

SoulCore

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Chapter One

Ava's Test

I looked upon the island of Alechor and its cluttering of buildings molded and built within its jungle and jagged cliffs. The base was nestled protectively along the shores and ready-primed in the ideal spot to look outwards to the east. Even tired, I felt my eyes taking in as much as possible in the rush of movement. What seemed like a chaotic mess had a structured routine of purpose and drive as people moved from building to building carrying weapons, crates, and papers.

The helicopter landed with a tussle before I was beckoned away from the vehicle into the base's expanse, where waiting for me, a younger cadet stood ready with his uniform ironed and pressed only the dusting of sand dirtied his boots. I took a moment to take in the ever-busy training of the base's populous before the young cadet rushed forward.

"Senior Lt. Keulo, if you'd come with me, the colonel awaits your arrival." I gave a stiff nod and hefted my duffle bag over my shoulders to follow behind the cadet as he took me deeper into the base through the winding main carriageway. The cadet turned his head occasionally to peer at me when he thought I wasn't looking; he was not the only person to do so.

A part of me couldn't imagine in my wildest dreams that I would be making my way into the one place where they kept the T1 and its Reaper or even that I had been allowed to work intimately with them. But, for the first time, it seemed like I was benefiting from my hard work, the time, the effort spent, and the title of prodigy and youngest woman to be promoted to Senior Lt. of Engineering was paying off.

As we crossed a barricade line and the road began sloping, I first saw the large iron vault doors standing twenty feet tall and guarded by two heavily armed grunts that led deeper into the island's core. I had a basic understanding of the base's layout, but that knowledge was escaping me as I felt my heart hammering in my chest, the iron doors opening before me as the cadet flashed his badge, and I got my first sight of through the darkness to my new home.

Lead-lined walls, encased in iron and scaffolding floors covering piping and cable lines running through the base, met me as my eyes adjusted to the dark. The slow creaking and screeching of the iron doors came to an audible bang as all the light was trapped outside, leaving me in the cold, dreary hall. The cadet moved forward past me towards a pair of sliding doors, and as they moved

aside, a scan of his badge revealed an elevator shaft that he promptly beckoned me onto.

As the Elevator lurched downwards, I had time to ponder my decision to take this position. I wasn't sure what I got out of it. The chance to see and study something no one else had ever done before, at least, they haven't ever studied an active T1, to my knowledge. I wasn't even sure why they approached me; all I had done was invent a new Nerve Stem that dissipated heat by expanding hydraulic glands. I was barely twenty-six, and here I was on my way to a top-secret facility to work a part of a top-secret program if only William could see me now.

I swallowed heavily as I held back the memories; thankfully, I was interrupted as the elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open, scraping metal against metal. The cadet stepped forward but stopped as he set himself ready.

"At ease, cadet, I'll take her from here." Came an age-cracked voice, and I caught sight of Colonel Maisie Drumstan for the first time. His peppered hair was kept short, but an even whitened beard covered his face. A set of piercing brown eyes met my blue ones with a curious look before the colonel nodded for me to follow him, and as we left the cadet behind, my heart raced faster.

"I'm glad to see you've made it here in one piece, Lieutenant. I was sure the heat would have kept you away. Let alone the dulcet tones of a chopper's whining." The Colonel looked over his shoulder as I nearly stumbled on a step leading deeper into the already deep halls.

"I've been in worse, sir." I had to concentrate on not stuttering or tripping as we broke out into the main hall as it wound its way into a maze of directions that escaped me.

"Naturally, you're a farmer's child. Likely' put to work?" I hadn't picked up on that being a question until the man nodded towards the left towards two more oversized doors that swung inwards and sat slightly ajar far at the end of the hall. "We will make a stop before we get you moved into your office. Figure we would get the hard part out of the way."

"Of course," was my only response as I recognized those doors as the man pushed them further ajar. I could see the work of engineers as they moved about the core shells that lined the large hanger bay with assortments of tools surrounding each. The hanger sloped from fifty feet tall into a much higher hundred and twenty feet. And even from the platform leading down into the hanger, I could see why; the T1 shell stood in its corner, dwarfing the room with its size.

I followed behind the Colonel's wide steps as heads looked up, and I could feel them peeling me apart in their heads. They would whisper to one another, but I moved on as we got closer to the T1. As we drew closer, the man called, "Kiara," but no answer came.

He tried again to get the same results before making his way up the grated steps and to the platform that wound around the T1's space, and I soon followed pace. I couldn't take my eyes off the massive form and the old metals layered into protective plates. Buried deep behind them, I could make out the weaving of the Nerve Stems and Peripheral weaponry.

"Kiara, come on," the man sighed as I watched him enter the pilot's core, and I hesitated before climbing in behind him to be met with a waterfall of Nerve Stems that curtained the room. Specific

bundles tied aside, leaving room at the center where I could see the Colonel crouched above a pile of things.

Clothes and clothes heaped around a smattering of chip bags and soda cans, a sizable stack of what looked like cafeteria trays awaited to be tossed out. Instead, a few duffle bags heaped with items and clothes almost made this place seem to be lived in. Speculation that I soon discovered was confirmed as the colonel reached down to shake at the bundle of clothes.

“Kiara, get up; I ain’t wanting to do this the hard way.” I could now recognize the unmistakable form of a woman curled under the clothes, using another duffle bag as a pillow. Her almost stark white hair was dirtied with brown at the roots, a mess of unkempt short hair, and the soft sounds of snoring followed the colonel’s actions.

The Colonel stood up with a grunt, and I couldn’t help but wonder why a cadet would ever be allowed to live in such squalor, let alone sleep on the job or use a shell as their private apartment. “Well, Lieutenant, would you say I tried?”

“I think so, sir. But, if I might ask-” The man shook his head, anticipating my question, and “Kiara isn’t a cadet lieutenant,” was his response before he nudged the woman hard with his boot. Her response was to gasp in pain, rolling away from the shoe further into the Nerve Stem, before sitting up and her head tilted to glare at the man who only stood with the slight upturn of a smirk.

“What the hell, I was sleeping,” the woman shook out her hair with her hands; the zip-up hoodie hung baggie on her as she seemed to see me for the first time, and that glare darkened in response.

“I did try to wake you up gently, let alone the fact,” the man looked down at his watch. “It is almost two in the afternoon, and I’d like to introduce you to someone.” He motioned towards me, and I took that to step forward, but the woman gave me the vilest look before returning to the colonel.

“I told you I don’t need anyone babysitting me, I can take care of myself and Dani, and it’s not like any of the others did. They were too busy pining over being able to be this close to a T1 to do their job.” The woman spoke with such hatred, a hatred I don’t even know someone could have for me, and even if I got a chance to speak, I doubt I would understand what to say back.

“That is beyond the point, Kiara. I say you need someone to help you, and that will be how it is. Lieutenant Keulo will be the Senior Engineer assigned to you and Dani; that was our deal. Is that clear?” The man held the woman’s gaze, and the complex, aged exterior rippled with authority, but I was more surprised she didn’t weather under his gaze before she turned to me.

“I don’t need or want you around, and you’ll be just like all the others; you’ll be better off going somewhere else” before she stood with a huff and shoved past me and out of the core, leaving me flabbergasted.

The colonel seemed to chuckle, “Hard part is done; I think she likes you” he gave a nod that I could only blink as I was unsure what was happening. “Come on, let us get you moved in,” he

moved past me before stopping outside the core to look over his shoulder, “unless this was too much for you and you want out, I won’t hold it against you.”

I realized he was giving me an out, but I wasn’t sure if that was how it worked. The woman hated me for no other reason than because I existed. It was apparent the chance for me to get close to the T1, let alone her to take care of either, was slim, or if her attitude was to go by anything, the last thing she would do was come to me willingly. But that didn’t sit well with me, the thought that I would give up just because of a self-impressed woman who let her position get to her hated her. I let out a breath, I couldn’t give up, but honestly, I wasn’t sure what the next step was as I felt my stomach turn, knowing what I had signed up for.

“No, sir, I think this is manageable.” I gave the colonel a nod, who pierced me with a curious glance.

“As you can see, the first hill to climb, Lieutenant, is to bridge this gap between you and Kiara. A bit of advice, go easy on her. She is more than meets the eye, or her attitude implies, if that’s the case, let’s get moving,” And with that, he turned, making me scramble to catch back up with him down the stairs.

Chapter Two

A New Bordum

My offices were more luxurious than I had thought they would be. Being the Senior Engineer of a T1 required much more space than I was used to. But to be fair, I hadn't ever been able to find out. A couch lined the immediate wall beside the door in the main office, and a large painting of shrubs and trees decorated the wall behind it. On the opposite wall was a bookcase with a smattering of books left behind by the last tenant and plenty of space to add my own. A large desk separated the far wall from the entrance, and two chairs sat in front of its length that held a terminal system and a few monitors. A door past the couch leads to a small bedroom and bathroom with minimum amenities.

The door on the right intrigued me as it was apparent that it hadn't been touched. Where else in the rest of the rooms, there were left behind spots in the dust where the last tenant had packed their stuff up before leaving, indicating they had been lived in. But this room was spotless, with a medical bed, medicines, and medical devices adorning the walls. A cabinet full of bulkier medical machinery rested immediately beside the door, all stocked and untouched. The room hadn't been used once, made even more apparent by the fact that some medicines were expired. Kiara or none of the last Engineers had used this room once, and I don't think I had to guess why. A part of me couldn't help feeling disappointed, let down, stolen from. My earlier thoughts of finally seeing a reward for all my efforts were just pipe dreams. It almost made me want to cry, but instead, I breathed. An opportunity was just that; I would be foolish to let it out of my grasp now that I had it.

I spent the first few days getting familiar with the base's operations, digging into the terminals while keeping eyes on Kiara's and the T1's vitals through their transponders. But with the lack of action, it seemed that the woman at least seemed to keep to herself enough not to come to harm. And my curiosity about what happened to all the engineers before reared its head as I dug into the file cabinets left behind, only to find missing files and redactions that gave me less information than I had gotten my first day from Kiara. It was clear that each had been moved or dismissed willingly or unwillingly at the request of Kiara, yet none of them gave reasons why. I spent another good chunk of my day doing health reports, all of which began to sound cookie-cutter and copied and pasted. I couldn't help but feel like a parrot in an officer's uniform. The other engineers seemed to avoid me, which I could only attribute to jealousy or some bitterness at my past achievements.

It was a week of mediocracy and boredom that I eventually crawled from my offices to have coffee and breakfast in the cafeteria. The stale rooms and almost harrowing interior tended to draw out your exhaustion, so coffee was a good start.

"If it isn't the famous Senior Engineering Officer, or should I say youngest Senior Engineering Officer?" I nearly toppled my coffee as the man sat in the chair across from me, his tray thumping against the metal table, rocketing me from my thoughts.

"I-I'm sorry?" I blinked back unwavering as I took in the man's almost handsome cut face, long black hair that touched his shoulders, and immaculately shaved face and cleaned uniform.

He reached a hand across the table, which I took to shake, glade when he let it go. "Name's Lieutenant Marim Folister, I'm the Information Technologies and Security officer here, but

you can call me Marim.” He nodded to me before picking up his utensils to begin eating.

“How has your first week been? Hopefully, the T1 isn’t giving you too much of a problem?” I could almost hear the sarcasm from him. It had become more apparent that everyone avoided the T1’s Reaper Pilot like the plague.

I busied myself with my coffee taking short sips of the now cold drink, “I’ve been making my way- “

“Meaning you haven’t done much?” Marim interrupted with raised eyebrows and a gangling smirk. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone, but if you need anything, just let me know” I nodded back before letting him return to breakfast and myself to my coffee, long enough for a thought to occur.

“Your Officer of Information Security?” he nodded with his mouth full, “Could you help me get some files? I have been trying to get all the health reports and medical documents for the T1 and Kiara but haven’t found them.”

Marim seemed to ponder my question before replying, “I think I can do that; I’ll have to check clearance levels and such, so give me a week or two, and I’ll have what I can on your desk, sound good?” I could only nod enthusiastically with the inner ‘thank gods’ ringing in my thoughts.

“Speaking of the devil herself,” Marim spoke in a comical whisper as I followed his gaze. The room had fallen to whispers, causing the utensils against the trays to sound like gunshots in the night. Kiara had stepped into the room, her baggie hoodie swallowing her, the black spandex of her core suit was hidden under a pair of ripped jeans, and her boots were muddy and old. Her hair looked unkept, but I could see the darkness of it being washed.

She kept her head down as she moved to the line that parted, letting her quickly grab a tray, laden it with a bowl of oatmeal and a carton of milk before rushing away, stopping only for a moment as her green eyes caught my blue. I wasn’t sure what to think as her face went from surprise to wonder, to unsureness and then a glare, before leaving the cafeteria to explode in noise.

“Someone likes you, that or you’re in her little black book of death, Reaper and all” Marim grinned all the while; I didn’t know which I preferred. “You excited about the field operation? Kiara and the T1 are going out for a training op.”

I blinked back, trying not to choke on my coffee before asking, “W-when was that exactly?”

Marim raised his eyebrow again, a grin spreading across his lips, “it’s tomorrow. I’d suggest sorting out your calendar soon.” I pondered, chucking the last of my coffee at the man before standing up.

“Well, I’m going to go do that now. Let me know about those files as soon as you can.” The man gave a tiny wave as I took my tray away, disposing of it, before leaving, intending to scream into my duvet after ensuring my calendar was updated

Chapter Three

A Bond is Formed

The time leading up to the field operation seemed to stretch and shorten in waves, I would find myself busy, and time would slow, but in those moments, I had to myself; I found that time seemed to run faster than I could think. I wasn't even sure of my responsibilities; in most cases, the pilots could be handled by one or two engineers. But it was clear that a T1 wasn't just any SoulCore; it required the utmost attention. And even more so, it was clear that this wouldn't be just any field operation.

The Command Center felt unnaturally quiet, considering the bare whispers could be trumpets compared to the beat of my heart. The turning of knobs and pushing of buttons were deafening, and among all this, I was short of knowledge watching the vitals of Kiara and the T1, trying to read the abundance of sensory data sent back; it was blazing fast, which I wasn't used to. The operation was only half an hour in, and trouble had already struck.

"We have two Nundu class H1s five knots out from the T1, sir. They are closing fast at vectors- " The sound of blood rushing to my ears muted the engineer officer as I watched particularly close. '*Come on, Kiara, see them, you have to see them*,' Was the thought that raced through my head as I tried to find in the transponder stream any indication of the woman's intent, but It didn't take long before the radar sensed the movement of the T1 in the direction of the Nundu, but still no sign in the data of their acknowledgment of them; I found myself stumped and confused.

"The T1 has engaged the Nundu; there are signatures-" there was a break in the commentary as gasps filled the command center. "two more Nundu Class H1s have emerged from the ocean and are converging on the T1's position!"

There was an uproar in my heartbeats, and the tides in my mind turned; Kiara was in danger, and by the looks on the other engineers' faces, they thought the same. I looked towards the colonel and felt winded by his almost concentrative focus on Kiara's indicator among the radar information.

"The radar shows the T1 has come into contact with a strike," all eyes turned to me, but there was nothing. No data showing they had been hit or that Kiara was even remotely worked. Something was wrong, and as I watched the IO stream, I saw it in a blink of an eye; the same pattern repeated. Considering no other engineer could touch the T1, it was apparent that Kiara made sure of that and that she tampered with the transponder, but the question was why.

“Nundu H1A has been neutralized, T1 is converging onto H1B moving to intercept, T minus 60 seconds for H1C and D to reach its position.” The words have become noise to me, and it was in the moments as another gasp and the sound of more movements as the officer called out another hit that I saw the IO as it lagged before a slew of information was plastered into the IO stream; a conversation.

‘*Dani! Quick to the left! We knew about the other two we got little time-*’, ‘*Ki, I’ve been hit again! Ki?*’ and ‘I*-my arms been smashed in that hit, Dani-*’ transmissions were followed by Kiara’s vitals dropping.

“Kiara is unconscious!” I called it out more out of shock, but it was enough to let the room know the severity of the situation as I scrambled to understand the problem.

“But the T1 is still in flight?” came a far-off voice, and I could barely make out the colonel’s voice as he spoke up, “We need to take control of it quickly, get it back to base, Lieutenant.”

“The T1 has silenced H1C and B-“ I pondered the implications of what was happening, walking the list of concerns and obvious facts with a fine-toothed comb. Kiara sabotages the transponder, and Dani and Kiara are talking to each other. Dani can speak, and Dani is the T1 by Kiara’s words; SoulCores shouldn’t be able to talk to their pilots.

Kiara’s words from our first meeting burned their way to the front of my mind, ‘*I told you I don’t need anyone babysitting me. I can take care of myself and Dani, and it’s not like any of the others did. They were too busy pining over being able to be this close to a T1 to do their job.*’ She didn’t trust anyone and seemed to care deeply for Dani. If people knew what the T1 was capable of, I left that thought alone.

“H1D has been neutralized; the T1 is the only marked actor on the radar, sir!” came the call from the officer as Marim piped in, “We best get the Mark Threes out to get the T1. It will sit in the water with an unconscious pilot.” The way he said that irked me as I sat down, staring at the empty transponder, the last transmission blinking back at me; ‘*Ki?*’

I reached for the terminal, wondering, and like someone who hasn’t ever used a keyboard, I typed each letter slowly out to send down the stream, ‘*Dani*?’

The was no response for what felt like forever as I could feel movement around me as a rescue response began its preparations. Finally, I could only look at Kiara’s vitals in fear as I sent one more output, ‘*Dani, please, it’s Lt. Ava. I need you to get Kiara back to me; if you don’t, she could die from blood loss*.’

And I waited, before the stream filled with another input, ‘*Ava, I don’t know where to go. You’re not supposed to know about me.*’ I could almost hear the fear in those words but pushed it aside as anger filled me at Kiara’s recklessness and the danger she was putting herself and Dani in.

‘*I’m sending you vectors to get her back; follow them to the T, don’t worry about it yet. I won’t tell anyone.*’ As the T1 began returning to base, I swore that I felt the colonel’s eyes watching me before he nodded in my direction.

I stood up, ripped my tablet from the terminal, took all the logs, and rushed out of the command center and down the main hall, nearly knocking over a few cadets as they scrambled to get out of the way. The two large doors that lead to the hangers were wide open as the base was on high alert. The sounds of chaos filled the air as I pushed back and through people coming up the stairs. Then, moments before the Mark Threes were ready to push out, the sound of the hanger doors that brought Shells in from the ocean opened, and the T1 landed haphazardly in its spot on the floor.

Looking at the T1’s shell, the left hemisphere of its core-shell was caved inwards towards the engineer’s core. The light behind the T1’s visor passed in my direction as I rushed up the stairs with the sound of metal creaking and tearing itself apart as the core’s door was forced open by the T1. I could hear two pilots not far behind me rushing to help as I dug myself through the Nerve Stems to find Kiara covered in blood, her arm mangled in the caved-in portion of the core as it pinched her between them.

“Dani, force her out; I got her,” almost as an afterthought, I added, “I promise!” Then, as the Nerve Stems gave from Kiara’s body, she slumped, and I rushed forward and caught her. Kiara’s eyes opened as the Stems released her, dazed, painfilled, and bleary.

“Dani, help Dani-“ was Kiara’s muttered phrase as she looked lost and disoriented towards me; I shifted her weight to look at her arm as I whispered to just her as the two pilots had finally pulled enough of the Stems apart, “I promise, I will take care of Dani, and you.”

Kiara’s green eyes stared into mine, almost emotionless, before her eyes closed, unconsciousness retaking her. “Come on! Quickly we need to get her out and stabilize her!” I let my training take over and pushed all my questions and anger behind walls; I was now focused on keeping Kiara alive, at least long enough to express my anger toward her when it was done.

My mind wandered as Kiara was brought to my office and laid on the bed, and I began stemming the bleeding while stabilizing her vitals. A week passed in this manner as Kiara’s wounds reopened and closed, and she remained unconscious. And I spent the time projecting, I felt frustrated, but

also my anger shifted to the others around me. I could hear them talk about Kiara as if it wasn't wrong, as if she wasn't someone that could be dying and in pain. She was just an object to them, to be ordered around and forced to do their bidding. The way they talked, it was no wonder Kiara did everything she could to keep control.

I spent some of that week attending to Dani, moving and reaffixing the Nerve Stems within the Engineer's core long enough to fix the transponder and to replace it as Kiara meant for it to function. Part of me had considered chucking it when I found the device nearly crushed, and my anger spiked. The emotional toll as I felt tears slide down my cheeks in those moments was too much. I had joined the academy so I didn't have to watch others die; thinking about it now was foolish.

And once the insides were cleaned up, I worked hours on the carapace of Dani's shell, reorienting the parts and filling in what I could find; all the while, I could feel Dani's sensors on me. Finally, on the second day of this, I looked about to see us alone.

"Kiara is going to be okay; she is stable and just needs rest and to give her arm time to heal." I felt weird talking to what I had assumed to be another AI shell constructed by some ancient civilization. But it turns out they weren't just a shell.

"If I admit to you how angry I am at Kiara, you won't use it against me, would you?" as spoke as Dani's head tilted as if to listen. "The danger she put you two in, for a moment, I thought you were both done for. Everything I have ever experienced told me you should have been done for. Though I guess I understand why she would keep this quiet. She's not wrong. If people knew about you, they'd want to know more."

As the hanger grew quiet and I moved to leave Dani alone, they stopped me, raising their hand in a fist to my level; they waited for me. I could only blink back before bumping my fist against theirs, and with a spin of theatrics, Dani splayed its fingers back in mimicry of an explosion; It brought a smile to my face, the first in a long while. I left while calling out, "Thank you, Dani, " returning to the boring parts of my job; paperwork.

I found myself changing out Kiara's IV when she woke up, shifting in the bed with a groan, a soft muttering of 'Dani' under her breath as she turned to get up. I didn't hesitate to reach forward and hold back.

"Dani is okay, and I cared for them like you asked. In fact, Dani wants me to make sure you stay in bed and get better. Are you going to do that, or must I sedate you?" The question was given with such vitriol towards Kiara that I hoped my anger was evident. But instead, I added much softer as the girl looked up at me, "Please."

I could see the consideration in her eyes before she slumped, and I was able to help her back and finish up the IV. I could feel her eyes on me as I rolled the gloves into the disposal bin before the sound of her clearing her throat was followed by a question, "What happened?"

"What happened, you ask-" I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head before I moved closer to her, whispering as quietly as I could, "What happened was you recklessly put yourself in a position where no one can help you. What the hell were you thinking, messing with the transponder like that? Any number of things could have been happening to you, and I wouldn't have known-"

"I told you I can take care of-" She flinched back as I slammed my hand onto the bedside table, taking a deep breath in; I was visibly shaking.

"I don't know what I have to do, Kiara. I don't think I'm asking for much, and I get it; you don't trust me or label me based on everyone else before me, but if we don't bridge this gap, what's the point? You could have died! Dani could have died! Does that not register to you?" I inhaled deeply, more glad than ever that there were two doors and walls made of lead between us and the outside.

Kiara stared, not in shock, but almost emotionless, and blinked back. "You know," I said while pacing, busying myself with cleaning up the already spotless room, "I get it, your right. If anyone knew what you were hiding, the danger to you and Dani would be worse. But all I can do right now is this."

Moving forward, I reached my fist up with my pinky stretched out and waited. Kiara seemed hesitant before wrapping her pinky around mine. "I promise you, Kiara, that I don't want to hurt you or Dani; I want to help. I'm not going to tell anyone, I put the transponder back as you had it, but I only have one thing to ask" The suddenly quiet girl nodded as our hands dropped. "Please, don't hide this from me; I can't take care of either of you if you hide."

I didn't even wait for an answer before going to the door. "If you need anything, I'll be in here. Just give me a holler; otherwise, you will be here until I deem you fit, which means it's in your best interest to rest and heal." And with a smoldering glare at the now shy girl, I shut the door harder than I meant to and slumped in my office chair, trying to wipe tears away with shaking hands.