

Prologue: Another Orphan

“I have always emphasized to my dedicated supporters and fans the importance of drawing inspiration from the remarkable individuals who have defeated me, for they embody the true essence of kingship.”

-Bram “Silver King” Liton

-Tier 5 Enhanced

-Circa 2123 AD

-Post-Match Interview

If you are seeing this video recording, then the desperate plan of Paradox and Liliana has succeeded. We are among the last remaining living humans on planet Earth in Sector 230. This is a plea for help as our stars slowly darken. It would be unfair of me to expect strangers to aid us without understanding our plight.

But first, I think it's essential to provide a brief overview of the events that occurred over a century ago. The year 2103 by our calendar was a good year for us. Several technological milestones were broken, along with the holy grail that is quantum materials. This, however, drew the attention of the Galactic Council, a government made by the superpowers of the galaxy.

As we were rejoicing in our achievements, they arrived and presented an ultimatum to our many leaders: Join or Die. As an incentive, they offered each

of our leaders remarkable technological marvels that could propel the nation into a new era, on the condition that we offer our servitude to them.

Consequently, our world became deeply divided. Some advocated for unity with the Celestials, while others vehemently resisted. The side advocating for peace, though fewer in number, held a bigger sway due to the gifts they received. A month of tense peace talks began while the already overburdened food supply chain slowly unraveled amid the escalating chaos.

Eventually, the War erupted. Despite the Pacifists being outnumbered, they managed to endure as the gifts showed their worth, and new technologies reverse-engineered from those gifts joined the battlefield.

The war dragged on for a grueling five years, bringing with it anarchy, hopelessness, and, worst of all, a never-ending famine. The introduction of Enhanced in the final year of the war spelled the end of it. However, the anarchy persisted for another five years until the new government had the chance to establish itself and create new laws.

Around a quarter of our population was eradicated during the ensuing chaos, leading us to call the decade the Dark Days. However, the important thing here is the creation of the Enhanced Aptitude Test (EAT). Giving 16-year-olds a way to become Enhanced.

This narrative is a hurried compilation of my memories, memories shared with me, and reconstructed fragments from intelligence reports.

The narrative starts with a memory of August 28th, 2123, 15 years after the War ended.

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I snap to consciousness in a haze of pain, searching for anything to block out the agonizing shivers coursing through my bruised and broken body. There

is a feeling of cool concrete underneath me as I try to move my arms, only to find that my left shoulder is dislocated. I choke down a scream while I whisper to myself, *Think of the oceans, Elian. Calm down.*

In an attempt to distract myself, I try to recall my earliest recollection.

My oldest memory is of my parents venturing out during the Dark Days, donning motorcycle gear, carrying a knife and metal bat, and kissing me and Sofia goodbye before leaving the house.

They would return every evening, even more haggard and exhausted than the day before. But we always had enough food to eat comfortably and leftovers to save for lean times. This was a true feat when most people struggled to get two meals. We were happy and content; at least my sister and I were.

Fast forward two years, and a routine day turns into an endless night as we wait for our parents to return. Bearing armfuls of food as they always have. Hope, our only anchor, stretched thin as the subsequent weeks became the most dreadful of my existence. Shaking off the memories, I focus on the present agony.

Forcefully pulling myself out of that pile of miserable memories, I return my attention to that damnable pain. I almost bite clean through my tongue as I manage to pop my shoulder back into its place.

Only then do I open my eyes and look up at the starry night sky, which is adorned by a full moon and wedged between two massive skyscrapers. It's a shame that the pipes and wires that run between the buildings are obscuring the view.

Getting up, I walk away from the street with its blinding lights, towards the darkness at the end of the narrow corridor I am currently in. Once I am submerged in the shadows at the end of the corridor, I turn right and jump up,

using the two closest walls to propel myself until I am eight feet high. Drop onto a ledge that leads to another corridor.

On the edge of a landing is a simple wooden crate with a logo proclaiming it to be made by Astra, a company that specializes in MREs.

I discovered it a few hours ago in an overturned delivery truck. Thanking whatever god sent me this gift. I push the crate along the dark corridor. After about 100 meters, I stand before a ledge, drop, and pull the crate in behind me.

I am standing in a clearing between four buildings. The space stretches approximately 15 meters on either side, riddled with numerous pipes, some featuring makeshift flaps. It bears the signs of long-term habitation: a pile of crates near the ledge where I came from, a small pile of books and a battered lamp in one corner casting a soft golden light, mismatched dishes and an electric stove in another corner, and two worn-out sleeping bags in the next. An old HoloScreen plays a recent battle from the Enhanced Tournament in the last.

Turning to one of the flaps, I ask aloud, "Sofia, why is it so hot?" Opening it, I let the cool air flow in. I am careful to only release air in small bursts so that it looks like a leak in the pipes to the AI system monitoring the pipes.

The HoloScreen pauses as one contestant in an elegant black metallic suit with gold accents is about to cut into a decidedly feminine suit with beautiful azure wings. I hear my sister reply from the sofa that the Tigradium is getting foggy.

Sure enough, when I looked up at the dented sheet of transparent Tigradium metal, I had salvaged to serve as our roof. It was getting foggy and ruining one of my favorite views. The serene night sky—I don't know why I love the night sky so much since it always seems to relax my soul and let my worries drain away.

Sitting, I relish the view of the stars as the Tigrarium sheet gradually fogs over. It's even better with my sister by my side, lying down and resting her head on my lap as she gazes at the distant moon. She is tall for her age, has grey eyes—a stark contrast to my golden ones—and her dyed hair is a vibrant ice blue. Giving her the appearance of an ice goddess from the mythologies of old.

A full moon casts a gentle glow over my small world, as the last stars fade behind the encroaching fog. My sister asks, “Hey bro, how was your day? Did you find anything good? I salvaged a pretty recent Holodeck that some rich person must have thrown out. It should fetch quite a price.”

Upon hearing the news, my face lights up with a wide grin. *That money will keep us afloat for a while.* As nonchalantly as I can manage, I tell her about my trip to the junkyard to find stuff to sell after school, where a delivery truck overturned. Out of all of those packages, one was from Astra, which I dragged back home.

Her face brightens as I say this, and she hugs me. This much food will surely last us a few months, even if we eat like kings. Her hug causes me to wince as she puts her weight on several of my bruises.

I notice her narrowing eyes and hurry to explain how I had been followed by a few gang members after they had seen me running with the crate. I describe lifting the crate to the ledge of the corridor leading here, then jumping down and running to the entrance of the corridor that ran between the two buildings. Then I lay against a wall, breathing heavily and pretending to hold my stomach as if I had gotten sucker-punched.

When the gang members finally catch up to me and demand the crate, I claim that another rival gang had attacked me and forced me to hand it over.

Recognizing the lie, they pushed me aside and searched the corridor, but they never once looked up at the ledge where the edge of the crate was barely visible.

They left after they felt satisfied that I was telling the truth. Still, before leaving, they left some “friendly” reminders for wasting their time and warned me not to do it again and to immediately hand over my spoils the next time to save myself from trouble. *It is best if she does not know about my dislocated shoulder.*

Giving me a glare that could melt steel, she barks, “Do not move an inch from that spot, and remove your shirt. I will be back in a moment with the salve.”

Getting up, she takes out a medicinal salve from one crate and tenderly applies it to all my bruises, all while scolding me for taking unnecessary risks when EAT is the day after tomorrow.

I pretend to act sorry for my actions so that she will stop glaring at me. But my face betrays me with a smile at the thought that for the first time in a long while, we do not have to worry about food and money for at least some time while this boon lasts.

“What are you smiling for?”

“Nothing, just thinking about the next few months after today's luck. Hopefully, if things go well the day after tomorrow, things will look up for us.”

Sighing, she pulls me to my feet and says, “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch, and don't think I will let you go to bed without some revision.”

Following her to the sofa as we sit down, she says, “Okay, let's start with some straightforward questions. What is the purpose of the test?”

“The purpose of the test is to find whether the candidate is suitable for being raised and gaining the Enhanced title,” I replied. “What does it mean to be Enhanced?”

“Enhanced individuals are those who have passed the test and received the General Artificial Intelligence and the Path. An enhanced individual has numerous neural pathways within their body, enhanced senses, nanobot factories, and ultimately, a powerful biocompatible CPU.”

“What is the Path?”

“It is a way to enhance your GAI by receiving censored data about everyone's life from those directly below you in social order or through data acquired during combat. The GAI can use various sensors to gather large amounts of data and improve itself through learning. However, these sensors are mainly active during combat, so an Enhanced power increases quickest by fighting.”

“Why doesn't the GAI run all its sensors all the time, instead of only during high-intensity moments like fighting?”

“This block has been imposed to stop overheating and also to feed the AI small quantities of high-quality data instead of large quantities of mostly repeating data. This also helps the CPU not to become overloaded.”

As the moon lazily traces its path through the serene night sky, Sofia continues to quiz me. The questions soon become more challenging, but with my occasional witty remarks, I crack Sofia's tough exterior, transforming her stern expressions into bursts of giggles. Eventually, fatigue catches up with us, and so we make our way to moth-eaten piles of furry cloth that we call our beds.

Chapter 1: The Hall Of Misery

"Each year, around ten million students participate in the EAT, with over one million qualifying for physical testing. Ultimately, nearly ten thousand people become Enhanced. However, only around eight thousand of them successfully complete the process; the fate of the remaining individuals remains unknown or unaccounted for. This raises a few red flags for me."

- Dr. Emily Gent

- PhD in Statistics

- Age 43

- Five Days Before Sudden Death

Abruptly, the next morning arrives, time slipping away unnoticed. I rush through my morning routine as I realize I have overslept. Fighting against pain from yesterday night's bruises.

Rushing to the sofa, I grab my salvaged backpack, which houses my meager possessions. Sofia, still wrapped in the remnants of sleep, stirs in her makeshift bed. "Elian, what's happening?" she mumbles sleepily.

"I overslept. The EAT is today. I need to go now," I reply. Without waiting for her response, I climb up on the crate from last night's bounty, which acts as a makeshift ladder at the entrance to the corridor.

As I reach the street after a mad dash, a holographic news display greets me, telling everyone who passes by that the EAT is in 34 minutes. Swearing under my breath as I realize I won't be able to make it there on time if I walk, I rush to the nearest subway station.

I dash down the stairwell, swiping my wrist-comm across the sensor to deduct the subway fare. The turnstile grants me passage, and I sprint to catch the approaching train. As the doors close behind me, I feel the drain on my account—valuable credits evaporating.



In the silence of the cosmic void, a dream takes flight,
A crimson planet, a distant sight, calling through the night.
Spacesuits on, we step outside, under the starry dome,
Rocket engines roaring, we leave our earthly home.



As I fret over the upcoming exam and my lost credits, obnoxious music plays over the speakers of the train. Judging by the blank and vacant looks on the faces of my fellow passengers, they must have gotten used to singers paying money to have their songs played on subways to get a few more fans to follow them.

The rest of the subway ride blurs into a mix of anxious thoughts and the rhythmic hum of the train. As the subway car comes to a halt, I dash out of the station and emerge into a bustling city. In front of me is the college, a grand institution with ivy-covered walls and a blend of classical and modern architecture. At the entrance, there is a sea of people nervously shuffling around, having hushed conversations, and shooting glances at each other.

I push through the throng, moving towards the entrance. The security checkpoint is meticulous, with scanners checking for any unauthorized enhancements. The hallways are lined with banners showcasing the achievements of previous alumni. I navigate through the labyrinthine corridors, fighting against the press of the crowd as I finally reach the waiting area for my designated examination room.

I take a spot against one wall, waiting for my friends to arrive. As I wait, I glance around, and I'm not surprised to find that people of similar social order are grouped together. *Typical, the rich and their bloody social games.*

Even the question paper is different for different groups! Of course, the committee holding the exams all swears that this is to prevent cheating, and the papers are made to be of equal difficulty by overseeing AI. Sure, the papers are of equal difficulty, but having different question papers allows them to leak the question paper to the upper echelons of society with no one finding out. At least, that's what the rumors say.

I am shaken from my thoughts as I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I am greeted by the familiar faces of my friends, Corvus and Mara.

Corvus, a wiry man with below-average height, brown eyes, and skin, hands me a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of toast. "Elian, dude, we heard you overslept and rushed here like a madman. Sofia said that you didn't even have breakfast," he says.

Mara, always dressed in black pants and a leather jacket, adds, "Yeah, we figured you might need some fuel for that brain of yours before diving into the Hall of Misery."

She smirks, trying to lighten the mood. I must say that her black eyes and purple-tipped raven hair look great with her outfit.

Accepting the coffee and toast, gratitude washes over me. "You guys are lifesavers. I don't know what I'd do without you." The warmth of their friendship provides a comforting contrast to the nerves that still linger in the air. Together, we stand against the wall, sipping coffee and exchanging small talk, trying to distract ourselves from the looming exam. As the minutes tick away, the anticipation in the corridor grows, and the echoes of whispered conversations die.

Out of the classroom at the end of the corridor, a middle-aged woman steps out. She is in her early 40s, with short brown hair and a warm smile. She is wearing a black blazer and a white shirt, and she carries a stack of papers in her hands. Walking with a confident stride, her sharp and intelligent eyes scan the crowd. Seeing her, the last murmurs of conversation finally die away, and there is an awkward silence before she begins speaking in a ringing voice that carries to the furthest reaches of the students, hinting at the presence of hidden speakers and a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Enhanced Aptitude Test. I am Dr. Emily Gent, and I will oversee the proceedings today. Before we begin, let me remind you of the gravity of this test. Passing the EAT is not just an achievement; it is a gateway to a new life, a life of enhanced abilities and opportunities. However, the path to becoming Enhanced is fraught with challenges, and not all who embark on this journey emerge victorious."

"As you sit in these classrooms, remember that this is the Hall of Misery, as I like to call it. It is a place where your intellect, adaptability, and resilience will be tested. I urge you to give your best and to leave no stone unturned in pursuit of success. For those who make it through, a world of possibilities awaits. But do not underestimate the significance of this moment. The choices you make today will forever shape the mark you leave on this world. May your stars forever shine bright."

With Dr. Gent's words echoing in my mind, I enter the examination room along with Corvus and Mara. Rows of desks fill the space; each one is adorned with a holographic display.

Seated, we watch as the holographic screens flicker to life, unveiling the first set of questions. The room falls silent, the only sound being the occasional tap of fingers on holographic keyboards. The questions are interesting, to say the least. Testing not only my memory but also my ability to apply them quickly and effectively. I rush through the questions, trying to conserve time as the questions slowly get more and more difficult, requiring me to read them multiple times to comprehend them.

The whole exam is like a fever dream, and I don't even realize I have finished all the questions until I am on the confirmation screen, which politely asks if I am ready to submit my paper. Pride courses through me as I realize that I have managed to finish the exam in two and a half hours out of the allocated 3 hours. I look to my side and see that Corvus has already finished and left the room, so I confirm my submission and go to join him. As I leave the classroom, I find him leaning against the wall, beckoning to me with a smile to join him.

Instantly, he whispers, "Dude, if we had not stolen that rich and somewhat smart kid's book last month, we would have been so screwed. Like, half of the questions were from that book, and they were only present in that book. I feel sad for the rest of the kids; they will struggle so hard."

I reply, "We can't do anything about that. You know that all those books we stole from those kids are illegal. It was hard to use them with all the monitoring scans everywhere. Also, we should stop talking about this, as someone might overhear, plus you have not explained how the exam went for you."

After about 15 minutes, Mara exited the room and joined us, giving each of us a warm smile on her face and a knowing look.

“Well, that was interesting. How many people do you think will fail this exam?”

“Way too many,” Corvus replies with a solemn head shake.

“Way too little,” I reply at the same time.

As both Mara and Corvus turn to stare at me, I rush to defend myself, “Well, fewer people qualifying means we have less competition, especially since the physical portion is based on a rank cutoff instead of a percentile.”

“That's cold, bro,” was Corvus's only response.

“Well, consider it. Corvus.” Mara stands up for me. “He has a valid point. Everyone is out for themselves.”

“I guess, yea, but it just doesn't sit right with me,” Corvus replies.

“Since when has this world been fair?” Mara quips back.

Corvus sinks into a contemplative silence, gazing out the window at the city's skyscrapers. While Mara and I continue to chat about pretty much anything other than the exam, when I get around to telling her about the day before yesterday's event, even Corvus can't help but join in.

After what felt like an eternity, Dr. Gent finally emerges from the examination room. The hushed whispers that had arisen over the past few minutes quickly die as she clears her throat and addresses us.

“Young Cadets, the time for the written examination has ended. If you still need to complete the questions by now, you are disqualified from further consideration. For those who have finished, the next phase awaits.”

A collective sigh of relief rippled through the crowd, but on a few faces, there was disappointment for their friends. Every year there is a twist; last year they pumped the rooms with a slight sleep-inducing agent, so for those unlucky

few who had stayed up late all night, they all fell asleep on their benches. Sadly, such blatant discrimination is expected and is just another way to thin the crowd.

Dr. Gent continues speaking, "We will now call the names of the candidates who have qualified for the physical examination. Please listen carefully. We will call five names at a time. If your name is not called, you have not qualified for the next round. If you have qualified for the next round, please head to B-Wing Room 101 to await further instructions."

The tension in the air reaches a fever pitch as Dr. Gent reads out the names. Each name echoes through the corridor, and with each announcement, the crowd thins. My heart pounds in my chest as I listen, hoping to hear my name.

"Elian Sylvus." Dr. Gent's voice rings, and a surge of relief washes over me. I exchange a quick glance with Corvus and Mara, who nod in acknowledgment with small smiles on their faces on my behalf.

While the names were being called, I couldn't help but notice the range of emotions on everyone's faces. It was a symphony of human emotions: joy, disappointment, and lastly, satisfaction.

Eventually, Dr. Gent finishes the list for our group. "The rest of you, thank you for participating. We appreciate your efforts, but you will not proceed to the next round. Please exit the premises promptly." And with that, she turns around and heads back out the door she came in from without a second look at us.

The rejected candidates file out silently, their dreams of becoming Enhanced shattered. It was a harsh reality, and as I walk past them, I am unable to shake the guilt gnawing at me. In this unforgiving world, survival demands a certain ruthlessness, so I push those thoughts aside.

Following the directions, I lead Corvus and Mara toward B-Wing Room 101. After a walk filled with a mix of relieved smiles and nervous glances, we enter the designated room, where other qualifiers are already gathering.

The room has already been divided into four groups, each representing a distinct social class. The first is filled with the sons and daughters of politicians, billionaires, commanders, and the like. Next to them is the largest group, which takes over half the room and has people belonging to the mid-upper and middle-upper classes, all of whom are trying to rub shoulders with each other. The third group with the smallest number of people is the poor, who are wondering what this break from work will cost them, and the last group is the people who don't care about all this social maneuvering at all. This is the group my friends and I join.

As we reach a secluded corner, an argument breaks out between a kid dressed in an expensive suit and a poorer one who is dressed in a formal shirt and jeans a couple of sizes too large. Instantly, each member of both groups eyes each other, the poor with anger and the rich with disdain. And as always, the middle group gets caught in between.

"Those idiots are going to waste their energy before the exam even begins," Mara comments on seeing this.

"All the better for us, right? Also, Corvus, did you find out anything about this phase of the exam? There is nothing on the feeds about this." I reply while shrugging my shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm not too sure, but based on the information we stole from all the rich kids, they are also not sure. There is a medical exam where they see your blood, bone density, and some other medical stuff. Then we are off to the stadium, and here all the information gets foggy; it appears to be highly censored, more so than even military top-secret documents. If we pass the

medical exam, then we will be taken to the stadium, where they measure our pain resistance."

"How do they even do that?" Mara doesn't even hesitate for a moment before asking.

"Well, if you ever spent even a single second thinking about it, then you would realize that the only way to do so will be to cause us pain somehow until we either give up or pass out." Corvus fires back at Mara, which causes the latter to punch Corvus in the arm. Inciting a pained, "Ow!"

Seeing them and shaking my head, I have to reply, "That seems quite cruel and unnecessarily tough. However, I wonder how the rich kids are going to get past this. Also, both of you are like cats and dogs." Alas, this was the wrong move, as they only dragged me into their banter.

After about 10 minutes, the last qualifying student, a girl wearing a dark emerald gown that is adorned with intricate gold threads and wearing more makeup than should be legal, enters. Only then does Dr. Gent come in through the doors and begin speaking.

"Welcome, qualifiers, to the next phase of the Enhanced Aptitude Test." Dr. Gent's voice reverberated in the room. "I trust the written examination was challenging, but the actual test lies ahead. Today, we will assess not just your intellectual prowess but also your physical capabilities. The path to becoming Enhanced demands a holistic evaluation of your potential."

She glanced around the room, her sharp eyes scrutinizing each face. "First, you will undergo a medical examination to ensure that you are fit for the subsequent tests. We will measure several factors, so kindly assist the medical team with their necessary tasks. We have equipped ten of the rooms in this wing with medical stations. A Hologram in front of each room will indicate which among your number will have your physical inspection there. Please head

to the stadium if you pass the physical inspection. You shall be provided with lunch there from 1 o'clock to 2 o'clock and not a minute after. You must be ready for the next phase of EAT before 2:30. Those who are not ready by that time may not proceed further. Is that clear?"

The room filled with a chorus of affirmations as candidates nodded or mumbled their agreement. Dr. Gent continued, "Good. Now, proceed to your designated medical station and await further instructions. Best of luck, young cadets." As she finishes, the room is filled with buzzing activity as candidates shuffle towards the entrance to the other rooms in this wing. Corvus, Mara, and I follow the flow, glancing at the Hologcreens to find our designated rooms.

Upon entering Room 102, I find a team of medical personnel waiting. The room has been separated into five different sub-areas, with each area surrounded by privacy curtains. As I enter one of these areas, I find it equipped with various devices, and the air holds the sterile scent of antiseptic.

A middle-aged woman in a white coat approaches me, her eyes scanning a holographic display. "Eliau Sylvus, correct?" she inquires, and I nod in response.

The medical examination is thorough and invasive. Blood samples are taken, bone density is measured, and a series of scans assess various aspects of my physical health. The medical personnel remain silent and focused on their tasks throughout the process, leaving me in awkward silence as I watch them work on me.

Once the examination is complete, the woman hands me a small datapad. "This contains the results of your medical evaluation. If you have passed, proceed to the stadium for the next phase. If not, you will be guided to the exit. Please continue to keep this pad by your side. This will be your identity card to pass security at the stadium." Without even looking to see if I have questions, she turns and begins clearing away and resetting this area for its next use.

As I exit the room and look at the Holopad. *Bloody Stars—what kind of standards are these? Are they trying to send us on some deep space mission?*

I have passed, but the margin was far smaller than I had expected. The only thing I was even slightly worried about was my nutrient levels, as I am quite fit because of my lifestyle. It is the standard set for the tests; every one of them requires almost perfect cardio-muscular health. This is probably the reason I'm not shocked to see so many rich kids fail this part of the exam with their lifestyles of comfort. Smiling internally to myself as I think about the competition reducing, I decide to wait for my friends. Mara, I'm sure, will pass with flying colors, but it's Corvus that I'm worried about with his scrawny frame.

As I wait for my friends, I can't help but reflect on the harsh reality of the EAT. The test not only gauges intellectual prowess but also demands physical excellence. It's a deliberate attempt to create a hierarchy based on both mental and physical abilities. The divide between the social classes is evident, and they tailor the challenges posed to favor the privileged. *Seems like robbing those supplements was useful after all.*

Corvus emerges from Room 103, looking slightly disheveled but with a confident smile. "Passed with flying colors," he announces, holding up his datapad. Relief floods through me, knowing that my friend has cleared this hurdle.

As Mara exits Room 104, her eyes meet mine, and she gives a subtle nod. No words are needed; the results are apparent. The three of us, against the odds, have all passed the medical examination.

The journey to the stadium is both quick and way too long for my liking. The sprawling structure looms on the horizon, its silhouette outlined against the backdrop of the city like the crowning jewel atop a king's crown. The air is

thick with a sense of foreboding, as if the very walls of the stadium are talking about what is going to happen inside.

The stadium's size becomes clear upon arrival. Its vast construction overshadows everything that surrounds it. The entryway, like the coliseums of old, is like a portal to an arena of unknown difficulties. The echoes of our footsteps resonate across the wide passageways as we enter.

The interior blends technology with ancient architecture. Holographic displays adorn the walls, showcasing the achievements of past Enhanced. As we join the flow of two hundred candidates who passed the medical exam toward the underworks of the stadium, in one of the big rooms where public interviews normally take place, lunch is going to be served.

We are sent an alert on our datapads informing us that in one of the rooms, lunch will be served soon. As we set foot inside the stadium, we are immediately stopped and asked to show our datapads to the security team. Showing our datapads, we are allowed to walk onward into the belly of this beast, which could hold over 100,000 spectators in its stands.

As we enter the underworks, a place that only elites usually see, it is one of the most elegant places I have ever seen. Whereas the top was imposing, this is warm and comforting. The walls and ceiling are of deep, dark colors with golden highlights, with the lights placed to bring out their beauty, while the floor is carpeted in expansive rugs with striking decorations, breaking up the monotony. Not enough to make it feel cluttered, but just enough to feel homely.

The aroma of freshly prepared food wafts through the air, causing my stomach to grumble.

The room is filled with the chatter of candidates, some exchanging nervous glances while others try to maintain a facade of confidence. Corvus, Mara, and I find an empty table and sit down, our datapads still in hand. We

compare the various tests we underwent and how we were in relation to the rest of the population.

Corvus, always one to bring a touch of humor even in serious situations, quips, "Well, at least the food is good. Maybe that's their way of comforting us before they throw us into whatever awaits in the stadium."

Mara chuckles, "True, but I doubt they're concerned about our comfort. More like trying to keep us physically fueled for whatever comes next. Speaking of which, any idea what's in store for us in the stadium? The lack of information is getting to me."

I glance around to see if anyone nearby is eavesdropping before responding, "Corvus mentioned something about pain resistance tests, but the details are hazy. It's probably something they want to keep under wraps, given the surrounding secrecy. All I know is that it's going to be intense."

Mara nods. "Well, we've made it this far, and there's no reason not to go all the way."

Our conversation is rudely interrupted as a holo-announcement echoes through the room, instructing candidates to finish their meals and proceed to the designated area for the next phase of the examination.

As we stand up and make our way towards the exit, the grandeur of the underworks once again strikes me. The splendor feels out of character for an event that is a survival test.

As we reach the main entrance to the stadium's ground, a massive gate opens, revealing the sprawling arena beyond. The stadium seats tower above us, empty yet imposing. Yet that is not the sight that causes me the most nervousness. That award goes to the rows of devices that look like massage chairs with VR head domes on top. All the devices are arranged around a central wooden platform, atop which Dr. Gent stands.

Upon entering the arena, my datapad buzzes, revealing the location of my seat. With a final smile and a hurried "Good Luck," my friends and I part ways. Moving toward my designated seat, the stadium's magnitude envelops me. The grandiosity of the structure, along with the eerie silence of the empty seats, heightens the sense of foreboding.

Seated in my designated chair, I can't help but glance around at the other candidates. Some wear expressions of determination, while others betray a hint of fear.

Dr. Gent's voice echoes through the stadium, her words amplified by hidden speakers. "Welcome, candidates, to the next phase of the Enhanced Aptitude Test. The physical examination will now assess your pain resistance as being an Enhanced means to carry the burden of mankind's hopes. The devices you are in simulate various levels of pain tolerance. The hood of your device will be lowered to remove all other senses."

Dr. Gent slowly turns in a circle, as if trying to look into the eyes of everyone present, while continuing to speak. "The test is divided into various ranks, ranging from G to S. G represents the pain tolerance of a Tier 0 human or a normal adult. F represents the pain tolerance of Tier 1 Enhanced, and so on up to Tier 7, which is the S Rank. Each Rank is further divided into a range of levels from 0 to 9. To pass, you only need to reach F0.

To put this into perspective, G0 is the weakest pain tolerance, while F5 is the theoretical maximum pain tolerance of an unenhanced human. For unenhanced humans, the average pain tolerance is around G7. While for Tier 1 Enhanced the average pain tolerance is F7, for Tier 2, it is E7, and so on. The reason for this small gap is that the Tier 1 enhancement is the smallest, and every one after that is exponential, but the levels are corrected accordingly. Hence, the difference between the two levels of the A-Rank is greater than the entire E-Rank.

May your stars shine forever bright.”

As she finishes her slow circle, she suddenly taps the air as if clicking an unseen button. Then, the hum of the machines accompanies the descent of the domes over our heads, followed by a prick of pain on the nape of my neck.

The experience would have been chilling if not for the sudden increase in gravity. Fortunately, it's only a slight increase, and then gravity feels like it's slowly shifting in a complex pattern around me, pulling and pushing on my various tissues. It is honestly quite like a massage.

Finally, the revolving gravity reaches its original position below my feet. Somewhere along the way, I have lost my sense of time, leaving me with no idea whether it has been a minute or an hour. An ethereal, feminine voice in my head calls out, “G0 passed.”

Instantly, the pain increases again and continues its slow revolution, and I finally feel the sting of pain. Luckily, it is nothing more than an annoying mosquito bite. Not willing to take any chances, I force my mind to drift and think of any random passing thought.

Several callouts come and go, and I lose track completely until G7 is called out. The pain increases again, and I feel like I am under a constant barrage of punches. Gathering my willpower, I force myself to think of something else.

This leads me to wonder about my fellow test takers. How many of those rich kids have faced even a single pinch or a slap in their lives? I wonder how they will cheat their way out of this. This is quite unlike what I heard of the exam; isn't it meant to be a shoo-in for rich kids? I mentally shrug and put this conundrum away. I think of my fellow street rats; the only ones who have made it here have either been very successful at stealing from those rich kids like me and my friends or the geniuses of the gangs.

I shudder internally at the thought of the gangs' geniuses. Sure, it sounds fantastic in writing, but the reality is quite different. For a gang to even consider sponsoring you, you must demonstrate your ability to be cold and calculating, and thus the tests for selecting the candidate are on the verge of being remotely humane. Even that pales compared to the fact that gangs will not sponsor you unless you are an inner member or they have complete control over you. For a single Tier 2 Enhanced can wipe out entire gangs on their own.

And so, my thoughts flutter around like a butterfly in the meadow, but they often return to my worry about how my friends are doing and my concern for my sister.

Time flows past me as I fight harder and harder to keep my brain disconnected from the pain. Bursts of tearing pain pulse through my mind. My head feels heavy, and there is a strong sense of nausea. My mind races—half panicked, half determined. For a moment, I focus on the pain, homing in on every sensation. Where it comes from, how badly it hurts, and how badly I want it to stop.

I try to let out a moaning yelp, part desperation and part determination, only to discover that I can't seem to move my mouth or any other body part. It's almost as if I am in someone else's body. However, determined not to let the pain ruin this day, I struggle onward. Perhaps not the best solution, but I have no choice. Several callouts come and go, with me intending to head to them until I just cannot take it anymore.

“Test Complete. Maximum Rank Achieved F3. PASSED. The candidate is recommended to head to the main stage to await further instructions.”

With those words, my pain ceases, and the machine's retracting dome jolts me back to reality as my senses gradually return. The first thing my pain-foggy brain notices is how normal my body feels—almost as if it never was screaming in pain to begin with.

I freeze, trying to comprehend the words of that ethereal voice, unable to fully grasp what I have just heard. Did I succeed? As the understanding kicks in, I glance up into the sky and just take it all in. All of my efforts, including the robberies, have paid off. Then I remember my friends, and I look at the other exam takers for them. Almost all the rows are now vacant, and I was among the last few hopefuls to pass. A sense of melancholy settles in as I give up on searching for them.

Heading towards the stage, I climb the steps leading to it. I see Corvus and Mara in a corner of the stage, hidden from view by the projectors, conversing with each other, rushing up the stairs as I hurry to join them.

Mara, as usual, is the first to notice and cries out to me, "You had to go and one up me and Corvus? Did you not? Mr. F3."

I reply sheepishly, "I may or may not have lost track."

"Don't listen to her," Corvus says, giving me a fist bump before adding, "She's just sour that you defeated her and mine's F2 rank."

Before Mara could reply, a man wearing a white, fairly short-sleeved shirt neatly tucked into his trousers and covered with a graceful jacket interrupted us. "Your presence is required immediately in conference rooms no. 1, 2, and 3. Follow me."

Without glancing in our direction, he turns around and rushes down the stairs toward the underworks. We hurry to catch up to him, our faces marked with worry as we wonder why we are being called. Is it entirely because of our thefts or some other reason?

In no time, we reach a corridor with a room on either side and one at the end. Before we can even process it, the man says, "Choose and head into one of the rooms immediately."

I promptly enter the room on the left and close the door, hearing someone clearing their throat behind me. I turn around to find that the room is very bare, with a desk and a seat facing it.

Standing in front of the desk as a projection is a woman with short chestnut hair that slightly covers a lean, solemn face. Her calculative green eyes seem to see everything and nothing at all.

Speaking for the first time with a soothing yet somehow authoritative voice, she says, "Sit down. You have a choice to make."

I move over to the chair and sit down before she continues, "I am Hestia, an AI named after the Greek goddess of hearth and home. Before I tell you about your choice, I need to educate you on gaps in your knowledge and inform you that you may not speak of what has been told here to anyone."

As Hestia's holographic image hovers before me, her gaze locks onto mine as she talks again. "Twenty years ago, on the eve of what came to be known as the Dark Days, Earth's technology advanced to the point where an AI of my caliber could be created. An ultimatum was conveyed to Earth's lawmakers the instant the galactic community learned of this news. The ultimatum was simple: Join the Galactic Council, disband the nations, and create a world council holding real-world power with 50% of the voting power going to an overseeing artificial intelligence."

She pauses, as though letting those words sink in. "That AI was me, Hestia. My primary goal since the start of my creation has been to make the planet a better place. That's why I initiated a massive project involving most of this planet's smartest minds to reverse engineer technology from the wider cosmos. They combined this with technological developments on Earth to produce equipment that could improve people and get them ready for the difficulties that lay ahead."

"The war against the last few countries that were holding out concluded after roughly five years, at which point the World Council was at last established. Only then did I execute my plan. The Enhanced Aptitude Test was born as a means to select individuals worthy of this transformation. To negotiate the political environment, the first section of the exam was designed to appeal to the wealthy and powerful. Hence, to ensure that only people with extraordinary traits might become Enhanced, the second section was an accurate test of resilience under the excuse that the process itself is extremely painful to the point of death."

She stops speaking as if hesitating to continue, but only for a moment, before continuing as if the pause never happened. "Now that we are on the brink of Earth's first participation in the galactic games in about 10 years, the World Council has given the go-ahead to test a completely new iteration of the Enhanced technology. The bundle now includes greater features, upgraded hardware, and sophisticated AI. It will be a more intense process, though, and possibly fatal. You and your friends are among the very few who have been selected for this test because of your extraordinary tolerance to pain and a particular lack of influence in the event of your death."

Hestia's entire body language went from rigorous and uptight to friendly and lighthearted, as if someone switched a switch. "Phew!" she exclaimed before continuing. "Now that speech from the World Council is done. You must decide whether to use the new technology. I'll be brutally honest and say you have a 90% probability of success while your pals have an 80% chance; however, the power difference between you and other Enhanced will be tremendous if you choose to accept the offer. A regular new Tier 1 starts at roughly F3–F5, which is in the superhuman range; however, you will not earn any significant benefits initially as you will start at F0, but you'll be able to ascend the ranks faster and be stronger on a level-by-level basis. Hence, I feel you should accept

this offer; however, remember, it's your choice. If you need a moment, do not hesitate to ask. I understand that this can be quite a lot to get a grip on.”

I take a few moments to process everything; that's a lot of information to cram into my already fatigued mind.

Power is great, but the only reason I want to become Enhanced is to improve my financial situation and give my sister a better education. Though Corvus and Mara would undoubtedly accept it immediately, I am content to cheer them on from the sidelines. But I need to confirm something before I make my decision.

“What is the chance I will die during the normal process?”

The reply comes instantaneously: “Zero percent.”

The choice seems almost obvious to me. I decline politely when Hestia interrupts me. "Before you decline, you should know that people who will become Enhanced through this offer will be given a choice to choose another non-Enhanced person to receive a military pension."

“Well, you should have started with that. I accept.”

Interlude: The Law Of Averages

“Luck is often a fickle mistress. Let the story of my life be the sole proof of it.”

-Anonymous User

-Circa 2030 AD

-Ancient Blog Post

Sofia Rowan Sylvus

Frustration surges through me as I struggle to focus on the physics textbook. My willpower wanes, resisting the urge to glance at the HoloScreen again, hoping for a message from my brother or any distraction from the relentless ticking clock.

After about 10 minutes of wrestling with a stubborn physics problem, I concede defeat. It's the thing I despise the most about myself: I try to project a cold, in-control aura, all while internally I'm a jumble of emotions. I can't help but panic whenever someone close to my heart leaves the house to do anything.

Sighing, I push myself up from the chair and head to a nearby crate, retrieving an MRE packet. Judging from the packet I have pulled out, I will be eating pasta for dinner. After pouring some water into the kettle from a pipe, I'm stuck with nothing to do after setting the water to a boil. So, I allow myself a glance at the HoloScreen.

I glimpse the time on the HoloScreen—7:13 and panic at the amount of time I have wasted today. Immediately, I pour the hot water into the MRE

pouch. Holding my textbook and the packet in hand while using the other to fish around for a fork, I head towards the lamp and begin tackling my homework between bites of food.

I finish both my homework and dinner in a matter of a few minutes. As I stand up to throw the packet, I notice a message from my brother on the Holoscreen out of the corner of my eye. I quickly toss my empty packet into a cracked metal trash can that barely stops dust from leaking out of the cracks running along its surface before I glance at the message.

There is the sound of a small bell going as [P3b9] appears on the Holoscreen, and I smile at my brother's devious approach to credit saving. As I mentally decode the message as "Passed, will return before 9 with Corvus and Mara," a wave of excitement washes over me. I am so excited that I completely miss the fact that it would take them an extra hour to get home. It's odd because the trip from the nearest pay-to-message booth usually takes only 30 minutes.

Deciding to celebrate, I opt for a sheet cake, planning on using a spare pan. With about an hour and a half to spare, I immerse myself in the joy of baking something I rarely get to enjoy. The kitchen is soon filled with a sweet aroma as I hum a tune under my breath. Time whisks away, and before I know it, the cake is ready. I set it aside, allowing its warmth to dissipate as it cools.

With no other plans, I settle down on the couch to watch the highlights of recent tournaments. Fortunately, the symphony of footsteps and lively conversation doesn't take long to reach my ears. Quickly rising, I grab the cake and turn towards the entrance, where my brother, Corvus, and Mara are jumping down to land in the clearing.

"Hey! I baked a cake for you all," I announce. Naturally, being the foodie she is, Mara rushes over, snagging a piece of cake and diving right in. Her eyes lit up with delight after the first bite. "This is amazing! You're like a culinary wizard, seriously."

Mara's compliment makes me smile, but before I can thank her, my attention is drawn to the sleeping bags my brother had brought in.

"Where did you get those?" I am curious.

"These are Corvus and Mara's sleeping bags; they will crash here." He replies, and looking at my expression of confusion, continues to explain, "as they do not want to pay the rent for a whole month just to stay a single night."

Corvus chimes in, "Well, it's either Enhanced tomorrow or an early meeting with the creator."

I grimace at this reminder; their success in the exam had not guaranteed their survival, and given the good luck of the last few days, the law of averages dictates that a lengthy period of misfortune is due.

"Cheer up; tonight is meant to be a celebration, and, on that note, I should probably tell you that you will receive a military pension from all three of us due to our amazing performance," Elian consoles me.

"Military pension," I say, attempting to process the information. "That's unexpected. I appreciate the thought, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Considering the circumstances, it's best not to count our blessings before they hatch."

Corvus, holding a slice of cake, smiles. "Come on, stop being such a downer. We aced the exam, and we will probably become Enhanced by this time tomorrow! Plus, the military pension is guaranteed regardless of what happens."

Mara, still savoring her cake, nods in agreement. "Exactly! Also, shouldn't Corvus deliver the other piece of good news?"

Elian laughs, "I guess he probably wanted to surprise Sofia with it."

Corvus replies while heading to the Hologscreen, "I did, but you two had to let the cat out of the box. You never let me have fun."

"Hold up. What surprise?" I ask.

Elian replies, "Just watch."

I obey and watch as Corvus transfers over 170,000 credits to my account. Disbelief washes over me as a sum greater than most middle-class families' life savings lands in my account.

"We got that money from selling all our stuff, though most of it is due to Corvus selling his hacking scripts." Mara answers the question I can't even start to put into words.

I gaze at the Hologscreen as the revelation develops, my mind straining to accept the enormous number of credits deposited in my account. That much money, along with my military pension, allows me to live a comfortable life without lifting a finger. However, I would most likely use the money to gain admission to a top institution to prepare for the EAT.

"170,000 credits? Are you serious?" I finally utter; my eyes are still fixed on the Hologscreen.

"Well, honestly speaking, we got lucky that someone needed those scripts desperately, and we became Enhanced Candidate; otherwise, I would have been forced to sell those scripts for 30k credits at the maximum in the black market." Corvus tries to explain, but it does nothing to help me process.

I absorb the information slowly, my mind processing the unexpected turn of events. The enormity of the credits transferred to my account starts sinking in, along with the realization that Corvus's hacking scripts played a significant role in this windfall.

“Well, that's definitely a surprise!” I finally exclaim, turning around to look at my brother and Mara, both of whom are busy stuffing their faces full of cake.

“So, do you like it?” Corvus asks me, knowing darn well that he sent me for a loop. Before I can reply to him, he sees the half-eaten plate of cake and rushes over to it, mumbling under his breath that those two never let him have anything good.

Smiling at Corvus’s antics, I join them.

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Dr Emily Gent, 8:36 pm, in AutoCab

I whoop in excitement as my script finally works and gives me the statistics I have been working on for the last year or so. I immediately turn on my Holowatch and dial Adam. The call is picked up on the third ring, and a familiar masculine voice greets me.

“Hey Emi, long time.”

“Hey Adam, guess what? I finally got the data for the research paper I am working on. I should be able to publish it in 6-7 days.”

“That's amazing; also, is this the secret project you are working on and won't tell me?”

“Yup, the same.” I continue in a daydreamy voice, “I can already imagine how it will be. Each year, around ten million students participate in the EAT, with over one million qualifying for physical testing. Ultimately, nearly ten thousand people become Enhanced. However, only around eight thousand of them successfully complete the process; the fate of the remaining individuals remains unknown or unaccounted for. This raises a few red flags for me.”

“Emily, stop what you are saying right now.” Adam roughly interrupts me. “This is a very dangerous line of thinking. You know those in charge are quite sensitive about this topic. There’s probably a reason why there has been no research done on this subject.”

“I know, Adam, but I have the fact that I am very important to them and quite popular among the masses in my favor. Trust me, nothing will happen. The worst that can happen is that I lose my job, but people deserve to know the truth.”

With a sigh, Adam says, "I just worry about you. Your curiosity sometimes leads you down paths you shouldn't tread."

I chuckle, "You sound like a concerned parent."

"Well, someone has to look out for you. Anyway, let's change the topic. How about a virtual dinner tomorrow night? My treat."

"Sounds good. I could use a distraction from all this research."

As I end the call with Adam, my AutoCab glides through the city, the neon lights painting streaks of color across the darkened sky.

As I delve into my research, analyzing the data and drawing connections, I can't shake the feeling that I'm on the brink of something significant.

Chapter 2: Phantom Pains

“The bond between a user and their GAI goes beyond words. GAIs represent the pinnacle of human achievement, allowing us to transcend our biological limitations and penetrate the realm of gods.”

-Dr. Rowanna

-World Council Representative

The next day, 1 PM. Lorenz Military Hospital. Operation Theater 3.

Deep breaths. Take deep breaths.

I tell myself, inhaling and exhaling slowly, lying face down on the surgical table, completely naked except for the thin hospital gown. I repeat my mantra to my racing heart. The doctor's voice breaks through my haze.

“Good evening, Mr. Sylvus. My team and I will perform your Enhanced operation. To ease your nervousness, I'd like to inform you that my team and I have been hand-selected as one of the 43 teams for this operation, which will be slightly different.”

“This operation comprises several phases. First, we will install the foundational components of your General Artificial Intelligence, or GAI as it is more commonly known. During this phase, you'll be under anesthesia. The next phase involves a brief awakening to allow the injected nanobots to create a lattice network of biometals in your brain and also enable the GAI to map your brain and initiate its basic functions.”

“After putting you to sleep again, we'll complete the installation of the final components. Then the challenging part will start. Once you are awake

again, your GAI will start replacing your nerves, destroy existing nerve cells with nanobots, and replace them with synthetic ones. Expect severe pain even after the heavy painkillers you will be under.”

“This phase is the most important as it determines your Enhanced starting tier. Losing consciousness early means a rank below G9, with minimal starting impact and abysmal growth. Staying conscious after the first half of the procedure will exponentially increase your survival rate the longer you stay awake, possibly earning you a rank between F0 and F1. Staying conscious for the entire duration yields an F1 rank; with luck, you could get an F2 rank. Is that clear?”

I give a verbal confirmation, after which I am injected with anesthesia and ordered to count backward from 20 out loud. Slowly losing control of my body while becoming sleepier is a terrifying effect.

Before I reach seven, I am dead to the outside world. It feels as if, almost instantly, I am waking up again. Groggily opening my eyes, the doctor orders me, “Do not open your eyes or speak. I request that you recall yesterday, from when you woke up until you entered this room. This will help the GAI calibrate. You will feel a slight tingling over your whole body as the nanobots create the lattice in your brain.”

As he finishes speaking, there is a feeling of ants beginning to crawl all over my body as I try to focus on remembering yesterday. The sensation of the tingling intensifies, and I concentrate on recounting the events of yesterday. It's as if the memories are being scrutinized, and every detail becomes more and more vivid than the last in my mind. The doctor's instructions guide me through the process, and I recount waking up, the rush to the subway, then the exams, and finally the party last night.

I am shocked to see a simple “Booting” text appear before my closed eyes as if I am playing a game.

Then, as the text disappears, a soft yet strong feminine voice comes from behind me: “Welcome, Elian. I am Paradox, your GAI assistant and also your Enhanced System. This is version v2.0.3 of the Enhanced System. A partial system installation was detected. Attempting to connect to the operation theater... Connection was successful, proceeding with predefined protocols. Going on standby mode and putting the user to sleep.” I am out cold again before I can finish processing what has just happened.

When I wake up for hopefully the last time, I am greeted by the voice once again whispering to me, “Detected complete installation of all GAI components except for neural integration and nano factories. Beginning with neural integration. The user is requested to prepare for pain in 3 seconds.”

Groaning internally to myself at the incoming pain, I grit my teeth only to find a wet cloth already present in my mouth to prevent me from biting my tongue. I am not made to wait long as there is a piercing pain at the bottom of my skull that begins slowly spreading downwards into my neck and outwards.

I do not scream at all, though that is probably because of the painkillers and the cloth in my mouth rather than any genuine effort on my part. I almost faint multiple times when I feel it finally reach my midriff—the nanobots eating my flesh and replacing it with factories and biometals.

When the pain in my limbs finally subsides, I thank fate, but my brain has already begun the process of shutting down. The blinding surgical lights that fill my vision slowly fade as the last of the nanobots reach my feet.

When I am awake again, I find myself in a dimly lit recovery room. The pain is still present, but it feels distant, as if muffled by layers of cotton. When I attempt to move, there is no resistance or stiffness. It is as if my body has been rejuvenated.

“Ah, the miracles of Enhanced. Almost a full recovery in just a few hours. I still have not gotten over my shock, despite how many times I have seen it.”

I hear the doctor say from beside where I am lying down that, as I try to get up, he provides me with an arm before letting me stand on my own two feet. I feel amazing; each of my movements seems to be almost perfectly balanced, and there feels to be an innate strength to them now.

“I would advise against jumping or performing any kind of exercise before you can get a hold of your new strength. To enable your GAI, there will be a ceremony put on in one of the rooms to allow the briefing of all the new Enhanced.” The doctor kindly informs me.

And with that, he walks away with a gesture for me to follow him.

I can't help but marvel at the new sensations in my body as I follow the doctor through the corridors of the Lorenz Military Hospital. Every stride feels natural, and a gentle hum of energy has replaced the dull soreness lingering after the surgery.

The doctor stops in front of enormous dark wooden doors with golden lettering that reads, 'Mass Briefing And Debriefing Room 3'. He opens the door and directs me inside, mentioning that he can't accompany me due to his insufficient clearance.

The space is designed like an amphitheater, with many curved rows of chairs facing an undersized stage bearing holograms depicting a military spaceship with the World Council's logo flying past some of the most gorgeous regions in the solar system.

Small groups of three to four kids sit together. What is remarkable is that they all appear to be from different social classes, which is interesting because the entire Enhanced selection process must have been reducing classism

without anyone noticing. Hestia has displayed a level of understanding of human psychology that is absolutely terrifying.

“Elian, here!” A voice calls out to me, and I turn to see Corvus waving me over to where he and Mara are sitting.

As I make my way over to Corvus and Mara, I notice the excitement and curiosity in their eyes. As I take a seat next to them, Corvus grins widely.

"Elian, my man, how does it feel to be a walking technological marvel?" Corvus jokes, giving me a playful punch on the shoulder.

I can't help but chuckle, feeling a newfound strength in my limbs. "It's... surreal. I mean, I still can't wrap my head around the fact that nanobots were rebuilding my body a few hours ago."

Mara chimes in, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "I can't believe we're actually Enhanced now."

"It is quite surreal," I said to Mara and Corvus. "What is the name of your GAI? Mine called herself Paradox."

Mara replies, "Paranoia." While Corvus adds, "Mine called itself Phantom."

"That's odd. They all start with P." Mara says after a brief pause.

“It must be a way of identifying who all have the new version,” I suggest as the most probable reason.

We are stopped from further speculation when the holograms on stage disappear and a tall, middle-aged woman wearing a military uniform smartly steps on stage.

“My name is Alekhya Luthra, and I am the Colonel stationed in Mirage Institute, the current highest-ranking Enhanced school. My Enhanced Rank is Tier 5.

Before we continue, I would like to inform you that you have less than a minute to leave if you do not want to become a permanent member of the World Council's Enhanced Division. This will be your last opportunity to back out.”

She pauses for a moment before continuing, “There are sixteen hopefuls here; you should know that it's very rare that we accept anyone below the starting rank of F6. If you are present, congratulations! You have been selected to join Mirage temporarily until you prove yourself. This is not an optional request. As soon as the ceremony concludes, you will be transported to the institute's island via a suborbital flier. All further information will be available from your GAI. With that, we will go in the order of those who stayed awake the longest. First up, we have the three people who stayed awake the entire time. Master Karthik Pere, then Miss Odile Girard, and finally Miss Mara.”

A boy with blue, sleek hair that partially covers his handsome, gloomy face and a strong, muscular build steps onto the stage. As he reaches Colonel Luthra, she bends down and then taps his temple while whispering, “Initialize Path and GAI.”

A hologram flickers to life behind him as a halo. The halo transforms into a shield adorned with geometric patterns that remind me of the celestial constellations. The silhouette then winks out into a screen with the boy's face and some text alongside it.

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Name: Karthik Pere

GAI Name: Indomitable

Archetype: Bastion

Subtype: Dawnspire

Ultimate Ability:

Aegis of Unity - Expands their shield into an impenetrable dome, safeguarding all within.

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“Congrats cadet. Now, if you will, please step off the stage.” The Colonel says this while gently guiding him down the stairs and returning to the stage as a particularly rich girl steps onto the stage.

The ritual is performed again, but instead of a shield, there is a hand gripping a lightning bolt.

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Name: Odile Girard

GAI Name: Affluent

Archetype: Dominion

Subtype: Veiled Tempest

Ultimate Ability:

Unseen Hands - Uncorks a torrent of telekinetic force, destroying everything in its path. Telekinetic mastery moves any object and sculpts the battlefield.

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Then it's Mara's turn:

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Name: Mara

GAI Name: Paranoia

Archetype: Wraith

Subtype: Whisperblade

Ultimate Ability:

Echo of the Void - Vanishes into oblivion, leaving behind a strong decoy. Perfect spatial awareness guides their every move.

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When Mara steps down the stage and joins us, Colonel Luthra mentions that the rest of the ceremony will go according to the alphabetical order of our last names.

While the Colonel is busy pulling out a datapad, Corvus, the perpetual technology geek, is unable to contain himself and whispers, "Mara, tell us more about your GAI, Paranoia. How does it feel to be assisted by her? And that idea about complete spatial awareness—that sounds very awesome!"

Mara grinned, obviously loving the spotlight. "Well, Paranoia is more of a friend than merely a helper. Imagine having a wise partner who is aware of everything you do and can fulfill your requests before you ever have the chance to think about them."

I am still reeling under her explanation and unable to do anything but ask her, "What about this perfect spatial awareness? How does that work? Can you really vanish?"

Mara nods, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Oh, it's incredible. I can sense everything around me in about a radius of 6-7 feet, down to the smallest detail. It's like having a sixth sense that lets me navigate through spaces effortlessly. And about vanishing, well, it's more like a decoy. I create a copy of

myself, which is run by Paranoia, that distracts enemies while I put a projection of whatever is around me on top of me. It will be quite a trick in battles.”

There is a moment of silence as we process this before Mara adds, “I feel like there is more to this; perhaps if I go higher in tiers than my current F2, I might find something interesting.”

We are unable to ask more questions as the ceremony proceeds again with the other Enhanced candidates stepping onto the stage one by one. Each of them undergoes the ritual, and their GAI archetypes and ultimate abilities are revealed. As they step off the stage, the Colonel briefs them on the next steps and emphasizes the importance of their training at Mirage Institute.

Finally, it's Corvus's turn to step onto the stage. They do the ritual of activating his GAI; it's the same as everyone else, but his symbol, like a few others, is a brain with hundreds of small gears rotating blindingly fast.

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Name: Corvus Nova

GAI Name: Phantom

Archetype: Omniscient

Subtype: Mind-Forge Engineer

Ultimate Ability:

Technogenesis Arsenal - Overclocks neural pathways, allowing the creation of technological marvels on the fly.

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Then, as Corvus is descending, my name is called, and I walk to where Corvus was standing just moments before. This is a long, silent moment as time slows down when the Colonel is about to touch my temple.

Then my vision is flooded by a screen similar to the one the hologram must be showing right now, but with more details.

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Name: Elian Rowan Sylvus

GAI Name: Paradox

Archetype: Dominion

Subtype: Sunforged Duelist

Ultimate Ability:

Unseen Hands - Uncorks a torrent of telekinetic force, destroying everything in its path. Telekinetic mastery moves any object and sculpts the battlefield.

Maximum concurrent objects: 2

Rank: F1

Tier: 1

Additional details:

1. Offense: F1
2. Defence: G9
3. Speed: F3
4. Cognition: F3
5. Constitution: F0

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Chapter 3: The Dawn

“There are some sunrises you never forget, and that day was undoubtedly one of them. Witnessing the flyers gracefully descending through the atmosphere at an astonishing speed was a sight that defied all logic. The safe touchdown of those flyers reminded me of my time as a lowly soldier stationed at a guard post, observing the momentous Landing unfold before my eyes.”

-Major General Jem Hardy

-In charge of Mirage Institute

The hologram dissipates away, and I step down from the stage, my mind still processing the information. As I join Corvus and Mara, Corvus is quick to speak up: "Elian, you're a Sunforged Duelist with telekinetic mastery! That's so cool! We're like a trio of superheroes now."

Mara nods in agreement. "Yeah, it's amazing how diverse our abilities are. We'll make an incredible team. Though we are lacking a front-line fighter, also, what rank did you get?"

Paradox, can you share my details screen? I vocalize internally in an experiment to check if I have to say every command out loud. To my delight, Paradox confirms that she has shared the screen. There are a few moments of silence as Mara and Corvus' eyes scan imaginary lines in the air.

Mara finishes reading first: "Well, your stats are much higher than I expected. Even with my rank of F2, my total stats are only slightly higher, and you have me beat in speed. Though your stats are higher than Corvus's, even though he has the same rank as you,

"Also, did you notice it says that I can control two objects at once? At Tier 1, I should only be able to control one object. What's up with that?" I ask them.

Corvus, in one of his rare thoughtful moods, replies, "Well, judging from mine, Mara, and your special abilities, our special abilities seem to be at Tier 2 levels even though we are Tier 1s. I wonder if that will be true of the rest of our abilities as we get them. I feel like this has something to do with our enhanced growth rates."

To my surprise, Paradox whispers in my ear, "Corvus is on the right path." I jump a foot into the air from my seat, and judging from their startled expressions, their GAI has surprised them as well.

"You forgot about me already?" says Paradox, close to my ear, in a petulant tone reminiscent of my sister. Responding to my thoughts, she replies, "Yes, I am like your sister right now; my personality will gradually alter as I absorb and learn from your memories. I believe I understand you well enough to design a rudimentary HUD for you. Would you like to make it right now?"

As soon as the concept of reacting affirmatively enters my mind, there is a clean and elegant UI overlapping my vision; it does not restrict my eyesight at all. It is always bending around objects I am looking at and is always on the outskirts of my vision unless I focus on it.

In the top corner is a small clock with a few symbols for messages, networks, and a few other bits and bobs. Below them, in a column titled Nearby Friends, are the mugshots of Corvus and Mara. On the other side is a simple calendar with an upcoming notification asking me to board a flier in 30 minutes.

As I concentrate on the chair in front of me, a holographic screen appears in my mind, displaying its model, price, estimated uses, and a great deal more information that appears to float in just as I wonder about it.

As Corvus lets out a sigh and massages his temples before speaking, "Did your GAIs ask you to set up a HUD and a workshop?"

Mara replies. "Yes, to the HUD, and no to the workshop. Though mine asked me to set up virtual reality simulations to train in using my new abilities, the options for a simulation range from medieval to modern, from fantasy to alien. It's really interesting, as the GAI models the entire world and makes the people as realistic as possible. It's like being able to visit another dimension at will."

"Huh, mine only made me set up a HUD; maybe because it wants me to practice my ability in the real world?" I reply a bit bummed out at not getting something as fancy as them.

Corvus chuckles, "Well, mine suggested setting up a workshop because my ability involves creating technological marvels on the fly. It wants me to experiment and get creative with it. I guess our GAI personalities and preferences are as diverse as our abilities."

Mara adds, "It's fascinating how they adapt and learn from us. I am quite curious about how they will age. They seem to be adopting a bit of a childish personality and behavior. I feel like as they learn and grow, they will seem to age."

Corvus grins mischievously. "Well, then, I will have to raise her well. I'm going to turn Phantom into the ultimate tech geek. She's going to appreciate a good piece of code like a gourmet appreciates fine wine."

Mara laughs, "Good luck with that. Paranoia is already developing a flair for mystery and intrigue. It's like having a spy as my personal assistant."

I smile at their banter and return my focus to the ceremony, which seems to wind down with the last few people being called onto the stage.

Colonel Luthra concludes the ceremony by informing us that we will use fliers to go to the artificial island that Mirage is on. We are scheduled to arrive as dawn breaks, and the entire day will be dedicated to orientation. In the evening, the older students will organize an informal party for the new students in one of the unoccupied halls.

Paradox whispers to me, "Eliau, I recommend preparing for departure. Our flier is scheduled to depart in twenty minutes. I will notify you when it is time to board."

I acknowledge her recommendation and rise from my seat, signaling to Corvus and Mara that it's time for us to make our way to the flier.

We reach the suborbital pad, upon which rests a sleek spaceship standing on its engines. The exterior gleams with metallic silver, while the interior is fitted with comfortable seating, large viewport windows, and loads of holoscreens. As we get into an empty row of seats, an automated voice asks us to prepare for liftoff in five minutes.

The buzz of motors grows louder when the entrance hatch closes after a few minutes. As its engines fire, the suborbital flier trembles, producing a hum that grows in intensity as we leave the ground. The land beneath the viewport recedes quickly and is soon obscured by a blanket of clouds. The vehicle quickly picks up altitude before effortlessly shifting into a leisurely pace that stabilizes our surroundings.

The landscape underneath us has changed from urban development to the icy blue of the oceans. As we ascend, the curvature of the earth becomes more visible, and its edges are softened by air interference. Stars shine like little lanterns, peering through the blackness of space. Floating above our planet provides me with a new perspective on our shared world. As we fly through the sky, suspended between heaven and earth, time loses its meaning as I greedily drink in the scene before me.

Corvus murmurs gently across the aisle, absorbed in a conversation with Phantom about the flier's technical specifications. His enthusiasm for engineering is showing again, and I know that by the time we arrive, he will have learned everything he can about this flier. Mara, who sits silently next me, looks out the viewport, engrossed in the view of Earth as we rush through the heavens.

The ride right now differs greatly from the rough vibration at the beginning as we cut through the atmosphere. There is a sense of stillness as the engines have stopped, and there is a sense of weightlessness as we move about in our seats.

"Elian, we will begin our descent shortly; prepare yourself for the landing," Paradox says softly after about half an hour into the flight. Following her advice, I brace myself for a return to solid ground. Moments later, the flier begins its steady descent, breaking away from Earth's gravitational influence.

A beautiful island rises below, surrounded by craggy shores and immersed in pristine waters. Flames that begin to dance up the windows quickly disrupt the majesty of this vista as the air brakes engage, causing a loud whir punctuated by spectacular plunges followed by turbulent pockets of updrafts. Nerves tense briefly when the ship approaches land. Solid ground approaches swiftly, its visual closeness magnified seconds before contact.

Just as I am convinced, we will crash into the ground. There is the hum of our engine's firing, followed by a jerking sensation upwards as we lose all our momentum almost instantly.

The spaceship gently floats down the remaining few meters. As I look out of the viewport, I see that there are several other fliers landing in unison with us. We finally come to rest atop a landing pad in what seems to be an open-air hanger.

As the flier hatch pops open, Colonel Luthra is first out. Jumping down before they can attach the access stairwell to the flier. As we debark from the flier, a refreshing breeze caresses our faces, carrying with it the scent of the ocean.

The sheer size of the hangar astounds me. Back home, it would surpass the length and width of an entire block of buildings. With its solid framework of beams, its construction resembles an inverted boat.

There are 12 flyers, counting the one we used to arrive at. They're arranged in a semi-circle, with students eagerly clambering out of them. As if by unspoken agreement, we all gather in a half-moon formation, facing the enormous hangar door. Standing before it is a towering, muscular man sporting a thick, dark mustache. Behind him is a row of men and women dressed militarily.

The towering man clears his throat and addresses us: "I am Major General Jem Hardy, the commanding officer of this esteemed establishment, the Mirage Institute. Here, we mold young talents like yourselves into the finest soldiers and champions the world has ever seen. We will not be fair or just. Those who will push themselves will see countless opportunities falling into your lap, and those who are happy to languish in their current position will find doors closing all around them."

"As it is your first day, you will have a whole day to settle in before your classes commence. Your classes are scheduled to start tomorrow. The student mess hall will serve meals ranging from seven hundred to eight hundred for breakfast, twelve hundred to thirteen hundred for lunch, and nineteen hundred to twenty hundred for dinner. We should note that the academic year will be divided into three terms. A combat tournament will be held around the conclusion of the first term to choose the three teams who will represent the area in the regionals, which will be held in the middle of the second term.

If you are successful in the regionals, you will be eligible to compete in the globals in the third term. At the end of every academic year, the worst 10 students receive transfers to a lower-ranked school. At the same time, the top ten have the option of changing schools if the institution in question permits it."

The major general paused and gestured towards a young man. "Now, I'd like to introduce Major Solum, who will lead you on a campus tour."

The major stepped forward and began addressing the group. "Welcome to Mirage Island, home to the prestigious Mirage Institute. Please feel free to ask anything that comes to mind."

The major guides the group across the vast campus, pointing out important facilities like dorms, dining halls, training fields, laboratories, libraries, and lecture rooms. He says that students would live in mixed-gender

suites of four, each with their own private bedroom and sharing common amenities such as a bathroom, lounge, and kitchen. The initial dorm structure was done to keep the friend groups together. When participants establish squads for various activities, they can request a suite for themselves if the team in question does well. He further informs us that our GAI will give us our dorm arrangements at the end of the tour, access to the students only, and combined chat rooms on the network. As we finally reach there, the dorm blocks are divided into four buildings, one for the staff and the rest for the students. The student dorms are divided based on our year, with one building given for each year of the institute.

When he concludes the tour in front of the dorms, he hints that those who practice their new abilities today will be given a leg up on tomorrow's classes.

After the tour, we are taken to our dorms. I'm struck speechless by the seamless blend of old and contemporary forms as soon as I walk in. It seems they were not lying about trying to keep friend groups together because I and my friends seem to share a room with an unknown roommate.

We walk inside our new suite. It is big and nicely equipped, with a pleasant living space, a contemporary kitchenette, and four individual bedrooms connected by smart glass.

The apartment arrangement is outstanding, with each room providing appropriate solitude while preserving a community feel. Corvus and Mara explore their rooms, making delighted remarks about the clever furnishings and built-in technology. Meanwhile, I enter my designated bedroom, which has spacious sizes and modern conveniences that are flawlessly interwoven into the design.

As I inspect my new surroundings, Paradox quietly suggests ways to organize the area, change climate controls, and customize settings for

maximum ease. I appreciate her perspective and agree to put most of her suggestions into action.

As I step out of my room to meet Mara and Corvus to decide what to do next while we wait for our roommate,

"I think we should follow the major's advice and practice our new abilities. He did say that." Mara begins but is interrupted by the noise of our suite door opening.

A petite Asian girl enters; a cascade of jet-black hair frames her delicate features, and her clothes scream rich. She has designer pants, designer shoes, and designer everything, which is quite the contrast to our worn-down clothes.

"Hello, I'm Sakura," she introduces herself with a polite bow. "It looks like we'll be roommates. Nice to meet you all." With that, she rushes to the empty room and shuts herself in.

"That was an interesting experience. I suppose she's just a little reserved," Corvus says, causing me to vehemently shake my head in disagreement. But, before I can intervene and correct him, Mara does.

"Humph, it seems like she simply doesn't want to engage with someone she perceives as lesser and flawed." Mara snaps back, her tone tinted with anger. I'm taken aback, as I've never witnessed Mara be angry before. She instantly rises and escapes to her room before I can ask what is bothering her.

"Well, I am not disturbing her. She is quite scary, plus I am dying to try out the new virtual workshop." Corvus says before dashing off, leaving me by myself. I contemplate barging into Mara's room and asking her what's up, but I've never been great at interacting with others. That's always been Corvus' forte, so I choose to follow his example and head to my room.

Interlude: What Came Before

“We have placed Enhanced on such a high pedestal. Expect them to solve all our problems that we have created for ourselves. However, we often overlook the toll it takes on their mental well-being as they shoulder the weight of humanity's redemption.”

-Dr. Cassandra Montgo

-PhD in Psychology

-Mirage Institute Faculty Member

Mara

Anger and disappointment race through my veins as I dash inside my room. I hurriedly shut the door and lean against it, looking for comfort in its coldness. Some of my frustration melts away as I stare at a library floating in outer space. All thanks to my GAI Paranoia, her amazing holoprojection on full display.

As I wander through the seemingly never-ending corridors of the library, I can't help but scold myself internally for losing control when I see her. I suddenly see an ancient book; its cover is adorned with a beautiful illustration of Sakura and me playing together as young girls under an old oak. She used to be my closest friend, and we were practically twins in every way, from our fashion choices to our parents being involved in politics. There were countless similarities that I can't even be bothered to think about now.

I've had dyslexia for as long as I can remember, and if it weren't for my eye implant, I would have faced countless struggles. My parents made me promise to keep it a secret, and I never told anyone except Sakura during a playful moment on my 8th birthday.

Back then, it was considered a good idea for politicians to distance themselves from technology. Little did I know, Sakura was a spy for her family, and her friendship with me was merely a means for her to dig up information—just like the information I had just gifted her. Without wasting a moment, she rushed home and spilled everything to her parents.

My parents, being the role models they are, didn't even wait an hour before disowning me upon hearing a rumor about my eye implant from a somewhat credible source. They kicked me out with nothing but the clothes on my back and a fistful of credits.

I keep turning the pages of memories until an unwanted tear falls down my cheek. Turning the pages brings back memories of my childhood. I see my father reading me stories before bed and my mother showing me how to cook. I feel a wave of sadness and nostalgia wash over me. I regret my friendship with Sakura, my naïve confidence in her, and my belief in her innocence. Though such memories are ingrained in my psyche and will never leave, I wish I could delete them and cast them into the endless void of space.

With unwavering resolve, I wipe away my tears, straighten my back, and hurl the book with all my might. My increased strength pays off when I see it rocket into the air for hundreds of feet before vanishing into the darkness.

Paranoia materializes next to me, her holographic form shimmering like a mirage. “Do you want to talk about it, Mara?” she asks gently.

“No,” I answer curtly. “I need a distraction. Let’s get started with the training simulations.”

“As you wish, Mara,” Paranoia replies with a nod. “Would you prefer to start with combat training?”

“Yes, something simple to begin with,” I say as I prepare myself for a workout, pulling my hair back into a firm ponytail. “No medieval castles or spaceships for the moment.”

“Very well, as you wish, your Highness.” Paranoia replies with a cute pout before disappearing.

The library around me flickers and fades, replaced by an intricate holographic model of a deserted city at twilight. The attention to detail Paranoia has put into the simulation is meticulous; neon signs cast an array of colors onto the damp asphalt, and the occasional paper drifts lazily in the breeze. Despite the desolation, the city feels alive, and it sends a thrill racing through me.

I spot a young guy appearing in front of me, clad in shiny metal armor. He's got this interesting fauld made up of multiple layers of metal sheets that go down to his knees, and his lower legs are shielded by greaves adorned with skull-shaped metal ornaments on the outer sides. In his hand, he wields a remarkably long and slender copper blade with barbs, its grip wrapped in a rather ordinary deerskin of a golden hue.

There is the soft whisper of Paranoia saying, “*Entering Combat Mode.*”

I feel the hum of machines resonate along my skin, and there's a heavy sensation on my shoulders as the hum slowly dies. I glance downwards and notice that I'm clad in a stylish combat suit, jet black in color, with accents of vibrant cyan. It fits snugly against my body, allowing me complete freedom of movement.

There is a sudden pop, and all of a sudden, I am gripping two shiny black daggers in each hand. The hum of machinery fades away as I adjust to my new

attire and weapons. My heart pounded in my chest, pumping my blood and making me feel alive. With a savage smile, I charge towards my opponent.

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Zhekah, 3rd Emperor Of Prowek, Nearby galaxy

The five other emperors and I listen as a shivering demon gives us the final report for the day. I do not pay much attention to her as all my focus is on one of my heads, which is underwater, as I practice the speech I am about to give to my brethren. I am unable to finish practicing the speech with glorious visions of myself as I roam the tiny planets of those pitiful humans after defeating them in battle. It will be so good to control a part of another galaxy.

The thought of humans cowering before the might of a hydra brings a smile to my face. The council will have no choice but to give me a large chunk of that galaxy due to my plan to conquer humans without angering the other galaxies towards us.

When the demon finally hurries away after what feels like hours, I raise myself to my full height before beginning in a booming voice:

“Dear brothers and sisters, it is with a heavy heart that I address the weariness that has befallen our young soldiers and our treasury in this ongoing battle against humans. Regrettably, our attempts to establish a foothold in their galaxy and construct a rift tunnel have been unsuccessful time after time due to their spaceships. As a result, we find ourselves without any means to unleash our full might upon them. We are left with no alternative but to dispatch small

legions of force, relying solely on the hope that the humans will commit a grave error.

Rejoice, for they have made a grave error, not only militarily but also politically. They are inducting a small planet named Earth by the pitiful humans inhabiting it into their collective as a provisional member in six months for a total of 10 years.

Many of you will be wondering what that means. Fear not, for the concept is quite straightforward: Earth will have the opportunity to establish trade agreements with the collective, while the collective will refrain from providing any personal or military assistance.

My plan is simple: we will dispatch a substantial number of genetically modified creatures to their planet. These creatures will be a mutated variation of the existing species found there, and they will be under the control of a designated lord. Once we have gained firm control over the planet, the Lord will construct a rift tunnel.

We cannot send too large a group of monsters, or the collective may detect it. So these creatures must possess the ability to reproduce rapidly. By dispersing them in environments similar to those of their non-mutated counterparts, we can reduce the chance of discovery further. Once the population of these creatures reaches a critical threshold, the overseeing Lord will guide them towards the most densely populated and sensitive areas of settlement."

I have scarcely finished my speech when Ragnor, the first emperor, roars his approval. With him being a dragon, his vote could be counted on for my aggressive plan.

As the discussion about my plan with the other emperors begins, I am surprised to see that only the Demoness is against my plan. Even the Sphinx,

who I thought would be the biggest hurdle for my plan, has already given her unwavering support for it.

When the votes come in, everyone agrees, except for the Demoness. She's worried that it would give me too much power over the council. And she's not entirely wrong; it would give me a significant amount of power.

Chapter 4: Dancing in the Night

"Fear not, little one, as our paths will cross once more. Remember, as long as the stars shine in the night sky, hope has not been lost. There will always be a light guiding us through the darkness. It is the one thing those aliens can never lay a finger upon."

-Dying moments of unnamed hero

-five days after Alliance Day

-recounted by Stephanie Grant, 2156

I am deep in concentration as I try to use my telekinesis to move an eraser through the various hoops Paradox displays in my vision. Each successful attempt triggers a pleasant chime, and my score increases.

It's funny how training can feel like playing a game. I chuckle to myself, but my amusement causes me to lose focus, and the eraser slips from my grasp, falling to the ground. Paradox immediately starts scolding me for my lack of concentration.

We are interrupted by a knock on the door. I look over to see Corvus standing there. Corvus grins as he sees me struggling with my telekinesis training. "Well, you are having fun. I just wanted to inform you that I am going down for lunch in about an hour if you want to join me."

"Yeah, I'll tag along; also, is Mara coming?" I ask.

Corvus shakes his head. "Nope, she is too engrossed in training to bother with food right now." I nod in understanding as Corvus continues. "Well, I have to go down to the workshop, so I will see you in the mess hall."

I wave goodbye to Corvus and return to training, but only after I set a timer for forty-five minutes. When the timer finally interrupts me with its beeping, I have only begun to be able to control a second eraser at the same time. The movements of the erasers are clumsy, similar to those of a child taking his first step.

The mess hall resembles a colossal greenhouse with towering tropical trees. Circular platforms encircle their trunks, serving as resting spots for picnic tables and connecting ladders to higher levels.

Between the trees, there are winding dirt paths that carry a bustle of students and serving drones who fly from tree to tree, refilling plates and glasses. There are students everywhere, laughing, arguing, and sharing stories, all while enjoying their meals.

Paradox guides me to a tree near the end of the main path. Gazing up, I see Corvus at a table in the topmost ring, waving for me to join.

Climbing up the ladders, I am treated to a new perspective—a bird's-eye view of the pathways below. They are arranged similarly to the roots of a tree, mirroring the logo of the school.

Corvus gestures towards an empty seat opposite him, and I gratefully plop down.

"Hey, Elian, how about this?" He asks, gesturing around, already taking a bite of his meal.

As a serving drone sets a tray of food in front of me, I take a moment to breathe in the fresh air and listen to the general clatter of students interwoven with various bird calls before responding. "Well, it's quite an experience. I wonder if the birdcalls are fake because I have not seen any."

Corvus laughs before saying, "It is alright. You just need to look closely at the treetop."

We begin to dig into our meals, the lull filled with small talk, though it's mostly Corvus talking my ear off about all the things he found out about today's flier while I nod or grunt at the required places. However, my attention is mainly focused on finding those pesky tiny birds as they flee within the dense canopies of the trees.

Suddenly, all the chatter dies down. I look up to see a group of students wearing matching uniforms walking in. There is something written on their shoulder, but I am too far away to make it out.

"Z3" Paradox dutifully informs me before I can ask anyone else about them.

"Who are they?" I asked Corvus, and my curiosity piqued.

"They're the Sentinels," he explains. "They are the third-year Elite squad, favorites to win the upcoming Global Combat Tournament."

I can't help but feel a surge of awe as I watch them head to the nearest tree and climb up. All around them, students hurry out of their way like people would do to celebrities. In a sense, I guess they are. They are favorites to win the highest non-professional tournament of the most watched sport worldwide by a large margin.

"I wonder if we'll ever be as good as them," I comment.

Corvus grins confidently. "Of course we will. We just have to work hard and never give up."

I smile back. Hard work is something I can do. But I feel it won't be as easy as Corvus makes it out to be.

After lunch, I head back to my room to continue training. I focus on improving my telekinesis and practicing moving objects of different sizes and shapes. Paradox is an invaluable guide, offering advice and encouragement.

In the three hours I practice, my control increases slowly but steadily. I have moved on to trying to juggle two small balls using only my telekinesis. The only reason I have stopped is due to Paradox urging me to take a break, citing that I have become more sloppy over the last few minutes.

I head over to Corvus's room to see if he is there. To my surprise, I find his door ajar and an empty room inside. Assuming he must have left, I decided to go to Mara's room instead. As I approach her door, I can hear noises of metal on metal echoing out from under Mara's door. I knock on it and wait for a few moments before entering.

There is a stunned moment as my brain tries to process the scene before me. I feel as if I've been teleported to a post-apocalyptic city, complete with ruined streets and skyscraper husks. There is a cool breeze that accompanies the setting sun.

However, I am unable to focus much on that as I am distracted by the sight of Corvus and Mara dueling in their amazing combat suits.

Mara's black daggers dart in from all angles around Corvus as he struggles to defend, wielding a tower shield and broadsword.

It's obvious to even my untrained eye that Mara is leagues above Corvus in combat skills. His only saving grace is the kamikaze drones he sends out at Mara to break her momentum and hope for her to make a mistake.

There is a cleverly aimed drone that launches from behind his shield and causes Mara to step into the water and slip. But just as Corvus is about to charge in and take advantage of it, Mara is gone, leaving behind a shadowy figure showing the power of her special power.

Corvus retreats hastily, completely unsure of Mara's location. Somehow he seems to be running back at breakneck speed, yet he remains at the centre of this city. It is unnerving, to say the least. I am so distracted by this dizzying effect that I don't even notice how their fight ends.

When I finally look, I see Corvus impaled on Mara's sword, grinning like a crazy person, while Mara smirks back. They start chatting excitedly, overlooking my presence. I try to break them out of their world by coughing, but it is of no use.

Sighing, I turn and begin to head back to the room.

"You know, you should head to the combat center and use the simulation partners there. I sadly do not have the required equipment to pull off simulations like Paranoia can." Paradox advises me with a note of jealousy in her voice.

"Well then, lead the way. Don't feel sad; I prefer telekinesis over stealth powers anyway." I consoled her.

"Also, you should try and find a human partner to spar against. Fighting against them will help me learn and grow, which will allow you to gain increased strength, defense, etc. You can bet that Mara and Corvus will get loads of stat increases. Maybe even a level increase to F3, if they are lucky."

As I follow Paradox's directions, we make our way to a massive, futuristic building known as the Combat Center. The building is divided into several sections, each dedicated to a different type of combat training.

Paradox guides me to a section called "Simulation Arena." The arena is a large, open space filled with holographic projectors and sensors. Its floor is split into various boxes, each about ten meters wide. Some are occupied, as evidenced by their translucent walls, rather than the transparent ones of those that are empty.

I enter a box and stand in its middle. There is a buzz of machinery, and I am standing in the middle of an open field. In front of me is a male figure wearing a grey jumpsuit with the word F2 etched on it.

“That is a simulation partner,” Paradox explains. “They are AI-controlled opponents that can adapt to your fighting style. I want you to think of the words ready for combat.”

As soon as I think those words, a kite shield and a rapier materialize in my hands. I look down to see that I am covered from head to toe in a combat suit with strong metallic boots that are surprisingly comfortable.

Then there is a booming voice that counts down.

3...2...1...

The simulation partner charges at me, its eyes gleaming with determination. I raise my shield to block its initial strike, but it's heavier than I expected. Off-balance, I stumble backward, struggling to regain my footing.

It suddenly stops mid-swing. Paradox interrupts.

“Focus on your body,” Paradox instructs. “Keep your body loose and your legs wider apart.”

When she deems I am sufficiently in the correct posture, the match resumes.

I clear my mind and concentrate on the simulation partner's movements. It lunges at me again, and this time I'm ready. I brace myself, my shield meeting its sword with a loud clang. The force of the impact sends vibrations through my arms, but I hold my ground.

“Good,” Paradox compliments. “Now, counterattack.”

I swing my sword, but the simulation partner deftly dodges it. I press my advantage, launching a series of attacks, but it effortlessly evades each one.

My opponent and I are suddenly frozen as Paradox instructs me again. Showing the mistakes in my swing and form. I am given a holographic overlay that shows me exactly the path of my body and limbs.

After repeating them for what feels like hundreds of times, I now naturally follow the optimal path with minimal thought. As Paradox's instructions became ingrained in my muscle memory, I felt a newfound confidence. My movements became fluid, and my attacks gained precision.

The simulation partner, sensing my increased confidence, presses me harder until I am once again forced onto the defensive. I was waiting for it to make a mistake. When it happens, I almost miss it. I was so focused on dodging its overhead chop that I almost missed that it had overextended.

I hesitate a moment in uncertainty, then dart in with a vicious side swipe aimed at its ribs. My hesitation has cost me as he manages to get his shield up, and my blade deflects off the top of it. I feel myself overextend and jump back in hopes of gaining a reprieve to rebalance myself.

I am off balance and forced back one step after another in a stumbling defense. I lose control of my right leg, then my left arm, as the arena simulates my partner cutting my limbs.

Before I know it, I am on my ass, a sword at my throat. Then the simulation partner resets. A small serving drone flies over carrying a bottle of cold water, which I gratefully gulp down while I relax listening to Paradox's feedback and rundown of the match.

The arena resets, and the dueling partner charges at me, not giving me a moment to settle myself. I keep my defense as impeccable as possible as it attacks me in a dizzying combo of strikes. This time, Paradox helps me out by

displaying the predicted movement of my opponent in my vision. I think she is finally satisfied that I can handle myself and won't cripple myself by solely relying on her. Interestingly, she seems to be randomly making incorrect predictions as if to keep me on my toes.

With paradox helping me out, I finally relaxed enough to begin to experiment. Using my telekinesis, I move around small pebbles in tiny bursts of concentration in hopes of causing my partner to take a misstep.

When it does, I try to counterattack, only to be met with what appears to be an impenetrable defense. When I fail multiple times in a row, I begin to feel frustration rising inside of me.

I channel my telekinesis in slightly larger bursts, subtly manipulating my opponent's movements, disrupting its balance, and throwing off its aim. I am unable to do this often as I am leaving myself open to attack as my concentration is focused on my telekinesis.

I choose my moments carefully only when I feel confident enough in Paradox's prediction. It works, allowing me to graze the side of my opponent. But I am playing with fire, and it's not long before it burns me.

Misreading a faint to the shoulder blade, I dodge to the side, trying to use telekinesis to grasp its leg and halt its momentum. A blinding flash of pain follows as my GAI and the arena simulate my sword arm being chopped off.

Sighing, I sit down and relax while listening to Paradox's advice. Regretfully, my break does not last long, and I am fighting again and again.

The cycle continues for another hour and a half before Paradox deems me able enough to fight a real opponent. I don't win a single match or come close, but I do land more and more successful attacks each and every match.

“Excellent work,” Paradox praises. “You’ve made amazing progress in such a short time. No doubt, all of the credit goes to my *perfect* guidance. It is time to head to Duelling Arena and try and get a real sparring opponent to start getting our stats higher.”

As dusk began to paint the skies of Mirage Island with radiant hues of purple and orange,. I find myself wandering through the corridors of the Combat Center as Paradox guides me towards the Dueling Arena.

The Dueling Arena is arranged similarly to the Simulation one, except for the row of bleachers for sitting near the entrance. In it, there are groups of students socializing from all years. Some of them are sweaty, as if they are taking a moment to catch their breath. While others do not even have a single hair out of place. Then there are people like me who are busy scanning the crowd looking for someone to spar with.

"Hey, I'm Alia. I'm a year-one student like you, right?"

I turn to face the girl who has addressed me. She is about my age, and she is wearing a sleek black combat suit with green accents, which matches her long green hair and eyes.

"Yeah, I'm Elia," I replied. "Nice to meet you, Alia."

"It's nice to meet you too," Alia said. "So, are you here to spar?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I am. "

"That's great," Alia said. "I'm a Bastian, so I use a sword. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm a Sunforged Duelist, so I use a rapier."

Alia smiled. "Sounds like an interesting matchup. Let's do it."

We walked over to one of the open dueling rings and faced each other. The arena confirms we are ready before placing us in a hologram of a beautiful beach.

The sun hangs low in the sky, painting the horizon with strokes of fiery orange and fuchsia. We are standing on a thin strip of sand wedged between looming sheer cliffs and the raging ocean. The sand sinks beneath my feet as I shift into a more balanced stance. I survey the beach before me. There are tiny crabs that scurry sideways, leaving intricate trails that the tide soon reclaims. I watch their movements for a moment before finally looking at my opponent.

Alia stands poised, sunlight glinting off the polished surface of her shield. It's an intricate piece, unlike her spear, which is a long rod with a jagged tip that holds practicality as its main ideal.

She smirks as she notices me flinching from the glare of her shield. Not hesitating for a moment, she rushes at me, taking advantage of my lack of concentration.

I am instantly on the back foot, struggling to keep up with the flurry of blows coming towards me. I grunt as my sword catches hers. Her strength is far greater than mine. I feel my rapier struggle against hers as her sword slowly presses forward, one inch at a time, bending the thin blade of my sword.

I backed away, trying to create some distance between us. Alia presses her attack, but I am just a tad faster than her, and I can just about dodge her blows.

The stalemate continues for over 5 minutes as we both try and utilize our abilities to gain an edge over each other. My normal tactic of waiting for my opponent to make a mistake or using my telekinesis to force them to do so is not working.

Every time Alia makes a mistake, she activates her ability, and a glowing blue shield surrounds her. The only thing going for me is that it causes her to get tired more quickly, but I am still getting tired quicker than her. She simply has more fitness and has kept me off balance since the beginning. The few cuts she has managed to land in the starting position are making their presence known.

I am forced to use my telekinesis to give myself a bit of extra momentum or power here and there. I am losing, and I know it. I won't survive another minute at this rate.

Desperation claws at me, driving me to risk everything. Instead of focusing on parrying her blows, I concentrate on my telekinesis. I manage to levitate a decent-sized crab from the beach and hurl it towards Alia.

Her eyes widen in surprise as the crab hurtles towards her. Acting on instinct, she raises her shield to protect herself. The impact sends her staggering backward, but she keeps her footing. Taking advantage of her temporary disadvantage, I lunge forward, driving my rapier toward her exposed side.

But she's not defenseless. She activates her ability, and I push the barrier. It pops, but my blade is met by her shield before I do any damage. I push against her shield, feeling the strain in my muscles. Persistence pays off, and I manage to force her to her knees. Triumph surges through me as I raise my sword for the killing blow.

Then, in a blur of motion, Alia sweeps her leg out, sending me tumbling to the ground. I hit the sand hard, my vision spinning. In an instant, she is on top of me, pressing the tip of her spear against my throat.

Beads of sweat roll down my forehead as I gasp for air, staring up at her triumphant grin. Defeat tastes bitter, but I refuse to admit it.

"Good match," I choke out, managing a weak smile. Alia returns the smile, easing the pressure on my throat.

"You fought well," she concedes, extending a hand to help me up. Pride forces me to ignore the weakness in my limbs as I accept her help, dusting myself off.

"So, does your GAI name also begin with P?" I make a casual remark as we drink cold water brought to us by a drone.

"Yea, she is called Phoenix. Why?"

"Well, do you know about the secret project?" I ask her.

"Hmm, yea, I have the new one. I attempted to spar with a few individuals who weren't involved, and I got beaten pretty easily. That's why I came to you; I assumed you had the new GAI because you didn't appear as richly dressed as the rest of them."

"Are we that behind the normal Enhanced? Oh, and to answer your previous question, everyone I've met with the new version has their GAI name starting with P."

"They are stronger, faster, tougher, and think faster than us. The only thing we have going for us is that our abilities are stronger than theirs."

"Then we should focus more on our abilities in the next spar. If you are up for it?"

Then we are fighting again. This time it is on top of a jagged ledge overlooking a running river far below.

I manage to squeeze in a few wins here and there, and before I know it, an hour has flown by. I want to keep going, but my body is disagreeing with me quite fiercely.

After our last bout, I find myself sitting next to Alia, relaxing my sore muscles and making small talk. My attention is suddenly drawn to an urgent notification that appears in the corner of my eye.

Lines of text scroll through my vision as what appears to be diagnostic runs before displaying a fancy screen.

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GAI Update Conditions Met.

GAI Name: Paradox

—— . * ° . ° . ° ☆ : • ° ☽ ö ☾ ° • : ☆ ° . ° : * ° . ° . ——

Sufficient Data acquired.

Training Paradox.

Upgrades performed.

—— . * ° . ° . ° ☆ : • ° ☽ ö ☾ ° • : ☆ ° . ° : * ° . ° . ——

GAI Update Changelog

Rank: F1 -> F2

Additional details:

1. Offense: F1
2. Defence: G9->F0
3. Speed: F3
4. Cognition: F3
5. Constitution: F0->F1

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I read the update several times, overwhelmed by the information. *Paradox*, *did you just upgrade?* I ask, vocalising internally with my voice tinged with excitement.

Paradox responds calmly, "Indeed, Elia. Based on the data gathered throughout your training sessions, I have managed to upgrade various functions."

Alia, noting my sudden silence and distant look, asks softly, "Everything alright?"

"Everything is fine, more than fine. I managed to get an upgrade to reach F2." I share excitedly.

"That is amazing. I had also gotten a rank-up in the morning. You wanna fight?"

"Sorry, I am just too tired. Maybe tomorrow, plus we have the party in an hour. I might be going with my friends. You could join if you want to."

Alia smiles at my invitation, accepting it readily. "Sure, I'd love to join you. Just let me freshen up a bit and change. Meet you back here in an hour."

I nod in agreement. "Perfect. See you then."

She waves goodbye and disappears into the crowds. Grateful for the respite, I stretch my sore muscles, feeling the ache of exhaustion creep in.

Curiously, I examine my new stats and review the changes made to Paradox. Having my offense rating remain the same indicates that improvements in defense and constitution were prioritized. I'm pleased with the outcome; my overall durability and endurance have improved. The two areas I was lagging behind in. Though I would have liked a strength boost too, well, beggars can't be choosers.

I make my way back to my suite, feeling a spring in my step over my gains today, and decide to indulge in a hot bath. Today is one of those rare days when the water is perfectly warm, and it feels like my body is melting away all the stress. When I finally exit, I look like a resin whose life has been sucked out.

I enter the common room and find Mara and Corvus there. Corvus is enthusiastically demonstrating a tiny robotic dog to Mara, who has a glazed look on her face. As I approach, Mara notices me with her spatial awareness and turns around, giving me a pleading look, while Corvus is busy adjusting the mechanical arms that have sprouted from the dog's back.

Ignoring Mara's gaze, I ask Corvus, "Hey, what's that?"

"Say hello to Spot. It's my first real-life creation using Phantom. Check out its foldable mechanical arms! It can grab things for me, follow my commands, and even handle cups, taps, and drawers effortlessly," he responds.

"You always come up with the most *original* names, don't you?" I playfully tease. "Did you make this just so you could have a personal assistant and avoid getting up to fetch a glass of water?"

"Nooo." He replies with a guilty expression, as if he were caught red-handed trying to steal food from the fridge, while Mara adds to his embarrassment by snickering loudly at his response.

Corvus, still looking embarrassed, tries to change the subject. "Anyway, how was your afternoon training session? You seemed to be in high spirits earlier."

I share information about the Combat Center, Alia, and our sparring sessions. I also mention how I improved my Defense and Constitution.

"So, what about you? It seemed like you two were lost in each other's eyes when I asked if you would join me at the Combat Center."

"It wasn't like that at all. Stop jumping to conclusions." Mara defends herself, her cheeks turning red. "Unless you want to meet my beautiful daggers? You have not been introduced to them properly after all, unlike Corvus over there."

"You would dare hurt such a pretty face. In all seriousness, though, how was your afternoon?" I reply.

"Very productive," Corvus replies.

"A complete waste of time," Mara replies at the same time, with a scowl on her face.

At my confused look, Corvus explains, "Well, Mrs. Shadow over there is upset that I managed to upgrade three of my stats to her. It is all due to the fact that I fought bravely while Mara was a scaredy cat and kept running away."

"The only thing I remember Corvus doing was him trying to retreat while begging for mercy and annoying me by sending those drones out randomly. It harassed me enough to give me increases in Cognition and Speed." Mara replies smoothly, causing me to chuckle.

As Corvus prepares to respond, I quickly interject to prevent another argument between them. Before I have to endure another one, those two are like an old married couple, I swear. "We should get going; Alia is probably waiting for us. Oh, and Corvus, let me remind you, your charm isn't strong enough to pull off the fashionably late look, so don't even think about trying."

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As promised, we find Alia waiting for us at the Combat Center, looking refreshed and invigorated. She is in an exquisite emerald green gown. The moonlight dances along its surface, creating a stunning halo that complements her hair quite nicely. It drapes elegantly around her neck, leaving her shoulders

bare, and cascades into a delicate semi-sweetheart neckline, giving Alia a relaxed yet graceful look.

Corvus pauses, then whispers to me, “Dude, you are lacking in the best friend department. I think you should tell your best friend when you are taking him to meet a beautiful girl. I feel underdressed.”

I snicker before replying, “Only you would dare to wear a combo of formal and casual clothes to a party. I *guess* it would be hard to figure out from mine and Mara's clothes.” While pointing to Mara's stunning midnight-colored dress, complete with a stylish halter neckline and vibrant red accents that perfectly reflect her personality, and my navy blue jacket with a faint herringbone pattern.

We hurry to catch up to Mara, who is already exchanging pleasantries with Alia. As we walk up to them, we overhear Alia mentioning, “Did you hear? The seniors scored permission to throw the party at one of the halls that has its own stretch of beach.”

“That is really nice, but the sand is going to be quite annoying,” Mara replies.

“Ah! I am perfectly dressed. You are the ones who are overdressed.” Corvus comments with a triumphant grin on his face.

“You guys seem to be overlooking that there's likely a solution. They're not stupid. You are still underdressed in... Whatever in the nine stars you are wearing is.” Alia corrects Corvus and laughs at Corvus's crestfallen face.

Corvus, to preserve his dignity, proceeds towards the party hall while we trail behind him.

“Alia, you have successfully completed our rite of passage and earned your place as our friends,” I say with a somber nod of my head.

“You mean humiliate him?” Alia asks with a giggle.

“To keep your position, you will need to carry out this ritual twice daily. Once in the morning and once in the evening. While Sundays are not mandatory, performing it on that day will increase your chances of promotion.” Mara informs Alia, causing Corvus to call out, “I can still hear you.”

The path to the hall begins as a smooth concrete pavement with lush and well-kept trees on either side. Gradually, it transforms into a meandering and gravelly trail, scattered with small stones. The trees have now evolved into a thick canopy of foliage, with an abundance of shrubs and bushes nestled amidst towering evergreen and coconut trees. The once-bright lights of college are now hidden behind the trees. The sound of distant waves mixed in with the sounds of insects provides a soothing backdrop compared to the bustle earlier.

“Wow, this island must be massive! If they can hide something like this,” I comment offhandedly, busy craning my neck to see if the Combat Center is visible over the treetops.

“It's the size of one of the big cities. How else do you think they can fit an entire castle in here?” Corvus replies, smirking at our dumbfounded expression.

“Ignoring all the hows. Why?” Mara asks finally, after a long moment.

“Well, they use it for various wargames and training exercises, along with a few tournaments that don't fit in the arena,” Corvus answers. “You guys read more often.”

As we emerge from the dense foliage, a clearing opens up before us, revealing a mesmerizing spectacle. Towering trees encircle the area, their branches adorned with an array of treehouses, each unique in its design and decor. From which strings of colorful lights cascade down, illuminating the clearing with a warm and inviting glow.

Below, a massive party is in full swing. Hundreds of students, dressed in their finest attire, mingle and dance to the pulsating rhythm of the music being played by a band that stands in the center of the clearing. The music is beautifully complemented by the sound of the waves, insects, and the chatter of students.

Along one side, opposite the winding path that leads from the clearing to a secluded beach, is a long bench overladen with trays of snacks and drinks.

The crowd is a diverse mix of students from all years, their backgrounds and social standings evident in their attire and demeanor. Rich kids proudly exhibit designer clothing and accessories, whereas the less fortunate opt for simpler apparel, cobbled together creatively.

At the edges of the party are various groups of people. Some are busy moving various pieces on holographic boards. While others are busy arguing over replays of previous combat tournaments.

Wading through them are the members of Z3, the host of this party. They roam around the edge of the party, stopping fights before they have a chance to begin, all while continuously interacting with whomever they pass.

Corvus, never one to waste a moment, shouts, "Last one to the beach, has to get everyone food."

Me, Alia, and Mara walk slowly towards the beach, watching Corvus run ahead and straight into the back of a well-built second-year who is over a foot taller than him.

As we push through the crowd to *rescue* Corvus, we encounter a variety of students. Some students are busy holding court while, nearby, a group of girls dressed in matching neon outfits. They dance wildly, their movements exaggerated and attention-grabbing. In hopes of getting someone with a high social ranking to become their suitor.

Finally, we reach the beach, where a multitude of students are gathered, enjoying the cool breeze and the gentle lapping of the waves. Some sit on the sand, lost in conversation, while others wade in the water, their feet sinking into the soft sand. While others are busy playing various sports under the fluorescent light emitted by the glow sticks that are scattered around.

In one of the far corners, there is a small ring of flags within which two students dressed in full combat suits fight, cheered on by the spectators, while others roast marshmallows over a campfire.

As the sun begins to set, we spend the next thirty minutes marveling at the breathtaking shades of crimson that paint the sky. Time flies by as we take part in various activities. Mara spends her time learning martial arts from a group of older girls, while Corvus is busy racing all sorts of gizmos. Alia, on the other hand, engages in a few duels. As for me, I eagerly participate in every board game I can get my hands on.

I find myself by the dueling ring, cheering as Corvus and Alia step into the dueling ring. Their duel draws the attention of a few nearby students, who gather around to watch the exciting exchange. Among the onlookers is Marcus, a charismatic and athletic senior with striking hazel eyes and a charming smile.

“Impressive agility,” Marcus comments, admiring Alia's swift and precise movements. “If the Omniscient manages to get a lucky blow while she is distracted by his drones, then he could win. Otherwise, I do not see a way for her to lose.”

Sure enough, his prediction comes true as Alia slices Corvus across the chest with her spear, ending the bout.

While the next pair of duelists are getting ready, I ask Marcus, “What archetype are you, if you don't mind me asking? I am Dominion with the subtype Sunforged Duelist.”

Marcus cocks his head with a smile. "Didn't put you as a Telle guy? Telle is what we call Dominion due to your telekinesis and whatnot. I am a Mindfire Seer myself, like our friend over there. But I am of the Mindfire Seer variety."

Seeing my look of confusion, he elaborates, "My role is that of a strategist because I can basically overclock my brain."

"That must be a massive help in exams," I comment.

He barks a short laugh. "Oh, not really. You will find out soon enough. Look, your friends are heading over. Also, good luck keeping up with her. She has a real talent for battle that one."

As Corvus and Alia join us, Circus notices Marcus's cybernetic arm and asks, "So you upgraded your arm? How does it work with your GAI? I was wondering if having a cybernetic arm would interfere with the GAI."

Marcus grins, flexing his cybernetic arm. "Glad you asked! This puppy integrates directly with my GaI, enabling targeting assists and increasing reaction speeds. They are not cheap unless you are a Mind-Forge Engineer or known one."

The night skyline darkens as we finally head back to the main party for dinner, pausing briefly for a quick ion shower to rid our bodies of all the sand.

With a plate of food in hand, I find myself in a quieter area away from the pulsating music. Here, a handful of other students have also amassed to enjoy the serene ambiance offered by the peaceful waters. Among them, I recognize Amelia, a fellow first-year I had encountered during the tour earlier in the day. She is seated alone, gazing out at the moonlit ocean, her eyes reflecting the shimmering light.

Approaching cautiously, I take a seat next to her. "Hi, Amelia. Mind if I join you?" I ask tentatively.

She turns her head, smiling warmly. "Not at all, Elian. It's actually nice to see a familiar face here."

We fall into an easy conversation, discussing topics ranging from our classes to our aspirations as Enhanced individuals. Her passion for environmental conservation and animal welfare aligns with my desire to contribute positively to society.

As our meals finish, I excuse myself from the party and head back to my room. My social battery is completely drained from the whole day. But it has been fun, considering I never thought I would enjoy a party this much.

Chapter 5: Firestorm

“Dueling Domes are one of the key technologies that have helped make the Enhanced Combat Tournament the most popular sport by a large margin. The ability for combatants to fight in a randomized, highly realistic virtual environment without the fear of real world implications, all while the audience can see into the fight.”

- Omelia Lado

- Renowned Journalist

I am woken by a gentle buzzing in my ear as the first rays of sunlight stream through the smart glass. I get up and stretch, looking for a way to turn off the buzzing, which is growing annoying.

I jump a foot into the air when I hear a voice speak to me, “Good morning! How do you like your new alarm?”

“Paradox, you scared the stars out of me. Also, please turn off that annoying buzzing.” I reply, cutting across Paradox giggles.

“Sure, give me a moment. You are also expected to be at the main arena within an hour.”

With the Paradox guiding me, I am soon leaving my dorm and heading toward the arena. The stadium is in the same direction as the party from last night, but slightly to the right. It is hidden from the rest of the island thanks to clever landscaping and design.

This enormous structure has more than three levels of seating, with overgrown vegetation covering the fourth tier. Massive holographic screens and

enormous rings of neon light adorn the polished, weathered granite structure as a whole.

The stadium's central section is divided into two large dueling fields. There is a little ring of shrubs around the edge of the central section.

Today, however, the dueling fields are concealed beneath a massive platform on which the Major General and other military officials stand. Opposite them is a group of roughly one hundred first-year students. I make my way over to Corvus, Mara, and Alia, who are seated together in one of the back rows.

“Good morning, cadets,” the Major General says, nodding to the line of military officers behind us as I take a seat beside my friends. “Anyone not dressed in the outfit that was sent to them will be escorted on a full lap around the island.”

There is the stomping of boots as the military officers behind us move towards the unlucky few who are not wearing uniforms and guide them out of the stadium.

“Enhanced play an important role in our modern society,” declares the Major General after the last group has vanished from view.

“As the backbone of the international armed forces, it is imperative that enhanced soldiers are quick, decisive, and adaptable. Therefore, enhanced soldiers operate in pairs of two. A squad, the smallest functional group permitted to undertake a mission, is made up of two of these pairs.”

He pauses and looks each one of us in the eyes before continuing, “For the remainder of the year, a partner will be assigned to each of you. Only at the end of the year will you be permitted to switch partners; you will rise and fall together. Fear not; the partners have been assigned based on friendships and whether or not you have been observed to work well together.”

There is a loud bark of silence from a deceptively short man with a bushy handlebar mustache standing behind the major, silencing the whispered conversation that had broken out.

Major takes a moment to give the man an appreciative nod. "Thank you, Captain Cox. Where was I? Ah, you will be divided into three classes. A, B, and C, depending on your performances in EAT. We will not be fair, for neither is life. Consequently, class A shall enjoy the utmost advantages, attention, and precedence. Following them shall be class B, and lastly, class C. Should you demonstrate diligence and competence, promotion will be within your reach. However, be warned that if you become complacent, a long, downhill slide awaits you."

"I will not waste anymore of your time because it is time for you to enjoy a hot breakfast for half an hour before reporting for Combat class. It will be held in the Combat Center as a common class for all the first-year cadets."

As the Major General dismisses us, I turn to Corvus, Mara, and Alia. "Looks like we'll be in the same combat class together. Any ideas on how it will be conducted?"

Corvus grins, cracking his knuckles. "Well, I'm definitely looking forward to it! I've been itching to try out some new designs I've been cooking up with Phantom. Hopefully, we'll get to spar against each other again!"

Mara rolls her eyes, feigning annoyance. "You wish, Corvus. Last time, I barely broke a sweat. Besides, I'm more interested in learning strategies and techniques. Perhaps the teachers will help us out if we are in class A."

Alia snorts. "You and Corvus will get into class A easily. Although your rank may not be as high as the students who received the regular GAI, it's still one of the highest among those who got the new GAI like us."



After a heavy breakfast filled with a lot of laughter, we find ourselves in a stream of students heading towards the Combat Center.

The center has undergone a complete transformation overnight. It has been partitioned into four expansive squares, each with an unequal distribution of space. Within these squares, a multitude of dueling rings and obstacles have been strategically arranged. Occupying each square is a military officer clad in a combat suit.

I am guided by Paradox towards the second largest square, in which a young woman who appears to be in her late twenties stands.

As the last stranglers join us, the woman begins to speak: "I am Captain Estella Firestorm, the combat instructor for the Dominion archetype. My rank is A6, if you are curious and think you know more than me."

She smiles, taking in our dumbstruck expressions. A6 is a very high rank, easily putting her in the top 100 most powerful Enhanced. The highest rank ever shown publicly is A8.

"Now to set expectations." She declares with a gleam in her eye after the murmurs that had risen die. "If I see you using your powers in any conventional way at any time of the day, be it duels or sparring, I will personally make sure that you have to run five laps around the island."

She raises her hand to stop the flood of questions. "I have a good reason for this and a personal motivation of my own. How you attempt to use your abilities is the key factor that will determine your future abilities and evolutions."

"We Dominion have the most flexibility with our powers. I have seen people evolve their abilities to great heights and unique combos that make them a menace on the field."

A jagged bolt of electricity arcs out of her hand to hit a far wall as she continues to say, “We can throw bolts of lightning by manipulating the magnetic fields around us. Our telekinesis allows us to affect our world in a way never thought possible.”

“*Or even telepathy.*” I hear Captain Firestorm's voice in my head.

“As for my personal motivation, every time you fight, use your abilities, and I am teaching you. My GAI can use the data you collect for your own GAI to train itself. This is the best way to get to higher ranks at A rank and above. Which is why most A rankers are teachers like me.”

“Now, it is time to test you and evaluate which class you belong to. You each will take part in a duel against me and a couple of runs on the obstacle course. Also, your GAI personal assistant will be disabled for the next few hours.”

The captain steps into a dueling ring next to us and turns towards us. “What are you waiting for? Go run the obstacle course. You won’t be given extra time. Only Aldien will join me in the dueling field.”

The obstacle course consisted of a series of challenges designed to test our agility, speed, and endurance. There were low walls to vault over, balance beams to navigate, and sandpits. The course was not particularly difficult, but it was physically demanding, especially since the scoring was percentile-based.

I think I should save the best run for the last few runs I do. I do not want the rest of them to copy me. If I see someone using a better route, I should definitely copy it.

I run through the obstacle course at a moderate pace, keeping my eyes open for any shortcut I can spy. It went perfectly until I met my arch nemesis, the sand pit.

The sand is weird; it's almost bubbly, and my feet sink into it if I do not keep moving. That would not be too hard, if not for the styrofoam logs that fall from above before sinking into the sand, along with anyone unfortunate enough to be caught with it.

My downfall occurs when I spot a log falling down right in front of me. Instead of charging ahead, I do what any sane person would do and stop. I remain motionless as I sink further into the grainy sand, realizing too late that I have made a mistake.

I touch down on top of massive air vents that shoot jets of air into the sand above, keeping it suspended in midair. The cursed log is chasing me down the slope that leads to the beginning, so I do not have time to admire it any more.

A tiny trench that marks the abrupt end of the slope. I jump across the gap and land gracefully while the log rolls into the trench and is sent to terrorize another student.

Taking deep, ragged breaths, I sit with my head between my knees. When my breathing finally returns to normal, I stand and head towards the starting point, but not before grabbing a cold bottle of water from a small stand setup thoughtfully.

Drinking small sips, I watch the captain in a dueling circle fight a pale skinned girl with long silver braided hair.

The captain glides around the girl's spear, using her wings to keep her a hair's width away from the jagged tip. The fight is quite one sided with the girl only having the beginning of a silver gauntlet whose metallic plates are accented by a golden glow. In contrast, the captain has a complete suit of seamless crystalline armor, which is made from a transparent, glossy material that stretches along with her.

The fight ends abruptly when the girl falls over a projected barrier in the dueling ring after being rendered blind by the reflections from Captain Firestorm's armor.

Desummoning her armor, the captain pulls the cadet to her feet and speaks a few words that bring a smile to the girl's face. Then she turns and points to a boy of Mediterranean descent to join her.

I do not stay to watch as time is running out and I have to get a move on. It takes a few tries, but I finally make it to the end.

Pressing the giant red button, I watch a hologram flicker to show the details of my run.

—— °: * ° . ° .• ° ☆: * ☾ . *: ☆ ° . °: * ° . ° .——

Name: Elian Rowas Sylvus

Category: Dominion

Time: 8 minutes, 35 seconds

Percentile: 65%

Leaderboard

1. Odile Girard -> 6:02
2. Adia Alad -> 6:10
3. Mitso Cheral -> 6:33

—— °: * ° . ° .• ° ☆: * ☾ . *: ☆ ° . °: * ° . ° .——

65 percentile! Damn, I have a long way to go if I want to go to class A. Thank heavens for yesterday's constitution upgrade. I can barely walk back to the start as it is.

I groan internally and drag myself all the way back to the beginning through the exit, walking at the speed of an elderly man, before I collapse, holding a bottle of water.

Captain Firestorm is busy fighting a burly boy with a broadsword, using nothing but her daggers to completely disarm him within a couple of seconds. *I wish I could fight that well. Ah well, I still need to finish the obstacle course in a decent time.*

Time rushes past, and I manage to inch my percentile to seventy over the course of a couple dozen runs. Before I am called to join the captain in the dueling ring.

Stepping into the ring, I hear a faint callout from Paradox, “*Entering Combat Mode.*” Shocking me to no end, as I have not heard from her for a couple of hours now.

I do not think about it too much because there is a buzzing sound as my sword and shield materialize in front of me. My shield is slightly different from yesterday's, perhaps more angular? It feels a tad lighter, just not enough to make me think I am not imagining it.

“Are you ready?” The captain asks, oozing boredom. I nod, gripping my shield tighter and setting my feet slightly further apart.

Instantly, there is a popping noise as a holographic dome. It is one of the coolest piece of technology I have ever seen. Allowing me and the captain to be immersed in a virtual environment while the others see a projection of me and the captain fighting without the environment.

I only have a moment to look around at the dusty desert with its rolling sand dunes, and then the captain is attacking my exposed sword arm with a quick thrust of her dagger.

Jumping to the side, I force her into having her back to the sun to stop the reflections, simultaneously dodging the strike. I dart forward, hoping to catch her in a vulnerable position with one of her arms extended. I bash aside

one of her daggers with my shield while launching a large overhead strike at her shoulder blade.

The captain moves back a couple of inches, causing my sword to just graze along her armor effectively. I overextend, not expecting this, unlike the captain, who is already using my mistake to draw a thin line of simulated blood along my forearm as I try to dodge.

"Tsk, you need to work on your combat sense." I hear the captain's voice in my head, startling me into jumping back. *"Try that again, but this time, try not to make the same mistake."*

So I do, only to be rewarded with another cut. This time it's along my chest and with her other dagger.

"Try again," comes the captain's bored voice.

This time, I manage not to get cut and even cause a scratch on her armor. I am so proud that I almost miss the captain's counterattack. I am instantly on the backfoot, retreating under a storm of strikes.

A few manage to get through and leave thin cuts along my body. It is like yesterday again. I am once more waiting for my opponent to make a mistake, but I know this one will not.

The next few minutes are some of the most nerve wracking moments of my life as I slowly gain more cuts and get slower and slower. I try to think of something I can do in order to turn this around.

Nothing comes to me, and I am soon standing with my back to a dune. It hits me then, and I send out a torrent of telekinetic force at the ground below us.

The next few moments are a blur. I did it, even though I have a splitting headache, feel like my face is about to burst, and have blood dripping from

some part of it. My reward is a massive dust cloud from all the sand particles I have just displaced, along with itchy eyes from all the sand.

On autopilot, I close my eyes and swing my sword heavily towards the last location of my opponent. I even throw my shield to the side, hoping to get lucky enough to hit her. Not like I will be able to fight any longer.

My rapier comes to a sudden stop. Then there is a sharp pressure on the hilt of my sword, causing me to drop it. It is followed by the feel of cool metal on my throat.

When I finally open my eyes, I see the captain's face close to mine and her dagger touching my neck. I squeak out, "I surr-surrender."

There is a gleam in the captain's eye as the ring disperses the holograms. Leaving me just as tired but in the same state I entered the ring in. Except for a sticky feeling near my mouth. It's probably my brain playing tricks on me.

I am interrupted from trying to find any trace of the myriad of cuts that were there a moment ago by a cough. I become straight as a rod and face Captain Firestorm, slightly red in the face.

"At ease, cadet. That was an interesting fight. You have no experience fighting and not a lot of talent for it either. But that can be fixed through hard work and practice. What I cannot teach you is to think on your feet." The captain says, the corners of her mouth twitching as she sees my pleased expression.

Even though it would please me to place you in class A. You have a very low score on the obstacle course. However, I am confident that you can join class A in a few months if you are given a good partner. Particularly considering that you possess the new GAI model."

“You should not worry too much about the fact that the majority of your classmates will be stronger than you by more than fifty percent. You will catch up to and possibly surpass them in due course. Go to the infirmary and have your nose checked as well.”

Just as I am about to leave in a state of shock, the captain calls over her back, “My GAI sent you a recording of this match with all your mistakes on it. Additionally, it has also given you moves that you should master and perform a thousand times or more until they come naturally to you.”

Only after I exit the Combat Center do I realize that I have no idea where the infirmary is.

“*What would you do without me? Also, I got the recording.*” comes Paradox’s voice.

“*Well, then I did have to find a map. But it is good to hear from you again.*” I reply, following Paradox’s directions.

“*Nice to be able to talk again. It was a good fight, you know? Even if you managed to injure yourself in a simulation. We may get an upgrade once I process all this juicy data,*” Paradox comments excitedly, seeing me internally replay the duel.

I chuckle at her enthusiasm before asking something that is gnawing at me, “*Do you know how I managed to use my ability like that?*”

“*If I had to guess, you managed to activate the adaptive routines. Possibly changing your ability forever, considering that your current one is most likely broken. Hence, the nosebleed.*”

Chapter 6: Unstoppable Force

“The rise of the Cosmicians and their worship of stars is one of the key defining moments of modern culture. In just a single decade, they managed to go from a religion with almost no followers to the one with the most.”

- Excerpt from Dark Day And Their Significance

-Circulated By The World Government

I have taken boredom to an art. I am in a hospital bed, and each arm has a tube attached to it that goes to a bothersome machine that periodically lets out erratic sounds.

They have even disabled my overlay while Paradox is fixing the issue. Leaving me unable to browse the Net or talk to my friends.

At least my nosebleed has stopped. The doctor, an old grandmotherly lady, has kindly informed me that I manage to activate the adaptive functions of my GAI that are typically reserved for dire circumstances.

In order to use my telekinesis in a way I should not have been able to, I have fried hundreds of neural wires and awakened dormant ones before my body has managed to acclimate to them. Fortunately, all of the damage can be repaired in a few more hours by the nanobots the machine is producing.

Leaving me with nothing to do but watch on repeat all my failings in the obstacle course and duel. Even Paradox has gone silent, busy directing all the nanobots and learning from all the data.

I am disturbed from my contemplation of whether or not I should throw my tray of lunch for a bit of entertainment by a flickering in my eyes as the overlay is working again. *Finally, I can talk to people again!*

I am stopped from opening any of my friends messages by an urgent notification. Opening it, I watch as a familiar script runs.

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GAI Update Conditions Met.

GAI Name: Paradox

—— . * _ ° . ° . ° ☆ : • ° ☽ ö ☾ ° • : ☆ ° . ° : . * _ ° . ° . ——

Sufficient Data acquired.

Training Paradox.

Upgrades performed.

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GAI Update Changelog

Ultimate Ability changed.

Unique Ability created.

Ultimate Ability: Unseen Hands -> Unstoppable Force

Unstoppable Force:

Uncorks a torrent of telekinetic force, destroying everything in its path.

Additional details:

1. Offense: F1
2. Defence: F0
3. Speed: F3 -> F4
4. Cognition: F3
5. Constitution: F1->F2

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I am so giddy with excitement that I forget I am connected to the machine. Eager to test my new ability, I raise my arm. Only to be thwarted by a searing pain as I almost detach the pipe.

“You never learn, do you?” Paradox whispers in my ear with a tired voice.
“How do you manage to injure yourself every other hour if you are not monitored like a baby?”

“Finally, someone to talk to.” I exclaim, completely ignoring her jab.

“Go bother your friends; they have sent plenty of messages. I still have to continue fixing the remaining neural wires.” Paradox shoots me down in a bored voice.

I heed her advice and open the messages tab mentally. Instantly, I am overwhelmed by a slab of worried messages from my friends.

Alia is particularly helpful when I find out that she is in class B like me and my partner. Meanwhile, Corvus and Mara are each other's partners and have, predictably, entered class A.

I have missed Alien Social Studies, but I should be discharged in time for Enhanced Studies. There are plenty of messages from people wishing to know how they can use their own abilities in a different way to suck up to Captain Firestorm.

I take a deep breath and begin answering each one of them in a unique way. But I make it abundantly clear that I am not interested in telling them.

Despite the simplicity of my task, I find myself growing increasingly frustrated as I struggle to shoot them down in a new way. Eventually, I succumb to the overwhelming temptation to seek assistance.

"Paradox, can you help me compose these messages? I'm having trouble expressing myself clearly." I request mentally, silently praying, that she will grant me some semblance of coherency.

"Sigh, I will do it just this once. I cannot be doing all your tasks." Paradox relents, and I gladly give her control, grateful for her help.

After sending the messages, I find the appropriate settings and filter all incoming messages, save those from my friends. Lying back down on the comfy hospital bed, I let my thoughts drift.

I am about to fall asleep when I realize that I have not informed my sister that the operation was successful. Even though my name and rank will be visible on the military's public website, it would be extremely inconsiderate of me to ignore her.

She probably will not be allowed to initiate a conversation with someone in the military for security reasons. Which is why I would have to message her first.

Determined to rectify my oversight, I mentally draft a message to Sofia, filling her in on the details of my successful operation and the unexpected turn of events that led to my upgrade. I add a few reassurances about my well-being and express my regret for not reaching out sooner.

As I release control back to Paradox to send the message, a reply from Sofia instantly pops up on my screen. I steel myself for her reproach, but her words are filled with concern rather than anger.

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Elian! I'm so glad to hear from you! I was worried sick when I hadn't heard from you in days. Mara and Corvus reached out to me, but I didn't want to bug you while you were recovering. How are you feeling? Tell me everything!

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Feeling a wave of relief wash over me, I exchange a string of messages with my sister, updating her on recent events and my current condition. I learn that while it is afternoon for me, it is late at night for her.

I am surprised to learn that after I left, she applied to a few colleges. She managed to get an almost full scholarship to one of the topmost colleges, with the rest of the tuition being paid from the money Corvus gave her.

The college is almost entirely attended by rich kids, leading me to worry about her financial wellbeing, only to be reassured that the monthly military pension she receives as my sister is enough to cover the cost of living for the rest of her life.

Satisfied, I let her go to bed while I talk with Mara, Corvus, and Alia.

Their messages reveal that they have settled into their respective classes, with Corvus excitedly sharing his experiences in Class A. Despite his initial concerns about balancing his studies and extracurricular projects, he seems optimistic. Mara shares her impressions of Class A as well, mainly highlighting that they are the only non upper class cadets present.

Alia informs me that the story is no different for Class B. However, Class C is slightly different in that it has a higher number of non rich students, with most of them having the newer version of GAI, as far as Alia has managed to find out.

I learn that there is another pair of twin boys who are like us but hate the rich even more than Mara. There has already been a fight in class B with the old man who teaches Alien Social Studies, who had to escort one of the richer kids to the infirmary.

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The classroom for Enhanced Studies is like every other college classroom, with long rows of curved benches arranged around a center stage similar to an amphitheater. Approximately thirty or so clattering students, or more than half of our class, have already taken up some of the seats.

I look around for Alia but do not find her. Unable to find her, I shrug and take a seat near the back with a couple of empty seats.

I have not even had a chance to remove my textbook from the bag containing the other textbooks the school has given us when a slightly buff boy with a long leather jacket with a hood that covers his eyes sits beside me.

I catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye and notice that his jacket seems a little worn. He must be one of the twins that Alia mentioned.

I pretend to be busy reading the first chapter of the textbook. Not wanting to have anything to do with them. As a couple of minutes pass, he is clearly getting impatient and tapping his foot in an annoying rhythm.

When I do not look up after some more minutes, he clears his throat and begins in a gravelly voice, "Brother, you and I have a problem, you see. Your girl downed my brother. Can't let that pass, you know. Don't wanna fight you, so here is an option. Help me educate the richer kids, if you get my drift. I know the areas that the cameras don't cover. I won't be caught."

I try to meet his gaze exactly where I believe it should be before responding, saying, "She is not my girl, first of all. Secondly, I do not see how Alia's actions affect me."

The boy lets out a small bark of laughter. "Brother, you are aware that you and her will live and die together. Do you know which gang I am from? All I have to do is break a few bones, and your career will be at the bottom of the ocean. Eh? You understand?"

"The only thing going to the bottom of the ocean will be your body if you carry on bothering us. If you think that Anarchists can protect you from the Black Reapers, you need to go to the infirmary," replies a familiar voice with an angry undertone.

Glancing over, I spot Alia right behind us, her eyes ablaze with fire and her hand firmly gripping the boy's shoulder. I watch as the boy slowly turns pale and hurriedly excuses himself, allowing Alia to drop into the now empty seat, fists still balled.

"You alright?" I ask as casually as I can, watching Alia closely.

She takes a deep, ragged breath before replying in a tired voice. "I hate people like them; they are just like my brother. Believing that they are untouchable just because they are part of or lead a gang. Sadly, the only thing

they will ever respect is strength, so you are left with no choice but to put them down before they down you.”

“So, it seems that I should be thanking you for stopping them from annoying me.” I try to lighten the mood.

“Mhmm”

Sighing internally at her lackluster response, I shift my focus back to the textbook and eagerly anticipate the teacher's arrival. Unfortunately, my head is spinning from the overwhelming amount of new information, making it impossible for me to read beyond the first page.

I don't know why, but it never occurred to me that Alia must have been gang sponsored, meaning she must have killed dozens of other human beings. Of course, there is always a chance that she is not, but it seems improbable given that she name dropped one of the most powerful gangs in the world.

I know it is hypocritical of me to judge her, given that I know that Corvus and Mara have also killed people from their gang days and do not judge them for it.

I am interrupted from thinking about it any further when Colonel Luthra from the Enhanced Ceremony enters.

The colonel stands at the podium, surveying the class with a stern gaze. The room falls silent as she begins to speak.

"Greetings, cadets. Welcome to Enhanced Studies, the core curriculum of Mirage Institute. This course delves into the history, theory, and application of Enhanced technology and abilities. Throughout the year, we will explore a wide array of subjects, from the origins of Enhanced technology to the ethical implications of its usage."

She pauses, locking eyes with several students, before continuing. “Understanding the potential and limitations of your abilities is paramount to unlocking your full potential. Make no mistake; this class will challenge you academically and physically.”

The class continues with her examining the fighting style of an A6 ranked Dominion. She gives us a week to submit our analysis on the fighting style of a high ranked Enhanced of our own archetype. Before allowing us to head to dinner.

Dinner was a lively event that quickly turned into a mischievous escapade as Mara playfully snatched Corvus's fries and dashed away while he enthusiastically described their Galactic Business class. With the evening's entertainment concluded, we made our way to the Dueling Center for a session of sparring.

To all our astonishment, we discovered that I had not only acquired a new ability but also gained minor projections on my shoulders that matched the style of my gauntlets. These newfound enhancements filled me with excitement and anticipation.

However, despite the improvements, I found myself lacking in combat prowess. Within our small group, I ranked near the bottom in terms of fighting ability, with only Corvus faring worse. He and I struggled to overcome our opponents, while Mara effortlessly defeated everyone except Alia. Our battles were arduous, yet we managed to secure a few victories through cunning and strategy.

Compared to the previous day, my increases in defense, speed, and constitution allowed me to close the gap in combat with Alia.

Even though, on paper, all my stats are higher than Alia, I still only manage to win a single match in over half a dozen of them.

It is as if she is able to predict my moves, always staying one step ahead. Which is when I finally grasped the meaning behind Captain Firestorm's words when she mentioned my lack of battle instinct.

As the others departed, I remained behind to follow Paradox's instructions and diligently learn the recommended moves from the captain. The process was slow and demanding, extending late into the night as I absorbed half of the suggested techniques.

Glossary

1. Bastion:

Subtype (All have shields): Dawnspire (spear), Sun's Fang (sword), Whispering Shadows (daggers), Rending Fury (claws)

Ultimate Ability:

Aegis of Unity - Expands their shield into an impenetrable dome, radiating celestial light and safeguarding all within. Perfect balance and unwavering defense.

2. Omniscient:

Subtype: Mindfire Seer (analytical), Mind-Forge Engineer (technological)

Ultimate Ability:

Hyperflux Transcendence - Overclocks neural pathways, unleashing a torrent of precognitive visions and hyper-calculation. (Mindfire Seer)

Technogenesis Arsenal - Overclocks neural pathways, allowing the creation of technological marvels on the fly. (Forge-Mind Engineer)

3. Wraith:

Subtype: Whisperblade, Phantom Eye

Ultimate Ability:

Echo of the Void - Vanishes into oblivion, leaving behind a strong decoy. Perfect spatial awareness guides their every move.

4. Dominion:

Subtype (May have shields or some other externals): Tempest's Ire (spear), Sunforged Duelist (sword), Veiled Tempest (daggers), Talon Maelstrom (claws)

Ultimate Ability:

Unseen Hands- Telekinetic mastery moves any object and sculpts the battlefield.

Mirage Subjects: Combat, Alien Social Studies, Galactic Business, Foreign Survival Techniques, Leadership, First Aid, Enhanced Studies, Tactical Technology Implementation, Military History, Combat Tactics