

REPUBLIC  
UNDER SIEGE:  
Threat from Within

By Michael J. Brooks

Wars of the New Humanity  
BOOK TWO





# Republic Under Siege

## Threat from Within

Wars of the New Humanity  
BOOK TWO

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## Praise for Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within

“The second book in the sci-fi series Wars of the New Humanity combines elements of thriller, social inspection, and sci-fi to produce a riveting, refreshingly original story . . . packed with moment-by-moment reactions to pain, surprising twists and turns, and journeys towards healing and revised destinies. Libraries seeking solid sci-fi replete with social and psychological inspections that move from the aftermath of world-changing war into the motives and experiences of young people who would forge new lives and worlds will find the social inspections in *Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within* compelling. It will attract a wide age range, from young adult to adult readers. Ideally, book clubs will also consider *Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within* for its many enlightening moments about the kernels of social change as individuals experience healing, transformation, loss, and novel opportunities.”

—**D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, *Midwest Book Review***

“Memorable characters, passionate prose, riveting action, graphic combat scenes, and steamy romance make this technothriller a standout read for new adult audiences. Brooks deftly explores social justice themes related to misogyny, racism, classism, and the balance between revolutionary ideals and maintaining functioning governmental systems while keeping his audience thoroughly entertained with the characters’ intertwined conflicts, romantic liaisons, and destinies.”

—**Kate Robinson, *The US Review of Books***

“Brooks’s prose serves the story well, with action scenes powerfully resonating on the page. Interesting questions as to what makes actions that bring about change morally right or wrong are delved into, adding an interesting twist to this sci-fi dystopian tale.”

—*The BookLife Prize, 2022*

**“Thoroughly captivating, ingenious, and full of heart-pounding tension.** Brooks has created a richly imagined world . . . The riveting storyline, plus plenty of jaw-dropping action scenes, keep readers on the edge of their seats. Solid and addictive; a SF thriller done right.”

—*The Prairies Book Review*

“Michael J. Brooks is a show and tell writer, which I could see right from the beginning of the story, as the scenes were so vivid. Through this story, Michael J. Brooks reminds us that there are consequences to the choices we make and that we can fit in somewhere, no matter who we are or where we come from.”

—*LitPick*

“The writer [Michael J. Brooks] excels in describing the resilience of the oppressed. *Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within* is one of the best sci-thrillers that I have read. It is a well-written and awesome book full of action and unpredictability. I recommend others to buy a copy.”

—*LitPick*

“It [the book] was an action-packed entertainer till the end.”

—*Fangirling Over Frappes*, a *Reedsy Discovery* reviewer

# Glossary

(nonalphabetic order)

**Earth Era:** the era of humanity before intergalactic migration from Earth

**Commonwealth:** humanity's star nation consisting of four planets—Eden and satellites One, Two, and Three

**Eden:** humanity's utopian motherworld inhabited by three-fifths of the human population

**Satellite One:** humanity's dystopian secondary world inhabited by two-fifths of the human population

**Satellites Two and Three:** vacant worlds belonging to the Commonwealth, used for military training exercises and mineral excavation

**Eden inhabitant/Eden citizen** (synonymous terms): human beings living on Eden, whether born on the planet or during Earth Era

**Highborn:** a moniker referring specifically to human beings born on Eden

**Colony inhabitant/colony citizen** (synonymous terms): human beings living in the colonies of Satellite One, whether born on the planet or during Earth Era

**Commonwealth Defense Force (CDF)/Defense Force**  
(synonymous terms): the Commonwealth's military force

**Guardian:** a soldier in the Commonwealth Defense Force

**Cadet:** a Guardian in training

**Shell:** a mechanized, armored combat suit used by Guardians

**Commonwealth Government/central government** (synonymous terms): the governing body of the entire Commonwealth, which includes the Parliament and Chief Executive's Office

**Republic of Unified Colonies (RUC):** the republic formed by colonies One, Four, and Six after they declared sovereignty from the Commonwealth

**The Three-week War:** the war initiated and won by the Commonwealth Government to reclaim colonies One, Four, and Six after they declared sovereignty from the Commonwealth

**The Coalition of Rebel Factions/the Coalition** (synonymous terms): a coalition of rebel factions formed by the remnant fighters of the RUC to continue combating the Commonwealth Government

**The Quad:** the Chief Executive's Manor, Parliament Building, Supreme Judiciary, and Defense Force Academy, on Eden, which are situated in a Quadrangle in the middle of Eden's capital, Cornerstone City

**Operation Hammer Fall:** the Coalition's operation to invade the Quad, commandeer the Parliament building and use its broadcast center to cast files exposing government corruption across the net

**The Battle of the Quad:** the historic battle between the Coalition rebels and CDF Guardians during Operation Hammer Fall

**The Interplanetary Union:** the intergalactic alliance consisting of the Commonwealth and planets Ghanrax, Dhalgratt, Varsh'Ru, Zirkran, Rumanoah, and Taramassia

**\*\*The [ ] symbol represents translation from a character's native language\*\***



# Author's Note

In *Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn* (Wars of the New Humanity book #1), humanity is partitioned between two worlds. One is a utopian paradise, which is Eden, the motherworld of the New Humanity's intergalactic republic, the Commonwealth. The other is Satellite One, a dystopian world that is essentially the Commonwealth's resource hub. And the role of Satellite One's inhabitants is to be resource harvesters, basically government servants. They live in colonies of subpar conditions and don't possess any of the modern technological luxuries that Eden inhabitants have. Colony inhabitants are at the bottom of the Commonwealth's socioeconomic totem pole, by design. However, the lottery affords colony inhabitants the opportunity to join the "upper echelon" of the New Humanity, on Eden. These lucky lottery beneficiaries then become immigrants. Yes, it's ironic that they're called immigrants when they're already citizens of the Commonwealth.

For *Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within* (Wars of the New Humanity book #2), I asked myself, what is the journey of a lottery beneficiary, an immigrant, like? What happens when an immigrant is transplanted on Eden with hopes and dreams only to find themselves still marginalized by a class system? The character developed to tell the immigrant journey became nineteen-year-old Akane Sugimori, introduced in the book's prologue, a character I greatly enjoyed developing. I had to tell Akane's intriguing backstory while advancing the present-day adventure, which resumes where the previous book left off, so I figured the best way to accomplish that was with chapter interludes, basically a chapter that transports the reader back to Akane's immigrant journey and

chronicles how she arrived to where she is in her present-day life. So the story pattern became present-day chapter, chapter interlude, repeat. Though Akane is a crucial character, I had to ensure she didn't overshadow our hero, Randal Scott. I also had to advance the story arc of Stacie Spencer, now Randy's ex.

In the previous book, Randy left the Commonwealth Defense Force (CDF) to side with the colonies' Coalition of Rebel Factions, who he thought were bad guys at first, just treasonist insurrectionists. The Coalition played their trump card, Operation Hammer Fall, and were successful at opening the door for colony and immigrant equality. Now, with no Coalition fighters being tried for war crimes, Randy returns to the CDF a pariah, and it seems Akane is one of few Guardians he can trust. Or can she be trusted?

Akane attempts to recruit Randy, one of the colonies' liberators, into what seems to be a social-justice organization fighting for immigrant equality. And due to the chapter interludes mentioned, readers are able to see how she was recruited as she takes Randy through a parallel experience. However, there seems to be more to this organization than meets the eye.

Akane really became the lynchpin that holds the story together, and I'm hoping that readers will enjoy Akane's journey just as much as I enjoyed writing it.

*Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within* contains the same exciting gunfights and mech-suit battles as *Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*, just not in the same wartime environment. The previous book took place during a violent war; this book takes place during the aftermath of that war and is more of a techno-thriller than a war story, but still explores the themes of rebellion, revolution, classism, discrimination, etcetera. Enjoy!

## Intro



“I’ve been marginalized by an oppressive government system, by a system designed to keep people like me down. But I decided to fight back. You may not approve of my methods, but I really don’t give a damn.”

—*Akane Sugimori*

# PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE THREE-WEEK WAR

**Planet: Satellite One**

**Colony Three**

Immigrant Departure Station

(Receiving Area)

**L**ucky, *damn* lucky. That's what eighteen-year-old Akane Sugimori was. There were colony inhabitants who'd kill to be in her shoes. She'd scored the opportunity to untether her future from a destiny of grueling labor, the opportunity to elevate beyond a dour life of second-class citizenship. To no longer be lumped with the lesser of humanity was a privilege—one that was near unattainable. Eden, the utopia of humanity's intergalactic republic, the Commonwealth, awaited her. So why the fuck was she down in

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the dumps? This was a dream coveted by friends and family, by almost every denizen of Colony Three's populace.

Clad in denim shorts, fashionably ripped fishnet stockings, and a black crop top, she sat Eden-bound on the frontmost bench in the receiving area of Colony Three's immigrant departure station, mood somber. Arms clenched around herself and tapping the heel of her sneaker boots—in a nervous staccato—she endured each loathsome second that ticked by, waiting for her citizen registration number (CRN) to be announced over the intercom so her undesired voyage to Eden could begin. She wasn't looking forward to being whisked away from friends and family. Who would she laugh, dine, and share the pain and pleasures of life with? As inferior to the motherworld as it was, Satellite One would *always* be home in her heart.

To her left, Dad. To her right, Mom. Benjiro and Akari Sugimori were loving parents who'd made substantial sacrifices for her well-being. She wouldn't *dare* ask more of them. They had toiled in the caverns and agricultural fields of Colony Three as government-employed resource harvesters, and to some, government serfs. Working tooth and nail, risking bodily health, they provided their daughter the best upbringing possible. Akane had caused their blood pressure to skyrocket on more than one occasion, working the black-market commerce system at sixteen years of age to secretly, and unlawfully, peddle unattainable luxuries to residents of Sector 07 and bring relief to her parents' burdens. The sector was populated with migrants from the former Japan, garnering it the title NeoJapan. Migrants who'd congregated there had preserved their language, culture, art, and history in the era of the New Humanity, during a time when colony selectees had banded together for survival and community, resulting in the emergence of assimilated cultures.

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Due to her devil-may-care attitude, Akane had to admit the scoldings she got were deserved. But, especially now that she'd graduated into adulthood, the obstinate youth refused to let anyone, even Mom and Dad, police her individuality. Her attitude, mouth, and parent-disapproved fashion choice—right down to the pierced navel—were staying put.

As Akari and Benjiro each anchored an arm around her in an effort to console her, she couldn't help but wonder: would she be swapping one hell for another? She knew how to survive in this hell. The new one, not so much. She'd heard how colony inhabitants, fortunate enough to become lottery beneficiaries like herself, had their once-bright dreams crushed by a harsh reality when they experienced immigrant life on Eden firsthand. The Commonwealth Government had proclaimed the planet a haven of peace, comfort, and prosperity, but apparently Eden's high society wasn't receptive to colony immigrants. Issued ten thousand living credits, lottery beneficiaries were expected to excel with minimal support structures and transition assistance. Even so, for many colony inhabitants, Eden citizenship was the prize of a lifetime.

"Registrant C-Nine-Eight-Eight-Seven, proceed to Decon to prep for boarding," blared a young woman's reedy voice over the intercom. "I repeat, proceed to Decon." Scrolling across the wall's massive info display: C-9987 REPORT TO DECON.

Akane's heart skipped a beat. *That's me.* Depressed about separating from her parents, she was on the verge of tears.

Two men in their early twenties and one woman Akane's age sat four benches behind the Sugimori family. They were dreamers, anticipating a wondrous life on Eden. The young man with short auburn hair wore a sleeveless white hoodie and blue jeans. The other man wore his jet-black hair neck-length and was dressed in a T-shirt and cargo pants. The young woman had platinum-blonde

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pigtails that hung past her waist, and she was hella pretty—trim with supermodel looks. She was comfortably dressed for the trip in magenta palazzo-style pants and a Mercedes Gardner T-shirt, obviously a fan of the pop star. Waiting to be called to Decon, the trio regaled each other with friendly banter and stories of their childhood. The woman was the bubbly one of the threesome—continuously smiling, animated gesticulations, loads of laughter, voice bursting with optimism.

The Sugimoris stood. Akane’s chin hung in a downward tilt, and her shoulders sagged. She was *so* not feeling this moment.

Akari tenderly framed her daughter’s melancholy face with small hands calloused from intensive labor. “[We’ll miss you, Akane,]” she said, the warmth of her voice driving a dagger through her daughter’s heart. “[But this is your day, a special day. Be joyful.]”

*Be joyful?* Akane thought, looking at her mom like a sad child. Easy for her to say.

Benjiro, heavyhearted this day, fastened a soft, comforting grip on Akane’s shoulder. Like her mother, he had worried about how and where Akane was spending her spare time. Most of it was consumed by commingling with youth outside NeoJapan. She’d adopted non-native attitudes and a non-native patois from her social excursions. Precocious as a child, the older she got, the more rebellious and defiant to all authority—parental or otherwise—she became. Tell her not to do something and she’d do the opposite. But his daughter had grown into a strong, resilient young lady, and now she could escape the subpar habitats of Satellite One. Prosperity was within her reach. He was beyond happy for her, and it showed in his wide-set eyes. “[We are proud of you, Akane,]” his raspy voice said. “[A new life awaits you on Eden, a *better* life. There will be hardships to overcome, of course, but you will

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persevere.]” Being street-smart, resourceful, and possessing exceptional survival skills, Akane knew how to weather tough times, how to roll with the punches of life. “[And as soon as we’re permitted travel passes, we’ll come see you.]”

Bum-rushed by memories of parental love and affection, Akane bit her lower lip, and an ache welled up in her chest. “[Thanks, I love you guys.]” She sniffled. “[And thanks for putting up with all my harebrained mischief.]” Her voice was strained by the heartache.

Hot with anger, the woman on the intercom repeated herself. “Registrant C-Nine-Eight-Eight-Seven, report to Decon, *at once*,” she snapped. “What the hell are you doing?”

Akari kissed her daughter’s tear-slick cheek. “[We love you too. Now off you go.]”

Akane sniffled and wiped a hand over her glassy eyes. She snatched her hot-pink backpack from the floor, distinct with a cartoony skull on the back, and hefted it up onto her shoulders. Her main luggage had already been loaded onto the shuttle. She then took off running toward the lone terminal, before the intercom lady could get even more livid. Looking back at her parents, she laid eyes on them for what would be the last time in who knew when. And she waved see-ya-later.

Vision poor due to laboring in health-hazardous subterranean caverns, Akari watched her baby girl fade into a blur as she disappeared down the long terminal, brightly lit by the light panels along the ceiling. With a lump of sadness in her throat, her last thought was, *May good fortune smile upon you wherever you go, my daughter.*

The next traveler was summoned over the intercom. “Registrant C-Six-Five-Five-One, report to Decon. I repeat, report to Decon.”



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“That’s me!” the blonde pigtailed woman exclaimed, with alacrity. Überexcited, she bolted from the bench.

Midway down the terminal, Akane met a bulbous woman, far taller than her, wearing an all-white uniform with gold accents. Her pudgy pockmarked face was tight with a scowl of detest. *Guess she would be the boarding proctor*, Akane surmised. *Why the hell couldn’t her lazy keister come escort us?*

The proctor wasn’t going to fetch the beneficiaries from the receiving area herself. No way. She was an Eden inhabitant, on duty; “nadir” had to come to her. “Call me Ella,” the huge woman said in an inhospitable tone. She glowered harshly at the petite, lithe eighteen-year-old in front of her—with a crop of short-cut unruly dark hair and dark eyes to match. “I’ll be your boarding proctor, *pissant*. Do everything I say, and keep your *stinking* mouth shut unless spoken to.” Her thick lips expanded into a wry grin. “And don’t do anything that might *tick* me off, lest you want your Eden citizenship registration revoked. Which would certainly make me happy.”

*Geesh, what bug crawled up this roly-poly’s pants?* Akane thought, brows drawn together. She subdued the impulse to cuss out this churlish asshole.

The forehead of the austere proctor crinkled. The irrepressible enmity harbored in her soul was broadcasted on her face. She despised that another “nadir” had been granted access to the upper echelon of the New Humanity. “Nadir” belonged here on Satellite One, the New Humanity’s resource hub, as resource harvesters.

In a belittling timbre, the proctor said, “Please acknowledge understanding, registrant C-Nine-Eight-Eight-Seven.”

Damn, Akane thought, this woman didn’t even deign to use her actual name. Akane was nothing more than a CRN to her. “Yeah, I gotcha,” Akane said coolly, instead of going the fuck off. “You

won't get *annnyyyy* trouble from me." She was eager to get away from this corpulent doofus and get the joyride to Eden underway.

Ella noticed Akane's accent was pretty evident. *She must be a Sector 07 resident*, she figured.

The bubbly blonde woman with the pigtails came moseying up with a carefree stride

Ella's saggy features twitched, and her lips pursed. "Hey, Ms. *Lah-di-dah*, quit dragging your feet!" Startled, the woman tensed up and froze. "Move! Put some pep in your step!"

A flutter of nervousness slapped the sunny disposition off the woman's face. "Uh . . . coming right away, ma'am!" she hollered, voice stuttering. She kicked her pace up to a jog and brought herself to a stock-still halt in front of the craggy-faced boarding proctor.

Ella looked down at the tablet in her stubby hands and then swung her hard gaze back up at the blonde. "Registrant C-Six-Five-Five-One, Skylar Grace, correct?" she demanded.

The woman tipped her chin in a nod. "Yes, ma'am," she confirmed, her usual peppiness absent, voice sounding more reserved in the proctor's menacing presence.

The two twenty-something men then rushed up.

Ella glanced at her tablet. "Registrant C-One-Seven-Nine-Two, Jacobi Johnston."

"Here," the auburn-haired man said.

Next, Ella read off, "Registrant C-Zero-Eight-Nine-One, Desmond Castillo."

"That's me," the black-haired dusky-skinned man announced, sounding loud and proud.

Ella clipped the tablet to her large belt. "Alright, follow me," she ordered, in a pompous, don't-defy-me tone of voice. "I'm taking you to Decon so you can disinfect. Don't want you nadir

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contaminating the motherworld.”

Jacobi frowned at the epithet. *Nadir? Butt-ugly snob.*

The proctor and her group of beneficiaries veered into a junction left. Like the entirety of this government facility, it was flawless, squeaky-clean, and sterile, unlike a lot of outdated, lackluster structures on Satellite One.

Jacobi wandered closer to Akane, encroaching on her personal space. “*Psst*, hey, what’s your name?” he crooned.

His proximity drew Akane’s features into a cringe. “Why?” she answered flippantly. Coping with having to part ways with friends, family, and the world she was accustomed to, she wasn’t in a conversational mood.

Jacobi hunched his shoulders and smiled politely. “We all might as well get acquainted. We’re all embarking on the same journey, right?”

“All mouths *need* to remain closed, Mr. Johnston,” the proctor threatened, shepherding the group forward with a slow, lumbering gait. That was Jacobi’s warning shot. Next time, she might not be so merciful.

Jacobi went silent. *What a crotchety old bitch.*

A third of the junction’s distance there was a set of doors to the left and another set to the right.

Ella barked instruction. “Gents, that way.” She pointed left. “Ladies, that way.” She pointed right. “Once inside, you’ll receive further instruction.” With wrath lacing her husky voice and a look of warning wrinkling her visage, she added, “*Make sure you follow it to a T.*”

*Why do we have to get “decontaminated” like we’re infectious, diseased rodents or something?* Akane wondered. Well, no choice but to comply.

Akane and Skylar stepped into the ladies’ Decon. Twelve

claustrophobic-looking pods, connected to a series of pipes, were built into the curved wall of the white nondescript space. The doors shut behind them with a rushing sound, and a disembodied artificial voice said, “Welcome to Decon. Extract all apparel and place it in deposit bins for sterilization.” With a *click*, two rectangular bins ejected from wall lockers. “After discarding apparel, proceed to the sterilization pod of your choosing.”

Akane dropped her backpack on the bench in front of the bins, and she and Skylar began unlacing their footwear.

After tugging off her high-tops, Skylar rotated toward her new traveling companion with a glowing white smile stretching her cheeks. Bonding time. “So, what’s your name?”

“Akane.” The drab way she answered sent a clear message: she wasn’t happy and didn’t give a crap about schmoozing right now.

Skylar jerked her shirt overhead and dumped it into deposit bin zero-one, uncovering a silky pink bra.

Squeamish about undressing in front of strangers, Akane blushed and shyly eased her shirt up over her head.

“Why so glum?” Skylar inquired. “We’re headed to Eden. We’re headed to *paradise*,” she said, spreading her arms wide on “paradise.” Her voice exuded her relentless optimism. “I hear it’s a lot like Earth.” Born after Earth Era in Colony Five, she’d never laid eyes on humanity’s ex-motherworld, and had only seen imagery of its former glory, before Armageddon.

Akane discarded her shirt in deposit bin zero-two, along with her backpack. “Look, I’m just . . . not sure how things are gonna shake out. I mean, what are the odds of us immigrants actually . . . you know, prospering on Eden?”

Skylar threw a monkey wrench in Akane’s skepticism, spiling some truth. “Oviereya Amaechi became a Chairwoman of the Parliament and Chancellor of the Supreme Judiciary. Arson Scott

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became one of the Commonwealth's most revered war heroes and was awarded the pinnacle of military commendations. They were able to adapt, overcome, and shatter barriers. Anything's possible, Akane." With bravado and a sharp smile, Skylar pumped her fist and added, "*Motherfucking* anything." She flicked a hand dismissively, as if fanning away the aura of doubt percolating throughout Akane's mind. "Come on, girlfriend!"

Akane had a tendency to expect the worst to shield herself from disappointment. But that reminder, the reminder that colony inhabitants such as herself had risen to prominence in the Commonwealth, elicited a small hopeful smile from her. Albeit small, it was still a smile—a sign she wasn't all doom and gloom. "Guess there is hope for us, huh?" she remarked in a mild tone.

Skylar punched a fist upward. "Yep!" she said cheerfully. Her animated body language basically translated to "now that's the spirit!"

As the two finished undressing, they shot the breeze, and Akane loosened up. In their birthday suits, they strolled toward the pods, bare feet slapping the spotless floor.

Akane had to admit, she was envious of her fellow traveler's physique—definitely looked like she could be a supermodel. Skylar was stunning—a fine bone structure, luscious hips, a cute heart-shaped bottom, and a chest with ample curves. And she was one hundred percent au naturale, no black-market body mods. Self-conscious about her looks, Akane wished she'd been endowed with a physique like that. She was straight-figured, head to toe.

They entered neighboring decontamination pods.

"Initiating sterilization sequence," the automated guide notified them. Whirring. Clinks and clanks. A lone cylindrical vat in the room gurgled, then a cool chemical mist permeated the pods through the spinning applicator of their ceiling.

Skylar pivoted toward Akane's pod, hands pressed against glass and sapphire eyes gleaming. "So, whaddya think having our brains modded with a cerebral implant is gonna be like?" the chatty extrovert asked, elevating the pitch of her peppy voice over the loud hissing mist gusting against her nakedness.

Akane sighed, anxious to get out of this glass chamber thing and not in the mood for . . . "shower talk" with a hyperactive woman who couldn't stop jabbering for one second. Not how she thought preboarding would go. Life was so unpredictable. "You're able to . . . do some mental Bluetooth thing. Link, that's what they call it, right? Sync your mind with someone else's. Hear their thoughts. Walk through their memories. Experience their emotions. Become one with someone and all that jazz." Her visage communicated discomfort. "*Souunnndds* kinda creepy, if you ask me."

"*Nuh-uh*," Skylar disagreed. "Linking is supposed to be a gateway into deepening relationships. It's a way to bond, to form closer ties and expand cognitive awareness of another human being's innermost feelings." The smile on her face sharpened. With a sultry "Oh, I can't wait!" type of timbre, she added, "A way to manifest an extraordinary sex life too."

Akane's face and shoulders gave Skylar a "meh."

Skylar sighed. They were talking about one of the biggest technological breakthroughs of the human race, and all Akane could offer was a lukewarm reaction?

The unending mist continued on, cleansing any foreign bacteria, microbes, and parasites.

"So, what's your goal in life, Akane?" Skylar asked, continuing the get-to-know-you session.

Akane cocked a brow. "Huh?"

"You know, the thing that motivates you, that gives you a sense

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of purpose, that gives you the will to wake up and deal with the muck of life day after day. The thing *you* feel is your reason for breathing.”

*My ikigai?* Akane answered with, “Right now I’m just focused on keeping my head above water and steering clear of trouble on my soon-to-be new homeworld.”

“You gotta think *big*, Akane. If you don’t know your purpose yet, you gotta find it. Make one. Me, I’m destined for *stardom*. I’m gonna be a famous vocal artist, like Mercedes Gardner!” Mercedes was famous alright. Inhabitants of Eden and Satellite One were enamored with the entrancing sound of the pop star’s vocals. She had performed across Eden and traveled to Mission Worlds to uplift the morale of Guardians deployed on planetary-impact missions. And her vids usually netted over a hundred million views.

Akane looked at Skylar, thinking, *Yeah, right.*

Sick of Akane’s pessimism, Skylar’s face stiffened, and her tone transitioned to something not so friendly—a departure from her usual giddy self. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that’s a lofty goal for an immigrant, aren’t you?” The rising aggression in Skylar’s voice warned Akane she’d hit a big nerve, with her inauspicious forecasting. “You think I should take a step back and conform to reality, isn’t that right?”

Akane kept her mouth closed, listening on without a peep, not wanting to further piss off her traveling companion.

Skylar’s face tightened more. “Friends have told me the same stupid thing. They think I’m some zany airhead, a birdbrain, or ditsy or something. But it’s the conformists that remain content with being doormats for the Commonwealth Government and prosperity seekers like *yours truly* that become trailblazers.”

Akane heard her mother’s wisdom: “*Remember, Akane, even*

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*the most herculean feats can be conquered.*” Her parents had raised her to never cast a shadow on anyone’s dreams.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Akane apologized.

Skylar’s face instantly unkinked, features softening. “No prob, girlfriend. We’re good.”

The mist finally stopped, and some other, gelatinous, decon chemical then lathered the ladies. Thirty seconds later, a water shower rinsed away the gooey chemical. Then the drying cycle activated. After that, the three metal rings of the pods spun around, emitting purple X-ray beams. A chirp confirmed that the medical sensors had pronounced them well with a clean bill of health. Decon completed, the young ladies retrieved their clothing from the deposit bins and re-dressed.

Exiting the doors, they saw Ella, Jacobi, and Desmond waiting for them. Ella proceeded to lead the group to the ship hangar, where a single passenger carrier was docked.

The beneficiaries hurried up the craft’s boarding ramp, relieved to finally part from their crude, mean-spirited chaperon. The passenger compartment and cockpit were separated by a bulkhead, so the beneficiaries were left to themselves. And the passenger compartment seated up to twenty-five bodies, so it was quite roomy for four people.

The female pilot, wearing the standard orange aviator jumpsuit, completed all launch checks and blasted her voice over the intercom, with a chipper lilt. “Alright, ladies and gents, this is Deloris, your pilot, speaking. We are a ‘go.’ Sit back and enjoy the ride.” The roll-up hangar door reeled open, and the craft rolled out onto the tarmac. The propulsion system powered up. Engine cycling from a low purr to a high-pitch whine, the craft cruised into an overhead view of the colony, headed for space.

Jacobi stared through a porthole with an aggrieved expression.



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A hodgepodge of stacked tenements, small living pods, sorry-looking MHUs, and corroding girders of unfinished structures—promised to be completed years ago—shrank into specks as the surface grew distant. A montage of childhood memories cycled through his mind. At the outset of the New Humanity, he sat with his parents in auditoriums of resettlement centers—government hubs purposed for assimilating colony inhabitants into the New Humanity’s socioeconomic framework, a framework crafted by the Omni-system. The centers’ “indoctrination” programs prepared colony inhabitants for the roles they’d undertake. They were told being resource harvesters was an honor, and that the New Humanity rested on their shoulders, conditioning their minds to be exultant about second-class citizenship—an attempt at social engineering. Diagrammed on megascreens were the lush metropolises to come; Satellite One would replicate Eden in the near future. Colony inhabitants’ minds were filled with hope to inspire belief in the Commonwealth Government.

After the Phazharian and Bhalkran wars, inhabitants were led to believe the financial impact of those wars was why the vision promised hadn’t come to fruition yet; it was the reason why they had to tolerate years of insalubrious living arrangements. In actuality, colony inhabitants were victims of systematized degradation. Jacobi turned red just thinking about the squalor of impoverished zones in his sector, inhabitants’ cries for equality discredited by the government and the media. The government itself always controlled the narrative.

The colony labor force was keeping the Commonwealth afloat. They harvested the invaluable resources ensuring humanity’s star nation remained a thriving republic. *We’re the lifeblood of the New Humanity*, Jacobi thought. *But we’re treated like spokes on a wheel. Told our purpose is to simply be manual laborers for the*

*government and megacorporations.* This was his chance to stick it to the system designed to keep colony inhabitants at the bottom of the socioeconomic totem pole. This was his opportunity to be the maker of his own fate and honor his mother.

The toxins from the mines his mother had slaved in metastasized a fatal infection throughout her nervous system, dooming her to a premature death. He watched his emaciated, bedridden mother wilt away, while she was intubated to some shabby life-support system in an underequipped intensive care ward. Mrs. Johnston wanted her only child to live a life of abundance. He was smart and could pave any future he envisioned. Obtaining Eden citizenship was his chance to manifest that life of abundance.

Emerging into space, the craft's hull juddered.

Skylar sat stargazing out a window in amazement. *Wow, outer space!*

Akane was lounged back in her recliner's cushioned backrest. Hands resting behind her head, she pondered what sort of trials awaited her on Eden. Knowing a lot of suck was in store for everyone aboard, she'd suggested that Skylar slow her roll, but nothing seemed to be able to curb the jolly optimist's enthusiasm.

Jacobi walked over to Akane's seat, hands in his hoodie's pockets. "Hey, Akane, what's the first thing you're gonna do when we get to Eden?" he asked, trying to lure her into a social chat.

Akane sighed. "Dunno," she answered blandly, and was barely audible.

As someone who'd envied lottery beneficiaries, Jacobi was unnerved by Akane's seemingly lack of appreciation for this golden opportunity. She should've forfeited her lottery winning

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and let a more grateful entrant take her spot, he thought. Colony selectees were disqualified from Eden citizenship by a scad of admittance factors, some as minuscule as physical and mental disabilities. Some selectees simply didn't meet IQ requirements. Only the best of humanity was to inhabit Eden's continent, to maximize the human race's survival probability. But now Akane was of the blessed minority who'd secured a ticket to joining the upper echelon of the human race, yet she was acting all . . . petulant.

"Well, you don't seem all that thankful for this fortunate position we've lucked into," Jacobi said. "This is our chance to no longer be pigeonholed to a lifetime of marginalization. What gives?"

Akane sat upright and went on the defense—facial expression intense, tone severe. "Look, pal, my parents prayed for me to win Eden citizenship, and I intend to honor them. But I'm . . . a realist. That's all. I'd rather serve myself a dose of reality now than psych myself up for major disappointment. So, yeah, just because I'm not . . . jumping through the roof right now doesn't mean I don't value this opportunity. I'm just . . . a down-to-earth type of girl. Now stick a fork in it. Beat it."

"I see," Jacobi said in a level tone, backing off. He took a seat across the aisle, beside Desmond.

"So what's up with her? Why's she such a grinch?" Desmond asked, aiming a thumb in Akane's vicinity.

"Hey, I heard that, you jerk!" rang Akane's furious voice.

"Sorry!" Desmond said. He then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Why's she so moody?" he asked Jacobi.

Jacobi dropped his volume to "covert level" as well. "She's just . . . trying to stay level-headed. And I get it. Things will probably get worse for us before they get better."

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“Hey, you guys talkin’ about me?” Akane yelled over at them, suspicious.

“Uh, no, not at all,” Jacobi answered. *Geesh.*

“So, what’s your dream, man?” Desmond asked, shifting the conversation.

“Knowledge excites me. I wanna enroll into one of the universities. I wanna study abroad on other planets and commingle with different races. Then take that knowledge and do some sort of good.” Wanderlust and enthusiasm lit Jacobi’s face.

“The scholarly type, huh?”

Jacobi shrugged. “Guess so. What about you?”

“I’m gonna join the Commonwealth Defense Force, enlist into the Land Combatant Corps.”

“A friend of mine, a lottery beneficiary, told me the physical challenges you gotta endure at BCT are supertough. As one can expect, I guess. But then immigrants like us have to deal with bigoted drill sergeants on top of that. You ready?”

The overconfident smirk on Desmond’s face suggested he was beyond ready. “All fine by me, brother. I live for a good physical challenge, gets me thrilled. I play all sorts of contact sports in my sector. Buncha prick drill sergeants aren’t gonna intimidate me.” Desmond liked to get rowdy and roughhouse and loved guns and knives. Knowing their son well, his mother and father supported his decision to join the CDF, thought it was a good career choice for him. “Yup, the military’s where I belong, bud.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got the drive. I’ll say that much. I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“Thanks.” Desmond’s eyes glanced to where Skylar was sitting, behind Akane. Always extroverted and energetic, she’d finally run out of juice, deep in a state of much-deserved requiescence, and looking adorably quiet. “And hey, just so you

know, I got dibs on Skylar.”

Jacobi laughed. “You can have at her all you want. I’m not auditioning for ‘boyfriend,’ for either of those two.”

“That why you keep prowling around that Oriental chick?”

Jacobi’s face flushed with embarrassment. “It’s not what you think. My interest is *strictly* platonic.”

Desmond’s internal lie detector was going off. “Yeah, right, sure it is,” he said archly. “Tell me you’re not jockeying to get into her underpants.”

“I’m not in pursuit of anything beyond cordial relations, my friend.”

“Uh-huh. Liar,” Desmond responded in a jocular tone.

Body overtaken by lassitude, Akane’s heavy lids drooped shut. She thought about Mom and Dad, then sleep finally claimed her.

The hull vibrated, and shifting patterns of multicolored light gleamed outside the windows as the craft transitioned into Hyperspace Leap.

“Akane, wake up! Wake up, Akane!” Skylar’s voice hollered.

Akane groaned tiredly as a pair of hands rocked her out of her slumber. She awoke with a cranky expression at the sight of Skylar leaning over her, the rambunctious woman’s annoyingly chipper smile and nearly translucent eyes smack dab in her face. Akane was on the brink of shoving Ms. Happy-go-lucky to the floor. “What is it, dammit?” she asked, sounding pouty.

Exuberantly, Skylar answered. “We’re close now! It’s almost time!”

Akane rubbed the grogginess from her eyes. “Really!” Her heartbeat raced.

“Eden inbound,” the pilot reported over the intercom. The blue

planet and its single green-and-brown continental landmass grew closer. A countdown blipped on one of the control console's screens. "Atmospheric entry in three . . . two . . . one."

The shuttle rattled through Eden's atmosphere and descended. Surfing the turbulence caused by headwinds, it soared above sublime towering feats of architecture.

Conical, pyramidal, and cupola edifices with shining windows blurred by, along with other structures unorthodox to a colony inhabitant.

With a face of wonder, Akane plastered her palms to her starboard window, streaking it with her prints. *Squeak*. A big smile spread cheek to cheek. Her disbelieving eyes watched colorful flyers of various aesthetic whisk over the solar-paneled roadways—among masterworks of engineering constructed of glass, metal, and phyocrete, ranging in height. "*Hollyyyyy* fucking shit!" The clean-swept surface below was crazy-busy, tiny figures of pedestrians strolling across or riding slideways. They entered and exited a *mélange* of shops and restaurants. *This is incredible!* Vibrations of awe trembled Akane.

Exclamations broke out from everyone. Fingers pointed at this and that.

The shuttle blew past gold spires spearing the sky. After five more minutes of travel, it decelerated, banked downward, and smoothly leveled out. Then, undercarriage repulsors fired as the ship steadily landed in a vertical descent. It touched down on the outdoor landing deck of the immigrant reception station, just outside Myrtle City. The station was a flat-roofed, single-storey white building.

The shuttle's engines gasped off. Cooling metal creaked.

The pilot pressed the intercom button. "Ladies and gents, your trip has come to an end," she said gleefully. A panel of luminous

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blinking instruments powered down. Viewport screens showing the outside went dark. “You may now depart.”

The fuselage’s door unsealed, and the boarding ramp extended to the airstrip to let everyone off.

The beneficiaries disembarked, down the ramp, out into the brilliance of a cloudless sky and vivid sun.

A burly gray-uniformed man with grizzled hair and a full beard was removing their luggage from the portside storage hold—two rucksacks, belonging to Jacobi and Desmond, and two duffle bags, belonging to Akane and Skylar. “Well, hurry up. Come get your luggage so we can get in gear,” he said demandingly. The beneficiaries claimed their luggage and followed the man to a white commuter van. “Name’s Finnegan, by the way. I’ll be off-boarding you guys at Central Square. There, you’ll be able to obtain lodging and just about anything else you need.” The beneficiaries loaded into the van, chattering excitedly.

Skylar took a window seat. Akane went ahead and dropped down beside her. Jacobi and Desmond sat on the opposite side of the aisle, same row as Akane and Skylar.

Finnegan input the destination into the van’s onboard navigation system, letting autodrive take the wheel.

As the autonomous van made its way to Central Square, throngs of men and women traversed the city. There were no dirt roads, compact row homes, living pods, and stacked tenements. The contrast between Satellite One and Eden were like day and night, heaven and hell. On Satellite One, there were no aerial vehicles, just the ground ones, and inhabitants didn’t have any of the technological boons that were at Eden inhabitants’ disposal.

The van purred to a stop at a red light in the city’s entertainment district. Skylar’s starstruck eyes were zoned out on the twenty-foot holographic avatar of Mercedes Gardner atop a

cubical skyscraper. The superstar's ginger hair was so long that it cascaded beyond her hips. Tresses of the lengthy mane flowed around her smiling visage. *That's gonna be me, I know it!*

Skylar imagined scores of fans roaring her name as the concert's MC introduced her: "*And now, without further ado, who you've all been waiting for, Skylarrrr Graaccceeee!*"

The van jerked into motion with a *vroom*, giving the beneficiaries a tour of a strip mall.

High-end storefronts of haute couture going by infected Skylar with the shopping bug. The sign of a women's outlet said OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD GLAM CENTRAL. Another said SO-FINE GALAXY APPAREL. The stores' window displays exhibited extraterrestrial fashion. Skylar's intrigued eyes twinkled. "Tomorrow, you and I *have* to come back here, Akane."

"*Uh*, shouldn't we be preserving our *credits*?" Akane responded dubiously, brow crinkling.

"Aw, come on, don't be a spoilsport. We've got like . . . three to five months' worth of living credits. And this isn't some backwater world. This is Eden! It's not gonna take us long to get on our feet, not in the land of milk and honey. Live a little, Akane."

Akane sighed. "Well . . ." She was close to caving.

Skylar playfully nudged Akane's shoulder with her knuckles. "Oh, don't be a party pooper!"

Akane finally relented to peer pressure. "Okay, fine. But let's . . . not go overboard tomorrow."

"Cool, girls'-day-out tomorrow! Yaasss!"

Akane shook her head derisively.

It took only seconds for Skylar to start up the next conversation with Akane. "So, have you given it some more thought: your purpose, your life mission?"



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“My people often refer to it as *ikigai*. And no, I haven’t. Right now, I’m just making sure I stay off the street and don’t go hungry. I’ll worry about my *purpose* later.”

Skylar gave Akane some unwanted encouragement, ignoring the nonverbal cues expressing Akane’s irritation with the subject—the squints, mashing of her lips together, and raking of her jaw side to side. “Don’t worry, you’ll find it,” Skylar said jauntily.

Akane grunted. She wasn’t concerned about finding “it” right now.

Fifteen minutes later, the van gasped to a halt at the beneficiaries’ destination, Central Square. “This is the drop-off point. Good luck to ya,” Finnegan said.

The doors of the van split apart, releasing the beneficiaries into the hustle and bustle. After everyone off-boarded, the van hummed away.

The beneficiaries were astonished by how neat and clean the city was.

Myrtle City was like other metropolises on Eden: high air quality, first-rate housing, no ratty alleyways, not one single building dilapidated. Beautiful. Idyllic living.

Skylar watched sanitation golems sweep, scrub, and sterilize streets, slideways, and building windows. “Cool, robots!” She darted toward a storefront display to get a closer look at the flashy apparel. Her foot hit a sensor panel at the window, and suddenly a colorful cyclone of eye-catching pop-up holos swirled around her—a three-dimensional expo of skirts, pants, blouses, and lingerie. Her fascinated eyes flitted left and right. *Supercool*. She tapped the advertisement graphic in one of the multiple frames of a holo-grid. The dress in the advertisement jumped straight out at her, stretching over her body. Wow, she was wearing the hologram over her clothes!

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The floating holowords BUY NOW circled her head. Jacobi was staring, amazed at what just happened. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen.

Skylar left the sensor panel, and the holographic brochure dissipated, along with the holographic construct she was wearing.

Desmond canted his head skyward. Above eateries, boutiques, and corner stores were glass-walled balconies of ultramodern living complexes, and storeys of open-air walkways, rising heavenward, adjoined towering retail centers.

Citizens were smiling. Moods were joyous. No despondent faces, no waifs, no stressing over where the next meal would come from. These people seemed carefree, laid-back, and easygoing—unencumbered by woes that colony inhabitants had. And suicide rates, due to depression, were zero percent on Eden.

Never being gullible enough to see Eden through rose-colored glasses, the city's glitz and glamour were wearing thin for Akane. Honeymoon over, reality began to rear its ugly head—exposure therapy. She and her new friends had been transplanted in a world of foreign technology and culture they knew zilch about, left to fend for themselves, left to climb the broken rungs of the ladder of immigrant success. They'd been abandoned in an environment that operated differently from theirs.

Young female Highborn fashionistas strutted by Akane, wearing garish smartwear. They spoke unfamiliar terminology, operating wrist PDAs, playing sim games on gamecom pads, and using other gizmos Akane was clueless about. A suffocating feeling of overwhelm built up in her chest. She felt like an Earth Era relic, light-years behind the curb on mankind's modern technological innovations. And she felt so . . . uncultured.

Out of her comfort zone, her muscles became rigid with anxiety, and the pit of her gut churned. Her fear response was to

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retreat to Colony Three, a place of familiarity, to cower inside its refuge. But the daughter of Benjiro and Akari Sugimori was no wimp. She steeled her composure. Eden was her home now, and she'd face her discomfort and fears head-on. She intended to honor her hardworking parents, who wanted nothing more than to see her flourish on the New Humanity's motherworld.

Curious eyes scrutinized the beneficiaries, some faces staring repelled. The beneficiaries looked out of the ordinary. Though they were a part of the Union's human community too, they were foreigners on this world.

Two female lovers walked by Akane hand in hand, giggling. They wore matching attire: light-up microskirts, short tops that exposed their flat midriffs, and ankle boots. In tow, floating helper golems lugged the couple's overstuffed handbags.

This world seemed surreal to Akane, like a dream. Questions arose in the back of her mind: what to do for employment, how long would their credit vouchers last before the group hit rock bottom, how could they connect with more lottery beneficiaries?

Blithely unconcerned about the severity of their situation, Jacobi, Skylar, and Desmond stood in the midst of a tide of humanity, frissons of excitement prickling their flesh. They saw intergalactic tourists and day-trippers wearing language translators around their necks commingling with humans—a normal sight for Eden inhabitants, alien for colony ones. People sitting under pedestrian shelters chatted as they waited for air-cabs. Adolescents on air scooters laughed. Street vehicles and flyers honked, roads and air lanes alive with moving traffic. So many sounds. So much activity.

As her new friends took in the city's heart-stopping, energetic ambiance, Akane thought, *And this is where life kicks you in the ass and gives you a major wake-up call.*

# CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY

**Star Palace (space station)**

Specialist Randal Scott's Cabin

The warm, soothing intermix of pristine water and chemical relaxant sluiced from the shower jets, soaking Randy's golden-brown hair and cascading down his fit, slender physique. He exhaled, alleviation coursing through him and melancholic mood subsiding. Pressing his palms to the sleek tiled surface in front of him, he leaned into the spray, letting it pound against his shoulders and back. He anticipated getting chewed out by his task force leader, Lieutenant Breckenridge, for the physical altercation he ignited with his teammate in the wee hours of last night. The mouthy dumb prick deserved it, though, Randy thought.

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Randy had returned to the CDF from a three-month hiatus, a hiatus granted by what few top-ranking allies he had left within the CDF, most turning their back on him after his “treason.” Upon return, he had two mission trajectories to choose from, since the CDF’s martial-law operations on Satellite One had ended. Either he could be deployed on a tour of service to one of the planetary-impact missions left in progress or be assigned to the CDF’s Expedition Task Forces (ETF). The ETF seemed to be the way to go. Gallivanting the universe to dispatch the human and intergalactic bandits, marauders, traffickers, and ruiners of lives disrupting the Commonwealth’s safety and security sounded like a good change-up to being stationed dirtside in a combat environment. Been there, done that. But no matter which trajectory he opted into, he had to get reacquainted to the CDF—a post-civil-war CDF—and get reacquainted to being “Randal Scott.”

Prior to Operation Hammer Fall, he was the young Guardian full of piss and vinegar hellbent on restoring honor to his family’s revered namesake by killing the man who’d tainted it—his father, Arson Scott. Randy was supported and highly respected by lower and upper-ranking service members, Guardians who had sympathized with him. And his sphere of influence was vast, reaching top brass of law enforcement and the CDF. Favors he requested got approved. Now—post-war, post “treason”—the privileges, respect, and reverence that had come with his namesake were no more. It’s not like he gave a damn, though; he was a man with or without such prerogatives.

Fellow Guardians now distanced themselves from his presence whenever they could. Guardians gave him the silent treatment and condescending side-glances when they passed him—like he was some contagious vermin and not their brother-in-arms. He was just a traitor to them now, a bastard who’d forsaken the Oath, siding

with insurrectionists who had brought their campaign of terror to Eden soil, murdering comrades. Now he—and perhaps other defectors who’d rejoined the CDF—had a similar taste of the disrespectful outsider treatment immigrant Guardians had been receiving for years from their own comrades. Not because they had committed acts of treason, but simply because they were deemed unfit for Eden citizenship by the Omni-system. They were “nadir” meant to be resource harvesters *only* and were “contaminating” the prestige of the Defense Force.

The disrespect had hit a new low when the civil war between the Commonwealth Government and dissenting colonies erupted—a war that finally ended, after months, with the Battle of the Quad.

Since the war’s conclusion, with no Coalition fighters being tried for war crimes, there’d been an upsurge in mistreatment of immigrants within the CDF: mysterious hangings, rank delays, bullying, and harassment. Rigged investigations were doing little to apprehend the culprits, protected by a culture of immunity. Mistreatment of immigrant Guardians, and immigrant citizens throughout Eden, had reached a higher scale than in all of Commonwealth history. Anger was being taken out on Eden’s immigrants because it was their people, living on Satellite One, who started the New Humanity’s first civil war.

The end of the war seemed to have brought out the worst in the worst of human beings. And it seemed a civil war was still being waged, a sort of discreet, weaponless war—a war of ideologies and beliefs being fought in the political arena, between compatriots, and among Guardians.

This was supposed to be peacetime, but Randy knew that peace was fragile, brittle. It’d only take a spark to set the Commonwealth ablaze. He’d hate to be the Chief right now. On one side of the dilemma, immigrant activists were demanding a crackdown on

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hate crimes. On the other side, disgruntled and bereaved nonimmigrants—the majority of Eden’s population—were rioting for retribution for the service members killed by the Coalition. Mysterious fringe groups had even publicized names and faces of former Coalition fighters on the net, influencing lone wolves to travel to Satellite One and go on a witch hunt to commit murder. Times were tumultuous. Chief Executive wasn’t a job Randy would want to have. Not now, not ever. All things considered, Oviereya was keeping things together quite well.

Continuing to think about the mistreatment of immigrant Guardians, he thought this division within the CDF was insane, and only growing worse. All Guardians were supposed to be brothers and sisters. But now more than ever, that wasn’t true.

With a voice command, the shower disengaged and the drying cycle switched on, blower vents whistling. Dry, he stepped up to the mirror and wiped away the condensation obscuring his reflection. He examined the shiner of his left eye, a receipt from the brawl he started. Emotions compounded. “Dammit!” he blurted. He’d just given his task force commander, Captain Valentina Narvaez, a reason to write up a negative counseling statement in his service sketch. And now higher had ammunition to screw with his rank promotion, a promotion he was sure was already being screwed with, by some big-shot officer way above his pay grade—no doubt because he was a “treasonist.” Like all Coalition fighters, including CDF defectors, Randy had been absolved of war crimes by Chief Executive Amaechi. So in a perfect world, he wouldn’t be shunned by his comrades and society; the Union leaders themselves had declared the Coalition’s rebellion justified. But this wasn’t a perfect world, was it? The exoneration of Coalition fighters had fueled the flames of many CDF service members and Eden inhabitants.

Passing his fingers over the bruised flesh encircling his eye, he cursed the asshole who'd pushed his emotional triggers to the brink of physical escalation, Paul Shaffer. Randy had thick skin; he knew how to maintain his cool and ignore trivial BS, but Paul's cryptic verbal jabs and his vexatious teasing had gotten on his last nerve. Enough was enough. He had tried to deck the irritant but missed. That sparked the brawl. Paul took his shot and nailed Randy in the eye. Luckily, Captain Narvaez had stumbled onto the scene and broke up the fight, because Randy was sure he would've kicked Paul's ass into tomorrow.

Paul was indeed someone he'd have to be on his p's and q's around. It was obvious that not only did the irritant hate so-called traitors, he hated that immigrants were allowed to enlist into the CDF.

Randy stared into the mirror a long time, wheels in his brain turning. Out of the nine-man task force he was assigned to, Vanguard Alpha, he mulled over who he could let his guard down around. Lieutenant Carl Breckenridge, Vanguard Alpha's field-combat leader, appeared trustworthy. Randy was still feeling him out, though, but Carl didn't seem to subscribe to the same invidious behavior that Paul did, at least not while in uniform—perhaps putting professionalism before personal bias. Sergeant Jenny Pines seemed cool so far too. Of his other six teammates, Paul and his two buddies, Sergeant Mark MaCallum and Corporal Dan Maddox, were the ones who'd earned spots on Randy's watch list. He'd have to be a fool to trust them. He didn't even want to count on them to have his back in a firefight, and that was a crying shame.

Still getting to know the other three—Sergeant Sam Guthrie, Specialist Jamie (Jay) Lister, and Private Akane Sugimori—Akane was the Guardian he was confident he could trust. But he knew for



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sure that she was an immigrant, from Colony Three—which had the highest population of Asiatic migrants.

Akane had welcomed him with generosity on day one of this new mission assignment. And he had to admit, though she wasn't his usual type—white, blonde, athletic physique, decent curves—the tomboy wasn't hard on the eyes. She was cute. And, reading between the lines, she seemed smitten with him, infatuated even. Which was understandable. During their interactions, they'd developed good chemistry, and they naturally vibed well. Nothing was forced. All organic.

Because Randy had to endure the emotional tension from being labeled a traitor, Akane was a warm welcome for him. He was fond of her and gravitated toward her upbeat, chill demeanor. She was like . . . the girl next door. She was refreshing to be around. But he'd have to be careful; she was young and impressionable, just nineteen, and he didn't want to mislead her into believing their friendly interactions were a precursor to romance. Nope, no romance was brewing, or would ever happen. It didn't matter how cute he found Akane to be. Getting emotionally entangled with another woman wasn't in the cards right now. His relationship with Stacie, virtually the woman of his dreams, went up in flames, because of him—the mistake of his life, a mistake he owned.

And being Linked with Stacie, it wasn't easy to get over her. Shared memories, emotions, and sensations from their time together remained ingrained within his cerebral implant. Even thinking about her now, he could practically feel her presence on him everywhere—her touch, her lips, the soothing press of her creamy naked flesh as they cuddled. The reprocessed sensations were so palpable that his spine began to tingle.

Strengthening intimacy through Linking was always an intrinsic risk. If a long-term relationship crashed and burned,

romantic partners could experience a short-term case of relationship withdrawal referred to as Cerebral-attachment Syndrome—a constant recycling of feelings, emotions, memories, and sensations; even recurring dreams of their ex-lover occurred. Thanks to the mnemonic power of a cerebral implant, Cerebral-attachment Syndrome could last from weeks to months.

Trying to move forward with his life, and get past the syndrome, he had tested the waters with Kesley Whittaker. The sex was off the chain, but fantastic sex wasn't enough to sustain a long-term intimate relationship with her. She just wasn't the woman he wanted to cocreate a lifelong partnership with, so their fling fizzled out. But they remained on good terms—friends for life, after everything they'd been through.

Randy put Stacie out of his head, left his bathroom, and went to his closet. His cabin's spread wasn't anything to write home about: a fold-out wall bed, an armoire, and a table. It was still roomier than the cabins on Vanguard Alpha's ship, the *Nightingale*. From the wardrobe inside the closet—CDF uniforms and civvies—he extracted a sleeve and drew it on, inserting his feet into the Shell's single-piece foundation suit. Pulling the thin flex material up over the defined contours of his body, he slid his stout arms into the arm holes of the sleeve. Then he yanked up on the zipper to close the jumpsuit-like uniform, drawing the material tight over his chest.

Movement for today's op was slated for zero-eight-hundred hours. That meant three hours till showtime. It was a direct-action mission. Vanguard Alpha was assigned to raid the compound of a human-criminal trafficking racket that had abducted several of the Commonwealth's women throughout the last several months, as well as women from planets outside the Union, adding to an emerging intergalactic diaspora of victimized rescuees. The traffickers were also dealing guns, mech suits, weaponized

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vehicles, and any other goods that would garner them a profit on the black markets of the universe. Human criminals had been deepening their pockets off the burgeoning intergalactic trafficking industry since Earth Era and showed no signs of slowing down.

First order of morning for Randy was chow as usual.

The two halves of the motion-activated door split when he neared. *Hiss*. He exited his quarters. Crossing the length of the corridor, he encountered Mark MaCallum and Dan Maddox—Paul Shaffer’s cohort. They were having an animated discussion, punctuated by profanity.

Mark said to Dan, with wild hand gestures, “Can you believe this softy Chief? Ethics investigations into CDF culture? Suspending planetary-impact missions *she’s* not cool with? Her idea of . . . reformation.” He scoffed.

“Yeah, she needs to concentrate on the Commonwealth’s debt crisis and leave the CDF out of her reformist warpath.”

Boots tapped in their direction.

Mark’s vision went sideways, eyeballing Randy from the corner of his peripheral vision. He twisted around with a sneering smile. “Well, well, if it isn’t Randal Scott—Warrior Extraordinaire, son of infamous war hero Arson Scott, and most of all . . .” with a frosty tone, “*traitor*.”

“Excuse me,” Randy said casually, and made a detour around them.

“How’s that black eye?” Dan said with a chuckle, taking digs at Randy to waylay him. “Maybe next time you oughtta learn how to throw a punch” he mimicked how to throw a “correct” punch, “before taking a cheap shot at Shaffer.”

Jaw clenched, eyes forward, Randy proceeded to distance himself from the troublemakers.

“What’s wrong, not in a talkative mood?” Dan said. Randy

surged ahead with a relaxed stride, ignoring them—acting unbothered. “Look at you, pretending to be all calm and collected, but deep down inside, you’re just a testy little punk kid, aren’t you? Not to mention a *murderer*.” Dan was doing his best to bait Randy into a fight, wanting to beat down the ex-Coalition fighter, the “traitor.”

Randy paused. Miffed, his hands tightened into fists.

Pushing the boundaries of Randy’s self-restraint, Dan kept running his mouth. “If you don’t like what I’m saying, do something about it. Your move, or are you just a pushover?”

Keeping his emotions in check, Randy unclenched his fists and went onward, preventing himself from kicking off another fistfight. No need to give Lieutenant Breckenridge another reason to bust his chops. “I don’t have time for your childish antics.”

“All bark and no bite,” Mark said, and he and Dan went back to chatting about whatever.

Randy rode an elevator pod down to the mezzanine ring of the Star Palace, the CDF’s way station in the X-Quadrant—a space platform of three annular tiers with wraparound windows. The mezzanine’s concourse was alive with restaurants, entertainment venues, rec areas, and commercial vendors. There were many nonhuman merchants there, permitted to transact by the Commonwealth Government.

The mezzanine ring was like a microcity. The lower ring was the shipyard. The upper ring was all quarters, and had a few lounges.

These space stations were rest stops for some task forces, one-to-three-month stays for those executing multiple assignments in their designated quadrant. Vanguard Alpha had been there three days now, to prepare for their op. This would be a short stay for them. After rescuing the abductees, they were to set course back to

Eden.

Randy strolled through the busy concourse.

The aroma of exotic cuisines pervaded the air. Guardians ate and bantered tumultuously.

While walking, his ears caught snippets of underhanded barbs from Guardians, in casual wear or sleeves, within enough proximity to recognize who he was. “There’s the traitor . . . Rebel scum . . . Murderer . . . Coalition filth . . . He should be in the grave, not those Guardians . . .”

Randy’s watchful eyes scoped his perimeter, scouring for threats, as if he could be stabbed in the back at any given moment. Paranoia had him walking on pins and needles. *Is this what it’s boiled down to?* he asked himself. *Sizing up my own fellow Guardians as if they’re all rabid dogs salivating to tear into me?* Majority of the CDF being nonimmigrant Eden inhabitants opposed to the colonies’ rebellion, he felt like a pariah in what was supposed to be his military family.

Up ahead, he saw Akane sitting with Jay and Sam, feasting over bowls of something flavorful.

They were suited up in their sleeves for the mission. Sam, always maintaining an Earth Era military man’s professional appearance, was clean-shaven as usual and habitually kept his hairline high and tight. Randy could tell they were a close-knit trio, bonded through battle.

“Hey, Randy, over here!” Akane shouted, in a childlike timbre—eyes of adoration glued to him. She rose erect from her chair, a mop of straggly bangs tumbling across her forehead. She waved a hand to flag him down—wearing a hospitable smile, face glowing. “Come join us!” she shouted. Her voice was bright and lively.

Randy couldn’t help but smile in return at his admirer’s warm invitation. Considering her offer to sit and break bread, he decided

to go ahead and fellowship with his teammates at the dining table. He settled into a chair—Jay to his left, Akane in front, Sam to his right.

From the neighboring tables: guffaw, chitchat, and the clinging of utensils.

Within seconds, a server golem on four wheels rolled up to Randy to log his order. The bot was shaped like a cube and had a domed head.

Randy selected whatever everyone else at the table was having, and the golem buzzed away.

“Randal Scott, the man who helped liberate the colonies from oppression!” Jay said, in an uplifting tone of voice.

Randy turned toward the young swarthy man with long dreadlocks. Crazy how things were, he thought; he was a shining hero to some Guardians, albeit a few, and apparently a bastard to others. And not being a spotlihter, the “hero” stuff really meant nothing to him. He didn’t consider himself some war legend or anything and desired no tribute. And in actuality, there were no “good guys” or “bad guys” fighting the Battle of the Quad. Yeah, there were bad apples in the CDF, maybe a lot of bad apples, but that wasn’t every single Guardian. And he didn’t have some bad-guy detector in his brain to differentiate between those bad apples and the good ones.

Corrupt politicians and the avarice Eight Elite were the real bad guys. Both the Coalition fighters and the CDF’s Guardians were just warriors carrying out their respective duties that abdominal day. There were heroes on both sides, in Randy’s book. The Battle of the Quad was just one big unavoidable catastrophic situation.

“So how was it? How was it like fighting the Battle of the Quad?” Jay asked. The young dark-skinned black man lounged back in his chair, relaxed his hands behind his head, and crossed

his ankles.

Flashbacks of Guardians going down returned Randy's mind to the horror of the Battle of the Quad. He'd done his best to preserve lives but wasn't able to avoid killing some Guardians. It was war, after all. Composing his thoughts, he replied to Jay pointedly. "Hellish." Excellent descriptor. "Definitely not table talk for me, you know what I mean?" Lest he be retraumatized.

Jay's voice firmed as he uncrossed his ankles and sat upright. "Gotcha. I know how injurious to the psyche combat can be. Believe me, I've seen an awful lotta gruesome violence in the hell zones I've been deployed to." His psyche hadn't gone unmarred either; planetary-impact missions weren't always pleasant, rarely ever actually. "Sorry," he said, apologizing for not being more mindful.

"It's okay." The server golem returned to the table, delivering Randy's meal and a tumbler of fizzing Blueberry Peppermint Chiller on a tray. "So, where are you and Sam from, colony or Eden?" Randy asked conversationally—making small talk, and gathering information to discern who he could trust. Yeah, Akane seemed to trust Sam and Jay, and she was trustworthy to him, but he called his own shots, remaining guarded for the time being.

Jay answered. "I'm from Colony Six, so is Sam."

A screen in the concourse was on a newscast. A well-aged anchorman in his late fifties—with silver hair, a dimple chin and deep voice—said, "All votes have been counted, and Ron Burchardt, a pro-reform dark horse, has won against the anti-reform candidate, Todd Sieger." It was special election number three of several, to decide the exiled Parliament members' successors, whose corruption was exposed by the Coalition. "Pro-reform" was the new media term for Parliament candidates committed to accelerating colony development and addressing the

outburst of immigrant mistreatment. “Anti-reform” was the new media term for candidates whose intention was to prolong the current—gradual—progression track for the colonies and weren’t interested in taking an active role in addressing immigrant mistreatment.

Boos reigned throughout the concourse, most Guardians there being anti-reform. The applause for Ron Burchardt was tepid at best.

The anchorman said, “It seems like a total illogical victory, according to pre-election polls. Sieger has demanded a recount, and authorities say they’ll be looking into suspected voter fraud.”

Guardians, angry at the election results, grumbled.

“And now here is our interview with Damien Sykes, who announced his candidacy for Chief Executive three days ago,” the anchorman said. “And if he were to win, he’d become the second youngest Chief in history, at thirty-two years of age.”

A handsome golden-tan man with slicked-back dark blonde hair appeared onscreen. The Sykes family was one of the Seven Elite—once Eight, now Seven, since Stacie Spencer had withdrawn from the conglomerate. Damien had inherited the reins of his parents’ criminal empire after their deaths, like the children of the other slain family heads. The Seven’s bylaws forbade family heads from taking political office, capsizing the conglomerate’s power dynamics. But Damien was the odd man out. The ways of old were the byproduct of archaic mindsets, and it was beyond time for change. A staunch proponent of the current socioeconomic status quo, he was positioned as the poster boy for Eden’s anti-reform base.

Randy and his comrades looked toward the screen. The interview grabbed the attention of other Guardians as well. Damien was pegged as a major front-runner for the Chief Executive’s seat



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in next year's election. The wealthy corporate businessman was gaining traction and was expected to give Oviereya a run for her money.

The female interviewer said, "What is your message to the people of the Commonwealth, Mr. Sykes?"

Damien, with a snicker and a sly grin, gave off villainous vibes. "Simple. We need justice. A bunch of colony insurrectionists started a civil war and invaded our soil, killing Guardians. Not since the Bhalkran War had there been an attack here on Eden. And families are hurt. They deserve to have their loved ones' murderers incarcerated, or better yet, executed.

"A lot of people say the Coalition coming to Eden and removing corrupt politicians was a *good* thing. Okay, hear me out. If I went above the law and killed some psychopathic wife beater, would people be pissed off about it? Of course not. But does that mean I just get to walk away scot-free? No, it doesn't. So if someone who goes all vigilante is subject to the consequences of the law, then how the hell do a bunch of treasonists get to skate free?" His angry bronze eyes glared into the camera. "Tell us that, Amaechi. *Huh?* Tell emotionally devastated widows and parentless children why their loved ones' killers are loose. It makes no fucking sense. Eden's people are hurt and deserve better. And I understand their anguish; my parents, far from perfect, were murdered by the Coalition. And let's face it, these treasonists could've employed other strategies for accomplishing their colony-equality objective. Instead, they ignited a civil war and invaded humanity's motherworld."

"Well, to the Chief Executive's defense, the Union declared the colony rebellion justified, and she has the power and right to pardon anyone she wants, just like any other Chief," the interviewer said, unknowingly about to set off a tirade.

Damien's brows quirked. The controversial public figure went off. "Pardon? No, this is different! So don't give me that nonsense! And as for the Union playing Big Brother, to hell with their . . . ruling. We need to unseat Amaechi, get this peace-loving Coalition panderer outta office!"

Memories of the Battle of the Quad, refusing to lie dormant, besieged Randy's thoughts with mental visuals of combat casualties. His features pinched. Guilt and remorse—for the few lives he'd taken—engraved themselves into his face. Then his chin tilted toward his chest.

Jay's green-dyed eyes flicked over at him. "You letting that slimeball get into your head?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Randy said nonchalantly, playing down the pain. He sipped his drink, the complicit countenance on his face unchanged.

Damien's aggressive tongue continued to put Oviereya on blast. "She's even been promoting the idea of permitting the colonies unfettered access to trading partners. You know why that's a dumb idea? Easy, it means Eden would be competing for resources with its own colonies. *Duh*. There's a reason why things are the way they are. There's a reason why we didn't, and shouldn't, deviate from the blueprint the Omni-system fashioned for the New Humanity. The system's creators, Doctors Cyrus Kline, Jagr Vlcek, and Atticus Hancroft, knew what they were doing. Oviereya is dismantling our society in a very, very bad way."

After finishing off her pink bubbling beverage, Akane slammed her cup to the table and expelled an extralong sigh of disgust. "Damien Sykes, just another Gould."

"Worse," Sam opined. "Gould was . . . well-spoken. The skillful politician. He was low-key compared to this loudmouth."

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Sykes is . . . more flamboyant. More of a hothead. More outspoken. He's a demagogue who doesn't give a shit about censoring himself to cater to the less-extreme or just to save face. Gould articulated himself with finesse, but this guy, not so much. Sykes doesn't play it safe, at all. And unfortunately people are flocking toward him."

"You don't think he'd win the election, do you?" Akane questioned. "He's the son of one of the Eight. And the Coalition exposed the family heads for what they were, when they published those files across the net. They proved the eight family heads were just a buncha crime moguls."

Sam said, "Damien's been proven guilty of *nothing*, though. He's playing dumb, and he's promised to disband all criminal activities. An obvious lie, but in this new era of colonist hate, he's the savior a lot of Eden inhabitants are looking for. They're energized by this . . . loose cannon, so they overlook what's staring them right in the damn face: the possibility that he's no different from his parents. And the crazy thing is that I think he has a heck of a chance at unseating the incumbent Chief next year, according to polls.

"Oviereya . . . is soft. This guy's a bloodthirsty rampaging bull; she's a dove." He sipped his drink. "Oviereya needs to learn how to go on the offensive and not just play defense. You keep trying to be passive in a fistfight, your face eventually gets mauled. You've gotta get aggressive in politics, *really* aggressive. And maybe that's not her style, but like on the battlefield, if you don't adjust and adapt your tactics to your enemy's offense, you're dead."

Listening to Sam, Randy got the impression that he was not only the oldest of everyone at the table but the most insightful and combat-seasoned.

Jay contributed to the convo, saying, "Yeah, but I just can't see

some Purist sicko like Sykes becoming the Commonwealth's head honcho." Sam's face loured at Jay for mouthing the word "Purist," like it was forbidden. "And we know he's one of 'em. Gotta be. There're even rumors floating around about it now."

"Excuse me, a what?" Randy asked, raising a puzzled brow.

"You don't know?" Jay said.

"Is there a reason I should?" Randy retorted.

"Guess not. People who *do* hear about Purists think they're just fiction, some concoction of conspiracy groupies on the net. With you being prior Coalition, I thought maybe you would've heard about . . ."

"Sorry, I don't hang around the rumor mill or the land of conspiracy theory."

"Yeah, understandable," Akane chimed in. "Almost no one knows about them. And, as Jay said, people who do hear about them think they're just make-believe. But that's what they want." She rested her forearms on the table. "They're incognito. They don't give away who they are. It's not like they're running membership ads on the net or posting interest flyers around town.

"These people are rotten to the core, the worst of discriminators. They make Gould look like a saint. These . . . hive-minded, cult-like idealists are just die-hard believers in the Omnisystem's social stratification of the human race, like the damn thing was God. It's like they think Eden inhabitants are . . . 'the ordained' or something. These people do everything within their power to prolong the status quo and deprive colony inhabitants and immigrants of prosperity. They've got their slimy tentacles in politics, government, and even the CDF. All they . . ." anger flashed, "wanna do is acquire power and gin up fear.

"The rank delays, hangings, and harassment of immigrant Guardians . . . we think Purists within the CDF are behind the

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majority of them. Their wacko keep-the-hate-alive movement is catching fire, attracting followers. *Purists* are the ones who broadcasted the names and faces of Coalition fighters across the net, calling for whack jobs to track them down and murder them. And our hunches tell us Sergeant Shaffer's . . ." Sam craned his head toward Akane, brows knitted. Not another word left her mouth.

Randy, observant and incisive, tried to decipher the enigmatic message on Sam's face. He wasn't quite sure what it meant. It was like a . . . look of reprimand, a signal to shut up, as if Akane might be disclosing too much.

"Akane, I think Randy's heard enough for now," Sam remarked in a critical tone. "Some of this may be a lot to digest. We don't want him thinking we're nuts or something, now do we?"

All were quiet.

Randy's eyes swept the frozen faces at the table. Not one mouth moved. Diffusing the awkward atmosphere, which was dragging on, he said, "Meal was delicious." He got up. "I'm gonna go ahead and get to the *Nightingale*. I'll see you guys there." He walked away.

Slapping her hands down on the table, Akane pushed herself up from her chair, shooting to her feet. "Let me talk to him." Her voice was fervent with determination. "He might even be able to convince Arson Scott himself to lend us a hand." To emphasize such significance, she added, "War hero, Coalition icon, Reza's *top* commander. *Hell-oh*."

"You think we can trust him, fully?" Jay questioned, panning his head from Sam to Akane, with a visage of skepticism. "He killed Reza, after all. The Purists had Gould to believe in, we had Reza. And he and his dad took Reza from us."

Sam twined his fingers. He spoke thoughtfully, relaying his opinion. “Jay, Reza was my hero too,” he said, toneless. “And I say he had the right idea, eliminating the eight family heads and the corrupt officials. Some call it murder; I call it justice. But the fact of the matter is Reza’s change in course was going to end in defeat. Him pulling a three-sixty and crowning himself sovereign ruler of the Commonwealth Government would’ve caused the Coalition’s assault force to implode, rebels for the change in course and rebels opposed to it fighting each other. And the CDF would’ve taken advantage of the infighting and destroyed the assault force entirely. Even if the rebels remained united, there was no way, and I mean *no way*, they would’ve been able to overpower the CDF.

“Hammer Fall was supposed to be a quick op: take over the Quad, cast the corruption files into the public domain, and call for peace. Following Reza’s new plan, the Coalition would’ve eventually lost the Battle of the Quad, unless he had an ace up his sleeve no one knew about.” Which was possible. “And don’t think Guardians or citizens of Eden were going to accept Reza and praise him as a savior just because he exposed some corrupt officials and deactivated the net filters to allow colonists’ maltreatment, under the government, to be brought to light. Bullshit. So it was good that the Scotts dethroned him and allowed Amaechi to acquire the Chief Executive’s seat. A tough pill to swallow, but the Scotts made the right call, killing him.

“And don’t get the wrong idea. I listen to Reza’s orations nearly every day. I teach my kids about him, so they’ll know the revolutionary he was, and not the tyrant the majority of Eden portrays him to be. But Reza *had* let power poison his head. You take over things internally, not always by force. You infiltrate sectors of the government and military. You game the system. And

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you mete out justice not by public executions but in the most discreet way possible—a way that doesn't draw attention to oneself, a way that leaves no footprints. Plausible deniability. Reza's downfall was himself, Jay.”

Jay leaned into the backrest of his chair and took a moment of silence, coming to terms with the truth. “But do you think Randal Scott would cede to our ideals, our way of doing things?”

A driven woman, Akane remained persistent. “Just let me talk to him. I can persuade him to join us.” She sent her dark-eyed gaze toward Sam, seeking approval. “Yea or nay, Guthrie?” she demanded, irritation level rising as she alternated her thumb between thumbs-up and thumbs-down. “C'mon.”

Sam's pale-blue eyes stared into Akane's pleading expression. He could see she was passionate about enlisting Randy's help for their mission. “Alright, he's your assigned prospect now. Feed him info in small doses. No need to overdo it. Use sound judgment.”

Akane nodded understanding and raced off after Randy, a smile tugging on the corners of her mouth.

Jay said to Sam, “Akane's drooling over Randal Scott a little too much. She's getting way too attached. Don't get me wrong, I respect a guy who airdropped onto the Quad and risked life and limb to emancipate the colonies from systematic oppression, but he's not part of our trusted circle yet. Too early to be getting *that* cozy.”

Voice flat, Sam responded. “Honestly, Jaime, I don't care who Akane gushes over. As long as she's deadass sure where Scott's mindset is at before letting him through our door, she can get starry-eyed over him all she wants.”

Maneuvering her way through the jam-packed concourse of D-

Block to catch up to Randy, Akane hollered, “Hey, Randy, wait up!” The little svelte Guardian, in a hurry, jostled against shoulder after shoulder. “Excuse me . . . Sorry . . . Pardon me . . . Comin’ through.”

“Hey, watch where you’re goin’,” a man said, Akane shoving past him.

“Randy!” Akane called out.

Randy paused and wheeled around. “Akane, what’s up?”

Akane caught her breath. “We still got some time before the strategy brief. Stroll with me, kay?”

*Wonder what’s her aim.* Curious to know where this conversation would lead, Randy accepted her offer. “Sure, okay. Why not? Like you said, we’ve got some time, and I’d like to get better acquainted with my teammates.”

Akane smiled gratefully. “Awesome.” Eardrums pestered by raucous idle chatter, she scanned for a quieter venue to converse. She took notice of the environmental recreation-domes. “How about a park sim?” she suggested.

“Yeah, that’ll work.”

They went to one of the silver dome-shaped constructs. The doors chirped and hissed open. Beyond was a hydroponic biosphere simulating a park with fancy white benches, misting fountains, and walk bridges arched over artificial ponds.

The sky was a hyperrealistic holo, bright and blue with puffy white clouds. Piped-in sound effects mimicked birdsong. The plant life, like the colorful flower beds, was organic—grown synthetically.

*Good replica,* Randy thought as he and Akane began their nature walk. Definitely felt real.

His cerebral implant pinged. Akane had forwarded a Link request.



“Yeah, right,” Randy remarked, denying the request. He’d shut down Akane’s hopes for closer connection—one of the most intimate connections of all—for now.

Akane didn’t think he’d accept this early in their budding relationship, but it was worth a try, she thought. “C’mon, I want you to trust me, Randy. And we’re already friends, right? So what’s the big deal?”

*Whoever said we were friends?* “Let’s cross one bridge at a time. Besides, why the heck would you want to be inside my head anyway?”

Akane’s exotic eyes gaped with adulation. “You’re kidding me, right? You participated in one of the greatest acts of heroism in Commonwealth history!” she exclaimed. “The liberators who airdropped onto the Quad that day are rock stars to immigrants like me, especially you and your dad!”

Was that why she wanted to Link? Randy wondered. To get closer to a supposed “colony hero”? To learn from him? To get an orgasmic thrill off being psychically connected to someone she had a major crush on? The last annoyance he needed right now was some one-girl fan club.

As Akane and Randy sauntered under a trellis threaded with tangles of green vines, she said, “It’s because of you and your dad that the ceasefire happened, that Amaechi was appointed Chief, getting a colony restoration initiative going.” While strolling, holos of Earth Era animals materialized: rabbits, tortoises, squirrels, and others. “Who *wouldn’t* wanna Link with you, man?”

This kid’s head was in the clouds, Randy thought, and it was time to bring her back down to reality. He paused their walk right at the trellis’ exit. Censuring her, he said, “Believe me, there’s a lot up here” he pointed to his temple, “that you *don’t* want to see. That you don’t want to experience. You can’t comprehend the . . .

chronic trauma the Battle of the Quad cursed me with, faceless dead forever memorialized in my mind. You haven't encountered true pain, Akane, my pain—the pain of killing fellow Guardians, coupled with the pain of killing Coalition fighters who I was convinced were the enemy, before joining them. The mental anguish never seems to fully go away. You can't . . . outfight it. Its echo always returns to torment me. The kind of strife I live with, Akane, you don't want to know.

“And hey, I could've refused to participate in Hammer Fall. I could've just went back to Eden and sat on the sidelines, not joining the CDF or Coalition, protecting my conscience.” He sighed. “But I don't regret participating in Hammer Fall. Can't pull a time machine out of my ass and rewrite history anyway. But . . . because of that battle . . . because of the sacrifice . . . I can't even live out my own fucking military career in peace. I'm always . . . having to keep my head on a swivel, in fear of a Guardian knifing me in the back, for revenge. Best you protect the sanctity of your mind from any spillage of my unpleasant misfortune.” Linking came with pros and cons.

In an offended tone, Akane struck back. “Hey, *wiseguy*, save the roasting for some newbie fresh out of Basic. I already know something about living with pain.” The headstones of Skylar Grace and Desmond Castillo flashed in her mind, along with . . . the headstone of a woman dear to her. Akane Sugimori wasn't a newcomer to pain and suffering.

“Do you?” Randy questioned her.

“Yeah, and I know how it's like to live with paranoia too. I'm an immigrant, a target for Purists inside the CDF, just like you, after all.”

Randy rolled his eyes. “Here we go with this ‘Purist’ psycho-babble again.”

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With Akane's grip on her calm loosening and loosening, an outburst of emotion came bawling from her mouth. "They're a really big threat, *goddammit*, to people like you and me! Trust me. I know how far they'll go to rid the Commonwealth of immigrants." She gripped the chest of Randy's sleeve and bunched a wad of the fabric in her hand. "And those lowlifes took someone special from me, so don't lecture me about pain." The acrimony in her voice, the fire in her eyes, Randy hadn't seen her in such an incensed state. "I don't wanna see you, one of our heroes, found hacked into a million pieces by these shitbags. You get me, Randy?"

Though he wished she'd drop the "hero" stuff, her passionate outburst firmed Randy's features, now taking the youngster more seriously.

Akane said, "Purist cells are seeded across Eden, plotting to dominate central and region state government, law enforcement, and the CDF. Cliques of these people are all throughout our institutions, but you wouldn't recognize them, not blatantly. And remember, these people aren't your regular Eden citizens who just have a stuck-up, high n' mighty disposition toward immigrants. These people are *dangerous*. These people will kill."

"So, these Purists are like a . . . shadow society or something—operating under everyone's noses, existing outside the law."

Akane unballled her hand, letting go of Randy's uniform. "Bingo. A lot of cells are independent, but all are acting in solidarity toward a homogeneous goal: to keep Eden free of colonist integration, keep the colonists a bunch of servile resource harvesters, and ensure immigrants remain the lowest stratum of Eden society. They inspire leaderless resistance, lone actors committing acts of violence in the name of their warped manifesto. Our republic is under siege by these Purist groups. But they've got

opposition, who're countering them.”

*So, some sort of shadow warfare's going on?* Randy thought.

“The opposition espouses Reza's ideals but rebukes his late methods of executing those ideals,” Akane said. This talk of warring sides was giving Randy feelings of déjà vu. “It's a game of chess . . . an arcane war between two diametrical mentalities . . .”

*Okay, enough with the crumbs. Time for real answers,* Randy thought. He was fed up with Akane being all cryptic. “And just how do you know all this, Akane, *huh?*” he pressed, interrupting her.

Akane's wrist PDA chirped. “Aw, man! It's almost showtime. I can get into the nitty-gritty later. Right now, we gotta haul ass if we don't wanna be late for the mission brief. And we don't wanna piss off Breckenridge, believe me.” She rushed off, exiting the simulated environment and leaving the conversation at a cliffhanger.

Randy's brow furrowed. “To be continued, then,” he said, voice cold. *Who are you, Private Sugimori?* he wondered. Akane wasn't a quick study. There seemed to be a lot more to her than met the eye.