic chemistry class. I can't believe you convinced me to ride that death trap!" Yui said.

"Well, I thought my augmented friend would save me if anything went wrong."

Yui scoffed. "It was only three meters. I knew you would survive that fall."

"Geez. What a good friend you are." Elly smiled. It suddenly vanished a second later. "Yui, behind you."

Yui turned around. Two soldiers in dark blue uniforms walked through the crowd, attracting excited murmurs from the cadets. It wasn't hard to see why. They were two and a half meters tall with arms that were as big as most cadets' heads. They were like mythical giants walking among puny humans. Their skin was soft-colored, but there was no softness to them, only a shine of rocky hardness. Their eyes were of a deep black pupil and yellow iris. Even without their red berets, everyone knew who they were. The Alpha Force. If the Thraxos was the perfect evolution of a deadly predator, the Alpha Force was humanity's attempt to surpass it. They were humanity's monsters, and they had stopped in front of her. One man and one woman.

*I could have been like her if they had pushed my augmentation further,* Yui put the uncomfortable thought away.

"Cadet Yui," the male Alpha said. "You are to come with us."

"You can't just—" Elly protested, but Yui grabbed her by the wrist.

"It's okay, Elly. I'll join you later," Yui said, forcing out an assuring smile.

The two giants walked back through the crowd, flanking Yui in the middle as if she was in their protective care. The murmur of rumors surged through the crowd. *Who the hell is Yui?* was a question too often asked and too often answered with conspiracy theories. *An alien. A tube-baby designed to supplant the natural-born human race. And now, a secret agent of the Alpha Force.* Yui let out a sigh. Some of them were actually amusing. If only they knew the truth. It was boringly simple in comparison, but a hundred times more horrible.

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The elevator left the ring below. Yui felt her stomach lurching as the pseudo-spin gravity faded.

The two Alphas brought her to dock suspended in the middle of the ring. The training squadron rested proudly in their berths. The formerly Earth Defense Force cruisers *Aurora*, *Everest*, and *Nile*. They each had a double cylindrical hull that seemed archaic compared to the sleek narrow profile of modern warships. The day of them being in combat was long over, but they still dutifully served as training ships.

Yui was surprised when they boarded the innocuous freighter beside the training squadron and was even more surprised to find a ship tucked inside its cargo hold. It was a small narrow ship, barely ninety meters long. It resembled an old rocket ship, down to its pointy nose and oversize engine nozzle. *Hmm, its nose has extra armor and there are protective plates covering the engine,* Yui thought. She soon realized its purpose. She glanced around the half-empty cargo hold. *No one will suspect the Alphas traveling in an unmanned freighter, and even if they are discovered, the ship can just blow through the hull.*

A woman emerged out of the side hatch. She was smaller than either of the Alphas, yet the two giants froze like they were facing an unbeatable foe. Yui stared at the golden star glimmering on the woman's collar. Only three of those stars existed, and only one rank superseded it.

"I thought Fleet Admirals aren't supposed to travel without their fleet?" Yui asked.

Xin let out a brief smile. "If that was true, we would have gone crazy by the first year."

"Yui," Baum said as he appeared behind the Admiral. "You are a cadet now. You should show the Admiral the respect of her rank." He stood to the Admiral's right.

"It's all right, Alex. She has only been in the academy for three months after all." Xin made an away gesture with her right hand. The two Alphas simultaneously turned around and walked toward the airlock.

"Did you have to do that? Having them fetch me has attracted a lot of attention," Yui said.

"We have long passed the time for secrecy," Xin said.

Yui resisted the panic surging inside her. She had suspected it, but having it confirmed did nothing to mitigate her fear.

"So for theatrics then. Is that why you put me through those... trainings?" Yui asked, her voice barely staying calm.

Xin nodded. "It is important that you stand out from the start, but there is another reason. I need you to experience hardship, Yui. I need you to feel like you are fighting for your life."

"Why?"

"Because hardship is the foundation of a great leader," Xin answered. Yui glared at her. Her face was leaking bitter fury. Baum had been the face of her

suffering. Now it had a new one. “Ideally, I want you to graduate and deploy on a ship for a year or two, but reality seldom waits for our plan and preparation.” Yui’s heart beat faster and faster. Even before Xin said the words, she knew. “I need you to come with me to Unity.”

“No. I won’t go with you!” the words came out even before her second thought completed its journey across the neurons of her brain.

Xin took in a slow heavy breath. “Yui, the Grand Admiral has collapsed. The doctors are doing their best, but... he doesn’t have a long time left. Please understand the gravity of the situation,” Xin said like a parent trying to get a child to do their chore.

“How the hell can I help you with that? No matter who my father is, I am just a child.”

“But you are our most tangible connection to him. Is it not telling how fragile our nation is that our source of legitimacy must come from who our fathers are?” Xin took a pause and roughly rubbed her forehead. She then continued in a sterner voice, “You are part of a greater plan, Yui. I have other contingencies, but you are the more... peaceful option.”

A horrible realization gulped down Yui’s throat. “You are... You are going to kill those who oppose you.”

“I don’t want to, but I will. Humanity can’t afford to be fractured. Either by blood or circumstance, it is our duty to safeguard humanity,” Xin said.

“No, I won’t go with you!” Yui shouted. She dashed and swung her fist forward. She saw only a blur of movement before her fist hit Baum’s chest. It bounced off like it had hit a steel wall.

“It’s futile, child,” Baum said. Yui clenched her fists. Her fuming anger slowly tampered by the truth of the situation. Perhaps if Baum was alone, she could run. With the two Alphas nearby, she had no chance. She unclenched her fists and took a step back. Baum reciprocated and stepped to the side.

“When it is all over, can I come back here?” Yui asked.

Xin’s face twitched. A flash of an emotion that only lasted a fraction of a second, but Yui saw it. Guilt. “When it is all over, yes.”

*A lie. She couldn’t even bother with vague promises.* Yui felt the anger resurfacing. She pushed it down.

“I have one request. I want to finish the Hell Loop first.”

“Out of the question!” Xin snapped.

“Ma’am,” Baum interceded. Xin turned toward him. “We can put her in the first group. It is scheduled to leave tomorrow. She will be in Sol by the end of the week. Let her be with her fellow cadets one last time. I’ll go with her to make sure she arrives safely.”

Xin pondered for a lingering moment. If she had said no, Yui would have to risk fighting them all here and now. Fortunately, the Fleet Admiral eventually nodded.

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The elevator let out a soft ping as the door closed. It started to descend back to the ring. She was alone in the entire elevator, yet the air was suffocating. She knew what she needed to do now, but she was afraid of the pain that it would bring. A part of her wondered if she could endure it. *But if I don’t, I won’t see her again. This way... at least there’s a chance.*

The steel hatch opened. Elly was waiting for her. Her face perked up immediately.

“What’s that about?” she asked.

*Just say it. It’s just six simple words. I want to escape this place. But she will want to help. That’s just who she is. She has a bright future here. Is it right for me to jeopardize that?* “Nothing important. There was a miscommunication between the Alpha Force and Captain Baum. They thought I was an illegal augment,” Yui said. The lie pricked like a needle inside her heart.

“That must be scary.”

“I was never in any danger.” Yui forced out a smile. She had thought she hid all the pain. Something still showed.

Elly looked at her suspiciously. “Yui, what’s going on?”

For a second, Yui considered telling her the truth. Her fear won out again. “Nothing. Come on, let’s get that watermelon ice cream.”

After the third ice cream, Elly’s mood shot up. She was constantly laughing, especially after a BBQ stall went up in flames and burned all the hair off the two cadets operating it. For Yui, however, the night had lost its joy. The conversation with Xin was always in her mind. She tried so hard to find evidence that Xin was telling the truth. There was none. Even discounting that small flash of guilt, there

was no way for Yui to come back, especially not after Xin announced who she was and declared war on the rest of the Fleet. She would need Yui at her side. *She will never let me go. Like a doll of clay, she will mold me until everything that is who I am disappear. I will be a monster. Her monster.*

The last stall closed, and they retreated to their room.

“Good night, Yui,” Elly said as she climbed into the top bunk.

“Good night,” Yui said back.

She laid on her bed with open eyes. There were still too many things to prepare. A semi-transparent display appeared in the center of her vision. She opened up the star map. Dozens of stars dotted the screen, each connected like a spider web. In the center was the Academy. Yui began tracing the route of the Hell Loop. A green line extended from star to star until it landed on a single yellow star. *Sol. That is where I must make my escape.*

## Chapter 8

The next morning, Yui and Elly woke up to the most mysterious message. They were originally in the fourth group of the Hell Loop that was scheduled to depart in three weeks. They were now in the first, and they were departing in an hour. They could only share a second of pure panic before they desperately scrambled around the room to gather their stuff.

“What the hell is that?” Elly asked when they were in the elevator heading up to the central dock.

“Another one of Baum’s schemes, I guess,” Yui said. The soft lie pricked the back of her throat.

“I get that, but why am I included this time?” Elly said in exasperation.

“Well, you did always ask to come with me,” Yui pointed out.

Elly shook her head and let out a soft laugh. “That’s more for solidarity than anything else.”

Yui felt the tears in her eyes. She held it back and forced herself to smile. She would miss her laughter the most.

The elevator door opened. Two older cadets were waiting for them. It was John and Jane.

“Well, there’d better be a good reason for this last-minute swap,” Jane said with an annoyed face.

“They didn’t tell us,” Elly said quickly.

John took a slow step forward. He eyed both of them. Yui tried to put her most confident face. *No one must know*, she resolved.

“Jane, take her to your ship. Yui will join you later,” John said.

“What are you...” Jane started but shook her head midway. “No wait, I don’t care. I still have things to do. You come with me.” Jane pointed at Elly before she turned and sprinted toward the training squadron. Elly quickly followed behind her.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” Yui asked once they were out of earshot.

John’s eyes swept her carefully from head to toe. He then said in a whispering voice, “You have that look again. The same look you showed me when we first

met. You're about to do something stupidly reckless again, aren't you?"

Yui stared the older cadet up. Her thoughts clashed into an incoherent mess. Her plan had predicated on the sole fact that no one would find out until it was too late. *If he reports me to Baum... If he...*

"Just tell me one thing, Yui. Are you going to hurt the other cadets?" John asked. Yui's thoughts calmed down. That question, at least, was easy to answer.

"No."

"Good." John nodded in relief. His shoulders relaxed as if a burden of immense weight had been released. "I won't pretend that I understand what is going on. I only know that you tried to help that poor boy. You are a decent person, Yui. I wish you luck." John stepped to the side.

"Thank you, John," Yui said. She walked past him and toward the ship. Just a few steps in, she turned around and said, "You are going to be a great officer, John. The Fleet will be better because of you."

Yui boarded *Aurora*.

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Yui slowly woke up to the soft rhythmic hum of the ship. She released the strap across her chest and floated up from the bed.

"You can get more sleep if you like," Elly said from the top bunk. "They are still having problems with the reactor."

Yui connected to the ship network. She accessed the security feed for engineering.

"In the name of everything holy, give us the damned component!" Cadet Captain Jane shouted, her arms waving in frustration.

"Your crazy idea of a fix will blow the ship up! I can't in good conscience allow that to happen," the other cadet shouted at her.

"I swear I will shove you out of the airlock if you don't surrender it!" Jane shouted again.

"Then you will have to pry it out of my cold dead body," the other cadet said calmly.

"ARGGGH! You fu..."

Yui cut off the feed. *Seems like they're not solving it anytime soon.*

“This marks the fifteenth hour,” Yui said.

“Yeah and to happen in Sol of all places. Do you think this means they won’t graduate?” Elly asked.

“Probably not. I have analyzed the supposed damage to the reactor. I think it’s sabotage,” Yui said.

“From the instructors? That’s just mean,” Elly said. She popped her head down. “Well, we’ll be better prepared when it’s our turn.”

“Yeah.”

“So breakfast?” Elly asked.

“Sure.” Yui forced her lip to form a smile.

They both got dressed into their cadet gray uniform like they did every day in the previous month but with two notable additions, safety hooks in their belt and magnetic boots.

“Crap, the hatch is stuck again,” Elly said. She stepped to the side. Yui yanked it open with one hand.

“It probably only needs some lubricant,” Yui said.

“This ship should have been mothballed long ago,” Elly commented as they both stepped out.

“Most of her sisters are, but this one is special.” Yui traced her finger through the titanium wall. The ship had been kept clean, but her age still showed through the creaking of her hull and the occasional flickering bulbs that lit the cramped interior. “This is *Aurora*, first of her class. She’s one of the original ships in the Exile Fleet, and one of the few that participated both in the first and last battle of Earth.”

“That’s an argument to make it into a museum ship, not using it in the Hell Loop,” Elly pointed out.

Yui let out a chuckle. “I assure you, the engine and reactor are brand new. Well, new-ish.” They stopped and made way for the two older cadets running down the corridor with tense faces. They each held a roll of duct tape with such care that you would think they were holding a grenade.

“Can’t wait to be part of the crew instead of just being a passenger,” Elly said.

“You need to survive this first,” Yui said.

“Are you saying people die from Hell Loop? Elly asked, a little disturbed.

“Only the stupid ones who forget the one rule of high g acceleration.”

“Don’t leave or mess with your crash seat.”

“Yup.” Yui nodded.

They entered the mess deck and quickly got their breakfast. Elly was having pancakes and tofu sausages while Yui had only a single protein bar. She rationalized that a full stomach would only make her puke later on. Halfway through their meal, Yui felt the hum of the ship change. It had a new layer of soft thumping. She opened the engineering’s security feed. The protesting cadet was duct-taped into his crash seat. *Well, that’s one way of doing it*, Yui thought.

“We better eat quick. They’re starting the reactors up,” Yui said.

“How do you know that?” Elly asked.

Yui tapped the side of her head. “I can access the ship’s internal network. They already started reactor 2.”

“Three days of high g and surviving on nutrient pastes. Can’t say I’m looking forward to that,” Elly said with a sigh.

“Don’t forget swirling in your own filth as well,” Yui pointed out. Elly stopped chewing and gave her a not amused glare.

“Well, it’s not like we have any right to complain. The older generation spent weeks like that in battle. We just have to endure it for a few days with no one shooting at us,” Elly said. After a chew, she continued, “I heard the constant high g took a toll on their body.”

“It did. The old crash seats weren’t exactly perfect. Worse still, they lived in a time when basic augmentation isn’t even possible for the general crew. The Fleet doesn’t like to advertise it, but the truth is that not many of the older generation lived past fifty,” Yui said. *How long would my father live if he had survived the battle?* she wondered.

Elly put down her utensils and cast a poignant face. “I might disagree with them on a lot of stuff, but for what they did, they still deserve my highest respect,” Elly said.

“You are a remarkable person, Elly. You are going to be the best of our generation. I’m glad I met you.”

“Err, thanks,” Elly hesitantly said. She frowned. “Yui, are you....”

The announcement’s whistle sounded. Everyone stopped to listen. A rough male voice boomed,

“First years. You have ten minutes to get to your crash seat! Fail to do so and you will be a bloody mush on the wall.”

The deck erupted into a frantic panic. Elly dumped her tray into the disposal bin. They both rushed out of the mess deck.

*This is my last chance*, Yui thought. While they were running down the corridor, Yui grabbed Elly's wrist and pulled her into a storage room. She closed the hatch behind them.

"Yui, what the hell?" Elly said.

"I need to tell you something," Yui said.

"Now?" Elly said in exasperation. Seeing Yui's grim face, she slowly nodded. "Okay."

*Why is goodbye so hard to say?* It took her a second to force the words out. "After this, I'm ordered to stay on Unity."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know," Yui lied. *There was no need to tell her that humanity is on the brink of a civil war. There was nothing she can do anyway*, she thought.

"I see. When are you coming back?"

It was only two words. Two words that would cause so much pain. "I'm not."

Elly frowned. "They can't keep you there forever."

"They can actually, but that doesn't matter. I'm not going to stay on Unity," Yui paused to let her aching heart ease slightly. "I'm going to escape."

Elly looked at her as if she had stabbed herself. "That's crazy. If they caught you... Yui. The punishment for desertion is death."

"I know."

"Why?" Elly said, her voice growing desperate. "Surely you can fight them from the inside."

"These past three months... I've fooled myself thinking that I can, but the truth is I can't. As long as I stay, I will always be a pawn in their game of power."

"What are they asking you to do?" Elly asked. "I can help, Yui. My parents can help."

Yui shook her head. "For as long as I remember, I've been a soldier. Their soldier. Run this course. Fire this gun. Study this tactic. I was never given a chance to grow up. It's just like you said. They had taken my childhood. I'm done letting them twist who I am."

"I won't let that happen," Elly said with a determined voice. *She will never stop trying to help me*. Yui twisted her lip into a smile.

“Perhaps one day we can fight the entire Fleet, but right now we are powerless,” Yui said.

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” Elly said, tears bubbling out her eyes.

“Nor do I. So let’s make a promise.” Yui leaned forward and grabbed Elly’s hands. “No matter what happens, one day we will find each other again.”

“I like that.” Elly leaned forward. They touched their forehead together.

The hatch swung open.

“Oi, didn’t you hear the—“ Cadet Captain Jane stopped and raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“We’re on our way, cap,” Yui said. They both went out, and Jane rolled her eyes.

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The Hell Loop was a tradition that originated back when the Fleet was still called the Earth Defense Force. It was a rite of passage for cadets in their first and fourth year of the academy. For the fourth year cadets, it was the first true test of their ability to operate a warship without supervision. For the first year cadets, it was their introduction to a sustained high g acceleration, in a throwing them to the deep end of the pool type of way. The original loop ran from Luna Academy to Jupiter and back in three days. The new loop ran from Sidonia to Earth, taking a week to get there and back.

The older cadets floated above them. They made sure the straps on their chests were tight. Once they were done, they went back to their seats. Their seat reclined back to a forty-degree angle. Their terminal screens, suspended above, displayed a countdown. Five minutes later, the loop began. Yui felt five times her weight pushing down on her. She could hear pained groans from around her as the engine rumbled louder and louder. The ship started shaking violently.

Her vision grayed out as blood was pushed to the back of her eyeballs. She could feel her lungs being pressed down and each breath becoming a fight. Her mind turned hazy. If it had continued as it was, Yui would have stroked out in a matter of minutes. A warm injector plunged into the back of her neck. She felt a jolt of energy surging through her body. At the same time, her uniform compressed

on itself, forcing the pooled blood to flow again. She could feel her heart beating harder to get her blood circulating. She was conscious, but her mind was hazy. *This was how they fought. Pinned like a paralytic and hazy like a dream. How could they fight a battle more complex than just charging at each other head-on?* Yui let the feeling linger for a few more minutes. Then she triggered the prompt she had left floating in the corner of her vision.

One by one, her implant numbed her senses until she could not feel anything. Her implant fed visual signals directly to her brain, as well as a simulation of her other senses. Yui was no longer pinned on her seat. She stood in the middle of a white room. A screen floated in front of her, displaying a mirrored feed of the navigation console. This was the realm of the neural net, the primary control interface for all of the Fleet's warships. Yui was alone, but she could feel the presence of one other mind here. There was only one other person on *Aurora* who possessed the necessary implant to access this virtual world, Baum. Yui kept her fear at bay and constructed a private room around her. *That should keep him away for now*, Yui thought. She turned her attention toward the navigation screen.

From the transit point just below the elliptical orbital line of Saturn, the three cruisers of the training squadron formed into a wedge formation and started burning at 5 g toward Jupiter. Four hours later and at the halfway point, they flipped and decelerated at 3 g. After two more hours, they flipped again and accelerated back to 5 g toward Mars. Their vectors might seem random, but they were actually following virtual waypoints that simulated the path of Okamoto's fleet during the second battle of Earth. After making sure that the fourth year cadets weren't deviating from the flight plan, and that their patchwork of repair on the reactor was holding, Yui settled for the wait.

Eight hours after they arrived in Sol, the formation reached the peak of the loop and the most important part of the journey, the pass on Earth. The formation would come within 10,000 km of the planet as they slingshot past it. If they made a lethal mistake, the defensive grid around Unity would vaporize them. The complicated maneuver was made worse by the fact that 200 million people were watching them. The fourth year cadets were so focused on the task that none of them noticed Yui had left her seat.

Yui fell to her knee. Even with her implant numbing the pain, she still felt her muscles resisting to lift three times her weight. Yui gritted her teeth and forced herself up. She did not have much time. The formation was decelerating at 3 g, but once they slingshot past Earth, they would resume 5 g acceleration. Even her augmentation could not let her move with five times her weight.

Slowly and a step at a time, Yui made her way down the decks, ignoring the pained groans from the rest of the first year cadets. She reached the first hatch. With a stumble, she grabbed the handle with both hands and pulled it open. It would not budge. Yui manually triggered her adrenaline gland. A new vigor surged through her. She pulled again. This time, the hatch creaked open. Yui had to go through three more hatches before she reached her destination.

Baum stood in front of the airlock, waiting for her.