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.

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